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Daniela ANA, Ştefan VOICU

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After *Arbeitsschutzkontrollgesetz.* Strikes and organic intellectuals in the German meat industry

Daniela ANA[1], Ștefan VOICU[2]

Abstract

For decades, migrant workers with temporary and service contract work in the German meat industry have rarely been recruited by trade unions. The *Arbeitsschutzkontrollgesetz* ("Occupational Safety and Health Inspection Act") law implemented in 2021 aimed to grant equal employment conditions to the majority of the workers in slaughterhouses, creating new avenues for trade unions to gain more members and organize industry-level negotiations for better wages and a collective agreement. This article explores the lessons we can draw from the series of strikes that accompanied the negotiations. By relying primarily on participant observation in the meat industry strikes and employing an actor-centred perspective on industrial relations, the paper reveals the role of shop-floor organic intellectuals in mobilizing and demobilizing workers. The analysis of the strikes shows that organic intellectuals can be instrumental in articulating the resistance of subaltern groups, but they can also be co-opted by dominant groups to manufacture consent.

Keywords: meat industry, Romanians, migrant workers, organic intellectuals, trade union, strike, Germany.

Introduction

On a very cold April morning in 2021, the Nahrung-Genuss-Gaststätten (NGG) union - the main trade union in the German meat industry sector - was organizing one of the many strikes that year. At 4:30 AM, the strike-organizing team set up the tent in front of a slaughterhouse in a town in southern Bavaria and started preparing the information materials. Workers showed up in minibuses and cars at

[1] Leibniz Institute for Agricultural Economics in Transition Economies (IAMO), Halle/Saale, GERMANY. E-mail: ana@iamo.de.

[2] Department of Cultural Heritage, University of Bologna, ITALY. E-mail: stefanvalentin.voicu@unibo.it.

the slaughterhouse gate at 5:00 AM and then headed towards the main building to start their shift. The organizing team gave out safety vests imprinted with the message "Wir streiken!" ("We are on strike!") on the back and flyers with the main claims agreed with the trade union: more money, more holidays, and a collective agreement for the meat industry.[1]

These strikes were long overdue. The German meat industry is one of the largest in the European Union (EU) and it is concentrated in a handful of large companies[2] and, as previous research has shown, these large producers gained their market share through very cheap production costs resulting primarily from subcontracting East- and Central-European workers (Birke, 2022; Cosma *et al.,* 2020; Kossen, 2018; Mense-Petermann, 2018; Wagner, 2015; Wagner, & Hassel, 2016). Out of circa 160.000 workers in the branch, two thirds come from Eastern and Central Europe (NGG, 2021).[3]

Besides low pay, workers in the German meat industry have experienced uncertainty because of their short-term employment contracts, delayed remuneration, unpaid overtime, or cost deductions for accommodation, transport, and equipment (Voivozeanu, 2019). Moreover, migrant mobile labour was excluded until recently from industrial labour relations because of the so-called "insider model", which protected only permanent employees at the expense of posted workers who were seldom recruited by unions (Wagner, & Hassel, 2016).

The strikes in 2021 were boosted by the direct employment in slaughterhouses of former subcontracted migrant workers. The direct employment was made possible by the passing of *Arbeitsschutzkontrollgesetz* (ASKG) ("Occupational Safety and Health Inspection Act") at the end of 2020, after public outrage about the working and living conditions revealed by the extensive media coverage of the Covid-19 outbreaks in slaughterhouses (Ban *et al*., 2022; Cosma *et al*., 2020; Seeliger, & Sebastian, 2022). ASKG put an end to service contract work (*Werkverträge*) in slaughterhouses with a minimum of 50 employees starting on January 1st and to temporary agency work (*Leiharbeit*) starting on the 1st of April 2021.[4] Trade unions started approaching workers at the slaughterhouses in order to negotiate collective agreements on their behalf and help them demand higher wages and more holidays. Still, altogether, in 2021 only around 10% of the workers in the meat industry were estimated to be unionized (Erol, & Schulten, 2021).

What lessons can we draw from these series of strikes that accompanied the negotiations for better wages and a collective agreement? Why are workers reluctant to join a strike, and how are they encouraged to join one? What are the strategies of trade unions to represent this labour force and how can strikes contribute to increasing unionization numbers?

In the Global North, trust in trade unions has decreased especially since the 1970s into what Kesküla and Sanchez (2019, 111) call "union disaffection". This was predominantly the case in Germany too, where workers' unionization has decreased constantly in recent decades and where especially first-generation

migrant workers had limited unionization possibilities (Birke, 2022). Nevertheless, the 2021 strikes of an otherwise extremely fragmented and precarious migrant labour force seemed like a promising coagulation of workers' interests and bargaining power for the unions.

Discussions on precarious migrant workers' unionization in the EU have so far focused on a combination of institutional and organisational settings at national and sector levels, as well as the socio-cultural context in the host country and the ethnic identity of migrants. They looked at how these settings have influenced the decision of trade unions to engage with precarious migrant workers and determined their success (Connolly *et al.*, 2017; Marino *et al*., 2017).

In general, the literature seems to highlight a tendency for trade unions to be less inclined to approach migrant workers. On the other hand, trade unions enjoy organizational security and are deeply embedded in the national policy decision-making processes, while more vulnerable unions aim to revitalize their rank and file by engaging this labour force (Gorodzeisky, & Richards, 2013). The agency and ideology of the unions also play a considerable role (Marino, 2012; Refslund, 2021). Strong unions also tend to stick to traditional union strategies, whereas weaker unions have been more innovative in their actions, building broad societal coalitions and engaging with tactics beyond collective contract bargaining (Tapia, & Alberti, 2019).

Recent articles focused on the German meat industry have confirmed these trends. B. Wagner and Hassel (2016) argued that trade unions in Germany, despite declining power, still have a strong presence in labour market policy-making, but that their focus has been on the protection of domestic workers in standard employment, ignoring the rising number of non-unionized migrant workers on the labour market. However, they also noticed that the transforming employment structure of the meat industry, relying more on subcontracting migrant work, has weakened the power of the NGG, and its capacity to act.

I. Wagner (2015) has shown how a coalition of Polish slaughterhouse workers, a community initiative, and the NGG has led to better work contracts, but also to a proliferation of alliances between the union and civil society throughout Germany, as well as to a discussion about the possibility to negotiate an industry-wide collective contract (Sepsi, & Szot, 2021; Sepsi, 2021; Specht, & Schulten, 2021). Coalition-building in other sectors of the German economy dominated by precarious migrant labour have also proven relatively successful (Wunderlich, & Sommer, 2022; Lackus, & Schell, 2021). However, in the case of the meat industry, neither the introduction of a minimum wage, nor the passing of the ASKG has been directly attributed to the union's new forms of engagement, but rather to conjectural situations (Ban *et al*., 2022; Kuhlmann, & Vogeler, 2020; Seeliger, & Sebastian, 2022).

In this article, we take a less institutionalist approach and adopt an actor-centred perspective. On the one hand, several authors have already pointed out

reasons for the reluctance of migrant labourers to join a union. Amongst these we find employers' threats and tactics of intimidation, their temporary stay in the host country and at the workplace, the workers' absence of previous interaction with unions, the public perception of trade unionism in their country of origin, and the wage differentials between host and home country (Refslund, & Sippola, 2022; Wagner, 2015). On the other hand, trust building has proven essential in including migrant workers in the trade unions (Refslund, 2021; Wagner, 2015). Birke and Bluhm (2020) also underlined the leverage workers in the meat industry have with respect to their employers and pointed out the important role of strikes in making use of it.

To understand why migrant workers are reluctant and discouraged to join trade unions, but also how unions can successfully include the migrant workforce in their rank and file, we look at a set of strikes organized by NGG at slaughterhouses in southern Bavaria, Germany, after the implementation of the ASKG.[5] Although researchers have focused mostly on the Lower Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia states, where 60% of the pork and poultry meat production is concentrated, the region of Bavaria is also relevant as it concentrates a large share of the beef production (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2021). Participant and non-participant observation was carried out between September 2020 and July 2021, by one of the authors, while working as a campaigner for Faire Mobilität, the largest labour rights advisory network in Germany, travelling to slaughterhouses with the NGG trade union across Germany to provide interpretation for Romanian-speaking workers. We added to the field observations an analysis of press releases and news articles in Germany published in the same time interval.

Although at the Bavarian slaughterhouses we visited, the workers came from different East- and Central European countries as well as from Germany, we predominantly talked directly with workers of Romanian or Moldovan origin. Workers from Poland, Hungary or Bulgaria were also present in our locations, but in very small numbers, and due to the linguistic barrier, we could not talk to them. Moreover, at the three slaughterhouses where the strikes on which we focus took place, the workforce in the slaughtering, cutting and deboning departments (those taking part in strikes), were dominated by Romanian male workers. While we acknowledge that separation based on ethnic considerations contributes to the fragmentation of the workers and there is a need to create solidarity across ethnic divides (Refslund, & Sippola, 2021), our focus on migrant workers with the same ethnic identity has the purpose of revealing unionizing obstacles and opportunities faced during the interaction with an allegedly cultural homogeneous group.

We emphasize in this article the role of organic intellectuals in mobilizing these workers. According to Antonio Gramsci (1971), organic intellectuals emerge out of and are linked to specific social classes and are defined by their role in generating cohesion and self-awareness of their social class's position in society. Gramsci's social theory has been widely used in the social sciences and humanities (Francese, 2009), and in anthropology in particular (Kurtz, 1996; Smith, 2004; Streinzer, &

Tošić, 2022). However, the notion of organic intellectual has been less deployed analytically in comparison to his concept of hegemony, although the former is integral to the latter.

Our understanding of the concept derives from the work of Susana Narotzky (2015) and Ida Susser (2011). On one hand, from Narotzky we take the idea that the organic intellectual is capable of understanding the structural features that are immanent to a situational labour dispute but is also capable to use these insights to build cohesion among workers and a collective identity. On the other hand, with Susser, we identify these organic intellectuals at different organizational scales. These can emerge and be active both at the grassroots level, but also in parliament. Moreover, we also want to underscore an often-ignored aspect of organic intellectuals, that is, the fact that while they can be instrumental in articulating the resistance of subaltern groups, they can also be co-opted by dominant groups to manufacture consent.

In the next section, we focus on Gramsci's concept of organic intellectuals and their role in the 2021 strikes in the meat industry. Subsequently, we follow a timeline of changes in the meat industry in Germany from 1970 until the present, focusing on the most influential changes to the business model that paved the way for the drastic precarization of the workers, as well as on the institutional struggles from the side of trade unions and cooperation partners to break this business model through the ban of temporary and service contract work. Next, we analyse three slaughterhouse strikes where we highlight the role of organic intellectuals, showing that they can be instrumental in articulating the resistance of subaltern groups, but at the same time, they can be co-opted by employers to manufacture consent in the company. In conclusion, we reflect on the labour struggles and negotiations of 2021, and on the benefits and limitations that the presence of a general collective agreement managed to bring to the workers.

Organic intellectuals and unionization

Antonio Gramsci's theoretical reflections have had an enormous influence on all disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Although written while he was imprisoned by the Italian fascist regime, scholars have put in a great deal of work to interpret, reconstruct, and make analytical use of his insights. Primarily, it is his concept of hegemony that has had the greatest appeal for many scholars, because it is at the centre of his theoretical efforts to grasp the modes in which social inequalities are produced and reproduced by the use of force and ideology, but also why these inequalities are so durable and how change can be reached.

Hegemony is a term which Gramsci uses to designate a form of domination exercised by ruling classes through the active consent of the ruled classes. Stache and Bernhold (2021, 169), relying on the Gramscian concept of "hegemony" argue that the super-exploitation of animals and workers, despite major social and

ecological devastations, continue in a class-based society because what they call "meat capital"[6] is economically profitable, it creates internal unity and it meets a consensus among all classes, creating a "meat hegemony" (Stache, & Bernhold, 2021).

Intellectuals play an important role in achieving domination as they lead the institutions which mediate the relations of power between classes. Gramsci takes this Marxist insight further and makes an important distinction between two types of intellectuals: organic intellectuals and traditional intellectuals. Organic intellectuals are linked organically to a class in the sense that they emerge out of the social practices of that class and represent specialized aspects of those practices. Hence, the working class's organic intellectuals are, for example, machine operators, while those of the capitalists are entrepreneurs and high-skilled technicians. We acknowledge that the notion of an "organic intellectual" may not immediately resonate when examining a community of shop floor or manual laborers in a slaughterhouse. However, the concept encompasses individuals within the working class who grasp class interests and take action either in support of or against the interests of their own class. While we lack in-depth biographical data on the strike participants we are studying, we can track their recent professional trajectory and their understanding of the implications of strikes. By observing their role in interactions with trade unions, managers, and colleagues, we can identify them as organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense.

Gramsci contrasts organic intellectuals with the traditional intellectuals, usually men of letters, philosophers, journalists or the clergy, lawyers, teachers etc. As Gramsci (1971, 10) himself argued referring to the organic intellectuals: "the mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, 'permanent persuader' and not just a simple orator."

What gives organic intellectuals the function of intellectuals in the first place is their capacity to create the unity of the class to which they are organically linked by understanding the position it occupies in the political, economic, and cultural order of society and lead their class through the mediation of institutions such as trade unions, the press, or the political party. In her analysis of the uses of the class concept amongst trade union leaders of a shipyard in a Spanish town, Narotzky (2015) argues that how class is understood by these leaders is central to the creation of the cohesion and self-awareness Gramsci attributed to organic intellectuals. It is through an understanding of class that these leaders can become an organic intellectual capable of a knowledgeable analysis of the underlying features of the immediate situation, and is also an activist, the speaker with the megaphone organizing and leading protest (Narotzky, 2015).

However, as Ida Susser (2011) points out, organic intellectuals are present at different institutional scales, from the factory shop floor to the political party,

from grassroots organizations to national and transnational social movements, mediating the relationship between their class and other classes by resisting or consenting to hegemony.

Our methodological limitation to what was observable during the strikes aims to capture the practices of emergent organic intellectuals whose development could be hindered, or transformed and subjugated by the ruling classes. As Gramsci noted, there is a stratification of intellectuals achieved through the educational system through which the dominant class develops its own organic intellectuals, but hinders the development of the organic intellectuals of the subaltern classes or transforms them into traditional intellectuals whose organic link to their class is severed. Another way of transforming organic intellectuals is through subjugation. Here, Gramsci was less clear about how this is done and his reflections are limited to an analysis of party politics during the Italian Risorgimento. The most relevant passage in this sense is the one referring to how the Italian South was disciplined by the Northern hegemony. He mentions that the dominant class individually incorporated the southern intellectuals capable of leading the peasants by making them the personnel of the state and offering them privileges.

Since, according to Gramsci, the peasant class does not create organic intellectuals, one can assume that these southern intellectuals were traditional intellectuals, whose origins were the peasant class, but whose link with it was severed by the state-managed educational system. But, if in the case of the peasants, the subjugation must be of traditional intellectuals, in the case of the working class, it follows, the dominant class has to subjugate and hinder the development of the organic intellectuals of the dominated classes. Hence, in our case, we refer to the subjugation not of traditional intellectuals, but of the organic intellectuals created by the working class, nor to their incorporation into the state coercive apparatus, but in the factory's hierarchical organization. In this article we show how organic intellectuals co-opted by the employers of the slaughterhouses create fragmentation at the shop floor scale and discipline the workers, but also how organic intellectuals emerging out of the migrant workers' group build cohesion through collective self-awareness, and whose intellectual capacities could be developed through alternative educational initiatives established by institutions such as the trade union, the press, or the party.

Personal working histories and experience with trade unions create durable dispositions (Narotzky, 2010) which can explain why Romanian migrant workers, coming from a country with an - up to this day – large rural population and a history of rather weak trade unionism, have avoided collective action and instead relied on exit strategies enabled by their mobility inside the EU to find better jobs (Perrotta, 2015). However, it does not explain why some workers joined the 2021 strikes in the German slaughterhouses. In this article, we show that, while the strikes were indeed initiated by the trade union, emergent organic intellectuals at the shop floor were key in mobilizing the workers to strike and join the union, but at the same time vulnerable to co-option by the management.

The German meat industry and migrant workers

The German meat industry from the 1970s onward has been characterized by the privatisation of communal slaughterhouses and a concentration of production followed by its displacement from cities to small towns, where large facilities were built to increase the scale of production and to allow the use of technology operable by so-called "low-skill" workers, drawn predominantly from immigrant communities (Schulten, & Specht, 2021; Mense-Peterman, 2018; Wagner, & Hassel, 2016). Abusive work conditions for migrant workers have been characteristic of the meat industry and have been made possible by a system of posted, temporary and service contract work, forms of employment overused by German employers.

Not only has this industrial structure helped meet the increasing demand for meat nationally, while also keeping food cheap (Euractiv Special Report, 2017), but it also gave the industry an export competitive advantage. Within the European Union, Germany is the first producer of pork (21%), the second producer of beef (15%), and the third producer of poultry meat (12%). Moreover, the country produces 16% more than the necessary domestic production of meat. And, because in neighbouring meat-producing countries such as Denmark and Holland the precarious working contracts characteristic of the German meat industry have been used more scarcely, companies from these countries have relocated parts of their production in Germany (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2021).[7]

Postsocialist Central and Eastern Europe became an export market for this meat, a source of cheap feed, but more importantly, it became a reservoir of cheap and flexible labour. The case of Romania shows how these three aspects intermingled and reinforced each other.

After the fall of socialism at the end of 1989, Romania went through a series of reforms throughout a long decade of intermittent shock and gradual liberalizations, privatizations and stabilization policies (Ban, 2016). This led, on the one hand, to the restructuring of the socialist industry, which resulted in a scarcity of workplaces and to a dismantling of the welfare state, which increased the precarity of households (Meeus, 2012). On the other hand, the postsocialist reforms led initially to a return of labour to small-scale agriculture for subsistence and semi-subsistence purposes, on land which was restituted to them under the new privatization impetus (Verdery, 2003). More increasingly since the mid-2000s this also led to labour migration abroad, or even to a mix of agriculture and migration, in a repertoire of strategies of getting by. Moreover, competition between postsocialist states over foreign direct investments (Drakhoupil, 2008) resulted in ever-increasing deregulation of the local labour market, which, coupled with a shrinking labour force, weakened the power of trade unions (Adăscăliței & Guga, 2017; Varga, 2016).

As negotiations to become an EU member intensified, a new set of policies facilitated processes that engendered and reinforced each other: migration abroad boomed, creating a crisis of agricultural labour force. At the same time, the

arrival of foreign discount supermarkets outcompeted small-scale farm production, releasing more surplus labour. Land was gradually concentrated in large capital intensive farms focused on feed crops cultivation for export, which made the country dependent on food imports. The surplus labour released by agriculture helped maintain labour costs low for the outsourced manufacturing sites of large corporations at home, despite food price inflation, and secured a cheap labour force for EU industries characterized by precarious working condition.

Regardless of the sector in which they found work, Romanian migrant workers faced and often still face dire conditions. Scholars have documented the precarious conditions experienced by Romanian migrant workers in Austria (Hopfgartner *et al*., 2022), Italy (Domsodi, 2019; Țoc, & Guțu, 2021), Spain (Molinero-Gerbeau *et al.,* 2021), and the UK (Briggs, & Dobre, 2014; Ivancheva, 2007). More recently, the situation of Romanian workers in the German construction and meat sector (Voivozeanu, 2019), as well as in agriculture (Cosma *et al.,* 2020), has been documented.

According to Voivozeanu (2019), the main dimensions of precarity among migrant workers in the meat industry relate to job security, income level, control over working conditions and salary, and degree of protection. In our case, most of the newly directly-employed Romanian workers in the meat industry were dependent on the employer, be it the former subcontractor firm or the slaughterhouse, for a place to live and usually the accommodation for workers was in the vicinity of the slaughterhouses, at the outskirts of Bavarian towns. Not only did these accommodations have (still) substandard conditions, but they also isolated the migrant workers from their German colleagues and the rest of the world.

The return of Romanian migrant workers to their home countries during the Covid-19 restrictions revealed a shortage of labour supply which led to a set of exceptions to the EU-wide pandemic regulations, negotiated between Romania, and other Central Eastern European states, and the Western and Southern European countries receiving this emigrant labour force (Paul, 2020). This showed just how uneven the EU political economy is and how profoundly it relies on precarious migrant work. It also created an opportunity. The rhythm of exploitation characteristic of the "meat hegemony" system (Stache, & Bernhold, 2021) has been the rule for more than a decade in Germany until the Covid-19-related scandals about mass infections and the miserable living conditions of migrants came to the fore in the public discourse.

The alarming working conditions in the meat industry have been addressed repeatedly by the coalition formed by the trade union, NGOs and a few politicians; these initiatives resulted most notably in the introduction of the minimum wage in 2015 and the adoption of the so-called GSA-Fleisch in 2017 ("The Act to Secure Workers' Rights in the Meat Industry"), formally offering workers more social security.

The first month of the Covid-19 pandemic showed that these provisions gained through negotiations have been only inconsistently respected by general contractor companies and the subcontracted firms in the previous years. In December 2020, the German Parliament passed by a large majority the ASKG, addressing core issues of the meat business model (Faire Mobilität, 2022). Apart from banning temporary and service contract work, the ASKG contains measures designed to ensure compliance with existing labour laws, such as including the time spent changing and washing equipment as work time, the introduction of electronic time recording, and the introduction of more controls in the meat industry.

With the ASKG, some of these long-lasting aspects have been addressed, as direct employment became compulsory and, through this, it also became possible for migrant workers to unionize, and for the minimum wage to be slightly raised. However, the ASKG had only vague provisions regarding living conditions and also the amount of compulsory inspections in slaughterhouses is very low, at the same time being slowly implemented. The minimum inspection quota by the responsible authorities per federal state each year, starting with 2026, is of 5% of all companies. After the implementation of the ASKG, the negotiations for a collective agreement at the industry level commenced in 2021. When nation-wide Covid-19 restrictions were loosened in the spring of 2021, a string of warning strikes organized by the NGG took off, with the trade union asking for fairer working conditions and better salaries. Seeing hundreds of Eastern Europeans, often mainly Romanians, on strike in dozens of slaughterhouses was long considered unthinkable for many (Götzke, 2021).

After the third round of collective agreement negotiations in early April 2021, when the main claims of the union were rejected, the strikes became the main pressure tool for the union and the workers. Following the first few strikes, on April 17th the employers association called for an extraordinary meeting and offered a starting wage of 10.75 Euros per hour and a 45-month-long collective agreement. The union found the offer outrageous and "far from a serious attempt to finally put an end to exploitation in the meat industry."[8] Instead, the NGG wanted collective agreements declared generally binding by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, applying directly to all employees in the meat industry, regardless of whether an employer is bound by a collective agreement.

Old structures and lack of cohesion

During the first strike that started in mid-April at 5:00 AM, most workers did not show immediate signs of enthusiasm for the strike vests and flyers. A few took the vests and joined the strike immediately, others ignored us, while the majority were mistrustful, preoccupied or scared and tried to walk away as quickly as possible. The latter group were reacting to the presence of two employees: a German one, who was in a management position, and a Romanian one, who

was a slaughterhouse foreman and was busy approaching the passing workers in Romanian. He could be heard saying to them that they should not listen to the strike organizers and that they should go in.

Andrei was the first Romanian worker whom the strike-organizing team could talk to. He was angry and really unhappy with the salary he received for the first months of the year. He was one of the workers who had been working with the temporary work agencies for nine years and who were directly employed by the main company that year, receiving a limited contract with a maximum probation period of six months, as if the first nine years of work did not matter.

Instilling job insecurity can be an effective strategy of accumulation (Kasmir, 2014) and, as Voivozeanu (2019) shows, Romanian migrant workers in Germany experience different levels of job insecurity which create variegated precarious subjects inside an ethnically homogeneous community. However, this does not necessarily relate to the time of their employment, as she argues, because long-term workers in the meat industry could work for many years in a row on limited contracts and the accumulated length of a job for many migrants did not bring with itself any considerable advantage or security for the workers, as shown in Andrei's case.

While Andrei was smoking his cigarette and pondered joining the strike, the Romanian foreman and the German manager stopped him and convinced him to go inside. For one hour, the Romanian foreman and the German manager continued to convince workers who wanted to approach us to go inside, after which the two went inside as well.

The Romanian foreman was an ally of the management and used to work as a workforce recruiter in a subcontracting firm providing Romanian workers to the slaughterhouse until the end of 2020, as another Romanian worker told us. Subcontracting firms used to dominate the meat industry until the end of 2020, being officially the main providers of cheap labour force for German companies. After the adoption of the ASKG, recruiters of the subcontracted firms often became direct employees, like the Romanian foreman, legally acting as human resources or integration consultants, but in reality continuing recruitment and workforce management among their co-nationals and informally exerting on workers the power they had accumulated through their previous positions.

Personnel of former subcontractors often acted as if the recruited workers are "theirs" (Sepsi, 2021) and workers perceived them as informal supervisors in many companies, even after the dissolution of the subcontractors at the beginning of 2021. A couple of days later at a different slaughterhouse, during another strike, workers complained that although the working time was now registered electronically, as the ASKG required, the working hours to be paid were not taken from this source, but still from a non-transparent notebook that a Romanian foreman kept.

The Romanian foremen are organically linked to the workers as they usually come out of their ranks. But, while organically linked to the migrant workers, the Romanian foremen do not create cohesion and political self-awareness of the group, rather they create consent to the working conditions on behalf of the employing slaughterhouse. The foreman persuaded the workers that joining the strike and becoming members of the union could lead to losing their job, conjuring the idea that they might have to return home not only without pay, but maybe also in debt. Ultimately, the foreman reinforces the idea that although the working conditions are precarious, they still earn more than they could ever earn in Romania under similar, or worse, conditions.

These foremen rely on a combination of coercion and consent to reproduce the capitalist relations of production characteristic of the German meat industry (Stache, & Bernhold, 2021). When consent fails, these organic intellectuals become agents of coercion that use violence to keep the workers in line, as was the case at a strike from a different slaughterhouse, where the Romanian foreman intimidating the workers was known for having attacked a worker physically a couple of weeks earlier during another strike. The young man who had been hit had filed a complaint against the foreman, but at the same time, he planned to drive to Romania during the weekend and have two weeks of holiday, and was afraid of being forbidden to do so or even lose his job if he joined another strike.

An NGG secretary referring to a failed strike later in 2021 in the west of Germany, recounted a similar experience: he was in front of the slaughterhouse at 2 AM and around 80 Romanian workers wanted to go on strike but, in the end, did not dare because of the intimidation coming from the side of their former formal bosses:

"There's a lot of pressure on them, and some of the old subcontractors are still working here as consultants in the company and were already there this morning, trying to drive the colleagues back in by any means possible. All of a sudden, these securities and the former subcontractors showed up and talked to them very briefly in their language in a tone that was unbelievable, and the people panicked and gave their things back and went into the company to work" (Götzke, 2021).

Although the literature on organic intellectuals usually focuses on those who organize resistance to the dominant group's consensus, we consider it important to understand that figures such as the Romanian foremen are also organic intellectuals of the subaltern classes, but have been subjugated and co-opted by the dominant classes. What drives this co-option is the financial and social privilege granted to the co-opted foremen in the organization of labour and the fact that the foreman's job exists only as long as this particular labour recruitment system endures.

During the strike we just described, after the German manager and Romanian foreman left around 6:30 AM, around 80 people joined the strike and continued until around 9:30 AM. The workers joining the strike were mainly from the slaughtering and cutting departments, which, as Birke and Bluhm (2020) also

notice, are key in stopping the slaughterhouse workflow altogether. Some had questions about the dangers of joining the strikes, especially if there could be consequences for their pay or their work contract altogether. They were informed repeatedly either individually or through the microphone, in Romanian, that union members are, according to the law, allowed to take part in strikes organized by the trade union.[9] The absence of the Romanian foreman and the consultancy of the organizers were key to workers joining the strike.

Equally important, as we will show in the next section, is the presence of organic intellectuals who link their experiences as workers with the structural features that make these experiences possible in the first place and engage this knowledge in organizing their class against the dominant group's consensus. This kind of organic intellectual is named by trade unionists and organizers in our context "Vertrauensleute" ("trusted persons") or "Multiplikatoren" ("multipliers").

Cohesion and collective action

The following night, another strike took place at a different slaughterhouse, belonging to the same corporation, in a Bavarian town some tens of kilometres to the north from the one where the strike took place the previous day. It was energetically coordinated by the two trade union secretaries responsible for the region, as well as a works council representative.[10] The organizing team approached Alin, a Romanian worker in his early thirties, working in the slaughterhouse for seven years with a 9,50 Euro hourly wage.

Alin lived with his wife and his six-month-old daughter and was the only breadwinner in the household. He was unhappy with the 1,600 Euro net he got at the end of the month for the over 200 hours of work, as well as with the only twenty days of annual leave he received after seven years of work. At one point, he started offering us support spontaneously. He recognized his Romanian colleagues and approached them as they came to the slaughterhouse gate, told them who else was on the parking lot, and took on the role of the "trusted person" in the community, convincing workers to go on strike. Around one hundred workers joined the strike and, towards the end, there were several workers who filled in the forms to become union members.

The next night at 2:00 AM we were at the third Bavarian slaughterhouse belonging to the same company, employing around 400 workers, where the workforce was again predominantly from Romania. The local union secretary was visibly in close contact with many of the workers there, learning dozens of their names and a few greeting words in Romanian. The initial plan of the strike was for it to take place between 1:15 and 6:00 AM, and during this time around 50 workers remained outside. Once again, a Romanian worker, Ion, helped us stop the people and explain to them what was going on. Between 1:00 and 2:00 AM

a few tens of workers in the slaughtering section joined the strike - almost all of them were recent NGG members.

Although the main claims of the strike were around the minimum wage growth, several workers complained about other abuses in the company and this is where a lot of energy for the strike came from. Several workers told us that every month around 16-20 hours less was paid to the workers. Another worker complained about not receiving his salary for two months and being employed through another company which was registered in Austria. Moreover, only a few workers received direct contracts with the company, and the rest were still paid through the former main subcontracting firm. There was a mix of issues which made the workers angry.

This anger led to a turn of events: initially the strike was planned for circa four hours, until 6 AM, but many of the strikers said they did not want to go back to work for the day, because in the four remaining hours, they could still slaughter enough animals and thus not cause enough damage to the employer. The initial reservation to have a day-long strike had to do with the fact that it was Friday and over the weekend there could be issues related to animal welfare provisions, or that the day-long strike could create tensions among workers who would be called out on Saturday to do the Friday work. In the end, enough room was found to keep living animals until Monday. After the workers (backed by the campaigners) negotiated with the union secretary, the day-long strike was approved.

Unlike the organic intellectuals that are subjugated by the dominant class, Alin and Ion have remained faithful to their class and collaborated with the union. Willingness to organize might have been motivated by individual interests, but becoming part of the labour struggle they framed their own interests as class interests and these resonated with all the workers because these interests were organically linked to common experiences at the slaughterhouses. Unlike the co-opted intellectuals, these common experiences were not used to create threats and fragment the workers but to create cohesions amongst workers and mobilize them against the established consensus regarding their working conditions.

Our analysis confirms that in becoming an active part of a collective structure there is, without doubt, a self-serving interest at play but it comes from a collective sense of self, one that recognizes the common interests in a group and the value and resilience of collective organisation and negotiation for workers (Lazar, 2018). Organic intellectuals such as Alin and Ion are integral to generating group self-awareness and, as Lazar argues (2018, 270), “the processes of making collective selves are the source of the unions’ strength”.

Our analysis also shows that a stronger emphasis on building relations between the union and these organic intellectuals is needed, for two reasons. First, as shown in the previous section, organic intellectuals can be co-opted to generate consent to the existing working conditions amongst the workers. This ensures the perpetuation of the labour-sourcing system developed by the German meat industry

and other EU employment sectors relying on precarious migrant workers. And, as a consequence of this, fragmentation amongst the Romanian migrant workers continues, which hinders their unionization and fails to strengthen the union in relation to the employers.

Second, although coalition-building has been emphasized in the industrial relations literature as both a mode of revitalizing trade unions and including migrant workers, most of the work has been concentrated on coalitions between trade unions and other civil society organizations, with a preference for grassroots community organizations. However, as Alberti (2016) remarks in her research on the Living Wage Campaigns in the UK, the assumption behind these coalitions is that migrant workers are unable to articulate their demands by themselves. Political actions are "contracted out" to other civil society actors, creating the risk of bypassing the workers, whose specific demands might remain unvoiced.

Moreover, the literature on coalition-building tends to uncritically assume that community organizations exist and that they are representative, participatory and cohesive (Jiang, & Korczynski, 2022). In reality, the Romanian cultural associations in Germany, as well as in other EU countries where Romanian are employed in precarious jobs, do not participate publicly in coalitions for the improvement of work conditions such as the one analysed here. In the German case, the coalition building that led to the adoption of the ASKG relied on German civil society actors, concerned by the inhumane working conditions in the slaughterhouses and the consequences it might have for them (Ban *et al.,* 2022). Hence, rather than a bottom-up approach, the coalition-building action looks rather top-down, hindering workers' participation.

One way of overcoming these two obstacles is by creating forms of engaging organic intellectuals such as Alin and Ion in various forms of community building. This can be at the shop floor level and outside the working place, especially from the side of the trade unions who can support and encourage the "multipliers" types through regular visits at the same companies over years and the engagement of the workers' communities outside the workplace. They can be done through the organization of recurring social events, by establishing educational initiatives, and creating media outlets. Moreover, by diminishing the German society's "passive tolerance" (Strache, & Bernhold, 2021) from the larger society by reacting against the super-exploitation of workers and animals in the meat industry could also create broader social support for workers' struggles.

Conclusion

Since the 1970s, trade unions in the Global North have been confronted with a decline in membership and market deregulations that hampered their actions and reduced their power. The rise of a precarious mobile migrant workforce has especially challenged the unions, whose strategies regarding this new workforce

have varied depending on a multitude of factors, from institutional embeddedness in national policy and decision-making to differences in employment structures across sectors, or cultural frictions.

Although German trade unions have experienced a similar decline in power, they have maintained a certain level of influence in policy decisions and have in general been reluctant to incorporate the rising migrant labour force in their strategies. Exceptions have emerged however in economic sectors where this workforce has been predominant, such as in the meat sector, which is characterized by a concentration of the market share in a few large companies. The migrant labour, mostly coming from Eastern and Central Europe, allowed these companies to keep costs low and to gain a competitive advantage in the export market. Yet, this success was accomplished with great costs for the workers who have been living and working in extremely precarious conditions.

After years of more or less successful struggles for better working conditions out of the media spotlight and German citizens' concern, and efforts made by the NGG to organize these workers, despite the unfavourable legislative context, Covid-19 revealed the poor conditions in which these workers live and work and helped pass a new law in 2021. The ASKG offered the union new tools and possibilities to represent and organize migrant workers and, in 2021, initiated a series of strikes at German slaughterhouses.

Following dozens of strikes across Germany and a new negotiation round, in the summer of 2021, an increase of the minimum wage in the industry and an industry-wide and generally binding collective agreement were put into place. The new hourly minimum wage agreed was of 10,80 Euros from the 9,50 Euros at that time. The initial request of the trade union, to have the immediate increase to 12,30 Euros per hour, did not succeed. Instead, a slow and gradual increase was agreed upon in the last negotiation round. From January 2022 the minimum wage increased to 11 Euros and the 12,30 Euros hourly wage will be implemented only starting with December 2023. Apart from being slowly implemented, the increase in the meat industry minimum hourly wage is also relatively unsuccessful, given that the legal minimum wage in Germany had increased in parallel to a similar extent, reaching 12 Euros in October 2022 and remaining so until the end of 2023.

At the moment of writing this conclusion, the ASKG and the presence of a general collective agreement managed to bring some improvements to the workers; the majority of the 160.000 workers in the industry have direct contracts and are not separated by the unequal pay fault line anymore. It is estimated that circa 35.000 subcontracted workers were hired directly and the subcontractors were taken over and dissolved in January 2021 and some of the abuses in the industry decreased (Faire Mobilität, 2022). During the 2021 negotiations, the NGG gained circa 1.800 new members, of which more than two thirds were former service contract workers (Schulten, & Specht, 2021).

Our participant observation in several strikes at slaughterhouses in southern Bavaria revealed that the most effective strikes were those in which workers trusted each other and accepted to take part in the strike mostly after a co-worker talked to them, not when only a trade unionist or a campaigner did. We argued in this article that these workers are organic intellectuals, characterized by an ability to understand the structural conditions that have led to their precarious work experience and capable of deploying this understanding in the concrete actions of labour organizing.

It is, however, visible that the former subcontractors, who have been employed as foremen and consultants, contribute to this day to the "authoritarian manners, harassment, verbal violence or activities" (Adjan, 2023) that characterize the meat industry in Germany. A reason behind this is that contrary to the fetishism amongst scholars to see organic intellectuals as only articulators of resistance to hegemony, organic intellectuals can be co-opted by the dominant class and used to discipline the resisting workers.

We suggest that trade unions should pay more attention to organic intellectuals. Indeed, trade unions, and particularly the NGG, have engaged in coalition-building with civil society organizations in order to expand their repertoire of strategies and tactics beyond the workplace. However, in the absence of representative and cohesive migrant communities, such as is the case of the Romanian workers, who constitute a large share of migrant workers in the meat industry and who are, in some slaughterhouses, the only or the main ethnic group present, German civil society has been the main partners. The implication here is that these workers are passive victims of an exploitative regime and are unable to represent themselves. However, we showed that workers in global capitalism are not passive victims of relations of value extraction (Durst, 2018), they are also social actors who are finding or creating new meanings and provisioning strategies in their everyday lives. Trade unions have to create, together with these organic intellectuals, new forms of community engagement to avoid co-optation and to increase unionization.

Notes

[1]Throughout 2021, the NGG, together with consultancy centers and other local cooperation partners, organized around 300 information events and strikes in front of slaughterhouses and meat processing plants and online, reaching more than 45,000 employees (Faire Mobilität, 2022, 12).

[2]In 2019 Tönnies, Westfleisch, and Vion had a 57,1% share of the slaughtering sector in Germany (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2021)

[3]The exact numbers on the total of workers in the meat industry are not available and we rely here on the estimates in 2021 published by the NGG https://www.ngg.net/presse/pressemitteilungen/2021/mindestens-1230-euro-pro-stunde-fuer-beschaeftigte-in-deutschen-schlachthoefen-und-wurstfabriken/. Accessed on April 27, 2023.

[4]This applies only to "core business" activities in the meat industry, i.e., in the area of slaughtering, cutting and deboning (BMAS, 2021), excluding, for example, the employees who clean equipment. There were also exceptions allowed for meat processing companies to hire up to 14% temporary agency workers around the year, in order to supplement workforce especially during the grilling season.

[5]We anonymized the exact names of the places and the companies involved in our observations, as well as the names and personal details of the workers with whom we talked to.

[6]Stache and Bernhold (2021, 174) refer to meat capital as "all capitalist corporations that accumulate profits by (super-)exploiting human wage laborers and super-exploiting animals in order to produce meat".

[7]Examples of such relocations are the Danish company "Danish Crown" in the 2010s, as well as the Dutch company Vion (Erol, & Schulten,7).

[8]https://www.ngg.net/presse/pressemitteilungen/2021/fleischwirtschaft-arbeitgeber-verhindern-mindestlohn-proteste-auch-bei-branchenprimus-toennies/. Accessed on February 18, 2023.

[9]In our own experience, although workers are allowed by law to hide from the employer the fact that they are labour union members, they can be easily be uncovered when they join a strike or when they take part in works councils votes, and this does indeed sometime translate into threats and intimidations from the side of the employer (cf. Schulten, & Specht, 2021).

[10]A works council (*Betriebsrat* in German) in a company has the task of representing the interests of the employees in dealings with the employer and is elected by the employees of a company every four years.

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