

Finnish Trade Unions and Immigrant Labor¹



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Recent decades have witnessed new transitional migration systems across the globe. Inter- and intra-regional migrations have been propelled by the political and economic changes in Eastern Europe, the massive growth of industrial and service economies such as China and India, and increasing conflict and climate driven refugee movements. According to the migration systems theory, migration alters the social, cultural, economic, and institutional conditions at the sending and receiving ends – that is, the entire developmental space within which migration processes operate. These new migration systems have been accompanied by an unprecedented mobility of capital, restructuring of national and regional economies and the flexibilization of labour markets. Hence the new political economy of migration is linked to profound changes in contemporary working life (Vezzoli and Castles 2009, 74).

Numerous reports have highlighted the direct and indirect discrimination which immigrants experience in European labor markets, including Finland. Not only do recent migrants experience drastically higher rates of unemployment, but when managing to find work their pay is often significantly lower than that of the white majority. Also, problems – from rejection of qualifications acquired in the nation of origin to institutional racism – are common experiences among migrant job seekers. As a great majority of the welfare provisions in European countries are gained through a long-term and

stable connection to the labor market, immigrants are in a particularly vulnerable position. Research by the Finnish Institute of Migration has shown that while “foreigners sometimes have lower education, more extended family structures and less working experience, these factors can only partially explain their disadvantage in the labor market, with the much more fundamental problems remaining those associated with discriminatory practices linked to ethnic and cultural prejudices” (Heikkilä 2005).

Why should we as social policy researchers then be concerned with the way in which trade unions in particular have responded to immigration and ethnic discrimination?

I argue that more than any other public or private employer, local authority or government agency, trade unions are a key sector where equal opportunity and anti-racism should be addressed. It has been said that in the course of the last century in Western Europe, the trade union movement as an emancipatory force has contributed significantly to the development of nation states towards democratic welfare states. Looking at the developments during the last century, it is fair to state that the coalition between the state authorities and trade unions has been the primary engine for the institutionalization of political, industrial and social citi-

zanship of all members of the nation state. Thus, whether unions accept the challenge of immigrant interest representation has thus potentially large implications for the democratic development of the welfare states (Penninx and Roosblad 2000).

Specifically, trade unions have also a role in promoting equality in the labor markets and also within their own organization. Trade unions have a potential to contribute to the development of immigrants' political capital by providing more personal and collective resources among immigrant communities to be able to mobilize politically. Union membership can indeed significantly increase the representation of immigrant interests in unions themselves, in the workplaces and more generally in society.

The way in which trade unions have reacted to immigration is also important for the trade unions' future's sake. Labor unions have in the recent decades faced challenges in their operations due to globalization, hostile political climate and unemployment causing a downward pressure on union density, and the question of labor unions revitalization is of great importance. Research on labour union revitalization starts often from the premise that significant changes have taken place in the labor markets, such as changes in the demographic structures of the workers and as such questions related to gender, ethnicity and young people, as well union services and strategies with these groups come to the fore (Jonker 2008).

In addition to these demographic changes, as the economic globalization has accelerated, the past two decades have witnessed increasing neo-liberal pressures on the labor markets changing the established power relations and challenging the unions' ability to bargain and protect workers' rights. Also, it has been argued that demand for flexibility in the globalized "network economy" is increasing the informalisation and precarisation of work through offshoring, outsourcing, sub-contracting, and an overall diminution in working conditions. Labour market flexibilization is re-enforced and perpetuates ethnic, racial and gender segmentations. While workers everywhere are caught up in these changes, migrants, by virtue largely of their lack of societal connectedness, often experience a particular deterioration of conditions and social rights.

Thus the question of trade union movement's willingness and ability to protect the rights of migrant workers is intimately tied to the larger changes in the European labor markets (Hyland 2012).

Welfare states and immigration

Furthermore, the Nordic welfare states are based on a shared political goal of encouraging strong social cohesion. The Nordic social model is known for the universal nature of its welfare provision, which is based on the core values of equal opportunities, social solidarity and security for all. The model promotes social rights and the principle that everyone is entitled to equal access to social and health services, education and culture. This applies particularly to the vulnerable groups in society. A central goal is to create opportunities for all to take part in the social life and in the decision-making process in society. Today, in the Nordic welfare states the provision of services is largely based on a partnership between the public authorities, and third sector partners, including the trade unions. Especially a great share of the employment related benefits have been secured and partly provided by the trade unions, and as such, trade unions produce some of the significant practices of the welfare state, and are some of its most significant actors. At the same time globalisation has created an economically, socially and spatially integrated world. Labour diasporas have formed dense social networks intimately integrated into the spatial expansion of global capitalism. As such there is no escaping the fact of labour migration and it is increasingly difficult to conceive of coherent social policy that would not take migrant workers into account (Hyland 2012).

It has been also argued that especially in the Nordic countries, the idea that participating in the labor markets is the best way for immigrants to get integrated into society. This argument has been made for a number of reasons; one of them being that participation in the labor markets can increase immigrant human capital. This argument has also been made, because the Nordic welfare states depend on high employment rates, and at the wake of the large demographic challenge, immigrant labor is hoped to partially ease the challenge. Immi-

grant access to the labor market is however largely controlled, by the tripartite governing structure of the Finnish industrial relations. The Finnish labor markets can be described as highly organized, with relatively high levels of co-operation and consensus between the trade unions, employers' organizations and the state. Collective bargaining covers most parts of the labor market, and corporatist, tripartite decision making and implementation is relatively widespread. As such, the role of trade unions, together with the employers and the state, can be argued to be not only a welfare producing agent, but also one of a gate-keeper, controlling the access to and benefits of working life. Thus the way in which- and whose interests trade unions deem important to represent is a critical question.

Lastly, if none of the previous reasons convinced you, perhaps the classic reason will: The question how the Finnish trade union movement has responded to immigration and the well documented ethnic discrimination has been poorly studied in Finland, and in the international comparative literature the Finnish responses are completely lacking.

Social psychology and industrial relations

While typical labor union research is founded in theories of industrial relations, political science, economics and sociology, this research analyzes the response of the Finnish trade unions to immigration and ethnic discrimination mainly with social psychology theories of attitudes and social roles.

Why choose this unorthodox combination of theories to study these questions? What can social psychological theories tell us about organizations or movements this large, their culture, the attitudes they hold, and the behaviors exhibited in them?

Social psychology as an academic discipline bridges the theories from personality psychology and sociology. As a discipline it is particularly interested in people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and how they are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others. The basic tenet in social psychology is that human beings' behavior is influenced by the presence of others, be it real or imagined, and that social context serves to produce similar kinds of behaviors in humans.

Social psychologists have for a long time been studying questions of stereotyping, power, roles and attitudes, and their affect in people's behavior and organizational culture. Especially attitude research has been extensively applied to questions related to working life and labor markets. A particularly useful theory extensively applied in the study of gender and labour markets is that of the role congruity theory.

Role congruity theory, developed by Eagly and Diekmann posits that a group will be positively evaluated when its characteristics are perceived to align with the requirements of the group's typical social roles. Social roles may thus form the basis of norms that prescribe valued behavior for groups of people. According to the theory, prejudice arises from an incongruity between a group stereotype and social role characteristics, in other words the attributes and behaviors prescribed by those social roles. Prejudice occurs when members of a group enter or attempt to enter into social roles that are stereotypically mismatched for their group (Eagly and Diekmann 2005).

Furthermore, as I was not only interested in the positive or negative evaluations of immigrants on a likert type of scale, as attitudes have traditionally been studied, but rather in the way in which trade unionists conceptualize immigrants and their roles, I used a relational definition of an attitude, where by attitudes are understood as a relationship between an individual and his or her environment, and the representations that the individual makes of the environment. Specifically I wanted to find out what kinds of representations of an immigrant do the trade unionists produce and how are these attitudes reproduced within the organization? In order to analyze the attitudes of the trade unionists towards immigrants in this relational fashion, I used a fairly new attitude analysis method, loosely translated as qualitative attitude analysis, a relative of the discourse analysis.

Billig, the theoretical father of the qualitative attitude analysis, has argued that attitudes can be understood to as a position or a standpoint on a controversial question (Billig 1996). He believes that attitudes come out in a social context more so than are some kind of internal personality characteristics. Billig has also argued that attitudes

can be studied as something shared within social groups. So, for the present study, the response of the trade union movement to immigration, is studied through the attitudes held by the trade unionists towards immigrants, when attitudes are understood as a discursive and relational concept, produced within a social context, in this case focus groups (Billig 1996).

By using social psychological theories, such as the social role congruity theory, I was able to analyze not only how Finnish trade unionist view immigrants and ethnic discrimination, but also how the perceived immigrant characteristics impact the ideas and goals of the service provision for the entire diverse group of migrants.

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