Kann Solidarität „von unten“ in globalen Zuliefererketten organisiert werden? Der Fall ExChains

Zusammenfassung


Schlagwörter: Arbeit, Zwangsarbeit, Arbeitsdiskriminierung, Arbeitsbedingungen

* Dr. Nora Lohmeyer, wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin im Garment Supply Chain Governance Project, Freie Universität Berlin. E-Mail: nora.lohmeyer@fu-berlin.de
Prof. Dr. Elke Schüßler, Professorin für Betriebswirtschaftslehre und Vorständin des Instituts für Organisation, Johannes Kepler Universität Linz. E-Mail: elke.schuessler@jku.at
Prof. Dr. Markus Helfen, Professor für Betriebswirtschaftslehre mit dem Schwerpunkt Personalpolitik, Institut für Organisation und Lernen, Universität Innsbruck. E-Mail: markus.helfen@uibk.ac.at

** Artikel eingegangen: 15.05.2018, revidierte Fassung akzeptiert nach doppelt-blindem Begutachtungsverfahren: 10.09.2018
Can solidarity be organized "from below" in global supply chains? The case of ExChains

Abstract

Global supply chains in the garment industry are marked by labour standard violations in factories as well as retail stores. Against this background it is important to strengthen the bargaining power of workers along the supply chain. Establishing direct relationships among workers along the supply chain could be one way to achieve this aim. This paper builds on extant literature on transnational solidarity and highlights the specific challenges of understanding solidarity in a transnational social space by looking at the empirical context of global garment supply chains. It thereby seeks to go beyond treating “solidarity” as a mere metaphor for any form of transnational union or worker cooperation, and instead engages with the cultural-normative dimensions of the concept as referring to mutual bonds among groups of workers. By looking at the case of the ExChains network, this paper examines some of the opportunities and challenges involved in establishing and maintaining transnational worker solidarity. The paper concludes by discussing the transformative potential, but also the limits of transnational labour solidarity regarding substandard working conditions in global supply chains.

Keywords: Labor, coercive labor markets, labor discrimination, labor standards (JEL: J47, J5, J7, J8)

1. Introduction

Global supply chains in the garment industry are marked by labour standard violations not only in supplier factories typically in the “Global South”, but also increasingly in retail stores in the “Global North”. Workers in garment production often suffer from excessive overtime, low wages, and various forms of harassment and abuse in addition to potentially deadly health and safety risks (e.g. Schüßler, Frenkel & Wright, 2018). Often, collective representation to establish bargaining power is made difficult by adverse regulation and aggressive anti-unionism in the countries where production is located. But also garment retail workers—although usually not risking their lives at work—suffer from the comparatively poor working conditions in the retail sector relative to other sectors (e.g. Anner, 2015). In retail, the often female part-time workers with a migration background face severe constraints for effective collective action and are subject to high demands for working time flexibility, wages below the national minimum, an intensification of work, verbal abuse, and various forms of managerial control and surveillance (Appelbaum & Schmitt, 2009; Grugulis & Bozkurt, 2011; Köhnen, 2006; Wirth, 2016). Garment retailers and brands in particular have previously been described as being hostile towards unionization and worker representation (Geppert, Williams & Wortmann, 2015; Geppert & Pastuh, 2017).

Numerous scholars from diverse backgrounds have argued that transnational labour collaboration is needed to counter unilateral management power in internationally segment-ed and dispersed global supply chains (e.g. Anner, 2000; 2009; Gordon & Turner, 2000; Juravich, 2007; Stevis & Boswell, 2007; Croucher & Cotton, 2009; Bieler & Lindberg, 2011). This literature agrees that transnational labour relations need to go beyond single campaigns or initiatives because effective pressure on multinational corporations (MNCs) to improve labour standards ultimately needs to be grounded in well-coordinated cooperation...
and collaboration among unions and their potential allies (Luterbacher, Prosser & Papadakis, 2017). However, such coordination and collaboration is difficult to establish for reasons like divergent interests and structural differences between unions in the core and the periphery of supply chains, power struggles among unions, exclusive union strategies as well as the lack of resources for transnational activities of trade unions and their global federations (see e.g. Bieler & Erne, 2014 for transnational union activism and its limits in Europe). Not surprisingly, in the face of these challenges, the literature is mostly sceptical regarding the potential for transnational mobilizing and organizing of workers in global production and retail alike (e.g. Burawoy, 2010; Frege & Kelly, 2004; Gennard & Newsome, 2005; Greer, Ciupijus & Lillie, 2013).

In this paper, we argue that the literature tends to analytically equate coordination and collaboration among unions and union federations with the idea of transnational solidarity. It hereby overlooks the cultural-normative dimension of effective union coordination and collaboration that builds on direct worker interaction and mobilization “on the ground”. Against this background, we examine more closely the barriers and possibilities for strengthening solidarity among workers as the normative-cultural glue of transnational labour coordination and collaboration by empirically examining a “grassroots initiative” aimed at connecting workers in different positions in global supply chains: the ExChains network in the global garment industry. ExChains was founded by members of the German trade union Ver.di in 2002 with the aim to build transnational solidarity among workers in garment production and retail by raising issues such as better fire and work protection, higher wages, trade union access rights and supplier transparency from the bottom up. It is a particularly interesting case for studying transnational aspects of solidarity, as it allows us to examine how traditional notions of craft or class solidarity (Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014) extend to or need to be refined in the new context of global production. In this effort, we refrain from treating “solidarity” as a mere metaphor for any form of transnational union cooperation or collaboration. Instead, we engage directly with solidarity as the cultural-normative dimension of labour cooperation and collaboration (also Fantasia, 1988; 1995), defining solidarity as the mutual bonds among groups of workers that are built around a communal sense of obligation to support collective action.

In what follows, we critically examine the previous literature on transnational solidarity and discuss the problems of a structurally over-determined view on transnational labour collaboration and labour power. We then examine the ExChains network as an illustrative case of the opportunities and challenges of establishing and maintaining transnational solidarity among workers. We conclude by discussing the transformative potential of transnational labour solidarity of this sort with regards to substandard working conditions.

2. Transnational solidarity in global supply chains

The concept of solidarity—as distinguished from more structural aspects of unions’ collective action (Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014)—adds an understanding of the cultural-normative dimension of structural, associational, institutional, and societal power of workers. In the employment relations literature, worker solidarity is widely regarded as a basic