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European Journal of Industrial Relations

Volume 14 Number 3 pp 289–308 www.sagepublications.com

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ABSTRACT ▪ The European works council (EWC) at General Motors is widely regarded as an outstanding example of cross-border trade union cooperation. This article reconstructs its development as a European trade union 'risk community', which since the mid-1990s has faced unprecedented challenges to workers' interests as a result of intra-European competition for investment and GM's strategy of corporate globalization. To a limited extent, the EWC offered a European solution to local and national problems, but cross-border cooperation has remained fragile and issue-specific, and has implied a Eurocentric notion of trade union internationalism.
KEYWORDS: European works councils ▪ General Motors ▪ international trade unionism ▪ solidarity

Introduction

Since the early 1990s European works councils (EWC) have attracted a great deal of attention by industrial relations scholars. Research output has grown impressively, but was long dominated by a debate whether or not EWCs represent a breakthrough towards transnational industrial relations and trade unionism. 'Optimists', starting from agency-based assumptions, considered labour representatives' capacity to overcome linguistic, cultural and trust barriers as the crucial variable. Where this capacity was strong, an EWC would progress through different stages, from pure information recipients to negotiation partners (Lecher et al., 1999). 'Pessimists', by contrast, emphasized structural factors hampering the emergence of transnational union solidarity in EWCs. They suggested that the councils would even heighten rather than ease regime competition by which national labour representatives are pitted against each other in conflicts over jobs and investment (Streeck, 1997).

Whilst useful in laying out different methodological avenues available for EWC research, the limits of both optimist and pessimist approaches were revealed by the strong variation in concrete EWC experience.

DOI: 10.1177/0959680108094136

Consequently, scholars have turned to the analysis of the conditions under which EWCs do or do not become active European players. Kotthoff (2006), Marginson (2000) and Marginson et al. (2004), for example, have convincingly demonstrated that EWC effectiveness is crucially dependent on factors such as the degree of company internationalization and the existence of autonomous European management structures. By implication, there is no automatism of EWCs developing from information committees into 'social actors' (Lecher) through learning and trust-building processes on the union side. Indeed, in the absence of facilitating factors, labour representatives may lack any incentive to ask for the establishment of a EWC; it is noteworthy in this regard that ten years after the adoption of the directive, under half the firms covered by the legislation have set up councils (Knudsen et al., 2007).

Against the pessimist position it has been correctly maintained that the link between EWC development and regime competition is more complex than often assumed. According to circumstances, worker representatives' experiences of being played off against each other may either provoke mutual distrust or act as a motive to enhance cross-border cooperation. In fact, several authors have found that strong EWCs often develop in companies with a high degree of inter-firm investment and job competition (Anner et al., 2006; Kotthoff, 2006).

This article adds to these insights with a case study of trade union cooperation in the EWC at General Motors (GM) Europe. Assessments of this EWC have changed radically since the late 1990s, when the company was presented as clear evidence for the arguments of 'pessimists' (Hancké, 2000). Today, it is widely regarded as being a paradigm of EWC effectiveness, hardly matched in any other firm (Carley and Hall, 2006; Whittall et al., 2007). There are good descriptive accounts of the dynamics culminating in the conclusion of several framework agreements since 2000 between the EWC and GM's European management; they reveal the achievements yet also the limits of cross-border union cooperation, as EWC negotiations did not replace but supplemented local and national bargaining (Banyuls and Haipeter, 2007; da Costa and Rehfeldt, 2007; Pulignano, 2006; Rehfeldt, 2004). However, interpretations offered for the 'vanguard' role of the EWC are neither fully convincing empirically (see below) nor theoretically grounded. Moreover, the importance of corporate globalization for EWC development is not addressed.

The interpretation offered in this article is based on the notion of 'risk community', which is derived on the one hand from existing EWC research, and on the other from theoretical and historical scholarship about international trade union cooperation. I argue that GM union representatives from different countries have supported transnational action through the EWC because the labour market interests of their constituencies were negatively affected by the company's transnational business strategies, and because they perceived a mutual dependence in order to counter this threat. While GM's European trade unionists were thus united by a *shared sense of vulnerability*, their joint initiatives were limited to the search for broad 'safety barriers' and did not overcome the perspective of inter-plant competition.

General Motors and its EWC

GM is the world's largest automotive group, headquartered in Detroit and with a strong presence in Europe, employing around 60,000 workers. Its European engagement reaches back to the 1920s, when the firm opened assembly facilities in Belgium and Denmark and acquired Vauxhall Motors in Luton (UK) and Adam Opel AG in Rüsselsheim (Germany). After 1945 its German operations expanded strongly, leading in the 1960s to the opening of new plants in Bochum and Kaiserslautern (Dassbach, 1989). Germany remains by far the largest European GM location, accounting for some 40 percent of total employment. Vauxhall fell behind from the late 1960s despite the launch of an additional facility at Ellesmere Port, a trend which was accelerated with the partial closure of the Luton plant in 2000 (Holden, 2003). GM diversified its European production geography from the late 1970s, opening a large manufacturing complex in Zaragoza (Spain) and component facilities in France and Austria. Since the fall of the iron curtain, new plants have been established in Eisenach (East Germany), Poland (Gliwice), Hungary (Esztergom) and Russia (Togliatti). GM's merger with Saab added a strong Swedish component (assembly at Trollhättan) (Bordenave and Lung, 2003).

GM's European production geography is reflected in the composition of the company's EWC, which is formally called 'European Employee Forum'. It was set up in 1996 under Article 13 of the EWC directive, and since 2000 has comprised 29 employee delegates: six from Germany, four from the UK, three each from Belgium, Spain and Sweden, two each from France and Austria, and one each from Denmark, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, Hungary, and Portugal. The EWC has been chaired by the president of the central Opel works council, first Rudolf Müller, later Klaus Franz, with the deputy position taken by the Belgian trade unionist Rudy Kennes.

The development of the EWC towards a status as negotiation partner of GM European management is well-documented, and need not be rehearsed in detail here. The first agreement was concluded in the year 2000 regarding GM's European power train operations, which were to be transferred into a joint venture with Fiat; it gave long-term employment and wage guarantees for the workers concerned. In the spring of 2001 the EWC negotiated a second European framework agreement in the wake of a crisis over the Luton plant, and the following October another agreement related to a European restructuring programme was concluded (Herber and Schäfer-Klug, 2002; Klebe and Roth, 2000). In October 2004, the EWC opposed company plans for the closure of a European plant, resulting in fresh negotiations concluded two months later. In parallel, the body became involved in the process of investment allocation for the new Vectra/Saab ranges (Bartmann, 2005). This trend has recently been reinforced through active EWC participation in the 'site selection process' for the next generation of 'Delta' (Astra) vehicles involving the plants in Bochum, Antwerp, Ellesmere Port, Trollhättan and Gliwice (Banyuls and Haipeter, 2007). Most of these negotiations were accompanied by 'European action days', with token strikes or demonstrations in the different European plants.

Data for this article were collected using primary and secondary sources. Most importantly, the analysis is based on unpublished trade union documents in Germany and the UK going back to the late 1980s, and the local and national press in both countries, for the most recent period supplemented by the use of Internet-based sources and documents published by the European Metalworkers Federation (EMF) and the GM EWC itself. In addition, a small number of semi-structured interviews were conducted with trade union officials and works councillors in the UK and Germany. The limited amount of interview-based evidence may be regarded as a methodological shortcoming, partially offset however by the extensive use of written sources. Moreover, the article focuses on trade union perceptions of changing company structures and strategies, rather than on the chronology of concrete actions and events, for which more interview-based sources would indeed be indispensable.

EWCs as Trade Union 'Risk Communities': Conceptual Considerations

The notion of *risk* community is based, first of all, on the assumption that national trade unions will seek international cooperation when they perceive international economic processes as threatening the labour market interests of their members, most importantly with regard to job security and wage levels. This reading follows the interpretation put forward by Logue (1980), who argues that national unions are unlikely to launch major international initiatives in the absence of concrete labour market problems which they are unable to tackle by exclusively national means of action. This limited nature of trade union internationalism reflects the fact that unions are democratically constituted organizations; their representatives are accountable to local and national constituencies and tend to view international issues through domestic lenses (Logue, 1980). This implies that organized labour faces a structural problem of parochialism (Offe and Wiesenthal, 1980).

Recent research demonstrates that this interpretation can be applied to EWCs. For example, a study of EWC involvement in processes of transnational restructuring (Carley and Hall, 2006) points out that these are likely to trigger EWC activity only where labour representatives perceive them to have a negative impact on employment security.

Yet this is only half the story. Undoubtedly pressure on employment and wage standards has been high in the West European motor industry since the early 1990s, as a result of slower demand growth and heightened competition in the wake of the Single European Market and the fall of the iron curtain (Dicken, 2007). However, this pressure, reflected in frequent cost-driven rationalization programmes coupled to management techniques of whipsawing and international performance benchmarking, has been observable in *all* major firms (Zagelmeyer, 2000). The question is why worker representatives turned the EWC into an instrument of transnational negotiation over corporate restructuring only at GM and Ford, whose EWC has also played a very active role since 2000 (Carley and Hall, 2006; Klebe and Roth, 2000).

The notion of risk *community* is suggested here to account for this difference. Compared to the situation in firms like Volkswagen, Fiat, or Renault the interests of national trade unions and works councils at GM have been *more evenly* affected by processes of corporate internationalization. To a greater extent than in the other companies, GM labour representatives have perceived internationalization as a *common* threat.

This perception has an internal and an external dimension. With regard to the former, da Costa and Rehfeldt (2007) argue that EWC activity at GM has benefited from the fact that the company headquarters is in the USA, which prevented European unions from seeking national solutions. Other explanatory factors put forward by da Costa and Rehfeldt, for example high trade union density, a long tradition of cross-border contacts and the leading role of German representatives, are less convincing: all apply equally, for example, to Volkswagen. And as Marginson et al. (2004) demonstrate, American ownership does not ‘guarantee’ the emergence of an active EWC. The crucial point is that US-owned firms seem more likely than their European-owned counterparts to display a number of structural characteristics, which apply to GM: a high degree of cross-border integration, wide geographical spread of European operations and relatively autonomous European management structures. From the point of view of national unions, this pattern translates into a strong awareness of mutual vulnerability and of the limited effectiveness of national channels of influence (Kotthoff, 2006).

This contrasts with the situation in EU-based car producers. While the latter, in particular Volkswagen, have also moved towards European integration of facilities, there is still a very strong focus of ‘production geography’ on the home country (Dicken, 2007). Moreover, these firms lack an independent European management: European strategies are decided in the national headquarters in Wolfsburg, Paris or Turin.

A common threat perception is thus less likely to emerge in EU-based firms, as national unions in the home country retain a privileged position in two crucial respects. First, they can to some extent rely on the need of these firms to retain a positive image in the eyes of national governments and public opinions: witness the attempted or actual closures of foreign rather than domestic production plants by Renault, Volkswagen and Peugeot over the last decade. Second, labour representatives in the ‘core’ countries have few incentives to turn EWCs into negotiating bodies since they dispose of national channels of influence. In Volkswagen, for example, the EWC has been sidelined because the company’s supervisory board has remained the crucial arena for decision-making over international corporate strategy. There have been intensive cross-border union contacts even beyond Europe but they have always been conducted under the leadership of German employee representatives who have become, to a certain extent, ‘advocates of the diaspora’ (Kotthoff) in negotiations with German management. For their counterparts in other countries, however, this has at times raised the question ‘whether home country employee representatives use their influence . . . in ways that are of benefit to employees Europe-wide or whether it is used more to further or protect their national interests’ (Carley and Hall, 2006: 67).

Turning to the external dimension of ‘risk community’, it is astonishing how little attention EWC research has so far paid to processes of economic globalization. Some studies have pointed to the role of EWCs in the elaboration of global codes of conduct by multinational firms, while others have described how the existence of EWCs can trigger a dynamic towards voluntary global works councils (Miller, 2004, Müller et al., 2004). Yet, these activities are mostly regarded as stepping stones for a global regulatory regime, rather than as consciously *European* strategies to deal with economic globalization. That the most active EWCs are to be found in non-European firms has usually been explained with *exclusive* reference to these companies’ lack of a national centre, which, as the GM case shows, is indeed a crucial factor. The only hint at a potential role of an external dimension is provided by Huijgen et al. (2007: 224), who suggest that the strong profile of EWCs in companies like Ford or GM might be the result of an identity projection in which ‘the “Other” is located outside Europe’. Yet they do not develop this argument further.

This lack of attention to the external dimension is surprising not least because aspects of global economic change have played a prominent role for the agenda of European integration since the the late 1980s, reflected in the growth of a literature on ‘new regionalism’, which conceptualizes

Europe as one among several regional blocs whose interactions constitute the global political economy. European institutions are seen to have acquired functions in relation to the challenges that globalization incurs upon European nation-states (Breslin, 2002; Fort and Webber, 2006).

These are important elements for the study of EWCs since their emergence in the 1990s was clearly linked to the growing if vague discourse about a 'European social model', a response not least to concerns to safeguard European welfare regimes. EWCs appear to reflect a shared European commitment to collectively organized industrial relations in contrast to the American model of deregulated labour markets and the management-dominated Japanese model of company-level employment relations (Hyman, 2005).

In a more mundane sense, EWCs can be seen as new vehicles of interest representation for European workforces in processes of global company restructuring. Like Ford, GM has made considerable though not always successful efforts towards global integration of its operations over the last decade (Bordenave and Lung, 2003). This process, described in more detail below, has translated into a second level of common threat for GM trade unionists in Europe. Alongside the perception of *mutual vulnerability within Europe*, worker representatives have also developed a sense of *shared European vulnerability* vis-à-vis GM locations in other world regions. This is again in marked contrast to the situation in EU-based companies. While Europe has always been the 'junior partner' within GM's global operations, most European firms have remained strongly Eurocentric in their production geographies (Dicken, 2007), and they have also been much less prone to engage in global rationalization schemes (Freyssenet et al., 2003). Moreover, even in cases such as the abortive Daimler–Chrysler merger where the non-European dimension became temporarily prominent, this was not an incentive for more EWC activity. Given that the bulk of Daimler–Chrysler's European production was in Germany, and that global strategy was designed through coordination between the national headquarters in Germany and the United States, the representation of 'European interests' was largely irrelevant.

Focusing our analysis on the interaction between company structures and union labour market interests does not mean that we deny the importance of other factors contributing to the dynamic development of the EWC at General Motors, such as personal relations between delegates, the pre-history of cross-border union contacts or the role played by national unions and the EMF (da Costa and Rehfeldt, 2007; Pulignano, 2006). It is clear that a perception of shared vulnerability does not in itself 'guarantee' the adoption of common objectives by worker representatives, and still less the actual effectiveness of an EWC. Perceptions need to be translated into action through political strategies, and whether these will be successful depends not least on management attitudes and policies. A systematic analysis of these aspects is beyond the scope of this article, and the explanatory ambition is confined to proposing a set of conditions which – given their reflection in the perceptions of worker representatives themselves – seem crucial elements favouring the development of the EWC.

A European Trade Union 'Risk Community': Internal Dimension

The EWC's agenda for negotiations with European management at GM demonstrates the salience of risk and threat perceptions. With the partial exception of the agreement related to the Fiat joint venture in 2000, bargaining positions usually concentrated on two basic demands: European restructuring should occur without entire production sites being closed, and employment cutbacks should be implemented without compulsory redundancies (Carley and Hall, 2006). In addition, and increasingly in recent years, there was a concern to protect established local and national wages and conditions (Bartmann, 2005).

These EWC demands reflect an essentially defensive posture against GM's regular exercises in European restructuring, aimed since the mid-1990s at headcount and labour cost reductions. In one sense, this was not much different from the situation in other European car firms. Against the background of heightened competition, all companies pursued strategies of cost-driven rationalization coupled to techniques of international performance benchmarking, to which unions, rather than opposing this agenda in principle, responded by insisting on socially responsible restructuring (Zagelmeyer, 2000).

What was peculiar about GM, however, was the conscious attempt to 'share the pain' across Europe, and hence to empower the EWC to conduct European-level negotiations. To reiterate our central argument, the main reason was that to a greater extent than in other companies, worker representatives perceived GM's restructuring programmes as a *common* threat. This perception, in turn, mirrored the specificities of GM's European structures and strategies. First, its production facilities are highly integrated across the continent. Largely standardized European vehicles are each produced in several locations and countries, supplemented by extensive cross-border shipments of components. The integration process which dates back to the mid-1970s acquired crucial momentum in the late 1980s in response to the Single European Market project (Dassbach, 1989). The company now frequently threatened to shift production and investments between locations, and used such threats to obtain trade union concessions, such as a reform of shift systems (Mueller and Purcell, 1992). This led GM trade unionists to reflect on the necessity for European-level consultation. In Germany, IG Metall president Franz Steinkühler referred explicitly to Ford and GM in

April 1988, calling for an EWC because of the dangers concession bargaining in foreign subsidiaries of multinational firms implied for German employment and wage standards.

Since the mid-1990s the problem has magnified as GM, constantly losing market share between 1995 and 2004, has been faced with an almost permanent problem of overcapacity. Threats of relocation of production and consequential plant closure have become recurrent; and, more than in the case of EU-based firms, such threats have hung in a similar way over many of GM's European plants, as the company devised ever more sophisticated methods of internal competition. Though not all plants have been vulnerable to closure to the same extent, it is nevertheless significant that EWC agreements often occurred when cutback threats affected several locations: Bochum, Antwerp and Zaragoza in autumn 2001, Rüsselsheim and Trollhättan in 2004 (Bartmann, 2005), all West European 'Delta' plants in 2007.

Apart from GM's strong capacity for cross-border asset-switching, this common perception of threat has been favoured by the geographical dispersion of GM facilities, and by the existence of an autonomous European management organization. The potential even for German unions, representing some 40 percent of European GM workers, to 'play the national card' has been very limited. It is true that suspicions about a 'German bias' in GM's European strategy have arisen repeatedly among unionists from other locations. Recent management comments justifying cutbacks at Antwerp rather than Bochum with reference to the need to retain a good brand image in GM's largest European market have confirmed that this is indeed to some extent the case.

However, German unions at GM can rely on such a logic to a much lesser extent than, say, their counterparts at Volkswagen, which needs to defend a German market share that is twice the level of GM. Still more importantly, Opel worker representatives lack the privileged access to corporate decision-making enjoyed by their colleagues at VW. In 1986 GM decided to shift the coordination functions of its European business from the Opel headquarters in Rüsselsheim to Zurich, strongly enhancing the autonomy of the new European organization and hence the ability of the company to deploy credible threats of investment switching in negotiations with *all* national unions.

Moreover, European and national GM managers often deliberately raise uncertainty as to the outcome of the regular rounds of corporate restructuring. A senior Opel manager publicly argued in 1993 that strategies to heighten competition between European locations could, if applied in 'small doses', be used to accelerate efficiency improvements in the whole European group. On several occasions, rumours of impending cutbacks were spread by top managers talking in general terms about the urgent need to cut European overcapacity, or even claiming that GM needed to close one or several of its European plants. Such statements often triggered a wave of speculation in different countries, further fuelled by public debates about the complex character of investment and cutback decisions in the motor industry.

The sense of a shared European vulnerability reflects not only the impact of such management tactics but also the failed attempts of national unions themselves to 'go it alone', that is, to deal with crises through purely domestic means. During the 1990s, national unions had actively contributed to inter-plant competition through unilateral and often secret negotiations with local or national management, deliberately designed to obtain investment at the expense of other locations. The basic feature was always the same: in exchange for management commitments to future investment, unions agreed to wage cuts or measures to improve labour productivity. As Hancké (2000) argues, the origin of this type of bargaining clearly lay with the IG Metall where the concept of *Standortsicherung* (protecting production locations, implying that this would be at the expense of other locations) was elevated to a national strategy from the early 1990s. The central Opel works council concluded the first such agreement in 1993, followed in late 1997 by a similar deal. The latter caused a spiral of 'domino' concession bargaining; within weeks of the German negotiations similar agreements were signed in Belgium, Spain and the UK.

It was not least this experience that made European trade unionists at GM understand their mutual vulnerability. British delegates were particularly critical, pointing to the 'knock-on' effects of investment agreements in Germany and Belgium on plants in the UK and the inactivity of the EWC in this regard. In their cumulative effect the national agreements further heightened inter-plant competition, since management investment commitments significantly added to the overcapacity problem within the European operations. The closure of Vectra assembly at Luton in 2000 demonstrated that GM's European management did not recoil from reneging upon agreements entered into shortly before (Holden, 2003) and hence that national deals were no guarantee for future job security. Moreover, a continuation of unilateral national negotiations in the context of GM's European structures appeared to translate into ever new rounds of 'domino bargaining', and hence in a race to the bottom with dangerous implications for wages and working conditions in *all* European GM locations. This strongly strengthened the belief in the need for at least a minimum degree of cross-border understanding to protect local and national collective labour standards in the longer term (Herber and Schäfer-Klug, 2002). The use of metaphors like 'safety barrier' to describe EWC framework agreements signals the awareness of national representatives that in the peculiar circumstances of GM they could no longer autonomously safeguard their labour market interests.

The practical procedural consequence was a mutual commitment by local and national representatives to refrain from unilateral concession bargaining in situations of European restructuring, prior to the conclusion of a framework agreement by the EWC. While this could appear easy to implement in occasions of 'sharing losses' it is a complex task in processes of investment allocation. In the recent 'Delta' case, for example, European management had set cost-saving targets for individual plants, and agreed to negotiate with the EWC only after the representatives from each 'Delta' plant had provided a 'letter of intent' revealing their potential commitment to achieve these cost savings in the event of a positive allocation decision.

This last point reveals that the increasingly active role of the EWC cannot be taken to mean that local and national bargaining arenas have been losing importance, and still less that worker representatives are in the process of abandoning their local and national allegiances in search of a transnational European identity. In fact, all the EWC agreements stipulate that most of the detailed restructuring measures are to be carried out at domestic level, and the implications of these measures for individual sites have often been very different (Pulignano, 2006). Unsurprisingly, therefore, the degree of support given to the EWC by the locations also varies; it can hardly be considered a coincidence, for example, that the date chosen for the most recent 'European action day' in May 2007 coincided with a national holiday in Poland, which gave an easy justification for the non-participation of workers at Gliwice, where relatively little will change as a result of the 'Delta' process. Yet Polish union representatives did not oppose EWC initiatives, not least because the future of their plant does not appear totally safe either. As Meardi (2004) has argued, relocations of production since EU enlargement have occurred westwards *and* eastwards; more specifically in the case of GM, the Gliwice plant has itself already been affected by a small production relocation to another East European facility run by GM in a joint venture with Suzuki (Banyuls and Haipeter, 2007).

The EWC continuously faces the task of reconciling diverging local and national interests; in fact, next to providing 'safety barriers' its most important objective seems to be the elaboration of accepted rules for 'fair competition' between locations, such as the transparency of investment tenders and the definition of 'bottom lines' for wage concessions (Bartmann, 2005). The EWC and the associated EMF committee act as a 'clearing house' for conflicts between locations, as, for example in 2004 when Belgian and British delegates complained about the infringement of the transparency principle by the Bochum works council (Telljohann, 2007). The coexistence of an active EWC and continued inter-plant competition is perhaps best illustrated by the comments of the Belgian EWC vice-chair Kennes after the recent 'Delta' affair: while expressing satisfaction that European cooperation allowed the Antwerp plant to remain open despite having lost out on Astra production, he nevertheless criticized management's selection decision as driven by brand considerations rather than productivity, which would have favoured the Belgian site.

In fact, in the national context trade union positions continue to reflect inter-plant competition. In the UK, for example, support for the EWC has since the late 1990s been combined with a lobby directed at the national government for a 'European level playing field' in terms of labour law. The campaign was based on the suspicion that multinational firms, among them GM, often singled out UK sites to bear the brunt of restructuring because it was cheaper and easier to dismiss people in Britain than on the continent. The underlying logic is expressed in the 'level playing field' metaphor: the aim is to ensure fair rules of competition between European countries.

The reasons for the continued attachment of trade unions to 'their' national context are well-known and need not be rehearsed here (Pasture and Verberckmoes, 1998). It is useful to recall though that similar conflicts arise *within* countries (Hoffmann, 2006). Indeed, they are particularly difficult to avoid in situations of competition for *new* investment since local strategies are often adapted to specific circumstances, which are difficult to translate into a logic of redistribution (Kristensen and Zeitlin, 2005).

The more important point for the analysis is that competition between locations in itself does not prevent the development of EWCs. At GM, worker representatives realized that to some extent they were all in the same boat and that no national group could achieve its objectives without a degree of cross-border cooperation. So far, we have looked at this pattern from an intra-European perspective. The analysis now turns to the external dimension of the European trade union 'risk community'.

A European Trade Union 'Risk Community': External Dimension

As indicated above, this external dimension is closely connected to changes in global corporate strategy, two elements of which should be distinguished. First, GM embarked on a radical process of global product standardization. New models were developed on 'global platforms', designed to rationalize the various model ranges sold throughout the world. This globalization process was far from linear; it suffered setbacks because of market constraints, and was contested within the company, illustrated most drastically in the open fight between GM International and Opel management in 1997. Yet the overall direction continued, and as a result European operations became much more integrated into the global company (Bordenave and Lung, 2003). Since 2004 this process has further accelerated as Detroit has increased its corporate control over the regional company groupings in Europe, Asia and Latin America (Banyuls and Haipeter, 2007).

Second, GM's global production geography changed significantly. On the one hand, its European borders shifted east with the new plants in East Germany, Poland, and Hungary. On the other hand, GM invested in new growth areas outside the 'triad' countries, engaging in large-scale joint ventures in Russia and China, and taking over the Korean manufacturer Daewoo. As a consequence, the relative position of the traditional European operations declined (Bordenave and Lung, 2003).

Against this background, the active role of the EWC has been favoured not only by union perceptions of mutual vulnerability within Europe but also by fears for the future of European operations within GM's global architecture. Moreover, the importance of European management structures for union strategies further increased, since GM's global strategies were the result of interactions between Detroit and the regional divisions in North America, Europe, Latin America, and Asia.

The link between 'European interests' and corporate globalization was already discernible in the first preparatory encounters leading up to the creation of the EWC in the mid-1990s. Leading Opel works councillors spoke of the necessity for a new 'European thinking' when GM was investing large sums in other parts of the world. British representatives warned that GM's new plants in Asia were a threat to long-term employment prospects in Europe. After the EWC was established in 1996, similar fears continued to be expressed; the German EWC chair warned that accelerated investments in Asia, partly financed from European profits, would come at the expense of necessary improvements of European products and facilities.

EWC concerns were related to both elements of GM's corporate globalization. There was a great deal of anxiety about its shifting production geography. German employee representatives had protested in 1993 against employment cuts and wage concessions by arguing that it was thanks to 'German profits' that GM had been able to invest in other *European* operations in Belgium, Spain and Sweden. Now the same argument was shifted a level 'higher': profits made in 'Europe' should be reinvested there rather than used for GM's global expansion plans.

The new global platform strategy equally caused apprehension because it made production in European locations to some extent substitutable across continents. Future investments and jobs could no longer be taken for granted by virtue of the company's need to sell a distinctly European model range. Moreover, the platform concept increased GM's benchmarking options with regard to production processes. Indeed, the first joint EWC action was a protest against the 'template' project in 1997, a study designed to quantify potential cost savings in European manufacturing operations against the benchmark of GM's NUMMI plant in the

USA (Rehder, 2003). Leading EWC representatives also argued that GM's European workers were already paying the price for the misconceived strategy of global product standardization, which had prevented the development of vehicles in tune with European market demand. Again, this argument had previously been used by the German works council to request more independence for *national* management and the Opel brand. Now it was 'Europeanized': the EWC claimed that GM's 'European brands' Opel, Saab and Vauxhall needed more autonomy and a more European product profile to achieve a turnaround in sales, and hence a stabilization of employment prospects.

Since 2000 the importance of corporate globalization for GM's EWC has increased though the emphasis of its arguments has shifted slightly. In the light of the continued dynamics of global platform development, it no longer concentrates exclusively on the advocacy of European autonomy but also lobbies for a stronger role of European operations *within* the globalization process. This approach has two rather uneasily coexisting aspects. The EWC promotes European leadership for global product development and, in terms of marketing, greater export opportunities for European brands in other world regions. The latter point, for example, was explicitly included in the 2001 'Olympia' restructuring framework agreement. On the other hand, EWC representatives argue that European sales of non-European GM brands (such as Chevrolet) should be sourced from production plants in Europe. The joint EWC bargaining position with regard to the 'Delta' decision in 2007 rested ultimately on the demand that plants without the new investment would be compensated by the allocation of non-European GM models destined for sale in European markets. A EWC press release a few days prior to the decision pointed out that 'an important principle for the employee representatives would be that cars which should be sold in the European market should be produced in the European plants'. The EWC chair summarized this approach rather bluntly as based on the assumption that Europe should obtain a greater slice of the global cake.

Anxiety about expansion of GM operations in other parts of the world has remained a EWC *leitmotiv*. Indeed, after the end of GM's ill-fated merger experiment with Fiat in 2005, employee representatives became ever more concerned about this process, which was increasingly perceived as a deliberate company strategy to 'move east'. Plans to open further plants in Russia, Poland and Romania caused as much uproar as newspaper interviews of leading GM managers alluding to a potential longer-term shift of GM activities to Eastern Europe, China, Korea and India. Links were drawn between the changing GM geography and the global platform approach: once new capacities were installed in Eastern Europe and Asia, plants in Western Europe would be forced into cost competition with these new facilities. Global car architectures, an EWC leaflet warned in March 2007, meant that 'a single plant can manufacture very different GM brands and models and that production can be transferred between plants even beyond Europe within six weeks'.

To counter such threats the EWC has adopted a twin-track approach. In the negotiations with GM management it plays the 'commercial card' by emphasizing the distinctive features of the European car market, which the company ignores at its peril. The mediocre market performance of GM in Europe since the mid-1990s reinforces this argument and the derived lobby for innovative 'European' car design and engineering and the cultivation of European brand images. Given that European market demand indeed differs from America and Asia in crucial respects (Jürgens, 2004), the EWC argues that GM's own business success depends on the retention of a distinctly European style, which in turn would guarantee future employment.

At the same time, the EWC attempts to build a united front of workforces and their representatives across the continent to demonstrate that plans for a globalization at the expense of European locations will meet resistance, and hence damage the company's business in the region. It is not least to this end that the EWC has created the *gmworkersblog*, an Internet forum providing reports and debates about ongoing European negotiations, and a space for exchange between workers and union representatives. 'European solidarity' has become the buzzword on the forum, defined not only as an intra-European affair but, still more importantly, as the necessity to stand united in the defence of European interests within the global GM network.

The importance of this latter objective can again be illustrated by the 'Delta' negotiations. EWC leaders strongly discouraged representatives in 'Delta' plants from concluding local agreements, not only by pointing to the dangers of an intra-European race to the bottom but also by highlighting the risks inherent in GM's globalization even for the winners of the 'Delta' competition.

> The allocation of a future global product like the next Astra does not make a plant and the jobs 'safe' anymore. After getting the new product the workers, unions and works councils can easily be blackmailed by management to make further concessions, otherwise the plant can lose its production to a 'cheaper' plant worldwide.

After the selection decision, angry workers in Antwerp were reminded that European solidarity had enabled the plant to stay open and that the allocation of two other GM models, which had originally been scheduled for production in Eastern Europe or Asia, represented a great success.

Clearly, not all of this rhetoric can be taken at face value since it certainly also served to downplay the fact that there had been indeed winners and losers, and that the agreement itself had only been possible at the expense of further massive cost-saving programmes. Moreover, it is striking how much EWC positions reflect a European solidarity notion essentially designed for the defence of *West* European locations against competition from Eastern Europe. One straightforward interpretation of this pattern would be that East European delegates are still a very small minority within the EWC. This, however, would not explain the fact that labour representatives from Gliwice participated in the 'Delta' campaign, though less actively than their West European colleagues. The crucial point appears to be that EWC thinking reflects the 'insider' approach characteristic of traditional works council politics in Germany (Hohn, 1988): interest representation is concentrated on *existing* workforces with an inherent tendency to discriminate against 'outsiders'.

In principle this need not imply an East–West cleavage, yet given that GM is unlikely to open new plants in Western Europe the insider–outsider ambiguity remains confined to Eastern Europe. While continuous efforts are made to take account of the interests of insider locations such as Gliwice, the EWC, understandably fearful of the creation of further overcapacity that might endanger the future of traditional locations, adopts a hostile approach towards potential 'new entrants'. The acceptance of this approach by Polish delegates, though not unproblematic especially in cases of new investments in other *Polish* locations (Banyuls and Haipeter, 2007), is facilitated by the fact that they, too, do not appear totally 'safe'.

From this evidence it appears clearly that the perception of a shared (West) European vulnerability to the external threat constituted by corporate globalization has taken strong roots at GM, and it has been a crucial element for the transformation of the company's EWC from a consultation committee to a negotiation body.

Conclusions

Today the EWC at GM is widely regarded as the primary example of cross-border trade union cooperation on the continent, and it seems likely that its future development will have consequences far beyond the company itself. This article has attempted to reconstruct the development of the EWC, applying the concept of a European trade union risk community, which since the mid 1990s has faced unprecedented challenges to employee interests as a result of intra-European competition for investment, and externally, as a result of GM's strategy of corporate globalization. The EWC offered broad 'safety barriers', a still well-confined European defence of local and national union interests where it appeared that these could no longer be defended at the domestic level alone.

Placed within the broader picture of EWC research, these findings lend support to structure- rather than agency-based interpretations; yet they point to structures that facilitate rather than obstruct the emergence of European trade union understanding. It should be emphasized again that this is not to deny the relevance of agency factors not considered in this article since these are necessary to translate shared perceptions into joint actions. What is claimed here, however, is that if we wish to account for the difference between the development of the GM EWC and those in EU-based automobile firms we must look to company structures and strategies, and their perceptions by labour representatives in the different locations.

Such conclusions may disappoint hopes for the emergence of a 'truly' transnational labour identity. They confirm Kotthoff's view (2006: 174) that even successful EWCs 'do not have a strong European identity . . . in the sense of strong affective bonds and collective feelings'. Cross-border cooperation in a risk community seems fragile, issue-specific and dependent on the coincidence of local and national interests. In a broader perspective this may be interpreted as a weak variant of Durkheim's 'organic solidarity', which Hyman (1999) has recently brought back to the agenda of trade union studies. Contrary to 'mechanical solidarity' based on categories ascribed to actors (such as class), organic solidarity is the result of a reconciliation of different interests, reflecting a situation of mutual interdependence in which actors have to rely on each other to achieve their own objectives.

Essentially, these conclusions represent a warning against a reading of the GM case as heralding a new age of labour transnationalism destined to overcome union parochialism. Indeed, the remarkable strengthening of European trade union cooperation at GM seems to have gone hand in hand with a partial transformation of that parochialism towards a new, geographically extended form: Eurocentrism. The case study material suggests that European cooperation was to an important extent achieved through a contraposition of (West) European and non-European interests. Significantly, this process appears to have been accompanied by increasing tensions between GM's European labour representatives and the American United Auto Workers (UAW), which has shown little interest in international trade union cooperation (Anner et al., 2006). In contrast to firms like Volkswagen and Renault, no 'world works council' has yet been created at GM.

Given the apparent danger that European works councils may turn into 'protectionist' instruments, it would seem important for future research to pay more attention to the role of EWCs in processes of corporate globalization beyond regulatory issues such as codes of conduct. This is not only likely to enhance our understanding of EWC functioning but can, perhaps, help to raise the awareness for the future challenge to reconcile parochial European interests with those of workers in other world regions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the SASE Meeting at Copenhagen Business School (June 2007) and the Industrial Relations in Europe conference at the University of Athens (July 2007); I thank participants in the respective panels for their comments. I also thank the two anonymous reviewers of the journal, whose criticisms and suggestions have helped to improve the article.

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