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Stream 9.3 European Welfare States and Labor Markets in Situations of Crises

On the Margins of Social Policy? Trade Unions and Activation Reforms in Denmark, Germany and the US

High unemployment was one element of the crisis during the 1980s. Governments introduced activation policies as a means to face the employment crisis in the 1990s (Lødemel/Trickey 2001; Goul Andersen 2001 et al.; Peck 2001). In comparison to former reforms of unemployment insurance and social assistance schemes these reforms are characterized by a severe loss of the social partners' influence (esp. trade unions) (Jørgensen 2009; Trampusch 2005; Turner/Hurd 2001).

The main aim of the paper is to analyze the role trade unions (especially trade union umbrella organizations) played in activation reforms and the reasons for the declining influence in Denmark, Germany and the US. The main argument of the paper can be summarized as follows: The diminishing role of trade unions in times of crises is a neither a single-contry-phenomenon nor one-time-only-phenomenon. Activation reforms are of special interest here because trade unions have long been important policymakers but have ignored the labor market insider-outsder problem and have thus not seen actiavtion workers as valuable trade union members. In order to show that this development is not only a syndrome of conservative governments and economic crisis the following criteria will have to be included in the analysis, too: strength of the labor movements and the mobilization of their members, structure and leadership of the organizations, political aims and representation in the policymaking process.

The paper is organized as follows: section 2, will provide a short outline of the relevant theoretical arguments and the analytical framework of trade union influence in the field of social policy. In section 3, I will discuss the historical developments of trade union influence in this field in the three countries. Afterwards, I will analyze their role in the activation reform process. In section 5, a short analysis of the implications for the current crisis is given.