

Beckmann, Thore; Likaj, Xhulia; Steimer, Paul; Stöckel, Michael

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Hochschule für
Wirtschaft und Recht Berlin
Berlin School of Economics and Law

Institute for International Political Economy Berlin

Precarisation, Individualisation and the Development of Trade Unions in Germany

Authors: Thore Beckmann, Xhulia Likaj, Paul Steimer, Michael Stöckel

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Precarisation, Individualisation and the Development of Trade Unions in Germany

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Abstract:

Individualisation and precarisation as two broad trends in contemporary industrialised societies are related to one another and to certain developments in the German trade union landscape. With a focus on a reunified Germany from the nineties onwards, in this paper the impact of individualisation and precarisation on the state of trade unions is analysed. These processes are confluent and contribute to a diminishing influence of trade unions on the shape of industrial relations. In general, the neoliberal age brought about a competitive environment to which individuals are adapting. Nonetheless individualisation, on the one hand, induces mobility and self-determination for a fraction of workers who may no longer be represented by unified trade unions. The precarised and outsourced workforce, on the other hand, is deprived of life choices and has difficulties to organise in a conventional manner, even more so in an environment of asymmetric developments between labour market trends and membership structures in trade unions. Hence, it can be argued that these major trends endure an erosion of collective solidarity which has been the basis of a Fordist employment relationship.

Keywords: Individualisation, Precarisation, Germany, Trade Unions, Industrial Relations, Labour Market

Contacts: thorebeckmann@gmail.com

likaj.xhulia@gmail.com

paul.steimer1@gmail.com

michael.stoeckel@posteo.de

1. Introduction

Unions' power has been in decline in recent decades in the majority of western industrial countries. In an increasingly globalised world, where the number of workers competing against each other rises constantly, the financial sector of the economy becomes more intrusive and the labour market gets more and more fragmented, unions see themselves confronted with an array of new challenges. The 'German model', in this sense, has always been considered a stable system with high levels of social protection. However, the recent trends in the labour market and wider societal developments have undermined this reputation. This paper aims to understand the new challenges and recent struggles facing trade unions in Germany since reunification. Attention is paid solely to theories of individualisation and precarisation, their deep entwinement and their linkages to German trade union development. Thus, the paper is structured as follows:

In chapter two, the recent trends of trade unions in Germany will be discussed and introduced. The focus lies on four major trends for which a relationship to individualisation and precarisation is assumed: decrease in union membership; representation crisis; general changes in industrial relations and rise of professional associations. Chapter three deals with the process of individualisation and how the role of society and of the individual within it has changed. In chapter four precarisation theory will be studied with respect to a highly fragmented and competitive society.

Based on the main findings of the theoretical chapters, the goal of this paper is to apply aspects of individualisation and precarisation to the four trends of trade union development which were identified in chapter two. Thus the research question aims to investigate how the four changes in trade unions and the two transformation processes relate to one another. It is presumed that certain aspects of individualisation and precarisation have influenced, caused or reinforced the four trends. They might also be mutually dependent on each other. The aim is to specify and narrow down the main characteristics of the relationships, debated in more detail in chapter five, which is then followed by a concluding chapter.

As historical and country-specific developments play a role in this paper, the focus lies on just one country, Germany, even though a decline of trade union power can be observed all around the Global North and South. Here, it should also be noted that a Global South and a comprehensive Gender perspective on trade unions and the two transformation processes is not covered in the course of this paper.

2. The changes in trade unions since reunification

In this chapter, the important changes that happened to trade unions in Germany since the accession of the federal states of the former East Germany are treated. A brief overview of the historical developments is followed by an elaboration on some of the most seminal changes which occurred since the early 1990s. These changes were selected based on a literature review of social science research on trade unions and are part of our inquiry. The selected indicators for these changes are: decline in membership, crisis of representation, change in industrial relations and rise of professional associations.

Trade unions are facing multiple crises since the 2000s. This changing environment is aligned with the global change from Fordism to neoliberal globalisation. Fordism in Germany was characterised by a high degree of corporatism, for instance a wage bargaining system which was oriented towards productivity growth and workers' co-determination. The concurrence of different crises, it is argued, has led to an "assertiveness crisis" (Schroeder et al., 2011, p. 16). This means that trade unions forfeited influence in general and in particular regarding their core concern to represent the 'general' interest of wage labour.

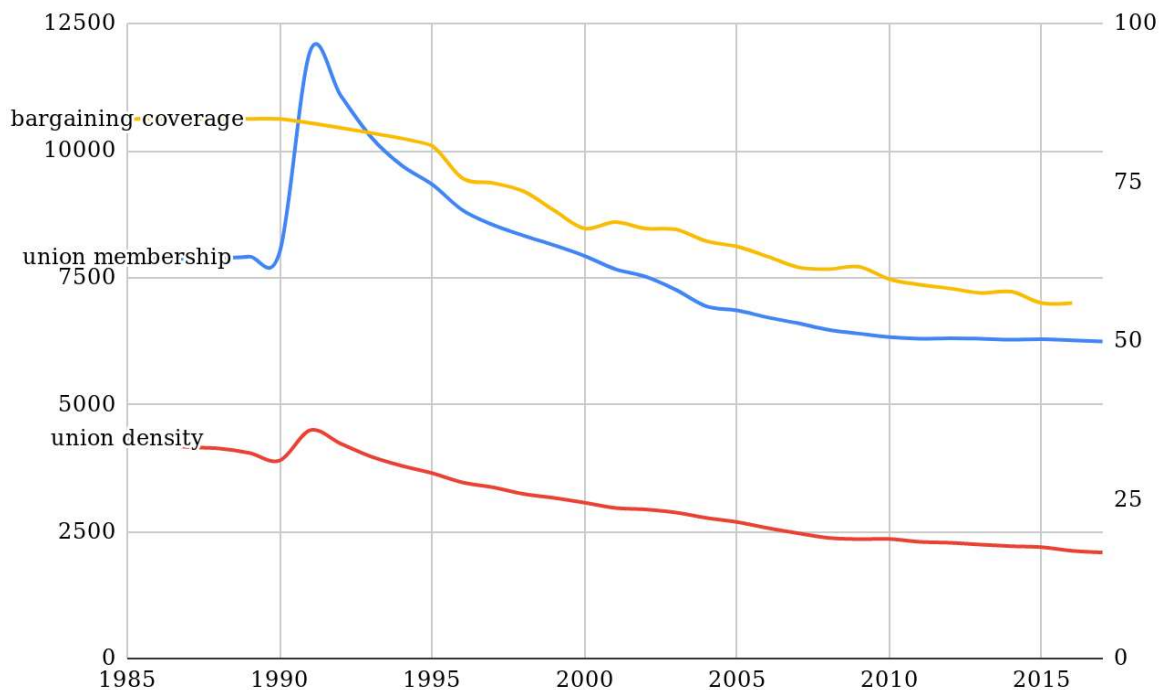
In the 'German model' the influential and privileged unions are the standard unions and their affiliated sectoral unions (Wiesenthal, 2013, p. 417). The German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) is the umbrella association under which eight sectoral unions are organised. Privileged by the state and as the standard partner of cooperation for sectoral industry federations, they are also engaged in activities beyond the mere representation of interests of wage labour. They are equally concerned with a favourable macroeconomic and societal development.

For the purpose of this analysis, this section contains an overview of structural changes of employment relations that affected unions. The aforementioned 'assertiveness crisis' results from the concurrence of problems of the standard union model. Aspects of these problematic symptoms are a membership, embeddedness and opponent crisis (Schroeder et al., 2011, p. 15). In the next subsections, the changes in sectoral composition and in industrial relations are discussed. It can be observed that there is a certain alienation taking place between workers that are union members and the working population that is not unionised. The rise of professional associations is discussed as another challenging aspect for unions. These seminal changes are challenging unions, thus rendering them less capable of fulfilling their societal role foreseen in conventional Fordism in Germany.

2.1 Membership crisis

In this subsection, the crisis of union membership and union density is discussed. In figure 1, indicators of union influence are displayed. The illustration starts a few years before 1990, when the new federal states of East Germany (GDR) acceded to the German Federal Republic. This allows us to grasp developments in the imminent aftermath of reunification in 1990.

Figure 1. *Bargaining coverage*¹ and *union density*² (percent, right axis), and *union membership*³ (in thousands, left axis), Germany, 1985-2017.



Source: Visser (2019), author's presentation.

In the first year after reunification, union density and total union membership sharply increased from around 10 million to 14 million. These peaks originated from a partial accession of sectoral unions which had been organised in the Free German Trade Union Federation in the GDR (Ebbinghaus and Göbel 2013, p. 219). Nonetheless, the rise could not reverse the diminishing tendency which had already started in the early 1980s. During the early nineties the newly acquired members were partially lost again due to the rapid deindustrialisation in the federal states of East Germany.

¹ 'Bargaining coverage' refers to the adjusted bargaining coverage rate. It is the proportion of all wage earners with the right to wage bargaining. Yearly values are only available in 1985, 1990 and from 1995 to 2016.

² 'Union density' is the proportion of net union members in employed population.

³ 'Union membership' is the net union membership, which is the total union membership minus union members outside the active, dependent and employed labour force.

The long-term decline of all three indicators of union power is often explained by a more general deindustrialisation occurring all over Germany. Highly organised branches, namely the mining and steel industry, and other export-oriented manufacturing sectors, were most affected by job losses. These job losses stem from rationalisation measures which were imposed on these industries due to increased international competition. Moreover, jobs were created in the service sector which is characterised by a lower union density (Ebbinghaus and Göbel 2013, p. 217). Nonetheless, it can also be observed in figure 1 that overall union membership has stabilised since 2010⁴; still falling, although at a lower rate.

2.2 Crisis of representation

Closely connected to the membership crisis, the union landscape also faces a so-called crisis of representation meaning a decoupling or a drifting apart of the developments and characteristics of wage earners and the characteristics of union membership itself. This manifests for instance in the fact that the composition of union members has not kept up with changes in labour market participations: Women, service sector workers, precarious labour and migrant workers are underrepresented in unions, although the workforce participation of these groups of workers has increased.

There are lasting and persistent differences in the ability to organise among different employee groups. Generally, blue-collar-workers are the group with the highest degree of organisation and with the highest share of union membership (40.6% in 2011) besides white-collar-workers and civil servants (Ebbinghaus and Göbel 2013, p. 221). However, it is increasingly difficult to disentangle the share of white- and blue-collar-workers, because many companies do not uniformly separate into these categories. Nonetheless, the general tendencies are clear regarding the mismatch between union members and employment situations. Furthermore, female wage labour is represented in a higher proportion in sectors characterised by a lower degree of union density. These sectors are retail, textile and private household services (*ibid.*, p. 225). Linked to this mismatch is the problem that unions themselves had a persistent conviction of representing mainly the core workforce. However - and also since the new wave of union revitalisation strategies - this mismatch tendency is expected to be reversed as the core workforce realises that it is also put under pressure by non-standard employment and agency work (Schmalz and Dörre 2013, p. 14).

⁴ There has been a growth in total membership at IG Metall, the Industrial Union of Metalworkers, between 2010 and 2016, however on a very low scale. So there is a stabilisation, but with a loss of roughly one fifth or 500.000 members as compared to the 2000s. The second largest sectoral union, the United Service Trade Union ver.di, has at least managed to decrease the rate of member losses.

2.3 Changing industrial relations

Due to changing industrial relations many authors acknowledged the erosion of what is traditionally understood as the ‘social partnership’ between trade unions and employer associations (Dribbusch and Birke 2014, p. 7). This social partnership is a mitigation of class conflict and is therefore an important cornerstone of the Fordist system of industrial relations in Germany. Regarding the changing industrial relations, wage bargaining coverage as a central feature of union’s power shall be discussed. The assertiveness of unions diminishes, because the foundation of new work councils is increasingly and aggressively prevented by employers (Dribbusch and Behrens 2016), and the existing work councils experience a decreasing presence of trade union members (Schroeder 2014, p. 12). Moreover, the tariff autonomy is also constrained on sectoral wage bargaining.

The negotiation of wage agreements is the central activity for unions. The processes of collective bargaining involve a combination of private and public law, which has developed out of the struggle for workers’ rights. Consequently, the freedom to negotiate collective bargaining agreements - the tariff autonomy - forms an essential part of the social rights of workers. This autonomy represents the freedom of workers to form a coalition for the purposes of negotiation with the employer concerning payment and working conditions (Blanke 2013, p. 175).

Laws and regulations set the framework for employment, for co-determination in the company and for negotiations between the tariff partners. These negotiations between unions and employer or industry associations generally take place autonomously and independent of state intervention. Several changes in industrial relations are a challenge for trade unions. For instance, wage agreements are losing importance and in many sectors there is a growing number of employers opting out of tariff commitments (ibid., p. 200). Opening clauses are increasingly used in tariff agreements, especially since the *Pforzheimer Abkommen* of the IG Metall from 2004, and are often criticised as they allow companies to increase their cost competitiveness. Moreover they can be misused to prevent wage increases (Artus and Rösch 2017, p. 25) and are often tantamount to an inner erosion of collective agreements (Streeck and Rehder 2005, p. 60ff.).

Related to the rise in collective bargaining loopholes and similar to the development in union membership, the bargaining coverage has also decreased significantly since 1990 (see figure 1). These collective bargaining loopholes can be seen as an attempt from employers to evade the binding nature of wage agreements, be it regional, sectoral or firm-based. This exposes the employee directly to market mechanisms of competition and risks of income losses (Dörre 2001, p. 677). Further, with the perspective of cutting costs, the employer associations called for a deregulation and flexibilisation. However, the employer associations are also facing the problem

of falling membership. In East Germany, for instance, employer associations could only establish memberships among larger companies. The employer associations face their own membership crisis with a further “decentralisation of bargaining on wages and employment conditions” (Schroeder and Silvia 2013, p. 358) with a shift from industry wide and multi-employer agreements to firm-level bargaining. Consequently, a continued “pluralisation and flexibilisation of the landscape of employers’ organisation“ is taking place (ibid.). There are, for example, options for companies to become members of an industry association while opting out of the tariff commitment. It is very questionable that the strategy of industry associations to address declines in membership can be successful.

Another related aspect of changing industrial relations is a ruling by the Federal Labour Court in 2010 that rejected the principle of uniform wage agreements. This principle established that it is only valid to have a single wage agreement within one company. It also structured labour relations for decades, but now, both industry associations and unions fear a competition between different unions, professional associations and industry associations within companies. Hence, in an increasing number of sectors and corporations none or several wage agreements exist. This makes it challenging for unions to organise negotiations without a counterpart. (Schroeder et al. 2011, p. 10).

2.4 Rise of professional associations

The rise of importance and increasing effectiveness of professional associations, which represent workers only within a specific sector, is challenging the DGB. As mentioned above, there has been a significant decline in membership , while professional associations have been very successful in attracting new members. Considering that union membership is an indicator of the overall bargaining power of a union, it should not be surprising that they are increasingly involved in direct wage-setting, which traditionally has not been the case (Schroeder and Greef 2008, p. 330). This process ends up favoring only very specific employment groups. Prominent examples in Germany are the Train Drivers Unions⁵, the Association of Airplane Pilots⁶ and the Alliance of Employed Physicians⁷. The plurality of organisations representing workers’ interest has been an integral part of the ‘German model’ for a long time. Nonetheless, before the second half of the 2000s the phenomenon of strikes by professional trade unions has been largely uncommon in the otherwise corporatist ‘German Model’ (Schroeder et al. 2011, p. 9).

⁵ Gewerkschaft deutscher Lokführer

⁶ Gewerkschaft Cockpit

⁷ Marburger Bund – Verband der angestellten und verbeamteten Ärztinnen und Ärzte Deutschlands

The representation of workers has always existed beyond the standard unions of the DGB and they fulfilled complementary functions, in the sense that they represented the explicit interests and status of specific professional groups. Most of these associations have friendly alliances with the DGB. Besides the complementary functions, there were always aspects of competition between standard and professional associations. However, due to the fact that the state and employer associations exclusively and institutionally integrated and recognised the DGB standard unions, the competitive aspects of the relationship between DGB and professional associations never played an important role until recently (ibid., p. 15).

In a straightforward way, these professional associations follow a policy which is motivated by their particular clientelism. Streeck (2006) describes this as a “workers aristocracy” (p. 149). This phenomenon implies that the concept of solidarity is delineated by the borders of the professional status group. Professional associations aim at wage policies which are oriented towards the level of skills performed by the profession. In that sense, the determination of income differentiation among the professions reflects the meritocratic principle. Therefore, their particular interest politics are contrary to an approach of inclusive solidarity among all workers or all wage dependent employees, which is followed by the standard unions.

According to Streeck (ibid.), the DGB follows responsible income politics, which is not only beneficial for one profession and would not harm other professional groups within the same company or sector. In some branches, the professional associations push the standard unions into a claims-competition. This means, in order for the standard union not to lose members to the professional association, the former should exceed the claims of the latter. This can continue and potentially divide the assertiveness of union power as a whole.

3. Theory of individualisation

In order to find roots for the displayed trends of trade unions, this paper outlines the theories of individualisation and precarisation in the following chapters before assessing possible linkages in the final chapter. Individualisation has come to the forefront of the discussion in sociology with the works of Ulrich Beck in the 1980s. This chapter will try to give a short outline of Beck’s theory of individualisation and subsequently present different aspects of the process of individualisation on society and the individuals in it.

3.1 Beck's three dimensions of individualisation

Beck's (1986) theory of individualisation identifies a differentiation of life-style patterns in society but also outlines that autonomy became the goal for the majority within it. This trend represents the start of the process of mass-individualisation.

Beck understands individualisation as being different from phenomena like individualism or emancipation. The first describes the institutional change on a macro-level, whereas the second refers to a personal change of the micro-level of individuals. The process of individualisation in Beck's sense can be characterised by three dimensions.

The first dimension is the so called *Herauslösungsdimension* which states that social and geographical mobility as well as increased living standards in the post-war period led to lifestyle patterns that got autonomous and independent from its origins of class and family (Beck 1986, p. 125f). The second dimension is the *Entzauberungsdimension* which says that prescribed behavioural patterns vanish. Living conditions and chances in life are not determined and structured by collective fates or classes anymore. Uncertainties and risks must now be handled by the individual (Beck 1986, p. 144, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1990). The third and final dimension of the process of individualisation is the *Reintegrationsdimension*. This dimension says that even though the individual gains autonomy in the first place, new responsibilities in the individualised society occur. The freedom may thus only be a mirage (Beck 1986, p. 148).

This definition of individualisation combines several aspects. On the one hand, the individual gains autonomy in its decision making instead of having to follow a predetermined lifestyle. On the other hand, the plethora of decisions may be too large for a single individual. The same ambivalence goes for the effects of individualisation on society in the sense of Beck. While society may be disencumbered by the additional freedom of the individual, the possibility arises that it collapses without the contributions of the individuals who do not see themselves as a part of such society anymore (Schroer 2000, p. 15). The latter aspect becomes important when linking the theory of individualisation with the development of trade unions since the 1990s.

3.2 Bauman's dilemma of the individual

Acknowledging that individualisation affects society and the individual at the same time while also acknowledging that individuals are shaping society is very important. While individuals in the society of individualism were supported by the systems to become autonomous, this characteristic changed to an extreme in the society of increasing individualism described by Zygmunt Bauman (2000, 2001), Robert Castel (2000, 2009, 2011) and Matthias Junge (2010). According to these

authors, individualism can be seen as a phenomenon within the overarching process of individualisation. Both are interacting and influencing each other. The focus on the individual and its autonomy, as well as the market as the structure-giving force, has led to a society where individuals are being forced towards individualism.

Bauman however argues, that individualisation today explains the freedom of the individual and its restraints only to a lesser degree but rather focuses on the separation of individual decisions from the functioning of the whole system. A system like that becomes immune to the decisions of the individuals and resembles a system in which individual decisions become arbitrary. While the individuals think that they are free, this has only become an illusion (Bauman 2000, p. 209). Bauman therefore states that individualisation in modern society is the opposite of freedom because it is constituted by endless uncertainties (Bauman 2001, p. 83ff.). Robert Castel supports this view and argues that the self-fulfillment of an individual is only possible when certain rules of the system are given and uncertainties in this system are limited (Castel 2011, p. 328f.). He continues comparing the situation of an individual within society to a dangerous adventure.

Bauman describes the postmodern life as one of fear because there is no guidance (1996). The only structural guidance in such a system is that it pushes the individual towards individualism and through this lack of choices this society basically resembles the opposite of freedom (Kron 2002, p. 369). With the obligation to act as an individual without a relation to society, Bauman argues that society is suppressing the moral impulse that every human naturally possesses (ibid., p. 371). This moral impulse for example could lead the individual to engage in a trade union because it believes in the collective identity of its group and sees its own engagement as beneficial not only for itself but also for individuals in a similar situation.

Overall, it can be argued that the individual becomes alienated from society because it does not feel as a part or as a determining factor in it. In this society, where market forces are determining the structure, the freedom to consume becomes the defining characteristic of individual autonomy (Kron 2001, p. 63ff.). The individuals become overloaded with decision-making and self-responsibility. However individuals that are self-responsible at all times might shy away from responsibilities or engagement in groups.

3.3 The individualised society

The pluralisation of lifestyles and the erosion of the labour market render individuals increasingly disenchanting with society. In such a society, the class and family, an individual is born into, become

the important determinants for the course of his/her life. Contrary to the third dimension of Beck's theory on individualisation, the increasingly passive society led to a more rigid society.

Koppetsch (2010) analyses that contemporary society is divided into individuals able to fulfill the demands of self-responsibility and individuals compelled to accept the declining opportunities for their autonomous life. According to Koppetsch (2010), roots for this change of the society can be found in the flexibilisation of the labour market, the diminishing welfare state and changes in the job culture as for example the increasing tertiarisation which hit the core of the collective identity of the middle class. Castel (2000) also points to the diminishing working population since the 1990s as a characteristic of the change in society. Building upon this, Vogel (2008) mentions the change of the welfare state which once defended and ensured the status and security of its individuals but became minimised to a point where it requires individuals to secure themselves against risks. This leads - as Castel (2009) puts it - to the return of social insecurity.

3.4 Threats of the individualised society

With the tertiarisation and the flexibilisation of the labour market, the middle class has become increasingly de-collectivised. Creative jobs have also become more frequent and the share of highly educated people in precarious working conditions has increased. Individuals have traded the paternalism of the state against the dependence on their employer, their social relationships, or even the number of followers on social media (Koppetsch 2010, p. 234f.).

Living with the perception of freedom and being indoctrinated in a society and economy that preaches self-fulfillment and self-optimisation, failure seems to be independent of external parameters (Koppetsch 2010, p. 228). A society like this, with self-centred individuals, hinders the creation of class identity, because people see themselves as individual players in the game of society. Bauman (2003, p. 162) adds to this that success in such a labour market becomes arbitrary but is perceived as a personal failure.

Especially a rising percentage of highly educated people in temporary jobs do not feel part of a class that is working in a precarious working situation because they only perceive their current situation as a temporary anomaly. These jobs are often times done on a part-time basis and structured as self-employed work for certain service providers. These can be call centre jobs, delivery jobs but also social media and click-baiting activities. These jobs are often times carried out by highly educated people not identifying with their current employment status. Thus, the building of class solidarity suffers not only from the fact that the system itself produces self-centred narcissistic individuals (Castel 2011) but that these individuals do not even see themselves as

similar to their actual peers. This becomes especially obvious in the rise of creative jobs where only a few highly popular jobs are available and individuals often times overestimate themselves and their chances to get such a job (Koppetsch 2010, p. 228). Missing out on one of these opportunities may quickly lead to the perception of personal failure because the sector is designed as if a large part of your personality determines your success while, in reality, an even bigger portion is just luck (Koppetsch 2010, p. 228). Even though Ulrich Beck did not see individualisation as negative per se, he analyses that the market-individual, perceives societal crises as individual crises and that the collective characteristics of the society are less and less noticeable for the individual (Beck 1986, p. 117f.).

Junge (2010) elaborates in this sense on individualisation as a process that creates mandatory norms even though it pretends to create voluntary norms. The created norms become sanctioned by the market if not fulfilled and therefore cannot be voluntary norms. It is also remarkable, that the price for the sanctions, for example social transfers or unemployment benefits, do not have to be paid by the player that sanctions the behaviour. While the market is the punitive force, it does not have to bear the consequences (Junge 2010, p. 271f.). Historically, these consequences have been handled by the state but as Keupp (2010, p. 257) outlines, these consequences have been shifted towards the individual as well. This means the end of the state in the role of the provision and the shift towards a self-caring system. The coined term of “investing in people” gets a literal meaning in this scenario, where the individual is not only responsible for its performance on the labour market but also for its health, its old-age provision and its failure, among other outcomes.

3.5 Individualisation and precarity

When the safety net for the less fortunate becomes individualised as well, society is even more punitive toward its losers, creating precarity and increasing social inequality. Castel (2011) describes such a society as divided between two groups. On the one hand, there are those who are able to use individualisation as freedom of choice and limitless opportunities leading to a narcissistic society and on the other hand, there are those for whom individualisation means decreasing freedom and overwhelming uncertainty. For those belonging to the latter group, the eroded welfare state does not provide aid to reintegrate these individuals into the society, thus abandoning them in their precarious situation (Castel 2011). The dependency of these individuals on the few provisions of the welfare state increases in a system like this. Individual aspects like family or inherited wealth as a safety net become increasingly important once again, leading to social rigidity and inequality (Koppetsch 2010). Labelled as self-responsibility, the previous

institutions of the post-war period that forced the individuals to individualise, do not provide independence from the state but lead to an even greater dependency which - in the end – further increases structural inequalities. This conclusion in the scope of the theory of individualisation is in line with the findings of recent popular inequality studies from Milanovic (2016) and Piketty (2014) who both predicted that, in the 21st century, the family in which an individual is born regains importance with regard to this persons social mobility and material welfare.

Castel (2011), therefore, advocates for a change in the societal structure. He argues that self-fulfillment is only possible in a society that provides certain rules and boundaries in which the individual can move freely. If individualisation and a further marketisation of society is permitted, this would result in an increase in the number of people living and working in precarious conditions.

4. Theory of precarisation

Precarisation refers to a process where employment relationships become increasingly unstable and work and life conditions are characterised by permanent insecurity (Dörre 2014, p. 70). Jørgensen (2016) describes precarity as the result of “decades of neoliberal policy hegemony” during which the labour markets have gone through a substantial process of deregulation and flexibilisation with a consequent narrowing of workers’ rights (p. 962). On a historical timeline, precarity applies to the current economy where unreliable welfare provisions and unstable working conditions are often deemed to be the norm. To this extent it is contrasted to the preceding Fordist period characterised by high social protection and standard employment relationships. Nevertheless, class inequalities and gender asymmetries within the labour market were deeply embedded in the Fordist capitalism of Western countries; meaning that precarity still existed during this period but mainly concerned the periphery (in geographical and social terms) of industrialised societies. Nonetheless, even low wage labour had strong cohesive effects being indissoluble from its social and participatory rights (Dörre 2014, p. 71, Robinson 2011, p. 3). It is common to a variety of authors, however, to contend Fordist security and the wide protection offered by unions as being a historical exception and precarity as being the norm (Neilson and Rossiter 2008, Robinson 2011, Frase 2013).

The term *precarité* was used by Pierre Bourdieu to describe the conditions of the colonial working class in the 1960s and has, since then, witnessed a widening of its reference group (Cangià 2018). In his 2011 book “The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class”, Guy Standing brought the term back in vogue and introduced a new definition. In his viewpoint, the precariat is a distinct socio-economic group, a “class-in-the-making” and as such has the potential to rise up and present itself as a concrete threat to the dominant neoliberal system (ibid., p. 7). Here, however, a different

perspective is being adopted: in line with authors such as Dörre, Robinson, Neilson, Rossiter et al., we deem precarious reality as being characterised by high fragmentation, lack of class awareness and low solidarity. Traditional organisational forms like trade unions are revealed to be inappropriate in that regular participation becomes arduous alongside irregular jobs. In such a molecular scenario it is hard to imagine the existence, or even the formation, of a precariat class. The literature clearly shows that the debate over a clear and unified definition of precarity is still open and multifaceted.

Equally difficult is the scientific use of the notion of precarious employment. This is due to the fact that no statistical category encompassing all types of precarious employment exists and not all non-standard employment forms can be considered precarious. In order to be able to operationalise this notion, we will make use of the multi-dimensional perspective offered by Rodgers (1989). The reference point taken by the author is the notion of the standard employment relationship: a normative model established through collective agreements which “incorporated a degree of regularity and durability in employment relationships, protected workers from socially unacceptable practices and working conditions, established rights and obligations, and provided a core of social stability to underpin economic growth” (ibid., p. 1). Having clarified that, precarious employment becomes sub-standard or inferior employment and can be measured by taking into account four dimensions. The temporal dimension refers to the degree of certainty over the continuity of employment and is measured by the type of contract and the employment duration. The organisational dimension covers working conditions, time, shifts, intensity as well as health and safety measures while the economic dimension refers to the payment and the possibility of salary progression. The social dimension encompasses both legal and social protection against discrimination, dismissal, accidents, social benefits and unemployment coverage (ibid., p. 3). Frade et al. (2004) further articulate this multidimensional definition describing precarious employment as characterised by a variety of temporary limited contracts not respecting the socially accepted standards relative to workers’ rights, legal and collective protection resulting from an unequal distribution between workers and employers and among workers themselves (leading to segmentation) which then translates into insecure working and living conditions (p. 48).

Another issue to be taken into consideration is the *threat effect* put forward by Appelbaum (2001) and responsible for introducing insecurity factors inside normal employment relationships. The threat effect, which is related to the future deterioration of market conditions, has been widely used by employers to exercise downward pressure on wages, impose worse working conditions, depress bargaining power and weaken unions (p. 4). This could be an indicator of a further expansion of the precarity process towards forms of employment relationships that are traditionally considered

to be secure. The trend seems to be an increasing commodification of labour; a scenario in which the employer sees labour as disposable, replaceable and completely determined by markets instead of social institutions (Rodgers G. et al., 1989).

4.1 Drivers of precarious employment

The literature identifies four major drivers deemed to be responsible for the expansion of precarious forms of employment. On a macro-level, precarious employment goes side by side with the ongoing societal transformation into a *globalised* one; a process that has undermined the former institutionalised agreements which occurred at the national level. The sharp competition at the international level and also between workers as well as the increasing risk of social dumping require a highly dynamic economy which has accelerated the trend towards the flexibilisation of the labour market. Another possible cause that explains the proliferation of precarious jobs is the recent digital revolution which has increased capital mobility, reduced the need for labour, enabled the monitoring of value creation at the establishment level from the side of investors as well as the management of commodity chains at a global level. Also resulting from the digital revolution is the fast-paced expansion of the so-called “gig economy” where the shift in risk from the firm to the worker (who is now defined as ‘independent contractor’) is increasingly noticeable. The process of financialisation - occurring in many leading corporations and progressively expanding to the economy as a whole - is the third driver of precarious employment. In this framework the value placed on stakeholders (such as workers) has been overwhelmingly overshadowed by the needs and interests of shareholders that usually result in outsourcing or resizing actions. On an institutional level and common to many countries, there is the process of de-unionisation and a progressive decline of industrial relations. The latter - and fourth driving force of precariousness - has left workers uncovered by the most traditional protection form of organisation and has given employers great space to manoeuvre in terms of wage determination and contractual forms (Kalleberg & Vallas 2017, p. 5).

4.2 The notion of precarious employment at the national level

The great variety and heterogeneity of definitions offered by the literature is also reflected at the country-level in the sense that a unified supra-national framework conceptualising precarious employment does not exist. There seems, however, to be a widespread consensus on using the standard employment relationship as a reference point. Consequently, there is a tendency to incorporate in a single large category all types of jobs that are excluded from the standard

employment relationship due to the fact that they fall below such standards (Frade 2004, p. 39f). In line with this idea, precarious employment incorporates the negative qualities of the employment regime. 'Atypical employment' is also very often included in this macro category due to its association with poor or low-quality jobs (ibid., p. 44).

Noteworthy is also the tendency, in many European countries, to keep the debate over precarious employment circumscribed to a certain extent to its origins (e.g. poverty, hidden employment or labour market regulation). In Germany the discourse rotates around labour market regulation and on matters of industrial relations arguing whether an erosion of employment relationships regulated by collective agreements is observable (ibid., p. 34). This last point can be explained by the deep embeddedness of the normal or standard type of employment relationship (*Normalarbeitsverhältnis*) in German society and the recent increase in atypical contractual forms.

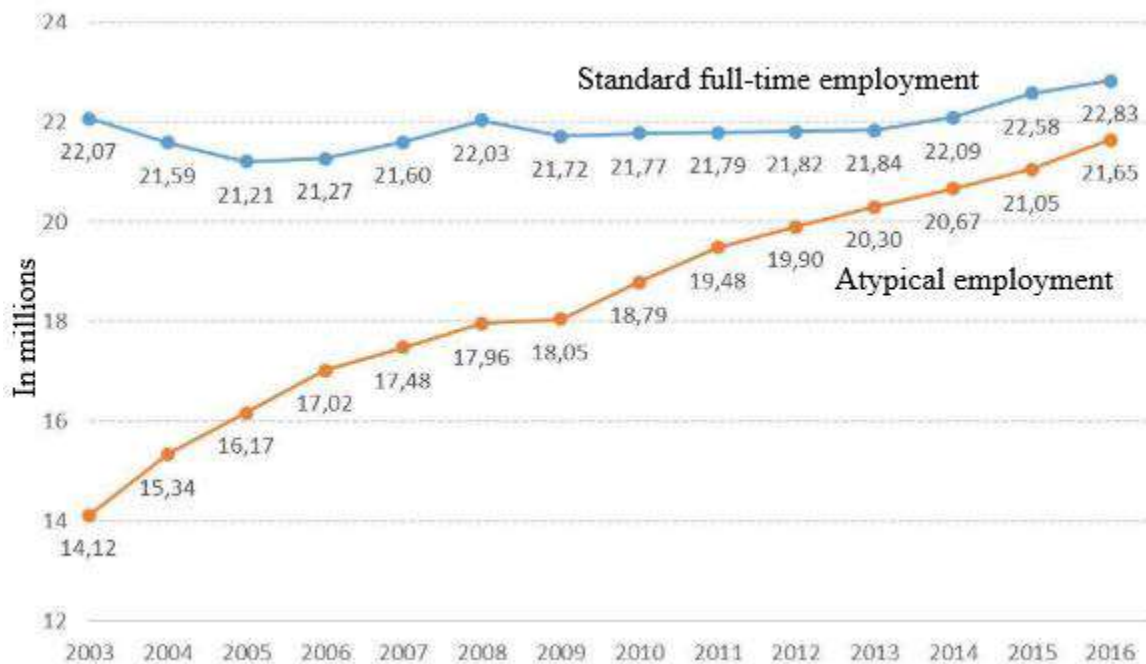
4.3 Precarious employment in Germany

Labour market segmentation into sub-markets with different characteristics and internal rules has been a key development within labour markets throughout many countries during the recent years. This process can occur because of the existence of diverse production models, information and power asymmetries, or may be due to flexibilisation strategies in response to particular divisions of labour. Labour market segmentation theories rather focus on institutional factors such as governing contractual agreements (segmentation along the temporal dimension between open-ended/full-time and fixed-term/part-time contracts), lack of enforcement (along the legal dimension (formal/informal work) and worker's background (migrant/non-migrant) (ILO 2018).

Social scientists affirm that the German situation is characterised by a segmentation between the internal labour market and the external labour market. The actors involved in each of the markets consist of a stable group of core workers respectively (particularly in skill-intensive service and manufacturing sectors that benefit from collective agreements and social protection) characterised by decent wages and employment stability, and a group of peripheral workers who are more likely to fall under atypical forms of employment characterised by unstable earnings (Frade, 2004, p. 81). Moreover employment stability and flexibility are shared unequally across socio-economic groups, occupations and sectors (Eichhorst 2013, p. 4). Overall the wage gap between core and precarious workers is deeply pronounced; with the latter experiencing even lower entitlements for social and unemployment protection. The historical tendency in countries like Germany to put the interests of core workers to the forefront has further contributed to the amplification of the gap.

A major divisional line is also reflected amid the different contractual forms with open-ended full-time contracts still covering an important part of the workforce on one hand, and all other types of contracts on the other. Fixed-term contracts usually apply to apprentices and to new workers entering the labour market. While transition opportunities may be higher within the private sector, this is less true for the others. Self-employment is quite common in the creative and crafts sectors while labour leasing agencies are common in the manufacturing sector and more generally among the basic occupations. Marginal employment (or Mini-jobs) has also grown drastically in Germany during the recent years. Part-time contracts remain largely spread and appear to be less sectoral and more gender-oriented with women covering a higher share (Eichhorst 2013, p.3 ff). Figure 2 briefly summarises the development in the two macro categories in Germany since the beginning of 2000s. The data clearly shows that, while the trend in full-time standard employment has been relatively stable, atypical forms of employment have seen a substantial increase in magnitude.

Figure 2: *Development of standard full-time employment and atypical employment⁸ in Germany (2003-2016).*



Source: DGB (author's own translation)

With the expansion of the labour market another pattern of segmentation appears to have become more important over time. The secondary segments of the labour market follow sectoral and demographic patterns (Eichhorst, 2013, p. 4). The expansion of the service sector (or tertiarisation process) is another phenomenon deserving some space inside the articulated debate concerning precarity since it significantly contributes to insecure employment relationships. The number of employees in the service sector in Germany has continuously increased, particularly since the beginning of the 1980s (Erlinghagen 2004, p. 16). Erlinghagen and Knuth (2004) divided service activities into five subgroups and conducted a study investigating the stability of employment relationships within each of them. What they found is that, among household and personal services, infrastructure and transport services, production services, economic transaction services and administrative, organisational and communication services there are significant differences in job stability. The most unstable employment relationships are contained in the first two subgroups (ibid., p. 18).

Overall, collective bargaining and union representation have failed to guarantee compliance with acceptable employment norms in these sectors. This is mainly due to the increasing difficulty faced

⁸ The group of atypical employment consists of standard part-time employment, marginal employment, temporary employment, solo-self-employment and subcontracted work.

by trade unions to organise these relatively new and fragmented sectors usually formed by a large ratio of disadvantaged workers such as women, immigrants and young people who have traditionally had less involvement with unions. This proves to be particularly true for call centres and the domiciliary care sector where collectively agreed employment quality is very low; equally weak is the ability of unions to monitor the firm compliance with such agreements. There have even been cases in which unions have, through disadvantageous collective agreements, contributed to the continuation or legalisation of their precarious conditions (Frade 2004, p. 96ff.).

A significant body of the literature has collocated the overall precarity process side by side with the loss of power and relevance of unions reducing the room for compromises. Apart from the loss in membership - extensively discussed in chapter two - trade unions have also lost political power. This has allowed, starting from 1980s, the smooth enactment of a multitude of welfare and labour market reforms. Besides, their weakening must be understood in relation to the demand for de-standardisation of employment regulations and norms on the part of employers (Holst 2013, p. 143). The decrease in union power and the parallel proliferation of below-the-standard forms of employment hint to the likelihood of a continuous increase in precariousness.

5. The relation between individualisation and precarisation and the change in trade unions

Precarisation and individualisation, as theoretically discussed in chapter three and four, describe certain transformation processes in the labour market and in societies in general. In the last centuries, they have taken place in many countries and certainly within German society. The assessment of how precarisation and individualisation relate to each of the changes in German trade unions since reunification is the topic of this chapter. The types of relationships between the trade union changes and the two transformation processes are identified in the following discussions, so it is questioned how they might have influenced, caused or reinforced one another.

5.1 Linkages to the membership and representation crisis

As shown in chapter two, the number of trade union members decreased drastically since reunification, a process taking place mainly in the 1990s. Unionists have been discussing this issue ever since and have come to various conclusions. The most common and accepted argument is that demographics are the main driver, since more people are leaving the labour market than entering it (e.g. Schroeder and Munimus 2011, p. 108ff.), which also reflects in the age structure of the members. Another argument often mentioned refers to the process of tertiarisation: Since trade

unions have traditionally been more active in the industrial sector, a weaker union engagement in the service sector would have lowered the number of union members and union density (e.g. Dribbusch and Birke 2014, p. 6f. or Ebbinghaus 2013, p. 217). Besides tertiarisation and the demographics, further arguments regarding the membership crisis can be found, which relate to precarisation and individualisation. These arguments are intertwined with the crisis of representation also being discussed in the following paragraphs. Recalling chapter two, the crisis of representation relates to the phenomenon that until today union structures have not been adequately adjusted to the manifold changes on the labour market such as rising female and migrant employment, increasing precarity, rise of the service sector, self-employment or digital jobs.

One aspect of the individualisation process is the diversification of life courses, since people face less predefined traditional role models nowadays (Beck 1986). Connected to changed biographical patterns, it can also be observed that people change workplaces more often during their careers. Reasons for that can be found in the transforming labour market but also the increased self-responsibility of employees to design their career could have played a role. In that respect, Beck (1986, p. 122ff.) sees a relationship to the increased average education level, which has led to self-determined decisions being constantly reconsidered. Constant reconsideration, also about the working career, might have influenced increased job changes as well as the increased willingness or even coercion to be geographically mobile (Beck, 1986, p. 125). These job changes in turn, could have had a detrimental effect on overall union membership numbers. If the working environment is in a constant flux, also across sectors, it can be assumed that the awareness of working conditions or the willingness to improve them decreases and could prevent people from committing to a trade union.

Besides the above-mentioned increase in job changes, the labour market has also shifted towards more part-time jobs, subcontracted work, fixed-term contracts and the expansion of the low-wage sector as shown in chapter four, closely related to rising precarisation (e.g. Dribbusch and Birke 2014, p. 7). This segmentation of the labour market could also be an obstacle to becoming a union member, since it is perceived that trade unions mainly focus on the core workforce with a “normal” employment relationship (e.g. Schroeder 2014). According to Schroeder (2016, p. 379), trade unions still have problems organising precarious workers properly and increasing their participation in the union movement.

Some even state more critically that the German trade unions are shaped by a culture of dominance by middle-aged male skilled core workers (Podann 2012; Ledwith 2012; Frerichs et al. 2004 p. 123). Hence, many precarious forms of employment are not represented within trade unions and

prevent atypical workers from becoming a member, which is a key aspect of the representation crisis. While part-time employees show less engagement in trade unions in general (e.g. Lesch et al. 2015), especially the increase in agency labour and subcontracted work, which are often highly precarious forms of employment, could possibly have adverse effects on the number of union members. This very much fits to the argument from Frerichs et al. (2004), that there is a growing asymmetry between the structure of unified trade unions in Germany and actual societal processes already mentioned in chapter 5.1, which contributes to the so-called representation crisis of German trade unions.

Many authors outlined the increased competition between workers at the workplace due to a mixed staff of core and subcontracted workers (e.g. Dörre et al. 2009 or Holst 2009). On the one hand, it can be observed that there is a growing tension between the core and the subcontracted workforce, since the core workers are confronted with the danger of being replaced by cheaper outsourced or leased workers (Holst 2009, p. 147), whereas these subcontracted workers feel a disadvantage, since they are paid less for performing the same work (Dörre et al. 2009, p. 25ff.). On the other hand, competition is ever-present among the agency workers, since they compete for rare chances to become permanent workers in the firm (Dörre et al 2009, p. 24 or Holst 2009, p. 147). Employers benefit from this competitive situation in a way that Appelbaum (2001) called the threat effect already discussed in chapter four. The multi-faceted and fierce competition leads, according to Dörre et al. (2009), to an individualised situation of workers in firms with subcontracted workers and reduces the cohesion and solidarity between workers. As the worker solidarity is a key element for the membership in a trade union (Frerichs et. al. 2004, p. 53ff.), these impacts of subcontracted work on the firm-level might have negatively contributed to the number of union members. However, it has to be admitted here, that subcontracted work started to increase simultaneously with the *Hartz 1* law, which was implemented after a major decrease in union membership had already taken place.

One aspect of precarisation and also individualisation is a social disintegration taking place within society. Precarisation, as shown in chapter four, cannot only be explained through changes in the labour market, but also through the trend of social disintegration. This, in turn, is closely related to a lack of class consciousness, and thus solidarity with other workers can hardly be built up. In that manner, Dribbusch (2010) observes that precarisation undermines collectivity and disciplines workers, which might also hinder precarious workers to become trade union members. Dribbusch (2010) sees it therefore as inevitable to develop strategies to bring precarious workers back into the zone of solidarity.

Social disintegration as part of individualisation is also observed by political party researcher Oskar Niedermeyer (2013, p. 18f.). The related erosion of social classes would reduce normative incentives to become a member of traditional organisations, in which collective class identities or altruistic behaviour patterns are understood as the basis of the membership (ibid.). Thus, individualisation contributed to the decrease in voluntary engagement not only in trade unions, but in traditional organisations, for instance in political parties, in general. The decoupling of traditional bonds as part of individualisation might have also played a role in decreasing the number of union members, since generational transfers of family trade union traditions have generally become more improbable. Keupp (2010, p. 248) underlines this argument by saying that decisions, such as entry into a trade union are no longer self-evident and thus not given by family tradition.

5.2 Linkages to the changing industrial relations

German trade unions have generally lost influence in wage-setting processes. This cannot only be seen in the decrease in union membership, but also in the decrease of collective bargaining coverage and wage agreement autonomy (see chapter 2.5.). Related to that is the shift of industry-wide multi-employer agreements towards more decentralised wage-setting, like company-based collective bargaining (Schroeder and Greef 2008, p. 352), also linked closely to the previously discussed rise of professional associations. According to Lesch (2008) or Bispinck (2008, p. 6ff) this contributes to a diversification of the collective bargaining landscape, which is also characterised by a weaker unity of collective agreements, since company-based and multi-employer agreements are increasingly used simultaneously and complementary. In the trend of decreasing collective bargaining coverage, which also stems from the erosion of Social Partnership, we again find aspects which are very much embedded in the processes of individualisation and precarisation.

Similar to the fall in union members, the diversification of employment, as a structural aspect of precarisation, has had detrimental effects on the German bargaining coverage, since part-time or marginally employed people are often not covered by collective agreements. Additionally, as shown in chapter two, companies increasingly escape collective agreements by using opening clauses, establishing associations without collective bargaining commitments (*OT-Verbände*) or outsourcing activities in the service sector with more precarious employment⁹ but less collective agreements. Thus precarisation and the decrease in bargaining coverage can be seen as mutually dependent. The diversification of employment has contributed to the decreasing coverage, which

⁹ Thus, tertiarisation and precarisation cannot be seen as detached phenomena.

in turn leads to more precarious employment considering that workers covered by a tariff agreement are naturally less prone to precarity.

The increase in company-based agreements goes very much in line with processes of individualisation. In his article about the postmodern society and individualisation Hitzler (2010, p. 327) observes that the traditional and much ritualised distributive struggle between unions and employers is outdated in modern society, where individuals become more important than the collective. The tendencies of a narcissistic society (Castel 2011) and the need for self-care and self-fulfillment (Bauman 2001, Kron 2002) have been outlined in chapter three and become important in this part of the assessment of individualisation on trade unions. People increasingly seek for more self-determination and opportunities to shape their individual life. Company-based agreements seemingly give people the ability to influence their own outcome from labour in a more direct and individual way than an area or multi-employer agreement can offer. This relationship can be similarly explained by the rise in particular interests and the fragmentation processes prevailing across all spheres. In this regard, Schroeder (2016, p. 382) holds the view, that mute compulsion arising from social class affiliation has been replaced by conscious and rational decisions, which put trade unions in competition. Further, Hitzler (2010) also hypothesizes that due to individualisation the traditional distributive struggle is replaced by more indirect and unregulated forms of struggle. This view is congruent with Schroeder's (2016, p. 379) observation, that employer associations increasingly have to deal with the unwillingness of employers to regulate employment conditions, especially in newly found companies.

5.3 Linkages to the rise of professional associations

While we were not able to identify a strong linkage between precarisation and the rise of professional associations, the theories of individualisation provide several explanations to this trend in the German trade union landscape. If one follows the argument of Castel (2011), Koppetsch (2010) and Bauman (2000, 2001), individuals have become increasingly self-centered and focus on their own personal benefit in the individualised society. Considering this, workers might feel a greater incentive to become a members of a professional association rather than joining a sectoral union. Sectoral unions are organised under the umbrella organisation DGB representing the interests of the whole body of workers (Schroeder and Greef 2008, p. 348f.). The membership in a professional association might give people the feeling of directly benefiting from it, as more particular interests are represented, while the membership in a sectoral union is rather based on the solidarity between workers across an entire sector or even among the whole workforce through the

DGB. Some authors argue that these forms of solidarity have diminished significantly in times of individualisation and precarisation (e.g. Koppetsch 2010 or Dörre 2014). In that sense, the increasing power, influence and membership of professional associations could be explained.

Authors like Becker and Hadjar (2010, p. 67ff.) observed that social classes are no longer homogenous mass groups but rather encompass multiple identities with divergent interests. However, Frerichs et al. (2004, p. 53ff.) argue that the structure of unified trade unions in Germany relies on a consistent working-class identity with coherent interests and solidarity between workers, which does not reflect the societal development described above. From this it can be concluded, that there is an asymmetry between the unified trade union structures based on the working class and individualisation processes in society. In turn, it could be argued that professional associations are better equipped to capture the diversified interests of employees, as they, contrary to unified unions, do not rely on coherent class interests but focus on the defense of privileges of particular groups. Furthermore, they are comprised of smaller and more homogenous groups (Frerichs et. al. 2004, p. 48), which consequently could explain the membership and power shift from unified to professional associations since the 2000s.

One aspect of individualisation processes is an increasing competition on the labour market, which employees conform to accordingly. The rise of professional associations reinforces this development. According to Schroeder (2005, p. 12f), Streeck (2003, p. 99) or Lesch and Biebler (2007, p. 147ff.), the increasing bargaining power of professional associations fosters labour market competition, undermines the interests of the whole workforce to the benefit of the particular interests of skilled workers and also jeopardises the existence of unified trade unions. Bispinck and Dribbusch (2008, p. 158ff.) warn that the increased bargaining power of professional associations and the related competitiveness between unions could also push less assertive branches without professional associations out of the community of solidarity. In line with this argument, Streeck (2006, p. 150f.) even sees the danger of a comeback of the so-called “worker aristocracy” referring to the cleavage of the working class in elite workers aligned with capitalists with more rights and freedom and the ‘real’ working class with highly precarious employment conditions.

Given that employees recognise these forms of competitiveness, which are amplified by the rise of professional associations, it could be argued that they do not want to become part of a professional associations. However, if one assumes that people might adapt to the competitive environment in the labour market and develop a kind of ‘dog-eat-dog’ mentality, there would be no restraint for them to become a member in a professional association. The argument regarding adaptation to the competitive environment is consistent with the perceptions of Castel (2009, 2011).

6. Conclusion

This paper showed that certain aspects of the changes in the German trade union landscape since the 1990s can be explained within the scope of the concepts of individualisation and precarisation. In the following paragraphs, we will give a short summary of our findings regarding the relationship between the two transformation processes and the four selected changes regarding trade unions since German reunification, namely the membership and representation crisis, more general changes in industrial relations and the rise in importance of professional associations. Regarding the membership and representation crisis, which cannot be analysed separately, this paper finds that the traditional structure of unified trade unions based on the principle of solidarity within the working class is very much asymmetric to individualisation processes, for example the increase in individual interests in society. Thus, this might have contributed to the decrease in union membership, since people do not see their individual interests represented by trade unions. Although trade unions have been using new organising strategies to successfully include precarious workers in recent years, especially temporary workers, precarious forms of labour are still often not represented in trade unions. Thus, precarisation may have had an effect on the decline in the membership of unified unions and the representation crisis as well.

The rise of professional associations is very much in line with processes of individualisation. If individualistic and competitive behaviour is seen as part of individualisation and as a major trend in our society, this contributed to attracting people to join professional associations. Contrary to unified unions, professional associations offer a more direct and homogenous way of interest representation. Competitive environments and fragmentation in the union movement and in the labour market, which can arise from powerful professional associations, is often not seen as problematic in an individualised society but may have detrimental effects on labour conditions.

Changing industrial relations such as the shift from multi-employer agreements to company-based agreements or increasing exemptions from collective commitments can also be understood within the scope of individualisation. Again, the rise of particular interests, opposite to collective solidarity, plays a major role. Thus, fragmentation, which can be seen in many spheres of the individualised society, also takes place in the trade union landscape. Additionally, the changing industrial relations can be seen as reinforcing precarity, since employers are not only increasingly unwilling to regulate employment by cooperating with trade unions or promote work councils, but also advocate for deregulation measures in the labour market.

Individualisation and precarisation not only affect society but the individual and his behavioural patterns as well. Individualised people who strive for autonomy and freedom end up abandoning

trade unions as suitable representatives. Emphasising the importance of collectivity, in order to gain freedom within certain boundaries will be an important task of mobilisation strategies of trade unions in the future. In this regard, German unions have developed several strategies to revitalise the union movement and combat existing challenges and new obstacles related to changes in the labour market and society. For instance, the *IG Metall* achieved a milestone in 2010 regarding atypical employment by reaching a multi-employer agreement for the German steel industry (since 2012 for the entire metal industry), which ensures an equal payment for agency work with respect to permanently employed workers. Ver.di is also adapting to new realities for instance with the project “Cloud and Crowd”, which is attempting to unionise workers who work in cloud- and crowd-based projects like Call- and Service Centres. Ver.di is pushing for co-determination in an increasingly digitalised work-environment characterised by rising automatisisation. In the same sense, ver.di is trying to analyse transformation for workers through digitalisation and in how far unions may help to ensure good digitalised work within its “Transwork”-programme. Both projects directly address work forces who increasingly lack the willingness to unionise and therefore counteract the trend of diminishing union-density and membership rates.

In that sense, there is a camp that resists certain fatalistic tendencies in social science research on unions. The so-called “labour revitalisation studies” (Schmalz and Dörre 2013, p. 14) and studies on “strategic unionism” (ibid., p. 345) seek to emphasise the role unions can play in shaping industrial relations and forwarding a research agenda which focuses on strategic choices for unions. The analysis shows how far two major trends in society might have influenced the assertiveness of unions throughout the past 30 years in Germany. Unions should take account of these societal changes and adopt strategies to counteract the problematic symptoms of precarisation and individualisation processes.

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