



When does solidarity end? Transnational labour cooperation during and after the crisis – the GM/Opel case revisited

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Susanne Pernicka

Johannes Kepler Universität Linz, Austria

Vera Glassner

Johannes Kepler Universität Linz, Austria

Nele Dittmar

Johannes Kepler Universität Linz, Austria

Adam Mrozowicki

Uniwersytet Wrocławski, Poland

Małgorzata Maciejewska

Uniwersytet Wrocławski, Poland

Abstract

The General Motors (GM) case stands out for its transnational employee cooperation. During the crisis the ‘national turn’ of union politics seems to have eroded solidarity and mutual trust relations. In this article the authors suggest disentangling the behaviour of labour representatives and their attitudes, identities and feelings to develop a more sophisticated perspective on labour transnationalism. Concepts of sociological neo-institutionalism and empirical evidence from two automobile companies (GM/Opel and Volkswagen) in Germany, the UK and Poland are used to investigate the conditions under which transnational solidarity occurs and prevails. The authors conclude that solidarity in both companies has not come to an end and contributes to repertoires of contention in future labour conflicts.

Corresponding author:

Susanne Pernicka, Department of Economic and Organisational Sociology, Johannes Kepler Universität Linz, Altenberger Strasse 69, 4040 Linz, Austria.

Email: Susanne.pernicka@jku.at

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Introduction

While European and global markets expand, and regulations have been removed to enable capital and labour to move freely within the European Union, transnational collective action of national trade unions is still an exception rather than a rule. The successful cases of cross-national labour cooperation in Europe have been primarily built out of strong local and national positions (Anner et al., 2006: 8). Labour transnationalism has been based either on stable, firm-centred transnational relationships around European Works Councils (EWCs), on trade unions with high density rates and mobilising capacities (European Action Days), or on labour representatives with a strong pattern-setting position in national and sectoral wage bargaining (Pernicka and Glassner, 2014). As Commons (1909) argued more than 100 years ago, following the geographic expansion of product markets trade unions would sooner or later have to expand their scope of activities to regain control over labour markets. Yet this assumption contrasts with research findings; a large number of national and local unions have barely attempted or succeeded in developing transnational institutions of cooperation. Besides intensified international competitive pressures, scholars have therefore put their emphasis on ‘opportunity structures’ (Anner et al., 2006; Bernaciak, 2010, 2013; Tarrow, 1994, 2001; Turner, 1996) to explain the domestic and international strategies of labour actors. Supportive structures such as the EWC Directive or access to national, European and global infrastructures and political power provide structural opportunities for transnational trade union action. As structures do not fully explain social behaviour, actor-centred approaches have been developed to complement structural accounts. These approaches focus on the role of union leaders who might facilitate labour transnationalism. In adopting theoretical insights from the broader social movement literature (Snow and McAdam, 2000) to explain successful cases of labour transnationalism, Greer and Hauptmeier (2012: 281) draw on the concept of ‘identity work’, which refers to processes through which a collective identity, common understandings of issues at stake, shared norms and goals are created, sustained and modified. As has been convincingly demonstrated by the case of General Motors Europe (GME), trade unions and EWCs are able to introduce and sustain principles of solidarity and cooperation even within highly competitive environments. The sustainability of the transnational cooperation of labour in GME is thus explained by both supportive macro-institutional structures in Europe and human agency at various social levels that involves continuous face-to-face exchange and trust building. Yet, in contrast to the determinants of labour transnationalism that have been widely discussed it is still an open question under what conditions norms and belief systems of transnational solidarity can be created and sustained, even in times of crisis. And if these norms, values and practices of solidarity and cooperation remain intact, what effects do they have on the behaviour, attitudes and cognitions of trade union and EWC actors?

In this article we call into question the widely accepted perception that the ‘national turn’ of trade union politics during the crisis has eroded transnational solidarity and

mutual trust relations in GME (Bernaciak, 2013; Hertwig et al., 2013). In order to develop a more differentiated perspective on transnational solidarity of trade unions and EWCs, we suggest disentangling the behaviour from the attitudes and cognitions of actors. The hypothesis is that a decline in observable transnational cooperation does not necessarily mean that mutual trust relationships and already created norms and values of solidarity have ceased to be influential or were disrupted. Solidarity has been emphasised by trade unions as a universal principle based on the common interests of all workers. Despite this rhetoric they have primarily organised and represented national collectivities. Our research interest lies in the question whether solidarity as a collective good of workers and based on their willingness to forgo material or symbolic resources for the welfare of others has been established and sustained at the level of field-specific norms and cultures. Since solidarity is always based on principles of exclusion and inclusion (Hyman 1999), we are particularly interested in the boundary work trade unions pursue in their attempt to create and sustain norms and practices of solidarity behaviour.

The article adopts an ‘institutional logics perspective’ (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008) because of the intriguing possibilities it offers to theorise and empirically study how institutions as broader belief systems shape the behaviour and cognition of individual and collective actors. Rejecting individualistic, rational choice theories and macro-structural perspectives, Friedland and Alford (1991) posited that every institution in society (such as the capitalist market, communities) has a central logic. Institutional logics represent frames of reference that condition actors’ choices for sense making, the vocabulary they use to motivate action, and their sense of self and identity (Thornton et al., 2012: 2). From an institutional logics perspective, international competition and transnational solidarity are based on two possible institutional logics (market logic and community logic), respectively, in fields of industrial relations. Furthermore, market logic and the community logic of transnational solidarity imply different patterns of material distribution of resources and incomes. Thus, conflicts between business and labour as well as within (organised) labour are expected to arise over both symbolic and material interests.

The article begins with a literature review and discusses existing perspectives on the determinants of labour transnationalism with a particular focus on the automobile industry. Then we develop an institutional logics perspective on cross-border cooperation and suggest a heuristic interpretative framework that allows evaluating the state of institutional logics (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008) and their effects upon the behaviour, cognitions and emotions expressed by the actors. In the ensuing section we outline and explain our sample selection of two auto-companies, GM/Opel and Volkswagen (VW), and present empirical results from 27 semi-structured interviews with trade unionists and EWCs in Germany, the UK, Poland and at the European level.¹ After the discussion of the results, we draw our conclusions.

Literature review

Most of the existing literature on labour transnationalism explicitly or implicitly draws on a rational choice conception of collective actors (Anner et al., 2006; Bernaciak, 2010, 2013; Gajewska, 2009; Streeck, 1998). According to classical rational choice theory of collective action (Olson, 1965), labour representatives would not be willing to contribute

to a public good (such as transnational wage bargaining coordination rules or cross-border industrial action) unless coercion or other special incentives for (international) cooperation exist. Following this line of reasoning, unions may be able to overcome the collective action problem because of special incentives and support at national and transnational level that make certain forms of cooperation plausible. The relevant literature in the automobile industry identifies the following incentives that were found to support the cost–benefit considerations in favour of transnational collective action: transnationalisation of business activities, management strategies of coercive cost-comparisons and inter-plant competition within multinational companies, the EWC Directive, European and Global Framework Agreements and existing transnational networks of European and World Works Councils (Anner et al., 2006; Bernaciak, 2010; Dehnen and Rampeltshammer, 2011). In her investigation of GME in Germany and Poland, Bernaciak (2010, 2013) found evidence that supports her rational choice based assumptions of trade union interests and behaviour. Before the crisis, unionists cooperated transnationally when no local negotiation channel was available to German unionists and the Polish unionists benefited more from the assistance of their Western counterparts than from local solutions (Bernaciak, 2010: 119). When the crisis began to hit the car industry trade unions were found to redirect their strategies towards the national level because of the state's extraordinary involvement in the economy (e.g. bonus for scrapping cars, state support in investments). These national opportunities provided viable alternatives to transnational strategies and, eventually, disrupted former transnational cooperation and trust relationships between labour actors (Bernaciak, 2013: 140). As a rational choice perspective on transnational collective action underlines the role of (changing) political and structural opportunities, trade unions seem to oscillate between different spatial levels and adapt their strategic focus, respectively. Social ties and trust relationships seem to play a subordinate role when it comes to following one's particularistic economic interests.

In order to understand more sustainable forms of labour transnationalism, rational choice based theories and macro-structural approaches are often combined with or substituted by actor-centred conceptions derived from trade union revitalisation literature. A commonality of the latter approaches is their interest in social mechanisms that shape the behaviour of trade union actors. In this regard, two strands of literature can be distinguished: (1) social movement literature (Frege and Kelly, 2003; Gajewska, 2009; Greer and Hauptmeier, 2008; Kelly, 1998) and (2) sociological neo-institutionalism (Pernicka and Glassner, 2014; Voss and Sherman, 2000). Social movement literature develops a perspective on micro-social processes and the construction of common understandings and interpretations of the social world (framing) and emphasises the importance of *leadership* (McAdam, 1988; Ostrom, 2000) in mobilising (trans)national collective action. With their notion of 'identity work' (see above), Greer and Hauptmeier (2012) contributed to this vital debate. A less developed strand within revitalisation literature refers to neo-institutional conceptions of organisational theory. This literature concerns both the characteristics of unionists themselves and their social embeddedness within meso-level institutional fields. In their analysis of union revitalisation processes in the United States, Voss and Sherman (2000) referred to leaders with activist experience outside the labour movement who not only build bridges between organisations but also between distinct norms and cultural expectations (bureaucracy vs bottom-up organising). Hence, they

found evidence of ‘normative isomorphism’ (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) which occurs primarily through professionalisation processes. Through the selection and training of union organisers and staff they were made committed to the new strategic model of trade unionism.

Both strands of revitalisation literature (social movement and neo-institutional organisational theories) differ from rational choice accounts in that they perceive actors’ interests and cognitions as socially embedded rather than as given *ex ante*. While rational choice thinking assumes rational actors to pursue utility maximisation within a given set of social constraints and opportunities, social movement literature and the institutional logics approach in particular maintain that actors follow both instrumental as well as non-utilitarian forms of behaviour. Moreover, both approaches specify the (historical) conflicts over symbolic (norms and values, interpretative frames, etc.) and material resources between industrial relations actors. Contrary to social movement concepts, however, neo-institutional accounts focus on field-specific institutions and processes that shape the identities and behaviour of actors. They posit that the meaning of rationality varies by institutional order (Friedland and Alford, 1991). Rather than by continuous face-to-face contacts between engaged activists and labour, pre-existing and newly introduced institutional logics in organisational fields² are assumed to condition actors’ choices for sense making, the vocabulary they use to motivate action and their sense of self and identity (Thornton et al., 2012: 2). Institutional logics and political struggles over their (re)production and change are regarded as primary mechanisms that facilitate and sustain or hinder transnational solidarity and cooperative behaviour in industrial relations fields.

An institutional logics approach to labour transnationalism

This article strives to enhance existing theorising on the determinants of transnational solidarity and cooperation of labour and its sustainability. Apart from regulative institutions (EWC Directive, Framework Agreements, more recent measures of the European Economic Governance regime and the TROIKA, etc.) we argue that existing institutional logics (i.e. belief systems and associated practices) in fields of industrial relations provide labour actors with positive or negative power resources vis-a-vis employers and state actors as well as in intra-group relationships of labour. Moreover, institutional logics represent meaning systems which shape cognitions, identities and social action in (trans)national fields. Actors are expected to accept the social knowledge, norms and practices in a given institutionalised field and take these for granted (Zucker, 1977), while conflict and competition over the distribution of symbolic and material resources emerge when long-standing boundaries are compromised (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010: 214). Thus, while the predominance of the capitalist market logic explains the behaviour and attitudes of employers at transnational level, trade unions need to build institutional bridges from national fields and fight for alternative normative and cultural patterns of meaning (Swidler, 1986) at transnational level. This reasoning is in line with Offe and Wieselthaler’s (1980: 78ff.) classic contention about two logics of collective action: while the more powerful (i.e. capitalist enterprises) will find the individualistic and purely instrumental form of collective action sufficiently promising for the preservation of their power position, workers’ organisations in capitalist systems always find themselves forced to rely upon

non-utilitarian forms of collective action. Moreover, the community logic is closely related to institutions of corporatist and social democratic welfare states implying relatively high levels of solidarity as compared to liberal welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and Central and Eastern European new neoliberal economies (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012). However, norms and values of solidarity and cooperation might also govern the cognitions and behaviour of industrial relations actors beyond the national level. Still, the predominance of the market logic puts pressure too on the perceptions and behaviour of national trade unions. They often support organisational forms and practices that increase national competitiveness of their constituencies in internationalised markets. Conformity to the symbols and practices of the market logic may generate legitimacy with regard to their national constituencies and hence, secure access to national and local resources (membership fees, mobilising capacity at local and national level).

Under certain material and institutional conditions we expect an increased probability that labour actors engage in transnational collective action. The expansion of product markets is expected to push trade unions and EWCs towards strategic labour transnationalism if they possess organisational strength in terms of structural, associational and institutional power. Transnational institutions are conceived as the results of (historical) interactions and struggles between actors in internationalised fields (see Turner, 1996). This brings us to the concept of institutional work or institutional strategies (two terms we use synonymously), defined as work motivated significantly by its potential institutional effects. Institutional work can therefore also be understood as physical or mental effort performed in order to achieve an effect on a (trans)national institution (Lawrence et al., 2009: 15). For instance, trade unions' efforts to create cross-border institutions of cooperation involve 'harder' work than business activities aiming to enforce market-related interests. This is true at least under current conditions where EU policies and institutions of market liberalism prevail.

If supportive transnational institutions of cooperation and solidarity can be established, we assume these to provide labour actors with power resources and repertoires of contention (Tilly, 2006) even in times of crisis. With regard to institutions as resources, we distinguish between regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements (Scott, 2008) that impact upon attitudes, identities and behaviour (Thornton et al., 2012). Thus, institutional effects can also be measured along reported and observed emotional reactions of individual field actors. For instance, actors who deviate from normative expectations, cultural-cognitive beliefs and community practices of solidarity and cooperation are expected to feel ashamed and confused, and hence feel the need to justify themselves (Scott, 2008: 60). Thus, apart from observable behaviour, it is the cognitions and emotions expressed by the actors that provide us with a means to evaluate whether or not common meaning systems could be established and if so, whether they are widely intact or not.

Two cases of labour transnationalism: GM/Opel and Volkswagen

In methodological terms, we selected two extreme cases (Ebbinghaus, 2006) of successful labour transnationalism in the automobile industry (Volkswagen and GM/Opel) in very different national fields of industrial relations (the UK, Poland and Germany). GM/

Opel is considered as the primary case in our analysis to which Volkswagen is contrasted as a secondary case. GM/Opel and Volkswagen share some commonalities but also differ in important aspects. Both have strong actors of employee representation and both belong to the automobile industry, which holds a strong position compared to other sectors of the economy. This is especially true for Germany: few economies are as dependent on the automobile as the German economy (Diez, 2012: 37). The UK motor industry has suffered from structural problems but seems to be recovering, having ‘reinvented itself over the past 15 years’ (Cooke, 2009: 29). The post-transition auto industry in Poland is heavily dependent on foreign automobile firms (Šćepanović, 2013). Special economic zones aim at attracting foreign investors by guaranteeing public aid: income and property tax exemptions, low prices on land lease, and infrastructure (roads, buildings, power and water supply) (Maciejewska, 2012). However, the two selected companies and their labour representatives show considerable differences with regard to their economic situation and their endowment with institutional resources. Drawing on the neo-institutional framework developed above, we evaluate two hypotheses. (1) As the probability of labour transnationalism increases with a rise in – transnational – power resources we expect that labour actors at GM/Opel have to put more effort into ‘institutional work’ to build and sustain transnational cooperation than their counterparts at VW. The latter can draw on transnational institutional resources provided by a social partnership culture in management–labour relations. (2) A decline in transnational cooperative behaviour does not necessarily mean that norms of cooperation and solidarity cease to exist and be influential. Established institutional logics of cross-border cooperation are expected to impact upon social action and cognitions, even if there is no observable transnational collective action.

Adam Opel AG with its headquarters in Rüsselsheim, Germany, is a daughter of the American carmaker General Motors (GM). Until 2010, GM’s European branch was called ‘General Motors Europe’ (GME) and included the German brand Opel and the British brand Vauxhall. Since 2010, GME has ceased to exist and GM’s European operations have been run by Adam Opel AG. GM/Opel has 11 manufacturing sites in Europe, four of which are located in Germany, two in the UK and one in Poland. The vast majority of the 35,000 GM employees in Europe are employed in Germany (Adam Opel AG, 2013). Unlike GM/Opel, VW has no separate European management but the global company headquarters are located in Wolfsburg, Germany. Of the 28 production sites with 260,000 employees in Germany, 10 belong to the Volkswagen brands (Volkswagen PKW and Volkswagen Nutzfahrzeuge) (Volkswagen AG, 2014). Two VW sites are located in Poland, and since 1998 the British brand Bentley with its manufacturing site in Crewe (UK) has belonged to the company.

Table 1 gives an overview of the structural, regulative, normative, cultural-cognitive and associational power resources at play in the two companies and their positive or negative consequences for industrial relations.

Structural power resources

GM/Opel has been in a difficult economic situation for decades and experienced various restructuring programmes. It has been faced with problems of overcapacity, declining

Table 1. Resources for transnational union strategies in company fields.

	Volkswagen	GM/Opel
Structural power resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expansion of output and markets (+) • (Labour) cost differentials between plants (-) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overcapacities, declining output; but signs of recovery (-) • (Labour) cost differentials between plants (-) • Decades of restructuring (-)
Regulative institutions	<p>Germany:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Company collective agreement (+) • 'Volkswagen law' (+) • Co-determination at workplace and supervisory board level (+) <p>United Kingdom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plant-level agreement (+) <p>Poland:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plant-level collective agreement at Poznan (no registered collective agreement at Polkowice) (+) <p>Europe/World:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European and World Works Councils (+) • International Framework Agreements (IFAs) (+) 	<p>Germany:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sectoral collective agreement (+) • Co-determination at workplace and supervisory board level (+) <p>United Kingdom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National company agreement (+) <p>Poland:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No plant-level collective agreement (-) <p>Europe/World:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European (and World) Works Councils (+) • European Framework Agreements (EFAs) (+)
Normative and cultural-cognitive institutions	<p>Industrial relations in company field:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labour relations based on social partnership (+) • Acceptance/fostering of co-determination by the employer (+) • Notion of 'Volkswagen family' (+) • Limited/'moderated' intra-company competition (+) <p>Intra-labour relations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptance of IG Metall's leadership in transnational employee cooperation (+) 	<p>Industrial relations in company field:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labour relations more conflictual (breaches of EFAs by employer) (-) • Some involvement of German works councils in company policies (+) • Transnational 'whipsawing' (-) <p>Intra-labour relations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transnational cooperation punctured by site egoisms (+/-)
Associational power resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High union density (> 90% in Germany, 55–90% in UK, in Poland 60–95%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High union density (50–90% in Germany, > 90% in UK, in Poland 60%)

(+/-) indicate that institutions provide positive or negative power resources to labour actors.

output, layoffs and plant closures. The situation has further deteriorated in the economic crisis of 2008/2009. However, since the insolvency of GM in 2009 small signs of recovery can be detected (interview 17). Volkswagen's economic situation, on the other hand, could not be more different. After a phase of employment reduction until the middle of the 2000s (Hauser-Ditz et al., 2010: 147–148), the company has increased employment worldwide since 2007. In contrast to other big car manufacturers, VW – although temporarily reducing production in 2008/2009 – since then has continued its course of growth and expansion (Pries and Seeliger, 2012: 86).

Regulative power resources

As mentioned above, both companies have strong actors of employee representation at establishment and enterprise levels. They act within a regulative framework which provides positive as well as negative resources for transnational union action.

Opel in Germany applies the sectoral collective agreement for the metal industry (although with temporary downwards derogations for the Opel sites), while Vauxhall in the UK has a national company agreement. In Poland, collective bargaining usually takes place at the company level, but the GM/Opel site in Gliwice has no formally registered collective agreement. Although plant-level union representatives of Solidarnosc are regularly renegotiating agreements they lack influence on basic forms of wage regulation (interview 26). While British industrial relations are characterised by voluntarism and the absence of statutory regulation (Hyman, 2003: 40) and Polish industrial relations display a lack of effective social dialogue (above the plant level), the German labour law provides for far-reaching co-determination rights at establishment and enterprise level. Opel in Germany has a strong works council, and unions and employee representatives are members of the company's supervisory board. The GM/Opel European Works Council (EWC) was founded in 1996 as the 'European Employee Forum' (EEF). Since 2012, the revised EWC Directive has been applied, and the body is now called EWC. Since its establishment, the GM/Opel EWC has concluded numerous European Framework Agreements (EFAs) with management concerning company restructuring in Europe. Presently, the GM unions are engaged in the process of building up a 'Global Information Sharing Forum' (meant to become a world works council). A preliminary agreement on this with management was reached in 2012 and three meetings have taken place so far (June 2014). In contrast to the EWC, it is lacking any legal backing however.

The Volkswagen AG is an exception within the German auto industry as it does not apply the sectoral collective agreement but a company collective agreement, which has – in the past – exceeded the sectoral pay level (Jürgens et al., 2006: 26).³ Bentley in the UK applies a plant-level agreement. In Poland, VW Poznan has a plant-level agreement, while Polkowice does not; however agreements on pay and important conditions are regularly renewed. In addition to the strong German co-determination rights, the so-called 'Volkswagen law' provides additional power to the employees' side in the company: special regulations on decision making in the supervisory board make the approval of the employee representatives necessary for the opening and relocating of sites. Volkswagen's EWC was established in 1990 and officially recognised by management in

1992 (Hauser-Ditz et al., 2010: 132). The World Works Council (WWC) was established in 1998/1999. At the beginning of 2014, the two bodies were integrated to make employee cooperation more efficient (in its functioning, the European and World Works Council at VW can be understood as one body, and we will use the abbreviation 'W/EWC' in the following). Unlike at GM, framework agreements at VW are concluded at the global level (International Framework Agreement – IFA). Such IFAs are for example the Charter on Labour Relations and the Charter on Temporary Agency Work (TAW). The charters are implemented at the different sites according to local laws and customs.

Normative and cultural-cognitive power resources

At VW firmly established norms of social partnership impact upon both sides of industrial relations, management and labour, and facilitate labour's role in transnational cooperation. In contrast, institutional logics at GME (and later GM/Opel) widely mirror US-American labour relations, which are relatively conflictual (e.g. Rampeltshammer and Dehnen, 2010). Thus, at GM/Opel we expect that labour has needed to invest more of its own attempts to successfully coordinate labour activities at transnational level. However, open conflicts with management might also serve as an incentive to generate solidarity between labour actors at different sites. In the years after the establishment of the EEF management was rather hostile towards organised labour (e.g. Dehnen and Rampeltshammer, 2011). An example is that GM management did not always comply with the principles set down in the EFAs such as informing the EWC about planned restructuring and refraining from plant closures and compulsory redundancies. However, management recognised the EEF as a negotiation partner which strengthened cooperation on labour's side. Among labour representatives, strong norms of solidarity and the principle of sharing the burden of restructuring have been established over time.

The EWC at GM/Opel is often described as being 'German-centric'. However, the dominance of German union officers and, in particular, their chairing of the EEF is in most cases seen as supportive. Labour representatives in other countries benefit from the strong employee co-determination rights in Germany that guarantee access to information provided by management. At Volkswagen labour relations are based on partnership and cooperation and go beyond legally guaranteed co-determination (Jürgens, 2002: 10). The principles of social partnership and co-determination are widely accepted by management; management and the trade union are 'partners on equal terms' (interview 10). Both management and labour have agreed on the aim of balancing competitiveness and employment security, the so-called 'Volkswagen way' (interview 10). German-style co-determination shapes employee-management relations also at locations in the UK and Poland and gives unions a strong role (interviews 16, 23). This approach also extends to transnational employee participation in the W/EWC. International meetings of labour representatives are funded by management, and they also provide for language interpretation. The dominance of the German members of the W/EWC at VW and IG Metall's leadership role is accepted and considered as being beneficial to transnational labour cooperation. British and Polish unionists expressed a strong sense of belonging to the 'VW family'. When it comes to deliberations about product allocation within the W/EWC at VW, norms of cooperation prevail over norms of competition (interview 23).

Associational power resources

At both GM/Opel and VW union densities at their German, Polish and British sites are high. In the German car industry IG Metall is the only relevant union. In the British motor industry, the dominant union is Unite, but a smaller union – GMB – also plays a role (as is the case at Bentley). The most relevant union in the Polish automobile industry is Solidarnosc, although smaller unions like the Free Trade Union August 80 and the affiliates to the Metalworkers' Federation belonging to OPZZ (the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions) are also present in some companies (as in GM/Opel Gliwice). The German Opel sites have union densities from 50 to 90%, varying between white- and blue-collar workers and eastern and western Germany. At the UK sites, density (of Unite) among blue-collar workers is estimated to be above 90%. Early personal contacts between representatives from IG Metall and Solidarnosc, established via the EWC, helped to establish a strong union presence at Gliwice, where union density is around 60% among blue-collar workers (interviews 24, 26). At Volkswagen, the union density in all German VW-plants is extremely high, mostly close to 100%. It is another particularity of VW that union density is also very high in white-collar areas and at eastern German sites. At Bentley, there is a difference between white- and blue-collar workers, but with about 55 and 90% respectively, the union density is high and above UK average (interview 16). IG Metall played a major role in establishing strong trade union representation at the Polish locations by supporting the Solidarnosc union (interview 20). Union densities are outstandingly high, i.e. 95% at Polkowice and around 60% at Poznan (interviews 21, 22). In both companies, Solidarnosc is the only union in the company.

Labour transnationalism at GM/Opel and VW

This section presents empirical evidence of labour transnationalism at GM/Opel and VW. The aim is to show whether or not principles of transnational solidarity and cooperation have been created and still shape the behaviour, identities and shared understandings of labour representatives at GM/Opel and VW since the global economic crisis hit the European car industry in 2008.

Transnational labour action at GM/Opel

Transnational labour cooperation at GME dates back to the establishment of the EEF in 1996. Since then, the EEF has developed into an active and effective forum of employee participation and mobilisation (e.g. Fetzer, 2008; Greer and Hauptmeier, 2008). Employee representatives responded to management strategies of establishing standardised platforms for certain models at different plants and whipsawing techniques to put pressure on labour costs by intensified cross-border cooperation. Furthermore, the EWC negotiated and concluded several EFAs between 2000 and 2008 with the company's management (Bartmann and Blum-Geenen, 2007; Da Costa and Rehfeldt, 2007; Rampeltshammer and Dehnen, 2010). Ongoing restructuring and cost-cutting measures were implemented by management, often without consulting labour representatives and against what was agreed in framework agreements. At several occasions, the EWC responded by mobilising

workers transnationally and organising protest and industrial action across borders (Gajewska, 2008). Common principles to coordinate the allocation of production volumes between plants and avoid under-bidding and competitive bargaining triggered by managements' whipsawing tactics were formally adopted in October 2001 when an EFA based on a 'common understanding of important principles' shared by both parties was concluded. Management agreed to reduce capacities without plant closures and compulsory redundancies and labour representatives accepted the necessity to improve productivity (Da Costa and Rehfeldt, 2007: 314). The EWC adopted the principle of 'sharing the pain' according to which concessions were seen as necessary, but distributed evenly across plants in Europe (Greer and Hauptmeier, 2012: 287).

As the economic situation of GME did not improve despite continued restructuring and cost-cutting programmes, management announced further restructuring plans without prior consultation. The announcement of massive layoffs at German plants led to wildcat strikes at Bochum. Bidding contests were initiated for the Zafira (between Rüsselsheim and Gliwice in Poland) and the Vectra (between Rüsselsheim and Trollhättan). The Swedish and German unions and the European Metalworkers' Federation (EMF) jointly declared to reject competition between production sites and share job losses ('Copenhagen Declaration' 2004). However, despite joint declarations to abstain from competitive bidding a deal was struck at Gliwice in 2004, and the plant won the largest part of the production of the Zafira model in exchange for wage freezes and other concessions. In view of fierce labour cost competition with plants in Central and Eastern Europe, IG Metall increased their efforts – and were finally successful – to convince labour representatives from Gliwice to cooperate rather than compete with them.

Together with the EMF the German union contributed to the foundation of a 'European Trade Union Coordination Group' (ETUCG) in 2004 that aimed at supporting the EEF by national (and European) trade union officers. Trade unions from 11 countries participated in the ETUCG of GME. One year later (2005), the so-called 'Joint Delta Working Group' was established in order to strengthen cooperation between sites that shared GME's 'Delta Platform' for the production of the Astra model. The aim of the group was to reduce inter-site competition in bidding contests for the Astra. In the same year, IG Metall, with the support of the EMF, initiated the 'GMEECO' (General Motors Europe Employees' Cooperation) project. The project, which was partially funded by the European Commission, was set up to provide financial and organisational support for meetings of the Delta Working Group. The meetings helped to build mutual trust relations between union and employee representatives from the five Delta plants (in Belgium, the UK, Poland, Sweden and Germany). Personal exchange and communication between the Delta plants were regular and intense, according to all respondents. British participants of the Delta Group retrospectively point out the good and lasting contacts they made, and that they could 'pick up the phone and ring anybody up in Germany' (interview 14). Union representatives from Gliwice state that they have close contacts both with German trade unions and the British Astra plant Ellesmere Port; particularly, in the context of management's cost and productivity comparisons information is quickly exchanged via phone (interview 27). Even after the GMEECO projects (a follow-up project called GMEECO II fell into the turbulent times of crisis), strong ties and communicative relations persisted, and project-based cooperation has continued (interview 17).

Union cooperation within the Delta Group was overshadowed by the persisting economic difficulties of GME. In June 2006, after the management's announcement to close down the plant in Azambuja (Portugal), labour representatives mobilised workers transnationally and organised protest and industrial action at other European plants (Gajewska, 2008; Greer and Hauptmeier, 2012). Although the plant in Azambuja was not part of the Delta Group, IG Metall and the EEF used the platform to organise European Action Days over a period of several weeks (interview 07). However, in the end, the closure of the plant in the same year was not averted.

Intense inter-plant competition and whipsawing by management led to growing tensions within the EEF and showed the limits of 'burden sharing'. In ensuing negotiations with management after the closure of Azambuja, the British employee representatives were disappointed by the lack of support by German EWC members to fight management's plan to take out one shift at Ellesmere Port (interview 14). Rather, local negotiations were carried out at the Bochum plant, in order to save capacity for the plant that was perceived (by British labour representatives) to benefit from the reduction of volume at Ellesmere Port. Despite these tensions, the norm of 'sharing-the-pain' was still effective; a further EFA on product allocation among the four Astra plants was concluded in late 2007 (Greer and Hauptmeier, 2012: 291). East–West labour cooperation was strengthened within the EEF's Delta Group. For instance, IG Metall and Klaus Franz, chairing the EWC, supported their colleagues from Solidarnosc at Gliwice in pay negotiations in 2007 in exchange for the consent of the Polish colleagues to 'give up one car model' (interview 26). However, the deepening of the crisis at GME and continued restructuring and downsizing by management, with Azambuja and Antwerp being closed and the Saab plant in the Swedish Trollhättan sold, weakened the European trade union network. With the breakout of the global economic crisis, the Joint Delta Working Group dissolved.

Two incidents in particular that occurred during the economic crisis of 2008 and the following years are claimed to have had a negative impact on solidarity and trust relations among employees at GM/Opel. The first bone of contention was the (failed) takeover of Opel by the supplier Magna in 2009 and the active role IG Metall played in these negotiations. A takeover would have brought particularistic advantages for the German sites (Bernaciak, 2013: 146). From the point of view of the British and Polish trade unionists this has led to a parting of the ways and a split in the employee side as they were very much against a takeover by Magna that was perceived to endanger their sites (interviews 14, 26).

The second rupture concerns the negotiations about the allocation of the new Astra model from 2016 onwards. German unionists felt the 'secret' negotiations (Hertwig et al., 2013: 10) in Ellesmere Port in 2012 to be a betrayal of trust. The British colleagues are seen to have 'bought' the Astra by giving concessions and thus broken the 'Delta Agreement'. Even though the Polish site in Gliwice also gets its share of the new Astra model, allegations by IG Metall against Solidarnosc are not as fierce as in the British case (interview 03). The British union representatives concede that there is some truth in the German perception that the British colleagues were negotiating on their own. However, from their point of view the negotiations were never secret. Furthermore, the British point out that Bochum had already made concessions to get the previous Astra model, 'they gave up all kind of things' (interviews 14, 19). Representatives of IG Metall

confirm this; there had been a common understanding among all European GM sites that Bochum was not always reliable (interviews 06, 26).

However, despite these ruptures, our empirical evidence shows that norms and cultures of cooperation built up before the crisis have continued to affect actors' behaviour at GM/Opel.

For example, production volumes were shifted between plants to deal with underutilisation of factories. As German unionists report, they were very impressed by the display of solidarity of their Polish GM colleagues, who let some production units of the Zafira go to Bochum during the crisis because the workers there needed a phase of full-time work to be able to benefit from short-time work regulations afterwards (interview 02). When Bochum was faced with closure, Solidarnosc at Gliwice printed leaflets promoting unity among GM employees against management's whipsawing tactics (interview 26). Another established practice to compensate for fluctuations in factory utilisation is the exchange of employees between sites. In 2012 and 2013 workers from Gliwice were temporarily employed at the German GM/Opel plant in Eisenach as well as in other German and European sites to save their jobs. Polish unionists appreciate that workers from Poland are taken on at German plants (interview 26).

Transnational labour action at VW

Volkswagen's EWC was established in 1990, and the WWC was set up in 1999. IG Metall was actively involved in the establishment of a transnational forum for labour representation since the company's global expansion. In the early 1980s IG Metall initiated a global trade union network. Within the so-called 'InterSoli' (International Solidarity) network various topics were addressed in different working groups. Cooperation is described as being particularly intense in Asia and South America, and later, in Central and Eastern Europe (interviews 12, 13, 21). The global level, or the WWC, is of greater importance for trade union action than the European one due to the global expansion of VW (interviews 11, 12).

In order to improve the competitive position of the VW company restructuring measures were implemented in the mid-1990s and competition between plants increased (Pries and Schweer, 2004). The allocation of product volumes became an important issue for the EWC. Labour cooperation was seriously challenged for the first time when management announced the intended closure of the plant in Brussels. In a joint declaration the EWC demanded a fair sharing of risks and chances. Finally, the closure of the plant was averted and a proportion of the jobs was maintained (Hauser-Ditz et al., 2010). For some (critical) observers though, the case of Brussels does not indicate solidarity but rather particularistic national (and local) interests of German labour representatives (Bartmann and Blum-Geenen, 2009: 92; Knirsch, 2014).

From the perspective of British unionists cooperation within the W/EWC is described as being particularly well developed with the German labour representatives. The British W/EWC member appreciates the role of both the current chairman of the W/EWC and German unionists in coordinating regular information exchange. The interviewed British labour representative takes part actively and regularly in information exchange within the W/EWC (interviews 11, 16). Examples of the strong and sustained cooperative

relations between British and German labour representatives are the deliberations on the assembly of engines (between Crewe and Salzgitter) and components (between Crewe and the plants in Chemnitz, Mosel and Dresden) (interview 16). The same holds true for strong and well-established cooperative relations between the Polish and German engine production plants Polkowice, Salzgitter and Chemnitz (interview 20).

Despite the vast associational power of Volkswagen's W/EWC, it took on a negotiation role later than GME's EEF. The 'Charter of Labour Relations', signed by management, the International Metalworkers' Federation (now IndustriALL Global) and the WWC in 2009, aimed at extending the German model of employee participation globally (Pries and Seeliger, 2012). Likewise, another IFA, i.e. the 'Charter of Temporary Work in the Volkswagen Company', was signed in 2012. It lays down principles of equal treatment and equal pay of temporary and core workers. However, the implementation of the Charter at plants in different countries is uneven (interview 10). The implementation of IFAs fosters transnational cooperation. For instance, the agreement on temporary work at the Bentley plant in Crewe is modelled on the IFA, and the plant was one of the first locations where the Charter was implemented (interview 16).

The W/EWC's capability to mobilise workers across countries became apparent for the first time when workers from different plants demonstrated for the maintenance of the Volkswagen law. The law had to be amended due to complaints by the European Commission. Workers from plants in Europe, such as at the Polish VW plants, and beyond participated in the protests (interview 12).

Although VW was not hit by the economic crisis of 2008/2009 as GM/Opel was, some measures had to be taken to deal with underutilisation of plants. The Audi Q3 was relocated from Ingolstadt to Martorell (SEAT) to increase utilisation of the Spanish plant. Even though this decision could not easily be conveyed to the employees in Ingolstadt, the W/EWC played an active part in its initiation and implementation (interview 11). German and Polish unionists describe this as an established and successful practice within the Volkswagen corporation (interviews 11, 23). Another example of this is that Bentley cars are also built at VW in Dresden. A union representative at Bentley describes this as Bentley's way of being part of the VW family (interview 16). Another shared product between Bentley and a German site are engines from Salzgitter which are assembled in Crewe. This cooperation seems to have been encouraged and supported by the German works council, despite reservations from local management at the Salzgitter plant. The exchange of employees between sites also seems to be a well-established practice at VW. Workers from Poznan and Polkowice were temporarily given jobs at German sites, made possible by a shift of production volumes between German sites. Polish unionists appreciate that this was made possible even though the German union was facing media pressure urging them to take on German temporary agency workers instead (interview 20).

Norms and cultures and their effects at GM/Opel

Building up and maintaining institutional logics of transnational cooperation and solidarity do not only impact upon visible behaviour. Evidence for the effects of institutions is found also at the level of attitudes, identities and feelings expressed by the actors. In the

years from 2000 onwards, labour representatives from GME and Volkswagen have intensified cross-border cooperation, concluded European or International Framework Agreements and organised transnational protest and industrial action. Transnational collective action of unions is based on at least partially shared understandings of solidarity and might contribute to the deepening of cooperative relations based on solidarity.

Transnational exchange between EWC members at GM/Opel has helped 'to sustain relationships, build understandings, talk about each other's problems and gives you an insight into cultural differences' (interview 17). Although conflicts and differences in opinions are part of the interaction within the EWC the norm of cooperation seems to be strong: 'Conflict actually brings us in a sense together to find a solution' (interview 17). Initiatives such as the GMEECO project that aimed at financing meetings between Astra plants were seen as 'a stepping stone ... in the creation and maintenance of a working relation on the employee side' (interview 17). Personal exchange between unionists and plant-level representatives helped to 'break down cultural barriers' (interview 18). Union officers from Unite underscore intense and long-standing cooperation with their German colleagues (interview 19). Their relationship with the Polish union representatives is described as being a 'good working relation' that is sometimes hampered by language problems (interview 19). IG Metall representatives state that cooperation with the Polish trade union Solidarnosc has been strong since the Delta Working Group was founded (interviews 02, 07). The Polish themselves express more ambivalent views on the cooperation within the Delta Group; although participants were in the end able to convince each other that 'they were not here to compete with each other' (interviews 24, 26), tangible outcomes regarding the allocation of production volumes have been rare and the goal of avoiding plant closures was not reached. While from the Polish point of view the EWC can be a resource for local (pay) negotiations, it is also seen as a site of struggles over production volumes in which one has to take part in order not to be left out (interview 27).

Cultural norms differ most strongly when it comes to transnational protest and strike action. Although the efforts of the British labour representatives to initiate protest actions despite harsh anti-strike regulation were appreciated by the Germans (interview 02), some British unionists feel that their efforts to organise protest action are not sufficiently honoured by colleagues from other countries (interviews 14, 15), while at the same time stating that the Germans 'did not do as much as they could' in transnational industrial action (interview 14).

While we have already demonstrated that there is still empirical evidence for transnational cooperation of labour at GM/Opel, we are particularly interested in the effect the crisis-related events might or might not have on the belief systems and, hence, on the attitudes, identities and feelings of the actors involved.

On the one hand, we indeed found empirical evidence for an interpretation according to which the narrative 'share-the-pain' has ceased to exert influence already with the closure of the site in Antwerp when everybody had been acting on their own again (interview 04). From this point of view, the 'logic of competition' seems to prevail again over norms of cooperation according to which nobody should negotiate with management separately. Thinking of one's own site first and trying to protect employment is perceived as a matter of course and the natural limit to transnational solidarity (interviews 18, 27).

However, the disappointment and anger of German unionists about what recently happened in Ellesmere Port also show that norms of cooperation still impact on actors'

cognitions and affects. Some British and Polish trade unionists also seem to feel the need to justify their action and point out that other sites have also not complied with EWC agreements in the past (interview 26). From the German point of view, however, the British defection is seen as a particularly great disappointment precisely because the British had always kept to the joint agreements before (interview 06).

In the view of some European unionists (interview 01) the climate within the EWC has changed completely with the closure of the Antwerp site and the negotiations about the Astra in Ellesmere Port; one IG Metall representative even sees himself before 'a pile of rubble' (interview 04). The majority of our interviewees, however, feel that these images of destruction are completely inappropriate with regard to the EWC (interview 02). While cooperation sometimes works and sometimes does not, all parties involved are seen to be honestly willing to revive and strengthen cooperation (interview 03, 08). Some German unionists feel that there is a strong basic constitution and a 'stock of capital' (interview 03) within the EWC which cannot be destroyed even if the promises of solidarity cannot be kept at all times. This view is also shared by British unionists; at the beginning, 'everybody was a stranger. And today we don't have any strangers' (interview 17). Agreements within the EWC and working together as a team are seen as the only possibility to counter the 'divide-and-rule' tactics of management (interviews 03, 17). The conclusion of EFAs with management is also still seen as an important – though legally weak – instrument by the unionists (interviews 07, 26). The GM EWC is felt to be 'the best by far', because in contrast to other EWCs 'we negotiate' (interview 19). And even though there have not been EFAs in the last few years national or local negotiations have still been coordinated at European level to some extent (interviews 08, 26).⁴

Norms and cultures and their effects at VW

At VW, German labour representatives underscore the importance of respecting cultural differences and norms. For instance, the implementation of the Global Labour Charter should consider national institutions and practices at the plants. Despite the caution expressed by German unionists not to be perceived as culturally dominant they sometimes also show paternalistic orientations (e.g. Greer and Hauptmeier, 2008). German labour representatives see it as their task to 'qualify people' in order to ensure the implementation of the Global Labour Charter (interview 12). However, mutual learning and information exchange are considered as crucial in order to enlarge the knowledge about national labour relations and practices of employee participation. The value of transnational cooperation within the EWC was initially not shared by British labour representatives, who were rather suspicious about it but 'soon found it to be a great asset' to them (interview 16). From the point of view of both British and Polish unionists the German aspiration to extend employee representation to all VW locations is not felt to be a kind of 'imperialist' behaviour but on the contrary, the German-centric but inclusive way in which the W/EWC is run and the efforts undertaken to build an integrated body seem to be much appreciated (interviews 16, 20, 23). For example, the British union representative was asked by the VW W/EWC to travel to America as a kind of mediator for the relationship with the US union UAW (United Automobile Workers) because of his better understanding of the US-American system of industrial relations (interview 16).

Likewise, a colleague from Poland was selected to mediate in a conflict at the plant in Russia (interview 20).

The German labour representatives consciously do not dominate the W/EWC. Rather, they promote the balanced participation of all locations and brands and are keen to ensure equal access of non-German labour representatives to the company management. Although the chair of the company works council in Wolfsburg and the general secretary of the W/EWC 'control' the forum, they consider themselves as 'service providers for the foreign locations' (interview 12).

The allocation of production volumes and models between plants is an important issue in the W/EWC and indicates the effectiveness of norms of solidarity and cooperation. The German labour representatives possess considerable power to ensure compliance to common norms and principles due to their position on the company's supervisory board. Deviance from the norm of cooperation, for instance by the underbidding of wages or labour standards, would be sanctioned by the exclusion from the 'VW community' (interview 11). In fact, such an incidence has not happened yet but there were cases of 'naming and shaming' of single plants.

As pointed out above, the economic crisis had only short-term impact on VW, which was met with measures like relocation of production volumes and exchange of employees between (European) sites. Also, the Polish unionists implemented regulations on flexible working time 'borrowed' from Germany at their sites to deal with the crisis – despite harsh criticism from other Polish Solidarnosc unionists and before their actual sanctioning by the Polish law (interviews 23, 20). These instances of cooperation have rather strengthened solidarity among employee representatives and unions (interview 11). However, the economic crisis hit VW nowhere near as hard as GM/Opel and, generally, employee cooperation in the VW corporation takes place in a climate of 'share-the-gain' rather than 'share-the-pain'. Unionists can only speculate on how worsened economic conditions would affect transnational cooperation of the VW-employee side. But the norms of cooperation and solidarity at VW are felt to be so strong that concession bargaining between sites is perceived to be unimaginable (interview 11).

Discussion and conclusions

We started from the premise that transnational collective action of labour does not automatically follow the territorial expansion of product markets but hinges on various pre-conditions. First, we expected the probability of labour transnationalism to increase with a rise in power resources (structural, associational and institutional) at national and transnational level. With regard to institutional power we argued that besides formal regulations, dominant institutional logics (i.e. belief systems and practices) in social fields are expected to either facilitate or hinder the evolution of transnational labour cooperation. Second, beyond these power resources labour actors have to be willing and able to establish and sustain transnational norms and practices of solidarity and cooperation. The extent to which institutional work is necessary depends on existing power resources. Third, existing institutions which facilitate cross-border cooperation might remain intact and supportive for labour, even if there is no observable transnational collective action.

As has been demonstrated by two multinational companies in the automobile industry, even if strong and active EWCs exist, individual and collective actors themselves

needed to put efforts in ‘institutional work’ to create structures that in turn have affected the behaviour and identities of labour (and management). The predominance of market logic and conflictual labour relations at enterprise level in combination with low levels of economic power on the side of labour indeed required ‘harder’ work to build up transnational employee cooperation, as has been demonstrated with the GM/Opel case. Compared to VW, where regulation promotes cooperation (‘the VW law’) and norms and cultures of social partnership (notion of ‘VW family’) in company fields prevail and affect the identities and motivations for cooperative action of both management and labour, GM management was found to be the clear antagonist, fostering the logic of competition. There have been several breaches of EFAs by GME management, which was heavily influenced by its US-American headquarters. Increasing economic pressures at GM/Opel during and after the crisis further accentuated the structural differences between VW and GM/Opel.

Our own evidence supports existing scholarly findings on the role of strong and recognised *leaders* (EWCs, trade union actors) who can act as ‘political entrepreneurs’ in highly competitive environments or as ‘co-managers’ in cooperative cultures by framing interests or conflicts to create collective identities and norms of reciprocity (Greer and Hauptmeier, 2008, 2012). Yet, we have questioned the perception that the ‘national turn’ of labour representatives during the economic crisis as well as personnel changes in the composition of the EWC at GM/Opel have eroded transnational solidarity and mutual trust relations. Important labour actors, who have left the EWC because of site closures or retirement, so the argument goes, take with them their personal networks and relationships that had sustained the culture of cooperation (Hertwig et al., 2013: 10). Although we found some evidence of an erosion of trust relationships at GM/Opel in our interviews, firmly established norms and practices of cooperation and solidarity still have an effect independently of particular individual actors. Drawing on the institutional logics perspective we proposed to disentangle employee representatives’ behaviour from their expressed attitudes, identities and feelings to evaluate whether or not institutions of cooperation are intact. In both of our company cases, we still found evidence of institutional effects also during the economic crisis. Cooperation based on norms of solidarity seems to have remained the dominant way of how to frame and tackle difficult situations, as can be seen by the solidarity of Polish unionists at GM/Opel who ceded some production units of the Zafira in favour of the Bochum site during the economic crisis. The evolution of common understandings and the feeling that all labour representatives and their constituencies are part of a ‘risk community’ (Fetzer, 2008) contributed to both instrumental rationalities that ensure one’s own survival in a shrinking multinational company and non-utilitarian forms of behaviour and cognitions which facilitate solidarity among employee representatives even under highly competitive and worsening economic conditions. Even in instances where particularistic behaviour prevailed, such as occurred at the GM/Opel site in Ellesmere Port (UK), we found that institutions of cooperation still impact on actors’ cognitions and affects. Feeling a need to justify one’s own deviant behaviour from expected norms and practices indicates that the community logic still has an effect on social action and identities.

The comparison between GM/Opel and VW has demonstrated that institutions of cooperation based on solidarity rather than on coercion differ in terms of their specific boundaries and practices. At the GM/Opel site in Bochum, for instance, labour

representatives could maintain their role as *enfant terrible* within the larger community of European trade unions and EWC members. Workplace representatives repeatedly made concessions to keep production and employment (Blöcker et al., 2013: 55–56). In contrast to VW, GM/Opel labour representatives simply could not enforce cooperative behaviour on all of its international colleagues. While at GM such a deviant behaviour might be considered as a breach of concluded contracts (solidarity pledge, ‘sharing the pain’), breaches of the principle of solidarity at VW would be felt to be a personal affront in the context of the ‘VW family’. At VW it is mainly the Germans on whom the functioning of the W/EWC is dependent and the asymmetry of power among transnational labour actors is larger and bolstered by the VW law. This example clearly shows that solidarity-based cooperation is a dynamic rather than a static social phenomenon. In situations of conflict and competition over the distribution of resources labour actors have continuously needed to create and recreate identities and norms of cooperation, while firmly established institutions at VW facilitate the resilience of the logic of community even among management actors. Still, solidarity-based forms of transnational cooperation are confined to multinational company fields and boundary work of labour actors also contributes to an uneven distribution of resources between insiders (employees) and outsiders. Despite their notion of solidarity as a universal principle labour actors still have to accept that their ability (and willingness) to enforce labour cooperation and solidarity beyond national or company borders is rather limited.

In this article we argued that existing approaches, i.e. macro-structural perspectives, rational choice theories and purely micro-level accounts of labour transnationalism fall short when it comes to understand and explain the (re)production, change and destruction of belief systems and practices of cross-border cooperation and solidarity in times of crisis. We claimed and found evidence that established norms and cultures of cross-border solidarity have effects on the behaviour and cognitions of labour actors even under changing conditions at the micro-social (personal changes) and the organisational level (national turn of trade union behaviour). Thus, neo-institutional conceptions (institutional logics, organisational fields and institutional work) provide a fruitful analytical tool that accounts for the dynamic interrelationship between and changes in structures and actors in the study of labour transnationalism.

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Notes

1. The interviews were conducted between November 2013 and May 2014. Most were face-to-face interviews, some carried out via the telephone. The interviews lasted between one and three hours. We interviewed trade unionists and worker representatives from different levels (national, regional, local and workplace). For a list of interviews, see Appendix.
2. An organisational field describes a ‘community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and faithfully with one another than with actors outside the field’ (Scott, 2001: 56).
3. Only six of the German VW sites belong to Volkswagen AG. The other German VW sites are separate companies. Only Volkswagen AG has a company collective agreement, the other

VW companies (as well as the brands Audi, Porsche and MAN) are members of the metal employers' association and apply the sectoral collective agreement for the metal and electronics industry.

4. The last EFA on the 'Plan for the Future' for Opel was concluded in 2010.

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Author biographies

Susanne Pernicka is University Professor at the Department of Economic and Organizational Sociology at the University of Linz, Austria. Her recent publications include, with A Reichel (2014) ‘An institutional logics approach to the heterogeneous world of highly skilled work’, *Employee Relations* 36(3): 235–253.

Vera Glassner is a researcher at the Department of Economic and Organizational Sociology at the University of Linz, Austria. Her recent publications include, with S Pernicka (2014) 'Transnational strategies of trade unions towards European wage policy: A neoinstitutional framework', *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 20(4): 317–334.

Nele Dittmar is pre-doc researcher at the Department of Economic and Organizational Sociology at the University of Linz, Austria. She has published, with S Pernicka and V Glassner (2015) 'When does solidarity end? Transnationales Gewerkschaftshandeln in der Automobilproduktion vor und während der Krise', In: Pernicka S (ed.) *Horizontale Europäisierung im Feld der Arbeitsbeziehungen*. Wiesbaden: Springer, pp. 111–150.

Adam Mrozowicki is lecturer at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Wrocław, Poland. His latest publication is 'Varieties of trade union organizing in Central and Eastern Europe: A comparison of the retail and automotive sectors', *European Journal of Industrial Relations* (2014) 20(4): 297–315.

Małgorzata Maciejewska is a researcher at the Feminist Think Tank research network and a member of the All-Poland Labour Union 'Workers' Initiative'. Publications include 'Exhausted bodies and precious products: Women's work in a Special Economic Zone for the electronics industry in Poland', *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation* (2012) 6(2): 94–112.

Appendix. Interviews.

Number	Date	Level	Organisation (Function anonymised)
01	7 Nov. 2013	Europe	IndustriALL Europe
02	12 Nov. 2013	National	IG Metall Head Office
03	12 Nov. 2013	National	IG Metall Head Office
04	13 Nov. 2013	National	IG Metall Head Office
05	13 Nov. 2013	National	IG Metall Head Office
06	13 Nov. 2013	National	IG Metall Head Office
07	20 Nov. 2013	National	IG Metall Head Office
08	27 Nov. 2013	Company	Works Council Opel
09	11 Dec. 2013	Local	IG Metall Local Office Wolfsburg
10	11 Dec. 2013	Regional	IG Metall Regional Office Niedersachsen and Sachsen-Anhalt
11	4 Mar. 2014	National	IG Metall Head Office
12	5 Mar. 2014	Company	Works Council Volkswagen
13	31 Mar. 2014	World	IndustriALL Global
14	6 Mar. 2014	Local	Unite local level (GM)
15	6 Mar. 2014	National	Unite national level
16	6 Mar. 2014	Local	Unite local level (VW)
17	15 May 2014	Local	Local level (GM)
18	21 May 2014	Regional	Unite regional level
19	21 May 2014	Regional	Unite regional level
20	20 Dec. 2013	Local	Solidarnosc local level (VW)
21	20 Dec. 2013	Local	Solidarnosc local level (VW)
22	7 Jan. 2014	Local	Solidarnosc local level (VW)
23	7 Jan. 2014	Local	Solidarnosc local level (VW)
24	3 Feb. 2014	Regional	Solidarnosc regional level
25	3 Feb. 2014	National	Solidarnosc national level
26	4 Feb. 2014	Local	Solidarnosc local level (GM)
27	4 Feb. 2014	Local	Solidarnosc local level (GM)