

Franz Kersjes

The German Newspaper Industry in the 1980s and Since: the Role of the Unions

First of all I would like to thank you for the invitation to this lecture and for the opportunity to report about the development of the German newspaper industry since the 1980s.

I would like to give a short overview concerning the newspaper industry in Germany:

In my home country there still appear 134 newspapers with an edition of approximately 20 million copies daily. They are predominantly smaller newspapers with a regional distribution area. Only 9 newspapers appear with a high edition everywhere in Germany. Here there are:

- Bild
- Die Welt
- Süddeutsche Zeitung
- Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
- Frankfurter Rundschau
- Financial Times Germany
- Neues Deutschland
- taz. Die tageszeitung
- Handelsblatt

Most of those newspapers belong to the ten biggest newspaper groups.

There are:

- Axel Springer Verlag AG
- Verlagsgruppe Stuttgarter Zeitung
- Verlagsgruppe Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung
- Verlagsgruppe Ippen
- Georg von Holtzbrink
- Verlagsgruppe Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
- Verlagsgruppe Madsack, Hannover
- Deutsche Druck- und Verlagsgesellschaft
- Deutsche Zeitungsholding, Berlin (Mecom)

These groups are journalistically and politically very active and are in the possession of many publishing companies and printing presses.

They also produce magazines and are sometimes have shares in private broadcasting companies. Almost all of them are represented on the Internet and have founded own agencies.

The media groups have a lot of power – a lot of power! – also in Germany.

Structure of the working relations

And now some preliminary remarks regarding the structure of the working relations in Germany:

There are wage agreements which are made between a trade union and companies or entrepreneurs' associations. Agreed arrangements are binding on the members of the contract-closing organisations.

In these wage agreements, for example, the regular working hours, the duration of the vacation, wages and salaries and a lot more are regulated.

If the single employee is a member of the responsible trade union and the company in which he works is bound to the wage agreement, then the arrangements of the wage agreement must be kept.

Moreover, the relations between employers and employees in the companies are formed by an industrial-relations scheme law.

The employees can choose a protection of interests, a works committee, in the company which can have an influence with many personnel matters, for example, with the employment and dismissal of employees. The members of a works committee do not have to be a member of a trade union.

But works committees are not allowed to reconcile collective wage agreements as they may not call upon workers to strike. Also they are not allowed to settle agreements that are usually settled in collective wage agreements. Nevertheless there is no competition between shop agreements and collective wage agreements.

– Those were my preliminary remarks to the working relations in Germany.

In the newspaper companies different wage agreements are made use of. There are wage agreements for the employees in the newspaper printing presses; those are valid in the whole of Germany.

They are concluded for the whole printing industry, which means for all printing presses which are tied to wage agreements.

For the employees in the publishing companies of newspapers there are regional wage agreements which are valid in the respective federal states, for example, in North Rhine-Westphalia. And there are wage agreements for editors.

The trade union media, print and paper, media studies and arts, was in charge of the newspaper industry until 2001. In 2001 there was a new foundation to the German Unified Service Sector Union of 5 independent trade unions. In this context we are one of a total of 13 sections.

The Publishers are mostly members of the Federation of German Publishers. This association has also regionally sections.

In the context of collective bargaining with the entrepreneurs it was and is important:

The trade unions must be able to strike, and, therefore, need many members. The solidarity of their members is necessary for the enforcement of their demands. But this is necessary in all trade unions all over the world.

My trade union was very successful for a long time! We had won ourselves good wage agreements! But starting from the 1980s it became more and more difficult to improve the wage agreements.

Trade unions in the fight for social justice

We got a big problem: Caused by the rapid technical progress, the introduction of new technologies, for example, the digitization in the text production, the productiveness rose

faster than the production. And this entailed that for the newspaper production less employees were needed.

To possibly prevent dismissals, our trade union demanded a shortening of the weekly working hours from formerly 40 to 35 hours in the week.

But the employers were against it. And thus in 1984 it came to a violent labour dispute which lasted a total of 13 weeks. In almost all newspaper companies employees went on strike. On many days almost no newspaper appeared in Germany. In my opinion, it was the probably biggest labour dispute in the history of our trade union.

Finally the publishers wanted to sign a new collective wage agreement, because their costs and financial losses caused by our strike were getting too high.

We reached, finally, a partial success. The working hours were shortened to 38.5 hours in the week, without cuts in payment, so wages and salaries weren't reduced accordingly. Only many years later, after many other fights, we came to agree on 35 hours a week.

During the following years there have been discussions over and over again with the newspaper companies, concerning the improvement of terms of employment and wage agreements.

These were conflicts around the most different rate-political aims, from the improvement and protection of the incomes to the reduction in working hours and the health protection up to regulations of the professional education, advanced training and continuing education.

In the collective bargaining this year the newspaper enterprises have threatened to conclude a new wage agreement for the employees in the technology and in the editorial staff only if their demands are fulfilled.

They demanded above all a lengthening of the regular weekly working hours, namely a return to the 40-hour-week without higher payment.

The employees successfully went on strike against this and have rejected the demands. The agreed 35-hour-week will be stuck to.

Aims of the employers

In Germany there have been considerable changes in the employer-employee relationships in the last 10 to 20 years. Before that, it had been the norm that an employment contract was concluded for an unlimited period, which means, for boundless duration, with the respective company. The working relations were mostly steady for years or decades.

In the present, possibly half of all new employment contracts are concluded for a certain limited time, sometimes for only a few months. Above all young people have problems to find a lasting employment.

On almost all business sectors in Germany, also in the newspaper industry, the temporary work plays a big role.

Employees are employed by temporary work enterprises and are then lent by these to companies for a restricted time. They receive a lower wage than the constant employees and are cheaper for the enterprises.

The number of the permanent employees falls and they are substituted by employees with a lower wage. This is what we call wage dumping.

Also in newspaper companies there are less and less jobs for the permanent employees. They are more and more substituted with lower-paid temporary workers.

The trade unions in Germany demand that the temporarily employed earn the same wage as the permanently employed. Up to now merely the industrial trade union "metal" was able to enforce the same agreed payment for all employees in the steel industry, that means also for temporary employees.

Works committees in companies with more than 20 employees however have to give their approval also to the employment of temporary workers. They can only refuse this approval by law, if employees already have been dismissed or would be disadvantaged because of the employment of temporary workers. Nevertheless employees are often dismissed to be replaced by temporary workers.

Recently there has been one more scandal. The employees lose their rate rights by splittings in the enterprise.

Several juridical independent companies are founded. A company for machine A, a company for machine B, a company for the working preparation, one for the subsequent treatment, one for the dispatch, one for the doorman, etc., etc.

For example, a total of 400 employees in the production and distribution of a German newspaper in Magdeburg at the "Magdeburger Volksstimme" have been laid out to many different independent companies. There are no more wage agreements and no works committees.

All together it must be ascertained:

More and more people are concerned or threatened by worse terms of employment and job losses. The aims of the groups and entrepreneurs' associations are clear: Wage agreements and laws for the protection of the working people should lose their obligation, so that the working relations can be subjected to the respective operational needs of the respective companies.

The existing economic system is going through profound changes. This means for employees: less protection, less rights, income losses and often degrading working conditions.

Many politicians support the demands of entrepreneurs and investors because supposedly the labour cost is too high in Germany and the international competitiveness of German enterprises is threatened.

A stronger exploitation of the dependent employees is legalised politically and juridically. At the same time, as the freedom rights of the enterprises grow, the social achievements dwindle. The extortion methods of the enterprises work: The fear of the loss of jobs leads to the Entsolidarisierung (with drawl of solidarity) in the staffs and to the loss of power of the trade unions.

Many companies have already left the responsible entrepreneurs' association and have tried to escape from the rate obligation in the past years. The entrepreneurs' associations have got under pressure and offer a change to a membership without rate obligation to their member companies.

For over decade the rate escape has been rising in many branches considerably. Nevertheless, on account of the lacking fight readiness of the staffs the trade unions in most cases did not succeed in concluding any company wage agreements.

In the meantime, only 39 percent of all companies in West Germany fall under a collective agreement, in Eastern Germany there are only 24 percent. On numerous business sectors there are no more wage agreements.

In the view of many entrepreneurs, essential material achievements of the regional wage agreements should not be binding on companies covered by collective agreements.

They should be substituted with operational arrangements. But company arrangements cannot substitute wage agreements. On the operational level works committees and staffs have no juridical possibilities to reject demands of the enterprisers.

Only the trade unions may call out on strike in Germany if it is about the enforcement of a wage agreement.

Most enterprises try to maintain and improve their competitiveness through the reduction of their costs. By staff reduction and raised achievement pressure for the remaining employees, sales losses are meant to be compensated and yields be protected.

Works committees and staffs are forced to step back from agreed and social achievements every day. They are being threatened with the closing of the company if they do not submit to the demands of the commercial management.

And consequently, many employees are afraid to fight for their rights. The fear of the loss of the job often paralyzes every form of objection or even opposition.

According to a survey of the Hans Böckler endowment, in 84 percent of all companies in Germany the employees work considerably more than they are paid for.

If they finished work according to their employment contract, about one million additional unemployed people would have to be employed.

Many entrepreneurs and their associations think that in future the trade unions should not be involved any more in the creation of the employer-employee relationships.

On the contents of the employment contracts should be decided in the companies. By this, wage agreements lose their ordinal-political function, and there is no more basis for pacified exchange terms between capital and work. Operational wage dumping replaces rate connections.

The wage agreement system is substituted with a system of one-sided extortion. But the abolition of the bandage effect of wage agreements solves no problem, but destroys the social foundation of the market economy. The persons responsible in politics and economy must become aware of what this means for the future.

Developments in the newspaper industry

Also the employees in publishing companies and editorial staff of German newspapers are worried about the future. Their jobs are threatened and the opinion variety in the reporting about political, economic, sporty and local events is limited.

Economy measures and job reductions are supposed to protect the yields of the newspaper publishers. Because of the financial crisis lower income from the announcement/advertising business and increasingly lower editions are feared.

Up to now most newspaper publishers have lacked a lasting strategy to fight against the consumer reduction successfully. Above all, there are too little young people among the

readers. Today not even half of those aged 14 to 19 reads a newspaper. In 1997 there were still nearly 60 percent.

Many newspaper readers yield their information increasingly on the Internet. The readiness to pay for information sinks constantly. Only the editions of the national newspapers have developed positively recently.

During the past years a drastic job reduction has already taken place in many newspaper houses. Particularly the editorial staffs are concerned. Work pressures and stress have drastically risen for the remaining editors.

There is virtually no more time for a careful research of information and news. The working situation is partly unacceptable.

Numerous local newsrooms were closed or merged with other editorial staff. Predominantly free employees are occupied for little money.

These are journalists without lasting employment which deliver their own texts only when required. They are paid substantially worse than firmly hired editors.

In the centre of the publishing company interests there are obviously not the expectations and concerns of the readers, but economic interests. In that regard, a newspaper publishing company doesn't differ from other enterprises oriented to profit.

Journalism is a necessary public property which allows democratic structures in our society. Therefore, a special responsibility is connected with the publication of news and opinions for commercial reasons.

From newspaper publishers it must be expected that they serve the public interest, while they promote unbiased journalism and create possibilities to inform the citizens extensively.

According to my opinion, commercially financed media cannot pursue economic self-interests without endangering their role in the service of the public. This means: The operational dismissal of editors necessarily entails a loss of opinion variety.

And if the freedom of speech is limited by growing dependence on advertisers, this means the loss of freedom of the press!

Freedom of the press must not be reduced to the personal freedom of the newspaper publishers. An internal freedom of the press which gives a right of codetermination to the employees in the editorial staff is necessary in the publishing companies.

An editorial staff statute which regulates the relation between publishing company and editorial staff could be an essential contribution to the democratisation in the press. Not only the trade unions should fight for these aims.

My personal experience of life as a trade unionist shows me again and again:

Who fights can lose,
Who does not fight, has already lost.

I thank you for your attention.

Wapping and the Role of Murdoch Reconsidered in International Context

BUIRA Study Group on the History of Industrial Relations

Wednesday 7 December 2011: refreshments available from 4.30 for a 5.00pm start

Room M211, University of Westminster (Westminster Business School, 35 Marylebone Road, London NW1 5LS - virtually opposite Baker Street tube station).

This seminar gives us the chance to analyse the origins and significance of the Wapping dispute at the News International Group, some 25 years after the owner, Rupert Murdoch, relocated his national newspapers to a non-union printing plant in Docklands and sacked more than 5,500 production and clerical workers. We shall also analyse working conditions in the German print industry from the 1980s onwards as a point of contrast and comparison.

Programme:

5.00pm: Introduction

Linda Clarke (University of Westminster) and Michael Gold (Royal Holloway University of London)

5.10-5.50pm

Linda Melvern: *Wapping: The Unanswered Questions*

Linda will address the central issue of her book, 'The End of the Street' (Methuen 1986), namely the determining role of Rupert Murdoch in the history of Fleet Street. The paper will include a description of the labour relations in old Fleet Street and Murdoch's conspiracy to outmanoeuvre the British print unions. Links with the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher were forged at this time. There are questions unanswered, and research needs to be done to uncover more of this story.

Linda is an acclaimed investigative journalist and author, as well as an Honorary Professor in the Department of International Politics, University of Wales, Aberystwyth. See her website at: <http://www.lindamelvern.com/bio>

5.50-6.30pm

Franz Kersjes: *The German Newspaper Industry in the 1980s and Since: the Role of the Unions*

Franz will give a detailed report on the development of the working conditions in the German newspaper industry since 1980.

In his youth, Franz took a technical apprenticeship in the German print industry. From 1980 to 2001, he was Chairman of the German Print and Media Union and, at the same time, a member of the Regional Executive of the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) in North Rhine-Westphalia. Today he is publisher and author of the web site World of Work: <http://www.weltderarbeit.de>

6.30-7.00pm Questions and discussion – and drinks

7.00pm Close