

CAN EUROPE'S TRADE UNIONS REPRESENT AND ORGANISE WORKERS IN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES?

- Even though national systems with extensive collective bargaining coverage may offer some protection to pay and working conditions in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), they do not necessarily provide workers with rights to representation at workplace level.
- European SMEs do not generally adopt formal equality policies or procedures that may offer protection against discrimination. The informality characteristic of employee relations in SMEs does not encourage equality.
- For workers in SMEs, multi-level representation at regional, sectoral, but also *workplace level* is crucial to the protection of their terms and conditions, but also to ensure rights to representation and to collective organisation.

These are just a few of the conclusions that are put forward in the latest issue of *Transfer*, the quarterly publication of the Research department of the ETUI-REHS, that has just been published (May 2007).

This special issue of *Transfer* presents seven articles reflecting the work of the SMALL* project, which examined the nature of employee representation and voice in SMEs in eight European countries as part of a European Union Fifth Framework Programme project. It identifies the challenges that Europe's trade unions will have to face if they are to reverse union decline in SMEs.

Background:

More than two-thirds of European workers now work in SMEs (defined as enterprises with fewer than 250 employees). SMEs often achieve profitability at the expense of productivity, by relying on poor working conditions and irregular forms of employment. In over half of European countries the legal framework governing collective representation includes thresholds based upon employee numbers that effectively exclude workers in SMEs. The general absence of a workplace union presence means that workers have little opportunity to articulate individual or collective grievances. Conflict resolution is rarely resolved through institutional or representational channels, but more likely through voluntary or involuntary informal 'exit'. This places workers in a position of extreme weakness.

*SMALL - Representation and Voice in Small and Medium Sized European Enterprises: Monitoring Actors, Labour Organisations and Legal Frameworks.

Transfer: the European Review of Labour and Research.

Transfer is a publication of the Research department of the ETUI-REHS.

Its principal aim is to stimulate dialogue between the European Trade Union movement and the academic and research community.

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The European Trade Union Institute for Research, Education and Health and Safety (ETUI-REHS) is an international non-profit-making Association established under Belgian law. It conducts research on issues of strategic importance for the world of labour, provides trade union education and training activities and promotes a high level of health and safety protection for workers in Europe.