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LIFE LONG LEARNING: A PRECONDITION FOR FLEXIBILITY AND SECURITY (FLEXICURITY)

PRELIMINARY REMARK

Capitalism has brought about an economic and especially an ethical crisis world wide. During a number of decades a latent crisis-prone development has been inherent to capitalism – and almost all parts of the population within developed capitalistic countries profited by this.

There seemed to be no limits to economic growth. Economists like Milton Friedman and Friedrich August von Hayek were two of the most important theorists and known world wide.

In Germany it was mainly Ludwig Erhard putting theories into practice. After Hayek in 1974 and Friedman in 1976 had received the Nobel Price, their neo-liberal concept became the basis of European economic policy – through materialization in Chile by Pinochet via Margaret Thatcher, market-radicalism became reality with this development. Privatization and deregulation was spreading, social systems were being reduced. All sceptical views by critical scientists were disregarded – at this point I'd like to remind you of the works of the Club of Rome; temporary economic crises were forgotten relatively fast.

At least since the 1980s there has been a debate about wasting our resources parallel to economic development - for instance, the debates about the environment and the climate. An increasing number of people in developed capitalistic countries became aware of the fact that the obvious positive materialistic development was somehow connected with the impoverishment of the people in the so called developing countries. The attempt to create a social counter design failed completely. The end of the 1980s marked the end of this experiment and capitalism was able to establish its economic and cultural ideas seemingly without any limitations world wide.

The wars in this world, mainly initiated by American capital interests, show that the development mentioned did not occur without counter action. Terrorism – this is how I interpret this – is also an answer to it. Nearly all South- and Central-American countries are ruled by left wing governments – this is also an answer to the world wide endeavour of capitalism.

TRADES UNIONS BEING ORGANISATIONS INHERENT IN POLITICAL SYSTEM

And what about the trade unions? In almost all countries they always considered themselves to be part of developments. Through growing material affluence within developed capitalistic countries unions became “accomplices” of the development. Much was achieved for workers and employees as far as wage-increases were concerned – for instance in the field of social systems. Unions were functioning in a designing way – at least in the rhenish capitalism – in matters of society and economy. Unions were represented in many committees of the social systems and on boards of directors of large companies. Via works committees and staff councils unions were able to take part in designing and influencing company affairs. This position was often called “co-management” – by unions, too. With the beginning of decreasing profit rates the achievements of the unions were questioned and through political policies taken back. Counter actions by unions were cautious.

The development of the productive force made less workers for production possible and an enormous amount of capital profit was possible, at the same time there was a substantial pressure placed on incomes and working conditions. The question was: what to do with these profits? The breakdown of the international finance sector with all its phantastic products makes obvious what has happened. Now, we are to pay for the continuation of capitalism.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING BEING PART OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Such a long introduction to explain and give reasons why we – as unions – use “knowledge” for the development of the power of production. In order to acquire

knowledge, we have to learn. In our experience – as unions – it shows clearly that without sufficient and individual higher vocational qualification workers and employees can very quickly be replaced. The development of the power of production requires more and more higher qualifications. For capital it is the “cheapest” to learn “on the job” for necessary jobs. “Older” people – who very often are not so old – are left in the lurch. They have to be flexible – and also mobile to offer their work somewhere else mostly at lower prices. Unfortunately, this very often means that their qualifications have become useless and that they have to leave their surroundings – which they had identified with a great deal of their lives – and “migrate” to other working places. Life has become insecure. All those nice promises of capitalism have turned into lies, promises such as: “When capital is well, all will be well, too!”

The unions have tried to find social regulations and solutions within their possibilities to help those people affected. In Germany, one of the answers was to engage in all areas of vocational qualification, which meant within the company, regional and central.

Political influence via appropriate positions was – and still is! – taken because first vocational training is part of the educational system and is not some kind of learning for jobs for which “learning by doing” would be sufficient. For a long time there was agreement that all of society would be responsible for a new vocational qualification and would take on the costs after redundancy for structural reasons.

PRECONDITIONS FOR FLEXICURITY WITHIN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

It became clear to us that national orientation of developments and prospects for workers and employees alone would not be enough because the development of capital and finance has in the meantime become global. Even if protecting solutions are favourable and under current conditions somehow “tempting”, we won’t give in to temptations. We need European solutions which will fit into world wide structures.

Security as a pre-condition for mobility and flexibility for workers and employees. That is what we understand by FLEXICURITY. Otherwise, unions will not become “accomplices” of future development again.

We know at least theoretically how elements of mobility, flexibility – and for us particularly important: security – are to be joined.

1. A good general knowledge for all people is a pre-condition for further qualification. This is – in my opinion – a constitutional right and should be a right for all people in this world.
2. Qualifying people soundly for their future occupation. This should be the basis for specializing during the course of one's working life and ought to be updated continuously.
3. During one's working life it should be possible to acquire new qualifications in order to remain mobile and flexible. In Germany we only know retraining programs offered and financed by the state when redundancy is the case. This ought to be changed!
4. Universities need a kind of EDUCATION which will be universal in form and content. Short term study programs at universities should not be the only programs on offer. Sensible would be study programs which are specializing and building up on basic academic studies.
5. The educational system ought to be open and flexible so that contents of education and training can be attained by everyone and everywhere at the different institutions – unaffected by *formal* prerequisites. Academic institutions should no longer exclusively be accessible to academics.
6. Such an educational system should be offered and it should function across borders at least in Europe. A precondition for this is a bilingual offer in almost all fields of qualification.

CREATE CONDITIONS FOR LIFE LONG LEARNING!

Within such a system of life long learning existing institutions have to carry on important operations, but they do have to change. If they are not capable of facing up to changed challenges, we shall have to create new ones. It'll be impossible for us to go on the way we used to.

Vocational qualification is not solely within the interest of the employer. This realization has not only come to some unions but also to employers in Germany. Pay agreements were completed which contain an individual right of further qualification within working time.

There are laws for educational leave which give workers and employees the right to take part in educational programs and training for a certain time during working time and still be paid their normal wage. As far as contents of this educational leave in Lower Saxony are concerned – and I can only speak about this – there have been a lot of changes within the last 30 years: at the beginning, courses concerning political education were being preferred, whereas vocational education adding complementary contents to existing ones were favoured. There are only assumptions for this change: to actually make demands on this right of educational leave and being paid while doing so is closely connected to the economic situation. If newly acquired knowledge can be used for the company employees will be more inclined to claim their rights.

It makes sense for freely chosen vocational mobility across borders to develop initiatives for adapting qualifications within the frame of existing possibilities. There are vast possibilities of leave qualifying for the perception of tasks for interest groups of a company.

LIFE LONG LEARNING: A DEMAND OF THE EUROPEAN TRADES UNION CONGRESS

The European Trades Union Congress defined its position regarding vocational education in the resolution “first training”, vocational education and further education for a European occupation strategy in March 2009. With this resolution the European

Trades Union Congress takes a stand concerning information given by the commission: “strategic frame for the European cooperation in the field of general and vocational education” (865 of 16th Dec. 2008) and “new competences for new jobs; anticipate requirements for the labour market and qualifications and harmonize them” (868 of 19th Dec. 2008).

With this resolution, European Trades Union Congress takes a firm position: “life long learning is an essential instrument to guarantee full employment through the combination of political policy supporting workplace quality and social progress.

Challenges are enormous in the view of the European Trades Union Congress. It says: “Continual technological progress is becoming faster, the development of new information technologies require therefore anticipation of the needs for qualifying and a continual adaptation of the qualifications of workers and employees through life long learning”.

This anticipation and the followed qualification must, in the opinion of the European Trades Union Congress, extend national offers in direction of international offers and possibilities of leave.

Within the strategy and action plan for 2007 – 2011, the European Trades Union Congress emphasized during its congress in 2007 in Sevilla the meaning of life long learning being a prerequisite for a competitive Europe:

“Europe has to invest more into training and further training on a national and on a European level. In Europe, investing into education and training beginning at nursery school up to adult education is a necessity not a luxury. Life long learning – regarding vocational training and academic education, among others – should enable European workers and employees to stand up to international competition. In this context, vocational training and further education is a possibility to develop talents and abilities and it is as important as academic education: one aim of the European trade unions movement is a better training and better life long learning leading to a society that has its basis in knowledge.

In the north-west of Germany, we have been working for a number of years to come to a continual exchange across borders in the field of first vocational training. Materialization – desired by all participants – failed because systems between two states are not compatible. There is much to do to have results in the near future.

The standing position of the current debate in the European Trades Union Congress is making steps towards integrated systems of training and further education attending to academic education and in this context seeing the necessity of opening universities for workers and employees in Europe.

Therefore, in my opinion, it would be logically consistent that the state provides essential financial means particularly for scientific learning and research - this ought to be acknowledged. It's not at all acceptable that within a concept of long life learning workers and employees are excluded from academic further education financed by the state.

INSTITUTIONALIZED COOPERATION BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES AND TRADES UNIONS

“Opening academic research for the interests of workers and employees” was a title of a financed project by the state in the 1980s in Germany. Among other four universities, the University of Oldenburg participated in this project. The participation was logically consistent because of an agreement of cooperation at the time of founding the university in 1974 between the university and the DGB – the German Trades Union Congress- with its educational establishment called ARBEIT und LEBEN (to work and to live). This agreement of cooperation was drawn up mainly to fight the liberals and the conservatives because allegedly the “freedom of research and teaching” was at stake. A conservative paper brought the headline “University in Vetter’s Trapping” (H.O. Vetter was chairman of the German Trades Union Congress in 1974).

Not being moved by these attacks we then tried and materialized giving much help to workers and employees by trying to find ways in making it easier for them to enter university. There was resistance and there were obstacles on both sides to be

removed. The first seminar of works committees took place in the rooms of the university using their resources like rooms, technical aids, teachers – this was met by furious public aggression. The development of concepts for political education of workers and employees, particularly within the frame of educational leave, was then not so strongly criticized.

With the already mentioned research project “opening of academic research” – I myself was in charge of the project in Oldenburg – a lot of initiatives were developed which made access to the university for workers and employees easier.

The result of the project was that a place of work for the cooperation between the university and the unions was created and financed by the state. This place of work for the cooperation organises between the university and the regional unions among bilateral contacts between different scientists and unionists particularly with regard to educational courses for company interest groups and for regional unions. Through permanent contacts needs are ascertained and determined concerning the contents of offers to be made. The university and the regional unions are institutionally connected by a cooperation committee which meets twice a year.

With this institutionalized cooperation, prerequisites are given for a long lasting opening of the university for academic additional qualification for workers and employees. In order to materialize this sensible extension of university offers, conditions for entering university must be changed and the offers of the university must be adapted to an additional target group concerning content and didactics. Those who want this opening must change themselves and leave the ivory tower of the university. Objectively, this development is in the interest of society – and universities are part of this society and substantially financed through it. Being a regional union, we are demanding such a development.

Hoping that these informations gave you interesting input for further debates, I thank you very much for your attention.