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Training, Social Dialogue and Collective Bargaining in Western Europe

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Training is commonly regarded as essential to the competitiveness of national economies and individual enterprises. It is also seen as a vital means of enhancing the employment security of workers. To that extent, it has been claimed that continuing training may provide fertile ground for the development of social dialogue and joint initiatives by employers and trade unions. Trade unions across Europe have also increasingly sought to have training included on collective bargaining agendas. This article examines recent developments in collective bargaining and social dialogue in respect of continuing training. It explores experiences in a number of Western European economies, in addition to social dialogue at the European level. It is suggested that the prospects for the development of effective social dialogue and consensual approaches to continuing training are more uncertain than is sometimes supposed.

Keywords: collective bargaining, continuing training, industrial relations, social dialogue, vocational education and training

Introduction

It is frequently argued that skills and knowledge are among the most important determinants of competitiveness in a global economy experiencing rapid technological change and intensified international competition. Economic developments are also thought to be having far-reaching implications for the labour market, encouraging increasing demand for skilled 'knowledge' workers, falling demand for less skilled labour and greater job insecurity (ILO, 1998). It is therefore unsurprising that the issues of education and vocational training regularly feature in economic and social policy debates. Policy-makers frequently emphasize the need to improve

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access to education and training, tackle skill shortages and raise skill levels. However, achieving these objectives requires an ability and willingness on the part of employers and employees to invest sufficiently in skill formation. As a consequence, policy-makers are drawn to consider the extent to which investment decisions should be left to market forces, the potential of different incentive mechanisms and how to ensure that the specific needs of employers and workers are identified and met. With regard to the last of these issues, the ILO has emphasized the desirability of social dialogue and partnerships involving employer and trade union organizations. At its 88th session in 2000 the ILO's General Conference adopted a set of conclusions relating to human resources training and development. The ILO envisaged that employers and trade unions should together play a key role in the promotion of continuing training and concluded that:

The social partners should strengthen social dialogue on training, share responsibility in formulating education and training policies and engage in partnerships with each other or with governments for investing in, planning and implementing training. . . . Government should establish a framework for effective social dialogue and partnerships in training and employment. This should result in a coordinated education and training policy at national level, and long term strategies, which are formulated in consultation with the social partners and are integrated with economic and employment policies. It should also include tripartite, national and sector training arrangements and provide for a transparent and comprehensive training and labour market information system. (ILO, 2000: 25–6)

Policy-makers within the European Union have similarly presented social dialogue as an important mechanism for facilitating improvements in training activities and outcomes. The European Commission (EC) has advocated that sectoral and inter-professional social dialogue should take place in respect of training and qualifications and has also encouraged member states to involve national-level employer and union organizations in the implementation of the European Employment Strategy (EES), which has among its objectives the promotion of 'employability' through skill acquisition. Furthermore, in a number of European countries (for example Austria and Spain), employers and unions play a part in regulating training through their involvement in bi- or tripartite bodies. These bodies typically have responsibility for activities such as collecting and redistributing financial contributions and determining the content of training programmes.

While examples of EU, national and sectoral dialogue and cooperation exist, it is also apparent that conflicts of interest can arise in respect of training and that these might prove hard to resolve. In recent years, national governments in a number of European countries have invited employers and trade unions to contribute to the process of reforming national training systems. However, in some cases fundamental disagreements have arisen concerning the relative contributions of employers and employees to the funding of training and the nature and extent of employee entitlements. In parallel with these developments, trade unions across Europe have increasingly made continuing (i.e. post-induction or post-apprenticeship) training a feature of their collective bargaining demands in an attempt to improve their members' job security. In contrast to apprenticeship training, for which trade unions in some European countries share responsibility with employers, trade union involvement in decisions relating to continuing training has typically been very limited.¹ Therefore, it is possible that employers will view trade union bargaining demands as a challenge to their established prerogatives. At EU level, sectoral dialogue concerning continuing training has occurred and in some cases employer and trade union bodies have issued joint recommendations for improvements in training practices. However, dialogue has thus far been confined to a relatively small number of sectors. Moreover, there are grounds for scepticism concerning the potential of EU-level social dialogue to bring about significant and widespread improvements in continuing training activities. These issues are explored in depth in the present article. The article examines recent developments in social dialogue and collective bargaining in respect of continuing training at EU, national and sectoral levels and identifies sources of tension, barriers to cooperation and other factors that might serve to limit the extent and effectiveness of social dialogue. The central argument is that the prospects for the development of effective social dialogue and cooperation between employer and trade union organizations are more uncertain than is sometimes supposed.

Continuing Training, Competitiveness and 'Employability'

The issues of training and skill formation are at the heart of current European policy debates concerning unemployment and social

inclusion, the future of the welfare state, employment protection and competitiveness. The general consensus among policy-makers at the level of the EU is that Europe will best be able to meet the competitive challenges presented by developing lower-wage economies by producing higher value-added and more 'knowledge-intensive' goods and services. It is thought that this will require ongoing investment in the education and skills of workers. Furthermore, new competitive challenges are contributing to more frequent restructuring and greater job insecurity in some European industries, particularly those most exposed to the forces of international competition. In the face of greater insecurity, European policy-makers have argued that workers should accept greater individual responsibility for maximizing their future 'employability' through skill acquisition. It has been argued that this is but one facet of a more fundamental and ongoing change in the governance of work and welfare. Jessop (2002: 248), for example, claims that a tendential shift is taking place away from 'Keynesian national welfare states' (and associated concerns with improving social rights) towards 'Schumpeterian workfare post-national regimes' that are primarily concerned with creating conditions that benefit employers. The policy prescriptions associated with the latter include the development of skills, knowledge and innovative capacity, as well as cuts in social expenditure, the construction of more 'flexible' labour markets and more restrictive benefit entitlements. In practice, the policies adopted by European economies in recent years have exhibited significant international variation, yet there has nevertheless been a widespread shift towards the adoption of supply-side employment measures that place an emphasis on 'gainful employment as the principal channel to achieve effective citizenship' (Ferrera and Hemerijck, 2003: 123) and political rhetoric that stresses the importance of workers enhancing their 'employability' through skill acquisition and work experience.

To the extent that skills and knowledge are essential in helping organizations to compete, safeguarding jobs and enhancing workers' labour market opportunities, employers and trade unions might be thought to have a common interest in promoting continuing training. This is the assumption underpinning the ILO and EU's advocacy of social dialogue on this issue. However, while this belief might not be entirely mistaken, it should be recognized that the interests of employers and trade unions may also differ in certain key respects (see Heyes [2000] for a detailed discussion). For

example, it is not obvious that employers and workers will share an interest in the same types of continuing training and education. It can be anticipated that employers will be most interested in training that directly contributes to their organizations. Workers might see value in such training (to the extent that it enhances their job security, for example), but might also have an interest in acquiring skills that will potentially enhance their value to alternative employers and thus contribute to their longer-term employment security. Difficulties may arise in reaching agreement on how the costs of supporting different types of training should be distributed between employees, employers and state agencies. A related issue concerns the extent to which training opportunities are extended to older workers, those in low wage, 'low skill' jobs and other groups who tend to experience disadvantage where training is concerned. Trade unions often regard improved equality of access as an important bargaining objective, and policy-makers also tend to view widened participation in training as necessary in helping to achieve greater social inclusion and job security. However, to the extent that the pattern of disadvantage reflects employers' control over access to continuing training opportunities and their interest in linking training to the priorities of their organizations, it is highly questionable whether widespread changes in employer behaviour can be achieved through social dialogue alone.

Attention must also be paid to the outcomes of social dialogue or collective bargaining. As studies have demonstrated, trade unions in a number of European countries have managed to negotiate training agreements but have not always been able to ensure that employers implement them (Heidemann et al., 1994) or reward learning (Huzzard, 2001). The issue of enforcement is important, but has tended to be overlooked in EU policy pronouncements concerning continuing training. As explained later, the main reason for the issue being neglected is that EU-imposed regulations in this area would almost certainly be deemed incompatible with the fundamental right of member states to retain responsibility for their education and training systems, as enshrined in Article 150 of the European Union's Treaty.

Three inferences can be drawn from the discussion thus far: first, it is a mistake to regard training as an inherently non-conflictual issue; second, the scope for mutually beneficial cooperation might be more limited than is sometimes suggested; and third, conflicts of interest might escalate into collective disputes. These considerations are

examined in detail in the remaining sections of the article. The analysis to some extent echoes the work of Ashton et al. (2000) in demonstrating the need for an approach that is sensitive to the role of social agency and which regards vocational education and training (VET) outcomes as a product of the interacting policies and activities of national governments, unions and employers. However, Ashton et al.'s empirical focus is largely confined to individual nation-states. By contrast, this article addresses developments at sectoral, national and supranational levels and examines the manner in which they are articulated.

Developments in European Social Dialogue Concerning Training

European-level social dialogue in respect of training is a well-established activity. Since the first Val Duchesse Summit in 1985, the peak-level European employer and trade union organizations, ETUC, UNICE and CEEP, have expressed support for a partnership approach to training and have reached a number of training-related inter-sectoral joint opinions, covering issues such as geographical and occupational mobility, basic education, initial training, women and training and vocational training for adults. Progress has also been made in improving the transparency of accreditation and moving towards wider recognition of vocational qualifications.

Social dialogue relating to training was given a boost by the European Employment Strategy (EES), which was initiated at the 1994 Essen Summit and developed at subsequent European summits (see Goetschy, 1999; Seferiades, 2003). Under the EES, training is regarded as an essential means of bringing about the 'modernization' of work organization and the future competitiveness of European businesses. The EES is founded on an assumption that the forces of 'globalization' and technological change have resulted in an increased need for adaptability and restructuring and that work has, by association, become less stable and secure. In this context, training has come to be seen as one of the principal means by which organizations may secure the competitive advantages of 'flexibility' and 'adaptability'. Training has also come to be regarded as an instrument of active labour market policies that can assist in the promotion of social inclusion by addressing the needs of disadvantaged groups and the unemployed. Emphasis has thus been placed

on the enhancement of individual 'employability' through skill acquisition. It is not only the unemployed who are said to stand to benefit in this regard. For employed workers, the acquisition of skills is presented as a means of enhancing their job security and longer-term employment prospects in a labour market that allegedly exposes them to greater risks than in the past.

In order to implement the EES, member states are encouraged to draw up National Reform Programme Reports (formerly referred to as National Action Plans [NAPs]) designed to address the EES's 'four pillars': equal opportunities; adaptability on the part of employees and business; entrepreneurship; and 'employability'. The 1997 Luxembourg Summit expressed the expectation that member states would involve the 'social partners' in the elaboration and implementation of NAPs. Employers and unions were also encouraged to commit themselves to pursuing agreements that support and extend opportunities for training, work experience and lifelong learning. In 2002, the peak-level organizations agreed a 'Framework of Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competencies and Qualifications', intended to provide a further boost to actions relating to education and training. The joint statement asserted the need for 'an intensification of dialogue and partnership' and identified four priorities: the 'identification and anticipation of competencies and qualifications needs'; 'recognition and validation of competencies and qualifications'; 'information, support and guidance'; and 'mobilizing resources for the lifelong development of competencies'. The member organizations of ETUC, UNICE and CEEP are expected to promote the framework at national level, draw up annual reports on national actions with respect to the four priorities and evaluate the impact on companies and workers. The first follow-up report, produced in 2003, pointed to a number of subsequent developments across EU member states, including dissemination of information and sectoral analyses of training needs.

In addition to inter-professional social dialogue, agreements have also been reached for specific sectors. Training has been discussed by a number of the 31 sectoral dialogue committees established since 1998,² including those covering the footwear, entertainment, electricity, leather, textiles and maritime transport sectors. In 2000, an agreement on improving the transferability of qualifications between member states was reached in the fishing sector. In 2002, an agreement was concluded for the agriculture sector, covering

issues such as recognition of on-the-job training, rights to individual skill assessment and improved cross-border recognition of qualifications. Also in 2002, the EU-level employer and trade union organizations representing the electricity sector issued a joint statement on future skill requirements, accompanied by a series of recommendations. More recently, in 2004, the social partner organizations representing the hotels and restaurants sector agreed a set of continuing training guidelines, which included recommendations on issues such as mentoring, evaluation and accreditation of skills.

Employers and unions have also been invited to contribute to debates and initiatives that have followed in the wake of the 2000 Lisbon European Council, which concluded that the EU should become a dynamic knowledge-based society, and the 2002 Barcelona European Council, which established that the European approach to education and training should become a 'world reference' by 2010. The 2002 Copenhagen Declaration on enhanced European cooperation on VET paved the way for new initiatives designed to achieve these objectives. Work to date has focused on measures to improve credit transfer and quality assurance in respect of training provision, and on developing a framework to bring about transparency of qualifications and competences. The programme of work does not include initiatives to provide workers with improved rights to continuing training (despite such an entitlement being included in the Charter of Fundamental Rights), nor does it appear that any obligations will be placed on employers (or member states) to increase investments in training. The focus is rather on initiatives designed to reduce employers' information costs and promote labour mobility by improving the portability of qualifications.

The Limits of European Social Dialogue on Continuing Training

Social dialogue on training and lifelong learning at the European level is clearly extensive and there is evidence that the EES has encouraged new initiatives in respect of training. Austria's National Action Plan for the year 2000, for example, included a commitment to make available an apprenticeship place for all young people seeking one, while in 2001 the (now defunct) German Alliance for Jobs, Training and Competitiveness announced a new initiative on qualifications and training, designed to promote lifelong learning and bring about equality of opportunity for men and women. Training

has tended to feature most strongly in National Reform Programme Reports and Action Plans that have been drawn up in consultation with national-level employer and union organizations. However, close consultation has tended to occur only in member states (such as Finland, Ireland and the Netherlands) that have significant experience of reaching national agreements on economic and social policy issues (Léonard, 2001: 32).

Despite the attention increasingly being paid to training at the European level, and agreement by the European employer and union organizations on the need for a 'partnership approach' to training-related matters, there are grounds for suspecting that European-level initiatives will not result in widespread improvements in training practices. Under the principle of subsidiarity, member states of the EU retain sole responsibility for the content and organization of training provision within their national borders. Thus current EU initiatives in respect of training are being developed on the basis that cooperation will be voluntary and not subject to legislation: there is no intention to implement a common policy. This is in keeping with the EU's current approach to governance in the fields of employment and social policy, which generally rejects the principle of requiring member states to comply with 'top-down' regulations. Instead, the EU has developed a so-called 'open method of coordination', which is intended to promote policy learning, benchmarking, information sharing and the diffusion of 'good practice' across EU member states. Some commentators are optimistic that the 'open method of coordination' will encourage innovative solutions in difficult policy areas, while others regard the governance arrangements as too weak to ensure that member states will make, and adhere to, commitments in the social and employment policy areas (for an overview of these debates, see Trubek and Mosher, 2003).

As far as continuing training is concerned, adherence to the 'open method of coordination' implies that certain potential policy objectives will be ruled out or difficult to achieve. In the absence of sanctions and 'hard laws', it is unclear what can be done at European level to bring about a widespread improvement in employers' training activities. It is therefore likely that the focus of policy will continue to be restricted to the supply side of the market for training and skills. For similar reasons, it seems unlikely that enforceable, Europe-wide entitlements for workers to undertake training or life-long learning will be introduced. The ETUC has advocated that all workers be given a right of access to further vocational training and

supported the idea, discussed by the High Level Group on industrial change, that companies that dismiss workers without having maintained their competences and qualifications should be sanctioned. So far, these proposals have not attracted the widespread support of employers or policy-makers. In 2002, the Commission began consulting the 'social partners' on the issue of restructuring and the 'social consequences' of EC competition law. In the ETUC's view, however, the Commission appeared to have 'prejudged' the outcome of the consultation exercise by dismissing from the outset the possibility of fresh legislation. Eventually the peak-level employer and union organizations opted in 2003 to produce a joint text, which highlighted, among other things, the importance of maintaining and developing workers' competences and qualifications so as to maintain their 'employability'. However, the force of the joint text and its consequences for practices at national, sectoral and company levels remain uncertain.

It is highly likely that the 'open method of coordination' will mean that national politics will continue to be the most important determinant of the content of national training policies. The model of policy-making underpinning the 'open method of coordination' approach is one that assumes rational, 'evidence-based' policy development based on the identification of examples of 'good practice'. However, views on what is 'good practice' are likely to differ between national governments, reflecting differences in political ideology and immediate considerations relating to the financial and political costs and benefits of implementing particular policies (Walker, 2000; Heyes, 2004). It therefore seems likely that training policies, practices, institutions and outcomes will continue to differ markedly between member states. Many of the limitations associated with the 'open method of coordination' also apply to the sectoral and inter-professional agreements reached at the European level as these similarly place few obligations on national actors. The EU-level employer and union organizations do not have the authority to force their national member organizations to act in accordance with any agreements they might reach. Moreover, social dialogue in respect of some sectors is entirely absent, reflecting either a lack of a representative employer organization or unwillingness on the part of employers to enter into negotiations (Keller, 2003; Gennard and Newsome, 2005).

A further constraint limiting the practical impact of dialogue at the European level relates to the economic incentives facing employ-

ers in particular industries and a tension between efforts to develop a European *response* to changes in the international division of labour, and the *contribution* that the EC and European employers make to these changes through competition policy and the reorganization of production within and across national frontiers. An example is provided by the textiles industry. In 1997 the European Commission adopted a plan of action designed to increase the competitiveness of the European textile and clothing industry. Key to the proposals was an enhancement of training, alongside the development of new products and processes. The plan was drawn up with input from trade unions and employers' organizations. Yet while employers' organizations were prepared to enter into statements of intent at European level, the economic incentives facing firms at the national level have militated against progress. For many producers, relocating production to lower-wage economies has proved more attractive than attempts to upgrade employee skills and enter higher value-added product markets. This has proved to be the case even for 'high skills economies' such as Germany. The problem confronting trade unions and policy-makers is that it is precisely in those firms and industries where commitments to workers and investing in their training are likely to be lowest that risk of redundancy and the need for transferable skills are highest. In some industries, such as the UK steel industry, this has led to trade unions becoming providers of education and training for workers facing redundancy. A notable example is that of the closure of UK plants belonging to the Anglo-Dutch steelmaker, Corus. The Corus example is instructive, because it offers a reminder that the pursuit of shareholder value and weak constraints on management are more important determinants of (in)security and 'employability' than training and development. Unlike their UK counterparts, the Dutch employees of Corus had rights to information regarding the merger and were better placed to negotiate an agreement relating to job security (Appelbaum, 2001).

Developments in Social Dialogue and Collective Bargaining within European Countries

The preceding discussion has demonstrated that the interests and agendas of employers and unions in respect of training at the European level may differ in major respects. The potential for

disagreement is also evident at the level of individual member states. Even in economies with strong traditions of social dialogue, employers and unions have often held opposing views with regard to how different forms of training and learning should be resourced, both in terms of time (e.g. whether training takes place during working time and is paid for by the employer), and in terms of the relative financial contributions that should be required of employees, employers and governments. Disagreements have often proved hard to resolve. In the Netherlands, for example, the bipartite Labour Foundation (a consultative body comprising union and employer organizations) recommended in 1997 that agreements be reached at sectoral and company level on training policy, facilities and participation by disadvantaged groups. However, reaching agreements proved extremely difficult because of employers and trade unions' conflicting views concerning their respective responsibilities. In particular, employers argued that they should not be expected to support training that was not directly job-related (EIRO, 1998a). Similar problems were encountered in Norway in the wake of a 1998 agreement by the Norwegian employer and union representative organizations that workers should be given a statutory right to leave of absence for training and education. The right was incorporated into law in 1999. However, no agreement was reached over the issue of financing of subsistence payments for employees taking training leave and other elements of the reform programme (EIRO, 2001a). The trade unions favoured a tripartite funding scheme to which they, the employers and the government would contribute. During the 2000 bargaining round, which culminated in a six-day strike, the unions stipulated that their acceptance of a moderate pay rise would be conditional on such a scheme being accepted. However, the employers and the government were unwilling to commit to the idea of a central fund and eventually the unions were forced to drop their demand. A public committee was subsequently established to look at this issue, but was unable to agree on a model.

Difficulties of a related nature arose in the course of recent discussions between French employers and trade unions regarding the reform of training arrangements. The reform process was initiated by the French government, which was concerned by the complexity of the levy-based financing system and the failure of training arrangements to extend training opportunities to relatively disadvantaged workers. A 1999 white paper proposed that individuals

be granted a guaranteed entitlement to training and that certification and validation of knowledge and experience be improved. However, legislation was postponed in order to allow employer and union bodies to discuss the issues. The subsequent discussions were marked by fundamental disagreements relating to the relative contributions of employers and employees to the cost of training and whether training requested by an employer should continue to count as working time. Differences also existed on the employers' side between MEDEF (the confederation representing large businesses) and the confederations representing SMEs and craftwork employers, both of which were opposed to the introduction of an individual right to training (EIRO, 2001b). The talks broke down in 2001 and did not restart until 2003. An agreement was finally reached following concessions by the employers' side on the issue of funding.

The frequency with which training appears on collective bargaining agendas varies considerably between the economies of Western Europe. In Greece, for example, learning and training rarely emerge as bargaining issues (Rossi and Demetriades, 2002). In the Netherlands, by contrast, 121 out of 125 collective agreements surveyed by the Labour Inspectorate in 2001 made reference to training (EIRO, 2002). Regardless of these differences in frequency, company-level bargaining in respect of continuing training has been less common than sectoral or inter-sectoral-level bargaining (EIRO, 1998b). However, it is possible that company-level negotiations will become more widespread, to the extent that a shift is taking place in many European member states towards less centralized bargaining arrangements (Marginson et al., 2003). A notable development in this regard has been the spread of company-level 'pacts for employment and competitiveness' (PECs), which Seifert and Massa-Wirth (2005: 218) (following Sisson, 1999), define as 'mutual accords between management and workforce representatives that resolve company-specific problems related to employment and competition'. PECs have emerged as an organizational response to the economic challenges presented by European Monetary Union and consequent pressures for cost and organizational restructuring (Marginson and Sisson, 2002). Typically, PECs involve trade unions making concessions in respect of working practices in return for employer commitments relating to matters such as job security and improved training.

Seifert and Massa-Wirth's recent study of German PECs found that agreements on additional training had been reached in 31 percent of establishments with a PEC and that 26 percent of such establishments had negotiated a guarantee to provide trainees with employment. However, other (albeit less recent) evidence has suggested that the focus of negotiations in respect of additional training has tended to be on the 'needs of the company' with more emphasis being given to 'compensations for training – employment, wages, working time – than on its priorities, contents or recipients' (EIRO, 1998b: 18). A lack of detailed information makes it hard to draw conclusions about the implications of PECs for continuing training and education opportunities. Given that PECs generally have a remit to address issues relating to competitiveness and restructuring, and that they are often established in the context of difficult economic circumstances, it can be inferred that any additional training will most likely be directed at meeting the immediate 'needs' of the organization. However, Seifert and Massa-Wirth (2005) have found that, in Germany at least, PECs are also being established in favourable economic contexts. It is possible that in such circumstances employee representatives will be in a better position to secure employer support for broader education and training initiatives that meet the longer-term interests of workers, including those who have traditionally experienced disadvantage in respect of access to training (for example, older and less skilled workers). This issue would merit further investigation.

Looking beyond PECs, the extent to which trade unions and other representative bodies (e.g. works councils) play a role in continuing training at company level, and the extent to which their role is institutionalized, varies considerably. In Germany, the traditionally limited role of unions in respect of continuing training stands in marked contrast to their much more extensive involvement in the regulation of initial training.³ In France, by contrast, unions have enjoyed substantial rights to contribute to decisions relating to continuing training. However, Rainbird and Vincent (1996) have shown that the weakness of French unions and constraints on the ability of negotiators to analyse training needs have served to limit the effectiveness of unions' attempts to influence continuing training within companies. One result has been that unskilled workers have been relatively disadvantaged in terms of access to continuing training opportunities. Giraud (2002) reached similar conclusions on the

basis of a comparison of continuing training in France and Germany, which demonstrated that joint regulation of training at the level of the company was relatively underdeveloped in both countries. Elsewhere in Europe unions have experienced difficulties in ensuring that sector-level agreements result in improved training at the enterprise level. In Italy, for example, the relatively weak nature of local union organization has resulted in unions making little progress in using sector agreements to promote vocational training (Winterton, 2000).

A final issue meriting attention is the emergence of attempts by trade unions in different countries to coordinate their bargaining efforts in respect of continuing training. This development is a facet of a broader (albeit limited and uneven) trend towards the setting of common bargaining objectives and improved information sharing by unions as a means of responding to the economic challenges of European integration, and in particular the threat of downward wage competition (Sisson and Marginson, 2002). A number of initiatives have so far been taken with regard to continuing training. In 2001, the European Metalworkers' Federation annual conference debated a draft training charter, which set out a number of principles for improving access to training, including a right for workers to receive training, an expectation that annual plans would be drawn up by individual workers and their employer and an assumption that training should take place during working hours. The principles also emphasized that local employee representatives should be kept informed by the company of changing skill requirements and training schemes. Other union federations have similarly specified minimum standards for vocational training (Leisink, 2002: 113).

A further example of efforts by unions to develop a coordinated approach to promoting continuing training is provided by the 'Doorn' group of unions from Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, which identified lifelong learning as their common theme for 2002. The unions agreed to work towards three objectives: first, making lifelong training and education the right of all employees; second, ensuring that employers' training activities be transparent and internationally comparable; and third, ensuring that training and education be viewed as investments. Experiences in the German metalworking industry suggest that the first of the Doorn group's aims, which is also central to the EMF's training charter, is likely to remain particularly hard to

achieve. In 2001, the metalworking industry's employers and union organizations for the Baden Württemberg region signed an agreement on further and continuing training that entitled employees to enter into annual consultations with their employers so as to determine their future training requirements, with the training to be paid for by the employer. Employees with five years' service were also given the right to leave their company to pursue further qualifications and subsequently return to work. However, employers were initially unwilling to provide workers with an entitlement to training or to pay for such training and only following targeted warning strikes by IG Metall was progress made on these fronts (EIRO, 2001c).

Conclusions

Continuing training has become a core component of the EU's economic and social policy and is widely regarded as an activity that all social agencies have an interest in promoting. However, this article has argued that the extent of employers' and trade unions' common interests in respect of continuing training, and thus the scope for consensual cooperation, is more limited than is often claimed. The experiences of countries across Western Europe, including those (such as Germany) whose 'training systems' are said to be characterized by 'cooperation', 'corporatism' or 'social partnership' (ILO, 1998; Ashton et al., 2000; Eaton, 2000) demonstrate the potential for fundamental disagreements between employers, unions and the state, particularly with regard to the question of how responsibilities for supporting different types of training should be shared and the extent to which training should be an entitlement. Issues such as improving the transparency of qualifications and other measures to reduce information costs and facilitate labour market mobility have proved less contentious and perhaps hold out the best prospects for cooperation.

The emphasis placed on training in European and national-level economic and social policy agendas has created difficult strategic challenges for unions. The focus on skills is associated with an analysis that presents 'globalization' as an exogenous force threatening employment and social protection and requiring that labour markets become more 'flexible' if competitiveness and jobs are to

be secured. To the extent that unions are unable effectively to challenge such a depiction, seeking improved rights of access to high quality training may seem a desirable and necessary objective. However, it is likely that attempts to secure such rights will continue to meet opposition at various levels. The extent to which unions will be able to overcome such opposition will depend more on their collective strength and ability to influence the will of policy-makers than on appeals to the supposed mutual benefits of training provision. Yet even if substantial gains can be made, it remains the case that training cannot provide sufficient insurance against economic risk: 'employability' is not only a function of workers' knowledge and skills but is also dependent on the existence of an adequate supply of decent jobs and the existence of a political will to regulate the activities of companies. Such considerations do not fit comfortably with policy agendas that emphasize the need for lightly regulated labour markets and that represent insecurity, internationalization and restructuring as beyond the control or influence of policy-makers.

Notes

I am grateful to three anonymous referees for supplying very constructive comments on an earlier version of this article. I am responsible for any errors that remain.

1. This has been the case even in those countries, such as Germany, that are sometimes regarded as pursuing a 'corporatist approach' to vocational education and training (VET) (Crouch et al., 1999).

2. Prior to 1998, sector-specific dialogue occurred through Joint Committees established by the Commission, or Informal Working Parties established at the initiative of the social partners.

3. Although works councils might be expected to play a role, they cover only 57 per cent of German employees and their effectiveness in respect of influencing training is variable (Frege, 2002).

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