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# Identity Work: Sustaining Transnational Collective Action at General Motors Europe

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# Identity Work: Sustaining Transnational Collective Action at General Motors Europe

## Abstract

What are the conditions under which transnational collective action is initiated and sustained? This paper presents a case study of General Motors Europe, where labor leaders have mobilized the workforce and bargained with management at the transnational level repeatedly over more than a decade as a response to management whipsawing and threats of plant closures. In contrast to structuralist interest-based theories of union behavior, we identify a process of “identity work” that was necessary to sustain transnational worker cooperation.

## Keywords

General Motors, identity work, Europe, industrial relations, collective bargaining

## Disciplines

Collective Bargaining | Human Resources Management | International and Comparative Labor Relations | Unions

## Comments

### Required Publisher Statement

© Wiley. Final version published as: Greer, I., & Hauptmeier, M. (2012). Identity work: Sustaining transnational collective action at General Motors Europe. *Industrial Relations*, 51(1), 275-299.

DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-232X.2012.00677.x

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### Suggested Citation

Greer, I., & Hauptmeier, M. (2012). *Identity work: Sustaining transnational collective action at General Motors Europe* [Electronic version]. Retrieved [insert date], from Cornell University, ILR School site:

<http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles/973>

**Identity work:**

**Sustaining transnational collective action at General Motors Europe**

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Many thanks to the Cornell University's Einaudi Centre, the Hans Böckler Foundation, and Cardiff Business School for funding portions of the field research. For comments on earlier drafts, many thanks to Khalid Al Hoor, Magdalena Bernaciak, Rick Delbridge, Virginia Doellgast, Bradon Ellem, Thomas Fetzer, Chris Forde, Ed Heery, Harry Katz, Nathan Lillie, Miguel Martinez Lucio, Mark Stuart, and Lowell Turner, as well as an anonymous reviewer and Industrial Relations editor Steven Rafael. Thanks also to participants in the British Universities Industrial Relations Association conference, Bristol, 26-28 June 2008; the 'Internationalization and Organization' seminar at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin in August 2008; the workshop 'Transnational Solidarity in Times of Global Restructuring', Nottingham, 6-7 November 2008; the HRM special interest group workshop of the British Academy of Management, Cardiff, 30-31 March 2009, the World Congress of the International Industrial Relations Association, Sydney, 24-27 August 2009, and the Transatlantic Social Dialogue, Brussels, 12-13 March 2010.

## **Identity work:**

### **Sustaining transnational collective action at General Motors Europe**

#### **Abstract**

What are the conditions under which transnational collective action is initiated and sustained?

This paper presents a case study of General Motors Europe, where labor leaders have mobilized the workforce and bargained with management at the transnational level repeatedly over more than a decade as a response to management whipsawing and threats of plant closures. In contrast to structuralist interest-based theories of union behavior, we identify a process of ‘identity work’ that was necessary to sustain transnational worker cooperation.

#### **Introduction**

In Europe, labor transnationalism has become an important research topic and an important policy issue. As the European Union (EU) has liberalized the flow of goods, services, capital and labor between member states, employers based in high-wage countries in the north and west have gained easier ‘exit’ options in the south and east. Trade unions responded by calling for countervailing social legislation, and, in 1994, an EU directive was passed creating a legal basis for employee information and consultation bodies within multinationals. Since then, scholars have debated whether these bodies – known as European Works Councils (EWCs) – were better interpreted as structures of international labor solidarity (Martínez Lucio and Weston 1995; Turner 1996) or as tools for the pursuit of competing local or national interests (Streeck 1998; Hancké 2000).

The General Motors Europe (GME) case is an unusually well developed example of union-side transnational collective action. Since the establishment of the EWC in 1996, worker representatives have organized five Europe-wide work stoppages (Gajewska 2009), negotiated six transnational collective agreements with management (Rehfeldt and Da Costa 2008), and built an organizational structure to sustain this activity that was extended to lower-wage locations in Poland and Hungary (Bernaciak 2010). These developments took place in a highly adverse economic context. Coping with the overcapacities and fierce competition in the European auto market, management downsized production and used new production assignments to pit plants against one another, with the aim of extracting labor concessions. Despite the competing material interests between plants that resulted, unionists at GME developed and sustained a high level of transnational activity.

Our paper addresses a theoretical puzzle that has faced generations of industrial relations scholars. The collective action problem suggests that rationally interested actors do not collectively act, even if cooperation would be beneficial and produce better result for all actors, unless some form of coercion or special incentives exist (Olson 1965). How, then, can collective action take place? Following this line of reasoning, unions may be able to overcome the collective action problem because of supportive national institutions that stipulate firm-level worker participation, independent collective bargaining, union control of training and unemployment insurance arrangements, and quasi-mandatory union membership. However, because these conditions are almost never met on the transnational level, the internationalization of the economy exacerbates this problem. Indeed, rational-choice arguments are used to explain why international solidarity is unlikely (e.g. Hancké 2000; Cooke 2005). But why has collective action been sustained over more than a decade at GME?

We argue that the *identity work* of union leaders is crucial for understanding how collective action is sustained. Labor transnationalism in this case persisted, not because it was successful in making gains for workers, but because it influenced activists' ideas and motives. Due to the union leaders' framing of interests and problems, development of shared norms and goals, strengthening of social ties and building trust within the EWC, and mobilization of workers more broadly, labor transnationalism emerged and was sustained in the face of conflicts of material interest. Examining this case over a long period of time helps us to understand how the collective action problem is dealt with in repeated iterations of investment decisions and collective bargaining rounds.<sup>i</sup>

We begin the paper by reviewing the explanations of labor transnationalism in the industrial relations literature. Second, we conceptualize the problem unions face in organizing transnational union cooperation through the lens of the collective action problem. Third, we provide an overview of the argument and preview how unions overcame this problem. Fourth, we present the case study, which traces the development of worker representation at GME from the formation of the European subsidiary in 1986 to the 2009 bankruptcy and bailout negotiations. Finally, we discuss the limits and implications of this study.

### **The conditions of labor transnationalism**

Theories of union behavior are highly sensitive to context. Unions are constituted and shaped by the institutions of nation-states (Turner 1991; Hyman 2001), local socio-economic context beyond the workplace (Dörre and Röttger 2006; Turner and Cornfield 2007), and the relations of production and exchange that constitute industries and firms (Commons 1909; Doellgast, Nohara, and Tchobanian 2009). They can, however, strategically adapt when these structures are

disrupted (Voss and Sherman 2000; Katz, Batt, and Keefe 2003). When industries become international, trade unionists sometimes internationalize their own work (Lillie 2006; Bronfenbrenner 2007). But what are the conditions under which they do so?

Most writers on EWCs argue that when conflicting material interests are present international solidarity is unlikely. At a time when globalization and decentralization of bargaining have progressed parallel to one another (Katz 1993), multinational corporations have been an increasingly important terrain for trade unions (Marginson 2000). In these internationally integrated corporate structures, management has won concessions from the workforce by comparing sites of work (Mueller and Purcell 1992). In local productivity coalitions with local managers, trade unionists have secured their own members' jobs within multinationals in ways that have put pressure on their colleagues elsewhere in the system to follow suit (Hancké 2000). The advent of institutionalized rights for worker representatives in the form of the EWC directive did not bring this whipsawing to an end, due to the inevitable unevenness of bargaining in different national institutional contexts (Pulignano 2007), low-trust relations between representatives from different countries (Timming 2006), and the weakness of the directive compared to Europe's national institutions of worker participation (Streeck 1998). The thesis here is that conflicts of interest undermine solidarity, even when an EWC is present.

Recent analyses of the GME case come to different conclusions. By examining multiple rounds of investment and collective bargaining over time, they show that conflicts of interest do not necessarily prevent sustained transnational action. Why? First, there can be simultaneous commonalities and conflicts of material interest. In a case study of GME, Fetzner (2008) points out that global competition for investment between GM's regional subsidiaries has led to a 'community of risk' between trade unionists across Europe and – despite continued conflicts of

interest between different plant-level trade unionists – facilitated labor transnationalism. Second, the way conflicts of interest are structured can actually promote organized international solidarity. In a comparison of four European automakers, Greer and Hauptmeier (2008), find that the aggressive management strategy of whipsawing at GME forced change in the behavior of unionists, leading to a creative approach to organizing international solidarity by the EWC. Third, there may be incentives to cooperate that have to do with the micro-level dynamics of the company rather than the broader political economy of investment and pay setting. In a three-company examination of bilateral Polish-German union relationships, Bernaciak (2010) shows how the relatively weak channels of local and national influence by German works councilors at GME created incentives for cooperation on both sides. These three papers show that, even where management pits worker representatives against one another, the resulting conflicts of interest may be insufficient to prevent labor transnationalism, and may actually encourage it.

An alternative to the macro-institutional comparative approach to union behavior can be found in the literature on union revitalization. This literature concerns the characteristics of unions and unionists themselves. In their analysis of local unions in the United States engaging in organizing, Voss and Sherman (2000) identify the presence of staff with backgrounds outside the union movement and a sense of crisis in the organization as two necessary conditions for strategic change. In sustaining relationships between unions and other community organizations, Nissen and Russo (2007) identify funded subsidiary organizations, or ‘social justice infrastructure’, as important. Central to these accounts are the experiences of staff and activists, both in building bridges between organizations (Rose 2000; Dörre and Röttger 2006) and cementing new patterns of bureaucracy within them (Yu 2008). Such changes can take place in a wide range of national, regional, and sectoral contexts (Turner and Cornfield 2007; Turner

2009). Margaret Levi argues that change and stability in union strategy can be explained by micro-level within-organization institution building carried out by union leaders (Levi 2005) and that conflict in coalitions can be tamed through credibility built up over time through consistent delivery on promises to provide resources to carry out activist work (Levi and Murphy 2006). These studies concentrate on the characteristics of unions themselves, rather than the material incentives built into the political-economic context.

### **Labor transnationalism as a collective action problem**

The challenges facing union cooperation across multinationals have been conceptualized by some writers in game theoretic terms. In line with much of the EWC literature, Cooke (2005) argues that unions have ‘largely chosen to act independently’ (288); those examples of transnationalism that do exist involve ‘little organizational sacrifice, compromise, or risk-taking by unions’ (286). His explanation is that unions have been unable to exercise sufficient power in their dealings with multinationals, and therefore have failed to generate sufficient payoffs to create incentives to cooperate. The simplifying assumptions in this model are derived from the prisoners’ dilemma from game theory: union choices to cooperate or compete for investments are determined by rational expectations about material payoffs (in collective bargaining) and the behavior of the other unions (whether they will compete or cooperate). In a prisoners’ dilemma, non-cooperation is the most probable outcome and constitutes a ‘single strongly stable equilibrium’ (Hardin 1971: 475).

In some ways this picture resembles the situation at GME. First, following the transnational integration of production in Europe, management used competition for investment between unionized plants as part of its collective bargaining strategy. Plants with the highest

labor concessions were either supposed to receive the exclusive right to produce a new car or produce a higher share of the total production volume compared to plants that would not agree to concessions. Second, because GME regularly made losses and had excess production capacities, the stakes were higher than just collective bargaining outcomes – they included plant closure as a potential outcome. Management had to restructure its European operation, through job losses, either distributed across Europe or concentrated in specific plants, which would be closed or lose shifts. Unionists at the different GM plants in Europe had to decide how to respond to these challenges. They could either seek to outperform other plants in Europe and undercut them in collective bargaining, in order to secure production assignments, minimize local job losses, and avoid plant closure. Alternatively, they could cooperate with other unions, in the fight against plant closures and job losses. Third, like many other unions, they did not have the power to prevent negative payoffs. The prevention of plant closures meant the distribution of job losses and labor concessions across Europe, gains in collective bargaining were unlikely, and weak sales made all-out striking ineffective.

When do unionists work together across borders, and when do they pursue their interests individually? Rational choice theory suggests that self-interested, rational actors are not likely to cooperate, even if such cooperation would be mutually beneficial and result in higher pay-offs for all actors. In the prisoners' dilemma game, for example, one of the actors can defect from cooperation, leaving a willing co-operator with the worst possible outcome; the opportunistic defector obtains the best outcome (Gibbons 1992). The GME case cannot be realistically modeled as a prisoners' dilemma, because the actor constellation was not sufficiently stable (due to the creation or acquisition of new plants and the closure or sale of old ones) and because there was a high degree of uncertainty in overall payoffs due to the economic circumstances. The case

does, however, illustrate the collective action problem more generally: “ (...) [U]nless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, rational, self interested individuals will not act in their common interest” (Olson 1965: 2).

Researchers have identified a number of forms that these ‘special devices’ can take. Ostrom (2000) lists numerous factors encouraging collective action, some internal to the group of players and some external: the common understanding of the group; the presence of leadership; having a choice of whether to participate or not; past experience and level of social capital; and ‘a wide diversity of rules that are used to change the structure of the situation’ (among others) (148). Compared to local and national settings, such factors are less common in transnational settings. For example, linguistic and cultural differences hinder common understanding, past experience and social capital take time to develop at a transnational level, union leaders are elected by and therefore accountable to workers in their plant rather than workers in the MNC as a whole, and participation in EWCs is voluntary. These were, in fact, all problems encountered at GME.

### **Identity work at General Motors Europe**

An in-depth look at this case forces us to consider thicker conceptions of human agency. In order to illuminate the motives, interests and preferences that sustain labor transnationalism, we examine the collective identity of unionists. Previous industrial relations literature along this line of inquiry includes Locke and Thelen’s (1995) discussion of national union identity as a key independent variable, which they define as ‘world views’ or ‘cognitive maps’ (p. 312). Such identities are multiple, as in Hyman’s (2001) framework stressing variable identification of national unions with class, society, or the market. These ideas have already had some resonance

in the debate about EWCs, as in Whittall et al's (2009) argument that a common transnational identity emerges when an EWC has a relatively open and rapid flow of information and is not hierarchical (i.e. is not dominated by a single national group). The comparative industrial relations literature, however, lacks a conceptualization of the active role of actors in constructing identities.

Our argument builds on the broader social movement literature to identify the mechanisms and social processes through which trade unionists create a transnational collective identity. Based on conceptualizations of common norms, shared interests and collective goals, this literature shows how identities can motivate collective action and cope with collective action problems (Polletta and Jasper 2001). The notion of 'identity work' refers to the processes through which a collective identity is created, sustained and modified (Snow and McAdam 2000, Snow and Anderson 1987). In our case, we observe trade unionists working to reshape perceptions about identity and motives on which their colleagues act. They do this by actively framing the issues, developing common goals and norms, strengthening the relations between EWC members, and educating and involving the workforce.

The EWC at GME has attempted to create a shared perception and understanding of problems, interests, and strategies, a process known as 'framing' (Benford and Snow 2000; Kay 2005). We might expect, in keeping with the industrial relations decentralization literature, that local union leaders would respond to global pressures by insisting on more local flexibility to cooperate with management. In this case, however, they used the EWC as a platform to treat international competition as a grievance, an illegitimate management whipsawing strategy to close plants and win concessions in Europe. Purely national strategies could not solve these

transnational problems, they argued, and it was in the interest of labor to cooperate across borders.

Central to this reframing process was the development of common goals and norms. When GM Europe made heavy losses, worker representatives agreed to concessions, but insisted that they be negotiated at the European level in order to avoid a plant closure. This norm was succinctly called ‘sharing the pain’. Furthermore, the EWC responded to a new tendering process for investment by developing a norm not to agree to local negotiations and concessions with management and instead hold out for a European-level agreement that would allow all plants to survive. This was formalized as in a Solidarity Pledge, which all EWC members signed.

The EWC leadership sought to anchor this approach in strong relationships between the group’s members. The continuous and regular face-to-face exchange – an essential requirement for overcoming collective action problems (Ostrom 2000) – within the EWC allowed its members to get to know each other, not only through meetings and other official communication, but also through informal socializing. In response to the worry that the strategy might be identified with the numerically dominant German group, the leadership consciously integrated unionists from Belgium and Spain into leadership positions and sought to establish an egalitarian working relationship that gave all members a strong voice in the EWC. The long-term tenure of many key unionists over more than a decade and continuous relationships helped to nurture trust, which facilitated cooperation.

The EWC leadership also sought to anchor the transnational collective identity in the broader workforce, through education and involvement. EWC members discussed international work in local union meetings, workforce assemblies, and works council elections. In a series of international exchanges, local union activists learned more about each other’s workplaces and

unions. In addition, transnational collective negotiations, underpinned by work stoppages and protests, demonstrated to the workforce that the international strategy was not merely a matter of international meetings, but also involved and affected them.

Our argument is that this identity work can underpin and sustain a transnational union strategy in the face of material conflicts of interest. We do not say that identity work is easy, nor do we identify an endpoint in which the transnational identity has finally triumphed over local or national identities. Indeed, the production system of GME generates material conflicts of interest as it undermines the power of local and national unions. Local union identities at the plant level are continually reinforced through daily interaction, and national union identities can be reinforced by an engagement with politics, national bargaining arrangements, or a common language. Transnational collective identities lack this kind of underpinning, and they develop parallel to other, sometimes more important, identities. In order to sustain a transnational approach to trade unionism, identity work has to be ongoing, and the next section shows concretely how this can happen.

### **The rise and resilience of transnational worker cooperation at GM Europe**

At GME labor transnationalism has developed parallel to the internationalization of the firm. During the postwar period until the formation of the new Zurich-based subsidiary in 1986, the British brand Vauxhall was produced in Luton and Ellesmere Port and managed from London, while the mostly German brand Opel assembled cars in Rüsselsheim, Bochum, Kaiserslautern, and in Belgium (Antwerp) and had its headquarters in Rüsselsheim. GM owned another assembly plant in Portugal (Azambuja) and a parts plant in France (Strasbourg). In the 1980s, GM shifted these plants into the single subsidiary, built factories in Spain (Saragossa) and

Austria (Vienna), and purchased the Swedish automaker Saab (with an assembly plant in Trollhättan). After the breakdown of communism, GM expanded production further into Eastern Europe, with assembly in East Germany (Eisenach) in 1991 and Poland (Gliwice) in 1998 and parts production in Hungary (Szentgotthard) in 1992. Over this period, there were two shifts in General Motors' production system in Europe that undermined the power of unions and introduced existential uncertainty for them.

First, the company moved to standardize production internationally. In the form of a Global Manufacturing System (GMS), the global firm developed shared standards for production and tools for benchmarking manufacturing processes and their costs and performance. Management standardized production further by grouping models sold under various brand names into ever fewer globally shared 'platforms'. Producing very similar cars as Opels, Saabs, and Vauxhalls allowed the company to buy parts in bulk and reduce the costs associated with design and development. Within each platform, GME could conduct closer between-plant comparisons, more easily re-assign production, and make more credible demands from unions for concessions in exchange for investment.

A second issue had to do with overcapacity, due to the above sketched expansion strategy, followed by disappointing sales. After the industry slump of 1993 GME's market share declined, production overcapacities increased, and its financial performance began to deteriorate. Between 2000 and 2008 it made losses every year of between \$190 million and \$1.7 billion. Under pressure to turn a profit, management moved to reduce the workforce (from 89,000 to 57,000 between 2000 and 2007) (GM 10k reports, various years), extract labor concessions, and close factories. Overcapacity also reduced the importance of union strike threats, since strikes would have temporarily reduced labor costs while the company sold off its excess inventory.

Managers developed their transnational bargaining strategy during the 1980s. In a series of collective agreements over working-time flexibility in parts production, they found that the reassignment of production provided leverage in winning concessions from its workforce (Mueller and Purcell 1992), and during the 1990s they came under increased pressure to do this more due to the profit squeeze and overcapacity.

While trade unionists in the United Kingdom and Germany began to worry about international competition as early as the 1980s, there was little interaction between them, and no contact with the Southern Europeans. In February 1992, a meeting took place that was initiated by the German works council and supported by the European Metal Workers Federation. At this meeting, the chairman of the German works council proposed demanding a voluntary EWC agreement from management, as had happened at Volkswagen. However, British and German trade unionists could not agree on a common position; below the surface was mutual suspicion. The British were skeptical of the Germans' participation on the supervisory board and in-plant cooperation with management, while the Germans were skeptical of the combative approach towards management favored by their British colleagues (trade union interviews 2005).

Shortly after this meeting, two events provided a new impetus for the EWC. The first was the Directive on European Works Councils, passed by the European Parliament in September 1994, which stipulated that multinational firms had to either establish an EWC by September 1996 or the EWC would have to take a form stipulated by the Directive. The second was the European recession of 1993, in which management sought to reduce costs through whipsawing. In Germany, the company's newsletter, the *Opel Post*, published a table showing that German GM workers had the highest wages and lowest annual working time within the worldwide GM company, and quoted a newspaper editorial that argued, 'German workers have become the most

expensive and laziest in the world' (22 June 1993). Shortly thereafter, management unilaterally cancelled three collective agreements on social benefits, and in 1995, a round of whipsawing followed. Management offered production of the Vectra and additional investments to the plants in Rüsselsheim, Antwerp, and Luton. Production went to Luton and Rüsselsheim after concessions were agreed, including a pattern-breaking agreement in Germany that slowed the rate of pay increases below that of the sectoral agreement and provided workers with an employment security clause (Rehder 2003).

The EWC was formed through a voluntary agreement reached by labor and management finalized eight days before the due date set in the EU Directive. Although the worker-representation structure was largely in line with the legislation, management opposed calling it a 'works council', and it was called a European Employee Forum. It meets three times a year, includes 30 worker representatives from 17 countries (in 1999 extended to include Hungarian and Polish representatives), and has separate subcommittees to prepare the meetings and to represent the various production sites. In recognition of tensions between national unions and in-plant worker representatives, this body – which, in keeping with common parlance, we will refer to as the EWC – includes representatives both from plants and from national trade unions.

The first meeting took place in January 1997 in Brussels. The chair, Rudi Müller, set a tone of willingness to cooperate with management in general but to oppose certain management practices. He called for a stronger quality image and niche products designed specifically for European consumers and criticized the company's internationalization strategy, especially the investments in Latin America and Asia. This latter point was to be a constant theme in the EWC's declarations (Fetzer 2008), and the EWC moved quickly to challenge management. At its second meeting, a battle had already begun with management over a 'template study', whose

purpose was to use a set of criteria developed at the Toyota-GM joint venture in California, NUMMI, to identify savings that might be reached through the reorganization of production. While the EWC had been informed of the study, it had lacked certain details and had not been consulted. After calling a worker-side meeting and finding out that it had already taken place in Ellesmere Port and Azambuja (in Germany the works council had blocked it by taking management to court), the EWC passed a resolution declaring the study a 'crass violation of trust' (Kotthoff 2006).

More significant, however, was the bargaining round of 1998. The company announced reductions of staff in Europe, and national-level pacts were negotiated in Belgium, the United Kingdom and Germany. The agreements reached in early 1998 in Germany and Belgium both included five-year guarantees of employment, investment and production, as well as provisions to prevent layoffs through early retirement, part-time work, and reviews of outsourcing arrangements. In exchange, workers accepted more working-time flexibility and wage restraint. These agreements put pressure on trade unionists in Luton, where, despite low labor costs and high flexibility, unit costs were higher due to low productivity and an unfavorable exchange rate. The unions agreed to participate in a drive to increase productivity by 30% (Hancké 2000).

These agreements produced severe tensions within the EWC. The German agreement was especially problematic, because, unlike the 1993 agreement or the 'gentlemen's agreements' that characterize British industrial relations, it contained a legally enforceable employment guarantee (Schulten, Seifert, and Zagelmeyer 2002). Although the deal brought a new plant to Rüsselsheim, new motor production to Kaiserslautern, and an additional shift to Bochum, works councilors had negotiated and signed it without informing other EWC members. Kotthoff writes, 'one eyewitness reported that an English colleague came into the room so angry, that he looked

like “he might beat up [one of his German colleagues]”. British trade unionists argued that the Germans ‘gave themselves advantages over the others, felt superior to the rest, acted separately in their own interests, were privileged due to their proximity to management, etc. . . [Post-2000 EWC chair] Klaus Franz said in retrospect, “either we would get back on our feet or remain a purely formal body” (2006: 14, authors’ translation).

The 1998 concessions were not only a defeat; they also acted as a trigger for the intensification of worker-side international cooperation. Union leaders increasingly realized that they could not counter transnational whipsawing by management by focusing their actions at the local and national levels. The resulting discussions soon led to calls for greater worker-side cooperation and a common strategy. These regular EWC meetings helped participants to get to know each other better on a personal level, to discuss the company’s problems, and take part in company-funded English lessons for EWC members (works council interviews 2005).

With a change in leadership, the year 2000 marked a turning point in the work of the EWC. Klaus Franz, a works councilor from the Rüsselsheim site, became chair of the German works council and the EWC. He had been a member of the EWC since 1996, and over the years, he had built personal ties with other European colleagues and had envisioned stronger transnational worker cooperation to counter management’s transnational whipsawing. Within Germany he was a maverick, a vocal advocate of greater flexibility for within-company bargaining and outspoken critic of IG Metall’s leadership. Although the Social Democratic Party (SPD) is the traditional political voice of the German labor movement, Franz had been a candidate for the Green Party and in local politics. Franz also sought to broaden decision-making beyond Germany, partly due to tense relationships between works councilors at the two large German sites and partly because of the lack of privileged access of Germans to management. He

brought a Belgian trade unionist into the vice chairman position, strengthened the role of the multi-national steering group, and hired an organizer to coordinate EWC work. Communication was opened further in 2007 with the creation of a multilingual GM Workers Blog, which included links to news articles, EWC announcements, solidarity declarations, and public comments.

The first challenge to this group came in March 2000, when GM managers announced a joint venture with FIAT without consulting the EWC. The planned restructuring of parts production would affect 15,000 workers in Europe and 15,000 in Brazil. In Bochum workers responded with a wildcat strike; meanwhile, the EWC leadership pointed out to management that it had breached the EWC statute, which stipulates that management has to inform and consult worker representatives over major restructuring in Europe, and demanded negotiations at the international level. Management agreed to bargain this first European framework agreement in order to salvage the deal with FIAT. Under its terms, all GM workers in Europe transferred to the new firm would have the same terms and conditions of employment as GM employees in their respective countries (works council interview 18 April 2005).

In December 2000, a second conflict, over the closure of the Luton plant, led to a European Day of Action and a second international agreement. Although management informed the EWC, the announcement sparked immediate and fierce local labor protest in Luton, and EU-wide mobilization in response. On 25 January 2001, 40,000 GM workers participated in a European work stoppage, a so-called European Action Day, against the plant closure. Parallel to the protest, negotiations between management and EWC reached a breakthrough (Herber and Schäfer-Klug 2002). Franz announced the resolution via a conference phone to protesting workers in Germany.

Although the plant was not saved, management agreed to avoid mandatory redundancies through the transfer of workers into a nearby van plant. From management's point of view, including European-level labor representatives engendered more cooperation in restructuring, since it enabled them to bargain with individuals not directly involved in the heated local conflict (management interview 22 March 2004). From the point of view of German EWC leaders, it was a way to make up for the 1998 agreement and showing that they had learned from their mistakes and helped to build up trust to their British colleagues (Kotthoff 2006).

Despite ongoing restructuring efforts, the financial situation of GME was deteriorating, and in 2001 management and the EWC negotiated a restructuring plan called Olympia. In response to rumors of plans to close down another plant in Europe, with Antwerp or Saragossa the possible targets, the EWC leadership developed a new principle for international work. Because worker representatives did not doubt GM's difficult economic situation, they would agree to concessions. However, they demanded that cuts be spread equally across all plants in Europe in order to avoid plant closures, a principle they called 'sharing the pain'. EWC and management negotiated a third collective agreement at the European level, which stipulated cost reductions for each plant, but ruled out a plant closure and forced redundancies.

The three European collective agreements in 2000 and 2001 and the transnational work stoppage in the Luton conflict helped to focus the EWCs work around a common fight to prevent forced redundancies and plant closures in Europe. Common transnational collective action and a positive result – innovative transnational collective agreements – were important experiences for the EWC. Through 2002 and 2003, although no new major restructuring initiative was taken by GM, union leaders continued to pursue the transnational strategy. EWC members continued to meet, and in the 2002 German works council elections, the dominant IG Metall caucus used its

international strategy as a prominent plank in its platform, in effect, using the election process to educate workers about the importance of international solidarity. This was motivated by the view that “a transnational strategy is only as strong as it is backed up by the local workforce” (union interview 20 May 2005).

In 2004, GM was still losing money in Europe. ‘Olympia’ had been insufficient, and management began to seek new concessions from labor in Europe. In September 2004, after months of rumors, management announced a plant closure, with Trollhättan, Bochum, and Rüsselsheim the suspected targets, and in October they announced personnel reductions in Germany of 10,000, or every third German employee. Immediately after the announcement, a wildcat strike broke loose in Bochum. The EWC organized a second European Action Day, including more than 40,000 workers stopping work for at least an hour. As the strike in Bochum (which became an occupation) entered its sixth day, assembly plants across Europe depending on it for axles had to stop production.

In November, the EWC made its ‘Declaration of Zurich’ denouncing the restructuring program, declaring that ‘management is unable to carry out a kind of social dialog that is normal in Europe’, and demanding European-level negotiations. The result was a fourth European collective bargaining framework, ruling out plant closures and mandatory redundancies; stipulating voluntary buyout programs, transfers into joint ventures, and early retirement; requiring intensive involvement by worker representatives in this process, including the site selection process. The agreement, signed in December, allowed for the elimination of 12,000 jobs, including 9,500 in Germany, without plant closures, and set out a broad framework for local concession bargaining (Dribbusch 2004; EMF 2005). The concessions that followed

included working time extension and reduction of pay increases in Germany, early-retirement incentives in Sweden, and the elimination of various bonuses elsewhere (Pulignano 2007).

The EWC's next struggle concerned the closure of the Azambuja plant and transfer of production to Saragossa. The EWC responded to management's announcement with five weeks of mobilization in June and July 2006 involving all major plants, but again varying between sites. Work stoppages lasting two to eight hours took place in plants in Sweden, Germany, United Kingdom, Belgium, and Spain, and 'information meetings at all shifts' in France, Poland and Hungary. During the demonstration in Rüsselsheim, EWC activists collected money from the workforce to support the striking workers and their families in Portugal, who had no income during the strike. Portuguese unionists organized a 'march on Lisbon' and a 24-hour work stoppage and worked with European-level and Portuguese politicians to demand in the event of a closure the repayment of tens of millions of euros worth of subsidies. In order to sustain international solidarity action for five weeks, these mobilizations took place on a rolling basis, varying at each site in intensity from day to day, and coordinated by the EWC (Whittall et al 2009). In the end, worker representatives won assurances from management to postpone the plant closure, to fund programs to help workers find alternative employment, and to provide severance pay 260% above the statutory minimum (Bartmann and Blum-Geenen 2006). Despite being the recipients of the work, Spanish unions struck in support of their colleagues in Portugal, as did the potential future beneficiaries of Western European plant closures in Poland and Hungary.

As restructuring progressed, management refined its whipsawing practices. Previously it had been informal; but in 2004 management introduced a formal bidding process for the allocation of new production. The plant with the best tender, which could mean higher labor

concessions, was supposed to receive new car production. Management announced two tenders: a competition between Rüsselsheim and Gliwice for new Zafira production and between Rüsselsheim and Trollhättan for the Vectra. The EWC responded by organizing what it called ‘social competition’: representatives promised to inform each other about negotiations with management and not to undercut existing collective bargaining agreement. Furthermore, they established a sister cities exchange between Trollhättan and Rüsselsheim, both medium-sized cities dependent on car production. Politicians from each town, including the mayors, visited the other town and issued statements demanding sufficient production for both sites. Gliwice won the first tender and Rüsselsheim the second, and this competition contributed to the concessionary dynamics of 2004 mentioned above.

The EWC decided to take a different approach in 2005, when management announced a new bidding process for the next Astra model along the Delta Platform and invited tenders from Bochum, Ellesmere Port, Antwerp, Gliwice, and Trollhättan. The EWC responded by organizing a Joint Delta Working Group in cooperation with the [European Metalworkers' Federation](#) (EMF). The group’s main purpose was to negotiate with European management, stop the whipsawing and ensure a distribution of production that would all plants of the Delta platform to survive (works council interview 5 March 2005). The Joint Delta Working Group consisted of two labor representatives from each country, including a representative of the local plant and the national union, the latter in order to safeguard national bargaining agreements in the face of potential plant egoism.

This work took place outside the scope of the EWC agreement, and management refused to recognize it. Because it required funds, the EWC organizer wrote bids, and funding came from the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation (the SPD’s research and education arm) and the EU

Commission. The latter project was in cooperation with the IG Metall under the project heading, ‘Requirements and Perspective of the General Motors Europe Employees Co-operation’ (GMEECO), and was presented to the Commission as an innovative case of transnational employment relations. GMEECO was launched in November 2005 and funded the Joint Delta Working Group. EU funding provided prestige as well as material support to develop the transnational strategy further.

The funding enabled the EWC to hire two additional staff members, mainly to run workshops at the site five sites involved in the bidding process. These visits of the members of the Joint Delta Working Group helped participants to get to know each other better on a personal level and to learn more about industrial relations at plants in other countries. The workshop helped to facilitate information exchange, plan actions, to build trust between members to ‘develop criteria for the site selection process that reflects the interests of all plants’ (Bartmann and Blum-Geenen 2006). At the first plant workshop in December 2005, at the Gliwice plant, each member signed a ‘solidarity pledge’, promising each other not to engage in local concession bargaining and to commonly pursue a fair allocation of production across the plants of the Delta platform.

Management never accepted the Joint Delta Working Group as a negotiating partner and decided unilaterally on the distribution of production. The big loser was the Antwerp plant, which having already lost a shift a few months previously, would now lose all Astra production. Following this decision, on 25 April 2007, workers in Antwerp went on strike, supported on 3 May by another European Day of Action covering 15 sites in 8 countries. The EWC demanded a guarantee of at least two new products for Antwerp and a ‘European Future Agreement’ setting minimum standards for outsourcing until 2016. Management compromised with the EWC by

agreeing to produce two new models and to consider producing a third vehicle in Antwerp. After nearly two weeks on strike, just over 50% of the workers at the Antwerp plant voted in favor of resuming work (Telljohann and Tapia 2007).

The lukewarm reception by the Antwerp workforce was not the only problem. Within the EWC accusations flew that worker representatives in Ellesmere Port and Bochum had broken the common front by negotiating locally with management. At Ellesmere Port, if an agreement existed, it had been an informal ‘gentleman’s agreement’, and, after intervention by the EWC, it was not signed. At Bochum, however, the works councils had signed a formal agreement with management over outsourcing, allowing it in exchange for protections of workers in affected parts of the plant. On the GM Workers Blog the EWC organizer asked why the Bochum works council had made a local agreement before a European framework had been established. The head of Bochum’s works council responded angrily that this accusation was ‘a brazen lie’ and asked why it was made in a blog ‘visible worldwide to friends and foes’, rather than privately in EWC and Delta group meetings (GM EWC, 6-7 July 2007, translation by authors). After contentious discussions the EWC reached a common position and negotiated a framework agreement, that required negotiations over any outsourcing not agreed in the earlier deals; securing employment and products at the four plants receiving the work over the life-span of the model; and (if possible) the avoidance of future volume-related redundancies through European-level negotiations (GM EWC, 24 October 2007).

Despite these problems, international work continued to develop. In November 2007 and September 2008, an exchange took place between rank-and-file trade unionists in Bochum and Gliwice. With the support of the regional Protestant and Catholic churches, the unions IG Metall and Solidarinosc, and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, they aimed to develop mutual

understanding of union work and promoting the idea of countering competition through ‘networking from below’ (works council interview 23 September 2009). Second, the GMEECO project was renewed. In January 2008, it held a meeting in Belgium in anticipation of upcoming decisions over investment in the Gamma platform, including assembly plants in Saragossa, Eisenach, and Warsaw, and parts plants in Bochum, Kaiserslautern, Szentgottard, and Strasbourg (France); it received 12 months’ funding and was wrapped up amid news of GM’s impending bankruptcy (GMEECO 2008).

The staying power of the transnational strategy can be seen in the tense situation created by the General Motors bankruptcy and bailout negotiations throughout 2009. When the firm expressed an interest in selling off GME – and in 2010 it did divest itself from Saab – the EWC leadership actively supported the separation of the European operation. This was a controversial position, because it brought the German government and its national industrial policy priorities into the restructuring process. When, in May 2009, GME’s cash flow dried up, the German government provided guarantees for loans in order to maintain production, and eventually, a deal was struck to sell what would be called ‘Opel’ to the Austro-Canadian parts company Magna. In September 2009 – before the deal was complete – Magna announced plans to close the Antwerp plant and shift production to Bochum. The EWC responded quickly by organizing a European demonstration in Antwerp that included 3000 participants from Spain, England, Belgium and Germany (observation 22 September 2009). When General Motors changed its course and decided not to sell its European operations, it confirmed the decision to close the Antwerp plant, and began negotiations with the Spanish, British, and German governments over subsidizing what remained.

## **Conclusion**

This article engages with a challenge posed by rational choice theorists regarding the difficulties of collective action in the context of labor transnationalism. In contrast to the rational-choice expectation that cooperation is unlikely, our analysis of longer-term processes of interaction at GME uncovered transnational collective action sustained for more than a decade. This finding led us to challenge some of the assumptions about actor behavior behind much comparative industrial relations scholarship. Our case led us to outline a process of identity work that led to a different outcome than that predicted by interest-based structuralism.

We reached this conclusion because the standard assertions about EWCs – e.g. that they are ‘vehicles for international labour regime competition’ used by managers to win consent for restructuring from local trade unionists (Hancké 2000) – simply did not apply to GME. Behind this interpretation is a view that the actions and motives of actors are primarily shaped by macro-institutional and industry structures. In the auto industry, this assumption leads to the prediction that conflicts of material interest prevent meaningful international solidarity action. This is not such an implausible point of view and was shared by some of our interviewees. The actors themselves expressed surprise that the potential beneficiaries and victims of restructuring were cooperating, as when Spanish workers struck against the plant closure in Azambuja, and when more than a thousand German trade unionists rallied in Antwerp. In both cases, unionists acted against their narrow material interests. In the 1990s, with the integration and standardization of production across borders, when management’s transnational whipsawing practices intensified, the trend turned toward more international cooperation. Despite painful compromises and occasionally open conflict between its members, the EWC sustained and intensified its work.

The key difference between this EWC and many others is the identity work the EWC leadership carried out to promote labor transnationalism. They educated and mobilized workers, which was important given the possibility that workers could punish their elected leaders for ‘sharing the pain’ as opposed to making gains. Collective action – mobilizations against plant closures and whipsawing – also reinforced the collective identity, with its strong element of drama (as when Franz announced developments in bargaining in real time to demonstrating workers) and mass mobilization (with at times 40,000 workers involved across Europe). The transnational strategy was brought into local works council elections and reinforced by international exchanges of union activists, some of which had external support from the European Commission and churches. The EWC also promoted closer relationships between its own members. This meant broadening decision making beyond the numerically dominant national group, which was important given the possibility that this supposedly ‘transnational’ approach might be interpreted as merely serving the interests of the Germans. These relationships were strengthened over time through regular face-to-face meetings, private exchanges via phone and e-mail, public exchanges online, and, as one EWC member put it, ‘drinking lots of beer together’ (public meeting, 22 September 2009).

As a result, EWC representatives developed significant commonalities in their interpretation of the situation, a shared goal of preventing forced dismissals and plant closures, a contentious relationship with a distant transnational management, and a normative attachment to international solidarity. After 2000, when management began to close plants, the EWC developed an alternative principle, namely the distribution of labor concessions equally across all plants, a solidarity norm of ‘sharing the pain’. Another norm was articulated by worker representatives in the form of the Solidarity Pledge of 2005, which entailed refraining from local

concession bargaining until a common framework had first been agreed to fairly distribute production and prevent all plant closures.

Conflicts within the union camp are sometimes used as evidence to demonstrate the limits of what EWCs can accomplish. Indeed, despite some attempts to reach out to colleagues in other parts of the world – including a 2005 trip to North America and a 2008 invitation to bring an American trade unionist into the supervisory board of the German operations – the transnational approach has been limited to Europe. However, tensions within the labor camp at GME also demonstrate the strong effect that labor transnationalism can have on local trade unionists' ideas and behavior. In several instances – most notably in 1998, 2004, and 2007 – local leaders narrowly interpreted their economic interests in a way that undermined the bargaining position of colleagues elsewhere. In each instance, however, the international strategy was later reaffirmed, through some modification of the approach (as in the advent of transnational bargaining and platform groups) and some symbolic gesture (usually accusations followed by denials, apologies, or obfuscation). EWC members questioned the efficacy of the existing transnational strategy and the good faith of their colleagues and sometimes expressed surprise that international cooperation was maintained. But they did not question the idea of transnational solidarity. Indeed, the most vocal public critics of the EWC leadership, in Bochum, also worked with local church bodies to organize exchanges with Polish colleagues. These disagreements served to reinforce the social relations that in turn cemented the transnational identity.

Like all case studies, this one raises an issue of generalizability. Can identity work sustain transnational collective action outside of Europe, where the macro-institutional context is less supportive? At first glance the answer seems negative: American trade unionists at General

Motors do not seem interested in international work. When we interviewed them in 2002-5, national and local union leaders viewed their crisis as domestic and hoped to solve their problems through new work practices, concession bargaining, and political lobbying. They did not have regular contact with colleagues in other countries. More generally, although important cross-border links have formed between unions in Latin America and North America (Anner and Evans 2004), the empirical evidence suggests weak institutionalization compared to EWCs (Anner et al 2005).

While there is an institutional difference that may lead to a difference in behavior, the evidence on EWCs shows that macro-level institutions do not determine what unions do. Indeed, the EWC legislation had mixed effects, since it provided resources that could be used both for worker-side coordination and for local cooperation with management. Our argument suggests that it is possible for union leaders to redefine the collective ideology of worker representatives and of union members and build within-company structures to support this work. It may therefore be that absent supportive macro-level institutions, in the Americas and in other parts of the world, identity work can also play a role in building and sustaining international labor solidarity.

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<sup>i</sup> This study is part of a larger program of research between 2002 and 2009 at various automakers in Germany, Spain, United Kingdom and the United States. It included around 200 interviews with managers (at the plant and company levels) and worker representatives (trade unionists and works councilors). After 2006, we decided to focus special attention on GME, because we were surprised by, and interested in, the exceptionally high degree of transnational mobilization, structure building and collective negotiations. Our case study is based on 25 interview transcripts with worker representatives and managers at GME, participant observations and informal conversations, which we supplemented with archived union leaflets and newsletters of the EWC and labor organizations in Germany and Spain. In addition, we consulted publicly available sources such as corporate filings, press reports, academic articles, and the GM Workers Blog.