

### **The Sociology of Industrial Relations: A Question of Continuing or Renewed Importance?**

Our goal is to provide information on a new study program at the Department of Sociology, Philosophical Faculty, Charles University and to promote discussion on the topicality of industrial relations both within the transformation of Czech society, and at an international level.

In the spring semester of 1994 the Department of Sociology, Philosophical Faculty, enlarged its study program to include a new optional one-semester course on „Industrial Relations“. This interdisciplinary course, especially firmly established in Western Europe, concerns the institutionalisation of industrial relations on the state level, as well as on level of organisations, the labour market, collective bargaining, worker participation and labour conflicts. A necessary part of the program is the study of the ways in which individual actors – employees, employers and government – develop their own norms and rules for the regulation of labour spheres in the framework of mutual relations.

Our course, „Industrial Relations“, aims to provide students with an introductory review of the relevant issues which are in many respects broader than sociology and which, at the same time, show significant perspectives in their application. This new specialisation also increases the possibilities of our graduates securing good jobs, the Czech Republic lacking qualified specialists due to the directive stagnation of industrial relations over the last forty years. With respect to the European tradition, it is, moreover, hard to imagine a modern capitalist economy without institutionalised labour relations.

Our department has gained a decisive impulse as well as professional and financial support for the establishment of this applied discipline through participation in a TEMPUS project. The goal of this TEMPUS project, „Study of Industrial Relations 1992/94“, was to develop an educational programme and a coursebook, and to initiate the regular study of industrial relations at five universities in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria,

with the assistance of three universities in England, Germany and the Netherlands, coordinated by Dr. H. Moerel from the Institute for Applied Social Sciences in the Netherlands. The role of the Western partners consisted in providing help in the creation of a study program and teacher training in the form of three one-week-seminars at the above mentioned universities.

A single-semester students' course was started at our Department of Sociology in the Spring of 1994, including two guest lectures on „Changing Industrial Relations in Britain and Germany“. The students are trained in subjects such as economic and social transition, labour relations actors, labour relations systems, labour market policies, industrial democracy, worker participation, conflict (resolution), consultation, co-operation and collective bargaining.

A coursebook written by the participants on „Industrial Relations“, has been prepared and published in each of the countries involved. The Czech version should appear by the end of 1994. Apart from a general introduction to the study of industrial relations (they deal mostly with labour relations, and employee relations in the Western countries in response to the decreasing importance of industry), the subjects discussed in the textbook are:

- National labour relations frameworks (in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, the Netherlands and Poland)
- The construction of parties
- Economic transformation
- The labour market
- Labour conflicts
- Collective bargaining
- Worker participation

A comparative approach with international and historical perspectives was used in elaborating all the issues.

As radical changes have occurred in the sphere of industrial relations and these have thus far not been studied systematically in post-communist countries, this approach has required research on the current situation (the

situation is much better in Poland and Hungary).

It has therefore been necessary to broaden the purely pedagogical orientation of the TEMPUS projects and introduce a research component in order to gain and elaborate recent data. In this connection, our Department was able to use grants from both the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic and Charles University focused on industrial relations in the transformation of Czech enterprises (head of the research project is Dr. J. Buriánek). The following individuals deserve special mention: Dr. Kuchař from the Institute of Sociological Studies, School of Social Sciences, Charles University, and Dr. Hradecká and Dr. Vlášil from the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, who have also been investigating recent industrial relations.

We intend to launch a new postgraduate course on „Industrial Relations“ next year. This course should provide especially for the needs of employees from the Trade Unions, Labour Offices, Employers' and Entrepreneurs' Associations and Administration. Moreover, the feedback from course participants will provide material which will allow comparison of our academic interpretation with the reality of Czech industrial relations.

Besides the TEMPUS program, we would like to maintain the exchange of international experience within the framework of the activities of the „European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions“ in Dublin, as well as bilateral co-operation with our TEMPUS partners. The fact that European industrial relations have gained a publishing basis in the form of own journal with the title „European Journal of Industrial Relations“ this year emphasises not only the topicality of the theme but especially the im-

portance of the European tradition of „Industrial Relations“ (created among others to establish social peace). The fact that labour relations in Western countries are also undergoing radical changes requiring the reaction of experts was stressed in a lecture by Prof. R. Hyman from the University of Warwick and Dr. E. Dietrich from Universität Bielefeld at our Department in May 1994. These lectures by leading experts should help in the introduction to the problems of industrial relations particular to our conditions. The mere comparison of two quite different systems of industrial relations in Germany (a legally based dual system of work councils and trade unions) and Great Britain (free collective bargaining between trade unions and employers) demonstrated the necessity of understanding national systems and cultural specifics as a prerequisite for explaining the substance of their differences. There seem to be two main tasks for sociology, which in the 50's was already defending the legitimacy of its approach to the problems of Industrial Relations against that of economists („Industrial Relations“ are taken in this case as a field of study and analysis and not as an individual scientific discipline), in co-operation with lawyers, economists, social psychologists, politologists and historians under the Czech conditions:

- 1) the establishment of the system of categories and terms and the development of education in this field,
- 2) research on economic processes and the labour market, tripartity and its functioning in our political system, labour law, collective bargaining in the sense of the strategy of actors' behaviour (Labour Code, Collective Bargaining Law, Strike Law).

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