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Beyond Restructuring: the role of workers' participation in addressing intensified cross-border standardisation and centralisation in multinational companies

Christoph Dörrenbächer[1], Mike Geppert[2], Aline Hoffmann[3], Daniel Pastuh[2], and Matthias Tomenendal[1]

Multinational companies (MNCs) and those who are linked to them, such as suppliers, regions, managers, and workers, are heading down a bumpy road of transition. There are many signs that the multinational company of the 2020s will look and behave differently and as a consequence need to be approached differently by workers and their representatives. New information and communication (ICT) technologies are digitalising our economy in an unprecedented way. Growth continues to shift from the developed to the emerging markets. New powerful multinationals such as Huawei or Alphabet have appeared on the scene. At the same time, the global competitive environment in Europe and beyond is getting tougher.

MNCs currently shape and have been shaped by these two mega-trends of digitalisation and (de-)globalisation, by trying to ride the wave of change following a two-step strategy of both stretching and bundling up. "Stretching" refers to the fact that companies seek to grow bigger, more digital, and more international through expansion, mergers, and acquisitions, both within and across industries, a process powered by an accelerated implementation of information and communication technology. The subsequent 'bundling up' processes manifest themselves in various processes of cross-border standardisation and centralisation.

Based on a systematic evaluation of academic and non-academic literature as well as on 35 in-depth interviews with experts from academics, management consultants and trade union consultants across Europe, the paper, for one, maps the most important trends of cross-border standardization and centralization moves in MNCs. The following four trends turned out to be of pivotal importance from a workers´ perspective and will be analysed in detail:

- The renewed challenge of 'lean' management principles and strategic business outsourcing
- New organisational concepts and standardization trends in Human Resource Management
- IT-based standardization, Big Data and Industry/Services 4.0
- Compliance-induced process standardisation

Based on the results of an in-depth discussion of these trends with about 120 worker representatives at the EWPCC Conference in December 2017, the paper, secondly, assesses the implications these cross-border standardization and centralization trends habour for working conditions and employment. Moreover it looks at current and long term implications these trends have on the processes and subjects of workers participation in Europe. Here the paper in particular looks at what will be the 'rules of engagement' for workers' representatives in increasingly standardized regimes.

[1] Berlin School of Economics and Law
[2] Friedrich Schiller University of Jena
[3] European Trade union Institute, Brüssels