

Assessing Priorities of Transatlantic Building and Construction Unions During COVID-19

The proposed project would compare building and construction trades unions (BCTU) campaigns and priorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is premised on the research question: how did the COVID-19 pandemic impact transatlantic BCTU priorities and campaigns?

Background:

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Union (EU) and United States ordered businesses be shut down and populations shelter in place. The construction industry in transatlantic nations has a strong emphasis for worker safety protocols (Jung et al., 2020); therefore, public health experts included the industry among the first to reopen alongside other essential businesses. In the wake of these decisions and the pandemic, the industry has changed in two ways: worker safety and a green transition.

While the industry has made an attempt to ensure safety and promote public health measures during the pandemic, later studies have found decreased compliance has harmed these assumptions (Raoufi and Fayek, 2020; Moreno-Sueskun et al., 2020). As a result, the industry has seen increased transmission and higher complication risks than other essential businesses (Pasco et al., 2020). BCTU have since stepped in, demanding personal protective equipment (PPE), screening guidelines, and formalized sick leave policies. These negotiations have taken place on both the sectoral scale (between BCTU and business groups) and governments (lobbying officials for worker-friendly reopening plans and regulations).

The BCTU have also begun working to help define the future of the construction industry by pushing for a green transition (including renewable energy, building retrofits, sustainable infrastructure, etc.). The pandemic has sent the global economy into a “lockdown recession,” leaving tens of millions of people across the EU and US unemployed (Song and Zhou, 2020; Bureau of Labor Statistics, December 2020; Eurostat – European Commission, January 2021). Governments and markets have turned to a green transition as a responsible and reliable stimulus plan to help transform the economy (Lahcen et al., 2020; Hosseini, 2020). BCTU have taken a leadership role in this budding market, helping push for expansionary policies that invest heavily in a new green market. This will be increasingly important as COVID-19 vaccinations are distributed, lockdown orders are lifted, and the global economy looks to get back on stable footing.

Research Objectives:

The proposed project would examine how BCTU shifted pre-pandemic campaigns and priorities to address new concerns with COVID-19. Looking at how BCTU pushed for safety regulations on jobsites and have worked for a green economy in the wake of the pandemic, this project will examine the similarities and differences between American and EU unions when dealing with these two issues. This project will take a mixed-method approach, utilizing a literature review of government and workplace policies, interviews with union, governmental, and industry leaders, and economic data analysis.

The goal of this project would be to understand the different organizational priorities and objectives of American and EU BCTU given the pandemic, as well as to compare the success of these changes. Given the developing situation in this field, there is not much COVID-centered research on BCTU responses to the pandemic. Furthermore, there is even less comparative work as to the differences between how American and EU unions have responded to the pandemic. The proposed project would add to the current field by highlighting their similarities and differences over the past year, using qualitative methods to compare these organizations. The results of this project would extrapolate on these findings to indicate differences between European and American labor unions.