

# Union Low-pay-worker Representation and the *sans-papiers* Strikes in France

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The article deals with the problem of union representation in the low-pay-sector. Regarding especially (but not only) the situation in Germany, it claims a cultural gap between traditional unions and employees in the expanding precarious job sector. This is due to the difficult circumstances for worker interest representation in these sectors, but also to problems of the unions to deal with ‘crazy’ struggles typically erupting in this employment area. In the following the French case of the *sans-papiers* strike between October 2009 and summer 2010 is empirically examined as an example of relatively successful ‘bridge-building’ between established unions and precarious wage-earners. Although this case is also committed to specific French conditions, some things can be learned from it for a more general assessment of the topic of union politics in the low-pay area.

**Key words:** low pay work, precarious work, interest representation, *sans papiers*-strike

The structures and policies of (not only) the German union movement have been historically strongly characterised by the conditions enjoyed by male, domestic skilled workers. This is what up to today still makes up the bastion of union organising. In the large production operations of the (west-)German metal, electrical, chemical and mining industries, but also in banking and insurance, the unions are still strong, wages comparatively high, job conditions and employer-employee relations well regulated, and there are considerable opportunities for participation in workplace decision-making. But, in the wake of service-sector expansion, the feminisation of the labour-market, the growth of ethnic minorities in Germany as well as the ‘precaritisation-