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Trade Union Strategies
in a Time of Economic Crisis:
the Case of a Car Assembly Plant
in Poland



ABOUT THE PROJECT

This study was prepared in the larger framework of “**The Changing Nature of Employment in Europe in the Context of Challenges, Threats, and Opportunities for Employees and Employers**” initiative (<http://www.changingemployment.eu>). The ChangingEmployment program is a Marie Curie Initial Training Network funded by the Seventh Framework Program of the European Commission between 2012-2016. This paper focuses on Poland, and is part of a series of studies on trade union strategies in the automotive sector in Eastern Europe. Other studies in the series focus on Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania.

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THE CASE OF A CAR ASSEMBLY PLANT IN POLAND**

Justyna Kajta and Adam Mrozowicki

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the forms and expressions of workers’ collective actions aimed at improving their employment conditions in the automotive sector in Poland following the global financial and economic crisis. After the end of state socialism, the sector went through massive restructuring, which included the privatization of state-owned firms and the inflow of foreign direct investments. This resulted in changes in work organization, product upgrading and, most importantly, the integration of Central and Eastern European (CEE) automotive firms into global production networks (Pavlínek 2015). In the 1990s, trade unions in the sector began to lose their membership both due to their more general problems in redefining their role in the new capitalist environment (Crowley and Ost 2001) and as a consequence of restructuring and privatization. Consequently, as argued by Bernaciak and Ščepanović (2010: 130), unions focused mainly on securing their survival in existing unionized companies rather than making efforts to organize newly established firms. In the 2000s, however, greenfield investments in the region witnessed attempts at union revitalization (Meardi 2007), trade union organizing (Ostrowski 2014; Mrozowicki 2014) being doubled by the emergence of transnational trade union cooperation at the company level between Eastern and Western subsidiaries of multinational companies (Bernaciak 2010; Pernicka et al. 2015).

New challenges for trade unions in the sector sprang up with the 2008+ global economic crisis, which put previously established transnational union solidarities to the test and confronted labor organizations with attempts to cut labor costs, increase numerical flexibility, and expand the use of temporary work agencies. Given such a context, this paper explores the consequences of the crisis for the perpetuation and transformation of trade union strategies in the automotive sector in Poland. Following Boxall (2008: 209), by strategy we mean the “characteristic ways” in which trade unions interact with their environment, reflected in the patterns “of critical choices about ends and means that we see unfolding in an organization’s behavior.” Such a definition does not imply formal methods of strategic planning, but encourages us to explore “typical intentions or goals and the resources they typically build or mobilize to reach these goals” (Boxall 2008: 209). We are particularly interested in whether new problems and challenges related to the economic downturn served as drivers for innovative union strategies. The latter are understood, in accordance with Bernaciak and Kahancová (2016), as

courses of action differing from the ones pursued in the past and that are meant to address a newly emerging challenge or tackle an existing problem more effectively.

We approach trade union strategies as resulting from an interplay of workers' and union leaders' agency and structural factors limiting their room of maneuver (cf. Boxall 2008; Mrozowicki and Van Hootehem 2008). On the one hand, strategies emerge within an existing opportunity structure, which is understood in terms of "the presence or absence of particular barriers in the institutional, political and social context" (Turner 2007: 1). The features of industrial relations at the national and sectoral level, the various resources available to the labor movement, the strategies of employers and the overall economic situation of the sector make up a set of conditions for what is strategically possible and realistically accomplishable at a given moment in time. On the other hand, trade union strategies are not fully nor directly determined by their structural context. While structures and institutions influence the degree of freedom trade unions have in pursuing their goals, they do not preclude the possibility to "act otherwise" — that is, to refuse to simply enact limitations and make better use of the existing institutional framework in order to advance union objectives (Boxall 2008; Turner 2007). Thus, the agency of workers, both in terms of their bottom-up mobilization and in what concerns the choices made by union leaders, are indispensable when it comes to explaining trade union strategies.

The context for our analysis of union strategies in this paper is the 2008+ global economic crisis. Although Poland has been affected by the downturn to lesser extent than other European economies (see Maciejewska et al. 2016) and the number of crisis-induced bankruptcies, closures and relocations in the automotive industry was relatively low (Pavlínek 2015: 224), the 2008-09 period marked the greatest decrease in FDI inflows to the sector since the mid-1990s while the output of assembled vehicles decreased by 39% between 2008 and 2013 (Pavlínek 2015: 225). Trade unions' responses to the crisis varied considerably across the CEE countries (Glassner 2013; Greskovits 2015; Kahancová 2015). As suggested by Glassner (2013: 156), in countries such as Poland, which are characterized by decentralized collective bargaining and limited union influence on policy-making, "social partner organizations did not play a prominent role in finding solutions to the crisis, with individual and management-led, company-specific measures prevailing." Nevertheless, other researchers (Kahancová 2015; Maciejewska and Mrozowicki 2016) have suggested that in sectors in which trade unions were better established the crisis did contribute to the emergence of novel union strategies, including attempts to develop new, sector-wide regulations as well as a shift from "traditional resources, including strong membership and collective bargaining, to exerting union influence through legislation, public protests and political support" (Kahancová 2015: 353). Given the variety of scenarios, it is a matter of empirical analysis to establish which kind of strategies were chosen by unions in the automotive sector, and why.

The paper inquires into the drivers, forms and conditions of prevailing trade union strategies in the Polish automotive sector by exploring the case of one car manufacturer framed by a broader, sectoral-level analysis. We focus on the case of the subsidiary of the transnational corporation with headquarters in Italy, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles Poland (FCA Poland), which was rather badly affected by the heightening of competitive pressure due to the crisis and consequently experienced a job loss of approximately 1,450 workers in its Tychy plant. Redundancies resulted from the relocation of the Fiat Panda model from Poland to Italy, a measure purportedly motivated by "the persisting crisis in the European auto market" (Annual Report 2013: 101). Apart from the relatively strong impact of the crisis on employment in the company, there are three other reasons behind the choice of Fiat as a case study in our research. First, as a brownfield investment and the only large automotive company to

have survived the post-89 transformations, it enables us to explore the long-term development of trade union strategies. Second, given the strong inter-union rivalry in the plant, it makes for a good case in studying the impact of some more general features of the Polish trade unionism, such as its “competitive pluralism” (Gardawski 2003), on the properties and outcomes of company-level union strategies. Third, the company has witnessed a relatively high incidence of protests and industrial conflicts, which makes it an interesting case in assessing the impact of collective mobilization in advancing workers’ interests at the company level.

The empirical data which this paper relies on include expert interviews with trade union leaders on the company (17) and sectoral (5) levels in the automotive sector carried out within a number of research projects in which the authors were involved in 2009-16 (see appendix for details). We supplemented the interview data with a comprehensive literature review, and an analysis of secondary data coming from sources such as the Central Statistical Office (GUS), the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS), the Annual Reports of Fiat S.p.A and FCA. In addition to the interviews and secondary data analysis, we carried out a content analysis of the statements and information published on the websites of major trade unions in the plant chosen for our case study, including NSZZ Solidarność, the Free Trade Union August ’80 and the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union of Employees — the Intercompany Organization of the FCA and Companies (affiliated to Metalworkers Federation of OPZZ).

The paper is structured as follows. We begin by exploring the core characteristics of industrial relations at the national and sectoral levels, with a particular focus on sectoral level union strategies. Next, we introduce the case of the FCA and discuss trade union strategies at the company level while looking at trade union organizing, collective bargaining, and protest actions. Finally, we elaborate upon the implications of the study for understanding both the changing and the persistent nature of union strategies in the sector in the context of 2008+ economic crisis.

2. INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN POLAND: NATIONAL AND SECTORAL CONTEXTS

2.1. Industrial relations and trade unionism in Poland: an overview

The Polish industrial relations system has been described in terms of an “imperfect pluralism” (Kozek 2003: 39) or “illusory corporatism” (Ost 2000: 503). Its main features include: (1) low trade union density (11% in 2015, cf. Feliksiak 2015) and low employer organization rate (around 20%, cf. EC 2015); (2) weakly developed tripartite institutions of social dialogue and (with some exceptions) equally limited leverage of trade unions on policy-making; (3) the limited relevance of sector-level collective bargaining and the dominance of company-level collective bargaining, as well as a low collective bargaining coverage (around 15-25%); (4) “competitive pluralism” (Gardawski 2003), which translates into trade union fragmentation and inter-union rivalry.

In the 1990s, as a result of restructuring and privatization, unions faced problems when it came to defining their place in the new political, economic and social environment and to dealing with the expansion of workers’ individualistic life strategies, leading to the quick loss of union membership and the dwindling of organizational resources (Crowley and Ost 2001, Gardawski et al. 2012). In coping with their organizational problems in such a hostile environment, at the turn of millennium trade unions

began to develop more proactive strategies, including organizing campaigns in new privately owned companies and the provision of better services to their members. Even so, the attempt at expanding to the private sector has not brought spectacular results. According to survey data, in 2014 trade unions were present in 70% of public sector firms as compared to just 16% of entirely private companies in the country (Feliksiak 2014), of which majority tended to be large firms.

In the wake of 2008+ economic slowdown, Polish trade union strategies became more innovative in that they started addressing new problems and developing new tools for actions (Kahancová 2015; Maciejewska and Mrozowicki 2016). More emphasis was placed on the mobilization of workers in various citizens' initiatives outside the workplace (e.g. the referendum campaigns against retirement age reforms and for minimum wage increases organized by NSZZ Solidarność), international litigation procedures (filing cases against the national labor legislation at the ILO and the European Commission) and street-level mobilization against the expansion of precarious (so-called "junk") contracts, the flexibilization of working time, and the lack of social dialogue with the Civic Platform - Polish People's Party coalition government. Importantly, the main national trade union confederations (the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions [OPZZ], the Trade Unions Forum [FZZ] and NSZZ Solidarność) became more prone to cooperate, which has been interpreted as a possible sign of slow and not yet completed overcoming historical inter-union rivalry (Gardawski et al. 2012)¹.

The drivers of union innovation can be linked to the crisis of national-level social dialogue after 2009 and the weakness of sectoral level collective bargaining, which left little space for unions to operate within the confines of traditional instruments and tactics. The presidential and parliamentary elections of 2015 gave additional public exposure to trade unions' positions and demands. Among the most recent tangible results of the national-level union actions we find (1) changes in the Labor Code aimed at reducing the maximum duration of temporary employment (2015); (2) the establishment of the Social Dialogue Council (SDC) (2015) at the national level, replacing the Tripartite Commission for Social and Economic Affairs and obtaining broader, legislative prerogatives; (3) changes in the Public Procurement Act (2014) opening the possibility of using social clauses in public procurement tendering; (4) the proposed changes to the Trade Union Act (2016), which will open the possibility to unionize workers with civil-law (non-Labor Code) contracts and those who are self-employed, is at the time of writing (June 2016) being discussed in the SDC (cf. Maciejewska and Mrozowicki 2016).

2.2. Industrial relations and trade union actions in the automotive sector

While national-level union actions have proven successful to some extent, existing research (Glassner 2013; Kahancová 2015; Maciejewska and Mrozowicki 2016; Mrozowicki 2014) suggests that trade union strategies in the period of economic slowdown varied across the sectors. In attempting to account for such variations, a reference can be made to different types of working-class power (Silver 2003). In sectors in which workers possessed considerable structural power (based on their position and role within the economic system, sector and workplace) and associational power (measured, inter-alia, by trade union density and organizational resources of unions), trade union influence in counteracting the precarization of employment proved to be greater (Maciejewska and Mrozowicki 2016). Consequently,

1 Competitive pluralism, even if weakened in the case of the major national trade unions, is still very much present in the case of the relationships between the largest unions (such as NSZZ Solidarność, OPZZ or FZZ) and smaller (and often more radical) trade unions (such as the Free Trade Union August '80 and the All-Poland Trade Unions' Workers' Initiative) which are not the part of the Social Dialogue Council.

collectively bargained anti-crisis solutions were more often observed in these sectors than in the ones in which the working-class held less advantageous positions (cf. Glassner 2013: 167). The analysis in this paper makes it possible to expose the mechanisms behind this development by looking at the forms and consequences of union strategies at the company and industry level in the automotive sector. Arguably, the automotive sector represents an example of a relatively well-unionized industry, in which workers likewise possess considerable structural power based on their skills, on the properties of labor process and on the economic importance of the sector for the national economy.

As summarized by Pavlínek (2015: 209), “the automotive industry was at the forefront of [the] FDI-driven development strategy in which foreign TNCs took over the CEE automotive industry through heavy capital investment, restructuring it and incorporating it into European and global production networks in the 1990s and 2000s”. Bernaciak and Ščepanović (2010: 128) demonstrated that initial foreign investments were predominantly oriented to domestic markets and the production of cheap, small cars, “with relatively low local content and functionally quite separate from the rest of the European production networks”. The growing integration of the Visegrad countries in the EU, the removal of trade barriers and the search for new sources of competitiveness by Western companies led to the upgrading of CEE production locations and their greater integration into global production networks. CEE countries specialize in small cars and components production and have over time moved to higher value-added segments (Bernaciak and Ščepanović 2010: 132). The great majority of production is export-oriented, leading to a high degree of dependency on the state of key foreign markets.

According to the most recent available data, the automotive sector in Poland employed some 411 thousand people in 2014, including 173.4 thousand in production (the section “manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers”) and 237,6 in sales and services (the section “wholesale and retail trade and repair of motor vehicles and motorcycle”) (RSP GUS 2016). The core producers of passenger cars and engines include GM/Opel, Fiat, VW, Toyota and ISUZU. However, the majority of sectoral employment is comprised by those working in the components manufacturing (76% in 2014). While employment in the vehicles assembly segment declined between 2008 and 2014 by 13.1%, it grew in the components segment by 21% (except for a temporary decline in 2009). A similar trend can be observed if we look at production value, which for the whole sector increased by almost 13%, mostly as a result of growth in the components segment, as it declined by some 15% for vehicle assembly. A recovery observed since 2013 was mostly due to the new investments and the improved situation on export markets (PZPM 2015).

Table 1: Employment, wages and production in the automotive industry in Poland

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
1. Employment (1000)	156.1	136	146.8	152.8	155.8	164.3	173.4
2. Average gross wages (PLN)	3124.33	3253.90	3529.88	3741.32	3874.17	4132.60	4306.96
3. Average gross wages (EUR)	889.59	751.89	883.64	907.95	925.79	984.53	1029.31
4. National /sectoral wage ratio	106%	105%	109%	110%	110%	113%	114 %
5. Production value (MN EUR)	24361.7	19674.0	23670.0	26668.8	25034.5	26424.6	27510.6

Source: (1-4): RSP GUS 2016 (Section “Manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers”), (5) Eurostat Structural Business Statistics (Nace Rev 2. C29).

Note: The wages were converted into Euro according to average exchange rate for each year calculated on the basis of the data provided by the European Central Bank.

The automotive sector worldwide is an example of an uneven unionization, with relatively strong workers' organizations in the core automotive plants and usually weaker or absent organization in supplier firms, except for those that involve skill- and capital intensive labor processes. It is very difficult to make a precise assessment of trade union density in the automotive sector in Poland, but it can be suggested that it might be between 10 and 15% of the total workforce². According to the leader of the National Automotive Industry Section (NAIS) of NSZZ Solidarność, three employers' organizations³ are unsupportive of sectoral level social dialogue and they refuse to negotiate any kind of industry-wide collective agreement. This is in contrast with the situation in the mid-1990s, when negotiations were held for a collective agreement applying to entire automotive sector, which lasted until the early 2000s. With the withdrawal of Fiat from negotiations and the practical dissolution of the employer organization that led them, the possibility of signing another agreement was rendered remote.

Given the favorable economic situation of the sector during the pre-crisis period, in 2007 the Regional Automotive Section of Śląsko-Dąbrowski Region of NSZZ Solidarność managed to mobilize seven out of 14 companies (suppliers and assemblers), among them GMMP Opel and Fiat, to demand a common wage increase of 1000 PLN (approx. 250 EUR) for the entire automotive sector in the region, better overtime payments, lower production norms for night shifts, greater supplements to the basic wage, and entitlement to health leaves after a shorter period in employment (Towalski 2007). The conditions facilitating such an action included the Section's new, proactive leadership (made up of young union leaders from multinational companies), labor shortages in the sector caused by migration abroad after the EU enlargement, and relatively good economic results in 2005-07. The Regional Section was able to put together a common narrative and to build up tension by threatening to organize strikes in the automotive sector in Silesia. This notwithstanding, it had neither partners, since employer organizations ignored its actions, nor power to run collective bargaining at the supra-company level. Consequently, the company-level union organizations ended up negotiating pay raises on their own, with some tangible achievements being made at Fiat and GMMP Opel. Economic slowdown in 2008 simply added to the factors deterring a possible regional consolidation of union demands.

More generally speaking, the NAIS NSZZ "Solidarność", as the only sectoral level organization covering the automotive industry, functions as a platform for sharing good practices and information concerning wages, health and safety, and employment practices. Other trade unions active in the sector, such as the Metalworkers Trade Union Federation of OPZZ or the Free Trade Union August '80 (WZZ Sierpień '80), do not have special branches for the automotive industry. NSZZ Solidarność leaders in the sector are fully aware of the limits of the company-centered approach. For instance, the Regional Section of Automotive Industry of NSZZ Solidarność in Upper Silesia has tried to support commissions in smaller companies, volunteering as experts and offering their support during protests. Even if sectoral trade union leaders recognize the need to reduce the differences in earnings and working conditions between automotive parts supplies and the automotive assembly plants, they also note that it is impossible to completely eliminate them since their persistence is part and parcel of MNCs' business strategies.

2 There were around 14,000 members in the National Automotive Industry Section (NAIS) of NSZZ Solidarność. In the case of the Metalworkers Trade Union Federation of OPZZ, only the aggregated membership for the whole metal sector is known (18,950 in 2009). The Free Trade Union August '80 is strong only in the FCA, in which it might have 2000 to 3000 members, but its total membership in the sector is unknown. Other trade unions are much weaker. In this context, sectoral union density is rather closer to 10-15%.

3 The Polish Automotive Industry Association (Polski Związek Przemysłu Motoryzacyjnego), the Polish Association of the Private Employers of the Automotive and Tractor Industries (Polski Związek Pracodawców Prywatnych Przemysłu Motoryzacyjnego i Ciągnikowego) and the Automotive Industry Employers' Association (Związek Pracodawców Motoryzacji).

In such a situation and especially when it comes to larger MNCs, the company level remains a central reference point for trade union activities that are coordinated in a rather informal way by branch union structures. In large automotive companies, the combination of locality-based organizing (within inter-company union structures⁴), service provision and (rather occasional) militancy brought “tangible pay increases and helped to secure favorable fringe benefits for workers” (Mrozowicki 2014: 310) before the crisis. There were also instances of including temporary agency workers in the NSZZ Solidarność inter-company-level structures in large plants in the automotive sector, such as GM Opel or Volkswagen Poland. In Volkswagen Poland in Poznań, negotiating and signing the “Charter on temporary work in the Volkswagen corporation” (2012) by the World Works Council of VW, guaranteed favorable conditions for temporary agency workers: there can be no more than 5% temporary agency workers in the total workforce, they must have the same earnings (wage and bonuses) and they have to be treated in the same way as permanent workers. The situation proved much more difficult in some smaller, labor-intensive supplier companies in which trade unions were usually more focused on safeguarding the minimum regulations of the Labor Code (Mrozowicki 2014: 311).

The onset of the crisis brought a significant challenge to established union strategies. It questioned, among other things, the earlier emerging patterns of solidarity of core, unionized workers with temporary agency workers, who were the first to be laid off⁵. It also contributed to greater competition between East European and West European locations of some multinational companies that aimed to further reduce the costs of production (Pernicka et al. 2015). In the context of highly decentralized collective bargaining combined with growing competitive pressure, the activities of trade unions in the larger automotive and engine plants are crucial for the employment conditions and wages in supplier companies both in terms of informal benchmarking and the activities of inter-company union organizations. In this respect, an in-depth study of the trade union strategies in Fiat offers the chance to better understand the opportunities and limitations of company-centered trade union approaches.

3. THE CASE OF FIAT: THE LOCAL CONTEXT AND COMPANY HISTORY IN POLAND

The Fiat plant in Tychy is part of the Fiat Chrysler Automobiles Group Poland. The plant is located in Upper Silesia, known for being the most industrialized region in Poland, mostly due to its black coal mining and steelworks industry. Although the presence of Fiat in Upper Silesia dates back to the 1970s, the history of the Italian company in Poland is much longer (PDF 2008), going as far back as 1920, when a “Polish Fiat” joint venture was launched. Following the destruction of the plant during the war and the difficult political context caused by postwar transformations, the cooperation was re-established only in 1965 for production of the Italian-licensed Fiat 125p in Warsaw, starting with 1967, and of the Polonez model, starting with 1978.

4 Inter-company union organization (Międzyzakładowa organizacja związkowa, MOZ) can be established by workers employed by more than one employer. It was initially used mostly as an instrument of unions’ integration following restructuring, privatization and fragmentation of state-owned companies. However, trade unions in the automotive sector became increasingly experimental when it came to MOZ. For instance, the Free Trade Union August’ 80 in Fiat covered by its MOZ a new union organization at Tesco in the late 2000s, in order to reinforce the bargaining power of the latter.

5 In total, some 450 TWA employees lost their jobs in the period of 2010-12 in GM Opel, some 300 at VW Poznań and 450 at Fiat – to give just couple of examples. Union leaders interviewed agreed that the loss of TWAs often helped to save permanent jobs.

In 1971, Fiat signed the agreement with Polish government to start the production in Bielsko-Biała, Upper Silesia, followed in 1975 by the construction of a new plant in Tychy. Apart from these two plants, the newly created FSM (the Small Cars Plant) industrial group associated 10 components producers, a transport company as well as a design and a R&D center. The costs of licenses, machinery and equipment purchased in Italy were covered by the export of components and assembled cars to the Western markets, marking the beginning of mass export-oriented automotive production in Poland. The production of the Fiat 126p started in 1975 and proved to be successful⁶. By the end of 1980s, the FSM employed over 24 000 people. In August 1980, both the Bielsko-Biała plant and the Tychy one went on strike in solidarity with workers on the coast, leading to the emergence of strong NSZZ Solidarność structures in the FSM.

A new phase of the history of the FSM began with the regime change of 1989. In 1990, the FSM was transformed into a joint-stock company, paving the way towards its privatization. Western investors in the automotive industry, including Fiat Auto S.p.A, were very much interested in expanding their operations to Eastern European markets because of the expected growth in consumer demand for cheap, small cars, the enforcement of trade restrictions for second-hand vehicles and generous state support for foreign manufacturers (Bernaciak and Šćepanović 2010: 128). In 1991, the negotiations between Fiat and the Polish government about the privatization of the FSM started. At the time, the company was heavily indebted (PDF 2008: 34). In the signed Memorandum of Understanding, Fiat Auto agreed to investments of USD 800 million. In 1992, the Fiat Auto S.p.A acquired 90% FSM shares for a very low price, with no guaranteed preferential shares for workers, and set out to establish three companies on the basis of the FSM assets: (1) Fiat Auto Poland SA (FAP, comprising of the Tychy and Bielsko-Biała plants), (2) Teksid Poland SA and (3) Magneti Marelli SA. All three companies became the first foundations for the operations of Fiat Group in Poland. As argued by Klimkowska (2015: 247), the terms of privatization were very favorable for Fiat: it received PLN 500 million income tax relief (until 1993), preferential terms when it came to car and components trading and limited sanctions for breaking privatization agreements. Fiat's decision to buy the FSM was directly related to cutting production costs by relocating production of profitable small car models (such as Cinquecento and Seicento) to Poland in which labor costs were lower.

The privatization agreement, drafted in Warsaw without consulting with the trade unions (except for two leaders, cf. Meardi 2000: 78), led to a massive workers' strike. In July 1992, 90% of workers in the Tychy plant left their workstations. Even so, the leaders of NSZZ Solidarność and the Metalworkers trade union (belonging to OPZZ) were reluctant to support the strike, which they regarded as contrary to the interests of workers and the company. In opposition to the two largest unions, workers in the Tychy plant decided en masse to continue their protest and to join a radical break away union, NSZZ Solidarność'80, which backed the strike action⁷. The main demands concerned a pay rise (up to 10% of the price of Cinquecento model), the granting of shares to employees, the preservation of the company's healthcare center and the laying off old management. After 56 days, the strike ended, with moderate success in terms of pay plus a promise of bringing back the workers fired during the action. As discussed below, the main outcome of the strike was twofold: (1) the signing of a company-level collective agreement in the next years; (2) the emergence of strong inter-union rivalry, in particular between the Free Trade Union August '80 (a radical breakaway from Solidarność '80 which involved some of the leaders of the 1992 strike) and NSZZ Solidarność.

6 It lasted until 2000 and reached over 3.3 million cars in the history of the model

7 In 1993, when the Free Trade Union August'80 broke away from NSZZ Solidarność '80, the whole company-level structure of Solidarność '80 joined August '80.

From 1993 to 2003, a large number of organizational and technological changes were introduced, which resulted in a significant boost in productivity. Based on the Italian experience, the company changed its structure into a “network company” (PDF 2008: 36). In 1995-1996, lean production was implemented. It was labelled the “Efficient Factory” model and included, inter alia, workers’ self-certification, statistical process control, six sigma and other tools (FCA Poland 2015: 18-19). Initial changes were introduced by the new, Italian management which afterwards was gradually replaced by the Polish managers. Following the privatization, 160 managerial positions were filled by Italians; in the 1999 their number was decreased to a dozen or so and in the mid-2000s to “couple of managers” (PDF 2008: 35). Other changes included workers’ retraining, recruitment of young workers and widening salary differentials (Meardi 2000: 79). The workforce in the Fiat Group was reduced from around 27,000 employees for FSM before the privatization to 13,749 workers for the Fiat Group in 2008. Fiat focused on its core business in Tychy and Bielsko-Biała, while other activities were outsourced. Together with the substantial reduction of the workforce and the aforementioned organizational changes, this contributed to very sharp increase in the number of cars produced per one worker — from 16.3 in 1993 to 89 in 2006 (PDF 2008: 37). In 2000, the Bielsko-Biała plant ceased producing cars and the whole of production was restricted to Tychy.

Following the sharp decline of local sales in Poland in the early 2000s, along with the liberalizing the trade in second-hand cars, the majority of the FAP production (97% in 2010) became export-oriented. This was followed by further development of quality-control systems. The location of the Panda II (in 2003) and Fiat 500 (in 2007) models in the FAP Tychy was accompanied by EUR 870 million investments in new technologies (FCA Poland 2015: 12). In 2007, the Tychy plant received the Bronze Level certification of the World Class Manufacturing (WCM) system, in 2009 – the Silver Level and in 2013, the Gold Level of the WCM⁸.

Notwithstanding the high quality of the cars produced and no matter the increasing productivity, the Tychy plant was affected by the declining global market share of Fiat Auto S.p.A. The 2008+ global economic crisis hit the Tychy plant relatively late, due to the budget character of the cars produced here, in particular the successful second generation Panda model that began production in 2003. However, the crisis did ultimately lead to the halting of development of the Tychy plant. Following the implementation of the “Fabbrica Italia” project, as a result of the agreement between Italian government and Fiat, in 2011 the production of the new (third generation) Panda was planned to happen in the Italian site of Pomigliano d’Arco, leaving the Tychy plant with other, less profitable models (Fiat 500, Abarth 500, Lancia Ypsilon and Ford Ka) and with redundancies of 1,450 workers. As a result, production has decreased from about 605,797 cars in the peak year of 2009 to around 295,700 cars in 2013. It grew again in 2014 to 313,933 and around 330,000 cars in 2015 (FCA Poland 2015: 15). However, in May 2016 the production of Ford Ka ended which is likely to again lower the production volume.

In 2014, the merger of the Fiat Group with Chrysler Automobiles took place and as of 2015 the Fiat Group Automobiles in Poland has changed its name to Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) Group Poland. According to official sources (the FCA Poland website), the FCA Group Poland employed 9,400 people in 2014. Beside the core car assembly plant in Tychy (thereinafter, FCA Poland, formerly FAP, with 3,300 employees), the Group comprises 15 other companies and two joint ventures. The most

8 In the same year, the first Italian plant – in Melfi – receive WCM Silver level too, which clearly points to the high assessment of the Tychy plant.

important FCA Group plants are Magneti Marelli (five plants producing lighting, exhaust systems, suspension systems, fuel systems, dashboards and bumpers — with a total of 2850 employees), FCA Powertrain Poland in Bielsko Biała (engine producer, with 1100 employees), Teksid Iron Poland (iron casts, with 500 employees) and Comau (maintenance, with over 200 employees).

4. THE CASE STUDY: THE FAP/FCA PLANT IN TYCHY

In order to understand the situation of trade unions the FCA group in Poland, we will focus on the main assembly plant in Tychy functioning in 1992-2014 under the name Fiat Auto Poland (FAP) and afterwards as the Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) Poland. As repeatedly emphasized by trade union leaders, the situation in the Tychy plant has a crucial importance for collective bargaining in other companies in the group. The plant has also been the most important site for workers' informal protests and trade union mobilization, which makes it a good case to study the role of workers' collective agency in shaping trade union strategies.

4.1. The development of the plant-level industrial relations (1992-2010)

Starting the discussion of the case from the presentation of the plant-level industrial relations is justified as the latter directly influence trade union strategies. The time frame chosen for the presentation of their development is from 1992 (the moment of privatization) till 2010, when the recent global economic crisis started to affect the production and employment levels in the FAP. As noted by Meardi (2000: 79), “the strike of 1992 left as a legacy agitated and adversarial workplace industrial relations, with numerous conflicts not only between employer and unions but also among and within unions”. By contrast, in 2004, the FAP manager responsible for industrial relations characterized industrial relations in the company as increasingly consensual in comparison to the period after privatization, when high workers' expectations and unionists' “experiences derived from the past economic-political period” led to unrealistic claims and protests (Piętka 2004: 125). The director described the firm's industrial relations as being based on “freedom of opinion and systematic exchange of information” (Piętka 2004: 126). The company created a special position for a person “responsible for trade unions” to deal with industrial relations at the shop floor. In the 1990s, the company also invested in joint trainings of HR managers and trade unionists (Meardi 2000: 80), which resembled HR strategies adopted in other foreign companies in order to overcome the allegedly negative impact of socialist legacies (Dunn 2004).

Following a lengthy process of collective bargaining, which addressed some of the issues voiced during the 1992 strike and the subsequent labor disputes, a plant-level collective agreement was signed in 1996 in the Fiat Auto Poland. It was concluded for open-ended period and it is still in force in the FCA Poland (i.e. in the Tychy plant). According to our informants from the Free Trade Union August '80 and Metalworkers OPZZ, the collective agreement in the FAP was only slightly modified since its signing except for the annexes with the levels of wages and salaries which are negotiated every year. As suggested by the Metalworkers OPZZ representative, the agreement included many favorable regulations stipulated in the (already non-existent) supra-company collective agreement for the electro-mechanic industry from the 1980s. For instance, employees have free access to the company healthcare

and sport centers. The agreement guarantees that workers get a holiday bonus (50% of monthly wage), cheap summer camps, generous Christmas gifts for children, and subsidized transport to and from work. It also regulates a range of extra salary bonuses (monthly and annual bonuses, seniority bonuses, a fixed bonus for work in the FSM in the past and even a “coal equivalent”⁹, as well as individual efficiency bonuses linked to individual performance. The agreement also introduced favorable payment for work on Saturdays¹⁰. As already mentioned, the agreement covers workers from the Tychy FCA plant. The rest of companies belonging to the FCA Group in Poland, such as for instance Magneti Marelli Poland or FCA Powertrain Poland, have their own collective agreements or pay regulations, but they usually mirror the regulations of the FAP/FCA Poland (the Tychy plant).

The period between 1996 and the mid-2000s can be characterized by the consolidation of the fragmented model of the plant-level industrial relations based on the emergent conflicts between NSZZ Solidarność and other trade unions. As compared to the pre-1996 and post- 2005, periods the intensity of union-management conflicts was rather low. Even though wage increases were negotiated by unions in 2000 (6-7,5%), 2003 (3%) and 2004 (3%), no major pay disputes were noted in the press reports on Fiat between 1996 and 2005. On the one hand, it could reflect relatively consensual relations between unions and management at this time. On the other hand, it can also be interpreted as a sign of the lack of mobilizing capacities of unions in the context of high unemployment, declining demand for new cars in early 2000s (resulting in the loss of 1000 jobs in FAP in 2001) and emergent union fragmentation.

Since the mid-1990s, there are seven trade unions in the company¹¹, the largest of them being NSZZ Solidarność, Free Trade Union August '80 (20 companies) and NSZZ of Employees — the Intercompany Organization of the FCA and Affiliated Companies (hereafter, Metalworkers OPZZ)¹². Following privatization, all major trade unions established inter-company union committees allowing them to cover all former FSM companies and the newly established FAP/FCA Group firms. In the late 1990s, Meardi (2000: 80) reported a trade union density of 50% in the Tychy plant. In late 2000s and at the present moment it is closer to 30-35% and, as NSZZ Solidarność representative argued, it reflects management attempts at preventing the increase of union density beyond certain threshold¹³.

While August '80 and Metalworkers OPZZ leaders admit to have rather good relations with each other and the management, the relations between NSZZ Solidarność, management and other unions are rather adversarial. The fragmentation of trade unionism in the FAP has its roots in the inter-union conflicts following the 1992 strike and in the radicalization of NSZZ Solidarność in the plant as a result of the change of its leader in 2002. Both August '80, Metalworkers and NSZZ Solidarność are led by blue collar workers, but the leader of Solidarność is female and younger. All of them have acted as union leaders for a long time: the leader of the August 80 since 1991, the Metalworkers leader since 1987 and the Solidarność leader since 2002. It seems that the biggest problem in trade union activism is the long-standing competition between trade unions themselves, which was visible both in the articles

9 Fixed amount of money originally designed to pay for coal in the winter, known from the mining sector.

10 It is 120% of the wage once a worker has more than 80 hours of overtime in a given reference period.

11 There is an eighth trade union, which is very small and is practically inactive.

12 Other unions are Metalworkers Trade Union, Engineers and Technicians Trade Union, Metalworkers Trade Union of Central Services and Popieluszko Priest Christian Trade Unions.

13 Trade unionists' interviewed reported a practice of “removing” people from the unions by managers who were said to encourage union members to leave the unions that engaged in conflict with the management. Reportedly, this affected both August '80 (in 2010) and NSZZ Solidarność (in 2007). The leader of NSZZ Solidarność also referred to the case of offensive, anonymous leaflets that started to be distributed in the plant in 2015, whose content concerned her personal and family life.

published on their websites and during the interviews. The competitive union pluralism (Gardawski 2003) that characterizes the company is expressed in union leaders blaming each other for being unable to cooperate, for being too or not radical enough.

Since 2002, when the current NSZZ Solidarność leader was elected, the union has undertaken attempts aimed at increasing its membership which further intensified inter-union competition for a limited pool of workers. The tools used included the cyclic mobilization of workers, increasing the number of union representatives in the departments of the plants belonging to the Fiat Group, improving communication and democratizing decision-making, and formulating more proactive pay demands. Greater union assertiveness was enabled not only by renewed leadership, but also by growing sales of the FAP since 2003. Following the decline in production in the Tychy plant first from 344,000 cars in 1999 to 159,000 cars in 2002, the output began to increase until 2009 when it reached its historical record (606,000 cars). In addition, trade union bargaining power grew thanks to decreasing unemployment in 2005-2008 as a result of the improving economic situation in the country and migration abroad following Poland's accession to the European Union.

In the favorable economic context, NSZZ Solidarność engaged in the series of pay disputes in 2005-2010 which helped to increase not only wages, but also union membership: from 600 of NSZZ Solidarność members in the FAP in 1998 to 1,800 in 2010. During the collective bargaining rounds NSZZ Solidarność attempted to outbid pay demands of other unions which at the end resulted in higher than initially proposed wage increases. In 2005-10, the minimum wage at FAP rose by around 100% (Mrozowski 2014). In 2005, negotiated pay increases reached on average 110 – 150 PLN per month (27=37 EUR). In 2006, wage rises stayed at the level of 2-3%. According to the Fiat's Annual Reports, they were "more substantial" in 2007, but no exact data is available. After protracted negotiations, in 2008 an agreement concerning the first equal pay rise in FAP history was reached. Employees received 500 PLN (120 EUR) and an additional 50 PLN (12 EUR) for each working Saturday. Following protest actions in 2009, another pay rise was negotiated in early 2010: a 300 PLN (75 EUR) increase in the basic salary for all employees and a 1,900 PLN (475 EUR) annual bonus, paid in three instalments and dependent upon meeting production plan objectives. These were also granted in other companies of the Fiat Group.

While the leader of NSZZ Solidarność sees the successes in pay negotiation as the result of union militancy, the leaders of August '80 and Metalowcy consider them the effects of their bargaining skills. The president of NSZZ Solidarność is described by the leaders of the two other unions as too combative, unable to cooperate and not ready to support other unions. According to the leader of NSZZ Solidarność, both August '80 and Metalworkers have pro-management positions. The conflicts between unions, more precisely between NSZZ Solidarność and the others, are easily instrumentalized by the plant management and make any negotiations harder. An active works council does not exist because the unionists were not able to reach any agreement. No leader with whom we spoke can imagine a change in this situation and cooperation between unions. However, the relations between August '80 and NSZZ Solidarność had their ups and downs and the instances of trade unions' joint actions are possible to find. Most recently, in 2011, both NSZZ Solidarność and August '80 did not sign an agreement on pay rises in 2011 and registered (separately) a collective dispute. Interestingly, however, even though both unions had similar postulates, in their messages on the websites they emphasized their different stances. The situation changed again in 2013 (quite likely as a result of management pressure on August '80) and currently August '80 is more prone to cooperate both with Metalworkers and with the plant management.

As a result of inter-union rivalry, collective bargaining in the FAP/FCA Poland is very difficult. Trade union attempts to formally start collective disputes are challenged by the management, who sees them as illegal insofar as all the unions who signed the currently binding collective agreement (dating back to 1996) do not join. According to the Polish law, collective disputes over issues regulated by a collective agreement are not possible as long as the agreement is in force. Instead, it is required that all signatory parties (including all trade unions in the firm) renegotiate the regulations of collective agreement. As reported in the press¹⁴, the conflict over the right to start collective dispute by an individual union in Fiat dates back to 2007. The management argues that all trade unions would need to renegotiate the regulations of collective agreement rather than individually start collective dispute. However, due to inter-union conflicts, such a common stance proved to be difficult to reach.

Most recently, in 2011, the Fiat management questioned the legality of a collective disputes in the FAP led by August '80 (in 2011) and NSZZ Solidarność (in 2011-2012 and 2014-2015). In response, NSZZ Solidarność made the case in the court to confirm the legality of the dispute. However, the case drags on and the court's verdicts so far are unfavorable for unions¹⁵. Since according to Polish law the collective dispute is a necessary first step in initiating a strike (when other measures, such as mediation, fail), the possibility of organizing a legally recognized strike action within company premises in Fiat has become very limited. As a result, conflicts in the time of the recent crisis have been pushed outside factory gates and have taken on the forms of public demonstrations and gatherings. In the next section, we review the emergent forms of collective bargaining and workers' protests in relation to the evolution of employment, working time and wages at Fiat in 2010-16.

4.2. Employment, working time and wages: collective bargaining in a time of crisis

In 2016, the Tychy plant employed around 3,300 workers. During the previous five years, employment has been decreasing. While in 2008-10 the number of employees grew from 3,700 in 2007 to 6,100 in 2010, 2011 marked the beginning of a decline, down to around 3,400 in 2013 and 3,300 in 2015. As a result, the main challenge for trade unions was to keep wage growth stable while counteracting mass redundancies resulting from corporate restructuring and the loss of the Panda III model in favor of the Italian plant in Pomigliano d'Arco. In 2011, some workers with temporary contracts were transferred to the temporary work agency that had been used by Fiat since the growth years of the second half of 2000s. In the same year, the management announced that the company will no longer employ 450 temporary workers. This was due to the stopping of production for the Panda model in Tychy and the decreasing demand on European markets. Even more dismissals took place during the second half of 2012. In the course of tough negotiations between management and trade unions representatives over the dismissals, conditions for voluntary resignations and the level of redundancy payments were agreed upon, but they concerned permanent workers only.

In total, between 2012 and April 2013 almost 1,900 workers left FAP, most of which did so during the first quarter of 2013. Trade unions negotiated relatively high gratuities dependent on seniority: from

14 See: <http://www.tygodniksolidarnosc.com/pl/10683/57/c/wyzysk-pracownikow-fiata.html> (accessed on 20 July 2016)

15 As stated in the interview with the leader of NSZZ Solidarność (see press report quoted in footnote 14), „the criminal court stated that if the company questions the existence of collective dispute, the court is incapable to decide if there is the dispute or not”. In our own interview, the same leader said that the civil court stated that there is no collective dispute. The appeal made by the union led to the verdict of the Appeal Court that there is the collective dispute in the FAP, but NSZZ Solidarność cannot demand in it collective pay raises as they are regulated by the collective agreement.

nine-months' pay in case of those with up to five years' seniority through 10-months pay for workers with at least five years seniority raising up to 18-months' pay for a small minority of workers with at least 40 years of seniority. Even though the layoff criteria referred to workers' assessment (those with lower grades being at the top of the list), trade unions managed to successfully protect single parents and gave priority to voluntary resignations¹⁶. August '80 and Metalworkers also took part in discussions on support measures for laid off workers with local employment office in Tychy, co-financed by the Polish government and by EU funding¹⁷. However, only a few months after the dismissals, remaining employees were expected to work every Saturday and the plant started to hire people through temporary working agreements (TWAs). At the time of our research, there were about 30 people employed via TWA. Apart from these, the great majority of employees have open-ended work contracts, which is not very common in Poland nowadays. This is also a tangible result of trade union pressure (since 2007) to limit the scope of fixed term contracts in the company.

Apart from the question of numerical flexibility to be achieved through the use of TWAs and layoffs, collective bargaining and conflicts in the plant also concerned the flexibilization of working time. The reference period for calculating working time in the Tychy plant is three months¹⁸. In the Polish Labor Code, a standard reference period for calculating working time is four months, thus the solution in Tychy is more advantageous to workers. In the recent years, the management's attempts to extend the reference period to 12 months became a standard feature of pay negotiations, this being favored by the anti-crisis legislation adopted in 2009-11 and by the 2013 changes in the Labor Code. The management, in both the Tychy plant and the Powertrain plant in Bielsko-Biała, offered wage increases in exchange for working time flexibilization, but the trade unions systematically opposed to such ideas fearing that workers would lose overtime payments. In 2011-12, August '80 opposed the introduction of more flexible working time arrangements in the Tychy plant while other unions declared their willingness to sign the agreement. The situation subsequently changed and, in 2014-15, Solidarność refused to support management proposals and pointed to the fact that the FCA management intends to lower workers' wages and flexibilize working conditions in other companies of the Group. Expectedly, Solidarność's disapproval met with criticism from the other unions and with accusations of acting against workers' economic interests.

In an increasingly difficult economic context, wage negotiations at FCA Poland became more and more strenuous. In the previous section, we have mentioned real achievements of unions in the wage negotiations in 2005-2010. 2010 was the last year in which negotiations were successful. Subsequently, August '80 demanded a pay raise in 2011 and Solidarność tried to get equal pay increases for several years in a row (2011-15) but the management still made these conditional on unions' agreement on the extension of the reference period for calculating working time. In response, NSZZ Solidarność and August '80 engaged in various forms of protests (table 2).

16 While the president of Solidarność emphasized the stressful situation in the company, which made employees increasingly willing to leave, the presidents of August '80 and Metalworkers focused on the financial aspects and advantageous redundancy payments.

17 At Fiat, the cooperation between August '80 and Metalworkers is usually quite solid. As already mentioned, the main line of conflict is between NSZZ Solidarność and all other trade unions.

18 Three months were indicated by the trade union leaders interviewed. In the collective agreement, 16 weeks (four months) for the four-shift system work organization is mentioned. The reference period is a time bracket used to plan and account for the work of an employee upon the finishing of which overtime hours can be counted.

Table 2. The major forms of workers’ protest at the FAP/FCA Poland – Tychy (2010-2016)

Year and month	Type	Organizer	Themes/demands
June 2010	Protest in the front of the plant entrance	NSZZ Solidarność	Against an unfairly low efficiency bonus for 2009
January 2011	Picket in front of Italian Embassy in Warsaw	August '80	Disagreement with company policies and support for the Italian trade union FIOM
April 2011	Picket in front of the manager’s house	August '80	Against the “removal” of trade union members
February 2012	Protest in front of the main plant entrance	NSZZ Solidarność	Against violating social dialogue norms and ignoring the Polish law by the FIAT management (not acknowledging of a collective dispute)
May 2012	Protest rally in the front of main plant entrance	NSZZ Solidarność	Against disregarding workers’ rights/anti-union campaign and for respect of social dialogue Pay rise demands
May-June 2012	Protest rallies in the front of main plant entrance	NSZZ Solidarność	Against disregarding workers’ rights, discrimination and unjustified individual dismissals
February-March 2015	Strike threat Protest-strike action: 1) Red ribbon protest 2) Go-slow action 3) Pickets organized in front of main entrance to the plant 4) Planned strike action (suspended)	NSZZ Solidarność	Pay rise demands
May 2015	Blockade of a national road Planned general strike in June (suspended ¹⁹)	NSZZ Solidarność	Protest against delays in pay rise negotiations and the management’s disrespect for social dialogue

Source: Authors’ research based on interview and media analysis.

Due to aforementioned difficulties to get the legality of collective disputes recognized by the courts, there were no proper strikes in the plant and most actions took place outside the gates of the plant. The Metalworkers union did not engage in protest action at the Tychy plant. Because of inter-union rivalry, the protests were organized by individual trade unions and the most of them were led by NSZZ Solidarność. While the latter trade union chose to organize protests in front of the Fiat plant, August '80 decided for other locations. Some actions involved the use of various instruments such as “red ribbons” pinned to work clothes in showing solidarity, or go-slow actions. All protest actions enjoyed coverage in the local and national mass media. On top of these trade union-led actions, an informal workers’ protest took place in 2011, when unknown employees scratched and damaged about 200-300 cars during a night shift — an event interpreted as a reaction to the unmet expectations of wage increases²⁰.

19 General strike was suspended because the management proposed new negotiations. Besides, the collective dispute was not recognized as legal and strike could lead to negative consequences for the strikers.

20 See: <http://chorzow.naszemiasto.pl/artukul/sabotaz-w-tyskim-facie-uszkodzili-300-aut,774382,art,t,id,tm.html> (accessed on 18 April 2016). The perpetrators were never found.

In 2014, the average wage in the plant was around 5,600 PLN (1,338 EUR), including overtime pay and other bonuses²¹, which, according to the Metalworkers' leader, was similar to the average wage in other companies of the Group. Following the long negotiations and protests, the last pay agreement was signed in July 2015 by the majority of trade unions, introducing a “new performance-based compensation scheme for the period 2016-18, similar to the model implemented in Italy” (Annual Report 2016: 110). NSZZ Solidarność has not joined the agreement, as union leaders indicated that it precludes any further collective pay negotiations in 2016-18. The union has also demanded that all bonuses be included in the minimum guaranteed wage. Despite the opposition, the agreement did eventually come into force. It included a 130 PLN (approx. 30 EUR) monthly pay rise starting from July 2015 plus a one-off payment regularization for the first half of 2015 (780 PLN, approx. 190 EUR) for all employees. In addition, in all companies of the FCA Group, new types of performance-based bonuses were introduced for 2015-18: (1) a guaranteed bonus paid quarterly (about 130 PLN/30 EUR); (2) an annual bonus dependent upon FCA Poland plant performance and savings, which have to be verified and certified by an independent third party; (3) a bonus reflecting the EMEA (Europe, the Middle East and Africa) group performance and savings. The new rules reflect even greater integration of FCA Poland into a regional and global corporate wage regulation system. The effects remain to be seen, but it is clear that they limit the room for maneuver for plant-level unions in future pay negotiations.

4.3. Trade union strategies: the opportunities and limits of decentralized approaches

The case of the Fiat plant in Tychy illustrates multiple instances of trade unions' decentralized, locality-based strategies. It can be argued that the company-centered approach proved successful to some extent. In the process of a locality-based trade union development, trade unions in the FAP/FCA Poland set the wage and employment standards for other companies in the Fiat/FCA Group in Poland to follow. By doing so, large trade unions in the Tychy plant supplemented the activities of sectoral union federations, which had neither the resources nor the organizational capacity to support trade union development in the sector (Mrozowicki 2014). The unions' tangible achievements included systematic pay rises for the whole FCA Group following rather militant union strategies in the core company. In addition, the activity of at least one trade union in the plant (August '80) covered temporary agency workers, who enlisted as union members before the outburst of the crisis. This, however, has not protected them from redundancies. Other elements of trade union innovative practices include attempts to rejuvenate trade union committees consisting of trade union representatives in the plant's departments in order to facilitate generational change. In the case of NSZZ Solidarność, 50% of the inter-company union structure are people in their early 30s.

Nonetheless, the case of FAP/FCA Poland also points toward some shortcomings of trade union strategies pursued at the plant level. They include (1) difficulties in counteracting the precarization of work and the combined use of temporary work agencies and lay-offs; (2) the lack of significant pay rises in 2011-15 despite union protests — once a wage increase was finally granted in June 2015, it came at the cost of agreeing to freeze pay negotiations for 2016-18; (3) an inability to influence management's decision to relocate production back to Italy. The reasons of these failures concern both the factors

21 See: <http://www.polskieradio.pl/42/273/Artykul/1451791,Zwiazkowcy-brak-podwyzek-w-Fiacie-uderza-w-pracownikow-firm-kooperujacych> (accessed on 18 April 2016).

specific to plant-level industrial relations, such as conflict-oriented management, unions' inability to overcome historical trade union rivalry and limited transnational union cooperation, and supra-company factors reflecting the features of the industrial relations and political economy in Poland.

Two contextual factors seem to grant further support to the decentralization and “localization” of collective bargaining at Fiat. The first is the weakness of established channels of trade union influence at the international level. As compared to Volkswagen Poland and General Motors Manufacturing Poland (GMMP/Opel), in which permanent transnational cooperation between unions in the course of the crisis took place within European Works Councils (Pernicka et al. 2015), the interviews collected in Fiat document a quite different picture. The representatives of NSZZ Solidarność and Metalworkers OPZZ, who have held seats in the Fiat's European Works Council since 2005, stressed the limited role of the EWC in corporate decision-making, reflecting, in their views, both corporate policies and the weakness of Italian trade unions as compared to German ones. As suggested by the NSZZ Solidarność president, the plans concerning new car models are drawn up “at the high level”, with no trade union influence. The union leaders we interviewed in February 2016 had no information about the future car models to be produced after the end of the Ford Ka production, which was at the time expected to happen no later than April 2016. According to the August '80 president:

The trade union is now more company-centered and there is no cooperation within the corporation [...] because everyone looks at one's own yard [...]. As a trade union, we can do little because we do not have influence on strategic decisions. Once we went outside the Italian embassy but it does not change much because so what if I've handed in a letter. Neither Piechociński [Minister of the Economy during 2012-15] nor the new government helped because no one can force a business owner to invest. We could just write, and we did, that we were worried [...] What else can we do...will we strike? Then, they will tell us: if you want to strike we will not give you a new car.

The second factor, shared with VW, GM and sector-level unionists we interviewed, is their lack of belief in the abilities and will of the successive Polish governments to develop coherent industrial policies aimed at maintaining FDI and encouraging automotive companies to produce new car models in Poland. Given this well-founded skepticism concerning the state's capacity to impact companies' strategic investment decisions, the emphasis trade unions put on defending the interests of workers at the local level seems to be fully justified.

Nevertheless, some attempts are still made to influence national-level policy making. In 2010, the National Automotive Section of NSZZ Solidarność joined the debate on the state's industrial policy. It commissioned research and organized seminars, together with the Law and Justice party (the main oppositional party at the time). However, according to the NAIS NSZZ Solidarność president, no major political decisions followed. In 2014, by a decision of the Polish government, the area surrounding the Tychy plant was included into the Katowice Special Economic Zone in a hope to attract a new car model in exchange for tax exemptions. However, FAP representatives did not confirm any plans to invest in a new car model in reaction to this political decision²². During our interviews, the NSZZ Solidarność president in the plant was the only one to express belief that the new government led by the Law and Justice conservatives can contribute to a greater trade union influence on state industrial

22 See: <http://www.rp.pl/arttykul/1111342-Tyski-zaklad-Fiata-w-calosci-zostanie-wlaczony-do-katowickiej-SSE.html#ap-1> (accessed on 19 April 2016).

policies and encourage employers (including FCA Poland) to negotiate at a supra-company level. As of June 2016, however, no concrete political action has been undertaken in this regard.

More generally speaking, it can be suggested that the limited power and integration of sectoral level union structures combined with the reluctance (or, better said, the inability) of the Polish state to significantly influence multinational companies' decisions on wages and employment conditions contribute in reproducing a comparative advantage for the Polish subsidiaries of MNCs by maintaining relatively low labor costs and large margins of external flexibility in the automotive sector as a whole. As argued by Nölke and Vliegenthart (2009: 676), such a situation reflects the broader features of Eastern European "dependent market economies", in which multinational companies tend to avoid sectoral-level collective bargaining and opt for selective company-level solutions in order to keep their core workers fairly satisfied. However, it has to be kept in mind that the deficiencies of company-centered approaches at Fiat also reflect a range of local factors, including the strong inter-union rivalry at the plant level and limited leverage of trade unions on corporate decision-making processes at the international level.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has focused on the automotive sector in Poland in exploring the impact of the 2008+ economic crisis on trade union strategies. In particular, we discussed the developments at the car assembly plant in Tychy, which belongs to the Fiat Chrysler Group. We framed the case study by analyzing the basic features of industrial relations at the national and sectoral levels. Based on data collected between 2009 and 2016, we analyzed plant-level industrial relations and the influence of trade unions on employment practices, wages and working time. Our research confirms some of the earlier observations on crisis-related developments in the automotive companies, such as the rise of internal and external labor flexibility (Jürgens and Krzywdzinski 2010: 487) and the further decentralization of collective bargaining (Glassner 2013). Based on previous studies (Glassner 2013; Maciejewska and Mrozowicki 2016), we expected that the combination of workers' structural and associational power in the automotive sector would lead to the emergence of novel union strategies in addressing the problems that emerged during the economic downturn. At the same time, some degree of path-dependency in the evolution of union strategies could be anticipated.

Even though the study provided some evidence of the development of innovative union strategies at the plant level at Fiat, it also confirmed that "the crisis did not lead to any revival of sectoral collective bargaining" in the Polish automotive sector (Glassner 2013: 165). It can be argued that the lack of collectively bargained solutions at the sectoral level reflects more general features of the Polish industrial relations, including limited union density, lack of coordination and influence at the supra-company level and widespread unwillingness of employers in restricting their competitiveness and strategic leeway through comprehensive collective bargaining agreements. It also reflects the features of Poland's political economy, which is based on the "hands off" policy of the government in what concerns foreign investors in the automotive sector (Bernaciak and Šcepanović 2010: 142). Adding to these general factors, the specific case of FCA also shows that the crisis contributed to increasing regionalization of

wage and employment policies within the larger EMEA (Europe, the Middle East and Africa) group which left local unions, both at the company level and sectoral level, less space for collective bargaining.

In such a context, we explored both the real achievements and the significant shortcomings of company-centered trade union approaches in the case of the FCA plant in Tychy. On the negative side, the hopes to make use of the crisis as an opportunity to strengthen and unify trade union representation in the plant proved illusory. Trade union rivalry — the FCA being an extreme example of the “competitive pluralism” considered to be typical for Polish unionism (Gardawski 2003) — has not disappeared and has rather intensified in recent years, further undermining trade union bargaining power. In contrast to the situation observed at other companies, and in particular at Volkswagen Poland, where innovative use of company-level collective bargaining tools was made in order weather the crisis and minimize job loss, trade unions at Fiat were forced to go on the defensive in mitigating the negative effects of collective redundancies in 2013. The lack of trade union and state influence on corporate decisions at the international level, typical of dependent market economies and additionally reinforced by the plant-specific factors and politically driven choices to support Italian locations, contributed to the loss of a new car model to an Italian production site.

Nonetheless, it would be too pessimistic and one-sided to reduce trade union activities in the plant to the role of redundancy management and paint them simply as reactive actors in plant-level industrial relations. Echoing earlier studies (Kahancová 2015; Maciejewska and Mrozowicki 2016), it can be argued that the period of the crisis has indeed contributed to the emergence of novel union strategies, of which some proved effective despite structural, organizational and institutional constraints. This brings us back to the role of workers’ agency in the development of union strategies. Moving beyond the company premises, once the legal mechanism of collective disputes was blocked by the management, the periodic mobilization of workers in order to maintain trade union organizing potential and to keep the union membership active, the rejection of concession bargaining and the upholding of ties and solidarity between core assembler and supplier companies through inter-company union structures are only some of the innovative trade union practices observed in our case study. Importantly, formal protests were intertwined with informal acts of resistance, such as go-slows or reported cases of sabotage. Thanks to their determination and in spite of all weaknesses, trade unions in the Tychy plant have remained a force that cannot be easily dismissed by the corporate management, even if their actions do not always yield the results desired and expected by workers and even by union activists themselves.

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APPENDIX: EMPIRICAL DATA SOURCES: EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Project	Data
Negotiating capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe – Foundation for Polish Sciences HOM/2009/8B (2009-11)	Expert interviews (The Metalworkers Federation (Metalowcy) of OPZZ, The National Section of Automotive Industry NSZZ Solidarność, The Metalworkers Secretariat of NSZZ Solidarność) – 3 interviews Company level interviews with trade unionists in Fiat Auto Poland (NSZZ Solidarność president, NSZZ Solidarność representative in Fiat Services, the Free Trade Union August '80 (WZZ Sierpień '80) president, Deputy President of Independent Self-Governing Trade Union of Employees – the Intercompany Organization of the FCA and Affiliated Companies (NSZZ – OM/OPZZ)) – 4 interviews
Lean Production in the Automotive Industry in Britain and Poland (2011-13)	Expert interviews with trade union (NSZZ Solidarność) leaders and members at the VW Motor Poland – 3 interviews and GMMP – 4 interviews
Horizontal Europeanization – DFG (2013-14)	Expert interviews at the sectoral level (The National Section of Automotive Industry NSZZ Solidarność – 2 interviews) Company-level interviews with union leaders (NSZZ Solidarność) at GMMP, VW Poland and VW Manufacturing Poland – 6 interviews
From National to Local: Trade Union Strategies in the Automotive Sector in Eastern Europe – CEU (2016)	Expert interviews at the company level in FIAT (NSZZ Solidarność president, the Free Trade Union August '80 (WZZ Sierpień '80) and the president of NSZZ – OM/OPZZ – 3 interviews