Self-organization for a better life

Linking the concrete struggle for improved working conditions with a change in the individual and a critique of power relations is central for our work as a grassroots network. Through self-organized activities, workers develop ideas on how their workplaces and other areas of life could be remodeled in their interest and advocate for change themselves. Such efforts are always also anticipations of a different society without exploitation and exclusion and allow spaces for experiences of empowerment of one’s own world. They change the relationships between co-workers, which are no longer characterized by competition, but by a solidary togetherness.

Our Health mapping has been an important tool in this process for many years. It provides a collective space for discussion and organizing, allows questions of health and good living to be discussed together with concrete conflicts in the workplace and, as a result, to become active oneself.
In this newsletter, we report on various recent experiences of self-organization, the use of mappings and other tools, and reflections on the work of our network. It is about:

- the struggle for trade union rights and the historic success of the farmers protest in South Asia;
- Planning collaborations along the wine value chain in South Africa;
- History of self-empowerment and organizing through mappings in the TIE network;
- successful negotiations through mappings in the orange juice value chain in Brazil and in various industries in Mozambique;
- The reflection and development of health work at the conference in Brazil;
- Experiences of self-organization in Marseille;
- Organizing processes around health and digitalization at Zara and in the industry;
- Change: 2nd International Conference of TIE, ver.di, FES and RLS now in July 2022.

We hope to contribute to a joint discussion.

**Support our work!**

The TIE Global newsletter is always about thanking all our loyal friends, donors and supporters, too: Without your support, the TIE networks would not be able to act in an independent and self-organised fashion. However, the current pandemic crisis presents us with major challenges.

Since March 2020, contact restrictions forced us to call off numerous activities that the funding of our network is based upon, thus posing a major threat to the fundamental functioning of TIE Global. Therefore, we are asking you to continue supporting our work and to help us maintain our independence in the future. Any contribution will be much appreciated, as it will increase the chances for our being able to overcome the crisis and keep alive our international trade union work.

You can directly transfer donations to the account named above or click the donation button on our website www.tie-germany.org.

Feedback and comments on this newsletter are always welcome! Enjoy reading!

In solidarity,
TIE Bildungswerk e. V.

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**ExChains Garment**

**South Asia: Fight for trade union rights**

Trade union rights are part of human rights. To protest against their constant violation in the garment industry NGWF in Bangladesh organized a demonstration of garment workers on Human Rights Day. The garment industry is the largest industry in Bangladesh, employing 42 million people and representing 83% of the country’s export value. If workers form a union in a factory, they are fired by the owners. Business owners do not hesitate to attack workers, sue them, or temporarily close the factory.

In the pandemic these disputes have intensified in South Asia. Companies are closing unionized sites as part of value chain restructurings. But changes in day-to-day production are also causing problems for unions: Colleagues from the FTZ&GSEU in Sri Lanka report that companies are undermining union organizing efforts with so-called ‘bio bubbles’. Officially, they serve to protect against infection. In the factories, only a limited number of workers are supposed to have contact with each other. Outside these bubbles, there are supposed to be no discussions with other workers. This makes unionization enormously difficult.
The companies are not really concerned about the health of their workers. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, several 10,000 industrial jobs have been cut in Sri Lanka alone. At the same time, workers are expected to meet the same production goals as before. This can only be achieved through rigorous work intensification and unhealthy working conditions.

Podcast on experiences in the garment network

How can workers at both ends of the value chain act together in their struggle and thereby strengthen themselves? What experiences and struggles does the digitalization of the value chain bring? We talked about this in the podcast ‘Democratizing Work’.

Working-class history and support

To support the work of the ExChains garments network, there is a new project: the “T-shirt of the Month.” “Dna merch” is partnering with a global network of artists to create exclusive t-shirt designs inspired by events and stories from the Working-Class History archive part of the proceeds goes to the ExChains work.

Go to the website with the QR code

Farm Workers protest in India – Those who dare to fight win

After more than a year of protest by hundreds of thousands of farmers and farm workers and a general strike involving 250 million people, agricultural workers in India can celebrate an extraordinary victory. Following the passage of severe agrarian reforms in September 2020, many farmers and their unions joined together to form the Sanyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) alliance and successfully fought against neoliberal restructuring. “We congratulate SKM for its historic struggle in addressing the problems of farmers across the country,” writes the NTUI trade union federation. The NTUI and its affiliates, like all other progressive unions in the country, had shown solidarity with the struggle, which began in November 2020.

The protest was against three reforms of the extreme right-wing BJP government. Previously, various agricultural products such as rice and wheat were traded in state-controlled wholesale markets. If the price fell below a certain minimum level, the state intervened and paid producers the difference. Now, trade and contract forms are to be deregulated, and price and volume regulations are to be abolished. Liberalization would make it easier for large agribusinesses and investors to squeeze out small and medium-sized farmers. Agriculture plays a very impor-
ExChains Orange Juice

As part of the TIE network Ex-Chains, a network is also being built up along the orange juice supply chain. Workers from Germany and Brazil are involved. The experiences of the garment network play an important role in this. So far, the orange juice network aims to organize concrete actions at the workplace, put pressure on retailers and strengthen union activity in harvesting, processing and selling. In Brazil, rural unions of plantation workers and industrial workers are working together for the first time across organizational boundaries. Currently involved are representatives of rural and industrial unions, as well as German works councils at the retailers Edeka, Rewe, Lidl and Kaufland.

Expanding and strengthening the network

Despite the pandemic, 2021 was a year of growth for the network. Rural and industrial workers’ activists visited unions in different regions to introduce the network’s work. It now consists of thirty-seven unions from the states of São Paulo, Pará and Minas Gerais, which are developing a collaborative analysis of the value chain and common positions and strategies to strengthen union bargaining power. Activities are aimed at understanding the value chain, collecting, and evaluating information on production sites, working conditions and collective agreements, and implementing joint actions such as radio broadcasts, educational work or health mapping.

After training sessions with union activists, new unions were already using health mappings in the workplace in the second half of the year: on plantations to produce oranges and dendê (palm oil) in Pará, on orange plantations in Minas Gerais and on other plantations in São Paulo. Activists from different states and sectors carried out the activities together, enabling a mutual learning process and encouraging cohesion. Further mappings are planned for 2022.

The mappings lead to the further development of negotiations between unions and companies, in which not only wages or violations of the law are negotiated, but also a wide range of improvements in working conditions. In São Paulo, in the second half...
of the year, plantation workers’ unions successfully conducted the test phase of a new digital model for the weighing process with a major company, which was presented in the last report. If the company and unions agree on the process after the test run, the new weighing system will be expanded. This is a big win for workers, as previously non-transparent weighing was identified as a major cause of lost wages and control by contractors.

The changes achieved through the implementation of the mappings serve as pilot experiences for the network, which will be expanded to other companies as a result through the unions. Other pilot experiences are being explored on topics of worker collective housing, ergonomics, transportation, and pesticides.

### ExChains Wine

The TIE-ExChains network is lately in the process of building a second agricultural network along the global supply chain in the wine sector. We draw on experiences from the struggles of Brazilian workers on orange plantations, from ver.di Handel and from colleagues in the German retail sector. The agricultural workers’ union CSAAWU, which is mainly organized in the Western Cape of South Africa, is part of the network strengthening the struggles on site and in the German retail trade. The new possibility of cooperation between South African and Brazilian agricultural workers and activists of the VidaViva network in Mozambique will enable South-South cooperation as well as international cooperation along the value chain planned

A first delegation of TIE Germany, TIE Brazil and ver.di commercial section was able to travel to Cape Town in early October 2021 with the support of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. In personal exchange with the trade union CSAAWUU, current strategies of organizing the workplaces were discussed and concrete possibilities of cooperation were planned.

During the stay, the delegation met with workers and union leaders, visited homes and was able to inspect working conditions on a wine farm. Germany is the second largest importer of wine from South Africa and thus of paramount importance for the industry. The price margins are extremely unevenly distributed. More than 60 percent of the sales price is shared by discounters and bottling wineries in Germany. Only about seven percent end up with the winegrowers, and only lean 1.4 percent, or a minimum wage of fifty-two euros per week for 45 hours of work, reaches the workers. This is around one third below the income needed to support a household in South Africa. Occupational health and safety measures such as protective clothing against pesticides, sanitary facilities or clean drinking water at work are hardly available. Eighty percent of employees are seasonal workers and migrant workers.

Life outside of work is also determined by the large landowners. The workers often live in miserable conditions on the farms. Whether they are allowed to live together with their partners and children depends on the goodwill of the big landowners. The farms are far from urban infrastructure. Access to schools, hospitals and government offices is often only possible if the agricultural workers provide transportation. Farm owners also repeatedly try to criminalize unions.

Against this background, the delegation exchanged experiences in organizing workers in agriculture and trade as well as on developments in the platform economy and its impact on working conditions along value chains in a two-day workshop with
work along the entire supply chain up to the German food retail trade.

**VidaViva**

The TIE network VidaViva focuses on health issues to organize workers. Active members of the network report that work-related health risks are steadily increasing worldwide. Workers are told by companies that they should eat healthier and exercise better. The organization of work is being increasingly geared to efficiency, and the burdens continue to rise. In VidaViva, employees develop solidarity-based strategies to reduce stress and gain control over their daily work. However, we do not just want to make workplaces healthier, but organize trade union resistance against ever new impositions on our lives. Since 2003, we have therefore developed various tools for educational work, self-research, risk analysis, worker-oriented benchmarking etc. in order to develop union shop stewards. The delegates from Germany and Brazil reported on their experiences in the orange juice network.

Based on this, the South African activists will be trained in the implementation of health mapping and other organizing instruments with the support of Brazilian agricultural workers’ unions. Following pilot experiences on wine farms, the project will evaluate how to strengthen union mobilization and bargaining power as well as forms of international cooperation. As you can see, a start has been made.

**Interview: Domination carved into our bodies**

**Emancipatory practice and techniques for evaluating working conditions**

Mappings are used in different variants. As “health mapping” it is not new in trade union circles. In the TIE network, it is regularly used around the world. In an interview with the German trade union newspaper Express, we reported on its history, our experiences and successes.

*Perhaps you could briefly describe where the idea and concept of mapping came from, and what a typical health mapping at TIE looks like. What are you interested in and why do you choose this approach?*

The first origins of health mapping were class struggles at FIAT and other industries in Italy, which eventually led to a change in Italian workers’ medicine. There, workers used mapping both to better analyze work processes and conditions and to develop workplace demands. Other origins lie in a progressive health movement in Canada in the 1970s. Our version of health mapping was developed by TIE in Brazil in exchange with activists from Europe and North America. In Brazil, unions use it to organize around health in industry, the public sector, agriculture, and the private service sector.
Mapping consists of several steps: First, workers put dots on the silhouette of a body and mark the places where they have health concerns that are caused or are made worse by their work. Because workers share work realities, they name similar problems. This creates a collective understanding of their own health problems and that they are caused by work. Then, in a further step, workers discuss under the keyword ‘Our World’ what consequences health issues have on their everyday life. Workers then often describe that they hardly have time and energy for other activities, there are conflicts at home because of work and they are simply exhausted. This is followed by an analysis of the workplace: On a floor plan of the department, office, factory floor or branch, the employees jointly mark the causes of the health problems and analyze the different problems. In a final step, they discuss demands to eliminate the health burdens and develop a joint strategy to enforce them in the company.

We quickly realized that this approach works everywhere because it enables workers to address their health problems in the workplace, but also to collectivize them. Relations of domination, which are carved into our bodies as stress, become visible and therefore changeable again. [...]

For more details also have a look into the network reports or contact us at info@tie-germany.org

14th International Conference: How to remain capable of action?

The Corona pandemic has changed the work of unions worldwide. So has the work of the VidaViva network. While companies very quickly began extensive transformation processes with government aid behind them, the very contact of trade unions with workers at the workplace became a problem due to home-office regulations, state restrictions on contact and blocked access to companies. The unions’ ability to act politically was severely affected.
This year's VidaViva meeting in Brazil in early December was the first since the start of the pandemic and took place under changed conditions. Normally, about 120 people from eight countries attend to discuss the network's strategy and plan for the next year. Due to the pandemic, this year's meeting could only take place with one third of the activists. Some activists from Germany or Mozambique brought in the results of their health work via video conference.

The different local challenges since the beginning of the pandemic and how the unions have dealt with them were discussed. It became apparent that there is a great disparity in how all participating countries have dealt with the current challenges. Part of the trade union movement was able to continue working under changed conditions, while others almost had to stop their work.

The conference helped renew motivation and activities were planned in six states in Brazil. Latest ideas for implementing mappings and other tools were drafted so that union practice in presence is possible even in times of pandemic. Participants also agreed that the pandemic has speeded up the transformation processes in companies. Therefore, participants also discussed new issues such as digitalization and the increasing precarisation of employment that has emerged as a result of the transformation and which the trade union movement must confront.

Mozambique: Mappings against the social crisis

The current social crisis is changing our lives, our work, the way we communicate and organize ourselves worldwide. In Mozambique, too, people are experiencing a social crisis on top of already precarious working conditions and a large share of informal employment. There are acute problems in the workplace as insufficient safety measures, for example, among health workers; increasingly longer working hours and work that is taken home; the dismissal of older workers, the so-called risk group. In addition, there are illegal layoffs and people migrate to neighboring countries in search of work.

Mappings in various industries also allowed to discuss health in the workplace in 2021. They were conducted in the agricultural sector, energy sector, sugar production, trade and transport. Key findings were the permanent stress due to an insecure and
underpaid job and lack of perspectives to make structural changes for well-being, thus enabling a better life. Mappings in Mozambique are mainly used to strengthen collective bargaining agreements and trade union committees on a company level. As a result, concrete improvements have been achieved:

- a reduction in production targets in the sugar cane sector and the establishment of labor contracts for seasonal workers
- The introduction of contracts in agriculture, where workers were working without contracts.
- the improvement of equipment and protective clothing in agriculture
- the conclusion of collective agreements in trade and supermarkets. Workers also receive a basket of basic foodstuffs and meals during breaks.

These improvements will be built upon, and the process will continue.

France: Self-management in the northern districts of Marseille

Two years ago, with the onset of the pandemic, poverty and hunger spread through the poor northern neighborhoods of Marseille. The unemployment rate rose to 40 percent. Many residents had precarious jobs in the service sector that were quickly terminated. The financial resources provided by the state are not sufficient. This situation gave rise to initiatives by people who discussed how the supply situation could be improved together.

Residents of the city, retailers, bakers and other food suppliers were called upon to participate in the collection of necessary food. The call was taken up by the union for peasant agriculture, the Confederation Paysanne, and by the trade union federation Solidaires. At the same time, other trade unionists took part in the actions. At the first gathering place, residents and people who did not know each other before, such as the agricultural workers of the region and the residents of the Northern Quarters, met. Everyone was surprised by the spontaneous willingness to help, but also by the collective intelligence of how these supply tasks were planned and implemented together. In the meetings and in the actions, it has been possible to live collective and solidarity moments.

In the northern neighborhoods, there was also a MC-Donald’s store that was scheduled to close shortly before the start of the pandemic due to insufficient profitability. The staff had already achieved social improvements in previous years with strike actions. Now the branch was occupied. One of the strikers was a manager there, but he came from the northern quarters and knew exactly how important this branch was as a social center, despite the ‘malbouffe’, the bad food that was offered there.

The pandemic came and with it the idea not only to occupy the branch, but also to bring together there the various supply camps that had sprung up. From then on, hundreds of people gathered every day of the week to pick up their supply package. At the same time, the debate about the future of the Mc Do store continued. In joint meetings, the idea emerged to turn the branch into a self-managed social restaurant,
with organic burgers at tiered prices. After lengthy negotiations, the left-wing majority in the city assembly decided to buy the building and signed a one-year lease with the squatters for the time being.

There are many things left to do in order to implement all the plans and it is impressive to follow the dynamics of the self-management process. No matter how the next months go, the two-year experience of lived democratic self-determination is not going away.

**New forms of movement building**

**“Tara at Zara!”**

*Workers of a fashion retailer developed a comic about international restructuring of the company*

“What are you?” asks the customer as the little T-shirt Tara jumps out of the box. Tara is the main character of the comic strip that Zara employees in Germany developed together with TIE and ver.di’s trade department. Works councils and trade unionists use the comic as a tool to raise the issue of the company’s restructuring at work and at works meetings. Tara provokes discussions on digitization, working conditions that make people ill, and exploitation along the value chain.

The comic serves as a tool for trade unionists to create awareness of the changes in the company and to sharpen a common understanding among colleagues. Tara is part of a strategy for healthier working conditions: in Zara factories, colleagues have started to use workplace mapping to develop demands for healthier working conditions. Workers in several stores in the greater region of Frankfurt in Germany have jointly analyzed their workplaces and developed demands that are now to be implemented. One example: at the changing rooms, employees have many tasks at the same time. This is unmanageable and causes stress. The workers have developed the demand that one worker should welcome the customers and take care of the tasks involved, and one worker should be responsible for saying goodbye to the customers and processing the goods that have not been purchased. In this way, the work should be able to be completed at a reasonable pace.

These struggles have significance beyond the individual store. While digitizing the value chain, Zara is constantly restructuring work processes along the chain with the aim of achieving the greatest possible flexibility and efficiency. As a result, digitization increases existing health issues. Work processes are standardized, compared, and digitally controlled. Struggles about the concrete organization of work are thus not only improvements for the workers, but at the same time workers have an influence on the international restructuring. The comic helps to become aware of these connections and to find common demands.
Primark: Joint strategy for health and digitalization

For a long time, Primark was considered a laggard when it came to digitalization in retail. In the meantime, changes are being announced at the Irish fashion group: Employees shall be flexibly deployed in all departments and the company wants to dissolve fixed shifts. Experience with the digital transformation at H&M and Zara shows that these changes are harbingers of greater changes. After all, digital technologies only realize their potential for the company if employees can be deployed flexibly according to the company’s needs. The desired changes should enable the company to deploy staff precisely according to customer demand and working hours according to business needs – inflexible regulations in the interest of the workers stand in the way.

At the same time, workers at Primark already experience enormous health hazards at work. Constant work pressure and interruptions due to staff shortages, a fast pace of work and too many tasks at the same time keep the stress level permanently high. Mental stress is the order of the day. Workers expect these areas of conflict to be worsened by the upcoming changes. This is also a lesson learned from the restructuring at H&M and Zara.

Therefore, ver.di commerce, works council members, union activists at Primark and TIE are developing a strategy to influence changes in the company at an early stage and to enforce healthy working conditions. In several stores, they want to use workplace mapping in a coordinated way to organize their co-workers. Together, they want to raise awareness of health prob-
Discussions about digitalization are repeatedly reduced to the questions of whether jobs will be lost in the medium and long term as a result of this development, what qualifications and what data protection we will need in the future. Dissatisfied with this limitation, activists from TIE, Freudenberg and other companies have started a series of seminars in which we:

1. developed our own understanding that technology and technical systems do not simply fall from the sky, but are produced; social interests, power relations and effects are always already woven into technical systems.
2. define approaches to shaping technology already in the development stage and place them in an overall social context. In doing so, the activation and participation of workers at every moment had to be understood as central.

The result of this discussion is that processes of digitalization bring about fundamental changes in work, control, forms of employment, workers’ self-perceptions, but also of typical conflicts in the company and instruments of union representation. In addition, digitalization processes are changing the organization of value chains, our understanding of democracy, entire cities and the disputes about them, our needs, our communication and consumption habits, and the control and conditioning of the human body. Thus, it is not about a for or against progress, but how we can influence and determine current and future technologies and use them for our interests. Through an exchange with ver.di commerce, the results of this discussion repeatedly flowed into the work of works councils and collective bargaining committees in the retail sector and back.

In 2021, four seminars took place on this, from which a ‘learning and growing document’ was further developed, explaining the state of common understanding and conclusions. If interested, the work report can be requested (write to info@tie-germany.org). In addition to the elaboration of a Modular Company or Group Agreement focused on the above-mentioned changes and on the design of the future, the idea of a pilot project for the development of assistance technologies that promote a human-centered design of work (versatility, wholeness, control over work steps and their execution, health-preserving work performance) emerged. The group works council of an automotive supplier, in collaboration with TIE, is currently seeking cooperation with the Technical University Darmstadt and the company. The cooperation will initially be limited to an assistance technology and will provide works council members with a concrete learning experience in shaping technology in the early stages of development. As a result, the pilot project will be evaluated, further developed and, in the future, extended to autonomous software or delegation systems.

Series of Workshops: Digitalization in the industry.

International – solidary – strong:
International Meetings in July 2022

2nd International Conference on ‘Trade Union Work along Value Chains’ by ver.di, RLS, FES and TIE: 05th and 06th July 2022 in Berlin.

TIE international working meeting: 08th to 10th July 2022

Panel at the SSSP Online-Conference ‘From Everyday Struggles to Global Change: Possibilities and Hurdles for Transnational Social Movement Unionism’: 20th May 2022