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Renegades of Patient Times – Bargaining Conflict in Irish Public Services during and after Social Partnership

Abstract

My dissertation project deals with the causes and consequences of the shift in bargaining disputes from private industries to public services in European labor markets. The shift is explained with the higher level of structural tensions between employers and employees in public services, where a labor force whose products are in high demand and not threatened by relocation or technological change confronts an employer with a hardening budget constraint. While these contradictions are not present uniformly in the entire public sector, they are the most pronounced in the fastest expanding parts of it: health-, social care and education. When it comes to the consequences of this shift, the dissertation focuses on the effects on the broader labor movement and proposes that public sector unions will rely on their structural power and oppose concessional deals with state and capital, while private sector unions will support them as a tool to maintain institutional stability. This chapter tests these propositions on the case of Ireland, where the contradictions outlined above could be observed both in the pre- and the post-crisis period. Over time, it became increasingly difficult for Irish social partnership to accommodate public service professions - especially nurses and secondary school teachers. In a similar fashion, after the collapse of social partnership, structurally stronger professional unions in the public sector held out the longest against austerity, but they were outnumbered by mixed private-public and low-skilled unions who swallowed austerity in exchange for continued institutional recognition.