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**Abstract: What can trade unions and works councils do to make jobs better? – An approach from German manufacturing**

At the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century disillusion is displacing the high-flying vision of full employment and more and better jobs in Europe. One of the reasons for this development is that many companies have chosen a low road approach to increase competitiveness, shifting the risks of adaptability and flexibility to the employees (eg. more low wage and non-standard jobs).

In Germany, this development was dynamic over the last 10 years. This direction of change contradicts the requested political strategy of a high road of innovation, especially in manufacturing. The system of co-determination in this sector generally offers a good lever to drive work-oriented high road strategies. At the same time it is evident that trade unions and works councils are confronted with new challenges that go far beyond the well proven forms of action. This demands more and other forms of knowledge, competences and skills.

This paper provides an insight into the ongoing reform process of the metalworkers union (IG Metall) in Northrhine-Westfalia from action research. The multi-level-approach has a special focus in support of works councils at the shop floor level. It includes for example more flexible collective agreements, new forms of multi-company dialogues between works councils and new ways how to accelerate the transfer of science based knowledge into the practice of unions and works councils to stimulate alternatives to low road strategies. Its aim is an empowerment strategy which enables esp. works councils to develop and achieve “better” solutions for the company *and* the employees. This requires a massive learning process for the union itself and exemplifies institutional change at real-time.