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## Where are the trade unions? Some insights into the historical evolution of the Swiss VET system

**Bonoli Lorenzo**

Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, [lorenzo.bonoli@iffp.swiss](mailto:lorenzo.bonoli@iffp.swiss)

### Abstract

The Swiss VET, in its current institutional form, was gradually established over a 50-year period between 1880 and 1930. Beside the Confederation and the Cantons, the third main actor in this institutionalisation process can be identified in professional associations in the craft sector. On the contrary, trade unions play a minor role in the all process. The paper presents the main reasons that could explain the discreet presence of trade unions in the process of institutionalization of the domain and analyses the consequences of this on the first laws on VET and on the successive evolution to the present day.

### Keywords

history of Swiss vet; 1880-1930; trade unions, handicraft associations

### 1 Introduction

Comparative research into the historical evolution of VET systems reveals considerable differences in the way different countries have developed their own VET system (CEDEFOP 2004; Thelen 2004; Busemeyer & Trampusch 2012). Some recurrent features can nevertheless be pointed to, underlining in particular complex negotiations between the interests of the state, of companies, of workers and of young people (and their families). Focusing on the development of dual VET models, Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012) highlight four “neuralgic points of contention” (p.16) that “coagulate” the main conflictual issues among the actors in the domain. These neuralgic points are: “*the relationship between firm autonomy and (semi-) public monitoring*”, “*the relationship between school-based and firm-based VET*”, “*the financing of initial VET*”, and the “*relationship between VET and general education*” (pp. 17-19). The negotiations around these four main issues between the state, the employers’ associations and trade unions are decisive in establishing the complex division of responsibilities characterizing dual VET systems.

The evolution of the Swiss VET system can be read in the context drawn by these four neuralgic points, but one element is striking: the comparatively little weight and lower level engagement of trade unions (and of left-wing parties) in the whole process of the institutionalization of the VET system. This lower level of engagement emerges in particular if we compare it with the development of the German dual model of VET (cf. Trampusch 2010; Wolf 2017; Emmenegger et al, 2018; Emmenegger et al, *forthcoming*). Current research into the history of the Swiss VET system unambiguously shows that the lead in the institutionalization of VET was taken by professional associations in the domain of handicraft (in particular by the Swiss Handicraft Association [*Schweiz.Gewerbeverband*]), while the trade unions played a secondary role, surprisingly supporting most of the initiatives launched in this domain by the handicraft associations. (Tabin 1989; Gonon 1998; Bauder 2008)

So, the first questions that arise is the following: how can we explain the lower level engagement of the Swiss trade unions in the process of the institutionalization of the domain and



how to explain the support of these milieus for initiatives from the handicraft sector? Secondly, we have to ask to what extent this lower level engagement influenced negotiation on the four neuralgic points quoted above and more specifically on social issues linked to VET, for instance on working conditions (working hours, wages for apprentices) or on social measures favoring integration of young adults into the world of work?

Analysis of documents (laws, official reports, scientific publications, press articles, etc.) written between 1880 and 1930, the decisive period for the establishment of the Swiss VET system (Bonoli 2012; Gonon 2018), can help us to find an answer to these questions.

## 2 The weakness of Swiss Trade Union

These documents show that in Switzerland we do not witness a “class struggle” in the field of VET (Tabin 1989; Bauder 2008). Commenting on the results of the parliamentary commission, which prepared the first federal law in 1930 and where most of the interest groups of the time were represented, the Federal Council referred to “a rare unity of opinion on most of the important issues”(CF 1928, p. 766). This “rare unity of opinion” is the result of the fact that the trade unions did not adopt an opposition strategy in the domain of VET, which fact could be explained mainly by the weakness of workers’ organisations at the time. We find a confirmation of this in a draft for a law on apprenticeship proposed in 1913 by the Swiss Confederation of Trade Unions (*Schweiz. Gewerkschaftsbund*), where we can read: “the trade unions are not yet strong enough in all occupations requiring apprenticeship training to represent the interests of the workforce themselves”. For this reason “they consider the legal regulation of the apprenticeship relationship to be absolutely necessary”, and “their wishes meet here with those of the employers” (SGB 1913, p.2).

Comparing the role of trade unions in Switzerland and in Germany, Patrick Emmenegger, Lukas Graf, Alexandra Strebel (forthcoming) highlight several aspects that could explain the weak and consensual position of Swiss trade unions in the domain. This weakness is partly due to the federalist nature of the Swiss state and the decentralised nature of Swiss VET, split between cantonal responsibilities and occupational specificities. Such fragmentation probably slowed down the formation of strong trade union organisations and introduced a kind of “depoliticization” (forthcoming, p. 12) of the issue. Finally, in the process of institutionalisation of the Swiss VET system, regional public authorities (in particular municipalities and cantons) took on tasks directly related to the control of apprenticeship conditions at an early stage, from the first cantonal laws in 1890, which pre-empted “any possibility of unions playing a key role in this area” (ibid. p. 8) in contrast to what occurred in Germany.

## 3 The trade unions’ position on the issue

However, while the weakness of the trade unions certainly plays an important role in explaining their limited and consensual involvement, it should also be noted that at the time VET issues were not at the center of their concerns and a largely shared position on the topic was lacking.

On one hand, trade unions showed only little interest in VET issues, at least in the decades around 1900 (Bonoli 2016, Bauder 2008, Tabin 1989). Their major preoccupations were working conditions, wages, social insurance and political representation of workers (Heeb & Schürch 1993, GTHMO 1975). As Hans Hirter's analysis shows (Hirter 1984, p. 937), of the more than 6,000 claims made during all the strikes and protest movements in Switzerland between 1880 and 1914, topics related to VET appear only 47 times, while claims related to wages or working time are counted in thousands.

On the other hand, at regional level, we observe a widespread support for initiatives related to the improvement of workers qualifications. This support, based on the desire to improve working conditions and wages through a better qualification, materializes in an impressive

number of vocational courses for workers and apprentices, courses which took place in the evening or on Sundays and were organized by occupational workers' associations. However, this type of regional level commitment seems to have had relatively little influence on political positions at national level, where a more ideological interpretation of VET was put forward (Bauder 2008, p. 24 and p. 165), leading sometimes to critical positions against it.

Firstly, trade unions and left-wing circles justify not fully engaging in the issue of workers' training by specifying their priorities. Before engaging in issues related to training or education, it is *necessary* to improve the material conditions of the workers. In other words, as Robert Seidel (pedagogue, socialist politician and editor, among other activities, of the "*Arbeiterstimme*" the organ of the Socialist Party and the Trade Union Federation) points out, "you have to have enough to eat, you mustn't be freezing, if you want to have sense and feeling for education" (1881, p.2).

In this regard, what is striking when analysing the sources of the time is that the social argument, systematically evoked by bourgeois circles to promote vocational training (Cf. Comtesse 1890, Stocker 1917), which can be summarized as follows: "improving working, wage and living conditions through better training", is not at the center of the trade unions arguments. For them, the improvement of working and living conditions can only be achieved through negotiation, or through struggle, with employers; negotiation or struggle controlled and led by the trade union organisations in defense of all workers in a given sector. Adequate training or education were only possible after the improvement of conditions in the world of work. Training or education were not considered or fostered as a means to achieve an *individual* improvement in working conditions.

Secondly, the aims of VET were also often criticised for being too oriented towards ensuring good workers, docile to company bosses (*Arbeiterstimme* 19.2.1881), and insufficiently targeting "real" education: that is, according to Robert Grimm, one of the most prominent personalities in the Swiss labour movement: "the harmonious development of all physical, mental and spiritual abilities dormant in human beings" (1921, p. 13). A target that would require more general education and less workplace learning. It is from this perspective that we can read the support of trade union for full-time vocational schools, as well as the establishment from 1912 of the Swiss Centre for Workers' Education (Gschwend et al, 1987).

Finally, it should be noted that trade unions always also criticised workplace learning, a setting for learning that exposed young adults to exploitation and that was difficult for the authorities to control.

#### **4 The first cantonal laws promoted by the handicraft milieus**

Despite these criticisms, the first cantonal laws in the domain of VET and the first federal law of 1930, were largely approved by trade unions and left wing parties. Although these laws had been proposed mainly by handicraft milieus and right-wing progressive parties, besides economic aims – to improve production through better training –, they also comprehended measures to improve the *quality* of training and to ensure the *protection* of apprentices: measures largely supported also by trade unions.

To explain this, we have to consider that one of the main issues that pushed the professional associations to demand such laws was represented by the "unfair competition" that some "unscrupulous" bosses (Countess 1890, p.21) were making by exploiting apprentices as cheap labour force. Now, the response to this problem of unfair competition will entail a series of measures, in particular the regulation of the number of apprentices per company, of working hours and of the quality control of training, which were also desired by the trade unions for reasons of protection of apprentices. This convergence between measures against unfair competition and the protection of apprentices has certainly also contributed to trade

union support for these first laws in the domain. Besides, the debates at the time were strongly influenced by philanthropic arguments wanting to protect young adults from mistreatment and poor quality training. In this context, these measures were also part of a general strategy used by handicraft associations in order to strengthen their position against large-scale industry, which was less interested in controlling work conditions and in developing a high quality VET (Comtesse 1890). It should also be added that, in a period marked by the “Social Question”, these measures can be considered as social policy measures aimed at stabilising the socio-political climate, by helping young adults from the lower classes of the population to acquire good qualifications, to find better positions and achieve better living conditions, and thus to reduce protest movements (Bonoli 2015).

A closer look at these first laws on apprenticeship reveals some other interesting elements. We can affirm that these laws do not fully reflect the logic that characterised the class struggles of the time, which fact can also contribute to explain the support of trade unions and left-wing parties. In fact, these laws were still inspired by medieval guild apprenticeship in which the notion of “profession” played an important role (Stocker 1917; Ambrogini 1926). These laws did not aim only to train productive workers, but to introduce young people into a “professional community”. An introduction that must ensure quality training to improve the practice of the profession, but also to open the door to a career, by taking over the employer's company, by becoming independent or by taking exams to become a Master. The themes of a well-prepared succession for the professional community and of comprehensive training to ensure the necessary skills for independent work activities are also in the center of the debates that led to these laws (SGV 1895/1918).

## 5 Conclusion

The above-described elements help us to understand the role played by trade unions in the institutionalization of VET in Switzerland. They also help us to understand how the Swiss dual VET model developed, integrating, despite a low level of engagement of trade unions, not only economic aims but also social policy aims with measures to assure the quality of training and the protection of young people.

If we consider, in conclusion, the effect of the absence of a strong trade union actor in the negotiations at the origin of Swiss VET, in particular around the four neuralgic points already mentioned, we must recognize that the position of the handicraft associations was able to prevail at several levels: by obtaining broad control of the development of the sector (in particular of contents definition); by confirming on-the-job learning as a pillar of VET; by imposing apprenticeship conditions that ensure a profitable cost/benefit balance for companies; and by limiting the provision of general knowledge to ensure relatively specialised profiles. However, the dominant position of handicraft associations did not lead to a system focusing exclusively on economic performance. On the contrary, the specific socio-political situation of Switzerland around 1900 and the major challenges facing handicraft circles at that time meant that the first laws in the domain incorporated a kind of balance between economic and social aims, thus ensuring support from the trade unions.

Finally, these elements help us to understand the current situation in Switzerland, where trade unions still do not play a leading role in the domain, even though they take part in commissions and are regularly consulted, but where a balance between economic and social aims is always at the center of a conception of VET which is still largely shared by all the political orientations and which led in 2002 to the adoption in Parliament of the current VET law, with no opposing votes.

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### Biographical Notes

Lorenzo Bonoli is senior researcher and senior lecturer at the Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training in Lausanne. His research interests include systemic issues and evolution of the Swiss VET system, international issues of VET, comparison of international VET systems, epistemology of social sciences, discourse analysis.