

Call for Papers

Between Practice and Research: Democratization of Work in the Realm of Transfer Research

EuroDem Conference, Ruhr-University Bochum, Institute for Social Movements, Clemensstraße

17-19, 44789 Bochum, 26-27 February 2026

The production of discourses around workplace democracy has historically oscillated between hopes for radical transformation and cynical diagnoses of symbolic politics. One could argue, reality often unfolded somewhere in between. In the wake of current debates on the digital transformation of work, automation, AI-driven reorganization of production, and a declared polycrisis (Reckwitz & Rosa 2021, William & Erickson 2024) - i.e. the perception of social crises as overlapping, mutually reinforcing structural phenomena - similar tensions are re-emerging, frequently perceived as entirely novel, though they are deeply rooted in past experiences.

Looking back at earlier waves of structural change and transformation – especially since the 1980s – and the industrial-sociological debates they triggered, reveals patterns of friction between institutional, academic, and workplace-level understandings of democratization. Whether under the label of “Humanisation of Work” in Germany, post-Fordism, or lean production, democratic aspirations have often confronted complex realities of economic restructuring, managerial resistance, and changing labor relations.

While diagnoses of current transformations in work and production abound, they often focus on isolated phenomena – such as digitalization, AI, or economic restructuring – and address them as singular crises or disruptions. This fragmentation overlooks the historical entanglements and systemic continuities that shape today’s challenges. What remains underexplored is how these developments intersect, reinforce, or contradict one another within broader trajectories of workplace democratization. By bridging past and present, theory and practice, and singular diagnoses with structural analysis, this conference aims to address this gap and foster a more integrated understanding of democratic potentials and limitations in the evolving world of work.

This conference seeks to revisit these past and present contradictions through the lens of research that not only observes but aims to shape practice and vice versa to ultimately explore how democratic concepts of work have been transferred, translated and transformed across contexts: from theory to application, from one workplace or country to another, and from one era of change to the next.

We are pleased to invite submissions for an interdisciplinary conference exploring the evolving and contested terrain of workplace democracy – between visionary renewal and practical contradiction, between academic discourse and labor experimentation. This on-site conference is organised in the framework of the research project *Workplace democracy: a European ideal? Discourses and practices about the democratization of work after 1945 (EURO-DEM)* funded by the ANR and DFG.

We welcome contributions that engage with, but are not limited to, the following themes:

Conceptual and Methodological:

- **Methods and methodological challenges of transfer research** in the field of work and labor.
- **Forms and conceptions of transfer research:** What does it mean to “transfer” democratic ideals into practice? What are the possibilities and pitfalls?
- **Theoretical contributions** exploring multi-level or systemic understandings of democracy at work.

Empirical Approaches:

- **Case studies** exploring how democratic forms of work organization have been imagined, implemented, or resisted.
- **Tensions** between participatory and representative models of workplace democracy.
- The role of **academic discourse in shaping labor policy**, union strategies, and workplace reforms.
- **Critical analyses** of failed, partial, or co-opted democratization processes.

Historical Comparisons

- **Historical reconstructions** of labor policy debates and democratization initiatives in times of transformation (e.g. post-Fordism, digitalization, deindustrialization). **Comparative perspectives** on democratization efforts across sectors or national contexts.

Future Challenges

- **New forms of workplace participation** in the digital age: hype or real empowerment?

Submission Guidelines:

We welcome contributions from scholars, practitioners, unionists, and early-career researchers across disciplines including (but not limited to) sociology, labor studies, history, political science, organization studies, and industrial relations. Please submit an abstract of no more than **300 words**, along with a short biographical note by **30 November 2025** to Sophia.friedel@rub.de. Accepted contributors will be notified **early December 2025**. Selected papers may be considered for inclusion in an edited volume or special journal issue following the conference.

Contact:

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