Round table: PROJECT SHOWCASE: Varieties of Industrial Relations in Aviation Lockdown (VIRAL)

Chair: Michael Doherty (Maynooth University, Ireland)

Discussants:

Steen Erik Navrbjerg (FAOS, University of Copenhagen, Denmark)

Izabela Florczak (University of Łódź, Poland)

Marco Rocca (CNRS – University of Strasbourg, France)

Hanna Kinowska (Warsaw School of Economics, Poland)

David Mangan (Maynooth University, Ireland)

Members of the VIRAL team participated in the Labour Law Research Network Conference (LLRN6) held in Warsaw, Poland June 25-28. The members presented the findings of the project in a roundtable discussion and debated some of these findings with conference attendees.

The session opened with a brief introduction to the project and the panellists by Michael Doherty, and was followed by a presentation by Steen Navrbjerg on the nature of industrial relations in the aviation sector in the 7 project countries. A number of issues were then debated by the discussants (Steen Erik Navrbjerg, Izabela Florczak, Marco Rocca, Hanna Kinowska and David Mangan).

 The panellists outlined some of their initial assumptions, when the project began, and what surprised them as they carried out research. A number of panellists mentioned the fact that union density levels were very high in the sector (relative to the national picture). It was also mentioned that, in a number of countries, collective bargaining occurred at company level (in respect of air crew) rather than the sectoral level (again, different from the national picture).

Hanna Kinnowska spoke about the different business models of low-cost carriers, and legacy carriers, which, Steen Navrbjerg noted, had a profound impact on the nature of industrial relations in the different company contexts. Izabela Florczak spoke about the levels of self-employment amongst cabin crew and pilots seen in a number of countries, and the question of whether this was genuine, or false, self-employment was the subject of several questions from the audience.

David Mangan noted that there was an opportunity, due to the Covid-10 pandemic, to increase levels of social dialogue in the sector (both nationally and at EU-level). However, a number of panellists warned that, as the pandemic recedes, that this opportunity should not be wasted, and there was a lengthy discussion of how social dialogue in aviation might be strengthened.

Marco Rocca discussed a number of outcomes from the case studies carried out as part of the project, noting the failure (particularly in airports) to maintain employment levels to deal with the recovery in passenger traffic. There was a discussion of the nature of state supports to the sector during the pandemic, and whether or not these were simply ‘short-term bail outs’, or had the potential to influence/produce a more strategic long-term vision for the sector.

The panel discussed the strengths and challenges of researching in such a multi-disciplinary team (which included sociologists, labour lawyers, economists, and industrial relations scholars). Whilst at times difficulties emerged in different disciplines ‘speaking each other’s languages’, the panel concluded that it was impossible to research such a complex and multifaceted topic from the perspective of just one discipline.

Finally, looking to the future, there was a significant discussion of the challenges of sustainability in the sector (from an environmental and social/labour perspective), and the challenges of a just transition for workers and companies in aviation.