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„Social Partnership Revival“

The Framing of the Covid-19-Crisis in the German metal sector

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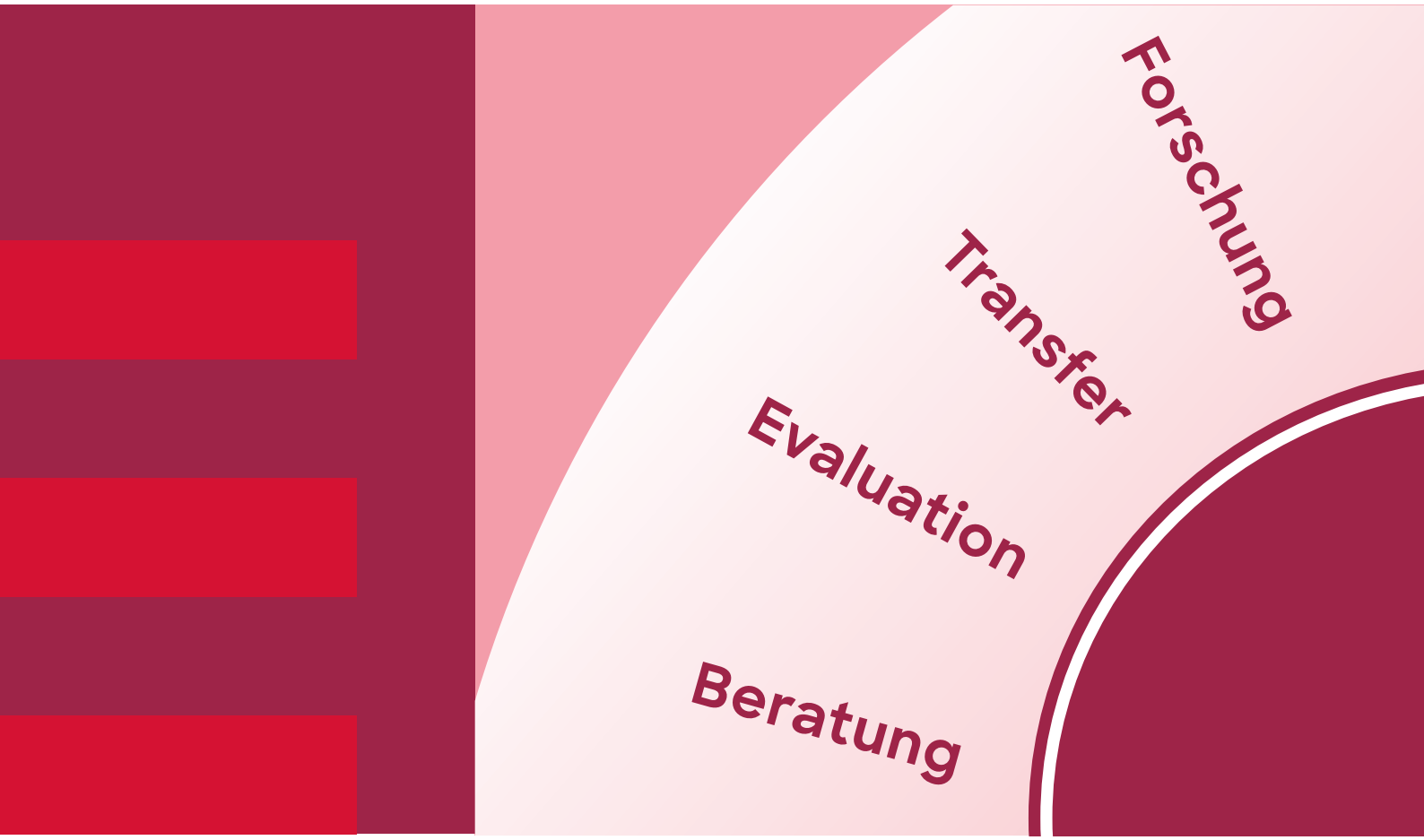

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Abstract

This paper examines how the collective bargaining parties of the German metal and electrical industry, Gesamtmetall and IG Metall, portrayed the Corona crisis in the public sphere. The empirical basis consists of press releases, guest contributions by the chairpersons and press interviews. The framing perspective adopted by this study promises to shed light on how the collective bargaining parties assess the social partnership's ability to act and what priorities they set. Social partnership is also coming under increasing pressure in the core areas of the German economic model. This is also reflected in our analysis: While at first glance there is a coalition of interests in the description of the crisis and the call for state aid to support the economy and safeguard employees, this is characterized by a strong imbalance. It is not just a matter of purely strategic cooperation on specific issues. The employer-side also insists on wage restraint and leaves unanswered union calls for a more far-reaching joint assumption of responsibility. Particularly against the backdrop of further effects of the pandemic on the labor market, this weakens the unions' bargaining power and puts further pressure on the institutional pattern of social partnership.

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1 Introduction

Industrial relations in Germany are characterized – at least in the core sectors – by the "social partnership" model. Since the 1990s at the latest, however, the model is showing signs of erosion. In contrast, the financial and economic crisis of 2007 onward saw at least a temporary revival of some of the principles of this model: in view of the deep economic slump, the collective bargaining partners and the state moved closer together again to work out joint crisis solutions (Tullius/Wolf 2012, Eichhorst/Weishaupt 2013; Kiess 2019). In the summer of 2020, it became apparent that the current pandemic would probably have even more far-reaching economic and social consequences than the financial and economic crisis. As a transnational phenomenon, the crisis does not only affect the domestic sectors, but also the export-markets. Accordingly, in this article, we ask what the Corona crisis means for the German model of social partnership.

On March 13th, 2020, the Confederation of German Trade Unions (DGB) and the President of the Confederation of German Employers' Associations (BDA) made a high-profile statement in a press release (PR) titled "Social partners put joint responsibility above differences in Corona crisis." It went:

> "We [will] jointly contribute to ensuring that the economic and social consequences of the pandemic for the people in our country remain limited and are overcome. In dialogue with politicians and in collective bargaining policy, we want to contribute once again to cushioning the economic and social consequences and facilitating the return to stable conditions" (ibid.).

It seems, at first glance, that the pandemic leads to a new form of "crisis corporatism" (Urban, 2013: 198 ff.). However, previous debates on the constantly weakening constitution of the German social partnership point at a more negative reading. The crisis of corporatism, the decreasing union density and coverage of collective agreements, and the neoliberal restructuring on-site and on a global scale give little reason for positive thinking. Against the backdrop of effective and uncontroversial crisis measures (e.g. short-time schemes) and collaborative pronouncements in the public communication of the associations, the question arises what effects the ongoing Corona crisis will have on the constitution and future of the social partnership. Is social partnership approach maintained during crisis, or are relations addressed in a more conflictual way? Are we witnessing a revitalization of the social partnership? Or does the crisis act as an accelerator of its erosion of social partnership that has long been conjured up and predicted?

The following section briefly introduces the concept of social partnership in theory and practice as well as a sociological concept of crisis. Moreover, we advocate a theoretical perspective, the framing approach, which allows us to look at the actors' perspectives on the crisis. Methodological explanations of case selection and application of the framing perspective follow in the next section. As the core sector of social partnership, we set our focus on the German metal sector. This economic segment is of particular interest because its strong export-dependency correlates with the fact that the corona-crisis affects the foreign markets possibly even stronger than the German domestic economy. We then outline the relations between IG Metall and Gesamtmetall as protagonists of the events core of the German social partnership model. This is followed by a discussion of our results, and a conclusion, where we summarize the findings in light of possible developments.

2 Social Partnership in (the) Crisis? Theoretical Framework

The catchphrase "social partnership in crisis" refers to both at the same time: On the one hand, it points to the challenges for social partnership in the Corona crisis and how social partners are dealing with the crisis. On the other hand, however, the phrase refers to the diagnosis of the crisis of social partnership itself, which has recurringly been claimed since the late 1970s. The term social partnership denotes a constellation that has contained class conflict in postwar German industrial capitalism. In the German debate, moreover, it is often a (self-)description that focuses on the community of needs of wage and profit earners and describes a - at least largely - constructive handling of labour-political conflicts. Against this, a more neutral concept, conflict partnership emphasizes the fundamental positioning of labour and capital. In the historically grown tight mesh of the economic model characterized by coordination and interdependence, the strike served the unions against the background of a coagulated balance of power, unlike in France and Italy, for example, as a "sword on the wall" (Müller-Jentsch 1997: 212) and thus primarily as a hypothetical threat.

The literature has repeatedly predicted a (final) crisis of German corporatism and especially of social partnership (e.g. Streeck 1993/1999; Müller-Jentsch 1999; Brinkmann et al. 2008). Indeed, there is ample evidence for such claims in the form of declining union membership, declining collective bargaining coverage in companies, a decline in co-determination in companies, and the declining influence of the social partners (or the unions) regarding politics. The increasing power asymmetry to the disadvantage of trade unions and the changes in the production regime induced by the global networking of economic cycles (Heinze 1998; Brinkmann et al. 2008; Bosch et al. 2009; Deppe 2012; Tullius/Wolf 2012; Arrowsmith/Pulignano 2013; Eichhorst/Weishaupt 2013) lead to unevenly distributed gains of (competitive) corporatist alliances and make (peaceful) cooperation less attractive in the long run. As the central pillar of social partnership, the trade unions in particular have lost considerable (organizational) power in recent decades (see Dribbusch/Birke 2019: 11 ff.). Many proponents of the erosion thesis therefore assume that the crisis of social partnership follows from the structural crisis of the trade unions as well as the deregulation of the labour market. Likewise, the literature suggests that the sustainable revitalization of social partnership depends on the sustainable renewal of trade union countervailing power (Haipeter 2012).

Against such assessments, though, social partnership has proven itself robust time and again. From the perspective of the actors, in particular, some studies indicate that it is still booming in working well its traditional areas (Helfen 2013). Under the impact of the global economic crisis in 2007 et seq., even an increase in positive references to cooperation, though maybe short-lived, has been demonstrated (Kiess 2019: 346). Despite diverging ideas about competitiveness and the role of the state, inter alia, adherence to social partnership resulted not least from the economic interests of the bargaining parties. In the Corona crisis, the trade unions were again and quite without question present in the crisis talks on short-time work and other issues. As the joint statement by the DGB and BDA in our introduction shows, the social partners communicated their common interest in stability in dealing with the social and economic consequences of the pandemic.

Beyond the empirical question of the structural nature of the social partnership (membership strength, collective bargaining coverage, etc.), the challenge posed by and in the Corona pandemic is a question of framing. This is even more the case if we consider concrete action repertoires at hand. We, therefore, examine, from the vantage point of political sociology, how social partners discursively legitimize their actions vis-à-vis their members and society. In doing so, we draw on the framing approach particularly well-established in mobilization research. According to this approach, interest organizations "frame, or

assign meaning to and interpret, relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (Snow/Benford 1988: 198). From this perspective, political mobilization occurs through the establishment of interpretive frames (see Seeliger 2018). In this respect, the debate about the crisis is also a debate about the normative validity of interpretive patterns (Gramsci 1971; Neubert 2001; Buckel/Fischer-Lescano 2007).

With a similar agenda, (Kiess 2019) already conducted an extensive study to examine the impact of the financial and global economic crisis on the German model of industrial relations. Following, among others, (Snow/Benford 1988, Entman 1993), he examined the

(1) motivational framing of the crisis (urgency): "How severe is the crisis? Whom does it affect?",
(2) the diagnostic framing of the crisis (cause identification): "Who is to blame for the crisis? What is the cause of the crisis?" as well as
(3) the prognostic framing of the crisis (future interpretation): "What needs to be done? Who should do it?" (Kiess 2019: 95).

We take up this approach and apply it to the social partners' handling of the Corona pandemic. Using the example of Gesamtmetall and IG Metall - two central players in the German model of social partnership - we ask how social partners assessed the Corona pandemic and its economic consequences, what causes of the social and economic problems they focused on and what solutions they propagated. We pay special attention to the actors' (self-)assessment of social partnership and to what they expect from each other. While from this framing perspective alone we cannot predict how social partnership may develop in the coming years, we can assess what aspects, themes, and predictions are emphasized in public communication.

Our research guiding assumptions regarding crisis framing and the challenges of the Corona pandemic, especially for union actors, can be summarized as follows: In the crisis, power relations are readjusted under conditions of increased pressure to act. The actors' crisis framing thus reflects disputes about the validity of interpretive patterns. Connected with this are concrete possibilities for action that, however, lie in the future. Against the background of eroding trade union power, the question arises in particular as to whether the pandemic and its consequences can be used as a "window of opportunity" for renewing the partnership – e.g. through compromise seeking behavior from both sides – especially in relation to the state. Framing is not "just talk" as it builds on the actor's assessment of the current situation and implicitly or explicitly includes their aims and interests vis a vis the state and the social partner. With the threat of job losses and collapsing tax revenues, however, a more difficult environment arises. The extent to which actors have already addressed these questions discursively is the subject of the following investigation.

3 Case Selection and Methodological Framework

In the comparative political economy literature and particularly the literature on labour relations, the German system is generally referred to as a coordinated market economy (Hall/Soskice 2001). After 1945, a vital trade union movement managed to maintain a balance of power between capital and labour that allowed for industrial citizenship (see Nachtwey/Seeliger 2020) institutionalized in strong welfare and collective bargaining institutions. The particular relationship between capital and labour has been identified as a constellation of „social partnership" (Gumbrell-McCormick/Hyman 2013), which granted trade unions

“both strongly institutionalized relationships with employers and an accepted role in public policy” (ibid.: 13).

From a Political Economy perspective, (Baccaro/Benassi 2014: 40) identify an overlapping of interests between capital and labour representatives which can lead to cross-class coalitions, because job security depends on export-driven growth. Besides a moderate wage development, a low inflation rate, limited public spending, and an undervalued currency constitute the institutional prerequisites of this model. Over time, intensive competition in the international economy has intensified „cooperation between labour and capital in the manufacturing sector and shored up traditional institutions and practices, including coordinated wage bargaining and labour-management cooperation at the firm level” (Thelen 2014: 47).

Since the 1970s, mainly due to economic globalization, German capitalism underwent a fundamental transformation, with several interdependent sequences of institutional change (Streeck 2009): A dominant trend of fragmentation in collective bargaining patterns corresponds with a decline in trade union membership. In the field of social policy, welfare cuts and a limitation of public finance reduce the states´ capacity to subsidize declining wages. Finally, the erosion of a formerly integrated network of corporate governance contributed to the disorganization of the embedded capitalism of the post-war-era. This institutional change has since the 1990s „taken place through the steady erosion in the coverage of sectoral bargaining and works councils, that has resulted from structural economic change and through the increasing willingness and ability of firms to escape from these institutions either by geographic mobility or a series of escape routes now legitimized by employer and labor associations” (Baccaro/Howell 2017: 32). Against this background, (Baccaro/Howell ibid.: 97) conclude that the German model is “unravelling”, though less so due to a “frontier assault”, but rather through gradual erosion. Similarly, Thelen (2014: 55) ascertains “a pattern of change through drift” of formerly stable institutions: “Instead ... change has transpired more gradually and quietly; collective bargaining coverage shrinks ‘naturally’ as the share of employment increases in those sectors in which unions have a weaker presence.”

Schroeder (2016) describes the development of the German labor market as differentiation into three worlds of social partnership. The first, institutionally strongly secured world is found in the manufacturing industry and core areas of the public sector. Less social security is guaranteed by the institutional frame of reference of a second world, which extends primarily to medium-sized companies and the peripheral areas of the public sector. While unions and capital associations are still at least partially present here, the third world of social partnership is characterized by the absence of both parties. No bargaining agreements and often precarious working conditions, especially in the service sector, are the result.

To our scope, we focus on the first world of social partnership. This comprises core industry sectors such as the big automotive, mechanical engineering, and electronics companies with large workforces and a high organization rate. Although this sector is increasingly losing its pull effect for the overall social partnership, "[t]he relations between the metal employers and IG Metall are often seen as shaping the style of German industrial relations as a whole, as they each represent influential segments of the core sector of the German export economy" (Helfen 2013: 487). With IG Metall and the employers' association Gesamtmetall, we also select two powerful interest groups beyond the actual collective bargaining policy. We focus on statements made by IG Metall at the federal level or by the national umbrella organization of employers, as these have signaling effects and are most likely to affect federal policy.

For these two associations, we collected all press releases/statements (PR) in the period from the first reference to the Corona crisis on March 6, 2020, to September 30, 2020. In addition, we included all

guest articles in newspapers and interviews in the period from March 6, 2020, to October 16, 2020[1], which the two social partners posted or linked in their respective press portals. The coding of the collected material followed the inductively developed results of Kiess (2019) in the form of qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2015), with a focus on structuring and summarizing the material along already developed criteria. We coded a total of 78 press releases published during this period (Rössler 2017) to compare the two associations. The high relevance of the Corona pandemic as the focus of the study is clear from Table 1: the vast majority of all press releases from the two associations in this period addressed the pandemic. IG Metall communicated more frequently overall, proportionately somewhat less, but still in three-quarters of all PRs on the Corona crisis.

Table 1: Crisis-related press releases by actor (own data)

Crisis-relation	IG Metall	Gesamtmetall
Yes	74.5% (41)	87% (20)
No	25.5% (14)	13% (3)
Total (N)	100% (55)	100% (23)

4 Social Partnership in the Metal Industry in the Corona Crisis

In terms of the temporal dimension, three phases of the crisis can be identified based on the input material. The first phase is characterized by the start of the pan-demic and the associated administrative challenges of the shutdown as well as oc-cupational health and safety. The second phase was characterized by the restart of production and the associated difficulties of collapsed markets, loss of production, and loss of wages due to short-time work. The third phase, which lasted throughout the survey period, was dominated by the debate about the correct way to normalize the economic situation and the struggle to find the right crisis management strategy.

Motivational Framing

IG Metall, on the one hand, describes the crisis in its communication in 24.4% of its press releases as a "virus" or "virus pandemic" (see Table 2), which implies an ex-ogenous yet dramatic shock. Also, however, the union links this frame to an eco-nomic recession as well as to other crisis events such as the mismanagement in the engineering industry (IG Metall June 23rd 2020) or the ongoing structural change in the sector. IG Metall chairman Hoffman, too, in a newspaper op-ed analyzes the cri-sis in the context of economic structural change (Süddeutsche Zeitung August 16th 2020) and thereby draws a dramatic picture: "The recession is now mixing with structural change. Corona is accelerating digitalization, and the auto industry is changing in the direction of electromobility. Together, this is endangering jobs en masse."

Gesamtmetall, on the other hand, describes the crisis mainly (45% of all PR in the period under review) against its economic background, as a recession caused and intensified by Corona and the associated

[1] We decided to include two interviews, one from each organisations, published after the period of investigation because they referred to the upcoming bargaining round between Gesamtmetall and IG Metall.

shutdown. In the publications of the em-ployers' association, references to structural change appear only in interviews, not in press releases, but then also emphasizes the significance of a double crisis: "[T]he number of insolvencies in the metal industry had risen significantly even before the Corona crisis. In January, there were 93 insolvencies in our industry, 55 percent more than in the same month last year. The background to this is that we were hit by a recession throughout the last year already, partly because of structural change. And now we have the Corona pandemic on top of that" (Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung April 22th 2020).

Hence, while there is some agreement on the relevance of the crisis, it becomes clear that IG Metall describes a more complex crisis, while Gesamtmetall focuses on the economic dimension of a - although unusual - recession. Nevertheless, both federations describe the crisis as a serious risk for the economy and/or workers. While this, of course, is not surprising given the global impact of the pandemic, it shows that both parties see and communicate a need for action.

Table 2: Assessment the significance of the Corona crisis by actor

	IG Metall	Gesamtmetall
No Framing	17.1% (7)	5% (1)
Virus/Pandemic (without reference)	24.4% (10)	5% (1)
Recession (effect of Corona/Shutdown)	12.2% (5)	45% (9)
Recession	7.3% (3)	
Pandemic and Recession	4.9% (2)	10% (2)
Pandemic, Recession and Structural change	2.4% (1)	
Corona and Mismanagement	2.4% (1)	
Structural Change in the Industry	2.4% (1)	
Recession and Structural Change	9.8% (4)	
Crisis as Chance	4.9% (2)	
Crisis as Risk	12.2% (5)	35% (7)
Total (N)	100% (41)	100% (20)

Both associations located the issues of their press releases mainly at the level of sectoral and company disputes (see table 3). 45% of Gesamtmetall's press releases focused on the metal industry as the level of conflict. For IG Metall, however, the figure was only 34.2%. Yet, these must be considered in connection with references to the company level (17.1%), since IG Metall occasionally took a position on announced layoffs and reorganizations of larger corporations, also at the national level. Examples include the disputes at the aircraft manufacturer Airbus (IG Metall May 14th 2020; June 30th 2020), the automotive supplier Continental (ibid. July 13th 2020), the truck manufacturer MAN (ibid. September 11th 2020) and the steel cor-poration ThyssenKrupp (ibid. May 5th 2020).

In the course of the crisis, both parties increasingly referred to the national scope of the crisis, emphasizing, in particular, the role of their industry for the entire national economy. This corresponds with the

classification of the bargaining parties as influ-ential and central to Germany's export-oriented economic model, even in compari-son with the umbrella organizations (German Trade Union Confederation and Con-federation of German Employers' Associations). Europe plays only a subordinate and, if at all, purely coordinative role. Only in the further course of the crisis did the European level of reference gain in importance.

Table 3: Level of reference of the crisis-related PRs by organization

Shop-Floor	17.1% (7)	15% (3)
Sector	34.2% (14)	45% (9)
National	36.6% (15)	35% (7)
Europe	12.2% (5)	
Global		5% (1)
Total (N)	100% (41)	100% (20)

At the centre of Gesamtmetall's crisis communication is the reference to companies' lack of liquidity (39.1%, see table 4). IG Metall also addresses this issue in one out of ten PRs and thereby supports claims for state support for ailing companies. For both, Gesamtmetall and IG Metall, the dispute over the two crisis packages was cen-tral, and both repeatedly thematized short-time work as a key instru-ment. While for Gesamtmetall the most important issues also included tax reliefs and financial aid to secure liquidity, for IG Metall the focus laid on investment and wage protection. The severity of the crisis is particularly evident from the fact that four out of five of IG Metall's crisis-related press releases were about securing apprenticeships and one in two was about securing jobs. At Gesamtmetall, too, 17.4% of the PRs revolved around securing employment, in this case mostly linked to the fear of losing skilled workers. Structural change and social and ecological transformation played a major role for IG Metall - in contrast to Gesamtmetall.

Table 4: Issues in the crisis-related PRs of the organizations (multiple naming possible, N=61)

	IG Metall (N=41)	Gesamtmetall (N=20)
Growth	27.3% (15)	8.2% (2)
Liquidity	10.9% (6)	39.1% (9)
Taxes	3.6% (2)	26.1% (6)
Crisis Package	17.1% (7)	26.1% (6)
Social Policy	3.6% (2)	8.7% (2)
Education and Training	21.8% (12)	8.7% (2)
Global/European Politics	14.6% (8)	
Future-proofing of particular branches	16.4% (9)	
Saving of companies	20% (11)	21.7% (5)
Investments	32.7% (18)	10% (3)
Labor Market	7.3% (4)	8.7% (2)
Job Security	49.1% (27)	17.4% (4)
Occupational safety/Health and Safety	12.7% (7)	10% (3)
Short-term work/Keep Jobs	18.2% (10)	30.4% (7)
Secure Wages	29.1% (16)	
Child Care	9.1% (5)	
Structural Change/Transformation	32.7% (18)	8.7% (2)
Data Security	1.8% (1)	

Diagnostic Framing

Both parties describe the current crisis primarily as a cyclical recession that was ei-ther triggered or intensified by the pandemic (see Table 5). Only IG Metall occa-sionally defined the crisis without a direct economic reference and framed it as a (vi-ral) pandemic, particularly at the beginning (22%). In contrast to the financial and global economic crisis (Kiess 2019: 257 ff), however, the organization has so far managed without using the frame systemic crisis. Thus, no references to structural (endogenous) prob-lems, such as those based on a deregulated labour and financial market, can be found. Conversely, Gesamtmetall did not speak of a governmental control failure in the current crisis, but even praises the crisis policy of the federal government in the interview:

„Before the crisis, the German government's policy was characterized by the distribution of social ben-efits and ever new burdens for the economy. But since the outbreak of the crisis, that has completely changed. In recent weeks, the grand coalition has made 150 percent economic policy. At last, people are remembering how important the economy and entrepreneurship are for the country“ (Die Welt June 19th 2020).

At this point, there is no difference in the public communication about the causes of the crisis. Both describe the crisis as the result of some kind of an external shock to the market, which triggered a recession or intensified the existing recession. IG Metall also provides diagnoses without a direct "Co-rona reference"; for example, it speaks only of a recession, which is, however, linked (in one in five PRs) to struc-tural change or the imminent transformation. A diagnosis that can be found similarly in Gesamtmetall (Gesamtmetall June 3rd 2020; June 19th 2020):

"Dulger [until November 26th 2020 president of Gesamtmetall, author's note] recalled that the crisis was making it even more difficult to earn the money needed to make necessary investments for structural change re-garding during digitization and mobility. This makes it all the more im-portant to "find our way back to a strong economy. We don't have to re-invent ourselves, but we must observe the principles of the social mar-ket economy." (ibid. June 19th 2020).

Both the union and the employers' association are convinced that the particular se-verity of the crisis was largely caused by the virus pandemic (Table 6). In summary, the common diagnosis is a crisis triggered by market failure but based on exogenous factors (the pandemic).

Table 5: Crisis diagnosis by organization

	IG Metall	Gesamtmetall
Virus/Pandemic	22% (9)	
Economic situation/Recession through Virus/Shutdown	22% (9)	70% (14)
Only Recession	14.6% (6)	
Structural Change and Recession	19.5% (8)	10% (2)
Administrative Causes: Leading/Planing	2.4% (1)	
Structural Change	2.4% (1)	
Others	2.4% (1)	
No Diagnose Diagnois	14.6% (6)	20% (4)
Total (N)	100% (41)	100% (20)

If we assume an ideal-typical understanding that a functioning arrangement of social partnership is based, among other things, on "a close bond between the social part-ners, rooted in shared values and ideas, supported by common or at least not cross-cutting interests" (Kiess 2019: 345), there is no blatant conflict of ideas and patterns of interpretation at the diagnostic level, at least at present. On the contrary, the virus represents a non-personified culprit, which, according to the current diagnosis, is the trigger or amplifier of the current situation for both parties. The case of MAN is an exception, where IG Metall points to previous mismanagement of employers as a trigger for the crisis (IG Metall September 11th 2020). Concerning mechanical engi-neering, it emphasizes that "insufficient personnel planning and a low level of in-vestment" during "boom years" (IG Metall June 23rd 2020) should not lead to a re-duction in training positions and employment because of the crisis. An abstract virus as the supposed trigger of the crisis is less conflicting to frame from the trade union side than, for example, bankers were in the global economic crisis of 2009ff.

Table 6: Responsibility for the crisis and its course by organization

	IG Metall	Gesamtmetall
Virus/Pandemic	43.9% (18)	60% (12)
State/Politics		5% (1)
Economy	7.3% (3)	
Firms/Companies	7.3% (3)	
N.N.	41.5% (17)	35% (7)
Total (N)	100% (41)	100% (20)

Prognostic Framing

In the dimension of prognostic framing, the explicit reference to the term “social partnership” is of particular interest to our research question. However, Gesamtmetall did not use this term in any of its PRs, while IG Metall referred to social partners or social partnership in only 5 of its 55 PRs published during the period under study. This is also reflected in the categorization of the published press releases in the variable "Reference to the other social partner". Gesamtmetall referred to the "collective bargaining parties" only twice (March 20th 2020; March 25th 2020), namely in the course of the concluded collective bargaining negotiations in North Rhine-Westphalia and assessed the wage restraint of IG Metall as a "sign of reason" (ibid. March 20th 2020), since it was currently a matter of "sheer existence for many companies". This is not surprising as it reflects employers’ genuine interest in low wages, however, uncompromisingly insisting on wage restraint may come at the cost of weakening the meaning of social partnership. Otherwise, Gesamtmetall indeed mainly referred to the state and not to the demands of the trade unions or the role of social partnership in the current situation.

For IG Metall, the dispute with employers played a more significant role in public communications. In almost half of its PRs, it referred to employers and their associations. In three cases, it even published joint press releases together with employers' associations, for example on April 9th 2020 when, together with the VDA (German Association of the Automotive Industry), VDIK (Association of International Motor Vehicle Manufacturers) and ZDK (German Association of Motor Trades and Repairs), they called for economic "activities to be ramped up again as quickly as can be justified in terms of health". Of particular interest is the joint declaration of the "Alliance for the Future of Industry", a consultation conference of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy (IG Metall June 24th 2020). In addition to the joint diagnosis that the Corona crisis is a recession (not itself a structural crisis) that meets structural change, the declaration included a joint commitment to engage in a dialogue process "with proposals on how to overcome the Corona pandemic and its consequences, how to secure economic substance and how to preserve qualified jobs" (ibid.). Together, the associations state: "The task now is to focus on the importance of a strong, competitive industry with a strong social partnership as the basis for securing prosperity in Germany and Europe" (ibid.). Gesamtmetall signed the corresponding declaration along with its umbrella association but abstained from publishing or commenting on it further.

Especially around labour day (IG Metall April 29th 2020; May 1st 2020), IG Metall president Hofmann demanded that companies should hold their employees. In a conservative newspaper he wrote on April 29th 2020:

"Crisis management and transformation through digitalization and decarbonization are not parallel processes but have thrust towards the radically changing world of work and society. This involves conflicts of interest and their democratic resolution. Trade unions with the capacity to act and the collective bargaining and social partnership that builds on them have a central role to play if this world of work is to be socially, ecologically and democratically structured."

While, as shown, for IG Metall a reference to social partnership is an important message way beyond collective bargaining, and at least the chairman clearly outlines his belief in a "democratic resolution" of "conflicts of interest" (ibid.), such references occur at Gesamtmetall exclusively in the course of the upcoming collective bargaining rounds. Comments or reactions to union positions appeared primarily on-demand in corresponding newspaper interviews. For example, in an interview and with a view to the next round of collective bargaining, Gesamtmetall President Dulger called for repeated wage sacrifices by the unions: "Everyone must contribute to overcoming the crisis, including the employees" (Süddeutsche Zeitung October 14th 2020).

As in the past global economic crisis, the Corona crisis entails (at least for the moment) a return to the state. This is also reflected in the addressees of the demands of IG Metall and Gesamtmetall, which focus strongly on the state as the savior from the current situation (Table 7): half of all press releases addressed the state. Gesamtmetall, for example, demanded more financial aid and relief in every third PR and the suspension or reduction of taxes in more than 40% of the PRs (not shown). For IG Metall, the focus was on demands for financial aid for employees, in particular by topping up the short-time allowances, job security, and socio-ecological transformation. Whether this can be interpreted - at least on the rhetorical level - as a desired return to corporatist structures is not clear, however. At least on the part of employers, this can rather be understood as a demand for short-term crisis-related support, without, however, wanting to engage in a stronger involvement in the corporatist triangle in the long term beyond the crisis.

Table 7: Addressees of crisis-related press-releases

	IG Metall	Gesamtmetall
State/Ministries/Politics	43.9% (18)	65% (13)
EU-States and EU	7.3% (3)	
The Economy and Firms	9.8% (4)	25% (5)
Employers´ Associations	4.9% (2)	
Society	2.4% (1)	
Collective Bargaining Partners	2.4% (1)	10% (2)
IG Metall and IGM Works Councils	24.4% (10)	
Workers and People, Employees in jobs with systematic relevance	4.9% (2)	
Total (N)	100% (41)	100% (20)

The greatest overlaps between the two conflicting parties - in addition to the central appeal of the state - can be seen in the demands for an extension of the short-time work scheme, investments to stimulate the economy (albeit with different empha-ses), and financial aid and financial relief for businesses. As described above, both view the government's actions to date as largely positive. The biggest common criti-cism of the German government's policy, however, was the lack of a car premium. For example, Gesamtmetall President Dulger said:

"I don't often agree with IG Metall head Jörg Hofmann, but in this case I do. We need such a broad-based economic stimulus program, especially to overcome the reluctance of many consumers to spend. Such an eco-nomic stimulus package also includes a car premium. Such a car premi-um has the broad-est impact on the economy" (Augsburger Allgemeine May 27th 2020).

The demand for a car premium is a good example of the point at which the interests of IG Metall and Gesamtmetall meet: securing industry-specific sales and thus the labour market.

5 Summary

Our analysis of the crisis framing by IG Metall and Gesamtmetall can be summarized in the following points:

(1) Regarding the motivational or significance framing, both conflicting parties framed the crisis as a threatening challenge and warn of the risks for employees and companies. Of course, the starting point of the crisis, the Corona pandemic, is very much present in the framing of the crisis. But the focus is on its impact on the econ-omy. As those affected, they name their clientele, whose interests they frame ac-cordingly with reference to the Corona crisis. Both actors played their part in the tra-ditional arenas of social partnership and brought their interests to bear, for example, at crisis summits of the federal gov-ernment and in the extended policymaking pro-cess (influencing the public, lobbying, etc.). In addition to traditional collective bar-gaining policy, the political arena plays a particularly important role in crisis manage-ment.

(2) We identified only a few differences in the diagnostic framing, i.e. the crisis di-agnoses of the parties overlap to a great extent. Both frame the crisis as an econom-ic recession triggered or intensified by the pandemic that, at the same time, hit an industry undergoing structural change. Both primarily name the virus or the pandem-ic as the cause or culprit for the ongoing developments and associated challenges. Thus, the cause of the crisis - again for both sides - is without an addressee, reduc-ing opportunities for blame attribution and conflict. IG Metall sticks to its role as an industrial union and largely refrains from criticizing any circumstances that might ex-acerbate the crisis (health protection, underfunding of the healthcare system, etc.) or leaves this to the umbrella organization and other sectoral unions.

(3) As regards the prognostic framing, the collective bargaining parties frequently articulate joint de-mands on the state following a similar perception and interpretation of the crisis. Both call for investment and, in particular, a car premium, the extension of the short-time work scheme, and aid for businesses. In contrast to the diagnostic dimension, these demands differ primarily against the background of para-digmatic knowledge as already elaborated by Kiess (2019): while IG Metall banks on increas-ing de-mand to support the economy, Gesamtmetall argues for the supply side im-provement of conditions. Above these ideological disagreements, we argue that the very one-sided reference on the part of IG Metall to the reconciliation of interests suggests a very defensive position.

At this point, a critical review of the crisis framing of the bargaining parties is indicat-ed, which attempts

to conclude these public positions regarding the future viability of social partnership.

First of all, common interests in struggles to safeguard companies and employment offer only little chance for improving the framework of conflict and for stabilizing so-cial partnership. We would also argue that identifying the virus as responsible for the current crisis leaves only little room for structural improvements. These common in-terests and assumptions may help to avoid new fundamental conflict but they are ei-ther too much common sense or too unspecified to have an impact. Moreover, while IG Metall is trying to achieve a balance of interests and is also making demands on behalf of companies and the industry in general, Gesamtmetall is acting purely self-centred. IG Metall's prognostic crisis framing is therefore divided: on the one hand, it acts conflictual, insisting on employment protecting and pointing at wrongdoings of managements. On the other hand, it clings to and appeals to the rationality of social partnership.

On the part of Gesamtmetall, however, IG Metall does not play any role outside of the obligatory reference to it in the course of collective bargaining rounds. Even the wage waiver in the collective bargaining round at the beginning of the crisis did not lead to any sustained positive references to IG Metall or social partnership in gen-eral. On top of that, for the 2021 collective bargaining rounds, Gesamtmetall aggres-sively demands another zero round, which indicates an ongoing weakening of the union side.

The strategy of Gesamtmetall can be assessed as confrontational, which, against the backdrop of little scope for distribution, is also likely to result from the current weak-ness of the employers. The predominantly absence of (positive) references to IG Metall or the social partnership speak for a difficult relationship. (Positive) Refer-ences and the emphasis on the collective bargaining partnership are linking strongly to wage restraint in the current situation. The common positive reference to short-time work and to securing companies' liquidity, speaks for a functioning social part-nership with immediate reference patterns and congruent interest positions.

From the first two levels of framing, one could speak of a functioning partnership "rooted in common [...] ideas" (Kiess 2019: 345) and a similar interpretation of the crisis. Further, the potential for (renewed) corporatist cooperation in dealing with the crisis can be inferred at first glance. Both parties – albeit to different degrees – op-erate within the social partnership framework and relate to each other directly or in-directly. A lack of ambition to change the framework as a whole illustrates both sides' defensive attitudes. At the same time, it is evident that the positive experiences of the past crisis only resonate in the common reference to short-time work. Thus, while perception and interpretation show strong overlaps, our analysis reveals that the social partnership is under pressure, especially in the prognostic interpretation of the future, concerning references to the counterpart, and regarding the right cri-sis management strategy.

On the part of Gesamtmetall, the continued acceptance of IG Metall as a partner at eye level is linked to further wage depression in the current collective bargaining round. Moreover, even the protection of the core workforce no longer appears to be guaranteed. IG Metall is thus faced with the challenge of either taking a proactive collective stand against layoffs and site closures or retreating to a "particularistic company or corporate corporatism" (Dörre and Schmalz, 2013: 30). The second path will inevitably continue the erosion of trade union power, and thus social part-nership. The first path, we argue, holds the potential for its revitalization, provided that in the course of it the social partners achieve a pacification of the dispute based on partnership, and in the long term the associations can stop the decline of their memberships.

At this point, a comparative look at the analysis of Kiess (2019: 304 ff.) investigating the framing of the financial crisis helps assess the current situation of the "first world" of social partnership in Germany:

Here, the the short-lived revival of the so-cial partnership was reflected in the crisis communication of the conflict parties, which, especially in the months after the crisis, referred to each other in public and were "oriented towards balance and cooperation" (Kiess 2019: 305). We cannot confirm this concerning the Corona crisis at present. First, because the reference on the part of Gesamtmetall to the social partner IG Metall or the social partnership largely does not exist and is limited only to the collective bargaining rounds. Second-ly, in contrast to the aforementioned common denominator of short-time work, 14.6% of the PRs of IG Metall (or 33.3% of all the PRs relating to the social partner) were confrontational.

6 Conclusion

The framing perspective adopted here can shed light on the communicative behav-ior of social partners and it helps assessing the (discursive) room of maneuver of social partners. Framing is not just talk as it builds on the actor's assessment of the current situation and implicitly or explicitly includes their aims and interests vis a vis the state and the social partner. Regarding our initial research question, we corrobo-rate that the social partnership in the metal sector is under increasing pressure in the Corona crisis and given the ongoing structural change. The threat of layoffs (even of permanent employees) and site closures right at the core of the German Model puts the relationship to the test. At the same time, the social partnership has not lost its narrative potential at least in the case of IG Metall. Appeals to social part-nership responsibility continue to play a major role in public and policy debates. Gesamtmetall is visibly taking a more confrontational course and linking the mainte-nance of good relations - not their improvement! - to further concessions. Against this background, one potentially interesting question for further research could aim at importance of the growth strategies pursued by German social partners which may explain the harmonistic position of IG Metall. In order to learn more about the process of preference formation, it could be promising to pursue a research strate-gy of triangulation through contrasting the framing perspective through expert inter-views with the representatives of the organizations involved.

The time for a final resume of the corona crisis has not yet come. With short-time-schemes and the temporary suspension of the insolvency regime, two of the central economic policy measures have been extended until 2022. It is, to use an analogy from the field of thermodynamics, only when the snow melts that the shit will show. The 2021 collective bargaining round, however, may illustrate in the short term which of the outlined paths will continue. With the trade union's demand for reduc-ing working hours and, from Gesamtmetall, the demand for wage depression, there is little ground for peaceful negotiations. Given this escalation, even though a com-promise in this round will be found, but also the escalation of the structural condi-tions, we may sketch out two scenarios: IG Metall takes up the "sword on the wall" (Müller-Jentsch 1997: 212) and demonstrates its capacity for conflict not only in the current round of collective bargaining but in the coming years. Provided that the conflict can subsequently be steered back into institutionalized channels, and IG Metall can at the same time expand its organizational power in other areas to prevent further retreats from collective agreements, the social partnership could be revital-ized at least in the first world, i.e., in core industries of the German model.

In a second scenario, both parties agree to make concessions, e.g., in the form of further decentralization of collective bargaining and/or wage sacrifice in exchange for job security. This would positively change their relationship in the short term, but would presumably continue the erosion since it would not stabilize power relations in the long term. IG Metall would increasingly have its place in this only as a commenta-tor on events, virtually "as a passenger in the back seat" (Streeck 2016: 58), without being

able to reach into the steering wheel. In any case, already the concessions made in the 2020 bargaining round did not lead to lasting positive development of relations. Rather, demands for more concessions grew even louder.

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