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Abstract submission

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Trade unions and the new corporate sustainability

The onset of the 2008 financial crisis and growing concerns about the state of the planet have increased the pressures for changing ‘business as usual’ practices. Traditional questions about corporate accountability – i.e. corporate externalities; shareholders primacy; managers’ remuneration – are becoming more and more prominent in regulatory debates. We are witnessing the convergence of corporate governance issues and broader issues of social, climate and energy governance. In this context, recent analyses have focused on the twin phenomena of financialization and marketization of climate change policies, mainly putting investors and business leaders in the spotlight. However, little academic work has been done on the agency and role of trade unions and their potential in supporting a more green and just economy.

This paper contributes to a better understanding of the role of trade unions in the corporate accountability domain, focusing mainly on EU-level debates. It does so by discussing two distinct perspectives. On the one hand, the increasing policies overlap between corporate governance and corporate accountability can arguably be interpreted as a regulatory attempt to deflect ‘hard’ questions of corporate control to a ‘softer’ domain of corporate accountability. In this process, trade union demands for e.g. worker participation become tied up or even co-opted in discussions about reporting and accountability. On the other hand, a socio-legal perspective would discuss the limits of traditional command-and-control regulation and the opportunities for a new approach. In particular it highlights the opportunity for trade unions to play a stronger regulatory role within a ‘transparency coalition’ that promotes long-term investments and pension funds activism. The paper draws on recent developments in EU corporate accountability and corporate governance to discuss these contrasting perspectives.