The Power Resources Approach:
Developments and Challenges

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Introduction

Instead of dismissing labour as a product of the past, the study of labour has been revitalised over the past two decades by approaches that emphasise the ability of organised labour to act strategically. This new branch of research on trade union renewal has challenged the discourse of a general decline of organised labour, focusing instead on innovative organising strategies, new forms of participation and campaigning in both the Global North and the Global South (Turner, Katz and Hurd, 2001; Clawson, 2003; Milkman, 2006; Agarwala, 2013; Murray, 2017). The focus of these studies has not been the institutional setting of labour relations or the overall impact of major trends like globalisation on labour, but rather the *strategic choice* in responding to new challenges and changing contexts.

In the discussion on trade union renewal, the power resources approach (PRA) has emerged as a research heuristic. The PRA is founded on the basic premise that organised labour can successfully defend its interests by collective mobilisation of power resources. This idea has significantly shaped the way scholars are dealing with the issue of union revitalisation and labour conflict, as studies from different world regions have examined union renewal as a process of utilising existing power resources while attempting to develop new ones (Von Holdt and Webster, 2008; Chun, 2009; Dörre, 2010a; McCallum, 2013; Julian, 2014; Melleiro and Steinhilber, 2016; Lehndorff, Dribbusch and Schulten, 2017; Ludwig and Webster, 2017; Xu and Schmalz, 2017). Many of these studies were part of close collaboration between scholars and unionists and therefore can be understood as being a form of "*organic public sociology* in which the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counter-public" (Burawoy, 2005: 7).[1]

The articles of this Special Issue are part of this debate. They are results of an international research project – "Trade Unions in Transformation" – initiated by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in spring 2015, aiming at identifying and analysing innovative forms of trade unionism in different world regions. Most of the papers were discussed (or even co-authored) with union actors involved in the struggles presented in this Special Issue. They all draw on the power resources approach in order to analyse the process of union renewal. This editorial introduces the analytical tool of power resources by analysing its development and by presenting its basic tenets. In what follows, we will first describe the origins of the power resources approach. In the next section we will present a specific variety of the approach applied in this Special Issue. After that, we will discuss the relevance

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[1] For an attempt to reframe and decolonise the debate on public sociology see Lozano (2018).

of the strategic context in applying the power resources approach by referring to the papers in this Special Issue, and finally we will discuss the mobilisation of labour power in societies in a state of fragile stability and in marginalised communities in developed countries.

A Brief History of the Power Resources Approach

The origins of the PRA lie in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the re-discovery of class as an analytical category and as a mobilising and organising principle among left scholars and social activists. The re-emergence of industrial conflict as well as the rise of the New Left and the student movement had shattered the "end of ideology thesis" challenging the hegemony of pluralism, neo-corporatism and orthodox Marxism. Although the growth of class theory was a global phenomenon, the form it took was shaped by the different historical and social contexts.

In Europe, Walter Korpi (1974, 1983) was a pioneer in demonstrating that the conflicts of interest manifested in the political arenas of the European welfare state could be seen as a form of democratic class struggle. In the United States (US), Erik Olin Wright introduced a sophisticated version of Marxist class theory and was to become a key figure in developing the PRA. Another more implicit influence on the power resources approach stems from social movement studies in the United States. Similar to the concept of power resources, the resource mobilisation approach assumes that mobilisation depends on movements' access and ability to accumulate collective resources and to utilise those resources in collective action (McCarthy and Zald, 1977).

Class theory and worker agency came to the fore in the semi-industrialised countries of the Global South in the 1970s and 1980s. A new worker militancy and a new form of unionism emerged that went beyond collective bargaining and actively engaged in political and community issues. These unions challenged authoritarian rule and the lack of social infrastructure in the working-class communities of countries such as Brazil, South Africa, the Philippines and South Korea. This new wave of worker militancy was labelled social movement unionism as it blurred the demarcation between unions as formal organisations and social movements as loosely structured networks of action (Webster, 1988; Lambert, 1990; Seidman, 1994; Moody, 1997; Gray, 2006). In the 1990s the concept of social movement unionism was to travel northwards where it was used to describe union revitalisation in the United States (Lipsig-Mumme and Webster, 2012). At this time, organised labour in most developed countries was in decline. With the rise of globalisation and the growing precarisation and informalisation of work, the overall context had changed dramatically since the late 1970s (Munck, 2002). Trade union density (the share of union members of the overall workforce) dropped fast. For instance, between 1980 and 2000 in the United States it fell from 20.9 per cent to 11.9 per cent, while in France it plummeted from 18.3 per cent to only 7 per cent (Mayer, 2004; Visser, 2016).

It was in this context that a second wave of the discussion on labour power started and the basic concept of the PRA was created by Erik Olin Wright (2000) and Beverly Silver (2003). Two concepts – structural power as the power stemming from labour's position in the economic system, and associational power arising from collective political or trade union workers' associations – laid the foundation for the discussion on the sources of labour power. In the following decade, scholars from different world regions added conceptual innovations to the approach. The concept of

symbolic power was added into the power resources approach by researchers in the United States (Chun, 2005, 2009; Fine 2006) and the Global South (Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout, 2008), arguing that workers with limited structural power were able to compensate for the lack of associational power "by drawing upon the contested arena of culture and public debates about values" (Chun, 2009: 7). Following a similar line of reasoning, researchers from South Africa argued that workers in the informal sector are able to mobilise logistical power instead of structural power through street blockades or other forms of joint action by trade unions together with social movements (Webster et al., 2008: 12–13). Researchers from Germany discussed the role of institutions for labour power, arguing that organised labour can draw upon institutional power resources such as institutionalised labour rights and institutionalised dialogue procedures, sources of power that labour can rely on even when structural and associational power is weakened (Dörre, Holst and Nachtwey, 2009; Urban, 2013; Schmalz and Dörre, 2013). In addition to these debates on the nature of labour power, scholars from Canada argued that specific capabilities are needed to mobilise the individual power resources (Lévesque and Murray, 2010, 2013). Taken together, this discussion led to a vast body of divergent varieties of the PRA, thereby further developing single power resources or exploring how these sources of power are interconnected (Chun, 2009; Lévesque and Murray, 2010; AK Strategic Unionism, 2013; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013; McGuire, 2014; Brookes, 2015).

Labour Power and Power Resources

The following conceptualisation of power resources draws on these experiences. It adds two further power resources, institutional power and societal power, to the original sources of labour power as introduced by Wright (2000) and Silver (2003). The relationship between the four power resources is complex, sometimes conflicting, and not to be understood simply as an add-on (AK Strategic Unionism, 2013). Furthermore, it is hardly possible for unions to advance all power resources at the same time. Therefore, it is not so much the extent of power resources, but rather their development and specific combinations which are crucial for unions' assertiveness. In the following, we outline key features of the approach coupled with examples of their application (see Figure 1).

The PRA is founded on the basic premise that the workforce can successfully defend its interests by collective mobilisation of power resources in the structurally asymmetric and antagonistic relationship between capital and labour. This notion builds on Max Weber's (1968: 53) definition of power which is understood as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance". Thus, labour power is perceived first and foremost as the power to do something (*power to*) and not as power to determine the rules of play *(power over)* (Lévesque and Murray, 2010). Labour power can be mobilised through different sources of power or power resources, but its use is always embedded in social relationships and power relations. This has two implications. First, the PRA needs to be understood as a relational concept, as employers are able to mobilise power resources to disorganise or come to an agreement with organised labour. Second, the primary concern of the power resources approach is not only to analyse structural power relations of this kind, but rather to understand the ability of wage earners to assert their interests within the given general context. In other words, labour power can be used in

specific historical phases to significantly alter these societal structures; the main objective of the PRA is to analyse the spaces of action of trade unions and employees under given circumstances.
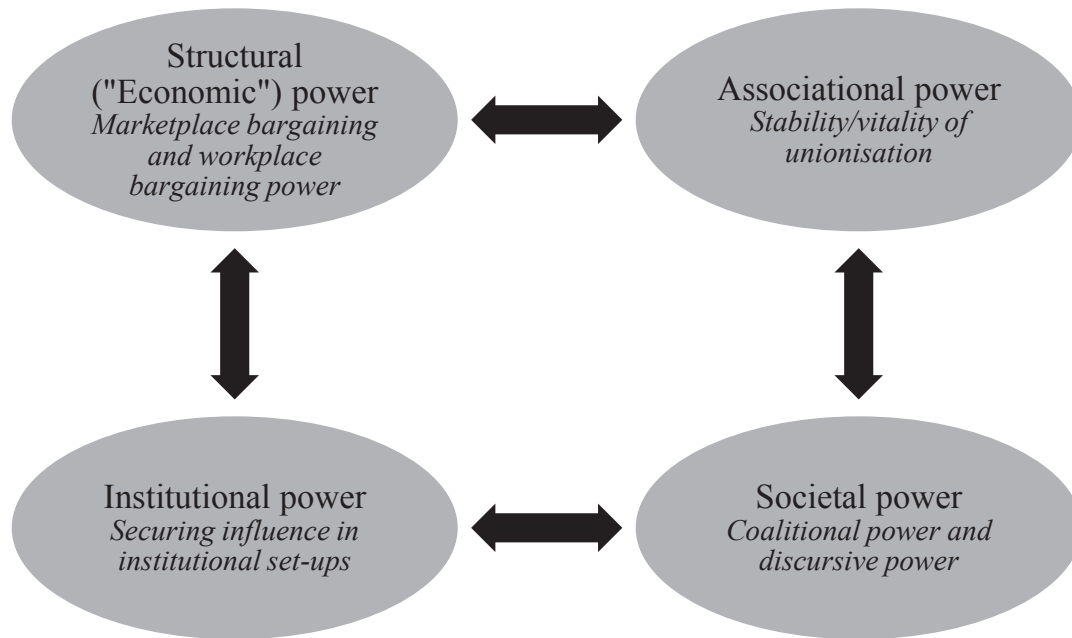
Source: Expanded chart based on Gerst, Pickshaus and Wagner (2011)

Figure 1. Trade union power resources

Structural power

Structural power refers to the position of wage earners in the economic system (Wright, 2000: 962; Silver, 2003: 13ff.). It is a primary power resource as it is available to workers and employees even without collective-interest representation. It arises "out of the type of dependencies between the social parties at the place of work" (Jürgens, 1984: 61) and also in the labour market. Structural power rests on the power to cause disruption (*disruptive power*) and as such to interrupt or restrict the valorisation of capital (Piven, 2008: Ch. 2). Following Beverly Silver's (2003: 13) argument, one can distinguish two forms of structural power: workplace bargaining power and marketplace bargaining power.

Workplace bargaining power depends on the status of workers and employees in the production process. It is mobilised by the refusal to continue working. In addition to strikes and sit-ins, it can also encompass covert forms of industrial conflict such as sabotage or go-slows (Brinkmann et al., 2008: 27). This means that workplace bargaining power is not always exercised centrally, but sometimes spontaneously by smaller groups. By stopping work, wage earners can cause major costs

for capitalists and force them to offer better wages or working conditions. Wage earners in sectors with high labour productivity, highly integrated production processes or important export branches have a particularly high degree of workplace bargaining power as local work stoppages have an impact that goes far beyond their workplace (Silver, 2003: 13). Workplace bargaining power is contested, however – capital tries to restrict workplace bargaining power by relocating production sites, changing the way production is organised or through rationalisation measures (Harvey, 1990: 96).

Workplace bargaining power is not only exercised in the production process, but also at other points in the capital cycle. For instance, wage earners in the transport sector have *logistical power,* which can slow the circulation of capital and labour via certain transport routes or distribution channels. In such cases they take their structural power out of the workplace and onto the landscape, often in association with other social movements. Logistical power can for instance be mobilised by street blockades by social groups who are not wage earners, such as informal self-employed workers (Webster, 2015: 119). An example of a successful mobilisation of logistical power is the self-employed minibus and motorcycle taxi drivers (boda-bodas) in Uganda who managed to organise despite informality and a weak influence on government policies (see Spooner and Mwanika, this issue)[2].

Marketplace bargaining power is the second form of structural power. It is the product of a tight labour market; this type of power exists given the "possession of rare qualifications and skills demanded by employers, low unemployment" and the "ability to fully withdraw from the labour market and to live off other sources of income" (Silver, 2003: 13f.). Marketplace bargaining power is exercised subtly and is only felt indirectly. For instance, employees can simply change their job without fearing unemployment when marketplace bargaining power is high, thereby producing extra training costs for employers. To prevent this, higher wages are paid.

Marketplace bargaining power varies depending on the structure of the labour market or, in other words, its segmentation into core workforces, those in vulnerable employment, the unemployed and other groups. Government regulation also imposes limits on the labour market, for instance through immigration policy, which influences the marketplace bargaining power of wage earners (Carr, 1968; Silver, 2003: 20ff.). The limits set are often tightened by ethnic and gender-specific division lines. The overall result is that staggered hierarchies prevail between individuals and groups of wage earners. Such divides become particularly clear in the informal sector in the Global South: informal workers have limited workplace and marketplace bargaining power, while the powerful and relatively well-paid workers in major industrial companies are often considered to enjoy a privileged position.

What is required to successfully apply structural power is the skill to optimally combine structural power with organisational capacities in the existing institutional setting and to develop an effective strike strategy. Conflicts can be dealt with more efficiently by deploying the weapon of striking in a targeted way instead of using it repeatedly without any real effect. Historically, changes in the accumulation of capital have always also influenced workplace and marketplace bargaining power (Silver, 2003: 13ff.; Dörre, 2010a: 873f.). The introduction of Fordist assembly-line work, for

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[2] For the reader's convenience, a list of the articles appearing in this Special Issue can be found at the end of the Reference list.

instance, meant that individual industrial workers could interrupt the production process virtually at the touch of a button. This influenced the trade unions' power to act. In some cases, such as the Russian auto industry, workers structural power is even high enough to enable grassroots plant-level unions to challenge the existing institutional system (see Hinz, this issue).

The decline of the American and of most European trade unions starting in the 1970s was ostensibly due to the dwindling structural power of wage earners. Not only did plant relocations and the focus on shareholder value undermine their workplace bargaining power, the supply-side economic policies of governments like those of Thatcher (from 1979) and Reagan (from 1981), following the neo-liberal watershed, contributed to cementing mass unemployment and weakening marketplace bargaining power. However, there are countervailing global trends to be seen as well. For instance, capital relocations have contributed in some countries of the Global South (such as China, South East Asia, Mexico) and also in Eastern Europe to the emergence of new worker milieus with a high degree of workplace bargaining power.

Associational power

Associational power arises "from workers uniting to form collective political or trade union workers' associations" (Brinkmann and Nachtwey, 2010: 25). It pools the primary power of workers and employees and can even compensate for a lack of structural power "without fully replacing it however" (Brinkmann and Nachtwey, 2010: 25). In contrast to structural power, this requires an organisational process to take place and collective actors to emerge who are capable of producing and executing strategies (Silver, 2003: 13ff.). Erik Olin Wright (2000: 963f.) distinguishes between three levels at which such actors come into play (see Table 1). At the workplace – and as such in connection with workplace bargaining power – there are works groups, shop steward councils and works councils. At the sectoral level – and as such closely connected to marketplace bargaining power – trade unions are the major players. Finally, in the political system – and as such in connection with societal power – it is above all workers' parties that represent the interests of wage earners. Above the levels described there are global union federations (GUFs) working transnationally and supporting wage earners, especially in countries with weak organisational or institutional resources. For instance, in the case of the Turkish delivery sector, the small transport workers' union TÜMTİS was supported by the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) and UNI Global Union (UNI) in its struggle against UPS and DHL for higher wages and better working conditions (see Birelma, this issue). Consequently, in times of globalisation, *articulation* – that is, constructing multi-level interaction and understanding, linking the local and the global across space – is a key capability of trade union action (Lévesque and Murray, 2010: 343).

Member numbers are usually cited as a reliable indicator for determining associational power. Karl Marx (1974: 91) was aware of the fact that the "power of the workmen" lay in the "force of numbers". In spite of the great variations in the significance and relevance of membership of trade unions from country to country, the following trend does apply – the higher the degree of unionisation in individual sectors, the stronger the works councils/committees and the higher the number of members of workers' parties, the higher the probability that they will successfully represent the wage earners. Trade unions play a special role because they offer the possibility of overarching coordination, larger than individual workplaces and autonomous representation of interests, which can counteract weak representation in the political system (Deppe, 1979: 192).

Associational power is not based solely on the number of members, though. Other factors are also of crucial significance (Lévesque and Murray, 2010: 336ff.), We discuss these briefly in the following paragraphs.

Table 1. Levels of labour power

	Structural power	Associational power	Institutional power	Societal power
Applied in the form of	Disruption of the valorisation of capital	Formation of workers' associations	Referring to legally fixed rights	Interaction with other social actors
At the level of the workplace	Labour unrest Changing jobs	Grassroots works group Works council Shop-steward bodies	Works constitution	Coalitional and discursive power by their very nature transcend the boundaries between the levels
At the industry-wide level	Economic strikes	Trade unions	Collective bargaining autonomy	
At the level of society	Political strikes	Workers' parties	Constitution Law and legislation	

Source: Own chart.

Infrastructural resources: Trade unions require material and human resources to be able to carry out their work. By material resources we mean the financial capacity of a trade union. This consists – alongside a full-to-the-brim strike fund amassed from reserves – of buildings for meetings, training and officials who earn a regular income. Trade unions are not only reliant on the work of full-time staff, they also need to pool certain staff capabilities to be successful. This includes technical specialist staff, scientific research institutes, education establishments, and above all experienced volunteers and permanent staff.

Organisational efficiency: To exert associational power, efficient organisational structures are necessary (Behrens, Hurd and Waddington, 2004). Only then can trade unions deploy their infrastructural resources effectively and conduct work action. An efficient organisational structure implies an efficient division of labour in the organisation, established and functioning working processes and a sensible distribution of resources (Behrens et al., 2004: 125ff.). The organisational structure also has to match the specific organisational context as the case study of NASVI, an organisation of informal street vendors in India, shows (see Kumar and Singh, this issue). NASVI was formed as an association of several trade unions and other organisations to increase its influence on daily politics. Organisational efficiency of unions is often challenged by changes in the labour market or company restructuring, thereby pushing unions to show high *organisational flexibility in* adapting organisational routines and traditions to reflect and support changes in markets and politics.

Member participation: In addition to the "willingness to pay", union members also need to

demonstrate a "willingness to act" and play an active role in measures such as strikes, campaigns and in the internal discussion process (Offe and Wiesenthal, 1980: 80). If the unions' full-time staff is not representative of the grassroots members, this can be an obstacle (Lévesque, Murray and Queux, 2005). Participation can only be ensured if the relationship between active trade unionists and "normal" members is based on a well-established "system of expectations and accomplishments" (Beaud and Pialoux, 1999: 363). The studies on trade union renewal highlight membership participation as one of the dimensions which is crucial for trade union renewal as democracy and participation are likely to reduce gaps of representation between leadership and members and allows for new groups of members, like young or precarious workers, to express their set of values in the union. Participation can range from direct democracy to campaigns which enhance membership participation, and to rank-and file-involvement in organising (Turner, 2005; Voss, 2010). However, the relationship between member participation and organisational efficiency is not one of simple correlation (Voss, 2010: 377ff.). Without active participation, trade unions tend to turn into bureaucratic organisations, while a very high level of member participation is difficult to sustain and may in the long run undermine efficiency.

Internal cohesion: Finally, associational power builds on solidarity between trade union members (Hyman, 2001: 169f.; Lévesque and Murray, 2010: 336f.). The existence of a collective identity plays a key role. It is formed through social networks, shared everyday experiences and ideological common ground. Internal cohesion in the organisation is crucial to be able to conduct industrial action successfully, overcome crisis situations and to pursue political projects. However, collective identities of workers transform as social milieus change, and thus need to be renewed constantly through organisational action. To achieve this objective, unions have to rely on the capability of *intermediation*, that is, developing a collective interest (consensus-building) out of conflicting demands both from within and outside of the union (Lévesque and Murray, 2010.: 341f.).

To effectively harness associational power, associations have to optimise their structures so that associational action can be reconciled with the underlying structural conditions and the interests of the members. Organisational flexibility can be enhanced by strategies such as organising new member groups, targeted reallocation of resources, changing the staff structure with a new generation of staff, new forms of member participation or "salient knowledge" (Ganz, 2000: 1012) – that is, specific local, biographical knowledge and skills.

The decline of US and many European trade unions was expressed most saliently through their dwindling associational power. The declining membership numbers in particular attest to this. In turn, this led to the shrinking of trade unions' infrastructural resources. With the weakening of the traditional working-class milieu in countries such as the United States, France, Germany and the United Kingdom, the internal cohesion of the organisations was also weakened; many members were less willing to get active and become involved. Some unions have managed to defy this decline by changing their organisational structures and recruiting new groups of members, for instance the German IG Metall (Schmalz and Thiel, 2017). In some countries of the Global South, new trade union movements have been emerging since the 1980s (South Africa, Brazil, South Korea, South East Asia, etc.). This had a great deal to do with the growing industrial sectors in these countries, which allowed them to recruit trade union members with a high degree of workplace bargaining power (Silver, 2003: 58ff.). A challenge for trade unions worldwide remains the low representation of precarious and female workers as a result of major social trends like precarisation and feminisation of

work; the rise of the service economy also contributed to this development.

Institutional power

Institutional power is usually the result of struggles and negotiation processes based on structural power and associational power. As "a secondary form of power", such institutions constitute "a coagulated form of the two other primary forms of power" (Brinkmann and Nachtwey, 2010: 21; on the concept of secondary power see Jürgens, 1984: 61). They are often the result of a concession or as an attempt at cooperation (or co-optation) on the part of capital towards labour. New institutions usually arise at the end of cycles of labour unrest, historical-political breaks with the past (decolonisation) or were implemented when capital was dependent on the labour movement's willingness to cooperate (Ramsay, 1977; Schmalz and Weinmann, 2016: 549). Institutional power is a "double-edged sword" as it has a two-fold nature – although it may grant trade unions rights, at the same time it restricts the union's power to act. The relationship between strengthening and weakening labour rights is always the product of a unique, one-off power balance between capital and labour which has been "solidified" in co-determination institutions (Poulantzas, 1978: 123ff.). The dual nature of institutional power brings with it the challenge of reconciling the "two faces of unionism" (Webster, 1988) – the focus on the grassroots and the movement on the one hand, and institutional representation of interests on the other, or mediating between the "logic of membership" and the "logic of influence" (Schmitter and Streeck, 1981). It comes down to the ability to use institutions through lobbying and by exhausting the legal possibilities available, while at the same time remaining politically autonomous. If this is not successful, unions risk scenarios such as representation gaps or a loss of influence over daily politics.

Containment of class conflict leads to the "institutional isolation" of labour conflict (Dahrendorf, 1959: 268). This means that conflicts are separated from their political content, banished to the economic sphere and dealt with inside individual institutions. This produces specific action routines by trade unions, employer associations and works councils. Here, the type of institutional regulation is key (Müller-Jentsch, 1997). There are different types such as legal guarantees (freedom of association, the right to strike, etc.), the legal institutional framework (labour courts, etc.), decision-making competences in individual policy fields (economics, labour market, etc.) and the collective bargaining system or workplace representation (co-determination, health and safety, etc.). Thus, the institutionalisation of class conflict goes hand in hand with its fixation in law and the emergence of different levels of institutional power. Institutional power is, thus, established at the same levels at which associational power is exercised and class compromises are forged (Wright, 2000: 963) – the political system, the arena of collective bargaining, and the workplace (see Table 1). Here, too, institutional power resources have developed at the supranational level, as a result of International Labour Organization (ILO) social and labour standards, for instance, which can play a role in conflicts at the national level. Transnational trade union actors usually aim to mobilise institutional power resources at various levels. For instance, in the case of the cooperation between IG Metall and the United Automobile Workers (UAW), UAW tried to mobilise (modestly successfully) institutional power resources at the plant level to reach a recognition agreement at Volkswagen Chatanooga in the United States (see Fichter, this issue).

The unique feature of institutional power is its steadfastness over time. It is rooted in the fact that institutions lay down basic social compromises transcending economic cycles and short-term

political changes. Trade unions can continue to use institutional power resources even if their associational and structural power is shrinking. One key question, therefore, is how stable institutionalised resources are. There are different time horizons that apply here. Sometimes they are extremely far-reaching, as they – like freedom of association – are considered untouchable privileges that have constitutional standing or that have been enshrined by supranational regimes. Other institutional resources are, however, more fragile. Many corporatist alliances are based on (tripartite) institutionalised dialogue procedures and can be rescinded rather easily (Haipeter, 2012: 117f.). Consequently, institutional power does not last forever. It can be weakened by different factors such as changing underlying economic conditions, a withdrawal of employer associations or governments from dialogue procedures or full-scale attacks on institutional power (e.g. the counter-reforms during Thatcherism).

Nevertheless, institutional power has remained rather steadfast in many countries. For instance, the German case is characterised by the fact that the institutional structure has remained largely intact from a formal point of view, but since the 1980s the underlying economic conditions and the behaviour on the side of capital has changed. Dwindling workplace bargaining and associational power of the wage earners contributed to the erosion of institutions, rendering the negotiation processes between capital and labour increasingly asymmetrical (Dörre, 2010a: 894ff.). Conversely, it can also be very difficult to enshrine new institutional power resources. The Brazilian central-left governments of Lula da Silva and Rousseff (2003 to 2016), for instance, faltered at the hurdle of fundamentally reforming the labour legislation that had been in place for roughly seventy years. The new institutional power resources gained by the CUT in this time turned out to be quite fragile when the Rousseff government was overthrown by a parliamentary coup in 2016 (see Dias and Krein, this issue). But there are also historical situations in which radical changes do occur. In the wake of the Euro crisis, a rigid austerity policy was institutionalised at the European level, which in Southern Europe has gone hand in hand with massive interference in collective bargaining autonomy, labour market reforms and the restriction of employee rights (Schulten and Müller, 2013; Lehndorff et al., 2017).

Societal power

By *societal power* we mean the latitudes for action arising from viable cooperation contexts with other social groups and organisations, and society's support for trade union demands. The exercise of societal power is essentially a question of the ability to assert hegemony, that is to say to generalise the political project of the trade unions within the prevailing power constellation so that society as a whole adopts it as its own. This entails a deliberate departure from the level of the workplace and opening up the trade union's social environment as a battlefield (Ganz, 2000: 146f.; Lévesque and Murray, 2013).

There are two sources of societal power – *coalitional power* and *discursive power*. Coalitional power means having networks with other social actors at one's disposal and being able to activate these for mobilisations and campaigns (Frege, Heery and Turner, 2004: 137ff.; Tattersall, 2005; Turner, 2006; Lévesque and Murray, 2010: 344). Essentially, this type of power involves pursing common goals and entering into mutual commitments. Coalitional power is thus based on boosting one's own associational power by harnessing the resources of other players or on the trade union's ability to mobilise support from these actors. Relevant literature cites social movements, social associations,

non-governmental organisations, students and churches as typical allies (Frege et al., 2004: 151; Milkman, Bloom and Narro, 2010; Joynt and Webster, 2016: 58–67). Such coalitions can only work, however, if there are bridge-builders (Brecher and Costello, 1990; Rose, 2000: 167ff.) – people who are equally rooted in the trade union and non-trade union contexts – and if alliances go beyond selective, occasional cooperation. Coalitional power can be harnessed in workplace disputes by affording employees support in the dispute they are involved in locally. Protests and joint initiatives can also allow trade unions to exert pressure in the political system. These types of coalitions range from local alliances against the privatisation of the water supply to transnational protest networks against free trade and investment agreements such as the movement against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP).

Effective exercise of societal power is also "expressed by being able to successfully intervene in public debates on historically established underlying hegemonic structures of the public sphere" (Urban, 2013: 22; see also McGuire and Scherrer, 2015), and in doing so to assume the role of opinion leader on union-related issues. Achieving a high degree of discursive power is subject to many preconditions. It builds on trade union issues being perceived as just by the general public, and this power is particularly potent "if the feeling of being treated unjustly amongst the workforce coincides with perceptions of reality shared by broad sections of society" (Haug, 2009: 890). If moral ideas of legitimacy or the "moral economy" (Thompson, 1971: 76) are being undermined, the trade unions can build public pressure. This happens above all through scandalisation of injustices, with trade unions waging classification battles over working conditions that are considered unfair (Chun, 2009: 13ff.).

The discursive power of trade unions is only effective, however, if it is in line with prevailing views of morality. These have developed historically and are embedded in everyday thinking through stories, myths and beliefs. Trade unions thus have specific narrative resources available to them that they can deploy to exercise discursive power (Lévesque and Murray, 2010: 339f.; 2013). They usually relate to struggles and fixed standards that are rooted in society's consciousness. From resisting apartheid in South Africa all the way to the "golden age" of Fordism, relationships and references can be built to politicise feelings of unjust treatment.

Furthermore, trade unions need to offer credible interpretation patterns or "frames" and solutions to problems. They usually refer here to the successes they have achieved through their work. The problem-solving ability of the trade unions is important in order to actually be able to deploy their own narrative resources in the first place, as otherwise the organisations lack credibility. This ability also contributes to renewing narrative resources, which would otherwise lose their mobilisation power, dismissed as "old hat", which in turn would lead to the trade unions losing their appeal. A pronounced problem-solving ability contributes to political opponents accepting trade unions as a negotiation partner or – in a situation of confrontation – to fearing them as an adversary. If trade unions are seen as defenders of just causes, their social influence will increase. For discursive power it is therefore a matter of trade unions providing patterns for interpreting or *framing* burning issues. The ability to frame problems is all about strategically developing and using the societal power of the organisation. This means taking the initiative at the right time, defining a proactive and autonomous agenda within a larger context, and selecting the right issues for mobilisations (Snow, Soule and Kriesi, 2004: 384). If the trade unions fail to produce new patterns of interpretation to make these politically effective, the foundations of their coalitional and discursive power quickly

crumble and in turn the opportunity to deploy them in the battle for hegemony.

Changes in the underlying conditions also change the societal power of the trade unions. Structural economic transformation can disintegrate their social environment and erode their coalitional power. Discursive power, too, can be weakened by "factual constraints". In many European countries and in the United States, the discursive power of the unions fell relatively continuously from the late 1970s. In the 1990s in particular, trade unions were increasingly perceived as outdated "nay-sayers" who had no real alternatives to offer in the age of globalisation. The trade unions also had problems finding new allies. Not only were their own social milieus crumbling, new social movements like the green, women's and human rights movements had little in common with traditional trade union work. Conversely, the *social movement unionism* in many countries of the Global South was based on successful cooperation with social movements and a new discourse on the role of unions (Fairbrother and Webster, 2008).

This brief presentation of the four power resources implies that organised labour can build its strategy by choosing which power resources to mobilise and to develop. In reality, of course, labour does not develop its power in isolation from other powerful wielders of power, namely capital and the state. In most cases, successful collective mobilisation of power resources follows a trial-and-error process, and often in opposition to the counter-power of dominant groups. Many cases of successful strategy-building start with an organisational crisis or a stark change of context and then lead to attempts to test new strategies to develop power resources and finally to a diffusion of new concepts and organisational learning. Developing *learning capabilities* and therefore fostering the ability to learn and to diffuse learning throughout the organisation is, thus, crucial for union revitalisation.

Context Matters: Power Resources in Global Capitalism

We suggest that the concept of power resources cannot be understood as a universal and static formula but needs to be located within the strategic environment in which workers find themselves (Brinkmann et al., 2008: 19ff.; Gallas, 2016). As the historical, political and social context differs, the use of power also takes different forms, a fact that is also demonstrated by the twenty-six case studies from different parts of the world that formed part of the project of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, some of which are presented in this Special Issue. Labour power in global capitalism is unevenly distributed and structured – with major ramifications for trade unions. For instance, the structural power of workers arises from the specific incorporation of a country into global capital accumulation. Accordingly, individual groups of workers in countries of the Global South are often particularly able to assert themselves as they occupy key positions in the economy (for example, workers in seaports and airports), while equally there are large groups of informally employed workers whose structural power is limited.

In India, a country characterised by a high level of informality, as Arbind Singh and Sachin Kumar demonstrate in their article in this issue, the associational power of street vendors has not been built in the form of a conventional trade union but through associations for informal workers. Since the 1990s the numbers of street vendors have increased in Indian cities due to the erosion of the rural livelihood base, urbanisation and growing informalisation. Despite their contribution to the urban economy, street vendors faced harassment, confiscations and sudden evictions. In this

context, the National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI) was formed as an association of trade unions, community-based organisations, NGOs and individual members to successfully advocate for street vendors' rights and policy changes. Similarly, as Dave Spooner and John Mark Mwanika outline in their article, in Uganda the structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s fostered the informalisation of the transport industry. The Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (ATGWU) built informal transport workers' associational power through the affiliation of mass-membership associations of informal workers, notably representing minibus taxi workers and motorcycle taxi riders. This strategy of building a hybrid organisation has assisted the union in bridging the divide between formal and informal workers, to achieve substantial gains for informal workers and to reduce their vulnerability. Taken together, informal self-employed workers with low structural power tend to create new forms of associational power, which diverge from traditional trade unions.

A high degree of structural power on the other hand can also shape the organisational form of labour. In the growing automotive industry in Russia, workers were not able to rely on traditional unions due to their persisting close relations to the state and hostile labour relations. Sarah Hinz demonstrates that in this context, new actors such as alternative unions are emerging which help to break the path dependency of post-communist employment relations, and that workers are able to challenge capital though the disruption of production and the exercise of structural power in globally interconnected value chains. However, a too-strong reliance on structural power can also be a factor for failure as it makes the emerging unions vulnerable as organisations and reluctant to push for institutional embedding.

Varying institutional arrangements also structure the space of action of individual trade unions. Institutional power results largely from the institutional system of the individual countries – the institutional power resources in states with corporatist labour relations (Argentina, Germany, Japan, etc.) are very pronounced while wage earners in countries with regulatory patterns geared towards free market principles (Chile, Great Britain, United States) often have fewer resources. The problems of trade union work in diverging institutional settings are indicated in the contribution by Michael Fichter on the transnational cooperation of the German IG Metall and the UAW in the US automotive industry. The different stages of an intensified cooperation reveal chances and challenges for unions to build transnational solidarity and to leverage global corporate power in defence of workers' interests across borders. By drawing on the failed experience of the UAW in seeking a recognition agreement for the implementation of a works council in the Chattanooga plant, the case study demonstrates that strategies that work in the institutional setting in one country cannot easily be transferred to a different environment. Rather, in the national system of industrial relations, the struggles and agreements agreed in the past still echo today – the dual-interest representation in Germany (works councils at the level of the workplace and trade unions at industry-wide level) originates, for instance, out of the compromise struck between the classes during the post-war period, and is not simply transferable to the less-institutionalised US context, where plant unions traditionally relied on their high structural power.

The contribution by José Dari Krein and Hugo Dias on the development of the Unified Workers' Central of Brazil (CUT) during four successive governments led by the Workers' Party (PT) from 2003 to 2016 also explores the contradictory nature of institutional power. The CUT, founded in 1983 under military rule, gained support by combining activities for economic

improvements with the political struggle against the authoritarian regime and for democracy. While the CUT has maintained close links with the Workers' Party to this today, this has presented the federation with the challenge of finding ways of handling its dual role of representing the workers' interests and participating in government. The authors demonstrate that the increase in institutional power has had ambiguous effects: While the CUT was able to successfully influence government policies and to strengthen its power base, its societal power began to decline from 2013 onwards and was further weakened by the economic and political crisis in 2015, which ultimately culminated in the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016.

The final contribution in this Special Issue turns to the importance of membership participation in successful plant organising. As Alpkan Birelma shows, globalisation has strongly impacted on the transport sector in Turkey where workers were faced with growing competition and declining working conditions. A small but inventive union, the Tüm Taşıma İşçileri Sendikası (TÜMTİS), was able to successfully target and organise in multinational corporations like DHL and UPS. Birelma points to the relevance of global union support in order to strengthen local campaigns. While taking cognisance of the transformation of the sectors and its structural constraints, he highlights the relevance of subjectivities, in particular the orientation of union and worker leaders, that were able to make a difference in building associational power from below, thereby showing the importance of participation for mobilising power resources in a highly transnationalised context.

While the case studies clearly demonstrate that the different contexts were decisive to understanding the deployment and development of workers' power resources, they also highlight the agency of workers and their collective organisations. Central to the PRA, therefore, is the assumption that the regeneration of existing power resources and the formation of new ones may vary through time and space, and is also shaped by subjective preferences.

Conclusion: Labour Power in Fragile Societies

The cases discussed in this Special Issue focus on successful attempts at finding legal ways to represent collective interests. However, in societies with hostile labour relations or where large parts of the workforce have no access to institutional power resources, or where organised labour does not perceive institutions as effective, other forms of collective action emerge. These forms do not only include labour unrest and wildcat strikes with structural power being applied, but also more violent forms of contention such as rioting, "boss-napping" or threats of violence. Particularly in societies characterised by a state of fragile stability, these more violent forms are important. In what follows, we will discuss such forms of interest representation, thereby focusing on the cases of South Africa and Europe after the 2008 financial crisis in order to outline domains for further research beyond the power resources heuristics.

The example of the South African labour movement shows the ambiguous use of power in a society in a state of fragile stability. In this context, the exercise of structural, associational and societal power has an ambiguous relationship to institutional power. In South Africa, it is possible to identify two broad approaches to the exercise of power. On the one hand, there were those who emphasised legal means of struggle in their long-term goal of ending apartheid. They sought inclusion of all workers within the industrial relations system and decided to register their unions

under the Labour Relations Act. The negotiation of recognition agreements, which set out the rights and duties of shop stewards and trade unions in the workplace, was the first step in establishing the "rule of law" on the shop floor. Put simply, the use of power was linked directly to building institutional power.

This strategy stood in marked contrast to the political and military struggle being waged by the African National Congress (ANC) and its internal allies in the labour movement. This strategy aimed at overthrowing state institutions through insurrectionary and sometimes violent tactics of "ungovernability" while building grassroots "organs of people's power" in the form of street committees and people's courts. But, as Karl von Holdt (2003: 103–4) has demonstrated, "the strategy of ungovernability could undermine the apartheid system, but it could also produce disorder, confusion and tension within the community".

In democratic South Africa the labour rights struggled for were formalised in the Constitution and in legislation establishing a form of institutional power. However, the informalisation of work has weakened the associational power of labour. Today, nearly half of the South African workforce (45 per cent) work either in the informal economy or as casual, outsourced or contract workers (Bezuidenhout, Bischoff and Nthejane, 2017: 53). Trade unions have failed to organise these workers, leaving most of them outside the traditional labour movement and the state regulatory system. Indeed, it has been argued that in post-apartheid South Africa, associational power has become disconnected from institutional power. Instead of a vital interaction between the two, the institutions created by the new labour regime have become disconnected from the organisations that created them (Webster, 2017).

This "representational gap" has led to the re-emergence of the two alternative models of industrial engagement developed during the apartheid period: the use of official, legal frameworks in which conflict is institutionalised, and that of subaltern worker rebellions in which extra-legal, covert forms of power are mobilised. Drawing on the struggles of casual workers in the South African Post Office, David Dickinson (2017) shows how, after extensive but unsuccessful attempts to resolve matters through legal means, casual workers embarked on alternative, violent forms of industrial action. It led to the formation of *maberete*, a series of informal worker committees who hunted down anyone delivering mail and beat them up. They eventually won their campaign for permanent contracts but only after members of the *maberete* visited the homes of the labour brokers, threatening them and their families with violence.

The use of violence in resolving power struggles in the workplace emerged most dramatically in the strikes on the platinum mines in Rustenburg in 2012. While not comparable to the violence used by the police in the Marikana massacre, the coercive tactics used by the mineworkers to maintain solidarity has been described by Chinguno (2015: 178) as a form of violent solidarity. This persistence of violence under democratic institutions is not a peculiarity of South Africa. Recent scholarship on violence in developing societies has challenged conventional views that democratic institutions necessarily lead to the observance of democratic norms. Violent pluralism, it is argued, may constitute a social order with its own kind of stability, characterised by endemic violence or cycles of violence (Arias and Goldstein, 2010: 9–13, 26–7).

Violent forms of non-institutionalised labour protest have also (re)gained importance in the Global North (Schmalz, Liebig and Thiel, 2015; Clover, 2016). For instance, in the case of Europe after the 2008 financial crisis, one can observe the (re)emergence of struggles characterised by actors

disregarding institutional procedures and by their "repertoire of contention" (Tilly, 1986: 4) being different from traditional forms of industrial action. The economic crisis led to rising unemployment and plant closures and was followed by a wave of "boss-napping", wildcat strikes and plant occupations in France, Great Britain and Southern Europe, pointing to representation gaps and inefficient institutions at the plant level (Gall, 2012; Hayes, 2012).

More importantly, Europe was shaken by several riots in marginalised neighbourhoods in Milan in 2010, Great Britain in 2011 and Stockholm in 2013 (*The Guardian* and LSE, 2011; Schierop, Ålund and Kings, 2014), and also earlier in the French *Banlieues* in 2005. These violent protests can be perceived as a form of "collective bargaining by riots" (Hobsbawm, 1952: 59). They are often based on young adults who are unemployed or precariously employed, and who live at the periphery of metropolitan areas, having little opportunity in the labour market and no stable associational or institutional power resources available to push their claims. Referring to similar but more recent experiences in the United States, Joshua Clover (2016) describes riots as a form of class struggle. According to Clover, riots used to be the predominant form of class conflict of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in most early industrialising countries; they were replaced by strikes as the most important form of contention in the nineteenth century. Today, with de-industrialisation and decreasing social stability, riots tend to re-emerge as an important form of class struggle in the core countries of global capitalism.

To sum up, the experiences in South Africa and Europe both point out that there are forms of violent labour protests which do not directly relate to the sources of labour power we have described in this article. The institutionalisation of industrial conflict is being eroded and the labour market is fragmenting society along new fault lines. Alongside the decline of traditional unions, new movements are emerging: "What is crucial is that even in developed countries, collective (labour) interests are often articulated outside the scope of normalised conflict" (Dörre, 2010b: 66). These protests are class-specific, bread-and-butter conflicts in which protesters feel powerless in the face of international financial institutions and vent their anger in the destruction of property and militant forms of action. Consequently, labour power beyond fixed institutional settings and hegemonic structures in societies in a state of fragile stability, as well as among marginalised communities in the Global North, deserve more attention and could become an important topic for future comparative research.

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Articles in this Special Issue

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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