

Global Issues

Workers' Organisation in Precarious Times: Abandoning Trade Union Fetishism, Rediscovering Class

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The COVID-19 emergency has made evident to the general public the importance of so-called essential activities for the lives of citizens and for the functioning of urban systems as a whole. However, it has also unveiled the conditions of insecurity, inequality, precariousness and thus exposure to health risks suffered by the majority of workers employed in these activities and inhabiting big cities. The fresh evidence that the health crisis has revealed about the existence of an underworld of precariousness and informality is just the tip of an iceberg, a further manifestation of pre-existing social conditions, phenomena and contradictions. Reflecting on these contradictory effects of the pandemic, the editors of this journal have thus recently argued that “global labour studies is tasked with expanding the existing fields of visibility. Crucially, this also involves shifting the focus to who is being pushed to, or has continuously remained on, the side-lines – making the hidden abodes visible” (Cook et al., 2020: 75).

One of the core areas of labour studies in which this call for visibility is probably most needed concerns the forms of workers' organisation and representation. There is evidence of increasing precarity and informality, which also “reveals how realms of social reproduction co-constitute the dynamics of exploitation observed in production” (Mezzadri, 2020: 157), and the existence of signals to a “return to merchant capital” (Van der Linden and Bremen, 2020), a pre-industrial form of capitalist development. Against all this, working-class representation continues to be largely framed in the trade union form. I argue, paraphrasing Marx and as a way of provoking discussions, that the dependency of research on the trade union as the *par excellence* form of organisation is creating a fetish of the union form, an interest in the form itself that hides from view broader processes of struggle and collective formation and of working-class mobilisations outside/in parallel/alternative to the union form currently occurring in the underworld of precariousness, the contemporary hidden abode of production.

Trade unions have played a fundamental role during the twentieth century in the most industrialised parts of the world and in the rural sector of many Global South realities. They have contributed to gradual improvements in working conditions and labour rights, and have given workers an effective voice of representation at the workplace and in the political sphere, forging political parties of the working class responsive to the interests of trade unions and workers. From either a reformist industrial relations perspective or a Marxist revolutionary approach, the central focus of labour research on workers' organisation was legitimately based on trade unions, institutional actors in the regulation of work and class organisations in the struggle against capitalism. However, since the end of the 1970s the advent of neo-liberalism, the speeding up of globalisation processes, the collapse of the Soviet world and the renewal of imperialist exploitation in the Global South (J. Smith, 2016) have completely reshaped processes of capital accumulation and the world of production. These forces have reconfigured labour processes, changing industrial and urban landscapes, and with this altering the composition of the working class around the world.

In this changed context, the industrial working class represented by socialist parties and by the twentieth-century trade union – which had to a certain extent been able to achieve, in some parts of the world, collectively shared social improvements – has largely disappeared as a politically important movement. Trade unions have declined worldwide, the labour parties that they helped to forge have vanished and their role as social policy institutions has increasingly been questioned.

Within this changed landscape it is nevertheless quite striking to note the tendency of labour research on workers' organisation to remain attached to trade-union-based frames of reference. This is the case, for instance, in the debates on the sources of power (Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster, 2018; Ellem, Goods and Todd, 2020), on mobilisation and collective action (Holgate, Simms and Tapia, 2018), on the organisation of migrants (Connolly, Marino and Lucio, 2019; Gorodzeisky and Richards, 2020), precarious work (Doellgast, Lillie and Pulignana, 2018), informal workers (Spooner and Mwanika 2018), or on the role trade unions might still have in shaping long-term frameworks of employment relations (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013). Clearly, this kind of research remains relevant to understanding the manoeuvring room that existing trade unions can have today in the representation of excluded categories of workers, or in assessing their relevance in shaping social policies and sustaining a left agenda of reforms. However, by considering policies, strategies and practices of trade unions, these studies necessarily adopt top-down organisational perspectives whose relevance for understanding the changed context of work is minimal. The reification of trade unions, a danger that the early Hyman (1975) noted in the mid-1970s at the zenith of the labour movement, as well as their transformation into the fetish of labour studies research on workers' organisation and representation, is hiding from view the manifold ways in which the collective proletariat continue to exist (mobilised or not), even in these times of class fragmentation.

There are important shifts in research about workers' organisation that aim to be beyond trade union fetishism. Studies critical of the power resources approach (Gallas, 2018; Nowak, 2018; Runciman, 2019) have discussed at length the limitation of perspectives that are centred exclusively on unions. Studies on developing countries and focusing on precarious informal workers have already put into evidence the existence of different expressions of workers' organisation, that are alternative to (Agarwala, 2013) or antagonistic to (Rizzo, 2017; Anner, 2018; Marinaro, 2018) trade unions. These studies have analysed the possibilities in the context of different labour regimes (C. Smith and Pun, 2006) and the role played by gender, ethnicity, race and migration status in work exploitation (Mezzadri, 2017; Morrison, Sacchetto and Croucher, 2020). Other studies, drawing from the labour process tradition, have looked at workers' organisation in the new platform economy, starting from the construction of collective identity and solidarity, thus adopting a more processual view in which trade unionism is a means towards an end rather than a means in itself (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2019; Cant and Woodcock, 2020).

These studies are important to recover a class dimension in our understanding of the possibilities of workers' organisation and more broadly of workers' exploitation within capitalism. The capital-labour relation typical of industrial manufacturing has always been at the centre of our understanding of the relations between industrial relations actors; they are an expression of surplus value generation and exploitation in workplaces and reflect the subordination of wage-dependent workers at society level. The political strength of the trade union movement and workers' parties during part of the twentieth century, together with the construction of systems of regulation of the employment relationship, helped to create a consensus around the existence of a wage-based class. From the political point of view which is intrinsic to studies of labour, studying trade unions meant studying class and its organisation. Today, in the context of a new proletarianisation of vast sectors of the world's working population, and with the advent of a broader conception of class (not

necessarily coincident with wage labour), we need to enlarge the scope and aim of studies looking at workers' organisation. The capital–labour relationship is but one of the contradictions of capitalism, and needs to be reconnected to other spheres of life and to the diverse social, geographical and historical contexts in which class exploitation occurs. Understanding how the articulation of these complex dynamics is expressed, and in which specific forms organisation is shaped, will be crucial in building workers' power and long-term working-class politics. In doing this, labour studies' rediscovery of class would be conditional on the abandonment of trade union fetishism.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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