

# Locating labour conflict and its organising forms in contemporary times: between class and the reproduction of capitalism<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The following article aims to provide a conceptually rooted introduction to the articles in the internationally coordinated themed collection on *Labour Conflict, Class and Collective Organization*, an initiative which has involved four journals focusing on labour studies from different geographical angles and academic traditions: *Economic and Labour Relations Review (ELRR)*; *Global Labour Journal (GLJ)*; *Partecipazione e Conflitto (PACO)*; and *Revista Latino Americana de Estudios del Trabajo (RELET)*. The contributions across the four journals are diverse, both in terms of geographical focus, disciplinary perspectives and sector of analysis. This diversity is very welcomed and represents a fertile soil for conceptual considerations, because it corresponds to the manifold forms in which labour conflict expresses itself in the reality of capitalism. What's the abstract unity of these concrete empirical realities, as Marx would have put it? In the following introduction, we focus on two general theoretical issues we consider fundamental and mutually interrelated: a rethinking of workers' collective forms of organization within and beyond trade unions; and the framing of these forms and of labour conflict in the broader historical dynamics of working classes formation. With this, we hope to provide a lens of analysis for the articles in the international special issue and, more generally, methodological guidance to future studies on labour conflict.

## KEYWORDS

Labour conflict, class, migration, production and social reproduction, formal and informal employment, trade unions, workers' self-organisation

## Introduction: the Materiality of Labour Conflict and its Forms

April 2023: For over two weeks now, frustrated migrant truck drivers from Georgia and Uzbekistan have been on strike in several European countries over unpaid wages and abusive treatment from their employer. The strike started in Italy and had since expanded to Germany. (Santos, 2023)

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<sup>1</sup> This introduction is common to the open access journals *Global Labour Journal (GLJ)*; *Partecipazione e Conflitto(PACO)*; and *Revista Latino Americana de Estudios del Trabajo(RELET)*. In order to avoid copyright issues with Cambridge University Press, the publisher of *Economic and Labour Relations Review (ELRR)*, we have decided to work on two different though overlapping introductory texts. The introduction in *Economic and Labour Relations Review* is authored by our colleague Jenny Chan, with whom we have worked together since the original call for the internationally coordinated special issue was launched.

April 2023: Nigerian airport union workers began a two-day strike demanding better conditions. The strike canceled flights as employees from across seven unions in Nigeria's aviation industry blocked access to the country's largest airports, in Lagos and the capital, Abuja. Strikes are common in Nigeria's aviation sector ... Monday's strike came on the heels of the government's refusal to release recently reviewed aviation working conditions and adjust pay to match Nigeria's new minimum wage of \$65 per month, according to a strike notice issued on the weekend. (Voa News, 2023)

May 2023: Protests in China are often small-scale. On 17 May, a handful of workers at an air-purifier factory in Xiamen, a coastal city in Fujian province, south-east China, gathered to demand the payment of wages that, they said, were in arrears. The protest was quiet, but it was one of nearly thirty similar demonstrations this month alone. (The Guardian, 2023)

May 2023: French hospitality workers demonstrated on Friday at a five-star hotel a few blocks from the Cannes Film Festival's red carpet to draw attention to the difficult working conditions in the shadows of the glamour. (Burrows 2023)

As a simple search in the most recent news headlines reveals, labour conflict remains one of the most powerful, visible and recurrent expression of societies' responses to the inequality, poverty and exploitation generated in capitalism by wage dependency. Whether we consider labour conflict as the direct outcome of workplace-based conditions of work and forms of value extraction, particularly affecting migrants as in the examples above, or as a part of broader social upheavals and rage against the precarisation of work and life, as in Chile's 2019 rebellion or in France's contemporary anti-austerity revolts, understanding labour conflict and its dynamic evolution at the compass of capitalism remains a central feature of understanding social change at large and thus a key to any sociologically and politically informed debates. Empirical evidence such as that above, however, not less importantly, also highlights the diversity of working conditions, actors, labour regimes and class configurations from which conflict can emerge, in more organised or disorganised forms, and this diversity equally addresses long-standing debates about class, politics and the collective forms of social emancipation.

Researchers have shed light on the different temporality in which labour conflict can emerge and the forms it takes in terms of organisation (Atzeni and Ness, 2018). Indeed, the diversity of working conditions and actors' locations within the production system shape the possibility of workers' action and their organising strategies (Burawoy, 1985; Chun, 2009; Lee, 2018; Peck, 2023; Taylor and Rioux, 2018). Trade unions have historically represented workers in workplaces and at the political level. However, the precarisation of labour and processes of labour market fragmentation associated with global migration flows (Boris et al., 2023) and the platformisation of work (Antunes, 2018) are reconfiguring working classes and their forms of organisation, calling into question the trade union form and strategy, and demanding an analysis able to grasp the informal ways of organising that have emerged at critical junctures.

## **Reconceptualising Labour Conflict and Collective Action**

In highlighting the centrality of labour conflict, we use two premises. The first is that by labour conflict we intend all forms of collective manifestations against labour exploitation directly or indirectly related to the wage relation and encompassing the spheres of work and life. The new technological acceleration imposed by platform capitalism is strengthening the ability of capitalism to extract value by reaching "new" working classes and expanding into niches of people's social lives. This means, and this is our second premise, that we have to be able to consider collective

action as a social process whose activation or de-activation is expressed in forms that can be explained by a multiplicity of factors, partly structural to the labour process (Atzeni, 2010; Edwards, 1986) and partly depending on the existence of “social environmental” factors: a fertile socio-political context (Atzeni, 2016); the strength of existing communities, political traditions and working class culture (Cini and Goldman, 2021; Nowak, 2019); highly despotic labour regimes (Pun et al., 2020), a specific labour (and class) composition (Wright, 2002), to name a few. The adoption of these premises is important for a number of reasons.

Firstly, our approach goes beyond traditional industrial relations (IR) conceptualisations of the capital-labour relationship as the basis of conflict and the role assigned to trade unions in this. Challenging the union-centric tradition of IR, recent research has investigated forms of worker self-organisation based on networks of solidarity that have emerged parallel to or beyond formal unions. Such research has examined changes emerging in the platform economy (Chan, 2021; Gutierrez Crocco and Atzeni, 2022; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020), in the South of the world (Anner, 2018; Marinaro, 2018; Rizzo, 2017), and among migrants (Alberti and Però 2018; Chan, 2023; Perrotta and Sacchetto, 2014; Benvegnù et al., 2018). Along with these empirical studies, other publications have addressed theoretical issues, inviting researchers to abandon the Eurocentrism of industrial relations and explore the role that community and space play in shaping collective action (Nowak, 2021), to rethink forms of organisation by going beyond fetishizing the trade union form (Atzeni, 2021), and to reflect on the need to more explicitly set class domination as the normative dimension and theoretical starting point for labour studies, henceforth orienting labour scholars who are aiming to produce knowledge “on the side of workers” (Gallas, 2022). Papers in this special issue of *GLJ*, for instance, use some of these insights to explain the solidarity networks that have emerged during the COVID-19 cycle of struggles in Canadian workplaces (See Anderson and Jenkinson in this issue).

Secondly, and as a corollary to non-union-centric perspectives, a broader conceptualisation of labour conflict allows rethinking our theorisation about workers’ collective action. As argued at length in a forthcoming article (Atzeni and Cini, 2023), the emergence of forms of self-organised action and informal organisation of workers in the precarious world of work is calling for new theories and more processual and less institutional approaches for understanding collective action. For decades, Kelly’s (1998) mobilisation theory has been the reference point within IR for much research concerning workers’ collectivism. It was part of a broader attempt that emerged between the 1990s and the 2000s in the English-speaking IR context to offer a theoretical anchorage and political support to studies focusing on the need to revitalise trade unions, at a time of their worldwide decline, and to contrast the growth of human resource management studies within IR. Mobilisation theory has its merits in putting the micro dynamics of collective action centre stage along with the issue of how to strategically build collective power in the workplace. Its attention to both micro and macro political dynamics and its explicit Marxist framework have been key to its hegemony and to partly re-addressing the political debate within the IR field. However, in light of the accelerated expansion of precarity across the globe and the blurring of the formal-informal divide within labour markets (Breman, et al. 2019; Kalleberg, 2009; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018), questions might be raised over the contemporaneous validity of a theoretical framework created to revitalise trade unions in the specific context of the UK at the end of the 1990s (Atzeni, 2022). Apart from the changed socio-political context, two further aspects of mobilisation theory appear unfit to much of the current reality of workers’ organisation and action, as shown by recent literature and articles published in this special issue and beyond. The first is the centrality of trade unions in the framework of mobilisation theory, and of their leaders in particular in transforming the sense of injustice into collective action. The second, and a consequence of the previous one, is

the linear, top down and non-processual nature of the construction of workers action and organisation at micro level. While it is fully justifiable that a theory that wants to revitalise trade unions in workplaces and at political level adopts this focus and approach, a theory more attuned to contemporaneous developments needs to stress how these two aspects, once taken together, are making invisible the struggles that newly formed groups of workers in the most precarious workplaces are everyday engaging with. Thus, we are definitely in need of renewing theories that can give sense and explain the current empirical reality while at the same time providing insights for workers' strategic organising. This is, for instance, what the paper by Alberti and Joyce (in this issue of *GLJ*) does in using a reformulation of the concept of mutuality to explain platform workers collective mobilisations.

Thirdly, by broadening our understanding of labour conflict, of its expressions and organising forms, we will be able to concretely develop a Marxist-rooted interdisciplinary perspective on labour to grasp how the articulation of state power structures, technological changes, local labour regimes and cultures, migration dynamics, social reproduction and racialised forms of work exploitation interact in blocking (more often than facilitating) the emergence of labour conflict. These factors are often analysed in great detail but in isolation from each other and following the specificities of disciplinary debates. On developing a unitary interdisciplinary framework for analysis, an attempt has been made recently by a proponent of labour regime analysis:

At its core, a labour regime signals the combination of social relations and institutions that bind capital and labour in a form of antagonistic relative stability in particular times and places ... Labour regimes analysis exposes the multiple threads linking different workers both within systems of global production and also across workplaces, regions and countries, thereby indicating avenues for building new solidarities. (Baglioni et al., 2022: 1-2)

Labour regime analysis, by calling for “the combination of social relations and institutions binding capital and labour in times and places” tries to address the need to articulate different spheres of analysis in a unitary framework, and is thus a powerful instrument in studying the relations among different factors, all affecting, to different degrees, the ability of workers to collectively organise, at a time in which class identities and configurations are going through intense processes of redefinition.

## **Understanding Class and its Links with Collective Action**

The question of differences, unity and solidarity is a long-standing problematic in historical working class experiences, both within and among countries, because class has often been imagined in terms of national groups. In fact, proletarian internationalism has been more often than not thought of as the coalition of different national working classes. Globalisation, and in particular the expansion of global supply chains, has nevertheless exacerbated the difficulty of continuing to think in this way. Further, even if some scholars maintain national union density as a proxy of class strength, the issue remains that unions have rarely been able to relate to a “transnational class”, characterised not only by a heterogeneity of forms of labour but also by a heterogeneity of “the combination of social relations and institutions binding capital and labour in times and places”, to return to Baglioni et al. (2022: 1-2). Indeed, it has recently been noted “location or specificity of regional labour markets matters” (Smith and Zheng, 2022).

When looking from a global perspective, diversity and fragmentation is the ontology of class. However, since the 1970s, the increase in the mobility of labour and of capital has significantly reshaped the working class, simultaneously creating elements of convergence and divergence in the

material conditions of the workers worldwide (Silver, 2003). Indeed, the characteristic of the contemporary era is a wide spectrum of employment situations, from the perspective of both skills and working conditions: from migrant workers engaged in agriculture, through brokers (middlemen, gang masters and so on), to workers in manufacturing in large workplaces, to video game creators; from the cyber proletariat working under the command of the algorithm in Amazon to the engineer who builds the algorithm, from the manufacturing worker who uses a laptop to the migrants working as riders.

The fragmentation of workers' experience is worsened by the outsourcing of production and, with it, industrial relations (Drahokoupil, 2015; Wills, 2009). The growth of outsourcing changes the boundaries of companies: on the one hand, a segmentation within the same production space through contracting out to a third firm or hiring temporary labour. On the other hand, there is a spatial reorganisation towards other locations through the construction of global value chains (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994). The centrality assumed by logistics responds exactly to the extension of the processes of outsourcing that reshape relations between states, labour and societies. Scholars highlight how outsourcing fuels divisions among the workforce, intensifies labour market segmentation and, thus, splits labour relations, concealing corporate responsibility. Outsourcing and precarisation processes have been seen as one of several responses that companies can deploy to circumvent workers' associational and structural power (Wright, 2000) and multiply differences. Labour precarisation takes different forms and is experienced in different ways in the Global North and South, depending on the different levels of vulnerability that workers are facing (Lazar and Sanchez, 2019). Precarity has become a concept for describing the rise of instability and uncertainty beyond the labour market (Lewis et al., 2014). However, the concept that precarity constitutes a class (Standing, 2011) is a shortcut to identify an employment situation that characterised an emerging "new working class". As Wright (2016: 135) underlines in his critique of Standing, "treating the precariat as a class – even as a class-in-the-making – obscures more than it clarifies". We argue that precarity should *not* be seen as the condition that defines class; rather, precarity is one of the many forms that (wage) labour takes in contemporary times. While we agree that precarity can produce a division among workers, we note that capitalism has continued to produce divisions and hostility inside the working class in different ways.

Undoubtedly, differences inside the working class have been among the main points that have characterised the development of capitalism in the past few centuries. These differences have sometimes been crucial to the divisions of the working class thanks to the persistence of nationalist frameworks of integration and the ideology of universalism of working class unity that have for long time reproduced the marginality of women and migrant workers. Differently to those who think that "migration regulates labour in a negative sense by dividing the working class along national, ethnic, racial, religious, linguistic and cultural lines" (Scott, 2013: 1094), we think that the working class was born as *mixté* and has been forcefully nationalised only during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Alberti and Sacchetto, forthcoming; Moulier-Boutang 1998; van der Linden 2008).

Labour scholars have long shown how racism and sexism have been strengthened to create and perpetuate exclusionary labour regimes (Roediger, 1991). From a feminist viewpoint, Silvia Federici (2004) stressed that primitive accumulation was not simply an accumulation and concentration of workers and capital, but an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class, whereby hierarchies built on gender and race have become constitutive of class domination and the formation of the modern proletariat.

Beverly Silver (2003), in *Forces of Labor*, an innovative world-historical mapping of workers' conflicts, articulated the connection between transformation in production models and cycles of worker struggles. She underlined how states, capital and the working class produce specific



strategies to create boundaries, “segmenting labour markets (pursued mainly by capital), bounding citizenship (pursued mainly by states), and constructing exclusionary class identities on non-class bases (pursued mainly by workers themselves)” (Silver, 2003: 24).

These boundaries highlight how crucial it is to consider the characteristics of the workforce and how these strategies are deployed by different actors inside and out of the workplaces, considering that they are historically rooted and context specific. As McGrath and Strauss (2015: 306) stress, “capitalism necessarily entails making use of, reinforcing and/or producing these relations of ‘difference’ in the construction of labour relations”.

Importantly, worldwide, workers have been able to get together in their milieu, and, at times, even to build cross-class alliances in order to advance their interests and rights. Indeed, the resurgence of forms of nationalism and the construction of intricate supply chains clash with worldwide labour struggles whose participants are more and more attentive to the transnational level of coordination, as highlighted by the case of Amazon workers (Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese, 2020; Kassem, 2022). One of the questions is, therefore, to understand whether the traditional trade union model is able to organise labour that is becoming increasingly mobile and informal. Even if labour conflicts remain one of the constants in capitalist development worldwide, analysis of these struggles rarely confronts the question of class. Since the 1980s in Western countries, as well as in other countries (for China, see Pun and Chan, 2008), class analyses at best dwelled on income-related living conditions with reference to processes of stratification and social inequality. The focus on forms of inequality in the distribution of wealth removes the gaze both from labour relations and from the everyday labour conflict. However, class is not a social status or an economic situation. Class, in our conception, takes root in shared experiences, which are shaped by relations of production and by changing cultural transformations, as well as by everyday practices in and out of the workplace (Thompson, 1980 | 1963).

Global labour historians widened labour history’s perspectives, shedding light on how workers’ experiences emerged not only from workplaces but also from everyday life to shape class consciousness (van der Linden, 2008). Revisiting theories of working class solidarity, Pun (2022) argues that it is important to consider how macro-structural approaches and micro processes of a collective-emotional environment are interconnected and interdependent in explaining the formation of worker identities and solidarity actions. Based on research on vocational school in China, she stresses how working-class youth develop everyday practices that rearticulate solidarity behaviour at school and in the workplace. Through cultural production, labour activism has been the backbone of contemporary forms of resistance and solidarity in China: songs, letters, poems and discussions in and out of the workplaces and dormitories constitute the cultural forms and expressions that allow collective awareness-raising. However, also in the case of China, feminist agendas for gender equality remain “rather marginalised in contemporary working-class resistance” (Yin, 2020: 438). Thinking of how class shapes itself means transcending the union and party forms of organisation of exploited employees. As Sian Lazar (2018: 270) notes, “interest only reveals part of the picture, at best, and at worst might even be misleading: as, for example, when we can only come up with theories of false consciousness when we see people acting against their interest”. The question is not the lack of (or the false) consciousness of workers (summarising that the class in itself fails to transform into a class for itself). We believe it is necessary to problematize binary views of class versus non-class, and class in itself versus class for itself. Class is a social relationship that cannot be reduced only to wage earners or to what happens in the workplace. Indeed, class is shaped in the labour process, as well as in social reproduction and in the racialisation and gendering processes that run through different societies. From this point of view, class is constructed in struggle and conflict with other groups, within various ideas: it is at these junctures that the sets of

ideas of these individuals and the ways in which they intend to pursue these claims are most visible. Therefore, as Cicerchia (2021: 617-618) underlined, class is not a homogeneous group and “internal divisions within the working class are constitutive of class formation”. It is only through solidarity as culture of collective practice that class can emerge. In fact, different subjects do not come together as a class because they have the same enemy, capital, but because they develop specific culture and social relations aimed at the dissolution of class society (Ricciardi, 2023).

## **Contributions to the internationally coordinated special issue**

In this section of the editorial introduction, we provide a general overview of the sixteen papers included in the special issues and published by the four journals supporting our internationally coordinated special issue on *Labour Conflict, Class and Workers' Organisation*.

The distribution of papers among the different journals responded primarily to each author's decision in relation to the public audience, editorial focus and approach followed by each of the journals. In writing this section we have, however, endeavoured to move towards a more entangled presentation and reading of the papers by regrouping them through the identification of common themes or subthemes linked to the special issue. These themes include: 1) the relations between union and non-union actors in the context of different national and local institutions; 2) the state, international trade unionism and the scale of labour conflict; 3) conceptual and exploratory papers looking at the nature of conflict and collective organisation in the platform economy in the light of the established IR framework; 4) migration and labour conflict; 5) changes in subjectivities and working class composition during the Covid pandemic.

### ***The relations between union and non-union actors***

The first theme includes the papers “Dynamics of Unionism in the Platform Economy: the Case of the Food Delivery Sector in Bologna (Italy)”, by Claudia Marà, Valeria Pulignano, and Paul Stewart and published in *Economic and Labour Relations Review (ELRR)*; “Using the Unions: Healthcare Struggles in Italy and Spain Between Trade Unionism and Self-Organisation”, by Costanza Galanti and Marie Naughton, published in *Partecipazione e Conflitto (PACO)*; “Labour Institutions and the Dynamic Production of Informality: Collective Organisation of Hard-to-reach Workers in Tanzania” by Ilona Steiler, published in the *Global Labour Journal (GLJ)*; “Wildcat Strike Season: The Origin and Limits of Platform Driver Protests during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Indonesia”, by Arif Novianto, published in *GLJ*; and “Building Autonomous Power: Solidarity Networks in Precarious Times”, by Benjamin Anderson and John Jenkinson, published in *GLJ*.

The first paper under this theme, written by Marà, Pulignano and Stewart, takes a position against a view that marginalises the relevance of existing trade unions and national union traditions in the emerging conflicts of the platform economy. On the contrary, the authors argue that synergies between the two forms of workers' representation have existed in the case of Italy, both in the case of institutional support for the procedural embedding of conflict and for what the authors call the “posture of respect” trade unions have showed in relation to the independence and autonomy of self-organised delivery riders. The second paper under this theme, written by Galanti and Naughton, looks at the strategic use of union resources by workers' and users' self-organised groups in struggles that occurred in the Spanish and Italian health care sectors. In line with the previous paper, but emphasising more the instrumental nature of the relation, the authors identify expertise, institutional and legal resources, and publicity as the main reasons for interaction with trade unions. The third paper under this theme, written by Ilona Steiler, moves the focus from Europe to Tanzania, linking the issue of union and non-union representation to that of the informal

sectors of the economy (domestic and street vending) and the role that state law and institutions, including trade unions and the ILO, have in defining approaches to formality and informality and thus the sphere of their action vis a vis new bottom-up forms of workers' organisation. The fourth paper under this theme, written by Arif Novianto, goes back to the platform economy by studying the wildcat strikes organised in Indonesia by delivery drivers during the COVID pandemic. After highlighting the relevance of the protest wave in the context of Indonesia, with more than forty strikes from 2020 to 2022, the author points out that a combination of state absence distrust of union and labour market conditions can explain the recent growth of these forms of struggle. The fifth paper under this theme, written by Anderson and Jenkinson, using workers' inquiry as a method of data collection, highlights, from an activist standpoint, the role of autonomous solidarity networks – decentralised forms of organising that have emerged as alternatives in various sector of the Canadian economy during the COVID crisis.

### ***The state, international trade unionism and the scale of labour conflict***

The second theme includes the papers “Platform Workers in Brazil : Forms of Governance and Resistance in Times of Algorithmic Acceleration”, by Paula Menezes, published in *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios del Trabajo (RELET)*; *Desde la Fábrica al Mundo: Una aproximación a Los espacios globales de Organización sindical*”, by Julia Soul, published in *RELET*; “Political, General or Economic Strikes? New Types of Strikes and Workers' Contention in Italy (2008-2018)”, by Margherita Sabrina Perra and Katia Pilati, published in *PACO*.

The first paper under this theme, written by Paula Menezes, considers the case of platform delivery workers in Brazil and their forms of self-organised mobilisation by looking particularly at how these were intertwined with a negationist government discourse on the COVID emergency, with public emergency policies to support workers, and with the context of the huge informality in the labour market. The second paper, written by Soul, presents a study of global unions, a collective actor somehow marginalised by the emergence of studies using a bottom-up perspective. Thanks to ethnographic fieldwork carried out from 2012 to 2018 in the steel industry in various Latin American countries, Soul looks at global trade unions as institutions able to exert influence on the reconfiguration of local labour collectives, even within local realities increasingly characterised as global spaces of accumulation. In the third paper under this theme, written by Perra and Pilati, the authors' approach differs from the rest in terms of methodology, using a protest event analysis for the decade 2008-2018 in Italy rather than a qualitative take. By claiming a revised typology of strike events (a general political, a general economic and a local economic), it usefully identifies different, though not necessarily interacting, scales of labour conflict with different corresponding actors.

### ***The nature of conflict and collective organisation in the platform economy***

The third theme includes the articles “Struggle for Recognition, a Lever to Establish Industrial Relations from Below. Reinterpreting Couriers' Mobilisations in Food Delivery Sector in Italy”, by Nicola Quondamatteo and Marco Marrone, published in *PACO*; and “Mutualism, Class Composition, and the Reshaping of Worker Organisation in Platform Work and the Gig Economy”, by Gabriella Alberti and Simon Joyce, published in *GLJ*.

The first paper under this theme, written by Nicola Quondamatteo and Marco Marrone, attempts to explain the cycle of struggles led by riders in Italy in recent years by using the conceptual category of “recognition” and how this can renew IR debate. The authors focus on three interlinked dimensions and stages of recognition: internal, institutional and by employers. While the first concerns the formation of collective identity by workers, the second and the third would escalate



and strengthen collective identity and might indicate a pattern in similar struggles with no union presence initially. The second paper, written by Gabriella Alberti and Simon Joyce, aims to present a conceptual framework for the evidence that conflict in platform work at global level has been overwhelmingly led by non-union self-organised forms of collective organisation. The authors argue that mutualism, both as sharing resources and collective consciousness, can be used as a concept able to explain the solidarities and practices of informal organising used by workers in the unregulated context of the platform economy.

### ***Migration and labour conflict***

The fourth theme includes the papers “The Chronos of Class Conflict: The Relevance of the Temporal Dimension in Conflicts Related to Labour Migration”, by Anne Lise Carstensen, published in *ELRR*, and “Migrant Labor and Labor Unrest during the Pandemic: Studies from Germany and Austria”, by Peter Birke and Johanna Neuhauser, published in *ELRR*.

The first paper under this theme, written by Carstensen, tries to reconceptualise migrant labour conflict through the dimension of temporality: the temporal limitation often associated with migration processes and depending on restrictive work permits and state legislation; the seasonality and temporality of a specific job or sector in which migrants are usually employed; and the consequences of this temporally unstable work on migrants’ social reproduction makes temporality a fundamental conceptual device in studies of migrants’ labour. The second paper under this theme, written by Birke and Neuhauser, though focusing on migrant labour, takes a more empirical approach by analysing case studies from the meat industry, postal services and mask production in Germany and Austria. The paper presents evidence of different forms of exit and voice in the workplace and beyond in the context of the health and economic crisis generated by COVID.

### ***Changes in subjectivities and working class composition during the COVID pandemic***

The fifth theme includes the papers “Time, Discipline and Subjectivity: Performing Arts Worker Mobilisations in Italy During the Pandemic”, by Francesco Campolongo and Francesco Iannuzzi, published in *PACO*; “Circulating Through the Pipeline. Algorithmic Subjectivities and Mobile Struggles”, by Niccolò Cuppini, Mattia Frapporti and Maurilio Pirone, published in *PACO*; “The ‘Naming of Things’: US Labor in the Time of Covid-19”, by Sharryn Kasmir, published in *RELET*; and “Click Delete: A Workers’ Inquiry into the Academic Algorithm, On-line Higher Education, and Learning Management Systems”, by Robert Ovetz, published in *RELET*.

The first paper under this theme, written by Campolongo and Iannuzzi, focuses on the labour struggles of Italian artists during the Covid-19 pandemic. Compared to other sectors during the same period, these struggles have been particularly intense and sustained and in contrast to the tradition of low conflict and mobilisation typical of the sector. The authors, using mobilisation theory as a framework for analyses, consider that this deviation from the pattern could be a result of the combination of three factors: the simultaneous, unexpected mass experience of lack of income; the breakdown of disciplinary mechanisms in artistic work; and the greater availability of “free time”. In the second paper, written by Cuppini, Frapporti and Pirone, changing subjectivities and struggles are associated with the full scale development of the “new capitalism” of algorithms, platforms and digitalisation of life. The authors point particularly to the need to identify a new vocabulary concerned with the circularity and spatiality of the new phase of capitalism and that can give meaning and resignification to living labour, rather than focussing exclusively on wage labour as the value-producing factor within capitalism. The third paper under this theme, written by Kasmir, using the COVID-generated crisis as its empirical background, brings in the perspective

of labour anthropology to account for contemporary changes to class identity and reconfiguration in the context of the USA. It indicates how “on-the-ground politics of labour can lend shape to a future regime of accumulation, including working-class making”. In the fourth paper under this theme, written by Ovetz, the focus is on how the implementation of online learning in US universities and the algorithmic management system associated with this is deskilling faculty and – following Marx – transforming staff almost into an appendage of the learning machine. The paper is innovative in using workers’ inquiry for data collection and in explicitly aiming to produce knowledge from a worker’s point of view.

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