

Book Review Symposium

**Edward Webster and Lynford Dor (2023) *Recasting workers' power: Work and inequality in the shadow of the digital age*.
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Introduction

Professor Edward Webster, affectionately known as Eddie, breathed his last on Tuesday, 5 March 2024, twenty-four days before his eighty-second birthday. Eddie was healthy and had just participated in a run. The untimely death has left a profound void. His impactful research work, integrating a consistent focus on work and labour, spanned decades, dating back to the early 1970s. He went beyond just researching and publishing – activities in which he engaged extensively. Eddie was an engaged intellectual. This reminded me of Karl Marx's thesis: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (Marx, 2010 [1845]: 8). Eddie was actively involved in the emancipatory movement to change the world he researched.

In *Recasting Workers' Power*, Webster, a distinguished research professor at the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies and a founder and former director of the Society, Work and Development Institute, both at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, challenges "the end of labour thesis". This will go down in history as his last contribution to work and labour studies. In this book, he focused on workers and the labour movement in the twenty-first century amid deepening and widening cutting-edge digital technological transformation of the production process – the labour process, products and how people connect and socially relate with each other not only in production but also in society at large.

Writing with Lynford Dor, a doctoral researcher at the KU Leuven's Centre for Sociological Research and a research associate at the University of Johannesburg's SARCHI Chair in Social Change (CSC), Webster argues that the end of labour thesis reifies globalisation and the digital age and attributes to them a logic and coherence they do not have. Webster and Dor framed their approach from a Global South perspective, using sectoral case studies covering workers' and the labour movement's conditions in several African countries. They also framed their approach from a global labour studies perspective. In challenging the end of labour thesis, they draw our attention to the tendency by its proponents to see workers as nothing but victims in the aftermath of (neo-liberal) globalisation and cutting-edge technological advances and the labour movement as superseded.

No End to Labour Amid the Power Resources Approach

To be sure, the dominant reality is that the workplace under capitalist production is still restricted to profit-making, as Karl Marx (1990 [1867]) found. He characterised the workplace as a hidden abode of production – in which capital is not only producing but is itself produced amid contradictions between capital and labour. Workers form the labour movement in the course of the capital–labour contradictions to advance and defend their interests. In reminding us about Marx’s characterisation of the capitalist-dominated workplace, Webster and Dor draw our attention to one of the themes in the book. It is an analysis of the labour process to study the capital–labour conflict. They framed this analysis in the contradictory relationship between capital, personified by capitalist employers, and labour, with a focus on inequality. Webster and Dor concur with Beverly J. Silver and Lu Zhang (2009), that the capital–labour conflict follows everywhere capital goes.

In challenging the end of labour thesis, they profoundly defend and follow the power resources approach. This approach identifies the sources of workers’ power, paying particular attention to labour agency. Beyond that, in the last chapter, Webster extends the power resources approach based on evidence from the preceding chapters. The book critically builds on contributions made by other scholars, notably Erik Orlin Wright (2000), Beverly J. Silver (2003), Jenniffer Jihye Chun (2009), and Klaus Dörre, Hajo Holst and Oliver Nachtwey (2009) in the power-resources defining literature.

Wright identified the structural location and position of labour in production and broadly in the economic system as the source of workers’ structural power. Silver identified workers’ collective association, including organising into trade unions and political parties, as the source of workers’ associational power. *Recasting Workers’ Power* extends this beyond formal association, to include informal associations, non-governmental organisations, worker-controlled co-operatives and experimentation. Chun identified alliances or coalitions by labour with other social groups and action to influence public discourse as the sources of workers’ societal power. Dörre, Holst and Nachtwey drew attention to institutionalised labour rights and social dialogue processes as the sources of workers’ institutional power. Beyond these contributions, Webster and Dor recognise labour’s capability development and deployment as yet another source of workers’ power. In this regard, among others, Christian Le’vesque and Gregor Murray (2010; 2013) identified the ability by labour to learn from the past, resolve conflicts and build consensus, develop new strategies and establish an autonomous agenda, and adapt organisational traditions to changing policy needs.

Recasting Workers Power builds on Webster’s own contributions to labour studies, the labour process and the power resources approach literature. Notably, the contributions include *Grounding Globalization: Labour in the Age of Insecurity*, winner of the 2009 Distinguished Scholarly Monograph Prize awarded by the American Sociological Association Labor and Labor Movements Section. Webster co-authored it with Rob Lambert and Andries Bezuidenhout (2008). Also included in Webster’s contributions is Stefan Schmalz, Carmen Ludwig and Edward Webster (2018; 2019). Webster’s much earlier work, *Cast in a Racial Mould: Labour Process and Trade Unionism in the Foundries* (1985), deserves emphasis. This is because of the connection between its title and the content and title of *Recasting Workers’ Power*.

In *Cast in a Racial Mould*, Webster drew our attention to the emergence and rapid expansion of emerging trade unions in South Africa in the 1970s. These unions, including the Metal and Allied Workers Union (Mawu), drew their membership largely from unskilled and semi-skilled black, predominantly African, workers, amid the discrimination they faced under racial despotism in the labour process. They gained increased bargaining power and became the foundations for the development of national, mass-based trade unionism in manufacturing, among other sectors. Mawu played an important role not only in workplace and collective bargaining transformation

struggles but also in the wider struggle to end apartheid. In the 1980s, it merged with others to form the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), which, as documented by Kally Forrest (2011), carried forward interrelated workplace, bargaining transformation and wider community struggles.

Conversely, *Recasting Workers' Power* has come in the twenty-first century when neo-liberal globalisation and its forces' restructuring of the workplace and the economy have negatively impacted the labour movement, or, in one word, labour. Under this variant of the capitalist accumulation regime, capital has employed the digital age's cutting-edge technological inventions to deepen worker exploitation and increase precarity. This has contributed to the negative impact on labour, by among other things, making organising conditions more difficult – which is different from saying impossible. In sectors such as e-hailing delivery and taxi services, corporations have adopted authoritarian algorithmic management to co-ordinate and control the labour process and workers and exploit them through increased precarity (Chapter 5). Big players in this space include multinational corporations such as Amazon, Uber, Bolt and South African-based companies, notably Mr D Food and Takealot.

Workers in the e-hailing sector are paid a pittance and work long hours – dangerous not only for their occupational and overall health and safety but, because of fatigue and accidents, also for the safety of other road users. One worker remarked, “I just want to survive”, and another said, “I do not have off days. I work all days of the week. I only pause when there is an occasion” (Chapter 5: 106). Ironically, e-hailing companies assert that the workers are not their employees but their business partners – akin to independent contractors. They say this not to uplift the workers to the social level of their real partners but to deepen their exploitation, among other ways by avoiding compliance with national labour law and international labour conventions altogether. Unions organising in the e-hailing sector, in countries such as South Africa, are virtually non-existent. But all is not lost: the book shows that workers in this sector have started their own organising initiatives, including collective industrial action.

Also, the book has come in an epoch where the adoption of neo-liberal policies in the public sector, such as in the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality, has negatively impacted labour. In the ultimate analysis, neo-liberal policies have divided labour (Chapter 3). Privatisation and outsourcing, externalising workers to exploitative public sector tender-based capitalists, are among the policies the municipality adopted, localising the neo-liberal economic policy called Growth, Employment and Redistribution adopted by the national government back in 1996. In the end, the municipality and other public establishments which have followed such policies relate to the externalised workers from the standpoint of a tender state. Their direct relationship is not with the affected workers but legally with the private enterprises they award state tenders.

Webster emphasises the importance of autonomy as a principle that trade unions need to uphold, even if they were to enter into alliances with other organisations to forge societal power. I think he is carefully moderate by using the word autonomy. What unions need goes beyond autonomy: that is, full-fledged independence when they enter into alliances or coalitions with other organisations. As it follows from Webster's analysis, when a trade union ally which may be a governing party goes against the interests of workers on a specific ground, on that same ground the trade union must directly go against that ally.

All Knowledge is Collectively Produced

Asserting that “all knowledge is collectively produced” (xiii), Webster worked with other contributors besides Dor. It is worth noting that he met three of the four contributors when they

were either MA or PhD students: Dor, Dr Carmen Ludwig and Fikile Masikane. This shows that he took good quality student research seriously and followed a developmental approach, especially mentoring and having their research published in peer-reviewed forms.

Recasting Workers' Power comprises eight chapters. Webster conceptualised the first chapter with Lynford Dor. In it they explore the labour question in the digital age. In opposition to the-end-of-labour-thesis proponents, including Manuel Castells (1996), the end of labour triumphalist, and Michael Burawoy (2010), the uncompromising labour pessimist, Webster and Dor expound the power resources approach, showing that it frames the labour question differently. It is in this chapter that they defend and lay a solid foundation for the application of the power resources approach and its extension in the chapters that follow.

Webster produced the second chapter with Forrest, author of the *Metal that Will Not Bend: National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa 1980 -1995* (2011). The chapter focuses on precarious work in post-apartheid South Africa and labour's experimentation with alternative forms of representation in the informal sector.

In the third chapter, Webster critically focuses on neo-liberal restructuring in Johannesburg and its impact of the organisational structure of and relations between the municipality and workers – and their responses.

Dor contributed the fourth chapter, which offers insights from case studies on workers' struggles for equal treatment at work, against the background of externalisation and fragmentation by employers through restructuring in South Africa's manufacturing sector. He sees workers' efforts to advance their struggles through a non-governmental organisation.

Webster co-authored the fifth chapter with Masikane, bringing to our attention the dynamics of algorithmic management and alternative organising by workers in the gig economy. They focus on food courier delivery riders in Johannesburg, with a comparative study of workers in platform work in two other African cities, Accra in Ghana, and Nairobi in Kenya. Here I need to highlight my own conclusion right away after reading the chapter. Under algorithmic management, corporations such as Amazon, Uber, Bolt, Mr D Food and Takealot have broken down and converted paid management work processes, especially supervision and evaluation, into unpaid management tasks performed by e-hailing taxi and delivery consumers through ratings. This extends exploitation beyond e-hailing workers to the customers – who the exploiting capitalist corporations pay absolutely nothing.

Webster worked with Ludwig as a co-author for the sixth and seventh chapters. In the sixth chapter, they focus on the Ugandan Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union. The union transformed, moving with the times by crossing the divide between formal and informal workers. It organised workers in the informal economy, growing from 5 000 to nearly 100 000 members. Here, the lesson is that trade unions should transform if they are to survive and make an impact in the capital–labour conflict.

In the seventh chapter, Webster and Ludwig show how the global trade union federations coordinate support for supranational trade unions' exercise of power in the contested process of digital technological advances.

Conclusions

Recasting Workers' Power is, without a doubt, a compelling contribution not only to work and labour studies but also to development studies. While advancing the power resources approach, the book does not turn a blind eye to the pitfalls that may affect labour if the movement concentrates on one power resource at the expense of the others. It correctly warns against labour overemphasising

institutional power and thus challenges the movement to strike a balance in building and applying its power. The book shows how, despite the challenges of exploitation they face, workers are not passive victims but are active agents who seek to overcome those challenges.

By emphasising the importance of moving away from the end of labour narrative, and extending the power resources approach, the book draws attention to even precarious workers exercising their own agency. The book's conception of labour agency goes beyond the confines of the workplace, asserting that workers engage in struggle activities that include protests not only as employed or self-defined workers but also as citizens.

The end of labour thesis can be tackled from another perspective, but which the authors cannot be faulted for not incorporating in what they believe. As the source of new value creation or value addition, labour is always present in production, including in the production of capital goods such as production technology, going back in the value chain to the origination of their conception through research and development. As Marx and Friedrich Engels (1964 [1848]) point out, although the strength of the labour movement may weaken during certain periods, including as a result of capital-driven competition among workers, for as long as capital exploits labour as the source of new value creation or value addition, the capital–labour class contradictions will necessitate organising by workers as a response, continuing the labour movement.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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