

Dario Azzellini (Editor)

If Not Us, Who?

Workers worldwide against authoritarianism, fascism and dictatorship

VSA:



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Global workers against authoritarianism, fascism, and dictatorships

The Editor

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Cover photo: activists demonstrating at Kilusang Mayo Uno in the Philippines (see page 136ff.).

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Preface

Dario Azzellini

Authoritarian policies and governments are gaining ground around the world. As the systemic crisis intensifies, so too does authoritarianism. At the same time, humankind is faced with the task of having to fundamentally change the predominant models of production and consumption – above all in the Global North – in order to overcome inequality and exploitation and avoid ecological collapse. Bourgeois forces are neither able nor willing to impede this authoritarian advance and take the necessary steps to protect the environment; on the contrary: in times of crisis throughout history, the majority of them have always preferred authoritarian solutions to the question of redistribution. It therefore makes little sense to appeal to the bourgeoisie to overthrow capitalism. But nothing less will do in the long term, for, as Marx rightly points out: “Capitalist production ... only develops the technique and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker.” (Marx 1992: 638)

While there was once a consensus on the left that organizing workers was the primary tool in the fight for social change, workers today are frequently seen to support authoritarianism. The advent of neoliberalism has led not only to a decrease in the unionization of workers¹ and the bargaining power of trade unions, but also a decrease in the belief in many sections of the left and the social sciences that workers could play a pivotal role in social transformation. The prospect of overcoming capitalism often vanished in the same breath. Class was abandoned as both an analytical category and as a point of political reference – even labour was no longer considered to play a key role. To take just one example among many,² Manuel Castells explains that in the “information age”, labour has changed in such a way that the labour movement has lost its ability to act as “a major source of social cohesion and workers’ representation”. As a result, workers are no longer capable of being the emancipatory subjects of the future. According to Castells, the future belongs to identity movements not based on class; they are the “potential subjects of the information age” (Castells 1997, 354, 360).

¹ In this volume, the terms *worker* and *working class* are used in the sense of the opposition between capital and labour. The term *worker* thus refers to workers in the broader sense.

² Zygmunt Baumann, Jeremy Rifkin, and Richard Sennett, for example, also make similar arguments.

This analysis is problematic in a number of respects. It evidently only takes into consideration the Global North – and even then, only its core industrial nations. The global regions in which the majority of humans live and work are excluded from the analysis. But even in the former core industrial states, the Fordist standard employment conditions were never enjoyed by the majority of workers, just as the industrial worker has never formed *the* working class in the industrial centres, let alone on their peripheries. Industrial labour undoubtedly forged a proletariat in the core industrial states with highly homogenized working and living conditions and brought its members together in large masses, thereby also facilitating its organization. Entire societies were later organized on the model of the Fordist factory – from kindergartens, schools, and universities, to social security systems and pension schemes. But both the forms and the relations of production have changed drastically in recent decades, as has the prioritization of certain sectors in individual regions and on the global level, and also the demographics that now make up the working class.

Since the 1970s, the relationship between capital and waged labour has been continually changing, which has led to an increase in structural unemployment and escalating levels of precarization. The extent of industrial labour in the city centres has rapidly diminished; instead, informal labour and precarization have increased, particularly in the service sector. The end of the Fordist era is transpiring within the context of a structural and systemic crisis (Mészáros 2009; Wallerstein 2011). This crisis has yet to be overcome, which is why we are continually plagued by new crises and collapses. We are currently facing a global crisis that is being attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic was, however, merely the trigger and intensifier of a crisis whose arrival had previously already been heralded by declining container shipping volumes, overproduction, capital surplus, and an apparent lack of investment opportunities. And all of this at a time when not only the world's poor, but also considerable sections of the middle classes – on a global scale and in the relationship between the Global North and South, but also within the different global regions and countries themselves – had not yet managed to fully recover from the repercussions of the crisis that began in 2008.

The weakness of the labour movement cannot be overlooked here. The advent of neoliberalism and changes in production have significantly undermined the old models of organization. The crisis of the labour movements should, however, be viewed as cyclical; it will be overcome with the consolidation of the new emerging working classes (Silver 2005) and with the development of organizational models and forms of struggle that are adequate to the challenges faced. A significant part of the new composition of the working class that is emerging in the capitalist centres is made up of migrant workers.

As Beverly J. Silver noted at the beginning of this millennium, this provides a structural basis for the international spread of labour disputes and class conflict generally, thereby opening up the possibility of creating new transnational forms of associative power (Silver 2003).

New struggles and organizational structures are already emerging all over the world – this is also the subject of this book – but they have yet to establish themselves as a unified front. This has led to the development of a complex situation, as Domingo Pérez and Sebastián Osorio concisely put it in their article on the uprisings in the once model neoliberal country of Chile: “... weak and fragmented popular organization in neoliberalism has paradoxical political effects: it contributes both to the emergence of violent social uprisings in extreme neoliberalism, but also helps prolong uncertain political situations that can have dramatic counter-effects for the working class.”

Despite all these changes, interrupting profits on a large scale remains the most powerful tool the working class has at its disposal to have its demands met. Collectively achieving this from within the workplace may not be the only option available to workers, but it remains the most obvious, effective, and straightforward. It therefore comes as no surprise that studies conducted on the relationship between the unionization of workers and democratization in Europe, Latin America, East Asia, and Southeast Asia concluded that authoritarian regimes are generally hostile towards labour movements (Caraway et al. 2015: 2).

A 2019 study that examined almost 200 opposition movements in 150 countries between 1900 and 2006 concluded that instances of urban mobilization – and upon closer examination, especially those by industrial workers – were central to democratization (Dahlum et al.: 2019a). The results of the study were summarized as follows: “Current debates on the recent rise of authoritarian populists may point the finger at the working classes – but our research suggests that industrial workers have been crucial to the historical progress of democracy. ... Industrial workers have been key agents of democratization and, if anything, are even more important than the urban middle classes” (2019b).³ If we apply a broader interpretation of the concept of the worker here – one not restricted to industrial workers – it becomes evident that workers’ participation has almost always been crucial for democratization.

³ The study – which also examined the movements for women’s suffrage at the beginning of the 20th century – involved a detailed analysis of the social composition of 193 larger opposition movements in 150 countries. The social groups involved were divided into peasants, public servants, military personnel, religious and ethnic groups, industrial workers, and members of the urban middle classes. Urban mobilization, and more specifically the involvement of industrial workers, was found to be crucial for subsequent processes of democratization (Dahlum et al. 2019a).

This has been confirmed by recent experiences, whether it be the new class-specific branch of feminism that has emerged in a number of different countries, or the mass protests that have flared up from Chile to Lebanon to France. These developments give rise to the question of the role trade unions and other forms of workers' organization could play in the current context.

This essay collection brings together a selection of examples from around the world of the ways in which workers – both historically and in the present – have used trade unions and other forms of organization to resist fascism, dictatorships, authoritarian regimes, and authoritarian movements. The volume is intended to help raise awareness of the centrality of workers and their organizations in the fight against authoritarianism, and provides readers with an opportunity to study a series of different experiences, tools, and tactics. This also involves examining how trade unions and other forms of organization relate to other social and political organizations. The anthology focusses on the ways in which workers advocate for democratic change, even from a position of weakness. Their struggles were not always successful, and where they have been, they have rarely accomplished all of what they sought to achieve. However, nobody has managed to achieve as much and as quickly as workers have when they have organized – a fact that has not changed to this day.

The majority of the 29 chapters, with the exception of the first three, deal with individual countries. Some explore the more general role of workers' organizations during specific periods of history, for example, in the fight against dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, or in the transitional periods that followed their overthrow or fall; others examine specific trade unions, workers' organizations, or labour struggles. Some chapters explore significant historical events and struggles of the 20th century, but the majority address struggles in the past ten years. Instances of non-union-organized mobilization, pressure exerted from below upon traditional trade union apparatuses, and non-traditional tactics and organizational strategies – which in some cases even involved the formation of new unions or other kinds of workers' organization – play an important role in all of the chapters.

It was particularly important to me that this collection reflect the diversity of left-wing political and organizational approaches to workers' organization around the world and invite as many authors as possible from the countries and regions in question. As such, the perspectives and terminology in the articles may differ, especially from those of the increasingly dominant Global North. This diversity and variety is entirely intentional. Furthermore, my own research, activism, and engagement with movements on five continents in recent decades has taught me the importance of looking at a movement's actual tangible practice, while taking into consideration its historical context and specific conditions. A shared perspective on liberation will only

be able to emerge once we perceive and understand our differences, and we also have a lot to learn from one another.

Humanity is currently faced with the task of averting the destruction of the very basis of its own existence on planet Earth, at a time when the forces oriented along the traditional axis of capital and labour in the old industrial centres in the Global North, as outlined by Klaus Dörre in the first chapter, and also in parts of the Global South, are weaker than ever before. This is also explained throughout this book by a number of authors for vastly different contexts. In recent decades, however, a number of new movements have emerged along other lines of conflict and contradictions: workers have been organized who were not covered by the traditional workers' organizations, and with forms of action and organization that differ significantly from traditional labour organizations.⁴ These mobilizations and movements can no longer be overlooked, nor can the movements against ecological collapse; this has most recently been made abundantly clear by the popular⁵ anti-austerity protests and uprisings that have gripped almost the entire world ever since the economic crisis of 2007–8.

It is therefore a case of forging new alliances and new politics of resistance; of creating a new socialist project that must necessarily be feminist, environmentally sustainable, anti-racist, and decolonial if it wishes to constitute a broad and global alternative to existing political and social systems. The issue of labour (without the concept being separated into production and reproduction) is central to this, because it constitutes the basis upon which life and humanity are built, and because the question of who can have a real interest in dismantling and overcoming capitalism is still tethered to the opposition between labour and capital.

I would like to thank the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung for making this publication possible, and especially Boris Kanzleiter and Till Bender for being such excellent collaborators. I would also like to thank the authors, who had to field a constant stream of queries due to the English and German versions of the texts being edited simultaneously. My thanks also go to all my comrades around the world who have supported me by providing invaluable information and contacts, and to my son Camilo for the joy he brings me, and the energy he

⁴ On this, see also Kanzleiter 2020, who offers a good overview of the many different forces of global resistance and global alternatives, and the axes along which these are forming.

⁵ The term "popular" is employed here (and in the rest of the volume) in the Gramscian sense and in the Latin American usage.

has given me during this global pandemic. And last but not least, I would like to thank my parents.

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Democracy or Capitalism

On the Contradictory Societalization of Politics

Klaus Dörre

The crisis of democracy or of democratic capitalism is on everyone's lips. Even left-wing liberal authors critical of capitalism are speaking today of "post-democratic conditions". Liberal democracy, or so it appears, has passed its zenith. In this respect, it may be surprising that I refuse to speak of a crisis of democracy – for analytical as well as normative reasons. This is by no means to say that everything is fine with democracy – on the contrary. There is no doubt that a creeping de-democratization of democracy is taking place in the old capitalist centres, especially in the US. The new authoritarianism can, I suggest, be understood as a political reaction to a deep crisis of capitalism. More precisely, the early industrialized countries in particular are going through a historically new economic-ecological pincer crisis, and it is wholly uncertain whether this crisis can be solved by democratic means and within system-compatible channels. With these difficulties in mind, democracy is, for significant sections of the capitalist elite, no longer the preferred political form of government (Jesop 2018; see Deppe 2013). In the long run, the democratic form of government will only survive if its contents, procedures and institutions are extended to fields and sectors previously excluded from democratic decision-making. Such a democratization, so I argue, ultimately amounts to a break with capitalism. The erosion of democratic capitalism may lead to an alternative capitalism or it may lead to radical democracy.

What is Democracy?

In modern capitalist societies, democracy invariably boils down to the inclusion of the masses in decision-making and thus to the societalization (*Vergesellschaftung*) of politics. From a *logical-functional* point of view, a democratic form of rule based on the separation of the economy, the state and civil society is the best political form of rule for rational capitalism, i.e. for a society that is dependent on permanent innovation, revolutionization of the means of production, market expansion (Wood 2010) and, above all, the constant inclusion of a previously excluded non-capitalist Other. From a *historical* perspective, however, the harmony of capitalism and democracy is by no means the norm. For a long time, the majority of the ruling classes had considerable reservations about a form of rule in which the popular masses would be included in political decision-making. Wherever liberal democracy prevailed, this was by no means in accord with capitalist economics and the will of the grand bourgeoisie, but rather under pressure from mass- and labour move-

ments that imposed political innovations such as universal, equal, and secret suffrage against large sections of the ruling classes (Hobsbawm 2017).

With this in mind, one can speak of a dual character of modern democracies. On the one hand, representative, parliamentary democracy functions (or can function) as an integrative mechanism for dominated classes. On the other hand, however, liberal democracy also allows the masses to participate in politics, a process which can be self-dynamic and can spiral out of the control of those in power. Modern mass democracies are therefore the product of an antagonistic societalization. This means that from the perspective of the dominant capitalist elites, democracy is most functional when it has a socially integrating effect alongside everything else that the capitalist system requires. Democracy basically fits only with a rational capitalism that offers dominated classes the chance to push through interests in an organized form. However, even within democratically constituted states there are always zones of exclusion – for example, subclasses, precarious groups and the care work sector. In addition, there are zones of exclusion in dependent, peripheral states or colonies in which democracy does not function at all or functions only to a limited extent. These zones of exclusion are variable; they can be enlarged and reduced. Their reduction can be the result of anti-colonial movements, as in India, or, as in South Africa, it can result from the anti-apartheid struggle. In this respect, the nexus of rational capitalism and liberal democracy is not subject to any automatic social mechanism. But it is also clear that the always tense elective affinity between capitalism and democracy can be broken by the ruling classes.

This is where my present diagnosis comes in. I argue using Marx, but orient myself along a “middle line” that moves between system-compliant reformism and Leninist concepts of revolution. This line, in which names such as Wolfgang Abendroth, some Austromarxists, Antonio Gramsci and, to a certain extent, Nicos Poulantzas stand, is what I consider the most important with regard to the old capitalist centres. Views of the state categorizable under the “middle line” are oriented, for all their diversity, toward the basic idea that the state, law and thus democracy rest on asymmetrical compromises. The subaltern classes can be integrated only if there are concessions to their interests. These concessions are institutionalized as social and democratic rights; their normative content can then outlast even significant changes in the social relations of power.

Institutionalized worker power is based on such rights. Such institutionalized power made possible what Bob Jessop, following Max Weber, calls rational capitalism. It was a capitalism in which over-exploitation was marginalized for a historically short period of time. The financial-capitalist “conquest (*Landnahme*)” that began in the mid-1970s partially pushed back this form of antagonistic societalization of politics. It has curtailed social rights and further weakened capital’s potential adversary, who had won social reforms af-

ter renouncing revolution. Above all, however, it has enormously expanded the zone of exclusion (which tends to elude democratic decision-making) by expanding market mechanisms.

Put simply, we are dealing with a manifestation of primarily class-specific inequalities in the old (but also in the new) capitalist centres that is reminiscent of pre-revolutionary times. At the same time, the forces that represented the old class antagonism are weaker now than at any time since 1945. Parallel to this development, however, there has also been an institutionalization of new social movements representing reproductive interests and metabolic power.⁶ In fact, a process of integration similar to that which has lasted a good century in the case of the Western European labour movement has been taking place for three decades with the new social movements. We are dealing with an institutionalization of reproductive and metabolic power, as illustrated by sustainability goals, equal opportunity commissioners and environmental officials. This institutional integration is the essence of what Nancy Fraser has called progressive neoliberalism (Fraser 2009).

Law, which is not identical with democracy – since it allows minorities and even individuals to challenge democratic decisions – has become the form of regulation of even those contradictions and antagonisms that break out in ecological social conflict and in the social reproductive sector. This leads to a paradoxical constellation. On the one hand, the decline of civil society actors built around the opposition between wage labour and capital continues. On the other hand, societies like Germany's enjoy a degree of civil liberty that allows them to live more freely than ever before with regard to sexual orientations, religious beliefs and various forms of civic engagement in the sphere of social inclusion. For the capitalist elites there is hardly anything left to integrate because of the weakness of potential antagonists, but this is precisely why elementary malfunctions occur within the capitalist system and its democracies.

These malfunctions are the result of a somewhat irrational political capitalism, a political capitalism that is also largely responsible for the problems of democracy. Malfunctioning of course also exists within the political system. One of the root causes of this was that the centre-left parties in the capitalist centres had submitted to the supposed imperatives of globalization and had effectively abandoned their social reformism, which still served the old antagonism. This turnaround in social democracy enabled the liberal-conservative parties to move to the centre, with the effect that the political centre in

⁶ A distinction must be made between capital and workers' power and a (heterodox) form of power that arises from the position of conscious interest groups in the reproduction of natural conditions. Its sources are based on work as a life-giving process, thus not primarily on waged or gainful employment. I refer to this as metabolic power.

Western democracies no longer permits polarization. For a long time, it made no great difference whether conservatives or social democrats were elected. This is precisely what has fostered a populist revolt from the right, which operates with a double front. On the one hand, it is an attempt to occupy the social question from the right and steal it from the left; on the other hand, it is an attack on the degree of political-cultural liberalism in democratically constituted civil societies.

The Tendency Towards Bonapartist Democracies

The revolt of the radical right, which is interested in preserving capitalism and is therefore imaginary, signals more than just the inability of political parties to engage in democratic conflict. It is also the manifestation of a tendency toward bonapartist democracies, more or less pronounced in all the capitalist centres. Bonapartism (MEW vol. 8) refers to an “exceptional form” (Hall 2014: 92) of the state that immobilizes the tension between capitalism and democracy in a political interregnum. As an explanation, bonapartism always becomes interesting when the tension between capitalism and democracy is openly revealed without any resolution of the underlying stalemate in sight. In contrast to other authoritarian forms of rule, the bonapartist exception is characterized by three structural features: (1) *the blocked revolution*; (2) an *interregnum* that holds the forces of the new in check; (3) a *transformismo* supported by parts of the subaltern classes that delegate their interests to authoritarian leaders and formations for want of an alternative. All of the above structural features are characteristics of the “long decade” between the global financial crisis and the corona pandemic.

(1) *Blocked revolution*: Particularly the early industrialized countries but also the emerging markets are currently going through an economic-ecological pincer crisis, which represents a turning point in the relationship between society and nature. The pincer crisis means that the most important means of overcoming stagnation, unemployment and poverty, and of pacifying class conflicts under capitalism, namely the generation of economic growth, is becoming, under present conditions (high emissions, resource- and energy-intensive, fossil-fuel-based economic activity), increasingly destructive in ecological (and thus social) terms. The pincer grip of economy and ecology marks a crisis that currently lurks unresolved behind the corona pandemic. Because of its complexity alone, it is likely to last a long time. However, sustainability goals, fixed in 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to which almost the entire community of states has committed itself, demand that the pincer crisis must come to an end if large parts of the planet are not to become uninhabitable. These goals have long been more than just non-binding declarations of intent. With the sanctionable commitment to a complete decar-

bonization of the European economy by 2050, the pressure to transform has reached key industrial sectors such as the energy and automotive industries. Not only the early industrialized countries but also the emerging economies are facing a sustainability revolution whose time budgets are shrinking to the extent that the changes envisaged are being delayed.

(2) *Interregnum*: This historically new constellation of crises contains the seeds of the problem that led to the political interregnum described above. The political centre (centre-right and centre-left in the spectrum) has so far proved incapable of overcoming the pincer crisis. The liberal capitalist elites are counting on a renewed social market economy and the help of digital technology to be able to rapidly make the overdue shift to sustainability. In doing so, they are confronted with a peculiar squaring of the circle that currently characterizes any sustainability policy. On the one hand, (almost) everything must change as quickly as possible, because “it is very urgent. A system collapse is a real danger” (Weizsäcker 2020: 82). On the other hand, “the resource efficiency and circular economy of a natural (sic! – KD) capitalism should not be seen as a threat” (Weizsäcker 2020: 93). It could be concluded from this that it is more likely that the profit economy becomes sustainable or the world ends than that capitalism will give way to a different social order.

The forces of the political centre have not yet been able to solve this dilemma. However, the stalemate in the political centre is also exacerbated by the fact that the two major oppositional camps of the “spirit of Porto Alegre” often act against each other. Those formations that represent a continuity of the old socialist and workers’ movements (vertical organization, struggle for power) are located predominantly on the axis of capital-labour conflicts. The competing camp of libertarian currents and movements, on the other hand, relies on self-organization (functional decentralization), rejects as a matter of principle the idea of economic growth as the goal of emancipatory politics, and, in addition to the axes of ethnicity/nationality and gender, operates primarily in the field of ecological social conflict. Numerous splits between the two camps have so far prevented the development of an effective political alternative from below.

(3) *Transformismo*: The political interregnum and the split of left-oppositional forces in turn favour a *transformismo* (Gramsci 1991: 98, 101-116) of the authoritarian camp within the capitalist elites. *Transformismo* refers to the political ability in crisis situations to credibly embody the break with the existing order and to assume leadership as a problem solver. The radical right responds to globalization with neo-nationalism, to inequality with an ethnicization of distribution conflicts, and to climate change with its denial or relativization. This results in political polarizations that are interpreted – no doubt prematurely – as a new cleavage of globalists and communitarians or as a split between globalization-sympathetic “Anywheres” and globalization-sceptic-

cal “Somewheres”. In my view, this is more an indication that social class and ecological and social conflicts are increasingly turning into a socio-ecological transformation conflict. Only those actors who address key issues of both conflict axes have a chance to overcome the existing political interregnum in favour of sustainability goals.

Displaced Class Conflicts

All data from empirical political science research on democracy indicate that support for democracy is greatest when economic prosperity is achieved. After the crisis of 2007–09, a state such as the Federal Republic of Germany went through one of the longest periods of prosperity in its history. However, growth rates have by no means reached the level of earlier booms. European populations are ageing and shrinking. Despite the massive deployment of technology and digitization, labour productivity in the old capitalist centres is rising only very slowly. This raises the question: What does sustained weak growth mean for the stability of democracy? To answer this, we need to look again at what happened in the era of financial capitalist expansion. In the period from the mid-1970s to the turn of the millennium, financial market capitalism was the second most successful growth project in the history of capitalist social formation. At the same time, social inequality reached dimensions long unheard of, at least in the continental European centres. This is linked to the fact that the societalization logic of financial market capitalism turns the relationship between production, market and reproduction on its head. Everything is conceived from the customer’s point of view and the interests of the producer measured against customer interests. From capital’s perspective it is paramount that you can buy cheap. The pressure on wages – the wage ratio has fallen almost continuously in OECD countries since the 1980s and the OECD average remains at an all-time low despite a slight increase after 2013 – is compensated by the reduction in the price of consumer goods. This is in many respects fatal, because production conditions are largely ignored, especially in transnational value chains. In Germany, the bottom 40 percent of wage earners have suffered real income losses over the last 20 years. The precarious and low-wage sector has expanded rapidly. As a consequence, a growing abundance of goods, often produced in zones of social exclusion, means that growth opportunities for every individual are being curtailed.

To put it more pointedly, people are always subjects of growth, they cannot help it. But growth means something completely different for individual subjects than for capitalist companies. As Erich Fromm has shown, subjects are always concerned with the growth of their own abilities, with the development of their own growth-oriented powers. This kind of growth is increasingly hampered by the prevailing patterns of capitalist commodity production

– in both the global North and the global South. However, as long as majorities of the population can only develop their own powers if they participate directly or indirectly in dependent labour, they will be compelled to engage in a struggle for the distribution of the social surplus they have helped to create.

It is an existential challenge for the trade unions to manage the enormous pressure resulting from declining growth rates, digitalization, the necessary decarbonization of the economy and the overdue change in the industrial model in such a way that the ability to engage in conflict is maintained (or even established in the first place). Precisely because this is the case, trade unions and employees are sometimes hanging on to what currently exists, be it the mining of brown coal or the production of environmentally-damaging combustion engines. This makes it all the more problematic that forward-looking struggles such as the one in Germany over the reduction of working hours, for which the IG Metall union was able to mobilize 1.5 million people, find virtually no public resonance in the political system. This problem is also a home-made one. The academic left is largely silent or denounces such struggles as those of privileged older white men. Just one look at the young, often migrant workforces in many companies in the metal and electrical industry could teach them a lesson. More broadly speaking, Didier Eribon is right when he argues that there is a lack of public resonance spaces for democratic (including class) politics, a politics which concerns itself with wages, working conditions and working hours, but also reproductive activities, rent and social infrastructure and ecological sustainability. This lack of public resonance for class politics effectively precludes a progressive overcoming of the political interregnum.

For this reason, the revival and politicization of struggles on the class axis is an important prerequisite for putting the anti-democratic revolt from the right in its place and overcoming the political stalemate at the centre of the political system. This does not mean, however, that social struggles built around class antagonism can on their own prevent a relapse into ethnic-nationalist positions and overcome the pincer crisis. The old labour movements are now far too weak for this. There is, however, another starting point: one which, drawing on Marx, places the expansion of capitalism into society and nature at the centre of analysis and from this perspective determines countervailing forces. Social antagonism can then be seen as not only an antagonism between classes but, in short, one between market societalization and the institutions that make markets possible in the first place.

Conclusions

With visions of a transformative democracy, one inevitably moves from class division to the axes of gender, nature and racial devaluation. Acknowledging the diversity of mechanisms of exploitation and domination therefore neces-

sarily implies going beyond traditionalist classism or a perspective reduced to social democratic and trade union distribution policies. There is nothing to suggest that the belated sustainability revolution can be achieved primarily, if not exclusively, through market-based means. A central problem of today's economic conditions is precisely that "we are dealing with the consequences of an economic system" that "operates with far too little complexity". The centrality of private profit-making contradicts the diversity of society and the degree of complexity of its problems. This is why only radical changes are truly realistic, and only solidaristic action gives real meaning to life (Ringger/Wermuth 2020: 62: 206). Against an expansive and increasingly destructive capitalism, democracy can only be maintained by means of expansion. "Capitalism is incompatible with genuine democracy and peace," says the manifesto *Feminism for the 99%* (Arruzza et al. 2019: 66). For this reason, a new feminism is necessarily "an eco-socialist" one (Arruzza et al. 2019: 63). The same could be said of a unifying class politics. It must of necessity be feminist, anti-racist and ecologically sustainable in order to make possible what could prove to be essential for survival – the radical democratization and socialist transformation of modern capitalist societies.

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What Are We Fighting For?

Women Workers' Struggles

Paula Varela

During the last five years, we have witnessed a new feminist wave worldwide. Argentina broke out with the #NiUnaMenos movement in 2015, and three years later women painted the streets with green to demand the legalization of abortion. On the other side of the Atlantic, women were also taking to the streets for the right to abortion, both in Ireland, to achieve it after the struggles that led to the historic referendum in May 2018, and in Poland, to avoid losing it when it was under attack. The #MeToo movement went viral in the USA in 2018, at first as a movement limited to “celebrities” but which later spread to other areas of society, politicizing women and transforming them into one of the main groups mobilized against Donald Trump’s presidency. In a similar vein, the women’s movement began to grow in Brazil and become visible under the slogan #EleNão (not him), a reference to the candidacy of Jair Bolsonaro. Italy experienced the most massive mobilizations of recent times in the celebration of the International Women’s Strike on 8 March and the revitalization of its historic feminist movement from the formation of the women’s platform *Non una di meno*. In Spain, 8 March also became the key date for a mass movement that placed the feminist debate on the national political agenda, making, for example, the women’s movement a central political actor against the extreme right-wing party Vox in Andalusia. Chile experienced a rise in the women’s movement that played a key role in the student struggles that sparked the massive demonstrations in 2019 which, as its own protagonists took care to say, were not “for thirty pesos” but for thirty years of neoliberalism. The expansive wave reached Southeast Asia, triggering a women’s movement for equal rights that, in the case of Indonesia, has led massive mobilizations against the “bus law” of labour precarization at the beginning of 2020.

This wave has different political and social contexts within which it has placed issues such as femicides and gender violence, reproductive rights, sexual freedoms, wage inequalities, and women’s social reproductive work at the centre of public debate. But the heterogeneous backgrounds and claims should not let us lose sight of an element that runs through the different local experiences and gives particular qualities to this new wave: the crisis of neoliberal capitalism starting in 2008 and its expression in austerity plans, an escalation of labour precariousness, increasing unemployment and poverty, and the emergence of extreme right-wing parties. The new feminist wave is part of the resistance movements that have risen in the heat of the crisis. As

Cinzia Arruzza points out, “The explosion of the feminist movement was, of course, preceded by other mobilizations, the season of struggles of 2011–2013 with international visibility (in particular Occupy, the Indignados, and Taksim Square), with which it presents some elements of continuity” (2018). Within this particular context, the women’s movement tends to lose its sectorial character and becomes a political phenomenon within each country hit by mobilizations, joining the plethora of social movements that fight against cuts, right wing governments, and authoritarian politics.

But there is another element that distinguishes this new feminist wave: the vital importance given to the work done by women in contemporary societies for the understanding of their oppression, that is, the role of women in social reproduction work. “If we strike out, the world stops” can be read among the slogans of 8 March. As the main instance of articulation of the movement at the international level, the International Women’s Strike (IWS), marks the centrality of this class aspect in the women’s movement and, at the same time, it marks the centrality of women in the class that makes the world go round. The IWS is the tool of women as current societies’ “essential workers” and as the working class’s key members.

In this article, I address the relationship between the rising women’s movement and the struggles of working women in the context of the crisis of neoliberal capitalism, taking three considerations into account. First, the framework of social reproduction enables us to understand the leading role played by women in working-class struggles. Second, when we speak of social reproduction, we are not only referring to what happens in the household but what happens in thousands of workplaces where it is mainly women who carry out reproductive work (hospitals, schools, fast food chains, cleaning services, etc).⁷ The recognition of these two forms of social reproduction work (unpaid and waged) is fundamental for understanding the centrality of women in the contemporary morphology of the working class. Furthermore, it is critical because institutions of social reproduction have been one of the main focus points of neoliberal austerity plans worldwide. Third, this social reproduction approach allows us to bring to light how workers’ struggles go beyond economic demands and introduce claims that are being violently attacked by capital and the ruling class.

From this point of view, this article addresses four types of workplace struggles led by women: against gender violence, in favour of reproductive rights,

⁷ For a deeper understanding of social reproduction see Bhattacharya 2017 and Ferguson 2020. For a comparison between this understanding of social reproduction and an autonomist understanding, see Varela 2020.

for the defence of social reproduction services, and to keep working-class people safe from Covid-19.

“I’m Not on the Menu”

Dozens of women march together holding each other’s arms and on their taped mouths could be read the words #MeToo. They are not celebrities, they are McDonald’s workers. It is Tuesday, 18 September 2018, at the first strike against sexual harassment coordinated throughout ten cities in the USA. Their demands were: that the company creates an anti-sexual harassment committee (of women workers, corporate executives, franchise representatives, and leaders from national women’s groups), that it come good on its stated zero-tolerance policy for sexual harassment, hold mandatory training sessions for managers and employees, and create a simple system for receiving and responding to complaints to protect workers from retaliation (Orleck 2018). “Low-wage workers often don’t have access to the media and lawyers that celebrities do”, Eve Cervantez⁸ said. “I appreciate that it’s difficult for celebrities to come forward, but I would say it’s much more difficult for low-wage workers to come forward because they don’t have a safety net” (Reyes-Velarde/Vives 2018). With this simple phrase, Cervantez brought to light a crucial fact: the profound relation between exploitation and sexual harassment, or, in other words, sexual harassment as a disciplinary mechanism of a deeply precarized, racialized, gendered, and migrant workforce.⁹ McDonald’s workers described sexual abuse, coercion, and harassment as everyday occurrences in the workplace,¹⁰ and described the retaliation they suffered in the form of verbal abuse, cuts in hours, and intentionally inconvenient rosters when they denounced the abuses. The same picture could have been given by one of *Las Kellys*¹¹ on the other side of the Atlantic in 2019. “Completely naked, he told me he’d pay me well if I stayed the night with him” (*la Sexta* 2019), said a hotel maid organized in the *Las Kellys* women’s collective during its campaign against sexual harassment in Spain. The campaign achieved such strength, par-

⁸ Eve Cervantez is an attorney representing the 10 women who filed charges with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in May 2018.

⁹ Latin women played a key role in the protests, in some cities the signs were written in English and Spanish: “McDonald’s: Enough, no more sexual harassment. Basta, no más acoso sexual.”

¹⁰ A survey by Hart Research Associates (2016) found that about 40 percent of women in the industry who experience sexual harassment feel forced to accept it because they can’t afford to lose their jobs, and that 1 in 5 women who report it were retaliated against.

¹¹ *Las Kellys* is an acronym of “*las que limpian*”, laskellys.wordpress.com/2017/02/25/equipo-de-investigacion/. See Georgina Cisquilla’s documentary (2018) and Martínez/Burgueño (2019).

ticularly in the five-star hotel chains in tourist towns along the Spanish coast, that it forced the union federation Workers' Commissions (CCOO, *Comisiones Obreras*) to take up the demand and address the issue of sexual harassment under the slogan "the customer is not always right".

There are many points in common between the strike at McDonald's in 2018 and the actions of *Las Kellys* in 2019: the systematic nature of sexual harassment in the workplace; the precarious nature of employment and working conditions; and, directly related to precariousness, the immigrant status of many of the workers. But there is a fourth component that is also relevant: the sort of organization that promotes the struggle on both sides of the Atlantic. The McDonald's Tuesday's Strike was voted for and conducted by the Women's Committee constituted by women workers in different areas of several cities.¹² In the case of *Las Kellys*, we also find a network created by women workers in different hotels in Spain, whose purpose is to fight for the demands of this precarious sector of the workforce. In other words, they are women workers' organizations that are built outside the unions but are based in the workplace, they discuss their needs as working women and in that experience they articulate together two things that unions often separate: labour demands and gender demands, which take the single form of "gendered working-class demands".

"I Learnt about Our Rights as Women within the Factory"

In the central hallway of the MadyGraf factory there is a sign that says "Sunday, July 22, Madygraf Wears Green: Women Leading the Fight for Legal Abortion and Against Austerity". Green is the colour of the struggle for the legalization of abortion in Argentina, and the sign calls for an all-women assembly in the factory to prepare for their participation in the 8 August demonstrations, the day the Senate would address the Law of Voluntary Pregnancy Interruption.¹³ MadyGraf¹⁴ is a print shop run by workers in Buenos Aires. The sign was discussed, voted on, and hung up by the company's women's committee, one of the pillars of the struggle that culminated in the occupation and reassuming production of the print shop. This militant women's committee has linked the struggle in the factory to the broader feminist struggle beyond its gates (Ar-

¹² The Women's Committee at workplace were formed after the McDonald's shareholder (annual) meeting in 2017. In some cases, the protests were supported by activists from Fight for 15, MeToo, Tenant's Unions, Time's Up Legal Defense Fund, and unions members.

¹³ The Senate voted against the law on that occasion. On 30 December 2020 it voted in favour and it was finally approved (editor's note).

¹⁴ Formerly the property of RR Donnelley, workers and their families occupied it in 2014, when the management decided to shut down.

ruzza/Varela 2019). The assembly on 22 July was attended by more than 700 workers from different workplaces around the northern area of Buenos Aires and by militants from the women's organization *Pan y Rosas*.¹⁵

As is well known, the debate for the legalization of abortion in Argentina shocked the entire country and was a turning point in the massive women's movement that developed around the slogan #NiUnaMenos by 2015.¹⁶ One of the most controversial roles was played by the head of the General Confederation of Labour (*Confederación General del Trabajo*, CGT),¹⁷ which gathers almost 100 percent of workers in the private sector. A few days before the bill was debated in the House of Deputies, some of the top leaders of the CGT signed an appeal entitled "Peronists for Life," which stated: "Abortion is a foreign element to the Justicialist worldview, which cannot be separated from the culture of discarding." On 4 July, the CGT published an official statement in which it announced that it would not take a position on abortion, but it alerted the national government to the economic problems legalization would bring to the health system managed by the unions, because it would increase the costs of the service. The statement was repudiated by women union leaders and by several sectors of the feminist movement.

The CGT's policy reinforced the boundary between "women's issues" and "working-class issues", strengthening the conception that abortion is a matter of personal choice and not an issue that, being a decision that has to be taken by women and pregnant bodies, directly concerns the reproductive conditions of the working class as a whole. In this context, the struggle of working women for the legalization of abortion in the workplace (particularly in the private sector) was carried out by the "militant minority" in each workplace: women's committees, feminist militants, and political activists.

"Save Our Schools"

A crowd is demonstrating in the park in front of the state Capitol in Charleston, West Virginia. Among the many signs that can be seen, there is one held up by a girl that reads: "Rosa Parks was not wrong, neither are my teachers." We are on one of the many marches that took place during the nine-day statewide wildcat strike carried out by West Virginia teachers, in what became known as the beginning of the Teacher's Spring, in 2018. The association between the iconic figure of Rosa Parks and the strike may seem exaggerated,

¹⁵ See www.laizquierdadiario.com/Pan-y-Rosas.

¹⁶ See niunamenos.org.ar/; Colectivo Ni Una Menos 2018; Rodriguez 2016.

¹⁷ The leaders of the Central de Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA), a labour Confederation composed basically of state workers unions, positioned themselves in favour of legalizing abortion.

but as Tithi Bhattacharya (2018) describes in her reports from the scene, what is felt among the strikers is a feeling of kick-starting change in a situation of years of injustices that not only concern themselves as wage earners but also affect all those who depend on public education. The strike was carried out by thousands of teachers and public schools service personnel (bus drivers, cooks, custodians, secretaries), but involved thousands of other community members who actively supported it. Why?

A whole series of reasons can be found in Eric Blanc's book *Red State Revolt* (2019), but I would like to highlight the following three: (1) The very policy of the organizers of including demands that affect other workers, such as an increase in the budget for the PEIA (Public Employee Insurance Agency). One in seven West Virginians depend on PEIA. In this sense, the teacher's strike was a struggle in defence of the two great institutions of the formal economy of social reproduction: education and health. (2) The workplace decision-making organization. It allowed not only democratic decision-making with a school-by-school voting system, but also the possibility of turning the school into a strike operational base where, for example, the teachers, largely self-organized, could provide food for students who depend on free school meals. (3) The dual character of the school: as a wage-labour workplace and as a fundamental space for social reproduction. There, the "classic" demands of a strike (such as pay increases) are combined with deeply working-class demands such as quality education as well as the healthcare that the new generations of workers receive. That dual character of the school (as a workplace and a place of care) and the gendered dimension of the profession of teaching was expressed in how quickly wider sectors of the community were pulled into the strike. The teachers' strike became a struggle for the means and quality of working-class life-making and it showed the potential role of social reproductive workers (mostly women) as a bridge between workplaces and communities.

"Our Bodies Are on the Line"

The picture was circulated on social networks. Three nurses standing outside Mount Sinai Hospital in New York holding three signs: "Quality Health Care for All New Yorkers", "How Many of Us Must Die? #PPE Over Profit #Protect the Frontline" and the main one: "Capitalism: Do Not Resuscitate. Healthcare Workers for Socialism" (Kwon 2020). The woman who was holding the biggest sign is Tre Kwon, a New York City nurse, a rank-and-file member of the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA), and an editor of *Left Voice* journal. The demonstration was held on April 3, 2020, as part of a series of protests organized by nurses and other staff at various hospitals in NYC. "We formed this task force [Frontline Workers Task Force at Mount Sinai Hospital] because we saw that the whole saying of, you know, 'We're all in this together' that Cuomo,

Trump and other politicians and even CEOs are claiming, is totally bogus. We are the ones who have our bodies on the line. We are the ones who are putting our families at risk and ourselves at risk at our job. We're demanding attention now." (Goodman 2020).

Kwon's message highlighted two feelings that surfaced among various sectors of workers as the pandemic unfolded. On the one hand, while the dominant narrative talked about a virus affecting everyone, it was the workers who put their bodies on the "battlefield." On the other hand, despite the demagogic recognition of "essential workers", companies prioritized profit-making over workers' lives through a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and Covid-19 testing, extended working hours, increased nurse-to-patient ratios, no guarantee of paid leave in case of contagion, etc.

The exceptional nature of the pandemic brought to the debate two elements that are usually part of "the hidden abode of capital" (Marx): the contradiction between profit-making and working-class life-making, and the relevance of women in the "essential" work of social reproduction.

Workplaces as Catalysts, Women Workers as a Bridge

The struggles outlined above have some elements in common. The first and most obvious is that *they are led by women*. The second is that their claims exceed what is commonly understood as a labour struggle, including "extra-labour" demands such as the end of gender violence, the legalization of abortion, the defence of education and health institutions, and the prioritizing of life-making over profit-making. That is why, as pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, we talk about them as social reproduction struggles since they are related to crucial aspects of the conditions in which the working class carry out their social reproduction. Third, and very significant, these are *workplace struggles*. In some way, this challenges one of the most established commonplaces in labour studies but also in much of union leadership: that struggles at the workplace must be reduced to the fight for working conditions and wage compensation of the specific sector of workers hired in that specific workplace.

This understanding implies a double reduction: a biased perspective of the workplace and its disciplinary mechanisms (as we have seen, sexual harassment is part of the workplace's disciplinary procedures for a gendered workforce), but also a misunderstanding of the relation between what happens inside the workplace and outside it. It builds an insurmountable barrier between the spheres of production and reproduction, as if they were dichotomized fields for capital. These struggles led by women workers challenge this dichotomized comprehension of the class-war battlefield: the workplace is not taken as a sectorial space but as a powerful position (because of its power to

stop profit-making through coordinated workers' action) that could serve as a *catalyst* and strengthen the claims of the working class as a whole.

The neoliberal counter-reforms have shown that *the attacks on the working class have been in the realms of both production and reproduction*. The labour force's feminization in recent decades is a great example of this. As Kim Moody (2017) pointed out in his analysis of the way in which capital is "re-shaping the battleground of class war", the pauperization of the working class pushed women into some particular niches of the labour market: short-hour (and low-wage) jobs that allow them to continue doing unpaid social reproductive work in the household (especially for women with children). One of these niches is the social reproduction sector in the formal economy that has additionally been one of the main targets of neoliberal policies through privatization (transformation into commodity production) and austerity plans. Women workers are triple victims of neoliberal policies: as part of the working class as a whole because they have witnessed their working and living conditions plummet in the last 40 years; as those who mostly perform waged reproductive work, because they are at the centre of the attacks on public health and education services; and as those who mostly carry out unpaid social reproductive work because they have suffered an increase in their domestic work due to the fact that every school, nursery, aged-care home, and hospital that closes or is privatized means more work for women who cannot pay for those services in the market. In this sense, working-class women have a vivid experience of the deep connection between the realms of production and reproduction as the two targets of capital's attacks. This specific position of women within the working class is reflected in various ways in the new feminist wave and enables us to think of working women as bridges between production and reproduction. It even allows us to pose the question about workplaces as catalysts of struggles that raise not sectorial demands but claims related to fundamental needs for the working class's own life-making, as did the women who led the struggles reviewed above. Claims not only related to gender, but also to race, sexuality, and migration status.

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The Pandemic and Class Struggle

Dario Azzellini

No, we are not all in the same boat. We are not all equally affected by Covid-19 and its repercussions. As is so often the case under capitalism, elderly people, the poor, and “minorities” are finding themselves more vulnerable to infection, sickness, and death than the wealthy. This is true on an international level with regard to the relationship between the Global North and South, as well as within individual countries. At the same time, those whose livelihoods depend on the sale of their labour are also being affected by accelerated levels of poverty and destitution due to pay cuts and job losses. And because crises under capitalism tend to entail a transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich, the rich are getting richer. But there is also resistance to all of this: a global increase in labour conflicts has been observed since the Covid-19 pandemic took hold in March 2020. The USA saw its largest wave of strikes since 1946, with at least 1170 strikes held nationwide.¹⁸ Written in the midst of the second wave in December 2020, this article outlines the dimensions of the class war from above over the course of the pandemic, provides an initial systematization of the various labour conflicts, and presents a preliminary evaluation.

Strikes and protests have been taking place in sectors that have been particularly profoundly impacted by increased operating pressure and risk of infection due to the pandemic, and that were for the most part already characterized by poor working conditions and low pay: healthcare and nursing, warehousing, mail-order businesses and logistics, and finally also passenger transportation and food production, especially meat-processing factories and agriculture.

Protests and riots have also occurred in prisons around the world in response to inadequate protective measures and treatment of infected inmates. These riots have been brutally suppressed. Between March and May 2020, roughly 16 people were killed in more than two dozen prison riots in Italy; in Colombia the death toll was at least 23; in Sri Lanka eight prisoners were shot dead by security forces; and there were two deaths in Lima, Peru. Further protests and riots related to the Covid-19 pandemic occurred in prisons in the USA, Thailand, France, and other countries. Labour disputes arising in response to insufficient protective measures also occurred in sectors where workers were forced to continue working, and companies failed to implement sufficient protective measures. The pandemic has clearly demonstrated just

¹⁸ See paydayreport.com/covid-19-strike-wave-interactive-map/. The actual strike figure could even be significantly higher, as paydayreport.com itself admits.

how little value capital places on human life. As Marx noted: “Capital asks no question about the length of life of labour-power. What interests it is purely and simply the maximum of labour-power that can be set in motion in a working day.” (Marx 1992: 376)

Labour disputes also gripped production plants where mass redundancies or even permanent closures were planned. In a number of countries such as India, mass strikes were held during the pandemic in opposition to neoliberal government policies such as privatization, the curtailing of labour rights, and increasingly precarious employment conditions.¹⁹ Other revolts, such as those sparked by a series of racist murders by police in the USA, unfolded during the course of the pandemic or were only able to be halted momentarily or not at all, such as the anti-neoliberal revolt in Chile or the uprising against the coup regime in Bolivia.

Inequality and Class War from Above

According to a study of 1.3 million patient records in Germany, recipients of Hartz IV (state-funded unemployment and welfare benefits) are at an 84.1 percent higher risk of being hospitalized due to Covid-19 than employed people (Sozialverband Deutschland 2020). Studies from the USA, the United Kingdom, and other countries have drawn very similar conclusions, and these results can also be extended to the relationship between the North and South on a global level.²⁰ An additional element that further compounds this disparity is skin colour, or rather one’s perceived or attributed ethnicity, because racism (like gender) constitutes a structuring element within capitalism. People of colour are more likely to contract Covid-19, become more severely ill, and die due to the disease than white people (Wood 2020). This fact was further illustrated by a study conducted by the largest US nurses’ union, National Nurses United (NNU). According to the NNU, by September 2020, 1718 workers in the US healthcare sector had died from Covid-19 and related complications, among them 213 registered nurses. Of these registered nurses, 124 or 58.2 percent were people of colour, and 67 of them (or 31.5 percent of the nurses who died) were of Filipino descent, even though they only constitute roughly 4 percent of the total number of nurses in the country (Vaidya 2020).

¹⁹ In this essay, it was only possible to go into very limited detail about the many labour disputes that have taken place around the world. A number of international essays can be found on the websites of Labournet (www.labournet.de), the International Labour Network of Solidarity and Struggles (www.laboursolidarity.org/), and for the USA at paydayreport.com/. Due to space limitations, it was not possible to cite references for all of the strikes and protests mentioned here.

²⁰ While older people, who constitute a greater portion of the total population in wealthier countries, are more severely affected by the consequences of Covid-19.

The pandemic has also seen an acceleration of wealth concentration. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that global labour income decreased by 10.7 percent (or US\$3.5 trillion) in the first nine months of 2020, compared to the same period in the previous year. The largest loss, 15.1 percent, was recorded in lower middle income countries (ILO 2020). In contrast, the total combined wealth of the now 2,189 official billionaires worldwide grew to approximately US\$10.2 trillion (€8.7 trillion) by the end of July 2020. For comparison, in 2019, the total economic output of Germany, Europe's largest economy, was approximately €3.5 trillion (Bender 2020). The wealth of the USA's 614 billionaires increased by a total of US\$931 billion from mid-March 2020 to mid-October 2020 (Stebbins and Suneson 2020). True to the "too big to fail" theory – which was also a determining factor in the government bail-outs from 2008 onwards – taxpayers' money is most likely to be distributed to large corporations. Many accepted tax reductions, funding to pay short-time working allowances, and direct subsidies, which they often used to buy back shares and continue paying out dividends. Stock markets were already recording record highs again by the end of 2020. The pandemic is also accelerating the concentration of capital (already a law of capitalism, as outlined by Marx). The number of corporate insolvencies has continued to skyrocket as a result of losses induced by the pandemic; these have primarily affected small and medium-sized businesses in the retail, hotel, and restaurant sectors, but also in manufacturing. Large corporate groups, on the other hand, are using the pandemic to shut down individual sites and lay off staff.

Among the biggest winners in the crisis is Amazon, whose sales have increased by 40 percent during the pandemic (the company's trade in food and everyday items has even tripled). Between January and October 2020, Amazon hired 427,300 new employees worldwide, who were mainly appointed to the company's logistics centres in the USA, Italy, and India. As of October 2020, a total of more than 1.2 million people worked for Amazon (Weise 2020a, 2020b). Amazon's profits increased so much that between 18 March 2020 and 13 October 2020, the company's founder and CEO Jeff Bezos increased his own personal wealth by 79.8 percent, or US\$90.1 billion, to reach a total of US\$203.1 billion (Stebbins and Suneson 2020). He could have paid each of Amazon's 876,000 US employees US\$105,000 from his own personal wealth in August 2020 and still have been as wealthy as he was at the beginning of the pandemic (Oxfam 2020).

Workers' Struggles in "Essential" Sectors and for Protective Measures

In the healthcare sector, which has been one of the main targets of neoliberal austerity policies and privatization for at least three decades, strikes have been held all over the world in response to inadequate protective measures, poor rates of pay, precarious employment contracts, and poor working conditions.

Strikes were held, for example, in a number of cities in the USA, in Madrid and elsewhere in Spain, Belgium, Bulgaria, Romania, Papua New Guinea, and Zimbabwe. In France, the Macron government met mass protests by healthcare workers on 16 June with unbridled police violence. Videos depicting police bludgeoning the heroes in Macron's purported "war on corona" and dragging a nurse around by her hair went viral on social media.

The US website paydayreport.com, which specializes in the coverage of workers' struggles, counted 260 strike actions demanding better protective measures in the USA between 1 March and 31 May 2020 alone. These actions included strikes by public transport drivers in a number of US cities, the majority of which were directly instigated by drivers themselves. In March 2020, public transport bus drivers in Detroit, Michigan, USA, managed to have all of their demands for protective masks and bus cleaning met by way of a one-day wildcat strike. In May and June 2020 in San Francisco, Minneapolis, New York, and Washington, D.C., bus drivers refused to transport protesters to jail who had been arrested by police at protests staged in response to the killing of George Floyd (Moattar 2020). In Brussels in May 2020, a high number of public transport workers staged a wildcat strike after the union reached an agreement with management without the workers' consent. Workers in the underground train systems in Mexico City, Medellín (Colombia), and Santiago de Chile went on strike in September, and Japanese railway workers went on strike in November 2020. In Germany, the trade union *ver.di* waged a series of strikes in the public transport sector over a period of several months, demanding better pay and a reduction in working hours due to increased workload.

Strikes in the food industry initially primarily took place in the meat processing sector, where infection rates were especially high and working conditions especially poor. Once again, these were mostly wildcat strikes: for example, in March and April, wildcat strikes for more comprehensive protective measures and risk compensation payments were held in the poultry processing industry in the US states of Georgia and Minnesota. At a pork processing factory in the state of Nebraska, workers downed tools and called for production to cease after 48 workers tested positive for Covid-19.

In Italy and Spain, migrant workers in the agricultural sector went on strike for better protection against infection and for higher pay, and in May, farm workers in the apple industry in the US state of Washington, who are almost exclusively Mexican, staged strikes at a number of large farms, demanding better protective measures and a two-dollar-per-hour risk compensation payment (Bacon 2020).

An instance of a labour conflict in the food retail sector that is worth noting is the one-day strike staged in Spain by workers from the German supermarket chain Lidl. According to the service sector union *CCOO-Servicios* (*Comis-*

iones Obreras, or workers' commissions), of which more than half of the workers employed in 600 Lidl stores and numerous warehouses are members, the strike on 4 June was observed by 80 to 90 percent of staff and brought over half of the company's stores to a standstill. The left-wing union had called the strike because Lidl had barely implemented any safety measures, had provided staff with insufficient protective clothing and equipment, and had refused to compensate staff for the loss of earnings brought about by the new, limited opening hours. The social democratic trade union UGT (*Unión General de Trabajadores*, General Union of Workers) backed out of the strike at the last minute, following talks with Lidl's management. After the strike, Lidl reached an agreement with the CCOO stipulating the provision of protective masks to staff members, strict limits and controls on the number of customers allowed in the stores at any one time, and compensation for loss of earnings.²¹

The United Kingdom has also seen a number of wildcat strikes in the meat industry, public service sector, and the construction and retail industries. In March, 500 workers from the ASOS clothing and cosmetics chain walked off the job and demanded adherence to social distancing measures in the workplace. In Italy, a wave of strikes engulfed industrial production at the beginning of the pandemic. At the time, the country – especially in its industrial centres in the north – was experiencing the highest infection and death rates in the world. But despite an ostensible lockdown, work continued in the factories. Workers went on strike demanding more comprehensive protective measures, and in some cases calling for the temporary closure of production sites.

Another sector that has proven “essential” not only but especially during the pandemic is the distribution and logistics sector, where strikes for increased protective measures were held worldwide in the early days of the pandemic, from Australia to the USA to Italy. Italy is at the intersection of the North-South and East-West value creation chains and home to the most important logistics centres in Europe. Grass-roots unions, in particular the USB (*Unione Sindacale di Base*), have been successfully organizing logistics workers there for years. All logistics companies and warehouses, including Amazon, TNT, DHL, and UPS, have experienced strikes and unexpected staff absences from the workplace.

Amazon is known for paying its staff low wages while enforcing high working pressure – in addition to closely monitoring workers and preventing unionization at all costs. After long having kept these numbers under wraps, Amazon announced in early October 2020 that a total of approximately 20,000 of its employees in the USA in its mail-order division and Whole Foods supermarkets had contracted Covid-19; a figure the company prided itself on because, when adjusted for the age of its workforce, it was lower than the rate of in-

²¹ See www.ccoo-servicios.es/lidl/.

fection in the populations of the surrounding communities (Weise 2020a). But Amazon workers saw things differently. As early as March 2020, workers at the Amazon logistics centres in France and Italy downed tools and demanded more protective equipment. A number of strikes were also conducted between April and the end of 2020 at various locations in the USA, in which workers reinforced their demands for more comprehensive protective measures.

Workers' Struggles Despite the Pandemic

A variety of uprisings also took place during the pandemic (the revolutions at the beginning of the 20th century occurred during the Spanish flu pandemic), as did a number of labour conflicts with no or only limited connection to it. Some of these actions are outlined in other chapters of this book. A second mass strike took place in India in December 2020 in response to the government's neoliberal and right-wing nationalist policies; according to the unions, the strike was observed by 250 million people. As the workers' struggles described thus far have demonstrated, workers have also often made demands that were not necessarily directly linked to the pandemic. It is therefore often impossible to make a clear distinction between the causes – and even if the pandemic and its repercussions are the direct trigger, and workers' demands are directly related to the pandemic, the causes of the situation are rooted in employment conditions themselves. Nevertheless, a number of other struggles should also be mentioned here.

For the Prime Day bargain hunt on 13 and 14 October, Amazon workers in Germany, Spain, and Poland went on strike for better pay. Black Friday in November, as well as the busy shopping periods in the lead-up to Christmas were marked by a series of several-day strikes staged at different Amazon sites across Germany. Amazon workers who are members of *ver.di* fought for Christmas bonuses, recognition of the regional sectoral collective agreements of the retail and mail-order sector, and the establishment of a collective agreement for good and healthy working conditions. In the Dutch IJmuiden steelworks, which is owned by the Indian steel multinational Tata Steel, workers staged a strike lasting more than three weeks, thereby preventing the dismissal of 1,000 of the 9,000 workers and securing an employment guarantee until 2026. The company had already decided upon the dismissals prior to the pandemic.

Meanwhile, the former employees of a McDonald's restaurant in the marginalized *Quartiers Nord* of Marseille (a county comprising the northern suburbs), France occupied their former workplace after the restaurant declared bankruptcy shortly after the pandemic began. Together with local residents, they have organized the daily distribution of hundreds of solidarity meals to the general public throughout the pandemic. Until March 2020, the *Quartiers Nord* had been governed by the fascist *Rassemblement national* (National

Rally, RN), which had managed to secure 36 percent of the vote in 2014, making the area the largest RN-governed municipality in France. The RN definitively drove the poor neighbourhoods in the north of Marseille, which had been combined to form one single municipality, to the margins of society. In December 2020, the McDonald's squatters announced that they would be opening a vegetarian burger restaurant on the premises, which would also serve as a social hub and civic centre. McDonald's refuses to engage with the squatters and dismisses their occupation of the site as illegal. The new operators of the cooperative, who belong to the neighbourhood union, the *Syndicat des quartiers populaires de Marseille* (SQPM), have not let this deter them and consider their action a necessary "civic requisition" (Guemari et al., 2020).

Preliminary Conclusions

Although the selection of labour disputes outlined here will inevitably be incomplete, and global generalizations are difficult, it is nevertheless possible to draw some conclusions. During the pandemic, discourse around the concept of national unity, which is often effective in situations of extreme crisis, has either barely managed to develop or has completely failed to. Industrial disputes and class conflict have not been shut down or brushed aside, on the contrary: we have seen an intensification of the global trend towards an increase in industrial disputes. As in previous years, industrial conflicts during the Covid-19 pandemic tended to start with the workers themselves, with grass-roots unions, or with new approaches in sections of established unions (Azzellini/Kraft 2019). In the instances involving the larger, traditional unions, this almost always occurred due to pressure from the base or from external movements. In the majority of cases, they left it at statements against passing the costs of the crisis on to workers, and demands for adequate protection against infection. The larger, more traditional unions of the world for the most part avoided actively promoting workers' struggles on a broad front, or even bringing the subject of general strikes into the discussion at all. Even though conditions differ from country to country, this is not only because conventional unions are often bureaucratized and adhere to the rules of institutionalized industrial action (even if the employers' side does not), hoping to be recognized for mediating between labour and capital. In this regard, "reliability" in terms of controlling the labour force is as much a part of this as the awareness of bearing responsibility for national economies (and their competitiveness).

The increased conflict and increased willingness of workers to initiate industrial action is undoubtedly a positive turn of events. However, this must realistically be qualified by pointing out that in most countries and sectors of the world, these actions fall far short of what would – considering what is at stake – be deemed appropriate and necessary to actually shift the balance of

power between labour and capital in favour of labour. The reluctance of the trade unions can therefore also be attributed to a lack of readiness on the part of workers to engage in conflict (which nonetheless does not excuse them, since it is precisely the task of the trade unions to develop and strengthen such readiness). Numerous examples in this volume (and beyond) prove that trade unions and workers' struggles are definitely not obsolete. Yet they need to be more strongly intertwined with one another and with other movements than ever before.

In light of the anticipated wave of insolvencies and site closures that have already been announced, it would be logical and appropriate to occupy the factories and continue to operate them under workers' self-management. Over the past 20 years in Argentina alone, more than 400 companies have demonstrated that this is indeed possible and can be done in all sectors. Several hundred other companies in other Latin American countries have also followed suit; since the 2008 crisis, several dozen companies in Southern Europe, the USA, and other countries worldwide have done the same (Azzellini 2018). In particular the more traditional trade unions in the Global North should dispense with their rigid adherence to performing the unrestricted role of mediating between capital and labour and dealing with operational matters, to focusing on representing employees, and to strictly complying with institutionalized models of labour conflict (which capital has already long since abandoned).

The dimensions of the crisis and class war call for overarching political solutions. In order to achieve these, trade unions and workers must become more politically engaged than before and use coordinated actions in all sections of society to push for alternatives. The time for this is not only ripe, it is favourable. It has become undeniably clear that government intervention and national debt are political issues. Our task is now to prevent the crisis of capital and the manifold crisis of capitalism from once again being redefined as a mere debt crisis.

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Argentina: Workers' Resistance to Macrist Neoliberalism

Andrés Ruggeri and Elisa Gigliarelli

The Argentinian workers' movement has a long history struggling against authoritarian regimes and dictatorships. The last military dictatorship, which established a reign of state terrorism between 1976 and 1983, was particularly brutal toward trade union leaders and militants from workers' organizations. But despite the thousands of *desaparecidos*, assassinations and torture, the first great act of social resistance to the regime came from the unions, which held a general strike in 1979, at the height of the terror (Basualdo 2010).

However, the union movement lost its strength during the neoliberal hegemony of the 1990s. Privatizations, precarization, and the collaboration of most union structures lead to a defeat of the main ongoing struggles and to a certain passivity in traditional working-class sectors throughout the decade. Meanwhile, new forms of organization among the workers excluded from the traditional wage relation started to appear. Having lost their jobs, they shifted their struggle to the streets, where they faced the desperate situation resulting from an absence of both income and any kind of social security (Svampa/Pereyra 2003). Almost simultaneously – although not on such a massive scale – the workers' recuperated companies' movement started to appear. Workers that didn't want to accept unemployment as a result of factory closure started occupying their workplaces, to resist and, after a long struggle, to re-sume production under self-management (Ruggeri 2014).

What both movements proved during the major crisis the country experienced in 2001 was, on the one hand, that the loss of formal employment didn't mean a loss of workers' willingness to struggle and resist. On the other hand, it showed the existence of a broad sector of the population outside the world of organized labour and, as a consequence, outside of the traditional union's sphere of action and representation.

The Macri Government

Being aware of these circumstances is essential for understanding Argentinian workers' resistance to the latest neoliberal experiment, which occurred between 2015 and 2019 under the presidency of Mauricio Macri. Even though Macri was elected to government, his exercise of power has clearly been authoritarian. It was a government founded by the owners and the CEOs of the big corporations operating in the country, a kind of class government that had not been seen in Argentina for quite a long time. It was hostile to the poor

and to workers, treating them with violence and contempt whenever it had the opportunity to do so.

Huge mobilizations, general strikes, factory occupations, and picket-lines in the streets, characterized the whole period of Macri's presidency. Growing repression, through the use of infiltrators, spying on all opposition figures as well as members of the government, rigged judicial proceedings with the objective of jailing or extorting opponents, were some of the tools used to guarantee the governability that allowed Macri and his allies to continue plundering the country (Bertoia 2020). In spite of the enormous concentration of power that Macrism meant, from its very beginning the government had to face one of the most important cycles of mobilization in recent decades. Finally, due to the disastrous results of its economic policies it inevitably made its way towards electoral defeat against a broad Peronist coalition that also included all unions and the main social movements.

Mauricio Macri's labour policy aimed at precarization and lay-offs from the very beginning, as part of an economic program based on contracting foreign debt, destroying the productive apparatus, and on the primacy of financial capital and capital flight. This resulted in a severe impoverishment of the working population, the deterioration of all socio-economic indexes, and an economic debacle that led to a ruinous agreement with the IMF. Argentina incurred over 100 billion dollars in debt, 86 billion of which were immediately transferred out of the country (BCRA 2020).

We can characterize the Macri government as a stage of what Harvey calls "accumulation by dispossession" (2007). Accumulation under the neoliberal form of capitalism doesn't only occur through the direct exploitation of labour or indirect exploitation through financial and "market" mechanisms, but also through theft and plunder. The most obvious evidence for this was the enormous debt the nation contracted, leaving the whole population in debt and facing the familiar forms of extortion by international financial institutions and "vulture funds", a scenario that has been repeated multiple times in Argentinian history (Aspiazu/Schorr 2010).

Another part of the recolonization project that Macrism embodied was repositioning Argentina as a provider of primary resources and an energy exporter, decreasing of the "cost of labour" in these highly profitable sectors through lay-offs, high inflation rates, and recession in order to dilute the purchasing power of wages, as well as aiming to defeat any kind of social struggle of resistance.

This last aspect was a key factor in the government's project. Keeping a broad sector of the labour force unemployed is a strategic move to force lower wages, as it creates higher demand for employment and weakens unions. For this reason, the repression of any form of workers' resistance, both to lay-offs

and to a reduction in the purchasing power of wages and pensions, and the prevention of economic organization outside the wage relation, for example through cooperatives and social organizations, was central to the feasibility of this economic and political project (Ruggeri 2017a). Altogether, it was a government that openly dismantled all social achievements, so as to fully re-orient the state towards neoliberalism and the repression of social struggles, thereby guaranteeing huge gains for the business elite, who were, in fact, the same people as the government itself.

The Unions' Resistance

Lay-offs of precarious workers in certain sectors of the national public administration – some of whom had spent many years working for the state – began only a few days after Macri took office. In spite of the massive mobilizations organized by the *Asociación Trabajadores del Estado* (ATE, Association of State Workers), which is part of the *Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina* (CTA, Argentinian Workers' Central), the lay-offs were only prevented in very few cases. Altogether, throughout the Macrist government around 100,000 workers were fired this way (Letcher et al. 2017).

This first showdown between the government and the unions set the tone of the dispute for the following four years. The government tried to proceed against workers' rights and their unions by whatever means they could, trying to negotiate with the majority unions of the *Confederación General del Trabajo* (CGT, General Confederation of Labour), historically known to negotiate with whoever is in power. Nevertheless, the resistance grew to such an extent that passivity towards the government started to be dangerous for those union leaders that were inclined to dialogue.

At the beginning of Macri's presidency, Argentinian unionism was strongly divided, based on the positioning of each sector towards Cristina Kirchner's government. The major and historically Peronist confederation, the CGT, was split into three factions, and the alternative union, the CTA, into two (the CTA of the Workers, and the Autonomous CTA). Nevertheless, all factions called for a united rally as early as 29 April 2016, just a few months after the government had taken office, mobilizing around 300,000 people.

The first year of Macrism went by in the midst of an offensive strategy that had been calculated by the government in order to weaken and divide movements, unions, and political opposition as the consequences of its economic plan grew harsher. The government pressured the unions to sign watered-down collective bargaining agreements, with a wage increase below the level of inflation. In general, the attempt succeeded, although some unions, such as the bank workers', truck drivers', and *aceiteros* (oil producers') unions, which were in a better strategic position (Womack 2007) relative to Mac-

ism's ultra-neoliberal model, managed to maintain wages with very slight relative loss.

In 2017, during a new wave of lay-offs that occurred at the time the contracts of precarious state workers were due to be renewed, the unions led a succession of mobilizations throughout the whole month of March, culminating in a general strike in the first week of April that had a great turnout. Nevertheless, the government managed to transform this force into a new attack on popular resistance, by using the mobilizations as a pretext to unleash a wave of repression that ended up being systematic (Ruggeri 2017b). 2017 was also the year the repressive forces assassinated two militants, Santiago Maldonado and Rafael Nahuel, during conflicts in the indigenous areas of Patagonia. During one of the union mobilizations, when the call for a general strike – that had been announced without a date by the tree-way leadership of the CGT – was about to be delayed again, union members complained so forcefully that the leaders were forced to flee the stage they were supposed to be speaking from. Some occupied factories were also evicted, as in the case of PepsiCo and the print workshop *Artes Gráficas Rioplatense*. In spite of the high level of conflict in 2017, the Macrist government managed to win the mid-term elections in October.

The Social Security and Labour Reforms

Alianza Cambiemos interpreted its electoral success as a blank check to continue with two reforms that were strategic for its economic, political, and social programme: pensions and labour regime. Barely two weeks had passed after the elections when the government sent the social security reform to Congress and tried to approve it by proceeding at full speed. Even if this was only a part of the whole project, it represented a strong cut in the budget as well as to retirement and pension value.

The mobilizations against the measure surprisingly turned out to be huge. It was brought to an end by an enormous act of repression that obliged the parliament to suspend its sessions on various occasions, until the law was finally approved by a very slim margin. In a similar way to 2001, *cacerolazos*²² and night-time demonstrations took over the streets, even in the governing party's electoral strongholds in the middle-class neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires. Even though Macri managed to approve the law of "retirement mobility", he did so at the cost of facing massive opposition and unleashing fierce repression in the streets of the capital. Unions of all tendencies, social movements of the popular economy, and the entire spectrum of the political op-

²² A form of popular protest which consists in a group of people banging pots and pans together in order to attract attention.

position converged in the mobilization and, as a reaction to the repression, an unaligned multitude took to the streets until late at night. At the same time, opposition groups started a process of unification that was completed two years later with the creation of the *Frente de Todos*, that ended up defeating Macri in 2019.

In conclusion, the government's greatest objective, the labour reform, was never presented. The enormous costs faced while approving the social security laws pushed Macri to propose the project as a plan for a possible second mandate that never eventuated.

Resistance from Social Movements and Self-Management

A depiction of working-class resistance would not be complete without taking into account the movements of the popular economy, united in the *Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular* (CTEP, Confederation of Workers of the Popular Economy). This sector used Pope Francis's motto (Jorge Bergoglio had developed a close relationship with organizations in the popular neighbourhoods during his time in the Church of Buenos Aires) of the "three Ts" (*tierra, techo, trabajo*, land, lodging, labour) to lend political and social legitimacy to the protest. The enormous mobilizations of these organizations – emblematic of the huge sector of the working class that isn't included in the formal wage relation – grew larger as the policies that were destroying the country's domestic economy moved forward. As this happened, they became a factor of political destabilization and achieved huge negotiating power (Grabois 2018).

As early as 2016, the CTEP started a dialogue with the objective of uniting with the CGT. There were calls for common demonstrations including the two sectors, but ultimately this announced and desirable unity never eventuated. But the CTEP grew tremendously during the entire period that Macri was in power, and the movement's leaders converged into the electoral alliance that defeated Macri in 2019 and ended up creating their own union, the *Unión de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular* (UTEP, Popular Economy Workers' Union). The UTEP has few predecessors worldwide, being formed by informal workers, migrant workers, and cooperatives from sectors with high levels of precarization (Sabatés 2019).

Another significant form of resistance, although not so important in terms of numbers, was that of the worker-recuperated companies (WRC). For these self-management initiatives, Macri's government meant four years of suffering. This was not only due to the neoliberal economic policies that destroyed the domestic market and the productive capacity of large sectors of the economy, to the tremendous increase in the costs of essential services, and to the fall in workers' incomes, but most of all to the open hostility of power that –

both at an economic and political level – only became ever more patent. Recuperated companies reached the end of the period in economic distress, facing difficulties in maintaining machinery and in avoiding cuts to essential services, accumulating debt, but still standing. A few evictions, shut-downs, and sometimes even sell-offs occurred. Nevertheless, the total number of WRCs rose to around 400, although there was a slight reduction in the total number of workers involved (Ruggeri 2020). Their struggle played its part in the general movement. An example is the resistance to the eviction of the emblematic Hotel Bauen, which avoided being shut down despite numerous attempts to do so. Macriism went to great lengths to prevent occupations and the creation of new recuperated companies. Generally, it did so by anticipating factory lock-downs with police presence or by other means of repression. Nevertheless, there were around 50 new recuperations (Ruggeri 2020).

Conclusion

In this brief summary of Argentinian working-class resistance to Mauricio Macri's neoliberal and authoritarian government we showed how any project of the regressive transformation of economic and social structures will have to face strong resistance from workers. The Argentinian working class clearly has its share of leaders and structures that collaborate with power, that are bureaucratic and stultified, and it suffers from severe political fragmentation. To this we also have to add the existence of movements and organizations that were born outside of the wage relation, formed by workers who mainly perform subsistence labour activities, work in the so-called popular economy, as well as those in self-managed work activities, such as the WRCs. The convergence of these different sectors, which generally occurred despite their leaders, constituted a factor of great strength and resistance and ended up being a crucial factor in the defeat of Mauricio Macri's government.

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Anti-Neoliberal Revolt and General Strike in Chile 2019

Domingo Pérez and Sebastián Osorio²³

After a long period of stability and only slight disruptions in the last decade, neoliberalism in Chile experienced a historical setback with the popular revolt in 2019. The right-wing government of President Sebastián Piñera, a billionaire from the corporate service sector, responded with military repression. At the peak of the protests, the social movement unfolded a massive and radical general strike, the first since the 1980s. In this chapter, we analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the general strike and the role of unionism and workers in the revolt. Finally, the conflict opened the path to a constitutional plebiscite in 2020, an unprecedented event in the country's political history. However, the state used the conjuncture of the Covid-19 pandemic to redeploy authoritarian and repressive actions in a counter-attack on the social movement.

Chile's Neoliberal Inequality in a Comparative Perspective

In recent decades, Chile has maintained its historical levels of inequality due to the implementation of an extreme form of neoliberalism initiated by the dictatorship (1973–1989) and then deepened in a stable political form of liberal democracy (1990–). However, in 2019 it also experienced its biggest historical revolt, when the “popular classes” – understood as most precarious or impoverished working families (*working class* or *proletariat* in the broad sense) – mobilized radically and en masse.

In 2017, Chile ranked 176th out of 264 countries (67th percentile) regarding per capita income and 140th out of 164 countries (85th percentile) regarding inequality (GINI) (World Bank n. d.). This put it at the top of both measurements in Latin America, meaning that it is a rich and poor country simultaneously. In this context, while the official definitions and data have measured around 10 percent of people as living in poverty in recent decades, data from the *Radiography of Social Change* report (COES 2019) shows that at least 45 percent of the Chilean population has been poor at some point between 2016 and 2018. This socio-economic inequality and poverty have also been captured by the concept of “vulnerability” in the *How's Life? 2017* report (OECD 2017), which identifies 77.5 percent of Chileans as poor or economically vulnerable, the second-highest level among OECD countries.

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The factors behind this situation are rooted in the productive and reproductive spheres to a similar extent. On the one hand, in 2006, 64.3 percent of the workforce was considered to be working in “precarious labour” conditions (Sehnbruch 2012). According to ILO information, the informality rate in 2019 reached 30.4 percent; the proportion of temporary jobs fluctuates between 26 and 30 percent, the highest in the OECD; and collective bargaining coverage in 2016 was 18 percent for private wage earners, well below the 47 percent average for OECD countries (Vives et al., 2019). On the other hand, the socio-geographic concentration of poverty in the capital was measured at 48.1 percent (COES 2017). For a long time, the flexibility of the relationship between consumption and indebtedness (credit) allowed for the continuation of such socio-economic tensions. As a result, the indebtedness of Chilean households has already reached 74.3 percent on average (Banco Central de Chile, 2020).

Chile became a paradigmatic example of a neoliberal society, with high and increasing inequality, but at the same time, with considerable legitimacy and a stable political model. Even more, from Chile’s foundation, its long and narrow geography – extended along the western edge of South America – has hindered the formation of national movements and mobilizations. Nevertheless, a social explosion in October 2019 grew quickly in space and time.

This chapter analyses the role of trade unionism in the popular revolt against a regime that became politically and militarily authoritarian. We begin by pointing out the history of the process with its general explanatory aspects, then we focus on the characteristics of the general strike of 12 November 2019, which constitutes the peak of the conflict in this popular uprising.

Popular Revolt and the General Strike

The neoliberal model in Chile had spawned a series of social movements with mobilization cycles of occasional but radical events, around 40 percent of which are labour conflicts and an increasing amount of which are non-legal mobilizations (Garretón et al., 2017; OHL 2019). However, none of these mobilizations managed to transcend their union sphere or even pose structural transformations that affected the economy as a whole (Ponce et al., 2018; Pinto 2019).

Analysing the different strike scales emerging from the work world (OHL n. d.), the trend of workplace strikes – in companies or public institutions – begins to increase from 2006, when an unprecedented movement of subcontracted miners in Chile’s most important export industry and a secondary student movement erupted. General stoppages at the communal or regional level then appeared and increased after 2011 (the student movement exploded), especially in the non-metropolitan regions in the form of socio-territorial movements. Finally, general strikes also emerged and increased, but they were not

massive or radical and were limited to classical union forces: public employees, teachers, miners, and metal workers.

In this context, neither the government nor the opposition seemed to have been paying attention when, during the first weeks of October 2019, secondary students carried out a massive “fare evasion” on public transport to protest a 30-peso price increase (USD 0.037). These demonstrations gained strength and, following a repressive response from the authorities, numerous contingents of workers joined the conflict. In a matter of days, it escalated to the point that on 18 October, a gigantic popular mobilization took place in the city centre and the peripheral communes of the capital, Santiago. That night, nearly twenty subway stations were burned. The reaction of President Sebastián Piñera was to declare a state of emergency and the deployment of the armed forces onto the streets to support the Chilean police in maintaining public order. Just a few weeks earlier, President Piñera had presented the country to the international press as an “oasis” of calm and prosperity in Latin America. Chile joined the “Latin American Spring” and political-military authoritarianism, last seen in the dictatorship, returned.

The presence of the military on the streets further fuelled the revolt, which had already spread to most regions of the country. In addition to the unprecedented violence and size of the movement in post-dictatorship times, the novelty was its initially decentralized character, in which no social or partisan movement stood out or could be identified as being in a leadership position (Somma et al., 2020; Lepe-Carrión 2020). In this context, the first explanations postulated by progressive intellectuals were theses about the “social malaise” and the “awakening” of the masses – but these readings, again, were disregarding the growth of the workers’ will to fight over the last decade, even in the face of a highly unified bloc in power (Link et al., 2019).

An important example of the above was the formation of a platform of civil organizations called *Mesa de Unidad Social* (MUS, Social Unity Round-table) a few weeks before the crisis, which then significantly grew until it managed to direct (but not to lead per se) part of the protest. Specifically, two sectors begin to stand out in this instance: on the one hand, traditional organizations such as the *Central Unitaria de Trabajadores* (CUT, Unitary Central of Workers, the main trade union federation), along with unions and leaders of new movements with a moderate anti-neoliberal policy leaning. On the other hand, organizations with a significant degree of power to mobilize masses of people, more recently formed and with determined confrontational inclinations. Examples of the latter include the *Coordinadora 8M* (8 March Committee: feminists focused on general strikes and engaging in various struggles simultaneously), and other older groups that experienced a vertiginous strengthening and radicalism, like ACES (*Asamblea Coordinadora de Estudiantes Secundar-*

ios, High School Student Coordinating Assembly). In this scenario, the moderate sector of the MUS took the lead by calling for a first general strike on 23 and 24 October, which was joined by dock workers, teachers and miners, although the leading role continued to be played by popular protests. For several weeks and throughout the country, protests multiplied with different levels of violence.

An on-site survey in the geographic epicentre of the conflict profiled protesters living in multiple locations in the city: many identified as having a left-wing political position (66.3 percent), half of them were the primary source of income of their household, and they were making a variety of sectoral demands, but most said that a new constitution via a constituent assembly would be the primary means to resolve the conflict (Núcleo de Sociología Contingente 2019).

In this context, three relevant milestones emerged. The first occurred on 25 October, after the first strike attempt, and consisted of the most massive mobilization that is remembered: it gathered between 800,000 and 1,500,000 people in Santiago (up to a quarter of city's population) and was replicated in all large and medium-sized cities in the country.

The second milestone, in the face of the persistence of the social uprising and with evidence of multiple human rights violations by the state's repressive forces – corroborated by all observer organizations²⁴ –, the “Union Block” of Social Unity, a sector that brought together the union forces in the MUS from now on, presented a synthesis of the various demands of the social movement and called a general strike for 12 November.

The Centre for Social-Political Labour Studies investigated the mobilization through a review of the press and social networks during the day. Among its findings, the following stand out: 1) this was the stoppage with the most massive impact that has been carried out in the country since the return to a democratic regime in 1990; 2) despite the greater relative strength exhibited by the trade union movement regarding previous calls for general strikes, the success of this instance was mostly due to previous mobilizations; iii) the unions' deployment during the day suggests a rather discreet extension of the scope of this actor, where the leading role was held by previously strengthened unions and macro-union organizations; iv) particularly novel was the unity in action exhibited by several of the country's main unions in the call; v) the CUT, the mobilizing strength of which had been deteriorating since the cycle of protests that started in 2006, took a more open attitude to cooperating with other union organizations (CIPSTRA 2019a).

²⁴ Roughly 20,000 arrests, 3,000 injured and 34 killed.

In general, other workers' forces such as construction, commerce, and banking unions joined the unions that traditionally engage in strikes, as did various neighbourhood organizations and territorial strike committees that set up roadblocks and barricades to hinder the flow of vehicles in the main arterials of the cities. In this sense, the peculiarity of this general strike, the first mass strike since the 1980s, was that it mobilized an important contingent of the non-unionized working class, with multiple protests having an impact on economic activity. It was not only a union strike then, but a strike involving most of the working class (CIPSTRA 2019a).

A direct consequence of this was a deepening of the crisis that the government and congress were going through. The re-deployment of the armed forces onto the streets was a possible scenario, but this did not occur for a number of different reasons, among which a probable escalation of the conflict, costly for all political parties, must have been central. On 15 November, all of this culminated in the government and parties from across almost the entire political spectrum – save for the Communist Party – mulling the option of a new constitution as a way to end the crisis.

The proposed mechanism was not entirely democratic or transparent, but had an impact on the level of participation in the protests. At first, the leaders of the MUS agreed to suspend further action, but then changed their stance, deciding to call for a new general strike. This third event had less impact than the previous one (CIPSTRA 2019b), marking another turning point in the protests as groups continued to convene on specific days, but they failed to attract massive numbers, which hindered the coercive tactics of these actions. Thus, the official schedule for a new constitution was maintained, setting a plebiscite for April 2020. However, it was later interrupted because of the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁵

Political Challenges in Authoritarianism and Covid-19

Four aspects from the revolt and general strike stand out: 1) the potential of the process can be explained because, thanks to their chaotic nature, the mobilizations had as their primary impact a partial, and in some cases a total, multiple-day stoppage of economic activity in the urban centres, central to any process of social and political crisis; 2) despite not playing a leadership or vanguard role, trade unionism operated as a centralizing agent in the demonstrations, focusing their actions on specific days to intensify their effect, thus showing their validity in struggles that go beyond the workplace; 3) this process

²⁵ The referendum was finally held on 25 October 2020. 78 percent approved the drafting of a new constitution, 79 percent voted in favour of the election of a constitutional convention (electoral turnout was 51 percent) [editors' note].

was mainly possible because in general, the population was not intimidated by the authoritarian manoeuvres of the government (a political-generational factor, with more than 50 percent of those participating in the mobilizations being minors), and the hegemonic nature of the mobilizations turned repression into a double-edged sword that further delegitimized the established political powers; 4) this reinforced the thesis that revolts and insurrections create general strikes, and not the other way around.

Amid the protests that were continuing weekly, in March 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic began to take over the agenda in the media and the government took advantage of the situation: it declared a state of exception and deployed the military, not to carry out sanitary work but to protect public order. Then it decreed a “nominal quarantine” that applied to the reproductive world but not the productive one: it keeps a wide set of companies open, so workers continue to be exposed to the virus. Furthermore, it decreed pro-business legislation that facilitated the suspension of labour contracts. These policies, which have led to more than 300,000 people being infected – the 6th most infections in the world as of 16 July 2020 – , have shown to have a greater negative impact on precarious workers.

On the one hand, the government has sought to maintain neoliberal normality at the expense of an uncontrolled contagion rate of the virus. On the other, a lax popular organization has been present in a) protests in neighbourhoods demanding help from the authorities due to the effects of the government policies to deal with the pandemic; and b) calls for a general strike demanding the resignation of those in government. Yet these have had no significant impact to date.

In conclusion, this evidence suggests that weak and fragmented popular organization in neoliberalism has paradoxical political effects: it contributes both to the emergence of violent social uprisings in extreme neoliberalism, but also helps prolong uncertain political situations that can have dramatic counter-effects for the working class.

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Operating Under an Authoritarian Regime: Unions in Colombia

Gearóid Ó Loingsigh

Unlike other Latin American countries, Colombia's trade union movement has never known a golden age, nor a period in which it could operate free from the fear of repression and violence. Despite being hailed as Latin America's oldest, most stable democracy, Colombia is in fact its most enduring authoritarian regime.

It is perhaps not surprising then to learn that just 4.6 percent of Colombia's workforce is unionized (ENS 2019b: 89). This is due in part to the highly informal nature of employment in the country: it is estimated that around 65.7 percent of the workforce is informally engaged (ENS 2019b: 15), which is itself a sign of the weakness of the trade union movement. It is also due to repression. While there have been unionization drives in all sectors of the Colombian economy, agricultural and oil enclaves are perhaps the most noteworthy, not only for the unions themselves, the historic role they played, and the repression meted out against them, but also for the combination of political and economic demands made in a sector dominated by US capital. The most infamous slaughter of workers in Colombia is the 1928 banana workers massacre immortalized by Gabriel García Márquez in *100 Years of Solitude*, in which between two and three thousand strikers were murdered (Vega Cantor 2012: 14). One of the most significant gains of the trade union movement was the reversion of Tropical Oil's De Mares Concession to the state and the establishment of the state oil company Ecopetrol, which began operations in 1951 following a strike by up to 12,000 oil workers in 1948. This is not to say that unions did not exist in other sectors of the economy, but the enclave played a significant role in the creation of Colombia's proletariat and its nascent capitalist economy.

Times have changed, of course and the economy has diversified in terms of employment, though not in terms of its reliance on the extractive sector for the generation of foreign currency. Nowadays, the number of union affiliates is almost equally distributed between the private and public sector, 52 percent and 48 percent respectively. But the strongest unions are to be found in the public sector, particularly in the field of education, not only does the teaching union FECODE (*Federación Colombiana de Trabajadores de la Educación*, Colombian Federation of Educational Workers) account for 26.34 percent of all the unionised workers in Colombia, it has managed to unionise 69.23 percent of teachers, far exceeding the national average. The largest concentra-

tion of union affiliates is to be found in Bogotá (34.36 percent), followed by Antioquia (11.87 percent) and Valle (8.31 percent) (ENS 2018), though traditional combative sectors such as the oil workers affiliated to the USO (*Unión Sindical Obrera* – Workers’ Union) continue to play a role, notwithstanding their current weakness.

This concentration of union affiliates in the three major urban centres is an expression of the real fear and violence meted out in rural or semi-rural areas and their decimation at the hands of paramilitary groups. One such example is palm plantation workers. In the 1980s and the 1990s the workers in the palm industry, particularly those at Indupalma, the largest and most influential palm company at the time, made huge advances, so much so that the industry association Fedepalma (*Federación Nacional de Cultivadores de Palma de Aceite*, National Federation of Oil Palm Growers) published an editorial publicly calling for unions to be purged of communists and other supposedly subversive elements. In 1995, in the midst of collective negotiations with the company, paramilitaries ran amok, killing a number of trade union leaders and disappearing one other. Shortly afterwards, the union caved into all of the company’s demands and a process of “strategic alliances” began, in which farmers grew the crop and bore the costs, as well as a process of getting rid of workers and setting up so-called Associated Work Cooperatives. The violence in the palm sector was not limited to the negotiations in 1995. According to Sintraproaceites (*Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Industria del Cultivo y Procesamiento de aceites y vegetales*, National Union of Workers of the Oil and Vegetable Growing and Processing Industry), unionized workers have suffered extreme levels of violence, with 95 leaders murdered, 15 disappeared, and 50 forcibly displaced (Ó Loingsigh 2019). The two elements imposed by the company in 1995 are now standard practice in Colombia and the “cooperatives” are to be found across a whole range of industries and in large urban centres as well. It was a blow that the trade union at Indupalma never quite recovered from.

The murders in the palm sector are not isolated incidents. From the 1970s to the present day, trade unions have had to contend with the selective assassination of combative members at both a grass-roots and leadership level, and although the threat to capital posed by the trade unions is at its lowest point in history, the use of the tactic of selective assassinations has not abated. The National Trade Union School (ENS, *Escuela Nacional Sindical*) reports that between 1973 and December 2018, there were 14,842 attacks on trade unions, including 3,186 murders, across 487 unions (ENS 2019a: 10). The period from the mid-1990s to 2002 represented a quantitative and qualitative high point in these murders. The paramilitaries unified into a single organization, the AUC (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia)

and unleashed an onslaught throughout the country, occupying major urban centres including the oil port of Barrancabermeja. At the time, the city, popularly known as the Rebel City, was highly organized, with a wide array of social organizations and unions operating there and exerting real influence in the communities. Whole sections of the city were under the control of the guerrillas, principally, in this case the National Liberation Army (ELN, *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*).

The paramilitary assault was a slow process that began by taking nearby towns throughout the 1990s and began in earnest in May 1998, when a paramilitary incursion saw them disappear 25 people and murder seven more in the city. By December 1999, they had expelled the guerrillas, dismantled the trade union structures, and even forced the oil workers' union (USO) to relocate its headquarters to the relative safety of Bogotá, a move which severely eroded its relationship with its social base in the communities. The threat was not to be taken lightly once the paramilitaries had taken over and consolidated their hold on the city and wider region. Between 1988 and March 2002, some 79 members of the union had been assassinated and a further 35 injured (Ó Loingsigh 2003). In 2001–02, when the paramilitaries took over Barrancabermeja and other urban centres, of the 209 trade unionists murdered around the world, 137 were killed in Colombia alone, rising to 197 out of a world total of 223 the following year (Vega Cantor et al., 2009: 389).

The Colombian state has not relied exclusively on violence to repress the trade union movement, it has frequently used the legal system, dragging trade unionists through the courts on trumped-up charges. Though most trade unionists have been able to beat the charges, they frequently spent long periods in custody and were thus removed from their daily organizing activities, further hampering the work of unions in organizing resistance to the state. Once again, the USO is a prime example of this. Prior to the paramilitary takeover of Barrancabermeja, many union leaders had been brought up on charges, not just of rebellion but of murder, and were thus unable to participate in the struggles underway to resist the paramilitary onslaught. Not only were trade unionists framed, their lawyers were systematically harassed and even murdered. Some of them were brought up on charges themselves, a practice which continues to the present day, where to defend a political prisoner carries the risk of being charged along with the defendant in the same or some other unrelated case.

The peace process with the guerrilla organisation FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) brought little respite to the trade union movement and the broader social movements. Despite Santos' reputation as a man of peace both in Colombia and abroad, his government was little different in how it treated social move-

ments. It did not hesitate to repress the national peasant strike in 2014, as previous governments had done in the past. In 2012, the year the peace process began, 69 social leaders were assassinated, rising to 80 in 2016, the year the Santos government signed its agreement with the FARC, and continued to rise in the following year to 106, which was the last complete calendar year of the Santos government. Since then the figures have continued to rise, with 155 and 124 leaders killed in 2018 and 2019 respectively (Somos Defensores 2020: 104). Most of the social leaders killed were not trade union leaders, in part indicating the ease with which they can operate in rural areas against targets who do not enjoy the benefits of government protection schemes of bulletproof cars and bodyguards. It also is indicative of the key battlegrounds and areas of struggle against the extractivist model which has been implemented since the beginning of the century, but which has intensified in recent years. Only one of the 124 leaders murdered in 2019 was a trade unionist (Somos Defensores 2020: 97), as they are no longer the key elements of opposition to the neoliberal order. Throughout the 21st century, peasant, indigenous and student movements were much more forthright in their struggles. Although class-based combative trade unions such as the food workers union Sinaltrainal (*Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores del Sistema Agroalimentario*, National Union of Workers of the Food Sector), managed to expand, unionizing palm oil and sugar cane workers, who waged a long battle against the sugar barons, the majority of the trade union movement has been absent from key struggles. This has been especially true since the defeat of the oil workers in 2004, which is partially due to the paramilitary presence in Barrancabermeja and the forced rupture between the USO and the community that the paramilitary offensive entailed, as well as other repressive measures taken by the state (Vega Cantor et al., 2009: 425). It was not the only union to experience this rupture, nearly all unions that engaged in grass-roots work with communities had suffered the same thing. But not all accepted it, the expansion by Sinaltrainal has to be seen in terms of its decision to continue its work and also to unionize other sectors, as they saw themselves as a fighting union and were not content to be just one of an isolated myriad of unions in the food sector, with a certain presence in companies such as Nestlé and Coca-Cola. As a union, Sinaltrainal has maintained a class-struggle and internationalist perspective, and it works on many issues beyond wages and working conditions (Olaya 2018).

However, Colombia's trade union movement not only suffered from state repression, it also suffered from a general rightwards shift that has been seen in many trade union bodies across the world. Under the blows of violence, and the difficulties in organizing, more reformist and even openly class collaborationist currents gained the upper hand and formerly more combative

sectors softened their positions, some to the point that they could no longer be considered fighting unions.

In 2019, faced with work, pension, and tax reforms from the government, the trade union movement called for a national stoppage on 21 November. It should be borne in mind that for a number of decades the national trade union leadership has held to a conception of a national stoppage that paradoxically did not involve a cessation of production. They have become accustomed to calling for stoppages that resulted in little more than a march attended by elected trade union officials, small delegations of workers and students. This time however, the mobilization was different. In size, it far exceeded the expectations of the organizers (with up to 1.5 million people attending), who fully expected to sit down with the government in the following days to negotiate a deal that would demobilize the population without resolving any of the issues that gave rise to the protest. However, though the trade unions had called the march, they were not in control of it, as it had touched a nerve and the students and neighbourhood organizations were in no mood to leave it at that. The mobilizations continued and the repression was swift and brutal, resulting in the murder of Dilan Cruz, a young student from an impoverished working-class background, at the hands of Colombia's special riot police. The state responded to the wave of protests that had broken out in neighbourhoods across most major urban centres. It even declared a curfew in Bogotá, which was promptly ignored by the mass of the population. On the first night of the curfew, mass protests spontaneously broke out in the decidedly middle-class area of La Soledad and lasted into the early hours of the morning. A mass breaking of the curfew occurred in front of the president's private residence, with protesters banging pots and pans late into the night despite a heavy police presence.

The trade union movement showed little resolve to continue with the protests. The centre of the mobilizations moved to neighbourhood organizations, many of them newly created. The student organizations lacked the capacity to convoke a major national mobilization, but they were able to successfully organize neighbourhood demonstrations throughout the country, affecting public transport and consequently the rest of the economy. Their actions did force the trade union movement to call further protests. But the official leadership of the protests lay with the negotiating committee, which although it included non-union actors, was nonetheless heavily dominated by them and in particular by reformist currents such as the MOIR (*Movimiento Obrero Independiente Revolucionario*, Independent Revolutionary Workers Organization). The MOIR showed little appetite for continuing the fight and bureaucratically manoeuvred to sideline other voices both within and beyond the trade union movement. This all came to a head in February 2020, when attempts

were made to exclude social movements from a national assembly. The attempt failed and the new movements gained in strength. However, both the state and the union bureaucracy were saved by the Covid-19 outbreak, which has seen most protests suspended. The trade unions have been largely voiceless in addressing the issues raised by the pandemic in relation to workers' rights and healthcare, and to some degree the baton has been passed to the parliamentary left.

In the midst of the Covid-19 lockdown in Colombia, which initially was relatively strict, protests broke out in poorer areas due to a lack of food. The response of the state was repression. The trade union movement had little to say and was not involved in the protests. Once again, recently organized structures outside of the trade union movement came to the fore, in the neighbourhoods people took to the streets to force the government to distribute food aid, students in Bucaramanga took over the university in protest at the charging of fees and the decision to proceed with the academic year. A trade union movement that played such a heroic role in the struggle for workers' rights increasingly finds itself marginalized in terms of the broader struggles it once led.

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Brazilian Unions and the Struggle Against the Entrepreneurial-Military Dictatorship (1964–1985)

Henrique Tahan Novaes and Maurício Sardá de Faria

The entrepreneurial-military dictatorship (1964–1985) had a significant impact on workers' struggles in Brazil. Since President Getúlio Vargas's terms in office (1930–45 and 1950–54), an urban working class developed along with urban and rural unions that were coupled to the state. The pre-coup years (1950–1964) were a period of increasing social reforms, and Brazil's unions expanded. This chapter analyses workers' struggles against dictatorship between 1968 and 1985. We aim to show the immensely destructive impact the 1964 coup had on the Brazilian left, especially the Institutional Act No. 5 (1968). The consolidation of the dictatorship led to the dismantling of rural and urban unions, the exile of militants, imprisonments, torture, etc. In the second part of the chapter, we discuss the rise of the *Comissões de Fábrica* (Factory Commissions), the so-called *Novo Sindicalismo* (New Unionism) and Lula's rise, as well as the limited "re-democratization" process of the 1980s.

The 1964 Coup and Increasing Repression From 1968 Onwards

The USA, the conservative wing of the Catholic Church, the *latifundiários* (large land-owners), and the domestic bourgeoisie planned the coup which had profound consequences for workers' struggles (Fernandes 1986). The entrepreneurial-military dictatorship (1964–1985), restructured the hegemony of capital in Brazil and inaugurated a counter-revolution (Fernandes 1981).²⁶ On the

²⁶ Darcy Ribeiro claimed that Getúlio Vargas' suicide (1954) deferred the intervention of the military until 1964. In the 1950s, Brazil went through innumerable anti-corruption commissions named *mar de lama* (sea of mud). They were usually sponsored by big US corporations or by the Brazilian middle class in order to combat the creation of state or national companies. According to Darcy Ribeiro: "The news of the suicide [of Getúlio Vargas] befell me like a bomb. Above all, the Carta-Testamento [Testament-Letter], the most elevated document ever produced in Brazil, the most touching, the most significant. Since I read it, it is for me the political letter guiding me. And so it is for the more lucid Brazilians. But it is not, for a minority that has made this country unhappy ever since, governing in a corrupt, oppressive and petty way. I perceived instantaneously, after all, like all Brazilians perceived, that the campaign of *mar de lama* was a dirty trick of the press supported by the big foreign companies in order to overthrow the president who was creating Petrobras and who announced the creation of Eletrobras opposing the very powerful foreign groups, that of petrol and that of electricity" (Ribeiro 1996). Petrobras and Eletrobras are state companies with a high national profile.

other hand, Aarão Reis (1980) observes that the left-wing forces were not sufficiently organized to resist and also disregarded the possibility of a coup in 1964.

The 1964 coup was a clean historical rupture that destroyed the Brazilian left's ongoing process of developing hegemony. For example, on the day of the coup, the headquarters of the *União Nacional dos Estudantes* (UNE, National Students Union) was destroyed. In 1965, 80 percent of the professors of the University of Brasília (UNB) were dismissed; a large number of militants were assassinated or forced to leave the country. Glauber Rocha, one of the country's most ingenious film producers, moved to Cuba; Paulo Freire went to Chile; Darcy Ribeiro went to Uruguay; Sérgio Ferro, went into exile in Grenoble (France); Florestan Fernandes went to Canada; Luiz Carlos Prestes, the main representative of the Communist Party, went into exile in Russia.

The coup stopped the historical process of the rise of workers' struggles and the flourishing of intellectual theory and action in Brazil. Francisco de Oliveira describes the repercussions of the coup in Pernambuco, an important state of the Brazilian Northeast:

"The 1964 coup befell Pernambuco with particular fury. It decimated the leftist parties, the workers' movement, the Catholic politico-intellectual movement, the student movement; and forced a significant fraction of their leaders into exile. The climate of debate and the innovative initiatives vanished, the Popular Culture Movement and Paulo Freire, and the reform of the Sudene (*Superintendência do Desenvolvimento do Nordeste*, Superintendency for the Development of the Northeast) were disarticulated or lost their influence because of the coup. The only thing left was Dom Helder Câmara's solitary voice. By the way, he was installed in the archdiocese in the early post-coup days, where he gave a speech the courage and dignity of which would make him figure in an anthology of the great Brazilian civic-political speeches. The *Igreja da Resistência* (Resistance Church) came into being there; Dom Helder Câmara and Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns representing its highest and most important expressions." (Oliveira 2008: 85)

The Military-Civilian Dictatorship and Union Resistance

The "1968 World Revolution" had some repercussions in Brazil at the end of the 1960s. Certainly the flourishing of struggles at a global level led to a further hardening of the civilian-military dictatorship in 1968 with the decree of the *Ato Institucional número 5* (Institutional Act Number 5), the fifth of the seventeen major decrees made by the dictatorship in the years following the 1964 coup. It was in force until December 1968 and produced numerous arbitrary actions with lasting effects. It granted executive power to governors to arbitrarily punish those considered "enemies" of the regime. From 1968 on, torture, assassinations, and prisons became institutionalized and systematic.

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The Peasant Leagues (*Ligas Camponesas*), formed by the Communist Party in 1945, raised the flag of “radical land reforms” in the interest of the poor peasants. They became a movement of national importance and international impacts. By 1963, Brazil had hundreds of these leagues, with more than 500,000 members in 16 states, the largest being in Pernambuco and Paraíba. The council of the state of Pernambuco alone coordinated 27 leagues with 120,000 affiliates (Linhart 1980; Novaes 2009).

With the sudden growth of the Peasant Leagues, the conservative wing of the Catholic Church and the Ministry of Labour soon positioned themselves to help create conservative unions that would resist their rise. The coup of 1964, which restored “order”, reinvigorated repression against unions and the persecution of the Peasant Leagues. Their leaders were murdered, tortured, and exiled or were forced to go underground to continue their struggle. An emblematic case is that of Elizabeth Teixeira, the wife of João Pedro Teixeira, a leader of the Peasant Leagues who was murdered in 1962, two years before the coup. Elizabeth Teixeira, today 95 years old, fought clandestinely from 1964 to 1979. She moved to São Rafael, in the hinterland of Rio Grande do Norte (a state in the Northeast of Brazil) where she lived in hiding under a false name for 17 years, working as a laundress and teacher. Many believed she had died. It was filmmaker Eduardo Coutinho who found her after a long search. In 1979, Elizabeth benefited from the Amnesty Law (Pagenotto 2020).

Urban unions were also hit by harsh repression. Anti-bureaucratic union organizations and strikes were prohibited, their leaders were tortured and imprisoned or assassinated. The wave of urban repression started with the Cobrasma workers in Osasco, São Paulo state, and the workers at Braseixos in Contagem, Minas Gerais state (1968). In these factories the factory commissions were destitute and the union bureaucracies took control of the unions.

In this context, the workers’ reorganization took place in a molecular way, from their homes and their neighbourhoods to the re-articulation of the factory groups in the 1970s. They re-grouped until they could agitate again. This happened with the explosion of workers’ strikes initiated in 1978 in the ABC Paulista (on the outskirts of São Paulo: Santo André, São Bernardo and São Caetano), when a series of new factory commissions were formed.²⁷

Based upon long and patient organizational work carried out by groups influenced by the Church and dissident communists, clandestine groups were formed in various companies. Minor actions and sabotages signaled a possible resumption of workers’ strikes and struggles. At the end of the 1970s, from the point of view of the ruling classes, Brazil was already undergoing a

²⁷ To find out more about these struggles, see the films *Braços Cruzados, Máquinas Paradas* (Arms Crossed, Machines Stopped) and *ABC da Greve* (ABC of Strike).

“democratic” opening, slowly, gradually, controlled, and without ruptures (Fernandes 1986).

Autonomous workers’ organization in the workplace was considered a necessary condition for struggles to be effective and for the development of a new union structure. It was inspired by the experiences of workers at Cobrasma and Braseixos in 1968 and propagated mainly in the metallurgic and chemical sector by the *Movimento de Oposição Sindical* (Movement of Union Opposition) in São Paulo (Nascimento 2019).

The movement gained ground and in May 1978 it unleashed a cycle of workers’ struggles in ABC Paulista which would mark the beginning of a reduction of the tension provoked by the regime towards Brazil’s “re-democratization”, through a gradual, slow, and safe transition, which was designed by the military so that it would not lose the “reins” of the re-democratization process. It was in this context that Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, the future president of Brazil, emerged as a leader. The strikes promoted by the unions in the late 1970s and early 1980s were decisive for Brazil’s “re-democratization”.

From the end of the 1970s to beginning of the 1980s, numerous struggles culminated in the creation of the *Movimento Sem-Terra* (MST, Landless Movement), the *Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens* (Movement of People Affected by Dams), the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers’ Party), and a series of struggles – e.g. for public housing and public universities, in defence of public schools, in the public health system – emerged which generally called for Brazil’s re-democratization.

The first occupation by what would become the MST took place in Rio Grande do Sul (in the South of Brazil), on 7 September 1979, the day of Brazil’s independence. The date was chosen because the military would be distracted and busy with parades all over the country, including in Rio Grande do Sul. On 12 May 1978, Scania workers paralysed production and remained in the factory, mainly demanding wage increases. From then on, strikes that stopped production occurred regularly in the industrial region of ABC Paulista, the home of the country’s major automobile assembly plants, and spread from there to other sectors and regions.

The factory commissions shaped the dynamic of the strike movement and were a stimulating element: they organized general assemblies within the productive units in order to decide the steps to be taken and they involved the trade union in the negotiations (Faria/Novaes 2015). At a certain moment, employers began to focus on disrupting and repressing the factory commissions, since many commissions had achieved a certain institutionalization as a mediator between workers and management. Even the New Unionism, which emerged from ABC Paulista, stopped endorsing the creation of factory commissions, arguing that they exposed the rank and file leadership to the repression

of employers. The New Unionism instead supported the rank and file union commissions, which were formed by union leaders active in the workplace and which benefited from the legal stability conferred on members of the union leadership. The commissions also faced accusations of “union parallelism.”

Tragtenberg’s work is key for understanding the extent of the factory commissions’ activities, their role in the Brazilian workers movement, and how they were manifestations of workers’ autonomy. Tragtenberg relies on debates initiated by representatives of heterodox Marxism, such as Anton Pannekoek, Antonio Gramsci and Herman Gorter (Tragtenberg 1981). Opposing the practice of the commissions to the practice stemming from corporative trade union structures, he highlights the deep pedagogical impacts of the factory commissions’ struggles.

With the experience gained from their participation in the factory commission, the worker learns that there is a division of labour in the factory, which they must obey, while outside the factory they learn that politics has to be practised through the parties, economic demands must be made through trade unions, that knowledge is confined to schools, and TV and radio define what has or does not have cultural value. Their own life is divided into impervious fragments. It is the practice of their struggle through the commissions which gives them the resources to take a stand at the political, economic, and cultural level. They learn through the “school of struggle”. It teaches them that, by struggling for wages (economy), they are confronted with the factory hierarchy (power); they have recourse to self-organization and develop their socio-political and cultural conscience. They are part of a whole. (Tragtenberg 2011: 23–24)

In this process of self-organization, the workers create their own horizontal organizations, forming a “community of struggle” that controls the very process of the development of the struggles as well as their objectives. Thus, they avoid the transferral of the responsibility for dealing with the relationships of domination and oppression experienced outside the workplace to the organizations that supposedly “represent” the workers, through vertical processes that reorganize the division between “directors” and “directed”.

Tragtenberg made an enormous effort to propagate, through articles in newspapers, books, and magazines, the experiences of the factory commissions in Brazil, which emerged during the strike cycle begun in 1978, including those at companies such as Ford, Máquinas Piratininga, Asama, Massey Ferguson, Aliperti, Barbará, etc. Regarding the struggles of the factory commissions, Tragtenberg recalls the famous slogan of the International Workers’ Association: “the workers’ liberation must be the work of the workers themselves.” Liberation cannot be delegated to the “vanguards” on duty, since it depends on the initiative and participation of all involved. We can certainly

confirm Tragtenberg's view regarding the factory commission we analysed at Ford. It was a genuine workers' commission, neither tied to the entrepreneurs nor to the trade union. It truly belonged to the workers who toil there. It followed Tragtenberg's principle: "worker, if nobody works for you, nobody shall decide for you" (Tragtenberg 2008: 25).

Commenting on the experience of the factory commission at Asama (a machine factory in the metallurgical sector), Tragtenberg (2011) points out that it differentiated itself from the others to the extent that its creation aimed to correct the injustices that happened to the workers, demanding that employers grant them better work and living conditions. The major organ of the commission was the general assembly, and the union was defined in the commissions' statutes as a "consultative body". The mandates of its representatives were revocable at any time.

In sum, the importance Tragtenberg attributes to the factory commissions and to workers' autonomous struggles is due to his understanding that "[t]he workers' self-organization in their workplace and the democratization of the work relationships constitute the foundation of any democracy on the model of self-managed socialism, because the existence of factory despotism along with formal democracy beyond the factory walls is a profound contradiction." (Tragtenberg 2008: 21)

Workplaces remain spaces marked by despotism, currently even more profoundly than before, since it involves the colonization of workers' subjectivity with the ideas of capital. If unions have so far been unable to organize the class from the factory floor, the recuperated companies in many countries demonstrate that it is possible to go further and establish, at the same time, self-management and collective ownership of the means of production.

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Confronting Conservatism and Authoritarianism in Contemporary Brazil

Union Resistance and Popular Struggles Against Bolsonaro's Government

Flávia Braga Vieira

Since 2014, Brazil has experienced a surprising resurgence of right-wing movements. In 2016, these movements formed the basis of support for a judicial-parliamentary coup that ousted President Dilma Rousseff and brought Vice-President Michel Temer to power, who then inaugurated deeply anti-popular reforms. In 2018, new presidential elections brought the far-right leader Jair Bolsonaro to power. The first year of Bolsonaro's government deepened reforms and began a militarization of public life, which has precedents only in the military dictatorship of the 1960s and 1970s.

Popular resistance to this authoritarianism was weak, since the streets were still taken by the reactionary movements that had deposed the government of the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT), which is clearly identified with traditional unionism. Yet other kinds of social movements are developing new forms of action. This chapter discusses the conservative and authoritarian hegemony that has established itself in the country and popular resistance to it, analysing in particular two fronts that have emerged in recent years, bringing together new and old working-class movements. In addition, the crisis that is taking place with the Covid-19 pandemic seems to be paving the way for a class solidarity that can undermine the power of the reactionary forces that support Bolsonaro.

The Background to the Contemporary Authoritarian Scenario

The 1980s in Brazil were marked by intense battles to end the military dictatorship initiated in 1964. These grassroots struggles led to the creation of organizations such as the Workers' Party, the Unified Workers Central (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores*, CUT), the Landless Movement (*Movimento Sem Terra*, MST), and a large number of movements for housing and urban reform. A significant amount of the demands of these organizations were incorporated into the 1988 constitution, due to huge popular pressure in the streets. The PT represents the main organizational victory for the rise of the Brazilian working class in the 1980s.

In 2002, after three failed attempts, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva²⁸ of the PT won the presidential elections and was re-elected in 2006. His two mandates were

²⁸ Lula was the main popular leader that emerged from the period of re-democratization. Born into a very poor family, Lula became a metallurgist in São Paulo and led

permeated with contradictions. On the one hand, the government provided support to sectors of the upper middle classes. This support implied an expansion of export-oriented primary industries in the national economy and increases in income and wealth concentration. On the other hand, there was a significant annual increase in the minimum wage, economic growth, employment levels, and social inclusion policies, which significantly reduced extreme poverty. In parallel, the government changed the international axis of Brazil's orientation, from the North to the Global South. The approval rate of Lula's government at the end of his second mandate was more than 80 percent. The success of his policies made him a global star.

This success allowed Lula to choose Dilma Rousseff as his successor in 2010. Rousseff was the first woman to reach the presidency. Her first mandate was marked by criticism and an economic crisis that led to state divestment, and a reduction of the scope of the social, wage, and employment policies that had sustained the popularity of her predecessor. In 2013, millions of Brazilians, especially workers and the young, took to the streets to protest the rising cost of living (Braga 2013; Maricato et al., 2013). The streets were also occupied by various reactionary movements at the same time, especially the conservative middle class, which decried the long duration of PT rule. The federal government's response was weak and, after the outbreak of the protests, approval for Rousseff's government fell 27 points in three weeks, sinking to just 30 percent. In 2014, Rousseff was re-elected by a very narrow margin of votes, only 3.2 percent, which led to questions about her mandate from the very beginning (Singer 2018).

The Conservative Wave and the Consolidation of Authoritarianism

The erosion of Rousseff's government progressively deepened. The right-wing opposition in parliament gained allies in civil society through the emergence of conservative movements online. But there was another decisive factor in the weakening of the PT government: *Operação Lava Jato* (Operation Car Wash). Launched in April 2014, it was a set of investigations by the judiciary system to indict politicians and businessmen for acts of corruption, many of whom were convicted and arrested, especially politicians linked to the PT.²⁹

The following years were marked by deep political instability. The media and judicial actions of Operation Car Wash, street protests by the new conservative movements, and parliamentary action by the right-wing parties led

the biggest and most important strike that shook the military dictatorship.

²⁹ The key actor in the operation was federal judge Sergio Moro, who found former President Lula guilty in 2018, and became Minister of Justice in Bolsonaro's government in 2019.

to a judicial-parliamentary coup that deposed President Rousseff, through a clearly fabricated impeachment process (Ríos Vera 2018). After this camouflaged coup d'état, Vice President Michel Temer³⁰ was installed in power in August 2016, inaugurating deeply anti-popular reforms. The most significant of these was a set of changes to the country's labour law, which was passed in the National Congress in July 2017, modifying the constitutional rights of Brazilian workers that had been consolidated for over fifty years.

In April 2018, Operation Car Wash arrested Lula, who at that time led the polls for the presidential race. A series of protests was held by unions to defend Lula's freedom and denounce the fabricated trial that incriminated him, but the weight of judicial and media manipulation ensured the arrest of the former president. He was released in November 2019, but 580 days in prison prevented the country's most significant popular leader from running in the 2018 elections.

In October 2018, new presidential elections were held. Several candidates stood for election, but the anti-corruption agenda did not only affect the PT. No traditional leadership on the right managed to consolidate itself during the presidential race. With this, the retired military officer Jair Bolsonaro appeared on the scene, supported by the most reactionary sectors of society (Casimiro 2018; Almeida 2019). He was a federal deputy for seven terms and, during his 27 years in the Chamber of Deputies, became known for being an extreme right-wing personality, due to his defence of the military dictatorship and its use of torture. In the elections he appeared as a conservative defender of family values and more rigorous law and order policies.

The first year of Bolsonaro's government saw the expansion of anti-popular reforms (especially through the approval of the Social Security Reform) and development of a climate of profound hostility toward democracy and republican institutions. In several areas of government, authoritarian actions were consolidated. In civil society, the movements that elected Bolsonaro continued to organize street demonstrations to support the president's decisions. But these have reduced in size a lot and now every time they are held, they unite fewer sectors of the population, losing ground among the youth and popular strata they used to organize.

³⁰ Temer negotiated secretly with the coup forces. His party, the *Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro* (PMDB, the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party) has been part of all governments since the end of the military dictatorship and has no clear ideology.

Workers' Resistance During Bolsonaro's Government

Despite the partial conservative hegemony that has been installed in the country since 2015, workers and their organizations have not stopped fighting. The main initiative to coordinate these struggles was the creation of two fronts comprising social movements and trade unions (Proner et al., 2017). The first was created in September 2015 at a National People's Conference, with the aim of defending policies for workers and democratic institutions. Although it made criticisms of Rousseff's economic policy, its main purpose was to defend the PT government against the conservative attacks it was receiving. Named the Popular Brazil Front (*Frente Brasil Popular*, FBP),³¹ it brings together 68 organizations, in addition to parliamentarians and leaders from eight left and centre-left political parties. The organizations include local, regional, and national trade unions, union federations, youth and student organizations, groups of cultural and art activists, women, peasants, fishermen, black people, LGBTIQ+ people, among others.

The second group, the People Without Fear Front (*Frente Povo Sem Medo*, FPSM),³² was founded in October 2015, and comprises activists from 31 organizations, parties and groups that consider themselves the "left-wing opposition" to Rousseff's government. The FPSM acted together with the Popular Brazil Front in the demonstrations against the 2016 coup. After the impeachment of Rousseff, the more radicalized front began defending the idea of holding presidential elections outside the date scheduled for 2018. Its composition is as diverse as that of the other, involving unions, federations, urban, youth, and identity movements and groups.

In 2016 and 2017, the main focus of the fronts was to denounce the coup and the Temer Government's lack of legitimacy, organizing demonstrations against Labour Reform in several state capitals. The fronts were also important spaces for articulating the campaign for the liberation of Lula following his arrest in 2018: the *Campanha Lula Livre* (Free Lula Campaign).³³ They have also remained united in denouncing the authoritarianism of Bolsonaro after his election. Despite so many converging points, the FPSM presents itself in a more radical way, as it defends the deposing of Bolsonaro and holding fresh elections. The FBP has been more directly dedicated to trying to overturn Lula's conviction through the courts, wagering that he will be able to stand as a candidate in the 2022 elections and put a stop to the authoritarian cycle.

³¹ See frentebrasilsocial.org.br/.

³² See pt-br.facebook.com/povosemedonacional.

³³ This Campaign is organized in local committees that produce material, occupy squares, distribute pamphlets and call on the population to defend the freedom of the ex-president. See lulalivre.org.br/.

In parallel with the unified struggles of the two fronts, some sectors of the working class have also resisted conservatism. An important force was the movement of students and teachers from public schools and universities. In 2016, there was a series of demonstrations and occupations by public schools and universities in several Brazilian states. These demonstrations aimed at preventing projects and policies by state and federal governments. The students protested mainly against a Constitutional Amendment Bill that aimed to cut spending on education and health.³⁴ In 2017, 2018, and 2019, students continued to protest and organize against proposals that aim to prevent teachers from teaching content related to gender and sexuality or that apply critical pedagogy in classrooms.³⁵

However, the most exuberant manifestation of education in recent years occurred on 15 May 2019, on the so-called National Day in Defence of Education, the first major protest against Bolsonaro's government. Due to budget cuts in primary, secondary and tertiary education and the freezing of resources in science and technology, the protests led by students, union members, and education professionals brought together about 2 million people who took to the streets in more than 200 cities. The protests were repeated on 30 May and 13 August, but not to the same extent.

Another significant struggle was led by women's movements. In September 2018, protests known as Not Him or #EleNão³⁶ were popular demonstrations led by women all over the country to oppose Bolsonaro's candidacy. They became the largest protests ever held by women in Brazil and the largest concentration of popular energy during the 2018 presidential election campaign. They were spontaneously organized on social networks and motivated by the candidate's misogynistic statements and his threats to democracy. Social movements, feminist groups and left-wing parties supported and participated in the demonstrations, which took place in more than 160 cities across the country, bringing together more than one million people. Cities in other countries also registered demonstrations by Brazilian residents abroad or by feminist groups in support of Brazilian women.

These examples demonstrate that the Brazilian working class, in its most varied forms of organization, is not passively observing the authoritarian avalanche. On the other hand, organizations born out of the struggles for re-de-

³⁴ The project was approved by the National Congress in December 2016, freezing federal public spending for 20 years.

³⁵ Such projects continue to go through state and federal parliaments and have been the banner of Bolsonaro since his campaign, although the Supreme Court has already ruled that such projects are illegal, as they amount to acts of ideological censorship.

³⁶ See www.facebook.com/movimentoelenaio/.

mocratization in the 1980s were weakened by conservative attacks on the PT and its main leader, Lula. Apparently, organizations from the democratization period no longer speak to people with the same power. Identity, women's, and youth groups are calling more effectively for the defence of democratic values. However, the experiences presented here lead us to believe that combinations of "new" and "old" forms of class organization are necessary and are already underway to face the attacks by reactionary forces that have taken the country by storm.

Global Pandemic and National Pandemonium

When the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in Brazil, this moment of great need and increased inequality as well as of severe governmental crisis, an unexpected dynamic appeared within the working class. Abandoned by the state and capital, workers are beginning to organize themselves in a way that has not been seen we have not seen in the country for a long time. Some class lines of solidarity have been emerging, involving social movements from the countryside and the city, to guarantee food and health protection for vulnerable groups in the areas most exposed to contamination.

Among the hundreds (perhaps thousands) of popular solidarity actions, the campaign by the FBP and the FPSM, *Vamos precisar de todo mundo* (We Are Going to Need Everyone)³⁷ stands out. The fronts have created a website on which centres of solidarity can be found throughout the national territory and where individual or collective volunteers can join, making donations in cash, food, and hygiene goods, as well as making themselves available to deliver donations, together with the groups of movements organizing who needs to receive what and where. The campaign is serving vulnerable groups in different regions of the country, making an impressive connection between countryside and city. As an example, it is worth mentioning that MST settlements donated more than 1,500 tons of food to be distributed in urban peripheries between March and May (Vieira/Ghibaudi 2020).

This campaign has been led by popular movements and trade union organizations but has significant financial support from individual contributions from the working middle class in the cities, especially public servants, whose salaries are constantly threatened by the government. The devastating effect of such cuts, if implemented, will not be felt only in the quality of life of the public servants' families, but also in these actions of class solidarity with the most vulnerable.

The pandemic exposes the crisis and, at the same time, the possibilities of deepening the global capitalist system, through the reproduction of in-

³⁷ See todomundo.org/.

equalities and relations of exploitation. In Brazil, it exposes the authoritarian pandemonium of a government that rebels against democratic institutions (Augusto/Santos 2020). Yet it seems that the pandemic is also revealing the Brazilian working class's long tradition of solidarity and, probably, promoting unexpected struggles and victories in a not-so-distant future.

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Unions Respond to the Rise of Trump's Authoritarianism in the USA

Patrick Young

When US Americans headed to the polls to vote in the 2016 presidential election, union membership in the United States had been on a near-constant decline for more than 50 years to 10.7 percent of the workforce, and the amount of total income received by the working class in the country had fallen consistently for nearly 40 years. Over the same time period, the industrial midwestern states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin – all historic union strongholds – were hit badly by decades of industrial decline and job losses.

Real estate speculator and Republican Party nominee Donald Trump campaigned on a populist message aimed at building support from voters in those declining industrial regions, promising to “Make America Great Again” by limiting immigration, enacting tough trade policies, and bolstering police and military forces to restore “law and order” to US American streets.

Trump's message worked. He won the majority of votes in those key midwestern states and was elected president. A key segment of voters that propelled Trump to victory were white working-class voters in those midwestern industrial states, including union members. In 2012, only 43 percent of white union members voted for Republican Mitt Romney but by 2016, 52 percent of white union members voted for Republican Donald Trump. This shift occurred despite every major union in the USA endorsing and campaigning heavily for Democratic candidates in both elections (Leary and Maher 2019).

Once in office, Trump moved quickly to advance his authoritarian political agenda, signing a travel ban restricting immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries, appointing Alabama Senator and conservative populist Jeff Sessions to head the Department of Justice, and issuing an executive order to hire 10,000 federal immigration officers to patrol cities and promising to withhold federal funding from state and local governments that refused to assist immigration officials.

As millions of people took to the streets in Washington, DC and around the country to protest these policies, US unions played a supportive role by issuing statements and turning out for demonstrations. Dozens of national unions endorsed the Women's March on Washington and turned out members to join the more than 1 million people who took to the streets of Washington, DC. When Trump implemented his travel ban blocking immigration from Muslim-majority countries, union members joined mass spontaneous demonstrations at airports around the USA.

But that support was largely symbolic and there is little evidence that US unions invested significant resources in mobilizing against the rise in authoritarianism. As the Trump administration cranked out executive order after executive order undermining the rights of working class people, no major unions organized, or even seriously contemplated taking industrial action. In fact, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics recorded only 7 major strikes involving 25,300 workers in Trump's first year in office – the second-lowest number in the USA since 1947 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018).

Some labour leaders even made overtures to working with the Trump administration. United Steel Workers (USW) President Leo Gerard travelled to the White House to join Trump at a press conference announcing a trade investigation on steel imports. Richard Trumka, the president of the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations), the largest union federation in the USA, joined Trump's Manufacturing Council. Trumka left the council in August 2016, a day after the CEOs of two Fortune 500 companies, Merck and Intel, resigned from the same council in protest of statements Donald Trump made in support of white supremacists who had murdered a protestor in Charlottesville, Virginia (Morrisey 2018).

Teachers Strike in Hostile Territory

The first significant wave of worker-led resistance to the increasingly authoritarian climate in the USA happened in West Virginia in February 2018. West Virginia had been hit particularly hard by deindustrialization and was fertile ground for Trump's populist message. In the 2016 election he won the state with a 42 percent advantage.

Public school teachers across the United States had seen their real wages decline and class sizes increase for years, as austerity budgets and disinvestment in public schools had become the norm. The problem was particularly acute in West Virginia where teachers' compensation ranked 48th out of the 50 states. At the same time, Trump-appointed Education Secretary Betsy DeVos was rolling out expansive plans to privatize public education by providing vouchers for students to leave public schools for private schools. Teachers and other public sector workers in West Virginia have limited collective bargaining rights and state law outright prohibits public employees from striking. But when state education officials demanded that teachers agree to a decrease in real wages, rank and file teachers forced their unions to hold strike votes and ultimately organized a walkout.

In the lead up to the strike, West Virginia Governor Jim Justice emphasized that any work stoppage would be illegal and the state's highest law enforcement official, Attorney General Patrick Morrisey, said in a news release, "Let us make no mistake. The impending work stoppage is unlawful... Our of-

office is prepared to support any relevant state agency or board with the legal remedies they may choose to pursue to uphold the law" (2018). After educators in all 55 of West Virginia's counties voted to strike, government officials backed off from their threats to criminalize the strike. Convinced that teachers would not be showing up for work, school administrators cancelled school. After three weeks, teachers reached a settlement winning 5 percent across-the-board pay raises.

Over the following two months, teachers in Oklahoma and Arizona also took part in state-wide strikes, directly confronting laws prohibiting strikes by public employees. Both states had voted heavily for Trump in the 2016 election and were led by Republican governors aligned with Trump's political agenda. School and government officials in both states also emphasized that striking would be illegal but teachers did not back down. In both states, teachers walked off the job, promising not to return until their demands were met and, in both states, Republican governors and legislatures backed down and agreed to meet teachers' key demands.

Flight Attendants Challenge Government Shutdown

The next major wave of worker resistance to growing authoritarianism in the United States came months later, during a showdown over funding for Trump's proposed 2,000-mile wall along the country's southern border. In late December 2018 President Donald Trump refused to sign a spending bill that would fund the continuing operations of the federal government because the measure did not include any funding for the border wall. Without authorization to continue funding the government, nine executive departments with around 800,000 employees were forced to partially or fully shut down their operations.

Many of the employees in affected departments were furloughed, but 420,000 "essential" workers, including airport screeners and air traffic controllers were required to continue working without pay. The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), which represents approximately 700,000 federal government employees, and the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) each filed lawsuits against the federal government. No union, however, called – or even publicly threatened – a strike. Instead, union officials advised workers to continue to report for work, even though they were not being paid.

If the federal employee unions were nervous about the possibility of calling a strike, their caution was certainly warranted. The last time a union representing federal employees in the USA organized a major strike was in 1981 when 13,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) walked off the job demanding significant pay increases and a shortened work week. President Ronald Regan responded by declaring the strike

illegal, firing all of the strikers and bringing in military air traffic controllers to reopen the country's commercial airports.

As the 2019 shutdown wore on, increasing numbers of air traffic controllers and TSA screeners began to call in sick from work, forcing those still working to cover shifts with overtime or to work short-staffed. By the third week of January, one in 10 TSA screeners nationwide was not showing up to work. The rapidly eroding situation caused significant concerns among the private sector aviation unions that rely on those workers.

At a major conference convened by the AFL-CIO on 20 January 2019, president of the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) Sara Nelson told conference attendees, "Major airports are already seeing security checkpoints closing. Many more will follow ... The layers of safety and security that keep us safe are not in place due to the shutdown. I have a growing concern for our members' safety and security." Nelson went on to raise a proposal of a general strike to end the shutdown (Nelson 2019).

Days later, a coalition of airline unions including AFA, NATCA and the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), met to discuss the issue. Together the three unions issued a chilling statement, saying, "In our risk averse industry, we cannot even calculate the level of risk currently at play, nor predict the point at which the entire system will break. It is unprecedented" (2019).

While the three unions stopped short of calling for industrial action, by issuing such a chilling warning about airline safety the three unions clearly invited members to refuse to report to work. The warning also seriously raised the stakes for airlines and airport administrations that were attempting to continue operations as their systems became increasingly strained.

Two days later, New York's LaGuardia announced that it would no longer accept incoming flights. The same day President Trump signed a bill to end the shutdown and reopen the government and provide federal employees with back pay. The deal did not include any funding for Trump's border wall, marking a huge defeat for the Trump administration and a significant win for workers.

Unions Respond to Crises

In the spring and summer of 2020, two distinct crises hit the USA in rapid succession. As the Covid-19 pandemic spread through major US cities, a racial reckoning brought on by a spate of police murders of unarmed Black people brought thousands of people to the streets. While the USA enjoyed the luxury of having crucial time to prepare for the Covid-19 pandemic as the virus spread through Asia and Europe before major outbreaks started in Seattle and New York, the Trump administration largely squandered that time and was ill-prepared to respond to the crisis. By mid-summer, the USA was experiencing the highest infection rates and death rates in the world.

In the early days of the pandemic, as much of the population sheltered in place, essential workers – a disproportionate percentage of whom are immigrants and racial minorities – were forced to continue working, often without adequate protective equipment or compensation. With public health officials failing to offer adequate protections for workers, many were forced to take action to keep themselves and their co-workers safe. Between 1 March and 31 May 2020, labour journalist Mike Elk recorded over 260 strikes demanding Covid-19 protections (Elk 2020).

The vast majority of these strikes were wildcat actions that had not been organized or sanctioned by unions – even in workplaces where workers were members of a union. But in the face of the urgent and deadly situation, US labour unions were uncharacteristically supportive of these spontaneous work stoppages. Unions also organized video training sessions and published materials to support workers who were organizing spontaneous work stoppages and mobilized to demand that employers provide workers with appropriate personal protective equipment, paid sick leave (which was not yet legally required in the US), and hazard pay.

As the Covid-19 pandemic continued to spread, the USA was forced to face another crisis: the epidemic of police violence against Black people. On 25 May 2020, the day that the Covid-19 death toll in the United States reached 95,000, police officers in Minnesota callously murdered George Floyd, an unarmed Black man. The murder was captured on camera and streamed live online. It sparked mass outrage and prompted major demonstrations all over the country to demand not just justice for George Floyd but for officials to defund police forces.

Unions were quick to offer statements condemning the officers' actions but stopped short of supporting calls to defund the police. Service Employees International Union (SEIU) President Mary Kay Henry issued a long statement four days after Floyd's death calling for officers to be held accountable, but noted that many law enforcement officials were members of her union. Henry wrote, "It's important to recognize that the officers in Minneapolis are not representative of the entire law enforcement community. SEIU members serve on the frontlines doing essential work, including many in law enforcement who keep people safe and uphold the public trust" (Henry 2020).

The next day, as protests escalated in Washington, DC and around the country, protestors smashed out the windows of the headquarters of the AFL-CIO and set fire to the building. It is not clear if the AFL-CIO was specifically targeted because of the federation's failure to respond to the murder of George Floyd, because the federation's membership included tens of thousands of law enforcement officers, or if the building was among the hundreds of buildings that were targeted randomly by protesters that evening. In any event, it

is clear that some number of protesters did not recognize the nation's largest federation of trade unions as an important partner in the burgeoning uprising.

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka issued a statement the next day affirming the Federation's support of the Black Lives Matter movement and minimizing the significance of the attack on the Federation's headquarters. Trumka wrote, "in the end, the labour movement is not a building. We are a living collection of working people who will never stop fighting for economic, social and racial justice" (Trumka 2020). Days later, the AFL-CIO hung massive banners on its headquarters reading, "The AFL-CIO Supports Black Lives Matter".

Weeks into the uprising, labour unions moved from words into action. On Juneteenth, the holiday commemorating the end of slavery in the USA, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) struck all 29 ports in the union's jurisdiction, the whole Pacific Coast, for a full 8-hour shift. Then in July, a coalition of labour unions partnered with the Movement for Black Lives to organise the Strike for Black Lives on 20 July 2020. That day unions organized demonstrations at hundreds of worksites around the country with workers taking a knee, holding a moment of silence, or walking off the job at noon for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. While the action was largely symbolic and had little, if any, effect on operations at any worksites, the move to organize workplace actions on a large scale marked a major step forward for US unions who have historically maintained significant separation between their workplace activities and their political activities.

Throughout the first three-and-a-half years of the Trump administration, US unions have consistently spoken out against the rise of authoritarianism in the United States. At times, US unions have been slow to respond to rapidly unfolding events and often those responses lacked the institutional strength and resources to amount to anything more than symbolic objections. But over time and as the stakes became clearer, US unions have taken increasingly decisive action to respond to attacks on democratic norms.

Where union members have taken action in their workplaces, from teachers' strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona, to threatening strike action over safety concerns in the aviation industry, to wildcat strikes during the Covid-19 pandemic, unions have slowed the march towards authoritarianism or even won significant victories. As authoritarian tendencies continue to rise in the United States, these workplace actions could provide an instructive roadmap for US unions fighting to defend democratic institutions and norms.

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“The Wheel is Turning”³⁸

Fighting Apartheid with Workers’ Democracy, 1950–1990

Nicole Ulrich

Since apartheid ended in 1994, “democracy” has mainly been associated with electoral politics centred on parties, politicians, and parliament. The drastic narrowing of the popular political imagination has led to a perceived separation of politics and economics, and workers’ organizations (with between three to four million members today) have been reduced to bit players restricted to negotiating over wages and working conditions. One of the effects of this shift is the forgetting of the organizational traditions of workers – both at work and in their communities – and the significant *political* role that sections of the trade union movement played in challenging the racist authoritarianism of apartheid and the apartheid workplace regime. By fighting apartheid, these unions also envisaged an alternative human community that empowered the oppressed to take control of their daily lives. This paper gives a brief overview of the progressive trade union movement under apartheid. It focuses on union approaches to participatory democracy, workers’ control (of trade unions and society in general) and the political independence (from nationalist and socialist vanguards) of the workers’ movement during and after national liberation.

The long history of trade union organization in South Africa dates back to the late 1800s. The first independent African union (which organized workers classified by the state as “Native” or later “Bantu”) was the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA) formed in 1917. The IWA was influenced by the revolutionary syndicalist model of the “Wobblies” and later became part of the mighty Industrial Commercial Workers Union (ICU) that claimed a membership of over 100,000 at its height (van der Walt 2004). The ICU championed broader political concerns linked to colonialism and segregation and became a potent symbol of black resistance in the late 1920s. African workers continued to join unions in the 1930s and 1940s – either joining independent African unions, which had no rights, or “parallel”, separate African unions under the Trade and Labour Council (T&LC), which was based on registered unions of other racial groups that had access to official collective bargaining mechanisms and other industrial rights.

But by 1950, with the onset of apartheid, the workers’ movement proved weak and fell into crisis. Trade unions fractured along racial lines, were undemocratic, had unaccountable leaders, and were plagued by in-fighting and corruption (Alexandra 2000: 84). The Suppression of Communism Act (1950)

³⁸ The title of a poem by worker poet Alfred Qabula.

was passed, forcing union activists underground, and the industrial relations system was brought into line with apartheid policy. The registration of racially mixed unions (previously possible due to a legal loophole) was prohibited and a racially based industrial relations system created an entirely separate regulatory framework for African workers under the Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act in 1953. African unions were not illegal, but employers were not in any way compelled to negotiate with such unions and African workers could be arrested and imprisoned for striking.

Apartheid officials believed that such regulations would prevent African workers "from being used as political weapons", but they were quickly proven wrong (quoted in Horner 1976: 12). In May 1955, the surviving unions of the independent Council of Non-European Trade Unions (which had organized African industrial workers during World War II) and the left-wing unions from the T&LC came together to form the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). The federation was formally aligned to the African National Congress (ANC) and broader Congress movement and recognized political action, specifically the struggle for national liberation and against apartheid, as a key part of trade unionism.

As noted by Piet Beylvelde, the chairman of SACTU's inaugural congress: "You cannot separate politics and the way in which people are governed from their bread and butter or their freedom to move to and from places where they can find the best employment, or the houses they live in, or the type of education their children get. These things are of vital concern to the workers. The trade unions would therefore be neglecting the interests of their members if they failed to struggle for their members on all matters which affect them. The trade unions must be as active in the political field as they are in the economic sphere because the two hang together and cannot be isolated from each other." (Luckhardt/Wall 1981: 97)

SACTU's political unionism used the desire for national liberation and the popular struggles of the Congress movement to attract the support of workers (Lambert 1988). However, the combination of the economic and political struggle of workers was implemented unevenly and with mixed results. In the KwaZulu Natal region, SACTU's approach energized shop floor organization by encouraging the formation of factory committees (small politically conscious groups) which operated in a semi-clandestine manner until enough members had been recruited for a union (Lambert 1988: 115-207). These "new model unions" were based on democratically elected workplace committees and rooted in strong workplace organization. Robert Lambert (1988) argues that the organization of workers and the union movement were strengthened and workers were able to influence the political agenda of the ANC.

However, this was not the case for most of SACTU's affiliates, which struggled to establish sound democratic structures and either failed to champion the political demands of workers, focusing on economic issues such as wages, or became dominated by the interests of other classes in the nationalist movement.

The 1960s were particularly difficult and seen as a "decade of darkness" (Baskin 1991). The Sharpeville and Langa massacres in March 1960 signalled the beginning of a period of heightened repression in South Africa. Open political resistance was brutally crushed, forcing both the ANC and Pan-African Congress (PAC) into exile, and the African trade union movement declined. Although SACTU was not banned by the state, the federation was used as a front for recruiting Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) operatives and by 1966 up to 160 SACTU officials had been arrested (LACOM 1989: 152). By 1963, SACTU ceased local operations and its leaders went into exile.

Workers started to push back with a mass strike wave in 1973–74, which started in Durban and spread across the country, involving more than 90,000 workers (Friedman 1987: 40). Workers went on strike at their factories, rather than staying away, and "...the sight of large crowds of workers out on strike encouraged workers in neighbouring factories, and the strikes spread geographically road by road" (IIE 1974 :99). Labour activist Alfred Mthethwa recalls, "I had never been involved in such a situation. It was like seeing the beginning of a revolution" (in Hemson et al., 2006: 255).

The strikes marked the re-emergence of a workers' movement that would change the landscape forever. The new unions were not just a revival of the old. First, they were considerably larger than SACTU (which had a total membership of less than 50,000) (Baskin 1991: 13). Second, these new unions also aimed to address the organizational weaknesses of the past and developed new modes of resilient, democratic, and non-racial organization.

A new federation, the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Council (TUACC) established the tradition of workers' control – based on resilient, democratic trade unions controlled by the rank and file from the factory floor. TUACC assisted in the formation of the Metal Allied Workers Union (MAWU), the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU), and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). These united with other unions to form the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) in 1979. FOSATU promoted non-racialism, industrial unionism, and a distinct form of direct, participatory democracy. By the end of 1984, it represented nearly 120,000 workers (LACOM 1989: 187).

FOSATU General Secretary Joe Foster outlined the organizational aspects of workers' control in his 1982 speech, "The workers' struggle: where does FOSATU stand?". The ability of workers to control their unions was based on building solid structures in the workplace – the point of production where

workers have the most power and authority. It was also in the workplace that rank and file members, from different factory departments, elected their representatives, who were given clear mandates and held accountable through regular report back meetings. Workers' control was further entrenched by developing worker representatives into a layer of confident and capable worker leaders (through worker education) and creating structures that allowed these worker leaders to participate from a position of strength and dominate decision-making at all levels. FOSATU also sought to unite organized workers into a "tight" national structure. This meant that union affiliates, which organized on a national basis in strategic industries, agreed to share resources and develop policies jointly.

Non-racial organizations (as opposed to racial separation) that were run democratically by African workers stood in direct opposition to the authoritarian assumptions of the racist state. It is here that we see the emergence of the idea that the union movement was "building tomorrow today," meaning that the ways in which workers organized in the present would shape the future (so, for a democratic future, workers must build a democratic workers' movement from the bottom up) (Byrne/Ulrich 2016: 378).

For FOSATU, workers could only gain meaningful control over society if they created their own democratic organizations, which were independent of non-working-class political alliances and placed under their own command. FOSATU criticized SACTU – and the overtly nationalist "community unions" (such as the South African Allied Workers Union, SAAWU) that emerged at the start of the 1980s – for subordinating unions to unaccountable political parties. FOSATU also looked north and saw a pattern of nationalist parties like ZANU in Zimbabwe suppressing or capturing unions after independence. As Joe Foster explains: "All the great and successful popular movements have had as their aim the overthrow of oppressive – most often colonial – regimes. But these movements cannot and have not in themselves been able to deal with the particular and fundamental problems of workers.... It is, therefore essential that workers must strive to build their own powerful and effective organisation even whilst they are part of the wider popular struggle. This organisation is necessary to protect and further worker interests and to ensure that the popular movement is not hijacked by elements who will in the end have no option but to turn against their worker supporters" (Foster 1982: 228).

There was a group of workers in FOSTAU that expanded the concept of workers' control and developed an alternative vision of socialism (Byrne/Ulrich 2016). They wanted to develop "workers' control" into an ambitious political project to build a larger "working class movement" that would spearhead workers' struggle for economic and political liberation. They aimed to challenge apartheid and capitalism at the same time, rather than deferring

socialism to a later stage, after majority rule. They were socialist (anti-capitalist and anti-apartheid), but sceptical of the ANC and the SACP. In addition, FOSATU believed that trade unions were integral to building a counter-culture that included community-based struggles, cooperatives, and a socialist media. It is in this context that we see workers' choirs, theatre groups, and poets such as Alfred Qabula. We also see strong links being forged between unions and democratic community structures, in places like Cradock and Alexandra, giving rise to "people's power".

SACTU in exile characterized the apartheid state as fascist, but the FOSATU unions accepted a tactical engagement with statutory bodies and the law. Drawing on the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, the federation saw the apartheid state as a repressive instrument of domination and control, but also understood it to be located within a contradictory nexus of social relations and shaped by the balance of class forces (Fine et al., 1987: 193). This meant that workers could exploit the contradictions inherent in government reforms and use legal openings to their advantage if their organizations were strong, democratic, and resisted co-optation and measures that undermined their goals.

This expanded notion of workers' control was labelled "workerism" by its critics, and was rejected by the ANC, the SACP, and SACTU in exile, who were in turn labelled "populists" by their critics. The workerist-populist debate would continue after FOSATU joined with other unions in 1985 to form the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). At an organizational level, the workers control tradition left a real imprint on COSATU. For example, it adopted the principles of democratic trade unions united by a tight, national federation with vibrant educational and cultural structures. But the emphasis on the political independence of trade unions as an integral part of workers' control did not endure (Byrne/Ulrich 2016). Within two years the federation had openly aligned with the ANC, and even in 1985, its leadership included many ANC supporters, while the name "Congress" itself identified the federation with the ANC and SACTU. In 1990, it formally allied with the ANC and the SACP, an alliance which persists to this day.

COSATU brought over 500,000 workers together and grew rapidly after its formation. The federation formed a battering ram against apartheid. Under COSATU's banner, workers joined other anti-apartheid activists in the Mass Democratic Movement, and supported defiance campaigns, stay-aways, and public marches and rallies against racist policies, elections by a white-only electorate, and unfair labour laws (Kraak 1993: 245).

The trade union movement was key to defeating the racist authoritarianism of apartheid. This was done through militant action, and also through building strong, democratic trade union structures and forging a collective imagination of an egalitarian, non-racial future. However, since 1994, democracy

has brought new challenges and questions regarding the political role of trade unions in society remain as relevant as ever. As warned by unionists in FO-SATU, the political alliances established by COSATU have not protected workers in the post-apartheid period. Unions have lost touch with the rank and file, become increasingly bureaucratic, and the ruling ANC has embraced neoliberal programmes, paying scant attention to COSATU's policy proposals (Byrne/Ulrich 2016: 382). The massacre of 34 workers at Marikana in August 2012 has also revealed the brutally pro-capitalist character of the new democratic state, and has caused fractures within the trade union movement. We now wait to see how trade unions will respond politically to a post-Covid-19 world.

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Tunisia: The UGTT and Precarious Workers in the 2011 Uprising

Lorenzo Feltrin

The *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (UGTT, Tunisian General Labour Union) is widely recognized as the most important formally organized collective actor in Tunisia's 2011 uprising, which led to the downfall of Ben Ali's authoritarian regime and the democratization of the country (Beinin 2016; Feltrin 2019; Yousfi 2015). This article focuses on the role played by the labour federation in this process, arguing that the mobilizations of non-unionized (and often unwaged) precarious workers were key in pressuring the union to support the insurrection. Precarious workers are understood here in the broadest sense as all those who lack access to a secure income, including the so-called "unemployed", as in countries with no unemployment subsidies they still have to work – however irregularly – to survive (Feltrin 2018).

As the only legal union in the country, the UGTT was a broad and internally diverse organization that included supporters and opponents of the regime. In the 2011 uprising, politicized rank-and-file unionists challenged the policy of compromise adopted by the UGTT leadership and transmitted the fight being waged by precarious workers on the streets into the union's internal hierarchy, activating its infrastructure to transfer the conflict from the communal spaces of reproduction to "the hidden abodes of production" (Marx), in the form of regional general strikes. Yet if this process was successful in winning civil and political rights, it was ultimately unable to address the material working-class needs that were at the core of the uprising.

The Tunisian uprising started on 17 December 2010 in the marginalized interior region of Sidi Bouzid, with the self-immolation of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi and the ensuing clashes between mostly precarious youths and police. A group of trade unionists from the UGTT's secondary teaching federation, along with other activists, coordinated with the protesters and local lawyers to launch a committee in support of the mobilizations. On 18 December 2010, politicized UGTT militants from across the whole region decided to spread the mobilizations to areas outside Sidi Bouzid city to break the police "siege". The villages that saw the largest solidarity demonstrations were Menzel Bouzayane and Regueb (Hmed 2012).

The UGTT Sidi Bouzid Regional Secretary General (SG), Touhami Heni, was also an MP for the ruling party *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique* (RCD, Democratic Constitutional Rally). He did not disavow the protest, although he was wary of officially mobilizing the regional UGTT in support of

it. The UGTT National Executive Committee (NEC) did not declare any solidarity action, but fulfilled its traditional role of lobbying for the liberation of prisoners. But militant unionists mobilized autonomously despite (and against) the lack of calls for action from the intermediate and higher levels of the organization.

Meanwhile, a group of leftist UGTT dissidents organized a solidarity demonstration to be held on 25 December 2010 in front of UGTT headquarters in Tunis. In parallel, hackers linked to the Takriz collective shared a forged UGTT NEC statement on social media calling for a demonstration in front of the UGTT headquarters on the same day. The result was the first relatively large protest in the capital. Momentum was also generated by the fact that police had killed protesters Mohamed Amari and Chawki Nassri in Menzel Bouzayane the day before. The gathering was surrounded and attacked by police. Five UGTT national sectorial federations then called for a new demonstration for 27 December 2010. It was also attacked by police and UGTT SG Abdesslem Jerad disavowed it in the media (*Essabah*, 28 December 2010).

In early January, the protests spread to several areas of the country. Heavy clashes broke out in the village of Thala (in the marginalized region of Kasserine) and in Kasserine city. On 9 January 2011, police gunned down at least five protesters in Regueb, after which the UGTT's Local Executive Committee declared an open-ended local general strike. Between 8 and 10 January 2011, police fired live bullets at protesters in Thala and Kasserine city, killing at least 18. The Kasserine Regional Executive Committee, led by the RCD-affiliated Amor Mhamdi, maintained an ambiguous stance until the massacre, after which it sided with the protesters, eventually declaring a general strike.

The killings of protesters on 8–10 January 2011 provided an opportunity for UGTT militants to step up their pressure on the union's intermediate and upper levels. On 11 January 2011, when heavy clashes had reached the popular neighbourhoods of the capital, the UGTT National Administrative Commission authorized regional initiatives to support the protesters' demands, opening the way to regional general strikes.

On 12 January 2011, the general strike in the industrialized region of Sfax took place, along with regional strikes in Kairouan and Tozeur. The Sfax Regional EC, led by SG Mohamed Sha'aban, had actually made the decision to strike on 9 January 2011, before the National Administrative Commission had given it its "blessing". The Sfax demonstration gathered tens of thousands of protesters and was followed by clashes with police. The Sfax general strike is seen as the turning point of the uprising; it was in fact the first mass mobilization outside of the marginalized regions. It also signalled that the UGTT's national structures had been successfully pressured into siding with the uprising. Yet the same cannot be said for the UGTT SG. On the afternoon of the

same day, Jerad met Ben Ali and declared to the press: “I have found that the President of the Republic has a deep vision of the main problems and of their causes, and he is willing to solve them” (*La Presse de Tunisie*, 14 January 2011).

However, the mobilizations continued to follow their own momentum. On 13 January 2011, regional general strikes were held in Sidi Bouzid and Jendouba. On 14 January 2011, the general strike in Greater Tunis³⁹ took place. It was meant to be a mere two-hour stoppage but it became a large demonstration that filled the city centre, from UGTT headquarters to the vicinity of the Ministry of the Interior, where it transformed into a series of clashes. In the late afternoon of the same day, Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia to widespread disbelief.

The UGTT as an organization had a complex role in the uprising. Politicized rank-and-file militants played a crucial role from the beginning, while the intermediate and then upper levels gradually responded to pressure from below, and the national SG sought a compromise with Ben Ali until the end. The role played by politicized UGTT militants was geographically uneven and this depended mainly on the local strength of the union’s left wing. Yet the overall contribution of UGTT militants seems to be acknowledged even by the federation’s adversaries. The demonstrations often started from UGTT buildings, which were also used to hold citizens’ assemblies to coordinate the movement. An indispensable task of the union militants was that of using the UGTT’s network to spread the movement geographically.

The Tunisian uprising confronts us with the paradox of trade unionism playing a central role despite the relatively marginal role of industrial workers, who are traditionally associated with labour militancy. The real protagonist of the uprising was the precarious youth, with politicized public administration unionists (and other activists) providing support and some guidance.

In 2010, in the whole Sidi Bouzid region, there were only 28 private sector industrial enterprises with 10 employees or more – most of them in food processing and textiles – employing a total of 2,750 workers out of a population of 411,880.⁴⁰ The sectors in which the regional UGTT had most members were, in order, primary teaching, secondary teaching, agriculture, and health. Most members of the UGTT’s agricultural federation were civil servants at the Ministry of Agriculture rather than agricultural labourers. Indeed, it was public administration that gave the UGTT a comprehensive and capillary national infrastructure, even in the marginalized and barely-industrialized regions. Thus,

³⁹ Greater Tunis comprises the four regions of Tunis, Manouba, Ariana, and Ben Arous.

⁴⁰ According to an interviewee, the UGTT had a long-term presence only in two large factories, the German toy manufacturer Steiff and the Tunisian-owned Coala, a factory that made climate control devices. However, no known large struggles took place in these or other industrial units in the region at the time.

the militant trade unionists who mobilized to defend and expand the uprising were mostly public administration intellectual labourers, especially those working in primary and secondary teaching.

With the decline of agricultural employment, the stagnation of industrial employment, and the effects of austerity on hiring in public administration, the burden of absorbing the workforce expelled by automation from agriculture mostly fell to the low-end services sector. Events in Sidi Bouzid demonstrate this clearly. Mohamed Bouazizi himself, in fact, used to be an agricultural labourer working on a plot of land owned by his uncle, but the latter became over-indebted and was forced to sell the land to a Sfaxian businessman (Fautras 2015). The day Bouazizi set himself on fire, he was selling vegetables on the street, as an alternative source of income to the agricultural labour from which he had been expelled.

Kasserine is also barely industrialized. In 2010, the region had 72 private sector industrial firms with 10 employees or more, employing 4,945 workers out of a population of 431,821. Here, the textile sector is largest, followed by the production of construction materials. Kasserine features a Benetton plant, but as of 2015 it was still not unionized. There is also a state-owned cellulose factory established in 1956, which is seen by precarious male workers as the most obvious way to attain economic and thus existential security. It is therefore a common target of protests for employment. Yet the number of its employees fell from 1,200 in 2005 to 400 in 2015. Following this, its workplace union lost leverage and militancy declined.

The uprising, then, was mainly the work of precarious working-class factions outside of the UGTT, in alliance with activists including the politicized UGTT militants mainly working in public administration. But it is also necessary to stress the ephemeral nature of this alliance between precarious youths and left-wing unionists. The two groups were not linked through stable ideological and organizational ties, with the exception of the *Union des Diplômés Chômeurs* (UDC, Union of Unemployed Graduates). This became all the more evident when the Islamist party *Ennahda* (Renaissance), who had no organizational role in the uprising, won a large plurality in the 2011 elections, while the left suffered a crushing defeat.

Additionally, one should not discount the role of factory workers in the industrial centres of the country. With the regional strikes in Sfax and Greater Tunis, the industrial estates mostly stood still and empty, doing serious economic damage, and demonstrators asking for Ben Ali's departure flooded the city centres. The regional strikes, however, were the outcome of pressure coming from the struggles of precarious workers in the squares and the neighbourhoods, and not from shop-floor militancy in the factories. Public administration union militants served as a link between the precarious working-class

factions mobilizing in the communities and the relatively more secure workers in the public sector and in manufacturing.

The UGTT, as the country's largest civil society organization, was central to the political negotiations that followed Ben Ali's departure. Yet as the economic downturn following the uprising increased the power of international financial institutions to guide economic policy, mainstream political debate in Tunisian society was characterized by an escalation of tensions along the "modernist–Islamist" cleavage. This contributed to working-class de-composition, as workers were divided on such issues. Given the weakness of all modernist parties, the UGTT played the role of chief counter-weight to *Ennahda*.

At the same time, a massive wave of strikes gathered momentum. As shown by data from the Ministry of Social Affairs, the number of workdays lost in strikes more than quadrupled between 2010 and 2011 (from 74,763 to 309,343), and the figure remained high in the following years with a new peak of 361,464 in 2014. Within industry, textiles and engineering were the most significant sectors with regards to strikes, approximately reflecting the sectorial distribution of employment. Sfax and Ben Arous stand out as the regions where strikes were most numerous, which reflects their past traditions of labour struggles. In 2012, probably for the first time in Tunisia's history, the majority of strikes (56 percent) were authorized by the labour federations and therefore legal, while in 2010 and 2011 authorized strikes were only about one third of the total. Increased endorsement of the strikes was also an effect of trade union pluralism and of the new UGTT NEC's composition after the 2011 Congress.

The strikes were accompanied by mobilizations for secure employment and local development by precarious workers outside of the workplace, especially in marginalized regions. These often took the form of roadblocks outside the most strategic productive sites of a particular locality (phosphate extraction in Gafsa, oil and gas extraction in Kébili and Tataouine, phosphate processing in Gabes, etc.), which sometimes resulted in clashes with police. While such protests were most often contained locally, the mobilizations expanded nationwide in January 2016 and January 2018. On several occasions, UGTT Local or Regional ECs were pressured to call general strikes in solidarity with the demands of precarious workers (Feltrin 2018).

However, the UGTT's post-uprising power in influencing the composition of governments was not accompanied by a capacity to significantly steer their policies away from a neoliberal framework. The stand-off between the countervailing pressures of workers' mobilizations and the conditions demanded by foreign lenders was aggravated by the economic downturn. Yet the continuing mobilizations resulted in wage rigidity and in a situation where the economic crisis could not be managed through overtly repressive and defla-

tionary policies. Employment in public administration increased from 435,487 posts in 2010 to 591,174 in 2014, through a wave of new recruitments and the direct hiring – as demanded by the UGTT in 2011 – of all the outsourced employees working for the public administration. State-owned enterprises and state-sponsored employment schemes also increased their employees. Real wages in the formal sector overall increased faster than GDP in the 2011–2016 period (Ben Romdhane 2018: 124–40).

Yet inflation rates remained high and the official unemployment rate rose from 13 percent in 2010 to 15.3 percent in 2015, despite the new public sector hires, because of low investment in the private sector. The quality of welfare services seems to have deteriorated due to the renewed fiscal crisis of the state, and the marginalized interior regions have seen no significant improvement. This gave rise to the generalized view that the social justice demands of the 2011 uprising had remained unachieved. Socio-economic grievances, especially demands for secure employment and local development, were again central in the widespread social unrest that took place in the years following the uprising.

This article has shown how the UGTT was able to play an important role in the 2011 Tunisian uprising and the ensuing political transition. This happened in a complex way, with precarious workers spearheading the insurrection and politicized rank-and-file union militants supporting it to the point of imposing regional general strikes against the will of union leadership. These dynamics show how *trade unions can still be influential if they manage to take up grievances arising from below and beyond their membership, and even beyond the waged workforce.*

Unions can no longer base their strategies on the presupposition that capitalist development goes hand in hand with the expansion of job security and union density. Contemporary struggles are more effective when precarious workers mobilize but, due to their employment conditions, the precarious face major difficulties in waging successful collective action through traditional workplace unions. A strategic site of organization for precarious people is the realm of social reproduction – the community. This was shown in the neighbourhood and village-based informal organization of precarious people in Tunisia. The 2011 Tunisian uprising thus suggests that an important role for union activists today is that of forging links between community and workplace struggles.

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Workers and the Egyptian Revolution

Anne Alexander

Despite the long and rich history of labour activism in Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser's rise to power after the 1952 coup led to a long period when the state was relatively successful in preventing the development of independent workers' organizations or the generalization of strike action. Between the creation of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) in 1957 and the announcement of the Real Estate Tax Collectors' Union (RETAU) in 2008, the trade union movement was subsumed by the apparatus of the state. With the general secretary of the federation being a cabinet-level appointment and the senior layers of the union bureaucracy being almost entirely filled by senior members of the regime's party, the scope for mobilizing workers' self-activities within the official trade unions was almost non-existent. There were still major confrontations between workers and the authorities in al-Mahalla al-Kubra in 1984, at the Helwan steel works in 1989, and at Kafr al-Dawwar in 1994. But these were not strikes, they were workplace occupations where workers refused to go home at the end of their shift, and instead continued working in defiance of orders to stop (Alexander/Bassiouny 2014: 113-14). The predominance of this form of collective action betrayed the deep impact of Nasserist ideology and its promise of state-led development as the path out of poverty.

However, as the Egyptian ruling class swung away from a state capitalist approach to managing the economy and towards the emerging neoliberal orthodoxy under the rule of Sadat and Mubarak in the 1970s and 1980s, it abandoned key elements of the Nasserist "social contract". Crucially, the modest redistributive role played by state-run industries and government services, where workplaces functioned as the primary conduit for accessing benefits such as affordable housing and healthcare for industrial workers and civil servants, was disrupted by the programme of "structural adjustment" adopted from 1992 onwards.

Yet by the mid-2000s, workers' self-activity was beginning to make a comeback. Starting with a small wave of strikes in the private sector in 2004, a turning point was reached in December 2006 with a major strike at Misr Spinning in al-Mahalla al-Kubra. In contrast to most of the major battles in the 1980s and 1990s, workers took strike action rather than engaging in a work-in. Moreover, the strike was ended not by force but through a negotiated settlement with the Minister of Labour, who conceded most of the workers' demands, and it triggered a wave of similar strikes across the state-run textile sector. Nor was the strike wave confined to the textile industry: over the following four years strikes took place in almost every sector of the economy, both public and pri-

vate, and in large parts of the civil service (Beinin/El-Hamalawy 2007; Alexander/Bassiouny 2014; Bassiouny/Said 2007).

It was low-paid civil servants who made the breakthrough from strike organization to independent trade unions for the first time in two generations in 2008. Following a major strike by property tax collectors in December 2007, former local officials in the ETUF-affiliated union and new activists radicalized by the experience of strike action organized a national union-building drive. This culminated in a mass meeting at the Egyptian Journalists' Union headquarters in December 2008, which declared itself the first independent union in Egypt since 1957. Other independent unions organizing health technicians, teachers, and pensioners from public sector industries followed over the next two years. These four unions would form the nucleus of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), which was launched in January 2011 in the midst of the uprising against the Mubarak regime (Alexander/Bassiouny 2014: 236).

The eruption of revolution in 2011 was also preceded by the development of what Rabab el Mahdi has described as a "culture of protest" (El-Mahdi 2009). After years when opposition to the regime oscillated between passivity and terrorist atrocities by radical Islamist groups, the 2000s saw the emergence of new opposition networks among young activists from across the political spectrum. It started with the wave of protests in solidarity with the Second Intifada in Palestine in 2000, through the unexpected mass protests in response to the US-backed invasion of Iraq, to new movements such as *Kefaya* (Enough!) which mobilized street protests against the transfer of power from the ageing Hosni Mubarak to his son, Gamal (El-Mahdi/Marfleet 2009). Although the political protest movement and the strike wave only occasionally intersected before 2011 – most famously on 6 April 2008, when a planned strike by textile workers at Misr Spinning in Mahalla demanding a rise in the minimum wage sparked an attempted general strike by young activists in solidarity and an uprising of townspeople who tore down Mubarak's portrait and battled with riot police – the interweaving of political and economic protests proved difficult for the regime to crush, despite increasing repression.

In January 2011, the spark for revolution came from outside Egypt, carried from the mass movement which brought down Tunisian autocrat Ben Ali. The announcement of a day of marches and protest on 25 January, National Police Day, unleashed 18 days of spectacular popular mobilization. Although much of the world's media quickly congregated at the sit-in in Tahrir Square, focusing on the young, "tech-savvy", English-speaking middle class protesters who became the face of the revolution, collective action by workers played a critical role in the success of the first stage of the uprising. The first service organized workers provided to the revolution was to turn a deaf ear to the ETUF leadership,

which attempted to mobilize its rank and file for pro-regime counterprotests on 1 February. In the event, the union bureaucrats failed to mobilize anyone, leaving security forces to mobilize a mob of petty criminals and thugs instead.

The regime's counterattack being rebuffed by makeshift barricades erected by the square's defenders, the scene was set for the next phase in the uprising. After the failure of the attack on Tahrir Square on 1 February, the regime switched tactics: it moved towards re-opening workplaces and restoring "normality" outside the revolutionary encampments in the squares. It was at this juncture that a wave of strikes erupted. By the middle of the following week, workers in a wide range of sectors were reported to be taking action, with an estimated 300,000 or so engaged by the time Mubarak was removed by his own generals on 11 February (Alexander/Bassiouny 2014: 200). The strikes were rarely explicitly "political"; in most cases demands focused on workers' own grievances related to pay and conditions, but there could be no doubt about their *effect*. Workers in industries and sectors capable of causing major disruptions were among those taking action, such as the Suez Canal contractors, military-owned industries in Helwan, and Cairo public transport workers. Although workers were not in Tahrir Square as a visibly-organized force in large numbers, leaders of the embryonic independent unions were present in the square (where they founded a new union federation on 30 January), and revolutionary activists were in contact with worker activists in the Suez Canal, the Helwan military factories, and Cairo transport workers urging them to take strike action (Alexander/Bassiouny 2014: 201).

The dispersal of the revolution from the squares to the workplaces before 11 February directly led to another significant impact on the revolutionary process by workers' collective action: the deepening and extension of workplace-based struggles over pay, conditions, and trade union rights *after* the fall of Mubarak.

The strike wave was accompanied by a flourishing of workplace-based organizing as independent unions mushroomed. The EFITU had grown from having 4 members at its founding in January to 72 in October 2011, with a combined membership of 1.4 million people (Alexander/Bassiouny 2014: 241). Perhaps unsurprisingly, sectors where coordination could follow the outlines of national industries or public services tended to be more advanced than the rest. Junior doctors, for example, launched a well-supported national strike in May 2011, using the existing Doctors' Union as a platform for mobilizing, rather than setting up a new independent union (Shafiq 2011). School teachers, this time working through the vehicle of the independent union which had been founded in 2010, launched a national strike action in September 2011, timed to coincide with the beginning of the new academic year. The teachers' action was partially coordinated with strikes by the Cairo Public Transport workers'

union, indicating the potential for cross-sectoral alliances. However, the energy of this burgeoning movement was largely concentrated at the base, within individual workplaces, companies, or government services. Significantly, while the new independent union federation EFITU provided a space for networking between union activists from different sectors, it did not develop into an effective organizing and coordinating centre as subsequent events demonstrated.

By late November 2011, a number of factors coalesced to create conditions for a new round of spectacular confrontations between the revolutionary protest movement and the SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces), which climaxed in bloody battles in Mohamed Mahmoud Street just off Tahrir Square. The strike wave in September showed organized workers were impatient for real social change, and several strikes in the public sector included general demands for state investment in public services such as education and transport, in addition to calls for higher wages and better conditions (Alexander/Bassiouny 2014: 214). A brutal attack on Coptic Christian demonstrators and their allies at the Maspero television building on 9 October 2011, led by the armed forces and supported by some Islamists, had enraged many young revolutionary activists. They angrily accused the military of lying to cover up its responsibility both for the Maspero massacre and the violence inflicted on demonstrators in Tahrir Square and Mohammed Mahmoud Street. Finally, the SCAF had also antagonized the Islamist opposition by attempting to reserve for itself a number of “supra-constitutional” powers, just as the country prepared to go to the polls in the first parliamentary elections since the fall of Mubarak.

In contrast to the events of February 2011, however, there was no major intervention by organized workers *as* workers in the drama of November and early December 2011. There was no strike wave comparable in scale to the one which took off in the last few days of Mubarak’s rule. This was not because of a lack of support from the leadership of the independent unions, the EFITU issued several statements supporting the renewed sit-ins. The disconnect between the EFITU’s leaders and the mood in many workplaces was also apparent in the attempted mobilization for a general strike on 11 February 2012, the anniversary of the fall of Mubarak. Proposed initially by student activists, but then backed by the EFITU, the strike call targeted both the SCAF and the newly-elected parliament, which was dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafist Nour Party. The Brotherhood worked hard to break the strike, arguing that its MPs would take up workers’ grievances and echoing the military’s grim warnings of looming anarchy and chaos. In the event the counter-mobilization was largely successful, with only limited support registered in workplaces for the strike.

Thereafter, although levels of strike action remained exceptionally high, along with other forms of social protest, the ability of organized workers to

influence the direction of the revolutionary process in general, or even to wrest significant concessions from the state, receded. Political struggles between the Muslim Brotherhood-led government and a new opposition coalition comprising Nasserists, liberals, communists, and figures close to the old regime such as Amr Moussa, intensified in the autumn of 2012 and spring of 2013. Strikes and workers' protests also continued, and activists from the independent unions continued to participate in the political movement – for example mobilizing campaigns opposing the new constitution on the grounds that it weakened workers' rights, as well as supporting striking workers who began to face increased repression, such as the use of military courts against civilian strikers and threats to conscript workers in crucial sectors such as the railways. In contrast to the positive demands for change in 2011 and early 2012, by 2013 there was a marked shift towards defensive battles, as employers attempted to reassert their authority in the workplace (often by renegeing on collective agreements or victimizing independent union committees) (Alexander/Bassiouny 2014).

What of workers' participation in the huge wave of protest which led to the downfall of Mohamed Morsi and the military coup of July 2013? Activists in the independent unions were among the many groups who got behind the Tamarod "Rebellion" petition campaign which collected millions of signatures demanding early elections and became a lightning rod for a broader set of grievances with Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood government. Yet despite the appointment of Kamal Abu Eita of the EFITU to the post of Minister of Labour in the first post-Morsi cabinet – and regardless of the hopes of many worker activists – it rapidly became clear that this was to be no "second wave" of the revolution, but rather the consolidation of the counter-revolution. Abdelfattah al-Sisi, the Minister of Defence appointed by Morsi in August 2012, emerged as the leader of an energized military regime. Although the brunt of the repression was borne by the Muslim Brotherhood and the wider Islamist movement, the counter-revolutionary purge quickly expanded to roll back workers' rights, imprison leftist activists and trade unionists, and ban all protests.

In retrospect, there were several obstacles preventing the Egyptian workers' movement from translating its social weight into political and social gains for the Egyptian working class during the revolutionary crisis. The first of these was the relative newness of the independent unions, which were too small to shape the initial upsurge of workers' struggles and give them strategic direction. And although the workers' movement grew rapidly in the heat of the social battles triggered by Mubarak's fall, the fact that the major opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, was hostile to workers' self-activity yet retained significant levels of support among workers was a further major obstacle to connecting the strikes and workplace protests to the process of deepening the revolu-

tion. In contrast to the Brotherhood, which could mobilize hundreds of thousands of members, the radical left was extremely small, while the Nasserists lacked rooted organization. These two factors fed into a third: the timing of mobilizations for generalized or political strike demands within the broader dynamics of the revolutionary process. The willingness of many working-class Egyptians to give the electoral process time to work in November 2011 and February 2012 is likely to be a large part of the reason why attempts to re-connect the strike movement with the revolutionary movement were unsuccessful.

The military coup of July 2013 led to the creation of an even more brutal dictatorship than Mubarak's. The new regime moved quickly to crack down on strikes and protests, and by 2018 it had reversed the legal gains made by the independent union movement in 2011. The authorities frequently resorted to arrests, detention, and trials in military courts in order to penalize workers for taking collective action. The regime has been unable to completely repress strike activity however, as workers have organized strikes and sit-ins to demand the payment of late wages and bonuses, or to demand action over unsafe working conditions. In 2017, telecom workers, nurses, and garment workers were among those arrested over strikes, while food and ceramics workers were among those detained in 2018 (Amnesty International 2017; ITUC 2019). Although the space for political dissent has been sharply reduced, the fact that workers' economic resistance has continued under al-Sisi's rule highlights the potential for a rediscovery in the future of the dynamic of social and political protest which paved the way for the 2011 revolution.

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The Last Empire

The Struggle for Independence in African Colonies
and its Connection to the Portuguese Revolution (1974–1975)

João Carlos Louçã and Raquel Varela

Anaemic, peripheral, and anachronistic: this is how Portugal could be described in the early 1970s. Torn apart by the longest European dictatorship of the 20th century, its largely impoverished and illiterate population was used to feed the expanding focal points of industrialization and massively mobilized for the war that had been raging in the African colonies since 1961. This conflict, which only ended with the Carnation Revolution and the independence of African territories, was decisive for the military revolt that enabled the revolution and ended the dictatorship. Just as the working conditions, including forced labour, that African workers found themselves subjected to determine the course of action and the growing influence of the liberation movements, so the struggles that these movements engaged in were an essential condition for the development of organized resistance capable of facing and defeating the colonial army.

Imperialist Portugal and Forced Labor in the Colonies

“The immobility to which the native is condemned can only be called in question if the native decides to put an end to the history of colonization – the history of pillage – and to bring into existence the history of the nation – the history of decolonialization.” (Fanon 1965: 40)

Authoritarianism is an essential and unavoidable tool for the submission of the natives of the world by colonial powers and states. In all the geographical latitudes where there was territorial occupation and the subjugation of the majority of indigenous populations by imperialist powers, violence and coercion determined the conditions of the occupation. But they also generated resistance and liberation struggles. Portugal and its colonial history are no exception.

If there is some originality to Portuguese colonialism, it is without doubt its longevity. The last European empire, after losing its enclaves in India in 1961, still maintained Chinese Macau and East Timor under its dominion, but it was in Africa where the bulk of its empire was located. From the turn of the 19th century to the 1970s, the Portuguese elite lived in prey to the illusion of turning Africa into a new Brazil, seeking to transfer the wealth generated by the intense exploitation of primary resources to the old continent through the Portuguese ports. This anachronistic longevity would only come to an end with the Carnation Revolution in 1974, in the deep changes in the political condi-

tions of the metropolis – which were greatly influenced by the wear and tear caused by the colonial war effort – by the growing dissatisfaction of the metropolitan population and of the lower-ranking officers in that war.

Semi-peripheral, the country maintained an imperialist practice while being dependent on other European powers both in economic and – to a large extent – political terms. The country remained neutral in the Second World War, being ideologically close to Hitler's Reich but located in the historical and geographical area of Allied influence. Oliveira Salazar, the dictator who ruled the country until 1968, guaranteed that Portugal was one from the "Minho to East Timor". Portuguese colonial policy, which became renowned thanks to the dictator's claim that Portugal was "proudly alone", faced a public opinion that, in the aftermath of a world war, expected democratization and improvements to the population's living conditions and was naturally waiting for the demise of the fascist regimes on the Iberian Peninsula. Even though this end was postponed for more than twenty years, the contradictions of the colonial regime along with the unbearable exploitation that the African peoples were subjected to, did not wait for conditions to ripen in the metropolis for a struggle that paved the way for what happened in Portugal in 1974. In this cause-and-effect relationship – which works both ways – we can establish a framework about the root causes to try and understand what happened in Portugal during the revolutionary period (1974–1975) and, simultaneously, the conditions that led to the independence of the African colonies in 1975. Thus, the last European empire in Africa came to an end.

In 1970, the Portuguese regime was internationally isolated and facing strong opposition. At the domestic level, opposition centred on the colonial issue that had plunged the country into a war with no end in sight and that in its thirteen years involved around one million people in military contingents guaranteeing the occupation and opposing the liberation movements. In the case of African colonies, it was the failure of policies to integrate the native population – guaranteed by repression and the use of labour in coercion regimes – that transformed Africans into forced labour for the public works of the colonial state, or simply put them at the service of the colonial economy in its multiple forms of extractivism. As in other colonial regimes, Portugal also subjected the native labour force to coercion and violence. First with slavery, then by a strategy of devastating traditional subsistence economies, making forced labour the only way to guarantee compliance with the payment of taxes that was regulated by the colonial administration. It was in these harsh working conditions – in which workers were forced to sell their labour by the occupying power – that turned the political liberation movements into mass organizations.

Liberation Movement in the Colonies: Lack of Unions and “Subversive Forces”

In the early 1970s, the war had also encouraged the domestic market in the colonies. Whether due to the development of infrastructure, the need to provide supplies to the army, or to public works projects resulting from a last-ditch attempt to stop the inevitable process that would lead to the independence of all colonial territories just nineteen months after the April 1974 coup. However, in this time period, and until the fall of the dictatorship, the unions in Portugal were corporatist, which meant that union leaders were appointed by the government and loyal to the regime, and that collective actions such as strikes were strictly forbidden. In the colonies there were no unions. This explains why the clandestine organization of workers was carried out through and by the liberation movements. Despite this, there were moments of spontaneous strikes that determined the beginning of the armed struggle and a political programme that had independence as its ultimate objective.

In February 1961, the Portuguese army reacted to the cotton workers' strike in Baixa do Cassange, Angola, by bombing the communities with napalm. This strike had begun earlier that month and lasted for two weeks. Between 10,000 to 20,000 people were killed and entire villages were razed to the ground (Mateus 2004: 420). This northern area was a monoculture monopoly exploited by Cotonang, a Portuguese–Belgian company: “There was open revolt on 4 January, when Cotonang foremen were tied at the Soba Quivota Sanzala, ten kilometers away from Milando. ... Then came the population's threat to bash whoever tried to force them to work in the cotton fields” (Freudenthal 1999: 260), in public works like roads and other infrastructure, or to pay the annual tax. Production stopped for a whole month, and nothing would be the same again: “Gathered in large groups, the insurgents attacked both private and official buildings, damaged vehicles, bridges and rafts, brought down the Portuguese flag pole, but no Europeans were killed. In remote areas, such as the Luremo, Cuango, and Longo outposts, burnt cottonseeds piled up and native carnets were torn, alongside other signs of hostility. Gatherings became more frequent and threatening. This despite Cotonang's expressed concerns as the uprising was unfolding, and multiple requests by European dealers for armed intervention to bring it to an end.” (Freudenthal 1999: 263)

No systematic survey was ever carried out into the conflicts and no collective action undertaken by forced workers in Portuguese colonies. However, there was a partial one, based on both oral and written sources from the army and the secret police and it provides insight and evidence of a much more widespread resistance to forced labour than had been previously thought, both in its scope and in its continuity. The Portuguese army's psychological action guide flags the “non-improved group” (the masses) as the staunchest

supporters of liberation movements – in contrast to “tribal lords”, “intermediate groups”, “improved groups”, and settlers – in a typology based on qualification levels and territorial origins. According to the army, the “non-improved” group tended to “support subversion” because liberation movements pursue the struggle against the “moral duty to work”, “food and income culture”, and taxes: “subversion capitalizes on taxes, portraying them as a kind of violence aimed solely at making the white man richer” (General Staff of the Army 1970: 37-68).

Let us take the example of Pidjiguiti, Guinea-Bissau, a Portuguese colony in West Africa. Bissau itself used to be in the catchment area of Bissau’s docks, but fishing and coasting boats, sailing inside Guinea, used the adjacent Pidjiguiti docks. On 3 August 1959, a strike began in the general workshops, and spread to the whole of Pidjiguiti docks. Amongst others, it included sailors providing cabotage services, as well as those working for *Casa Gouveia*, linked to the powerful *Companhia União Fabril* (CUF, Industrial Union Company), the largest Portuguese industrial conglomerate. Detention orders for those on strike led to clashes and the strikers fought back with sticks and stones. In response, the police shot and killed seven people. French newspaper *Le Monde* mentioned a riot that had left five people dead and a significant number injured.

According to the account of Pinto Rema, a Franciscan priest: “The insubordinates have paddles, sticks, iron bars, stones and harpoons. Both sides refuse to give in or talk to each other. On the first clash, two police chiefs, Assunção and Dimas, are brutally attacked after firing warning shots. The fray causes injuries to seventeen guards, the police loses control and starts shooting to kill without restriction to exact vengeance; the result is that thirteen to fifteen people lay dead on the Pidjiguiti docks. The bodies of more sailors and dock workers were swept away by the river Geba, we do not know how many” (Rema 1982: 180).⁴¹ Historian Dalila Cabrita Mateus points out that this strike was at the root of the decision of the *Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde* (PAICG, African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde) to turn to armed struggle with peasant support: “A confidential report on this meeting, the ‘most crucial’ in PAICG’s history, according to Cabral, states it was the place where the move from nationalist unrest to national liberation struggle was prepared. Three instrumental resolutions were adopted: first, to shift the party’s activity to the countryside, mobilizing the

⁴¹ Henrique Pinto Rema. 1982. “História das Missões católicas da Guiné” (Braga, Ed. Franciscana, 856), cited in Dalila Mateus 2012, 180.

peasantry; second, to get ready for armed struggle; third, to move a share of the party's leadership abroad" (Davidson 1969: 181).⁴²

Support for the Resistance from War Opponents in Portugal

It was essential for the leaders of the liberation movements to build bridges with the movements opposing the war in Portugal. These bridges were built mainly among young students influenced by Maoist and Trotskyist organizations, or even by progressive Catholic movements. The repression by the political police was never enough to stop the growing opposition of a whole generation to colonial policy. It was unable to stop the desertion that reached more than 20 percent of young people conscripted between 1970 and 1972.

Samora Machel, who succeeded Eduardo Mondlane⁴³ as the director of the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO), hailed the deserters of the Portuguese army as heroes and used them in propaganda against the Portuguese occupation, which established a link between those contesting the Estado Novo regime (1933–1974) in Portugal and those who fought with weapons in hand in the African colonies. In the words of this African leader, the reasons for the antagonism between native populations and the colonial regime are clear: "the Mozambican is supposed to become a black-skinned Portuguese, a docile tool of colonialism whose highest ambition is to live like the settler in whose image he is created" (Machel 1970). His concern for the education of the Mozambican people was justified by the territories already controlled by the guerrillas and by the need to involve civilian populations in their defence and in the fight against the colonial system, making the racial mechanisms of labour exploitation visible.

"Mueda peasants' struggle against cotton growing is no different to the struggle of the sugar cane growers on the banks of the Zambezi, that the struggle of the stevedores in Lourenço Marques is the same as that of the miners in Tete. Workers shipped from Nampula to São Tomé or to the Lourenço Marques railways suffer the same exploitation as the men from Gaza who are sold to

⁴² Basil Davidson, 1969. "Révolution en Afrique: la Libération de la Guinée Portugaise" (Paris: Seuil, Combats, 36-37), cited in Dalila Mateus 2012, 181.

⁴³ The assassination of the leaders of various liberation movements was a method employed by Portuguese colonialism. This was the case with Eduardo Mondlane, FRELIMO's first president, who died in 1969 in Dar es Salaam when opening a package bomb that was prepared by the Portuguese political police. It was also the case with Amílcar Cabral, murdered in 1973 in Conakry, supposedly by elements of his own party that had betrayed him. What is certain is that on 22 November 1970, the Portuguese army carried out a military operation aimed at eliminating the entire PAIGC leadership exiled in Conakry and toppling the Sékou Touré regime. Nevertheless, this operation was met with tenacious resistance and failed in both objectives.

South Africa. The fishermen and rice cultivators in Manica e Sofala are exploited by the same foreigner that occupies the oilfields of Inhambane. Taxes were just as crushing a burden on the people of Niassa who, like all Mozambicans, never saw a school or hospital which catered for them” (Machel 1970).

As in other countries, the early 1970s saw a generation rise up against the authoritarianism of the state. Portugal – gagged by the censorship and political police of a regime in decline – also had its moments of significant expression of these movements that extended the influence of May 1968. The first feminist text,⁴⁴ the Cascais Jazz Festival where Charlie Haden challenged the colonial regime,⁴⁵ the university students in the main cities who organized despite repression, the strikes for a decent salary and decent living conditions that happened despite being banned. A country where the regime was already decrepit and where the struggle and organization of workers was decisive for its capitulation, both in the metropolis and in the African territories.

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⁴⁴ “*As Novas Cartas Portuguesas*” is a text by Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta, and Maria Velho da Costa published in 1972. In it the authors, known as the “Three Marias”, denounced the dictatorship’s repression, the power of the catholic patriarchy, and the situation of women, without ever forgetting the injustices of the war and the reality in colonial Africa. The regime banned the book and judicially persecuted the authors.

⁴⁵ The North American musician participated in the 1971 Cascais Jazz Festival (on the outskirts of Lisbon) where he played “*Song for Che*” which he dedicated to the fighters of the liberation movement. The next day he was arrested and kicked out of the country.

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Workers in South Korea and the 1980 Gwangju Uprising

Youngsu Won

Prelude: Brief Historical Context

Throughout the 20th century, Korea underwent a unique set of changes: colonial rule by imperial Japan (1910–45), national liberation and division (1945–48), and the Korean war (1950–53). Under the permanent division of the North and South, an extension of the international cold war, South Korea experienced the dynamics of developmental dictatorships and popular struggle for livelihood and democracy. South Koreans experienced a series of political upheavals in a relatively short span of time: the April Revolution in 1960, a military coup d'état in 1961, the Park Chunghee dictatorship (1961–79), the Seoul Spring and the Gwangju Uprising in 1980, the Chun Doo-hwan dictatorship (1979–87), and the June Uprising and the Great Workers' Struggle in 1987.

In this historical context, the democratic revolution was not complete, and the 21st century witnessed another series of political changes: anti-mad-cow (meat import) candlelight protests in 2008, and more massive candlelight protests in 2016–17, which eventually led to the impeachment of Park Geun-hye, daughter of dictator Park Chunghee, at which point South Korean democracy really took root.

It was a long and difficult path, requiring tough struggles and immeasurable sacrifices on the part of the people. Democracy and prosperity were not won by political leaders, but by workers and ordinary people. However, the real watershed was the tragic-heroic event that occurred in Gwangju in 1980: a popular uprising followed by a brutal massacre. Since the war and division, South Korea had been an anti-communist outpost in the international cold war. However, when ordinary people saw their own soldiers killing their sons and daughters, civilians young and old fought against bayonets and bullets. Since Gwangju 1980, everything changed in South Korea (Lee 2010; Won 2009a, b).

Background: Spring of Democratization and the Military Coup

On 26 October 1979, Park Chung-hee was assassinated by his friend, KCIA (Korean Central Intelligence Agency) Director Kim Jae-gyu, which spelled the end of an eighteen-year-long dictatorship. The people harboured high hopes for change and democracy. However, behind the scenes, Park's followers in the military initiated a stealth coup d'état on 12 December to keep the regime intact.

Next spring, students began to mobilize, demanding democracy and better living conditions. Workers went on strike to fight for higher wages and better

working conditions, thus ushering in the Seoul Spring in 1980. However, student leaders sensed political machinations behind the scenes and demanded that Chun Doo-hwan, who controlled both the KCIA and the military intelligence apparatus, step down.

On the fateful day of 15 May, more than 100,000 students and citizens held a huge rally at downtown Seoul Station to demand full democratization, but the student leaders abruptly dispersed the crowd to avoid giving the military a pretext for another coup. Nevertheless, on the night of 17 May, Chun Doo-hwan declared martial law to prohibit rallies and meetings. Tens of thousands of troops and tanks were dispatched to occupy Seoul, thereby ushering in another era of military dictatorship.

Gwangju, however, was different. While protests in Seoul were shut down in the morning of 18 May, Gwangju students gathered and fought with sticks and stones against the martial law troops. The subsequent dynamic led to a fateful massacre and popular uprising (Chung/Simin 2004; Won 2009b).

Ten Days of Resistance for Life and Democracy

On 15 May 1980, the city of Gwangju witnessed a 30,000 strong student march. Student leaders announced that should the university campuses be closed by the government they would gather at the campus gate to protest at 10 o'clock the next morning. After the declaration of martial law on 17 May, the Defense Security Command immediately arrested key opposition leaders, known as the "three Kims": Kim Dae-jung, Kim Young-sam, and Kim Jong-pil. Under Emergency Decree No. 10, the government imposed measures including university closures, mass media surveillance, and the prohibition of rallies and political activities. By 2am the next day, paratroopers had occupied the campuses of Chonnam National University and Chosun University. Troops patrolled the main streets and checkpoints were set up at all high schools.

In the morning of 18 May, despite martial law, about 100 students gathered in front of Chonnam University in protest. They threw stones at the paratroopers, who in turn beat them up. Some of the students then proceeded to protest on the main street, Geumnamro, and joined the 300 student demonstrators in the city centre. Police fired teargas into the crowd to disperse the demonstration. Then at 4pm, the military sent 7th Paratrooper Brigade to downtown Gwangju to quell the uprising. The student protestors were brutalized with army clubs and bayonets. The army searched and pursued the student protestors everywhere until the next morning (Katsiaficas 2012: 162–71).

On 19 May, state repression turned even more violent. Citizens of Gwangju from all walks of life became alarmed and were appalled by the unprecedented level of brutality. Angry citizens and even high school students took to the streets in protest. The same afternoon, more than 3,000 people kept

up the protest despite the violent crackdown. Paratroopers responded with more violence; students, men and women, young and old, protesters and bystanders alike, were brutalized.

By 20 May, the number of protestors had reached 200,000. Taxi and bus drivers used 200 of their vehicles as barricades to block the paratroopers on their path. Soldiers retaliated by hitting the citizens with clubs and rifle butts, and even bayoneted unarmed civilians. On many occasions, they tore the people's clothes to humiliate them. As there was a complete news blackout by the government, the military's brutality was unknown to the rest of the country. The Gwangju citizens, out of anger and frustration, set a private TV station (MBC) building on fire (Won 2009b).

By midnight of 20 May, the 11th Paratroopers Unit was ready to shoot unarmed civilians with live rounds, even though they had been ordered not to use arms. The next day, soldiers and students came into direct confrontation at the Chonnam Provincial Office and Chonnam University. In the morning, representatives of the protesters met the army commanders in charge, but no agreement was reached despite the Gwangju governor's promise to withdraw the paratroopers. It was an empty promise.

By noon of 21 May, the army began firing live bullets at citizens demonstrating outside the Chonnam Provincial Office and Chonnam University, but the protesters persisted. Paratroopers' snipers stationed on the rooftops of major buildings opened fire on the protesters, instantly killing scores of people. Soon, Gwangju hospitals were filled with casualties.

By the afternoon, the people of Gwangju began to arm themselves against army brutality. Some took arms from the police stations' arsenals of neighbouring areas of Naju City and Hwasun County. People organized themselves into a Citizen's Army. Others expropriated vehicles from the Asia Motors automobile plant to spread the news of army repression outside Gwangju. Rifles, bullets, and grenades were distributed among citizen-volunteers to defend themselves. That same evening, the army retreated from Gwangju, and the Citizen's Army successfully occupied the Provincial Office. This was a huge victory for the people of Gwangju. However, the martial law commander quickly retaliated by depicting the popular uprising as riots, instigated by "impure elements", thugs, and violent gangs. The army began a blockade in the name of self-defence and military units were told to fire at any perceived threat, which led to soldiers indiscriminately firing at unarmed civilians and civilian vehicles in the outskirts of Gwangju city (Chung/Simin 2004; Nah/Katsiaficas 2007).

From 22 May on, Gwangju was completely encircled and blockaded by the army. Contrary to rumours about violent gangs in Gwangju, the citizens in Gwangju were practicing democratic self-government with discipline. Nominated representatives began negotiating with the armed forces. All communi-

cations and traffic out of and into Gwangju were completely cut off by then, but Gwangju citizens persisted in telling the truth. They demanded that martial law be lifted and democracy leaders released. The Citizen's Army was put in charge of the city's security (Chung/Simin 2004).

During the six-day occupation, the people in Gwangju provided food and water to armed citizens, and hundreds donated blood for the injured. Despite the absence of state power, a peaceful and functioning society was maintained by the people. There was no report of theft nor robbery during the occupation. Some public service employees even cooperated with the Citizen's Committee to keep the city running. It was a liberated Gwangju. Huge mass rallies were held with the Civic Committee responsible for reporting on the situation. Lively discussion at these rallies ensued and important decisions about the struggle were made, after popular debate and consensus. Even though the moderates among the civil society leaders wanted to give up their arms and opted to surrender peacefully to evade further bloodshed, most citizens had insisted on continuing the armed struggle.

At 2am of 27 May, an army of 25,000 troops launched a swift suppression operation. The Provincial Office was the people's last resistance camp. The army fired more than 10,000 bullets at it, instantly killing dozens of Citizen's Army fighters. By then, the Provincial Office was taken over by the army and the Gwangju Uprising was crushed. After ten days of occupation and uprising by the citizens of Gwangju, the military began to attack the insurgents mercilessly. More than 2,000 citizens were killed or went missing during the uprising. However, official reports only mentioned 165 killed, 166 missing, 101 deaths caused by injuries, and 3,139 casualties. Right after quelling the uprising, the military carried out a massive arrest operation and detained 1,589 people ("Gwangju Uprising"). The victims were indiscriminately beaten and tortured in detention and incarcerated for many years. The victims and their families suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and most Gwangju citizens suffered psychological trauma. Many who had experienced or witnessed the massacre could not return to normal life. Suicide, violence, addiction, divorce, and other family and personal problems dominated Gwangju city for many years (Nah/Katsiaficas 2007; Won 2009b).

A Brief Analysis of the Uprising

The uprising began as a spontaneous students' protest. It was the paratroopers' brutal reaction that turned peaceful and defensive demonstrations into a full-scale armed uprising. Thus, despite their limited organization and political consciousness, the citizens of Gwangju won the battle against the armed troops. As the uprising expanded, more and more young and working-class people joined the struggle, as shown in the table next page. They eventually

Table: Age and occupation of the deceased in the uprising

Age	Number	Occupation	Number
Under 14	8	Student	27
15–19	36	Self-employed	21
20s	73	Office worker	14
30s	26	Assistant soldier*	2
40s	9	Public employee	2
50s	6	Driver	11
60s	4	Manual worker	34
Unknown	1	Unemployed	34
Total	163	Total	145

* Assistant soldiers werethe recruits in the 1980s that were exempted from military service for physical or other reasons, but had to work for the military or the civilian administration. They were under military command but not barracked.

Source: Wikipedia “Gwangju uprising”.

engaged the army in armed battles. Thus, a series of students’ protests had evolved into a historic popular uprising. These young militants had occupied the Provincial Office until the very end.

Though the uprising did not initially have clear political leadership, it liberated Gwangju and saved the lives of many students and civilians. Gwangju became a self-governed entity where citizens voluntarily kept peace and order in the city, even a commune was built. Thus the “Gwangju spirit” of resistance was born and it has remained a source of inspiration not only for the city, but the whole country (Nah/Katsiaficas 2007; Katsiasficas, 2012).

Gwangju’s Historical Significance and Enduring Impact

Gwangju 1980 was a watershed moment in South Korea’s path to democracy. After the Gwangju Uprising, the student movement became radicalized, which ushered in the anti-dictatorship struggles of the 1980s. That the truth of the Gwangju massacre be told and the assassins be punished were key demands of the movement. During and after the uprising, students and pro-democracy activists were shocked at the level of violence committed by the special troops sent to Gwangju, triggering intense political debates. The retreat from the mass mobilization at Seoul Station was hotly debated, and the then leaders’ decision to evade direct confrontation with the military was harshly criticized. This led to the militancy of the democracy movement, making it a key player in the people’s struggles. The goal of the movement was debated intensely and the conclusion drawn: a complete and revolutionary overthrow of the military regime was necessary to achieve democracy. There was also

consensus that the movement must fight against capitalism. Thus, the event in Gwangju foreshadowed a later radicalization of the movement, bringing about a new generation of young revolutionaries.

The Gwangju Uprising and its brutal suppression also had a significant impact on Korea's labour movement. Up until then, democratic unionism focused mainly on workplace issues, especially economic issues like wages, working conditions, plant closures, and so on. The trade unions mainly protected a small section of the working class, such as women workers, from export-oriented light industries like textiles, garments, and stuffed toys. The experience of Gwangju awakened the political consciousness of the labour movement. It finally recognized the military dictatorship as its enemy and began to look for the fundamental causes of contradictions in capitalism. This gave the movement a new direction and an orientation for the future.

Historically, after Gwangju, the student movement continued to lead social and political struggles across the country, which eventually culminated in the 1987 June Uprising (Won 2009b: 2014–15), a month-long nationwide protest. Lessons from Gwangju were learnt and Gwangju was no longer isolated. The national democracy movement succeeded in pushing back the dictatorship and paving the way for democracy. Furthermore, in summer 1987, Korean workers rose up all over the country, demanding wage rises and better working conditions. From 29 June to 31 October, workers went on 3,225 strikes with an average of 44 strikes per day. A total of 1,361 new unions were established as a result and 220,000 new members joined them, thus paving the way for an era of democratic and independent unionism (Won 2009a: 1984–86).

Under civilian governments in the 1990s, measures for appeasement and legal compensation were implemented, but they were limited and compromised by the political agendas of the governing groups. Ironically, as memorializing the past is being institutionalized in South Korea today, the spirit of Gwangju is fading away. Right-wing extremists attempt to tarnish Gwangju through fake news and malicious propaganda by insisting that the uprising was a North Korean plot, with its special units sent to the South to instigate unrest. However, historical evidence shows that without Gwangju, Korea would not be what it is today, and that the country would have taken much longer to achieve the freedom and political rights its people now enjoy. The contemporary generation of Koreans owe much to the Gwangju martyrs' sacrifice and heroic struggle.

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Labour Union Resistance to Neoliberal Labour Market Deregulation in Japan

Hiroaki Richard Watanabe

The Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government has been in power since 1955, except for two short periods: 1993 to 1994, and 2009 to 2012. Over time its authoritarian tendencies in the policymaking process have increased. To implement neoliberal labour market deregulation, the LDP government has excluded labour unions from the policymaking process in several cabinet councils. Labour unions also have experienced a decrease in negotiating power due to declining union density, lower coverage of collective bargaining, conflicts of interest in labour market deregulation, and so on. While non-regular workers and regular workers in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) endure precarious work conditions, “mainstream” unions based on enterprise unionism cling to the protection of regular workers in large companies. In contrast, “non-mainstream” individually-affiliated unions, which any individual workers can join irrespective of their company affiliation, have been eager to address the issue of poor working conditions.

This chapter examines how Japanese labour unions, especially individually-affiliated unions, have resisted neoliberal labour market deregulation. After examining neoliberal labour market deregulation and increases in work precarity, the chapter briefly discusses the response to the poor working conditions by mainstream labour unions. The chapter then conducts a case study of an individually-affiliated union, the *Shutoken Seinen Union* (SSU, Metropolitan Young Workers’ Union), which mainly represents the interests of young workers. The chapter argues that, although the SSU has helped young workers cope with work precarity and engage in labour disputes with employers, the union has failed to significantly improve their conditions due to a lack of both human and financial resources. While the SSU has exercised political agency and engaged in social movement unionism by forming coalitions with civil society organizations, it has not managed to resist neoliberal labour market deregulation and improve conditions for young workers.

Neoliberal Labour Market Deregulation and Poor Working Conditions

Japan has suffered from economic stagnation since the collapse of the asset price bubble in the early 1990s. Japanese companies also have experienced intensified economic competition from neighbouring East Asian countries such as South Korea, Taiwan, and China. In response to employers’ demand for greater labour market flexibility to cope with this situation, the LDP govern-

ment deregulated the labour market by increasingly authoritarian measures, as seen in the removal of labour unions from the policymaking process in cabinet councils such as the Council for Regulatory Reform during administrative reforms in the early 2000s (Miura 2012; Watanabe 2014). The implementation of neoliberal labour market deregulation by the LDP government may be considered a form of “authoritarian neoliberalism” (Bluff 2014). The LDP government, or more precisely the cabinet, attempted to increase its policymaking power by monopolizing agenda-setting power. Although labour unions still participate in the policymaking process in the tripartite advisory councils of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), the ministry’s policymaking power has been undermined to some extent.

The LDP government has implemented neoliberal labour market deregulation since the 1990s, mostly in non-regular employment such as temporary agency work and fixed-term contracts but also in regular employment in terms of work-hour rules (Watanabe 2018). Regarding non-regular employment, the government liberalized temporary agency work through the 1999 amendment to the Temporary Work Agency Law, which allowed employers to use it with only a few exceptions, including manufacturing. The 2003 amendment enabled employers to also use temporary agency work in the manufacturing sector, a significant amendment given the importance of manufacturing in the Japanese economy. Most recently, the 2015 amendment enabled employers to use temporary agency work without any time limit if employers change temp workers every three years. Although it does not matter to employers who the temp workers are, this has made temp work much more precarious, as contracts might be terminated within three years unless the worker is rehired as a regular or fixed-term worker.

Due to the implementation of neoliberal labour market deregulation, the number of non-regular workers has increased, and currently the percentage of non-regular workers among total workers is almost 40 percent. Their employment security is low, as seen in many dismissals during the global financial crisis in 2007–8 and most recently during the coronavirus pandemic. Their working conditions are poor, with low wages, insufficient access to social security such as corporate pensions and unemployment insurance, and so on.

Although regular workers are more protected, their working conditions have become poorer in terms of wages, work hours, and so on (Kumazawa 2013). For example, the LDP government relaxed work-hour rules by expanding the use of “discretionary work” with the 1998 and 2003 amendments to the Labour Standards Law. Regular workers in this category are supposed to have discretion over how to spend work hours but are not entitled to any overtime pay except when working on weekends, national holidays, and late at night. While these regular workers are supposed to have job autonomy in terms of

work hour allocation, this is often not the case. Instead, the expansion of discretionary work enabled employers to use regular workers more flexibly and pay lower salaries. Most recently, the LDP government introduced “highly-professional work” in the 2018 Work-style Reform. Highly-professional work is further deregulation of work-hour rules and regular workers in this category are not entitled to overtime pay under any circumstances. While the Work-style Reform also introduced the maximum legal limit on overtime work, the limit is still high (100 hours in the busiest months, 80 hours per month on average in any six months, and 720 hours overall per year) and it is unlikely to significantly reduce the number of *karōshi* (death by overwork) and *karō jisatsu* (committing suicide due to mental health problems caused by overwork). Japan remains among the countries with the longest work hours in the OECD. Regular workers have been under the continuous threat of being replaced by an increasing number of non-regular workers. This has enabled employers to put regular workers under pressure to work intensively in poor conditions.

Response to Work Precarity by Labour Unions

The neoliberal labour market deregulation implemented by the LDP government undermined the power of labour unions by increasing the number of non-regular workers, as it is more difficult for labour unions to organize non-regular workers, especially those who remain in the same workplace for only a short time. This has contributed to a reduction in union density, which sits at around 17 percent. The loss of access to the policymaking process in the cabinet councils also reduced the negotiating power of labour unions.

In addition, conflicts of interest among unions in labour market deregulation have contributed to the decline in their power. “Enterprise” unions in Japan’s internationally competitive sectors such as automobiles and (until recently) electronics have not necessarily opposed labour market deregulation. These unions have often formed cross-class coalitions with management to maintain the international competitiveness of their companies, thereby protecting the jobs of regular workers at the cost of non-regular workers. These unions have a great incentive to cooperate with employers rather than obstruct a company’s business, as their survival depends on the latter’s success (Fukui 2005). As a result, they have been indifferent to the work precarity of non-regular workers and the poor working conditions of an increasing number of regular workers, including issues such as illegal dismissals, non-payment of salaries, and long working hours. Industrial federations including RENGO (the Japanese Trade Union Confederation) have been more considerate of the plight of individual workers, whether regular or not, as they have had to demonstrate their *raison d’être* in society as representing the interests of “all” workers, rather than only regular workers in large companies (Kumazawa 2013). RENGO and

some industrial federations such as UA Zensen, the largest industrial federation in Japan in business sectors such as textiles, retail, and food processing, have made efforts to organize not only regular workers but also an increasing number of non-regular workers. Yet due to a lack of engagement by enterprise unions, the level of organizing of non-regular workers and regular workers in SMEs remains low, although the union density among non-regular workers has increased to some extent.

In contrast, individually-affiliated unions have fought more aggressively against employers to represent the interests of individual workers who suffer from work precarity and poor working conditions, especially non-regular workers and regular workers in SMEs (Royle and Urano 2012; Weathers 2010). Individually-affiliated unions in Japan include “general” unions, which are industrial and craft unions that mostly organize regular workers in SMEs and non-regular workers, and “community” unions, which are community-based, individually-affiliated unions that organize the same types of workers as those organized by general unions (Kojima 2020: 5).

In contrast to enterprise unions, individually-affiliated unions have a reputation for acting to achieve worker solidarity and social justice such as decent working conditions for all workers (Fukui 2005; Kumazawa 2013; Suzuki 2012). These unions represent the interests of non-regular workers and regular workers in SMEs who are not organized by enterprise unions and aim to resolve individual labour disputes. By performing these roles, individually-affiliated unions have played an important role in helping workers under precarious work conditions (Watanabe 2015). However, individually-affiliated unions have much less human and financial resources than enterprise unions. To compensate for this lack of power, some individually-affiliated unions have engaged in social movement unionism by forming coalitions with civil society organizations (Suzuki 2012: 70). But it is often on an ad-hoc basis and insufficiently institutionalized (Fukui 2005; Kojima 2020). Individually-affiliated unions also have attempted to exercise political agency in the form of political lobbying, policy proposals, mass protests, and so on.

Below, this chapter briefly presents a case study of the *Shutoken Seinen Union* (SSU, Tokyo Metropolitan Youth Union), an individually-affiliated union specialized in representing the interests of young workers, to examine how individually-affiliated unions have responded to the LDP government’s implementation of neoliberal labour market deregulation and why they have failed to significantly improve the working conditions of individual workers.

The Shutoken Seinen Union

Established in 2000, the *Shutoken Seinen Union* (SSU) is a community union affiliated with *Zenrōren* (the National Confederation of Trade Unions), the second largest trade union umbrella organization in Japan. According to the SSU's 2015 Annual Meeting Report, there were around 360 members as of December 2015 (the number remained steady over the last 5 years). The SSU is specialized in representing the interests of young workers, who have suffered from work precarity and poor working conditions since the LDP government's implementation of neoliberal labour market deregulation. Employers have increased the use of non-regular employment among young workers. With the increase in work precarity, the SSU has engaged in labour counseling and achieved a high settlement rate of labour disputes (interview, SSU Secretary General, 2016).

The SSU has engaged in social movement unionism by forming coalitions with civil society organizations and urged the government to improve social welfare services for the working poor and unemployed. During the global financial crisis, for example, the SSU joined a campaign organized by the *Han-Hinkon* (Anti-Poverty) Network to set up a *haken mura* (temp worker village), providing food and housing support to those temp workers who were dismissed and became homeless. More recently, the SSU participated in a campaign called "Fight for 1,500 yen". It was organized by the civil society organization *Aequitas* (meaning "fair" in Latin) in October 2015 and several times subsequently, with the goal of raising the minimum wage for the working poor. Japanese minimum wages are low from an international perspective and are currently only around 900 yen (around 8 USD at the exchange rate of \$1=110 yen) on average. The "Fight for 1,500 yen" campaign, which was based on social movement unionism, was successful in involving not only civil society organizations, labour unions, and concerned citizens including labour scholars and lawyers, but also the politicians of welfare-oriented opposition parties such as the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), the largest opposition party at that time, and the Japan Communist Party (interview, SSU Secretary General, 2016).

The SSU has also exercised political agency by lobbying politicians and bureaucrats. For example, it participated in *in-nai shūkai*, political meetings with opposition members in the Diet (Parliament), discussing working conditions for young workers and proposing several policies to Diet members. In addition, the SSU made policy requests to relevant ministries such as the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and the Labour Bureau of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government to improve working conditions for young workers in terms of minimum wages, job protection, working hours, job training, and so on (interview, SSU Secretary General, 2016).

However, with a small number of exceptions such as drawing more public attention to the existence of poor young workers, the SSU's social movement unionism and political actions have hardly had a significant impact on the government's labour policy and on improving the precarious working conditions of young workers. Japan's minimum wages are still far from the SSU's target of 1,500 yen and the recent rises in wages were mostly possible due to the declining population size and reductions in workforce supply. Individually-affiliated unions such as the SSU have had difficulty in organizing many workers, as they usually recruit members on an individual basis through labour consultation rather than relying on conventional mass recruitment in the workplace. With fewer resources, the SSU has not been able to engage in social movement unionism to a greater extent by instigating coalitions with civil society organizations and has not been able to exercise enough political agency to influence public policy. This has prevented the SSU from significantly improving the working conditions of young workers and their working conditions remain precarious.

Conclusion

The neoliberal labour market deregulation implemented by the increasingly authoritarian LDP government has increased work precarity and made working conditions poorer not only for non-regular workers but also for an increasing number of regular workers. Rather than responding to this situation by making efforts to improve working conditions, enterprise unions have been mostly indifferent, as they have a greater incentive to preserve the jobs of regular workers in large companies by cooperating with employers. Industrial federations and RENGO have made some effort to organize non-regular workers and regular workers in SMEs to demonstrate their social relevance. However, without the cooperation of enterprise unions, they have had little success in mitigating work precarity.

In contrast, individually-affiliated unions with identities based on worker solidarity have been eager to address the problem of the increase in work precarity and improve working conditions. These unions have played an important role in helping individual workers in their legal disputes with employers and have contributed to the improvement of working conditions in some individual cases. However, as seen in the case study of the SSU, these unions have suffered from a lack of resources, and their engagement in social movement unionism and the exercise of political agency have not been enough. As a result, many individual workers still suffer from work precarity and poor working conditions caused by the implementation of neoliberal labour market deregulation by the LDP government.

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Trade Union Mobilization Against the Modi Regime in India

Charvaak Pati

The year 2014 was a watershed for Indian politics, as the coalition National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), came to power under the leadership of Narendra Modi, who rode a wave of anti-corruption movements against the previous United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. The BJP secured a simple majority on its own in the *Lok Sabha* – the Lower House of the Indian Parliament – after more than three decades. The NDA was returned to power in 2019 with even better numbers in the general elections. Upon returning to power, the regime’s policies have pressed for neoliberal economic reforms in the form of labour law reforms and privatization. The organized trade union mobilizations since 2014, led by the Central Trade Unions (CTUs), have focused on these two of the government’s policy objectives, in addition to other generally aggressive pro-market policies like increases in foreign direct investment (FDI) in the retail, railway, and defence sectors. The CTUs primarily mobilized workers in the formal sector with trade union rights, such as in banking, insurance, railways, and in various state-owned enterprises. Formal workers constitute less than ten percent of the workforce in India (Aggarwal 2013). Workers have also spontaneously mobilized against the regime’s anti-worker policies, and these protests occurred outside of the official union movements. This chapter focuses on three elements of trade union mobilization against the Modi regime: the organized and official union movement led by the CTUs, the emergence of new working-class organizations operating outside of the CTUs, and spontaneous protests by workers in the informal sector. The chapter concludes with critical remarks on the limitations of union movements in India and union responses to the anti-labour policies in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Official Trade Union Mobilization

After coming to power, the Modi regime formulated two significant policies: *Make in India* and labour law reforms. While the *Make in India* initiative was launched to ostensibly compete with China and promote India as a base for manufacturing, the labour law reforms were meant to attract more private capital and especially international capital. Debates over labour reforms in India have a contentious history, and no previous regime has ever pushed as hard for these reforms as the Modi government did. With a majority in Parliament, the NDA regime found an opportune moment to promote labour reforms as a functional requirement for the *Make in India* programme.

The government amalgamated 44 labour laws into four labour codes⁴⁶ in order to do away with “archaic” laws. Furthermore, these reforms were considered necessary by the government to create conditions to increase the ease of doing business in India. This means making it extremely easy to get rid of workers as and when required and to do away with any possible union resistance. These reforms are being carried out without any evidence that they would create more employment opportunities (Roychowdhury 2019). The earlier version of the Industrial Disputes Act stipulated that a company with 100 employees must obtain permission from the government before laying off workers or closing down a unit. This threshold has been increased to 300 workers according to the new Industrial Relations Code Bill. Another contentious issue in the proposed labour laws is fixed-term employment, which unions fear will lead to more precarity and a loss of security among workers. On occupational safety, the new codes stipulate that safety measures taken by the companies will be self-reported by management and the previous regime of factory inspections will be abandoned (The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2019: 28-30).

The CTUs have organized many strikes against these proposed policies at the national level. Along with opposing the labour reforms, unions have also mobilized against attempts to privatize public sector undertakings (PSUs). Unions have protested against the privatization of Indian Railways, state-run telecom companies Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) and Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited (MTNL), and the state-owned airline Air India. The unions fear that the telecom sector in India will ultimately be a three-player sector with two major players Airtel and Reliance Geo and a minor player Vodafone Idea. A voluntary retirement scheme (VRS) was launched to force workers into accepting early retirement before these two state-run corporations were privatized.⁴⁷ Since the scheme was launched, close to 90,000 workers have accepted the early retirement offer made by the government (*The Economic Times*, 26 November 2019). The CTUs and the railway unions such as All India Railwaymen’s Federation (AIRF) went on strike to protest government plans to hand over the operation of passenger trains to private players and corporatize production units of railways under public–private partnerships (*The Hindu*, 2019). The AIRF observed a week-long Black Day from 1 to 6 July 2019 (Mishra 2019).

⁴⁶ The four labour codes have gone through multiple tripartite consultations and debates in parliament. Some of them have been introduced and others are in the process of being introduced and enacted. Moreover, the provincial governments have made amendments to the laws in line with the new codes even before they were introduced in the parliament.

⁴⁷ This view was expressed by Amarjeet Kaur, General Secretary of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) during a protest movement in Delhi, November 2019.

A three-day *Mahapadav* (massive sit-in) was organized in Delhi in November 2017 by 13 CTUs to protest one year of demonetization which was breaking the backs of informal workers. The CTUs and several independent trade unions came together to jointly protest against increases in casualized work, unemployment, pro-employer labour law reforms, an absence of employment creation, and foreign direct investment in strategic sectors such as railways and defence (Mahaprashasta 2017).

The unions have launched general strikes across the country since the economic reforms were carried out by the then Congress government in 1991. Millions of workers participated in these general strikes, which presented generalized demands by workers in both the formal and informal sectors. The largest ever general strike in India was held on 8 January 2020, which saw the participation of 250 million workers including workers from state-owned enterprises, informal workers in the formal sector, and informal sector workers. The demands included an increase in the minimum wage, rolling back labour reforms, policies to curb joblessness and public sector sell-offs, an end to low-wage contract work, and scrapping the recently enacted discriminatory citizenship law (Varma 2020).

The Emergence of Independent and Militant Unions

Mobilizations have been led by smaller but militant organizations in different industrial regions. The Workers' Solidarity Centre (WSC) has led a number of unionization movements in the automotive clusters in Delhi NCR⁴⁸. Similarly, the *Inquilabi Mazdoor Kendra* (IMK, Revolutionary Workers' Centre) has been active among workers in the industrial clusters in the state of Uttarakhand. The *Bigul Mazdoor* (Workers' Bugle) has led several successful workers' movements for unionization among informal workers and against the Modi regime's policies in Delhi. Many such organizations have been active in different parts of the country, and 14 unions and organizations recently came together to form a common front named the *Mazdoor Adhikar Sangharsh Abhiyan* (MASA, Campaign for Workers' Rights and Struggle), whose primary objective is to build a militant working-class movement in India, against what they call "the betrayal politics" of the CTUs. There are 12 CTUs in India affiliated to political parties with ideologies ranging from right-wing (BJP), to centrist (Congress) and left-wing. The National Trade Union Initiative (NTUI) is an independent union not affiliated with any political party. While the party-based unions draw their membership primarily from formal workers, the NTUI draws its membership from informal workers. The MASA's stated objective is to go beyond mere

⁴⁸ The National Capital Region (NCR) is a central planning region with 46 million inhabitants. It encompasses Delhi and several districts surrounding it.

economic demands of trade union politics in India while giving autonomy to unions and workers working under its banner. It also seeks to fight for contract-based and casualized workers who find no voice and representation in the CTUs. This approach, the MASA argues, stands in contrast to the centralized and bureaucratic functioning of central trade unions.⁴⁹ The MASA organized a rally in Delhi in March 2019 to protest the Modi regime's anti-labour policies, which drew over 10,000 workers, including industrial workers, urban informal workers and construction workers. In December 2019, a factory fire in Delhi killed 43 workers. While the CTUs issued statements condemning the incident, MASA unions protested against the factory owners and the government and demanded compensation for the deceased workers.

Another pan-India organization called the Automobile Workers' Union (AWU) was formed in November 2015 in the wake of protracted militant struggles waged by workers at India's premier automobile maker Maruti Suzuki India Limited (MSIL). The Maruti movement, which stood for a militant struggle for unionization and for the rights of workers imprisoned in the wake of the death of a senior management official in July 2012, went beyond its local struggles in Gurgaon–Manesar in the province of Haryana and succeeded in uniting auto workers and unions in different automobile clusters in India by "jumping scale", to use an expression by radical geographer Neil Smith. The AWU aims to unite auto workers' struggles in India as the industry is expanding amidst anti-union management and massive increases in the numbers of contract workers. The AWU is not affiliated to any of the CTUs and has been organizing and coordinating various local struggles by auto workers in different auto clusters in India.

Spontaneous Movements

Apart from the organized movements and mobilizations, spontaneous movements have also emerged that are led by ordinary workers rather than unions. One such instance of spontaneous movement was led by women garment workers in the cities of Bangalore, Mysuru, and Chennai in 2016. More than 100,000 workers, mostly women, hit the streets to protest proposed restric-

⁴⁹ Told to the author by Shyamveer, IMK during an interview in August, 2019. The IMK is one of the leading organizations in the MASA. The consensus among MASA unions is that the CTUs have been focusing on formal workers and their ideology is always economic. Moreover, these unions contend that the CTUs always take the legal route to fight against the employers in the factories, which according to the MASA, does not leave any room for spontaneous and militant struggles. They refer to the examples of the 2011–12 Maruti movement and the Honda workers' movement in 2016 to drive home the point that union mobilization should combine local struggles with national struggles against capital's strategies and the state's policies.

tions on withdrawals of their hard-earned money deposited in the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) retirement fund. The proposed amendment stated that withdrawals from the EPF would be allowed only after employees reach the age of 58. Faced with massive protests, the government was forced to withdraw the proposed amendment to the EPF (Yadav 2016). Similar spontaneous movements have been organized by workers in the automobile and garment sectors in different parts of India and these movements have been led by workers themselves with no mediation from the CTUs or any other working-class organization.

The garments industry in Gurgaon–Manesar stands out for the many spontaneous strikes and protests held there. The number of formal workers in the garments industry is abysmally low, and this has helped the employers avoid unionization. Yet not having a union has not stopped contract-based and casual workers from voicing their anger and resentment over low wages and long working hours. These workers have used general strikes as occasions to express their class antagonism in the form of throwing stones, destroying cars, shouting slogans, and dispersing without a trace. These spontaneous actions are becoming commonplace in the garments industry in many parts of India.⁵⁰ With over 90 percent of the workforce in the informal sector without a contract and union rights, these forms of protest are only going to increase in future.

Concluding Remarks

The privatization of state-owned enterprises and labour law reforms have been long-standing demands by the Indian capitalist class, being made even before Modi came to power. Yet earlier governments were slow in implementing these policies due to pressure from left-wing parties and trade unions. The new regime has accelerated the processes that were slowly unravelling due to democratic pressure from union and political parties. A fragmented union movement divided along party lines, alongside declining public sector employment and an increase in the massive informal workforce, has made it even more difficult to challenge anti-labour policies of the government. While independent and militant organizations are challenging the narrative and methods of struggle of the official and organized union movement, spontaneous workers' movements have emerged in many parts of India against the government's policies, declining wages, and worsening working conditions. These independent

⁵⁰ Various issues of *Faridabad Mazdoor Samachar* (FMS, Faridabad Workers' News) publish news on spontaneous workers' protests in the industrial areas of Delhi NCR, which is home to manufacturing clusters such as Gurgaon–Manesar–Dharuhera, New Okhla Industrial Development Authority (NOIDA), Greater NOIDA, and Faridabad.

organizations and spontaneous movements, however, have not been more successful than the CTUs in thwarting the government's anti-labour policies.

The weaknesses of the Indian union movement were further exposed in the wake of the national lockdown announced by the Modi government 25 March 2020, with only four hours' notice. The lockdown in India has dealt a heavy blow to the economy, and also created a humanitarian crisis. The lockdown has been particularly brutal for migrant workers, most of whom worked in the informal sector. With the economy set to contract, the crisis is being used by states to speed up labour reforms with no debate in parliament. Many state governments have declared different measures to revive the economy and use the crisis as an opportunity to implement more stringent anti-labour policies. Millions of migrant workers have left the cities and other industrial and urban areas for their villages with a remote possibility of finding employment. Spontaneous protests by migrant workers in different parts of the country forced the government to start *shramik* trains (worker trains).

Meanwhile, the federal government and the state governments are moving at great speed to relax labour laws. Several provinces like Rajasthan, Gujarat, Punjab, and Himachal Pradesh have already declared that there will be a lot of relaxation of labour laws in industry, including provisions to work 12 hours a day, with no double payment for the extra hours (Shyam Sundar 2020). Many other provinces such as Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Madhya Pradesh have since extended working hours. Unions have staged protests over these policies but have not been able to effectively mobilize workers and challenge the government. The migrant workers' situation and the looming economic recession present both an opportunity and a crisis for unions in India. It provides an opportunity for them to mobilize a massive number of migrant workers around issues like employment, higher wages, and better working conditions. The situation also has the potential to create a crisis for the union movement in India in the form of a reduction in public sector employment, traditionally its stable support base, as well as increasing automation and reducing the ability to organize informal workers. The unravelling of the dialectic of opportunity and crisis will determine the future of union movements in India under the Modi regime and beyond.

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Unions and Workers Against the Suharto Regime in Indonesia

Verna Dinah Q. Viajar⁵¹

The Indonesian labour movement was forged in the anti-colonial struggles against the Dutch, then persecuted during Suharto's authoritarian regime, and has been resurgent in the post-Suharto democratization process. During these important historical moments in Indonesia, the development of the Indonesian labour movements has gone through various phases. The period of Dutch colonialism allowed trade unions to organize freely, which later became the politicized and radicalized left labour movement up until independence. During the post-colonial Sukarno government, the left-leaning trade unions were caught up in the political conflict between the Indonesian communist party and the right-wing military. Following the rise of the military-backed, authoritarian Suharto government, a bloody purge of communists and leftists wiped-out the radical and militant labour movement in Indonesia which had existed since the Dutch colonial period. A repressed and state-sanctioned labour movement emerged from the ashes in one of the bloodiest ever coups in Southeast Asia. The repression and control of the trade union movement became the prerequisite for the establishment of Suharto's authoritarian rule (1968–1998) in the largest Islamic country in the world.

Even though it was weak, during the Suharto period the labour movement rose to the challenge of contributing to a democratic transition in the face of a regime hostile to both labour and its political adversaries. After three decades, the fall of Suharto allowed for the creation of thousands of trade unions that now comprise the various independent and competing union movements in Indonesia. This article explores the debates about the role of the Indonesian labour movement in the country's regime change and democratization process. It argues that unions and other labour-based movements formed in defence of workers' interests represent key elements in the struggle for democratization against the authoritarian Suharto regime. Understanding the role played by organized labour and its relationship to democratic reforms and regime change in Indonesia may provide insights into how social forces emerge and consolidate resistance against authoritarian practices within and beyond Indonesia.

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The Repressed and State-Sanctioned Labour Movement Under Suharto

Dutch–Indonesian trade unions existed since 1894 in colonial Indonesia, particularly in the public sector (i.e. teachers, postal workers), and in mining and railways (Muncada 2001). By the 1920s, workers in private companies were also organizing on the plantations, and in the petroleum and mining industries. Organized labour reached about one hundred trade unions comprised of more than 100,000 workers (Muncada 2001: 56). Whilst many focussed on shop floor issues such as wages and working conditions, some trade unions developed into militant and politicized labour organizations. Labour unrest heightened in the 1930s. By the mid-1940s, the militant labour movement “developed apace with the armed struggle for independence”, competing to influence the growth of left-wing unions (Gall 1998: 364). Sukarno, who was considered a socialist revolutionary (News Desk 2016), was the first president after independence, ruling from 1945–1967. He inherited a radically politicized labour movement, a strong communist political party (the PKI), the “largest non-ruling communist party in the world” (Mortimer 1974), and an increasingly right-wing military. Through his “Guided Democracy” approach to government, Sukarno’s traditional leadership struggled to balance competing social forces, ultimately succumbing to Suharto’s military coup in 1968.

The militant and left-wing trade unions were wiped out by the military to ensure the stability of the Suharto regime. In the interregnum (1965–1967) before Suharto’s New Order was firmly established, an estimated 500,000 people identified as members of or sympathetic to the Indonesian communist party (Gall 1998) were killed, and more than a million were arrested. The unions allied with the radical left movement were also decimated. The militant labour movement in Indonesia has its roots in the post-war labour federations, the GASBI (*Gabungan Serikat Indonesia*, Federation of Indonesian Trade Unions) and the GSBV (*Gabungan Sari kat Buruh Vertical*, Federation of Vertical Labour Unions), which formed one after another in 1946 and then quickly merged to form the SOBSI (*Sentral Organisasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia*) or All Indonesia Central Organization of Labour (Muncada 2001: 57-58). The members of the SOBSI, being the national labour organization and identified as affiliated to the Indonesian communist party, did not survive the military crack-down against communist groups.

The SOBSI’s rival unions which then supported the military were soon forced to align under a state-sanctioned, military-supervised labour organization called the FBSI (*Federasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia*) or Indonesian Labour Federation, in 1973. The FBSI changed its name to the SPSI (*Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia*) or All Indonesian Workers Union, in 1985 and then became the FSPSI (*Federasi Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia*) or All Indonesian Workers Union Federation in 1995 (Hadiz 1998; Muncada 2001). Suharto’s governance frame-

work “New Order” needed to avoid a resurgence of militant trade unions and maintain a docile and compliant labour force to meet its economic objectives. Wielding “corporatist control over organized labour”, Suharto largely stifled the labour movement and prohibited trade unions from engaging in political issues or participating in political organizations, practically severing their ties with political parties (Hadiz 1998; Neureiter 2013: 1078).

During this time, the military was involved in labour disputes, breaking up strikes, and arresting militant trade unionists. By the late 1980s, labour unrest over dismal economic and work conditions fuelled the emergence of independent trade unions such as the short-lived *Serikat Buruh Merdeka Setia Kawan* or Solidarity Free Trade Union (Gall 1998), established in 1989. “Solidarity” deplored the SPSI and FSPSI’s lack of independence from the state and business, but was easily crushed after being labelled “communists” by the military. The independent *Serikat Buruh Sejahtera Indonesia* (SBSI, or Indonesian Prosperity Trade Union) which was established in 1992 and led by labour lawyer Muchtar Pakpahan, posed a challenge to the state-controlled SPSI. Yet it only focused on improving shop-floor issues such as low wages and social security benefits and shunned involvement in political issues (Hadiz 1998; Gall 1998; Muncada 2001). This established a distance between organized labour and the *reformasi* movement that arose a few years before the fall of Suharto in 1997.

The independent unions organized in the early 1990s were not recognized under Suharto’s Pancasila industrial relations and Pakpahan eventually ended up in jail. However, Pakpahan initiated the movement of workers organizing outside the state-sanctioned labour organizations to resist exploitative working conditions. The independent enterprise-based wildcat strikes and protests inspired the justice campaign for Marsinah, “a young woman labour leader at a watch factory in East Java who was kidnapped, sexually assaulted, and murdered” in 1993 (Törnquist 2004: 7). The various labour protests culminated in the historic 1994 Medan workers’ strike, which involved around 30,000 workers demanding not only better pay but also basic democratic rights like the right to organize; they also voiced workers’ opposition to repression (Törnquist 2004). The 1994 Medan strike became the crucible for the Indonesian labour movement’s resurgence and its resistance to repression (Muncada 2001).

The Political Economy of Pancasila Industrial Relations

For more than two decades, Indonesian organized labour remained under the control of the Suharto regime, which was justified by its Pancasila labour relations policy, later renamed Pancasila industrial relations. The Pancasila ideology was started by Sukarno in 1945 and further deepened under Suharto towards social and political control. His framework promoted the Indonesian-based culture of seeking harmony within a community where “workers,

capital, and the state were parts of one big family, with the latter playing the role of benevolent father" (Hadiz 1998: 113; see also Törnquist 2004). Suharto's New Order regime anchored its economic policies in the ideology of Pancasila, as expressed in five principles: "nationalism or Indonesian unity; humanitarianism; Indonesian democracy through consultation and consensus; social justice; and belief in God" (Muncada 2001: 58). Belief in class conflict between workers and capitalists was considered un-Indonesian and against the tenets of Pancasila. The application of such a framework identified any form of labour protest, especially labour strikes, as violating the principles of Pancasila and sowing discord.

Pancasila industrial relations supported Suharto's economic strategy aimed at lifting Indonesia out of the list of poorest countries in Southeast Asia (Viajar 2009). Suharto's New Order jump-started Indonesia's industrialization through an import substitution strategy in the 1970s supported by oil revenues, and shifted to an export-oriented growth strategy in the 1980s following the oil crisis in the late 1970s (Gall 1998: 362; Viajar 2009: 101). A docile trade union movement in a low-wage labour market became crucial to Indonesia's growth strategy, which led to rapid economic growth from the 1980s until the 1997 Asian financial crisis. In this context, "the emergence of the new urban industrial working class" after sustained industrialization gave rise to labour unrest in the early 1990s (Hadiz 1998: 118). The workers demanded more freedom, not only to organize and negotiate but also to resist violence against trade unionists.

This paper views takes up Richard Hyman's view of industrial relations as being the processes of control over work relations as well as the mechanisms for regulating issues related to collective bargaining, wages and job conditions (Frege et al., 2011; Hyman 1975). In a similar vein, a broader understanding of labour movements includes not only the organized trade unions but also workers' interest groups, independent labour activists, labour NGOs, etc. In repressive labour regimes such as Indonesia and the Philippines, labour-based NGOs, human rights groups, or migrant-workers' organizations contributed to the development of labour activism and the overall growth of the trade union movement. A broader understanding of the labour movement has at its core the defence of workers' rights and interests as understood not only by trade unions but also by independent labour activists or groups (e.g. professional groups, labour lawyers), labour-based organizations (e.g. farmers' groups, migrant groups, etc.) and labour NGOs working for workers' empowerment.

Debates on the Role of Labour Movements in Democratization

The military-backed Suharto government ensured its reign for three decades by eliminating the main threats to military rule, the foremost of which was the PKI. The military included the left-leaning trade unions as threats to the consolidation of the Suharto regime's power. Studies on the links between labour and democratization in Europe, Latin America, and East and Southeast Asia have found out that most authoritarian regimes have an "anti-labour orientation" (Caraway et al., 2015: 2). Organized labour, with the capacity to mobilize at the shop-floor level and beyond towards expanded benefits and rights, contributed to the kinds of democratic reforms that authoritarian regimes perceive as a source of political instability. As it constitutes a threat to their power and political stability, labour must be kept in check by authoritarian leaders as trade unions are known to be able to disrupt and mobilize political will from the people (Neureiter 2013: 1063; Caraway et al., 2015). This has often been dealt with by the repression of labour.

In a study on the link between organized labour and democratization in Southeast Asia, Michael Neureiter has shown that the Indonesian labour movement has a role to play in a democratic transition, whether it be violent or otherwise (Neureiter 2015: 1063). For Neureiter, democratization broadly refers to "the transition from autocratic rule to more democratic forms of government", which include free elections and civil liberties (Neureiter 2015: 1069). Unions also continue to play a crucial role in the further democratization of democracies, as the struggle for workers' rights contributes to the expansion of democratic rights. Gregorio Gall likewise argues that despite its weaknesses, the Indonesian labour movement presented the "dominant challenge to the Suharto regime and the regime of accumulation" (Gall 1998: 374).

The independent organizing and protest actions of workers in their workplaces contributed to the anti-authoritarian and democratization movements that led to the broader opposition to Suharto's rule in the early 1990s. Opposing the repressive chains of Pancasila industrial relations, the workers outside the official trade union movement similarly fought for democratic change particularly regarding the freedom to organize and negotiate better wages and working conditions. The lack of official collaboration between the independent workers' organizations and the anti-Suharto democratization movement have led to suggestions that Indonesian organized labour only indirectly contributed to the ousting of Suharto (Törnquist 2004: 9) and was late to join the *reformasi* movement (Hadiz 1998: 109-110).

Indeed, state-sanctioned organized labour was late to join the democratization wave that ousted Suharto because of more than two decades of subordination and labour disciplining (Hadiz 1998; Törnquist 2004). But shop-floor workers operating independently of official organized labour, who waged cam-

paigns around workplace-specific issues such as better wages and the right to organize, intensified the level of economic discontent which led to political change. Workers' rights and struggles are inherently linked to broader democratization struggles, as justice and democracy on the shop floor mirror the struggle for equality in society. According to Neureiter, "there is little difference between the concept of fairness in the work place and the concept of justice in society" (2015:1063). Furthermore, Neureiter's study on organized labour in six countries in Southeast Asia, namely Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, concluded that despite their different cultures, "labour unions are likely to play an important role in democratization processes" in these countries (2015: 1085). The labour unions in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand met six criteria that enable them to challenge authoritarian regimes and contribute to the regime change, namely relative strength; labour relations; openness of markets; trade union competition; historical patterns; and integration into the international labour movement (Neureiter 2015: 1085).

Conclusion

The Indonesian labour movement has evolved through distinct phases influenced by changes in the political and economic context. The colonial period produced a highly politicized trade union movement that was heavily involved in the national independence movement. In the post-colonial period, a left-leaning labour movement identified with the Indonesian communist movement was caught in the political conflict between Sukarno's independence government and the Indonesian military. A repressed and state-sanctioned trade union movement emerged under Suharto's authoritarian regime, closely controlled by the military and suppressed by Pancasila industrial relations. Labour violence and exploitative working conditions under an export-oriented industrialization strategy produced a new industrial working class dissatisfied with ineffectual and state-controlled forms of labour organization. In the early 1990s, independent trade unions began organizing and using wildcat strikes, heralding the arrival of a competing labour movement.

During the tumultuous period leading up to Suharto's ouster, the series of labour strikes and protests in 1994 contributed to the anti-authoritarian *reformasi* movement that culminated in the fall of Suharto during the Asian financial crisis. Even though organized labour and the *reformasi* movement did not formally collaborate, Indonesian workers and unions provided input, even if indirectly, to the democratization movement which brought about regime change. This article argues that trade unions or organized labour and other movements formed in defence of workers' interests are all part of the Indonesian labour movement. Indonesia's labour movement became stron-

ger when linked with the broader democratization movements against the authoritarian Suharto regime. Trade unions were weakened in Suharto's repressive labour regime but contributed to regime change when workers demanded democratic rights such as freedom of association, rights that flourish in a democratic environment. However, changes in the relations of production gave birth to new social forces, such as the industrial working class, urban professionals and worker-based interest groups in Indonesia that form part of the broader democratization movement.

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Long Live Kilusang Mayo Uno

Filipino Organized Labour in the Age of Imperialism

Sarah Raymundo

In October 1975, in the dark days of Ferdinand Marcos' US-backed period of martial law (1972–1986), a historic event occurred that saw the melding of trade unionism with anti-fascist, anti-imperialist politics in the Philippines. Under the Union of Free Workers (*Kaisahan ng Malayang Manggagawa*) of La Tondeña, 500 workers held a work stoppage and barricaded themselves inside the La Tondeña distillery. Among their demands were regularization, maternity leave, and an end to arbitrary and illegal firing. Under martial law, the strike ban only applied to critical industries. La Tondeña did not count as such an industry even if it was, back then, the largest distillery in Asia. The strike gathered strong support from surrounding communities, especially from the religious and student sectors. After two days, there was a violent police crackdown on the strikers, which they and their supporters bravely defied. This very first open defiance of workers under martial law, glorious as it was, prompted Marcos to outlaw workers' strikes in all industries.

But what would a working class reckoning with the La Tondeña strike look like? This article on the *Kilusang Mayo Uno* (KMU, May First Movement) draws some conclusions about the particular characteristics of workers organizing in the Philippines, based on the KMU's assessment of the historic significance of the La Tondeña strike, which "symbolizes workers resistance to the brutal rule of the Marcos regime" (Lambert 1990: 268). In a press statement released soon after the strike, the Union of La Tondeña claimed that "We achieved in our two-day strike what we were unable to obtain in almost 5 years of follow up with the Department of Labour" (ibid.: 268). The strike inspired subsequent strikes and workers' organizing during this period, from 1972 through 1986.

In his article on the KMU, Robert Lambert sharply argues that the La Tondeña strike forged a "new style of working class politics" that grew out of grassroots organizing work and actions centred on the decisions of ordinary workers (ibid.: 268). He observes that this type of working class politics is different from traditional unions in the West. He argues that this is the result of the link that unions in the Global South forge with political movements. In this sense, trade unionism goes beyond economic benefits, workers' rights, and welfare to embrace the goal of "[shifting] the balance of power in society" (ibid.: 259). This new union form is based on "organizing grounded in an innovative strategy", which Lambert calls "social movement unionism" (ibid.).

The KMU was founded in 1980 as an alliance of militant trade unions amidst the onslaught of neoliberal attacks on working people worldwide by the global

oligarchy and against the backdrop the fragmentation of the Philippine labour movement on account of the predominance of US influence, yellow unionism, and company-controlled unionism (ibid.: 270).

The *Kilusang Mayo Uno*: Martial Law and Beyond

The KMU draws its history not only from the La Tondeña workers' strike but from a praxis that reaches back into both global and local histories of working class politics shaped by colonialism and the expansion of capitalism. KMU Chair Elmer Labog cites the 1886 May Day Strike, a nationwide work stoppage by US American workers, which fought for the reduction of daily working hours from 12 or 14 to 8, and the victorious anti-colonial and anti-feudal Philippine Revolution against Spain waged and won by the revolutionary Katiunan in 1896 as historical references for the KMU (2019).

The KMU is an independent labour centre in the Philippines that promotes militant unionism. Founded on 1 May 1980, at the height of the Marcos dictatorship, its founding objectives were 1) to gather and represent progressive workers' organizations that ran anti-fascist campaigns under martial law; 2) to organize and consolidate progressive workers' organizations towards the goals of the national democratic struggle against US imperialism (Labog 2019).

It exposed and opposed the continuity of anti-people policies such as low-intensity conflict and all-out war against communism in the so-called democratic transition of the Cory Aquino regime. The KMU joined various sectors in Philippine society in ousting President Joseph Estrada whose administration showcased the blight of bureaucratic capitalism. The KMU became one of the leading campaign centres against the Macapagal–Arroyo administration's extra-judicial killings. Among its thousands of victims were over 70 unionists and labour activists, including Diosdado Fortuna of the *Pagkakaisa ng Manggagawa sa Timog Katagalugan – KMU* (PAMANTIK-KMU, Solidarity of Workers in Southern Tagalog – KMU), who was also union chairperson at Nestlé Philippines.

The KMU also mobilized against attacks on civil liberties, with the iconic KMU Filipino working-class hero Crispin Beltran at the fore. In 2001, he was elected to Congress to represent Filipino peasants and workers under the Anakpawis Party-List (Party of the Toiling Masses). As the electoral wing of the KMU and the peasant group *Kilusang Mangbubukid ng Pilipinas* (Peasant Movement of the Philippines, KMP), the Anakpawis Party-List is known for its radical pro-labour and pro-peasant stance, which has been the basis for its legislative agenda and programme in the Philippine Congress (Labog 2019).

The KMU is a key organization in holding and linking economic campaigns such as wage increases and contractualization schemes as political struggles against an export-oriented and import-dependent economy that is fully sup-

ported by imperialist presidents, from the first US-backed Commonwealth president to Duterte. The KMU continues to fulfil this role in the post-Marcos era. It currently pushes back against the Duterte regime, the worst authoritarian regime since Marcos. Despite Duterte's massive killings and repression, the KMU has provided support for the wildcat strikes that have erupted across the archipelago since Duterte's rise to power.

In 2018, the KMU submitted an official membership count of 115,000 to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) (Labog 2020). Its current political and economic union work involves solid and on-the-ground organizing in Export Processing Zones (EPZ), poor urban communities, call centres, private hospitals, and the formation of broad alliances with other workers' organizations for wages, against tyranny, and providing a broad campaign centre for popular labour issues amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. The KMU holds fast to the principle of the peasant-worker alliance as a key force in the struggle for national liberation, thereby showing how labour in the Global South has and continues to fight against the violent drain of imperialism.

Out of a population of 108 million, approximately 3.9 million (or 3.6 per cent) are industrial workers, including workers in manufacturing, construction, export-growing businesses, and other wage earners. The KMU's membership and influence exceeds its 115,000 members, as since 2017 it has organized to address the phenomenon of contractualization, which prevents workers from joining unions; as well as the increasing semi-proletarianization of Filipino labour. The latter has pushed the organizing capacity of the KMU to reach out to poor urban and rural communities where there are irregular wage earners (10.4 million) and non-wage earners (6.3 million) such as vendors and other informal workers (Africa 2019). This mode of organizing and politicizing, which is currently occurring on a national scale, is an important lesson from the La Tondeña strike, where the economic struggle for workers' rights was linked to the exploitative conditions obtaining from an authoritarian government subservient to foreign capital.

The KMU's Anti-Imperialist Politics

The victory of the 1896 Philippine Revolution against Spain after nearly 400 years of colonization was sabotaged by US imperialism. The transfer of countries under the Spanish empire – the Philippines, Cuba, Guam, and Puerto Rico – to the US was legitimized through the 1898 Treaty of Paris; for this the US paid Spain \$20 million in “compensation”. This marked the end of the Spanish empire and the continuing colonization of the Philippines by US imperialism, a project defined by neo-colonial institution-building and genocide. This resulted in a persistent economic underdevelopment that maintains an export-oriented and import-dependent economy with a huge reserve army of labour.

The class of landless peasants has been the reserve army of labour and actual farm workers for foreign agribusiness ventures. The displaced segment of landless farmers populates the city and work as contractual workers in local factories and multinational EPZs. A rigid policy of contractualization makes for precarious work and de-unionized workplaces. Those who cannot find a job work in the informal economy. The persistence of landlessness is the root of urban poverty. Since 2016, President Duterte's war on drugs has targeted the urban poor and killed, with no due process, at least 27,000 people suspected of drug abuse and drug dealing (Raymundo 2019).

The absence of an industrial base, which is the source of unemployment in the Philippines, has also paved the way for two modalities of labour that fulfil global capital's demand for cheap service labour: outsourced and exported labour (Raymundo 2019).

The Philippines is the "world's undisputed call centre capital – overtaking closest rival India – with 16 to 18 percent of the global market share" (Zoleta 2018). There are 851 registered business process outsourcing (BPO) companies in the country. More than half them are call centres (429) and other firms providing IT-related services (400, or 46.2 percent). The remaining are medical transcription businesses (20) and animated film and cartoon production houses (9). As a US semi-colony, the Philippines provides 65 percent of its outsourcing services to its imperialist master, while also serving clients from Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. The latest data show that there are a total of 675,600 workers in the BPO industry. Dubbed the country's "sunshine industry" by the government, outsourced Filipino labourers are required to follow the actual working hours of the client's time zone, which is a huge and unhealthy adjustment to the body clock of Filipino service workers (Zoleta 2018; cf. Raymundo 2019).

Even President Rodrigo Duterte has recognized the importance of the BPO sector in the Philippine economy, as it is one of the largest contributors to the country's GDP. It is also the Philippines' leading foreign exchange earner, with a total of more than 1 billion Philippine pesos in total revenue. An example of Filipino low-cost outsourced labour is Verizon's scheme: it pays Filipino call centre agents less than "\$2 an hour in regular wages... requiring them an additional shift plus one to two extra hours of overtime on their normal shifts" (Chanco 2016).

The exporting of labour has been the Philippine state's stopgap solution and cornerstone policy up to the present. Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) are the top dollar earner and GDP booster. A 2018 World Bank Report reveals that in 2017 alone, the Philippines raked in Php 1.72 trillion (\$32.6 billion) from OFW remittances (Zoleta 2018; cf. Raymundo 2019).

With the changing landscape of Filipino labour since Marcos' martial law, organizing workers meant addressing the main consequences of an imperialist

system on workers in the Global South. These impacts include but are not limited to “global labour arbitrage” or the capture of value from the Global South by the Global North on account of “unequal exchange based on the worldwide hierarchy of wages” (Suwandi 2019: 20). Attendant on managing the crisis of monopoly capitalism is the intensified production of a large army of unemployed people in the periphery, which accounts for the increasing semi-proletarianization of Filipino labour. Foreign capital operating in tandem with domestic comprador interests that dominate the Philippine economy defines labour relations and immiserates the lives of the majority of Filipino families. Semi-proletarianization as it happens in the Philippines is a process in which labourers are forced by an imperialist system to survive through wageless, irregular, and contractualized labour.

This makes poor urban and rural communities labour-concentrated sites where an anti-imperialist working-class politics must be cultivated. The KMU goes out to meet people where they are, with the goal of collectively transforming the social, political, and economic dimensions of life from community to nation. The KMU organizes in the places where families of jeepney drivers and informal workers live. By creatively supporting the formation of workers’ organizations in call centres, the KMU addresses the latest forms of wage arbitrage in BPOs.

The KMU maintains solid ties with the Philippine peasantry based on the principle of a peasant–worker alliance. This basic mass alliance views the peasantry as the primary force of the Philippine revolution and the workers as the army of liberation. With the peasant–worker alliance at the forefront and base of a mass movement of patriotic forces in Philippine society, including petty bourgeois professionals, the national bourgeoisie or local industrialists, and participating sectors of students, women, church people, and national minorities, this broad anti-imperialist, anti-fascist front makes up the Philippine movement for a national democratic revolution toward socialism.

The KMU continues to build alliances with progressive and militant workers worldwide and plays a central role in broadening and deepening the spirit of international solidarity and the praxis of internationalism in the national democratic movement. KMU Chairperson Elmer “Bong” Labog is also Chairperson of the Philippine chapter of the International League of Peoples’ Struggle (ILPS), the largest anti-imperialist league of cross-sectoral peoples’ movements in the world.

While it is customary to limit the demands of workers’ unions to campaigns for higher wages, it is important to recognize that in the age of imperialism, the organized Filipino working class has been calling for immediate relief from skyrocketing prices and worsening living conditions not only by struggling in the economic sphere. Rather, this struggle is a significant part of the struggle

of and for labour. For the KMU, organizing and campaigning for living wages is inseparable from the demand for social amelioration for the wageless labour of informal workers, slum dwellers, landless peasants, and indigenous peoples. In the Philippines, this has been a struggle for human lives where workers are tasked with challenging imperialist domination. This makes the fight for wages in all its modalities a political fight that encompasses economic demands.

A crucial lesson to be learned from the KMU's 40 years of struggle is that unionism in a semi-colony cannot make a convenient choice between economic and political struggle. The role of the state is critical in this regard. It aids the transfer of what is otherwise a confined economic struggle between workers and capitalists within a particular site of production to a locus of globalized political struggle, in which the Leninist thesis of the state being an instrument for the exploitation of the oppressed is confirmed. There is a relative autonomy between state power and civil society, and the forces of the capitalist class do not divide the functions of class interest with the state as a mere arbiter. "[T]he state, which represents the coercive 'moment' of capitalist class domination, embodied in the most highly specialized exclusive, and centralized monopoly of social force, is ultimately the decisive point of concentration for all power in society" (Wood 2010: 47).

Long before the establishment of the KMU, the Philippine state had clearly demonstrated its bias for foreign big business in the age of imperialism. In this context, trade unions in the Global South like the KMU must be militantly anti-imperialist and internationalist in their historical struggle to free labour from the clutches of global capital. To this end they engage in an anti-imperialist and anti-fascist working-class struggle that is inextricably linked with the call for free land redistribution and national industrialization. The current dark authoritarian conditions in the Philippines can only be traversed by a comprehensive workers' organization that fights for the right to self-determination in the name of a brighter socialist future.

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Impasse in Iran: Workers Versus Authoritarian Neoliberalism

Peyman Jafari

Until recently, pundits viewed the modern middle and upper classes as the harbingers of democracy in Iran, making reference to their role in the Reform Movement that emerged in the early 1990s and galvanized during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) (Rivetti 2019). Disillusionment with Khatami’s economic liberalization among the lower classes, his failure to resist the conservative backlash, and the threat of war following the US occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq aided the election of hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. Ahmadinejad failed to deliver on his populist promises and turned to increasingly authoritarian policies. His fraudulent re-election in June 2009 ignited mass protests that raised democratic demands under the banner of the Green Movement (Nabavi 2012), which relied on the organizational networks of the middle class.

As labour protests have increased since the 2000s, and a new cycle of mass protests rattled the entire political establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran between late 2017 and late 2019, workers have started to feature more prominently in discussions of political change in Iran. This chapter looks at the formal and informal workers’ organizations and protests that underlie this shift. It examines the extent to which they have challenged authoritarian structures in Iran, and evaluates their strengths, weaknesses, and perspectives.

Iran’s Illiberal Bourgeoisie

The false argument that the bourgeoisie is central to democratization is advocated with particular obstinacy and zealotry in countries like Iran, where capitalist development is conceived to have “diverged” from a “standard” Western model. It is argued that if these countries adopt the “standard” model through economic liberalization and integration into the world market, the bourgeoisie will prosper and successfully challenge authoritarianism. The pro-market economist Mohammad Tabibian (2020), whose ideas have shaped the economic policies of president Hassan Rouhani (2013–), concedes, for instance, that capitalism can accommodate both democratic and authoritarian polities as in Saudi Arabia and China, but then argues that on a closer look, these countries are not really capitalist due to the weakness of the private sector.

State-owned companies and para-state organizations indeed control an estimated 80 percent of the Iranian economy, leaving 20 percent to the private sector (Khajehpour 2000: 579). Large-scale privatization has expanded the

size of the private sector only slightly, as privatized companies were acquired by public companies and institutions (Harris 2013). Rather than an exception, state-driven capital accumulation has been the pattern of development in peripheral countries faced with global competition. As I have explained elsewhere (Jafari 2012), economic liberalization has led to the emergence of a hybrid system of state and free-market capitalism that is not so much an anomaly as a reflection of Iran's position within global capitalism. It has led neither to a fully-fledged private sector nor to democratization, as the new capitalist class, in the private and the semi-state sectors, still relies on the state for protection against both foreign competition and domestic labour protests. Hence Iran's capitalists have aligned with the authoritarian state at crucial moments.

From Unions to Factory Committees

From their inception in the early 20th century, labour unions and organizations in Iran have played a central role in challenging authoritarian rule and fighting for democratic rights (Ladjevardi 1985). Mass strikes by industrial workers paralysed the Pahlavi monarchy in the final month of 1978 (Parsa 1989), making a crucial contribution to the success of the Iranian Revolution. As Islamist forces around Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini monopolized power and consolidated an increasingly authoritarian state, thousands of workers established factory committees (*showras*) that attempted to take control of administration and production. The hundreds of factory committees that emerged in key industrial centres in 1979–80 had many shortcomings and they were repressed, but they allowed workers to experience democracy through participation in collective debates and decision making. The post-revolutionary state repressed and banned them as it quickly took an authoritarian turn (Bayat 1986; Jafari 2020), while simultaneously trying to incorporate them through pro-worker rhetoric (Morgana 2018). In the last four decades, workers have continued to challenge authoritarian politics using a myriad of action repertoires and forms of organization. Some have used the state-sanctioned labour organizations to advance their demands, while others have attempted to organize independent unions and networks, and a third but smaller group has called for the re-establishment of *showras* and workers' control.

It is also important to note that workers, those wage earners without meaningful control over the labour process, are employed in both the formal and informal sectors, the latter accounting for a fifth of the official GDP. According to the Statistical Centre of Iran, in 2017 half of all 23.2 million working people worked in the services sector, while 31.5 percent worked in industry, and 18.7 percent worked in agriculture. Although the majority are employed in establishments with less than 10 workers, there is a significant concentration of workers (30 to 40 percent) in establishments with more than 10 workers.

“Yellow” Unions

Having mobilized workers and the urban poor through a populist ideology, the Islamists introduced policies that cushioned the impact of the Iran–Iraq War on the lower classes, reducing inequalities, and creating organizations that provided limited representation for workers. This in part reflected the influence of a form of Islamism that supported the newly established Islamic Republic under the leadership of Khomeini, while espousing anti-capitalism and Islamic labour organizations.

After the Iranian Revolution, all independent labour organizations were repressed, but the state sanctioned three forms of organizations as a way to incorporate workers: the Islamic labour councils, the Islamic labour associations, and guild associations. The inclusion of a management representative in the Islamic Councils and making membership of these organizations conditional on loyalty to the principle of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of an Islamic jurist, currently Ali Khamenei) has seriously limited their independence.

Despite their limitations, however, these organizations created a channel for workers to voice their demands and organize protests. The total number of these organizations increased from about 2,000 in 1990 to more than 5,000 in 2010, reaching more than 10,000 in 2018 (Khosravi et al., 2008: 72). This reflects the pressures that workers have exerted continuously on state officials through various forms of protest, forcing them to expand the political space for participation. This dynamic is even more visible in the operation of Workers’ House, which has regional branches that bring together representatives of the three above-mentioned labour organizations from different workplaces, regardless of their economic sector. Workers’ House is closely aligned with the reformist and moderate factions of the political establishment, though their relationships have been under stress due to the neoliberal orientation of those factions.

From the second half of the 1990s, Workers’ House became more inclined to organize protests and petitions as the economic liberalization of president Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani (1989–97) undermined the populist social contract, and its leaders feared that the independent labour protests and the uprisings of the urban poor in 1991–92 and in 1995 might spin out of control. The protests of oil workers were very significant in this respect. In August 1996, hundreds of workers from the Tehran refinery staged a demonstration in front of Workers’ House’s office, demanding that the Ministry of Oil apply the collective agreements and provide mortgages, sparking a wave of strikes and demonstrations by refinery workers in the following months. They demanded better living conditions and wages and the right to form independent organizations. Oil workers had already taken steps to form an independent organization by electing representatives in February 1997. However, the government intervened and dissolved their meeting in Tehran and declared workers’ organiza-

tions in the oil industry illegal. The oil workers' protests were repressed, but they helped to ignite a debate about the necessity of independent organizations among labour activists.

The workers' protests in the 1990s were part of a broader social dynamic in which students, women, and intellectuals started to demand social and political rights and challenged the authoritarian structures of the Islamic Republic. The rise of the reformist faction around Khatami, who won a landslide victory in the 1997 presidential election, was a response to these pressures from below. According to one survey, workers in establishments with more than five workers voted for Khatami in large numbers, in an attempt to seize a political opportunity to weaken the nations' authoritarian structures (Khosravi 2001: 6).

Independent Labour Organization

In the year following Khatami's election, labour activists recorded about 90 protests in large industries, including strikes at the Isfahan Steel plant, Behshahr Textiles, the Hamedan Glass manufacturing plant, and in the oil industry in Abadan and Gachsaran (Moghissi and Rahnama 2004: 289). Workers' House was pushed to take action, as it warned that since "the revolution the Islamic Councils have worked in the interests of the revolution and the leader and they have protected the plants from any harm. Now if they don't respond to their changing tasks, their necessity will weaken among workers and this is something that in our view the enemies of the system are pursuing" (Mahmoodi 2001: 17). It organized four mass protests for workers and one protest for the unemployed and the youth between December 1999 and April 2000. Confronted with workers celebrating May Day independently, Workers' House decided to organize its own celebrations.

Khatami's continuation of economic liberalization, however, led to increasing dissatisfaction among workers. In 2003, for instance, his government exempted all establishments with less than 10 workers from the Labour Law, undermining workers' legal protections.

During his second term (June 2001–August 2005), the number of labour protests rose remarkably. Between March 2001 and 2002, 319 protests were recorded. An important development in that year was also the entry of teachers and healthcare workers into labour struggles. High-profile strikes by a third of all teachers in early 2004 initiated by a dissident Islamic Council member, as well as at the copper-melting plant of Khatoonabad in 2004, at Iran Khodro, the Middle East's biggest car factory in 2005–6, and May Day parades catapulted the labour movement to national prominence. The relative rise of labour militancy (260 strikes in November–December 2005), disappointment with Khatami, and the relative political opening led some workers to establish independent unions and networks.

In 2004, 17,000 bus drivers formed the Union of Workers of the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company. Since its formation, this union has continued to organize members' assemblies, demonstrations, and strikes. It has also become a permanent target of state repression and intimidation, due to its symbolic representation of the independent labour movement. The Haft Tapeh sugar cane plant workers were the second group to organize an independent union in 2008.

Workers have also organized informal gatherings such as mountain climbing to circumvent surveillance, and in some places clandestine workers' committees have emerged. An increasing number of workers' bulletins with an anti-capitalist outlook started to appear as well, including *Progressive Worker*, *Worker's Intellect*, *Abolition of Wage Labour*, and *Showra* (Council), along with dozens of weblogs focusing on precarious labour relations. Independent networks that attempted to create national coordination have been formed as well, although they remain weak, are fractured along ideological lines, and are regularly repressed. The Independent Trade Union of Iranian Workers (ITUIW) was set up on May Day 1997 and later developed into the Independent Workers' Association of Iran (IWAI), which mainly issues statements on struggles and also publishes a journal called *Organisation*. Other (semi-)clandestine organizations include: the Committee for the Pursuit of the Creation of Free Labour Organisations, the Coordination Committee for the Creation of Labour Organizations, the Workers' Cultural and Support Organization, the Union of Labour Committees, and the Cooperation Council of Labour Organizations and Activists.

Radical Protests and Revolts

Labour activism continued to grow during the presidencies of the hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–13) and the moderate Hassan Rouhani (2013–). According to one report, there were 505 labour protests between March 2010 and March 2011: 137 demonstrations in front of government buildings; 150 sit-ins, road blockades, and gatherings; 148 strikes; and 70 protests of other forms (Javaheri-Langeroodi et al., 2012). Most of these and later protests are related to delayed or low wages, privatization, and temporary contracts and economic hardship in general caused by corruption, mismanagement, neo-liberal reforms, and devastating sanctions imposed by the USA. Another account registered about 100 labour protests in 2012, which increased to more than 400 in 2015 (Harris and Kalb 2018).

While most of these protests were directly organized from or around particular workplaces, a wave of street protests erupted in nearly 100 cities in December 2018 and January 2019, explicitly targeting corruption, inflation, and the political authorities. The same pattern appeared in November 2019, when

a sudden increase in fuel prices triggered mass demonstrations, blockades, and clashes with the security forces during which hundreds of protesters were killed. These protests were mainly organized by workers in the informal sector and unemployed youth. They lacked organizational structure, but they too combined economic and anti-authoritarian demands (Aghamir/Jafari 2019).

As mentioned earlier, these radical protests have shifted attention from the middle class to workers as the main challengers of Iran's authoritarian structures, leaving them rattled. At the same time, a small but significant number of workers have continued to organize collectively, and some have even put forward radical proposals to bring privatized factories under workers' control. Since the privatization of the Haft Tapeh sugarcane mill in 2016, its workers have organized continued protests, calling for the establishment of a factory committee to take over the administration. While criticizing the authorities, they have rejected US aggression against Iran, and condemned right-wing nationalist attempts to hijack labour struggles. This new radicalism reflects a growing hostility to neoliberalism among broad sectors of the working classes in Iran and elsewhere, as reflected by a banner that students unrolled in December 2019 in Tehran to support the nationwide protests: "Iran, France, Lebanon, Chile ... The same struggle. Down with neoliberalism."

Although these radical protests demonstrate the potential of the labour movement to democratize the workplace and the political system, they shouldn't distract us from the serious weaknesses of labour protests in Iran, which are still very much fragmented, localized, and lacking strong links to other social movements. While Iran's illiberal bourgeoisie is unwilling to challenge authoritarian politics, the working class still lacks the organizational muscle to do so. The recent wave of protests shows, however, that they might be able to break this deadlock in future.

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Israel's Trade Union Movement: Between Organizing and Silence

Jules El-Khatib

For a long time, the Israeli trade union movement was among the most influential in the world, but its influence among the Israeli working class – where membership levels have dropped from 80 percent in the 1950s to a mere 20 percent – is now dwindling, as is its political influence. This is due, among other things, to the unions' strained relationship with racism, the occupation, and social minorities, the consequence of which has been a series of massive shifts within the Israeli labour movement.

Once considered the most powerful trade union in the world (Fischer 1954), the Histadrut (*HaHistadrut HaKlalit schel Ha'Owdim B'Eretz Israel*, General Organization of Workers in Israel) was established in cooperation with European Jews who had emigrated to Palestine. Among its founding members were a number of social democrats and socialists, but the group's composition differed from that of many other trade union organizations: "Labourers were the big exception; students and the middle class were the norm" (Fischer 1954: 216-217).

Histadrut's roots can be traced back to the kibbutz movement, which was responsible for establishing settlements in Palestine for incoming Jews; their declared objective was to build settlements in which the focus was not on personal profit or gain, but rather on providing a good quality of life for everyone living there. In 1920, the trade union federation was established: "Histadrut was founded at the Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa by 87 men and women representing 4433 workers" (Fischer 1954: 218). A trade union for Palestinians was affiliated with the Histadrut but was not part of the official umbrella organization and, due to the latter's Zionist orientation, it was also not considered part of the movement. Initially Palestinian Israelis were not allowed to join the Histadrut; this only changed in 1953 (Fischer 1954: 220).

With Israeli social democracy on the wane, and with the privatization of state-run services and the sale of trade union companies and holdings in companies, the Histadrut found itself slipping into a state of decline. The privatization of state-owned companies and sell-off of state shares in companies occurred at virtually at the same time as the trade union companies were starting to be sold off in the 1980s. Until that point, the Histadrut had been the second-largest employer in the country. This was followed by a restructuring of the Israeli trade union movement: it shifted away from being an economically relevant actor within Israel to becoming a classical trade union that was primarily involved in conducting collective wage negotiations and organizing strikes in specific situations.

In addition to the privatizations and waning influence of the Labour Party, the third factor in the decline of the Israeli trade union movement was a series of defeats in trade union disputes. The disputes in the chemical industry were particularly significant, especially the one at Haifa Chemicals in the mid-1990s, where the union suffered a crushing defeat as a result of delayed action. The outcome was the formation of a new trade union umbrella organization: “When it became clear that the Histadrut had become too weak to boost union membership numbers in Israel and defend its achievements to date, Koah LaOvdim (Power to the Workers) was founded [in 2007]” (Adaki 2020). Koah LaOvdim was founded by activists and workers who were frustrated with the Histadrut. The strategy of the two trade unions differed in terms of their organizing style, as well as their handling of industrial disputes at Haifa Chemicals.

Throughout 1996 and especially in 2011, Histadrut’s primary focus was organizing strikes and protecting existing contracts, even if this meant accepting a worsening of conditions elsewhere. Koah LaOvdim, on the other hand, opted to stage a strike calling for the improvement of work conditions for all employees, instead of protecting only the older generations of workers and their better contracts.

The Histadrut, Occupation, and War

The Histadrut advocates peace with Palestine and a two-state solution. In 2008, it reached an agreement with the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU), according to which a portion of the membership fees paid by Palestinians was to be transferred to the PGFTU. But this did not stop the majority of Histadrut members from supporting wars and attacks waged by Israel against Palestine. “What that means became clear, for example, when the Histadrut backed the Israeli military offensive against Gaza in 2008 and 2009, known as Operation Cast Lead, and then attempted to justify the attack against the Gaza flotilla conducted by an Israeli naval unit (nine passengers were shot dead)” (Witt-Stahl 2013).

In the 1990s, forces affiliated with the right-wing political party Likud started to gain influence within the Histadrut. PGFTU spokesperson Mohammed Al-Atawneh explains: “The relations and exchange of activities within the framework of the common agreement between the PGFTU and Histadrut have been stalled for years. All agreements signed by the two organizations have been suspended, and negotiation meetings have ceased” (Schamberger 2019).

Palestinians who do not have an Israeli passport are also unable to join the Histadrut, even if they work in Israel. It’s a different story for the Israelis who live and work in settlements in Palestinian territory: they are eligible to become members of the federation.

Overall, the federation's outlook is at the very least ambivalent when it comes to international trade union positions. While it officially advocates a two-state solution, it effectively supports those who live in the settlements simply by allowing them to join.

The Histadrut's swing to the right is also evidenced by its relations with political parties: while earlier chairs of the Histadrut were almost always members of the social democratic Awoda (*Mifleget haAwoda halsra'elit*, Israeli Labor Party), this has not been the case for a number of years. The new chairperson, Avi Nissenkorn, has become a member of Benjamin Gantz's centre-right Israel Resilience Party, which advocates for the expansion of settlements and only recognizes Palestine as a rump state.

The Histadrut: Deportations and Racism

As with most other industrialized nations, Israel experiences an influx of refugees and migrants from poorer countries. The Histadrut has declared that they are in principle prepared to accept refugees as members if they work in Israel, and counts around 3,000 refugees among its members (Adiv 2018). At first, however, several hundred refugees were unable to join the individual unions due to "technical difficulties"; this only changed later due to intense pressure from NGOs and migrant organizations (Plaut 2018).

The federation generally remains silent when it comes to the concrete problems of refugees. In 2018, when the Israeli government announced their plans to deport 37,000 people to Rwanda, a number of groups spoke out against this move, including the United Arab List, the Labour Party, and Meretz, as well as parts of the liberal political spectrum – in stark contrast to the Histadrut, who remained silent on the issue.

Since opening up its membership to non-Jewish people, Histadrut has declared in its statutes that it is opposed to racism and all forms of discrimination based on ethnicity, sexuality, or nationality. However, its primary focus is on organizing and representing Jewish-Israeli employees, rather than the equal representation of all workers in Israel, regardless of whether they are Jewish-Israeli or Palestinian, or whether they have an Israeli passport. This also means that the organization's public relations work is conducted exclusively in Hebrew.

In practice, the fact that the federation officially opposes racism does not mean that it takes part in concrete anti-racist struggles and movements, which in Israel primarily affect Palestinians. This is clearly demonstrated by the Nation-State Bill introduced in 2018 by the Netanyahu government, which denies official language status to Arabic, refers to non-Jewish persons with Israeli passports merely as inhabitants, and authorizes village selection committees to reject non-Jewish persons (Mossawa Center 2018). More than 10,000

people protested against the bill in Tel Aviv, including not only Palestinians and left-wingers (Cohen 2018), but also left-wing liberals, social democrats, and members of the union. The Histadrut itself, however, did not call for protests; it opposed them, even though the bill in question violates the federation's own regulations.

Koah LaOvdim: Occupation and War

Koah LaOvdim was born out of protests that the Histadrut had no desire to lead, and its goal from the beginning was to organize workers in Israel and significantly increase democratic participation in the trade union struggle. It therefore pays particular attention to marginalized groups such as Palestinians. Koah LaOvdim has yet to make an official statement regarding the attacks on Gaza, or the Israeli government's occupation policy. This could be due to the fact that – apart from Palestinians – the union primarily seeks to organize Orthodox Jews.

However, leading members of Koah LaOvdim have also explicitly spoken out against the current policies of the Israeli government, its racism, the expansion of the settlements, and the continued occupation of Palestine. Among these voices is the acting president of Koah LaOvdim, who cosigned a letter in support of Jeremy Corbyn, in which the signatories describe themselves as committed to “civil equality within Israel, to an end to the occupation and the blockade of Gaza, to a just peace and justice for the Palestinian refugees” (Letter of support 2018).

Koah LaOvdim: Racism and Deportations

Koah LaOvdim has called for an end to the deportations to Rwanda (Adiv 2018), though these calls have been described as inadequate by anti-racist initiatives and the smaller trade union Workers' Advice Center MAAN (WAC-MAAN). Some prominent members of the federation have also called for demonstrations and protests against the mass deportations that were ultimately abandoned.

In its statute, the federation takes a stance not only against racism, but against all forms of discrimination. In order to implement this ideology in everyday life, each of its publications “also appears in Arabic, because we want to be able to offer the many Palestinian-Israeli workers access to information on the topics of labour disputes and workers' rights”, as Maya Peretz, head of the transportation drivers branch, explains (Krieg 2017).

When it comes to protests against police violence toward Ethiopian Jews and Palestinian Israelis, Koah LaOvdim has repeatedly expressed its support. As Yaniv Bar Ilan, a spokesperson for the federation, explains: “We support any demonstration against racism” (Galinsky 2019). However, Koah LaOvdim does not necessarily relate anti-racism to the policy decisions of the Israeli

government, which is why they have not explicitly spoken out against the Nation-State Bill and the consequent discrimination against minorities in Israel. Federation members took part in the mass protests against the bill, but the federation itself did not officially call for participation.

Mass Protests Against Discrimination

Mass protests against various forms of discrimination have taken place even without the participation of the large trade unions. In 2017, mass protests against the destruction of 11 occupied houses in Qalansawe by the Israeli army and government erupted in all the Palestinian towns and cities in Israel. Approximately 500,000 Palestinians in Israel took part in the protests, which were called for by the United Arab List, civil rights organizations, and WAC-MAAN (McKernan 2017). The protests also more generally addressed the fact that more than 5,000 Arab homes that have been destroyed by Israeli forces in the past 20 years (McKernan 2017).

In 2018, mass protests once again erupted in Israel, but this time the focus was on protests by women against domestic violence and murders of women. The protests – which were called for by Jewish-Israeli, Muslim, and Palestinian-Israeli women’s organizations, NGOs, left-wing and social democratic parties, and this time also by trade unions – led to 12 cities granting female workers the day off so that they could take part. Among the 12 cities that called for the protests, only three had majority Jewish populations (Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Ramat Gan); the other cities were the Palestinian cities in Israel: Tamra, Jaljulia, Tira, Taybeh, Qalansuwa, Kafr Qasem, Sakhnin, Kafr Bara, and Arabeh (Khoury and Yaaron 2018).

Both protests demonstrated the existence of opposition to authoritarian measures, discrimination, and racism. The Histadrut and Koah LaOvdim, however, only choose to take part in a protest when it concerns both Jewish and Palestinian Israelis; they usually remain silent when it comes to demonstrations that are primarily concerned with the problems faced by Palestinian Israelis.

Israel’s Trade Unions: A Lack of Resistance to the Occupation

If the global trade union movement wishes to reach people enduring war and racism, it must have strong principles, and this is particularly so in countries that have an aggressive policy of occupation and war. This requires an uncompromising rejection of all occupation policies and an unwavering commitment to a just peace, as well as active participation in the struggle against racism and discrimination in one’s own country. Failing to ensure this will make it impossible for the movement to appeal to Palestinian Israelis and thus successfully combat exploitation.

Two of the three largest Israeli trade union organizations, the Histadrut and Koah LaOvdim, advocate peace and a two-state solution; the third, the National Labor Federation in Eretz-Israel, is officially critical of this position. In contrast, the fourth and smallest Israeli trade union organization, WAC-MAAN, explicitly speaks out against all forms of settlement, the occupation policy, and war; yet WAC-MAAN might be better described as an NGO rather than a union, as only two collective wage agreements have been signed in the organization's history. Apart from protests against occupation and war, WAC-MAAN has in recent years mainly attempted to organize Palestinian Israelis, sometimes in direct conflict with the Histadrut (Auspalestine 2019).

The Histadrut and Koah LaOvdim have not stated a clear position on Israel's current swing to the right. Koah LaOvdim will not be able to fulfil its aim of being a progressive trade union until it takes an unequivocal stance against discriminatory and racist legislation, as well as against attacks on Palestinians in Israel. In order to achieve this goal, Koah LaOvim will at some point have to decide whether it wishes to represent all Israeli workers – even those, for example, who work as security guards in the settlements – or if its wants to adopt a clear left-wing position and only represent those whose work does not support the expansion and development of the settlements and thereby undermine the last hopes for peace. Koah LaOvdim currently lacks an explicitly anti-racist and anti-war position, which makes it difficult for the union to appeal to Palestinian workers who are directly suffering from the effects of both war and racism.

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Lebanon: Labour Mobilization for the Consolidation of the October Revolution

Lea Bou Khater

The effects of social and economic injustice in Lebanon intensified and culminated in social unrest in October 2019. Thousands of Lebanese citizens took the streets on 17 October after the cabinet approved a new tax (a USD 0.20 per day fee) on internet-based phone calls over services like WhatsApp. While the largest protest took place in Beirut where thousands gathered in Riad al-Solh and Martyr Square, protesters also gathered for the first time in other main cities like Tripoli, Saida, Tyre, and Baalbeck. As a result, Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned and in January 2020 a new technocratic government was formed. On the back of a long-running decline in foreign reserves, popular dissent was accompanied by a 14-day bank closure, which triggered a currency crisis and a run on the banks, followed by unofficial capital controls and a hidden haircut on deposits. In March 2020, for the first time the state decided to default on a USD 1.2 billion Eurobond debt. In June 2020, protests, which would only be halted with the outbreak of Covid-19, slowly resurfaced against government inertia, while the Lebanese pound plummeted to a record low, causing the prices of basic staples to soar.

The unfolding of the October Revolution was however marred by the conspicuous absence of Lebanon's labour movement, which can be explained by the assault of post-civil war neoliberal economic policies on Lebanese labour, the cooptation and sectarianization of the labour movement, the inhospitable legal environment, and organizational problems within the labour movement itself. It is in this context that a group of professionals, including university professors, journalists, engineers, and physicians have begun organizing under the umbrella of the newly-formed Lebanese Professionals Association (LPA). They have used the momentum of the October protests to coordinate alternative labour movements. This essay examines the role of political dissent in the struggle for change and the place of the labour movement in the Lebanese uprising or the so-called October Revolution.

In his monograph on contentious politics in the Arab region, John Chalcraft explains how the Arab Uprisings "showed to a wider audience than usual that it is not adequate, in writing the history of the region, to ignore contentious politics, or to cede the basic dynamics of change to external powers, securitocracies, ruling monarchies, the politics of the ruling parties and their clients, or crony capitalism" (Chalcraft 2017: 3). It is clearly necessary to turn away from structural and institutional approaches and to emphasise the ways the protests have shaped the struggle for change and the making of the Arab region.

Investigating popular protests in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, Joel Beinin examines the place of the labour movement and argues that these uprisings emerged from long-lasting movements of dissent – they did not come out of nowhere – which played a central role in the decade preceding the Arab uprising. More specifically, in his examination of the labour movement in both countries, Beinin explains that possibilities and limitations of workers are defined by their organizational capacities, relationships with political parties, civil society, as well as changes in the local and global economy (Beinin 2015).

In the case of Lebanon, it is important to examine the place of the labour movement in the outbreak of social unrest in October 2019. How did labour organize for change through alternative associations and despite weak union agency, and how did it relate to other movements and forces during the October Revolution? In this essay I argue that the October movement and recent labour organizing in Lebanon stem from the accumulation of previous movements and experiences. To better understand the role and process of recent labour organizing, we need to consider two factors, which are discussed in the following: 1) changes in the local economy, and 2) the organizational capacities of labour activists. The research relies on a review of the use of social media by the new labour associations and on a series unstructured interviews with labour activists.

Economic and Financial Systems in Crisis

Decades of social and economic injustice were a driving factor in the social unrest that burst onto Lebanon's streets in mid-October 2019. In a survey conducted during the first ten days of the October Revolution,⁵² more than 87 percent of protesters indicated that economic reasons were behind their participation. Corruption was the second most cited response (61 percent), followed by the taxation system in place (59 percent) (Bou Khater and Majed 2020: 17).

In fact, the Lebanese people had been pushed to breaking point by the failure of long-standing neoliberal policies that have exacerbated inequality and poverty and starkly reduced the ability of the state to care for those left behind. Since the French mandate, the ruling elite moulded state institutions in a way that benefited their financial interests, which implied a weak state and a free market economy (Gates 1998: 50). The state's *laissez-faire* relationship with the private sector has intensified throughout the history of Lebanon, leading to soaring inequalities and a dismantling of the welfare state and its commitment to guarantee social and economic justice.

⁵² Structured interviewing conducted with a sample of 1,183 protesters targeted at various protest sites across Lebanon between 19 October and 31 October, 2019.

For the purpose of illustration, 10 percent of the Lebanese adult population had captured 45 percent of wealth between 2005 and 2014. More recently, data from a leaked 2020 document by the Banking Control Commission of Lebanon showed that one percent of depositors held 52 percent of deposits in 2018. On the eve of the October Revolution, 44 percent of residents lacked any form of social protection (Central Administration of Statistics 2020). In lieu of the state, people rely heavily on services provided by community-based organizations that further weaken the ties between citizens and the state while conversely maintaining the pervasiveness of traditional sectarian patron–client relationships – what Melani Cammett (2014) dubs “compassionate communalism”.

In respect to labour protection, illegal capital control, salary cuts, and layoffs have threatened the livelihoods of workers and their dependents since the onset of revolution in October 2019, which was accompanied by a dire economic crisis. Formal workers are precariously provided for by the state through health insurance, family allocations, and end-of-service indemnities, yet all of this is limited in quantity and quality. Workers lack unemployment benefits and insurance for disability and work accidents. Most informal workers such as seasonal workers, construction and agricultural workers, migrant and domestic workers, as well as the self-employed, unemployed, and retirees remain excluded from social protection schemes.

Cooptation of the Labour Movement

Neoliberal economic policies adopted since the end of the civil war have also tamed a labour movement that had succeeded in improving working and living conditions, especially throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Aggressive trade liberalization and reliance on foreign capital and remittances distorted the economy and the labour market in turn. Soaring debt servicing led to monetary and fiscal policies that crowded out the productive sector. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of enterprises are micro-sized (employing fewer than five workers), which has a negative impact on labour organizing given the limited capacity for workers to associate in small enterprises. Migrant workers, who make up 21 percent of the total workforce, are excluded from labour organizing (Central Administration of Statistics, 2020).

In addition to restrictive labour market features, the labour movement is subdued by legal restrictions. The 1946 Lebanese Labour Code significantly limits freedom of association: according to Article 86, no trade unions may be established without prior authorization from the Ministry of Labour; according to Article 50, the only union members protected from dismissal are those elected as union board members. In line with these restrictions, Lebanon never ratified the International Labour Organization Convention No. 87 on Freedom

of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize (1948), which eliminates any requirement that union formation be first authorized by the state.

The labour movement is marred by an obsolete organizational structure which lacks democratic and proportional representation. The labour movement in Lebanon is represented by the General Confederation of Workers in Lebanon (GCWL), an umbrella organization comprising 60 trade union federations. According to the GCWL's 1970 charter – which remains unchanged until today – each federation is represented by four members on the GCWL Representative Council, irrespective of its membership size, i.e. a federation comprising 5,000 members and a federation of 500 members are both represented by four members each. Moreover, these four members are appointed by the federation executive council rather than being directly elected by the members of the federation itself. Finally, these non-elected representatives in turn elect the GCWL Executive Council and its president.

This undemocratic structure clearly leaves room for political manipulation and intervention. In fact, attempts to democratize the GCWL's 1970 charter have repeatedly failed. Since the 1990s, the Ministry of Labour has facilitated the authorization of “fake” trade unions that aimed to populate newly formed “fake” federations, all of them affiliated with ruling political parties. This “bourgeoning” of unions and federations was aimed at increasing the political intervention in the decision-making process of the GCWL, due to its above-mentioned undemocratic structure. By the late 1990s, the GCWL had become an extension of the ruling elite's interests and its positions continue to be severed from the conditions and demands of the workforce it claims to represent.

Political interference in labour organizing is not limited to the GCWL, which captures trade unions in the private sector. The Union Coordination Committee (UCC), which represents public sector employees, has also been co-opted in recent years, largely as a reaction to its past successes. The UCC represents around 130,000 civil servants including public sector teachers. Public sector employees face legal obstacles to organizing: civil servants are forbidden from directly engaging in political affairs, joining a political party, or participating in strikes. Nevertheless, despite these legal shackles, the UCC led a successful campaign for a new salary scale between 2012 and 2017, which hinged on long strikes, large protests, and a boycotting of marking baccalaureate (high-school diploma) exams. The new salary scale was finally approved by parliament but the UCC was co-opted shortly thereafter. UCC representatives were ousted in the next elections of public sector leagues by the alliance of ten political parties that tapped into the manipulation of traditional sectarian affiliations. The UCC representatives were soon replaced by members affiliated with ruling political parties.

In light of this, it is understandable that neither the GCWL nor the UCC called for any strikes or demonstrations amidst the October Revolution in 2019. In fact, the GCWL waited 19 days after the onset of the protests before it issued a brief statement (General Confederation of Workers in Lebanon 2019).

Alternative Labour Organizing: Continuum and Consolidation of the October Revolution

At the onset of the October Revolution and amidst the silence of a co-opted GCWL and UCC, a group of professionals, including university professors, journalists, engineers, and physicians, began organizing in Beirut. Inspired by the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), they have used the momentum of the October protests to coordinate alternative labour movements. Similarly, several groups of professionals had also been organizing outside Beirut and in different regions. They quickly joined forces with their peers in Beirut and together they formed the LPA on 28 October. They issued an introductory paper declaring their support for and participation in the October uprising in protest of the political and economic system in place, refusing all ensuing social, economic, financial, and monetary policies, and calling for a democratic transition to a secular state based on social justice. The LPA is now composed of several associations of university professors, engineers, physicians, journalists and media workers, and workers in non-governmental organizations. Each association comprises around 200 members.

Continuum for Consolidation

The founding of the LPA stems from the accumulation of mobilizations and experiences in the previous years. Drawing upon previous experiences in popular protests, several founding members of the LPA have been articulating the need to organize. The need to organize has been the subject of continuous discussions and debates among them over the past couple of years. In fact, previous experiences have paved the way for a retrospective on the need to organize and to overcome the fear of traditional organizing and frameworks of representation.

Several founding members of the LPA were activists in previous popular protests and mobilizations since 2005. Several members told me how the 2015 mobilization that began with the trash crisis and ended in late summer was an important turning point. Some members of the Independent Professors Association (IPA) were already dedicated activists within the Lebanese University since 2009. Others were active members of the Independent Union Movement (IUM) which was created as a reaction to the cooptation of the UCC. "The IUM has been active since 2017 but has never enjoyed the media coverage of the LPA. The latter has benefited from the impetus of the October Revolution", a member of the LPA explained. "Our activism and our demands

are not new. But the momentum of the October Revolution has brought our demands to the fore.”

According to the LPA members interviewed, the October Revolution has showed once again the limited capabilities of structureless and leaderless movements in dealing with soaring economic grievances and social injustice and has made clear the importance of and the need to return to labour organizing, which can guarantee sustainability over time as well as coordination and a geographic spread throughout the country.

Organizational Challenges

The nascent LPA faces organizational challenges that need lengthy discussions and probably the envisioning of new approaches to organizing. A serious challenge is the structure of the LPA and its impact on decision making-processes and the representation of the different associations. This is a seminal issue that is holding up the LPA as a whole. The umbrella organization might need more time to acquire a representative structure. Despite the organizational obstacles, the associations under the LPA continue to organize and expand. On the association level, some organizers have raised the issue of inclusion and exclusion criteria for their association. Organizational obstacles include the presence of different occupational profiles under one association: employers, self-employed people, and employees. This debate is still prominent among labour activists.

Drawing upon the lessons of previous movements and accumulated experiences, the LPA was born from within the October Revolution and has benefited from extraordinary circumstances and context for additional exposure, visibility, and recruitment. However, organizational challenges have started to hinder its advancement. These obstacles have already questioned the viability of the LPA as an umbrella body that coordinates different members and sets the political tone of the movement regarding the political events and changes ensuing from the October Revolution and the ravages of the economic crisis. Nevertheless, the member association has started to operate in a standalone way for the organizing of professionals and the protection of labour rights and working conditions.

Conclusion

In addition to the economic crisis, the impact of Covid-19 on the workforce has added to the urgency of labour organizing. In fact, migrant workers, who are considered the most vulnerable category of workers legally, socially, economically, and linguistically, have started to protest against salary cuts and layoffs. In May 2019, 400 migrant cleaning workers of Bangladeshi and Indian nationality organized week-long strikes demanding one day off per week, to be

paid in the first five days of the month, and an end to all abuse against them. These workers are paid in Lebanese pounds and the value of their wages has decreased. Migrant domestic workers, mainly Ethiopian nationals, are also facing harsh working conditions and foreign currency shortages. They have organized community assistance and a series of protests in front of the Ethiopian Embassy in Beirut. Recently, Civil Defence volunteers estimated at around 2,500 members organized sit-ins and protests demanding that Cabinet secure them paid, full-time jobs. Most are paramedics, rescue workers, and firefighters. As workers grapple with dire economic conditions, labour organizing will become more necessary than ever to achieve better working conditions, fuel the revival of the labour movement, and consolidate the October Revolution.

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Unions of Iraq: Burdens of the Past and Crises of the Present

Omar al-Jaffal

The protests that broke out in Iraq in October 2019⁵³ saw major participation from labour unions and syndicates in the massive occupation of main squares in 11 cities. Iraqis, particularly unionists, recognized the impact of unionized movements in mobilizing protests and affecting politics, perhaps for the first time in decades. The unions' participation marked a crucial turning point not only in joining protests and demonstrations en masse, but also through their display of solidarity across broader networks. For instance, the teachers' union was the first to take part in the student strike which led to a nationwide disruption of education, which in turn facilitated broader student participation in the demonstrations. As a result, the protesters would eagerly anticipate the sight of students as they flocked to the main sit-in sites in central and southern provinces, marching in spectacular unison and uniform white-shirt costumes while chanting against US and Iranian intervention.

Crucially, the Iraqi Bar Association went on to defend protesters who had been incarcerated. Tents were set up at various protest sites to provide legal advice to demonstrators as well as to discuss the shortcomings of the Iraqi constitution and laws and point out the laws and articles that they should push to modify. Iraq's Doctors' Union was also at the forefront of the mass protests, announcing a general strike and having its members, medical doctors and health-care teams both on the ground and in hospitals, provide treatment and support to thousands of wounded protesters, as well as circulating instructions on how to avoid tear gas attacks and how to mitigate their effects. Such vital interventions have been instrumental in bolstering protesters' determination to hold their ground. In southern Iraq, the nation's oil reservoir and gateway to the Gulf, unions were subject to extreme security measures that compromised their capacity to mobilize. However, despite their inability to participate actively in the protesters' attempts to disrupt oil production, union members succeeded in relaying information regarding strategic sites and routes which, if sabotaged, could significantly impact the course of events and force the authorities to submit to the protesters' demands.⁵⁴

⁵³ Protests in several regions have persisted throughout the period in which this text was written, despite the Covid-19 pandemic and the use of excessive violence against demonstrators.

⁵⁴ Author's interview with Hassan Juma, president of the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (FOUI).

In response, authorities threatened to lay off teachers who insisted on carrying on with the strike (Mahdi 2019), while lawyers faced a series of assassinations in the central and southern provinces (Al-Nashmi 2020) to dissuade them from supporting and defending the protesters, not to mention the violent crackdown on the protesters themselves, during which tens of medical personnel were killed and several nurses and doctors were abducted in the middle of Baghdad's Tahrir Square. By March 2020, the UN delegation to Iraq estimated 490 demonstrators killed, 7,783 wounded and 98 abducted including several union members, at the hands of the Iraqi security forces and several militias (UNAMI 2020).

The unions' relentless participation in the protests forced Barham Salih, President of Iraq, to meet with their leadership (on 3 November 2019) and discuss their demands and visions for overcoming the current crisis. In those meetings, major unions pledged to remain united behind the protesters' demands to fight corruption, overhaul the electoral laws, hold officials involved in corruption and brutality accountable, select new members to the Independent High Electoral Commission and oversee early parliamentary elections. Unions also demanded to take part in leading the transitional period following the resignation of the short-lived government formed by Adil Abdul Mahdi less than year ago, under the rising pressure from popular protests.

However, despite unions gaining prominence through political action and alignment with popular demands, their role began to recede as teachers and doctors suspended strike (on 7 November 2019). The Bar Association suddenly went silent over the escalation of violence and arbitrary arrests, although some lawyers continued to push for the release of detained protesters. Workers' unions reverted to their internal conflicts and divisions: one union that is associated with the ruling political parties, another affiliated with the communist and labour parties, and a third seeking to be independent from the existing crisis-ridden political parties. This was not the first time unions had played such a prominent role in political transformations in Iraq, while facing recurrent setbacks due to organizational failures and state oppression, since the inception of the modern Iraqi state in 1921. The deep-seated fear of recognizing and empowering unions led consecutive Iraqi governments to meddle with them and hamper them with legal obstacles.

The Origins of Unions

While clearly distinct from contemporary unions, certain professions were pioneers in self-organizing. The Lawyer's Bar Association was established in 1918, whereas the Medical Association of Iraq (Al-Tuhafi 2014) was established in 1921, in connection with the inauguration of the first king of Iraq by the British who had occupied the country in 1914. The British-sponsored monarchy

and the British authorities that controlled most of Iraq's resources barred the establishment of new labour unions despite the promulgation of the Associations Law in 1922 and the rise of a new working class resulting from modernization and the British colonial projects. The Iraqi monarchy denied a license for a club of 8,000 railway workers, and took disciplinary measures against its advocates (Gharib 2003). That same year, dock workers at the port of Basra went on strike in protest of harsh and discriminatory labour conditions imposed by the British administration. In 1927, railway workers went on strike to demand a labour law. None of these strikes were successful. Many of their organizers were subjected to severe disciplinary measures and lay-offs. Yet relentless pressure by workers eventually led to the establishment of the Artisans' Association, the Hairdressers Guild, and the Union of Printing Workers, among others (Al-Egaily 2013).

Among the pioneers was Muhammad Salih Al-Qazzaz, who in 1929 founded the Artisans' Association (*Jam'iyyat Ashab al-Sina'i*), mainly composed of craftsmen and small traders (Farouk-Sluglett/Sluglett 1983). Al-Qazzaz led workers' strikes and demonstrations and encouraged workers to join unions. But the government opposed the expansion of the union movement, especially after the Association advocated for the 1931 general strike, and participated in protests against mass lay-offs due to the Great Depression, and against the Municipal Fees Law which imposed additional levies on workers. The government shut down and banned the Association. In 1932, the Workers' Federation of Iraq was granted a license. One year later it directly confronted the Baghdad Electric Light and Power Company in protest of rising electricity prices. Al-Qazzaz called for a boycott of the company. The monarchy responded by persecuting the federation leaders, arresting Al-Qazzaz and later banishing him to the province of Sulaymaniyah. Labour unions remained banned until 1944. In 1946, 16 unions were registered. But by 1949 authorities had launched a new crackdown campaign against unions and shut down several headquarters (Farouk-Sluglett/Sluglett 1983; Gharib 2003).

It was not until the 1958 revolution that labour unions could finally breathe. The year 1959 saw the organization of the first trade union conference and the largest workers' march in Iraqi history celebrating May 1st. However, the unions' brief flourishing ended with the nationalist generals' coup d'état against Abd Al-Karim Qassim and his socialist republican regime in February 1963. The deterioration continued as the Ba'ath party rose to power in 1968, consolidating the single-party system. This was then exacerbated under the autocratic rule of Saddam Hussein who seized power in 1979. Despite persecution, workers organized more than 40 strikes between the 1920s and 1970s (Alwan 2016). Not all strikes succeeded, but a few eventually forced authorities to recognize some of the basic labour regulations such as limiting work-

ing hours, alleviating unjust taxation, and counting official holidays as paid work days. However, decrees that undermined labour unions issued during the 1950s and 1960s were selectively deployed against unions by the government installed under the US occupation following the April 2003 invasion.

The Unions' Crisis

Following the US military invasion, the unions sought a new beginning.⁵⁵ Union leaders hoped to restructure and boost their power in the new political system, but the US and the local government were neither ready nor willing to allow such a transformation. In the immediate aftermath of 2003, Paul Bremer, the civilian administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority, signed off more than a hundred decrees, most of which were aimed at establishing a neoliberal economy in Iraq. Several of those decrees were specifically devised to hinder the establishment of new unions. Meanwhile, the established unions experienced deeper conflicts among their members and the political parties that sought to gain control over them. In 2005, the government froze the assets of the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), including financial and real estate assets that had been acquired with workers' membership fees in the 1950s and 1960s. In 2012, the leadership of the General Federation was handed over to people connected with the Sadrist Movement, led by the Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Throughout this conflict, union leaders began to break away and establish one alternative union after the other, such that in Iraq today there are eight general federations⁵⁶ that claim to represent all workers.

However, the Iraqi authorities never recognized any representative bodies besides the GFTU, which conveniently supports and abides by Decree 150 issued in 1987 under Saddam Hussein, which bans public sector workers from forming or joining unions. From the government's viewpoint, the decree proved extremely successful in controlling the unions and diminishing their power and capacity to mobilize. Nevertheless, the Iraqi government maintained an arbitrary and interest-driven relationship with the other workers federations and unions. It would only recognize these bodies when they expressed generic demands such as wage increases or permanent employment. Yet once their demands took the form of protest against foreign corporate encroachment on national oil reserves or the privatization of particular sectors such as electricity and other industries (Bacon 2007), the government

⁵⁵ Author's interview with Hassan Juma, president of the FOUI.

⁵⁶ The unions and federations are: the GFTU, the FOUI, the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI), the Federation of Iraqi Trade Unions (IFTU), the Independent Federation of Trade and Workers Unions in Iraq, the General Federation of Trade Unions and Employees, the General Federation of Iraqi Workers, and the Central National Federation of Iraqi Trade Unions.

would respond with sanctions and incarceration threats based on the widely condemned Anti-Terrorism Law. The law enables the government to severely punish, including by capital punishment, whoever “brings about horror and fear among people and creates chaos to achieve terrorist goals.”

A State of Public Employment

Iraq is a rentier state whose economy largely depends on oil revenues. As a result, one in five Iraqi citizens are dependent in some way on the state economy. Additionally, Iraq runs the largest bureaucratic network in the Middle East with a total of four million public sector employees, or 10 percent of the Iraqi population. It seems evident that banning government employees from organizing and joining unions is politically meant to weaken the workers’ movement and to bring public service employees under the control of the oligarchic system, shared by dominant political parties and the class of merchants directly associated with them.

Over the past decade, the Iraqi authorities have attempted to pass several pieces of union legislation that undermine workers’ agency and restrict the unions’ agency. So far, no union laws have been passed. Some were resisted by the unions themselves since they appeared in the spirit of Saddam Hussein’s decree banning public service employees from unionizing and striking. Meanwhile, the government appeared to take advantage of this legislative void in order to fully dismantle the unions and thwart their efforts to reorganize. Additionally, authorities continued to coerce union members. Some of the unionists I interviewed described the profound impact of the state’s terror tactics against unionists, and its refusal to pass legislation guaranteeing freedom of association, on the relationship between workers and their representatives. This led to serious challenges in recruiting new members due to fears of consequences such as losing their employment.⁵⁷

Moreover, the dominant political parties resorted to two different strategies to contain labour unions. On the one hand, they introduced a number of government and party members into the unions and boosted their popularity either by supporting their campaigns or by meddling with the elections to guarantee their victory. Thus, they paved the way for a seizure of power and for steering unions towards endorsing state policies. For instance, the president of the Iraqi Journalists’ Syndicate (IJS) during the past 13 years has continuously rejected journalists’ applications for membership, while offering membership to compliant voters who have never practiced journalism. Yet,

⁵⁷ Author’s interview with Hashimiya Al-Sa’di, head of the Iraqi Union for Electricity Workers, Hassan Juma, president of the Iraqi FOUJ, and Abd Al-Karim Sweilem Abu Watan, president of the IFTA.

the syndicate remains silent with regards to the continuous breach of journalists' safety in a country that is notorious for violence toward them and for the absence of any form of liability regarding ensuring their safety.

The other strategy deployed by the government to control unions is the establishment of substitute unions that circumvent the main one and weaken its influence. Several unionists point to similar strategies used to divide the labour unions, while others name unions that receive funds from certain political parties.

Unions today face numerous crises arising from their troubled relationship with the government, which often refuses to recognize unions or negotiate with them. Some union leaders point to a serious challenge proceeding from the decline of unionization culture following decades-long government measures intended to discourage and prohibit labour unions. Together, these factors have led unions into grave financial difficulties due to diminishing membership fee revenues, which leads to an increased reliance on donations from their leaders and supporters. In the absence of any legislative and regulatory frameworks addressing the unions' scope of action and their financial vulnerabilities, the workers' struggle led by the unions has been reduced to harmless protests and anti-government demonstrations.

Unions have equally suffered from several setbacks related to organization, mobilization on the ground, raising awareness and addressing the media. Some of the union leaders I interviewed rejected the possibility of a shared cause with private sector employees, therefore insisting on exclusively mobilizing workers in the public sector. Such attitudes undermine the potential for reaching out to all working sectors. The Iraqi transport sector is a case in point where this distinction is evident and crucial. Iraq's public transport infrastructure is arguably the most neglected in the region. By contrast, there is a highly efficient and successful yet unorganized private-owned transportation network that includes mini-buses, vans, and around 2 million taxis, all of which are subjected to the same injustices as public workers, including municipal and traffic fines and intimidation by security forces, not to mention the government granting taxi operating licenses to foreign companies that compete with local drivers.

Finally, one must note that unions have not followed in efforts to enhance and modernize their communication with their public. Instead, they adhere to an anachronistic set of slogans from the struggles of the 1950s and 1960s in addressing the workers and documenting and managing their working conditions. As such, they encounter serious difficulties in attracting and organizing younger workers. Moreover, labour unions lack any database structure that indicates the real numbers of organized workers in any particular sector. So, while the government frequently uses pressure to obstruct labour unions, the

latter seem unwilling to develop new mechanisms that respond to contemporary injustices facing workers in Iraq today.

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Bosnia-Herzegovina: Workers' Organization at the Root of the 2014 Social Uprising

Anna Calori

February 2014 saw the largest mass protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the fall of socialist Yugoslavia and the ensuing wars. Workers' organizations and independent unions were at the root of the social uprising, which brought different parts of society together in the struggle against predatory privatization. While this was the largest of its kind, workers had been mobilizing in various forms for the previous two decades, protesting against the dismantlement of the country's industrial giants and the fraudulent restructuring of former socialist companies. This article draws on the testimony of workers and unionists to illustrate how unmet expectations of a worker-based privatization process and the grievances resulting from the marginalization of workers were voiced across the country. It shows how past solidarities intersected with new strategies of mobilization to give life to a new movement. Finally, it comments on the current status of workers' mobilization in the country.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is situated in the heart of the Western Balkans, with a population of roughly 3.5 million. Historically at the crossroads of a number of different cultures (Slavic, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian), it is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, with roughly 50 percent of the population identifying as Bosniak, 31 percent as Serb, 15 percent as Croat, and 3 percent as "other". Similar percentages hold for those identifying as Muslim, Orthodox, and Catholic respectively (Al Jazeera Balkans 2016).

An Overview of Bosnia's Recent History and Economic Outlook

To better understand the origins of the 2014 social uprising, it is necessary to briefly illustrate the history of Bosnia's industrialization in the second half of the 20th century. One of the six former socialist republics that formed the Yugoslav Federation, Bosnia was considered to have a medium level of development, with Slovenia and Croatia being at the higher end of the spectrum, and Macedonia and Kosovo at the lower end.

After the Second World War, Bosnia's economy relied on large heavy-industry complexes (extraction, mining, steelworks, and hydroelectricity). In parallel to its industrial sector, in the 1950s Yugoslavia developed and formalized its system of workers' self-management. Factories were organized as workers' organizations (*radne organizacije*), and self-governed through the deliberations of workers' councils. Management boards were elected democratically each year, and any profit or income resulting from production was deemed to

be “socially owned” (i.e. owned by the collective of workers), and was distributed within the enterprise as a bonus in proportion to work.

The Bosnian workforce developed a sense of collective belonging as part of a Yugoslavist, workerist, and self-managed nation, which championed its industrial sector and had an eye on developing global trade partnerships. Self-management led to a “micro-corporatist” alliance between management and labour (Grdešić 2015: 105). This alliance, in turn, created strong workplace allegiances that led workers to identify with the enterprise they worked for (Archer and Musić 2016: 6).

Yet as Yugoslavia’s economic situation deteriorated throughout the 1980s thanks to a foreign debt crisis and hyperinflation, workers’ economic conditions worsened. Many Yugoslav republics, from Serbia, to Bosnia, to Kosovo, were a theatre of mass workers’ protests and strikes, some of which were later co-opted by nationalist leaders in the years leading to the break-up of Yugoslavia.

As the war unfolded, the country and its companies were fought over by warring factions and paramilitary forces in control of different parts of the country – the ArBiH (*Armija Bosne i Hercegovine*, Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina), the HVO (*Hrvatsko Vijeće Obrane*, Croatian Defence Council), and the VRS (*Vojaska Republike Srpske*, Army of Republika Srpska). Workers were drafted into different factions, and their companies were fragmented as they were brought under the jurisdiction of different entities. Notwithstanding the material destruction of many of their factories and former workplaces, workers expected to be able to return to work, and were promised war-time compensation in the form of re-employment and/or company shares.

Multiple Waves of Privatization, Workers’ Anger, and the 2014 Protests

The Peace Agreement signed in Dayton (Ohio) in November 1995 divided the Bosnian territory into two entities: the Republika Srpska (RS), comprising the main Serb-dominated territories and the eastern part of Sarajevo, amounting to 49 percent of the total area; and the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (FBiH), covering the territories with a Bosniak-Muslim or Croat majority, amounting to 51 percent (Bieber 2006: 77). Each entity has its own parliament, which holds some legislative and executive functions, while matters of national interest are left to the national parliament, governed on the basis of ethnic quotas. The political and ethnic de facto division of the country had deep repercussions for its economy, particularly in the industrial sector, which suffered heavy bombardments and looting during the war.

After initial efforts towards peace-building and the reconstruction of infrastructure, the Peace Implementation Council (the international organ tasked with coordinating the Agreement’s implementation) and international bod-

ies such as the World Bank, USAID, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development commenced a programme of rapid mass privatization. Marketization, liberalization, and mass privatization were to be implemented as broadly and quickly as possible.

Former social ownership was nationalized according to the jurisdiction of the entities, and mass privatization was carried out through a voucher-based system, where workers (formerly the “social owners” of companies) would be given vouchers representing a share in the overall state capital, rather than directly in the factories that employed them.

As trade unionist M.J. from a large engineering and industrial complex in Sarajevo recalls: “immediately after the war, the union was not very well organized, so in my opinion the government used that chance to transform social ownership into state ownership, so as to be able to interfere in that. [...] Our workers did not want any of their factories to be privatized or sold, however the government wasn’t of the same opinion, and had the possibility to do it by law.”⁵⁸

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a series of mass privatization reforms that broke up the former large conglomerates and exporters into smaller factories, often being sold for much less than their actual value and with little guarantee of any investment, returning to production, or guarantees for laid-off workers. Privatization entailed a combination of mismanagement, corrupt deals, and lack of investment, which led to most of these companies going completely bankrupt and thousands of workers losing their jobs (Renner 2006).

The feeling of ownership of one’s workplace, and of belonging to a collective threatened by an unfair transition, led industrial workers across the country to seek participation in privatization through workers’ shareholding; they hoped for a transition that would allow them to return to their jobs and workplaces, restructured so as to ensure a revived presence in the world market (Calori/Jurkat 2017).

As a representative of the *Savez samostalnih sindikata* (Council of Independent Unions) remarked: “in general, we were in favour of privatization, but not in the way in which it was conceptualized and carried out by the ruling oligarchic politicians. We were absolutely certain that it is not possible to avoid the new social arrangement and the market economy and so forth, but we wanted for that to be as transparent, useful, and fair to citizens as possible. We knew that it wouldn’t be ideal, but we fought for it to be fair, so that as few people as possible feel that kind of injustice that in the end happened with privatization.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ M.J., interview with author, Sarajevo, 23 June 2016.

⁵⁹ E.B., interview with the author, Sarajevo, 13 June 2016.

The workers' understanding that their factories were "their own" mobilized them to protest against a form of privatization that would dispossess them not only of the right to work, but of the right to own their workplaces. Many reported an increasing feeling of dispossession, as privatization deprived them of ownership as well as management rights. As E.B, a factory worker and strike organiser at the Tuzla detergent factory DITA noted: "The factory was mine only at the beginning of the 1970s and 1980s, it was mine when I could decide on everything. When all the talk about shareholding, assemblies and [political] parties started, it all went... I do not have any right to vote any more, and then nothing is mine."⁶⁰

Workers engaged in strikes and protests against a specific kind of privatization: one that was splitting up their workplaces and selling them off to local private investors who had accumulated capital and shares by purchasing vouchers on the illegal market (M.K.S. 2004). Instead of re-starting production, the new private owners would sell the company's assets, file for bankruptcy, and leave workers unemployed with months of overdue salaries left unpaid. Workers demanded rights "to life, health, and work", and asserted that they were in favour of finding strategic partners for privatization, but against the sale of their factories to war profiteers and investors with a dubious record (Tabučić 2003). The bankruptcy and subsequent closure of large industrial conglomerates across the country, particularly in the industrial centres like Tuzla, Zenica, Sarajevo, and Zvornik contributed to the rise of an already staggeringly high unemployment rate (27.5 percent in 2014, to which should be added the further 20 percent of people employed in the informal or "grey" economy).⁶¹ In June 2008, roughly 8,000 workers protested against the precarious living conditions caused by the process of privatization and the bankruptcy of their firms (Energoinvest List 2008).

Protests against privatization and mass lay-offs characterized the whole decade between 2003 and 2013, leading to the largest mass protests in the region in February 2014. The unrest started in Tuzla, once the industrial heart of Bosnia, where a number of large state firms had collapsed in the process of privatization. Workers and protesters considered the local government responsible for the failure of privatization and for the lack of social and economic protection guaranteed to laid-off employees. A peaceful gathering of workers quickly turned into violent clashes with police when workers attempted to enter the municipal government building to present their demands of com-

⁶⁰ M.B., interview with the author, Dita Tuzla, 4 May 2016.

⁶¹ Eurostat, Enlargement Countries – Labour Market statistics, ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Enlargement_countries_-_labour_market_statistics&oldid=463611#Unemployment_rates (accessed 28 June 2020).

pensation for healthcare, pensions, and overdue salaries after their companies were declared bankrupt (Ruvic/Zuvela 2014). Police brutality and the lack of a conciliatory response from local or national authorities sparked outrage amongst citizens, who gathered in mass protests in Tuzla (roughly between 1,000 and 7,000 people) and across the country. Protesters set parts of government buildings alight in Tuzla and in the capital, Sarajevo, and involved other industrial centres throughout the country.

These protests built a civic momentum that was channelled, thanks to the efforts of numerous activists, into the creation of plenums: citizens' assemblies that experimented with democracy from below. Plenum activists "voiced an independent, third vision of the state as serving socio-economic needs and guaranteeing the social rights of all its constituents, independent of ethnicity, and called for reforms to the privatization process such that it would accommodate the agency of workers" (Puljek-Shank/Fritsch 2019: 145). The experience of the plenums was conducive to a renewed attention to bottom-up politics and "local first" collective action, creating a new sense of empowerment among local communities and, as some have argued, a "post-ethnic identity" (Belyaeva 2017).

Workers' organization and struggles took a variety of forms, from hunger strikes, to solidarity strikes and rallies, to the occupation and reappropriation of factories. Apart from the clashes in February 2014, protests were mostly peaceful, and often involved participation from across the board, together with students' movements and local activists – a feature that characterizes many of the new social movements across the former Yugoslav territory (Bonfiglioli 2019: 162).

The eruptive strength of these new movements was precisely their cross-generational and inter-ethnic character. In the struggle to challenge a political system perpetuating ethnic and religious differences amongst Bosnians, workers and activists stressed that it was socio-economic inequalities that affected citizens the most, regardless of their ethnic or religious background. The famous slogan, "We are hungry in three languages" (referring to the three official languages of Bosnia) was a powerful reminder of the movement's rejection of ethnic division, and rather their willingness to reject a politically divisive system.

Yet the workers and unionists interviewed felt slightly disillusioned with the potential of the unrest to bring about concrete changes to their immediate socio-economic circumstances. In a situation of extreme economic precariousness and widespread political clientelism, some workers feared that a continuing to participate in protests would hinder their ability to find work in the future. As a worker involved in organizing the protests in Sarajevo recalls: "I told people a thousand times: when we fight for our rights, there needs to

be the majority of us, 80 to 90 percent.” However, people are fearful here, perhaps that fear remains from the previous system. People are scared that somebody will fire them, they are afraid of going to the protest, that they will be seen on television.”⁶²

While the plenums created a space for civic, non-ethnic, bottom-up engagement, in many cases workers’ participation waned. In the case of Tuzla, the city at the heart of the protests and with a long tradition of civic and workers’ rights movements, the plenum led to the formation of an independent union, the Solidarity Union (*Sindikát Solidarnosti*), making clear the protesters’ rejection of established political parties and their influence on official trade unions (De Noni 2014). A few examples of workers seeking to take back control of their factories, buying back their own shares, and actually self-managing their companies are further testament to the resilience of these practices. Most notably, the detergent factory DITA in Tuzla was heralded as symbol of an inter-generational, inter-ethnic struggle to occupy and take back ownership of workplaces, and a fight to re-establish control from the bottom up.

Conclusion

The highly bureaucratized political system which emerged in Bosnia after the Dayton Peace Agreement led to asset stripping and privatization, managed by a small group of players with overlapping political and economic interests. Moving away from the socialist tradition of workers’ states, the transition in Bosnia has meant a fracturing and privatization of large conglomerates, deindustrialization and bankruptcy.

Workers felt marginalized by a system of economic violence that deprived them of economic and ownership rights, and acted upon expectations of a “just” transition that would respect the feeling of attachment and ownership towards their companies that had been cemented throughout the decades of self-management. It was the collective memory of self-management that brought workers of different generations together – the memory of an alternative which had its issues, but where workers felt they had a voice, and that their voice was heard.

The protests of 2014 were not simply a cathartic expression of decades of marginalization and discontent, but were also conducive to the formulation of new forms of workers’ organizations and new local unions. Plenums and citizens’ assemblies constituted the grounds for creating broader alliances between workers, students and civil rights activists. Fighting a divisive system that superimposes ethnic divisions upon citizens and workers, these new

⁶² A.M., Interview with the author, Sarajevo, 24 February 2016.

organizations have built an inclusive platform by which socio-economic demands can be made.

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Neo-Authoritarianism, Co-optation, and Resistance

Workers and Alternative Unions in Russia:

Sarah Hinz and Jeremy Morris

Industrial relations in Russia derive from those in the USSR, which were marked by quiescence thanks to the ideological and structural subservience of unions to the communist party. While privatization and marketization in the 1990s provoked industrial conflict, unions struggled to transform their identity and role. From 2000, the growth of transnational companies led to the development of alternative, activist, and democratic union movements. While still a minority, they are politically committed and conflict oriented. However, transnational employers adjust to this new challenge in turn, pushing back against efforts to overcome workplace injustice. In this article we highlight these dynamics by means of the example of Volkswagen and Benteler in Kaluga in 2012. While new union formations have had some success, the industrial relations legacy of the USSR remains significant in Russia. Putin's authoritarian system has sought to co-opt unions at the same time as limiting the capacity for mobilization from below.

Introduction

Russia has a long authoritarian history. The USSR's industrialization under Stalin was coercive and exploitative and this state-worker relation did not fundamentally change. Scholars such as Donald Filtzer, Michael Burawoy, and Stephen Kotkin debated whether workers, lacking associational outlets for collective grievances, adopted micro-tactics of resistance, or why they failed to develop class consciousness given rapid changes and the peasantization of industry. Further complicating this was the growth of a welfare state: unions and the workplace were assigned the role of redistribution. A paternalist social contract dominated; workers forwent associational power in return for a tacit commitment to increased wages and social benefits. The "social wage" included access to housing, kindergartens, and even subsidized work canteens. Particularly in defence industries (a dominant part of industrial production), this wage could make up two-thirds of one's money income. Thus, workers often viewed the state as authoritarian yet "benevolent" (Mandel 2001). State enterprises effectively enlisted unions for the distribution of social goods. While the social contract broke down as the USSR encountered economic problems from the late 1970s onward, the authoritarian legacies of corporatism and paternalism remain important to worker organization and consciousness.

As the Soviet system broke down, large-scale strikes took place, showing the relative effectiveness of workers to translate structural power – bolstered by major skilled labour shortages – into demands for workplace democratization and broader reforms. But even in 1989 during massive coal-miner strikes, unions sat with management *opposite* workers demanding change (Clarke 2005; Mandel 2004). Independent unions began to form – not only in mining, but also in transport and automotive industries. Yet they represented small minorities of workers, whereas the “traditional” corporatist unions continued to be dominant, eventually stifling the alternative union movement (Mandel 2001). The 1990s were characterized by economic insecurity and political strife. In such a frustrating environment, cycles of intense and desperate protest action beyond the organisational structures of traditional unions in Russia occurred (Greene/Robertson 2009; Bizyukov/Grishko 2012).

Russia’s umbrella trade union organization, the FNPR (*Federatsiia Nezavisimikh Profsoiuzov Rossii*, Federation of Independent Russian Trade Unions) is still the largest of its kind in Europe, with approximately 20 million members in 2018 (Vserossiiskii Elektropfsoiuz 2018). FNPR unions rarely initiate strikes or protest, despite increasing worker militancy. These bureaucratic organizations reject class conflict and their track record in voicing worker demands is low (Olimpieva 2012). Much membership is involuntary – a legacy of compulsory enrolment in the USSR, underling the “inertial” character of unions and large parts of the workforce alike. Since their founding in 1990, these organizations have mainly defended their institutional “partnership” position, at the expense of their members’ pay, conditions, and security (Ashwin/Clarke 2001; Mandel 2004; Vinogradova et al., 2012).

Also noteworthy is the low level of solidarity between sectors; there is no history of coordination between unions and political parties, although there are trilateral agreements and institutions. Since the early 2000s, an increasingly repressive labour code backed by a resurgent security apparatus is ready to pre-empt industrial conflict by directly targeting activists. At key moments, Putin has made political interventions that combine appeals to “authoritarian” order, paternalistic rhetoric directed at workers couched in the language of social conservatism, and concessions (usually indefinitely deferred) regarding better pay and conditions.

At the same time, even the stifling atmosphere of Putin’s Russia cannot completely extinguish resistance on the part of labour. Labour protests elude the repressive code, or utilize the “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990) of resistance, individualized tactics, or online campaigns. Key sectors like the automotive and service industries, with intense exploitation and a field less dominated by traditional unions, represent niches for new activist labour organizers to colonize. The main case study of this chapter focusses on this opportunity – as

the nature of work changes and new forms of employment relations arise and union legacies recede, labour organization is increasingly possible, despite, or even because of, the many obstacles in its way.

Case Study in Union and Employer Learning: Volkswagen

We focus on the dominant presence of German manufacturer Volkswagen in Russia. Its facility was established in 2008 in Kaluga, south-west of Moscow. The case of a successful Western European automobile firm entering the Russian market illustrates new modes of conflict and negotiation between workers and management. Since production is exclusively oriented to the domestic market, interconnections with and dependence on German headquarters are low, which means fewer chances to adapt the established “German” modes of negotiation between capital and labour to “Russian” employment relations.

Our data stem from fieldwork in the Kaluga region since 2009 on workers and industrial relations in “traditional” industry, as well as analysing new transnational corporations (TNCs) (Morris 2011; 2012). In addition, the study uses interview-based field research from 2012–13 on the development of alternative unions at foreign firms, car producers, and suppliers.

New Activist and Confrontational Unions Emerge

A new alternative union movement developed during the 2000s that challenged the traditional system of employment relations. Over time it may develop the capacity to shift the balance of power in industrial relations. However, this is predicated on a broader experience among workers of intensive neoliberalization and deregulation associated with the entry of transnational firms in key industrial sectors, the overcoming of the paternalist attitudes of employers and the state, and the degree of coercion and co-optation from the authorities. In the following section, we explore the growth of workers’ power in Volkswagen’s first Russian plant, where such developments are particularly visible.

While only amounting to 3.8 percent of Russian GDP (Lang and Boutenko 2016), due to the dominance of the natural resources sector, by 2008 the automotive market in Russia had become the fastest growing in the world by value. Russia’s push to diversify its domestic economy included a plan to attract foreign capital to build joint ventures and invest in greenfield sites, offering unified taxes as well as providing tailored infrastructure in a number of regions.

The Kaluga region is attractive to foreign car makers because of its proximity to Moscow and Western Europe (GCC 2012). When Volkswagen, now the largest foreign car producer in Russia, arrived, it was accompanied by a number of significant foreign suppliers, giving a considerable boost to the region. In the early 2010s, VW employed around 6,000 workers at its Kaluga facility,

with around 70 percent employed in assembly (Voss et al., 2006). The plant had a particularly high turnover: an annual rate of 1,000 workers was not unusual (until the Ukraine crisis further reduced demand for cars and therefore workers), illustrating the ongoing shortages of skilled labour as well as high levels of worker dissatisfaction due to intensive production processes.

The rising significance of foreign firms in Russia heralds a new area of alternative trade unionism (Chetvernina 2009; Olimpieva 2012). New unions quickly took the chance to address workers' rights and interests in these transnational companies, free of the post-socialist legacy still present in domestic firms. Their most important union association, MPRA, emerged in 2007 out of a local union at St. Petersburg's Ford plant, after an intense, year-long labour conflict (Shulzhenko 2017; Olimpieva 2012). MPRA (*Mezhregional'nyi profsoiuz "Rabochii assotsiatsiia"*, Interregional Trade Union "Workers' Association", formerly the Interregional Trade Union of Automobile Workers) brings together some 3,000 members from across 40 regions. They utilize workers' traditionally strong workplace bargaining power in the automotive industry by mobilizing large groups of workers in the production process to achieve typical demands, often with reference to their privileged colleagues employed at the firms' headquarters.

Kaluga's VW plant was subject to comprehensive unionization by MPRA, shortly after the factory opened. Though it was not until four years later, in 2012, with some 1,200 workers organized, that the union gained formal recognition by management in the wake of its first collective bargaining period. This success was strongly fostered by workers' large-scale strike and protest actions aimed at reaching a collective bargaining agreement with management at Benteler, one of Volkswagen's key suppliers located nearby. Since then, MPRA has been the dominant union not only at Benteler, but at VW too, acting as official collective bargaining partner and in the latter case ultimately ousting a traditional FNPR union which was established shortly after the founding of MPRA's union organization.

MPRA, as in the case of Volkswagen and Benteler, typically mobilizes members for concrete protest actions that sometimes use unconventional means, i.e. work-to-rule actions or country-wide boycotts. These cause significant costs for firms, particularly by disrupting vulnerable value chains. These industrial actions avoid strict and repressive labour laws that set high barriers for trade unions to declare legal strikes. Fewer bureaucratic hurdles within the agile organization are also advantageous to the mostly locally active unions.

However, at both the plant and sector level, the trade union organizations are still learning and struggle to stabilize their resources within MPRA. The difficulty of uniting the varying interests of members and at the same time informing the workforce about current negotiations with management was a

crucial task for obtaining lasting bargaining power. Similarly, bargaining power at the sector level is fragile because collective agreements, where they exist, are limited to the plant level. This keeps the unions' actions primarily local, limiting their influence. Unionists view any attempt to reach binding agreements beyond the plant as "far away", and prioritize improving basic working conditions in their own factory. Moreover, employers in TNCs in the automotive sector in general do not organize themselves in employer associations. As a result, MPRA would have no collective bargaining partner at the sector or regional level, making such negotiations superfluous.

Despite or because of their successes in enforcing collective bargaining agreements at VW and Benteler in 2012, some union members were questioned by local security services tasked with combatting "extremism" shortly after the labour conflicts were settled (Tumanov 2012; Karavaev/Lomakin 2015). Eventually the members were released, but they were kept in the dark about the purpose and outcome of the investigation (Hinz 2018). These intimidation tactics of active unionists show the authoritarian resurgence in state-worker relations.

The state's hostility towards trade union action is visible in the drastically reformed labour code of 2001. This restricted the right to action, especially for smaller, alternative unions (Olimpieva 2012; Greene/Robertson 2009). Their aims of directly affecting policy making and influencing labour markets and social politics, or even of attaining the capacity to provoke forms of social unrest, posed enough of a threat to the government to justify these changes early in Putin's rule. Any transformation of the established system would give alternative unions opportunities to gain leverage; therefore, the government is eager to support traditional unions as dominant actors, despite the fact that their level of approval in society is continually eroding.

So far, as a small union association mostly in transnational and automotive companies within a fragmented system of employment relations, MPRA's scope to expand to the broader working class or society is limited. Overall, this new movement is marked by the difficulties in transforming its successes at the plant level, and even along value chains, into lasting organizational power and meaningful influence in institutions and politics, with the latter being particularly restrained by authoritarianism. It remains an open question whether new unions will be able to not only survive but evolve under these hostile circumstances.

Conclusion

The appearance of new conflict-oriented unions in Russia seems promising. New unions like the one in Kaluga use unconventional methods of protest to promote worker interests. Entangled interconnections and dependencies of

transnational firms along the value chain, as well as the differing national, political, and economic determinants of former socialist countries, make an appraisal of the situation of workers and their unions challenging. New unions successfully represented workers and challenged the legacy system by comprehensively organizing members primarily in foreign-owned firms. While unions made considerable gains at plant level across a number of TNCs in the automotive sector over a period of roughly ten years, their prospects for lasting consolidation are not overly positive. Our analysis suggests developments are largely due to workers' high primary bargaining power in a market where a lack of imports constrains the actions of the company. MPRA has experienced a notable drop in members due to the progressive deterioration in automotive employment associated with ongoing economic problems in Russia, leading to stagnation in the development of associational power. The unions' exclusive focus on the local level, while successful, precludes pursuing sector-wide and regional agreements. This obstacle continues up to the institutional level, where those new union formations have practically no way of overcoming the stalled institutions of employment relations marked by a continuing monopoly of traditional unions and a pseudo-paternalist state. Thus, a shift in the power balance of this established system is a long-term prospect. Ironically, it is the actions of the authoritarian state that have the potential to accelerate matters. Continuing austerity policies in the public sector have led to more grass-roots labour organization among public sector workers – in 2019, 20 percent of labour protests were by medical workers protesting low wages (TsSTP 2020). If activist unions are to regain the initiative, they need to transition from areas of material production and enter the fray where neo-liberalization is now at its most disruptive in Russia – in the public sector, and among the new service sectors like Uber and food delivery.

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Rebuilding Trade Unionism During the Spanish Transition to Democracy

Victor Peña González, Eva Bermúdez-Figueroa, and Beltrán Roca

The defeat of the left after the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) made it extremely difficult to reorganize the labour movement following the extreme repression of the first years of the Francoist regime and, finally, the transition to democracy. During the first years of dictatorship, the policy of physically exterminating members of left-wing parties and trade unions created an unprecedented climate of fear. Political opposition first took the form of guerrilla action, mainly in rural areas, but also in certain cities. As time passed, the dictatorship's counter strategy transformed, with the goal of fostering economic growth and promoting commercial cooperation with foreign countries. The Francoist regime attempted to gain international legitimacy by moving away from a strategy of the extermination of dissidence to a policy of selective repression and the institutionalization of very limited channels for participation. Although independent trade unions and strikes were forbidden, Spain saw a rebirth of the labour movement after the 1960s. Historical trade unions – the anarcho-syndicalist *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT, National Confederation of Labour) and the socialist *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT, General Union of Workers) – operated from exile in France, but did not succeed in this new hostile environment. However, by the 1960s workers began to self-organize and to engage in industrial conflicts in certain areas, mainly taking advantage of the relative openness of the dictatorship. The labour movement, mainly led by the Communist Party and progressive Catholic organizations, played a key role in the mobilization of labour, political opposition movements, and the democratization of Spain at the end of the dictatorship and in the period of transition (1970s). At the same time, radical and autonomous forms of labour activism flourished, challenging the emerging neo-corporatist system and the policy of social pacts favoured by the hegemonic trade unions.

The transformation of Spanish capitalism and the new parliamentary monarchy during the transition necessitated the neutralization of labour conflict, something that took place by institutionalizing new forms of social dialogue and favouring those trade unions that were willing to participate in political exchange. This implied the marginalization, and in some cases the criminalization, of radical trade unions and autonomous groups. This chapter briefly describes this context and the processes by which the landscape of Spanish trade unions was reconfigured by the favouring of certain moderate trade unions.

The Struggle Against the Dictatorship, Labour Unrest, and Political Pacts

The reconfiguration of the Spanish labour movement after the victory of General Franco in the Spanish Civil War was a significant process, one of the results of which was the birth of a new labour movement led by *Comisiones Obreras* (CC OO, Workers' Commissions). This new labour movement was also formed by Christian militants who created their own organizations; the most well-known of these being the *Unión Sindical Obrera* (USO, Workers' Union). In 1967, one year before repression against them began to escalate, the USO abandoned the unitary space of the CC OO because of critiques of Communist domination. The CC OO, born as a horizontal movement with a strong socio-political orientation, gradually came under the influence of the Communist Party, and became a "transmission belt" of the party. Despite the division between both unions, they cooperated (mainly at the local level) and were able to rebuild the Spanish labour movement in clandestinity. Unions became the main challenge to the dictatorship, and together with their growing labour demands and activities, the democratization of Spanish society was on their agenda.

The final years of the dictatorship were characterized by increasing labour conflicts. The death of General Franco on 20 November 1975 marked the peak of these struggles. The tipping point came in 1976, with more than three and half a million workers on strike, a pre-insurreccional situation in Vitoria/Gasteiz, and the first steps being taken toward a new democratic political and labour order (Domènech 2002: 62-65). The old labour movement, represented primarily by the UGT, was legalized that year and boosted by the aims of the European socialist family (Ortuño 2002).

The broad preference in the labour movement for a unified central workers' body clashed with the UGT's desire to abandon the structures of the *Organización Sindical Española* (OSE, Spanish Workers' Organization),⁶³ not only for antifascist reasons, but as way of distancing itself from the CC OO, which derived its power from the OSE's structures. This contradiction led to the failure of the *Coordinadora de Organizaciones Sindicales* (COS, Union Organizations' Coordination) and paved the way for a political pact. The pact has been viewed by some authors (Balfour 1989) as one of the reasons for the stagnation of the Spanish labour movement after the country's transition to democracy.

The pact was managed by the Communist Party as a key tactic for entering government and building a new democracy. This had the effect of transforming the CC OO, a socio-political movement, into a trade union akin to the UGT in its organizational structure and (moderate) political orientation. Criticism of this process by the revolutionary left legitimized the fragmentation of

⁶³ Also known as "the Vertical Union" or simply "the Vertical".

the new labour movement into a constellation of workers' organizations. Despite the popularity of some radical left-wing parties and unions such as the *Confederación de Sindicatos Unitarios de Trabajadores* (CSUT, Unitary Trade Unions Confederation) and the *Sindicato Unitario* (SU, Unitary Trade Union), they did not become central protagonists in the new concertation (Pérez-Serrano 2013: 263-268). Another radical union with a different trajectory but that also opposed political pacts was the CNT (Vadillo 2019: 273-276). In spite of their marginalization, various radical trade unions survived these pactist politics and the resulting "neo-corporatist system" of labour relations (Roca 2015).

The growing international economic crisis of 1973 and its devastating impact upon unemployment levels, the menace of political repression, and the need to integrate Spain into the European Common Market and enjoy the benefits it offered were all influential in the preparing the political pact. The meeting between the anti-Francoist opposition and the government materialized in the Moncloa Pact, which established the conditions for neutralizing the new labour movement and disciplining all workers through a new system of labour relations in Spain.

The Deactivation of Labour Conflict Through a Neo-Corporatist System

During the political transition, the main Spanish labour organizations agreed to participate in political meetings with the government and employers' organizations (Rodríguez-Rata 2011). The CC OO and the UGT obtained institutional recognition and support, such as participation in consultation bodies, public funding for their activities, and participation in funding bodies for workers' training. This resulted in a "competitive corporatist" system that combined weak welfare policies and tripartite structures with low salaries and labour deregulation in order to compete with other newly industrialized countries on the international market (Etxezarreta 1991; González-Begega/Luque-Balbona 2014). In addition, during the first years of the transition, the way trade unions took part in political dialogue was mediated and reinforced by the political parties to which they were historically tied: the Communist Party in the case of the CC OO, and the social-democratic PSOE (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) in the case of the UGT.

The political transition paved the way for the regulation of labour activism. In 1977, trade unions, which previously had been clandestine or exiled, were legalized. Subsequent reforms contributed to regulating and defining union action within a neo-corporatist framework: in 1977, the right to strike was established; in 1978, the first trade union elections in which the legalized unions participated were held. In 1980, the Workers' Statute, which regulates industrial relations and established a multilevel system of collective bargaining, was passed. And in 1985, the Trade Union Freedom Act became law.

The years 1977 to 1985 represented a period of tripartite social dialogue. Major trade unions were involved in a series of social pacts aimed, among other things, at neutralizing labour conflict. After the Moncloa Pacts in 1977, which set the groundwork for the economic modernization of the country, trade unions participated in tripartite or bipartite dialogues with the government and with recently established employers' associations.

As Köhler explains: "The initial period of concertation established some of the characteristics that were to become permanent in the Spanish experience. On the one hand, it opened a process of organisational concentration of social agents, backed by a high social recognition and by some institutional incentives" (Köhler 2018: 729). In effect, major trade unions effectively became "social agents" and focused their strategy on political dialogue, relegating other forms of power such as membership, mobilization, and industrial conflicts, to a secondary position. Whilst they maintained a certain level of activism associated with collective bargaining, their emphasis on social dialogue led them to a weak position, preventing them from connecting with growing sectors of the working class (Martinez-Lucio 2008).

The Increasing Hegemony of Social-Democratic Unions

The possibility of bargaining at different levels during the end of the dictatorship led many workers to get involved in labour activism. The Catholic USO and the CC OO took advantage of the situation and adopted the strategy of infiltrating the Francoist "Vertical Union" (the OSE), which was not so much a mechanism for workers' representation as a state structure in which employers and employees could negotiate working conditions. Despite the limited nature of the Vertical Union, the strategy was a success because the clandestine unions were able to obtain resources and use official channels to engage in industrial disputes and defend workers' interests in collective bargaining, while avoiding repression. In addition, the CC OO, although created as a horizontal socio-political movement, gradually came to be controlled and supported by the Communist Party; while the USO benefited from the support of Catholic priests, churches, associations, and even certain bishops. The change in the Catholic hierarchy after the Second Vatican Council was fundamental.

The experience, militancy, and legitimacy gained by acting as clandestine activists within the Vertical Union gave the CC OO and the USO an advantage over historical unions such as the UGT and the CNT. The USO and the CNT suffered major splits that weakened their positions during the reconfiguration of the Spanish labour movement. A large faction of the USO, citing a lack of funding and political support, left the union and joined the UGT in 1977. In the following years, other significant factions joined the UGT (Bermúdez-Figueroa/Roca 2020). The CNT also began to experience internal rifts, fed by previous

divisions from its period of exile. The first free elections of union representatives were held in 1978. The CC OO won 37.8 percent of the delegates, followed by the UGT with 31 percent. The USO won only 5.9 percent and the CNT, which mostly called for a boycott of the elections, only received 0.2 percent.

The PSOE's economic and public support of the UGT was essential. Socialist leaders not only attempted to recruit members and organizers from the USO and other unions, but also oversaw the transfer of significant resources from the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the German Social Democratic Party to the UGT. A few months after the PSOE's leader Felipe González included the union's General Secretary, Nicolás Redondo, on his team, the UGT managed to recruit 600,000 members. The union election results of the UGT of 1978 reflected the success of their strategy. The PSOE victory in the 1982 general elections meant further new support for the UGT, which received a significant amount of funds in the restoration of its historical patrimony, which had been confiscated by Franco during the Civil War.

The Marginalization of Radical Forms of Labour Activism

Marginalizing radical forms of labour activism was critical for the authors of the political transition for two reasons. First, radical unions opposed the political pacts in which the Communist Party and the PSOE were involved with other political forces (Catholics, conservatives, Francoists, liberals, etc.). Second, economic liberalization and modernization demanded a reduction in industrial disputes and setting limits to salary increases and other labour demands.

The anarcho-sindicalist CNT suffered serious internal disagreements and rifts from 1978 through 1983 that led to the creation of a new anarcho-sindicalist organization, the Reconstituted CNT (which adopted the name CGT, *Confederación General del Trabajo*, General Confederation of Labor, in 1989). At the same time, police infiltration and repression undermined its attempts to organize. The 1978 Scala Case, in which a theatre burned down after a CNT demonstration in Barcelona, was a milestone in the history of the repression of the contemporary anarcho-sindicalist union.

In addition to the CNT, other forms of radical labour activism arose from the influx of Italian autonomist ideas, and were known as the autonomous struggles. These forms of militancy advocated for workers' self-organization and rejected formal structures, inter-union competition, and institutionalization. They defended wildcat strikes and called for the political education of the working class. Such initiatives were especially strong in Catalonia. They organized long strikes in certain industries and big businesses during the 1970s, such as at Roca (bathroom products) and among construction workers and dock workers. They eventually dissolved, with some of their members joining the CNT.

Radical Marxist unions such as the Basque Nationalist Workers' Commissions (LAB, *Langile Abertzaleen Batzordeak*) in the Basque Country, the Unitary Union (SU, *Sindicato Unitario*), the CSUT (*Confederación de Sindicatos Unitarios de Trabajadores*, Confederation of United Workers' Unions), and the Andalusian Land Workers' Union (SAT, *Sindicato Andaluz de Trabajadores*), had a certain amount of strength at the end of the 1970s. In the 1978 elections for union representatives the CSUT, linked to the Maoist Work Party of Spain (*Partido del Trabajo de España*, PTE), won 4 percent of the representatives, and the Unitary Union (*Sindicato Unitario*), created by another Maoist party, the ORT (*Organización Revolucionaria de Trabajadores*, Revolutionary Workers Organization), won 2.7 percent. The CSUT dissolved in 1981 and the Unitary Union's influence declined dramatically. The LAB was founded in 1974 as a mass assembly movement, following the model of the autonomous Workers Commissions (*Comisiones Obreras*, CC OO) and the *abertzale* (Basque nationalist) Workers' Commissions. In 1977 it turned into a trade union, and since then it has increased its strength. Today they have 19.1 percent (3,247) of the elected representatives in the Basque Country Autonomous Community and the 16.95 percent (1,054) in Navarra.

Under the Spanish labour relations system, the status of "more representative" is given to unions with more than 10 percent of delegates at the state level and 15 percent at the regional level. This allows the selection of certain unions as interlocutors in social dialogue. Today, only the Basque and Galician unions, which combine socialist and separatist characteristics, and the CC OO and UGT, have this status. The institutional support of social-democratic unions and, in certain cases, police repression, have contributed to the neutralization of certain forms of radical activism that were very strong at the end of the dictatorship and during the transition period. The radical left suffered a decline in the 1980s, but remains alive today in cycles of contest and in some specific and territorial forms of labour militancy.

The study of the reconfiguration of Spanish unionism during the end of the dictatorship can inform discussions about the conditions and possibilities for transformative labour activism today. The experience of Spanish unions offers us two important lessons: first, that building a movement requires a clear strategy for obtaining resources, no matter the context; second, obtaining resources from external actors (political parties and/or political exchange) has a deep influence on the political orientation of the union, in some cases undermining its character as an agent for radical democratization.

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Coal Not Dole!

The Great Strike Against Thatcher

Peter North

Coal miners often have a special place in the history of the working class movement in many places. Perhaps it's the uniquely hard nature of sweaty, muscular work in hot, dark, dirty, and dangerous conditions, and the associated high rates of death and illness. Working together, washing in the pit baths after a shift, socializing together after work, and living in geographically distinct single-industry pit villages with jobs passing from father to son led to high levels of solidarity and trade unionism.

In the UK, the miners are specifically remembered for their epic battles throughout the 20th century, but especially during the 1926 general strike. The British government, led by Winston Churchill, saw the strike as an attempt at revolution. It responded by nationalizing newspapers to produce the *British Gazette* and mobilizing students in particular to strike break on a massive scale. The general strike lasted nine days, and the miners were again left to struggle on for another seven months before again being starved back to work under worse conditions than before.

Conscripted miners called Bevin Boys made a major contribution to the victory in World War II and the subsequent nationalization of the mines by the post-war Labour government gave miners dignity for the first time in an "island built on coal" – and powered by it. That said, the mines were not put under democratic workers control, and miners may have been surprised to see former private sector managers and owners back in charge as National Coal Board (NCB) managers running the industry for the benefit of the British state. The sector continued to decline throughout the 1950s and 1960s as coal was replaced by oil and nuclear power in the UK's energy mix. Conditions were much better under nationalization, and the pay was better, but the inflation of the late 1960s and into the 1970s meant conditions were still difficult. The miners knew that, as their leader Laurence Daly put it, "we only get what we are strong enough to take" (Henke/Beckett 2009).

Saltley Gate

Things changed in January 1972 when the miners launched their first strike since 1926, in the middle of winter with coal stocks low. An unprepared government was faced with flying pickets that closed down power stations far from home, one by one, with significant levels of support from other trade unionists. No pickets of mines were necessary as no one broke the strike (or "scabbed"). Arthur Scargill emerged as a powerful, effective, well-organized,

and charismatic trade union leader who “took the view that we were in a class war, not playing cricket on the village green like they did in 1926” (Scargill 1975: 13). The climax of the strike came in February at Saltley Gates coke works in Birmingham: 400 miners battled police to stop coal lorries for three days, with 100 thrown in jail and 50 injured. On 10 February, a one-day solidarity strike was called across Birmingham’s engineering workers, and after a mass march the chief constable threw in the towel and closed the gates. The Battle of Saltley Gates went down in history as the apogee of working-class solidarity. Scargill himself later said, “All I ever hoped for, in unionism and solidarity, all I’ve dreamed of, came true on February 10 at Saltley in Birmingham. I cried that day” (Henke/Beckett 2009). A weak government called a two-day official enquiry which found the money to meet the miners’ demands. The stain of 1926 had been wiped out.

The miners inflicted their second defeat on the Conservative government in 1974. In February, again in the depths of winter, 91 percent of the miners voted to strike to rectify declining wages – to which the government responded by calling a general election, declaring a state of emergency, and limiting energy use. A three-day work week was declared, and families sat round the table by candlelight. The Conservatives campaigned on the question “Who governs Britain”, which invited the response “if you need to ask that, it’s not you”. They lost and, after a second election in 1974, the Labour government, for the first time, introduced a long term “Plan for Coal” which saw investment for first time since the 1940s. The Tories had been defeated for now, but they planned their response in the form of the Ridley Plan, by which a Tory government would take on and defeat British trade unions one by one, starting with the steel workers. On winning the 1979 general election in the context of widespread industrial disputes in what became known as the winter of discontent, they planned their next moves.

The Body Swerve

In February 1981, the government announced a restructuring of the coal industry, calculating that after the recent defeat of steel workers the miners would not walk out. But, remembering the victories in the early 70s, the miners gave the NCB a week to withdraw the cuts. Within that week, half the miners walked out, even in traditionally moderate areas. The government had not expected such a proactive response, and was not prepared for a fight in the middle of winter. The plans were promptly withdrawn – seemingly this was the third victory in a row for the miners. Communist miners’ leader Mick McGahey said it was less a victory than a “body swerve” to prepare for the next confrontation (Milne 2014: 8). The Tories knew they must eventually take on the miners and defeat them, but at a time of their choosing.

They formed Secret Cabinet Office Committee MISC57 to plan for the coming confrontation. A Police National Reporting Centre was established to co-ordinate the fight against the flying pickets, and legal restrictions on trade unions outlawed secondary picketing and solidarity action. The NCB began to stockpile coal for the coming war. A US American with a reputation for a strong antipathy to unions, Iain MacGregor, was appointed to run the NCB. The government was ready. Saltley Gate would not be allowed to happen again.

The Great Strike: Battle Commences

On 3 March 1984, miners at Cortonwood Colliery in Yorkshire were told that their pit would close. This seemed strange as the pit had five years coal still available, had been recently refurbished and miners had transferred there from other pits. A total of 500 Cortonwood miners voted to strike, and 300 of them picketed the Yorkshire offices of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in nearby Barnsley where the Yorkshire Area Council was meeting. By 9 March, rolling strike action spread across Yorkshire, and flying pickets spread out across other mining districts to explain the issues to their fellow miners and ask for their support. This was how it was always done, and how the miners had won in 1972 and 1974. Miners did not cross picket lines, they showed solidarity with their comrades. The NCB had thrown down the gauntlet, and it had to be picked up.

Others were not so sure this was the right tactic. This was a strike at a time of the NCB and the government's choosing, at the beginning of spring and with coal stocks high. They argued that a ballot was necessary for action to be called nationally, and that it would be better to show that action was being taken democratically, by the book. They argued that the Yorkshire flying pickets were being counterproductive over the county line in Nottinghamshire ("Notts"), making a strike ballot harder to win. Notts miners' leaders asked the Yorkshire miners to stay away while they organized a ballot, but the Yorkshire pickets kept coming, arguing that they had the momentum, that to stop now would be suicidal, and that a ballot gives one miner the right to vote another out of his job.

While the strike had now spread nationally, Notts still wanted a pithead ballot, and antipathy between miners in Yorkshire and Notts was hardening. No one expected miners to cross picket lines, and that they did, and in large numbers in Notts, was a surprise. With military precision on its side this time, the NCB responded with speed and ruthlessness, winning a high court injunction to stop the flying pickets, which was of course ignored. MacGreggor said "this is a well-rehearsed and organised rebellion" (Henke/Beckett 2009).

The government then put its plans into action. A total of 8,000 police officers were deployed into Nottinghamshire and coaches of flying pickets were turned back at the border. Fighting took place at pit gates between working

and striking miners, and on 15 March a picket was killed by a brick. A rampant press and the government said that the strike had become a threat to law and order. By 19 March, heavy votes were recorded against a strike in Notts, the Midlands, North East, and North West, but there was still no national ballot or let up in the actions of the flying pickets. By now, strikers said they had voted with their feet and did not want a ballot. This was a war. The strike is on, and it's effective. Many in Notts, though, worked on.

The police had by now become effectively a paramilitary force defending working miners in Nottinghamshire, and the pickets rarely got the upper hand. Flying pickets from Kent were turned back at the Dartford Tunnel under the Thames, hundreds of miles from their destination. Strikers were treated as enemies of the state by tanked-up police officers on horses, charging pickets and beating everyone they could get hold of with truncheons. The police waved wadges of overtime pay at hungry miners, making crude comments about what was happening to their families while they were at the picket lines.

The Battle of Orgreave

The government then attempted to smash the miners as spectacularly as the miners had defeated the government at Saltley Gates. This time *they* chose the field on which to join battle: out of Notts (so it could continue to produce coal), and on open ground rather than in the heart of a city (where engineers can march in support). They chose Orgreave coke works just outside Sheffield in South Yorkshire. The police put a cordon round Notts, left the road to Orgreave clear, and made it known that they would move coke from Orgreave to the Scunthorpe steel works – that the steel works kept operating was vital. They chose a time when Sheffield's engineers were on a factory shutdown.

The three-week Battle of Orgreave began on 29 May 1984. On the first day, 1,000 pickets faced a succession of baton charges from mounted police and dog handlers with Alsatians. Eighty-two people were arrested and 132 injured. The next day there were 3,000 pickets, and 2,000 the following day. Scargill was arrested on 30 May. The final battle was engaged on 18 June, when 4,000 police fought similar numbers of pickets for 10 hours in what looked like medieval combat. Ninety-three people were arrested, and hundreds injured – there are no agreed-upon numbers. Police behind shield walls rhythmically beat their truncheons on their shields, a declaration that this was an army which has declared war. Miners offering no resistance, trying to walk away or putting their hands up to surrender or show that they were peaceable were left with bloody gashes on their heads and backs, lying around on the floor unconscious and semi-conscious. The state had declared war, and inflicted a bloody defeat on the miners. Unlike in Saltley, this time there was no solidarity action from Sheffield's engineers up the road.

The defeat knocked the stuffing out of the pickets and the dispute as a whole. The police now had the psychological advantage, and the miners were pushed out of Notts and only allowed to picket their own pits in small numbers. The police followed the pickets out of Notts like a victorious army chasing a retreating enemy. The pit villages looked like occupied countries, with miners attached in their homes, in pubs, on the street. Things then settled down for a long haul with Scargill hoping that the advantage would be his when the winter arrived, and the government and the NCB hoping that enough miners would drift back to work and/or accept increasingly generous redundancy terms. Those that did not would be starved back. A negotiated solution was not possible – neither side wanted it (Henke/Beckett 2009). This was class war, and there would be a winner and a loser.

“The Enemy Within”

The government and the media made it clear what the stakes in this struggle were. This was no resolvable industrial dispute though which the consensual restructuring of what we now know to be a fundamentally unsustainable, dirty, and dangerous industry, so miners would no longer expect their sons to do what they had had to do to survive. From the government’s side, on 20 July 1984 Industry Secretary Peter Walker declared that “It can only be the desire to impose on Britain the type of socialist state that the British electorate constantly rejects, that motivates Mr Scargill to do so much damage to his industry” (Henke/Beckett 2009), while in *The Times* the same day he said “contempt for parliamentary democracy and desire to seize power through the militancy of the mob This is not a mining dispute, it is a challenge to British democracy and hence to the British people”. Thatcher said that she had fought General Galtieri, the “enemy without” in the Falklands. She now faced the “enemy within” (Milne 2014). Picketing continued but by the summer and into the autumn and winter there was an increasing drift back to work, encouraged by ever higher offers of redundancy payments, and inflated figures in the press.

Perhaps what is amazing is how many miners stuck the struggle out into the autumn and hard winter of 1984–5. That was, as much as anything, due to a fear of what a future without work meant for isolated, proud, cohesive, and well-kept pit villages with no other options: the villages would die. Across the UK, trade unionists and citizens rallied round to support them, collecting money and food (Massey/Wainwright 1985). Individuals visited churches, temples, and mosques and shook buckets in town centres. Gays and lesbians famously rallied round, as the movie *Pride* shows so well. In the pit villages themselves, “Women Against Pit Closures” groups were set up to support and feed the strikers – striking families were not left to sink or swim but were supported. Meals were cooked collectively, Christmas parties organized, and

this became the place in which solidarity was maintained for months on end in the depths of winter (Loach 1985). Millions of pounds flowed into the miners' villages, making sure miners would not be starved back to work as they had been in the 1920s.

The strikers hung on, but "Generals" January and February did not come to their aid in the form of the power cuts that hit the government in 1974. The drift back to work was becoming a flood by late January 1985, and by March it was clear that the battle was lost. While some wanted to fight on, the NUM voted to return to work without a deal, hoping to fight another day. The miners marched back into work behind their banners, but to very different workplaces. Managers refused to negotiate with a smashed union. The Notts miners did not do much better; first the remaining pits were privatized and then the industry was decimated through the 1990s. There is now no deep mining coal anywhere in the UK. That might be good for the planet, but the cost to miners, their families and communities was immense – as anyone who has seen the movie *Brassed Off* can attest.

This was a fight for communities, jobs and manufacturing, for decency, and for trade unions. When the miners lost, we all lost. Some would say that starting a fight against a prepared government at the beginning of spring was a tactical error. Others argue that if picketing had been organized as effectively in 1984 as it had been in 1972, and if trade union leaders had supported the miners, things would have been different (Callinicos/Simons 1985). Given the levels of picket-line and state violence, things were starting to look like a situation of dual power – neither side could impose its will on the other. One must win, one must lose. Unfortunately, however, things did not develop into a pre-revolutionary situation. No workers councils were formed, and one side did win: the government. Looking back, the great strike is seen as inspirational for workers and trade unionists in the UK, a climactic battle in which you had to take sides. The solidarity and support generated by millions of people for the miners shows what is possible when workers come together to battle for a better world, even if, today, that means that coal is better left in the ground.

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No End to the Resistance

Social Movements in France and Emmanuel Macron

Sebastian Chwala

When Emmanuel Macron won the French presidential election in 2017, a broad cross-section of both the media and political landscape praised the French people for their electoral decision. During the election campaign, Macron had evaded any clear categorization in terms of being left or right-wing. Instead he presented himself as a pragmatist who vowed to break with the traditional political camps and promised a fresh start that would put France back on the road to moral and economic success. Even parts of the political left could not help but delight in Macron's victory in spring 2017, as he declared his support for the expansion of transnational cooperation within the European Union.

Reactions within the French trade union movement to Macron's election success varied. This is not surprising, given that the French union movement has been split into a number of different umbrella organizations along political and strategic lines ever since it began. While the predominant conflict was initially between left-wing and conservative-Catholic unions, the Russian Revolution led to the development of new divisions between the social democratic factions and those who, in the shadow of the newly formed French Communist Party (PCF), viewed the Soviet Union in a positive light (Giraud et al., 2018: 60-2). Following brief periods of unity in the mid-1930s under the Popular Front government and in the immediate post-war period, the incipient conflict between "East" and "West" ultimately led to the French trade union movement becoming very pluralistic, a characteristic that endures to this day (Mouriaux 2004: 16-20).

While the French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT, *Confédération Démocratique du Travail*) and the General Confederation of Labour-Workers' Force (CGT-FO, *Confédération Générale du Travail – Force ouvrière*), which have traditionally been more social-democratic and consensus-oriented, currently agree to deregulation to safeguard production sites and in exchange for the expansion of formal co-determination structures within enterprises, the General Confederation of Labour (CGT, *Confédération Générale du Travail*) has traditionally relied on mobilization in the streets. This is where the differing traditions of the trade union federations became apparent. The CGT still has strong ties to the Communist Party in terms of personnel (even though its de facto status as a party-affiliated organization definitively ended in the early 2000s), and its political agenda is determined by aspects of a class-struggle orientation that aims to exert social influence from the workplace. The other large federations, by contrast, have long since ceased to view themselves as

socio-politically relevant institutions, and no longer see their primary function as representing the material needs of company employees. Practical debates over securing competitiveness and accepting an economy based on capitalist principles have prevailed (Giraud et al., 2018: 66-72).

Under the leadership of its current chairman Laurent Berger, the CFDT has shown a particular willingness to reach a consensus and negotiate. The union was readily utilized by Macron as a first point of contact in his bid to legitimize his own reform plans among workers. But herein lies the problem of this once Catholic and later intermittently radical left-wing trade union. The implosion of the communist workers' movement and the concomitant adoption of a supposedly de-ideologized, apolitical, and objective position, as represented by the CFDT, contributed to the CFDT overtaking the CGT in the works council elections in the private sector (Libération 2018). However, the fact that engaging in social dialogue and negotiations between employers' associations and unions, which in France are mediated by the state, is a foreign concept for Emmanuel Macron and his party *La République en Marche!* (LREM, The Republic On the Move) is detrimental to this union. They never go beyond the simulation stage. Informed by the presidential French Constitution, which limits the degree of parliamentary control that can be exercised against the executive, Macron's style of governance involved taking swift action by getting all of his reform plans passed in the shortest possible time frame so as to quickly create facts on the ground. Because the CFDT continues to renounce the use of strikes as a means of leverage, the union is increasingly perceived as being more on the side of employers than workers.

At any rate, the CFDT's growing influence among workers should also be put into perspective. It is mainly due to the weakness of the CGT. The CGT was once first and foremost a workers' union. As a result of structural changes and deindustrialization from the 1960s onwards, it increasingly lost its strongholds among workers in large companies. This has reduced the CGT's fighting strength and its ability to politicize workers' milieus. Historically, the CFDT has organized mainly white-collar workers and employees with academic backgrounds. The CGT has also barely been able to organize young proletarians from the suburbs who are employed in the service sector. Forms of the collective reproduction of the old Fordist workers' identity are completely lacking. The "antagonistic attitude" that young migrant workers develop as a result of years of marginalization within the education system and the daily humiliations suffered at the hands of state organs of repression can lead them to question the existing order. Yet union structures are too ineffectual to channel such people's rebellious energy, for example through education work, into a kind of collective emancipation against general social conditions (Berthonneau 2017). It therefore comes as no surprise that the number of employees

who are union members is currently stagnating at a low 11 percent (Centre d'Observation de la Société 2019).

Nevertheless, shortly after the 2017 elections, the first attempts were made to initiate protest movements against Macron. The *Front Social* emerged after Macron, shortly after having assumed office, announced further deregulation of labour law and appointed right-wing liberal politicians to set economic and financial policy. A number of left-wing civic initiatives rallied around the left-wing CGT and called for protest rallies and demonstrations against the impending cuts to the welfare state planned by Macron and a government led by the right-wing liberal prime minister Édouard Philippe. They did not, however, succeed in mobilizing large numbers of people and quickly ebbed away (Israel 2017).

People are Outraged by Macron's "Renewal" of France, but the Left is Floundering

In contrast to the previous year, 2018 was characterized by a boom in social movements. While the media still saw President Macron as a superstar at the beginning of the year, protest movements began to develop in all areas of society from spring onwards in response to the fact that all areas of social and economic life were now being overrun with "reforms" implemented by the president and his government. In addition to granting further massive tax cuts amounting to billions of euros to large French companies, more than 100,000 jobs in the public sector were put on the line. Even hospitals were not exempt from staff cuts, and a number of emergency rooms faced closure. Although it was to remain publicly owned, the national railway SNCF was to be converted into a company organized under private law, and passenger transport was to be opened up to private companies. Asylum laws were to be significantly tightened, and a reform of university admission regulations was also on the agenda. These plans were met with vociferous protest from students and trade unions; strikes were held at the SNCF for weeks, and dozens of universities were temporarily occupied (Chwala 2018).

The heart of the student protests was the Tolbiac campus of the University of Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne, which was blockaded and became self-administered for a number of weeks. The planned reforms were critically examined in a series of alternative lectures, and a space was created to facilitate networking, in particular between students and railway workers. Remarkably enough, however, there were hardly any protests in the schools in the spring of 2018. Attempts were made on the part of the institutional left to unite the protest front into a powerful and enduring common movement (Clavel/Tremblay 2018).

On 5 May 2018, the events of the hot spring months came to a head when 130,000 people who were engaged in various forms of protest against Ma-

cron's policies demonstrated in Paris. Film director François Ruffin, a National Assembly deputy for *La France Insoumise* (LFI), and economist Frédéric Lordon had been calling for this demonstration, ironically called the *Fête à Macron* (party for Macron), since April (Zerouala 2018).

Despite a long-standing open feud between the PCF and the LFI party pertaining to strategy and hegemony within the “anti-liberal left”, representatives of all movements took part in the demonstration. In order to counteract concerns that the non-partisan *Fête à Macron* could be misappropriated by political parties, another day of decentralized protests under the same name was called for at the initiative of Attac France and the left-wing think tank *Fondation Copernic*, in which tens of thousands of people once again took part. Even the CGT, which primarily defines itself through labour struggles, called for people to participate in this civic day of action (Israel/Graulle 2018). In the end, however, these actions did not prevent the government from implementing its legislative changes.

The “Yellow Vests” are Changing France, but to What Extent?

Although the movements closely associated with the academic left and the unions had sought out an open conflict with the government and lost, there was no real respite for those marching under the right-wing liberal banner. Much to the surprise of onlookers, the wrath of the “yellow vests” erupted in November 2018. While the initial trigger was their rejection of a so-called “green tax” that would have significantly increased the price of diesel fuel for consumers, the demands of the yellow vests soon went far beyond this single issue. Even a movement of school students who were anxious about the effects the 2018 educational reforms might have on their career prospects made themselves heard (Morin 2018). The social composition of this student movement also resembled that of the yellow vests. There is, however, no denying that unorganized right-wing actors on social media had also helped initiating the actions of November 2018 (Sénécat 2019).

Both in the yellow vests' numerous Facebook groups and for those gathering at the roundabouts that were long used by demonstrators as assembly points and that functioned in a similar way to the *Nuit Debout* urban social movement in 2016, the predominant concern was a further dismantlement of state infrastructure, low-wage public retirement pensions, and an inequitable taxation system that under-taxed the wealthy. Racist rhetoric did not play a part in the movement, and over time sympathy for people living in the suburbs grew among a large number of the active “yellow vests”. This occurred as the movement was subjected to massive repression over the course of 2019. There was increasing awareness that social groups that were considered subversive could hardly expect concessions in the authoritarian Fifth Republic. For

decades, suburbs with high numbers of migrant inhabitants had been places where the state and police had attempted by all possible means to violently quell protests against marginalization and poverty (Chwala 2019). The yellow vests then saw this constellation confirmed for themselves, even though their movement was for the most part spearheaded by white individualized actors from detached housing estates who commute to work in the metropolitan areas. However, the actions of the yellow vests led to the emergence of close-knit local communities. A number of activists who had endured declining prospects and massive cuts to social spending found in the yellow vest movement a means of escaping their social isolation. While the hard core of the movement is also characterized by an above-average level sympathy for the social left, both the cultural and spatial distance from the larger cities hindered a long-term, sustained commitment to the cause (Floris/Gwiazdzinski 2019; Jeanpierre 2019).

So far, even the yellow vests have not been able to decisively shift Macron's course, but they have managed to recentre some important issues and ideas. On the one hand, the yellow vests demonstrate that modern-day workers' milieus are not uniform and have not become the new core constituency of radical right-wing movements in France. The yellow vests have rearticulated positions critical of capitalism and class-struggle orientation in proletarian milieus and have contributed to their re-politicization. In this regard, the yellow vest movement could constitute a preliminary stage that leads to further political organization within the social left. The issue of police violence is now also finally being addressed in French society; there are not only debates about individual incidents, but also a structural analysis that has exposed the hierarchical, masculinist, and racist consensus that pervades police institutions.

All of this was discursively amplified in France by the crisis triggered by Covid-19, even though the strict curfews put a stop to protests for months. The overburdened hospital system and the excessive mortality rate in geriatric care facilities confirmed the validity of the yellow vests' calls for a state bound to act in the interests of all people. It was the yellow vests who, once the absolute curfews had been lifted, assembled at roundabouts in order to angrily make their presence felt. Days of protest ensued in which tens of thousands of people called for a strengthening of the public health system. In May 2020, all progressive civic organizations, including the CGT, managed to come together for the first time to formulate a collective proposal for a socio-ecological transformation (Graulle 2020).

The pressure elicited by the movements was mainly of political benefit to the Greens, previously only a minor party, and ultimately led to a rapprochement between all the left-wing parties. The left-wing coalition candidates in the local elections held in March and June of this year, in which activists from

the movements also ran for office, were a great success. It remains to be seen whether a reformed and regenerated left, which places a particular emphasis on giving a voice to actors outside the political establishment, will manage to tap into the prevailing “socio-ecological” mood and, with a programmatic synthesis, provide a viable alternative to the right-wing nationalist and neo-liberal political options.

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Between the Times

A Brief Moment of Self-Empowerment – Workers in the GDR in 1989 and 1990

Renate Hürtgen

When revolutionary energy took hold among factory workers in the GDR in the autumn of 1989, it followed a period of dictatorial rule over the workforce, in which every autonomous movement independent of state and party had been suppressed. In order to fully grasp the historical significance of this brief period of grassroots political awakening among factory workers, it is essential that we explore what the situation was like for workers in the GDR.

After 1945, the same spirit of change that had gripped the labour movement across Europe also prevailed in the Soviet Occupation Zone/GDR. After the war, workers' councils were established in factories, old site managers were dismissed, and spontaneous efforts were made to install the first ever trade union structures to represent and support both industrial and agrarian workers. Yet these self-organized committees did not last long; they were soon banned and replaced by the FDGB (Free German Trade Union Federation), which functioned according to the Soviet model. Social-democratic and anarchist – but also communist – officials were no longer welcome unless they were prepared to comply with the dictates of the Stalinist faction. Founded in 1946, the FDGB soon took up what would be its definitive function within the GDR: from the early 1950s, its primary task was to ensure that the state economic plan was met and surpassed. Trade union work in the GDR primarily consisted of urging workers to achieve increased output; little remained of traditional trade union functions. Since many social security benefits in the GDR were guaranteed through the employer, the trade unions took on a considerable degree of importance for employees from the 1960s onwards – especially for women. However, there is a dearth of historical examples of trade unions organizing collective campaigns for increased wages, longer holiday leave, or better working conditions. The trade unions constitute institutionalized proof that what was once an autonomous labour movement in the GDR had become a “nationalized labour movement”, that is, that it had lost the character of being a properly political movement.

The Beginning of the End of an Autonomous Labour Movement in the GDR

The tradition of labour movements was still very much alive when, eight years after the end of the war, workers in the GDR fought back against the unreasonable demands of the regime and went on strike for their rights on 17 June

1953. Construction workers in Berlin assembled on Stalinallee, and shortly thereafter, blue and white-collar workers in over 300 companies assembled in their factories, presented their demands, elected strike leaders, declared their solidarity with their fellow workers who were already on strike, and resorted to the methods of resistance with which they were familiar.

The uprising was famously crushed with the help of Soviet tanks; arrests followed, and even death sentences were carried out. The actions, which were experienced as a defeat, were not discussed in the domestic sphere, as bans prohibited people from even mentioning 17 June 1953. In the factories, tribunals were held and employees were urged to publicly denounce the defendants. Those who refused to do so and refused to condemn the uprising as a “fascist putsch” risked being sent to prison. The suppression of the 17 June 1953 uprising became an historic turning point in terms of how workers in the GDR navigated conflict situations. It would be the last time that masses of workers in the GDR collectively fought back against the “corporate state” until the autumn of 1989.

The GDR leadership’s first response to the events of 17 June 1953 was to get the Stasi to construct a surveillance and monitoring system in the factories; the focus of their work shifted from the home to the workplace (the “production principle”). After 1953, the Combat Groups of the Working Class were developed into paramilitary units; it was common knowledge that they were to be deployed against the workers if another mass strike were to occur.

The example of the strike action in the GDR factories demonstrates how the tradition-conscious workers had become individualized and privatized wage-earners who not only no longer had any direct experience of strike situations, but also had to relearn all forms of collective, internal resistance. Striking was and is an integral part of working-class culture – something that the new leaders of the GDR, who felt obliged to uphold this tradition, were well aware of. They therefore focused all of their “attention” on eradicating all forms of collective resistance from the lives of workers in the GDR, especially industrial strikes. They established a repressive monitoring and surveillance system, which significantly contributed to the political atomization of the GDR labour force (Hürtgen 2005).

Following the 1953 uprising, it was no longer possible for activists to draw public attention to strike actions via the media or demonstrations in front of factory gates. The GDR’s repressive policy towards workers’ strike and protest activities and the “hushing up” of any form of employee protest ultimately meant that walkouts or work stoppages – although still practised here and there – no longer existed for workers in the GDR.

What workers were traditionally – and still in the early days of the GDR – attempting to achieve through strikes or other forms of collective resistance

shifted to the individual assertion of workers' self-interest. In the petitions and complaints filed by workers, a number of the wishes and demands presented, such as increases to premiums and wages, guaranteed kindergarten places, and lamps or coffee machines for the workplace, were the same that had led to strikes in the past. In the 1970s and 1980s, "industrial action" in the GDR had essentially become a series of individual requests that were formulated in the private domestic sphere and only discussed within the family before being lodged (Hürtgen 2013).

How the DDR Labour Movement "Rose From the Ashes" in 1989

In the summer of 1989, trade union leaders, the Council of Ministers, and party leaders were inundated with petitions and open letters that had been drawn up in work teams, trade union branches, or together with co-workers "around the kitchen table". These collective kinds of lobby groups were considered so dangerous that the secret police of the GDR, the Stasi, brought them all under its control. However, they managed to garner as little public attention at the time as the other unheard-of "events" in the factories; for example, in elections for the management of the factory trade unions in May 1989, candidates were elected who had not been put forward by the party, and the state's economic plan was openly rejected. In September 1989, there were isolated cases among workers of "hostile group formation", as the Stasi described the first autonomous political movements to occur following decades of standstill.

In October 1989, when hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets not only in Leipzig and Dresden, but throughout the entire country, Erich Honecker had resigned, and the new parties and opposition groups had taken shape, the workers of the GDR had not yet come into play as an independent actor in their own right. A loud grumbling could be heard within the factories and unions, but it was not until the political heads of the party regime had been overthrown and the border had been opened that the situation in the factories finally took on a revolutionary tone. The open border provided an opportunity for escape, as those who took a stand within the factory context did so without the cloak of anonymity offered by larger public street demonstrations.

The old power structures persisted within the factories, which is why, in the first phase of the industrial *Wende* (turning point), demands were made that the factories' operating situation be disclosed. In the meantime, small groups of three to five people had come together in the factories in order to formulate such demands and call for workers' assemblies. Then the rank and file mobilized: the voluntary shop stewards proposed a vote of confidence in their full-time management of the trade union. The most important demands for all of the factories' rank and file activists during this phase were the removal of the SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) and the Combat Groups

of the Working Class from the factories, and an end to socialist competition. In some factories, demands of this kind were backed up by a warning strike.

More than 200 factory strikes, warning strikes, and protests were held from August 1989 to April 1990; the significance of these actions for the overall movement has thus far garnered as little recognition as the direct democratic attempts at self-empowerment carried out in the factories, which is discussed below. One explanation for this widespread lack of awareness can be found in the character of the movement itself: unlike in 1953, no workers' uprisings took place in the GDR in 1989. Opposition groups had little interest in changing the workers' conditions. At the Alexanderplatz demonstration on 4 November 1989, Heiner Müller was the only speaker to address the workers' situation; he called for the formation of horizontally organized unions that would be independent of the FDGB (Hürtgen 2001: 165).

The Industrial Awakening of 1989: The Little-Known Side of the GDR Revolution

In November 1989, the trade unions in the GDR were basically non-existent. The executive board of the FDGB played no further role in the upheavals; the entire union apparatus had fallen into a kind of stupor, unable to act unless on orders "from above". It was only the voluntary shop stewards who played a crucial role during this period: they used the structures and means associated with their position to help set change in motion in the workplace. No regional associations or executive boards of any individual trade unions were involved in overthrowing the old power structures within the factories and establishing new ones; the changes to labour relations in factories in the GDR in 1989–90 were initiated exclusively by grassroots activists operating within the factories.

This lack of industrial lobby groups left room for discussions to arise about formulating an alternative. The old balance of power was not permanently dismantled with the fall of Erich Honecker in October, nor with the resignation of his successor, Egon Krenz, in December 1989. Directors took the opportunity to adjust to market economy conditions. They held secret negotiations with interested businesses from the West and began dismissing workers. On 22 December 1989, the director of a power station announced the shutdown of entire sections of the plant; in other factories, negotiations were conducted with companies from the West, which employees were excluded from. Pressure mounted among workers to establish their own lobby groups capable of counteracting this uncontrolled corporate growth.

The protagonists of the GDR's Autumn Revolution had no concept of how to transform society as a whole, nor how to transform industrial structures. An extended learning process began because, as Ewald S., an activist of the

independent grassroots movement from the *Geräte- und Reglerwerk Teltow* (GRW), retrospectively summarizes the situation: "Nobody had any idea about democracy, not in the factories at any rate." Quite spontaneously and without having previously reached any such consensus, everybody saw these initiatives as an expression of the interests and intentions of the majority and as "solely committed to the workers". In order for these small groups of sometimes only four or five co-workers to attain the legitimacy required to speak and act on behalf of the rest of the workers, they collected signatures to support their cause, or organized a vote.

Others simply established themselves as a "staff council", "company council", "works council", "institutional board", "independent lobby group for working people", "independent trade union group", "working committee", or simply a "workers' council", in order to later be properly elected as their company lobby group by a majority of employees. Terms such as "provisional works council" aptly describe the transitional nature of such bodies, and the "round tables" that were established in the factories in the autumn of 1989 also indicate that, in 1989 and 1990, the balance of power in the GDR had not yet been determined. What the establishment of these groups had in common was that they did not see themselves as part of the reconstruction of the FDGB, but rather as the nucleus of an independent, grassroots, democratic trade union, or an entirely new vehicle for advocating workers' interests, the future form of which nobody could predict.

For workers in the GDR, these events were monumental; they entailed a level of self-empowerment that they had never known before, a sudden surge of immense power that might only exist in times of revolution. For the first time, they were summoned to workers' assemblies themselves, where they became aware of their size and strength for the very first time. When protagonists of this industrial *Wende* met up ten years after the autumn of 1989, alongside their reasonable understanding that they had failed to achieve their revolutionary aims, they also made repeated reference to the period that had had such a decisive impact on the future course of their lives: a time marked by a spirit of collective optimism, when workers marched with "heads held high". Unfortunately, workers in the GDR had little time for this kind of experience; the vacuum in which part of the factory workforce began to intervene with their own ideas and actions was dismantled in a matter of weeks.

It is not easy to discern the structure and content of a future representation of workers' interests in the GDR amid this great variety of initiatives. In some factories, a newly elected BGL (factory union management), a company council, and an independent trade union group existed side by side for a number of weeks. Apart from a few exceptions, these initiatives were mostly oriented toward work conducted within the factory.

One of the exceptions that had inter-company union links in mind was the IUG (Initiative for Independent Trade Unions). At the end of December 1989, the IUG prepared a statute that would apply in the event that a new structure should emerge in the factories from below. The statute left it open whether the independent union should be organized by branch, company, or occupation. Yet it unequivocally demands that the full-time bureaucratic apparatus be replaced by volunteers. Other grassroots initiatives included the reduction of full-time staff in their programmes for a new independent trade union, along with the direct election of all officials, strike ballots, transparency, and of course the right to strike and organize.

It was due to this grass-roots democratic spirit from the autumn of 1989 that the new factory initiatives were able to voice their demands for such extensive rights to the factory management in such a matter-of-fact and self-assured way. Their programmes included rights of co-determination “in all issues of company development”, in “all structural issues”, as well as “in all property issues”, as the work programme of the Funkwerk Köpenick (a telecommunication engineering company) works council put it. In other factories, calls were made for workers to “have a say in all cadre-related political affairs”, as well as in matters regarding “planning, production, investment activity, sales, and research and development”; others demanded the right of veto regarding matters pertaining to personnel and company strategy, or placed the decision regarding “filling management positions with people who have garnered the trust of employees through their professional, technical, and economic expertise” entirely within the remit of the future works council (Gehrke/ Hürtgen 2001). How shocked and appalled they must have been a few months later when they discovered what kinds of limits had been imposed on the federal German works council.

The German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) unions, which had observed the events in the factories of the GDR from early on, did not adopt any of these incentives for their own industrial work. They completely turned their backs on these and all other grassroots initiatives within the factories, and worked hard to push federal German industrial relations legislation through as quickly as possible without the participation of GDR workers and without modifying or adapting it to the historically unique situation. The numerous new ideas and grassroots democratic inspiration for the design of participatory structures from autumn 1989 gave way to the organizational demands of preparing for and holding elections.

A socialist revolution to overthrow the capitalist system did not take place in the GDR in 1989 and 1990. How could it have after decades of oppression of an autonomous workers’ movement? Instead, a historically narrow window of opportunity had opened up for a learning process pertaining to the

substance and structures of the autonomous workplace lobby groups, which was to leave its mark. Having been entirely omitted from the annals of history, even those pertaining to the trade union movement, East German workers shortly thereafter began to mobilize against the privatization and closure of GDR factories. These closures were primarily organized by the *Treuhandanstalt* (trust agency), which eradicated more than half of all industrial jobs within just two years. Between 1990 and 1994, a wave of strikes and protests against this deindustrialization policy engulfed the East German states, the likes of which had not been seen since the 1920s. The majority of these struggles were carried out without trade union leaders, organized instead by employees, shop stewards, and the first elected works councils.

The brutal form of neoliberalism practised in East Germany in the 1990s ultimately worked to radicalize industrial action, making it more political, and at the same time demonstrating that the German trade union policy which had been in place for decades was incapable of responding to this exceptional situation. The co-management policy and industrial negotiation strategy therefore failed in the wake of widespread factory closures, and state-organized deindustrialization could only have been rectified by way of a political strike. There is a time for trade union “instruments”, and they should be fundamentally reviewed when the situation demands it.

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From Symbolism to Practice

German Unions Need to Support Anti-Racism in the Fight Against the Dangers of the Right

Romin Khan

The German Trade Union Confederation (*Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund*, DGB),⁶⁴ and its eight member organizations see themselves as a bulwark against right-wing extremism and racism. This basic understanding is rooted in German history. The transfer of power from the middle-class elites to the National Socialists led to the persecution of the political opponents of the Nazis, especially Social Democrats, Communists, and many union leaders. The SA (*Sturmabteilung*, the Nazi Party's paramilitary wing) occupied the unions' headquarters on 2 May 1933, after which the unions were dismantled. After the Second World War, anti-fascism was part of the fundamental consensus of the DGB, which was re-established as a united trade union in 1949.

The unions that comprise the DGB advocate the democratization of the economy, the state, and society, and fight all forms of discrimination in the economy, the state, or society based on sex, race, ethnic background, religion or world view, disability, age, or sexual orientation. Today these goals (which are formulated in DGB's charter) are the guiding basis for the DGB's fight against racist and populist right-wing trends and attitudes (DGB-Bundesvorstand 2018).

But charters and declarations must be put into practice. After the war, Germany's recruitment of migrant workers from 1955 represented a severe test of the DGB's fundamental position. After initial hesitation and defensive positions (out of fear of wage competition by the newly arrived workers), a position of solidarity prevailed in the union. Incorporating the new colleagues into the membership body was successful not least because migrant employees actively demanded their rights with wildcat strikes and self-organization and refused to accept the role of a flexible reserve army assigned to them by capital (IG Metall 2019: 15-17).

In the years after the war, no extremist right-wing party managed to establish itself permanently or to significantly convert the racist resentment

⁶⁴ The DGB is the largest umbrella organization for unions in Germany. The eight member unions with their approximately six million members cover all sectors and areas of the economy. The DGB advocates the principle of a united trade union (*Einheitsgewerkschaft*) due to the historical experience of the division of workers' movements and the resulting failure to prevent the rise of the Nazis.

and right-wing attitudes held by some sections of the union membership⁶⁵ into votes. The growing potential of the right was absorbed by Helmut Kohl's CDU/FDP government, which came to power in 1982; Kohl had won the election by threatening to send the majority of people of Turkish background back to their country of origin (Herbert 2001: 249). The unions positioned themselves against the state's stirring up of hatred and the increasing attacks on migrants with initiatives like *Mach meinen Kumpel nicht an!* (Don't attack my buddy!) in 1986. Since that time, this association has stood up for equal treatment and solidarity in the workplace and serves as a point of connection for the anti-racist activities of many workers.

Over thirty years later, with the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, AfD), a political party was established that, unlike earlier right-wing and fascist parties, acted as a gathering point for various political tendencies, and has a political appeal that reaches all the way to the political centre. The AfD encompasses Christian, conservative, and neoliberal circles as well as a strong national-socialist wing whose nationalist social-populism also attracts wage earners and the unemployed, including many union members. Here, the central battleground is the aggressive defence of fossil-fuel industry capitalism and agitation against a kind of "rootless" big business that uses globalization to transfer profits abroad "at the expense of German workers". This has been expedited by the government's "mass immigration" policies, with the intention of putting downward pressure on wages and leads to "population replacement".

The different tendencies of the AfD come together in their common agitation against taking in refugees and against accepting Muslim life in Germany; racism is the cement that binds it all together. This is where the different groups within the AfD – which often stand diametrically opposed on questions of labour market and social policy – close ranks.

The way that the AfD has disguised itself as a harmless and normal democratic party has made it difficult for the unions to develop effective counter-strategies. While the consensus of maintaining distance from the AfD was never seriously in danger among the unions, there has been disagreement as to how the party can be demystified rhetorically and in terms of content – which leading unionists call for – if it makes no clear programmatic commitments in terms of labour market and social policies.

Another obstacle to an active counter-mobilization within the unions was the way the AfD portrayed itself as a "party of the little people" due to the

⁶⁵ The last large-scale study of approval rates of union members for right-wing parties and positions was undertaken by the *Kommission Rechtsextremismus* (Commission Against Right-Wing Extremism) in the 1990s (DGB-Bundesvorstand 2000).

above-average approval it received from workers, the unemployed, and union members in state and federal elections in 2016 and 2017.⁶⁶ After what became known as the 2015 Summer of Migration,⁶⁷ several approaches to unionist political education were initiated that set a realistic view of the causes of refugee and migration movements against the influence and agitation of the right. With its Facts, Not Populism seminar series about refugee and migration policies, ver.di,⁶⁸ for example, has primarily sought to reach trainees and young employees. This empowers young people and trainees to act against right-wing populism, to recognize fake news and populist arguments, and to cultivate anti-racist and democratic attitudes.

The initial hesitation about actively fighting against the AfD only changed when the AfD's internal power struggles and election successes (especially in eastern Germany) led to the increased influence of the openly fascist wing of the party and its national-socialist programme. The mobilization of right-wing thugs in Chemnitz in August 2018 culminated in stirring up hatred against and attacks on migrants. The situation was reminiscent of the racist pogroms in eastern and western Germany in the 1990s.

Several days earlier, a young man from Chemnitz (himself a person of colour) had been killed in a fight by a refugee from Iraq. The AfD instrumentalized the deed for their racist propaganda against "migrant violence", which served to trivialize and defend the ensuing overreaction. The subsequent attendance of large parts of the AfD leadership at a march of silence for the victim and their open show of solidarity with neo-Nazis made it clear that both groups shared the same goal: the violent creation of an ethnically and culturally cleansed Germany.

Chemnitz was a turning point for large parts of the left-liberal spectrum, the unions among them. The whole scenario revealed how the rapid rise of a racist party had been enabled and how this had led to an atmosphere of violence: the major German media outlets took up the narrative of refugees' increased inclination to violence; federal Minister of the Interior Horst See-

⁶⁶ The election results confirm many studies that show that approval of extremist right-wing ideologies has also risen amongst workers since 2015. Union members even have a greater tendency towards authoritarian and nationalist attitudes than people who are not active in unions (Zick et al., 2018: 134).

⁶⁷ In 2015, faced with large numbers of refugees attempting to enter Europe via the Balkans, Germany took in almost one million asylum seekers from Middle Eastern countries affected by war and other crises.

⁶⁸ With two million members, ver.di is the second largest union in the DGB (after IG Metall) and represents employees in the service sector, including the civil service, the healthcare sector, and the transportation and logistics sector. Fifty-two percent of active ver.di members are women.

hofer expressed understanding for the attackers and legitimized the violence by saying that migration was the “mother of all problems” (Die Welt 2018); and the police showed themselves either unable or unwilling to prevent the racist attacks from taking place.

These events gave a boost to the newly formed *#Unteilbar-Bündnis* (#Indivisible Alliance), which on 13 October 2018 held a demonstration in Berlin for an open and solidary society that was attended by upwards of 240,000 people, over five times more than the organizers had expected. The message was clear: social issues, the fight for good education and employment, and the right to asylum will not be played off against each other – these struggles are indivisible. “One of the strengths of the appeal was that it didn’t present a one-dimensional understanding of racism as the product of social precarization, which would perhaps disappear again if the precarity of large segments of the population ceased. Rather, social dismantling and racism are understood as separate yet interconnected problems” (Reusch 2018). This was precisely the awareness that had often been lacking from earlier analyses by the unions regarding the rise of the new right-wing extremism and racism.

The events of Chemnitz and the *unteilbar* demonstration changed the nature of the debate within the unions. For example, while the previous ver.di chairman Frank Bsirkse had long maintained a simplistic view of the AfD as “social protests that had drifted to the right”, now the emphasis fell on the specifically racist character of the party,⁶⁹ which threatened and disparaged union members with migrant backgrounds.⁷⁰

Even if the social reforms of the late 1990s had led to a rise in low-wage employment and social precariousness in Germany, when one considers the social distance between refugees and most people who vote right-wing, the argument that voting behaviour is determined by fear of losing one’s job due to competition by new migrants is a shallow one. In essence, many AfD voters want to maintain their privileges based on their background or skin colour in a society that is becoming more diverse. Right-wing ideologies are always ideologies of inequality.

The unions have adopted the slogan *Klare Kante und offene Tür* (a firm stance and an open door) as a helpful guiding principle for political and day-to-day disputes. Hans-Jürgen Urban, a member of IG Metall’s federal executive board, aptly summarized the associated attitude at the *unteilbar* demon-

⁶⁹ See IG BAU 2018, and DGB-Bundesvorstand 2019.

⁷⁰ In 2017, IG Metall was the first German union to scientifically study how many of its members have a migration background. They found that almost 22 percent do, a total of almost 500,000 people. See www.igmetall.de/presse/pressemitteilungen/ig-metall-fast-eine-halbe-million-mitglieder-haben-migrat.

stration: “Our message is: ‘*Klare Kante gegen rechts!*’ (A firm stance against the right). A firm stance against anyone [...] who disguises themselves as an advocate for the so-called ‘little people’ in order to sell their disgusting fantasies of *Volk*⁷¹ and race. There is no room for your racism in a democratic society! But it is [just as] important to extend a hand to those who have been pushed to the margins of society, who are threatened daily with social decline and who have seen their own life histories devalued and betrayed. [...] An open door does not mean accommodating right-wing attitudes. An open door means an invitation to fight against reactionary solutions in favour of solutions to social problems based on solidarity. With us, in the unions, in social movements and local initiatives. [...] An IG Metall without colleagues with a migration background or with a non-German passport is a horrific idea” (Urban 2018a).

In the following, I want to sketch four core areas in which this guiding principle can unfold its effect on a union-level and a firm-level. The task of re-politicizing enterprises in the fight against the right falls to the unions precisely because they “are often (...) the only democratic organizations that can reach those workers sympathetic to right-wing populism” (Dörre et al., 2018: 83). The challenge is also intensified by the fact that unions are confronted with tickets close to the AfD in works council elections in a small number of enterprises.⁷² The threat is not limited to the political level through the AfD’s appeal to its own members; it is now also a question of power bases within firms.

a) The meaning of equal rights for common struggles

“In future, the common social status of wage workers can also serve as the foundation of an everyday solidarity that lives from mutual recognition” (Urban 2018b). The (often racist) division of the workforce into core and fringe groups undermines working relationships built on equal rights and cooperation. Outrage at this situation offers a starting point for discussion and for conferring the principle of equal rights (such as the right to vote) to everyone independent of their citizenship status as a means of strengthening the entire class. Today no-one seriously questions the right of workers without a German passport to vote in works council elections, which was the case until the early 1970s.

⁷¹ Volk can be translated as ‘nation’ or ‘people’. The right – from right-wing conservatives to fascists – uses the term to refer to an idea of Germanness that is rooted in biological and ethnic criteria (editor’s note).

⁷² For further information about right-wing corporate groups, see: www.labour-net.de/politik/gw/gw-in-d/igm/zentrum-automobil-e-v-eine-neofaschistische-betriebsgruppe-bei-daimler-stuttgart/.

b) Anti-racist education

Unions must do more to push back the division between “us” and “them”, the creation of the category of “foreigners” that can then be assigned with particular characteristics. To achieve this, education requires a historical understanding of racism that demonstrates how the “foreigner” is constructed in the labour market and in citizenship law, in order to provide an understanding of their lower social status. Even today, the lack of language courses and residence rights, for example, shows that for a long time the ruling class had no interest in pursuing a policy of integration. Instead, even against the resistance of many migrants, they sought to establish a migration system based purely on economic considerations.

c) Shifting the debate

In response to the perception of an apparent worsening of working conditions and increasing social precarity, right-wing groups have built their political approach on an insider–outsider logic of “us versus them”. In contrast, Sauer et al. (2018) call for “unions to be strengthened as a protective power for all groups of wage earners (whether employees, the unemployed, those in precarious situations, or migrants), thereby [creating] an antidote against the right-wing groups’ promise of security, a promise which is underlaid with feelings of resentment”. Many topics could clearly demarcate top and bottom in a meaningful way again: tax evasion and the tax-funded subsidizing of prosperous enterprises through low pay rates and topping up wages, profits arising from the actions that cause migration, and widespread union-busting (which marks the return of capitalist landowner policies) are topics that overwhelmingly outstrip racist thought patterns and strengthen the class standpoint. But resentments often sit so deep, and are reproduced thousandfold via social media, that there is also a need for clear statements in this regard. Works agreements in favour of respectful behaviour and against racism send the potent message that racist behaviour in the workplace can have serious consequences.

d) Living and strengthening diversity

Labour struggles in recent years have convincingly shown that the fixation on a white German skilled workforce (as is in vogue again in parts of the left) has little to do with the reality of a heterogeneous class composition (IG Metall 2017; Khalil et al., 2020). Looking at the unions’ boards and leadership positions, it is clear that they don’t reflect the reality of an immigration society. It is high time that this changed (Khan 2020), not only to fulfil the promise of participation and lived diversity but also to immunize against the processes of division described above. The counter-narrative of solidarity between

different wage-earning people must be much more strongly reflected in the level of representation, to delegitimize the false notion of ethnically homogeneous groups and nations.

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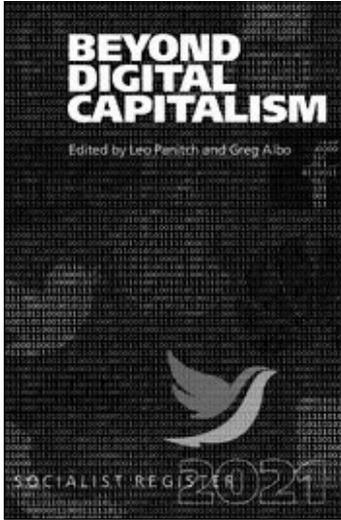
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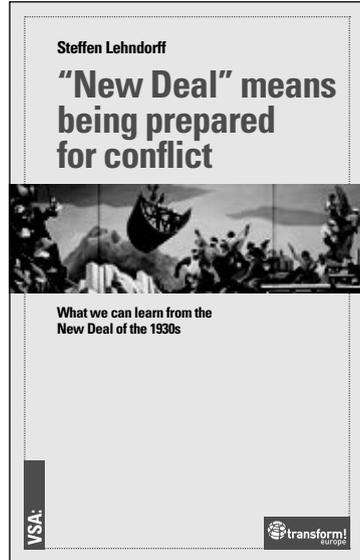
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