

**Labour conflicts in the global south: towards a new theory of resistance?**

As indicated in the various contributions to this special issue, when analysing labour conflict in the Global South, we first need to make a theoretical, a conceptual shift beyond Eurocentric industrial relations. As Jörg Nowak shows in his article, the traditional focus of industrial relations research on trade unions, employers' associations and the state was developed in the historically specific conditions of post-World War II industrialised countries, when trade unions had become institutionally integrated into Keynesian economic policy-making around Fordist mass production and mass consumption. Clinging on to this by now outdated conceptual starting point implies that key struggles over capitalist exploitation and important dimensions of resistance are overlooked. Instead, Nowak suggests to focus on the social formation, which includes various arenas of conflict. We need to 'address social formations as totalities in which labour, workers, and labour conflict are conceived in their interdependence with other spheres of social life'. Hence, not only struggles over wage increases and work conditions, but also over essential services such as access to healthcare, education or clean water are part of wider struggles against capitalist exploitation. The workplace continues to be an important place of action and mobilisation against exploitation, but so are other places and arenas like essential services, neighbourhoods, housing issues and families and households.

Maurizio Atzeni's call against trade union fetishism follows similar lines. For too long, he argues, have industrial relations scholars privileged trade unions as the main actors resisting exploitation and representing working class interests. Instead, the focus should be on actually existing processes of struggle in order to capture working class action in a comprehensive manner. Researchers, he argues, need to focus on 'the multiple forms of working class action

and organisation that co-exist across the formal and informal spaces in which workers' interests and their representation are formed'. As we have outlined in the Introduction to this special issue, this division between formal and informal labour is another legacy of Eurocentric industrial relations literature. Formal employment, considered as standard, typical employment form, again based on the experiences of Fordist social relations of production post-World War II, has been contrasted with 'atypical', exceptional forms of employment. Nevertheless, formal and informal labour are generally conditional on each other and the boundaries between the two are blurred. In any case, formal employment had never been standard practice in the Global South, and in advanced industrialised countries too, precarious employment has seen a strong comeback after decades of neo-liberal restructuring. Additionally, as Atzeni makes clear, precariousness is not only experienced at the workplace, but increasingly also when it comes to accessing essential services such as housing, health care and water. Struggles to secure this access are often waged via organisational vehicles different from trade unions. In short, neither Nowak nor Atzeni would argue that trade unions have become irrelevant when it comes to the representation of the interests of workers and wider society. However, they should not become the methodological starting-point of our analysis. Instead, we need to focus on struggles across the 'social factory' including struggles in the workplace, in areas of social reproduction like healthcare, housing and domestic work, and conflicts around basic infrastructure like water services, education and public transport. An emphasis on the social formation in which capitalist accumulation takes place may allow us to do precisely that.

This continuing importance of trade unions while equally highlighting novel forms of organisation in the defence of people's livelihoods comes to the fore in the analysis of innovative workers' responses in Africa by Carmen Ludwig, Eddie Webster, Fikile Masikane and Dave Spooner. As they make clear, trade unions are not static organisations, but they can change and the way they change and adapt to changing circumstances determines whether they

remain relevant. Unsurprisingly, this may take different forms in different locations. While the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) organises precarious workers in Cape Town building class solidarity across the formal – informal divide, the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union (ATGWU) in Uganda opts for a different strategy. Acknowledging that other organisations had already been successful at organising informal workers, they affiliate informal workers' associations to their organisation. Finally, when it comes to food delivery workers in Johannesburg, these organise in the form of community organisations. Overall, Ludwig and her colleagues conclude that traditional trade unions remain important in the way they provide 'support and access to institutional power for the emerging organisations of precarious workers'. In short, in line with our methodological considerations, trade unions continue to be important actors, but they are only one form of working class organisation amongst others and, in order to remain relevant, they have to take into account the concerns of precarious workers as well as issues beyond the workplace. The analysis of the forms of organisation of app-based drivers in Indonesia by Fahmi Panimbang comes to similar conclusions. He demonstrates how the different organisational forms used by those drivers, i.e. community based organisations, more formal associations and trade unions, have complimentary strengths and weaknesses. It turns out that trade unions in Indonesia remain focused on organising workers in manufacturing. As with the example of workers' organisations in Africa, we might see more hybrid forms across community organisations, trade unions and other types of workers' associations.

Recent struggles in China indicate well the need of going beyond the workplace when analysing resistance against capitalist exploitation. The Jasic solidarity struggles have indicated how workplace conflict reaches into wider society with left students mobilising more widely in support. When Shenzhen Jasic Technology workers were brutally repressed for having demanded the right to establish their own trade union in order to defend their workplace rights,

student groups mobilised in solidarity across several universities. The resulting unity of workers and left students, Pun Ngai argues, initiated a new stage in Chinese industrial relations. ‘The sheer class inequality experienced by students working inside plants during summer vocation, the unconvincing narrative of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, and the political awareness of Chinese workers all contributed to this turn to Maoist communism’, she states. Faced with the stark reality of increasing inequality in society, students have taken up workers’ concerns. Ironically, it was a result of the (mis-)use of student interns on industrial production lines by companies that led to a politicisation of both student action and workplace politics. We can only fully acknowledge the implications of these developments, if we look at the whole social formation, rather than only the capitalist labour process.

The contributions by Michaela Douth and Madhumita Dutta highlight yet again the importance of a focus on the social formation. As Douth shows, while it was mainly female workers in the Cambodian textile sector, who went on strike and organised from below predominantly outside the workplace in neighbourhoods, homes and market places, at the political level the demands were formulated by trade unions, dominated by male workers. She unravels well the various challenges female workers face when organising. They are not only workers in factories, but also mothers, sisters and daughters with a range of related responsibilities in social reproduction. They are facing exploitation in the workplace as well as patriarchal oppression within wider society. Trade union-led demands often focus on higher salaries. ‘The everyday struggles of (re)production that women workers face, however, cannot be solved by “only” increasing the official minimum wage, and thus point towards broader political issues like healthcare, housing and public infrastructure. Women workers are deeply rooted in and linked to “a more complex gendered (re)production regime” that aims to steadily (re)produce – here especially – the female working poor’, Douth concludes.

Dutta too engages with the double burden of capital and patriarchy faced by female workers in her in-depth analysis of female trade union leaders. The focus on this double form of oppression sheds light on the multiple sites of waged and unwaged work, which characterises female workers' daily experiences not only at the workplace. Unsurprisingly, female trade union leaders do not only organise around workplace issues. Based on their own life experiences, they also mobilise workers in their residential areas addressing issues such as domestic violence and access to clean water. Patriarchal oppression and violence, in turn, is present at the workplace, where female workers are often exposed to sexual harassment and violence, including by male trade union leaders. It is the overlapping and reinforcement of capitalist exploitation and patriarchal oppression, which requires our attention when analysing labour conflict at the level of the social formation, rather than a narrow focus on trade unions and workplace issues.

In the article by Douth, another aspect of social reproduction is mentioned: the rural linkages of urban workers. Connections to villages and families in the rural areas play a role for workers that in other societies is represented by the welfare state or the private service industry, like for example the provision of care, healthcare and food in case of sickness. These rural-urban linkages of workers who migrated to cities are at the centre of the contribution by Huang Yu and Ng Kenneth Tsz Fung. It has become a commonplace in labour studies on China that the rural urban linkages of migrant workers, or in other words, their 'semi-proletarianisation', prevents them from attaining full class consciousness. Huang and Ng rather ask to what extent the rural urban linkages of workers might not also come with additional resources and political experiences that can as well lead to more militancy. Research about African societies in the 1970s demonstrates that it was not the "fully proletarianised" workers who were most militant, but rather migrant workers with rural links, casual workers and peasants. Huang and Ng question any unilinear relationship between class position in terms of

the degree of proletarianisation and the nature of class action undertaken by the workers in question. Instead, they ask how the multiplicity of social relations and influences play out for labour conflict in an urban setting, the rural-urban linkages being one of these. Thus, not the degree of proletarianisation, but processes of politicisation of various arenas of action are decisive for the exact unfolding of class conflict. In this contribution, too, the notion of the broader basis of social reproduction of the working classes, for example through rural linkages, enters into the picture, pointing beyond an economistic focus on workplace issues. The experiences of social relations in rural areas can turn into a mobilising or a demobilising factor for labour conflict, depending on the conjuncture and on processes of politicisation.

Isil Erdinc finally looks at the interplay between authoritarian rule and international trade union action via an analysis of trade union action in Turkey. While it turns out that references to global union federations are often denounced as treason in the context of reinforced Turkish nationalism in the later phase of Erdogan's rule, there were cases in which international pressure proved successful despite the adverse context. One case was the urge of a government-aligned rightwing union from the Turkish automobile sector to join a global union federation, which was effectively used by the global federation to arrange a ceasefire regarding the at times violent conflicts between rightwing and leftwing unions in this sector in Turkey. Erdinc shows that the so-called boomerang effect of global action is effectively limited by national authoritarian contexts and thus does not apply universally. Nonetheless, it still can be employed in authoritarian settings in specific cases. The relevance of the international as a potential arena of action and the crucial influence of national government politics and repression, accompanied by the use of unions loyal to authoritarian governments, stresses the need to investigate the linkages of workplace politics to broader relations of power. The analysis of Erdinc demonstrates that the international arena is not the silver bullet for successful

labour conflict, and that the phenomenon of yellow, i.e. government-led or employer-led unionism is still relevant, especially in authoritarian national contexts.

Summing up the results of our inquiry into labour conflicts in the Global South, we feel the strong need for further conceptual and theoretical work that builds on existing research, in this special issue and beyond. Dualist constructions that evolved out of Northern epistemologies and experiences like the couplet trade unions / social movements and formal / informal labour rather tend to hide from view the specific constellations in many countries in the Global South. The new hybrid forms of worker organising will need a new concept beyond the concepts of trade unions and social movements. The fact that formal labour has always been an exception if seen in a global perspective, will also require to unpack the black box of the concept of informal labour, and to create new categories which further differentiate the seemingly diffuse “informality”. It is often researchers beyond the core countries who demonstrate more ability to rethink those concepts (see for example Maneiro and Bautés 2017). While this conceptual and theoretical work has to be informed by results of empirical research, we often face the fact that the great mass of empirical studies does not see the theoretical debate it requires in order to develop the field of global labour studies further. This is a step which we have only begun to take, and which will require further projects and approaches to yield more solid results. Nevertheless, we believe that it is necessary to emphasise at least that many of the basic concepts that are used by labour researchers do need revision and thorough questioning.

## References

Maneiro, María and Nicolas Bautés (2017) ‘Retomar la informalidad. Un abordaje de su dimensión política’, *O Social em Questão*, Ano XX, No. 39, 301-326.