Guest editorial: Debates on social movements and trade unionism in Europe. New forms of interaction and transformative identities in work and society

The question of how representation is changing in relation to work has many dimensions and debates tied to it. The emergence of a more neoliberal economic order and a new set of challenges facing employment regulation have led to restraints and tensions within established forms of worker representation and politics. The changing nature of the workplace and the increasingly fragmented nature of labor markets challenge the established modus operandi of traditional industrial relations (Baccaro and Howell, 2017). In particular, we have seen a new range of social movements and actors emerge that are addressing workplace related issues in new and novel ways through the raising of new social sensibilities and forms of communication and decision making within the workforce, especially those at the edges of the traditional regulatory structures.

These shifts in the social dimensions of work and these new voices raise questions as to whether established actors will be displaced or whether their own approaches will need to change and shift toward a more open and socially oriented approach to organizing workers (for a discussion on choices and futures within industrial relations see Hyman, 2015 and Visser, 2019a).

This special issue aims to cover some aspects of these debates and to place the contributions in the context of this significant area of discussion which looks at questions of how boundaries within industrial relations are changing and how we need to draw on broader aspects of social movement theory and activities (Martínez Lucio, forthcoming). However, how this is done is a major question, and what these links mean can vary as the contributions to this special issue suggest.

1. Background and context

Over the last two decades, the proportion of workers in trade unions has been declining across Europe, and workers have been having to deal with a whole new set of challenges (Visser, 2019b). This change reflects developments such as the emergence of a more decentralized and outsourced model of capitalism that has undermined the more organized and stable forms of workplace around which organized labor is normally active. Moreover, the emergence of new business models in the economy, the introduction of new technologies at work, and the proliferation of atypical forms of relations between workers and their "company" have led to a

proliferation of challenges in the labor market that have generated difficulties in the implementation of traditional trade union regulatory tools and repertoires (Keune, 2013).

The reasons for the progressive decline in the levels of worker representation –although by no means absolute– and the levels of strike activity have been the subject of various academic debates (Martínez Lucio, 2006), although this decline varies according to the national context. Among macrosocial causes, the continuing decline of heavy and traditional industries has contributed to the relative weakening of established cohesive, albeit at times exclusively working-class, communities. In addition, while globalization in the shape of mobile and increasingly powerful multinational corporations –and the deregulation of workers and social rights in a range of national contexts– has reduced trade union power broadly speaking in terms of strike rates and the effectiveness of national union structures (Baccaro and Howell, 2017), we have nonetheless also seen incumbent trade union bureaucracies grappling with new forms of worker activity as they seek to maintain more traditional and institutional forms of engagement with the state (Piazza, 2010), although there has been some discussion regarding the nature of union revitalization in recent years (Murray, 2017) and new waves of union-led protest in various contexts since mid-2022 require any pessimistic views about unions to be cautious. Some have therefore suggested that the relatively institutionalized role of traditional unions and their growing distance from new forms of grassroots' organizing and social movements is one of the factors that can explain the uneven levels of labor protest and mobilization in the EU (Gajewska, 2008). In addition, although we are beginning to see significant changes in work- and employment-related politics, it is the national context (in terms of a country's legislation, economic structures, trade union political identity, and specific labor market institutions) that remains the key arena for researchers studying patterns of trade union and labor protest across European countries.

Many new but not exclusively social movements and non-governmental organizations have, therefore, been encroaching on, and influencing, the representation of work and employment issues. Examples include the organizations related to the living wage campaign in the UK, equal rights questions in many contexts as highlighted by bodies such as Stonewall, and health and safety at work issues raised by various organizations dealing with mental health. While some of these social movements or social organizations appear to be acting as key influencers of policy developments at work, or in quasi-trade unions in some cases, in other instances new forms of minority trade unionism seem to be drawing on more radical social movements to develop a social protest framework and identity (Waterman, 1993; Stewart, 2006; Heery et al., 2012). We are also seeing new forms of organizing around community unionism and worker networks that are using hybrid forms of local-level social movement activism and social networks (Holgate, 2021). There is also a push toward new radical forms of trade unionism which contribute to this too (Connolly, 2012; Connolly and Darlington, 2012). In effect, the boundaries between the sphere of employment and work, on the one hand, and society and community, on the other, are being eroded in new ways. Indeed, there are increasingly alliances and joint mobilization campaigns between trade unions (especially minority unions but not exclusively so) and social movements, which combine resources and political cultures to enhance labor rights mobilization. Commentators on the future of trade union, such as Visser (2019a, 2019b), have argued that one of the scenarios that trade unions face is that of their role being marginalized due to the impact of new sets of social actors and movements who engage with a large part of the workforce that are under-represented.

In this situation different social initiatives are emerging that are related to workers' rights, working conditions, and economic models themselves. These range from traditional forms of political mobilization and institutionalized trade union engagement through to mechanisms that could be considered innovative and more decentred – and participative – than some of the traditional forms and practices of trade unionism (Alberti and Però, 2018). Alliances have

also recently emerged between labor rights activism in poorly regulated sectors, in alliances with community networks, and in social movements. In some countries, a kind of "social unionism" is emerging that politicizes the working and living conditions of new organizations, such as domestic workers, precarious self-employed workers, or workers' centers in different sectors (Voss and Sherman, 2013; Roca, 2020). These new innovative developments can also be seen in the form of more public- and media-facing conflict strategies, in an increasingly strategic engagement with a variety of social media (Geelan and Hodder, 2017), in the use of new social and organizational participative forms and structures, and in a new set of sociological categories of worker activists and networks that are beyond, or on the fringes of, the traditional remit of the "organized" labor movement (Standing, 2012).

2. Recent changes in European trade unionism: new trade union cleavages, trade union renewal, and new labor subjects

New types of organization advocating for workers' rights and working conditions are emerging in response to this new, neoliberal, economic context. New forms of autonomous worker mobilization have emerged in the service sector and on digital platforms, and in non-traditional sectors for organizing labor (Wood, 2015; Wood *et al.*, 2018). Sectors that have traditionally had greater difficulties for trade union action and affiliation, such as for waiters, domestic workers, care workers, or street vendors, have seen new forms of representation emerge.

The last two decades have also seen an increase in social movement mobilization around welfare-state-related issues in Europe, for example in relation to housing, pensions, and migrants' rights. The generalization of economic, legal, and social precarity has rendered a number of social groups increasingly vulnerable (young people, the working poor, women, migrants, etc.). These groups have organized themselves to advance various initiatives, especially in relation to unregulated work and social rights.

The transformation and weakening of traditional unions in some areas and their traditional approaches to labor conflicts have left a gap that both unions and non-union organizations have tried to fill. The need to adapt to the new realities of work, the labor market, and neoliberalism has provided an opportunity to develop new ways of understanding and pursuing labor struggles. There have also been efforts to expand and renew trade unions through the adoption of models using methods that are more efficient and based more on solidarity among workers (Scholz, 2016; Vandaele, 2018). Traditional forms of union organization and action, such as collective bargaining and strike action (Ortega, 2019), have begun to be complemented, and even replaced in some cases, by other tactics and novel organizational forms.

These have also been named "New Forms of Worker Organization" (Ness, 2014), referring to trade union movements that have interrelated with social movements and have recovered their repertoires and actions. In Spain, authors such as Moral-Martín and Brunet i Icart (2018) have named this phenomenon "new trade union movements", referring to the concept of new social movements, since they incorporate into the field of trade unions not only new repertoires typical of social movements, but also demands typical of other social movements such as feminism, anti-racism, or democracy. There is also a discussion that has been building steadily regarding minority unions drawing on the Japanese context historically as a counterpoint to more established company and "majority" unions (Stewart, 2006) and more recently "indie" (independent) unions with a more direct form of internal democratic decision making (Alberti and Però, 2018).

Trade unionism and labor organizations have consequently been forced to rethink and reinvent their own traditional and established strategies (Minter, 2017), although one cannot forget that some are already engaged in local and community forms of action due to their

identity – so this depends on the nature of the organizations in question (Marino *et al.*, 2017). Trade unions face a serious challenge: their negotiation, representation, and organizing capacities have been diminished in some respects by the general decline in the broad range of factors that have historically facilitated trade union action (Dueñas Herrero, 2019).

In some countries, such as Spain, the weakening of trade unionism at certain moments in the face of this systemic shift to neoliberalism has led to the adoption of new strategies that reflect a weaker bargaining position and a declining social relevance (de Guzmán *et al.*, 2016). Other factors have also contributed to the decline in trade union capacity, membership, and activity. The changing nature of migration, for example, has been a determining factor in shaping the new realities of precarious work (Rogers, 2017; Goods *et al.*, 2019). Trade unions likely require a different relationship with migrant populations than with workers born in the country due to factors such as differences in trade union and political culture, migrants' unfamiliarity with trade unionism in their destination countries, and, above all, material conditions that make it more difficult for migrants to join and be active in unions, although much depends on the context and the migrant community (Connolly *et al.*, 2019).

An emerging feature of the new forms of union strategy, especially in some of the more recent forms of representation, has been an intersectional approach, which has also become prominent in social struggles and increasingly recognizes multi-dimensional, interrelated axes of oppression grounded in gender, ethnicity, ability, class, and sexual orientation (McBride *et al.*, 2015; Collins, 2000; Lee and Tapia, 2021). Some social movements linked to workplace and employment issues have recognized that, in order to further the struggles of workers and other precarious populations, it is necessary to connect them with others and that a broader range of non-traditional, non-economic categories and identities are required to properly diagnose and challenge the multiple causes of social injustice in post-industrial capitalism.

In this new context, the idea of hybrid identities has been taken up by movements aiming to gain broader traction and recognition for their struggles in Western Europe and Mediterranean countries affected by the debt crisis (Ioannou, 2022). Hybrid identities can be articulated in various ways, but they serve to unify diverse groups under the common banner of their vulnerability – and this appears to be increasingly a feature of new social movements related to work and new forms of social-movement-style unionism (Della Porta *et al.*, 2022; Moody, 1997). These identities appeal to subjects commonly experiencing the financialization of every aspect of social life and the subordination of representative politics to financial interests. The discourses around these identities also often embrace a counter-institutional condemnation of aspects of the European Union's strategy as an "austericidal" enemy. Harvey's (2005) idea of generalized dispossession is a common element of these new discourses, reflecting the exclusion and damage wrought by neoliberalism generally.

In this sense, there are two generally accepted arguments regarding why these new organizations are not rendered redundant by traditional unions. First, the diminished capacities or reach of existing trade unions leave gaps that these new groups can usefully fill. The traditional tools of trade unions are less useful in the context of new forms of work, while the bureaucratization of these unions and their lack of agility in the face of rapidly changing labor markets has also made it harder for them to effectively engage the workers represented by these new groups, although this has been steadily changing and much depends on the original social orientation of the union (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013). It is not unknown to see traditional unions being legally and politically constrained in ways these new groups are not. Second, these new groups do not simply reject or seek to replace traditional trade unions. They present themselves as complements, rather than substitutes, for traditional unions, filling the gaps these unions leave (Smith, 2022).

3. Dynamic intersections between new types of trade unionism and social movements

The most precarious forms of work in the labor market are concentrated among the most vulnerable people. In recent years, young people, migrants, the elderly, and women (Barattini, 2009; Berg *et al.*, 2018; López de la Fuente, 2019; Gorodzeisky and Richards, 2020) have sometimes been deprived of trade union instruments that would allow them to articulate responses to a labor market that is increasingly less secure, with fewer guarantees, and more unstable. Thus, in recent years there has been a growing concern among trade union organizations, but also from academia, to address the issues of the representation and resistance of precarious workers and workers in atypical employment situations (Pulignano *et al.*, 2016). Although the economic conditions and labor relations generated by neoliberal processes and globalization have led to a tendency to think about the disappearance of workers' movements as we know them, the movements that have emerged in recent years to confront the new realities of work have not always been foreseen (Silver, 2014, p. 47).

At the end of the 1990s, Moody (1997) pointed out the need to weave alliances between traditional trade union forms and social movements, which were capable of confronting the realities generated by globalization and the internationalization of work. Thus, in the face of the new challenges and conflicts resulting from neoliberal labor models, the last few decades have seen the emergence of experiences in the field of trade unions that have led to a renewal of the labor movement, both in the North and in the global South (Moody, 1997, p. 72).

Other authors such as Paret have developed the concept of "precarious politics" to refer to movements and actions that have sought self-determination for precarious workers, who have taken the organizational lead to confront their specific increasingly precariousness conditions in the labor market and to compensate for the problems of representation in these workers' unions (Paret, 2013, p. 758). These forms of resistance can be characterized by their not being exclusively focused on the labor field, but rather as also incorporating other demands and problems associated with precariousness, such as housing or access to other public services.

Thus, the regeneration of trade unionism in Western democracies has involved the incorporation of new groups that had been largely forgotten by labor movements, generating new organizational and action strategies, as well as seeking alliances with other social organizations and attaching key figures to them (Moody, 1997; Turner and Hurd, 2001). This has been the case when establishing links with active social movements and a policy of symbiosis with them (Gall and Holgate, 2018, p. 563).

Different movements have perceived that trade unions had forgotten social demands and claims that had been taken up by new social movements, such as climate issues or new waves of feminism. In this tension, trade unions have been seen as outdated organizations in need of renewal, which means being more flexible in incorporating and addressing new issues (Vandenberg, 2006; Kirton, 2015).

It has been pointed out that the solution to this problem of traditional trade unionism was: to incorporate usually forgotten groups, such as youth, migrants, and women; to generate new demands present in a changing society and approach new labor issues; and to update and adapt to more disruptive and contentious repertoires typical of social movements (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017). These strategies have in some cases involved the recovery of class and grassroots trade unionism, generating mobilization strategies that are locally focused and more centered on the workplace, involve actions in which militants recover the leading role and are based on a bottom-up logic rather than on just involving negotiation between trade union and business elites, generating new alliances and coalitions with movements and other organizations (including internationally), and developing emancipatory and transformative policies of the social order (Arriaga, 2020).

One of the most useful accounts for our research that characterizes these developments, including the emergence of social movement unions (SMUs), has been Peter Fairbrother's (2008) study. Trade unions have, in recent years, sought to build alliances with civil society organizations and movements that do not work directly on labor issues (Dixon, 2014, p. 1185). This has led to some union campaigns becoming "much more sophisticated, combining cutting-edge research programmes with contentious protests to bring companies to the bargaining table" (Dixon, 2014, p. 1185).

The fact that these new kinds of labor organization are often embedded in communities and networks of other movements working in different areas is of particular interest to us given its link to the study of social movements (Meyer, 2017, pp. 1128–1129). The embrace by SMUs of conflicts, activists and movements that are not focused exclusively on labor issues connects to important concepts in the study of social movements, namely those of a transversal struggle uniting disparate social forces, and of the intersectional nature of oppression and injustice (Milkman and Voss, 2004, p. 10).

An example which is often cited is the case of new forms of work in terms of "riders" in the platform economy who are an interesting reference point for the changes being discussed in different national countries (Rogers, 2017; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2017; Dufresne, 2019; Goods *et al.*, 2019; Díez Prat and Ranz Martín, 2020; Vandaele, 2020; Woodcock, 2020). Much has been said about the experience of "riders" in the debate on new forms of worker representation, although this sector remains remarkably small (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020). However, we have seen that the collective action of riders mobilizing for their rights as employees is a novel kind of collective labor action. One of the concepts that has been coined in recent years to identify labor struggles that are twinned with broader political struggles for human rights and social justice, and that do not simply organize workers around workplace issues, is that of social movement unionism (Milkman and Voss, 2014; Engeman, 2015).

Some of the organizations that have emerged in recent years resemble the definition of social movement unionism in three respects: in experimenting with the introduction of different collective actions that go beyond the strike (Waterman, 1993); with the creation of alliances with organizations and collectives in the nearest locality in which action is developed (Voss and Sherman, 2000, 2013); and in the sense that it is a response to the crisis of the forms of representative and hegemonic unionism (unions on occasions tend to engage in contentious politics to defend workers' interests).

Other novel dimensions of the riders' contentious actions are their largely instrumental relationship with traditional unions (because they have not been recognized as workers until now); their extensive use of social networks as arenas of political contestation; and their use of strategic litigation to politicize a labor conflict. These mobilizations thus come close to meeting Tarrow's definition of contentious action as those in which "ordinary people – frequently in alliance with more influential citizens and shifts in public opinion – join forces to confront elites, authorities and their opponents" (Tarrow, 1994, p. 4). These efforts have taken place in the context of the evolving political economy of labor in Spain and, specifically, in relation to the devastating effects of the platform economy on workers' social protection.

On the other hand, when the collective actions of these new organizations operate in a specific community or city, with distinctive characteristics, they come close to the term "community unionism" as they have a particularly local dimension if their action is deployed in alliance with local civil society collectives and social movements. Above all, this is because this is a clear case of precarious workers who are difficult to organize due to deregulation in their labor framework, although many established unions are learning from these dynamics and processes in industrial relations and thus engaging with new forms of representation (Stewart *et al.*, 2009; Smith, 2022).

Hence, from a macro-sociological perspective, the activism of these new hybrid organizations requires us to analyse these forms of collective labor in terms of their political engagement, since, as new forms of labor organization, they engage at various institutional and social levels even going beyond the limits of the national (Fernández-Trujillo, 2022).

4. Conclusion and reflection: appreciating the complexity of trade union-social movement relations

However, the actual interface and the issues between the social and economic dimensions of worker representation remain complex, and we are at a stage where we need to see that perhaps there is no clear fit between the community, social, and movement dimensions of workers as these can be porous and open to a range of different structures and hybrids (Köhler and Calleja Jiménez, 2019; Martínez Lucio, forthcoming). The set of papers that constitute this special issue are a sample of the diverse patterns and issues that can develop across these spaces, and which suggest that we need to start reflecting on the possibilities and ironies of new social movement dynamics.

The contributions to this special issue as a whole bring a different set of insights into what has emerged as an important debate within labor and employment relations. "The Tail that Wags the Dog: Lessons from London's Independent Trade Unions for Trade Union Renewal" is a contribution that points to the lack of risk taking within established unions and a tendency to focus on partnerships and more institutionalized approaches to relations with employers. This case study outlines some of the core debates that have emerged in terms of such concerns and illustrates this through a case study.

The article "Worker Resistance Strategies and Union Action in Platform Work: The Case of Uber in Spain" looks at the platform economy and new forms of mobilization and actors that are emerging, though in this case the paper shows how the nature of existing forms of regulation and representation of a collective nature can be used by new sets of workers mobilizing according to their rights and through their socially based mobilizations. This paper builds on the work and development being seen in the academic debate, which highlights a more complex form of interactions between new and old actors within labor and employment relations. Although established unions are learning how to engage with new developments and struggles there is a slowness and bureaucratic legacy that has hampered development.

Issues of class mobilization and its importance are also picked up in the paper related to Sweden: "Cycles of Labor Protests: Public and Private Sector Unions" Contentious Actions', where the debate on mobilization and the realm of the social is discussed up. The argument that we have seen new forms of mobilization and new forms of repertoires of collective action is put in a context where changes appear to be much more contradictory across the private and public sector. The paper argues that we need to locate collective action within a much broader understanding of actions and to understand that the focus is very much falling on the public sector where more established forms of worker organization appear to exist.

Finally, a major challenge to the role of the collective voice and the nature of social movement–labor alliances is raised by the fourth piece "Co-produced or co-opted? Reflections on the 'Movement' to Promote Good Employment in Greater Manchester". This is an important intervention regarding a local state initiative to set labor standards and good employment practices through employment charters. The initiative involves state, employer, and labor actors, though in this detailed case study there is an outline of the manner in which the "social" is redefined politically in ways that do not clearly bring collective voices and collective representation to the center of such developments. Instead, whilst being innovative and often progressive in social terms, the social interventions of non-union actors may bring real challenges and may "corporatize" the nature of the debate and have it rely on voluntary and "soft" approaches.

What these articles suggest is that we need to begin to map these relations and structures across the social and political boundaries of work. The time when we simply contrasted the social with the economic and judged the strengths and weaknesses of each is being surpassed as the link between the two is more complex and varied. In addition, there may be a range of other actors with a "corporate" (and even neo-liberal) dimension de-politicizing these social agendas of work; see Johnson *et al.* (this issue). The question therefore is: How do intersectional and more direct forms of participation shape and counter such developments in order to ensure that this social shift in the content and context of industrial relations is part of a democratic broadening of work?

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