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## EDITORIAL

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

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

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

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

## **1. Introduction: the materiality of labour conflict and its forms**

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

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

May 2023: “Protests in China are often small-scale. On 17 May, a handful of workers at an air-purifier factory in Xiamen, a coastal city in Fujian province, south-east China, gathered to demand the payment of wages that, they said, were in arrears. The protest was quiet, but it was one of nearly 30 similar demonstrations this month alone” (The Guardian 2023).

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

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

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

## **2. Reconceptualising labour conflict and collective action**

In highlighting the centrality of labour conflict, we make two premises. The first is that for labour conflict we intend all forms of collective manifestations against labour exploitation directly or indirectly related to the wage relation and encompassing the sphere of work and life. The new technological acceleration imposed by platform capitalism is strengthening the ability of capitalism to extract value by reaching “new” working

classes and expanding into niches of people social lives. This means, and this is our second premise, that we have to be able to consider collective action as a social process whose activation/de-activation is expressed in forms that can be explained by a multiplicity of factors, partly structural to the labour process (Atzeni 2010; Edwards 1986) and partly depending on the existence of ‘social environmental’ factors: a fertile socio-political context (Atzeni 2016); the strength of existing communities, political traditions and working class culture (Cini and Goldmann 2021; Nowak 2019); an highly despotic labour regimes (Pun et al. 2020), a specific labour (and class) composition (Wright 2002) to name a few. The adoption of these premises is important for a number of reasons.

Firstly, our approach goes beyond traditional industrial relations (IR) conceptualisations of the capital-labour relationship as the basis of conflict and the role assigned to trade unions in this. Challenging the union-centric tradition of IR, recent research has investigated forms of worker self-organisation based on networks of solidarity that have emerged parallel to or beyond formal unions. Such research has examined changes emerging in the platform economy (Chan 2021; Gutierrez Crocco and Atzeni 2022; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020), in the South of the world (Anner 2018; Marinaro 2018; Rizzo 2017), and among migrants (Alberti and Però 2018; Chan 2023; Perrotta and Sacchetto 2014; Benvegnù et al. 2018). Along with these empirical studies, other publications have addressed theoretical issues, inviting researchers to abandon the Eurocentrism of industrial relations and explore the role that community and space play in shaping collective action (Nowak 2021), to rethink forms of organisation by going beyond fetishizing the trade union form (Atzeni 2021), and to reflect on the need to more explicitly set class domination as the normative dimension and theoretical starting point for labour studies, henceforth orienting labour scholars who are aiming to produce knowledge ‘on the side of workers’ (Gallas 2022). Papers in this special issue published in PACO for instance, use some of these insights to explain the cycle of struggles led by food-delivery riders in Italy since 2016 (Quondamatteo and Marrone); or to explore the instrumental use of existing unions by self-organised groups in the health sector in Spain and Italy (Galanti and Naughton).

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

are making invisible the struggles that newly formed groups of workers in the most precarious workplaces are everyday engaging with. Thus, we are definitely in need of renewing theories that can give sense and explain the current empirical reality while at the same time providing insights for workers' strategic organising.

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

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

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

### **3. Understanding class and its links with collective action**

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

Since the 1970s, the increase in the mobility of labour and of capital have completely reshaped the working class, simultaneously creating elements of convergence and divergence in the material conditions of the workers worldwide (Silver 2003). Indeed, the characteristic of the contemporary era is a wide spectrum of employment situations, from the perspective of both skills and working conditions: from migrant workers engaged in agriculture, through brokers (middlemen, gangmasters and so on), to workers in manufacturing in large workplaces, to video game creators; from the cyber proletariat working under the command of the algorithm in Amazon to the engineer who builds the algorithm, from the manufacturing worker who uses a laptop to the migrants working as riders.

The fragmentation of workers' experience is worsened by the outsourcing of production and, with it, industrial relations (Drahokoupil, 2015; Wills, 2009). The growth of outsourcing changes the boundaries of companies: on the one hand, a segmentation within the same production space through contracting out to third firms or hiring temporary labour. On the other hand, a spatial reorganisation towards other locations through the

construction of global value chains (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994). The centrality assumed by logistics responds exactly to the extension of the processes of outsourcing that re-shape relations between states, labour and societies. Scholars highlight how outsourcing fuels divisions among the workforce, intensifies labour market segmentation and, thus, splits labour relations, concealing corporate responsibility. Outsourcing and precarisation processes have been seen as one of several responses that companies can deploy to circumvent workers' associational and structural power (Wright 2000) and multiply differences. Labour precarisation takes different forms and is experienced in different ways in the Global North and South, depending on the different levels of vulnerability that workers are facing (Lazar and Sanchez 2019). Precarity has become a conceptual tool to describe the rise of instability and uncertainty beyond the labour market (Lewis et al. 2014). However, the concept of precarity as a class (Standing 2011) is a shortcut to identify an employment situation that characterized an emerging 'new working class'. As Wright (2016: 135) underlines in his critique to Standing "treating the precariat as a class – even as a class-in-the-making – obscures more than it clarifies". We argue that precarity should *not* be seen as the condition that defines class; rather, precarity is one of the many forms that (wage) labour takes in contemporary times. While we agree that precarity can produce a division among workers, we note that capitalism has continued to produce divisions and hostility inside the working class in different ways.

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

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

Beverly Silver (2003) in *Forces of Labor*, an innovative world-historical mapping of workers' conflicts, articulated the connection between transformation in production models and cycles of worker struggles. She underlined how states, capital and the working class produce specific strategies to create boundaries: "segmenting labour markets (pursued mainly by capital), bounding citizenship (pursued mainly by states), and constructing exclusionary class identities on non-class bases (pursued mainly by workers themselves)" (Silver 2003: 24).

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

Importantly, worldwide, workers have been able to get together in their milieu, and at times even to build cross-class alliances, in order to advance their interests and rights. Indeed, the resurgence of forms of nationalism and the construction of intricate supply chains clash with worldwide labour struggles who are more and more attentive to the transnational level of coordination, as highlighted by the case of Amazon workers (Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese 2020; Kassem 2022). One of the questions is, therefore, to understand whether the traditional trade union model is able to organize labour that is becoming increasingly mobile and informal. Even if labour conflicts remain one of the constants in capitalist development worldwide,

analysis of these struggles rarely confronts the question of class. Since the 1980s in Western countries, as well as in other countries (for China, see Pun and Chan 2008), class analyses at best dwelled on income-related living conditions with reference to processes of stratification and social inequality. The focus on forms of inequality in the distribution of wealth removes the gaze both from labour relations and from the everyday labour conflict. However, class is not a social status or an economic situation. Class, in our conception, takes root in shared experiences, which are shaped by relations of production and by changing cultural transformations, as well as by everyday practices in and out of the workplace (Thompson 1980 [1963]). Global labour historians widened labour history's perspectives, shedding light on how workers' experiences emerged not only from workplaces but also from everyday life to shape class consciousness (van der Linden 2008). Revisiting theories of working class solidarity, Pun (2022) argues that it is important to consider how macro structural approaches and micro processes of a collective-emotional environment are interconnected and interdependent in explaining the formation of worker identities and solidarity actions. Based on research on vocational school in China, she stresses how youth working-class develop everyday practices that rearticulate solidarity behaviour at school and in the workplace. Through cultural production, labour activism has been the backbone of contemporary forms of resistance and solidarity in China: songs, letters, poems and discussions in and out of the workplaces and dormitories constitute the cultural forms and expressions that allow collective awareness raising. However, also in the case of China, feminist agendas for gender equality remain "rather marginalised in contemporary working-class resistance" (Yin 2020: 438). Thinking of how class shape itself means transcending the union and party forms of organisation of exploited employees. As Sian Lazar (2018: 270) notes, "interest only reveals part of the picture, at best, and at worst might even be misleading: as, for example, when we can only come up with theories of false consciousness when we see people acting against their interest". The question is not the lack of (or the false) consciousness of workers (summarising that the class in itself fails to transform into a class for itself). We believe it is necessary to problematize binary views of class versus non-class, and class in itself versus class for itself. Class is a social relationship that cannot be reduced only to wage earners or to what happen in the workplace. Indeed, class is shaped in the labour process, as well as in the social reproduction, and in the racialisation and gendering processes that run through different societies. From this point of view, class is constructed in struggle and conflict with other groups, within various ideas: it is at these junctures that the sets of ideas of these individuals and the ways in which they intend to pursue these claims are most visible. Therefore, as Cicerchia (2021: 617-618) underlined, class is not a homogeneous group and "internal divisions within the working class are constitutive of class formation". It is only through solidarity as culture of collective practice that class can emerge. In fact, different subjects do not come together as a class because they have the same enemy, capital, but because they develop specific culture and social relations aimed at the dissolution of class society (Ricciardi 2023).

#### **4. Contributions to the internationally coordinated themed collection**

Four journals participated in this themed collection on labour conflict: *Economic and Labour Relations Review* (ELRR), *Global Labour Journal* (GLJ), *Partecipazione e Conflitto* (Participation and Conflict, PACO), and *Revista Latino americana de Estudios del Trabajo* (The Latin American Journal of Labor Studies, RELET). We expect a total of sixteen papers, selected from the original call and that went through the usual revision process in each of the journals, will be published in the coming few months, depending on each journal's publishing schedule. In order to respect this publishing order, we finalise our introduction common to all journals with a presentation, in this case of the articles published in PACO only.

Costanza Galanti and Mary Naughton, looks at the campaigns of resistance to the commodification of healthcare, of workers and users organising outside the union form but nevertheless strategically relying on union resources. Drawing on fieldwork in the health systems of Italy and Spain, consisting of participant observations, non-participant observations and interviews, authors demonstrate that self-organised groups rely

on unions in struggles both within and outside the workplace and specify the types of resource these actors seek to access through unions.

Margherita Sabrina Perra and Katia Pilati, deploys a new typology analysis of strikes registered in Italy since 2008, based on a new data set of workers' collective actions, including strikes, observed in Italy in the decade 2008–2018. Perra and Pilati propose a revision of the classic distinction between economic and political strikes suggesting a new typology of strikes that distinguishes between general political strikes, general/large-scale economic strikes, and local economic strikes that differ along the lines of which actors promote them, the workers' occupations involved, the issues claimed, the scale of action, and the addresses of the actions.

Nicola Quondamatteo and Marco Marrone, attempting to explain the cycle of struggles led by food-delivery riders in Italy since 2016. The paper is the result of an extensive co-research and it offers an innovative perspective to the debate on the mobilisations of precarious and informal workers who are employed in sectors without a strong trade union. The authors use the conceptual category of 'recognition' and how this can renew Industrial Relations debate. They focus on three interlinked dimensions and stages of recognition: internal, institutional, and by employers. While the first concerns the formation of collective identity by workers, the second and the third would escalate and strengthen collective identity and might indicate a pattern in similar struggles with no union presence in Italy.

Francesco Campolongo and Francesco Eugenio Iannuzzi, focuses on the intense and sustained labour struggles of Italian artists at times of COVID-19 crisis, in sharp contrast to the tradition of low conflict and mobilisation typical of the sector. Through qualitative techniques the paper analyses the struggles for accessing social protection measures of performing art workers in Italy during the pandemic stressing three different contingent factors underlie these struggles: the simultaneous, unexpected mass experience of lack of income due to pandemic crises, the breakdown of disciplinary mechanisms in artistic work, and the greater availability of "free time". The findings shed new light on the mobilisation of precarious workers in work contexts characterised by the limited union presence and disciplinary regimes based on individualisation, competition, self-exploitation and consensus.

Niccolò Cuppini, Mattia Frapporti and Maurilio Pirone, analyzes platform labour in the urban spaces looking into changing subjectivities and labour struggles in the context of the digitalisation of life. The authors introduce the category of "algorithmic subjectivities" to identify workers that use digital technologies: from the logistical workers who operate in urban areas, to cloud workers fulfilling microtasks. Focusing on the practices of this new class composition employs to deal and struggle with the digital giants, they point to the need to identify a new vocabulary concerned with the circularity and spatiality of the new phase of capitalism.

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