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Class, labour conflict, and workers' organisation

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Abstract

This article is part of an internationally coordinated themed collection on 'labour conflict, forms of organisation, and class' exploring important questions. How can we explain the interplay of capital, the state, and the international order, in defining the persistence of labour conflict in changing historical and political-economic contexts? How have the economic, social, and technological transformations precipitated by the recent pandemic shaped the expression of work-related conflict? As part of a response to these main questions, the author and contributors of this collection conceptualise labour conflict and collective action in broader class analysis and examine the combined effect of state policies, migration, and digital innovation on contemporary labour politics. This article, drawing on insights from Marxist-oriented interdisciplinary approaches and feminist theories, seeks to suggest approaches to future studies on class, labour conflict, and workers' organisation.

Keywords: class; feminism; formal and informal employment; labour conflict; Marxist sociology; migration; production and social reproduction

JEL codes: B52; J01; J50

Introduction

Labour conflict is one of the most visible and persistent expressions of societies' responses to inequality generated in capitalism and patriarchy. Whether we consider labour conflict as the direct outcome of oppressive conditions of work and forms of value extraction, or as part of popular upheavals against the precarisation of work and life, an understanding of the nature of labour conflict and its evolution at the heart of capitalism's compass is important to analyse socio-political change. In light of the diversity of work and employment conditions, the specific locations of labourers within the production system, and familial dynamics, researchers have sought to explain workers' resistance and acquiescence, organising strategies, and the outcomes (Burawoy 1985; Marx 1990 [1867]; Peck 2023; Taylor & Rioux 2018; Wright 2005).

Trade unions have historically represented workers in workplaces and at the political level. However, the informalisation of labour and processes of labour market fragmentation associated with global migration flows have profoundly reconfigured the composition of working classes (Agarwala 2022; Alberti & Però 2018; Boris et al 2023; Kalleberg 2009; Kalleberg & Vallas 2018; Ness 2023). The radical left and reform-minded policymakers have pushed trade unions to be more responsive to migrants and various groups of informal workers. Moreover, activist-oriented analysts have provided novel

analytical perspectives to fully grasp the diverse ways of grassroots labour organising that have emerged at critical junctures (Atzeni 2014, 2021, 2022; Gutierrez Crocco & Atzeni 2022). Notwithstanding formidable challenges, workers, employers, and government representatives have engaged in negotiations to attempt to resolve production and overproduction crises (Atzeni 2010; Nowak 2019).

Revitalised trade unions have strengthened leadership and collaboration with autonomous workers' groups in achieving more inclusive, adequate, and effective labour protection for all workers (Ford 2009, 2019; Forsyth 2022; Hermanson 2023; MacDonald 2018; Milkman & Voss 2004; Rhomberg & Lopez 2021; Webster et al 2008). This article highlights the centrality of class analysis in understanding the logic and limits of workers' power and collective action. It considers unions and other forms of workers' organisation in crafting new frontiers in the fight for empowerment of labour. The next section delves into the pivotal role played by the state in facilitating capitalist accumulation and limiting labour forces on the one hand, but in some instances in alleviating workers' economic stress through establishing a social security system that boosts its legitimacy on the other hand. Then, the third section examines migration, informal work, and the relations of production and social reproduction. The fourth section explores the consequences for labour of the growth of the platform economy, digitalised control, and worker resistance. With reference to workers' agency and collective mobilisation, the fifth section analyses the self-organisation of labouring classes. Here, the contributing authors of this themed collection vividly document gig workers' and migrant labourers' unionisation efforts, strikes, and protests, while assessing the responses and powers of capital and the state.[1] The conclusion reflects on the normative foundations of a class analysis of the new world of labour.

Class, the state, and labour regimes

The economic liberalisation of the past half-century has vastly changed the nature of jobs and employment relations. As companies seek to increase profitability by employing less expensive workforces or relying on the availability of women, immigrants, and much of the rural population to reduce wages, it is tempting to envision the expansion of informal employment as merely an outcome of the labour-capital battle. But we must also consider the state's regulatory role in facilitating informalisation (Agarwala 2013; Anner 2011; Fürst et al 2017; Hung 2009; Kalleberg et al 2022; Solinger 2009). State-initiated labour and migrant policies often determine how workers are hired with different terms and conditions, and how some find themselves excluded from formal, government-sponsored grievance mechanisms and welfare provisions (Kuruvilla et al 2011). Through legislation and policy implementation, state officials are deeply involved in defining the logic and limits of informalisation.

Under the auspices of the state, when developing countries increasingly opened to foreign investment, newly found factory and service jobs were mostly concentrated in low value-added segments of globalised production. 'A labour regime', in the words of Baglioni et al (2022, 1), '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'. Lead firms retain core competence such as research and development, branding and marketing, while contracting suppliers and subcontractors to assemble products at the lowest possible cost. The use of 'flexible' labour to meet the boom-and-bust production cycles is frequent. Fundamentally, capitalism is a dynamic system of exploitation.

Immense wealth and massive poverty coexist amid capitalist expansion around the globe. The assumption of economic and social growth through global (re)integration as widely shared by national governments, businesses, and transnational institutions such as

the World Bank have not gone unchallenged. Indeed, the pathways to attracting foreign capital and further opening of domestic markets with access to land and workers have been highly controversial (Selwyn 2017). At the point of production, young female migrants and other less-protected workers are among those drawn into labour-intensive and capital-intensive industries. This proletarianisation process has often been promoted by state-guided industrialisation, migration, and urbanisation strategies (Chan 2018, 2021). Hundreds of millions of peasants and rural labourers are on the move, oftentimes leaving behind their children and the elderly.

Looking closer, the state and employers frequently use the formal/informal distinction to justify *not* enrolling workers in state-administered social security, such as pensions, healthcare benefits, and insurance against accidents and diseases (Kalleberg et al 2022). 'Transient' migrants, internal or international, are often classified as inferior, second-class citizens, whose access to public education, housing, and healthcare in the cities are constrained or denied (Friedman 2022). While migrant workers can exercise 'mobility power' to bring some benefits, such as using transnational differences in employment conditions and the scarcity of local labour in specific sectors for advancement, many simultaneously confront inequalities at and beyond the workplace, which are perpetuated by the collusion between capital and the state (Anderson 2020). The threshold of government subsidies for the needy, if any at all, is often far from sufficient for subsistence. With low income and insecure jobs, the most vulnerable may lose their ability to marry and care for children, thus exacerbating the social reproduction crisis (Fraser 2016; Kalleberg et al 2022; Selwyn 2017; Standing 2011).

In the face of large-scale protests initiated by workers and other oppressed social groups, however, some concessions are often made. Minimum wages — rarely living wages — are promulgated in specified jurisdictions. As wages are low and benefits few, many workers need to do massive amounts of overtime, thereby destabilising social and family lives. The sacrifice of opportunities for parenting, even when children have migrated with their parents, are shared experience among migrant families (Chan 2023; Friedman 2022). Worse yet, trade unions are frequently barred by both employers and the state. In China, for example, critical labour scholars and activist workers have long questioned the legitimacy of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions' exercise of monopolistic power and its capacity of representing workers across different levels (Chen 2009; Friedman 2014; Gallagher 2017; Pringle 2011).

Precarious work is becoming more pervasive. Although cross-national comparisons are complicated by different definitions of formal/informal employment, it is evident that non-regular workers, such as part-time, dispatch, and non-contract workers, have risen globally (Breman et al 2019; Standing 2011). Labour services regulated by digital platforms, in particular, have been growing during the COVID-19 lockdowns of cities and countryside. But labour protections are insufficient, with contention between 'social agendas (social protection, employment stability, and economic security)' and 'neoliberal agendas (competitiveness, investment, and growth)' (Kalleberg et al 2022, 147).

Capitalist accumulation, migration, and labour subjectivities

Capitalism reproduces and manipulates divisions and hostility inside the working class. Gender, racial/ethnic, and age differences, for example, have been institutionalised to create and perpetuate social hierarchies (Kim 2013; Roediger 1991; Roediger & Esch 2012; Tilly & Tilly 1998). Hegemonic masculinity refers to 'the currently most honoured way of being a man', requiring 'all other men to position themselves in relation to it' and ideologically legitimating 'the global subordination of women to men' (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, 832). Young women migrants wish to make money and enjoy

personal freedom before getting married, thus sometimes tolerating the harsh conditions in the urban workplace. By contrast, male tech migrants have obtained a relatively higher social-economic status as white-collar workers and are more integrated into urban life with greater consumption power. Indeed, individual workers would experience very different degrees of managerial control and autonomy (Li 2022; Vallas & Hill 2018).

Class subjectivities and gender identities are socially constructed in the migration and labour processes. Employers frequently provide migrants with dormitory housing and basic social facilities to relieve them from taking care of daily reproductive activities, thereby increasing labour time and effort to achieve profitability and production goals (Chan et al 2020; Goodburn & Mishra 2023). The boundary between 'home' and work is blurred. This spatial proximity helps meet just-in-time production deadlines by facilitating overtime work and lengthening the workday. Federici (2004) further 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 ethnicity have become constitutive of class domination and the formation of the modern proletariat.

Importantly, Silver (2003, 24) in *Forces of Labor*, an innovative world-historical mapping of labour conflict, 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)'. These boundaries highlight how crucial it is to consider the characteristics of the workforce and how these distinctions are deployed by different actors inside and out of the workplace. As McGrath and Strauss (2015, 306) summarise, 'capitalism necessarily entails making use of, reinforcing and/or producing these relations of "difference" in the construction of labour relations'.

Migrant informal workers are doubly trapped in informal employment relations and an unequal citizenship regime. Aggravated by the urban-biased development policy that has resulted in a great rural–urban disparity, the spheres of production (wage employment centred in the city) and social reproduction (childcare in the village) are spatially separated for many low-income rural migrants. While early discussions viewed informal work simply as an absence of formal employment arrangements, later studies explored the social composition and organisation of informal labour, as well as the interdependent relationship between informal and formal economic sectors (Castells & Portes 1989; Chan et al 2019; Lee et al 2020). The evolution of labour relations in contemporary economies requires in-depth analysis. As discussed in the next section, the rise of algorithmic management of work and control of informal labourers has been in turn dependent on the growth of internet-based retail trade.

Technology-driven growth, platform economy, and the politics of labour

The movement of goods and services is ever more reliant on seamless, wireless internet connectivity and mobile applications. Tech conglomerates and their logistics departments are incentivised to manage couriers through service contracting rather than formal employment (Alimahomed-Wilson & Reese 2020; Cowen 2014). In outsourcing, they do not provide 'labour-service partners' or independent contractors with employment contracts, minimum wages, or employee benefits. Indeed, normative expressions such as *share, task, help*, and *service* are now frequently used by businesses and governments as well, instead of more clearly defined terms such as *work, job*, and *employee* (Wu et al 2019, 576). In this discourse, the relations of production are obscured. But workers are not simply 'users of a

digital medium'; they are incorporated into a capitalist system of production (Gandini 2019, 1041). Software applications allocate and evaluate work to improve cost effectiveness. In this sense, the replacement of a human manager by an 'algorithmic boss' does not lessen the degree of corporate control, despite corporate hype concerning the 'independence' of delivery workers that is used to justify their classification as contractors, not employees.

In myriad subcontracting relationships, 'self-employed' labourers are generally required to provide their own technological means of production at work, such as a smartphone and a motorbike (Rème-Harnay 2023). With variable orders and piece-rates, workers' minimum earnings are not guaranteed. Moore and Newsome (2018) point out that parcel delivery work should be redefined as 'dependent self-employment' because the companies exercise direct control over the job. Despite the designation 'independent contractor', questions persist as to how much independence couriers attached to digital platforms enjoy. What is certain is that the new economy is transforming employment relations beyond digital applications and their algorithms (della Porta et al 2023; Kassem 2022).

Outside the state-defined employment relations framework, technological innovators have recruited workers through digital platforms to establish a worldwide system of on-demand labour services (Drahokoupil & Vandaele 2021; Srnicek 2017; Wood et al 2019; Zhang 2023). Online labour platforms of ride-hailing, food delivery, and parcel express delivery have created numerous part-time and full-time jobs across rural and urban spaces. In a span of a decade, digital labour platforms have grown exponentially from 142 in 2010 to 777 in 2020 globally (ILO 2021). Global tech conglomerates have been 'successful' not only by harnessing big data but also by leaping ahead of state regulation. Scholz (2017, 13) argues that the design of a corporate-dominated, platform-mediated labour system is 'instrumental in the process of dissolving direct employment, thereby creating low-wage futures for millions of people'. Indeed, companies seek to 'capture profits through digital intermediation, thus avoiding the encumbrances that ownership of fixed capital or the direct employment of labour usually entails' (Vallas & Schor 2020, 282).

The interaction of information technology, precarity, and labour relations has been much debated in the case of gig economy workers. Deadly road accidents involving delivery workers, labour strikes triggered by sharp pay cuts and speedups, and workers' claims for compensation have increasingly challenged image-conscious tech firms. In assessing workers' responses to precarious working conditions, their mutual support in everyday work is important (Tassinari & Maccarone 2020). Rizzo and Atzeni (2020, 1121) contend that 'the harshness of work and the need of mitigating its pernicious consequences' often provide 'grounds for the emergence of solidarity'. Platform corporations have drawn on pre-existing human relations such as marriage ties, kinship, and friendship into the sphere of production, thus reducing some costs of operation and supervision (Chan 2023). Likewise, platform-based workers have built social groups to share tips on job searches, negotiations with private insurance companies, and access to cheap accommodation. In the labour process, parcel couriers, while working independently in diverse locations, have devised coping strategies to exchange or redistribute parcels among themselves to meet tight deadlines, just like food riders who transfer meal orders to alleviate stress when necessary (Sun & Chen 2021).

The forging of on-line and off-line interpersonal networks can facilitate labour organising. Gig workers have been exploring a range of tactics such as the coordination of small-scale protests to demand higher pay, injury compensation, and fairer work schedules, based on a judgement that low-profile bargaining with management may be more effective than large-scale disruptions to traffic to get public attention (Liu & Friedman 2021). At other times, leveraging formal legal institutions, aggrieved workers

have filed labour disputes across multiple industries covering food and parcel delivery, car-hailing, and other types of platform-mediated service work, while labour relations between the online platforms and gig workers remain somewhat ambiguous (Lei 2021; Xiao 2019). Ultimately, suspension or deactivation of the troublemakers' user accounts is characteristic of the 'algorithmic panopticon' (Woodcock 2020, 88). Couriers' mobilising tactics at geographic delivery stations and through internet connectivity, however, are stimulating inquiry into the possibilities and limitations of workers' resistance.

Apart from the technological dimension, global venture capital has exerted its influence in high-tech sectors with the primary goals to maximise market value and profitability (Srnicek 2017; Zhang 2023). In successive rounds of financing, platform giants have devised local labour acquisition strategies to ensure a greater market share and rapid business growth in the long run. Under the direct impact of this venture capital-driven financialisation process, monopolistic or oligopolistic platform operators will cut labour bonuses on the one hand, and slash subsidies to consumers on the other hand. Workers' incomes and benefits will inevitably go down.

The self-organisation of labouring classes

How do labouring classes conquer political and economic power through self-organisation? Social scientists have usefully proposed the connection between macro political-economy approaches and micro-processes of a collective emotional environment in explaining the formation of worker identities and cultures of solidarity (Blecher 2010; Fantasia 1988; Pun 2022). Class, in our conception, takes root in shared experiences, which are shaped by relations of production and by cultural transformations, as well as by everyday practices in and out of the workplace (Thompson 1980 [1963]; van der Linden 2008). Class encompasses cultural dimensions as well as economic conditions. Workers have composed songs, letters, poems, art, and blog posts to raise collective awareness, express their voice, and mobilise public support (Garbelli 2023; Sun 2022, 2023). Different groups do not come together as a class merely because they have the same enemy, rather they must develop specific social relations, tactics, and strategies aimed at the dissolution of class society.

The (re)composition of labourers is taking place in various local communities. Migrants, for example, have built ethnic-based alliances, localistic networks, and informal settlements to foster equality and mutual support. Formal or informal workers' struggles over work status and remuneration, sometimes with support from governments as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and student-led anti-sweatshop movements, have sought comprehensive reforms centring on employment, healthcare, housing, education, and other essential human needs (Chun 2009; CKC Chan 2013; J Chan 2020; Ho 2014; Lee 2007, 2019; Liu 2015; Ross 2004; Seidman 2007). A labouring class in unity – when overcoming and transcending intra-class divisions and fragmentations by gender, citizenship status, and racial/ethnic differences – can better resist exploitation to reclaim human dignity and collective capacity (Morrison et al 2020; Perrotta & Sacchetto 2014).

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. Protesters have mobilised 'structural power' to disrupt production at the workplace level, particularly when they occupied a strategic location in close-knit production and logistics structures, henceforth bargaining with managers and/or pro-labour officials to achieve workers' goals (Alimahomed-Wilson & Reese 2020; Cowen 2014; Silver 2003). In analysing worker resistance, Elfström (2021, 21) sees that labour actions can be 'distinguished by the varying level of pressure that they bring to bear on the state'. Chinese workers and their

supporters are engaging in contained, boundary-spanning, or transgressive contention, while three approaches are sometimes combined to strengthen grassroots pressure. 'Contained resistance' refers to workers' claim-making through legal pathways. 'Boundary-spanning resistance' denotes workers' demands for improved conditions such as higher wages (above legal minimum levels). 'Transgressive resistance' involves more ambitious worker goals like establishing independent trade unions (outside party-state domination). Mobilisation would be strengthened by the coordination of actions among workers and their allies, yet would carry a high risk of crackdowns by companies and authorities (Fu 2018). Indeed, in contemporary China, labour unrest is correlated with greater spending on armed police personnel and equipment, denoting the increased repressive capacity of the state. Meanwhile, co-optation of service-oriented social organisations is giving rise to the growth of 'government-organised NGOs'. Repression and responsiveness, though difficult to coordinate across different levels and between different arms of the government, is integral to authoritarian evolution.

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 Latinoamericana de Estudios del Trabajo* (The Latin American Journal of Labor Studies, RELET). The following three articles, based on conceptual discussions and empirical case studies, shed light on work-related conflicts and autonomous worker organisations in the context of contemporary Europe (Carstensen 2023; Marà et al 2023; Neuhauser & Birke 2023).

Claudia Marà, Valeria Pulignano, and Paul Stewart (2023) present a longitudinal study of labour struggles in the food delivery sector in the city of Bologna, Italy. Focusing on Riders Union Bologna, a group of riders and grassroots activists who have long sought to tackle precariousness *outside* the formal union structure, the authors analyse synergies between old and new forms of labour actors amid the shifting national union traditions. The collaboration between traditional and self-organised unions suggests a possibility for progressive change in the long run.

Johanna Neuhauser and Peter Birke (2023) deploy the power resources approach to analyse labour unrest in three non-union sectors (meat industry, mask production, and postal services) during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany and Austria. The authors propose the conceptualisation of 'multiple precarity' to understand strikes and conflicts in workplaces where wages of predominantly low-level migrant workers remain very low. They have unveiled the conditions of insecurity and inequality confronted by these 'essential workers', who have maintained the functioning of urban and rural systems of production and distribution.

Anne Lisa Carstensen (2023) seeks to explain migrant labour conflict through the lens of temporality. She highlights temporal limitations that are often associated with migration processes, resulting from restrictive work permits and other state regulations, and the seasonality as well as fixed-contract terms of specific jobs in which migrants are usually employed. The consequences of this temporally unstable work on migrants' social reproduction makes temporality a fundamental conceptual device in studies of migrants' labour. Indeed, management has capitalised on a migrant workforce to increase flexibility and cut costs, while sometimes triggering collective resistance.

In summary, the contributing authors (Carstensen 2023; Marà et al 2023; Neuhauser & Birke 2023) ask how socio-political and economic factors, as well as the temporal dimension of migration, influence labour upsurge, labour market inclusion, and

containment of worker unrest. Temporary or contingent low-wage migrants, particularly those who have small children and other familial responsibility, are often constrained to lead and organise large-scale labour campaigns. High staff turnover further weakens mutual support and solidarity networks among co-workers. New empirical research evidence nevertheless reveals that different groups, including but not limited to low-paid migrants and gig labourers (comprising crowdsourced workers and subcontractor workers employed by agencies and subcontractors), have participated in union organising, social networking, and collective action in advancing their rights and interests.

Conclusion

Class is one of the fundamental forms of social power. From past to present, workers, peasants, and other civil society actors have fiercely contested exploitation, privatisation, and imperialism with the goal to create a better society (Appelbaum & Lichtenstein 2016; Harvey 2003, 2005; Hung 2011; Koo 2001; Perry 1993; Selden 1995; Wallerstein 1979). This article reflects on the need to more explicitly set class domination as the normative dimension for labour studies, henceforth orienting scholars who seek to produce knowledge supportive of workers. Kalleberg and colleagues, rather than prescribing barely adequate services or financial needs to the most adversely affected individuals, call for a 'class-based redistribution of income and wealth' to 'reduce the inequality between nonregular and regular workers' (Kalleberg et al 2022, 14). For Selwyn (2017), social ownership instead of private or state ownership of means of production is critical to maximising workers' power. 'The identification and satisfaction of communal needs and purposes', in his formulation, 'will be predicated upon cooperation within and between workplaces and communities' (Selwyn 2017, 131). Labour is to be democratically coordinated to produce use values for people.

As e-commerce retailers and their logistics partners seek to speed up production and circulation in this age of digital capitalism, the needs of human labour continue to resist management aspirations to achieve frictionless logistics linking one-click orders to super-fast doorstep delivery (Hua 2018; Qiu 2022). In what ways can we hold global financial capital and platform corporations accountable to create decent working conditions? How will the balance of power between managers and workers, and between the state and companies, shift? The COVID-19 emergency has made more evident the deep-seated class, race, and ethnic, as well as gender divides shaping working people's access to work, quality jobs, and living wages. The struggle for redistributing resources and creating greater social protections for all workers must carry on in the post-COVID era.

Note

1 For the additional articles published in this themed collection in *Global Labour Journal* (GLJ), *Partecipazione e Conflitto* (Participation and Conflict, PACO), and *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios del Trabajo* (The Latin American

Journal of Labor Studies, RELET), see the editorial essay by Maurizio Atzeni and Devi Sacchetto. The entire collection, with four participating journals including the *Economic and Labour Relations Review*, was originated from a special stream titled 'Labour Conflict, Forms of Organisation and Class', proposed by Maurizio Atzeni, Jenny Chan and Devi Sacchetto for the International Labour Process Conference, April 2022.

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