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## **Scaling Up? TRANSNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANISING IN GLOBALISED PRODUCTION**

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**JULIA HOFMANN**

**Introductory Commentary**

At the end of the 20th century, many (mainstream) scholars stated that ‘(organised) labour is dead’. At first glance, several societal developments seemed to prove them right: union density rates were shrinking, at least in the global North. The project of ‘real existing socialism’ failed. Laissez-faire economics and neoliberal restructuring attempts dominated the political landscape and led to a power shift towards capital. Increasing unemployment rates, as well as higher precariousness and vulnerability, were the consequences on the labour side. Strategic and political errors or misjudgements within union organisations further aggravated the situation.

At second glance though, this ‘superficial’ finding showed up not to be true, as the situation was way more complex. First, the status of unions and labour organisers differed highly between regions and countries: The global North versus the global South, Europe versus the United States, and, even in bigger regions, such as in Europe, the industrial relation systems remained more or less stable in several countries, while it came under increasing pressure in others. Second, the institutions that organised labour helped to build up after WWII (such as certain social and labour market instruments or specific forms of interest coordination like social-partnership) remained (more or less) intact, at least in Western Europe. If available, collective bargaining and company co-determination further supported enterprises and industries to remain successful. These forms of institutionalised power thus somehow helped unions to compensate for their losses in organisational power. Third, shrinking union density rates on the one hand were also temporally accompanied with revitalisation attempts and other forms of labour resistance on the other hand (Voss/Sherman 2000).

To counter the image of 'dead organised labour' and to (re-)gain confidence and power, unions and labour activists tried to learn from these successful strategies world-wide. In order to build up and strengthen labour's power resources, progressive research played a vital role. It estimated the chances and obstacles of the individual efforts. One main finding here was that it is essential to sound out the chances and limits of a progressive formation of alliances between unions and other relevant civil society actors, unorganised labour activists and social movements (Kelly 1998). In modern 'counter-movements', which fight against the marketisation of social relations, as Beverly Silver (2003) put it, 'old' and 'new' social movements should no longer oppose each other, but rather work together as part of a 'mosaic'. They would profit from their respective power resources and different strategies.

Further, research showed that an in-depth analysis of concrete organising and struggle experiences might help to shed light on the preconditions for success. By pointing at the actors and structures behind the struggles, as well as at critical moments within, it can help to equip the actors with best practice examples and orientations for their own strategic action. Of course, individual cases cannot be applied one to one to a different context; they require a certain translation. But an academic analysis can at least help unions and other labour organisers to ask themselves the question, 'What can we learn from these experiences?'

Finally, yet importantly, research showed how important it is to look beyond the 'national container' in a globally connected world. Even though labour campaigns might take place thousands of kilometres away, through our global (economic) entanglement, they can be highly connected with domestic challenges. Hence, it is important to provide a more in-depth view of the chances and obstacles of cross-border or transnational collective action. In this context, the research points, for example, at the fact that transnational collective action is highly demanding. It requires not only a joint interpretation of the situation (so-called joint frames) but also cross-border networks and the formation of a transnational, collective identity, or at least feelings of cross-border solidarity. Not only cultural, but also material factors might hinder transnational collective action (Tarrow 2005).

This special issue of the *Austrian Journal of Development Studies* considers all three of the above-named aspects and looks at the chances of and the barriers to transnational labour organising in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It

is thus an important contribution to the academic, but also activist and interest-based, debate on (transnational) labour organising. This issue not only focusses on concrete cases and the organising attempts of various social actors such as trade unions or social movements in a transnational context. Authors also point at the specific challenges of labour organising in globally connected industries such as the garment industry, mining or cotton production, as well as global forms of work such as on-demand platform work. Databases on transnational labour campaigns are presented and, on a more theoretical basis, academic frameworks coming from the global North are critically reflected on their adaption to the global South.

From an interest-based perspective, it is highly appreciated that progressive academia once more scratches on the old image of ‘dead (organised) labour’ and shows how vital the global labour movements are. Despite all adverse circumstances and structures, these cases show that there is always room for (organised labour) action. It remains to be hoped that these important debates do not remain only in the academic context, but find their way to labour activists, organisers and unionists world-wide.

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