

Presentation

Political repertoires in transnational labor struggles and new forms of global labor governance

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The broad diversity of issues associated to the “world of work” affect not only the industrial relations domain as such but also a set of political and social groups in society. There is a long tradition in sociology of work that links capital and class to wider themes such as industrialization, development, capitalism and populism. Needless to say, wage labor has become dominant since the eighteenth century, and with it the growth of the labor force as a “commodity”. At the same time, it was against this logic that the workers’ movement and its unions emerged, conquering broader labor and social rights, in a long conflict process that in Europe culminated in the triumph of the welfare state. Most of the analyses inspired by Karl Marx’s thought – who experienced the Industrial Revolution and other popular rebellions in Europe closely – became fundamental for a sociological understanding of these processes, from the first revolts of the English workers to the Paris Commune, through the Revolution of 1848. The rapid social transformation unleashed since then has highlighted the conflictual relationship between the main social classes of modernity. The wild capitalism of the first phase of industrialization favored the profitability of technical innovation, but at the same time it stimulated the collective action of the working classes, paving the way for broader civilizational conquests.

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But despite the historical ambitions for emancipation and international worker solidarity, the national basis of labor movements and trade unionism prevailed (Tilly, 1995; Costa, 2006). Such reality could be explained by a complementary range of factors: i) the strong relevance of elements of national labor regulation (legal regimes, wages and working conditions); ii) a global unionized workforce of only 7% of the world population (Ituc, 2014); iii) a scarcity of financial resources (most notorious in the context of economic crisis, deeply reinforced by pandemics) to encourage travel to the same physical space and common times of protest, despite the virtualities that today are associated with electronic unionism and distance communication; iv) an incorporation of logics of competition and conflict in the transnational union speeches and practices – do not forget, for example, that labor solidarity can be undermined by situations in which the struggle for better wage conditions in a given country can mean the degradation of the wage relationship or even rising unemployment in another country; v) employers' violations of labor rights in multinational companies; vi) the weakness of the channels of representation of labor interests at the transnational level (where the International Labor Organization appears isolated or secondary due to the presence of institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development etc.); vii) the absence or fragility of political agenda(s) with aggregating and mobilizing global dynamics, led by credible political actors able to maximize the content and the claiming power of social and labor struggles.

Such national basis has been strongly challenged by globalization and neoliberalism. Post-Fordist states (Jessop, 2013), flexible accumulation process (Harvey, 1989), precarization (Standing, 2001), global value chains (Gereffi & Korzeniewicz, 1990), and new factory regimes (Nichols *et al.*, 2004) have all cast important changes in the political and organizational realm where labor was used to act and fight. A new global configuration of production and demand within national economies and across countries threw workers and their representatives into a turmoil of insecurity and destructuring. However, global responses also emerged, some of them linked to the old and established frame of international unionism (Fairbrother & Hammer, 2005; Hyman, 2005), some associated to a more horizontally oriented form of activism close to social movements's style of action or setting up different types of possible coalitions (Waterman, 2001; Webster *et al.*, 2007; Costa & Estanque, 2019).

Key issues treated by scholarly literature on this theme are not conclusive. Governance of global value chains (Gereffi, Humphrey & Sturgeon, 2005) – which includes forcefully the role of labor– and global union networks (McCallum, 2013) are pieces of the debate related to how globalization process can be regulated and

its effects upon workers in transnational companies mitigated. All of that brings to the fore the crucial issue of transnational labor solidarity (Bieler, 2014). As a result, International Workers Committees at transnational corporations as well as global campaigns addressed to those firms are points of interest which have drawn attention to specialists. Much has been said nowadays about a new role for Global Union Federations (Ford & Gillan, 2015), the promise represented by International Framework Agreements (Stavis, 2010; Fichter & Helfen, 2011), and the open possibilities carried by, among others, Codes of Conduct from global companies (Fichter & Sydow, 2002) and “Decent Work” flag from multilateral institutions.

As a matter of fact, it is in this light that the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrined the principle that “work is not a commodity” (Philadelphia Declaration, 1944), which culminated in the recognition of the right to collective organization and negotiation (according to ILO Convention C098, approved in 1949). This has been an important factor in the generalization of “social dialogue”, encouraged by ILO on an international scale. However, neoliberal globalization reversed this course from the mid-1970s onwards, with the first oil shocks and productivity crisis related to high levels of work conflagration. Broader structural trends, such as an aging population, stagnating economic growth, increased competitiveness on a global scale, financial crises, among others, have provided the basis and arguments for neoliberalism, helping to legitimize measures that have moved back certain social policies and put the European social model at risk. The *Washington Consensus*, in the late 1980s, would open space for the consolidation of a new monetary policy favorable to the dominance of financial capitalism, stimulating the opening of borders to global trade, under the coordination of the most powerful economies and banking institutions (G20, IMF and World Bank), trying to force this model as the way forward for emerging economies.

A rich and variegated scholarship was already settled in this area recently. Stimulant approaches such as the Power Resources’ view (Visser, 1995; Jensen, Madsen & Due, 1995; Wright, 2000; Silver, 2003; Schmalz & Dörre, 2013; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Crouch, 2017; Lehndorff, Dribbush & Schulten, 2017; Costa et al, 2020; Estanque *et al.*, 2020), which is spread out throughout not few recent contributions over the field, vivifies the theoretical vein of the sociology dedicated to unions and the workers’ movement today. From the contextual viewpoint, since the emergence of the Brics’ group of intermediate-developed countries (some of them ex-colonies) in the globalization map, a more informed and scientifically-based report coming from the situation of capital and labor in those countries is felt as advisable and even necessary (Munck, 2010; Nichols & Sugar,

2004; Nichols *et al.*, 2004). They enter into a running debate which needs to be constantly fed by new findings based on research and reflection.

The thematic of this issue rounds not only around all those topics but goes also further. They show empirical paths to develop under the established issues and themes already well circumscribed. New perspectives and *angles d'attaque* are tried. This is auspicious in every sense, irrespective of position within international division of labor. However, countries from the Global South put particular challenges to a supposed common agenda in sociology of work. First they remember to us the problem related to different temporalities: development is unequal, uneven and has different logics depending on historical grounds of the territories it affects. Secondly, development is not neutral; it implies a critical assessment of notions such as growth and income: not every growth lead to progress in terms of social standards as much as not every income leads to satisfactory and human needs to be fulfilled – environmental damage and labor exploitation (e.g. informality), respectively, remind us that development *per se* is not enough to draw emancipatory scenarios for the future. Latin American countries have had a rich intellectual history associated with developmentalist ideas, with original insights taken seriously by mainstream social science, particularly in the sixties and seventies of the last century. Those ideas and insights remain a source of uneasiness and defy, since many of the bottlenecks then found out by researchers and thinkers are today still prevalent in those societies – poverty and the bourgeoisie's role towards ruling classes of the center or imperialism are just two of them. Thirdly, uneven temporalities may imply a dialectical approach of old and new: many aspects of the “old” industrialist order (let's say, Fordist regulation, including a salaried society as a norm) may appear currently as plausible somehow, while the “new” appeal to multilateral sovereignty may sound as a demise of the state to rule national questions. Labor law frame is a good point of observation: the rhythm of change from corporatist influence to more pluralist atmosphere is misleading depending on when the reading of events is taken – for Brazilian labor movement, for example, the complete removal of the old *Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho* (1943) has today a completely new meaning than during the iconic times of “new unionism” when Lula first come to the front. As a result, the ‘social movement unionism’ associated to CUT-Central Única dos Trabalhadores lost a lot of its fascination of the heroic days of fighting against dictatorship. Another point of observation that amplifies unequal temporalities is when the “contractualist” culture within capital and labor is carried out to the field of lawful class struggle. Mistakenly understood as similar to “anglo-saxon” pattern of labor relations, when anti-union and individualistic prospects were invoked to marginalize collective initiatives, the contractualist vocabulary was rather an imaginative political reper-

toire used by Brazilian unionists to call to attention the lack of democracy both at the bottom (the shopfloor) and at the top (the concertation arena) of the national industrial relations. Contract-like vocabulary kept an eye in the social-democrat style of neocorporatist experiences in North Europe, at the same time as criticized the statist-corporatist tradition of Iberian codes of labor regulation from the past. Leftist currents also wrongly interpreted at the time the contractualist mood bore by CUT leaders as a betrayal of socialist early times. National contract along industries and sectors remain today in Brazil a fundamental piece of every negotiation round between unions and employers; the fierce resistance from the second against that flag sponsored by the first tells eloquently about that (right) choice made by workers.

Fourthly, globalization has a history and the ever-invoked Polanyian notion of a pendulum between the market forces, on one side, and protectionist forces, on the other side, may be now moving towards the second pole. Besides the wider trend, though, the *direction* of change can never conceal the *rhythm* of change: the timing of how public policies and statist institutions are transformed into neoliberal support also counts. Again, the impressive resilience shown by the Labor Law throughout more than seven decades is a landmark of the weight of societal forces acting through different political and ideological spurs.

Linking the historical grounded basis to the global lines is the track we see as the more fruitful. Of special interest is the matter on models of representation for local unions, labor committees and global structures of international unionism. Another fascinating topic is the relationship between the existing structure of unionism and the local social movements (Anner, 2011) – sometimes linked to truly global issues (environmental protocols, fair-trade etc.) – and how they invigorate labor struggles (Evans, 2010).

Points of intersection with the traditional labour process analysis (Moody, 1997; Durand, 2007), e.g. how is the quest of workers' control before the new globalized scenario for dispersed sites of production, or rather how is the management's control divide between head office and branches throughout the world, are especially challenging, although still requiring a great deal of engagement and interest among specialists – the intellectual production at present days is far from shouldering the previous rich scholarly on conflict and consent, autonomy and control, at the point of production. Perhaps it is time to venture on those kind of pathways.

The promise of a “new labour internationalism” capable of revitalizing workers' movements in the era of globalization has been a matter of contention in the field of labour studies, either North and South. Labor internationalism interpellates sided and conexas problems such as how far modernization process could lead and to which point it has to stop in order to keep “society” alive and prevented to be

engulfed by every-man-for-himself policies (translated today into entrepreneurship ideals): while North has gone too far (eg. wasting natural resources and rationalizing work), South has maybe some road to be tracked ahead before leaving behind modernization promises. Modernization only (as the growth path conducted by some economic policies led by peripheral countries suggest)? Hindered modernization (as proposed by the social scientist Oliveira 2003)? Or simply uneven and combined development?

Those are the kind of dilemmas involved when international solidarism and working class global politics comes to the front. As organic cellules of society, labour forces are forcefully intertwined to every political choice made by ruling classes or global elites. The choices national unionisms make reflect the prevalent political economy at stake within national economies: in other words, what is the place reserved to the latter in the actual international division of labour? The answer to this question, albeit general and somehow abstract it can be, helps to understand the complexities involved when the empirical findings on union responses to globalization emerge from research. This one is not conclusive at all. It sheds more doubts and questions than offers definite answers. In the lines below this Dossier offers a contemporary and informed mapping on how is the state of arts of the topic globalization and labour.

Regional solidarities and trade union networks, global economic planning, globalizations of just transition, forms of transnational organizing, informal work, North and South, platform workers, digital communication processes are some of the themes debated in this Dossier, all finely commented by Ronaldo Munck as the final contribution of balance, perspectives and action.

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Abstract

Political repertoires in transnational labor struggles and new forms of global labor governance

Despite the concerns about wages and the increase in the quality of life of the working class having acquired a historical centrality in the struggle repertoires designed at national level, the ambition of internationalist solidarity and the emancipation of the forms of collective organization of workers has always been an end in yourself. In the light of current times, it is an ambition that can be witnessed in the way that the trends of globalization and contemporary neoliberalism demand adequate and organized responses, sharing experiences, contributions to new forms of global governance, more just and dignified. And also new learning outcomes for the classic protagonists of the world of work. By gathering contributions from international experts on the world of work, from different national contexts and disciplinary affiliations, this dossier fulfills this purpose of critical debate, supported by concrete experiences. Here the reader can find contributions on regional solidarity and union networks, political regulation processes, global economic planning, climate transition, forms of transnational labor organization, informal work, North and South relations, work in the platform economy or digital communication processes. Keywords: Transnational labor struggles; World of work; Global labor governance; Sociolaboral regulation.

Resumo

Repertórios políticos nas lutas trabalhistas transnacionais e as novas formas de governança trabalhista global

Apesar de as preocupações em torno do salário e da elevação da qualidade de vida da classe trabalhadora terem adquirido uma centralidade histórica nos reportórios de luta desenhados em escala nacional, a ambição de solidariedade internacionalista e de emancipação das formas de organização coletiva dos trabalhadores constituiu sempre um fim em si mesmo. À luz dos tempos atuais, trata-se de uma ambição que pode ser testemunhada no modo como as tendências de globalização e neoliberalismo contemporâneo reclamam respostas adequadas e organizadas, de partilha de experiências, de contributos para novas formas de governança global, mais justas e dignificantes. E igualmente de novas aprendizagens para os protagonistas clássicos do mundo do trabalho. Ao reunir contributos de especialistas internacionais sobre o mundo do trabalho, provenientes de distintos contextos nacionais e filiações disciplinares, este dossiê cumpre esse propósito de debate crítico, apoiado em experiências concretas. Aqui se encontram contributos sobre solidariedades regionais e redes sindicais, processos de regulamentação política, planejamento econômico global, transição climática, formas de organização laboral transnacional, trabalho informal, relações Norte e Sul, trabalho na economia de plataforma ou processos de comunicação digital.

Palavras-chave: Lutas trabalhistas transnacionais; Mundo do trabalho; Governança trabalhista global; Regulação sociolaboral.

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