

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
Universidade de Coimbra



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TRADE UNIONISM

Hermes Augusto Costa

Often considered the “poor relative” of labour relations, trade unionism comes under even greater pressure in situations of economic and employment crisis such as that resulting from COVID-19. Some of the empowerment resources of trade unions are therefore put to the test, as they were during the period of “internal devaluation” that accompanied the financial rescue and Troika intervention in Portugal. It is around these resources (sources of power) that the main problems revolve.

From a structural point of view, the negotiating capacity of workers in a work context seems to be diminished, first of all, because unemployment and the threats of collective dismissal in temporary work companies, in sectors such as hotels and tourism, etc., take on dramatic proportions. In addition to that, from an organisational point of view the propensity to attract new members tends to be lower, given that, not infrequently, the climate of economic uncertainty and even fear prevail over joining collective projects. Thirdly, the suspension of the right to strike (during the state of emergency) or the suspension of the hearing of trade union organisations on the drafting of labour laws, have highlighted the institutional weaknesses of trade unions.

In the face of these three types of blockades (often imposed “from the outside in”) at the structural, organisational and institutional levels, possibilities arise to respond in the societal field, i.e., to develop coalitions and net-

works in civil society and to value innovative strategies.

On the one hand, the fact that temporary workers, i.e., workers in a probation period, with fixed-term contracts and issuing self-employed receipts, are, among others, the most vulnerable in this pandemic crisis, makes it urgent to risk a new policy of alliances between the “old” trade unions and the “new” precarious workers’ organisations. It is important, therefore, to focus on factors that promote convergence and mutual learning: joint pressure to denounce and resist situations of unemployment and precariousness; outcry against a new era of austerity; a merging of the tactical sense of union struggles and the virtuousness of digital activism typical of precarious organisations, etc.

On the other hand, trade unions need to make the best use of social networks, not only to recruit new members, but also to communicate and speak “to the heart” of society. This pandemic has implicitly put pressure on trade unions to mobilise their members in support of “distance” campaigns, based on the use of digital communication resources and strategies. While recognising that the focus of trade unionism must continue to be on the workplace and in close proximity to workers, giving a larger role to digital communication, albeit in a supplementary way, is becoming increasingly necessary.