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# Resisting labour market insecurity: Old and new actors, rivals or allies?

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## Abstract

In most of the world, work has usually been precarious. For several decades, however, greater employment security was achieved in the developed economies. These gains have been increasingly eroded by neoliberal globalisation. We focus on Western Europe to examine whether trade unions are merely protectors of the remaining labour market 'insiders', or whether they can also represent the interests of the growing numbers of 'outsiders'. We also examine the role of 'new' social movements in mobilising against insecurity. Our reflections end by considering whether and how the two modes of response offered by trade unions and social movements may be integrated.

## Keywords

Labour market insecurity, globalisation, trade unions, social movements, protest, Europe

## Introduction

We are grateful for the invitation to contribute to this Special Issue. Our main aim is not to discuss the previous contributions (though we will refer briefly to them), since the introductory essay has already summarised their arguments. Rather, we wish to situate what they have presented within the context of broader debates and to point to two main issues that require additional scholarly attention. One is theoretical: how do we make sense of the transformations in labour markets and the broader world of work? The second is the practical impact of these transformations and the dynamics of resistance (and its absence). Intersecting with both these questions is the old analytical confrontation between structure and agency. We stress the importance of avoiding a binary choice between structuralism and actor-centric analysis: it is the intersection between the two that is crucial, and this intersection is shaped by patterns of social relations.

People make their own history, but they do not make it just as they choose.... The rise of capitalist industry in Britain two centuries ago involved gains and losses, both unevenly distributed. It massively increased insecurity, brought fragmentation and demoralisation, but also inspired resistance and generated solidarities. The collective experience of these years created, however incompletely, a working class, as Thompson (1963: 9) famously insisted: 'I do not see class as a "structure", nor even as a "category", but as something which happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships. More than this, the notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship.' It was a shared experience of oppression by a rapacious elite without the sense of *noblesse oblige* of the old ruling class which helped forge a broader collective insurgency, itself informed by a moral economy and political aspirations inherited from the past.

Our present epoch is radically different, but there are important parallels in the socio-economic dynamics, which must also be understood as the outcomes of historical relationships. Many

similar analytical questions arise. In an era shaped by globalised financialised capital, fragmentation and demoralisation of once cohesive working-class communities are today a key part of the new world of labour, involving in important respects the unmaking of the working class. But to understand the nature of these changes, and the possibilities of shaping unity out of division, we must probe deep into the complex social relations involved in everyday working lives. As Jenkins and Leicht put it (1997: 373), struggle and resistance ‘come together in a concrete nexus of economic, political, and ideological relationships between specific actors’.

In what follows we focus primarily on moments of resistance to the growing insecurity of work and its intensification under post-crisis austerity. More specifically, we discuss the relationship between trade unions and more informal modes of resistance. Our main focus is on experience in (western) Europe, since this is the region that we know best (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013). We end by pointing to a ‘variable geometry of resistance’: a tension between different national contexts, between local and global responses, between trade unions and social movements, between individualism and collectivism and between inter-group rivalry and solidarity.

In the next section we briefly summarise the key shift from the ‘organised capitalism’ of the early post-war decades in the ‘advanced’ economies to a mutation in which financial outcomes are the dominant driver and in which national modes of social regulation have lost much of their efficacy. We discuss the challenges which this new form of capitalism poses for labour, with growing insecurity and the weakening of traditional forms of collective representation; and also for theory, in terms of making analytical sense of these developments. In the core of our article we then discuss the ambiguous role of trade unions in representing the growing precarious workforce, and also the experience of mobilisation by alternative social movements. In conclusion we return to the notion of variable geometry, and reflect on the implications of our account for both theory and practice.

## **All that is solid melts into air: Challenges for labour, challenges for theory**

Working life has been precarious in most of the world throughout history. The rise of industrial capitalism, however, radically transformed the foundations of insecurity: in the ‘advanced’ economies, the dominant form of production was no longer by independent artisans or farmers who owned their own tools and (in the latter case) land but by wage-workers employed by a capitalist who owned the means of production and whose priority was to achieve a profit on this capital. Labour (power) became a commodity to be bought and sold, according to the vagaries of market forces. The disruptive implications were starkly depicted in the *Communist Manifesto*: ‘constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air....’

In the twentieth century, such apocalyptic accounts were widely dismissed. The transition to ‘organised capitalism’ had stabilised socio-economic relations. For several decades, indeed, greater employment security was achieved in the developed economies. More recently, however, these gains have been increasingly eroded by neoliberal globalisation. Polanyi (1944), writing during the war, interpreted the development of capitalist economies as the outcome of a ‘double movement’. The first, in the nineteenth century, involved the imposition of ‘free’ markets (though the whole idea of free markets is an oxymoron, since all markets are social and political constructs). The damaging social effects of this process, in particular those transforming labour into a ‘fictitious commodity’ to be hired and fired at will, provoked a counter-movement. Hence the struggles in the twentieth century for social, industrial and economic democracy represented a countervailing process to impose some constraint on the disruptive social consequences of market liberalism. Markets became ‘embedded’ in a systematic regulatory web.

Polanyi anticipated a parallel reaction to the excesses of market-making at the international level: renewed state regulation of the domestic economy linked to a retreat from ‘capitalist internationalism’. What however occurred was a new form of international regime, involving a bounded liberalisation of external trade, but linked to Keynesian economic management and a partial decommodification of labour at national level. ‘The principles of multilateralism and tariff reductions

were affirmed, but so were safeguards, exemptions, exceptions, and restrictions – all designed to protect the balance of payments and a variety of domestic social policies’ (Ruggie, 1982: 381).

The post-war social compromise was inherently ambiguous and unstable, for three main reasons. First, it reflected a specific, historically contingent balance of class forces, and one largely confined to ‘advanced’ economies. Second, it assumed different forms cross-nationally, but in all cases involved an accommodation between national labour movements, employers who were primarily national in terms of corporate ownership and production strategies, and governments which were to a large degree autonomous in social and economic policy: an outcome of the bounded character of economic internationalisation which Ruggie described. Third, the existence of an alternative socio-economic model to the East – however deformed and repressive – imposed a degree of self-restraint on capitalist aggression.

These three preconditions no longer apply. What has developed in recent decades has been analysed by McMurtry (1998) as the ‘cancer stage of capitalism’. Polanyi (1944: 73) described labour, land and money as ‘fictitious commodities’ because while they were all subject to market forces, unlike real commodities they were not produced for sale on the market. ‘To allow the market mechanism to be the sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment, indeed, even of the amount and use of their purchasing power, would result in the demolition of society.’ Certainly the post-war compromises imposed firm limits on the commodification of labour, land and money; but Polanyi’s analysis was remarkably prescient. What has now occurred is the systematic weakening and removal of the social constraints on the destructive dynamic of commodification: a ‘carcinogenic mutation’ which has released the pathological potential which capitalist economies always contained (McMurtry, 1998: 127-128).

The cancer stage of capitalism is linked as both cause and effect to the erosion of the three preconditions of post-war social compromises. First, globalisation – of which European economic integration is one important element – has removed the dominant capitalist agglomerations from national control. There are many ways of conceptualising the historical development of globalisation, including its technological foundations and its geographical scope. What we would highlight are the changes in its core dynamic. Its earliest forms involved international movements of commodities: raw materials, manufactured products but also labour (including slave and semi-slave labour, as Nelson Lichtenstein reminds us). The mid-twentieth century saw a qualitative shift to the dominant role of multinational corporations and the development of what may best be called global surplus value chains, in which corporate strategists subject actual producers to constant pressures to cut costs, creating new forms of insecurity. In the third, most recent phase, finance capital intensifies the dynamic of commodification.

Financialisation is the second key transformation. Liberalisation of financial markets has spawned an array of exotic fictitious commodities which Polanyi could never have imagined: derivatives, secondary markets, hedge funds, private equity, leveraged buy-outs, credit default swaps.... It is now possible, and indeed more effective, to generate a surplus without producing value: money can be expanded without the production of commodities as traditionally understood. Corporations have themselves been transformed into commodities, increasingly bought and sold, creating new modes of insecurity: for growing numbers of workers (and their unions), it is no longer even clear *who* is the employer (Standing, 2011: 35).

The third transformation involves the reconfiguration of the role of the state. The post-war compromises involved the state in multiple ways. Particularly but not exclusively in Europe, legislation created a web of individual employment rights, and also buttressed collective representation of worker interests through trade unions and works councils. Welfare regimes were central to Polanyi’s ‘double movement’. Macroeconomic regulation on Keynesian lines sustained near-full employment. Governments themselves became major employers, typically committed to supporting high labour standards. But in recent decades, neoliberal globalisation has provided an alibi for anti-social policies by governments that insist that there is no alternative to submission to international markets (Weiss, 1998). On the one hand, government policies have been aimed at ‘rolling back the state’, and restricting social protections to those that can be justified on grounds of productivity and competitiveness; on the other, new and repressive forms of intervention have been required to impose the sway of market forces. The European Union (EU), once often viewed as a defender of decommodification, has become one of the key drivers of this process: its ‘new economic

governance' increasingly targets social welfare and employment protection; while the austerity packages imposed on the 'programme' countries by the Troika of European Commission, European Central Bank (ECB) and International Monetary Fund have coercively imposed escalating insecurity.

National economies and national labour markets are thus increasingly *disembedded* from effective social regulation; and the beneficiaries of financialised 'shareholder value' capitalism have little interest in maintaining historic compromises. The balance of class forces has shifted radically. These trends can be understood, within Polanyi's framework, as a *counter-counter-movement*, a *third* phase involving the deliberate unravelling of the regulatory web constructed in previous decades. The norm of insecurity, widely believed to have been overcome in the mid-twentieth century, is increasingly re-imposed.

### ***The challenge for labour***

Recommodification poses clear challenges for labour, in the sense both of the life-chances of workers as individuals and of the organisations which represent their interests collectively. The extent of the first is evident from some simple statistical indicators. In Table 1 we provide basic data on insecurity in selected west European countries – usually regarded as the region in which decommodification was most firmly established – setting out rates of unemployment and temporary contracts for the labour force in general and for those aged under 25. The data cover the six largest EU member states, together with Greece and Portugal, which were particularly severely affected by the crisis, and Sweden, which was relatively unaffected and where it is often assumed that decades of social-democratic regulation have eliminated labour market insecurity. We give statistics for 2008, before the main impact of the crisis, and 2014, when some but by no means all European economies had recovered. The figures show the major increase in unemployment rates in the worst affected countries, and the far higher impact on the 15-24 age group. Labour market insecurity is thus in particular a problem for younger workers. Table 1 also shows that in most of the countries – whether or not there is a high overall level of unemployment – the majority of young people who obtain jobs are employed on precarious contracts, and that if anything the situation has deteriorated further after the 'recovery'. In Germany, the figure is inflated by the high proportion of apprenticeships, which are included in the Eurostat analysis, and we show the lower percentages when these are excluded (though note that increasingly, German apprenticeships do not lead to permanent employment). There is no similar explanation for the high figures in Sweden, where apprenticeships are far less extensive.

At first sight a curious exception, the UK has a far lower rate of fixed-term contracts than other countries in our selection; however, because standard employment relationships offer very limited protection against dismissal, employers have limited incentives to use temporary contracts. Greece also has a far lower rate of temporary contracts than most, but not only is the unemployment rate one of the highest but there is a particularly high prevalence of self-employment (31%, twice the EU average), often a form of disguised precarious employment. Italy, with 23% self-employment, is also well above average. Much more generally, the growth of the 'platform' or 'gig' economy has created new forms of spurious self-employment (Drahokoupil and Fabo, 2016). Another feature of more traditional sectors of employment is the 'posting' of workers from low-wage countries to undertake contracts in economies with better pay and conditions, undercutting local standards.

[Table 1 about here]

Can growing insecurity be resisted; and if so, how? Much current debate hinges on whether existing institutions of labour market regulation, and in particular trade unions, have both the capacity and the will to reverse the trend. With the rate of unionisation almost universally in decline, and partly in consequence with a loss of material resources and political influence, their capacity may indeed be questioned. The thesis that they also lack the will is associated in particular with writers (Lindbeck and Snower, 1988; Rueda, 2007) who perceive unions as defenders of the relatively secure core of labour market 'insiders' rather than precarious 'outsiders', and argue that the social-democratic parties with which unions in many countries were traditionally linked are committed to an institutional welfare framework which similarly advantages those already better protected.

If not by trade unions, how can the interests of the growing precarious workforce be advanced? Is it possible that less institutionalised forms of collective mobilisation, of the type primarily analysed within social movement research, can be more effective in coordinating the distinctive interests of those increasingly excluded from what was once seen, at least in developed economies, as the ‘normal’ employment relationship? We refer to such forms of collectivism, particularly as they have emerged in the past decade in countries worst affected by the crisis, as ‘new social movements’ – though their forms of action may often have longer historical roots.

Are trade unions and such alternative movements rivals or potential allies in responding to the challenges of growing labour market insecurity? This is the focus in the core of our article. For this we draw on our previous research into trade unions in Western Europe, in which we adopted a broader thematic but narrower geographical lens (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013).

### ***The challenge for theory***

If the practices and institutions of social regulation and industrial relations were nationally distinctive, so was much of the analytical apparatus deployed to understand the representation of labour interests. None of the traditional academic disciplines offers a sufficient lens to make sense of the dynamics of contemporary globalisation and of possible labour responses. The two contributions which frame the previous case studies address this challenge. In his introductory essay, Tobias Schulze-Cleven identifies global labour studies and comparative political economy as the most significant current approaches to globalisation and its discontents, and explores potential routes to a synthesis. In his discussion, though, he also refers to two other distinct perspectives, power resources and mobilisation theories. We may note that all four, partially overlapping approaches are cross-disciplinary in character. We would also suggest that to the three dimensions which he identifies – the roles of ideas, interests and institutions – it is necessary to add *social relations*. In our view, any adequate conceptual map of current trends, if it is to transcend fatalistic structural determinism, must be relation-centric. For interests and identities are not objectively given but are socially constructed through interactions within and between socio-economic groups. Moreover, intra- and inter-group division and/or solidarity are shaped by the ways in which interests and identities are subjectively *framed*, as mobilisation theorists have long argued (Kelly, 1998; Snow et al., 1986).

Such considerations must inform any attempt to theorise the situation of the ‘new’ insecure labour market groups in advanced economies. The best known approach to this question is the concept of the ‘precariat’ developed by Standing (2011, 2014, 2015). His analysis contains many ambiguities (as could be said, indeed, of the classic Marxian writings on the proletariat). He describes the precariat as not a class but a ‘class-in-the-making’. At the same time, it is a class ‘at war with itself’, for ‘the precariat is far from being homogeneous’ (2011: 15). In particular, he distinguishes three groups: first, those from traditional working-class communities whose former security has been undermined by globalisation; second, migrants, ethnic minorities, ex-convicts, who constitute ‘denizens’ deprived of social rights; third, ‘the educated, plunged into a precariat existence after being promised the opposite, a bright career of personal development and satisfaction’ (2014: 29-30). The first group is susceptible to far-right authoritarian politics, and often fears or despises the other two; the second is largely apolitical, but occasionally erupts into violent protests; the third is ‘the potentially transformative part of the precariat, the new vanguard [who] are open to becoming the progressives’ (2015: 8). The radicalism of the latter may potentially displace the action of trade unions which ‘have entrenched their interests inside capitalism’ (2015: 5).

As many critics – such as Paret (2016) and Wright (2016) – have argued, it is far from evident how such diverse and antipathetic groups, though all victims of intensified socio-economic insecurity, can be expected to develop into a coherent collective actor. Moreover, there is no clear boundary between those described as the precariat and the ‘core’ proletariat or salariat, of whom a growing proportion face new risks and uncertainties. Building alliances among Standing’s three groups is as great a challenge as bridging the interests and aspirations of ‘precariat’, ‘proletariat’ and ‘salariat’.

Not only does labour market insecurity not create a homogeneous ‘precariat’, it does not result in a simple polarisation between insiders and outsiders, and affects in different ways social groups with contrasting capacities for collective mobilisation. Whether trade unions – organisations

for which constructing solidarities has always been a goal, never an accomplishment – can play a progressive role in this cannot be determined a priori.

In their concluding symposium Tobias Schulze-Cleven, Gary Herrigel, Nelson Lichtenstein and Gay Seidman call for the combination of insights from history, sociology and political economy. They argue for ‘more active engagement among complementary perspectives to break down typical boundaries of contemporary research’. As scholars from the inherently cross-disciplinary field of industrial relations, we wholeheartedly agree. We might also add to the three disciplines represented, that of social geography, which has increasingly illuminated the links between labour and globalisation (Herod, 2009; Peck, 1996).

Yet is this a recipe for eclecticism; and if so, does this matter? Analytical promiscuity can be dangerous: many theoretical concepts in the social sciences derive their meaning from a distinctive interpretative paradigm which is not open to direct translation. Nevertheless, this non-commensurability has high costs: a fragmentation of understanding among a variety of competing perspectives, each of which is one-sided and incomplete. As Sil and Katzenstein (2010: 413) argue, ‘research traditions give themselves permission to bypass aspects of a complex reality that do not neatly fit within the metatheoretical parameters they have established by fiat’. Hence they call for ‘analytical eclecticism’ in order to increase the scope of our causal accounts of large and multi-faceted social processes, of which insecurity under globalisation is obviously one.

The central theoretical challenge is to move beyond multi-disciplinarity, in which different analytical models are simply juxtaposed, to interdisciplinarity, whereby a new synthesis is constructed. This is easier said than done. Any approach must confront the familiar tension between structure and agency. Structural forces (including embedded institutions) constrain action, but also create opportunities – not least because structural dynamics are themselves contradictory.

### **Collective responses to insecurity: Negotiation and/or contention?**

It is common to contrast trade unions, with their elaborate formal decision-making structures, and more spontaneous, often activist-led social movements and NGOs. Such a dichotomy is however questionable. Unions are themselves – or surely ought to be – non-governmental organisations, and commonly they emerged as forms of collective resistance that challenged key principles of the prevailing social and economic order. They thus matched the classic definition of social movements proposed by Tarrow (1994: 4): ‘collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities’. With time, however, unions in many countries became increasingly dependent for their survival on institutionalised internal routines and formalised external relationships with employers and governments. As Gramsci noted (1977), negotiation with external interlocutors could yield an ‘industrial legality’ which could bring organisational (and material) advantages, yet could also weaken the organic, ideational resonance with those whose aspirations unions sought to voice. A considerable literature points to a tension between ‘movement’ and ‘organisation’ in trade union identities.

Indeed an analogous tension applies to all NGOs. McIlroy (2000: 3) highlights a distinction ‘between insider and outsider groups. Insider groups are accepted as legitimate by government and regularly consulted over policy.... Insiders feel pressure to distance themselves from direct action and may become prisoner groups, dependent upon government.’ By contrast, ‘outsider groups... have no wish to become involved in routine relations or are unable to achieve recognition by government. They may lack the skills and resources to take the inside track or eschew it because of radical ideology and objectives. Outsider groups rely on mass protest and strikes or civil disobedience.’ Trade unions in many countries shifted from primarily outsider status to an insider role in the twentieth century (though this became jeopardised under neoliberalism), but many other organisations (for example in the field of social policy, women’s rights or the environment) have followed a similar trajectory. Just as in trade unions, a shift to insider status has provoked internal conflict, with battles (as among the German Greens in the 1980s) between ‘fundamentalists’ and ‘realists’. Many other NGOs have always been bodies which ‘focus on concrete and often technical objectives’ and ‘collaborate with institutional and governmental elites, requiring compromises that can disappoint the hopes of their more ardent supporters’ (Tarrow, 2006: 210-211). It is debatable whether ‘new’ social

movements are new because their modes of collective mobilisation in the information age allow them to escape some of these tensions, or simply because the recency of their emergence entails that serious options for collaboration have not yet arisen.

### ***Trade unions in an age of insecurity: Insiders or outsiders?***

In recent years, the tension between the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ role of trade unions has become sharper as a result of the increasing precariousness of much of the labour force, as outlined above. Their traditional policy has often been to oppose atypical work in all its forms, and as a consequence to avoid or exclude precarious workers (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2011); but in recent years most have accepted that insecurity is a reality that will not go away, and have recognised the need to represent the interests of these often disparate groups of workers. Otherwise they risk the continued erosion of their membership base and their capacity to regulate the world of work. Increasingly they have been influenced by the ‘organising model’, developed by unions such as the American SEIU, which explicitly targets precarious workers as a potential trade union constituency, but at the same time they have adopted it selectively (Thomas, 2016). How they do respond is conditioned by their own structures and ideologies, the national industrial relations system in which they operate, the economic situation and other factors.

One of the reasons why unions have been forced to take the growing insecurity of the workforce more seriously is that – as seen above – young workers tend to be most affected, and these are essential for the survival of trade unionism. There is a narrower gap between the membership density of permanent and fixed-term workers in some countries (such as Austria, Belgium and Ireland) than in most others, but in general the gap is substantial (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013). Another reason is that the increase in the numbers of people in precarious work is a threat to the status of all workers, including the ‘traditional’ male, full-time workers on ‘open-ended’ contracts who are the backbone of trade unionism. Yet precarious workers are particularly difficult to unionise: insecurity means that they may fear harassment or even the loss of their job if they become active; many change jobs and even sectors frequently, and in the case of migrants may return to their native country or move to a third country. Furthermore, ‘precarious’ workers do not constitute a single group, as noted above, as they exist both at the low and high ends of the labour market, with the largest number in low- or semi-skilled occupations, but some in highly skilled positions.

Nevertheless, trade unions in most countries have recently endeavoured to organise and represent precarious workers and to bring their concerns into the mainstream of union demands. In many cases, this has taken the form of organising campaigns which seek to recruit precarious workers into traditional trade union structures. The best-known of such cases is probably the campaign by the Dutch multi-industrial union *Bondgenoten* – part of the FNV (*Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging*), but now divided as part of the confederation’s restructuring – to organise low-paid and mainly migrant precarious workers, employed by the contracted-out cleaning operations for the Dutch railways and Schiphol airport. This campaign lasted for several years, culminating in 2010 to the longest Dutch strike since the 1930s. It was successful in many ways, winning improved pay and conditions and improving the public image of trade unions as campaigners for social justice, but it did not immediately lead to a higher membership density among precarious workers (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013: 62-63). In France, analogous campaigns have taken place among similar groups – cleaners on the Paris metro and railways, but also workers in fast-food outlets and shopping centres. Both the CGT (*Confédération générale du travail*) and CFDT (*Confédération française démocratique du travail*) have dedicated resources to campaigns among these groups of workers. As in the Netherlands, these campaigns have rarely led to a long-term increase in membership but have improved terms and conditions and brought the concerns of these workers into the mainstream. Such campaigns give rise to the question of how long unions will devote increasingly scarce resources to campaigns among precarious, low-paid workers that do not lead to immediate improvements in union density, even if there are other positive results. However, some campaigns *have* led to increased membership, particularly among young people (notably in the German *IG Metall*, as described in the contribution by Stefan Schmalz and Marcel Thiel). The German service sector union *ver.di* has also



undertaken high-profile campaigns among precarious retail workers, notably in the supermarket chain *Lidl* and the online retailer Amazon, though with less success (Sauviat, 2015).

Other campaigns, focused on higher-skilled and better-paid precarious workers and often led by these workers themselves, have sometimes brought an increase in union membership. The Austrian white-collar union GPA (*Gewerkschaft der Privatangestellten*) seems to have made gains in membership and density, at least in part as a result of its targeted efforts to organise workers in the retail sector and in call centres, many of whom are precarious (Pernicka and Aust, 2007). In Poland – where, as Table 1 shows, the proportion of temporary contracts among young workers is exceptionally high – unions have also been particularly active in recruitment among precarious workers, for example targeting security guards and the retail sector. They have been successful in highlighting the problem of precarious employment, strongly criticising the increasing use of service-provision contracts, which were favoured by many employers over standard employment contracts. The label ‘junk contracts’ was made a key slogan in public debates (Bernaciak et al., 2014; Mrozowicki and Maciejewska, 2013), an example of what Maite Tapia, Tami Lee and Mikhail Filipovitch in their contribution term ‘symbolic power’. There are also signs that unions are turning their attention to the ‘gig’ economy; in Britain the GMB general union won a notable court victory, establishing the employee status of drivers working for the Uber company.

In addition to campaigns aimed at bringing precarious workers into traditional union structures, some of the most interesting union responses have been to adapt existing structures or to create new ones, often led by precarious workers themselves. Again in the Netherlands, the FNV has set up a special section for self-employed workers (*FNV Zelfstandigen*). In Italy, all three major confederations created separate unions for temporary workers; NIdiL (*Nuove identità di lavoro*), founded in 1998 by the largest confederation CGIL (*Confederazione generale italiana del lavoro*) is probably the most active, although the total membership remains relatively low (Benassi and Vlandas, 2016). This initiative can be contrasted with the readiness of the main Spanish confederations to accept worse conditions for new labour market entrants in order to ward off attacks on conditions of established ‘core’ workers (Pulignano et al., 2016). The Austrian GPA formed a special section for freelance workers (*work@flex*), and staged a series of successful actions aimed at organising these workers (Stern, 2010: 43) and at publicising the exploitative use of dependent self-employed contracts in call centres. Such initiatives, while empowering precarious workers, also separate them from the main union and may not help to advance their interests within the union movement more widely. Other confederations have adapted existing structures, such as the creation of the CGT *Union syndicale de l’interim* to organise agency workers, including both those on permanent contracts staffing the agencies and the temporary workers. This structure has been successful in obtaining better pay and employment rights for agency workers but remains controversial, because it exists outside the usual industrial and territorial organisations. Another Italian initiative, the resurrection of the old *camere di lavoro* (chambers of labour) providing services to all categories of members at local level, has provided a focal point for precarious, usually young, workers, to remain part of a trade union structure even when they change industrial sectors. In Germany, the construction union *IG BAU* even established a separate cross-national subsidiary, the European Migrant Workers’ Union, though with only limited success (Greer et al., 2013). More traditional methods to organise migrant workers in the construction sector, including posted workers, have been adopted with some success in the Nordic countries (Eldring et al., 2012; Friberg et al., 2014; Hardy et al., 2012).

While many confederations have devoted a great deal of time and resources to organising precarious workers, this still remains a somewhat peripheral activity within most unions, compared to representing the interests of their ‘core’ constituencies through collective bargaining and political pressure. Indeed, as mentioned above, organising insecure workers is more difficult and provides fewer tangible results. In some cases, ‘core’ union members resist recruiting such employees, as in the case of Greek call centre workers (Kornelakis and Voskeritsian, 2016). For related reasons, there are few elected trade union representatives and officers drawn from these groups, because their employment is often of short duration, and because they often change jobs and industries (and sometimes countries). When considered in conjunction with the need to replenish the trade union ranks and bring in a larger number of younger workers, the issue of insecurity has become more central to unions in many countries and forms an integral part of their efforts to organise and represent the young.

One should also note that in many countries, particularly in Southern Europe where unions have often possessed limited collective bargaining strength but considerable capacity for political mobilisation, their efforts have often aimed to achieve broader socio-political inclusion and protection of precarious workers, whether or not they can be recruited as members (Meardi et al., 2012: 15-16). Overall, Pulignano et al. conclude (2015: 808, 822) that ‘European unions are increasingly trying to defend the outsiders, but meet institutional obstacles that vary by country’ because ‘effective union protection of atypical workers is arduous without favourable legal and political frameworks’.

### ***The rise of ‘new’ social movements***

A notable consequence of the crisis, the growth of insecurity and the imposition of austerity has been the emergence of a range of new ‘outsider’ movements, particularly in the worst affected countries, generating a form of ‘subterranean politics’ (Pianta and Gerbaudo 2014). The actions have tended to display a high participation of young people, often with a focus on the predicament of the ‘precarious generation’ most affected by the crisis.

From a cross-national comparative perspective, four key features of ‘new’ social movements can be identified. The first is the complex interconnection between national and supranational dynamics. On the one hand, there has been a rapid process of mutual learning across frontiers. The ‘Arab Spring’ provided an inspiration for many of the mass protests from 2011 onwards. ‘Occupy Wall Street’ informed the Blockupy protests against the ECB in Frankfurt and the actions of UK Uncut in London. The Spanish *Indignados* were emulated across southern Europe. There was ‘a kind of contagion effect, suggesting the presence of learning processes and the modular character of the mobilization’ (Fonseca, 2014: 47). Yet ‘on the other hand, institutional differences, different traditions of political and social participation and the degree of trust in the political institutions help explain some of the marked differences of the protests in European countries, in particular as to their relationship to conventional channels such as political parties and trade unions’ (Campos Lima and Martin Artiles, 2014: 145). The national basis of most protest activity has meant that there has been little coordinated action at the level of the EU, a key driver of deregulation and austerity (Pianta and Gerbaudo, 2014). But there are exceptions: notably, the campaigns against water privatisation which began in Italy in 2003 and spread across Europe (Fattori, 2013).

A second common theme is the central role of social media in the ‘new’ forms of protest and resistance (Estanque and Fonseca, 2014). Social media provide a channel for discussing grievances, formulating demands and coordinating action, and for disseminating the initiatives – and any incidents of repression by the authorities – to a mass public. For some, such as Castells (2012) or Mason (2013), these means of communication – taken for granted by the generation which is worst affected by austerity – permit autonomy rather than authority and explosive spontaneity rather than the routines of traditional organised negotiation with governments and employers. However, uncritical ‘techno-optimism’ is dangerous: social media channels are dispersed and individualised, and rather than generating collective identities and collective action they may fragment movements of resistance (Tarrow, 2006: 210). Access to electronic media remains unequally distributed and can be very effectively manipulated by the rich and powerful (Flesher Fominaya, 2014; Rød and Weidmann, 2015). At best, argues Gerbaudo (2012: 12), successful use of such media for protest and resistance requires a ‘choreography of assembly’ which functions in ‘directing people towards specific protest events, in providing participants with suggestions and instructions about how to act, and in the construction of an emotional narration to sustain their coming together in a public space’. Such choreography is typically undertaken by often invisible and perhaps reluctant core activists who provide a form of ‘soft’ leadership.

Third, this ‘choreography’ has often involved reclaiming public spaces as arenas for discussion and debate as well as demonstration (Aslanidis, 2016; Flesher Fominaya, 2014). While the first actions were directed against governments (national but also supranational), it was a logical step to target the financial institutions which initiated crisis and insecurity and drove the austere response. Occupy Wall Street in September 2011 achieved echoes not only across North America but also in Europe, with the first Blockupy protest in Frankfurt in May 2012. In London, an occupation

began in October 2011 outside St Paul's Cathedral, the nearest location to the Stock Exchange that protestors could use.

A fourth, but related, aspect is the 'defence of the commons'. This has involved, most obviously, resistance to privatisation, particularly when imposed by the Troika. But there is also a less defensive dimension, as proposed in the series of World and European Social Forums since 2001, to 'reinvent the world'. The link between the quality of work, the quality of living and the environment is made explicit: neoliberal global capital destroys nature as it destroys workers. Hence many of the 'new' forms of protest seek to assert elements of participative democracy which in some ways are novel but in others can be traced back to ancient traditions.

### ***The complex and uneven national experience of resistance***

The best known example of the 'new' forms of protest and resistance is the Spanish *Indignados* or *Movimiento 15-M*, which developed from demonstrations on 15 May 2011, organised largely through social media. The *Indignados* have been described as 'a movement with two souls' (Taibo, 2013): one comprising activists with a background in the alter-globalisation campaigns; the other, young people, mainly highly educated and with little or no background in political activism, whose hopes of a comfortable career had been dashed.

Spanish trade unionism is numerically weak by west European standards (density around 15%) but the two main confederations, *Comisiones Obreras* (CC.OO) and *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT), became entrenched in public policy-making after the fall of the dictatorship in the 1970s. For many *Indignados*, they were as much part of the problem as were the mainstream political parties: at best negotiating the terms of austerity rather than leading forceful opposition. 'The politicians rob us, the unions sell us, the employers enslave us, the banks swindle us and the press lies to us' ran one slogan. Yet 'the divide between the world of trade union activists and that of the *Indignados* was less clear-cut than claimed by some' (Bérout, 2014: 29); and indeed, by 2012 there were signs of a growing rapprochement. The *Indignados*, in turn, helped enlarge the repertoire of trade union action, calling for 'inclusive' strikes in which the unemployed, students, precarious workers and other citizens could participate (Cerrillo Vidal, 2013: 43). Uniquely, one outcome has been the creation of an important new political party, *Podemos*.

In Portugal, as in Spain, 'trade unions have been involved in organizing mass protest action, although their capacity for mobilization was surpassed on various occasions by more spontaneous demonstrations of protest' (Rocha and Stoleroff, 2014: 152). In particular, the two main confederations CGTP (*Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses*) and UGT (*União Geral de Trabalhadores*), unlike their Spanish counterparts, have been fundamentally divided in their responses to crisis and insecurity. Union division increased the space for other vectors of resistance. Though unemployment has been less severe than in Spain, over half young Portuguese workers had temporary contracts even before the crisis. In 2007 the movement *Precários Inflexíveis* (PI, Precarious but Inflexible) emerged as a virtual association of unemployed and precarious workers. Protestors took over the streets of Lisbon and other cities on 12 March 2011, in one of the biggest demonstrations since the Portuguese revolution of 1974 (Estanque et al., 2013). The initiative helped inspire the May protests in Spain, which were in turn followed by the occupation of the *Praça do Rossio* in the centre of Lisbon in May, in part in solidarity with the Spanish *Indignados* (Baumgarten, 2013). The movement *Que se lixe a troika!* (Fuck the Troika) has since played a major role in challenging externally imposed austerity, often coordinating protest demonstrations with the CGTP (Campos Lima and Martin Artiles, 2014).

Although most initial protests occurred independently of the trade unions, as in Spain, there has been some subsequent convergence (Braga, 2016). In its Manifesto, PI insists that trade unions remain the most representative associations of workers, but adds that the world of work has changed and that trade union structures must change to accommodate temporary workers, those forced into dependent self-employment and the unemployed. 'Insisting on an antagonism between those who, for various reasons, are remote from experience of organisation and the world of trade unionism helps nobody and weakens the working class as a whole.'

In Greece, resistance to Troika-imposed austerity was strongly influenced by the Spanish example, with *Amesi Dimokratia Tora!* (Direct Democracy Now!) formed in May 2011 and helping initiate a mass occupation of *Plateia Syntagma* (Constitution Square, in front of the parliament) as a forum for direct discussion and debate. As in Portugal and Spain, Greek trade unions are weak in terms of membership, particularly in the private sector. Traditionally, they have had little financial need for members because of payments received from the welfare fund (*ergatikí estía*) to which all private sector workers are required to contribute.

In Italy, almost 30% of workers aged 15-24 are unemployed and almost 40% of those in work are on temporary contracts. Perhaps for this reason, as noted above all three main union confederations established special unions for precarious workers in the late 1990s (Burroni and Carrieri, 2011; Leonardi, 2001). Such initiatives were, however, double-edged: while offering a dedicated structure for mainly young workers with non-standard contracts, they risked segregating such workers from the unions' 'core' membership (Murgia and Selmi 2012).

Some of the most prominent actions on behalf of these workers, however, have occurred outside the formal framework of trade unionism. The *San Precario* movement, named after the fictitious 'patron saint' of temporary workers, was created in 2004 to highlight the issue of labour market insecurity, in similar ways to PI in Portugal. But the methods were distinctive: mimicking Italian religiosity, activists carried effigies of *San Precario* (and later, his female equivalent *Santa Precaria*) on their demonstrations and combined street theatre with political campaigning.

In France, as in the other countries discussed, labour market insecurity is a particular problem for young workers, with 23% unemployed in 2011 and 55% of those employed having temporary contracts. The term *Génération précaire* ('precarious generation') was coined by a young, minority ethnic worker in the fast-food sector, in a book describing his efforts to build collective action and organisation among fellow workers (Mabrouki, 2004). Somewhat ironically, however, the label was adopted in the following year by graduates and university students protesting against the abuse of internships, often paid at a fraction of the minimum wage or else unpaid: 'we have work but not employment'. They attempted to organise strike action by interns and demanded legislative reforms, with some success. French students have a history of formal organisation and often ritualised protest, analogous to the impressive demonstrative actions of the numerically weak trade unions and at times undertaken jointly. If the tactics have sometimes been innovative, most of the time the protests of the highly educated but precariously employed have addressed familiar interlocutors through traditional channels. In some ways, suggest Bérout and Yon (2012: 175), the closest French equivalent to the outrage of the *Indignados* has been the violent rioting in the impoverished, largely minority ethnic *banlieues*, 'where the protests unfold outside the customary frameworks of collective action'.

Social protests have of course been a global phenomenon. Ortiz et al. (2013) document 843 events between 2006 and mid-2013, showing an upward trajectory. They also find a disproportionate prevalence of social protests in 'high-income countries'. Their data indicate that among these countries, the protests are dominated by Europe, with the majority of the largest taking place in France, Italy, Portugal and Spain (Ortiz et al., 2013: 34). However, a notable early example was in Iceland, the first European casualty of the global financial crisis. Mass protests, with demonstrators banging pots and pans outside parliament, forced the government to resign. A subsequent grassroots campaign also ensured that in two referendums, in 2010 and 2011, voters rejected proposals to repay British and Dutch banks which had lost reserves invested at unrealistic interest rates in Iceland.

A challenge common to all such movements is the need to build cohesion out of diversity. Mason (2012: 66-79) identifies the social roots of the revolts as 'the graduate with no future' and 'the Jacobin with a laptop'. Yet as already noted, the constituencies of deprivation and anger are far more heterogeneous. As we argued in the Introduction, the disenfranchised graduate seen by Standing as the vanguard of the precariat cannot easily be assimilated into a general category involving groups with very different social and economic backgrounds and futures. These include the young, unskilled and poorly educated whose protests in some countries have been particularly violent but with no clear political focus. Also important are older workers who are victims of workplace closures or public sector job cuts, and who in most countries no longer have trade union representation (Faniel, 2012).

Such diversity results in obvious problems of aggregation of interests and objectives. In this context, Gerbaudo (2014: 2) argues that a distinctive feature of recent mass protests has been the effort to reclaim 'the ancient belief that there is such a thing as "the people", and that this collective

actor is the ultimate source of sovereignty and legitimate power'. The slogan 'we are the 99%' coined by the Occupy movement similarly expresses what might be termed progressive populism (Klandermans and van Stekelenburg, 2016). Yet clearly the oppositions underlying crisis and insecurity are more complex. A substantial proportion of the population, even in the worst affected countries, see themselves – not altogether wrongly – as at least partial beneficiaries of the existing system, whatever its irrationalities and degradations; or at least believe that they have more to lose than to gain in contesting it. At best, the notion of 99% versus 1% can be considered a Sorelian myth, inspiring self-confidence and solidarity which might eventually make the slogan self-fulfilling. Yet the downside, as Juris et al. point out (2012: 436), is that 'the Occupy movements with their majoritarian populist impulse and organizational logic of massing large numbers of individuals in concrete physical spaces have had difficulty recognizing and addressing internal specificity and difference'. Hence the significance of divisions and potential conflicts of interest according to class, gender and ethnicity can easily be suppressed, whereas a genuinely popular movement needs to admit and negotiate these.

### **Conclusion: The variable geometry of resistance**

In his classic study of the emergent English working class in the early nineteenth century, Thompson (1963: 231) described how 'over the period... there was a slight improvement in average material standards. Over the same period there was intensified exploitation, greater insecurity, and increasing human misery.' Though aspects of his account have been contested, it is clear that a shared experience of loss generated resistance. The radical demands of some of the groups and movements which emerged were not realised, but they informed more successful struggles by later generations. Today, two centuries later, insecurity and austerity have likewise provoked resistance, whether through strikes or through other forms of protest and contention, which have resulted in some victories – even if only partial. As Bailey (2015) insists, resistance is not futile.

In our conclusion we return to some of the analytical themes raised at the outset of our article, before considering the practical implications for labour. Our central argument has been that structural forces are important, but so is agency, and to explore the tension between structure and agency we need to focus on social relations. These relations are in turn always uneven and contradictory, creating openness to historical contingency, as is evident from our cross-country survey of responses to insecurity.

Material contexts impose constraints but also create opportunities. The organisational capacities and strategic competence of the key actors shape the outcomes, perhaps producing the difference between success and failure. These capacities and competences depend in turn on the systems of social relations in which actors are embedded.

In addressing the implications for labour, we deploy the concept of variable geometry. By this we refer in particular to three aspects of unevenness: the relationship between the global and the local; that between trade unions and other vectors of protest; and the challenge of crafting solidarity from diversity. To fight back against the odds requires strategic imagination, new alliances and transnational learning and solidarity.

Globalisation is by definition supranational; the modalities of resistance are predominantly national, or indeed sub-national. This variable geometry in part reflects national differences in opportunity structures, in part diverse historical traditions and repertoires of contention (Tilly, 2006). But while resistance to globalised insecurity occurs in nationally specific contexts, its focus must unavoidably be international. This is one of the central arguments developed in recent decades by the alter-globalisation movements. Trade unionisms have their own, more institutionalised international structures, but internationalism is far less embedded in everyday trade union action. And internationalism means little if it is purely a concern of 'international experts': it must be built into the routine discourse and practice of labour movements. In this respect, what Tarrow (2006) calls 'the new transnational activism', often orchestrated by what he terms 'rooted cosmopolitans' who are locally embedded but globally oriented and connected, may represent a more agile form of cross-national coordination.

As we noted earlier, there is a long history of mutual suspicion between trade unions and more spontaneous, often activist-led social movements and NGOs; yet neither form of resistance can succeed alone. Almost everywhere, unions have lost power resources. Structural power is severely weakened by globalisation, and associational power has declined with falling membership density. In much of western Europe, institutional power remains superficially robust, which can induce complacency, as was long the case with German unions; but without other supports, institutional status can be fragile (Hassel, 2007). Unions are almost universally weak among the younger workers who, as shown earlier, have been particularly seriously affected by the erosion of labour market security. Many of the victims of insecurity see trade unions as part of the problem. Yet if protests against unemployment and precarious work have commonly been led by more radical social movements, their very spontaneity obstructs sustained resistance; and in some cases they become captured by highly politicised ‘orchestrators’. Organisational divisions and rivalries, as the contributions by Terri Caraway and Michele Ford and by Rudra Sil show in different ways, can seriously weaken the capacity for effective action. Where these divisions are transcended, important synergies can be created between the different types of collective actor. As Ibsen and Tapia (2017) show, there is growing evidence of successful attempts by unions to build ‘coalitional power’ with other social movements. This again reflects the relational character of responses to insecurity.

Globalised ‘neo-entrepreneurial’ capitalism, as Jenkins and Leicht (1997: 379) term it, ‘produces a more fragmented labor market as it also shrinks the number of established places for members of the working class’. As we have already argued, different social and economic groups have been affected in significantly different ways by crisis and austerity, and these differences can create new divisions and antagonisms, not the supposed unity of the ‘99%’. A sense of mutuality, of a common fate and common interests, is not objectively given but is a task requiring a difficult struggle. Unity cannot be built by a linguistic sleight-of-hand – ‘the people united’ – but requires sustained dialogue and debate, otherwise the interests of the weakest are easily submerged beneath a spurious assumption of commonality.

The construction of solidarities at both national and international levels involves vital cognitive and discursive elements. In this context, della Porta (2012: 276) notes that ‘the proposals and practices of the *indignados* and occupying movement – as well as those spread in and by the Arab Spring – resonate in fact with (more traditional) participatory visions, but also with new deliberative conceptions that underline the importance of creating multiple public spaces, egalitarian but plural’. For Melucci (1989), the creation of a collective identity is a process of negotiation over time which contains three aspects: shaping a cognitive framework within which the environment is understood and goals and tactics are formulated; fostering social relationships among participants; and stimulating an emotional dynamic among those involved. Such processes are somewhat alien to most trade unionisms (or have been lost over time), but have been vital for many of the ‘new’ social movements. Hence developing synergies between the organisational capacity of the ‘old’ and the imaginative spontaneity of the ‘new’, drawing on the strengths of each, is an important means to build effective resistance to the re-commodification of labour.

It is necessary to address the systemic nature of the crisis, but in comprehensible terms. Movements of resistance must embrace the principle that ‘capitalism is the reality, but not our perspective’ (Urban, 2014: 41). To be effective, different modes of resistance must be mutually supportive, and above all must be informed by a vision of an alternative. The challenge, as always for those pursuing a different socio-economic order, is to formulate alternatives which are concrete, comprehensible and attractive. Pablo Iglesias of *Podemos* said recently: ‘this is what the enemy expects of us, that we use words that nobody can understand, that we remain a minority in the shelter of our traditional symbols. This way we would pose no threat’ (Lambert, 2015). The issue is partly one of language, to simplify without trivialising; but it is also to provide concrete examples of economic solidarity outside the market. And indeed, a key element in a number of the protests discussed – notably in Spain and in Greece – has been the collective provision and exchange of food, health care and other services, bypassing the money economy, and this has certainly helped enthuse and empower many of those worst affected by insecurity and austerity.

Those who drive neoliberal globalisation, the hegemony of finance capital and the politics of insecurity and austerity rely on the demoralisation of their victims. Resistance may well draw its inspiration from anger, but to be translated into constructive action it requires self-confidence in the



capacity to initiate change. In dark times, to build hope is perhaps the most difficult challenge, and not only because hopes can so easily be disappointed. But fatalism and surrender should not be the only options. Another world – and another Europe – is possible.

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## Biographical notes

**Richard Hyman** is Emeritus Professor of Industrial Relations at the London School of Economics, UK and editor of the *European Journal of Industrial Relations*. He has written widely on industrial

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**Table 1. Labour market indicators (%), selected countries**

	Unemployment				Temporary contracts			
	15-64		15-24		15-64		15-24	
	2008	2014	2008	2014	2008	2014	2008	2014
DE	7.3	5.3	10.8	8.3	13.1	11.8	55.2	52.2
			<i>excluding apprentices</i>		9.2	7.8	26.9	22.3
EL	7.8	26.5	21.9	52.4	7.7	7.5	22.8	21.3
ES	11.3	24.5	24.5	53.2	24.1	19.9	55.0	62.6
FR	7.4	10.3	19.0	24.2	13.5	13.4	51.4	54.4
IT	6.7	12.7	21.2	42.7	10.0	10.4	37.7	48.6
PL	7.1	9.0	17.2	23.9	20.9	22.4	54.7	64.4
PT	8.8	14.1	21.6	34.7	18.3	18.0	51.7	59.0
SE	6.2	7.9	20.2	22.9	14.3	15.2	52.4	54.8
UK	5.6	8.1	15.0	17.0	4.6	5.3	11.3	14.3

Source: Eurostat and Statistisches Bundesamt