

Increasing Precarisation, Decreasing Capacities for Collective Action: Reinventing Union Power at the Nodes of Global Production

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Track 2: Global Supply Chains and Implications for Labour

Abstract

In the last three decades, popular notion of employment relationship has changed considerably. This change has paralleled the shift in the field of industrial and employment relations from the ‘language of rights’ to the ‘language of flexibility’. For fifty years or so after the Second World War (often described as the golden age of the welfare state), the general idea of employment relationship involved a single, consistent and prototypical identity. That identity consisted, in the view of the worker as someone with mutually beneficial, long-term attachment to an employer. There is little doubt that newer forms of employment relationship, significantly different from the model earlier referred to, have emerged in recent times. These non-standard forms of work reflect growing incidences of informalisation of employment, which greatly challenge union mobilisation and power, and render considerable number of workers vulnerable.

At the heart of the challenge of fostering an effective (and agreeable) procedure for the governance of labour relations is clearly the asymmetry that now exists in power relations between the major institutional actors and interests- labour and capital (Burke and Epstein, 2001). Under the regime of globalisation, production and labour markets have altered considerably. These markets are now organised on a global scale, thereby mitigating the moderating effect that national governments and many unions, who themselves exist mainly as national entities, had with respect to labour relation systems. To be sure, this has resulted in considerable loss of power for unions, increase in precarious work and the strengthening of the position of private capital and/or transnational corporations in terms of the disciplines of labour relations.

But have trade unions reached their limit, especially in their roles of representation, interest aggregation and collective action? This paper thinks that this proposition is clearly debateable: The view that the global economy has completely eclipsed trade unions and that unions are not relevant in the context of a globalized economy, should be contested. Although the debilitating effects on union are obvious, it is reasonable to argue that a change in the approach to unions’ business models or modes of operation can result in more union effectiveness. A clear understanding of the sources of power and how to leverage same is needed

on the part of unions. Unions must seek to direct mobilisation after the planetary deployment of capital, escalating engagement in the interest of workers and their members at the nodes of global production. It is important that institutional capacity, especially the organising diagonal, be developed by the unions.

Keywords: Precarisation, Collective Action, Union Power Global Production Nodes

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Edwin Anisha is primarily a researcher and labour educator. He has been working in Nigeria's foremost national labour college known as the Michael Imoudu National Institute for Labour Studies, Ilorin-Nigeria for nearly two decades. He is an alumnus of the respected Global Labour University-University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

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