

XII Global Labour University Conference, 2017
Jawaharlal Nehru University, India, New Delhi

Theme of Conference: Reincarnation or Death of Neoliberalism? The rise of market authoritarianism and its challenges for labour

Session: Building Movements against Neoliberalism and Neo-nationalism

Title of paper: Re-building the trade union movement through Power Resources.

Edward Webster, University of Witwatersrand.

In the face of the neo-liberalization of the global economy, we have seen the emergence of a kind of populism fuelled by nationalist entrepreneurs favouring isolationism and xenophobia. Labour has responded in ambiguous ways to this challenge, many workers identify with the promise of jobs being brought back to their countries, others are sceptical of the rhetoric and remain committed to labour's universalist agenda. This paper examines the emergence over the past two decades of studies that emphasize the ability of trade unions to act strategically in response to the challenge of neo-liberalism. (for instance Voss/Sherman 2000; Frege/Kelly 2004; Turner 2006; Chun 2009; Lévesque/Murray 2013). It identifies new organising strategies that are emerging in the face of the growing informalization of work. This trade union revitalisation discourse recognises that trade unions have a strategic choice in responding to the challenge of neoliberalism. They do so by utilising their existing power resources while attempting to develop new power resources. The concept of power resources identifies four dimensions of union power – structural, associational,

institutional and societal- providing a method to understand what strategic choices unions may pursue ((Piven, 2000; Wright, 2002; Silver, 2004; Chun, 2010; Schmaltz/Dorre; Webster/Ludwig, 2017) The paper draws on a global research project of twenty five cases in Latin America, Africa and south Asia. In this paper I examine three of three case studies of unions that have utilized power resources to revitalize their unions. The researchers draw on a range of research strategies , including in-depth interviews and participant observation . The paper provides a bridge between academic analysis and trade union action. The focus of the paper will be on identifying critical factors of success and failure in regard to organizational transformation and the development and utilization of power resources.