

Global Labour University XIII Conference

“The Future of Work: Democracy, Development and the Role of Labour”

Suggested sub-theme: Trade Union Organization and Strategies

Paper Title

Is the game rigged? A critical appraisal of the power resource approach

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Abstract

The power resource approach (PRA) is being increasingly used in the field of labour studies, more specifically in labour revitalisation studies. What is now called the Jena PRA draws on references such as Erik Olin Wright (2000) and Beverly Silver (2003) to elaborate a framework centered on four power resources – besides structural and associational power, societal and institutional power are added – and on “strategic choice” by trade unions.

The Jena approach takes the deliberate choice to privilege the notion of “power to do something (*power to*) and not as power to determine the rules of play (*power over*)”. As it is emphasized “[their] primary concern is not structural power relations of this kind, but rather the ability of wage-earners to assert their interests within the given general context”. (Schmalz and Dörre, 2014)

While we welcome the growing popularity of such a strategic approach, especially insofar as it inspires efforts to understand and support workers’ agency, we believe it is crucial to submit it to a critical appraisal. Our main argument is that the Jena approach overstates the power of agency vis-à-vis the power of structure. To be more precise, the “given general context”, i. e., the broader set of social relations where trade union action is inscribed, is determinant to understand the power resource, or the combination of resources, that can be used at a certain moment. Moreover, it is crucial to ascertain whether the outcome of the deployment of a specific strategy entails a lasting transformation in the context or whether it can be easily reversed or – in the worse case scenario – whether it can reinforce an anti-worker bias in other settings.

In our critical appraisal, we will engage the three sets of approaches and relate them to a number of empirical cases, especially from Brazil and South Africa (including the strike of casual post office workers). First of all, following Gallas strategic-relational

perspective on power resources that stresses that one must “refrain from equating worker’s power with “union power”” and the necessity of a conjunctural analysis of the “strategic environment workers find themselves in” (2016: 201, 203); Secondly, we will consider, in a specific and concrete strategic environment, the specific rules of play (power over), and the power of trade unions to change these rules (power to), considering the distinction made by Lukes (1975) on the three dimensions of power. Finally, we will question, based on the experience of the Global South, the emergence of “new” sources of power - symbolic and logistical -, that interrelate with the “old” ones, and describe the process of searching for new sources of power in a movement that extends from the workplace to communities and civil society (Webster, 2015).

Bibliography:

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