

Affirming democracy: trade union action meets work fragmentation

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How do you organize collective action if the workforce is spread in a fragmented value chain and if the power that governs processes is “faceless”?

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The *openMovements* series invites leading social scientists to share their research results and perspectives on contemporary social struggles.



There are many problems for trade unions in dealing with the changes that have occurred in the world of work in the last few decades. In western economies today, the institutional bargaining power of trade unions faces a crisis, and affirming workers' rights and improving working conditions through traditional systems of social dialogue at industrial and territorial level proves increasingly difficult, with a general decline in membership rates over the years.

Trade unions, as regards their membership and institutional framework, vary greatly. However, within the world of work, there are many shared challenges, with a [common neoliberal trajectory](#) based not only on institutional deregulation but also on institutional conversion.

Flexibility is the common organizational driver for the present-day economy and it has a profound impact both on the institutional framework and individual lives. Fragmentation and precariousness are on the rise supported by many reforms couched in a common language: outsourcing, subcontracting, franchising, temporary contracts, mini-jobs, discontinuous work, continuous restructuring and, [as analyzed by OECD](#), a general reduction in the degree of

employment protection against dismissal.

As was clearly explained by [Manuel Castells](#), the economic (and decisional) power of productive processes, articulated in a network of enterprises at national and global level, is ever more concentrated in the hands of a few employers, top management, and investors in the global financial market, in the core companies of the value chain.

These processes are part of a wider staging of the dematerialization of production, as defined by the Italian sociologist Luciano Gallino (2011). He called this “[finanzcapitalismo](#)” (financial capitalism), whose power is exerted through the imposition of a “social megamachine” that can maximize the value of individuals and ecosystems in terms of financial power. So, how can trade unionists combat the reduction of workers’ rights? How can democracy address these problems?

Trade unions are not the only political and social organisations who encounter difficulties in governing economic power and programming long-term development: the richest people invest at the worldwide level such that the link between a company and a specific geographical context is broken by the fragmentation of the value chain, and the concentration of economic and decisional power. Moreover, the recent economic crisis has reduced opportunities for social dialogue, with workers blackmailed by threat of dismissals and global competition.

Economic activities, organized at multi-national level by a flexible workflow, are being increasingly separated from political and social institutions operating (and often subordinated) to limited local, national, branch or macro-regional settings. This inability of parties, trade unions and social actors to deal with market pressures, leads to a crisis within democratic institutions. In this scenario, people end up losing their collective voice and their individual rights.

In terms of social life, unemployment, inequality, personal uncertainty, lack of welfare, risk of poverty, austerity programmes are hitting individuals harder and harder. In fact, a large body of literature – from [Joseph Stiglitz](#) to [Thomas Piketty](#) – shows that inequality is increasing in most advanced economies. The development model is more and more driven by the market. Social movements – at local and international level – condemn this situation, demanding “real democracy”, “global justice”, “equity” and “sustainable development”.

Exit from the crisis: from fragmentation to workers’ unions

The crisis of trade unions is part of this general crisis of democracy, with a reduction of opportunities to confront economic power. To deal with this crisis, trade unions need to address fragmentation in workers’ and social struggles. How do you organize collective action if the workforce is spread in a fragmented value chain and if the power that governs processes is “faceless” (because you are working in a franchising unit, in a small outsourced or subcontractor company, in a local plant of a big multinational enterprise, in a company with international shareholders, or as a temporary or self-employed worker)?

Nevertheless, in the US and Europe, in recent years, there have been several initiatives in “community organizing”, “social unionism”, “inclusive bargaining”, “new recruitment strategies” and other kinds of actions to tackle work fragmentation and precarious work, with the aim of empowering the most marginal and vulnerable people.

In many cases, these processes are supported by alliances between trade unions, associations and self-organized groups. The main tactic is to exit from the single productive unit to meet workers and citizens outside their own companies, affirming the workers’ voice in social life, and trying to recreate the ties that production and the market have destroyed.

Starting in the 1990s in the USA, there were several initiatives in community organizing approaches aimed at generating collective power for the powerless, like the “[Justice for Janitors campaign](#)”, organized by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). The community organizing approach aims to empower a vulnerable and fragmented workforce by increasing workers’ capacity to mobilize together. Trade unionists engage with the natural leaders of workers’ communities, with associations and self-organized groups. Alliances at local level are the basic

tools for action.

In recent years, these approaches have been adopted in several sectors. The capacity to carry out actions involving fragmented workforce in company units is crucial for present-day unionism. The “Making Change at Walmart” campaign (promoted by the association OurWalmart with the trade union UFCW) and, recently, the “[Fight for \\$15](#)” campaign to increase the minimum wage for a rising quota of the “working poor”, are based on these alliances among unions, local workers’ associations (also supporting their organization) and people involved in other social movements, such as “Occupy”.

The new millennium

In Europe, similar initiatives have spread in the last two decades – as analyzed by [Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman](#), among others – with the development of new forms of trade union recruitment to represent and thereby empower the most vulnerable workers. By way of example, we can mention the web-based campaign “[False economy](#)” launched by the British TUC in 2010 to organize anti-cuts protests with local activists.

In France, trade unions supported the “[Convergence nationale de défense et développement des services publics](#)” as well as the struggles of the “intermittent du spectacle” and, at present, the [big demonstrations against the “Loi Travail](#)”, national employment reform. In Germany, *ver.di* adapted the organizing model of commerce sectors and in call-centers, and IG Metall promoted campaigns with temporary workers in the metal industry. In Italy, there have been several “[inclusive bargaining](#)” initiatives and campaigns organized by CGIL to address work fragmentation, to extend rights to precarious workers and to the self-employed. Several alliances have also been formed to affirm migrants’ rights and fight against the black economy, in conjunction with associations, like the campaign in the agricultural sector organized by FLAI-CGIL with Libera and Arci. Activists opened local offices to support migrants, going out to agricultural fields by mobile van to reach this “hidden” workforce. Moreover, in the last few months, the CGIL proposed a campaign to uphold a [Workers’ Charter for Universal Rights at Work](#) (“Carta dei diritti universali del lavoro”) with the aim of tackling fragmentation in working conditions.

With these kinds of initiatives, trade unionists are trying to strengthen networks among individuals, as well as cooperation among trade unions and other associations, like migrant, religious and professional associations and self-organized groups of workers.

What is clear is that unions need to renew their activities by rethinking the ways in which they represent, organize and mobilise workers.

Critical issues and future prospects

- From fragmentation to convergence

These kinds of actions aim to help workers escape their isolation – created by unemployment, precariousness and work fragmentation – by involving people along the value chain and, increasingly, outside companies acting at local level and on the web, offering answers to questions related to their working conditions as well as to their daily problems, supporting exchanges of experience, strengthening their engagement and representation by offering individual services and collective support.

These strategies demonstrate that unions can react to workers’ fragmentation and isolation, reframing their collective actions, helping individuals to build their own networks and cooperate with other social actors to affirm rights and democracy.

However, these practices have several critical problems that need to be overcome and finding the exit door from the silo is far from easy.

- Long-term prospects for all workers

First, these actions do not yield quick enough results on behalf of their members, but they can help trade unions to strengthen their image as an organization engaged in defending the entire workforce, starting with the most vulnerable people. This means that trade unions need to develop long-term strategies, considering that membership is an important goal for the formal bargaining system but it is not the basic goal and it is not reachable in a short time. Moreover, trade unions need to strengthen solidarity among workers, with a view to expanding actions to involve more and more precarious workers and unemployed people.

- Broad alliances and broad vision

Secondly, even though there are many experiences of struggle, protest and bargaining for vulnerable workers' rights at local and sectoral level, there are few examples of cooperation between unions and other associations to affirm a general development model at national and global level. There are several examples of alliances and convergences but it seems that the silo approach (struggles in specific companies and on specific issues) still prevails over the capacity to express a broad vision of development.

A broad vision needs to consider several issues from a common standpoint: labour and employment issues (including the importance of improving worker conditions, extending workers' rights, increasing minimum wages, governing financial power, reducing inequalities); social policies (especially considering the question of the basic income and the importance of public goods and public services); migration processes; the environment. Strong alliances have been forged against some national employment reforms or policies, as in Spain, United Kingdom, Greece, Italy and, recently, in France with the protests against the "Loi Travail", or in the call for a minimum wage, as in the case of the "Fight for 15\$" movement in USA. However, it seems that it is difficult to build broad long-term alliances and common perspectives. One way to pursue this goal is to focus action on the general system of development and on fundamental and universal rights, to be able to defend all individuals/workers against the power of the global market.

- Representative, participative and deliberative democracy

Thirdly, these experiences aim to revitalize the political arena, by affirming at all levels against the "no alternatives" approach – and the "no debate" approach – of market logic, the deliberative, participative and representative dimensions of democracy. For trade unions and other social actors, this means striving to change the institutional framework, to strengthen individual and collective voices.

In addition, it means strengthening democracy inside trade unions, with a view to giving all workers maximum opportunities for active engagement and representation inside their own organization.

This requires a deliberative, participative, representative unionism as one element in building a more democratic social life. In pursuit of this, it is useful to accompany all the innovations, training and experimentations in the process, with spaces for comment where unionists and activists can share their experiences and create new practices.

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