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Trade unions in the globalising world – cases of Finland, South Africa and India

Introduction

A few decades ago an article focusing on the global nature of worker resistance would have been problematic to compile. It still is. In recent times however, images and practices of global resistance have been accepted as an integral part of the intensified processes of globalisation.

The trade union movement is the most organised and stable dimension of worker resistance. It appears simultaneously and interconnected with many other civil movements (e.g. peasant, feminist, ethnic, political movements). Its organisational and ideological roots are to be found in the industrialised “western” world, most of all resulting from the special type of employment relationships in market economies. A precondition for trade unions to stabilise their position is the transformation of labourers into a commodity from slavery and other pre-capitalist employment relationships. Workers’ social movements can operate as a labour market partner. Before this commoditisation, the main activity of labouring people is temporary resistance against oppression and the exploitation of employers.

The distinction between stable workers’ organisations (i.e. trade unions) and temporary organisations is no longer as clear as it was at the dawn of the capitalism. Globalisation on the one hand and anti-imperialist struggles on the other, have changed the whole landscape. In a small and prosperous country like Finland, one can find an extremely clear capitalist structure. A structure of the same kind appears in a few large and developed companies in India and South-Africa. They are however not national structures and the social and political infrastructures are totally different from their Finnish counterparts.

A century ago capitalism was an archipelago ruled by some colonialist countries. Today it is a world system. Transportation and telecommunication technologies are the main causes of uniting the capitalist archipelago into one world system. That is why writing about the globalising trade union movement would be an easier task than dealing with other resistances. It would however be a more slanted picture, the nearer the description comes to the present time.-. Globalising means among other things, that at grass roots level the patchwork quilt of resistances acquires more colours and manifestations among which trade unions are only one. Some trade union leaders even cause a change over of side, from the workers’ to bosses’ camp.

As with most research themes in social science, globalisations, resistances and trade unions as part of it do not simply appear to us as a neat parcel of definitions with clear boundaries. Because of that I prefer to develop questions that may provoke a range of responses, each of which opens up further questions for discussion. I am interested for example in

1. What the trade union movement represents in the global world
 - How it is associated with global resistance
 - In what ways theories of economy, power, politics, civil society, culture and social life shape competing understandings of trade union movement and resistance
 - In what ways trade union activities in new contexts challenge our efforts to understand the whole phenomenon

- How past approaches to understanding trade union movements mainly in the prosperous and industrialised parts of the globe have and should be reinterpreted in contemporary discussions
 - What concrete trade union practices are emerging e.g. around the intensification of global production.
2. Who the acting participants are
- If we can fix agencies of trade union movements with particular groups or named actors (e.g. trade unionists or trade union officials) If we do so, what are the implications for marginalized, silent and invisible actors who are the great majority of all workers?
 - How we recognize different resistances as they are expressed in social and political life If we acknowledge some forms of resistance more readily as trade union behaviour than others
 - If it is possible to make clear distinctions between practices of resistance and compliance, or between global and local sites of practices

My framework is organised following the perspectives of classic and some well-known present authors. Cases from Finland, South Africa and India are utilised as illustrative examples.

I will start with an approximate description of the structure of paid labour on the globe illustrated by locating some of our national cases in this model. Positions in the employment structure do not however give enough information to understand trade unions. They are not only institutions, organisations and people in their structural positions. Trade unions are movements, mobilising themselves, mobilised, demobilised and remobilised from inside and outside. And they are products for their counterparts: employers, governments, military, strike-breakers etc.

A description of the economic and social structure of the world and the case countries, some basic notes on hegemony and power and the influences of the extension of the market principle, commoditisation of natural resources and environment, labour processes and labour power, systems of credit and exchange, shape my theoretical and empirical perspectives. After a short survey and critics of the most common theories on trade union movements, I analyse trade unions in Finland, SA and India thoroughly.

Besides the above-mentioned perspectives, I explore thesis and hypothesis of the problematic divide between domination and resistance. As a starting point there is a hypothesis that relations of power are never exterior to other types of social relationships. There is no all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled. In a word we can find a plurality of resistances everywhere; unobtrusive and covert forms of resistance.

Structures: economy, culture, social, politics

From the point of view of e.g. Immanuel Wallerstein (1988)¹ capitalism is just at its dawn. The present-day SA and India still include all stages of the history of exploitation from tribal communities to post-industrial (pre-informational) capitalist relations via colonialism and early phases of industrial capitalism. Finland on the other hand, represents a rapid transformation from an agricultural to pre-informational society (during only one generation). Setting forth these together offers an opportunity to describe and reflect the long trends of capitalist development in the world.

Most certainly, capitalism is the most hegemonic and most powerful of world regimes but there is a lot of potential resistance within all kinds of relations of production. Depending on the definition of trade union movement, it has a history of two (Great Britain in the 19th century) to three

centuries (Luddites in the 18th century) closely related with the expansion of the capitalist relations of production. The cases of this article are all topical even though they represent different levels of the development of the trade union movement.

For some interpreters, the incorporation and subordination of people within global capitalism has produced the possibility for transnational democratising projects. These people can be labelled as the national elite living in different regions on the globe, some for example in SA, Finland and India. Others, a huge majority of people, are beset by difficulties of forging private troubles into public issues in an increasingly individualized world.

My preliminary suggestion for our description of the basic social structure of the world is the following (the case examples only from Finland);:

- global elite
 - definition: dominating economic, cultural and social capitalⁱⁱ (Bourdieu) together with national elite
 - live mainly in prosperous parts of metropolis, some also in feudal regions also in countryside estates
 - about 1 % of the population of Finland
- national elite
 - approximately 1/10 of Finnish population
- core white collar and blue collar workers
 - those who have a stable employment relationship and who have an opportunity to continuously develop their competences so that their employer pays the costs
 - approximately 1/3 of the Finnish labour force
- marginal white collar and blue collar workers
 - precarious or insecure employment relationship
 - approx. 1/3 of the Finnish labour force
- those living in their “realm of freedom”
 - no need for remunerated employment
 - approx 1/4 of Finnish population (the biggest group are pensioners)
- people living on informal incomes
 - a tiny group in Finland
 - a large proportion of people in SA and India

When I take some descriptive figures from Finland and SA, the illustration becomes a little bit more precise.

Finland:

- A few originally Finnish, currently successful global enterprises (mobile phones, paper, engineering)
- A wealthy majority of 3 million people (the average annual income of the household approximately 50 000 Euros, 300 000 Rands in 2003)
- A precarious minority of 2 million people (the annual income of a person less than about 30 000 Euros, the guaranteed annual income approximately 7000 Euros/person)

South Africa

- A few originally South African, currently successful global enterprises (e.g. mining, forestry, food industries)
- A tiny minority of wealthy, mostly white people (, I estimate some 2-3 million)

- A large majority of poor and the poorest of poor people (annual incomes less than 12 000 Rands/ 2000 Euros)

The next phase of analysis should be to give as accurate a description as possible from the case countries following the above structure.

Stages of commoditisation

I suppose that an important distinction for trade union analysis in industrialised countries is between core and marginal workforce. The latter is extremely commoditised and in this respect comparable to the majority of those workers who are working within the scope of an official employment relationship in developing countries (like SA and India)

The cases of SA and India are examples of the most basic features of global capitalism where all structural factors (class antagonism, labour market, power, cultural, social etc. inequalities) crystallize. I will use these cases to briefly describe the important distinction between class position and class movement. My assumption is that one can find similarities between the whole Finnish workforce on the one hand and SA and Indian elites and core workforces on the other hand.

Some tendencies within bourgeois liberal theories and Marxism are inclined to reduce transformations in all aspects of social life to economic determinants. I prefer wider and more multidimensional concepts like *hegemony*, originally developed by Antonio Gramsci. The term encompasses dynamic processes in which social identities, relations, organizations and structures based on asymmetrical distributions of power and influence are constituted by the dominant classes. The institutions of civil society, such as religions, family relations, schools, media and also trade unions give meaning and organization to everyday life. Hegemony is a lived process and that is why different social contexts will produce different forums of hegemony with different sets of actors. On the one hand the process of establishing hegemony presumes and requires participation of subordinate groups. On the other hand these same groups are *counter-hegemonic* when resisting their superiors.

My presumption is that hegemony within Finland and within the Indian case companies are quite similar in some respects and appear as a very global management ideology in different cultural contexts. The SA examples deal with tendencies of counter-hegemonies among those subordinated.

Indian examples represent labour market conflicts between those who sell and buy commoditised labour power in modern enterprises situated in a pre-capitalist region in a huge developing economy. They also present a forecast of how attempts and models to regulate and manage conflicting interests in modern enterprises are global, even in developing countries.

Mobilisation and demobilisation

Finland might be interpreted as one of the most extreme examples of capitalist development. Like in almost all social movements, the majority of the Finnish trade union leadership has been integrated with local, national and international power structures. Open trade union resistance has been transformed into co-operation with employers and government bodies during a century. The first national collective agreement was made within the printing industry in 1899. In the 1970s all trade union central federations were prepared to join the corporatist three party income policy

agreements. Strike movements started to subside. In the peak year, 1976, there were over 3000 local (wild cat) strikes. The last year of more than a thousand strikes was 1988. From 1996 onwards there have been less than 100 more or less spontaneous strikes.

As an illustration I present the short history of Finnish trade union movement as a function of mobilisation:

Table 1
Mobilisation, demobilisation and integration of the Finnish trade unions

Period	1880-1918	1919-1945	1945-1957	1957-1967	1967-1985	1984-
<i>Content of mobilisation</i>	Mobilisation: creation of trade unions. In the end the class war	Demobilisation: extreme right wing politics against trade unions. Integration: agreement about collaboration before the II World War to get workers support the war together with Nazi Germany	Mobilisation: remobilisation of trade unions after the Soviet victory of war; a lot of strikes, rising union density, radical demands about participation in management. In the end the general strike	Demobilisation: scattering the blue collar central federation; increasing activity within white collar trade unions	Mobilisation: Unification of blue collar federations; increase of union densities and wild cat strikes. In the end increasing integration	Integration: All trade union federations interested in emphasising national competitiveness. Remobilisation: temporary resistance against dismissals connected with globalisation; creation of new trade union of precarious workers

Parallel development of power structure within work organisations and trade unions has also had influence on practical modifications of the trade union structure.

The Finland case illustrates the corporatist power structure within which company and state top managers together with trade union top leadership (= global elite within a nation) attempt to defend their own interests which they define to be the competitiveness of a nation. These interests are in conflict with interests of the precarious minority of the country's population and the majority of the working people in the world. This statement about the adversarial positions of labour market parties is a basic assumption in our frame of reference.

The basic model of trade union movements and their position in relation to other social movements

The traditional consideration of would be to present a brief summary about the most common trade union theories and thereafter define the theoretical frame of reference that will be used in the book. There are other ways of starting too. I have chosen to keep them open in the beginning.

My theoretical frames of reference deal at least cursorily with 1) interaction between the basic determinants of the structure of societies (economy, technology) and superstructure (power, culture, social) and 2) resistance within these different structural levels. The case countries offer an

opportunity to present an illustrative overview of their historical development combined with theoretical interpretations.

Basic classification of trade unions in the globalising world

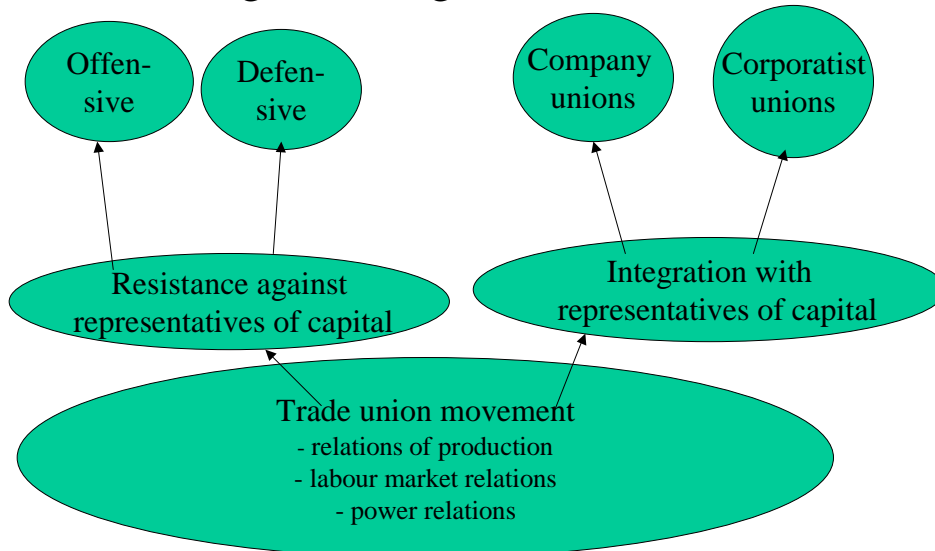


Figure 1

Basically the trade union movement originates from capitalist relations of production, from its antagonist class structure. Conflicting interests between those who buy and sell labour power within labour markets is another basic structure that explains the rise of trade unions. A long process from pre-capitalist guild system and professional associations to craft, general, industrial, company or professional trade unions has created the present day trade union structure.

My understanding of the meaning of global resistance, together with perceptions of the scope and possibility of concrete resistance, is shaped by competing views of the world. I share the interpretation that the incorporation and subordination of people within global capitalism has produced the possibility of trans-national democratising projects for some. My interpretation is that this is true for a global elite everywhere and for national elites in some places and for them exclusively. Finland is an extremely clear example. The South African white upper class is quite evident too. The developing black elite there is on the contrary, quite confusing.

For most people resistances are beset by the difficulties of forging private troubles into public issues in an increasingly individualized world. In practice, global resistances continually challenge our efforts to understand and explain them. As they emerge in new contexts, they are simultaneously being incorporated into a global governance agenda.

As an example of one patch of the huge patchwork quilt of resistances, the trade union movement is the most stable one, perhaps together with peasant movements. Both are stable because their basis is the question of material conditions, relations of production or exchange relations of commodities (labour power included).

The politics of resistance has to be floodlit by a broader set of connections to globalization and the oft-cited neo-liberal restructuring strategies of states, multinational corporations and international organizations. Within this frame we witness “counter movements”ⁱⁱⁱ as societies seek to protect themselves from the global extension of the market economy into their lives. Neoliberalism has provoked a series of crises and counter hegemonic^{iv} movements. Many feminists emphasize particular experiences of women in the global restructuring of firms, states and societies.

From the point of view of industrialized countries (like Finland) as public spaces are privatised, as welfare systems are retrenched, as production moves to the “offshore” sites of export processing zones, it may be more localized practices of resistance that are of greatest significance. My Indian cases represent on the one hand, localized practices of multinational companies. On the other hand, they are core companies at a Indian state level.

South African cases describe quite, perhaps totally different processes of demobilising and remobilising workers in poor surroundings of a country which on average is at a middle prosperous level among nations.

I have defined three preliminary levels and dimensions of resistance:

<i>Dimensions of resistance</i>				
		Main targets	Main agents	Modes of resistance
<i>Levels of resistance</i>	Open and organized conflict (power, politics)	State, corporations, trans-national organisations (WB, IMF)	Trade unions, resistance movements, armed groups	Bargaining, strikes, demonstrations, dissidence, armed resistance, “terrorisms”
	Economy, markets	Wage and salary gap, exploitation, extravagance, luxury, pollution	Trade unions, individuals, counter-movements and – organisations	Boycotts, demonstrations, destruction, consumption habits
	Culture	Hegemonic discourses	Individuals, counter-movements and – organisations	Counter-discourses

All levels of resistance live in parallel: From peasant revolts to trade unions, from the anti-apartheid revolution to the Spring demonstrations in France in 2006, from Greenpeace to anti-establishment hip-hop music. They also go through their own evolution. Slave rebels and peasant movements originate from pre-capitalist modes of production. Trade unions and socialist parties are connected with capitalism. Resistant Internet networks need their technology basis.

Resistance movements at a given time become integrated into the establishment like labour and green parties, trade unions and feminist movements in the post-industrial period of the industrial age in the “western world”. The conduct and meaning of resistance are culturally embedded.

Class structure is only partly the basis of resistance. Agents of resistance emerge from interactions between structure and agency that leads to the contextual privileging of particular intersections of different modes of identity, i.e. class-nationality-gender-ethnicity-religion-sexual orientation. As certain dimensions of political and economic power become more diffuse and less institutionalised, so too will forms of resistance.

Resistance is localized, regionalized and globalized at the same time that economic globalization slices across geopolitical borders. The “public-private” dichotomy no longer holds for most. Dimensions of social life are affected in varying and interconnected ways by globalizing forces. People whose modes of existence are threatened by globalization, respond to achieving certain objectives in a sustained manner. While forms of struggle differ, groups may adopt varied means to contest and link to their counterparts in other countries or regions. The development of cyberspace allows opportunities for globalized resistance from private homes.

Trade unions as a resistance movement and a part of the integrated capitalist power structure

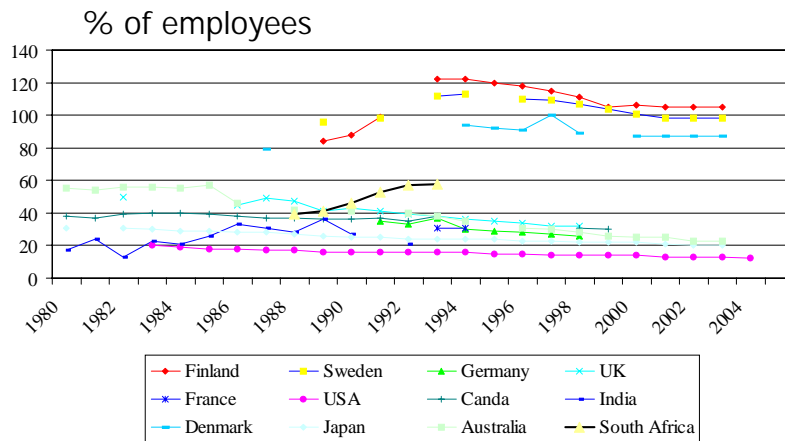
Discussion of common sense in the development of consciousness is crucial to explaining historical and contemporary forms of resistance. It is the product of an individual’s relationship to and position in a variety of social groups.

The coexistence of conformity and resistance can give rise to inconsistencies between thought and action. This helps to explain contradictory behaviour on the part of a subaltern group. It may embrace its own conception of the world developed during resistances while still adopting conceptions borrowed from dominant classes. The fragmentation of social identity that is characterized by simultaneous membership of different groups means that it is possible, if not probable, that the subaltern can be progressive on certain issues and reactionary on others in the same instance.

With contemporary globalization, the interpenetration of forces at the local, national, regional and world level implies that different peoples enter into alliances that are contradictory. Contemporary social movements can be conceptualised as a form of collective action based on solidarity, carrying on a conflict and breaking the limits of the system in which action occurs. In this fumbling definition there are two implicit problems. Collectivity is assumed in the notion “movement”. This has the effect of constructing social movements as united fronts in and of themselves. There is also an assumption of organizational structure. This may be the case with some social movements, like trade unions, but networks with no clearly defined organizational structure have formed in an era of globalization. Participants in these “submerged networks” live their everyday lives mostly without engaging in openly declared contestations. In the absence of openly declared collective action, resistance has to be read as the ways in which people live their everyday lives. In the context of increasingly complex societies, the absence of openly declared contestations should not be mistaken for acquiescence.

I have attempted to create a preliminary overview about the trade union movement in present India, South Africa and Finland and in some other countries using the statistics of ILO. The result is summarized in the graph below.

Trade union densities in some market economies



I classify the countries presented in the figure into the following categories (mentioned union densities from the latest available year):

- 1) Scandinavia , union density stable and approximately about 70 % (the ILO figures are not valid)
- 2) Continental Europe (Germany, Netherlands), union density declining, 25-35 %
- 3) English-speaking industrialised countries (UK, Canada, Australia), union density declining, 40-25 %
- 4) USA, union density declining, 12 %
- 5) Developing countries (India, South Africa), union density rising, 30-50 %
- 6) So-called socialist or communist countries, the official union density 90 %

A lot of countries are not included in this graph. Especially developing countries should be categorized more analytically, but at present we don't have sufficient information to do that.

As such, the ILO statistics are extremely unreliable. For example in many years in the 90s the union density of Finland was reported to be over 100 %, 30-40 percent over the real figure. Deepening and specifying quantitative facts about the national trade union movements would be one of the tasks for developing the article.

Discussion

Academic commentators and international organizations tend to name particular movements in order to explain a form of civil collective agency. Trade unions, women's groups, chambers of commerce, farming and housing cooperatives, religion-based organisations, academic institutes, community-based organisations, consumer protection bodies, criminal syndicates, development cooperation groups, environmental campaigns, ethnic lobbies, charitable foundations, farmers' groups, human rights advocates, relief organisations, peace activists, professional bodies, and youth campaigns are often mentioned as expressions of collective agency. However I ask whether agency can be unequivocally ascribed to a particular group or movement. Fixed forms of agency do not

capture the mobility and malleability of those creative forms of social life that are localized transit points for mobile forms of civic and civil life. For example, trade union resistances have begun to be explained through the rubric of global social movement unionism, suggesting that institutionalised labour groups now speak for a wider constituency. There is little doubt that cooperation with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has broadened the agenda of trade union politics, but it is possible that this serves to fix worker resistance within an exclusive framework. It is not at all self-evident that marginalized voices can be heard within this frame. We have to ask ourselves if collective agencies can be mapped onto class solidarities or do they more closely mirror ethnic, gendered or racial identities.

Conventionally, political and social thought has functioned around a series of binaries: state/non-state, global/local, resistance/compliance, individual/collective. Though resistance is characteristically understood to be expressed through the politics of protest, demonstration, public statement or declaration, the more mundane gestures of everyday life reveal significant sites of political struggle. For instance the assumed boundary between resistance and compliance have been revealed to be insecure and contradictory in Scandinavian countries for decades. It has developed towards a corporatist regime. My Indian and South African cases can not be interpreted clearly as earlier phases of similar evolution.

ⁱ Wallerstein Immanuel (2004): *The Politics of the Capitalist World-Economy*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

ⁱⁱ Bourdieu Pierre (1984) *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Rputöedge and KeganPaul. London 1984

ⁱⁱⁱ Polanyi Karl (1957: *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our time*. Beacon Press, Boston MA.

^{iv} Cox Robert W.(1993) in Gill Stephen (ed. 1993): *Gramsci, Historial Mateerialism and International Relations*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 49-66.