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Dossier

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Letter from the editor

While global capitalism has remained in the grip of a series of multi-dimensional and intertwined crises (including ongoing economic malaise, legacy of Covid, escalating impact of climate change, intensification of wars in different parts of the world – such as Ukraine, Palestine, and Africa –, the geopolitical crisis between Russia, China, and the West, and the mounting debt crisis in the Global South), the past three years have also seen a welcome resurgence of strike action and social conflicts in many different countries around the world.

With the onset of the global financial crisis at the beginning of the 21st century there had already been a comeback of strikes and labour struggles in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, as well as a series of strikes against austerity in Western Europe. While the level of workers' resistance was generally not sustained for long, there were elements of the global crisis that continued to create widespread anger and radicalisation, with an increasing political generalisation about the capitalist system and the problems it creates, particularly amongst young people shaped by social movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and the Climate Action movement.

More recently, there was also a new upsurge of angry and defiant strike movements at varying levels of intensity and momentum in numerous countries, with workers rediscovering their power when they take collective action.

The revival of such strike activity has contributed to an undermining of the long predominant view that such action was no longer feasible due to widespread structural changes in the composition of the working class towards 'precarious', insecure and fragmented work contexts that make trade unionism and collective action near impossible.

In this edition of ***Workers of the World** journal,* Carlos Salas, Jeffery David, and Luis Quintana's paper analyses the changes undergone by the Mexican trade union movement since the 2019 revision of the labour law, accompanied by a policy of wage recovery that reversed the prolonged wage decline that had prevailed during more than thirty years of neoliberalism in Mexico. Munyaradzi Gwisai and Antonater Choto examine the severe crisis affecting Zimbabwe's trade union movement under neoliberal globalisation from 2014 to 2024, and its possibilities for transformation. Matias Muuronen looks at the political reaction to the Finnish nurses' strikes in 2022 using the perspectives of Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault to analyse the state response. Alba Valéria, Andrea Oltramari, and Martín Zamora's article discusses Brazilian trade unionism by analysing two major contributions and complementary perspectives on a path to a new trade unionism.
Ankhi Mukherjee writes about the farmers' protest in India (2020-21) and the counternarratives created by citizen journalism through social media platforms against sustained pro-state discourses by mainstream media.

In the translated articles' section we publish a review of Raquel Varela and Roberto Della Santa's new book, *Brief History of Portugal,* by António Carlos Cortez, first published in *Diário de Notícias*.

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Matias Muuronen

Striking nurses as a national security issue: exclusion and temporality in the Finnish parliament

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the political reaction to Finnish nurses' proposed strikes in 2022, focusing on parliament's debate over legislative measures for the industrial action. It analyses how nurses' strikes are positioned relative to the government and legal structures. The research argues that parliamentary rhetoric distances nurses from the state, framing them as an external threat and thus depoliticizing the strikes. Two perspectives on the state response emerge: one viewing the strikes through Giorgio Agamben's lens, challenging sovereign power in managing health crises, and another through Michel Foucault's perspective, challenging the government's healthcare discourse as a national security issue.

KEYWORDS

Biopolitics
Nurses
Strike
Parliament

INTRODUCTION

Nurses, who are framed within the ethos of a vocation, traditionally navigate a landscape defined by sacrifice and lofty ideals (Bessant, 1992). In contemporary discourse, caregivers, particularly nurses, confront a moral dilemma when contemplating strike action which is distinct from other labour sectors (Huget, 2020, p. 2).

Unlike strikes in industries that disrupt profit margins, caregivers grapple with the intentional suspension of their care duties, raising poignant moral questions. This dilemma poses a stark choice: prioritise immediate care for dependents by abstaining from strikes, or advocate for long-term improvements in care quality through participation in strikes (Huget, 2020). The moral complexity inherent in the actions of striking nurses is underscored by societal perceptions, often viewing such strikes as a moral failing despite being responses to systemic failures. Such a moral quandary emerges in two blog posts by Tehy – a prominent Finnish nurses' union – at the helm of planned strikes in 2022:

> *Why is it that when a female-dominated sector exercises its legal right to strike and demands concrete action in line with the goal of equal pay enshrined in the government programme, every effort is made to silence them?*[1]

> *We ... have been asked why we are striking in intensive care. Are the male-dominated sectors asked why they are targeting ports or paper mills? We are striking in places where everyone can easily see the importance and demands of a nurse's work are grossly disproportionate to the pay.*[2]

Describing a trend towards a politicisation of caregiving, Briskin (2011, p. 91) hints at acknowledging a collective responsibility for militancy in a trade which has witnessed ever deteriorating working conditions and frozen pay, affecting the quality of care. Hence the urgency of preparing to mobilise collectively to achieve these aims.

Although the research presented below does not have a gendered focus in itself, it seeks to take part in a broader inquiry on women's labour activism (Briskin, 2011) by examining the Finnish government's response to proposed strikes, shedding light on attempts to address or undermine their effects. The issue at hand has both internal and external repercussions.

Internally, nurses witness first-hand the consequences of the commodification of social life and care work: although financially compensated for their labour, the commodification process simultaneously presents care as "nonproductive work and paid work that cannot be a source of social recognition" (Uhde, 2016). Externally, the importation of nurses from the Global South to fill the vacancies in the troubled health sector reminds us of the "social reproduction of working classes within the context of the hierarchically organised global labour market" (Ferguson and McNally, 2015).

1 Kirvesniemi (2022b)
2 Kirvesniemi (2022a)

NURSES' LABOUR UNION'S STRIKE

Finland is facing a shortage of nurses. Various solutions have been proposed to address the issue, such as importing qualified nurses from the Global South, improving working conditions, increasing admissions to nursing degrees, and promoting the healthcare sector's image. Nurses' unions believe the solution is higher wages. Finnish nurses have the lowest average income among Nordic countries, with a 2021 average monthly salary of 2645 euros, nearly 600 euros below Finland's average income of 3220 euros.

The nursing shortage is a frequent topic in Finnish media. In 2007, nurses' unions used a mass resignation strategy over salary disputes, with 13 000 nurses threatening to resign. Despite government opposition and an attempt at developing legislation to curb the strikes, a collective agreement was eventually reached, ensuring a substantial salary increase over four years. This successful negotiation also inspired similar strikes in Denmark and Sweden the following year.

In the aftermath of Covid-19, the Finnish Union of Practical Nurses (SuPer) and the Union of Health and Social Care Professionals (Tehy) have voiced concerns over working conditions. During the pandemic, media highlighted overworked nurses. Throughout and after the pandemic, Tehy and SuPer demanded better conditions of work.

In August 2022, unable to come to an agreement with the municipal employer, Tehy and SuPer announced a day-long strike in an intensive care unit (ICU) on 2 September, with further strikes planned. These included bans on overtime and staff circulation between hospitals, leading to significant political uproar.

The National Conciliator got the labour minister involved to postpone the strikes. The government began drafting the Patient Safety Act, requiring essential health care services during strikes, effectively mandating nurses to work to maintain hospital staff levels. The Helsinki District Court temporarily declared ICU strikes unlawful, citing right to life clauses in the Finnish constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights, and stating it is not customary to endanger lives for higher pay.

On 14 September, the Helsinki District Court issued the temporary measure, and on 19 September, the Patient Safety Act passed parliament's Constitutional Affairs Committee. The bill highlighted that it should only be put into use when there are no other forms or methods for securing the health and wellbeing of patients. Measures which should be taken before resorting to the act include transferring patients into different hospitals and purchasing services from private contractors. It was also stated that the law should not be used to crack down on labour action.

BIOPOLITICS

In the language of critical discourse analysis, one could argue that both the event and the structure contain elements inherent

within the broader debate on biopolitics. In Agamben's (1995) formulation, *zoe* represents the "simple fact of living common to all living beings" while *bios* refers to the "form or way of living proper to an individual or a group". Put in brief terms, the former deals with natural life – a human without political rights – while the latter deals with the individual through their rights as a political citizen.

Agamben responds to Michel Foucault's first volume of *Histoire de la Sexualité*, which traces the entrance of biological life into the sphere of the state. For Foucault, the impetus for a biopolitics lies in the replacement of the Aristotelian separation between the biological (*zoe*) and the political (*bios*) within a polity which begins to take "life as its referent object" (Dillon and Logo-Guerrero, 2008). Rather than separation of the two concepts, *zoe* and *bios* become intertwined within modern biopolitics. Here, life becomes a central object of politics and is no longer deemed to pertain to a zone outside of it.

Bare life exists at the intersection between *zoe* and *bios*. Agamben posits that bare life was present in early polities, while Foucault sees biopolitics as modern. Foucault links the sovereign's role to governance technologies, whereas Agamben emphasises the sovereign's role in creating bare life conditions. Both agree on the state's drive to manage citizens' lives, but Agamben notes these developments make lives "capable of being killed to an unprecedented degree". Foucault sees sovereign modalities shifting with biopolitics, supported by discipline and governmentality.

My curiosity is driven towards the state's response to the strikes, exploring how they relate to the debate on *zoe* and *bios*. The guiding question is: how are the nurses' strikes positioned in relation to the government? I draw from Roberto Esposito's concept of *immunitas*, which, like Foucault's and Agamben's concepts, addresses biopolitics. Esposito sees law as normalizing, restoring order after "life-threatening situations" (2011). He frames threats as internal to the community, describing legal violence as an immunitary function, where the legal system maintains power by monopolising violence.

Biopolitics examines how political power regulates life. Agamben's "bare life" highlights individuals reduced to biological existence without political rights. Foucault, on the other hand, emphasises dispersed power and disciplinary techniques governing populations. Esposito further contributes to the discussion through his analysis of the immunitary function of law, wherein threats to the community are managed through legal mechanisms.

Using this theoretical lens, I analyse the Finnish government's response to the nurses' strikes, framed as a national security issue, and the Patient Safety Act's enactment within biopolitics. This analysis reveals how political authorities assert control over life and labour, contributing to understanding the intersections of healthcare, labour rights and state power. The study aims to provide insights into the political dynamics of the nurses' strikes and their implications for democratic governance and social justice in Finland.

3 Markus Lohi (2022)
4 Kim Berg (2022)
5 Markus Lohi (2022)

THE CIRCUMSTANTIAL PREMISE

The plenary on 16 September gathered to debate the proposal for a law on securing essential healthcare during labour action. Led by the Social Democrats, the moderately leftist government included the Centre Party, the Greens, the Swedish People's Party and the Left Alliance. The introductory speech was given by Markus Lohi, chair of the Social Affairs and Health Committee and a representative of the Centre Party. He reported the committee's proposal.

According to Lohi, parliament must protect citizens' right to life. If a labour strike occurs without organised protective work, legislators must act to avoid a situation where "personnel shortage caused by industrial action would threaten the health or lives of customers or patients". Lohi added that the purpose was not to prevent labour action.

Lohi's argumentation in favour of the legislation relied on two frames of authority. The first is the constitutional responsibility to ensure citizens' right to life. Lohi stated that the proposed strikes place two central rights in opposition: the right to life and the right to organised labour action. Most government representatives frame the correct response to this opposition as simple, depicting the right to life as overriding the right to labour action:

> 1. Here one has two basic rights in opposition, and ultimately the committee sees that also the task of a legislator in the parliament is to ensure - through legislation - people's right to life in such a way that no one's life is put at risk during industrial action.3

The second authoritative declaration draws from a pool of experts who informed the Social Affairs and Health Committee of the risks involved in the strike:

> 2. This view has been confirmed also with experts: without this law the strongest basic right is no longer secured. Experts have stated that without protective work, people would die.4

The pool of experts included in the proposal consisted of public servants at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, such as government councillors and senior physicians. In addition, leading staff from the health sector in municipalities were heard.

The Patient Safety Act is therefore depicted as necessary to avoid deaths caused by lack of staff in both intensive care and home care during a labour strike. Predating the discussion on the legislation is a circumstantial premise in which the parliament is not a participant. Lohi constructs the issue as one between the municipal employer and the labour unions.

> 3. According to the reasoning of the government proposal, the need for regulation is due to the disagreement between the participants of the negotiation with regards to protective work during the already declared stoppage... [5]

The premise presented frames the suggested strike as the result of a momentary rather than a structural issue. There remains, however, an element of inclusion with regards to the role of the government in the negotiations. Ilmari Nurminen, a representative of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and a member of the Social Affairs and Health Committee, stated:

> 4. First and foremost, this proposal strengthens the grounds for agreement. We want to create stronger structures for the labour market through which purposeful, impartial and quick methods of reconciliation and negotiation for solving labour disputes in the future may be formed, and with this proposal we want to strengthen this shared path of reconciliation.[6]

As a third element of positionality, many parliamentarians referenced the unprecedented nature of the potential strikes:

> 5. All of us here know that we must solve this question of nurses from the perspective of the sustainability of our entire healthcare. I want to emphasise that the nurses have earned their wages. On the other hand, I am also saddened by the fact that the nurses saw as their only solution the set of industrial actions which are directly directed towards the lives and health of patients. It tells an unfortunate language about the crumbling of a culture of agreements and, on the other hand, the employer side has wanted to break these structures of negotiation, since it has been seen as such a large agitating factor in the labour market.[7]

Similarly, Johanna Ojala-Niemelä, a parliamentarian of the SDP and a member of the Constitutional Law Committee, stated:

> 6. One may still strike, but the right for industrial action may not endanger people's lives and health. Here the situation is very exceptional, because the threat for a strike is directed toward the ICU and there is no agreement for protective work.[8]

In essence, the rhetoric has two distinctive features. First, there is a constant element of inclusion and exclusion. The regulation is needed because the municipal employer and the labour unions cannot come to an agreement (extract 3). This is the exclusive function, in which the negotiating sides are framed outside of the realms of the government. This is exemplified in the speech of Kim Berg, a member of the Social Affairs and Health Committee:

> 7. The starting point for the bill in process is that it won't be used to intervene in the negotiations of the labour market parties nor in the employees' freedom of association nor in the right to industrial action based on it.[9]

Negotiations are to take place strictly between the employer and the employee. In this case, the employer is represented by the municipal representatives and the employee by the labour unions, Tehy and SuPer. When salary increases have been agreed upon in Finland, their level has followed the agreements made between the employers' Technology Industry and the employees' Industrial Association.

6 Ilmari Nurminen (2022)
7 Ibid.
8 Johanna Ojala-Niemelä (2022)
9 Kim Berg (2022)
10 Tiina Karppi, (2022a)
11 Sainila-Vaarno Anne & Kirvesniemi, Else-Mai (2022).

Simultaneously, the stakes are so high, in light of the potential death of patients, that the government must act to some extent on the negotiations – not with regards to negotiations over labour rights in general, but solely in response to a lack of consensus for protective work. Yet there is a general element: the bill must also provide the grounds for future negotiations. This is exemplified in extract 4.

Second, the exceptional nature of the proposed strikes is brought to the fore. This is emblematic in extract 5, where Nurminen frames the nurses' action as disappointing, while simultaneously highlighting the irresponsible manner in which the employer's side has dealt with the issue. Similarly, extract 6 points out the exceptional circumstances within which the nurses' strike would take place.

EXTERNALITY AND THE PROPOSAL OF THE COMMITTEE

In what follows, I propose that the composition of the strike is externalised in relation to law. Arguably, the rhetoric of the nurses circulating in the media with regards to the proposed strikes highlights this position of externality. The implied notion of showcasing, through the strikes, what the future of health care may be underlines the different positions of legality. Lack of staff due to a strike is external violence, while lack of staff due to structural issues is internal. The following statement from a nurse at a protest summarises a common notion of externality:

> 8. Patient safety is endangered every day when there are not enough nurses. Patient safety is only discussed when nurses want something better. I think this is not about the patients. If it was about them, the employers would be required to do something about the matter. [10]

A similar distinction is provided in a blog post by Tehy, which references the legislative proposal by the Social Affairs and Health Committee.

> 9. [P]age 23 of the proposal reveals ... that in the southern part of Helsinki there are 250 positions out of which thirty to forty percent remain unfilled on a continuous basis. ... The city of Helsinki remains unpunished despite a lack of nurses. The parliament has not created a forced labour law ...[11]

The analysis proposed here is not directed at questioning expert positions guiding the committee, nor does it consider the conditions as implied by the nurses as necessarily correct descriptions. Rather, the focus lies on the expressions concerned with the power dynamic between the unions and the government. The locality – not the form – of suppression is of interest here. Does the government response to the strike evoke the expulsion of an internal threat? And if so, through which means is this accomplished? Let us return to the case at hand.

At the height of the protests, references to a forced labour law were often made. At the doorsteps of the parliamentary building, Silja Paavola, the chair of SuPer, stated:

> 10. We are here to show that to us belong the same rights as to others and what does the parliament do? Creates a forced labour law…[12]

It is necessary to bear in mind that the proposal which formed the basis of the parliamentary debate on 16 September, 2022, suggested that during a strike which does not provide for protective work,

> 11. the municipality which functions as the employer could order social and healthcare professionals which are in their service to conduct – in addition or instead to their ordinary tasks – tasks ordered by the employer. [13]

The proposal also maintains that refusing to comply with such an order would lead to the nurse being fined. The proposal suggests that if the fine is not put in place.

> 12. there exists a danger that … decisions would remain meaningless if personnel would still refuse work.[14]

In relation to a discussion on international agreements on forced labour, the proposal of the committee hints that the looming nurses' strike could suit the framework of a *force majeure* case.[15] The proposal references the ILO Forced Labour Convention, which states:

> 13. For the purposes of this Convention, the term forced or compulsory labour shall mean all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily.[16]

Yet, according to the convention, the term "forced or compulsory labour" shall not include:

> 14. (d) any work or service exacted in cases of emergency, that is to say, in the event of war or of a calamity … such as fire, flood, famine, earthquake … and in general any circumstance that would endanger the existence or the well-being of the whole or part of the population;[17]

In a similar fashion, in the ensuing paragraphs, the Committee's proposal references the European Convention on Human Rights and the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights:

> 15. According to the Convention´s Article 4 § 3, by forced labour is not meant the sort of work or service which is required at a moment in which a danger or an accident threatens the existence or wellbeing of the society …[18]

> 16. According to Article 8 § 3 a) of the UN's Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, no one shall be required to perform forced labour … According to § 3 c iii, forced labour does not include any service, which is required when the existence of society or its wellbeing is threatened by an emergency or an accident.[19]

Fining nurses who are unwilling to provide protective work was not implemented in the final piece of legislation. Yet the language on the issue of forced labour proposes a circumstantial premise similar to the one introduced above in terms of externality. In extract 3, the strikes are framed as resulting from a negotiation in which the government is not a participant. Extracts 15 and 16 allude to danger and accidents when discussing the strikes.

Another circumstantial element comes to the fore in a discussion on making exemptions from working time regulations. The proposal considers the possibility of deviating from working time regulations in case it becomes challenging to provide for sufficient nurses during industrial action. Such regulations enforce a certain rest time between shifts, for instance. The legislation proposes that the employer could be exempt from such regulation in case it is necessary to provide resources for health care:

> 17. The proposed provision would be comparable to the working time regulations on emergency work in §19. However, the difference would be that according to the proposed provision, one could deviate from working time regulations specifically on the basis of industrial action directed at health care provided by the municipality … while according to the working time regulation, a prerequisite for emergency labour is an unpredictable event.[20]

> 18. Because the industrial action is not unpredictable, emergency work as accredited by working time regulations is not applicable. Therefore it is suggested that the legislation includes a separate provision which deviates from the working time regulation.[21]

As one notes from above, according to the working time regulation a prerequisite for emergency work is an unpredictable event. To make provisions in the working time regulation, the prerequisite is shifted from an unpredictable event to industrial action directed at municipal health care (extract 17). In terms of positionality, such a distinction is revealing since it is simultaneously temporal and spatial. The temporal element portrays the industrial action as not having any relation to past events nor as resulting from a longer-term industrial struggle. Here the justification for changes in the treatment of core civil rights is based on a legislative measure aimed at dealing with unpredictable occurrences.

According to the nurses' unions, such a discourse on emergency work is misleading. A blog by Tehy - one of the prominent nurses' unions - underlines that there will be no strikes during an emergency or an unpredictable event. "A *force majeure* case is a

12 Tiina Karppi (2022b)
13 Valiokunnan mietintö StVM 14/2022 vp 06.10.2022
14 Ibid.
15 Valiokunnan mietintö StVM 14/2022 vp HE 130/2022 14.09.2022, p. 19
16 C029 - Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) Article 2
17 Ibid.
18 Valiokunnan mietintö StVM (2022)
19 Ibid.
20 Idem. p. 41
21 Ibid.

prerequisite for emergency work during which emergency work will be conducted as required by law".[22]

Hospitals have a plan for organising during a major accident and the plan will be put into effect when necessary: the team responsible for work during a major accident follows a protocol and will arrive to work immediately, as has been agreed. Tehy emphasises that emergency work as a concept should not be used to describe a shortage of staff. Employers ought to rather admit that a chronic lack of staff in hospitals endangers patients even during regular working days.

In essence, each of the examples above depict notions of externality and atemporality regarding the relationship between the strikes and the committee's proposal. The spatial element is evident in extracts 15 and 16, which equate the strikes to a danger or an emergency. Similarly, extracts 17 and 18 seek to implant the strike in a legislative measure which is directed at unpredictable events.

In terms of spatiality, linking labour action to danger or an unpredictable event echoes Agamben's distinction between *zoe* and *bios*. To recapitulate, *bios* relates to the sphere of the political community, while *zoe* represents events taking place external to the political community. Bare life is situated in between the two, and the references evoking forced labour may well suit its parameters: by requiring nurses to work on the basis of a legislative measure, the nurses are prevented from using certain political rights. This is justified by a legal measure (*bios*) which refers to the eruption of an unpredictable event (*zoe*).

The rhetoric of the proposal emphasises the occurrence of a threat to the lives of citizens (*zoe*) rather than the staging of labour action (*bios*). Thereby, the rhetoric dislocates any processual or political implications from the strikes. By analysing the proposal through categories of *zoe* and *bios*, one notices the way the externalisation – or zoefication – of the strikes is accomplished by projecting them as external to the life of the political community: as an earthquake, a danger or an unpredictable event.

This is a significant distinction, because it reveals a relationship between the event (the strikes), the structure (the committee proposal) and the subjects (the nurses). The zoefication of the strikes is a requisite for placing the nurses into a zone of indistinction between *zoe* and *bios*. In other words, the structure constrains the event by externalising it. This allows the proposal to treat its subjects as bare life, evident in the legislative justification in extract 16, which seeks to circumvent accusations of forced labour. It becomes clear that situating the nurses in the sphere of ***bare life*** is founded on assimilating the strikes to the sphere of *zoe:* the externalisation of the strikes allows the proposal to justify restrictions on the nurses' political rights.

As has been demonstrated, the circumstantial premise is key for understanding how the event is positioned in relation to the structure. The subjects are externalised in relation to the state by projecting the striking nurses on an atemporal plane. Moving from a temporal sphere to locality, one can assess both the positionality of the nurses (the subjects) and the positionality of the strikes (the event). This atemporal notion is interesting, since it does not take into account the manner in which nurses' labour unions claim that their industrial action had been made futile earlier in the same year. Below is an excerpt from a blog from Tehy, which refers to an earlier strike:

> 19. We at Tehy have also been asked why the central strike committee has declared that protective work will not be given this time. Protective work was given during industrial action in the spring of 2022. This was not enough for the employers. During spring, the employers required more protective workforce than there is during regular work shifts by invoking the strikes. To arrange protective work it required more workers than there are, for example, on a regular day during this summer. Minister Linden rushed in, prepared the Patient Safety Act, and with his actions watered down a legal strike.[23]

By focusing on the locality of the strikes, one comes across an externalisation which functions by locating the strikes at the level of an unpredictable event or a natural disaster. Such an externalisation takes place twice and it is significant that the two occurrences are evoked in order to justify drastic measures with regards to the right to organised labour action (extracts 15 and 16) and working time regulations (extracts 17 and 18).

FORCE MAJEURE AND STATE LEGITIMACY

An analysis of the proposal's rhetoric focuses on aspects of a specific discourse rather than competing ones. This analysis examines how parliamentarians acquire roles and relationships in relation to the committee's proposal and how this strengthens their identification with a particular discourse. The discourse is classificatory, providing forms of exclusion and inclusion related to the nurses' strike.

The parliamentary debate and the committee's proposal construct striking nurses as an external threat. One sees similarities to Roberto Esposito's immunitary function of legal violence. Esposito states that law "is forced to adopt an indirect method to reach its objective, one that is only attainable through an instrument that contradicts it" (Esposito, 2011, p. 19). This contradiction justifies curbing specific rights to uphold others, exemplifying Esposito's argument that the immunitary paradigm protects the political body by externalising internal threats. The nurses' strike, an internal issue, is portrayed as external. The ILO conventions' Article 2, referenced in the proposal, states that forced labour excludes work exacted during calamities, which are external threats. If strikes are seen as having similar dangers, they are portrayed as external.

According to Esposito (2011, p. 94), biopolitics sees death as "a mode or tonality" of the preservation of life. What makes the case of the nurses strike interesting from the perspective of Esposito's theory is how the response to the strikes seem to fit his notion of non-negation particularly well:

> Life can be protected from what negates it only by means of a further negation.[24]

One could then propose that the committee proposal is an

22 Hankonen (2022)
23 Kirvesniemi (2022)
24 Esposito (2011), p. 15

immune response par excellence. The nurses' unwillingness to provide protective work during the strike is the first negation. The proposal's equating the effects of the strikes to a state of emergency is the second.

Based on the proposed analysis, how should one approach the question: how are the nurses' strikes positioned in relation to the government? I propose that the strikes are framed as parallelling *zoe*: as a calamity, a danger or an accident. This is done to justify changes with regard to legislative measures dealing with political rights. Thus, rather than seeing the development of the Patient Safety Act in terms of a responsibility to protect the citizenry, one could formulate it as a biopolitical act of legitimation. The state derives its legitimacy from protecting the body as "the absolute good" (Esposito, 2011, p. 94). This legitimisation, I propose, is grounded on the externality through which the nurses' strike is depicted.

The political rhetoric in extracts 1 and 2 highlights the responsibility of the government in relation to its citizens. This evokes the state as rightfully valuing the right to life over the right to organised labour action. This signals a value choice rather than the existence of the state as a strict and centralized power structure, which an act of legitimation is concerned with. My argument to view the Patient Safety Act as an act of legitimation is based on the committee proposal's use of agreements which make an equivalence between the strikes and an emergency (extract 14) or a danger (extract 15). Seen in light of Carl Schmitt's state of exception, the references to a *force majeure* case parallel a logic in which the state must compromise on certain civil rights in order to maintain cohesion within society.

HEALTHCARE AS A NATIONAL SECURITY ISSUE

Is there an alternative interpretation to Agamben's approach? In Foucauldian analysis, both macro-political and micro-political elements are crucial. Foucault's view of power goes beyond the state, analysing how power circulates and penetrates it – hence the use of sovereignty and discipline in Foucault's biopolitics. Discipline, a power relation of micro-politics, circulates within the population without a central point (Collier, 2009, p. 81). For Foucault, power resides in all spheres of society: biopolitics is characterised by its ability to individualise power. This is exemplified in representative Lohi's speech:

> 20. My feelings are conflicted because we know that the law is resisted very broadly among nurses. Some resist the law, aware of its contents. However, most have built their understanding on the basis of the message of the law which they have been told. Within this group there are surely many of those who think that this law would prevent nurses' industrial action. This is not the case, and so it may not be. Nurses must have the same right to fight for better employment conditions … as other professional groups. It has to be openly stated as well that not a single nurse's wage or working conditions would be improved whether or not this law is accepted or rejected.[25]

By implying that there are nurses who disagree with the act on the basis of false premises, and by stating that "nurses' must have the same right to fight for better employment conditions just as other professional groups", Lohi locates authority among the subjects themselves. The nurses are responsible for misreading the legislation and, simultaneously, the legislation is seen as not affecting their capability for industrial action. In addition – and in line with Foucault's technologies of self – Lohi constructs "individuals simultaneously as subjects and as objects" (Biggs and Powell, 2001, p. 7). Nurses are encouraged to produce industrial action, but only if they are first willing to subject themselves to certain forms of knowledge, in this case a specific reading of the Patient Safety Act.

I suggest two interpretations of the strikes. Following Agamben, the strikes evoke an act of state legitimation. In other words, the nurses' strikes *challenge the government's exercise of sovereign power in managing public health crises*. Here, the committee's proposal exemplifies the right to take life as solely pertaining to the sovereign. The emphasis on sovereignty is based on Agamben's nomological approach: the proposal is seen through a top-down approach, in which the state derives its legitimacy through a strong stance.

On the other hand, one could critique such a view through Foucault's circulatory view of power. As such, the act is not a sovereign response, but rather emblematises the role of techniques of government. In contrast to a sovereign response to a public health crisis, following Foucault's emphasis on security, one could see the nurses' strikes as *challenging the government's biopolitical discourse of healthcare as a national security issue.* By highlighting a specific circulation of information, Lohi's speech hints at a biopolitical discourse in which power is dispersed. Here, one reaches Foucault's often cited acknowledgment of the relationship between knowledge and power. Lohi's reading (knowledge) of the Patient Safety Act postulates two occurrences. First, the nurses are acting on the basis of misinformation. Second, the nurses may strike but ought only to do so according to principles shared among all vocations.

In terms of subjects and objects, one could reformulate the two premises as follows: the nurses are turned into political objects by restraining their right to industrial action. Yet this is done solely due to their unwillingness to subject to a specific form of knowledge. This is the mutual reinforcement of power and knowledge. How do such discourses relate to healthcare as a national security issue?

A differentiation between *a public health crisis* and *a national security issue* is helpful. In the framework of Agamben, a health crisis relates to the sovereign's power to take life. Therefore, it is expected that the government emphasises its sovereign right to manage and impose a state of emergency. On the other hand, a national security issue – which follows from a reading of Foucault – does not highlight a form of negative repression with regards to citizens' lives but rather a productive mode of governance which adjusts for controlling individual bodies. In other words, by evoking national security, I refer to Foucault's differentiation between the (old) sovereign's "right to take life or let live" and a biopolitics which has the "power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (Foucault, 1976).

Moving further from the individualising spectrum, the dispersion of power is also characteristic of the practices of government experts. From the perspective of securitisation studies,

> before an event can mobilise security policies and rhetoric, it needs to be conceived of as a question of insecurity and this conception needs to be sustained by discursively reiterating its threatening qualities. (Huysmans, 2006, p. 7)

Interestingly, references to an external threat are distinctively more outspoken in the committee's proposal than in parliamentary speeches. This highlights the technocratic nature of securitisation practices, or "security as a technique of governing danger".

Here, the equation of the strikes with the sphere of *zoe* seems all of a sudden to exemplify the political nature of expert knowledge rather than a sovereign's right and duty to protect its citizens. Following Huysmans' framework of security practices, the emphasis lies in the production of knowledge between the nurses' strike and techniques of government rather than between the nurses' strike and the state as the sovereign. Such a distinction is important, because it provides alternative ways in which one could approach the function of the exclusionary rhetoric with regards to the nurses' strike. Seen as a health crisis, in itself, one might explain the rhetoric on the basis of a sovereign's right to protect its citizenry. However, the perspective of securitisation studies questions the framing of a health crisis in the first place. Rather, the emphasis lies on the way information circulates and, in this case, provides the imagery of a crisis, a war or a natural hazard.

This is the critique aimed at the formulation of the Patient Safety Act as an act of legitimation. The analysis references three instances of expertise. First, health care experts declared that a strike during which there is no guarantee of a sufficient provision for protective work could lead to loss of life. Second, the committee's proposal references declarations from the United Nations, the International Labor Organization and the European Convention on Human Rights in order to assimilate the strike into a *force majeure* case. Third, by equating the strikes to an unpredictable event, it is suggested that provisions could be made in the nurses' working time regulations. These instances call to mind securitising practices which are sustained by expert knowledge rather than a central sovereign which declares its sole right to govern its populus in a period of emergency.

Hence, the paper leaves its reader with two open interpretations. On the one hand, the imagery of a crisis evokes the state response as exemplifying an act of legitimation imposed by the sovereign, in which decisions owing to questions of life and death pertain solely to its sphere. On the other hand, by emphasising expert knowledge guiding the development of the legislation, one is able to pinpoint how the issue is securitised not through the central power of the sovereign but rather by complex webs of knowledge which externalise the political threat.

The two readings are emblematic of alternative views of power in the 21st century. The first follows Agamben's emphasis of a sovereign making use of the means at its disposal to highlight its sole right with regards to the right to kill. The references to an act of legitimation are drawn from here: the nurses' strike questions the sovereign right to judge matters of life and death. The second reading, however, reflects on Foucault's formulation of individualising power and governance through expertise.

Ultimately, by evoking the spheres of *zoe* and *bios*, the research demonstrates how those denied pertinence to a group reclaim their relation through the discharge itself: the banned is neither excluded nor included within the community (Nancy, 1993, pp. 36-47). By assimilating the effects of the strikes into a natural disaster (*zoe*), the state excludes the industrial action from the sphere of the political (*bios*). Yet it is precisely this assimilation which allows the state to recreate the strike as an object of politics. However, the strikes are only brought forward by highlighting their relation to a sphere outside of politics to circumvent rights pertaining to it, namely legislation dealing with forced labour and working time regulations.

CONCLUSION

In examining the political response to the planned strikes by Finnish nurses' labour unions in September 2022, two conclusions emerge. First, the parliamentary discourse portrays the nurses as undeserving of support by disconnecting them from any temporal relationship with the state, thereby positioning them outside the realm of political consideration. This temporal displacement is complemented by the Social Affairs and Health Committee's depiction of the strikes as an unforeseen emergency, echoing Agamben's concept of *zoe* and *bios*. This positioning justifies legislative interventions, such as changes in working time regulations, under the guise of addressing an existential threat.

Second, by employing a Foucauldian lens, an alternative interpretation emerges. Rather than solely attributing power to a central sovereign, the analysis reveals power as dispersed across various echelons of society, including expert knowledge. The securitisation of the strikes, evident in the committee's proposal, is not solely an act of sovereign legitimation but also a result of complex webs of knowledge. Expert opinions, referencing international conventions and health risks, contribute to framing the strikes as emergencies necessitating pre-emptive legislative action.

Thus, two alternative interpretations emerge. Perhaps for Agamben the nurses' strikes *challenge the governments' exercise of sovereign power in managing public health crises.* For Foucault, on the other hand, the nurses' strikes *challenge the governments' biopolitical discourse of healthcare as a national security issue.* The second interpretation is a useful contrast because it highlights the role of expert knowledge in sustaining state power, challenging the earlier analysis based on a view of a sovereign which holds power centrally.

For Foucault, power resides in all spheres of society: biopolitics is characterised by its ability to individualise power. Power is all-encompassing, to the extent that there is no longer a central sovereign which maintains power. The dispersion of power manifests itself when politicians urge nurses' to re-evaluate their moral compass or voice their concern that nurses have simply misunderstood the legislative measure. This is individualising power: *you* are responsible for reading the legislation as *we* have meant it to be read ■

25 Markus Lohi, (2022).

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Trade Unionism in Zimbabwe under conditions of autocratic neoliberalism, 2014 to 2024: Challenges and Possibilities for Revival and Transformation

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the severe crisis affecting Zimbabwe's trade union movement from 2014 to 2024 under neoliberal globalization. It explores the compounded external and internal challenges weakening unionism, shown by declining membership, diminished activism, job insecurity, and a drastic wage fall. Externally, union struggles stem from Zimbabwe's repressive political environment and neoliberal economic policies, leading to informal work conditions and labour casualisation—a trend originating with the 1991 Economic Structural Adjustment Programme. Internally, the paper highlights fragmentation within unions, a disempowered membership base, and a corrupt, elitist leadership that stifles democratic union processes and aligns ideologically with neoliberalism. This leadership is reinforced by support from employers, political elites, and international allies. Despite these formidable challenges, the paper argues that the trade union movement remains an essential and indispensable platform for the working class to challenge and confront the hegemony of the capitalist ruling class and for a more humane, just and egalitarian society based on socialist ethos and foundations.

KEYWORDS

Trade Unionism
External and Internal Challenges
Neoliberal-globalization crisis
Political and Legal Repression

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the shift towards neoliberal economic policies have profoundly impacted trade unions worldwide. The shift from manufacturing to service-oriented economies has decreased union membership, as service sector jobs are often less unionized. Deregulation and changes in labour laws in some have made it more difficult for unions to organize workers and negotiate collective agreements, alongside a growing trend of employer resistance to unionization. Privatization and market liberalization, particularly during economic downturns, have contributed to precarious forms of employment and an increasing prevalence of informal work arrangements. As a result, global union membership, known as union density, has declined, weakening unions' bargaining power and effectiveness in advocating for workers' rights and benefits and as agencies of radical reformist or revolutionary change in society.

Edward Webster, a prominent scholar on labour and trade unions, has extensively analysed the weakening of trade unions globally, focusing on the impacts of globalization, technological changes, and the informalization of work.

Zimbabwean trade unions have not been immune to these trends. The last decade (2014–2024) has been particularly challenging for trade unionism in Zimbabwe amid a growing and debilitating economic crisis. Unions have faced a multi-faceted neoliberal offensive from employers and the state, legal and state threats, ideological and social pressures, as well as internal challenges such as splits. Indeed, it is not far off to argue that, more than ever since independence in 1980, unions today face an existential threat unless urgent measures are taken to stem the tide. The state of unions is genuinely dire. The reasons for this are both external and internal to the union movement, as this article will further elaborate.

Externally or objectively, factors centred on an autocratic, repressive political and legal superstructure and the impact of globalization and neoliberal economic policies. The latter has resulted in acute informalization of the economy and casualisation of labour. The neoliberal policies are traceable to the introduction of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (EASP) in 1991.

Internal factors include fragmentation and multiplicity of unions, a weak, disempowered rank-and-file, and a corrupt, elitist labour aristocracy dominating the unions. This elite leadership layer has suffocated internal union democracy and an independent rank-and-file. It is characterised by ideological subservience to the dominant capitalist and neoliberal narrative of the bourgeois ruling class.

This paper acknowledges the importance of what has been written on the challenges faced by trade unions by academics such as Raftopoulous, Kanyenze and Sachikonye (2018: 145 & 151), identifying the challenges as "economic crisis and decline in membership, politicization, factionalism and fragmentation". The authors highlighted how de-industrialization, job cuts, precarity of employment and repression by the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic-Front (ZANU-PF) government have affected unions. In this paper, we argue for an analysis that deeply integrates the external and internal factors, exploring the dialectical relationship between the different factors.

METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative research. It was important for the researchers to see the world through the participants' eyes to "understand how people experience and interpret events in their lives" (Whitley, 2002: 34). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, gathering rank-and-file union members' views of four selected unions. Semi-structured interviews are adjustable, allowing the participants to convey themselves in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher (Blee and Taylor 2002: 92). Purposive sampling was used to select a sample of representative unions in the teaching, mining, food manufacturing and bank and finance industries. Industries that the researchers felt still played an important role in the country's economy and political setup. Interviewees include union rank-and-file leaders, workers committee leaders and union officials. Substitute names are used to protect the identity of interviewees. Existing literature, such as works by Raftopoulous, Sachikonye and Kanyenze, was used to supplement the semi-structured interviews.

The first section defines a trade union and outlines its roles and objectives to provide context for understanding the challenges faced by trade unions in Zimbabwe in mobilizing workers against continued austerity measures. This is followed by analyzing the external threats to unions and examine the internal challenges these unions face. The last part explores the potential for the revival and transformation of the union movement in Zimbabwe and its role in the class struggle between labour and capital under capitalism.

UNIONS AND THEIR ROLES AND OBJECTIVES

Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb (1920: 1) provide a good working definition of trade unions: "A trade union is a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives." This definition sets the context for why workers join unions. Workers' various needs drive them to join unions, which successful unions strive to meet. According to Finnemore (2000: 71), these needs can be categorized as economic, job security, political, social, and self-fulfillment. Economic and job security are the most crucial in present-day Zimbabwe.

Unions primarily exist to satisfy their members' economic needs, particularly attaining a living wage. This is acknowledged in section 65 (1) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, which guarantees the right to a fair and reasonable wage. Finnemore (2000: 71) notes that in Britain in 1989, 80 percent of workers cited economic reasons as important for joining a union. Engels (1881) argued that trade unions emerged as a necessity in 19th-century Britain to provide workers with a collective instrument to ensure fair wages and reasonable working hours.

The second major need is employment security. Interviews conducted by this research revealed that job insecurity has increased in Zimbabwe due to retrenchments and company closures over the past two decades. Finnemore (2000: 72) states that insecurity drives unionization, as members expect protection from retrenchment, dismissal, and unilateral management actions.

The decline of trade unionism in Zimbabwe and globally is largely due to unions' inability to adequately protect and advance these key employee needs, exacerbated by external challenges.

EXTERNAL THREATS

This section examines the external threats faced by labour unions in Zimbabwe. Specifically, the discussion will focus on the economic threats that arise from employer tactics and state intervention and the legal constraints imposed by government policies and laws. Understanding these threats is crucial for assessing the possibilities for the revival of the labour movement in Zimbabwe.

ECONOMIC THREATS AND THE EMPLOYER-STATE NEOLIBERAL OFFENSIVE

The primary external threat to Zimbabwean trade unionism today is economic. Kanyenze (2018: 75) notes that Zimbabwe has faced a deepening economic crisis since the early 2000s, prompting the government and employers to adopt neoliberal austerity policies. This economic turmoil, combined with neoliberal globalization, has disrupted Zimbabwe's productive forces and relations. Historically, Zimbabwe was one of Sub-Saharan Africa's most industrialized nations after South Africa, with a semi-industrial economy developed under settler colonialism (Mlambo 2017: 99). Until the 1980s, its manufacturing sector produced a diverse range of goods, including consumer and capital goods, particularly in engineering, chemicals, metals, and transport (Gwisai 2002: 221). Manufacturing accounted for 24.9 percent of GDP, while agriculture employed 14 percent of the workforce (Kanyenze 2021: 23), supporting a strong and militant trade union movement that contributed significantly to the anti-colonial nationalist movement and the industrial and political upheavals post-1996.

However, globalization and neo-liberalism had a huge impact on the economy after 1990, which in turn created serious structural challenges for the union movement.

Faced with economic stagnation from the late 1980s, the government adopted an International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank inspired neoliberal economic framework, Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP). ESAP's policies were marked by trade liberalization, devaluation of the local currency, fiscal and monetary policy reforms, public enterprise reforms, and de-regulation of investment, labour and pricing markets, including more relaxed retrenchment and dismissal laws (Kanyenze 2021: 91).

ESAP was supposed to stimulate economic growth on the basis of free-market liberalism. However, this did not happen and was disastrous for a hitherto protected small, national industrial base like Zimbabwe's. The local, protected industries were unable to match or compete with the onslaught of globalized, advanced industries from the Global North and major emerging economies like China, India, and Brazil. Sutcliffe (2013: 6) points out that adopting the IMF-sponsored neoliberal policies under ESAP prompted a near collapse of Zimbabwe's industrial base. The neoliberal shift of the economy in the context of globalization led to de-industrialization and significant job losses. Labour Force Survey Report (LFSR) for the Fourth Quarter (Q4) of 2023 produced by the Zimbabwe National Statistical Agency revealed that informalization grew sharply such that by 2023, the IMF estimated that Zimbabwe had the third most informalized economy in the world, with workers in the informal economy constituting over 85.5 percent of the working population.

De-regulation under the neoliberal policies led to increasing casualization of work, with a growing shift from permanent, secure jobs to fixed-term contract employment marked by precarious employment security.

The adverse effects of neoliberal globalization in Zimbabwe have been exacerbated by a severe economic crisis, deepening since 2000. This crisis, compounded by heightened political turmoil and international isolation, followed the ZANU-PF government's adoption of the Fast-Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP). Although seen as a necessary redistributive reform benefiting black peasantry and middle classes (Moyo, 2011), the FTLRP caused short- to medium-term economic disruption and displaced a significant number of commercial farm workers. A 2004 Refugees International report estimated that 78 percent lost their jobs due to land seizures and redistribution; before the reform, farm workers numbered between 325,000 and 450,000, supporting 1.5 to 2 million people. The General Agriculture and Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ) was heavily impacted, with its membership and financial base decimated, leading to operational challenges in supporting affected members.

Critically, as a result of FTLRP in December 2001, the president of the USA signed the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZIDERA) into law, imposing severe economic sanctions on the country (Moyo and Chambati 2013). This study contends that, although ZIDERA sanction are often described as targeted specifically at the ruling ZANU-PF, they have, in effect restricted Zimbabwe's access to international credit and financial markets. This has had an impact on the workers and the labour movement. The international isolation accelerated the economic crisis from the 1990s, resulting in the collapse of the Zimbabwe Dollar in 2008. Hyperinflation reached an unprecedented historic 231 million in 2008, the second-highest inflation in history (Chagonda 2012: 84). Factories, farms and businesses closed. Unemployment soared. This led to unprecedented levels of unemployment, attacks on wages and employment security and casualisation of labour (Munangagwa 2009: 120). By 2014 less than 900,000 of the 13 million population were formally employed, and 84 percent were informally employed (Bhebhe and Mahapa 2014:72).

This hostile economic environment marked by de-industrialization and the collapse of commercial agriculture has severely undermined trade unionism. The drastic fall in formal employment has led to a massive fall in unionization. This is reflected in the fall of members of the country's largest trade union federation, the ZCTU, whose membership dropped from 244,622 (25.7 percent) in 2007 to 89,818 (7.5 percent) in 2017 (Raftopoulous et al. 2018: 146). Not only have unionization rates fallen because of the massive job losses and unprecedented economic informalisation, but unions' bargaining power and service delivery have been seriously undermined.

Even under the normal dynamics of political economy, the capacity of unions to push wages above the average dictated by the law of wages is constrained by what Engels (1881) referred to as the "industrial reserve army of the unemployed." Under capitalism, there is generally never a state of full employment, even during an economic boom. This reserve army of the unemployed is a powerful whip in the hands of the employers against employees and unions. Engels states that:

> The application of mechanical power and machinery to new trades, and the extension and improvements of machinery in trades already subjected to it, keep turning out of work more and more "hands", and they do so at a far quicker rate than that at which these superseded "hands" can be absorbed by, and find employment in, the manufactures of the country. These superseded "hands" form a real industrial army of reserve for the use of Capital. If trade is terrible, they may starve, beg, steal, or go to the workhouse; if trade is good, they are ready at hand to expand production; and until the very last man, woman, or child of this army of reserve shall have found work — which happens in times of frantic over-production alone — until then will its competition keep down wages, and by its existence alone strengthen the power of Capital in its struggle with Labour. In the race with Capital, Labour is not only handicapped, it has to drag a cannon-ball riveted to its foot. Yet that is fair according to Capitalist political economy (Engels: 1881).

In the context of massive levels of formal unemployment, with 86.8 percent of the working population by 2023 in the informal economy (LFSR 2023: Q4), this was a massive cannonball riveted to the Zimbabwean trade union movement. The situation was made worse by an increasingly authoritarian and repressive state (Raftopoulous *et al.*, 2018).

Sensing their unrivalled economic advantage arising from this huge reserve army of the unemployed, and in response to the continuing domestic financial and economic crisis and pressures of globalization, employers, supported by the state and judiciary, have pushed for a fundamental re-configuration of the labour relations landscape. A re-configuration that evokes memories of the era of primitive accumulation of establishment of capitalism in Zimbabwe in the early 20th century, *chibharo*[1] (Gwisai 2006 and Madhuku 2015). This has involved a race to the bottom characterised by a three-pronged neoliberal attack on the working class and unions. This offensive firstly involves substantial job cuts through retrenchments and casualisation of labour. An interview with Mary from the food manufacturing industry highlighted that older, permanent, and often unionized workers are replaced with younger, un-unionised contract workers, especially female workers, earning much lower wages without job security, pensions, or medical aid. Women are the latest entrants to the job market. However, in a patriarchal society, they still retain traditional social and biological roles, which seriously impedes their active involvement in trade unions.

The second arm of the offensive involved significant cuts in wages and benefits. ECONET Wireless Zimbabwe, the second biggest counter on the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange, called this a "war on deflation" or internal devaluation (Mhlanga: 2017). The idea was to drive wages to historic low levels, with ECONET 2015 cutting wages by 20 percent. This was nothing but a thinly disguised war on workers and unions designed to force slave wages on workers. The dominant political elites in the country now support this war. The ruling ZANU-PF styles it the "Zimbabwe is Open for Business".

The third prong of the neo-liberal offensive was the smashing of industry-wide collective bargaining and trade unions so that employers set wages with a non-unionised casualized labour force with wages linked to productivity – a version of *chibharo*. In April 2018, doctors and nurses went on strike. When nurses went on strike in April 2018, the retired army general and now vice president, Constantino Chiwenga, who led the coup to remove Mugabe, fired more than 15,000 nurses without even hearing or addressing their grievances. In a revealing Herald newspaper article in April 2018 titled "Time for labour market reform", Nicky Mangwana, a leading ideologue of ZANU-PF based in the UK and its Presidential Elections deputy spokesperson and now the Permanent Secretary for the Information Ministry, laid this out graphically. He argued that the summary dismissal in April 2018 of the 15,000 striking nurses was part of a broader neoliberal anti-union agenda. He wrote:

> The moment President Mnangagwa said, "Our system of economic organisation will incorporate elements of market economy in which enterprise is encouraged, protected and allowed just and merited rewards," was defining. From that moment, the power and strength of the unions had to be reduced. This is because capital was being offered space to flourish. As neoliberal as it may sound, unionism struggles to co-exist with free-market economics. There is just not enough space for both. This is exactly what Margaret Thatcher found out.
> So, the nurses' strike came at a time when a clear message needed to be sent that unions would never be allowed to have a stranglehold over the economy again. This ideological position aligns with the "Zimbabwe is open for business" mantra. The labour market cannot stay unreformed when the political and economic systems are being reformed. The free market does not operate in an environment of labour market rigidity. The new dispensation should reform the labour laws and practices to re-orient them towards a free-market economy attractive to investment.

The firing of the nurses was a warning that there will never be more of the same in the market. ZANU-PF is very likely to adjust its constitution because its government's claims of socialism are beginning to sound hollow when it is running a free market economy.

> If reducing union power increases employment, let us all embrace it. The ZCTU used to have much power... If the Zimbabwe economy is going to improve, there is a need to reform the labour market. That includes reducing the powers of the unions... The wage level should be linked to how a company is performing. Both unions and governmental influence on the labour market is too much.

1 Chibaro was used by the locals when capitalism was introduced in Zimbabwe to refer to forced labour and slave like treatment at work.

> In all major countries, unionism is in serious decline. In Zimbabwe, there is only one way for it to go down (*The Herald*, 21 April 2018).

The above-outlined economic factors, employers' and states' neoliberal offensive, are external challenges that have seriously compromised the attraction of unions to recruit new members or maintain current ones, contributing to the drastic fall in unionization rates. Indeed, they constitute unprecedented existential threats to unionism, which can only be dealt with by a collective mobilization of the working class and the poor to confront the ruinous neoliberal austerity policies now being followed and supported by the State, business, judicial and political elites.

LEGAL AND STATE THREATS

The above ruling class neoliberal offensive has been facilitated and enabled by hostile neoliberal anti-worker and anti-union legislation and judgments by the courts, which have virtually removed the employees' right to protection from unfair dismissal and retrenchment (Gwisai 2006).
Perhaps the most dramatic example of the threats in judicial form was the 17 July 2015 Supreme Court decision of *Nyamande and Another v Zuva Petroleum (Pvt) Ltd* (2015) 'the Zuva decision.' The *Zuva* decision upheld the employers' common law power to dismiss employees on notice, massacring over 20,000 jobs in firms like ECONET, Steward Bank, GMB and NRZ (Mtimtema 2018: 221).

Threats have also emanated from the legislative arm. The Labour Relations Amendment Act, 2015 (No. 5 of 2015) was ostensibly enacted to address the adverse effects of the *Zuva* decision. Still, it ended up being a dagger drawn to workers' hearts. Section 12C of the new enactment completely overhauled the previous protective retrenchment laws under the Labour Relations Amendment Act, 2002, replacing it with a new framework that has made retrenchment automatic and easier. Employers now have to pay a maximum retrenchment package of not less than one month's salary for every year of service. If they can prove incapacity, they may be exempted from paying anything at all Section 13 of Act 5 of 2015 amended section 74 of the Labour Act to specifically require collective bargaining to promote "high levels of productivity, economic competitiveness and sustainability." This is likely inspired by the neoliberal sweatshops copied from China.

There has also been a battery of the High Court and Supreme Court decisions designed to support employers' casualisation and anti-union agenda. In *Magodora and Others v CARE International Zimbabwe* (2014), the Supreme Court ruled that an employer could employ workers on continuously renewed fixed-term contracts indefinitely, and such employees had no legitimate expectation of being turned permanent employees. In the case of *Innscor Africa (Pvt) Ltd v Chimoto* (2012), the Supreme Court put a nail to Section 12B (4) of the Labour Act. The court held that despite section 12B (4) stipulating that the Labour Court could consider mitigation factors like the employees' service history, disciplinary record and personal circumstances in ordering a penalty less than dismissal, the ultimate discretion of the appropriate penalty lay with the employer. Hence, the Court reversed the decision of the Labour Court not to dismiss an employee found guilty of negligence in preparing an invoice for a pizza and prejudicing the employer for $4-00.

A cursory survey of recent decisions handed down by the Supreme Court in the last decades shows that employers win seven to eight of every ten cases before the court. The judiciary has become a true bastion of the neoliberal offensive against workers.

Added to the above has been an increasingly hostile and authoritarian state. The trade union movement led by the ZCTU has played a significant role in the struggle for political democracy and, consequently, has been at the receiving end of this repression. This was particularly so from the period after 1997, which eventually led to the formation of the ZCTU-backed Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The MDC posed the most potent threat to the post-colonial authoritarian state, defeating Mugabe in the March 2008 presidential elections but stopped from assuming power.

Therefore, the ZANU-PF-led state has regarded the ZCTU and its affiliates as adversarial forces, responding with repressive measures. Under legislation such as the Public Order and Security Act (Chapter 11:17), IndustriALL (2018) noted that trade union leaders have faced detention, torture, and the suppression of meetings for exercising their rights to freedom of association and assembly. Yeros (2002:180) traced the government's efforts to curb workers' militancy associated with the ZCTU to its facilitation of the Zimbabwe Federation of Trade Unions (ZFTU) in October 1997, officially registered in July 1998. This strategy intensified following the formation of the MDC, with state policy shifting toward promoting union fragmentation by endorsing ZFTU-aligned unions. This approach has resulted in the Ministry of Labour registering numerous groups claiming to represent unions, leading to an unprecedented proliferation of registered unions and a weakened labour movement.

INTERNAL THREATS

The external threats detailed in the preceding section have been devastating because of internal and subjective factors that have bedeviled the union movement in Zimbabwe. These internal challenges include membership dwindling, fragmentation, a leadership crisis characterised by a lack of internal union democracy, ideological subservience and class collaborationism, especially in National Employment Councils (NECs) and increasing disillusionment among workers. This section delves into these challenges, which ultimately undermine the unions' capacity to effectively represent and advocate for their members, ultimately weakening the broader labour movement in the country.

CLASS COLLABORATIONISM: IDEOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL THREATS AND UNION DEPENDENCY ON NECS AND NGOS

A key subjective weakness of the union movement has been that of class collaborationism by the union leadership with employers, especially in NECs and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). This threat is ideological and social, namely the class capture of many union leaders in embracing the prevailing ruling class neo-liberal ideology and class collaborationist strategies.

This ideological class capture arises primarily from the relationships developed by the labour leaderships with external players, particularly NECs and international NGOs, characterized by dependency and corruption. The 2015 ZCTU Report highlights that many unions and federations rely heavily on NECs, global trade unions, and international NGOs for their sustenance. Corrupt relationships have been built between officials of international organizations and officials of local unions. A ZCTU report of October 2015, as reported by Makoshori in the *Financial Gazette* on 14 April 2016, revealed that the ZCTU gets over 85 percent of its revenue from donors and only 15 percent from subscriptions. Between 2011 and 2015, such donors provided US$5,7 million against US$1 million from affiliates.
During interviews, the NECs were pointed out as having a poisonous impact on trade unions. NECs have become the graveyards of unions. In an interview, Tapiwa a mining union member stated:

> It appears that the union leaders have diverted their attention away from the development of the unions. Instead, their focus is now on obtaining allowances and loans from the NEC. These resources are used to acquire extravagant vehicles, operate personal enterprises, and indulge in a lavish lifestyle, all while attending meetings at luxurious hotels.

Most respondents indicated that NEC funds primarily drive leadership conflicts and union splits. Corrupt alliances have emerged between bosses and NEC officials, with some previously radical union leaders forming joint ventures with them to secure NEC tenders. Consequently, these leaders have repeatedly accepted zero-percent wage increases.

WAGE THEFT AND DWINDLING UNION MEMBERSHIP

The economic situation in Zimbabwe is dire. The Labour Force Survey Report (LFSR: Q4) of 2023 revealed that 42 percent of employed individuals earned less than ZWL$800,000 (approximately US$138) per month, significantly below the Consumer Council of Zimbabwe's (CCZ) low-income urban monthly basket for December 2023, which was ZWL$3,628,994.20 (around US$616.12). This disparity underscores the severe inadequacy of wages to cover basic living expenses.

Compounding this issue, a relentless wave of price increases at the end of 2023 and into 2024 further eroded the purchasing power of these insufficient wages. The official inflation rate surged from 26.5 percent in December 2023 to 34.8 percent in January 2024, while the Total Consumption Poverty Line (TCPL) increased by 41.9 percent, from ZWL$40,252.59 to ZWL$198,981.37 over the same period (LFSR 2024: Q1). These figures underscore the deepening economic instability and rising living costs

In a 2015 report, the ZCTU highlighted that over 120,000 workers were affected by wage theft, characterised by employers' failure or systematic delay in paying wages. This issue is compounded by continued job cuts, with estimates indicating that over 300,000 jobs have been lost in the formal sector over the past decade. Kanyenze (2018: 108) detailed that 227,369 workers lost their jobs between June 2011 and May 2014, underscoring the persistent challenges faced by the labour market.
The trend towards informalisation has been alarmingly prevalent in Zimbabwe. The LFSR (2023: Q2) indicated that only 28.8 percent of workers were employed in the formal sector (excluding agriculture). In contrast, the informal economy accounted for 43.7 percent of the employed population (non-agricultural) and a staggering 86.8 percent overall. Of those formally employed, only 36.8 percent were permanent employees (LFSR 2023: Q4). This shift towards informal employment reflects the shrinking formal economy and the growing reliance on less secure, often low-paying informal jobs. This shrinks the pool from which to build unions.

UNION FRAGMENTATION – MOTU!

Instead of merging in the face of dwindling numbers due to job cuts and casualization, unions have exploded. As discussed earlier, ZANU-PF supported the war veterans in establishing a separate labour body, the Zimbabwe Federation of Trade Unions (ZFTU), marking the origins of fragmentation within the labour movement. Raftopoulous (2018: 67) noted that the formation of ZFTU was a strategic move by the ZANU-PF government to counterbalance the influence of the increasingly independent ZCTU. Following the creation of ZFTU, unions led by individuals sympathetic to the ruling ZANU-PF aligned with it. Subsequently, trade unions had to choose between aligning with ZCTU or ZFTU, resulting in workers' interests being often neglected, as noted by Mudyawabikwa (2004).

The Labour Force Survey Report (2020: Q1) notes that between 2014 and 2024, several new unions were registered annually. These splinter unions emerged due to conflicts over leadership positions, leaders' refusal to step down, and interference by employers and political parties. Workers indicated that unions have become big business. In an interview for this research, Tendekai, a teacher in Harare, expressed concern about how the unions have become business entities and are now primarily focused on competing against each other to offer benefit schemes such as housing and car loans or schemes, as well as setting up medical insurance, retirement, and bereavement support undermining the core duties of trade unionism. This research introduces the term 'MOTU'—'My Own Trade Union!' to describe the formation of splint unions. Two sectors with high numbers of trade unions, the teaching and mining sectors, serve as prominent examples of this trend.

According to an online checking platform, ZimFact 2022, there are approximately 135,000 public school teachers across Zimbabwe. In a country where less than 20 percent of the workforce is unionised, the teaching sector currently has more than ten unions in existence. Uzhenyu (2018: 263) cites a labour expert who noted, 'After independence, there was only one teacher association, the Zimbabwe Teachers Association (ZIMTA), representing all teachers. However, today, there are many teachers' unions, each with its own distinct vision and mandate. This paper noted that some of these unions have relatively small membership, typically fewer than 500 members. In the case of Zimbabwe's teachers, the existence of more than ten different unions, many with small memberships, means that their collective voice is weaker. On March 27, 2024, *The Zimbabwean* cited the lack of unity among teachers as a contributing factor to their inability to

collectively strike in response to a meagre US$20 increment in their salaries, bringing them to US$300 instead of their requested living wage of US$540. This fragmentation of the union in the teaching sector makes it easier for the government to dismiss or downplay teachers' demands.

In the second example of the mining sector, LFSR (2023: Q2) recorded 200,878 people formally employed in the mining industry. The statistics obtained by this research indicate nine active trade unions in the mining sector. This fragmentation has resulted in the unions being financially less viable and incapable of leading effective actions against the bosses or the state. Furthermore, the fragmentation complicates reaching a consensus, as these groups often compete to outmaneuver one another. The divisions have led to a lack of cohesive action, reducing the overall impact of collective actions such as strikes.

CORRUPTION, LACK OF INTERNAL UNION DEMOCRACY AND WORKERS' DISILLUSIONMENT

This research also established that there is a leadership crisis in most unions. The money coming from the NEC mentioned earlier has corrupted the union leaders and killed internal union democracy. Leaders refuse to leave when their terms expire. NEC funds are used to rig union elections. Congresses are postponed indefinitely or manipulated, elections are rigged, rivals are disqualified, and some positions are not even contested. Interviewees highlighted the role of corrupt lawyers who help union leaders amend constitutions and use courts to remain in power forever. They are assisted by lawyers and NEC officials whom they have entered into unholy alliances. Many leaders now use unions as springboards to advance political careers, especially in the opposition and end up subordinating the union agenda to their party's agenda. They oppose independent, united, militant class actions across unions and federations.

There are no audited financial reports or holding of constitutional meetings and labour forums. Labour union members highlighted that cliques of leaders do collective bargaining without a mandate from members. Opponents are expelled outside constitutional provisions. In the 2015 ZCTU Report, the secretary-general, Japhet Moyo, stated that many of the federation's 25 affiliates refused ZCTU officials access into their offices, thereby "raising fear of fraud, financial mismanagement and corruption." Moyo lambasted affiliates for driving ZCTU into "insolvency and extinction" due to non-payment of subscriptions. The report stated:

> Some unions had no information such as bank statements, income and expenditure statements, or membership registers. Large amounts were being spent on leadership monthly allowances and travel and subsistence costs, yet nothing was being paid to ZCTU.

As discussed, the above has been compounded by the corrupt influence of funds from NECs, international trade unions, and NGOs. In a shrinking economy, unionism has become a zero-sum game, a winner-takes-all game. This is more so because there are no pensions for retiring leaders, and many union leaders lack the education, skills, and qualifications to get alternative jobs that will maintain their current lifestyles.

The issues outlined above have led to a notable social divide between labour leaders and ordinary members across most unions, with only a few exceptions. These problems are undermining the trust between union leadership and members, resulting in disillusionment and disengagement among the rank-and-file. In an interview that this study had with Kariwo, she shared that she decided to terminate her membership with one of the prominent teachers' unions after feeling that its union leaders were not effectively representing her interests and were engaged in corrupt practices. She emphasized that:

> I got demoralized when the union started venturing into business activities offering services that the government, as the employer, is supposed to offer as benefits. Instead of representing workers, they were becoming more concerned about offering benefit schemes such as housing and car loans or schemes and setting up medical insurance, retirement, and bereavement support. When I questioned this move, I was informed that it was a separate initiative, run independently, yet targeting the union members. I was further disheartened to realize that the union officials' primary focus had shifted towards generating revenue through these initiatives, competing with other unions, and undermining the potential of solidarity with other unions in the teaching sector. I withdrew my membership and am currently not unionised.

Due to the aforementioned factors, significant disillusionment has taken hold among the regular members, contributing to the drastic decline in union membership. Unions need to address these internal issues to rejuvenate the weakening labour movement.

UNIONS ARE STILL NECESSARY FOR THE WORKING CLASS.

However, it has not all been gloomy. In the face of ongoing economic challenges and political instability, there have been significant moments of resistance and solidarity among Zimbabwean workers. This section will explore the key events and strikes that exemplify the resilience and determination of Zimbabwe's rank-and-file workers. From spontaneous strikes by sugar cane and council workers to organised protests by healthcare professionals and railway employees, these actions underscore a growing sense of unity and empowerment among the working class.

The period 2016 – 2018 was notable, as the economic crisis worsened and the ruling elites politically imploded. From the beginning of 2016, there was a wave of spontaneous strikes. These included strikes by Chiredzi sugar cane workers, Chitungwiza council workers and Mutare nurses. In February 2016, there was a 32-day sleep-in protest by state grain parastatal Grain Marketing Board (GMB) workers against non-payment of wages. Then, protests were made against banks by the banking union, ZIBAWU. This was followed in April 2016 by the 80-day sleep-in strike by over 3,000 National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ) workers in a strike against non-payment of wages. The strike was organised by rank-and-file workers drawn from the four unions in the industry but without the union leaders. Although over 50 strikers were eventually fired, the strike was largely successful. The strike was settled when the NRZ bosses were forced to agree to pay employees regularly even if at 50 per centum of their monthly salaries – still much better than the up to 15 months arrears in salaries that had until then prevailed. The strike history is well captured in *Railways of Zimbabwe v Jeremiah Muzangwa and 1 357 Others* (2016).

In November 2016, junior doctors organised under the Zimbabwe Hospital Doctors Association (ZHDA) went on an illegal strike for several days, protesting low salaries. A graphic example of the potential power of workers united in unions was demonstrated in the opening half of 2018. Following the 40 percent decline of the Zimbabwe de facto currency on 22 September 2017 and the consequent rise of prices of essential goods by over 50 percent, workers suffered a sharp erosion of the purchasing power of their salaries. In March 2018, thousands of doctors and nurses led by the doctors' union, ZHDA, and nurses' union, went on an illegal strike for nearly one-month, demanding cost-of-living adjustments. The state was forced to concede increments of salaries and allowances over 50 percent to the doctors and a lower one for the nurses (*Herald*, March 2018). When the nurses pressed on with their strike, demanding further concessions, the government responded in the usual style, with the new Vice-President General Chiwenga announcing the summary dismissal of over 5,000 striking nurses (*Herald*, 21 April 2018). However, in the end, the government was forced to reinstate the striking nurses.

In February 2022, a united strike by teachers' unions led by the radical Federation of Zimbabwe Educators' Union, protesting the decimation of teachers' salaries after the February 2019 monetary changes restoring the ZW Dollar at a rate of 1:1. According to the ZIMTA (20220 the changes had resulted in teachers' salaries collapsing from US$540 in October 2018 to a ZWL Dollar salary equivalent to about US$100 by February 2022, in an economy that was rapidly dollarizing. The strike was widespread, with the government suspending 135,000 of the roughly 140,000 employed in public schools for participating in the strike. The strike won some major gains, with the Government forced to give its workers a US$100-00 cost of living adjustment in US Dollars (International Worker Organizer: 2022).

An important factor is that the strike actions of the last decade saw solidarity with the striking workers by other unions and workers. During the 32-day GMB workers' sleep-in, there were officed food and cash donations by radical unions such as the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Energy Workers Union, and College Lecturers Association of Zimbabwe. When the Zimbabwe Banks and Allied Workers Union (ZIBAWU) organised a demonstration against ECONET Wireless-owned Steward Bank for cutting jobs, over 50 GMB strikers joined them. The solidarity with the railway strike by radical unions such as ZIBAWU and socialist organisations, led by the International Socialist Organization, led to the formation of an anti-austerity united front, the People's Assembly Against Poverty.

CONCLUSION

The above examples of workers' struggle over the past decade show the resilience and potential for resistance despite occurring in a challenging environment. While many union leaders have failed workers, committed activists and leaders still fight for meaningful change. Yet, without unified, large-scale, and coordinated efforts, isolated actions often end in limited success or defeat. Strikes within the public sector, primarily led by radical unions, indicate that organized labour can still drive significant movements. Through collective action and class solidarity, a renewed union leadership rooted in working-class consciousness and unity could emerge, enabling unions to undertake stronger, more impactful actions.

Historically, unions have been crucial in defending workers' rights, leading powerful and effective struggles against capitalist exploitation. To maintain their influence, workers must not abandon unions or create splinter groups, as this weakens the collective power essential for confronting the capitalist establishment. Instead, unions need to undergo transformative changes to become effective vehicles for worker struggles. At the heart of this transformation is the restoration of internal union democracy, which includes holding regular forums, ensuring democratic elections, and instituting term limits for union leaders. Corrupt leaders must be removed to retain workers' trust, as a transparent, democratic union structure is vital for worker engagement and effectiveness.

A significant threat to union democracy has been the misuse of NECs. Although NECs offer a platform for resources and collective bargaining, they often facilitate corruption and authoritarianism within unions. Advanced workers need to implement mechanisms that democratize and monitor NEC resources, such as rotating NEC representation and channeling allowances back into union funds. By doing so, unions can establish strike funds, provide solidarity to other workers, and host educational programmes that promote ideological awareness and skill-building among the rank-and-file.

Additionally, unions can strengthen their movement by leveraging social media tools, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, which have been instrumental in organising recent strikes. To counter union fragmentation, smaller unions should consider merging to create more cohesive and powerful organisations. Unions must also actively recruit marginalised workers, including youth, women, and contract workers, who have often been excluded from union protections yet are increasingly central in today's workplaces. A united working class is essential to withstand the neoliberal attacks of the capitalist ruling class.

A more militant strategy is necessary, moving beyond the past decade's strategies of legal action and class collaboration toward direct mass actions like sit-ins, go-slows, pickets, and protests. The railway strike demonstrated how rank-and-file workers can mobilize even when union leaders are unresponsive or compromised. Mass action, uniting both permanent and contract workers, will enable unions to defend jobs and wages more effectively.

Zimbabwean workers have a history of militant action, such as the 1996–1997 strikes, culminating in the ZCTU-led general strike on December 9, 1997. This collective action illustrated the potential for organised labour to challenge neoliberal policies. Rebuilding unions on principles of class solidarity, unity, and direct action can empower workers to resist the exploitation of the capitalist system and revitalise the labour movement.

In the long term, it is essential for workers to recognise the root causes of attacks on unions and the working class in Zimbabwe

and beyond: the inherent crisis within late capitalism. This crisis stems from the contradiction between the highly advanced global economy and the outdated production relations of the nation-state, private property, and profit-driven production. To sustain profit margins, the capitalist class increasingly imposes austerity, enacts neoliberal policies, and wages wars over global markets and resources, intensifying pressure on workers and unions.

Trade unions are a critical tool in building the resistance of the working class, but on an increasingly regional and international basis if they are to be effective as a precursor to ultimately develop a class-based and international movement of working people for the overthrow of capitalism, globally, and to bring the wealth of society under the democratic control of working people, and the construction of socialism at a global level as the only sustainable way out of the fundamental contradictions that today face the capitalist mode of production ■

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Trade unionism in Brazil: organisational challenges in the face of transformations in labour relations

ABSTRACT

The aim of this essay is to discuss Brazilian trade unionism by analysing the contributions of Lúcio and Galvão from the perspective of Nancy Fraser. Lúcio ratifies the importance of a regulatory framework that restructures unions, while Galvão argues this is not enough, as the grassroots must be organised for the struggles. The Forum of Trade Union Centres (FCS) favoured the integrated action of entities to demand legal guarantees, but was unsuccessful in mobilising them. In the light of Fraser's critical conception, we understand that the struggle must be for redistribution of resources, social recognition and equal participation, which supports both the contributions of Lúcio, for whom the unions must be restructured, and those of Galvão, who advocates mobilising the grassroots so that the working class does not succumb to capital.

KEYWORDS

Labour relations
Brazilian trade unionism
Regulation mark
Grassroots mobilisation

INTRODUCTION

The recent transformations in labour relations, driven at first by the crisis of Fordism and the emergence of the flexible accumulation pattern (Harvey, 2010) and reinforced by the recent 2008 crisis (Tonelo, 2020), point to an unfavourable context for workers, while at the same time challenging the struggles of the trade union movement. The new forms of work organisation are moving towards more flexible employment relationships and the erosion of replacement of the workforce. This trend shows in the reduction of the number of workers in organisations and the imposition of polyvalent work, an increase in production through the intensification of work, an increase in working hours, and even the insertion of technologies that increase productivity at the same time they save the workforce (Alves, 2007; Antunes, 1999; Gounet, 1999; Piccinini and Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2011). Along with this, there is also the use of flexible contracts that are less protected by labour legislation, such as outsourcing, self-employment or "pejotisation"[1] (Antunes, 2018).

Labour relations refers to the way in which a given society organises the purchase and sale of labour power, an acquisition that takes place on the market when the buyer and seller of this commodity face each other and establish an exchange agreement. Thus, the rules that impose conditions on the form of this acquisition – limiting working hours, stipulating minimum amounts of pay, regulating rest periods – make up these relations (De Faria, 2004; Fischer, 1987; Piccinini; Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2011). The dynamics of these relationships occur through conflicts between capital and labour, given that both have conflicting interests (De Faria, 2017). In this context, injustices whose centrality concerns inequality of redistribution are produced, such as exploitation, economic marginalisation and deprivation, as well as those that concern inequality of recognition, such as cultural domination, concealment (in which subjects become invisible through discursive practices legitimised by the culture itself), and the disrespect that emerges from stereotyped cultural representations, in which subjects are publicly disqualified or publicly defamed (Fraser, 2006).

It is worth mentioning that, along with the crisis of Fordism, the main capitalist countries experienced a crisis of the so-called welfare state and the implementation of neoliberalism. Far from being just a set of public policies that cut social spending and take away rights, neoliberalism is a political project of the global capitalist class that aims to suffocate the workers' movement, especially the trade union movement (Harvey, 2008). In addition, the collapse of the Soviet experiment in the early 1990s contributed to a crisis of the socialist imaginary and the strengthening of a new political imaginary based on the fight against the injustices of cultural domination and the deficit of recognition (Fraser, 2006).

In light of the rise of neoliberalism, with attacks on the legal protections of the working class, a discussion is under way in various spheres of the country about the direction of trade unionism. In this debate, in the academic sphere, Lúcio (2021) proposes a restructuring of trade unions in order to renew trade union organisation in the face of the new labour context. For Galvão (2021), it's not enough just to restructure trade union activity; it is also necessary to organise workers to face "the ideological impact of neoliberalism". In this sense, Galvão (2021) advocates a less normative and more political direction, which is to say that far beyond the constitution of a legal framework, trade unions must direct their struggles more broadly, in the sense of revealing the contradictions between capital and labour and mobilising their grassroots.
Thus, this essay aims to contribute to the debate on Brazilian trade unionism by analysing the contributions made by Lúcio and Galvão from the perspective of Nancy Fraser's critical theory.
The next section presents a brief history of Brazilian trade unionism and describes the organisation of the Brazilian trade union movement. The section after that addresses Lúcio and Galvão's proposals, as well as the theoretical proposition of this study, based on Fraser's. The final considerations summarise the proposals for Brazilian trade unionism.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BRAZILIAN TRADE UNIONS AND HOW THEY ARE ORGANISED

In Brazil, trade unionism has experienced various moments since the creation of the CLT (Consolidated Labour Laws) by President Getúlio Vargas on 1 May, 1943, when the country was changing its profile from a rural economy to one in a process of industrialisation. During this period, unions were tied to state control, in a corporatist and authoritarian way (Campos, 2016). Surveillance relationships were established with co-opted union leaders (known by the jargon *pelegos*[2]) and through the so-called union tax, which involved government control over union funding (Antunes, 2018).

When the military took power in 1964, unions were suppressed, along with other segments of society. Despite the truculence of the military regime, the struggle for democracy broke out in the late 1970s and unions played an important role in this process. Thus the "new trade unionism" emerged, marked by large-scale strikes and the political articulations that developed in that decade. In 1978, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) emerged as a leading figure as president of the São Bernardo and Diadema Metalworkers' Union (now the ABC), in the historic strike by assembly plant workers (Colombi et al., 2022).

Antunes and Silva (2015, p. 511) note that "the new unionism promoted significant changes in Brazilian union and political culture by establishing new practices, mechanisms and institutions" which were confrontational, trying to distance themselves from state control and its agreements. The 1980s and 1990s were a period of effervescence in social, trade union and political movements, in which the transition from military to civilian rule led to the emergence of new political parties, including the Workers' Party (PT), which Lula helped

1 Translator's note: A loan translation from Brazilian Portuguese, denoting the practice of a worker starting a company and being hired as a legal entity - a PJ (Pessoa Jurídica, juridical person) – instead of an individual worker, and thus giving up basic labour rights.

2 Translator's note. A pelego is a piece of harness used in the south of Brazil and Argentina, made of sheep or lamb leather and placed on the saddle to allow the rider to ride more comfortably. The term became a metaphor referring for a union leader at the service of the powerful, or even considered a traitor to the workers.

found and in which he has been leading his political life.

In 2002, Lula was elected president of Brazil by the Workers' Party (PT) for two terms, and managed to make Dilma Rousseff, also of the PT, his successor, also for two terms (though she ruled for one and a half terms due to an impeachment process). The period from 2003 to 2016 was marked by a left-wing government, but one that had to negotiate support with other ideological camps in order to run the country. In the meantime, the unions embodied negotiating practices with which they agreed on actions, measures and policies, renouncing confrontation (Antunes and Silva, 2015). According to Colombi (2019), the negotiating stance and the union leaders' attachment to a political-ideological stance in line with the government's played an important role during this period. We understand that this practice, to a certain extent, contributed to the demobilisation and weakening of the working class' power to fight, although other factors also play a role in this context.

In addition, from 2013 to 2016, the country went through a wave of street movements, which was a watershed for the Brazilian trade union movement, because until then the movement had been successful in a number of strikes and favourable negotiations, but it was already having difficulty in mobilising the grassroots for union struggles (Lúcio, 2021). Proof of this were the "days of 2013", whose interpretations are controversial among researchers, but undoubtedly protests on those days brought large numbers of people onto the streets.

Initially, the demonstrations, over public transport fares, were progressive in nature. However, part of the mobilisation was captured and led by rightists, with diffuse, conservative agendas and attacking Dilma's government, which culminated in a coup against the president in 2016. The movements, which claimed to be "No Party", brought the extreme right to the streets, with a discourse that rejected any parties or entities, as if political neutrality were possible (Ferraz, Gomes and Souza, 2017). To a certain extent, by disseminating the idea that parties, organisations and movements were responsible for the ills of society and therefore dispensable, the working class ended up feeling a certain hopelessness in the collective struggle, contributing to a negative view of party politics and unions, and this became part of the discursive strategy of the far right.

Thus, in 2016, through a process in the federal legislature (which had a majority of centre, right and far right parties), the political coup against President Dilma took place, for the "crime of fiscal pedalling[3]" (Colombi, 2019), ending only recently on 21 August, 2023, when the Federal Regional Court (TRF) of the 1st Region (Brasília) unanimously dismissed the improbity action, clearing Dilma (Richter, 2023). The president was removed from office at a time that was unfavourable to progressive demands. As a result of the demobilisation of the population and the fragility of the unions (Campos, 2016), popular resistance cooled in the period between 2016 and 2022.

The weakening of the progressive camp created a favourable scenario for the implementation of unpopular policies that took away workers' social rights. The 2017 labour reform, which produced profound changes to the Consolidation of Labour Laws (Marcelino and Galvão, 2020), is particularly noticeable. Regarding union representation, the new legislation allows agreements and negotiations between employers and employees to prevail, legally, over what is legislated. By assuming equal conditions between workers and capitalists, this provision creates legal uncertainty for the former, who, in a context of structural unemployment, may find themselves obliged to accept agreements that do not benefit them at all. The Brazilian union model includes federations, confederations and union centres in addition to unions of specific sectors and professions.

Although they emerged decades earlier (DIEESE, 2023), it was only in 2008 that Law No. 11 648 was passed; it officially recognised trade union centres (Marcelino and Galvão, 2020), allocating a percentage of the Union Tax (union contribution), extinguished in 2017, to those centres that reached the level of representativeness provided for in the legislation (DIEESE, 2023). In 2019, in the context of weakening unions on the one hand and the need to confront the Bolsonaro government's attacks on the other, the FCS was created, which is an "informal coalition created to present politically unified positions in a scenario of growing adversity for workers" (Colombi et al., 2022, p. 23).

Since the first government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a president with a history related to the "new trade unionism", there had been discussions about possible trade union reform. In 2010, the Labour Relations Council (CRT) was created. However, with the fall of the left-wing government in 2016, the discussion running at the CRT was put on hold.

To resume the debate on the situation of working-class organisations, the FCS organised the National Conference of the Working Class (CONCLAT), which took place in April 2022 (Marcelino and Galvão, 2020) with the themes employment, rights, democracy and life. The FCS approved the decision to repeal what it called the "regressive milestones of the labour reform", as suggested by the program of the then Lula/Alckmin ticket.

Upon taking office again in 2023, the newly elected government created a Tripartite Working Group of government, trade union centres and entrepreneurs, tasked with debating a new regulatory framework for labour relations in Brazil. This discussion is expected to generate a bill which may be sent to the national congress for approval (Lúcio, 2020, 2021; Mirhan and Santana, 2023).

Table 1 shows a list of Brazilian trade union centres, their year of foundation, and the representation rates of each, from data registered with the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MTE) and accessible to these entities.

3 Translator's note: A loan translation from Brazilian Portuguese, meaning misusing or manipulating public accounts to hide budget gaps.

TABLE 1: BRAZILIAN TRADE UNION CENTRES

TRADE UNION CENTRE	YEAR OF FOUNDATION	RATE OF REPRESENTATION (%)
Central Unificada Dos Profissionais Servidores Públicos Do Brasil (Unified Centre for Professional Public Servants in Brazil)	1958 (Inactive at MTE)	0.01
Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT) (Unified Workers' Centre)	1983	27.45
Força Sindical (FS) (Trade Union Force)	1990	18.45
Intersindical Da Orla Portuária Do Espírito Santo (Interunion of the Port Area of Espírito Santo)	1991	0.01
Associação Nacional Dos Sindicatos Social-Democrata (National Association of Social Democratic Trade Unions)	1997	0.01
Central Geral dos Trabalhadores do Brasil (CGTB) (General Centre of Workers of Brazil)	2004	1.60
Nova Central Sindical dos Trabalhadores (NCST) (New Workers' Trade Union Centre)	2005	13.44
União Sindical dos Trabalhadores (UST) (Workers' Trade Union)	2006	0.04
União Geral dos Trabalhadores (UGT) (General Workers' Union)	2007	14.08
Central dos Trabalhadores e Trabalhadoras do Brasil (CTB) (Centre of Men and Women Workers of Brazil)	2007	10.39
Central dos Sindicatos Brasileiros (CSB) (Brazilian Unions Centre)	2008	10.56
Central Dos Trabalhadores e Trabalhadoras Do Brasil - RS (Centre of Men and Women Workers of Brazil in Rio Grande do Sul)	2008	0.01
Central Nacional Sindical Dos Profissionais Em Geral - CENASP (National Trade Union Centre for Professionals in General)	2009	0.01
Central Sindical e Popular - Coordenação Nacional de Lutas (CSP-Conlutas) (People's Trade Union Centre - National Coordination of Struggles)	2010	0.96
Intersindical - Central da Classe Trabalhadora (Interunion - Working Class Centre)	2014	0.12
Pública - Central do Servidor (Public Servant Centre)	2015	1.34
Central das Entidades de Servidores Públicos (CESP) (Central of Public Servant Entities)	2017	0.53
Central do Brasil Democrática de Trabalhadores - (CBDT Nacional) (Central Democratic Workers' Union of Brazil)	2023	0.93
TOTAL		**100%**

Source: Prepared by the authors using data from the MTE (2024).

At the end of the first decade of the 2000s and the beginning of the second, several trade union centres were created, fragmenting working-class representation. This phenomenon may be related to the emergence of public funding for trade union centres, if we consider that some political groups preferred to create their own centre rather than compete for political space and resources with already consolidated leaderships.

Colombi et al. (2022) pointed out that there were thirteen trade union centres, according to the register of these bodies deposited with the Ministry of Economy in December 2021. However, this register is currently being updated by the MTE and so far has 18 registered trade union centres.

The FCS was created with the aim of reducing fragmentation and strengthening the trade union struggle. It is made up of CUT, FS, UGT, CTB, NCST, CSB, Intersindical, CSP Conlutas, CGTB and Pública (Colombi et al., 2022). With Lula's return to the federal executive, the FCS was invited to join the Tripartite Working Group to discuss a new trade union legal framework.
The discussion around a new regulatory framework for labour relations requires confronting the characteristics of the Brazilian union structure, which includes divisions according to geographical delimitations and also professional categories as established by the government in accordance with the Framework of Activities and Related Professions, in which the unions have "the municipality as their minimum territorial base" (DIEESE, 2023, p. 86).

PROPOSALS FOR BRAZILIAN TRADE UNIONISM

Contemporary union struggles take place in a complex scenario, but with potential for progress, despite some proposals that have been discussed in the literature. Below we will analyse Lúcio's (2020, 2022) proposals and Galvão's (2021) debate with him. This analysis will be based on Fraser's (2009) three dimensions of justice: recognition, redistribution and equal participation.

Fraser (2006) argues that recognition became the paradigm of political conflicts at the end of the 20th century. In this scenario, the demands for recognition of difference (of nationality, ethnicity, "race", gender and sexuality) supersede class interests, in which cultural recognition takes the place of socio-economic redistribution even though the struggles for recognition take place in a world with marked material inequality. This is why Fraser (2006) points to the need for a new intellectual and practical task, namely to develop a critical theory of recognition combined with the social policy of equality, theorising how economic deprivation and cultural disrespect are intertwined and sustain each other simultaneously.

Moreover, Nancy Fraser has incorporated criticisms of her initial formulation, pointing to the integration of the cultural and economic dimensions with a third, the political dimension, in an arrangement that allows for the participation of all social actors. By adding the third dimension – the political (equal participation) – the author updates her theory for the 21st century, to advocate equal representation whose character is democratic but different from the liberal-bourgeois state's concept of representative democracy. In other words, Fraser (2009) advocates representation in which all social actors can have direct access to the decision-making process.

LÚCIO'S PROPOSAL

Lúcio (2020; 2021) states that, until 2017, there was no crisis in Brazilian trade unionism, but there were dilemmas, political attacks and a contradiction between trade union freedom and restrictions on trade union autonomy with the strengthening of some trade union centres and the weakening of grassroots unions.
Lúcio's proposal brings together the FCS's discussions, which have been taking place since 2019, with proposed guarantees for the working class. We present the dimensions of Lúcio's proposal in Table 2.

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF THE DIMENSIONS OF LÚCIO'S PROPOSAL

DIMENSION	ELEMENTS OF THE PROPOSAL
Foundations	Foundations
Trade union organisation	Representation, collective negotiations, regulation, public servants
Role of the state	Role of the state
Transitional constitutional provisions	Transitional constitutional provisions
The future: towards an inter-union pact for change	a) The young worker of the future b) The movement c) Representation for all d) The aggregation e) The workplace f) The place of residence g) Unions and social protection h) The hidden employer i) Employability j) Unions and services k) Financing and asset reorganisation l) Communication m) Research, education and advisory services
An expanded and renewed trade union agenda	• Job protection policies and the state as "employer of last resort". • Reducing working hours and increasing hourly wages. • Impacts of technology in the world of work – technology as a collective good to improve working and living conditions for all, and not as an instrument of exclusion or increased inequality. • Education and professional training (technological change, freedom, democracy and equality). • Labour productivity and ways of sharing gains. • Flexibility in hiring and expanded labour protection.

Source: Authors' data (2024), based on excerpts from Lúcio's text (2021)

Lúcio (2021) believes that the new Brazilian labour legislation, with the flexibilisation of labour relations and the consequent weakening of unions, would be something given, as shown in other countries, by the stage the capitalist mode of production finds itself in.

Thus Lúcio argues that the future of Brazilian trade unionism requires "a bold project to transition from the current trade union structure to a new approach" (Lúcio, 2021, p. 18), noting that the content he addresses has already been appreciated by academia through various approaches "which have stimulated evaluations of the need for and feasibility of a *restructuring planned and coordinated by union leaders*" (2021, p. 4; emphasis added). This proposition overestimates the role of union leaders in this task.

The author talks about returning to "root unionism", but doesn't specify what root unionism consists of. He also mentions that "'solidarity', 'identity' and 'representation' have lost their old meaning and need to be reframed" (Lúcio, 2021, p. 4) without explaining what this old meaning consists of. Given the Brazilian context, in which not all trade union centres have joined the FCS, and the centres that do participate have different theoretical and political actions and nuances (Colombi, 2019; Mirhan and Santana, 2023), it is necessary to explain the meanings of the terms mentioned by Lúcio. This proposal is an alternative to address structural and legal issues, but it lacks elements to deal with grassroots mobilisation and the political struggle against capital.

GALVÃO'S PROPOSAL

Galvão (2021) invites Lúcio (2021) to debate the challenges and future possibilities for Brazilian trade unionism and. Table 3 shows Galvão's contributions.

TABLE 3 - GALVÃO'S ANALYSIS OF THE DIMENSIONS OF LÚCIO'S PROPOSAL

DIMENSION	ELEMENTS OF THE PROPOSAL
Legal-political dimension (Equal representation in decision-making)	"If everything is decided from above - by the state, via trade union legislation, and/or by the leaders, who define the best form of organisation based on the institutional guarantees that assure them, without necessarily worrying about the best way to do effective grassroots work - how are workers going to recognise themselves and give legitimacy to the organisations designed to represent their interests?" (Galvão, 2021, p. 7)
Sociocultural dimension (Social recognition of subjects)	"To broaden the social base of trade unionism, incorporating the precarious, women, young people, blacks, immigrants; to incorporate new demands, such as the issue of social reproduction (given the recognition of the importance of domestic and care work) and concern for the environment; to combat inequalities and discrimination associated with gender, race, sexual orientation ... by organising and mobilising workers in the territories in which they circulate and live" (Galvão 2021, p. 3).
Economic dimension (Redistribution)	"[...] the construction and propagation of a broad agenda around the importance of work in society, which includes the defence of socially useful jobs, the reduction of working hours without wage cuts and policies for income distribution and social protection" (Galvão, 2021, p. 7)

Source: Authors' data compiled from excerpts from Galvão's text (2021).

In questioning the progress on a new legal framework for Brazilian trade unionism, given that discussions are taking place at the top (the state, union leaders and businesspeople) far removed from grassroots participation, Galvão (2021) reveals the somehow hierarchical nature of Lúcio's (2021) proposal, a pertinent issue in relation to union leaders.

Furthermore, Galvão (2021) highlights the prescriptive nature of Lúcio's proposal, as if the systematisation of new precepts alone had the power to breathe new life into unions. The author brings to light the core of any discussion about trade unionism for the 21st century: that organisations must promote the participation of the working class not as spectators, but as protagonists.

Galvão's (2021) proposal also incorporates the idea that it is crucial to expand the territory in which trade unions operate, creating the possibility of mobilising workers in the most diverse spaces in which they circulate. This proposal is important given that, in the contemporary scenario, work can be carried out in different territories, at the company's premises or in public spaces, and at people's homes in the case of teleworking. Galvão (2021) is clear about how complex it would be to implement the proposal defended in his text, but he sees the need to take into account the new work scenario in which everyone is recognised in their diversity (gender, race, sexual orientation, culture, age, class, and so on), going beyond structural and legal aspects.

Galvão (2021) also argues that trade unions must build an agenda that includes possibilities for a fairer distribution of economic resources, with a perspective that can help to overcome the relationship of submission of the workforce to capital.

Galvão (2021) also points out the importance of the trade union movement recognising the subjectivity of workers as a constitutive element of human beings. Given that the discursive practices that promote the neoliberal ideology propagate individualism as a life option, they affect the subjectivity of individuals and hinder collective experiences of otherness.

Finally, despite the existence of the FCS since 2019, there is still fragmentation, which undermines the possibility of building common alternatives because, although "in the current context of regression of rights, divergences tend to take a back seat, there are still important differences to be considered when analysing the prospects for the Brazilian trade union movement" (Galvão, 2021, p. 3).

FOR A CRITICAL PROPOSAL

In light of a contemporary critical theory developed by the American Nancy Fraser (2006, 2009, 2024) – the result of theoretical clashes with so-called Marxian authors from the third generation of the Frankfurt School – we sought to analyse the contributions of Lúcio and Galvão to the current moment of Brazilian trade unionism, based on the following dimensions:

1. Equal distribution of material wealth, which corresponds to the economic dimension for Fraser;
2. Social recognition, which corresponds to the cultural dimension for Fraser;
3. Equal representation in decision-making spheres, which corresponds to the legal-political dimension for Fraser.

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Galvão's (2021) proposal is broader and follows Fraser's theoretical formulations, as he argues that, far beyond new union regulations, we must seek to include grassroots political representation as protagonists in and of all spaces and at all times of the struggle, from conception to practice.

Regarding cultural recognition, Fraser (2006, 2009) advocates for cultural justice that is integrated with other popular struggles, which a trade union must promote, in order to transform the cultural and symbolic structures of the capitalist system. Thus, true recognition is not about identity but status, and involves "a more comprehensive transformation of social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication, so as to transform *everyone's* sense of self" (Fraser, 2006, p. 232). For Fraser (2006, 2009, 2024), there is distributive injustice when people are prevented from participating fully in society because of economic structures that prevent them from accessing the resources they need to live on equal terms. Only by combining a robust egalitarian distribution policy with an inclusive and class-sensitive recognition policy can we build a fairer world. In this way, the right to recognition is the right to share socially constructed goods and socially produced income (De Faria, 2017), not via income distribution, but as goods and public policies – that is, if the subject is recognised, they have access to decisions and to everything that is socially produced, and this changes the *status* of the actors.

Still on the political-legal dimension, Galvão (2021, p. 4) believes that all subjects must be able to participate directly in socio-cultural, economic and political life, pointing out that, in the current system of capital, "the unstructured nature of our labour market means that many workers, because they are protected neither by legislation nor by the collective bargaining carried out by unions, do not see themselves as agents with rights", because, despite being part of society, they are excluded from it. Lúcio (2021), on the other hand, believes that political participation can be representative, such as the discussion on the new union legal framework which is taking place through union leaders without the grassroots being aware of it.

Thus it can be said that Fraser's critical theory is close to Galvão's proposition (2021), insofar as the authors argue that recognition of the working class occurs through direct political (not only representative) action and the fair distribution of produced goods and public policies, with the basic task of trade unions being to mobilise and organise subjects, included or excluded from the formal labour market, to fight for the right to a dignified existence.

The reality described only reaffirms the urgency of thinking about practices that actually mobilise the grassroots, since union restructuring alone will not make people defend their rights and participate in popular struggles. Thus the FCS ratified a march to Brasilia in the first half of 2024, to pressure the congress and the federal government to repeal measures contrary to the interests of workers, in May. This proposal could have been a part of the integrated union action in the interests of the working class, but the grassroots were not mobilised or made aware of this plan, so it was a summit action.

Thus, in the light of Fraser's critical conceptions, it is essential that trade unions include their members in all stages of the movement, constituting *de facto* equal participation. It is also essential that the subjects are recognised as human beings, whether they are formal workers, precarious workers, unemployed workers, women, young people, black people or immigrants. In addition, we must fight for a fair redistribution of the resources produced by the labour force. Added to this is the need to consider the psychosocial aspect as a manifestation of individual and collective subjectivity, rescuing the otherness and sense of belonging of the working class.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Considering the scenario outlined above, it is difficult to offer a single answer regarding a new legal framework for Brazilian trade unionism and for broadening the scope of the trade union struggle to one in which the working class can make concrete contributions to strengthening trade union entities.

We believe that the proposals discussed for a new trade unionism are complementary. Thus the project for a new union structure (Lúcio, 2021) makes important contributions, given the new types of employment contract introduced by the Brazilian labour reform, new technologies and informality promoted by digital platforms, domestic work and unemployment, among others. Galvão (2021), on the other hand, goes beyond the normative aspect, as he advocates a unionism that "expands the spaces of action beyond the workplace, organising and mobilising workers in the territories in which they circulate and live" (Galvão, 2021, p. 3).

Thus the FCS is a concrete response to the integrated action of the entities, through joint actions and participation in the Tripartite Working Group that is discussing the new regulatory framework, as advocated by Lúcio (2021). However, this alone is not enough, as Brazilian trade unionism has not yet achieved recent success in mobilising the grassroots, according to Galvão (2021), to reflect on and fight for decent work, income redistribution, socio-cultural recognition, equal political participation and practices of solidarity and belonging that promote social justice (Fraser, 2009).

This article was limited to examining the performance of national trade union organisations in general. There is a need to deepen the study with more robust data and empirical data collection, which could be broken down by sector of activity, territory (municipality, state or country) and union structure (grassroots, federation or central). Another broader empirical study could involve a comparison with the international trade union movement ■

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Unions and strikes in contemporary Mexico

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the changes the trade union movement has undergone since the 2019 revision of the labour law, promoted by the first left-leaning government since the 1930s. We observe that the changes in labour laws were accompanied by a policy of wage recovery that reversed the prolonged wage decline that had prevailed during more than thirty years of neoliberalism in Mexico. Along with the wage recovery, there has been an increase inunionisation rates, a slight growth in strikes, and the formation of new independent unions that have managed to challenge the large workers' federations aligned to the former ruling party, and in some important cases displace them, as happened at General Motors in Silao, Guanajuato on 3 November, 2021.

KEYWORDS

Labour reform
Trade unions
Strikes
Neoliberalism

INTRODUCTION

Until very recently, the Mexican labour movement was predominantly under the influence of "protection unions", a term used to describe unions that clandestinely signed "protection contracts" with employers to the detriment of the workers. These contracts were a tool to maintain low labour costs, stifling genuine worker representation and enriching the leaders of such unions. A staggering 85 percent of the contracts in Mexico were identified as protection contracts, as acknowledged by the Mexican Secretary of Labour (El Economista, 2021).

This situation directly resulted from the "perfect dictatorship", a term used to describe the one-party rule of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in Mexico. The PRI was supported by, and supported, big national industrial unions and union confederations, as well as national peasant organisations and organisations of businesses, small and large, which were incorporated into the structures of the PRI. This corporatist labour relations regime persisted and had significant social consequences, including the prevalence of "protection unions", that is, sweetheart unions.

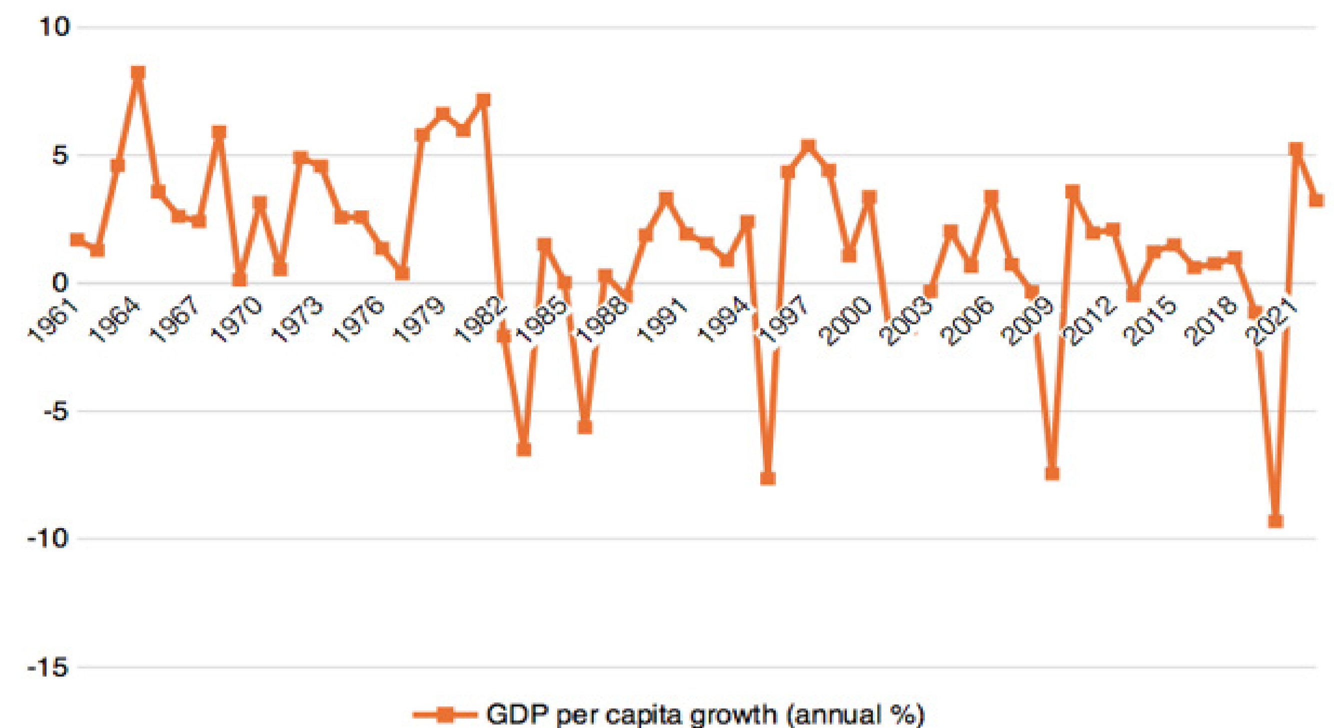
This article examines unions' current conditions and activities in Mexico in the context of the 2019 Federal Labour Law revision and the consequences for labour law compliance of the Mexico, Canada, and the United States Trade Agreement (USMCA), which was signed in 2018 and went into effect on 1 July, 2020.

For that purpose, we look briefly at the history of unions in Mexico in the context of the evolution of the Mexican economy and the corresponding political changes. In the final sections of this article, we will discuss the recent activities of independent unions in light of the political and institutional changes brought about by the government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), who has been vocal about his support for workers' rights and has introduced essential labour reforms.

CHANGING THE WORLD, CHANGING UNIONS

During the late 1930s, the growth of nationalised industries at the national level (petroleum, communications and railroads) and, at local level, the important electrical energy firm Central Power and Light (Luz y Fuerza del Centro), as well as the implementation of import substitution policies, spurred rapid economic growth, outpacing other Latin American countries. This system rewarded organised workers in the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM)[1] and other "official" unions – so called because of their incorporation into the ruling party's structures – with rising wages and numerous social benefits. Organised peasants benefited from subsidised inputs and price supports and employers enjoyed protected markets, all in exchange for the political support of the PRI. From 1950 to 1967, GDP per capita grew relatively fast (see Astorga et al., 2005), but towards the second half of the 1960s, growth began to slow down, and an external secto

GRAPH 1. GDP PER CAPITA GROWTH (ANNUAL %)



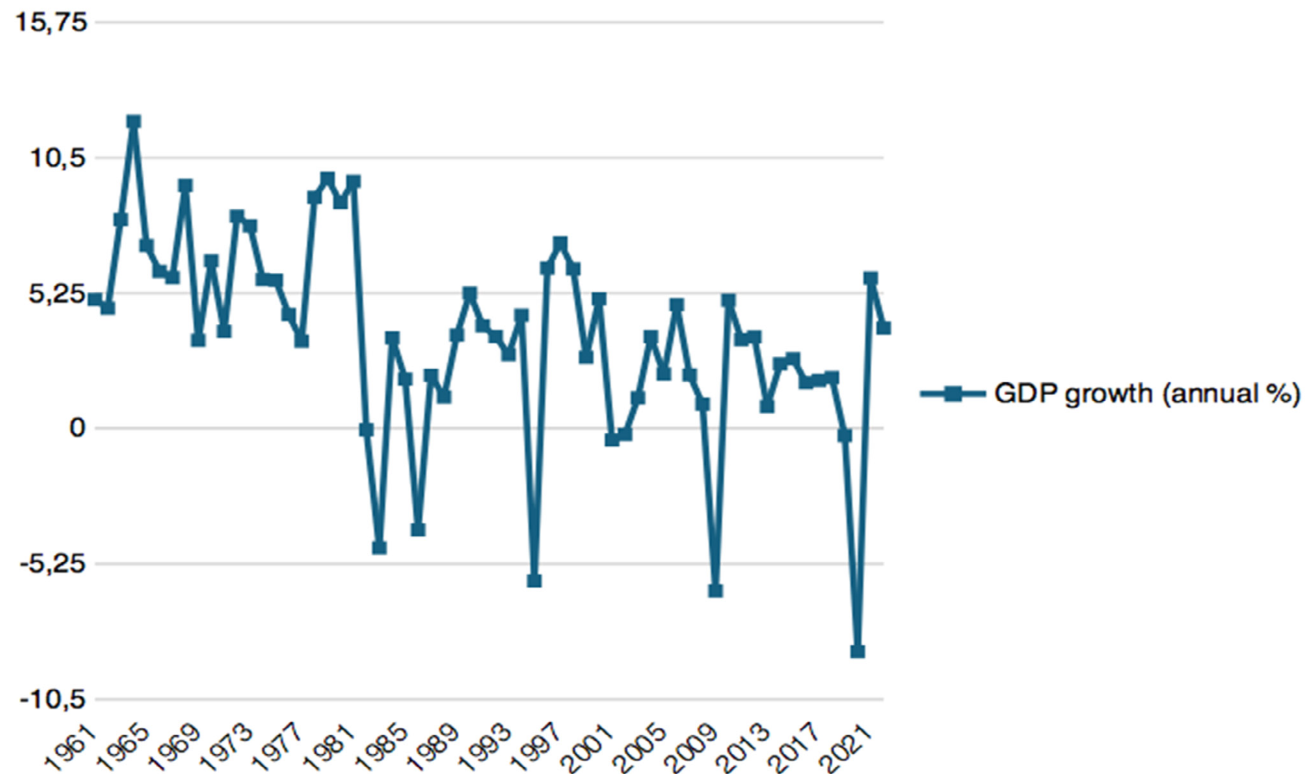
Source: Authors' elaboration based on estimates of the Maddison Project Database MPD (Olt and Luiten van Zanden, 2024).

1 Founded in 1936 and initially led by members of the Mexican Communist Party (see Zepeda, 2021, p. 88 and ff).

The import substitution model started showing economic cracks as state-led industrialisation did not create a robust industrial sector capable of absorbing a growing urban population. Extreme inequality and a lack of social mobility led to rising political tensions and a series of economic and political crises: the army massacre of hundreds of student protesters in Tlatelolco in 1968, rural unrest (including armed guerrilla movements) and radical independent union strikes in the 1970s, peso devaluation in 1976, and the debt crisis of 1982. These crises were met with authoritarian measures, including violent repression and the imposition of "pacts" and "wage caps" *(topes salariales)* aiming to restrain wages.

Graph 2 vividly illustrates the growth process between 1960 and 1980, showing how GDP grew slowly during the late 1960s and early 1970s and collapsed in the 1980s. A similar GDP per capita growth for the same period is shown in Graph 1.

GRAPH 2. GDP GROWTH (ANNUAL %)



Source: World Bank Development Indicators, World Bank

In 1988, the disputed election of Carlos Salinas de Gortari marked a definitive turn toward authoritarian social policy and neoliberal economics, resulting in the end of the relative privilege of workers organised in the corporatist unions. The neoliberal model, based on the privatisation of public assets and leaving remaining state enterprises at the mercy of open markets, had an immediate and dramatic impact on the most privileged sector of the organised working class, the oil workers, whose powerful and wealthy leader, Joaquín Hernández Galicia – *"la Quina"* – had opposed the privatisation policies. Weeks after Salinas was inaugurated, he sent the Mexican army to assault the home of Hernández Galicia and arrest him in what is known as *"el quinazo"*, demonstrating Salinas' willingness to use power ruthlessly.

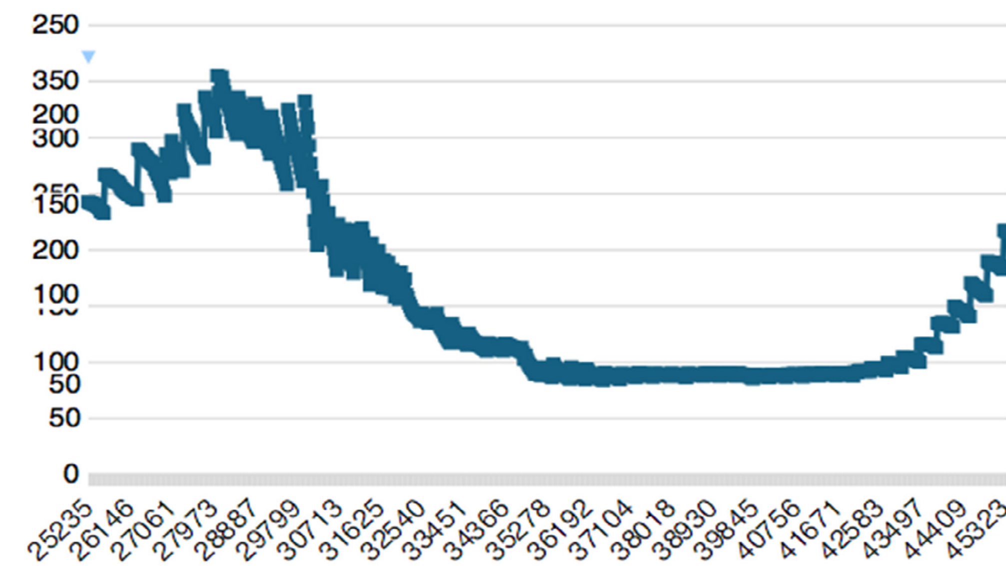
This use of repressive force sent a message to the influential union leaders of the other national industrial unions and the national confederations that they had no choice but to support the new neoliberal regime. It became clear that while union leaders would remain a privileged elite, their union membership would see their wages lose their purchasing power through wage caps below the inflation rate and the use of executive power to repress strikes.

The union leaders of the CTM and other "official" unions signed on to a series of economic stabilisation pacts, accepting the government's economic policy that wages be kept low to attract foreign investment. The labour leaders kept their access to power, their seats in Congress, and their control of labour relations through their seats on the tripartite boards that ruled on all aspects of labour disputes and union registration. However, the wage caps, the privatisation of state enterprises and the opening of closed markets meant a rapid decline in workers' living standards as their unions lost their bargaining power to maintain, much less increase, real wages.

The labour relations regime was transformed from an instrument of state and employer control that rewarded a narrow sector of organised workers to an instrument of control without any rewards.

The labour regime became a decaying and increasingly corrupt structure maintained by the combined power of capital and the state. Union leaders adopted protection contracts as the principal form of labour relations; since they were constrained from bargaining gains for their members, they now saw a more overt alliance with capital as their best option. As Graph 3 shows, the minimum wage began to decline after 1976, with the decline accelerating after 1994.

GRAPH 3. MINIMUM WAGE IN REAL TERMS (BASE 2018)



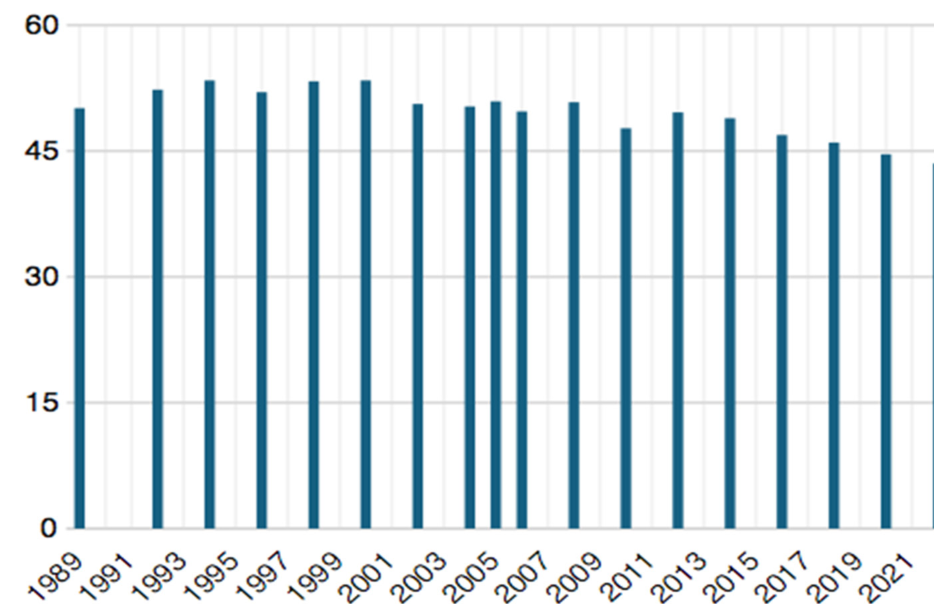
Source: SieInternet, Banco de México

A temporary agricultural guest worker program initiated during the Second World War (the Bracero Program) allowed US farmers to hire Mexican migrant workers. Although its magnitude diminished and it was formally closed in 1964, it established a prototype of temporary labour use to replace US workers and at the same time, reduce costs (Mandeel, 2014). After it ended, a new program called the Maquiladora Program was established to allow "the temporary importation of inputs from foreign sources without the payment of import duties" to manufacturing firms in Mexico (Eaton, 1997). Maquiladoras grew in importance in the auto parts and electronics industries and were the base for the 1994 North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) signed by Canada, Mexico and the United States.

The advent of NAFTA in 1994 only exacerbated and accelerated Mexico's descent into social crisis by driving millions out of the rural economy (Scott et al., 2006) and into the poorest neighbourhoods of the cities to work in the petty commodity sector or to head north to the US as undocumented workers (Weisbrott et al., 2012), who ironically later became one of Mexico's most important sources of foreign exchange through their remittances.

Income inequality has always been a prevalent feature of Mexico. Although we lack long-term data, estimates for 1950 by Navarrete (1960) show a Gini index of around 50. More recent data shows that inequality grew unevenly until 2013 and then diminished to a historical minimum in 2022.

GRAPH 4. GINI INDEX 1989-2022



Source: World Bank Development Indicators, World Bank

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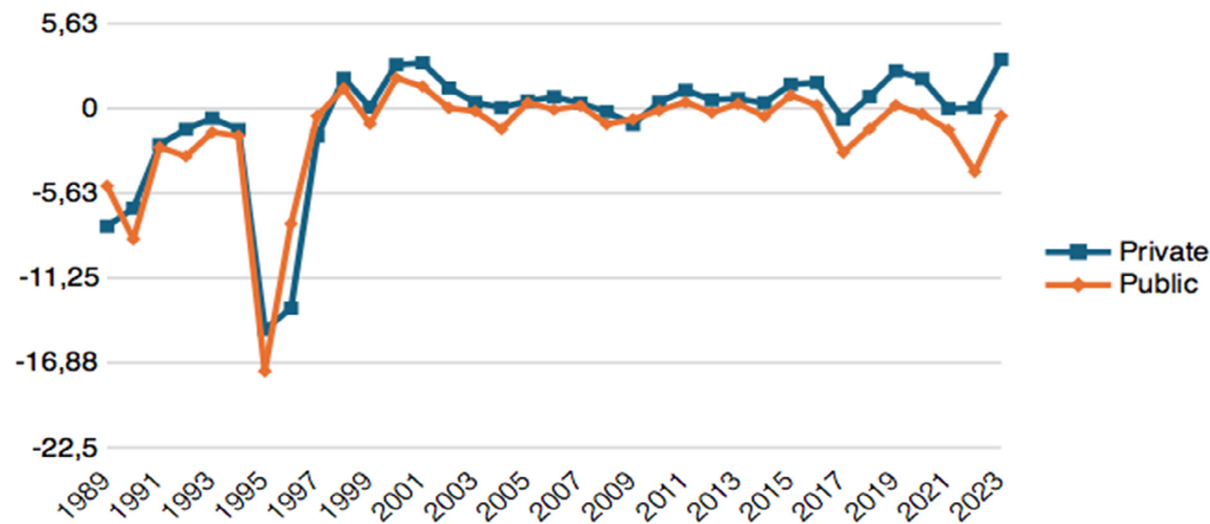
The steady decline in wages and the growth of poverty and inequality finally led to the PRI losing the presidency to Vicente Fox of the PAN in 2000, after a campaign calling for "change" (*cambio*). However, it soon became clear that the Fox government (2000-2006) was more of the same, imposing the same wage caps, declaring strikes illegal, continuing the sale of public assets, destroying the remaining state enterprises, and looking the other way as employers and official unions enriched themselves at the expense of the workers.

GRAPH 5. GINI INDEX 1989-2022



Source: https://www.stps.gob.mx/gobmx/estadisticas/revisiones_salariales.htm

There was some hope that the 1997 formation of the National Workers Union (Union Nacional de Trabajadores, UNT) – a new national grouping of independent unions led by the *telefonistas* in the Telephone Workers Union of the Mexican Republic (STRM),the Union of Workers of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (STUNAM) and the National Union of Workers of the Mexican Institute of Social Security (SNTSS) – would revive the labour movement, but this proved to be a false hope, as the UNT unions did not establish a viable infrastructure and remained a loose coalition, with each union pursuing its objectives and interests and coming together primarily for joint political positioning.

The most significant development during this period, in which the UNT was a prominent actor, was the growth of a labour law reform movement focused on the secret ballot in union representation elections and eliminating the inefficient and corrupt tripartite labour boards.

This period also saw the increasing engagement of US, Canadian, and Mexican trade unionists in trinational forums and organisations to promote labour law reform and international labour solidarity. The AFL-CIO, which had long maintained a relationship with the CTM, underwent a leadership change in 1995, leading to a new international policy. In 1997, the "free labour" institutes of the Cold War period, which prioritised fighting, left-led unions, were abolished, and the Solidarity Centre was established with a union solidarity agenda. The Solidarity Centre immediately signed an agreement with the UNT and began working with independent unions in Mexico, supporting the independent VW union after their strike was declared illegal by the Fox administration in 2000 and supporting the successful organising campaign of an independent union at the Korean maquiladora Kukdong in 2001. The shift in the foreign policy of the AFL-CIO was one positive result of NAFTA, which caused some US trade unions to take Mexico and Mexican unions more seriously, not simply as unfair competition for jobs, but as allies in the struggle for decent jobs and wages.

THE ROLE OF INDEPENDENT UNIONS

In describing the broad outlines of the Mexican labour movement and the trend of corporatist unions and their protection contracts, we should not ignore the history of union insurgency and the anarchist (Ricardo Flores Magón), communist (Lombardo Toledano) and social democratic (Luis N. Morones) tendencies that have been part of the movement since the earliest worker rebellions that gave rise to the Mexican revolution.

These tendencies have played a leading role in the creation of the Mexican labour movement and at many critical junctures, such as the mass upsurge of the movement in the 1935 to 1940 period that gave birth to the large national industrial unions and the CTM, the 1950s democratic insurgencies in the electrical workers' union and the railroad workers' union, and in the 1970s, radical left and independent unions that gave birth to the Nissan and VW independent unions and saw bitter strikes in the industrial belt around Mexico City, and dissident democratic movements among *Los Mineros* (National Union of Mine and Metal Workers of the Mexican Republic, SNTMMSRM), in the teachers union (National Union of Education Workers, SNTE) and others. The tradition of dissent, rank-and-file rebellion, and militant and democratic unionism has been a constant source of pressure on the corporatist labour movement, and it remains a source of hope today.

As the neoliberal era has seen the degeneration and decay of the corporatist unions into corrupt protection unions serving their corrupt leaders in collusion with the employers, and the continuing decline of the workers' living standards, the power and control of those leaders of the Mexican labour movement has increasingly been undermined. With the landslide victory of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and his Morena Party in 2018, the labour law reform of 1 May, 2019 and the implementation of the labour chapter of USMCA, an institutional framework had been put in place could be expected to enable upsurge of independent union organising on a scale reminiscent of the mass organising upsurge of the 1935-1940 period. Table 1 and Graph 6 below show the evolution of unionisation in Mexico in recent years.

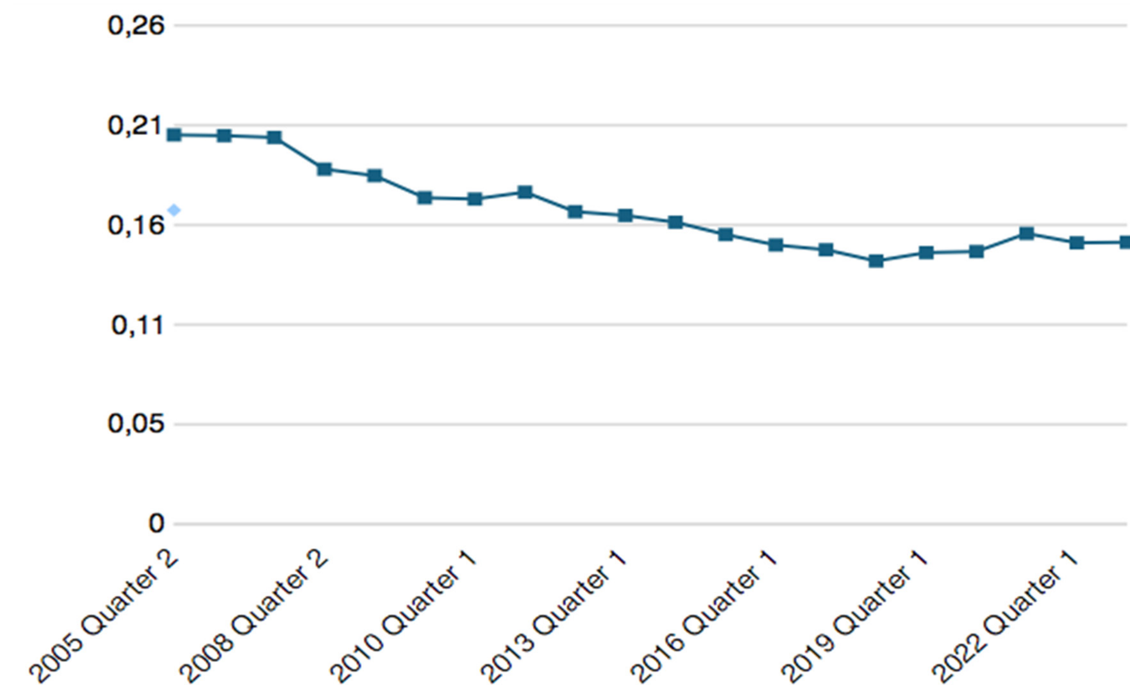
Before 1992, the sources for estimating unionisation rates were scarce, although some attempts to measure the number of union workers using an Income and Expenditure Survey not designed to capture this information (Zepeda, 2021) suggested very high rates (30%). More recent estimates show the post-1992 evolution:

TABLE 1. UNIANIZATION RATES

NUMBER OF UNIONISED MEMBERS			
	1992	**2000**	**2002**
EAP	30 261 606	41 026 994	41 983 675
Industrial Workers*	8 119 017	10 085 329	12 542 175
Total Union workers	4 116 919	4 025 878	4 199 320
Men	2 730 809	2 320 830	2 461 890
Women	1 386 111	1 705 048	1 737 430
Unionisation rate	13.6%	9.8%	10%
*Includes manufacturing, electricity and construction workers			

Source: Based on Esquinca and Melgoza (2006)

GRAPH 6. UNIANIZATION RATES. 2005-2023



Source:Siel, Secretaría del Trabajo. México 2024

TABLE 2. PRIVATE-PUBLIC COMPOSITION OF UNION MEMBERSHIP

2010	Private sector	Public sector	Total
Unionised	1 429 584	2 847 810	4 277 394
Non-unionised	16 213 018	2 467 609	18 680 627
2024	**Private sector**	**Public sector**	**Total**
Unionised	2 221 539	3 007 115	5 228 654
Non-unionised	23 865 524	2 907 869	26 773 393

Source:Siel, Secretaría del Trabajo. México 2024

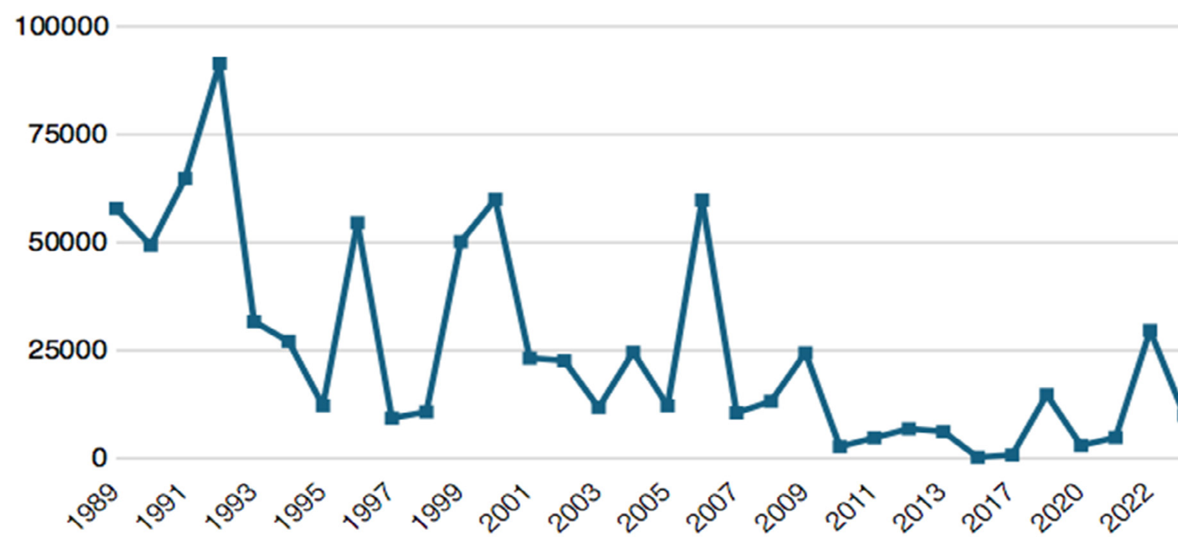
If the composition of union membership is considered, as in Table 2 the majority of unionized members belong to public sector unions, although their share has tended to decrease over time: in 2010 the ratio of affiliations in the public sector with respect to the private sector was 2 to 1. while by 2024 that same ratio was only 1.4 to 1. Another relevant feature of the structure of unionization in Mexico is that the vast majority of non-unionized workers belong to the private sector, although their weight has been slightly reduced over time: in 2010 non-unionized workers in the private sector represented 89% of the total, while by 2024 they represent 87%.

Using Labour Ministry administrative data, Graph 7 shows how the number of workers participating in strike movements also increased as unionisation rates grew with the accession of a Left government to the country's presidency.

That shows that the anti-union policies promoted by neoliberal governments for more than thirty years have been modified.

The number of workers participating in strikes (local jurisdictions) peaked in 1990 during the darkest period of the neoliberal order in Mexico; the uptick was quickly controlled but not extinguished. Such low rates express the legal difficulties unions (official or independent) have in starting a strike.

GRAPH 7. NUMBER OF WORKERS PARTICIPATING IN STRIKES (LOCAL JURISDICTION)



Source:https://www.stps.gob.mx/gobmx/estadisticas/emplazamientos_huelgas.htm

In 2012 very regressive changes to the Federal Labour Law were introduced. They included, among the main changes, restrictions on severance payments and the total liberalisation of subcontracting (NACLA, 2014). Those changes were repealed in 2019 by the labour law reform under the Lopez Obrador government. The new labour law replaced the tripartite labour boards – instruments of corporatism through the presence of "official union" leaders – with independent labour tribunals under the judiciary. It required secret ballot votes to "legitimate" or reject all existing contracts and secret ballot votes in union representation and leadership elections. In 2021, a second reform prohibited most outsourcing. The reforms are strengthened by Mexico's commitment to the USMCA trade agreement that replaced NAFTA, which contains a "Labour Chapter" with a Rapid Response Labour Mechanism that can entertain complaints by any Mexican or US union or worker if Mexico's labour laws are violated in any company that exports goods or services to the USA.

These legal and institutional changes are intended to transform – "democratise" – Mexico's labour movement and encourage an increase in real wages, goals that have been repeatedly articulated by Mexico's president, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, and by his first secretary of labour and current secretary of the interior, Luisa Maria Alcalde. Of course, legal and institutional changes do not bring about profound social change when the powerful interests of influential persons and groups are at stake, as in Mexico's economy and labour movement.

The corporatist union leaders and their allies in government and business have not gone away and are unlikely to give up their power without a fight. So, to realise the wholesale transformation of the corrupt and undemocratic labour relations regime, a social force must take advantage of the legal and institutional changes and carry out the transformation in practice in the real world.

INDEPENDENT UNIONS' CURRENT STRUGGLES TOWARDS ORGANISING AND AGAINST CAPITAL

One of the first tests of the new labour regime came in January 2019, when the new Morena government announced a twenty percent increase in the national minimum wage, and a hundred percent increase in the minimum wage in the northern border region, where most of the *maquiladoras* (export manufacturing facilities) are concentrated. This sparked a wildcat strike by 45 000 maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, who walked out to protest that the increase was not passed on to workers earning above minimum wage, even though their CTM contract mandated that it would be. The workers rebelled against the union's inaction and demanded a twenty percent across-the-board increase and a 32,000 peso (US$1600) bonus. After two weeks on strike, the employers and Tamaulipas state government asked the Mexican secretary of labour to intervene, as would have been normal under previous administrations. However, this time the secretary of labour directed her deputy secretary to respond; he publicly advised the employers to "sit down and negotiate" and declared that the federal government would not intervene. Shortly after this declaration, the workers won their demands. Out of this historic struggle was born the "20/32

Movement" and a new independent union, the National Union of Workers of Industry and Services (SNITIS). The new union went on to challenge the CTM for representation rights in other plants, as mentioned below.

The next test of the new labour law and, in addition, the labour provisions of the USMCA, was a challenge to one of the most potent corporatist CTM unions and the US corporate giant General Motors, by the workers and their supporters at the 6500-worker GM assembly plant in Silao, Guanajuato.

This challenge resulted in an unprecedented and historic vote in which the workers rejected the CTM contract, which was terminated on 3 November, 2021. This victory was only possible because workers denounced the CTM's destruction of ballots in the first attempt to hold the vote. The US trade representative and the Mexican secretary of labour intervened under the terms of the Rapid Response Labour Mechanism, and a new election was ordered.

On 10 December, 2021, a new independent union led by GM Silao workers, the National Independent Union of Workers of the Auto Industry (SINTTIA), filed a request for a certificate of representative status that would entitle them to represent the GM Silao workers and negotiate a new contract with GM. However, their right to represent the workers and bargain a new contract was challenged by two CTM unions and a CROC union, all representatives of the traditional "official unions" of Mexico's past.

The Federal Center for Conciliation and Labour Registration conducted the vote on 1 February, 2022, with observers from the National Elections Institute (INE), the National Commission for Human Rights, and "external observers" who had applied for and received accreditation from the Federal Center.

The independent union SINTTIA surpassed all expectations with 76% of all the votes cast, 4192 votes. In contrast, the nearest rival, a CTM union from Jalisco, got 932 votes, a Guanajuato CTM union got 247 votes, and the CROC union got just 18 votes. The result of the vote sent SINTTIA supporters into loud celebration, chanting "*Sí, Sí, SINTTIA"* with their fists in the air. Within a few months, on 10 May, 2022, SINTTIA negotiated a first contract with General Motors, with an 8.5% wage increase, one of the best settlements in the Mexican auto industry.

Two thousand workers at Saint Gobain Sekurit, an auto glass factory in Cuautla, Morelos, voted down a protection contract held by the notoriously corrupt and violent Confederation of Workers and Peasants, or CTC, despite threats to organisers and workers by CTC thugs, and the new union, the Independent Union of Free and Democratic Workers of Saint-Gobain Mexico won an overwhelming election victory, earning the right to represent the workers and bargain a new contract.

In San Luis Potosi, 1200 workers at 3M Purification, a manufacturer of diverse consumer products including auto wax and personal protective equipment, voted down their protection contract and joined a new independent union, the Mexican Workers' Union League (LSOM).

The LSOM went on to win an election against a CTM union at a Goodyear tyre plant in San Luis Potosi and successfully forced the company to accept the rubber industry sectoral contract (*contrato-ley*). This resulted in a multi-million dollar back-pay

settlement and a substantial wage increase for the 1200 workers. A USMCA Rapid Response Labour Mechanism complaint aided this victory.

There have been approximately twenty Rapid Response Labour Mechanism complaints to date. More than half of these complaints have been resolved favourably, resulting in independent union victories over protection unions, including at Panasonic Automotive in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Tridonex Auto Parts in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, by the National Union of Industrial and Service Workers (SNITIS), the independent union that arose out of the Matamoros wildcat strike; Teksid Hierro Foundry in Frontera, Coahuila, by the National Mine and Metal Workers Union (Los Mineros); and at Fraenkische Industrial Pipes in Silao, Guanajuato (by SINTTIA, the independent union that was formed at General Motors).

These are all important victories, and one significant characteristic of these new independent unions – SINTTIA, SNITIS, LSOM – is that they are all national industrial unions and not enterprise unions like most of the earlier independent unions at Nissan, VW and so on.

However, these few victories in more than five years since the labour law reform and the USMCA went into effect are just the beginning of efforts to transform the labour relations regime in which the old corrupt protection unions continue to control most collective bargaining agreements.

A NEW INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

As a result of the Labour Law Reform process requiring the legitimation of all 139 000 registered collective bargaining agreements by secret ballot, 27 336 were validated, and approximately 600 were voted down. More than 100 000 contracts, about eighty percent of the total, were invalidated because they were not submitted to a vote, confirming the large number of "protection contracts". Approximately 4.9 million workers participated in a successful legitimation vote, indicating the number of union members covered by a valid collective bargaining agreement. This is far below the number of members claimed by the 4000 or so registered unions – the CTM alone claims 4.5 million members.

The director of the Federal Center for Conciliation and Labour Registration (CFCRL), which was created by the 2019 Labour Law Reform, recently stated his surprise that, contrary to expectations, only 97 new union registrations have been issued since the reforms went into effect. In addition, he also called attention to the fact that many applications for representation certificates had to be denied because they appeared fraudulent and likely were prepared by the employers, and that a relatively small number of certificates had been issued; only one-third resulted in signing collective bargaining agreements.

Tens of thousands of collective bargaining agreements were invalidated by this process, and the relatively small number of workers involved in the legitimation vote (4.9 million out of more than 22 million workers registered with the Mexican Institute of Social Security) indicates a low union density and a vacuum of union representation.

The question arises: if there is a vacuum of union representation, and the institutional reforms in labour law and the USMCA Rapid Response Labour Mechanism are in place to guarantee respect for labour rights, why is more union organising and collective bargaining not taking place? Here are some possible answers.

First, the older independent unions are mostly enterprise unions that have shown little desire to expand their reach beyond their workplace. They are focussing on satisfying their current members and maintaining their current position in the enterprise. As a result, they have minimal infrastructure and staff, only enough to serve their members. Nonetheless, the respect they have earned as examples of successful struggles for independence from the corporatist system, and as democratic organisations achieving good contracts for their members, gives them significant prestige and status in the independent labour movement.

The new independent unions – SINTTIA, SNITIS and LSOM – are industrial unions and do have a desire to expand, as can be seen by the multiple campaigns they have undertaken. However, as new unions, they have few resources, employ no organisers, researchers or lawyers, and up to now have depended on external organisations' funding and material support.

The US labour movement has supported Mexican workers and unions, primarily through support of the labour law reform movement and the negotiation of the labour chapter of the USMCA. Up to now, US unions have relied on the Solidarity Center, which is primarily funded by the US government, to represent their interests in Mexico. However, that has recently begun to change, as unions such as the United Steelworkers (USW) and United Auto Workers (UAW) and a few others have become more aware of the need for a stronger Mexican labour movement to confront US and multinational corporations' race to the bottom. The USW has developed a strong relationship with *Los Mineros* (SNTMMSRM), with who they share a common industry and major employers, and whose general secretary, Napoleon Gomez Urrutia, was persecuted by the previous administration and spent several years in exile in Canada, hosted by the USW, until he became a Morena senator in 2018 and was able to return to Mexico. The UAW, which has seen the US "Big Three" (GM, Ford, and Stellantis) open many assembly and component plants in Mexico, recently had a change in leadership leading to a more aggressive organising approach and has announced plans to extend support for independent union organising in Mexico.

Hopefully, the new independent Mexican unions will develop the resources from within their ranks, build their infrastructure, develop a targeting strategy, refine their organising approach, and increase the scale of their successes. Engagement with US unions would be especially beneficial in organising some of the corporations that operate on both sides of the border. It would also be helpful if many more new unions were formed in other sectors, especially in the commercial and service sectors, where most Mexican workers are employed.

The path forward to a more democratic and representative labour movement, with higher wages and improved working conditions, is open. However, to realise the opportunities presented by the institutional changes of the past few years, more unions, more resources, and many more struggles will be required ■

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Farmer's Protest 2020: Play, Pause, Stop, Rewind

ABSTRACT

The article investigates the farmer's protest in India (2020-21) against the Indian Agricultural Act of 2020. It focuses on the roles of organisations such as trade unions and civil societies that took part in the protest in 2020-21 beyond partisan politics, the active participation of the women and Dalit farmers, and the counter narratives created by citizen journalism through social media platforms against sustained pro-state discourses from mainstream media. It studies the successes and limitations of the movement in the context of the nature of contemporary Indian politics and its future course.

KEYWORDS

Farmers' protest in India 2020-21
Minimum Support Price (MSP)
Strike
Indian Agricultural Act of 2020

PLAY: SITUATING THE STRIKE

The dusty movie projector whirrs into action, the old VCR engulfs the videotape, the taciturn keys of the keypad respond ever so quietly. The screen lights up as we sit back and observe the Framers' Protest of 2020 yet again. The first version of this paper was presented at the 6th International Association of Strikes and Social Conflicts (IASSC) Conference in Cape Town, 5-7 February 2024, in a paper titled "Farmers' Protest and Indian Agricultural Act of 2020: Trials, Tribulations, and Triumphs of Peasant Movement in the 21st Century". That presentation focused primarily on the farmers' protest in India that took place from September 2020 to November 2021. As we were presenting the paper, the farmers were assembling for a second protest to march towards Delhi on 13 February 2024, demanding legal assurance of the Minimum Support Price (MSP)[1] that had not been fulfilled by the government since the first protest that led to the repeal of the three Farm Acts. However, this second protest met with a swift and brutal end, unlike the previous one held in 2020-21, as the state took no chance this time with their fellow citizens. Farmers could not reach Delhi and were stopped at the Shambhu border[2]. The protest continues at the border while we write this paper.

On 16 March 2024, the Election Commission of India declared the dates for the general elections to be held in seven phases from 19 April to 1 June, 2024, with the result due on 4 June, 2024, a scrupulous dance of democracy to elect the central government. During the election campaign, the major issues for the opposition were unemployment, inflation, economic inequality, caste discrimination, women's safety, and MSP. The farmers' strike, one may extrapolate, is symptomatic of the unholy alliance of crony capitalism and the populist politics of *Hindutva*[3] endorsed by the ruling regime under the rubric of a personality-cult formation sited in the image of the prime minister of India, Narendra Modi. The year-long farmer's protest of 2020 may well prove to be the watershed moment in the political history of India in the 21st century that fundamentally changed dynamics of the Indian society. The Government of India enacted the Indian Agricultural Act 2020 on 27 September 2020. It comprised of three acts: Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act 2020 allows multinational corporations to indulge in indiscriminate procurement, trading, e-commerce and use of agricultural produce without any safety net for farmers or regulatory mechanism from the state governments. The Farmers' (Endowment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services 2020 facilitates farmers entering into agreements with corporations and resolving disputes among parties. The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act 2020 removes agricultural produce like food grains and edible oils from a list of essential items allowing indiscriminate stock piling and manipulation of prices in open market. The three acts commonly referred to as Farm Acts, propagated the free-market ethos where individual farmers can enter into agreements with big businesses to potentially earn more profit. Moreover, the view widely circulated in mainstream media was that both the corporations and the farmers would be potentially well off with deregulation of markets and abolition of the bureaucracy's red tape-ism. On the other hand, a substantial number of big and small farmers, especially from North India, protested against the acts as they deemed them draconian acts that robbed the farmers of their safety net for market forces with the state being the regulatory body. The protest started on a local scale, predominantly with farmers from Punjab and Haryana. It soon gained pan-Indian and global support that forced the government to repeal the farm laws after a year of incessant struggle.

In September 2020, the farmers marched to Delhi to voice their demands against the three Farm Acts. They were stopped on the road to their nation's capital at Singhu, Ghazipur and Tikri. Barricades were built as the *borders* of the states of Haryana and Punjab took new meanings while the state began redefining its citizens (Thandi, 2024, pp. 6-9). The farmers left their farms unattended to be on the road, driven by the dire need to assemble and protest, but they never left the land. They settled on the *borders*, tents went up, so too the community kitchens, the tractors and motorbikes punctured the cacophony of slogans, songs, debates, laughter, sweat, blood, tears and deaths as the biting cold winds of northern India raged over the makeshift tenements and the Covid pandemic loomed large. As always, they toiled, they persevered, they survived, and they triumphed knowing all the while that only the struggle is permanent and triumphs are few and far between, always momentary, always wanting. Their voices were stifled and turned on their heads by the robust propaganda machinery of the state. They responded by closing their *borders* to partisan politics and electoral gains. The internet was poor and so were the mobile communications. The smart phones still fired, videos were shared, songs were sung, and ground reportage by citizen journalists reached new heights of participatory journalism.

This paper focuses on the roles of organisations beyond partisan politics, the active participation of the women and Dalit farmers, and the counter narratives created by citizen journalism through social media platforms against sustained pro-state discourses by mainstream media. The paper argues that the nature of peasants' struggles in India has changed its course in neoliberal times from the ideologically driven movements under the aegis of mainstream political parties since the 1960s to a unique brand of populism that questions the traditional Marxist notions of sustained struggles of the working class and that the farmers' protests (both 2020-21 and 2024) directly affected the result of India's general election in 2024.

1 The Minimum Support Price (MSP) is a government-set price which aims to safeguard farmers against sudden declines in market prices for agricultural produce. Announced at the beginning of each sowing season, the MSP covers twenty-three crops in total (seven grains, five pulses, seven oilseeds and four cash crops) and is determined based on recommendations from the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP). This policy plays a crucial role in ensuring that farmers receive a minimum assured return on their produce, protecting them from the exploitation of middlemen and the unpredictability of market conditions. The MSP serves as a key instrument in supporting agricultural stability and farmer welfare in India (Commission for Agricultural Costs & Prices, Ministry of Agriculture & farmers Welfare, Government of India, https://cacp.da.gov.in/content.aspx?pid=32, accessed on 1st October 2024).

2 Shambhu border is located between Punjab and Haryana, near the Chandigarh-Delhi Highway (NH-44).

3 Hindutva is a right-wing ethno-nationalist ideology that frames India's cultural identity through the lens of Hinduism, with the aim of transforming India into an explicitly Hindu nation-state. The concept was first articulated in the early 1920s by Indian nationalist leader Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. Today, Hindutva is mostly associated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a major political party in India, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist paramilitary group. Proponents of Hindutva, known as Hindutvavadis (the supporters of Hindutva ideology), claim to represent India's large Hindu majority, which comprised 79.8% of the population in the 2011 census, with 14.2% identifying as Muslim, and the remainder consisting of Christians, Sikhs, and others. Hindutvavadis seek to reinterpret the secularism enshrined in the Indian constitution to prioritize Hindu rights. Although often conflated with Hinduism, Hindutva is distinct from the religious faith. Savarkar's original conception of Hindutva defined it as an ethnic rather than a religious identity. However, the ideology is often strongly pro-Hindu and overtly anti-Muslim in practice, although its advocates frequently describe it as a cultural philosophy or "way of life" rather than a strictly religious movement (Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hindutva).

PAUSE: THE QUESTION OF WOMEN AND DALIT FARMERS AND THE ROLE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM

This article interrogates the yearlong farmer's protest in India against the Indian Agricultural Act of 2020, often referred as the Farm Acts, from September 2020 till the repeal of the laws by the central government in November 2021 under pressure from the collective known as Samyukta Kissan Morcha (SKM, roughly translated as Collective Farmers' March) of almost all farmers' organisations and trade unions representing workers from every section of agriculture and allied sectors, especially from the north Indian states of Punjab, Haryana and parts of western Uttar Pradesh that were brought under the auspices of the first large scale experiment in industrialisation of agriculture in India in the 1960s, with the introduction of high yielding variety (HYV) seeds, abundant use of pesticides, mechanised tools and modern irrigation, fondly known as the Green Revolution[4] then, and Green Massacre (Ground Xero, 2023, p. 60) now, due to the ecological disaster that indiscriminate use of pesticides and HYV seeds brought, along with a debt-ridden farming class with the ever increasing cost of highly mechanised, resource intensive production, making agriculture largely unprofitable to small and mid-range farmers.

The article investigates the present farmers' protest to understand the nature of the strike as a political act of dissent and the movement as a sustained and organised process of protest against the neoliberal state. It argues that the farmers' protest is not a spontaneous act or event triggered by the three laws under the Indian Agricultural Act 2020. Rather, it is the result of prolonged and organised efforts of various farmers' unions and unions of allied sectors – particularly in Punjab and Haryana, which could ensure surplus production of food crops by being early adapters of large scale industrialisation of farming propagated by the state in the region – to address the adverse effects of deregulation of the market on agriculture since the 1980s, which was an obvious off-shoot of the Green Revolution. One can therefore argue that it is these sustained and painstaking efforts of the unions to make people aware of government policies over decades that allowed them to bring home the point that the Farm Acts are decisive steps taken by the state towards neoliberalism in farming that will have adverse consequences for almost 86 percent of small and marginal farmers. The acts will pave the way for unbridled corporatisation of agriculture, facilitating gradual deregulation of procurement and pricing of agricultural produce that government presently regulates through MSP (Bhaduri, 2022, pp. 31-33, 48-49). The laws clearly hint at eventual abolition of the safety net of MSP, thereby resulting in privatisation of public sector units (PSUs) such as Food Corporation of India (FCI), which procures food grains at MSP for the Public Distribution System (PDS) that provides food grains at subsidised rates to a large section of the populace who are under serious economic distress.

The central issue of the farmer's protest is the demand for legal assurance from the government on MSP, as the three laws aiming to deregulate the agricultural market are in direct conflict with MSP. However, according to the Shanta Kumar Committee report of 2015[5], only six percent of the farmers in India have large enough land holdings and resources for surplus production to sell to the government at MSP. And majority of these farmers are from Punjab and Haryana. Even in these two states, according to the agriculture census 2015/16, only 5.28 percent of the farmers have more than ten hectares (Ground Xero, 2023, p. 93). These pro-government reports met with severe criticisms from the press, national and international (see, for example, articles published in *The Hindu, The Frontline, Newslaundry, The Wire, Indian Express, Al Jazeera, BBC* and *CNN*, to name a few)[6]. In other regions of India, the agricultural land use patterns suggest even lesser possibilities for big industrial farming with surplus produce for regulated markets. Thus, one can extrapolate that although the farmers' protest had pan-Indian support of unions and solidarity from the agricultural community, it was limited in terms of mass mobilisation predominantly to Punjab, Haryana and parts of Uttar Pradesh. The guiding principle behind the movement is MSP, which is not the immediate concern of the majority of the farmers in India. So the movement could not resonate with the rest of India at the policy level, and therefore mass mobilisation of farmers from other parts of India was largely absent. While the movement gained considerable support from various sections of Indian society and received international attention, a section of the media in India – referred to by critics as "pro-state" or "*Godi* media" (lapdog media, a term which has gained momentum in the past ten years, when freedom of press found itself in severe crisis in India) – played a controversial role in framing the protests. These outlets often characterised the protestors negatively and attempted to delegitimize the movement. It presented the strike as based on a local issue instead of a national concern. It propagated the idea that corporatisation of farming would benefit small and marginal farmers who can directly sell their produce to the highest bidder, as MSP had always been the domain of large farmers. Mainstream media such as Republic TV, Times Now, Zee News, Aaj Tak and News18 vilified these farmers and their peaceful protest as "Khalistani separatist", "anti-nationals", and so on, to demean the rightful protest. The rampant use of fake news played a big role in the construction of such anti-farmers' protest narrative. Bhaduri (2022) states in his book, *The Emerging Face of Transformative Politics in India Farmers' Movement:*

> Since the media has a decisive role in propagating the ideology and simulating the war situation, the contradiction becomes deeper. The leader has to encourage modern methods of digital mass communication as a weapon of mass destruction of intelligence and awareness among the people…
>
> …News is not only manufactured but also filtered, through a mostly self-imposed censorship. This requires making as invisible as possible all inconvenient "small" news like unemployment, farmers' distress, caste, race killings or rape that adversely affects the climate of mobilization for nationalism.
>
> The faking of news is done both by commission and omission. (Bhaduri, 2022, pp. 17-18)

This essay argues that keeping the focus solely on the repeal of three laws by the state, as anti-farmer laws, with concerted effort to gain legal assurance on the continuation of MSP, is a necessary strategy by the SKM to bring all factions of the farmers' organisations representing large, small and marginal farmers along with other organisations of allied sectors under one common consensus. As Shinder Singh Thandi adds,

> The farmer camps grew larger as more and more farmers, encouraged by their organizations in different parts of India, began to join the protest movement. In addition to farmers, other sympathetic individuals, citizen groups and NGOs also joined in, not only socially widening the movement but also prolonging it to annoyance of central government and its supporters in the print, audio and visual media. (Thandi, 2024, p. 7)

The large-scale mobilisation of the agricultural community, braving all odds in the face of relentless state atrocities, the Covid-19 pandemic, farmers' suicides and martyrdom during the year-long struggle for survival could have been achieved only through reducing class, caste and gender equations to the common denominator of being a peasant fighting not only for survival, but for the right to grow and provide for the citizens of India.

The peasant movement against the Indian Agricultural Act of 2020, with road blocks, rallies, marches, staying, eating and sleeping under the same roof at the protest sites, day in and day out for more than a year, has been etched in collective memory of the nation through hundreds of chronicles in the form of citizen journalism,[7] social media posts, songs, slogans, street plays, demonstrations, and an open stage for people across India, its diaspora, and the larger international community to support and join the movement and show solidarity on the ground and in the virtual world. The counter narratives woven by the numerous smart phones in myriad new media outlets, intertwined with the traditional methods of mass mobilisation, presented a peoples' movement voicing dissent and showing unprecedented resilience, resolve and resistance against the robust propaganda machinery of the state. It is in this mediatic tapestry that one can locate the truth and the real achievement of one of the paradigmatic moments of the people's movement in India in the 21st century. While pro-state media outlets often portrayed the farmers as terrorists, separatists, or anti-nationals, citizen journalists, through social media platforms, provided ground-level reporting that challenged these biased narratives. Equipped with smartphones and real-time updates from protest sites, ordinary individuals captured and shared authentic footage of the peaceful protests, offering an alternative to the sensationalism pushed by mainstream media. Channels such as Mojo Story and independent journalists such as Mandeep Punia and Ravish Kumar presented unfiltered reports and interviews with farmers, which highlighted their legitimate economic concerns. Moreover, citizen journalists debunked fake news and misinformation by exposing manipulated images and videos, holding Godi media accountable for its distorted coverage. This grassroots-level journalism democratised the flow of information, giving voice to marginalised communities and amplifying the protestors' demands. The sheer volume and reach of citizen reporting made it impossible for mainstream outlets to control the narrative, showcasing the power of decentralised media in fostering truth and counteracting propaganda. In response to biased portrayals of protestors as terrorists or separatists, citizen journalists used social media platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp to provide real-time, unfiltered coverage of the protests. This grassroots reporting not only kept the Indian diaspora informed, but also attracted global support from international activists, celebrities, and politicians. Independent media portals and focus groups organised deliberative assemblies to recalibrate demands and sustain the movement's momentum, while sit-ins (*dharna*), encirclements (*gherao*), traffic and rail blockades (*rasta/rail roko*), and public meetings were used to demand accountability. Protest camps became hubs for real-time discussions, with citizen journalists documenting peaceful demonstrations and the state's repressive measures, such as police batons and water cannons.

In this context, writing about a contemporary event such as the farmers protest is like observing a living organism that is neither under anaesthesia nor long dead. We believe that to undergo a critical intervention in understanding an event like the farmers protest, we have to denounce the elegance of a retrospective study and take the role of a chronicler who is constantly in doubt about whether to be or not to be an active participant, however displaced and distanced their concerns and worlds are from that of the protesters. Is it enough to show solidarity to the farmers? Does it ensure a critical distance and detachment from the event? While debating the methodology of the research for this paper, we have asked ourselves whether it is essential, or rather effective, to harness the power of scientific objectivity. Or can we afford to grapple with the insecurities that come with

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4 The Green Revolution in India in the 1960s was a major agricultural transformation aiming to address malnutrition in developing nations by significantly boosting crop yields through technological advancements. It was first introduced in Punjab, and later in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Telengana. Key innovations included the development of high-yielding varieties (HYVs) of wheat and rice, often called "miracle" seeds, originating from Mexico and the Philippines. This period also saw the widespread use of chemical fertilizers, intensive irrigation, and dwarf wheat varieties that produced more grain without collapsing. While the Green Revolution increased food production, it had several adverse effects, such as reduced biodiversity through the decline of traditional crops such as indigenous rice varieties and millets, environmental damage from overuse of fertilizers and pesticides, and soil degradation due to excessive irrigation. It also exacerbated rural inequalities, benefiting wealthier farmers more than the poor. Today, technological advancements are focusing on reducing waste and limiting carbon emissions, with data-driven tools optimizing planting, irrigation and harvesting (National Library of Medicine, National Center for Biotechnology Information, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7611098/).

5 "The NSSO's (70th round) data for 2012-13 reveals that of all the paddy farmers who reported sale of paddy during July-December 2012, only 13.5 percent [of] farmers sold it to any procurement agency (during January-June 2013), only 16.2 percent farmers sold to any procurement agency. Together, they account for only six percent of total farmers in the country, who have gained from selling wheat and paddy directly to any procurement agency. That diversions of grains from PDS amounted to 46.7 percent in 2011-12 (based on calculations of offtake from central pool and NSSO's (68th round) consumption data from PDS, and that country had hugely surplus grain stocks, much above the buffer stock norms, even when cereal inflation was hovering between 8-12 percent in the last few years. This situation existed even after exporting more than 42 MMT of cereals during 2012-13 and 2013-14 combined, which India has presumably never done in its recorded history. What all this indicates is that India has moved far away from the shortages of 1960s, into surplus of cereals in post-2010 period, but somehow the food management system, of which FCI in an integral part, has not been able to deliver on its objectives very efficiently. The benefits of procurement have not gone to larger number of farmers beyond a few states, and leakages in TPDS remain unacceptably high. Needless to say, this necessitates a relook at the very role and functions of FCI within the ambit of overall food management systems, and concerns of food security" (Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution on Recommendations of High Level Committee on Restructuring of FCI, 22nd January 2015, https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=114860).

6 For example, "2020: Farmers take the country by storm: It showed how a peaceful and democratic protest could challenge the might of the state" (Frontline, 2022); "Of the dead at protest, 'small farmers' make up big chunk: Marginal farmers, landless too add numbers: study" (Vasudeva, 2021); "Farmers complete 7 months of protest, allege 'undeclared emergency'" (The Hindu, 2021a); "Farm laws: India farmers end protest after government accepts demands" (BBC, 2021). "The three farm laws were never a solution: True agricultural reform rests with local governments, and States need to go back to the basics and expert suggestions" (Narayanan, 2021); "The year the farmers went up against 'Godi' media, and won: And by doing so, the farmers reflected the general public's lack of trust in mainstream media" (Munjal. 2021); "Farmers across India have been protesting for months. Here's why" (Yeung, 2021).

7 See the reports by Participedia (n.d), Monitor Civicus (n.d.) and Iqubal and Alam (2021).

the plausibility of experiential knowledge and the speculative nature of the narratives and counter-narratives that emerge from the immediacy of the event? Amidst the urge to say the last and final word on the event, we realised that to be true to ourselves as witnesses to this piece of history that unfolds in front of us, we must embrace the transitory nature of writing about an event that is well and truly alive like a cornered animal, restless, scared, enraged and unpredictable, ready to snap into action without a moment's notice.

In the present essay, we have decided to take the role of patient bystanders, chance spectators who witness an event in real and reel, live and virtual, to gather our thoughts hastily and present our immediate reflections on the event, shaky and fragmentary like a stuttering stream of video through a sketchy internet connection, resonating with the plethora of ground reportage from the protest sites. This paper categorically restricts its observations and analyses to the immediate developments that marked the event of the first farmers' protest of 2020.

The study is based on the following resources. First, it draws upon the firsthand observations of the event in the central protest sites and observations of the allied protests organised by civil society in different parts of India, especially in the metropolitan centres of Delhi and Kolkata. Second, it gathers insights from the initial reactions of the protesters and the combined leadership of different trade unions regarding the nature of the protests, the methods of mass mobilisation, the coordination of the protest sites, the leadership hierarchy and the dissemination of the information through various platforms through series of unstructured interviews. Third, it explores secondary literature such as collections of interviews by Ground Xero, scholarly works by Thandi (2024), Bhaduri (2022), Kaur (2022), Moliner and Singh (2025). Fourth, it draws on newspaper reports and reportage in the standard electronic and print media as well as coverage via social networks such as YouTube, Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter). Fifth, we collected recordings, songs, memes and spoofs made by individuals and shared through messaging platforms such as WhatsApp. Finally, publicly available legal documents, policy documents, and press releases were consulted to provide us a point of departure for the present study.

The article argues that the farmers' protest of 2020, in its initial phase, could not gravitate towards a pan-Indian movement due to the lack of sustained mass mobilisation and awareness programs by trade unions and civil societies in the rest of India with an intensity akin to that in Punjab, Haryana, and parts of Uttar Pradesh. It opines that the focal point of the protest for the repeal of three farms acts was a necessary step towards bringing different farmers' organisation under one umbrella, but in the process it not only suspended the more fundamental issues of equality for women and Dalit farmers and the larger workforce in agriculture, but also failed to assimilate the broader questions of unemployment, caste and gender discrimination, as well as economic inequality brought by crony capitalism. We have observed that the women's and the Dalit questions have taken on new meanings in the context of the farmers' protest. The farmers' protest marked a shift in political rhetoric from the social to the economic. Finally, the paper argues that the narratives of protests have shifted from the traditional modes of dissemination in the neoliberal times through participatory journalism and an emergence of an unregulated public media through smartphones and cheap data plans, facilitated by the project Digital India[8], which was introduced by the central government in 2015.

This article identifies two phenomena that are symptomatic of the way forward for the peasant struggle to become a national movement spreading across the working class and beyond caste hierarchy in India. The protest saw 80,000 women farmers in yellow *chunris* (scarves) who came and took charge of the protest sites on 18 January 2021 to celebrate Women Farmer's Day and again in large numbers on 8 March 2021, International Working Women's Day. Many women stayed throughout the movement along with their male comrades. They protested the Supreme Court order for women and elderly members of the protest to return home as they believed that they were part of the protest not as wives and daughters of the farmers but as colleagues, who came out of their own free will to fight for their right to till the land. In Punjab, only thirteen percent of women own agricultural land. Even after the ownership of land on paper, they take no decisions on the use of the land and profits of production, which are controlled by the senior male members of the family. The women's right to be independent farmers and labourers has been a long-cherished dream that has come to the forefront after the protest. The acknowledgement of women as farmers is central to the success of the peasant movement in the future.

Throughout the Ground Xero's interviews[9] with union leaders and even notable women leaders such as Harinder Bindu (who has worked substantially with women from marginalised communities in terms of caste, especially Dalit farmers and agricultural labourers) (Ground Xero, 2023, pp. 71-91), the leaders use the sense of the other while discussing the issues of Dalit agricultural workers. Although the leaders are unanimous that Dalits and other marginalised communities should organise themselves, the lack of Dalit and women in the leadership in the present stage of the peasant movement indicates a larger economic and social problem. In this context, Rajinder Singh, the youngest member of the SKM, notes that only 3.5 percent of the land in Punjab is owned by Dalits. They form the largest section of the landless farmers and unorganised agricultural labourers. Although one third of the 165,000 acres of government-controlled land – 55000 acres – should be legally offered to the Dalits (Ground Xero, 2023, pp. 62-65), they are largely deprived. Redistributing ownership of Land to the actual user of the land remained largely overlooked by successive governments in India since independence. The large participation of the Dalit workforce in the present protest gave them visibility and empowerment.

8 Launched by the Government of India in July 2015, the Digital India initiative aimed to transform the country into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. The program sought to improve online infrastructure, increase internet connectivity, and promote digital literacy, particularly in rural areas. Key components included the expansion of broadband highways, the establishment of digital services such as e-governance, and the creation of jobs in the IT sector (see https://csc.gov.in/digitalIndia).

9 Ground Xero's book (2023) is a collection of interviews of leaders of the farmers' union, such as Dr Darshan Pal from Krantikari Kisan Union, Harinder Kaur Bindu from Bharatiya Kisan Union (Ekta-Ugrahan), Surjit Singh Phul from Bharatiya Kisan Union (Krantikari), Jasbir Kaur Natt from Punjab Kisan Union, Hannan Mollah from All India Kisan Sabha, Kavitha Kuruganti from Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture; as well as leaders of agricultural and rural worker unions, such as Pargat Singh from Krantikari Pendu Mazdoor Union, Lachhman Sewewala from Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union, and Darshan Nahar, Gurnam Singh and Mahipal from Dehati Mazdoor Sabha, along with journalists such as Hartosh Singh Bal, the political editor of The Caravan, to name a few.

The redistribution of agricultural land and increased participation in decision-making bodies by Dalits and other marginal communities is key to the success of future farmer's movements.

STOP: THE IMPACT OF THE FARMERS' PROTEST AND ELECTORAL POLITICS

The relative success[10] of the farmer's strike of 2020 as a mass movement may be analysed at two levels. The first is the roles of the trade unions, civil society organisations and mass support created through social media across the pan-Indian populace and expatriate Indians, and the larger global audience in the organisation and sustenance of the protest for more than a year against significant measures taken by the state to crush the strike. The second is the process by which the spontaneous public discontent in the primary sector regarding the farm acts has been assimilated into a larger discourse of loss of livelihood, large scale economic deprivation, the women's question, and redistribution of resources according to caste dynamics in the present political discourse. The sustained work by the farmers' union, however divided along the lines of ideology, caste, community, religion, and regional alliances, has created awareness among farmers regarding the agricultural policies that are steeply in favour of corporatisation of farming (Bhaduri, 2022, pp. 23-33). The adverse reaction of the state to the peaceful protests of the farmers, through its reluctance to address the demands and its indiscriminate use of force to resist the protest march, created widespread discontent among farmers of the region. This dissatisfaction among farmers in Punjab, Haryana and parts of Uttar Pradesh may be witnessed during the election campaign against the incumbent government. The opposition, commonly known as I.N.D.I.A bloc (The Indian National Development Inclusive Alliance), opposing the NDA (National Democratic Alliance) government that has been in power since 2014, has taken up the issue of MSP as one of the central critiques of the ruling coalition. One can extrapolate from the election result in the region that the political mobilisation of the trade unions against the Farm Acts had a direct impact on the electoral politics of these states during the general elections of 2024. The three states prominent in the farmers' protest – Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh – which were earlier the bastion of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government in the last two terms in 2014 and 2019, saw a significant defeat of BJP in this general election of 2024. BJP could not win any seat in the state of Punjab[11], and in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, especially the western part, BJP lost substantially. In Haryana, BJP lost fifty percent of the seats, whereas in the previous terms it won all ten seats[12]. BJP lost five seats in rural Haryana, which was actively participating in the farmers' protest, and they have also stopped BJP entering their villages during their election campaigns. Similarly in Uttar Pradesh[13], BJP suffered a huge blow, especially in western Uttar Pradesh, which was actively participating in the farmers' protest. In the 2022 state election, BJP had scored an astounding win across the state, yet that magic fell short after the farmers' protest and the results were clear in 2024 general election. Muzaffarnagar, one of the major sugarcane producing districts in western Uttar Pradesh, witnessed massive defeat of Sanjeev Baliyan, the union minister of BJP by 24672 votes[14]. Another important case in point is Lakhimpur Kheri constituency[15], where BJP minister Ajay Mishra Teni, who was involved in the SUV ramming row, lost the election by 34 329 votes[16]. Furthermore, the BJP lost significantly in Shamli district, Meerut, Agra, Mathura and Aligarh, all from the western parts and having a considerable Jat population, a caste group that participated in the farmers' protest extensively[17]. In 2014 and 2019 respectively, the BJP government got an absolute majority in parliament, but in 2024 it formed its first coalition government as it secured only 240 votes itself while NDA alliances managed to secure 294 seats, where 272 seats are the minimum requirement to form a government[18].

There has been a concerted effort by pro-state media outlets to discredit the farmer's protest. They have been demonised and termed terrorists and anti-national elements. The widespread support, especially from the Sikh expatriate communities[19], has been connected by the state to the *Khalistani*[20] insurgency of the past. However, there is a proliferation of counter narratives both in popular and scholarly discourses. It can be observed that civil society, through traditional modes of communication, especially in print and digital forms across the internet, has managed to produce alternative discourses against the well-oiled, anti-farmer propaganda of the state.

> All attempts to demonize the protestors and their leaders with various labels, such as Khalistanis, Marxist/Maoists, Urban Naxalites, anti-Nationals, 'tukde-tukde' gangs, pro-Pakistani agents, Chinese or other foreign agents, did not have much success. This attempt at 'Othering' the movement by Modi government's compliant and lap-dog media (Godi media) totally backfired as protestors developed their alternative print and social media channels to present a counter narrative on their grievances and in the process, also succeeding in globalizing the movement. (Thandi, 2024, p. 7)

10 The demands of farmers during the protest in 2020-21 were primarily centred on repealing the three Farm Acts, which were revoked in November 2021. However, the farmers had 12 demands in total, the most prominent being the legal guarantee for an MSP for all crops. Farmers sought the implementation of the Swaminathan Commission's recommendation (https://prsindia.org/policy/report-summaries/swaminathan-report-national-commission-farmers), which advocated for MSPs to be at least 50 percent higher than the weighted average cost of production, known as the C2+50% formula. Farmers also urged India to withdraw from the World Trade Organization (WTO) and halt all free trade agreements (FTAs). Other requests included pensions for farmers and farm labourers, compensation and job guarantees for the families of farmers who died during the Delhi protests, the repeal of the Electricity Amendment Bill 2020, and an extension of MGNREGA employment from 100 to 200 days a year with a daily wage of 700 Indian Rupees, linked to agricultural work. The protestors also called for stricter penalties against companies producing fake seeds, pesticides and fertilizers, the creation of a national commission for spices such as chilli and turmeric, and securing the rights of indigenous peoples over water, forests and land. Although the Government of India repealed the Farm Acts, other demands, especially for the MSP, were not addressed, which ensured the reemergence of the protest in February 2024.

11 Out of thirteen seats from Punjab, the Indian National Congress won seven seats, Aam Admi Party won three seats, Shiromani Akali Dal won one seat and two were won by independent candidates, whereas the BJP made no seats in the 2024 general election (https://results.eci.gov.in/PcResultGenJune2024/partywiseresult-S19.htm).

12 Out of ten seats, five were won by the BJP and five seats by the Indian National Congress (https://results.eci.gov.in/PcResultGenJune2024/partywiseresult-S07.htm).

13 Out of 80 seats, Samajhwadi Party won 37 seats, BJP won 33 seats, Indian National Congress won six seats, Rashtriya Lok Dal won two seats, Aazad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram) won one seat, Apna Dal (Soneylal) won one seat (https://results.eci.gov.in/PcResultGenJune2024/partywiseresult-S24.htm).

14 https://results.eci.gov.in/PcResultGenJune2024/candidateswise-S243.htm

15 During the farmers' protest in October 2021, Lakhimpur Kheri witnessed a series of violent acts in the form of an SUV hit and run incident, followed by shooting and mob lynching. Minister Teni's son was directly involved in the case.

16 https://results.eci.gov.in/PcResultGenJune2024/candidateswise-S2428.htm

17 https://results.eci.gov.in/PcResultGenJune2024/partywiseresult-S24.htm

18 See CSDS Lokniti Post Poll Survey 2024 for further details.

19 Mostly people from the Sikh and Punjabi community in Canada, UK and Australia. Canada has the largest Punjabi diaspora outside India.

20 The Khalistan Movement aims to establish Khalistan, an independent Sikh state, by separating the Punjab region from India through a secessionist campaign. Khalistan means "Land of the Pure."

The most significant development catalysed by the farmer's protest of 2020 is a new breed of participatory journalism via YouTube[21]. The widespread coverage of the farmers' protest on YouTube was facilitated by enthusiastic response from the audience. The journalist and commentators gradually became confident of the fact that YouTube may provide an alternative platform for journalists and social commentators who are critical of the state in contrast to the traditional print and electronic news channels. Several videos emerged on the YouTube platform that attempted to engage with the farmers' protest in India from the perspective of the farmers instead of the state propaganda that helped to inform the larger audience of India regarding the impact of the Farm Acts and the reason behind the protest, to organise a support for it amidst the massive amount of derogatory information circulated through mainstream media. These videos have varied scope, such as explaining the laws and their impact, live reporting from the protest site, interviews and sound-bytes collected by the protestors and supporters on-site, and analysis by political analysts such as Yogendra Yadav and seasoned journalists such as Ravish Kumar, to name a few. The complex role of social media, especially YouTube, in the present general election, one may argue, has its roots in the dissemination of information and misinformation during the farmers' protests of 2020.

There has been a flood of scholarly works on the farmer's protest in the past couple of years (Bhaduri, 2022; Ground Xero, 2023; Kaur, 2022; Thandi, 2024). They enrich our knowledge of the evolution of peasant movements in India, the relationship between agrarian reforms and the Indian polity, the new forms of political activism, and issues of gender and caste discrimination. It can be argued that the montage of attractions in the spectacular narratives of the farmers' strike foreground the silent labour force of the "women farmer" and the plight of the "Dalit" workforce in the agricultural sector. The substantial participation of women farmers in the strike and their active involvement in the running the movement has established them as a distinct workforce. They are mothers, sisters, daughters, but above all, they are farmers who demanded their right to livelihood. There had been a deep inequality regarding ownership of land and resources among Dalit farmers. The farmer's protest brought to the surface this deep-seated social inequality against the Dalit labour force in the agricultural sector. There is a dire need for large scale land reform to address this fundamental problem. It can be extrapolated that the central issue of reservation to address caste inequality in India during the general election campaign of 2024 to elect the central government, clearly suggests that large Dalit population in agriculture who are the worst affected; however, a voting majority of the nation has the potential to offer an electoral alternative to an ideology backed by crony capitalism and religious polarisation.

REWIND: AFTERTHOUGHTS

The farmer's protest of 2020 stopped short of being a peasant movement on a national scale for the following reasons. First, in India there are widely different land use patterns, the nature of farmers and agricultural labourers are varied across different geographical regions, the revenue generated from agriculture in different parts of the country broadly differ in magnitude, demographic patterns change every few hundred miles, and there are distinctive social and economic dynamics across different political entities in the federal structure of Indian democracy. Second, the strong trade union and farmers' organisations in Punjab and Haryana facilitated a mass mobilisation of the labour force associated with agriculture to protest against the government policies. Such organisational prowess could not be replicated in other parts of India. Moreover, the unions are divided on the basis of complex alliances of caste, religion, ideology and resources. It was unprecedented, even in the farmer's strike of 2020, for such a large array of farmers' organisations, predominantly from Punjab and Haryana, to congregate under the banner of SKM and decide on a common set of goals. Third, the mainstream media not only refrained from objective reporting of the event, but it also disseminated false information and actively participated in meticulously constructing the state's propaganda. The news of the protest never reached people on the ground.

The farmer's protest of 2020 has remained a movement of two agriculturally rich regions of north India, namely Punjab and Haryana, in public memory. It would have taken a pan-Indian character, at least visually, if the governments of individual states and the central government were not as prompt at stopping the farmers from other parts of India from reaching the protest site.

The BJP government in Haryana, with the help from central agencies, tried everything – water cannons, tear gas, shells, concrete barricades, lathi-charges, mass arrests – to stop the march but failed and, if anything, these repressive acts only riled up more farmers in Punjab, Haryana and western UP, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand and join the protest movement. These marches, unable to proceed further into Delhi, due to erection of massive steel and concrete barricades on the main highways, eventually decided to camp at three borders – Singhu, Tikri and Ghazibad. (Thandi, 2024, p. 7)

More importantly, the 2020 protest failed to connect the issue of agrarian distress with the larger national concerns of unemployment, inflation, loss of livelihood, economic inequality, and unbridled privatisation of natural resources. However, the narratives of dissent propagated by the opposition against the incumbent government in the general election of 2024 clearly suggest that the political formations in the electoral race to power have picked up from where the farmers' protest ended.

The rise of the silent women workforce to the surface as farmers and agricultural labourers beyond their traditional household image is one of the most significant developments of the protest. Before the strike there was rarely such spectacular representation of this silent force that comprises nearly half, if not more, of the labour in the primary sector. This large work force across caste, religion, class and region can be considered a distinct labour force on the basis of gender. The political forces in the general elections of 2024 could identify that this substantial bank of votes could be unified on the question of economic distress and social security. The farmers' protest allowed the women to be seen as equal in struggle and in profession. It facilitated a redefinition of the women farmers beyond domestic and gendered discourses. The Dalits and the minorities from different religious and tribal communities form a major portion of the underclass in India. They are divided on caste and religious lines that have been exploited by populist politics in India since the 1980s on a large scale. The left political formations, on the other extreme, tend to ignore the caste question and focus their energy solely on class hierarchy, and often fail to address or simply deny the importance or existence of the question of caste and its relevance in the larger socio-political and socio-economic contexts in India. The farmers' protest has clearly stated that the large section of the Dalits who form a major part of a vote bank divided across caste allegiances and religious affiliations continue to be at the margins of economic prosperity. A step towards equality can happen only through major policy changes such as land reforms and reservation of jobs[22]. The present political discourse during the parliamentary elections of 2024 may have found the right chord, or rather the appropriate rhetoric, to bridge the marginality of the Dalits in terms of caste and class, and their majority in the electoral representation.

The phenomena of strikes, protests, mass mobilisation and political activism in the neoliberal world will increasingly construct public perception in the virtual world, predominantly on social media platforms through smart phones and algorithmic architecture facilitated by ever faster internet carrying larger data loads. It will become increasingly hard to distinguish real from fake news. And discourses will rise and fall, losing their way in the maze of rabid targeted information. A sizeable portion of activists of the virtual world rarely end up on the streets to demand real action. The struggle for the voices of dissidence and protest of the future is to bring the apparently anonymous numbers on the web out in the open. The activity of protest and strike remain a humane activity to be fought as fellow humans. However, the modes of representing, chronicling, and expressing dissidence and protest have found new mediums with their own strengths and weaknesses. In the history of mass protests, methods of production and dissemination of discourse have changed over time, but the struggle for truth and compassion for fellow comrades has remained constant. Recent farmers' protests in Europe, Africa and Latin America might have numerous differences in the mode and nature of protests and their demands, but they all tend to focus on raising a voice against the urban bias in the governance of the agricultural sectors. However, one notable difference is that other political protests in India and abroad have allegiance to political parties, and often the leadership of the movement is controlled and governed by the leaders of political parties. The farmers' protest in India in 2020-21 marks a significant departure from this trajectory and it was led by farmers (landowners and landless farmers), other agricultural workers and their trade unions – who may have political affiliations, but those connections were not invoked to create the mobilisation towards the farmers' protest in 2020 and 2021; instead, it was focused on their demands, and in order to do this, farmers understood that they need to be united. The leaders of the farmers' protest travelled across India and met farmers from different parts of India to organise the mobilisation against the three Farm Acts and also the negative propaganda of mainstream media. They put across their side of the story against these defamatory propagations through modes of *Khaps* and *Mahapanchayat*[23], and they asked the people not to vote for or give allegiance to a certain political party or ideology; instead they asked them not to vote for BJP and to stop the privatisation of agricultural sector:

> The government's high-handed arrogance did not know how to cope with this form of non-violent protest which is capable of continuing indefinitely! The thirty-six plus farmers' unions which acted as the central coordinating body, each had different memberships, ideologies, regional cultures and affiliations. And yet, they spoke in one voice and acted as one body. It is the only case we know where democratic centralism was really democratic and centralism was voluntary. Its proof is the amazing spontaneity of the movement. They also used the traditional Khaps and Mahapanchayats to organise on a massive scale which was only possible by breaking consciously the barriers of class, caste, religion and gender. Village organisations are traditional, but their use to break oppressive and divisive customs was indeed unique.
>
> ...To bring about transformative changes without part politics of money, propaganda and authoritarianism from the top is certainly the most worthwhile political experiment in any modern democracy. (Bhaduri, 2022, p. 13)

The farmers' movement exemplifies how grassroots organising can challenge dominant power structures and the social norms that presume that only through social media can one reach the maximum number of people in shortest period of time, without relying on top-down political authority or financial influence. This bottom-up, non-violent form of resistance, which broke through barriers of class, caste, religion, and gender, is made possible through face-to-face interaction and active participation of people from all background in all levels of the protest, from planning to executing it in action, is truly transformative in its reach and impact. The enduring power of such movements reflects the resilience of democratic spirit, as the struggle for justice continues to evolve with time. Screens change, the film roll crawls into a cassette and then onto some corner of a drive, the image still moves frame by frame, second per second. The show goes on ■

21 Some links include: https://youtu.be/xMcBDrEfK1c?si=SLsed3jAdAm1On5l; https://youtu.be/xMcBDrEfK1c?si=SLsed3jAdAm1On5l; https://youtu.be/iHpZV7ro7lU?si=_ut-p5S56aE3BHb7; https://youtu.be/76w6GQ1vs1Y?si=3Y6yr3LV48rdfY_Y; https://youtu.be/lwrDi1ZMREI?si=LUs2jtHdKw8_UuvZ.

22 In India, job reservation, or affirmative action, is part of a broader social policy aiming to address historical injustices and systemic inequalities faced by marginalized communities, particularly the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Enshrined in the Indian constitution, job reservations allocate a percentage of government jobs and educational opportunities to these groups to promote social mobility and economic empowerment. However, the system has been a point of contention, with critics arguing it perpetuates divisions and others viewing it as essential to bridging the caste-based economic disparity. Although intended to uplift disadvantaged communities, its implementation is often seen as insufficient to fully redress the socio-economic marginalization of groups such as Dalits, especially in private sector employment, which remains largely unregulated by reservation policies.

23 These fall under local self-government in India, which is an example of democratic decentralisation through participatory modes of self-governance at the grassroot level, where the planning, decision-making and election of the representatives are done directly by the people through active participation in public meetings held on a regular basis in Gram Sabha, Khaps and Mahapanchayat.

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TRANSLATED ARTICLES SECTION

António Carlos Cortez

A reading of Portugal: a questioning book

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Translated from Portuguese by António Paço

> "Without history we are outside the present and therefore the future – historical consciousness reconciles us with ourselves. Not like a court or a couch, but with the effective possibilities of social transformation. That's why we wanted to write this book. Being in the present requires us to confront the past to envision the future. And the starting point for doing so is this: what is the history of the social formation to which one belongs? You need to know your own history to be part of it as subjects" (p. 17).

This is how we enter this powerful book by Raquel Varela and Roberto Della Santa: authors of the uncomfortable, heterodox and therefore essential book *Breve História de Portugal: a Era Contemporânea 1807-2020* [Brief History of Portugal: the Contemporary Era 1807-2020] opportunely published by Bertrand. Varela and Della Santa's thought (it should be noted the latter is Brazilian, with extensive teaching experience in this country, and with a solid perspective on social issues that today cannot be considered outside of the resurgence of totalitarian drifts, in which Brazil constitutes one of the laboratories of neo-fascism) cannot be reduced to a simple socialist or leftist primer. The use of such throwing weapons, for an eventual attack on a serious and documented object of investigation, will say more about those who wish to denigrate this book and its authors, than about the present work. It's a book that tells you what it wants and for what reasons: "The reader has here [a book driven] by three convictions of the authors: firstly, all men and women are intellectuals, even if not all of them perform the role of intellectuals. The act of thinking and acting, creatively and autonomously, is inscribed in all areas of human activity, from the foundations of language to the division of labour – and in all relevant spheres of life." Two other convictions: the observation that the world of labour obeys the logic of hierarchy: there are those who command and those who obey, being centred on power relations: between those who govern and those who are governed, this is how social reality is structured. Brecht, the German playwright (and the strength of the authoritative arguments shields the argument of many chapters in this volume), serves Raquel Varela and Roberto Della Santa as manna for the discourse they seek to disseminate: they are historians committed to the *res publica*, they have for themselves that, as the author of *Mother Courage* sustained, "a long time is not forever". In fact, if another premise, "Know thyself", coming from Socrates, and which animated Gramsci's thought, also mobilizes the power of thought in this inquisitive book about Portugal, this is due to the fact that the authors verify, in the wake of the various heterodoxies and utopias of modernity, that the conception of the world is a construction imposed on the subordinates, the humiliated and oppressed of this world. The case that needs to be studied in this book is simple: our country. But studying Portugal from a broader framework of social movements: from the French invasions to socialist movements and the great strength of trade unionism in the 19th century, from the First Republic to the 25th of April 1974 and up to the present: the end of the Social Pact in 1986, the creation of "*Geringonça*" ("Contraption", a word christened by one of the leaders of the Portuguese right and which undermined, from the beginning, the truth of the alliance between left-wing parties after the troika and the right-wing government of Passos Coelho – and language matters, because describing a historical alliance in this way is, without a doubt, indoctrinating); the central thesis that the Carnation Revolution began in Africa with the independence movements of the 1960s; finally, the dictatorship of Salazar and Caetano and the Estado Novo in the light of Bonapartist ideology, the source of fascism and, from a critical perspective, about finances, associative movements and popular revolts (statistics, transcripts of speeches, crossing of issues of social history with literary issues. The chapter on the Casino Democratic Conferences and the Generation of 1870, the driving force of socialist thought in Portugal, is masterful). Much of what is said here should make us think about our present in the light of a true thesis – this one: with the clear intention that the classes holding power maintain their economic monopoly over the country, Portugal participates in the great tensions of a Modernity that has, in Walter Benjamin's famous allegory, its emblem: the Angel of History looks at the ruins of time.

By integrating the various chapters of this volume into a broad historical angle (reminiscent of Adam Schaff's syntheses) subordinated to social and socialist thought, and from which perspectives of true social democracy are not absent (Olof Palme's aim: a democratic and Christian politics, in fact and not in name), this book shows us the State as a real instrument of affirmation of the bourgeoisie and expropriation of workers' autonomous means of production.

The 19th century is, in Portugal, as in Europe, "the transnational time of the Revolutions of the South": development of journalism, multiplication of literate and bookish culture, unstoppable dynamics of the corporate movement with a socialist or anarchist matrix; revolutions that, in our case, despite being late, put in confrontation, in the struggle between those who rule and those who obey, the Church and the enlightened bourgeoisie. What did they stand for? The liberal bourgeoisie uses Utopia as a project for the future, the Church and the aristocracy, the counter-revolution, conservatism, the pre-fascist triad God-Fatherland-Family, in an attempt to restrict the imagination as a dynamo of political action.

This is, no doubt, one of the most intriguing touchstones of this *Brief History of Portugal*: between the military and landed aristocracy and the capitalist bourgeoisie, the nineteenth-century monarchy clearly mirrors one of the betrayals of the elites: it was the replacement of a class of ancient lineage by another class of modern lineage. The maintenance of class privileges justifies the fight of the 20th century: bourgeoisie *vs.* workers. The First Republic, filled with courageous progressivism (the researchers clearly emphasize fraternity ideology, the effort to grant women the same rights as men), did not fulfil Antero's promise: "Christianity was the revolution of the ancient world. Socialism will be the revolution of the modern world." The working class, industrial workers (precisely Voz do Operário, founded in 1889, functions as an aggregating symbol of this critical spirit – José Mário Branco, in 2019, and Fausto Bordalo Dias, in 2024, both were veiled there, in a sign of unequivocal civic consciousness) struggle, as Raquel Varela and Roberto Della Santa emphasize, against the tentacular machine of oppression: censorship, persecution of individual freedoms, index, informers, institution of fear as a straitjacket from which people cannot be freed except by an enormous effort of giving voice and body, sacrificing millions of lives, to freedom as the supreme goal of History and Peoples.

Brief History of Portugal has absolutely remarkable chapters: the pages dedicated to the first general strike of the Portuguese labour movement, the clear and direct way in which the authors explain the logic of surplus value, the motive behind wage exploitation, the memory of names today ignored by the Portuguese (from the deportation of the leader of the Association of Rural Workers of Évora, in 1912, José Sebastião Cebola, to the death, in 1972, of Ribeiro Santos, a university student, to the large teachers' demonstrations in 2022-23, not forgetting the police charges at 25 de Abril Bridge ordered by Cavaco Silva, the list of indignation and struggle of the Portuguese people is here rigorously and passionately described and analysed), everything converges to make this book – may it be read by many, by everyone – today, in 2024, one of the cornerstones of what is inscribed in politics as a possibility of building the Polis: Utopia. The explanation of why we participated in the First World War; the successive demonstrations of the working classes against the rising cost of living (strikes, parades of unemployed people in Lagos, workers in Setúbal abandoning their workplaces against speculation in the price of bread; in Aveiro the street fights between fishermen and the National Guard, that year of 1915, like others, absolutely driven by the indignation of the poor), rationing, hoarding, sectoral strikes, the betrayal of Afonso Costa, the "union buster", much of what we read with Raquel Varela and Roberto Della Santa should lead us to ask a question: when will we, without paternalism of any kind, take our future into our own hands? But the authors do not answer this question… Or rather, they respond, but through the voices of poets and novelists (from the neo-realists to Saramago, from Manuel da Fonseca to the "Three Marias"); they respond by writing inspired pages about Antero and the protest song of the 1960s/70s and when, in a sagacious way, at the end of the book, they transcribe memorable pages from the great struggle for freedom: "What honest heart of a worker would not be indignant at the idea of serving as an instrument of the interests of his natural enemies against his friends and brothers?" (p. 450).

If, as Walter Benjamin once said, "history neither condemns nor absolves", it is certain that, as these committed professors, researchers and authors argue, "social destiny [only changed] through self-determination. That was the revolution in the last two hundred years." In 2024, on the brink of a war that could be apocalyptic and when, once again, from Trump to Bolsonaro, from Orban to Putin, from imperialist China to a Europe hostage to the interests of a self-elected Commission, more than ever, reading this book and other books that awaken us is already preparing the end of successive "states of exception". Was it not always in the name of "states of exception" that, from Hitler to the Russian intervention in Ukraine, from the dictatorships of South America to Pol-Pot, from the arrest and death of Rosa de Luxemburg to the concentration camps and gulags, oppression was advocated as normalized life? "We must arrive at a concept of history that corresponds to the truth," said Benjamin. Raquel Varela and Roberto Della Santa pursued this worthy design.

António Carlos Cortez, teacher, poet and literary critic. First published in *Diário de Notícias*, July 20, 2024.■

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