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Introduction: Politicizing the Transnational

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Introduction: Politicizing the transnational

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Abstract: Labor movements have always found it difficult to reveal and transform the social relations that constitute markets. The growing transnational movements of goods, capital, and services in themselves have therefore not triggered closer trade union cooperation across borders. Transnational collective action also requires conscious choices and a mutual understanding that solidarity across borders is warranted. For this reason, this special issue of *Labor History* assesses the role that politicization processes play in triggering transnational union action.

Keywords: trade unions, transnationalism, transnational collective action, politicization; social movements

Labor movements have always found it difficult to reveal and transform the social relations that constitute markets, not least because the “mutual relations of the producers, within which the social character of their labour affirms itself, take the form of a social relation between the products”.¹ It is therefore hardly surprising that the growing transnational movements of goods, capital, and services in themselves have not triggered closer trade union cooperation across borders. Although workers and trade unions have been shaken by the increasingly transnational nature of capitalist production processes and economic exchanges, there is consensus among international labor scholars that regional and global economic integration processes per se do not trigger transnational trade union action, however essential it would be for workers of the world to unite across borders.² Transnational collective action requires conscious choices and a mutual understanding that solidarity across borders is warranted. For this reason, this special issue reassesses the role that politicization processes play in triggering transnational union action.

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Capitalism, labor, and democracy

Given the disruptive nature of capitalist relations of production and exchange, capitalist societies have always required state structures in order to sustain their social reproduction, as acknowledged by scholars of very different regimes of capitalist accumulation and regulation: from the authoritarian corporatism of the 1930s,³ over the social democratic mid-twentieth century class compromise,⁴ to the contemporary neoliberal labor control regimes that impose the “laws of the market” by political fiat.⁵ Whereas “cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which [the bourgeoisie] batters down all Chinese walls”,⁶ capitalism requires legitimate political institutions that guarantee its functioning. Even in the USA, neoliberal capitalism would not work without the regulating hand of the state.⁷ It is incidentally no coincidence that the classical economists, such as Adam Smith, called their discipline *political economy*.

The intrinsically political nature of the capitalist political economy, however, also enables the labor movement to shift the conflict between workers and employers from the market place to the political arena.⁸ As workers are generally more numerous than capitalists, labor seems to retain an advantage in democratic political systems. Accordingly, capitalists opposed universal suffrage for a very long time, whereas labor fought for it.⁹ Friedrich Engels even regarded democratization as the strongest weapon for the emancipation of the workers and of humankind,¹⁰ even if resistance against capitalist exploitation clearly requires more than just representative democracy, namely mechanisms of direct and economic democracy. The creation of the social state during the twentieth century would indeed hardly have been possible without labor’s struggles for the democratization of socioeconomic policymaking.¹¹ In contrast, it should be noted that the neoliberal offensive against the social state was never meant to lead to the dissolution of the state as a law enforcement institution. Neoliberal governments only aimed at blocking unwelcome popular interferences in the governance of the capitalist reproduction process; for example, by delegating executive powers to technocratic regulatory agencies, as in the case of the European Central Bank.¹²

Free trade challenges organized labor as it puts workers from different countries in competition with one another. And yet, transnational integration processes also provided workers with new possibilities to organize resistance in the socioeconomic sphere at workplace or industrial level.¹³ The ongoing transnational economic integration processes, however, also undermine organized labor’s *political* mobilization and exchange power.¹⁴ The more capitalism is regulated by remote supranational governance regimes and the more these

regimes constrain democratic national states in their socioeconomic and fiscal choices, the more organized labor loses influence. In turn, popular democracy is degenerating into a “democracy without choice,” and not only in the periphery where “predatory elites have learned to cite ... external pressures as excuses for their own refusal to take responsibility for the welfare of ordinary citizens”.¹⁵ Also, in developed capitalist welfare states, it has become increasingly difficult to improve people’s working and living conditions through Webb and Webb’s classical “method of legal enactment”.¹⁶ Following the democratic state’s retreat from its “former heartland of basic economic strategy”,¹⁷ national governments more and more respond to transnational pressures exercised by financial market actors and supranational economic and financial institutions, rather than to their popular electorates. The “politics of constrained choice” is particularly challenging for parties of the center-left, as center-right voters are less inclined to oppose the supply-side socioeconomic policy adjustments that “responsible” government apparently requires in these “testing times”.¹⁸ However, even if social democratic parties have paid a high electoral price for the implementation of business-friendly adjustments in the socioeconomic sphere,¹⁹ moderate center-left parties may seek new justifications as promoters of progressive causes in other areas, for example in the field of identity politics. In contrast, the *raison d’être* of trade unions essentially depends on their capacity to shape socioeconomic developments in workers’ interests.

Despite the ongoing “hollowing out of democracy” in these “post-democratic” times, organized labor’s politicization struggles are hardly becoming less significant. Drawing on nineteenth century history, Peter Wagner has argued that “whenever capitalism exists without democracy it will be exposed to a critique of exploitation and injustice, likely to be expressed through calls for inclusive, egalitarian democracy”.²⁰ As the shifts in socioeconomic policymaking from the democratic social state to technocratic regulatory agencies are weakening the legitimacy of state structures that are essential for making and consolidating transnational capitalism, the contradiction between our society’s democratic values and the post-democratic state structures of global capitalism also insemminates social protest. It is therefore hardly surprising that many successful transnational trade union and social movement campaigns were political in the sense that they succeeded in politicizing technocratic regulations, such as Commissioner Bolkestein’s EU directive, On Services in the Internal Market, or President George W. Bush’s Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).²¹ What remains to be explored further are the conditions for transnational politicization struggles and their contribution to the making of a transnational labor movement.

Politicization struggles and transnational collective action

Studies of transnational union action have frequently relied on a small number of successful cases. Juravich and Bronfenbrenner's study of the transnational union campaign in the emblematic Ravenswood case, for example, showed that transnational unionism is possible.²² Studies of positive cases are also problematic, however, as they entail an inherent selection bias. In addition, they cannot explain why the very same union engages in transnational unionism in one instance but then refuses to cooperate across borders in a comparable case.²³ In turn, transnational labor and social movement scholars have employed either quantitative research designs, based for example on large datasets of protest events,²⁴ or qualitative comparative research designs based on Ragin's technique that aims to solve the problem of the small number of investigated cases by applying Mill's *system of logic* and Boolean algebra.²⁵

In some instances however, the case study method does not only provide us with useful insights about particular cases. Intensive case studies that trace social processes across time, for example, are better suited than large-N studies for exploring the role of social learning.²⁶ Given the important role that learning processes play in the making of national and transnational working class action,²⁷ the case study method therefore still promises theoretical advances. Thus, most contributions to this special issue return to the case study method, namely, to Lijphart's hypothesis generating; theory testing; or deviant case methods.²⁸

The first two contributions to this special issue analyze the actions of North, Central, and South American trade unions against two crucial transnational free trade agreements. Tamara Kay reassesses organized labor's 'unsuccessful' struggle against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the US and Mexico, and Bruno Dobrusin analyzes the 'successful' trade union campaign against the FTAA.²⁹ The repercussions of the two struggles across time provides a forceful argument for a different reading of the two cases. On the one hand, the anti-NAFTA struggles politicized U.S. and Mexican trade unions and motivated them to move beyond traditional workplace-centered struggles and engage in broader political campaigns at national and transnational level. On the other hand, the 'successful' anti-FTAA campaign did not lead to an increased engagement by South American unions in transnational struggles. Instead, organized labor delegated control over the alternative regional integration processes in Latin America to 'friendly' governments and returned their attention to domestic industrial relations.

Tamara Kay's contention that unions must move beyond traditional workplace-centered struggles, however, does not imply that unions should neglect the company level.

The third contribution, by Geraint Harvey and Peter Turnbull, on labor's struggles against the 'sky pirates' in the European civil aviation industry demonstrates that it would be wrong to disassociate political and workplace-centered trade union action.³⁰ However, whereas aviation unions have recognized that they must shift their focus from their national (flag) airlines to the European 'sky pirates,' such as Ryanair, their transnational activities are basically geared towards a (technocratic) engagement with EU institutions without direct (democratic) collective action to back it up. The European Transportworkers' Federation's reliance on the force of the argument rather than the argument of force led to dependence and internal divisions. For this reason, Harvey and Turnbull argue that trade unions must adopt not just European but also Euro-democratic strategies if they want to arrest the 'sky pirates.'

The fourth contribution by Mark Anner, on worker resistance in the global supply chain in the apparel industry also puts workplace relations in a broader political context by emphasizing the central role of power and power relations in labor control regimes. Building on a rich stream of scholarship on the mechanism of hegemonic control, consent, and resistance in the capital-labor relationship, Anner shows that global production patterns are not only mirroring wage cost differentials. All apparel exporters subject their workers to a severe labor control regime. Yet, the particular labor control regime differs considerably across countries, as also patterns of worker resistance. Whereas domestic state or employer authoritarianism plays a dominant role in Vietnam and Honduras, respectively, global market despotism prevails in Bangladesh. Although union action in both the Bangladesh and the Honduras case also entailed instances of transnational cooperation, in both cases cross-border solidarity relied on external support. In contrast, the wildcat strikes in Vietnam were much more local but also more political, if one considers the statutory minimum wage increases and labor law changes that they triggered. The self-legitimization of the 'socialist republic' as a worker's state apparently also legitimizes workers' collective action – even if the Communist Party leadership does not allow 'political strikes' – whereas the removal of pro-labor President Zelaya by the 2009 putsch in Honduras led to increased anti-union violence.

Given the crucial role that governance structures may play in triggering collective trade union action, the two final contributions return to the European Union. The current trajectory of the EU integration process is indeed providing us with a stimulating laboratory for the rethinking of our theoretical tools in the so-called global age. Firstly, the unrestricted movement of capital, goods, services, and people has created a European single market that is much more integrated than the global economy. If globalization is a process of increased economic interactions across borders, then the EU is definitely more 'globalized' than the

globe.³¹ Secondly, since the EU's expansion to the east, intra-European income inequalities have reached global proportions. Since January 2013 for example, the statutory minimum wages in the coastal provinces of China exceed those of the EU's poorest member states, i.e. Bulgaria and Romania.³² Finally, the concentration of new powers in the hands of EU executives in relation to both external trade agreements and intra-European social, economic, and fiscal policy may represent an important catalyst for contentious transnational action.

Sacha Dierckx's assesses European trade unions' attempts to repoliticize the movement of transnational capital through the introduction of a Financial Transaction Tax (FTT), and also the unions' critique of the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) seem to justify cautious optimism.³³ Dierckx acknowledges EU elites' aim to firmly secure the protection of private property rights through supranational legal constraints on fiscal, monetary, and trade and investment policies, but the proposed investor protection clauses in both the CETA and TTIP agreements are provoking a rethinking even within trade unions that hitherto had been in favor of free trade. Certainly, growing popular resistance does not mean that EU elites will abandon these projects. However, the more the European Commission has to recur to authoritarian means – such as the outright refusal to register the European Citizens' Initiative³⁴ proposed by the European campaign group STOP TTIP³⁵ – the weaker the frail democratic legitimacy of its supranational governance regime will become.

The European Union's new regime of economic governance provides Roland Erne with a critical case that allows him to re-examine the role of politics in labor transnationalism.³⁶ To what extent does labor's response to the unprecedented centralization of economic governance at EU level qualify his earlier findings on the crucial role of politicization processes in triggering transnational collective action? Do European trade unions really find it easier to politicize the administrative decisions of the Commission rather than the abstract market forces behind economic integration processes?³⁷ Erne's analysis shows that the politicization of supranational economic governance remains a necessary trigger for transnational collective action. However, he also highlights that EU leaders try to prevent the politicization and democratization of the EU's new economic governance regime not only by technocratic means. Equally important is the new regime's ability to *nationalize social conflicts* through its *country-specific* recommendations; corrective action plans; and fines. In this regard, the EU's new governance regime very much mirrors the corporate governance structures of multinational companies that control notionally autonomous subsidiaries through coercive comparisons based on centrally chosen key performance

indicators. And yet, the EU's new governance structures must be legitimate in order to guarantee popular consent. Whereas competitive nationalism has proven its capacity to manufacture working class consent in important instances, it is less likely that European elites will be able to legitimize supranational governance structures through a system that at the same time nationalizes social conflict.

Competition among workers themselves remains one of the biggest obstacles to (transnational) collective action, even if many workers intuitively know that union means strength. Accordingly, labor's apparently unsuccessful struggles can be as useful as its successful struggles in building transnational alliances, as shown for example by Tamara Kay's contribution to this special issue. Immediate success is not the most important criterion for assessing the labor movement's progress, as was argued a long time ago: "Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers".³⁸

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Note on the contributors

During the academic year 2013/2014, Roland Erne, Andreas Bieler, Darragh Golden, Idar Helle, Knut Kjeldstadli, Tiago Matos, and Sabina Stan were all members of the CAS research group, Globalization and the Possibility of Transnational Actors, at the Centre for Advanced Study in Oslo (<http://www.cas.uio.no/research/1314globalization/index.php>).

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- ¹ Marx, *Capital*, Chapter 1.4.
- ² Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, *Trade Unions*; Fairbrother et al., *Transnational Trade Unionism*; Bieler and Lindberg, *Global Restructuring*; Munck, *Globalization*.
- ³ Manoïlesco, *Le siècle du corporatisme*.
- ⁴ Crouch, *Industrial Relations*; Poulantzas, *L'Etat*.
- ⁵ Harvey, *A Brief History*, 19; Hayek, "The Economic Conditions."
- ⁶ Marx and Engels, *The Manifesto*, 16.
- ⁷ Block, "Understanding."
- ⁸ Korpi, *Democratic Class Struggle*.
- ⁹ Erne, *European Unions*, 31; Foot, *The Vote*.
- ¹⁰ Engels, *Introduction*.
- ¹¹ Supiot, *The Spirit*; Wahl, *The Rise*.
- ¹² Erne, "Interest Groups."
- ¹³ Bieler et al., *Labour*.
- ¹⁴ Erne, *European Unions*, 30–33.
- ¹⁵ Krastev, "The Balkans," 25.
- ¹⁶ Webb and Webb, *Industrial Democracy*, Part II, Chapter IV.
- ¹⁷ Crouch, "Privatised Keynesianism," 398.
- ¹⁸ Laffan, "Testing Times," 283.
- ¹⁹ Whereas the German SPD lost almost half of its votes during its time in government between 1998 (40.9 %) and 2009 (23.0%), the share of the Greek socialist party PASOK fell from 43.9% in 2009 to a mere 4.65% in 2015.
- ²⁰ Wagner, *The Democratic Crisis*, 14.
- ²¹ See Erne, "Politicizing" and Dobrusin, "Transnational Labor" in this issue.
- ²² Juravich and Bronfenbrenner, *Ravenswood*.
- ²³ Cf. The United Steelworkers of America in the Alcan, Pechiney, and Algroup merger case; Erne, *European Unions*, 161.
- ²⁴ Silver, *Forces of Labor*; Della Porta and Caiani, *Social Movements*.
- ²⁵ Kay, *NAFTA*; Brookes, "How Context-Appropriate Strategies"; Ragin, *The Comparative Method*; Caramani, *Introduction*.
- ²⁶ George and Bennett, *Case Studies*, 36; Levy, "Learning."
- ²⁷ Schmidt, "Farewell"; Cotton and Croucher, *Global Unions*; Föhrer, "What Role."
- ²⁸ Lijphart, "Comparative Politics," 691–693.
- ²⁹ Kay, "Union Politicization"; Dobrusin, "Transnational Labor."
- ³⁰ Harvey and Turnbull, "Can Labor Arrest"; Anner, "Labor Control."
- ³¹ Marginson and Sisson, *European Integration*.
- ³² Stan and Erne, "Explaining Romanian."
- ³³ Dierckx, "European Unions."
- ³⁴ The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) is a direct democratic instrument that enables one million EU citizens to request the European Commission to propose a legal act in an area where the member states have conferred powers onto the EU level. The ECI was introduced into EU law by the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 following a campaign for transnational direct democratic citizens' rights that can be traced back to 1995. Cf. Erne et al., *Transnationale Demokratie*; Papadopoulos, "Implementing."
- ³⁵ Meanwhile, the initiators of the STOP TIPP ECI have not only started a self-organized European Works Council, they have also taken the Commission to the European Court of Justice. Cf. Efler and Others v Commission, Case T-754/14, 2015/C 034/47, *Official Journal of the European Union*, 2.2.2015, C 34, 39–40.
- ³⁶ Erne, "Politicizing."
- ³⁷ Erne, *European Unions*, 189.
- ³⁸ Marx and Engels, *The Manifesto*, 19.

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