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Scaling Up? TRANSNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANISING IN GLOBALISED PRODUCTION

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JULIA HOFMANN

Introductory Commentary

At the end of the 20th century, many (mainstream) scholars stated that ‘(organised) labour is dead’. At first glance, several societal developments seemed to prove them right: union density rates were shrinking, at least in the global North. The project of ‘real existing socialism’ failed. Laissez-faire economics and neoliberal restructuring attempts dominated the political landscape and led to a power shift towards capital. Increasing unemployment rates, as well as higher precariousness and vulnerability, were the consequences on the labour side. Strategic and political errors or misjudgements within union organisations further aggravated the situation.

At second glance though, this ‘superficial’ finding showed up not to be true, as the situation was way more complex. First, the status of unions and labour organisers differed highly between regions and countries: The global North versus the global South, Europe versus the United States, and, even in bigger regions, such as in Europe, the industrial relation systems remained more or less stable in several countries, while it came under increasing pressure in others. Second, the institutions that organised labour helped to build up after WWII (such as certain social and labour market instruments or specific forms of interest coordination like social-partnership) remained (more or less) intact, at least in Western Europe. If available, collective bargaining and company co-determination further supported enterprises and industries to remain successful. These forms of institutionalised power thus somehow helped unions to compensate for their losses in organisational power. Third, shrinking union density rates on the one hand were also temporally accompanied with revitalisation attempts and other forms of labour resistance on the other hand (Voss/Sherman 2000).

To counter the image of 'dead organised labour' and to (re-)gain confidence and power, unions and labour activists tried to learn from these successful strategies world-wide. In order to build up and strengthen labour's power resources, progressive research played a vital role. It estimated the chances and obstacles of the individual efforts. One main finding here was that it is essential to sound out the chances and limits of a progressive formation of alliances between unions and other relevant civil society actors, unorganised labour activists and social movements (Kelly 1998). In modern 'counter-movements', which fight against the marketisation of social relations, as Beverly Silver (2003) put it, 'old' and 'new' social movements should no longer oppose each other, but rather work together as part of a 'mosaic'. They would profit from their respective power resources and different strategies.

Further, research showed that an in-depth analysis of concrete organising and struggle experiences might help to shed light on the preconditions for success. By pointing at the actors and structures behind the struggles, as well as at critical moments within, it can help to equip the actors with best practice examples and orientations for their own strategic action. Of course, individual cases cannot be applied one to one to a different context; they require a certain translation. But an academic analysis can at least help unions and other labour organisers to ask themselves the question, 'What can we learn from these experiences?'

Finally, yet importantly, research showed how important it is to look beyond the 'national container' in a globally connected world. Even though labour campaigns might take place thousands of kilometres away, through our global (economic) entanglement, they can be highly connected with domestic challenges. Hence, it is important to provide a more in-depth view of the chances and obstacles of cross-border or transnational collective action. In this context, the research points, for example, at the fact that transnational collective action is highly demanding. It requires not only a joint interpretation of the situation (so-called joint frames) but also cross-border networks and the formation of a transnational, collective identity, or at least feelings of cross-border solidarity. Not only cultural, but also material factors might hinder transnational collective action (Tarrow 2005).

This special issue of the Austrian Journal of Development Studies considers all three of the above-named aspects and looks at the chances of and the barriers to transnational labour organising in the 21st century. It

is thus an important contribution to the academic, but also activist and interest-based, debate on (transnational) labour organising. This issue not only focusses on concrete cases and the organising attempts of various social actors such as trade unions or social movements in a transnational context. Authors also point at the specific challenges of labour organising in globally connected industries such as the garment industry, mining or cotton production, as well as global forms of work such as on-demand platform work. Databases on transnational labour campaigns are presented and, on a more theoretical basis, academic frameworks coming from the global North are critically reflected on their adaption to the global South.

From an interest-based perspective, it is highly appreciated that progressive academia once more scratches on the old image of 'dead (organised) labour' and shows how vital the global labour movements are. Despite all adverse circumstances and structures, these cases show that there is always room for (organised labour) action. It remains to be hoped that these important debates do not remain only in the academic context, but find their way to labour activists, organisers and unionists world-wide.

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KARIN FISCHER, CORNELIA STARITZ, SIGNE MOE
**Scaling Up? On the Possibilities and Limits of Transnational
Labour Organising in Globalised Production**

ABSTRACT *This article provides an overview of theoretical and empirical efforts to understand the multiple dimensions enabling and hindering (transnational) labour organising in the context of globalised production. It situates the contributions to this special issue in the broader debate on the role of labour and workers' agency in global value chains and production networks. For this, it brings together chain and network approaches with labour studies in a highly productive dialogue. Focusing on labour as a transnational actor, the article further identifies different approaches of and actors within transnational organising and provides empirical insights on the complexity of the politics of scale in organising efforts. Four key issues are identified as complicating labour organising along global value chains: (i) asymmetrical power relations within organising, particularly between the global North and South, (ii) the continued importance of the local and national scale, (iii) difference and dividing lines between workers, and (iv) the red-green divide. The article argues for the importance of a multi-scalar and intersectional perspective on transnational organising beyond binaries. Such an approach recognises the key role of local alliances as well as the possibilities and limits arising from transnational organising initiatives to confront globalised capital.*

KEYWORDS *labour, transnational organising, activism, global value chains, global production networks, politics of scale*

I. Introduction

Research on global commodity chains (GCCs), value chains (GVCs) and production networks (GPNs)¹ has developed a rich analytical framework for studying globalised production and the international division of labour. It reveals important insights into the spatial expansion of production and firm strategies. Interestingly, labour relations and workers' agency remained a black box for quite a long time. Particularly "first generation" GVC research, which proliferated in the late 1990s, was mainly concerned with inter-firm relations, the resulting modes of governance, and the possibilities for economic upgrading. "Upgrading" denotes a process by which firms, countries or regions move to higher value activities in order to increase their benefits (e.g. order security, higher profits, enhanced capabilities) from participation in GVCs (Humphrey/Schmitz 2002). A better position of supplier firms and producers in the global South, so the expectation goes, would strengthen their bargaining capacity vis-à-vis lead firms that govern GVCs.

The focus on economic upgrading can be explained by many researchers in the field coming from or having close links to development studies. It is nevertheless somehow astonishing that labour issues remained at the margins, since GVCs not only impact on economic development prospects, but also on working conditions, wages, and workers' power and struggles. Labour was, however, mainly treated like a commodity input into production or a cost factor with regard to locational decisions (Thompson et al. 2015: 53; Selwyn 2016: 53; Selwyn 2019).

However, since the 2000s, scholars have opened up to labour issues. At the same time, researchers predominantly concerned with labour and workers' power have approached the GVC/GPN field and transnationalised their agenda. Both can benefit significantly from each other. While labour studies clarify the importance of labour relations and activism for the organisation and the outcomes of GVCs, the GVC/GPN research community brings in the importance of scales and highlights the hierarchical connection of labour regimes at different locations of production. Engaging in a dialogue is therefore a highly productive endeavour. This is what this special issue aims to undertake. The contributions assess how forms of (transnational) labour organising have evolved and changed in

the context of GVCs. They reveal successes, challenges and prospects of labour activism and discuss broader politico-economic and social contexts, thereby contributing to ongoing theoretical and methodological debates, as well as enriching the empirical evidence on cross-border organising.

This introductory article reviews, firstly, key developments in the GVC approach with regard to labour and particularly the development of the social upgrading concept. Secondly, it shows how GVC/GPN research has been enriched by other disciplinary and theoretical perspectives and how a GVC/GPN perspective has been used in labour studies. Thirdly, it discusses labour as a transnational actor, identifying different approaches of, and actors within, transnational organising. Fourthly, it provides empirical insights on (transnational) labour organising and the complexity of the politics of scale, deriving from the GVC/GPN and labour studies literature and the contributions of this special issue. The last section concludes.

2. GVC research and labour: from economic to social upgrading

GVC analysis is a moving research field. This is clearly shown in the discussion on “upgrading”. Early GVC research focused principally on industrial or economic upgrading and competitiveness issues (Gereffi 2019). After a first phase dominated by policy-oriented studies, a large number of studies started to dismantle the “optimistic upgrading narrative” (Thompson et al. 2015: 54). They show that economic upgrading is not an automatic outcome of participation in GVCs; rather, it is a contested process and one which firms can remain stuck in, or even downgrade to, low-value positions (Gibbon/Ponte 2005; Bair/Werner 2011). Moreover, even if economic upgrading is successful, it does not necessarily bring with it the assumed benefits (Kaplinsky 2005).

With regard to labour, the implicit assumption in early GVC research was that economic upgrading benefits workers through higher wages and better working conditions. Yet, this “optimistic narrative” was also soon questioned. Early research on GVCs and labour underscored that the gains (and costs) of GVC participation and economic upgrading are not spread evenly (Nadvi/Thoburn 2004; Barrientos/Kritzinger 2004). Following from these insights, researchers defined social upgrading as

a distinct process, independent from economic upgrading, and created a new research field of its own. Social upgrading was defined as the “improvement in the rights and entitlements of workers as social actors, which enhances the quality of their employment” (Barrientos et al. 2011: 324). Evidence for social upgrading is widely classified in two dimensions: measurable standards, which refer to tangible aspects such as wage levels, contractual terms and working hours; and enabling rights, which refer to freedom of association and collective bargaining, non-discrimination, voice and empowerment (Barrientos et al. 2011).

Extensive literature emerged studying if, how, and in what form workers, producers or family farmers could increase their benefits and improve their working conditions through economic upgrading processes. Key findings from this literature are that social and economic upgrading were not widespread and that economic upgrading is a necessary but insufficient condition for social upgrading (Pickles et al. 2015; Barrientos et al. 2016; articles in relation to the Capturing the Gains research project²). Work can be impacted by economic upgrading in many ways, for example, in terms of qualification, social security, working hours, income, gender equality, or freedom of association. These dimensions can change independently from each other and can improve or worsen (Selwyn 2013; Bair/Werner 2011; Rossi et al. 2014). For example, Anner (2020) highlighted that while economic upgrading may be associated with wage increases, it can simultaneously entail higher work intensity or a backlash against freedom of association.

There is also evidence of social ‘downgrading’, particularly if the outcomes of economic upgrading on different groups of workers are taken into account. Studies showed that economic upgrading may increase the skill content and improve working conditions for some workers but lead to social downgrading for others, due to cost, quality, and flexibility pressures. Hence, social up- and downgrading often differ by workforce segmentation (permanent vs. temporary, direct vs. subcontracted, etc.) and social identities such as gender, migrant status, ethnicity or race (Rossi 2013; Plank et al. 2014). Within agrarian value chains, “entrepreneurial” farmers might profit from economic upgrading – at the expense of rural wage labourers they hire on poor and ever worsening employment conditions (Amanor 2019; Fischer/Langthaler 2019).

A more radical critique that includes the paradigm of social upgrading as such focuses on the neglect of conflicts of interests and power asymmetries that permeate GVCs. Most forthcoming has been Selwyn (2013: 75), who denoted the social upgrading framework as an ‘elite comprehension of relations between capital, the state and labour’. He criticises the concept on three grounds: its assumption that lead firms, states, trade unions and international organisations coalesce around common interests in combating indecent work; its failure to see that the social relations of capitalist production render such cross-class alliances unviable; and its misspecification of the causes of indecent work and, consequently, unrealistic and ineffective policy proposals. As part of a wider turn to ‘labor-led development’, Selwyn (2016) argued for understanding labour exploitation and class conflict in GVCs from a bottom-up approach (see also Marslev et al. 2021).

In conclusion, it seems fair to say that the GVC camp needed some time to approach the labour issue. The GPN approach, however, was more open to labour issues from the very beginning. GPN researchers, predominantly economic geographers, chose the network perspective instead of chains in order to illuminate the wider social conditions in which production, reproduction, and consumption are embedded. In their research, they attempted to include non-firm actors involved in global production, such as national states, supra-national institutions, business associations and trade unions (Coe et al. 2008). Although the GPN framework acknowledged the importance of integrating labour, it must be stated that some studies still treated labour as the passive victim of restructuring, thus reproducing the factor of production approach (Taylor et al. 2015: 2).

3. GVC/GPN research and labour: engaging in a multidisciplinary dialogue

GVC/GPN research on labour has not only moved forward due to internal discussions. Research communities concerned with labour relations and workers’ power and agency have entered the field and further developed it from different disciplinary and theoretical angles. Together

with the “original” GVC/GPN scholars, a lively research area emerged, whose intellectual sources of mutual inspiration we now identify.

Labour geographers criticised the GVC approach as capital- and state-centric and introduced GPNs as ‘networks of embodied labour’. They questioned the focus on workers as objects without a deeper conceptualisation of their agency, making a plea to place labour agency at the centre of GPN dynamics. A central motive is to show that workers are not powerless and condemned to follow the dictates of global capital. Instead, they actively create and shape geographies, even when exposed to high vulnerability and insecurity (Coe/Jordhus-Lier 2010; Carswell/De Neve 2013). Significant here is labour and its ‘geographical condition’: actions of labour play out in complex social geographies and, at the same time, can be seen as spatial phenomena themselves (Herod 2001).

Feminist scholars emphasise that transnational production is linked to new forms of a gendered division of labour. In feminist theorising, GVCs rely on i) the intermingling of several forms of waged and nonwaged, free and unfree labour; ii) the extraction of visible and hidden surpluses from households; iii) gendered and racial exploitation of workers; and iv) the economic devaluation of household-based work, especially that of women (Dunaway 2014: 2). Feminist perspectives criticise a “productivist bias”, arguing for the importance and complex entanglements of the reproduction sphere and social differentiation related to gender and other categories (e.g. race, sexuality, age, nationality) to understand the functioning of GVCs. They highlight how these differences are embedded in local contexts and (re-)created through global relations and structures (Bair 2010; Barrientos 2019; Mezzadri et al. 2021; Sproll 2022).

The reference to Wilma Dunaway illustrates the importance of the world-systems approach that stood at the beginning of GVC/GPN research (Bair 2005). Its seminal founders, Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, defined a commodity chain as ‘a network of labor and production’ (1986: 159). They never thoroughly investigated labour and labour agency, though. Nevertheless, they assumed that commodity chains were based on sexism, racism and the appropriation of surplus value generated in private households. Instead of seeing economic upgrading as the main strategy for development, world-systems theorists advocated for increasing the value

of labour at every single ‘node of the chain,’ whether by bargaining or through militancy.

Another academic discipline that made important inroads into GVC/GPN research is global labour history. One of the most distinguished scholars in the field, Marcel van der Linden, coined the term ‘proletarian multiverse’. The term clarifies the fact that labour power is commodified in many different ways. Formal and informal, regular and irregular, productive and reproductive labour are by no means binary oppositions, but rather a process with many gradations and dimensions. Different modes of labour exploitation can be understood only by their relationship to each other and in a transnational perspective (van der Linden 2008: 32). Insights from labour history prompts GVC/GPN scholars to pay attention to the multi-faceted hidden and informal forms of labour along chains, including reproductive labour, and the long-term structuring and restructuring of transregional commodity chains: in other words, the changing geographies of uneven and combined development (Komlosy 2018).

Sociologists of work with a Marxist background also criticised the “labour blindness” of GVC research. They enriched research through labour process theory (LPT). Their prism of labour control brings labour exploitation and disciplining, consent and resistance to the foreground. While their original focus was on the firm, the factory, or the workplace, LPT scholars profit from GVC/GPN concepts in order to transcend the narrow focus on workplace relations, instead highlighting a multi-scalar conception of labour control (Smith et al. 2018). In a GVC/GPN perspective, local labour control practices such as, for example, labour-saving mechanisation, informality, subcontracting, or gender segmentation can be analysed as constitutive network elements. By tracing the changing social arrangements of trans-regional production at different sites and locations, it becomes clear how lead firms channel labour control pressures ‘through the chain’ (Thompson/Smith 2009: 915; Taylor et al. 2015). Strategies of control do not end at the factory gate and can be traced “down” to households, as feminist studies at the intersection of LPT and GVC/GPN research show (Baglioni 2018).

Most recently, legal scientists entered the field. Instead of treating law as an exogenous or contextual factor that influences the strategic decision-making of lead firms, law is seen as a vehicle that constitutes power

relations between actors in GVCs/GPNs. While some investigate the connection of legal mechanisms and modes of governance, others extend the economic understanding of “value” to the legal sphere: legal entitlements impact the relative power of actors, and, as a consequence, influence how value is created, captured and distributed within GVCs/GPNs. While GVC/GPN research profits from the “legal geographies” literature, a GVC/GPN perspective forces legal scholars to transcend their narrow focus on juridical subfields. New public and private regulatory arrangements such as the Bangladesh Accord, and certification or due diligence duties have developed in response to the rapidly changing business practices of GVC/GPNs. This prompts legal scholars to investigate the global co-existence and collision of different normative and judicative orders (see The IGLP Law and Global Production Working Group 2016).

4. Labour as a transnational actor: union-based governance struggles and networks of labour activism

Globalised production is a double-edged sword when it comes to transnational organising. On the one hand, GVCs/GPNs introduce new vulnerabilities to supplier firms and workers as lead firms pursue ‘regime shopping’, playing off firms, workers and states against each other on a global scale. (Re-)locational strategies of lead firms also directly aim to disrupt workers’ capacity to organise and defend their interests, and hence to override workers’ solidarity by seeing workers in other countries as competitors. Organising is also made more difficult, as it does not only involve multiple locations and countries within one company, but different companies where the direct employer is not the lead firm. On the other hand, GVCs/GPNs link workers up to workers, firms, consumers and states in other countries, exposing them to international initiatives and regulations at different scales. Global norms of workplace rights – such as the ILO core labour standards or corporate due diligence acts – create opportunities for pressure to be exerted on lead firms and states.

While workers are still often portrayed as being confined to the local and national level while capital acts globally, transnational strategies are not only capital’s and lead firms’ “weapon” to divide and weaken labour.

Workers and their allies have also attempted “to meet capital at its own scale”, with transnational labour activism increasing since the 2000s (Brookes/McCallum 2017: 201). Workers have scaled up their activities geographically and bridged space to expand the terrain of struggle outside the factory, the export processing zone, the region and the country, seeking to mobilise support on various scales to pressure employers, lead firms and states (Merk 2009: 606). “Jumping scale and bridging space” is a concept developed by labour geography that has described transnational labour activism (Merk 2009). It offers a broad spectrum for research scattered across various disciplines. There are no criteria for categorising the wide range of empirically observed types of transnational labour activism and the many different actors involved, but we roughly delineate two broad streams based on the actors in focus – workers and trade unions on the one hand and broader civil society alliances on the other.³

The first stream of research places global union efforts and bargaining campaigns at the heart of collective labour agency. Accordingly, the focus is on the global structures of the trade union movement and the ‘governance struggles’ (McCallum 2015) that are directed at modifying employment regulations at a transnational level. Most prominent governance tools are global framework agreements (GFAs) (Helfen/Fichter 2013; Brookes/McCallum 2017). GFAs are negotiated between a global union federation (GUF), such as IndustriALL Global Union or UNI Global Union, and the management of a TNC, with the purpose of ensuring minimum standards, social dialogue and collective bargaining at the TNC, its affiliates and sometimes also its suppliers. GFAs are, however, concentrated at TNCs with headquarters in Europe, particularly in Germany, France and Sweden, and more than 50 % of all GFAs were signed in three sectors – construction and wood, metal (largely automotive) and chemistry.⁴ In fact, the large majority of agreements have been achieved by IndustriALL.⁵

After some early hype, many studies show limited outcomes of GFAs on the ground, stressing the lack of local ownership and inclusion of trade unions at the production sites (Helfen/Fichter 2013; Bauer 2021) as well as the absence of a (global) regulatory apparatus to safeguard workers’ rights. McCallum (2013) identifies key reasons for the limited success of GFAs, namely a shortage of resources at GUFs, the absence or insufficient incorporation of local unions, the absence of communication between national trade unions and, last but not least, a lack of lead firms’ influence on suppliers.

The second stream focuses on broader advocacy networks that support particular struggles linked to GVCs/GPNs. Alliances of this kind not only cut across the boundaries of national/transnational, but also across production/consumption and labour/community (Munck 2002: 154-173). Scholarship on and from the global South in particular, goes beyond traditional ‘workplace’ issues and takes broader reproductive and livelihood issues into account, including housing, health care, domestic work, violence, etc., as well as broader development issues, including ecological and cultural concerns and resistance against the (neoliberal) model of development as such (Burawoy 2010; Ruwanpura 2015; Nowak 2017). This is also related to trade unions often being weak and concentrated in few (formal and/or public) sectors, making other institutions of labour agency important, including community, ethnic or religious groups and neighbourhoods, households and families (Bieler/Nowak 2021).

New phrases have been coined to describe this phenomenon as a form of “networked worker agency and activism”, including transnational advocacy networks (TANs), transnational labour alliances (TLAs) and networks of labour activism (NOLAs). One of the most prominent campaigns is probably the anti-sweatshop movement in the USA, Australia, Canada and the European Union (‘Clean Clothes Campaign’). Other examples include ethical campaigning around food and agrofuels production and the Global Workers Justice Alliance, which fights for migrant workers’ rights. Such campaigns are based on broad alliances, from independent or informal labour unions to development NGOs and human rights activists.

In contrast to the first stream, this scholarship focuses more closely on grassroots mobilisations around labour and wants to bring ‘non-unionized (or not solely unionized) worker agency into focus’ (Zajak et al. 2017: 901; Nowak 2017; Bieler/Nowak 2021). This form of labour-oriented activism is often separate from formal trade union organising and comparable to a ‘community unionism’ (Wills 2001) or ‘new social movement unionism’ perspective (Scipes 1992), which views unions as vehicles for broader socio-political change pursued in alliance with other social movements – women’s, ecological, human rights or peace movements. Both old and new social movement unionism have their roots in the global South and are quite distinctive from unionism in the global North. The “old social movement unionism” emerged during the 1970s and 80s in countries such as Brazil, South Africa and South Korea. Trade unionists fought side by

side with non-unionised workers and other social movements for democratisation and workers' rights. The "new social movement unionism" of the late 1990s is, unlike its predecessor, less affiliated with national political parties, or, in general, with national political organisations, and takes transnational organising more seriously (Waterman 1991; Webster et al. 2008; Nowak 2017: 968-69).

Accordingly, activists and academics take a critical view of (Northern dominated) global unions. Transnational union alliances tend to be dominated by their most powerful and financially strong affiliates, i.e. European- or U.S.-based unions, and their views and practices. This is especially true for unions in capital-intensive producer-driven chains such as automotive, machinery and chemistry. According to the criticism, many of the global unions have not moved beyond a conception of transnational collective bargaining. Sceptics argue that, beneath the surface, the international confederations' orientation to alliance-building and membership mobilisation is 'a largely strategic manoeuvre to cope with its weakened status within both the international corridors of power and the radical contours of the global justice movement' (Hodkinson 2005: 36, cited in Webster et al 2008: 196). They are unwilling or afraid to take on global capital (and solidarity with Southern labour), according to this criticism (Lindberg 2011; Palpacuer 2019).

Following the delineated research communities from the first and the second camp, a dividing line seems to exist between those who give priority to the labour issue and labour agency (stream one), and those who see livelihood struggles and rainbow coalitions as transformative forces (stream two). For researchers of the former, workers and their organisations are (the only) strategic actors. They argue that workers have a unique capacity to physically disrupt production and to appeal to employment relations institutions on various scales. Moreover, workers are embedded in laws, rules and regulations specific to the employment relationship. Thus, transnational labour alliances can afford a set of strategic tools that are unavailable to other types of actors (Brookes 2017; Selwyn 2016).

Marxist sociologists of work have developed the Power Resources Approach (PRA), which draws attention to the room for manoeuvre and strategic choices of workers. PRA comes from labour research (first stream), but was further developed in a lively debate among scholars and trade

unionists in the global North and South, and eventually transnationalised. Its origins go back to Erik Olin Wright (2000) and Beverly Silver (2003). They focused on structural power as the power stemming from labour's position in the economic system and the capacity it provides for disrupting capital accumulation, and associational power arising from collective political or trade union workers' associations. The basic concepts were extended by additional 'power resources', including societal power as the capacity arising from cooperation with other actors and organisations and the public support for workers' demands (Schmalz et al. 2018), and institutional power as the capacity to hold employers accountable 'through laws, regulations, and other formal or informal rules' (Brookes 2019; Chun 2009; see also contributions in *Global Labour Journal* 2018).

This newly awakened scholarly interest in the power resources of workers and the up-scaling of the – originally place-based – approach was a reaction to the emergence of new trade union movements, innovative organising strategies and campaigning between labour and non-labour actors, including at the transnational level. This also means that the PRA approach has not only been used to assess workers' and trade unions' traditional strategies and resources, but also to what extent labour can link with non-labour actors to increase power resources as well as to assess the strategies and resources of TANs, NOLAs and other social movements. Hence, while labour scholars used to link associational power to the predominant forms of formal worker organisations, such as trade unions, political parties and works councils, recent studies have examined associational power in more diverse, unconventional and informal forms, such as for rural migrant workers (Hui 2021) and informal workers (Britwum 2018).

The "value added" of a GVC/GPN perspective is also shown in PRA studies. It highlights that the manner in which workers and their organisations possess structural and associational power depends not only on power relations in employment relations and in society at the local and national context, but also on the role that workers and firms have in globally dispersed production networks. For example, workers who occupy choke points or bottlenecks in production processes – e.g. by making critical components – enjoy higher levels of structural power than those making easily replaceable goods (Brookes 2019). Just-in-time delivery and stringent buyer requirements can render supplier firms particularly vulner-

able to workers' action. In GVCs/GPNs with tight quality requirements, such as Fairtrade tea from Kenya, even small disruptions by workers can compromise a farm's ability to meet retailer demand (Riisgaard/Okinda 2018; Selwyn 2013). Globalised production does not only limit associational and coalitional power, but can also provide opportunities for transnational collaboration and activism, as Anner (2011) shows for manufacturing sectors (see also Brookes 2017).

5. Politics of scale: empirical insights into complex realities

The reality of transnational labour organising is of course complex and multi-faceted. Success depends on many factors, such as state-society relations, capital-labour relations and governance structures in GVCs/GPNs. Research into these factors cuts across the broadly defined camps defined above, showing that the two forms of today's labour internationalism – one based on unions, the other on grassroots alliances – are not clearly separable and that common challenges arise. We highlight four key issues complicating transnational labour organising, drawing on empirical insights from the literature and the contributions of this special issue.

Firstly, transnational organising networks can be rather diverse, including unions and many other actors, and do not need to represent the binary classifications outlined above. These networks are embedded in asymmetric North-South power relations and structures, which they can challenge or reproduce or do both at the same time. Transnational union activities today are not confined to capital-intensive sectors and Northern dominated top-down agency. Organising activities have reached out to the lower ends of GVCs/GPNs and into services. A good example of transnational union organising in these sectors is the GFA for private security guards, achieved by UNI Global Union and Service Employees International Union, or the regulations for hospitality workers negotiated by IUF that represents workers' associations in agriculture and catering. Both of these have a strong foothold in the global South (Helfen/Fichter 2013; McCallum 2015; Lindberg 2011). Ford's case study confirms a 'global union renewal' in Asia that goes beyond 'traditional constituencies': GUFs joined forces with (international) solidarity groups and local unions and reached

out to assist and organise temporary migrant workers. This ‘hybrid cooperation’ was particularly successful in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Thailand (Ford 2021). Union networks do also not necessarily revolve around big Northern-based GUFs. The ExChains network, for example, connects garment workers in South and South East Asia with works councils of big buyers in Germany. It cuts across the North-South divide and has established horizontal, non-hierarchical relationships between its members (Nowak 2021).

Asymmetric power structures, a frequent point of criticism regarding global trade union networks, also affect TANs and NOLAs. Dominance of well-equipped Northern NGOs can be found in ostensibly “horizontal” advocacy networks too, reproducing power hierarchies by benefiting voices from the global North and more institutionalised actors with larger resources (Palpacuer 2019). In addition, Wells makes the point that the role of Northern agency is privileged in successful campaigns for labour rights, thereby neglecting the role of Southern agency. He highlights the fact that local-level activism in factories in the South – in alliance with local communities – is a stronger determining factor of a movement’s success than the activities of Northern solidarity groups (Wells 2009; Seidman 2009).

In this special issue, two contributions specifically focus on power imbalances in transnational organising efforts. Jona Bauer and Anna Holl analyse institutionalised, trade union-centred, transnational labour rights mechanisms. By applying the PRA to two initiatives in the apparel sector, a GFA and the ACT on Living Wages Agreement between trade unions and global brands and retailers, they show that institutionalised labour relations in GVCs /GPNs can be “double-edged”. They provide a local channel for workers’ voices in conflicts with their direct employers, for instance in cases of union busting or withheld wages. At the same time, the mechanisms stabilise the position of lead firms by allowing them to govern labour issues more effectively and preventing worker struggles from spreading to other locations or scales. They also show that institutionalised mechanisms in their current state are not able to address sector-wide issues, such as low wages. Luke Sinwell in this issue also takes a critical stance on union politics, showing that union leaders facilitated the upscaling of a strike movement at platinum companies in South Africa while at the same

time trying to confine it within the scope of their own organisation in the context of inter-union competition.

Anti-sweatshop alliances such as the Clean Clothes Campaign are prominent evidence that it is also possible to use North-South power hierarchies in GVCs/GPNs to workers' advantage. In this issue, Karinda Flavell and Samantha Gunawardana contribute to the debate on the pitfalls of Northern-based solidarity efforts. They combine the PRA approach and feminist conceptualisations of power to unpack how activists engaged in Australian civil society organisations perceive different types of worker power of women garment workers in Asia and how these assumptions affect North-South cooperation in labour rights campaigns and funded projects. The article warns that when actors in the global North (intentionally or unintentionally) reproduce stereotypes, such as when framing women workers as passive and docile, they can end up ignoring worker agency in GVCs and within their own initiatives (see also Wells 2009).

In any event, the organisation of cross-border agency presents a great challenge for the actors involved. Many attempts at transnational organising collapsed, related to conflicts which emerge along divides caused by ideological and strategic differences, resource inequalities, and differentiated priorities and access to decision makers and elites (Brookes/McCallum 2017; Zajak et al. 2017). Regarding the organisation of action, while an over-centralisation and top-down approach can result in strategies that ignore local contexts and might lead to dysfunctional outcomes, a decentralised structure does not seem to be the solution either. If workers and their allied organisations do not establish a coordinating centre – be it a GUF or an experienced global grassroots network – they can only have an impact on single nodes of GVCs, at best. Thus, workers' organisations and networks need a certain degree of centralisation to coordinate action across specific locations; at the same time, they have to respond to specific logics in local and national contexts (Nowak 2021).

The complicated relationship between the local and the global is, *secondly*, a core topic in research linking transnational labour organising and GVCs. Critical statements towards cross-border “networks of labour” approaches can be found in the literature, stressing the continued importance of the local, national and regional focus of many struggles. Without local and national struggles and unionisation, transnational campaigns

and organising efforts remain weak and lose momentum. Gains can be consolidated, as many studies show, only by locally organised forces and their pressure on lead firms and local management to adhere to labour standards and on (sub-)national authorities to enforce them (Wells 2009; Ryland 2016; Schmalz et al. 2021). Studies further suggest different targets of struggles: while Northern advocacy campaigns mostly target lead firms or big buyers and are oriented towards large consumer markets, Southern labour confronts local authorities, on the firm and state level (Wells 2009). In short, many see the local and national still as the central “hub” where the success or failure of labour disputes is decided.

Several contributions in this special issue address the local-global relationship. In her case study of the cotton sector in Burkina Faso, Bettina Engels reiterates the importance of local organising. She extends the definition of “work” and “workers” beyond waged work and questions the adequacy of trade unions. This enables a broader view of worker organising, which leads her to argue that when local marginalised groups unite, they can resist global capital. However, her contribution also provides evidence that the ownership structure of companies and the type of links to end consumers can determine whether labour struggles at the local or global level succeed.

The local and national context clearly shapes organising possibilities and prospects. Jeroen Merk presents a failed effort of organising at the Nikomas footwear factory in Indonesia as an example of how national labour regulations and local elites can hinder worker unity. Even though the factory had been targeted by international campaigns, and workers, at least on paper, enjoy some degree of labour rights, successful worker organising did not materialise. His case study exemplifies the importance of local political economy factors in addition to GVC power dynamics. Merk’s contribution warns against the generalising of individual cases and points out that much can be learned, not only from successful organising, but also from failures.

Luke Sinwell’s study of the platinum workers’ strike in South Africa, on the other hand, shows that major worker movements can arise from the most basic forms of (local) worker cooperation. He traces the South African five-month strike at the world’s three biggest platinum companies in 2014 back to its beginnings, when two workers decided to confront

management with their wage demands. Activists were able to link to other struggles and broader social movements, nationally and transnationally. The case shows how GVC/GPNs are one concrete manifestation of the broader issue of global and national inequality. When workers at the lowest nodes of GVC/GPNs are able to put words to this inequality and organise, the demands can both move to different scales and foster broader social movements.

Hence, local and national struggles and transnational campaigning can complement each other. In regions where labour activism confronts authoritarianism, connecting the local to the global is essential. Joining forces with trade unions and NGOs in the global North can, in such settings, allow workers to connect to institutions and political contexts in other locations, such as formal complaint channels or GFAs, thus opening new avenues to exert pressure on lead firms (Anner 2015; Brookes 2019; Zajak et al. 2017). Similarly, transnational linkages to ethical campaigns, global multi-stakeholder initiatives or civil society campaigns can trigger a ‘boomerang’ effect (Keck/Sikkink 1998) whereby extra-local networks are used to upscale workers’ struggles and provoke powerful “outside” actors (e.g. states or lead firms) to intervene or influence behaviours of employers or authorities (Merk 2009). Research reveals a banal but cogent truth: success cannot be achieved without local organising but is strongest if organising is multi-scalar (Munck 2021; Schmalz et al. 2021). Hence, transnational activism should not be seen as a panacea but as an opportunity structure which can potentially provide local actors with additional sources of power (McCallum 2013; Zajak et al. 2017).

Thirdly, multi-scalar transnational organising faces “internal” differences that can become dividing lines. A fundamental barrier to organising, as Beverly Silver said, comes from workers themselves: workers maintain boundaries against others in order to defend particular privileges (Silver 2005). In other words, conflicts often do not develop along the line of capital, but take on the form of labour-labour conflicts. Internal division lines can evolve on a plant, firm or sector level, between blue-collar and white-collar, old and new or between regulated and informal or temporary workers or employees (Gerócs et al. 2021) as well as between workers of different gender, race, age, nationality or ethnicity (Mezzadri et al. 2021; Sproll 2022). This reduces the chances and scope of joint organising.

Labour-labour dividing lines also play out along the global North and South axis. For Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout (2008), the most fundamental challenge to labour internationalism in the age of globalisation remains that of bridging the North-South divide along GVCs. Some twenty years ago, Beverly Silver and Giovanni Arrighi also argued that this divide continues to be the main obstacle to the formation of a ‘homogenous world-proletarian condition’, as they call it. They argue that labour movements in the core have historically more often than not decided that their “bread is buttered” on the side of national-protectionism, which involved working-class racism and anti-immigrant stances (Silver/Arrighi 2000: 53, 71).

Feminist decolonial research shows, however, that difference does not necessarily have to create dividing lines. Rather, difference can be a fruitful starting point for rethinking workers in GVCs, worker organising, and transnational networks (Werner et al 2016; Desai/Rinaldo 2016). By acknowledging the plurality of perspectives and the intersectionality of oppression instead of fighting it, struggles and analyses can become broader and stronger. Along these lines, Madhumita Dutta argues, in her contribution, which is on the resistance of women in India, for a systematic integration of quotidian processes and everyday theorising into labour geography. She emphasises that social relations and lived experiences shape the politics of labour beyond wages and formal employment. Her feminist “bottom-up” approach to theory creation can do more justice to the role of everyday resistance and ‘knowledge production by working class women forged through work and struggle’ in workers’ lives and in broader struggles for labour rights than many earlier contributions in labour geography. In addition, Dutta’s article highlights how this change of perspective can open up space for new political alliances and solidarities.

Successful organising in highly fragmented platform economies with diverse labour forces also shows how difference does not have to be a limitation and has indeed fostered resistance and activism, based on global best practice and novel repertoires of action (Miguez/Menendez 2021). The contribution by Kruskaya Hidalgo Cordero shows how the rise of platform economies has exposed the limits of classic unions. At the same time, she emphasises that platform workers are subjected, to a varying extent, to categories of oppression such as class, gender and race. Her decolo-

nial perspective delivers empirical insights on how platform workers have created room for action within and beyond national borders despite these multiple dimensions of oppression. Workers can harness their global connectedness as an organising tool, as shown here in the case of delivery workers in Latin America, and specifically Ecuador. Naming and linking different experiences of oppression is a first step towards bridging the gap between workers in different locations and work relations. This process starts with everyday theory production, and shared platforms can facilitate the diffusion of such knowledge.

Fourthly, organising initiatives are confronted with a red-green divide. This can be considered a continuation of the distinction between those who “prioritise” labour and union-led struggles, and those focusing on social movement- or NOLA/TAN-led struggles. Particularly in the global South and in resource-based sectors (but not only), labour and social struggles have often been linked to broader livelihood and environmental issues, fighting against exploitation, the commodification of nature, and the destruction of livelihoods. Burawoy (2010) even argues that market-driven commodification (Polanyi) and not exploitation (Marx) is the key experience in our world today and that nature-linked struggles for land *and* labour will take the lead.

Meanwhile, the global union movement has also integrated environmental issues by putting ‘just transition’ at the centre of debates and politics around climate change (Rosemberg 2020; Stevis 2021). However, the concept has only been selectively picked up by national unions in the global North and even less in the global South. Newly emerging global regulatory strategies that embrace environmental *and* labour rights in GVCs/GPNs could bring “red” and “green” concerns together and foster transnationally organised joint activities. While international “soft law” standards such as the OECD and UN guidelines for multinational corporations remain rather toothless, recent legislative initiatives in countries in the global North have introduced mandatory human rights due diligence for lead firms and their supply chains. Depending on their reach and design, due diligence laws have the potential to support levelling some of the power imbalances in GVCs (see Lorenzen 2022). Transnational legal activism will be most successful where it combines (and not plays off against each other) labour and environmental issues, and when it addresses and seeks

to resolve inequalities and asymmetric power relations between actors in the global North and South (Seck 2018).

Research can facilitate a synthesis between labour and environmental struggles by including the reproductive sphere and broader livelihood issues, in which workers are embedded, as has been stressed by feminist, intersectional and decolonial perspectives. If workers conceive of themselves as ecologically vulnerable and embedded in relationships of family, community, and environment, the 'labour vs environment contestation could be re-imagined as a mutually beneficial search for sustainable livelihood choices', as Seck (2019: 7) states. In their contributions, Bettina Engels, Luke Sinwell and Mahudmita Dutta show space for new political alliances and solidarities based on such a broader and more interrelated view of labour and environmental issues. Forging a common agenda between labour, social, livelihood and environmental issues, and among countries of the global North and South remains a key issue facing transnational solidarity on a global scale. This will require a strategic multi-scalar and intersectional perspective beyond binaries like local versus global or North versus South.

As Munck (2021) argues, there has been an opposition set up in labour studies between "old" and "new" social movements. "Old" social movements, here defined as union-centred alliances, are deemed bureaucratic and stale, top-down, largely located in the global North and focusing on the state and the local level, whereas "new" movements, here defined as NOLAs and TANs, are seen as democratic and vibrant, bottom-up and global, focusing on the broader civil society and including and emerging from the global South. We discussed the fact that these binaries cannot be supported by the increasing number of empirical case studies of transnational organising. Labour struggles do not fit neatly into one of the two camps we have identified above. Yet, more importantly, such binaries do not help in developing strategies for labour organising in a globalised world and for understanding successes and failures and addressing related challenges. Analysis of transnational labour organising must remain attentive to contexts while of course aiming to identify generalisable factors of success and failure in the context of broader dynamics of global capitalism.

Speaking of generalisable factors of success and failure, although there is an increasing number of case studies from different sectors and locations,

we do not have systematic knowledge about the overall number, characteristics and outcomes of transnational labour organising. Marissa Brookes' contribution in this special issue addresses this lacuna by introducing and critically analysing the efforts around establishing the Transnational Labor Alliances Database. The database collects information on the characteristics, actors and developments of a great number of successful and failed transnational organising attempts. The article explores the possibilities and limits of large-N qualitative data collection. She proposes a typology of TLAs, asking (1) who workers are, (2) what they want, (3) where they campaign, (4) why the TLA forms, and (5) how tactics are deployed. This stakes out a path for comparative work on the power dynamics, political contexts and varied actors which cooperate in the context of GVCs and strengthen or weaken campaigns.

6. Conclusions

This article gave an overview of literature on GVCs/GPNs and labour and specifically on the role, possibilities and limits of transnational labour organising in GVCs. GVC/GPN research has clearly evolved and incorporated workers and concepts from labour research into its theoretical and, particularly, empirical analysis. In turn, labour research from different perspectives has taken up a chain and network perspective that helps to situate labour exploitation and struggles in multi-scalar hierarchical contexts, sector dynamics and lead firm strategies. These relations are mutually fruitful, providing a broad case study literature on experiences of workers and agency in global production in many sectors and locations.

Labour as a transnational actor has been approached from different actors' perspectives, but there are common challenges related to organisational issues, conflicts of interest and different priorities, as well as resource inequalities and power asymmetries among actors within transnational organising. A GVC/GPN perspective can help us to understand such asymmetries and the material possibilities and limitations of solidarity between workers in different positions in GVCs/GPNs. Analysis of the structure of GVCs/GPNs, their power relations and value expropriation and distribution, can also help us to find leverage points with which

to challenge firm strategies. The focus on production needs to be expanded in order to understand power relations, struggles and solidarities, and in order to include the sphere of reproduction as well as that of livelihoods and discursive aspects of power.

When it comes to resistance and organising in globalised production, local actors and struggles are crucial for success. Transnational relations have supported organising and struggles, but, without a local base, transnational initiatives and campaigns remain weak and unsustainable. Issues beyond classical workers' issues are crucial in order to forge alliances and to be relevant for the majority of workers. Dynamics in the workplace and in households as well as the commodification of nature in the context of broader neoliberal development projects affect workers all over the world every day. Forging a common agenda between labour, livelihood and environmental issues and the global North and South remains a (or the) key issue facing transnational solidarity on a global scale. This will require a strategic multi-scalar and intersectional perspective beyond the binary opposition of local versus global.

- 1 Behind these acronyms are different strands of research that have been discussed, for example, in Bair (2005), Hess (2009) and Fischer et al. (2021). In this article, we use the respective acronyms if we refer to their genealogies; when we address general issues independent of the theoretical background or empirical findings, we talk about GVCs/GPNs.
- 2 www.capturingthegains.org (accessed in November 25, 2021).
- 3 This research field has been labeled new global labour studies (NGLS), which is in itself an interdisciplinary field. NGLS emerging in the 2000s can be differentiated from new international labour studies (NILS) emerging in the 1980s. While both focus on studying labour from a global perspective and bringing labour (agency) into the analysis of globalisation, expanding the traditional, Euro/global North-centric industrial relations approach, NILS tends to focus on national labour movements transnationalising while NGLS on broader global labour movements and alliances (Brookes/McCallum 2017). This distinction is related to the distinction in the literature into "old labour transnationalism" (which began in the 19th century lasting until the last decade of the 20th century) based on trade unions, political parties and other bureaucratic organisations, and "new labour transnationalism" or "social movement unionism" based on social movements and more decentralised and horizontal networks, often coming from the global South (Webster et al. 2008). The two strands we outline below are based on this distinction.

- 4 European Commission and International Labour Organisation, “Database on transnational company agreements”, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=978> (data from 2019, accessed in November 25, 2021).
- 5 For a list of GFAs concluded between IndustriALL and TNCs, see: www.industriall-union.org/global-framework-agreements (accessed in November 25, 2021).

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*ABSTRACT Dieser Artikel gibt einen Überblick über die theoretischen und empirischen Bemühungen, die vielfältigen Dimensionen zu verstehen, die eine (transnationale) Organisierung von Arbeiter*innen im Kontext globalisierter Produktion ermöglichen und einschränken. Zu diesem Zweck werden Ketten- und Netzwerkansätze in einen produktiven Dialog mit den Labour Studies gebracht und die Beiträge im Heft den verschiedenen theoretischen Ansätzen*

*und Debattensträngen zugeordnet. Ausgehend von diesen Debatten und den Fallstudien dieser Schwerpunktausgabe identifiziert der Beitrag unterschiedliche Akteure und Strategien und liefert empirische Einsichten in die komplexen politics of scale bei der Organisation von Arbeitskämpfen. Vier zentrale Faktoren erschweren aus Sicht der Autor*innen die Organisation von Arbeiter*innen entlang von globalen Wertschöpfungsketten: (i) asymmetrische Machtverhältnisse bei Organisationsprozessen, insbesondere zwischen Akteuren im Globalen Norden und im Globalen Süden, (ii) die anhaltende Bedeutung der lokalen und nationalen Ebene, (iii) Unterschiede und Trennlinien zwischen Arbeiter*innen sowie (iv) die Spaltung zwischen „roten“ und „grünen“ Anliegen. Der Artikel unterstreicht die Bedeutung einer multi-skalaren und intersektionalen Perspektive auf transnationale Organisation. Ein solcher Zugang berücksichtigt die zentrale Rolle lokaler Bündnisse ebenso wie die Chancen und Grenzen, die sich aus transnationalen Organisationsbemühungen in Kämpfen gegen das globalisierte Kapital ergeben.*

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The Transnational Labor Alliances Database Project: Methods, Problems, and Progress

ABSTRACT *Transnational labour alliance (TLA) campaigns have been the subject of sustained scholarly inquiry for more than two decades. Nevertheless, little is known about the overall characteristics of TLA campaigns in general, in part because the full population of cases remains unknown. This article begins to fill this lacuna by introducing the Transnational Labor Alliances Database Project, an archive of primary and secondary documents and researcher-assembled case summaries created by the author over six years, with the help of over 100 undergraduate research assistants. This article explains the methodology of the project as well as several important limitations of the database in its current state. Additionally, this article provides a theoretical overview of key themes relevant to the analysis of TLAs and an empirical overview of broad trends in TLA campaigns. It makes a first step towards developing a typology of TLAs and argues that TLAs vary across at least five key dimensions: (1) who the main actors are; (2) what workers want; (3) where the campaign occurs; (4) why the TLA forms in the first place; and (5) how tactics are deployed.*

KEYWORDS *activism, database, labour, transnational, unions*

1. Introduction

In the late 2000s I set out to research what was then a fairly niche topic: transnational labour alliance (TLA) campaigns, meaning active collaborations among workers from two or more countries in efforts to improve working conditions and labour rights by changing the behav-

ior of a transnational corporation (TNC) or other employer. Thanks to a handful of excellent case studies scattered across the fields of geography, sociology, and industrial relations, I knew of a few TLAs. Yet beyond this small sample of examples, I knew next to nothing about the total number of TLAs in existence, the countries or regions most originated from, or the main strategies, issues, and goals characterising their campaigns. As it turned out, no one else knew either. Unlike well-worn social science subjects such as democratisation or interstate conflict, the topic of TLAs lacked a large-N dataset or other comprehensive collection of cases. The full population of TLA campaigns is in fact unknown, despite thousands of interviews, on-site observations, document analyses, and case studies conducted on the subject by scholars across several disciplines from the 2010s onward. Hence, full descriptive inference has been inhibited, as has the sort of research that could lead to more generalisable claims about cause and effect.

Nevertheless, one must start somewhere. Thus, undeterred by these limitations, I proceeded in a piecemeal fashion to collect as much information as I could on TLAs via news archives, union websites, and academic articles. I made phone calls. I met activists. I boarded planes to speak with union officials in Australia, the UK, and the US and corresponded with activists from Cambodia, Germany, the Netherlands, and elsewhere. Nearly every interview revealed another TLA previously unknown to me: tense standoffs, aborted alliances, unpublicised failures, and quiet wins, mentioned offhand through casual anecdotes over hot tea or a cold beer. I jotted down notes, then later attempted to collect as much information as I could on each new case I came across. By the time I began my first tenure-track job at UC Riverside in 2013, I had shoved scores of news clippings, flyers, pamphlets, printouts, and other hard copy documents into an over-stuffed filing cabinet in a somewhat absurd attempt to construct a physical database of every TLA campaign ever known.

For the sake of efficiency, the environment, and my sanity, I decided to go digital. Thus, in 2015 I launched the Transnational Labor Alliances Database Project (TLA Project). The purpose of this project is to construct a database documenting the basic facts of all known TLA campaigns, including both success and failure cases, occurring since the end of the Cold War. Currently, the database contains 1) chronologically ordered primary

and secondary sources with relevant information on each campaign and 2) brief overviews summarising each case's basic facts, including a detailed timeline of key events. At the time of this writing, 69 out of 155 cases in the database have final timelines, according to the criteria for 'finished', explained below.¹

This database is the first of its kind. To my knowledge there is no centralised listing of TLA campaigns, let alone a comprehensive database conducive to the systematic identification of patterns in labour transnationalism. My intention is for this database to serve not only academic researchers, but also union officials, labour activists, and others in the labour movement, by facilitating the identification of TLA campaigns suitable for systematic comparison using qualitative methods of causal analysis (e.g., Mills' methods, typological theory, set theoretic analysis, and most-likely, least-likely, deviant, and outlier case studies), as well as potential quantitative analyses if variables are eventually coded into a quantitative dataset.

This article begins by contextualising the TLA Project within New Global Labour Studies (NGLS) and some broader theoretical debates in the social sciences. In the next two sections, I explain the methodology of the project as well as several important methodological limitations of the database in its current state. The section after that provides an empirical overview of broad trends in TLA campaigns based on findings from the database to date. Finally, this article concludes with a commentary on the knowns and unknowns of TLA campaigns with an aim toward developing a typology of TLAs and informing directions for future research.

2. TLA data in context

TLA campaigns have been the subject of sustained scholarly inquiry for more than two decades (Sarkar/Kuruvillea 2020; Thomas 2019; Brookes 2019; Zajak et al. 2018; Evans 2014, 2010; McCallum 2013; Kay 2011; Anner 2011; Fairbrother et al. 2011; Croucher/Cotton 2009; Bronfenbrenner 2007; Herod 2003; Harrod/O'Brien 2002; Mazur 2000; Johns 1998). Through careful research, scholars of labour transnationalism have shed light on the dynamics of TLAs and their interactions with employers. Moreover, while

older analyses of labour transnationalism tended to centre on primarily descriptive, single case studies of success stories, in recent years more research has analysed unsuccessful campaigns and made use of comparative case studies, answering the call for more middle-range theories in the study of TLAs (Brookes/McCallum 2017). Indeed, we have learned quite a lot in the nearly quarter of a century since the launch of the New Labour Internationalism and the subsequent so-called NGLS.²

Nevertheless, there remain serious barriers to systematic research on TLA campaigns. Although scholars across the social sciences have analysed various forms of labour mobilisation to gain insight into enduring questions about the future of economic inequality, state-sponsored social protections, supply chain politics, and corporate social responsibility, the contribution of TLA campaigns in particular to these major issues remains mostly unknown, as productive dialogue between NGLS scholars and more mainstream social scientists has not always been forthcoming. While the latter sometimes neglect to treat labour as an actor with agency, the former too often eschew direct engagement with mainstream academic debates in favour of more narrow analyses. Data limitations are part of the problem: It is difficult to draw connections between TLA campaigns and big-picture questions in political science, sociology, and economics without enough data to conduct rigorous case studies and develop middle-range theories (Brookes/McCallum 2017: 210). The TLA Project can help to address this challenge.

There are several ways in which a large-N qualitative database of TLA campaigns can connect labour scholarship with current debates in the social sciences. For instance, scholars continue to ask whether states (national governments) are capable of countering the “race to the bottom” in labour rights due to international capital mobility (Ye 2020; Rodrik 2012; Silver 2003; Lindblom 1982). For some, the erosion of welfare states in the global North and the disappearance or nonexistence of social protections in the global South are clear signs of states’ complicity in the treatment of workers as mere commodities. Yet, some TLA campaigns have successfully persuaded states to enhance worker protections. For instance, the Campaign Against Precarious employment, a TLA supporting public sector workers in Turkey in the 2010s, concluded with a government decree effectively ending the outsourcing of central and local government workers

(Acevedo/Ibrahim/Morillo 2019). More systematic case studies of similar TLA campaigns could help uncover the conditions under which states become more willing to act in labour's favour.

Another pressing question concerns private governance, meaning regulation without formal government intervention (Amengual/Kuruwilla 2020; Vogel 2010). Is private governance a viable means of securing labour rights for employees of TNCs? When do corporations respond to the regulatory efforts of non-state actors? These questions are important, because the NGLS developed “largely in parallel with what is by now a mature body of literature in comparative and international political economy on corporate strategy and institutional change,” which “overlook[s] labour as a causal factor in the construction of a political-economic landscape” (Brookes/McCallum 2017: 211). Again, the TLA Project can help. Its data includes numerous campaigns that have changed the behaviour of transnational employers without any state intervention, offering evidence that private governance is at least possible. For example, a TLA campaign centred on Nestlé helped 53 workers in Indonesia win their jobs back and sign a collective bargaining agreement in 2011 (Kim/Lee/Ourkhan 2016), and in 2015 a TLA helped workers unionise every Coca-Cola bottling plant in Guatemala (Aguilar/Chao/Lee/Perez-Lar 2016). A large-N analysis of cases that fall into this category would enhance our knowledge of the conditions conducive to corporate regulation by non-state actors, while comparative case studies could reveal the mechanisms through which such private governance actually occurs.

Data from the TLA Project can also connect NGLS scholars with sociologists, economists, and geographers debating the (dis)advantages of analysing work and employment through a global value chain (GVC) or a global production network (GPN) framework (Coe/Yeung 2019; Selwyn/Musiolek/Ijarja 2020; Barrientos 2014; Gereffi 2014; Bair 2005). Specifically, the systematic analysis of TLA strategies can benefit from GVC and GPN theories of TNCs as both structures and actors. On the one hand, GVC theories' emphasis on corporate structures helps explain why some supply chain arrangements are more vulnerable than others to globally coordinated industrial action. On the other hand, GPN theories' emphasis on TNCs as actors can help us understand how both TNCs and TLAs make strategic use of the overlapping and sometimes contradictory web of

national and subnational laws and regulations in which supply chains are embedded. Such analyses, in turn, can further debates over how well GVC *vs.* GPN theories help us understand power relationships among actors across supply chains.

Among the most contentious subjects of scholarly debate is the resilience of neoliberal globalisation, especially in the context of growing populism, increasing economic nationalism, the rise of China, environmental crises, and supply chain challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 global pandemic (Schulze-Cleven/Vachon 2021). What is the future of globalisation? What would be the impact on labour if globalisation were to slow down or reverse in the coming years? More systematic analyses of labour campaigns using TLA Project data can speak to all of these issues. For instance, since globalisation's future will depend in part on the public's acceptance or rejection of free trade and the free flow of finance, it can be informative to analyse TLAs' strategic use of free trade agreements to protect rather than restrict labour rights (Scherrer 2020; Raess/Dür/Sari 2018; Kay 2011). Case studies of TLAs during the COVID-19 pandemic can likewise shed light on the future of globalisation by revealing the connection between a public health crisis and transnational activists' demands for better health and safety provisions along GVCs/GPNs (van Barneveld 2020; Stevano/Ali/Jamieson 2020; McNamara/Newman 2020).

In sum, data from the TLA Project make middle-range theorising possible. While NGLS scholars and those in the mainstream social sciences have made great progress in analysing their respective areas of expertise, more and better data on TLA campaigns create the potential for both sets of scholars to engage in a more productive dialogue with each other.

3. Methods of data collection

As noted above, the purpose of the Transnational Labor Alliances Database Project is to construct a database documenting the basic facts of transnational labour campaigns occurring since the late 1990s. TLA campaigns are defined as active collaborations among trade unions or other organised groups of workers from two or more countries, which attempt to address labour rights or employment relations issues with a TNC or other

employer. Active collaboration refers to deliberate, conscious planning on the part of the two (or more) workers' groups who formed the alliance. The TLA Project is housed in Google Drive and backed up weekly offline on a solid state drive.

Based on my physical collection outlined in the introduction, I began in 2015 by organising a small number of case files in a Google Drive folder according to the name of the main employer involved (with a few exceptions) and uploading relevant documents with information on each campaign. I then recruited and trained undergraduate students at the University of California, Riverside, to work as research assistants (RAs) collecting and uploading secondary sources for each case in the database. At the time of this writing, there are 24 undergraduate RAs working under my supervision on the TLA Project, either for course credit, for pay, or on a volunteer basis. Since the TLA Project's inception, I have trained over 150 undergraduates in methods of data collection and organisation. Each RA spends anywhere from 10 weeks to three years working on data collection for between three to six hours per week. Each RA is tasked with two main objectives: to build an archive of all publicly available sources with information on a given case, and assemble that case-specific information into a detailed timeline of events.

The process involves four steps. First, the RA collects all sources with relevant information on that campaign using Nexis Uni, Google, Google Scholar, Way Back Machine (archive.org), YouTube, social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, and the websites of unions, corporations, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Trade Union Advisory Committee, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the European Industrial Relations Observatory, and other relevant organisations. The RA then uploads these sources as pdfs, sound files (mp3s), videos (mp4s), or photos in the Google Drive, naming each file with a code for the year, month, and day of publication. Second, the RA uses these sources and a template I created to construct a comprehensive timeline recounting each campaign's basic facts and key events. The timeline template includes entries for information on the employer involved, the unions or other workers' organisations involved, any coalitional supporters beyond the labour movement, the main issues or dispute, the outcome, and important dates and events, summarised in chronolog-

ical order. All event entries include citations to sources contained in the TLA Project case file in the Google Drive.

Third, I have a second RA construct a separate timeline (without seeing the first one), using the same sources. Fourth, in order to check for inter-coder reliability, I examine both timelines for gaps, ambiguities, or inconsistencies and note any needs for additional research (e.g., information to be gathered in interviews) before merging them into a final timeline.³ At that point, we consider the case ‘finished.’ In other words, to be considered finished, a case folder must have two completed timelines plus one merged ‘final’ timeline, with our full understanding that relying on publicly available secondary sources does not actually render a case file complete in the sense of having obtained full knowledge of all events of the campaign. Rather, ‘finished’ case files are meant to serve as skeletons of case studies that can be utilised in future research that will necessarily involve supplementing our data with primary sources, including interviews with the key actors involved in each campaign.

Indeed, interviews and additional fieldwork in general are not only vital in order to fill gaps in our completed timelines, but also to expand the number of different perspectives represented in the data. Moreover, interviews have been crucial for learning about failed campaigns, which are rarely publicised. Since one goal is for this database to be as comprehensive as possible, I frequently add new cases to the Google Drive. To discover additional campaigns, I continue to use a variety of print and internet sources, including searches on websites of the nine Global Union Federations (GUFs), which collectively represent over 207 million workers in 163 countries and territories (AFL-CIO 2021) and have been instrumental in coordinating TLA campaigns.

Also, in February and March 2016, I conducted a round of semi-structured interviews in Geneva, Switzerland with officials and staff at the ILO, three GUFs (IUF, BWI, and IndustriALL),⁴ the Swiss union UNIA, and a former trade union leader from Ethiopia. The interviews served two purposes: Firstly, I was able to learn additional information about several transnational labour campaigns in the database, (especially IKEA, Nestle, NXP, Sheraton, and Unilever) that helped explain, clarify, and add to the data we obtained from publicly available sources.⁵ Secondly, I obtained advice and feedback on the database project itself from knowledgeable offi-

cials and staff, who offered a wide range of perspectives on the value of the database and the procedures I am using to collect and code the relevant data.⁶ Additionally, while in Geneva, I gave a formal presentation on this database project to two dozen staff from the Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) and the Multinational Enterprises and Enterprise Engagement Unit (MULTI) sections of the ILO. The project was well-received by these groups, which offered valuable feedback, insights, and advice.

4. Database struggles: five major methodological problems

Perhaps the most obvious flaw in the TLA Database Project is our nearly exclusive reliance on publicly available information.⁷ Granted, one goal of the project is simply to serve as an archive, collecting in one convenient location all publicly available documents, images, and videos pertaining to each case. Nonetheless, the 'finished' timelines are necessarily incomplete, as information available to the public likely obscures some of the less palatable aspects of labour-employer negotiations. Several interview subjects have revealed to me that a lot of 'real' campaign activity occurs behind closed doors in private negotiations between union leaders and the owners and managers of the companies in question. While this is not surprising, it does highlight one methodological limitation in our data collection process and underscores the necessity of conducting additional interviews with employers, managers, union officials, workers, and other campaign participants who participated in or have close knowledge of the transnational campaigns we are documenting in order to gain well-rounded accounts of each campaign.

A second, related flaw in the database is an underrepresentation of unsuccessful TLA campaigns. Unions tend not to publicise their own failures. Hence, it is highly probable that success stories are overrepresented in the publicly available data on which the project is based. Moreover, campaigns that are documented on organisations' websites and on social media often cease to be updated if they take a turn for the worse or reach a stage of stalemate, at which point information slows to a trickle. In extreme cases, evidence of a campaign can disappear from the internet altogether, particularly if it failed and its participants were drawn into

lawsuits requiring campaign materials to be taken down. Our use of Way Back Machine and Google cached pages helps remedy this issue to some extent. Still, it is ultimately up to the researcher to surmise that a campaign has failed based on context clues.

Compounding the selection bias problem is the fact that failure cases are fairly difficult to code in the first place, since even the actors who were actually involved in these campaigns disagree among themselves on what success even means. Existing scholarly work on TLA campaigns has defined an unsuccessful campaign as one that does not improve the material well-being or strategic capacity of any of the workers involved, or one that does so but at the price of some heavier material or strategic loss (Brookes 2019). Nevertheless, the best one can do when it comes to coding a case is to take into account all available viewpoints, weighing each view as fully and objectively as possible. Once again, in-depth interviews with a variety of campaign participants can go a long way toward improving the external validity of the data.

A third major flaw in the TLA database is our overwhelming reliance on English-language sources. This bias is due to the principal investigator of the TLA Project being a native English speaker based in the US. The RAs come from a variety of backgrounds but are all fluent in English and trained to carry out the data collection in English. Consequently, TLA campaigns that involve few or no English speaking individuals or organisations are far less likely to be represented in the data. We are increasingly collecting non-English-language sources that contain information on many of these campaigns by using different countries' Google search pages and news sites. Many of the RAs are fluent in Spanish, which helps increase the diversity of cases documented. Still, translations of sources are necessarily restricted to the language skills of the present research team. Only a truly global collaboration of researchers would be able to resolve our unintentional exclusion of campaigns that have no documentation in English and, consequently, are not known to us at this time.

Fourth, our database struggles to stay up to date. Despite hours of dedicated data collection nearly every week of the year, we are unable to stay abreast of new developments in all of the ongoing campaigns. Moreover, sometimes previously 'closed' cases with final timelines reopen, as new activities unfold in what were assumed to be concluded campaigns.

Such 'moving targets' make it challenging to keep our information up to date. The TLA project is already a labour-intensive process. The process is time-consuming because it requires one to first gather all of the basic facts of each campaign using a breadth of online sources. The large volume of data produced for each case then has to be sorted, read, and processed into a summary sheet and timeline. While my team of undergraduate RAs has been invaluable for the project, there is also a relatively high turnover among the RAs, as students graduate or leave the project to focus on coursework and careers. A more permanent research team, or perhaps the inclusion of RAs from many different countries, could help keep the TLA Project accurate and timely.

A fifth major flaw in the TLA database is due to disagreement among researchers and campaign participants themselves over what exactly constitutes a TLA and what exactly constitutes a campaign. Hence, despite staying true to the working definition of a TLA campaign as provided above, researchers must recognise that the cases included in the project contain some heterogeneity. There are different types of transnational campaigns represented in the database, including strictly bilateral labour alliances, multilateral alliances, and campaigns predominantly led and coordinated by a Global Union. While all campaigns entail some level of active transnational solidarity among unions or other organised groups of workers, not all of them focus on issues spanning several countries. Many have a more narrow focus on a single country or even just one workplace. And although there are some instances of cross-national collaboration involving only national (or subnational) unions or workers cooperating directly with other national (or subnational) unions or workers, the majority of TLAs in our database involve the direct participation of one or more international organisations, especially the Global Unions (most prominently, BWI, IndustriALL, ITF, IUF, and UNI), as well as one or more non-labour supporters, such as nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), human rights advocates, or consumer groups.

Goals vary as well. Some simply strive to reinstate a group of fired workers or gain union recognition from an employer. Yet others aim for longer-term objectives, such as obtaining a floor wage for an entire industry. Some campaigns are clearly reactive, meaning workers and unions responded to some change in behaviour or expectations from

the employer in question, while others are clearly proactive, meaning that labour initiated engagement with the employer in launching the campaign.

The danger of conceptual stretching is to treat oranges as apples and draw flawed conclusions based on a misunderstanding of the basic units of analysis. “Conceptualisation cannot remain an open question. Until scholars can better categorise different instances of labour transnationalism, neither small-N comparative case studies nor large-N statistical analyses can be carried out effectively”, since having clear categories “not only makes comparison possible but also alerts researchers to the relevant larger literature that might already offer some answers to the questions NGLS scholars have asked” (Brookes/McCallum 2017: 212). Hence, going forward it will be important to pay attention to distinctions such as those noted above. Below, I attempt to undertake a more systematic categorisation of TLA types in order to more precisely delineate these differences and any important analytical implications that these differences indicate. I also report some other findings from the TLA Project in general.

5. Progress nonetheless: some initial findings

As noted above, the TLA Project currently contains 155 campaign folders. Each folder contains anywhere from one to over 100 sources in the form of PDFs, JPGs, MP3s, and MP4s with information relevant to that particular campaign. Of the 155 folders, 69 (nearly 44.5%) contain ‘final’ timelines, 17 (nearly 11%) have two completed timelines that have yet to be merged into a final timeline, and 29 (just over 18%) have one completed timeline. The oldest TLA campaign documented in this database began in 1990 (Ravenswood Aluminum Corporation), unless one counts the International Transport Federation’s Flags of Convenience (FOC) campaign as beginning in 1948, when the ITF officially brought the issue to broader public attention, although the majority of FOC campaign activities documented in the TLA Project took place in the 2000s and 2010s (Shafer/Hotrum/Farison 2019). The newest TLA campaign to be documented (on an ongoing basis) in the database is the Make Amazon Pay Campaign, with updates as recent as November 2021.

TLA campaigns have originated from every continent except Antarctica.⁸ Common countries of origin for workplace disputes that eventually evolve into full transnational labour campaigns are Australia, Canada, Colombia, Germany, Honduras, India, Indonesia, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa, Sweden, the Netherlands, Turkey, the UK, and the US. While a fair share of authoritarian countries are represented in the data, the majority of TLA campaigns documented originate or otherwise play out predominantly in democratic countries. This is likely at least partially due to the fact that many of the Global Unions and other international organisations choose to operate only in democracies, given limited resources and the obvious constraints created by countries that repress freedom of association, assembly, and expression.

The home country of the employers targeted in TLA campaigns also varies widely, but more often than not involves a TNC or an employer that is otherwise intimately linked to a larger global production network. While TNCs headquartered in the US and the European Union are frequent targets of TLA campaigns, it appears that TLAs are increasingly targeting companies based in countries of the global South. Recent examples include campaigns aimed at Turkish Airlines, the Guyana Sugar Company, Robertson Winery in South Africa, Hotel Tharabar Gate in Myanmar, Jasic Technology Company in China, Philippine seafood giant Citra Mina, and Indonesian restaurant chain PT Champ Resto.

A vast range of industries are also represented in the data. Appearing frequently in the case files are workplaces centred on food and beverage production, food service, hotels, manufacturing (especially automobiles, garment, and electronics), retail (including clothing and supermarkets), shipping and logistics, and transportation services. Earlier campaigns from the 1990s through the mid-2000s appear to focus more on workers involved in the manufacturing and delivery of goods, whereas newer campaigns from the late 2000s through the present decade encompass more service sector workers. That said, since the COVID-19 pandemic displaced an enormous number of service sector workers in lodging, travel, tourism, and food service, it remains to be seen whether or not TLAs will continue to trend toward targeting service industry employers in the near future.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the TLAs documented utilise diverse tactics in their campaigns. Actions include, but are not limited to: appealing to

government authorities, boycotts, click-and-send website forms, court cases, email blitzes, go-slows, ILO complaints, invoking the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, letter writing, marches, 'naming and shaming' on social media, petitions, private negotiations between Global Unions and corporate leaders, protests, rallies, research reports, shareholder votes, sit-ins, strikes, and walk-outs. Many TLAs include groups of loosely affiliated workers not organised into any union or other formal organisation, such as the 2011 TLA focused on seasonal agricultural workers migrating from Mexico to Canada (Carrera/Aguirre Avila 2021), although no TLAs consisted exclusively of such groups. While most TLAs involved one or more Global Unions to some extent, others, such as the 2012-13 Adidas TLA involving workers in Argentina, the Dominican Republic, Indonesia, and Nicaragua (Acevedo/Bolanos 2020), did not.

Different Global Unions appear to prefer different types of involvement in TLA campaigns and emphasise different types of goals. For instance, the data suggest some disagreement among the Global Unions about the desirability of Global Framework Agreements (GFAs) as the end result of a transnational campaign as opposed to a means to an end or even a useless distraction. There also appears to be a difference between Global Unions that take on issues brought to them by unions or workers from countries in which a dispute is already unfolding and those that prefer to take it upon themselves to identify areas that could potentially benefit from a TLA campaign. Another interesting divide among the Global Unions is the extent to which they have attempted to include workers from China in TLA campaigns. For instance, the ITF and UNI, and to a lesser extent IndustriALL, have made efforts to engage the state-controlled All China Federation of Trade Unions directly; the other Global Unions have not (Brookes 2021).

Another finding is that TLAs also commonly attract supporters from beyond the labour movement, although some campaigns remain entirely in the realm of labour relations. For instance, the TLA fighting wage theft and poor working conditions at grocery store chain El Super gained support from nonprofit and grassroots organisations such as Strategic Action for a Just Economy and Ollin Cali Maquila Network and Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (Border Committee of Women Workers) (Gonzalez 2016), whereas the main participants in the transnational campaign focused on paper products corporation Kimberly-Clark were unions from Colombia

and the US (Torres/Kahlon/Farison 2018). When non-labour stakeholders do become involved, they tend to be either local community, legal assistance, or religious organisations or international consumer, environmental, human rights, or shareholder groups. Such coalitional support ranges from relatively hands-off help in the form of advice or financial resources to more hands-on activities such as union activist training, direct participation in rallies and protests, or orchestrating an international boycott of goods or services.

Moreover, whereas unions were the dominant actors in earlier TLAs, more recent TLAs include a broader spectrum of actors, including casual employees on short-term contracts, workers in the informal economy, and international migrants. For example, a TLA campaign focused on British multinational retailer Marks and Spencer won permanent contracts for thousands of UK migrant agency workers in 2008 (Patel/Tarango/Lee 2016). TLAs also fought for migrants' working and living conditions at US tobacco company Reynolds in 2007, against the blacklisting of Mexican migrant activists in Canada in 2011, and for migrant cruise ship workers' visa and reentry rights in New Zealand in 2021. Migrants have also become more active campaign participants. For instance, migrant workers joined unions from Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Thailand in a campaign protesting factory closures by international underwear manufacturer Triumph in 2009, and Polish and Lithuanian migrants played a key part in a campaign focused on Norwegian salmon and trout exporter Norse Production in 2012.

5.1 Toward a typology of TLAs?

All of the findings noted above are helpful for constructing a typology of TLA campaigns. Granted, because only 69 of the TLA Project's 155 cases have been coded as of this writing, a realistic attempt to group cases at this stage should strive less for a clear typology and more for a loose categorisation to be refined through further analysis. Crucially, TLAs appear to vary on at least five key dimensions: (1) *who* the main actors are, (2) *what* workers want, (3) *where* the campaign occurs, (4) *why* the TLA forms in the first place, and (5) *how* tactics are deployed. First, we can divide TLAs based on who comprises the alliance (e.g., two unions, multiple unions, Global Union and its allies, or two or more groups of nonunion-

ised workers) and who they target (e.g., TNCs, local employers, or states). Second, we can differentiate TLAs seeking short-term gains (e.g., higher wages, paid leave, retirement benefits) from those with longer-term goals (e.g., sustainable collective bargaining rights, unionisation, a GFA). Third, TLAs either focus on one workplace or encompass multiple workplaces. Fourth, TLA campaigns are either proactive or reactive. Fifth, TLA strategies may fall into the general categories of structural power, institutional power, and coalitional power, which refer respectively to workers' strategies to physically disrupt the production or delivery of goods and services; invoke the authority of national or international laws, rules, and regulations; and mobilise supporters beyond the labour movement (Brookes 2019).

Understandably, dividing TLAs along five dimensions can seem simultaneously overwhelming and inadequate. Even a simplified model that assigns five possible categories to the first dimension, two each for the next three dimensions, and three categories for the fifth dimension yields a typological space containing 72 cells and, therefore, 72 possible TLA 'types'. I predict, however, that the empirical distribution of cases would not be even across cells. Some cells would stay empty, while others would be highly populated, as cases cluster along certain dimensions. For example, TLAs with more long-term goals will likely also be proactive, span multiple workplaces, and involve Global Unions. Clearly, work on this front remains to be done. Completing the task of typologising TLAs will be crucial for moving forward with comparative analysis, large-N or otherwise.

6. Conclusion

The TLA Project exists not only to bridge the gap between the NGLS and the mainstream social science literature; it also exists to shed light on real-world concerns by tracking trends in transnationalism throughout major shifts in the geopolitical, technological, cultural, and macroeconomic landscape over time. TLAs are not separate from the national and global crises unfolding in the 2020s. Labour affects and is affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, environmental degradation and climate change,

economic inequality, the global decline in freedom of association and expression, the continued undervaluation of care work, and calls for racial justice, including the Movement for Black Lives (Schulze-Cleven/Vachon 2021). TLAs help define what it means to exercise power vis-à-vis powerful TNCs and states. They may yet prove to be an enduring feature of the global economy for decades to come.

Clearly, this overview has barely scratched the surface of the TLA Project's enormous potential. While the database itself will be valuable for both researchers and practitioners, the process of completing this project will also continue to generate findings along the way that will be of interest to a broad audience. These findings include an emerging picture of the geography of TLA campaigns, a typology of TLAs, varying forms of material and strategic gains won in TLA campaigns, strategies of coordination unions have used to cooperate across national borders, and patterns of strategic interaction among workers and employers on the international scale.

In sum, the topic of labour transnationalism is timely and important, as the future of secure, stable, gainful employment has come to depend not only on local dynamics and national politics but also increasingly on the interests and actions of corporations and other non-state actors. With this new database, we can begin to understand more thoroughly not only when and how TLAs succeed and fail, but also topics such as when and how the gains from successful TLA campaigns become institutionalised over time, what role national governments play in either enhancing or limiting forms of private governance, and how employers evolve over time in their strategic responses to transnational campaigns, among many other salient topics.

- 1 See Appendix for a full list of finished TLA campaign files. To request access to view the TLA Database, please email: mbrookes@ucr.edu
- 2 Examples of recent NGLS scholarship include Webster and O'Brien (2020), Sarkar and Kuruvilla (2020), Frangi and Zhang (2021) and Lohmeyer and Schüssler (2018).
- 3 Encouragingly, the first and second timelines only occasionally diverge so much as to require the creation of a third timeline.
- 4 A fourth Global Union, UNI, declined my request for interviews but remains open to the possibility of allowing me to speak with their staff if I provide letters of reference from unions and labour-friendly academic researchers.

- 5 These interviews were conducted with full approval from UCR's Institutional Review Board (IRB).
- 6 For instance, some interviewees told me that employers' perspectives need to be more fully represented in the database. Other interviewees expressed the opposite concern, that the database should be more focused on workers and unions and primarily serve their needs.
- 7 With the exception of a few cases in which primary source data was included in the timelines because I obtained explicit permission by interviewees who signed disclosure forms approved by the IRB.
- 8 That said, even Antarctica is touched by TLA concerns. The TLA Project archive contains an ITF *Seafarers' Bulletin* briefly referencing "the exploitation of crews working on illegal fishing vessels from regions as diverse as South-East Asia, the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and even Antarctica" (ITF 2011).

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Appendix

Below is a list of the 69 TLA campaigns fully documented in the database:

1. Accor
2. Adidas Panarub
3. Adidas PT Kizone
4. Agility Logistics
5. Amazon 2013-15
6. Blue Diamond
7. BMW
8. Bridgestone-Firestone
9. Brylane/PPR
10. Campaign Against Precarious Employment (Turkey)
11. Carrefour (Colombia)
12. Charleston 5
13. Citra Mina
14. Coca-Cola (Guatemala)
15. Crown Holdings / Carnival
16. Dannon / Danone
17. DESA

18. DHL
19. DNO
20. El Super
21. First Group
22. Flags of Convenience
23. Fonterra
24. Fruit of the Loom
25. H&M (2003-04)
26. IKEA
27. Imerys
28. Inditex (Turkey)
29. JBS (US)
30. Kik
31. Kimberly Clark
32. Lidl
33. Liverpool
34. Marks & Spencer
35. Mercedes / Daimler
36. Mondelez / Kraft (Egypt & Tunisia)
37. Mouse and the Elephant Campaign
38. Nestle
39. Nissan
40. Novamed
41. NXP (Philippines)
42. Pick 'N Pay
43. PKC Group
44. Ports of Convenience
45. Quebecor
46. Raffles
47. Ravenswood Aluminum
48. Rio Tinto (2000)
49. Rio Tinto (2012+)
50. Russell Athletics
51. Samsung
52. Securitas

53. Shame on Sheraton
54. Shangri-La
55. Sheraton (Maldives & Ethiopia)
56. Sheraton (Fiji)
57. Shoprite
58. T-Mobile
59. Tetley/Tata
60. Triumph
61. Turkish Airlines
62. Unilever (India – Mumbai)
63. Unilever (Netherlands)
64. Unilever (Pakistan – Casual-T)
65. Unilever (Pakistan – Rahim Yar Khan)
66. Unilever (United Kingdom)
67. UPS (Turkey)
68. Volkswagen
69. World Cup / Olympic Games (Brazil)

*ABSTRACT Kampagnen transnationaler Allianzen von Arbeiter*innen (Transnational Labour Alliances, TLAs) werden seit mehr als zwei Jahrzehnten intensiv beforscht. Dennoch ist über die allgemeinen Merkmale dieser Kampagnen wenig bekannt, was zum Teil daran liegt, dass die Gesamtheit der Fälle nicht erfasst wird. Dieser Leerstelle soll mit dem hier vorgestellten Transnational Labour Alliances Database Project entgegengewirkt werden. Bei dem Projekt handelt es sich um ein Archiv von Primär- und Sekundärquellen sowie um forschungsbasierte Fallbeschreibungen, die von der Autorin über sechs Jahre hinweg mit Hilfe von über 100 studentischen Forschungsassistent*innen gesammelt wurden. Der Artikel erläutert die Methodik des Projekts sowie die Schwachstellen, die die Datenbank aktuell aufweist. Darüber hinaus gibt der Beitrag einen theoriegeleiteten Überblick über die Themen, die für die Analyse der TLAs besonders relevant erscheinen, und einen empirischen Überblick*

*über allgemeine Trends bei den Kampagnen. Damit wird ein erster Schritt in Richtung einer Typologie der TLAs unternommen. Der Artikel argumentiert, dass sich TLAs hinsichtlich mindestens fünf zentraler Aspekte unterscheiden: (1) wer die Hauptakteure sind, (2) was die Arbeiter*innen wollen, (3) wo eine Kampagne stattfindet, (4) warum die TLA überhaupt entsteht und (5) welche Taktiken angewandt werden.*

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Workers' Power through Transnational Industrial Relations Agreements? A Global Framework Agreement and the ACT Initiative in the Garment Sector

ABSTRACT *This article analyses the impact on workers' power of two Transnational Industrial Relations Agreements (TIRAs) in the garment industry. A company-based Global Framework Agreement (GFA) is contrasted with the Action, Collaboration, Transformation (ACT) Initiative, which includes more than one lead firm and more extensive commitments. By applying a Power Resource perspective, we explore how vertical and horizontal power relations shape the implementation of both agreements, and how the agreements in turn affect those power relations. The research focuses on the implementation of the GFA and ACT in Bangladesh and Cambodia, respectively, drawing on document analysis and interviews with key stakeholders. We conclude that the GFA allows workers to pressure employers to comply with basic labour standards but also helps lead firms to better contain labour struggles and monitor their supply chain. ACT, in its design, gives unions the power to negotiate structural issues and therefore increases workers' power to a greater extent. However, ACT has so far lacked successful implementation. While both institutional approaches have the potential to influence asymmetric power relations in the garment sector, they have not, so far, substantially changed them.*

KEYWORDS *transnational industrial relations, trade union power, global production networks, garment, social upgrading*

I. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on garment workers have shown once more how fragile garment workers' rights in global production networks (GPN)¹ are. When fashion stores in the global North closed due to lockdown regulations, garment lead firms used emergency provisions in purchasing contracts to cancel orders of already produced clothes. In this way, financial losses were passed on to the weaker actors in GPNs. Thousands of supplier factories in the global South had to shut down, and millions of garment workers lost their jobs and incomes (Anner 2020a). This mode of crisis handling renders a mode of production visible, which is characterised by highly asymmetric power relations between global apparel lead firms, their suppliers, and workers. Despite these asymmetries, however, an alliance of global and local civil society organisations successfully pressured garment lead firms to at least pay for orders placed prior to the crisis (Pay Up Campaign 2020).

Low wages and poor working conditions, such as health and safety issues, gender-based discrimination, and harassment of trade unionists, are central concerns in GPN research (e.g. Arnold 2014; Plank et al. 2014; Rossi et al. 2014). Social upgrading subsumes strategies to improve the working conditions and livelihoods of workers in GPNs, for example through enforcement of national labour laws and collective bargaining (Barrientos et al. 2011; Milberg/Winkler 2011). Both of these traditional routes have limits in GPNs, as they only target capital at the places of production, namely suppliers which directly employ the garment workers, and not the lead firms in the global North. Supplier companies, however, have limited power and resources to increase wages and change the mode of production, as the working conditions are strongly influenced by the purchasing practises of Transnational Corporations (TNCs) (Marslev 2019; Anner et al. 2013).

Mechanisms of global labour governance seek to address these issues and regulate working and employment conditions in GPNs, for example through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) standards. However, such standards have proven insufficient in securing substantial social upgrading due to their voluntary nature, limited participation by labour actors, and the neglect of the conflict of interests between capital and labour (e.g.

Barrientos/Smith 2007; Egels-Zandén/Merk 2014; Miller et al. 2010; Zajak 2017a). An alternative to CSR are initiatives involving trade unions, represented at the global level by Global Trade Union Federations (GUFs) such as the IndustriALL Global Union. Such instruments are promising but difficult to establish in the garment industry, due to a monopolistic buyer market and an abundance of garment suppliers, resulting in huge power asymmetries (Gereffi et al. 2005).

In our research, we analyse two Transnational Industrial Relations Agreements (TIRAs) (Ashwin et al. 2020) between GUFs and TNCs. One is a Global Framework Agreement (GFA), the other is the Action, Collaboration, Transformation (ACT) agreement. The GFA under analysis is signed by one TNC to secure basic workers' rights in the GPN of the TNC. ACT, in contrast, is a multi-firm TIRA signed by 20 TNCs and aims at addressing the root causes of low wages and poor working conditions by transforming the purchasing practises of the participating TNCs and establishing sectoral collective bargaining.

By integrating the Power Resource Approach (PRA) and multiscalar labour agency and applying them to the two TIRAs, we explore how vertical and horizontal power relations between labour and capital shape the agreements, and how they in turn affect those power relations. The second aspect cannot be addressed equally for both TIRAs, as they vary in their degree of institutional implementation. We analyse two TIRAs from an action-centred perspective, looking at agency spaces of workers and their representatives. This is inspired by the shift in global labour studies from regulatory towards social movement-oriented perspectives and the understanding of working conditions as an outcome of power struggles (Brookes/McCallum 2017).

While both TIRAs apply in various countries, the analysis focuses on their implementation in Bangladesh and Cambodia, respectively. Both are ranking among the worst regarding workers' rights (International Trade Union Confederation 2020). The two analysed agreements came into being in 2015. The GFA in question builds on many years of experience, as the GFA approach was already developed in other sectors in the 1980s and is now reasonably well established. Bangladesh was the first country where it was successfully implemented, and the one with the highest sourcing volume of the signing TNC outside of China. In contrast to the GFA, the design and institutional foundations of ACT are still under development.

We assess the challenges of its implementation in Cambodia, where this process came closest to completion.

Our argument draws on 29 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in both countries and at the global level between March 2020 and June 2021, as well as on public and internal documents. The interviews covered involved trade unionists at different levels, supplier and lead firm representatives, and industry experts. The documents are the agreements themselves, internal procedural guidelines, press releases, website-texts, and similar communication material. The article proceeds by outlining the theoretical concepts employed. Subsequently, we present the two case studies. Finally, we comparatively conclude and outline how power dynamics shape both TIRAs and are in turn influenced by them.

2. Thinking workers' power in global production networks

Whether and in which ways workers have agency and can influence the conditions of their own employment depends on power relations within as well as beyond places of production. These are fundamentally shaped by the architecture of the GPN(s) the workers are positioned in, the form of workers' organisation, and the policy and institutional environments (Henderson et al. 2002; Bair 2008; Rainnie et al. 2011). To operationalise the power of labour organisations, the PRA is a helpful heuristic model. It allows for understanding labour struggles at the intersection of structural analysis of capitalist production and for an investigation of workers' agency. In this way, the perspective has also proved useful for analysing capital-labour relations in the global South (Spooner/Mwanika 2018; Webster 2015).

The PRA differentiates between four interrelated power resources of workers and their collective organisations, which are key in the analysis of TIRAs. Structural power refers to the workers' capacity to interrupt the valorisation of capital. In GPNs, structural power is influenced by the mode of GPN operations (e.g. just in time production vs. warehousing), the workers' position in the process (e.g. low-skilled production vs logistics), and the nature of their employment (e.g. day labourer vs. fixed contract) (Coe 2015). Associational power of workers emerges if they collectively form organisations which act strategically, for instance by signing

agreements (Wright 2000). If structural power resources are mobilised and pooled by associational power in the form of strikes or other actions, social upgrading can happen (Marslev 2019; Selwyn 2013).

Institutional and coalitional power resources extend the original two power resources model (Schmalz et al. 2018). Institutional workers' power arises from legal guarantees such as the right to strike and institutions such as labour courts. Additionally, institutional power resources can emerge from formal and informal conventions and practices between employers and labour organisations, such as collective bargaining (Coe 2015: 186). Coalitional power resources can come about if trade unions engage with non-labour stakeholders, successfully utilising support of other civil society organisations or consumers for workers' demands. The different power resources are deeply interlinked and complement, substitute or contradict each other. While institutional arrangements often create agency spaces for workers, they can also restrict them by containing strikes and other workers' actions and by predefining paths of negotiation (Schmalz et al. 2018: 121).

While the PRA originated in global analyses of labour movements (Silver 2003), its subsequent conceptualisations by Schmalz et al. do not systematically account for the global dimension of the networks in which workers are positioned. To fill this gap, we extend the PRA with the concept of scales. Originating from geography, scales are used to describe geographically and politically constructed spaces of social relations, such as the factory, the national, the regional, and the global level (Herod et al. 2007; Lier 2007; McGrath-Champ 2005). Through globally operating TNCs and their GPNs, workers and their agency spaces are necessarily connected to various actors at different scales simultaneously (Cumbers et al. 2008).

As workers' power resources are shaped by their relation to other actors, especially to capital and the state, we look at these power relations in GPNs along two dimensions. On the one hand, the vertical dimension covers power relations across scales. Vertical power relations often refer to transnational relations between GPN actors, for example between a global lead firm and a trade union federation in a production country. They also include inter-firm governance between lead firms and suppliers, thoroughly conceptualised in GPN (as well as GCC and GVC) theory (Gereffi et al. 2005; Gibbon et al. 2008). On the other hand, there are horizontal power

relations within one scale. These are most elaborately discussed regarding the places where production takes place. While the need for control of labour is established through the vertical governance of GPNs, it materialises in horizontal, socially embedded relations between workers, direct employers, and the state (Coe/Jordhus-Lier 2011; Levy 2008).

Labour conflict, labour action and institutional answers increasingly expand across scales. By extending the battle from the factory to other scales and building transnational alliances with GUFs or advocacy organisations, less powerful labour organisations can increase their power towards capital (Brookes 2017). We refer to this strategy of “jumping scales” (Merk 2009: 599) as a ‘vertical escalation’ of the capital/labour conflict. Such vertical escalation to nodes more sensitive to disruption or negative publicity can be a source of leverage in contexts of low structural, associational, and institutional power at the factory and national scale. Workers’ power in GPNs depends on the workers’ capacity to facilitate and harness this vertical escalation and capital’s ability to prevent or at least shape such processes.

Global and local labour organisations are involved in utilising power resources emerging from GPNs and wider societal configurations as well as (co-)creating new power resources through strategic interventions and interactions at different scales (Zajak 2017b). In our research, we particularly analyse institutional power resources, understood as historic products of struggles at the factory, national and global scale. TIRAs such as GFAs and ACT are outcomes of power struggles and only as effective as the involved labour organisations are powerful (Gregoratti/Miller 2011: 98). At the same time, TIRAs can only count as effective if they are able to influence the power relations between workers, employers, buyers, and states (McCallum 2013: 19–47).

3. The double-edged nature of a single-firm Global Framework Agreement

GFAs are documents negotiated and signed by GUFs such as IndustriALL, with TNCs mostly headquartered in Europe. They cover basic workers’ rights, such as the right to organise and apply to operations of the

TNC worldwide, often also to suppliers (Papadakis 2011). In contrast to enforceable ‘hard law’, GFAs are not legally binding, thus falling into the ‘soft law’ category (Mund/Priegnitz 2007). At least more recent ones have, however, included mechanisms for dealing with non-compliance. Hence, GFAs are mechanisms of global governance, co-created by workers’ organisations and TNCs (McCallum 2013; Niforou 2014).

The effects of GFAs have been debated. Scholars have particularly identified problems of local ownership at the production sites (Cumbers et al. 2008; Fichter/Stevis 2013) and of implementation in subcontracting arrangements (Gregoratti/Miller 2011; Williams et al. 2015). While GFAs clearly differ from other CSR commitments in their architecture, their social partnership approach might still primarily aim at reducing the risk of human rights activists campaigning and not trigger effective change for workers (Anner 2012; Fichter/McCallum 2015). However, GFAs have the advantage of putting a focus on enabling rights which can allow workers in the global South to stand up for their demands but are less secured by classical approaches of CSR (Egels-Zandén/Merk 2014; Hammer 2005).

In the garment sector, GFAs are relatively rare. This is common for buyer-driven GPNs, which are GPNs characterised by governance of lead firms not directly involved in production (Gereffi 1999). To date, there are six garment TNCs which have an active GFA with the sector GUF IndustriALL. The first GFA was signed with Inditex in 2007, followed by Mizuni in 2011, H&M in 2015 (an earlier version only covered its own staff), Tchibo in 2016, Asos in 2017, and Esprit in 2018 (European Commission 2021). One of these companies, subsequently referred to as ApparelCorp to protect interviewees, has a GFA with by far the most developed implementation mechanism (Bauer 2021).

ApparelCorp is an apparel retailer and operates slightly more than 5,000 stores in 74 countries. As is common in the garment industry, all production is sourced out to legally independent suppliers, with the lead firms focusing on design and marketing. Switching costs between a vast number of competing suppliers are very low, resulting in a highly asymmetrical power relation. In ApparelCorp’s GPN, 759 first tier suppliers and their subcontractors manufacture in 1,898 factories and employ around 1.6 million workers (ApparelCorp 2020). ApparelCorp’s collections with small volumes are still produced in Europe, mainly in Türkiye and Portugal. The

TNC offshores the production of goods with big volumes mostly to Asia and manages supplier relations through local offices.

ApparelCorp, the GUF IndustriALL representing their affiliated trade unions around the world, and the national trade union of the headquarters country signed the GFA in 2015. While IndustriALL had unsuccessfully attempted to sign a GFA with ApparelCorp for several years, the TNC eventually reached out to the GUF and signalled its strong interest in an agreement. Stakeholders of the agreement portray labour unrest at the scale of production and subsequent costly disruptions of the supply chain with short lead times as having motivated its formation.

In the GFA document, the buyer commits to ensuring the compliance of its suppliers with basic workers' rights, primarily referring to fundamental ILO conventions, and to promoting peaceful collaboration between employers and employees (ApparelCorp et al. 2015). While the GFA declares ApparelCorp's motivation to improve the situation of workers through conflict resolution support, the TNC makes no specific commitments regarding purchasing practices. The unique multi-scale implementation mechanism contains a conflict resolution procedure which allows workers and their organisations to report supplier misconduct to committees staffed by labour representatives and buyer personnel (ApparelCorp et al. 2018). Conflicts between supplier management and workers are intended to be discussed and solved at the factory scale. If no conclusion can be reached, they can be brought to so-called National Monitoring Committees (NMCs). These committees were established at the national scale and comprise 50% local ApparelCorp representatives and 50% representatives of trade unions affiliated with the GUF. At the global scale, a Joint Industrial Relations Development Committee (JIRDC) is set up as a final forum for conflict resolution.

The implementation mechanism has so far been established in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Türkiye. Bangladesh was the first country where the GFA was implemented. Confronted by a strong anti-union environment (Rahim/Islam 2020) and pro-business policy (Bair et al. 2020), the trade union density in the garment sector of Bangladesh is only about 2%. The most common triggers of labour protest and wildcat strikes are withheld wages. Only few conflicts are brought to court, while jurisdiction takes years and often does not benefit the workers

involved (Moazzem 2017). Of 587 factories producing for ApparelCorp in Bangladesh in 2020, only 32 were unionised.

While the reach of the GFA implementation is still limited, the empirical analysis suggests that the GFA provides workers and their organisations in Bangladesh with meaningful access to institutional power. Conflicts such as union busting and withheld wages at supplier factories can be vertically escalated to the NMC, and from there to the global scale for resolution. By staffing 50% of these committees and being informed about employer misconduct, the lead firm can use its leverage on suppliers to enforce compliance with agreed standards. Trade union representatives characterise ApparelCorp as having a great influence on suppliers in Bangladesh due to high-volume orders and the reputational importance of business relationships with the lead firm.

The GFA mechanism is reminiscent of the boomerang model in social movement theory. In this model, activists target state policy through activating foreign actors to influence the state (Brookes 2017; Keck/Sikkink 1998). Similarly, trade union actors report an improved leverage vis-a-vis local suppliers by engaging with the geographically distant buyer under the GFA. By helping workers to challenge their employers, the mechanism works as an alternative to engaging with weak and employer-biased state institutions. Trade unions in Bangladesh report to prefer the GFA route in the fight for their rights to taking rights violations to labour courts, due to the low accessibility and probability of gains through national jurisdiction. Institutionalised resources providing workers power, such as GFAs, are particularly important for workers in an environment where associational power resources are low, as described above, and the mobilisation of structural power resources risky. Labour action has little legal protection and is often answered by violent actions of security forces.

However, the GFA with ApparelCorp has a two-sided effect. The instrument does not only enable the vertical escalation of labour conflicts towards the buyer; at the same time, it allows the buyer to govern the conflict escalation. Conflicts which previously reached consumer markets through transnational worker-civil society coalitions appear to be replaced by an institutionalised and collaborative approach between trade unions in production countries and TNCs. The GFA mechanism offers a path of vertical escalation which the agreement defines. It explicitly encourages keeping the conflicts as close as possible to where they occur. At the same

time, the joint resolution mechanism allows ApparelCorp to anticipate risks at formally independent suppliers. This shows that GFAs can not only provide added-value for TNCs by helping to monitor social compliance at subsidiaries (Bourguignon et al. 2019), but also at suppliers.

While the NMCs intervene in cases of labour rights violations, they do not engage in wage setting or collective bargaining. By leaving the wage setting to the parties at the factory scale, the GFA mechanism tries to assure “mature industrial relations” (Miller et al. 2010) between employers and employees. The hope is that “mutual understanding and bonding” (IndustriALL Global Union 2018) of the parties opens the way for improvements. However, the highly asymmetrical vertical power relations and very small margins in garment GPNs often do not enable suppliers to pay a living wage, as agreed in the GFA (Anner 2020b). Additionally, the horizontal power disparity between employers and workers in Bangladesh leaves little chances of substantial wage increases through collective bargaining at the factory scale.

The formation and functioning of the GFA shows that workers in the GPN have at least a certain power, and that this is an important driver for buyer engagement with labour rights violations at their suppliers. The implementation structure offers an institutionalised channel through which workers can react to violations, but the agreement simultaneously contains power struggles within the scale of production. Scholars and practitioners shared a vision of GFAs, and the one with ApparelCorp in particular, as providing a platform to negotiate wider employment conditions and purchasing practises with lead firms (Helfen/Fichter 2013; Kaltenborn et al. 2020). However, empirical data from five years of implementation in Bangladesh shows a different picture. While the mechanism is somewhat successful in enforcing legally secured claims and tackling illegal employer activities, the instrument does not provide a negotiation table for sector-wide challenges.

4. The promising but contested multi-firm ACT agreement

ACT is a multi-firm TIRA between IndustriALL and 20² garment lead firms, such as Inditex, H&M and Primark. Fifteen lead firms signed a Memorandum of Understanding with IndustriALL in August 2015. Over

the years, eight firms joined and three were sold to competitors, resulting in a current total of 20 signatory firms – most of them headquartered in Europe. The agreement’s aim is to create institutional platforms in producer countries, platforms on which trade unions and employers can negotiate sector-wide changes. This is supported by lead firms’ commitments to enable these changes, financially and structurally (Alexander et al. 2017; Aswhin et al. 2020).

The ACT office in Berlin represents both IndustriALL and the signatory lead firms and holds the executive role in implementing the two inter-linked processes of sectoral bargaining and buyer commitments at two different scales. At the national scale in selected producer countries, the office works on establishing sectoral collective bargaining between national garment trade union federations and industry associations. At the global scale, the office coordinates and monitors the implementation of the lead firms’ commitments to transforming their purchasing practises in order to create conditions that support bargaining at the national scale.

Cambodia, a country with high unionisation rates and a vibrant history of workers’ action, was chosen as the first country for implementation. To date, it remains the one with the most in-depth negotiations among the implementation countries and is the one which has been most thoroughly examined (Cichon 2019). Promising developments in Myanmar, which led to a provisional sectoral agreement and Covid-19 commitments, were scotched by the military coup in March 2021. In Türkiye, sectoral negotiations have been hindered so far, due to the absence of a sector-wide industry association. Several introductory meetings were also conducted in Bangladesh, Vietnam, Ethiopia and in various Eastern European countries.

In the first years, the ACT office mainly worked on designing the process at the global scale, as the initial Memorandum of Understanding only laid out the foundation of the mechanism and still lacked crucial technical details. Central aspects of transforming the purchasing practices were identified through lead firms’ self-assessments and national stakeholder consultations. As a first result, six *Country-Specific Support Commitments* were announced in August 2018. These commitments aim at supporting countries in taking the first steps of establishing sectoral collective bargaining. They will be enforced by lead firms once a sectoral agree-

ment has been negotiated between suppliers and unions. Key elements are that lead firms make the country a preferred sourcing destination and incorporate higher wages in their calculation of purchasing prices.

In addition to these commitments at a national scale, ACT adopted five *Global Purchasing Practises Commitments* in November 2018. Signatory lead firms pledged to implement them throughout their GPNs by the end of 2023. Central here again is to include wage increases as an itemised cost in the purchasing price. Additionally, brands commit to timely payments as per purchasing contracts and to better planning and forecasting of orders.

If both processes are successfully enforced, the approach of ACT has the potential to fundamentally reshape vertical and horizontal power relations. The transformation of lead firms' purchasing practises could decrease the vertical power asymmetries between lead firms and suppliers. The establishment of sectoral bargaining would additionally create a source of institutional workers' power at the national scale vis-à-vis their employers. ACT is designed to vertically escalate sector-wide issues, such as the conflict regarding remuneration, from the factory to the national and ultimately global scale. This approach represents a major improvement compared to the escalation of individual rights violations in the conflict resolution processes of the GFA described above. However, the developments in Cambodia show that the implementation of ACT is confronted with serious challenges.

In September 2015, The ACT approach was introduced to Cambodian stakeholders for the first time. Unions reported that it took until 2017/18 for the meetings between the Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia (GMAC), trade unions, and the government to start. During a fourth ACT consultation in September 2018, IndustriALL reported on the progress of provisional negotiations between affiliated trade unions and the industry association. However, the optimistic hope to establish sectoral collective bargaining in Cambodia began to shatter at the beginning of 2019.

In February, the EU started a process to investigate the suspension of Cambodia's preferential access to the European market through the Everything-But-Arms (EBA) scheme, a suspension which occurred due to workers' rights violations, political repression, and a crackdown on inde-

pendent media. Cambodian unions called on the EU not to withdraw the trade benefit. In March, GMAC publicly withdrew from the ACT sectoral negotiations. They stated they would not be able to enter sectoral negotiations leading to higher wages if the signatory lead firms represented only 30-40 per cent of the buyers sourcing from Cambodia. Sectoral negotiations would result in the majority of suppliers having to pay higher wages while not benefiting from transformed purchasing practises. Additionally, ACT was not at this time able to address regional competition. The Country-Support Commitments did not prove attractive enough. GMAC stressed the comparatively high minimum wage in Cambodia's garment sector of 190 USD per month. Competitors in Bangladesh, for example, must pay only around 100 USD.

In April 2020, Cambodian unions called on several lead firms (GAP, Puma, Nike, Adidas, Uniqlo, Levi's and VF) to join the ACT agreement, blaming GMAC's decision to withdraw on their inaction. However, none of these lead firms have joined ACT. Companies headquartered in the US in particular, except for PVH, refuse to join. The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent order cancellations by some ACT signatories created further distrust among suppliers. In May 2020, Cambodia partially lost its EBA status, which further increased the cost of garments exported to the EU.

While the two sets of lead firm commitments do not hold any legal status, the ACT office is working on an enforcement mechanism. In September 2019, it adopted a *Monitoring and Accountability Framework*. The implementation of lead firm commitments will be monitored by their existing self-assessment, the anonymous assessment of suppliers, and information collected through a complaint and dispute settlement mechanism which is yet to be created. So far, little is known about the actual transformation of lead firms' purchasing practices and the consequences of non-compliance. Cambodian stakeholders express concern about the lack of an obligation for lead firms to pay higher prices to suppliers. General distrust in the mechanism is also rooted in fact that the amount of the price increases remains unclear to Cambodian stakeholders. In consequence, the Cambodian government hindered the ACT process by refusing to create the legal conditions to enable sectoral bargaining.

As a result of the above factors, the implementation of sectoral collective bargaining in Cambodia has stalled. Overall, unions welcomed their

inclusion in the implementation process and the possibility to negotiate with employers at a sectoral level. While they have not gained access to relevant power resources so far, representatives stress that lead firms have already benefited, as they were able to improve their image. Convincing GMAC to join sectoral negotiations was the key point in implementing ACT in Cambodia; Cambodian unions played a secondary role. The ACT office, involved lead firms and IndustriALL tried to win over suppliers by promoting the 'win-win situation' between suppliers and workers, emphasising that collective bargaining 'takes conflict out of the workplace'. While trade unions were eager to join sectoral bargaining, the sectoral supplier association GMAC was reluctant to do so.

At the time of writing, the ACT office is exploring a new approach of implementing the ACT idea by bypassing GMAC. The office is negotiating with individual suppliers of ACT lead firms to join a multi-employer agreement. This avenue could be more successful, as all joining suppliers would directly profit from transformed purchasing practices. The sectoral dimension of collective bargaining, however, is lost in this approach.

Throughout the ACT implementation process, no major activation of structural, associational, or coalitional power resources took place to encourage lead firms and employers to get ACT off the ground. This is surprising given that Cambodian trade unions have been very successful in pressuring capital and the state into concessions through a combination of strikes and protests (Marslev 2019). In contrast to the call for immediate change made by labour NGOs, ACT's long-term approach made the agreement attractive for lead firms (Ashwin et al. 2020). However, the long-term approach could also obscure lead firms' immediate responsibility to enable the payment of living wages. This becomes particularly problematic if ACT fails to establish institutional power and the mobilisation of other power resources remains in the background.

5. Conclusion

We analysed two TIRAs in different states of implementation on their design and effectiveness. The overall effect of the GFA with ApparelCorp is double-edged, enabling and limiting agency spaces of labour organisations

at the same time. Introducing institutional power allows unions at the scale of production to vertically escalate their concerns. The mechanism of the agreement has helped workers in Bangladesh pressure employers into complying with basic labour standards in a more effective way than was the case with state institutions. On the other hand, the focus of the GFA on avoiding the activation of coalitional power across scales and the governed vertical escalation of conflicts contains the struggle at the factory scale. This stabilises lead firm governance of the GPN. The GFA turned out not to serve as a tool for addressing sector-wide issues such as low wages. GFAs assign wage setting and collective bargaining to the factory scale, where small margins due to low prices paid by buyers, massive competition and horizontal power asymmetries render substantive wage increases unlikely.

ACT, in contrast, is designed to vertically escalate these sector-wide issues, especially the conflict regarding remuneration, from the factory to the national and ultimately global scale. The establishment of collective bargaining between trade unions and capital at the national scale is supported by the transformation of purchasing practises, orchestrated by a GUF and a group of lead firms at the global scale. ACT thereby addresses central weaknesses of the GFA approach by targeting issues deeply engraved in the GPN architecture. If the implementation of ACT succeeds, this instrument can reshape horizontal and vertical power relations in the garment industry. It can create institutional power of trade unions vis-à-vis their employers at the national scale and diminish the power disparity between lead firms and suppliers. However, existing vertical and horizontal power asymmetries have hindered the successful implementation of ACT since its formation. The agreement was unsuccessful in its critical goal of making suppliers join sectoral bargaining because of limited lead firm participation and a distrust regarding the mechanism among Cambodian stakeholders. ACT could even be detrimental to workers if the initiative remains unsuccessful in establishing institutional power over a long period and the mobilisation of other power resources continues to be treated as secondary in the meantime.

Both TIRAs have the potential to increase the institutional power resources of workers and their collective organisations in garment GPNs by connecting actors across scales. With the help of lead firms, they provide institutionalised platforms through which labour representatives can

address problematic employment and working conditions. The empirical research on the GFA in Bangladesh shows that such institutional power through the multi-scalar resolution process is appreciated by labour activists in the context of less effective state institutions. Similar perspectives were found in Cambodia, where trade unionists appreciate the idea of ACT and its potential to establish collective bargaining at the national scale. However, it has become clear that workers have gained little institutional power through ACT so far.

Overall, institutional power resources established through global mechanisms backed by lead firms need to be taken with caution. First, it should not be forgotten that the problems the initiatives try to solve are co-created by the lead firms' purchasing practises in the first place. This makes their role in the agreements contradictory, motivating the majority to stay away from TIRAs. Second, institutional power is usually the outcome of mobilising structural, associational, and coalitional power in labour action, which pressures capital into making concessions. Relying on institutionalised governance, a mobilisation of these power resources is at its best secondary in both TIRAs. Third, the analysed institutional arrangements can even support lead firms in managing and containing the mobilisation of other power resources.

Both TIRAs aim to provide ways for labour actors to cope with challenging political-economic contexts. By working on transnational institutional power, they try to compensate for a weak institutional environment as well as limited structural and associational power resources at the factory and the national scale. Whether this institutional approach can substantially and sustainably change the asymmetric power relations between capital and labour without a greater link to the mobilisation of structural, associational, and coalitional power resources is yet to be seen.

- 1 We use the term Global Production Network (GPN) as it has the advantage over Global Commodity Chain (GCC) and Global Value Chain (GVC) of being more open towards non-firm actors and institutions (Bair 2008).
- 2 The 15 founding lead firms include Arcadia Group (UK), Asos (UK), C&A (Germany), Debenhams (UK), Esprit (Germany), H&M (Sweden), Inditex (Spain), N Brown (UK), New Look (UK), Next (UK), Pentland Group (UK), Primark (UK), Tchibo (Germany), Tesco (UK), Topshop (UK); The eight subsequent signatory lead firms include KMart (Australia), Bestseller (Denmark), Cotton On

(Australia), PVH (US), zLabels (Germany), G-Star (Netherlands), Lidl (Germany), Big W (Australia); three UK firms were sold to competitors, leading to 20 signatories in total.

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ABSTRACT *In diesem Artikel werden die Auswirkungen von zwei transnationalen Vereinbarungen über Arbeitsbeziehungen (TIRA) in der Bekleidungsindustrie auf Arbeitnehmer*innenmacht untersucht. Ein konzernbezogenes globales Rahmenabkommen (GFA) wird der Initiative „Action, Collaboration, Transformation“ (ACT) gegenübergestellt, die mehr als ein Leitunternehmen umfasst und umfangreichere Verpflichtungen vorsieht. Unter Anwendung einer Macht-Ressourcen-Perspektive wird untersucht, wie vertikale und horizontale Machtbeziehungen die Umsetzung der beiden Abkommen prägen und wie die Abkommen ihrerseits diese Machtbeziehungen beeinflussen. Die Untersuchung konzentriert sich auf die Umsetzung des GFA und der ACT Initiative in Bangladesch bzw. Kambodscha und stützt sich auf die Analyse von Dokumenten und Interviews mit den wichtigsten Akteur*innen. Wir kommen zu dem Schluss, dass das GFA es den Arbeitnehmer*innen ermöglicht, Druck auf die Arbeitgeber auszuüben, grundlegende Arbeitsnormen einzuhalten, aber auch den führenden Unternehmen hilft, Arbeitskämpfe besser einzudämmen und ihre Lieferkette zu überwachen. Die ACT-Initiative gibt Gewerkschaften die Möglichkeit, strukturelle Probleme zu verhandeln, und stärkt somit die Macht der Arbeitnehmer*innen in größerem Umfang. Allerdings ist ACT bisher nicht erfolgreich umgesetzt worden. Obwohl beide institutionellen Ansätze das Potenzial haben, die asymmetrischen Machtverhältnisse in der Bekleidungsindustrie zu beeinflussen, haben sie diese bisher nicht wesentlich verändert.*

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**Global Production Networks, Latent Power Resources and
(Constrained) Collective Worker Agency: Findings from a Nike
Mega-Supplier in Indonesia**

ABSTRACT *This paper looks at the processes that constrain worker organising at Indonesia's largest manufacturer, PT Nikomas-Gemilang, where 68,000 workers produce athletic footwear for brands such as Nike, Adidas, and Puma. The paper critically applies the power resource approach to understand labour relations and (barriers to) transnational worker contestation at this mega-supplier. The paper gives special attention to the power dynamics that surround the factory, including the role local elites play in undermining trade union rights. This case study casts significant doubt upon the degree of freedom of association workers enjoy at Nikomas. It argues that traditional power structures in the region where the factory is located in combination with a long history of union-busting and the existence of a legacy union has constrained the organising possibilities of the Nikomas workers. However, it also highlights a case of a successful campaign against forced overtime. This way, the article shows that even in highly globalised sectors, local context enables and limits organising possibilities.*

KEYWORDS *power resource approach, global production networks, Nike, mega-suppliers, trade unions, freedom of association*

I. Introduction

The Power Resource Approach (PRA) discusses and analyses the variety of the power resources that workers and their organisations can mobilise to protect and advance their interests vis-à-vis capital (see e.g. Wright

2000; Schmalz et al. 2018; Fichter et al. 2018; Brookes 2018, 2019). Instead of assuming that the days of organised labour are over, the PRA stresses that workers can still act as agents of transformation through the 'collective mobilisation of power resources in the structurally asymmetric and antagonistic relation between capital and labour'(Schmalz et al. 2018: 115).

This paper uses the PRA to understand labour relations and (barriers to) transnational worker contestation at Indonesia's largest export factory, PT Nikomas Gemilang (from now on, Nikomas). We argue that the factory – at first sight, at least – seems to present a 'privileged' workplace in terms of the availability of power resources that would enable workers to place interventions at a variety of sociospatial scales to improve their position. Nikomas is a subsidiary of Yue Yuen, the world's largest footwear manufacturer (Kumar 2020; Merk 2008; Appelbaum 2008), and plays an important role within the athletic footwear's global production network (GPN). The company was established in Taiwan in the late 1960s and started to operate transnationally in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, it controls an estimated 20% share of the combined wholesale value of the global branded athletic and casual footwear market. Yue Yuen employs approximately 350,000 workers and receives orders from all the major sportswear brands. Due to rising labour costs in China, it has relocated much of its production capacity to factories in Vietnam and Indonesia, that together comprise 82% of its production capacity. Yue Yuen is an example of a giant manufacturer that has successfully 'upgraded' through vertical integration within the GPN, while working conditions for its largely female workforce have remained poor. Since the early 1990s, numerous reports have revealed labour rights violations at its workplaces, including militaristic management styles, sexual harassment, forced overtime, irregular wage practices, poor safety standards, unjust employment contracts, limited access to the toilet, intimidation, (veiled) threats, and repression of (independent) labour unions.

Mega-suppliers such as Nikomas are sometimes identified as strategic departure points for social upgrading within GPNs (Merk 2014). This argument is most strongly made in a recent book by Ashok Kumar, *Monopsony Capitalism: Power and Production in the Twilight of the Sweatshop Age*, in which he argues that bottom-up strategic organising at these mega-production sites, operating in tandem with an international solidarity campaign,

‘could open the door for sector-wide global collective bargaining?’ (2020: 235). Kumar states that consolidation tendencies at the spaces of production reflect a shift from monopsonic governance structures towards ‘a more mutually dependent symbiotic power relationship between global brands and big multinational production companies’ (ibid.: 142), which, he argues, may also be leveraged to support a worker-driven agenda that make sweatshops a ‘historical memory’ (ibid.: 236).

The emergence of mega-suppliers in industrial sectors such as footwear, garments and electronics does indeed reflect an important shift in how GPNs are organised (Raj-Reichert 2015; Appelbaum 2008); one that creates complex interdependences and vulnerabilities between lead firms and mega-suppliers that can be leveraged, at least in theory, to support a labour-driven agenda. However, this article will argue that the transformation of workers’ latent power resources into associational power is neither smooth nor a given. This (critical instance) case study wonders why it has been so difficult to actualise associational power at the Nikomas plant, even though “objective” conditions for worker organising appear to be widely available. This question is important, because organising workers remains the best way to counter poor working conditions, protect basic human rights and decency, improve wages, and mitigate power asymmetries. Not for nothing are freedom of association and collective bargaining referred to as “enabling rights”, meaning that full implementation would provide mechanisms through which trade unions can ensure that other labour standards are observed as well. While these rights represent a key mechanism to achieve justice within the world of work, in practice, however, the role of unions is extremely limited in most production countries due to the political repression of trade unions and corporate hostility.

Paying attention to the constraints applied to collective worker organising is also important because the PRA and the labour geography literature have been criticised for being biased towards ‘success stories’ (Coe/Jordhus-Lier 2011). Scholars have largely been interested in cases where a particular group of workers succeeded in mobilising themselves to act collectively and scale up its struggle, or they tend to focus on specific industries – the automotive, for instance – in which workers still have some political clout via their trade union. A success bias means that less attention is paid to *unorganised* workers, migrant workers, or worker strug-

gles in industrialising countries. Who, in other words, is in a position to ‘confront the universal and transnational qualities of capital’? (Harvey 2001: 390). While “success stories” may contain important lessons for the study of trade unions and social movements, and may narrate how worker-driven campaigns pressure powerful lead firms to remediate labour rights violations, shape transnational private governance regimes or even may tell us how multi-sited linkages between grassroots worker organisations and their overseas allies are established, it may be just as important – from both an analytical and emancipatory perspective – to ask why a group of workers was *unable* to organise collectively and then further examine whether this docility (or consent) is somehow employer “manufactured”.

Methodologically, however, establishing whether the nonexistence of collective worker agency – typically instituted as unions – is or *is not* the result of undue management interference represents a significant challenge, especially in institutional and regulatory contexts where freedom of association is poorly protected by law or in practice. In this study, we have proceeded by using multiple sources (triangulation), as well as carefully contextualising and embedding the Nikomas factory in the broader Indonesian sociospatial, political and institutional context. This paper tries to give a detailed, multidimensional explanation of the barriers and constraints workers face in seeking to actualise their right to organise. The data was collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews with 30 Indonesian labour rights advocates, experts, and trade unionists, including two male and two female national union officials from the four main federations active in Indonesia’s garment and footwear sector. In addition, there were two focus-group interviews with – mostly female – Nikomas workers, as well as a factory visit to Nikomas and interviews with CSR managers. The observations are further grounded by several field trips to Indonesia (from 2009 to 2020) and participation-observation in four roundtable meetings with unions, NGOs, and CSR managers from brand-named sportswear companies and footwear manufacturers, including Nikomas. And lastly, data was collected through (un-) published documentation produced by trade unions and NGOs.

The article is organised in five sections: it starts by providing some background to the Nikomas plant in Indonesia. Section two discusses the power resources approach (PRA) and focusses specifically on how Marissa

Brookes both critiques and advances this approach (Brookes 2018, 2019). This section will continue to argue why workers at the Nikomas plant seem to have access to different potential sources of power. Section three, in turn, discusses what elements constrain worker power at the Nikomas plant. It maps out, empirically, how management – in combination with local elites and a captive union – developed a place-based labour control regime that has been largely successful in undermining the emergence of independent collective worker power (Jonas 1996; Castree et al. 2004). In the fourth section, however, we will argue that despite these coercive conditions and a captive union, its workforce is not completely detached from wider labour networks, providing some space for worker intervention along vertical lines by merging coalitional and institutional sources of power. This will be illustrated with a widely published incident related to wage irregularities at the Nikomas plant. Finally, the ending will draw some broader conclusions from this case.¹

2. Background on Nikomas

Yue Yuen has been active in Indonesia since 1993, when it invested circa \$100 million in the Nikomas complex, sometimes called ‘Nike Town’. The company is located in eastern Serang, Banten – about 60 kilometres outside of Jakarta. Besides footwear and chemical factories and water treatment plants, the production site also includes office buildings, power plants, dormitories, sports fields, canteens, mosques, a chapel, a fire department, sundries shops, a library, and a polyclinic with a 70 bed capacity. Production at Nikomas is exclusively for export, mostly to European and North American destinations. It manufactures for famous sportswear brands such as Nike, Adidas, Puma, Asics, Saucony, and K-Swiss. The factory employs an amazing 68,000 to 80,000 workers, which makes it the largest factory in Indonesia and one of the largest in the world. It is also very large in historical terms; it is nearly as large as Ford’s famous River Rouge complex located in Dearborn, Michigan, which was the world’s largest factory for a long time.

Despite some technical upgrading over the last decade, athletic footwear production remains very labour intensive, as a typical pair of sport

shoes consists of dozens of separate parts and requires over 300 steps in the assembly process. Most of the workers perform simple, repetitive, unskilled tasks, which mainly involve the cutting of the material, and the stitching, lasting, finishing, final inspection, and packaging of the finished product (Merk 2011). Management at Nikomas is mainly from China, Taiwan, and Singapore, which is common in Taiwanese-owned production facilities operating abroad. Workers arrive from across Indonesia and thus encompass a great variety of ethnic backgrounds: Javanese, Batak, Moluccan, Sundo, Padangese, etc. About 75-80 percent of the workers are female, which is close to the sportswear and garment industry average, and many of them are Muslim. The most common age range of workers is between 18 and 35 years old. With the majority of workers being women, socially and culturally constructed perceptions of gender immediately play a role in shaping labour relations. Feminist scholars have long emphasised that women workers in particular end up with insecure, labour-intensive, and low-paying jobs, while paternalist oppression add additional barriers to worker organising (see e.g. Mezzadri 2017). An estimated 10-25 percent of the Nikomas workers are recruited from local villages, but most of the workers come from distant places, where deepening agrarian crises, escalating land conflicts around palm oil and, hence, fading sources of rural income and acute poverty, have forced many women to seek employment in the industrial towns of urban Java. Most of them are new to the industrial workforce. Few of these workers have had any trade union organising experience.

3. Power resources and worker agency at Nikomas

Before we look in detail at labour relations and worker agency at the Nikomas plant, it is worth recounting a brief evolution of the power resource approach. Erik Olin Wright (2000: 962) distinguishes workers' 'associational power', i.e., forms of power resulting from the formation of workers' collective organisations, from their 'structural power', defined as 'power that results simply from the location of workers within the economic system'. Scholars of the PPA have built on this work and have added concepts of institutional and societal sources of power that unions

can use ‘to influence the structural imbalance between capital and labour in their favour’ and revitalise action repertoires and operations across space (Fichter et al. 2018: 12; Schmalz et al. 2018). Marissa Brookes advances this approach by pointing out that the availability of power resources alone is not enough, because ‘power must be “activated” in order to be exercised’ (2019: 23). For workers to collectively exercise power, she argues, two main barriers need to be lifted for its utilisation. First, since power is ‘inherently relational’, any group of workers – in the process of collective organising – must be able to overcome resistance from antagonistic actors. This requires an in-depth understanding of the specific social, political, and economic context in which a group of workers is positioned to exercise power and confront their opponents (Coe/Jordhus-Lier 2011; Baglioni 2018). The second barrier that Brookes identifies concerns worker unity, which constitutes an essential variable within her coordination and context-appropriate power (CCAP) theory. While the literature on worker organising often defines associational power in terms of labour’s capacity to organise (Wright 2000), Brookes argues that this definition ‘takes for granted the internal cohesion of these actors within their own organisations’ (2019: 31). For workers to exercise power, they must first be able to coordinate within and between worker organisations (ibid.: 24-34). Unlike the other power resources (which are external to workers), associational power is located in the workers themselves and reflects ‘the ability of union leaders, shop stewards, labour activists or rank-and-file union members to compel the other members of their organisation to do something they otherwise would not do – [namely] to behave as a collective actor’ (Brookes 2018: 256). For intraunion coordination, Brookes argues, union leaders and members must be able ‘to act collectively’, which requires internal democracy, deliberative viability, rank-and-file participation, and leadership support; interunion coordination, in turn, requires two or more unions to agree on common goals and a set of tactics, which is only possible when these organisations vanquish several obstacles such as limited finances, language barriers, or authoritarian regimes that restrict interaction between labour rights advocates (Brookes 2019: 26).

Although intra- and interunion coordination are necessary to facilitate transnational collective action, Brookes argues that this is not sufficient to win a workers’ campaign. Employers, for example, can easily

respond to bargaining demands with threats of factory relocation. Instead, the *effectiveness* of union power depends on whether the strategies and tactics employed are ‘context-appropriate’, that is, succeed in threatening the ‘employer’s specific priorities, business strategies and long-term goals’ (ibid.: 22). Only when collective action successfully targets the company’s key vulnerabilities will management be prepared to settle the dispute and compromise. Since company vulnerabilities vary considerably – it is dependent, for instance, on the country where it is based, its clients, the specifics of the sector or industry in which it operates, and what place the firm occupies within the global division of labour – campaign strategies must be tailored to specific vulnerabilities of the target if they are to be victorious. In line with the power resources approach (see Schmalz et al. 2018), Brookes distinguishes between three specific sources of context-appropriate power – namely, ‘structural power’, ‘institutional power’, and ‘coalitional power’. Next, I will consider how these three different power sources at first glance seem available to Indonesian workers active in the athletic footwear industry, including those employed at Nikomas.

First, Indonesian workers in the athletic footwear industry benefit from the consolidation and concentration of production at large production sites (Merk 2014; Kumar 2020). This provides them with a form of structural power, which basically accrues from their position within the capitalist valorisation process (Wright 2000). Structural power can either arise from tight labour markets, which increases the bargaining power of workers, or from workplace bargaining power. In the latter context, Brookes defines structural power as ‘the capacity to physically disrupt an employer’s operations through strikes, slowdowns, and other forms of industrial action’ (2019: 4). The emergence of huge production sites, like those operated by Yue Yuen, also results in a ‘degree of spatial inflexibility’, and creates a situation in which labour can regain some of its collective power (Kumar 2020: 214; Merk 2014). The aggregation of vast numbers of workers within giant factories may generate class solidarity and accommodate industrial action, while large orders, shorter product cycles, strict time schedules and severe penalties for late deliveries or non-deliveries leave both Yue Yuen and its branded clients vulnerable to organised production disruptions, which can potentially paralyse important segments of the – tightly coordinated – athletic footwear GPN.

This potential for collective agency is not just theoretical: over the last decade the company has faced large-scale worker protests at both its Vietnamese and Chinese branches, which produce merchandise for the same clients. In 2014, during a two-week strike by 40,000 of its workers to protest social security arrears, its facility in Dongguan was brought to a standstill (Kumar 2020: chapter 3); while not much later, a mind-blowing 90,000 workers at its Vietnam subsidiary Pou Yuen went on a weeklong strike to dispute the pension plan proposed by the government (Tran 2015). These strikes are described as the largest in the modern history of both countries and managed to capture the attention of the global press.

Second, workers can exercise power by taking advantage of institutions that regulate employment relations through laws, regulations, and procedures (Brookes 2019: 19f.; Schmalz et al. 2018). The premise here is that the labour process is always embedded within a wider regulatory context in which state apparatuses, including legal frameworks, conflict-resolution institutions, instruments of tripartism and social dialogue, labour inspectorates, etc., play a pivotal role. Unlike its Chinese and Vietnamese branches, Nikomas operates in a country that ratified ILO conventions 87 and 98, which cover freedom of association and collective bargaining, while the (formal) threshold to establishing a union is low. On paper at least, this more open ‘political opportunity structure’ should provide workers with protections, resources, and incentives to engage in unionisation and collective action (Tarrow 1998). In addition to national laws, Indonesian footwear and apparel manufacturers have long been the subject of – as well as *participated* in – non-state governance mechanisms, sometimes referred to as ‘civil regulation’, that endorse the right to organise, among other core labour standards, such as codes of conduct and social auditing. Nikomas is not only deeply enmeshed within the CSR agenda of its main buyers (Merk 2008), but is also one of the few tier-1 manufacturers that has joined the Fair Labour Association Participation Suppliers’ program, a monitoring initiative that has attracted some of the largest brand-name companies, including ‘chain governors’ such as Nike and Adidas. Although these mechanisms are legally non-binding, Bartley/Egels-Zandén (2016) show that Indonesian unions frequently invoke these ‘symbolic commitments’ in workplace negotiations, whistleblowing practices and brand-boomerang campaigns, and are thus able to exercise a form of institutional power.

And third, Indonesian unions active in the garment and footwear industry have access to coalitional power, which Brookes defines as ‘the capacity to mobilize the influence of nonlabour stakeholders on whom an employer depends’ (2019: 21). In the case of globalised production processes, this may include efforts by a variety of allies located in countries where lead firms are headquartered or where most branded merchandise is being sold. Since the early 1990s, a variety of Indonesian unions – ranging from moderate to militant – have been part of cross-border and cross-organisational ‘networks of labour activism’ that provide opportunities to pressure distant powerholders at the spaces of consumption through brand-boomerang campaigns (Zajak et al. 2017). These networks enable ‘upscaling’ strategies that make it possible to expand the terrain of struggle across sociospatial scales. Of course, connectivity across space does not automatically make coalitional power effective, but public campaigns can inflict economic costs on lead firms in ways that unions at the spaces of production often cannot. Indonesian unions often engage brands such as Nike and Adidas as proxy targets, engaging them primarily to leverage change at a specific factory; for example, by remediating anti-union acts (see e.g. Bartley/Egels-Zandén 2016; den Hond et al. 2014). Besides “upscaling” workplace-centred disputes through urgent appeals systems and complaints mechanisms, Indonesian unions also participate in a variety of transnational campaign alliances and union networks. The largest is probably the Play Fair Alliance, which brings together Global Unions (ITUC and IndustriALL), Oxfam and the Clean Clothes Campaign.

4. Place-based labour control in Banten

From our discussion so far, we gather that there is plenty of potential for worker agency at the Nikomas plant. This is especially true compared to many other workers in the global South, especially those, to list a few, who are disconnected from GPNs, live in authoritarian regimes with no legal right to organise independent unions, operate in sectors with less developed networks of labour rights activism that help ‘bridge’ space, or toil in relative isolation – people such as domestic workers, homeworkers, etc. In contrast, the positionality of Nikomas workers seem to grant them opportunities of placing strategic interventions at – at least – three distinct

tive sociospatial scales. First, at the immediate site of production, where its massive workforce can potentially wield its structural power to improve its bargaining position vis-à-vis their employer. In fact, just the mere threat of a strike is sometimes sufficient to extract meaningful concessions from management. Second, as Indonesia's largest factory, its workforce could potentially play an important role in Indonesia's vibrant labour movement, that engages the state, not only through various forms of instituted social dialogue, but also, frequently, mobilises in large numbers in nationwide campaigns to express working-class discontent with low wages, insecure employment contracts, and pro-business legislation such as, most recently, the Omnibus Law on Job Creation. And finally, at the transnational level, its workforce seems well positioned to take up a key role in cross-border labour rights alliances and hybrid networks that articulate worker demands towards lead firms to ensure, for example, that the material concessions made at the factory level and/or national level are shared with lead firms.

However, as hinted earlier, the mere presence of latent power resources does not mean that they are 'actualised'. This requires a dialectical appreciation of the collective agency potential of workers vis-à-vis wider social relations in specific time-space contexts (Baglioni 2018; Coe/Jordhus-Lier 2011). This demands close attention to the place-based labour control practices aimed at influencing 'the conditions under which labour power is reproduced and is integrated into the labour process' (Jonas 1996: 325; Castree et al. 2004). Next, we will detail how a heterogeneous alliance of powerholders are conspiring attempting to institute a labour control regime that seeks to curb the use of these potential power resources. We proceed by first discussing how social relations and power dynamics specific to the region where the Nikomas plant is located impede the actualisation of (potential) power resources; after that we detail the ambiguous role the company's union plays in this process.

4.1 Shadow state

After the fall of President Suharto's New Order regime in 1998, earlier restrictions on trade union establishment were removed. With these legal barriers lifted and the rapid implosion of the state-labour nexus, Indonesia has witnessed an explosion in the number of trade unions. In practice, workers still face many barriers when they exercise their right to organise.

Labour inspections are poorly resourced, understaffed, minimally qualified and, frequently, biased and compromised (meaning corrupt). This is especially true at the regional level, where the state apparatus that deals with labour regulations is notoriously weak. As a result, labour laws are often selectively applied, while employers know they can violate regulations without much risk of being caught or prosecuted (Caraway 2008; Ford 2013). Reference to the institutional failure of formal institutions such as labour departments, industrial courts, and a weak rule of law, while important, is not sufficient in explaining barriers Indonesian trade unionists face when they seek to exercise their right to association. Decentralisation has also provided space for ‘informal networks, including relations between power holders and business’ at the regional level (Hadiz 2010: 12). This is sometimes referred to as a ‘shadow state’ (Hidayat 2007).

How is this relevant for labour-management relations and the imposition of labour control at Nikomas? As we have already noted, the plant is located in the Banten area, which is the most western province on the island of Java. The province was established in 2000, when it received regional autonomy. The shadow state structure in this region is known as *Jawara*, which Masaaki and Hamid (2008: 120) describe as

‘rural strongmen or semi-socially embedded men of prowess who are skilful in *pencak silat* (Indonesian traditional martial arts), and some are believed to have magical power, called *ilmu*. *Jawara* partly live in the underground world and are often involved in criminal activities. This ambiguous social status and their physical and alleged magical powers give them social standing.’

After the fall of Suharto and the decentralisation process that followed, the *Jawara* rose to become the ‘informal collective social agent’ (ibid.: 120) who are intimately connected with business associations, politicians, Bantenese social and cultural institutions and the military, and where ‘[t]hreats and the occasional exercise of violence and shows of force proved to be important and quick tools for politico-economic capital accumulation, especially at the local level’ (ibid.: 136). The *Jawara* are also key figures in numerous (urbanised) villages that surround the Nikomas factory, with many of them becoming village heads (*lurah*), and hence, part of Banten’s administrative hierarchy. Some village heads are also *Haji*, which means

that they have made a pilgrimage to Mecca, which grants them special status.

The powerful position that the Jawara occupy in Banten society has been well documented in the literature; however, little has been written about how these traditional power structures impact industrial relations at export-oriented factories such as Nikomas. As we will argue below, Jawara powerholders have become deeply entangled in the entire industrialisation process and play an important role in how daily life is organised and acted out in the neighbourhoods and villages that surround Nikomas, where the majority of workers reside. Foreign investors who want to open a plant in Banten must negotiate an agreement with the village heads and develop close relations with them as soon as an investment agreement has been signed. For example, factory management is then compelled to acquire or lease land (that is commonly or privately owned) through the village heads, but a one-off payment to lease the land is never sufficient; instead, these social elites seek a constant stream of income and employment opportunities for their associates. This may either come in the form of factory ‘gifts’ to the community – which, an informer points out, ‘is euphemistically termed CSR by Nikomas’ – or they may demand that a factory hire their associates for certain services such as waste disposal, recycling and factory security. Other than business deals that are directly related to the factory, there is also an entire range of more indirect economic activities that link the indigenous population to Nikomas’s interests. This includes not only factory suppliers, but also small and medium-sized businesses that benefit from the arrival of the many thousands of in-migrant workers that will need housing, food, transport, clothes and so on. Landlords who provide barrack-like lodgings are major beneficiaries of these situations.

An important mechanism they employ here is the right to recruit workers, locally known as ‘*pejorative Marlan*’ (mafia application) (World Bank 2006). These intermediaries (or labour brokers) will introduce the job applicant to the factory’s recruitment staff for an often substantial fee or pay off (Südwind 2012: 20; Connor 2002). The average fluctuates and depends on the position applied for, as well as the gender of the applicant – male candidates pay more – but workers say it is roughly one to two months wages (various interviews). This is a significant amount for impoverished workers, who commonly only earn the minimum wage. This means that

many of them must secure a loan, which often leaves them in debt to the village powerholders. A World Bank report dealing with informal work practices in Serang observed that '[f]irms know of the practice but it often represents a compromise between the company and local elites who are acting as agents for workers' (2006: 11). It also provides industrialists with an opportunity to make its prospective workforce responsible for part of the 'factory's tribute payment towards village leaders', as one informant suggests. For the middlemen, it means a significant revenue stream, since a large factory such as Nikomas needs to fill hundreds of vacancies every month.

Many have argued that this preference for female employees is based on management's belief that women workers are easier to control than their male counterparts, but this is probably also why the recruiters prefer in-migrant workers – because they are also perceived as being more docile and easier to manage (Mezzadri 2017). There is much research that shows that female in-migrant workers often successfully resist these gendered perceptions of manual dexterity, docility, and femininity in their daily struggles. However, in-migrant workers are also from a different social class than the indigenous population, where lineage and kinship play an important role in the legitimisation of their social roles within the community. For example, factory security is recruited from nearby (Jawara) communities, is exclusively male, and keen to reproduce and exploit gender discourses and stereotypes to emphasise harmonious industrial relations and discipline female workers (Warouw 2006: 203). Some workers fear being labelled as troublemakers. Understandably, the presence of the *preman* (strong man), surveillance practices, and the climate of fear surrounding Nikomas constrains the ability of (female) workers to freely associate and discourages them from actively participating in union activities and collective action.

4.2 Union busting

There is a long history of union suppression in the Nikomas plant. These informal security forces are very adept at detecting any discontent among the workers. In response, they may attempt to intimidate organisers both on and off the factory premises. 'The Jawara', as one activist puts it: 'operate as a bodyguard for the company' (Interview, June 14, 2014). In

2002, an Oxfam Australia report described how striking Nikomas workers were 'subjected to intense intimidation and harassment', with one worker stating that factory managers had ordered him into an office where he was 'told that if he did not stop organising workers, he would be attacked by hired thugs' (Connor 2002: 11). This worker was also 'repeatedly approached in the street by strangers and warned that his life was in danger if he did not resign from the factory' (ibid.). Another worker received similar threats and found his 'house ransacked by a local gang' (ibid.). As a result, the workers who had initially organised the strike handed in their resignations to factory management. Since Connor's 2002 report, interviewees report that at least three different national unions have attempted to establish branches at Nikomas; all three were unsuccessful in their efforts. Emelia Yanti, the secretary general of *Gabungan Serikat Buruh Indonesia* (GSBI), a national union federation, admits: 'It is very, very difficult at this factory. Whenever management finds out, local strongmen intimidate the organisers because they know where they live' (Interview, November 2019; Südwind 2012). She also believes that management bribes the village authorities, other notables, the district police, etc., which not only makes union organising almost impossible but also prevents workers from filing complaints involving intimidation or threats from the police. Notably, the collective bargaining contract at Nikomas gives factory security the right to enter the homes of workers accused of theft, but interviewees insist that this has also been used against worker organisers. During times of national industrial unrest, such as during the massive wage protests in 2013, *jawara* are mobilised to protect the factory from protestors. In general, these local powerholders regard the emergence of an independent trade union as 'a nuisance to the pursuit of their material advancement' (Hadiz 2010: 153).²

4.3 Legacy union

On paper, at least, Nikomas is a highly unionised factory, covering most of the blue-collar workers. There are, however, serious doubts about the credibility and independence of the union. When Nikomas was established in 1993, workers were only allowed to join the All Indonesian Employees Union (or SPSI), the official government union established during President Suharto's regime. The SPSI eventually became the National Union of Workers (SPN). After the union's turbulent birth,

relations between management and union officials became steadily more stable. In fact, there have been no reported strikes since 2000, and relations between management and union officials have remained peaceful. Today, the union maintains a 400 square metre office and employs 33 paid officials. The SPN leadership consists mostly of male union officials, in contrast to the largely female workforce. The union claims that 52,000 out of a total workforce of 68,000 workers are currently union members (Mahmudah 2013). Some interviewees claim that workers are automatically enrolled in the union upon signing their employment contracts, which restricts the freedom of workers to join a union of their own choosing. Others believe that new employees may not be automatically enrolled but that they are channelled into joining the union by the human resources department. This, in turn, provides management with the advantage of maintaining a (management-friendly) union. Meanwhile, the union is guaranteed the union dues of all the factory's new employees.

These practices are far from unusual in Indonesia, where many unions have emerged from the former SPSI, which enjoyed a monopoly on representing workers under the New Order regime. These 'legacy unions', as Caraway call them (2008), inherit legal, institutional and membership advantages that give them a competitive edge over rival unions. It is often difficult for a member of a legacy union to join another union. Besides the barriers to shifting union membership, legacy unions have found ways to restrict the access of rival unions to workplaces. Their management-friendly posture means that employers often actively seek to 'impede the entry of other unions into the workplace' (ibid.:1385).

The SPN branch at Nikomas regularly negotiates the workers' collective bargaining agreement. But, despite its very large membership and its capacity to potentially organise massive demonstrations and disrupt the production process, they never actually negotiate wage issues. This is quite remarkable, since most of the workers only earn the minimum wage and many of them would probably support a wage increase. Some union leaders from outside of the Nikomas factory believe that this is because 'they have no background in fighting. They come from management' (Interviews, September 17, 2013; November 12, 2019). While this may be true, the Nikomas branch of the SPN can hardly be called unique within the Indonesian context, where collective bargaining agreements often 'reit-

erate rights that are already guaranteed by national legislation' (Caraway 2008: 1371; Bartley/Egels-Zandén 2016). One union official at Nikomas argues that any wage issues raised would simply be blocked or ignored by factory management. He did emphasise the fact that the SPN does negotiate issues such as seniority, holiday benefits and severance pay. They also negotiate non-wage-related issues, such as ensuring that female employees can exercise their right to menstruation leave, which is a legal right in Indonesia but is often violated. Most interviewees are convinced that the union's leadership has a very friendly, co-opted or even 'yellow' relationship with management, although they also point out that, within its leadership, there are various factions, with some union officials demanding a more independent approach. To shed light on the role of the union, we will look instead at a widely published incident related to wage irregularities, which reveals much about the prevailing power dynamics at the Nikomas site.

5. Struggle around forced overtime

On 12 January 2012, the BBC reported that Nike's supplier, Nikomas, had agreed to pay \$1 million in overtime payments to Indonesian workers. Workers were being required to start work 15-20 minutes earlier and stay 15-20 minutes after work to clean up their work areas. This practice is known as *jam molor* – which refers to forced overtime, but literally means 'hour of delay'. The practice was made public by Jim Keady, a US activist who runs a small ('one-man') NGO called 'Educating for Justice', which focuses on revealing the poor working conditions at Nike suppliers operating in Indonesia. In collaboration with Nikomas workers and plant-level trade unionists, he calculated that the company had violated overtime regulations for the past 18 years. Keady estimated that the amount of money owed to workers would easily run into the 'tens of millions of US dollars' (2011). The practice demonstrates how 'small thefts' and the 'petty pilfering of minutes' through forced, unpaid overtime continue to play an important role in important segments of the global supply chain, as this practice provides manufacturers like Nikomas with an extra-legal source of surplus value (Marx 1976: 352).

When confronted with this information, a senior manager at Nikomas at first categorically denied the practice and argued that Keady's allegations were incorrect. He also disputed Keady's claim that he had received this information from SPN officials. And, indeed, not long after, the SPN union's chairman wrote a letter to Keady stating that the overtime claims were incorrect and that the union leadership could not confirm any of the data he had shared with Nike; even though, as Keady argues, the union representative 'and his colleagues shared all of this information with me in a videotaped meeting'. Keady believes that the SPN officials' denials were the result of the 'dynamics of pressure and fear that permeate these factories' (Keady 2011). Attempts to resolve the matter with the Nikomas union leadership ended in frustration. 'They were scared', Keady argued, and 'were dealing with some serious pressure from factory management' (ibid.). Intimidation by management very likely played an important role in the union's turnabout. However, it might also demonstrate how little the union leadership is prepared to confront management head-on and perhaps, as some interviewees suggest, they are simply compromised or bribed.

The dispute could easily have ended here; because of the fact that the legitimacy of Keady's claims had been challenged by Nikomas management *and* the company's union, few CSR managers of branded clients would have bothered to investigate the unpaid overtime matter any further. But although the factory's union had been neutralised, the SPN's national board (at the federation level) decided to take up the case and conduct their own investigation. This was done by deliberately sidestepping Nikomas union officials 'to keep the survey neutral and independent', as one trade union officer puts it (Mahmudah 2013: 6). The SPN national board had participated in the Play Fair campaign and had established close relations with officials from the global union body (IndustriALL), which they leveraged when approaching Nike with the accusations. Nike, in collaboration with the national SPN, also decided to investigate the matter. They dispatched two teams to the factory, one of which was undercover. The Nike CSR manager noted that while 'the local union ... had no recent complaints of such activity..., our subsequent follow-up with district-level union members has revealed information we feel needs further attention' (cited in Keady 2011). Both teams concluded that forced overtime

was indeed happening, hence confirming Keady's claim. The research also revealed that managers were verbally abusive, and that workers had to pay bribes to get jobs at the factory (the practice of *pejorative Marlan* as noted earlier).

At this point, Nikomas's management began to change its tune and admitted that unfair practices had indeed taken place. In other words, the efforts of the national union and its willingness to exercise coalitional as well as institutional context-appropriate power forced management to respond to the allegations. In reaction, Nikomas adopted an eight-point programme to address overtime regulations, including a rule that production would stop 10 minutes before a shift ended so that workers can clean up their work areas (Mahmudah 2013: 4). However, for the SPN national board this was not enough. They impressed upon both Nikomas and Nike that the workers also needed compensation for their unpaid overtime. The negotiations between Nike, Nikomas and union representatives that followed resulted in a ground-breaking agreement that compensated 4,500 workers for close to 600,000 hours of unpaid overtime over a period of two years. The agreement only went back two years, despite the fact that the practice went back 18 years, because Indonesian law only allowed a redress for the last two years. Nike issued a statement in which it declared that it 'commends the factory on their action plan and efforts to correct inadequacies in current policies designed to protect the rights of workers. Nike will continue to monitor and support their efforts to remediate the situation' (Hodal 2012). Although the total reimbursement will have little effect on Nikomas financially, the fact that a factory acknowledged its wrongdoing serves, as one journalist argued, 'as a warning to other companies' (BBC News 2012).

6. Conclusion

The overwhelming majority of workplaces in GPNs still do not have collective worker representation. While the reasons for low-unionisation rates can be complex, one important element – no doubt – is the employer's power to prevent workers from forming into collective organisations. Rather than theorising about how labour as an abstract category operates

across space, this study paid close attention to the dynamics at and around the workplace. If associational power distinguishes itself from other power resources because it is a capacity located in workers themselves, its actualisation remains contingent on place-based circumstances and practices. Local relations can strengthen worker power, as emphasised in the literature on social movement unionism; however, place-based social relations can also hinder the exercise of associational power. Ethnographic studies have highlighted how paternalistic oppression, intimidation, and violence (or the threat thereof) intersect and merge with hostile employer strategies to constrain collective worker agency (Baglioni 2018; Mezzadri 2017). These studies underline that trade union rights cannot be treated in a 'technical manner', as a box to tick during a monitoring process. The existence of (external) power resources at national or global levels is not sufficient to remove the place-based barriers that are impeding associational power, although it may provide an important support to workers organising at the workplace (Bartley/Egels-Zandén 2016; Den Hond et al. 2014).

We illustrated this with a detailed study of labour relations at Nikomas. Despite the presence of structural, institutional, and coalitional power resources, we have argued that Nikomas's management has been largely successful in repressing the actualisation of associational power by developing a very tight local labour control regime. We discussed how power dynamics surrounding the factory impede workers from organising an independent union, while the present 'legacy' union has a close relationship with management. This unquestionably constrains the workers' capacity to engage in collective action at the Nikomas site and use existing structural, institutional and coalitional power resources within the athletic footwear GPN to defend, promote and expand their interests. The absence of intraunion cohesion also erodes their capacity to use institutional power and coalitional power, however, without completely eliminating it, as demonstrated in the unpaid overtime case. Although both management *and* the factory union leadership strongly denied the activists' claims, they nevertheless succeeded in extracting concessions from management, which was forced to compensate a group of workers and to put an end to the practice of unpaid overtime. In terms of capacity-enhancing gains that would strengthen the workers' longer-term ability to defend their rights and interests (Brookes 2019: 10), the campaign had

little impact. The company is still dominated by the symbiotic relationship between factory management, a captive union and place-based social elites. Hence, Brookes is correct to conclude that 'structural, institutional and coalitional power tend to be most effective when workers act in concert – whether walking off worksites, maintaining picket lines, marching in rallies, meeting with managers, taking cases to court or bringing corporate practices to the attention of the public' (2018: 256). Nonetheless, the case raises questions regarding Brookes's claim that a successful transnational labour alliance *necessitates* the coexistence of all three variables: intraunion and interunion coordination, as well as context-appropriate power. While intraunion coordination remains the basis for building successful transnational alliances, exploring how vertical linkages between workers and allies can provide a potential lever of contestation in workplaces where 'unions' remain under employer control may provide insight into possible alternative routes for achieving positive change.

- 1 Numerous people provided valuable comments on earlier versions of this paper. Their help and encouragement is gratefully acknowledged.
- 2 In 2019, after I had concluded my data collection, a few hundred workers succeeded in registering an alternative union at the Nikomas plant. This union, a branch of Garteks, has since reported that it has faced serious opposition from both management *and* the legacy union, including bureaucratic delays in the transferring of union memberships, various legal manoeuvres, a court case, shifting union members to other workplaces, and discriminating against certain union members. During the writing of this article, the long-term prospects for the survival of this insurgent union and its ability to develop a power base at Nikomas continue to remain unclear. These questions will be explored in a future paper.

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*ABSTRACT In diesem Beitrag werden die Prozesse untersucht, die die Organisierung von Arbeiter*innen bei Indonesiens größtem Fabrikanten, PT Nikomas-Gemilang, erschweren. 68.000 Arbeiter*innen produzieren dort Sportschuhe für Marken wie Nike, Adidas und Puma. Der Beitrag stützt sich kritisch auf den Machtressourcenansatz und nutzt diesen, um die Arbeitsbeziehungen und die (Hindernisse für die) transnationalen Arbeitskämpfe bei diesem Mega-Zulieferer zu analysieren. Besonderes Augenmerk wird auf die Machtdynamik im Umfeld der Fabrik gelegt, einschließlich der Frage, welche Rolle lokale Eliten bei der Untergrabung von gewerkschaftlichen Rechten spielen. Die Fallstudie lässt erhebliche Zweifel an dem Grad der Vereinigungsfreiheit aufkommen, den die Arbeiter*innen bei Nikomas genießen. Die traditionellen Machtstrukturen in der Region, in Verbindung mit der langen Geschichte von Gewerkschaftsunterdrückung, und das Vorhandensein einer Gewerkschaft aus der nicht-demokratischen Vergangenheit schränken die Organisationsmöglichkeiten der Nikomas-Beschäftigten ein. Zugleich beleuchtet der Beitrag eine erfolgreiche Kampagne gegen erzwungene Überstunden. Auf diese Weise zeigt der Artikel, dass der lokale Kontext selbst in stark globalisierten Sektoren die Möglichkeiten und Grenzen von Organisierung entscheidend mitbestimmt.*

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BETTINA ENGELS

The Scale to be? Strategic Alliances in Cotton Production in Burkina Faso

ABSTRACT This paper explores the factors that impact what scales are useful for labour organising and struggle. It argues that besides transnational networking and campaigns, intra- and inter-class solidarity and collaboration at the local and national scale are central to claim workers' rights and needs, even in highly transnationalised sectors. In a case study on the cotton sector in Burkina Faso, it is analysed how various groups along the chain of production organise and mobilise to raise their claims. Collaboration between the various groups on the local and national scale turns out to be more important than transnational campaigning. However, in the light of the embeddedness of the sector in global production networks, transnational networking might still be a promising strategy but comes along with substantial challenges that are distinct for various actors. The paper discusses possible obstacles for transnational networking for the smallholders and informal and casual workers, and shows how local and national cooperation may be a prerequisite for such approaches.

KEYWORDS *cotton, labour, networking, scale, Burkina Faso, Africa*

1. Introduction

Capital's striving for maximising profit by exploiting labour goes beyond national scales. This is clearly not a solely recent phenomenon; just think of the transatlantic slave trade. In recent times of globalisation, capital's operation on transnational and global scales has intensified though, with relevant implications for labour, such as an increasing frag-

mentation along(side) global value chains, outsourcing, casualisation, and various forms of the informalisation of labour. This comes along with challenges to labour organisation. In this light, it has been argued in global labour studies that labour needs to mobilise and campaign on the transnational and global scale, too (Brookes/McCallum 2017; Fairbrother et al. 2013). This is not a particularity of labour but applies to many fields of civil society campaigning, e.g. when it comes to human rights, gender, climate justice, extractivism, and others. In this article, I investigate which scales are useful for labour organising and struggles, and what are the factors that impact on the appropriateness of the respective scales for mobilisation. I argue that, besides transnational networking and campaigns, intra- and inter-class solidarity and collaboration at the local and national scale are central to claiming workers' rights and needs, even in highly transnationalised sectors. I thereby start from the assumption that i) 'work' and 'workers' are not restricted to waged work and wage earners (Komlosy 2016); and ii) that labour unions are not the only, and not always the most appropriate, organisations to represent workers and claim their rights (Atzeni 2021).

By taking the cotton sector in Burkina Faso as a case study, it is analysed how various groups – smallholder cotton producers, and formal, informal and precarious workers in the cotton factories – along the chain of production in the country organise and mobilise for collective action to raise their claims. What ways and what scales turn out to be appropriate for organising and representing workers in the Burkinabé cotton sector? It is argued that the fragmentation of labour and reproduction between agrarian and non-agrarian, rural and urban, formal and informal, hampers organising and collective action. Inter-class collaboration, solidarity and strategic alliances can potentially bridge this fragmentation and thus strengthen workers' power. To achieve better conditions of work and life for the variety of workers in the sector, it is crucial to overcome the fragmentation of labour and strive for solidarity between small-holder producers and factory workers. This means that even though the sector is highly transnationalised, in Burkinabé cotton production, collaboration between the various groups on the local and national scale for now turns out to be more important than transnational campaigning. The principal reason for this is that smallholders and workers have distinct interests but a common opponent, which is the cotton industry. As long as peasants

and workers do not join forces, they risk being pitted against each other, in favour of capital's interests.

The empirical material for the case study was collected during five research stays in 2018-2020. In total, I carried out more than 30 semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) in the towns of Bobo-Dioulasso, Dédougou, Houndé, Ouagadougou, and a couple of villages in the provinces of Mouhoun (Boucle de Mouhoun region, central-west) and Tuy (Hauts-Bassins region, southwest). Interview partners included cotton farmers, workers at SOFITEX cotton plants, and representatives from labour unions, civil society organisations, cotton companies and the official cotton farmers association Union Nationale des Producteurs de Coton du Burkina Faso (UNPCB). In addition, I had numerous informal conversations, paid visits to the cotton fields, and participated in the meetings and mobilisation events of the labour unions and grassroots organisations. Secondary sources include reports, mainly from the Burkinabé press, and documents from international organisations, development agencies, state authorities, the cotton industry, trade unions and NGOs.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, the argument is brought forward that labour is not to be reduced to waged work, and that the majority of underprivileged workers – notably in the informal sectors and in smallholder agriculture – are sparsely organised and represented by labour unions. Then, the development of the Burkinabé cotton sector is depicted, and labour organising and collective action are outlined, both in smallholder farming and in the cotton factories. I present the interests of various classes of labour in cotton production, and of the smallholders, and argue that these are distinct but not antagonistic. I then discuss why, for many of the groups, it makes more sense to strive for alliances at the local and national scale, rather than transnationally. Possible obstacles to transnational networking for the smallholders and informal and casual workers are discussed subsequently.

2. Organising casual and informal workers

In capitalism, waged labour represents just one of many forms of labour. Focusing on waged labour, it might be argued, somehow reflects a

Euro- and androcentric perspective that universalises the concept of waged labour in the factories at the time of the emergence of capitalism in Europe (Komlosy 2016: 56f.). But capitalism has certainly not everywhere produced “double free” workers (Lerche 2010: 65). E. P. Thompson, Hobsbawm and others brought forward an understanding of the working class and workers’ struggles that is not limited to the industrial proletariat but includes other forms of labour and, correspondingly, other marginalised social groups (Komlosy 2016: 61), that some authors have described as the “popular classes” (Zeilig 2009). In many contexts worldwide, and particularly in the global South, formalised waged labour represents just a minority of the labour force whileas many more people work in the so-called informal sectors, or are smallholder peasants. In the 2000s, vibrant academic and activist debates and research have emerged on precarious and informal work, relating both to the global South and North (e.g. Armano et al. 2017; Castel 1995, 2000; Standing 2011).

Organising casual, precarious and informal workers comes with particular challenges: these workers often work individually, sometimes from home and sometimes mobile (e.g. street traders); some work in remote regions (e.g. in artisanal mining or agriculture); others have diverse jobs and workplaces. Frequently, they lack material resources and time for organising and collective action, as many are occupied with day-to-day survival, feeding their families, and care work. Many informal workers are undocumented. Trade unions often do not have much experience in organising and supporting them (Bonner/Spooner 2011).

As a consequence, casual, precarious and informal workers are sparsely represented in trade unions but are present in a range of other organisations, both progressive and neoliberal (Britwum/Akorsu 2017): workers’ associations, women’s associations, cooperatives, civil society organisations, advocacy organisations, and others – ranging from scattered local groups to well-organised transnational networks. In some cases, self-organisations of informal workers, with regard to their organisational forms and repertoires, resemble trade unions but do not identify themselves as trade unions. With regard to the African continent, numerous case studies explore the organising of informal sector workers, but predominantly in urban settings, e.g. transport (Rizzo/Atzeni 2020), private security services (Omolo/Odhong 2017), port workers, and street and market vendors (Lindell 2010). Britwum

and Akorsu (2017) present the noteworthy exception of casual workers in the palm oil production in Ghana, who have organised themselves alongside their regularly employed colleagues in two competing trade unions. Lerche (2010) points out that underprivileged classes – particularly workers who are facing risks when organising, such as migrant workers and ‘illicit’ workers – are more likely to organise in other organisations beyond traditional unions.

That informal and casual workers lack representation in trade unions is also due to specific challenges linked to the organising of informal and casual labour that unions have to deal with: the instability and fluidity of labour relations; resources that are needed for informal workers’ representation and that have to be generated by regular workers (e.g. paid from their membership fees); and obstacles on both sides, including racism, chauvinism, anti-ziganism, etc. Nevertheless, organising informal workers in existing trade unions can have advantages for both: It can increase the structural and organisational power resources of trade unions, and informal workers can benefit from trade unions’ material and socio-organisational resources (Bonner/Spooner 2011; Britwum/Akorsu 2017). On the other hand, labour studies and radical activists have pointed at trade unions’ tendency to dampen labour struggles (Arnold/Bongiovi 2012).

With regards to agrarian labour, scholars point out that lines between the countryside and towns, between agriculture and manufacturing, the formal and the informal, become increasingly blurred. Categorisations as workers, peasants, traders, employed, self-employed, formal, informal, urban and rural are getting less clear. Henry Bernstein (2010) has characterised the fragmentation of labour and reproduction alongside the lines of urban/rural, agrarian/non-agrarian, employed/self-employed with the concept of “classes of labour”. Classes of labour include, beyond waged labour, all workers who indirectly depend on selling their labour power; people who “have to pursue their reproduction through insecure and oppressive – and typically scarce – wage employment and/or a range of likewise precarious small-scale and insecure, ‘informal sector’ (‘survival’) activity, including farming; in effect, various and complex combinations of employment and self-employment” (Bernstein 2008, cited by Lerche 2010: 65). Classes of labour are fragmented, as ethnicity, race, caste, gender, etc. interplay with class relations and increasingly blur class locations.

This is where global production networks (GPN) analysis comes into play. GPN analysis reveals in detail how capital and production processes are organised on a global scale, and strategically coordinate the fragmentation and delocalisation of labour to the benefit of capital. Thus, GPN analysis “can serve to reveal the variegated landscape for agency potential across different sectors. [...] such an approach can detail the variable levels of potential agency within functionally integrated economic networks. [...] Moreover, latent lines of solidarity between different groups of workers in different places may also be unveiled” (Coe/Hess 2013: 5f.). Yet, labour and labour agency do not play a central role in many GPN analyses (Carswell/De Neve 2013). Oliver Pye’s work presents an important exception. He puts everyday practices and acts of resistance by workers on palm oil plantations to the centre stage and argues that “fragmentation thus provokes a counter-reaction from workers, who scale up everyday resistance strategies [...] within the palm oil global production network” (Pye 2017: 942).

In the following case study, I focus on workers’ agency and strategies of resistance and claim-making. The cotton sector, as with palm oil and other agricultural commodities, is indeed highly transnationalised. This becomes obvious even if the analysis, as in the case study presented here, is limited to the part of the chain of production that takes place in the country. From a GPN perspective, transnational influences can be revealed in every location within the network: seeds and fertiliser on the cotton fields are produced by transnational agro-industrial companies; transnational companies hold shares in all cotton companies operating in Burkina Faso; and the purchase price paid to the farmers is impacted by the transnational buyers of cotton and by world market dynamics.

3. Burkina Faso’s cotton sector

Cotton production in the former state of Upper Volta, nowadays Burkina Faso (the country has been so named since 1984), has a long history, going back to the pre-colonial period. Production increased under colonial rule, as the colonial authorities aimed to supply their armies and workers in the factories of industrialising Europe with cotton clothes (Bassett 2001). From the 1950s onwards, the sector was developed by the French

state-owned cotton company Compagnie Française pour le Développement des Fibres Textiles (CFDT, created in 1949). In 1979, the Burkinabé government created the monopolistic cotton company Société Burkinabé des Fibres et des Textiles (SOFITEX), a joint venture of the government and the French company CFDT. From the mid-1990s onwards, the World Bank promoted the liberalisation of the sector.

In 1998, the Union Nationale des Producteurs de Coton du Burkina Faso (UNPCB) was created as the national organisation of cotton farmers. This was not a process initiated 'from below' by the cotton farmers themselves. Its creation was rather a reaction of the authorities to the attempt by some farmers to organise themselves within an umbrella organisation (the Fédération Nationale des Organisations Paysannes, FENOP, created in 1996) and to facilitate the representation of their interests (Dowd-Uribe 2014b: 557). Subsequently, some wealthier producers, together with SOFITEX and the government, pushed the creation of the UNPCB as a more 'peaceful', corporatist organisation, with the intention of taming the farmers' movement (ibid.: 558). The UNPCB is in charge of supporting the producers and providing technical advice to them and representing them in negotiations with the cotton companies and the state authorities.

In 2004, the creation of two fully private cotton companies, Société Cotonnière du Gourma (SOCOMA) and Faso Coton, was authorised. SOFITEX thus no longer holds the monopoly in the sector; however, the two private companies are much smaller and less important, as more than 80 % of production remains under the control of SOFITEX. The three cotton companies do not compete with each other; rather, the total cotton producing zone is divided between the three companies. SOFITEX controls the West, Faso Coton the Centre, and SOCOMA the East. Faso Coton is part of Industrial Promotion Services (IPS) (West Africa), a company that started with packaging in the 1960s and later expanded its activities to agri-business. SOCOMA is part of the GEOCOTON group that holds 75 % of SOCOMA's share. 13 % is held by the UNPCB and 12 % by private Burkinabé shareholders, according to the company.

The sector is organised according to a highly vertically-integrated *filière* model. The *filière* system was set up by CFDT in the 1950s and is typical for cotton production in former French colonies in West Africa. It is characterised by state-controlled monopolistic companies – in Burkina

Faso SOFITEX – that organise cotton production. SOFITEX is in charge of the proliferation and distribution of seeds, fertiliser and pesticides; it guarantees credits for agricultural inputs for producers; it provides agricultural extensions (i.e. providing education and consultancy service to facilitate the application of research and specialised knowledge to agricultural practices); and it organises the purchase, transport, ginning and sale of the grains and fibres. Today, the *filière* system functions in the same way in all zones, with the UNPCB representing the producer cooperatives and the respective cotton company being in charge of supplying seeds, fertiliser and pesticides on credit to the cooperatives, providing agriculture extensions, and taking care of the purchase, transport, ginning and sale of the cotton. The UNPCB facilitates the credit system by supporting the collection of credits and assuming liability cooperatively.

In 1999, the UNPCB became a shareholder of SOFITEX. The Burkinabé state held 35 % of the shares of SOFITEX; GEOCOTON, which replaced the former CFDT, 34 %; the UNPCB, 30 %; and private banks (BIB and BICIA-B), 1 %. So the state is the largest shareholder, yet international and private actors are highly influential. The purchase price is fixed before the season begins so that farmers have some planning security. This is a particularity of the West African *filière* system. In other cotton-producing states, the cotton sector is less controlled by the state but dominated by international companies. However, when it comes to pricing, the government and state-owned companies are significantly restricted by the international buyers of cotton, such as the Swiss Reinhart and the Dutch Louis Dreyfuss, both leading agro-industrial companies that are main buyers of Burkina cotton. As Staritz et al. (2018) have outlined, national institutions and policies have an impact on cotton pricing. Strong associations of peasant producers thereby play a central role. However, the scope of action of national politics is restricted by the power asymmetries along the global commodity chain (Staritz et al. 2018: 24). Thus, the Burkinabé state agencies and SOFITEX are able to ensure intra-seasonable price stabilisation through a price supplement fund and other mechanisms; yet they can barely influence the actual price, which is set up at the world market level.

Cultivation itself is carried out by smallholder peasants, mainly on a family/household basis. Farmers are organised in cooperatives, the groupe-

ments des producteurs du coton (GPCs). The cooperatives are in charge of administering credits to the cotton farmers. In order to have access to input supplies and to be able to sell the cotton, every farmer has to be a member of a cooperative. At the beginning of the season, the cotton companies sell inputs on credit (with interest) to the cooperatives, and after the harvest, they purchase the cotton at a fixed price. Though cotton cultivation does come with risks and challenges, farmers stick to it because it is their only chance to access agricultural assets (input supply, credit, technical support, access to the market). Many farmers state that they would actually prefer to cultivate maize or other cereals if they got credit to do so (Dowd-Urbe 2014a; FGDs with cotton farmers, Tuy province, 9 February 2019 and 25 September 2019). Cotton farmers can at least get some fertiliser for maize cultivation on credit from the cotton companies if they produce a certain amount of cotton. Yet many farmers, especially the poorer ones, are chronically indebted, as they hardly manage to pay back their debts because of poor yields due to climate conditions, pest infestation, lack in labour, and the need for money for other basic items (medical care, school fees).

Most cotton farmers in Burkina Faso own a couple of hectares of land. Those who are more well-off may own up to 50 hectares. A very small minority of wealthy producers own over 100, some even over 300 hectares. Labour in smallholder farming is mostly unpaid family labour, namely farmers' wives and youth (see Luna 2019). Whether peasants have unpaid family labour at their disposal is crucial regarding how profitable cotton cultivation is for them. Women are exploited threefold: They do unpaid labour in the fields, care work at the household, and in addition to that have to pursue other activities, such as petty trading or gardening to feed their children. In the cotton cooperatives, as a rule, only male farmers are members and thus have access to input factors on credit; women can become members of a cooperative only in exceptional cases, e.g. when the husband had passed away.

Producers who have some cash and who cultivate larger areas also hire labour on an informal and daily or weekly basis. Informal day-workers are hired, especially for the harvest. Most day labourers are relatively poor people, both men and women, who do not own any land. To load the cotton onto the trucks to transport it to the factories, farmers often hire young men from the villages, again informally, on a daily basis.

4. Labour, organising and collective action

Farmers and formal and informal workers along the chain of cotton production are organised in various ways, to represent themselves and claim their interests. However, the level of organisation varies substantially among the distinct groups of workers. In particular, informal and casual workers, and unpaid family labourers, are hardly represented in any formal organisation.

4.1 Cotton farmers

With respect to organising the cotton farmers, the UNPCB is the principal organisation that is supposed to, and claims to, represent them. However, the UNPCB is a typical corporatist institution created according to the logic of liberal corporate multi-stakeholder governance. It aims to rationalise production, though ultimately it functions more to tame and control farmers rather than to represent their interests and help them raise their claims. It was established in a top-down way by the state authorities, hand-in-hand with SOFITEX and an elite of relatively wealthy farmers, and thus advances their interests. Such an institution, created in the context of neoliberal policies and economic restructuring, fails to integrate the interests of the majority of smallholder cotton producers (Engels 2021). This became obvious in 2011, when a struggle for its leadership created a severe crisis for the UNPCB. Many farmers felt cheated by the UNPCB and considered its board a “machine” of SOFITEX (Napon 2011). The current president of the UNPCB, Bambou Bihoun, who was elected in 2017, is one of the wealthiest cotton farmers in the country (Dofini 2017), and seeks collaboration with the cotton companies and the government instead of confrontation and conflict.

As a consequence, smallholder producers began to create concurrent organisations or align themselves with other organisations. In recent years, to raise their claims, farmers from various cooperatives in the SOFITEX zone have set up a network, the Collectif des Paysans, and have begun to organise within an existing nationwide youth association,¹ the Organisation Démocratique de la Jeunesse du Burkina Faso (Democratic Youth Organization of Burkina Faso, ODJ). In collective action, they frequently draw on non-institutionalised means in order to raise their claims. “We

have drafted an agenda of our claims”, as one smallholder explained (FDG with cotton farmers, Tuy province, 3 October 2019). “We present the agenda to the *union* [the UNPCB]. SOFITEX does not recognise the farmers but only the *union*. But at the *union*, our agenda goes straight to the wastepaper bin.” (ibid.)

4.2 In the cotton factories

SOFITEX has about 5,000 employees, of which only 1,500-1,700 have permanent contracts. 3,300-3,500 are working on temporary contracts of less than six months, though some work virtually the whole year round for the company, for example in the security service or as electricians. The main distinction among workers for the cotton companies is between permanent, seasonal and occasional contracts (*permanents*, *saisonniers*, and *occassionels*). Permanent workers have fixed contracts with access to social security and labour rights, according to the state law. Seasonal workers are recruited for the entire cotton season (up to four, in some years up to six months), usually every year again, and have social security, though with poorer conditions as compared to those holding permanent contracts. Occasional workers, in contrast, are recruited on demand and are not declared to the social security benefits office, meaning that they do not have access to social security. Some are paid on a weekly basis, others monthly, whereas the payment is basically the same and calculated per hour. The end of an occasional contract is usually announced one week in advance. Contract types and qualification are related; most of the white-collar employees and the management have permanent contracts, skilled labour is often on seasonal contracts, and ‘simple’, unskilled workers in the factories are mostly occasional. Distinctions exist among the 1,500 permanent employees at SOFITEX; namely between the management, low-ranking white-collars, and technicians.

The principle of permanent, seasonal and occasional work is the same at the three cotton companies, whereby Faso Coton has outsourced the occasional work to a sub-contracting firm.² At the factory of Faso Coton in Ouagadougou, in late 2020, around 150 workers had permanent contracts, and 250 were seasonal workers. Workers themselves estimated the number of occasional workers who work for the subcontracting firm at 140-150 (FDG, occasional workers, Ouagadougou, 07 March 2020); each year, 20-30 are deployed to Faso Coton (interview, trade union representative,

Ouagadougou, 10 December 2020). Occasional workers do most of the hard work, such as the loading and unloading of cotton bales that may weigh up to 180 or 200 kg, delivering seeds, fertiliser, pesticides etc. to the farmers, which also means carrying bags of 40 or 50 kg. Therefore, almost all occasional workers are relatively young men. The large share of casual work is a typical feature of agricultural production, due to seasonality, and all the more in highly transnationalised export-oriented agricultural sectors such as cotton and palm oil.

Permanent and seasonal workers are organised in labour unions. In the cotton companies, three labour unions represent the workers: the Confédération générale des travailleurs du Burkina (CGT-B), the Organisation Nationale des Syndicats Libres (ONSL), and the autonomous national labour union of textile workers (Syndicat national des travailleurs des fibres textiles, SYNAFITEX). The CGT-B is the biggest among the six labour union federations that exist in Burkina Faso. It is oriented towards a Marxist-Leninist ideology and understands itself as 'revolutionary', whereas the other federations are oriented towards more reformist and/or social democratic ideas. The ONSL and three other trade union federations are affiliated to the International Trade Union Council (ITUC). Besides, most trade unions have some sort of contact to trade unions in other countries, both in Western Africa and Europe (particularly in France).

At SOFITEX, 120 delegates represent the permanent and seasonal workers in the work council, of whom 73 are SYNAFITEX members, 46 come from the CGT-B, and one from the ONSL, resulting from the work council elections in early February 2019. At Faso Coton, in contrast, the CGT-B is now majoritarian in the work council. The SYNAFITEX is mostly considered a 'yellow' trade union (one that is close to, or influenced by, the employer).

Occasional workers, however, are not represented by the labour unions. The cotton companies recognise the work councils as representing the workers; however, at SOFITEX, occasional workers do not have the right to vote for the work council, and at Faso Coton occasional workers are not even employed by the cotton company itself. Though in principle occasional workers may strike, too, it is much riskier for them to do so, in view of their precarious status. However, wildcat strikes, sabotage and other forms of protest by occasional workers happen from time to time.

The CGT-B at Faso Coton focusses on improving the status and material conditions of the seasonal workers, for example with regard to the absorption of the cost for health care, housing, and transport. However, the CGT-B does not fight for the occasional workers. Union activists argue that if the union does not have a critical mass of members and supporters among the occasional workers, it cannot carry out any systematic action in favour of them (Interview with labour union representative, Ouagadougou, 3 March 2020 and 10 December 2020).

5. Establishing inter-class networks on the local and national scale or scale jumping? The 2018-2019 boycott campaign

The cotton farmers' discontent with the UNPCB and the SOFITEX was expressed in an extensive boycott campaign in the 2018-2019 season. In January 2018, smallholder producers organised in the ODJ held a press conference to complain about the poor quality of fertiliser delivered to them in the SOFITEX zone. Farmers who had received inferior quality fertiliser should be compensated, they claimed: "The cotton producing farmers must not be left alone to deal with the catastrophic consequence of the season. All actors of the *filière* have to bear the costs. Thus, simply cancel the total debts of the cotton season 2017-2018", a spokesperson of ODJ in Tuy province stated (Kinda 2018). On 30 April 2018, cotton farmers who were organised in the ODJ presented their claims to the regional state authority (the *Gouverneur*) of the Haut Bassins region. To reinforce their claims, the farmers launched a boycott of cotton cultivation (ODJ 2019). The initiative to boycott spread rapidly, particularly within the SOFITEX zone.

Boycott means that farmers decide not to cultivate cotton at all, or to significantly reduce the surface area and instead grow cereals (maize, millet, sorghum), beans or cash crops such as sesame, groundnuts and cashew. Consent for the boycott campaign varied among farmers, not only regionally – with some provinces showing a high, and others a low degree of boycott – but also within villages, GPCs and families. But regardless of whether they supported the boycott in principle, cotton producers widely agreed that fully abandoning cotton would be challenging, in view of the absence of cash-generating alternatives.

The boycott campaign resulted in a significant decrease in cotton production in the 2018-2019 season; while the Burkinabé cotton companies had set a target output of 800,000 tons, only 436,000 tons were produced, which meant a 29 % decrease as compared to the previous season. This led to Burkina Faso falling from being Africa's top cotton producing country to the fourth, after Benin, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire.³ Though weather conditions, the removal of genetically modified cotton, and the unstable security situation in Burkina Faso also negatively impacted cotton production, all actors involved consider the boycott to have been a major cause (Coulibaly 2019).

The principal claims that farmers raise in their protests include the increase of the purchase price to 500 CFA francs; lower prices for and quality control of agricultural inputs; change in the allocation mechanism for these inputs; and relief of farmers' debts for the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 seasons. Yet, the pricing of both cotton and inputs do not take place simply in the national arena, but in global production networks that are characterised by power asymmetries. Thus, if the purchase price paid to the smallholders was to be increased significantly, or the prices for agricultural inputs reduced, the government would probably have to subsidise it. Besides, key claims also concern the UNPCB: the dissolution of the national and departmental boards, an independent audit of all its offices, and examination of cases of possible malversation of UNPCB funds and the conviction of all persons in charge (Ouédraogo 2019).

Smallholder farmers – which means, usually, the male head of the peasant household – are rather well organised, in the cooperatives and thereby in the UNPCB (though many do not feel represented by it), and more recently, partly in the Collectif des Paysans and in the ODJ. In contrast, informal day-labourers and the many people who do unpaid family labour on the cotton fields, are not organised in the formal organisations, and their interests are quite weakly represented. Organisations such as the UNPCB assume that the (male) head of a household represents the interests of all household members. The ODJ addresses the fact that cotton cultivation is based on the exploitation of unpaid family labour, but this is rather a side than a core issue, and potential antagonisms within the household and the family are rarely made a subject of discussion, to my knowledge.

Related to the recent cotton boycott campaign, it became obvious that the workers in the factories and the smallholder farmers risk being played off against each other, to the advantage of the cotton companies, if they do not succeed in creating networks and strategic alliances. Representatives of the SOFITEX management and the ‘yellow’ labour union in the interviews frequently stated that both the company and the producers would have an interest in the fact that the amount of cotton produced is high, but that the claim for high purchase prices by the farmers would be unreasonable. They argue that the UNPCB represents the farmers – which, from the view of many of the smallholders, it does not – and that the UNPCB was a partner of the cotton companies and not in favour of the boycott. “We are worried about the calls for boycott”, a representative of a cotton company’s management outlined (Interview, 8 February 2019). “It has to be win-win: they win, we win, then life is pleasant.” (ibid.) So those farmers who call for boycott would actually torpedo the common interests of all engaged in the chain of cotton production. This argument is promoted by the management but reproduced by some workers, too: “If the farmers refuse to produce, this is a problem for those working in the factory.” (FDG with SOFITEX workers, Dédougou, 26 February 2019) This actually holds true, especially for the occasional workers, as they are the ones to be dismissed if the factory is underutilised, and for the seasonal workers, as the length of their contracts depend on the length of the cotton season, thus on the amount of the cotton production. So it is correct that, with the decrease of the amount of cotton produced, casual workers will find themselves without an income; yet, they are dismissed at the end of the season anyway. Thus, the issue is not the boycott by the farmers, but rather the precarious status of the majority of workers in the sector. And even though interests of the smallholders and workers are not the same, this does not mean that they are antagonistic. At least strategically, for both smallholders and workers it is wiser to ally with one another than with capital. ‘Win-win’ does not exist in capitalism; there are always winners and losers. And, as it is based on the exploitation of labour, life is unlikely to be pleasant for everybody. Most smallholder farmers exploit their own labour and others, of their family members and informal workers, often landless or poor peasants. Some of the poor peasants can be subsumed under the “classes of labour”, as Bernstein defines them, but many smallholder cotton

farmers cannot. However, they are all opposed to the cotton companies, as are the workers. In this view, inter-class alliances and solidarity between the various “classes of labour” in cotton production, and the smallholder farmers, make sense. According to a leading activist of the boycott, “If we do not produce that concerns the company and its cadres. To the seasonal and occasional workers, it is all the same; they have nothing to lose anyhow. Moreover, many of them are themselves peasants: They are on the field during the rainy season and work for SOFITEX during the cotton season.” (Interview, Houndé, 14 February 2019) As distinct from this, the idea of smallholders and workers being opposed to one another is put forward by the cotton company. As the boycott campaign activist put it: “When the workers protest, they lower the purchase price for cotton to meet their claims. If we get something, they dismiss some workers and others have to work double. That’s how it works.” (ibid.)

From this perspective, what is needed are networks and organisations to establish alliances and create solidarity between the various classes of labour and the smallholders. Obviously, the UNPCB is not the organisation to do so, as it represents the interests of the more well-off farmers, and allies with capital. The same applies to the ‘yellow’ labour unions that represent the interests of the more well-off among the cotton companies’ employees (the management and white-collars with permanent contracts). The CGT-B principally has the potential to do so, in view of the fact that it has a long tradition of broad alliances, namely between public sector servants, workers, high school and university students, and the unemployed urban youth (Engels 2019).

Cotton production in Burkina Faso is comprehensively based on informal, casual, and partly unpaid work, both in smallholder farming and in the factories. These classes of labour are barely organised in, and represented by, the trade unions, but rather by a range of other, often less institutionalised organisations, such as peasants’ groups, cooperatives, women’s organisations, youth associations, and others. Such organisations and trade unions are potential allies. This corresponds to the idea of social movement unionism (Waterman 1993); namely, labour unions that engage in broad social mobilisation beyond their core membership, their interests and claims, and thereby link labour struggles to wider aims such as democratisation, regime change, or environmental justice. For the Burkinabé

trade unions in the cotton sector, both in view of their social legitimacy, and strategically to confront the cotton companies, it seems more reasonable to strive for alliances on the local and national scale than for scale jumping and transnational networks. Moreover, as SOFITEX is a state-owned company, and the cotton sector is highly institutionalised by the state, both trade unions and cotton farmers tend to address their claims to the national rather than to the international level.

For the cotton producers, or more precisely, for their organisations, opportunities for transnational collaboration with international NGOs exist; but it seems that the issues on the agendas of international NGOs on the one side, and of most smallholder cotton farmers in Burkina Faso on the other, are rather distinct. Whereas the claims of the farmers concern the price and the quality of the fertilisers, pesticides and seeds, and the purchase price, international NGOs, when it comes to cotton production in general and in Africa in particular, are particularly interested in ecological issues, namely the fight against Monsanto's experiments with genetically modified cotton (Dowd-Uribe 2014a; Luna/Dowd-Uribe 2020) and the promotion of organic cotton (Dowd 2008). However, many smallholder producers are sceptical regarding organic cotton, and not all are opposed to the genetically modified seeds. This shows that these NGOs on the one side, and organisations of Burkinabé cotton farmers on the other, have different topics on their respective agendas.

Obstacles that furthermore possibly hinder organisations of smallholder cotton farmers as well as casual workers, are lack of time and communication barriers (many people prefer to communicate orally instead of in writing, and in African languages instead of French), and tend to use their phones rather than the internet. It is not by chance that African organisations in general, and from countries previously colonised by France and Portugal in particular, are often underrepresented in transnational agrarian movements. There are certain privileged actors that are able to play on the international stage – a case in point in the Burkinabé cotton sector is François Traoré, the first President of the UNPCB after its establishment in 1998 until 2010, and still one of the wealthiest cotton farmers in the country.⁴ As important as the efforts of such actors are, it is doubtful that they represent the majority of the poor farmers and marginalised groups, such as landless day labourers, unemployed youth,

and women. These are the groups whose interests are least of all formally organised and represented in the cotton sector.

In light of this, the need to organise marginalised and so far under-represented interests and to make the other actor aware, and to prompt them to take these interests seriously, seems more urgent than upscaling towards the international scale. The same applies to the sphere of the workers of the cotton companies; to increase their social legitimacy and their structural and organisational resources, it is more crucial for trade unions in the cotton companies to endeavour to organise informal and precarious workers than to upscale their activities and get engaged with international organisations and transnational networks. It can be argued, of course, that local and national collaboration does not rule out transnational networking; however, both peasant organisations and trade unions have limited resources available, and their principal task still is to negotiate collective interests within the respective social groups and actors, and then claim these interests from the cotton companies and the state authorities. So, eventually they have to set priorities and to gauge the advantages and drawbacks of getting engaged with the one or other scale.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that, for the collective actors that organise the various classes of labour in the Burkinabé cotton sector, it is more reasonable to engage in inter-class networking on the local and national scale rather than in transnational networking. This is however not yet an overall conclusion: the advantages and drawbacks of various forms of networking and campaigning depend on the specific conditions of economic sectors and national states. Notably, when companies threaten to outsource labour to other countries and parts of the world, transnational networking becomes a requirement for labour.

One condition is how the respective sector is structured, including whether companies are state-owned or multinational. A core feature of the Burkinabé cotton sector is the *filière* model, with the state as a central actor and SOFITEX as the main company, which is state-owned, and the UNPCB as an important organisation that farmers have to deal with.

All of these are actors and institutions at the national scale, whereas there is no strong institution at the international scale to which smallholder farmers or workers could address their claims. Thus, they are required to address the national and the company scale, whereas the latter in the Burkina Faso case is national, too. In contrast, in cases where companies are multinational, transnational campaigning is more promising, in order to put pressure on the companies by civil society organisations in their countries of origin and from the consumer side. The *filière* is indeed a relatively closed national system, as compared to cotton production in other countries and to other sectors; nevertheless, it is embedded in global production networks. Thus, the state authorities and SOFITEX have less room for manoeuvre than the peasants may assume or wish. However, transnational networking and campaigning would require inter-class solidarity at the local and national scale first.

- 1 'Youth' in terms of a social category, not necessarily age.
- 2 I do not have any information on SOCOMA, the smallest of the three cotton companies that operate in the East of the country.
- 3 In the 2020-2021 season, 492,613 tons were produced, and Burkina Faso ranked 3rd among Africa's cotton producing countries, after Benin and Côte d'Ivoire.
- 4 See Traoré's blog at <http://francoistraore.blogspot.com/> (last accessed 3.3.2022)

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*ABSTRACT Der Beitrag fragt danach, unter welchen Bedingungen welche räumlichen Ebenen (scales) strategisch sinnvoll sind, um die Anliegen und Interessen von Arbeiter*innen zu stärken. Es wird argumentiert, dass neben transnationalen Netzwerken und Kampagnen auch die klasseninterne und klassenübergreifende Solidarität sowie die Zusammenarbeit auf lokaler und nationaler Ebene von zentraler Bedeutung sind. Beides spielt auch in stark transnationalisierten Sektoren eine wichtige Rolle bei der Durchsetzung der Rechte und Bedürfnisse von Arbeiter*innen. Die Fallstudie zum Baumwollsektor in Burkina Faso zeigt, wie sich unterschiedliche Gruppen von Arbeiter*innen entlang der Produktionskette organisieren, um ihre Ansprüche geltend zu machen. Für diesen Fall zeigt sich, dass die Zusammenarbeit zwischen den verschiedenen Gruppen auf lokaler und nationaler Ebene eine größere Rolle spielt als transnationale Kampagnenarbeit. Angesichts der Einbettung des Sektors in globale Produktionsnetzwerke kann die transnationale Vernetzung aber dennoch eine vielversprechende Strategie sein, die jedoch mit erheblichen Herausforderungen für die verschiedenen Akteure verbunden ist. Der Beitrag diskutiert mögliche Hindernisse für die transnationale Vernetzung von Kleinbäuer*innen, informellen Arbeiter*innen und Gelegenheitsarbeiter*innen und argumentiert, dass lokale und nationale Vernetzung eine Voraussetzung für eine transnationale Organisation ist.*

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Workers' Power in Marikana: Building Bridges of Solidarity in South Africa's Platinum Mines (2012-2014)

ABSTRACT Between 2012 and 2014, South Africa witnessed an unprecedented labour movement culminating in a five-month strike at what were then the three largest platinum mining companies in the world. Drawing from ethnographic research and in-depth interviews, this article traces the multiple scales within which mineworkers organised collectively, forging unity outside of traditional trade union affiliations. What began as a 'living wage' demand amongst a small number of a specific category of workers at one shaft, in one company, soon spread across the entire industry capturing the hearts and minds of 80,000 platinum mineworkers. Mineworkers' ability to exercise power was intensified by their decision to jump scale and build bridges across companies and regions and to a lesser extent transnationally. The article also describes forms of solidarity in communities, especially by women, and the broader trade union movement and concludes by focusing on the fragmented nature of the working class in South Africa more generally. With few important exceptions, the extent to which mineworkers were able to exercise power beyond a relatively local or narrow scale is quite limited, despite this large-scale mobilisation.

KEYWORDS *mineworkers, Marikana, trade unions, jumping scale*

1. Introduction

On 16 August 2012, 34 Black mineworkers were gunned down by police under the auspices of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), in what has become known as the Marikana massacre. Marikana is the small town at the site of the Lonmin platinum mine in the Northwest province

of South Africa, where workers were striking at the time. The massacre not only resulted in an outcry internationally, including by former anti-apartheid activists, some of whom had boycotted South Africa's economy until the first democratic elections in 1994, but it also led to foundational political shifts within the country. It opened up spaces which appeared to be further left of the tripartite alliance made up of the ANC, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). This included the emergence of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the so-called 'NUMSA moment' (National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa), whereby the largest trade union in the country broke from the Alliance (with the ANC) and began the process of forming a United Front to challenge the adoption of neoliberal and anti-working class policies by the ruling ANC. According to one analyst (Alexander 2013), the Marikana massacre was a turning point in the history of the country. Indeed, to a significant extent, militant workers and communities would turn against the ANC and the tripartite alliance, declaring that it was too cozy with the bosses and represented the interest of capital, rather than poor and working class people.

While other scholarly works deal with the relationship between the Marikana massacre and what this means for the politics and history of the country more generally (Sinwell 2019), this article centres on the period between 2012 and 2014 when mineworkers led strike actions. I focus specifically on the relatively immediate origins of strike action at one shaft, Karee, in what was then called the Lonmin platinum mine¹. Workers in this shaft demanded a 'living wage' of R12,500, more than twice their salaries at the time, and this was the amount for which 34 workers died on the mountain in Marikana. The narrative presented in the body of this article demonstrates the way in which a relatively modest and seemingly apolitical attempt to improve working conditions and to adjust salaries became part of a multi-pronged set of solidarity interventions.

The research undertaken for the purposes of this article seeks to answer the following question: in what ways did mineworkers organise in the period 2012 and 2014? In addition, it seeks to identify major efforts at building solidarity beyond the so-called local level. The conclusion unpacks the significance of these efforts in the context of fragmentation amongst the working class in South Africa more generally. The article

suggests that the local level provides the potential and only meaningful basis for ‘jumping scale’ to others’ spaces, through which to engage in a collective project to improve living and working conditions. What is in the workers’ minds, their individual and collective consciousness, when he or she mobilises locally, is of central importance. A relatively tiny layer of activists within and beyond the contemporary mineworkers’ movement in South Africa undertook processes which were “place-based while acting *across* space” (ibid.). In order to address the locally specific interests of workers and their demands, activists require a “global sense of place” (Antonsich 2010: 331). To put it another way, it is incumbent upon workers, but also activists more generally, to “reach ... out from local ... identities to find threads that enable solidarity and extend lines of power for those that remain otherwise trapped in place” (Swyngedouw 1997: 168 in Castree et al. 2004: 210).

The mineworkers’ movement was a response to the shifting nature of the political economy, both nationally and internationally. Gold was historically at the epicentre of South Africa’s ‘mineral revolution’ from the end of the 19th century, which was rooted in the perceived need for cheap Black labour to dig out the precious metal. By the 1990s, the far more volatile platinum industry was booming. South Africa to a significant extent controlled the market, since at the time it held more than 80% of the underground reserves. When South Africa repositioned itself within the global economy in the post-apartheid period, mining industries sought headquarters overseas. This included then platinum powerhouses Lonmin and Amplats, which, at the time of the strikes, had headquarters in London. Importantly, BASF, based in Germany, is the biggest chemical company in the world and in 2012 it was responsible for purchasing about half of Lonmin’s platinum annually. It has been accused of being complicit in the exploitation of mineworkers, but strikers themselves have not geared their demands towards this specific aspect of the global production network. While rank and file mineworkers did not explicitly seek to organise workers at a transnational level in other countries, their local and regional organisation directly shaped global production networks to the extent that they stopped extracting platinum for refinement.

The prices of platinum, and commodities generally, skyrocketed in the late 1990s and 2000s, but the profits went mainly to shareholders – many

of them overseas – and not to workers. This left mineworkers overstretched. They were digging out platinum from underground, working overtime, but their wages remained largely untouched. After 2008 there was an emergent sense of crisis within the industry, “driven by the collapse of global demand in a context of massive over-investment, heightened competition and mounting corporate debt” (Capps 2015: 497). In 2010, there were nearly 25,000 more workers in the platinum industry in South Africa than in the gold one and, overall, the largest trade union in the country at the time (NUM) boasted more than 350,000 members. Between 2012 and 2014, South Africa witnessed an unprecedented labour movement, culminating in a five-month strike (the longest in the country’s mining history) at what were then the three largest platinum companies in the world.

Drawing on ethnographic research and several in-depth interviews which were undertaken during this tumultuous period, this article traces the multiple scales within which mineworkers organised collectively. After providing context, I proceed by detailing, in the section thereafter, what is arguably the most precise or narrow ‘geographical scale’ or place in which to organise: two particular workers in the changing rooms at one shaft in one mining company, who began a process which then spread to other shafts, companies and regions. It then details how the women of Marikana became involved at another ‘scale’, linking community and worker struggles, before highlighting the solidarity actions of communities from outside Marikana (who had themselves experienced police brutality for standing up for their rights). In the following section, I lay out the political and historical context within which these micro-processes took place. What began as a ‘living wage’ demand, originating amongst a small number of a specific category of workers at one shaft, in one company, soon spread across the entire industry, capturing the hearts and minds of 80,000 platinum mineworkers who would join the independent and upstart union. The idea of a ‘living wage’ also seeped into the consciousness of dispossessed communities, some of which crossed regional boundaries in order to provide working-class solidarity. The article also suggests that, although AMCU was critical in harnessing the unprecedented unity amongst workers in the platinum mines, this was limited to the specific sector, and leadership tended to block rank and file activists who wished “to jump scale” and “bridge spaces” (Merk 2009) beyond this.

2. Context of scales of power in the platinum mines in South Africa

Workers at the then three platinum giants – Amplats, Impala and Lonmin – each undertook extensive unprotected strikes in 2012. The term ‘unprotected’ is used to describe a strike where workers’ jobs are not ‘protected’ by the Labour Relations Act (LRA). Without this, workers can easily be fired. By the end of January 2012 at Impala (then the world’s second largest platinum mine), worker unrest had spread beyond the informal collective of rock drill operators (RDOs), and virtually the entire workforce had downed tools. That first strike ended on 3 March, and the RDO’s pay was increased to R9,000. Discontent with the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which was then the largest trade union in the ANC’s tripartite alliance, came to a head at Impala because the union opposed the popular, unprotected strike. By the end of the strike, management had fired 18,000 of the striking mineworkers. This effectively ended their union membership. About 11,000 others had resigned as NUM members at Impala by 30 March 2012. The perceived shortcomings of the union at each of the three major platinum mining companies, especially its failure to defend workers subject to dismissal for engaging in unprotected strikes, provided the immediate structural conditions in which informal worker committees arose, and a mineworkers’ movement took hold (see Chinguno 2015a, 2015b).

What began in 2012 as disparate and localised forms of rebellion, with relatively weak or seemingly non-existent ‘bridges’ between the three mining companies and the different shafts within them, was transformed into a wide-scale movement under the auspices of the ‘upstart’ union AMCU. The NUM, which had previously been in the driver seat in the platinum belt and was once a social movement linking community-based and worker struggles together to fight apartheid, was now seen by many rank and file workers to be in the pockets of management. By 2013, the vast majority of workers across the entire platinum belt had joined AMCU, and in 2014 the union led an intensive five-month strike. The workers were demanding a living wage of R12,500 across the platinum mines.

A few notes on union membership will provide the reader with context. On a national scale, AMCU’s membership increased from about 10,000

members in 2011 to about 120,000 in 2013, and, in the platinum sector as a whole, AMCU grew to 70 per cent of the workforce. In that year, the NUM dropped from more than 50 per cent to about 20 per cent membership in the sector (Niefertgodien 2017). Between 2011 and 2015, the union lost about 40 per cent of its 300,000 members overall. At a central committee meeting held in Pretoria in June 2016, the NUM's general secretary, David Sipunzi, noted that, "Our drop was mostly affected by the incident [unprotected strikes and police killings] in Rustenburg, where we experienced most membership losses" (Giokos/Mahlati 2016). In the present period, as we shall see, AMCU is competing for membership with NUMSA, which has gained ground, particularly at Impala platinum (Mndebele 2021).

Two important 'tectonic shifts' occurred after the Marikana massacre, both of which continue to have important implications for mine workers' political identities and for the building of an alternative left movement outside the framework of the ruling ANC. First is the EFF, which positions itself as an anti-capitalist, black consciousness political party. It was in fact launched in 2013 in Marikana. Its President and Commander in Chief Julius Malema, indicated that he and his colleagues chose to launch the EFF at the mountain in Marikana because mine workers had died for their 'economic freedom.' Many mineworkers, especially those who joined AMCU, have since developed a firm relationship with the EFF. This is in part because the EFF manifesto officially adopted mine workers' radical demand of R12,500. In the 2014 national elections, when the EFF gained more than one million votes (about six per cent of voters), the party became the official opposition to the ANC in the Northwest province, where many mineworkers left the ruling party and joined it.

A second aspect of the 'tectonic shift', with important implications for South Africa's left politics and beyond, is the breaking away of NUMSA from the ANC alliance. While AMCU and NUMSA do not have a strong working relationship, in the aftermath of Marikana they both stood against the ANC government. With the decline of the NUM, AMCU grew proportionately, but NUMSA became the largest trade union in South Africa, with approximately 350,000 members. At the end of 2013, the union made a decision to end its ongoing support for the ruling ANC, citing Marikana's massacre as one key reason. This set the stage for a historically momentous process that led to the union being expelled from the

COSATU and forming the United Front to bring together workers and community members across the country.

The massacre, which many mineworkers believed was endorsed by the ruling ANC, transformed the political identities of tens of thousands of mineworkers. The result was a growing distance between them and the tripartite alliance (which includes the NUM), offering the possibility that AMCU would be an important, if not integral, part of the new left political formations which were in their infancy in 2014, when mineworkers sustained five months of strike action. Before detailing broader political forces and the role of women in Marikana in providing solidarity, the next section captures in ethnographic detail the emergence of the sub-movement at Lonmin, the Karee shaft in particular, which is located around the community of Marikana where the massacre of 34 mineworkers took place. Management responses, as well as the massacre and state repression, led activists within and beyond Marikana to 'build bridges' and to 'jump scale' outside of the local contexts within which their struggles tended to be waged.

3. Meeting in the changing rooms: Micro-scale mobilisation

The collective mobilisation at Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana began with a concern amongst a specific category of workers, Rock Drill Operators (RDOs), at one shaft called Karee. There were two other shafts, Eastern and Western. RDOs are the workers who drill into the rock at the stope face, into which explosives are inserted in order to blast out the rock-containing ore. Since the introduction of the current (known as Patterson) pay scales in 1973, they are some of the least well-paid underground workers, although they do the most dangerous work. At Karee shaft, as we shall see, a small group of RDOs were concerned that at their shaft, unlike Western and Eastern, they did not have assistants to help them with the drill. These workers also began discussions about the demand for a 'living wage' of R12,500. The management response to their two demands (providing assistants and an increase in wages) in June and July 2012 was that they could consider giving mineworkers their shaft assistants, but the demand for R12,500 would have to be considered in consultation with the other two

shafts (Eastern and Western). RDOs at Karee responded by 'building bridges' between the RDOs at the other shafts, thereby extending the 'scale' of the demands from one isolated shaft to others.

The mineworkers' movement at Lonmin was initiated by a small group of RDOs at Karee who decided to put aside their union affiliation and form an independent, ad hoc committee. It began in May 2012, when one RDO at Karee, who was on leave at the time, considered the prospects of obtaining R12,500. He persuaded another worker (affiliated with a different union) and then several more, until more than 100 workers supported the demand and it became a collective effort. First, some brief background: in May 2011, a prominent NUM shop steward nicknamed 'Steve', whom workers at all three Lonmin mine shafts viewed as a genuine leader, was fired by the NUM for violating their constitution. Soon thereafter, virtually the entire Karee workforce went on an unprotected strike in defence of Steve, and management dismissed about 9,000 workers. This led to management selectively re-hiring most workers, but about 1,400 were not rehired. Lonmin representatives went in search of new workers, especially RDOs, to fill the gap in their workforce. From the workers' perspective, they had been fired by the NUM, which was viewed as siding with management and undermining their interests. In that context, AMCU began to recruit at Karee. By the time of the 9 August 2012 strike, NUM had barely 20 per cent membership at Karee, while AMCU had over 50 per cent. When combined with the other two Lonmin mines, Eastern and Western, however, the NUM represented the majority with 58 per cent of the total workforce (Da Costa n. d.: 149). This was to change drastically in the months to follow, as NUM membership declined significantly.

Molapo had come from Impala, where RDOs were now making comparatively more money than they did at Lonmin, due to the Impala strike earlier in the year. Although at Karee the drilling machine was lighter than those at Eastern and Western, and designed for single operators, he was nevertheless disappointed that in Karee, unlike in the other two major Lonmin shafts, RDOs had no assistants to carry the cumbersome machine. While Molapo, a worker, was on leave in early 2012, he observed: "I found the money at Lonmin, it's small. As the money is so small, it was clear that Lonmin doesn't have the truth. It was apartheid. They don't treat people equally... Those that they [management] liked, they gave them assistants.

And there are those that they... don't give assistants. That's the thing that hurt my heart the most, when I look at my salary. The money, it's small... after deduction, it comes to R4000, R3900. That's the thing that triggers me. And then I end up calling the guys and say, 'Hey...let's approach the management about this money'" (Interview Molapo, 28 September 2013). Molapo met a man named Mbulelo and they had a discussion in the changing rooms after completing a tough day's work underground in late May 2012. They had both been working at Lonmin for less than a year, but that day they began a process of uniting workers – one that has gone down in history.

They discussed a basic salary which they believed would adequately compensate them for their work: R12,500. Molapo remembers the conversation he had with Mbulelo: "We sat down, two of us. And then we said, because we see that we are earning 4,500, some 4,900, [we thought our salary should be] 5000 plus [an additional] 5000... We took the wages we are earning, we multiply it times two. And then we saw that if we can take the salary that we are getting and multiply it twice, that this will be an amount of money that can satisfy us... according to the work we are doing... That's why when I spoke to the workers I said, 12,500 is the money that can satisfy us" (Interview Mbulelo, 15 August 2013). He noted further that the additional R2,500 (on top of the 10,000 which was approximately twice the salary of an RDO) would come from management's 'sympathy' for the workers: "he can put some other cents that come from him [and] when it combines with this R10,000, it will be like R12,500" (Interview Molapo, 28 September 2013).

4. Bypassing union membership as the basis for organising

The workers at Karee shaft were members of both NUM and AMCU, but they decided to unite as workers more generally. Instead of narrowly confining themselves to union membership, the fact that they worked hard as RDOs led them to network and build unity amongst themselves. Molapo told the workers, "We don't have to meet these union guys because we will confuse ourselves. Because there are two [unions], we don't know which will agree and which will disagree. It's our right to approach manage-

ment if things are not going well” (Interview Molapo, 19 September 2014). During that initial conversation in late May 2012, when the two RDOs had met in the changing rooms, Molapo recalled, “We reached a point where we talked about combining workers” (Interview Molapo, 28 September 2013). Molapo and Mbulelo agreed, “Even if it can be like five RDOs, it will be fine. Five to 10 people and discuss... this issue” (Interview Molapo, 28 September 2013). They called a meeting with other Karee RDOs. They mobilised by word of mouth, and at the first meeting there were indeed the five or 10 people that Molapo and Mbulelo had hoped for. They discussed the fact that, at Karee, RDOs were paid the same amount as other workers in Eastern and Western, but they were not given an assistant.

Management, at this early stage, willingly negotiated. Management agreed with the workers to set up a task team to examine the work they were doing. Workers wanted to know about the allowance, and they were also concerned about the R12,500. The decision to give the RDOs at Karee an R750 allowance (or bonus) was signed by Exco on 27 July (Witness Statement Da Costa, 23 September 2012: 79). One might have expected that this increase would have kept the RDOs at bay, given that the RDO workers’ committee was largely born out of the fact that at Karee RDOs had no assistants. But the R12,500 demand had become engrained in their minds, and in the minds of those workers waiting for the report back.

It seemed that, among some workers, it was already R12,500 or nothing. According to Molapo, the two RDOs responded to the offer by saying: “you [da Costa] can give us your R750 but what we are saying is that we need R12,500” (Interview Molapo, 28 September 2013). They thus concluded that Da Costa had said that, while the R750 could be given to Karee, the R12,500 that they were requesting could not be determined by Karee only, but was a matter for all of Lonmin to consider. At the Karee shaft specifically, this was part of an attempt by management to “downscale the negotiation of wages and working conditions, and hence confine workers’ struggles to the local scale, or even to the level of the firm” (Bergene 2007: 146 in Merk 2009: 603). And yet, management’s attempt to quell the workers with an offer of an extra R750 per month backfired. The relatively speedy unilateral decision indicated to workers that management had money sitting in their coffers. The isolation of RDOs at Karee would soon be broken and this would have major ramifications for the

development of the strike. At the report back to the RDOs at Karee it was concluded that RDOs from Eastern and Western (the other two shafts at Lonmin) should join them in a collective struggle for R12,500. Soon, workers not only united with RDOs in other shafts, but virtually every underground worker joined in a strike action on 9 August 2012, before the police shot 34 mineworkers waiting for the employer on the now infamous mountain. While this section detailed how workers bypassed the unions at one company, the next investigates the ways in which they united workers from different companies and also how activists built bridges between labour and community struggles.

5. Uniting the platinum sector and labour and community struggles

The workers' struggle in Marikana would lead to the building of working-class bridges: 1) amongst mineworkers from other shafts and mines; 2) to other sectors; and 3), perhaps most importantly after the massacre, to communities where local women in particular became highly politicised and central to solidarity actions during this and subsequent strikes. Indeed, after the massacre, the strike at Lonmin in Marikana intensified even further. What appeared as a major victory in September 2012 at Lonmin (a 22% wage increase) prompted other employees in various workplaces over the next two months to engage in unprotected strike action, including in the gold, diamond and coal industries, and spreading eventually to automobile and truck manufacturing and the public sector. The farmworkers' struggle in the Western Cape province also gained traction, as exploited workers also demanded a minimum daily living wage (Wilderman 2015). While independent worker committees had been central to the organisation of the 2012 strikes and building networks outside of the Rustenburg region in Limpopo, which also contains platinum (Sinwell 2019), they were soon marginalised by the new union (AMCU) (Ntswana 2014; Sinwell 2016). By 2013, AMCU had gained formal recognition and then proceeded to "synchronise" the demand for R12,500 "at all the major platinum producers" (Chinguno 2019: 71).

A worker named Zakhele, who migrated from Flag Staff in the rural Eastern Cape for a better life at the mines, was one of the RDOs at Lonmin.

Having toiled at the mines since the early 1980s, he believed he was living on poverty wages. In the lead up to the 2014 strike, he and many others created strong linkages between their own working conditions and pay and the broader political and economic framework that left them trapped in a perpetual downward cycle. Referring to mineworkers as “slaves” he maintained that:

“We are oppressed, but it is up that dig up the platinum and precious metals. When they talk about the economy of the country, they mean the gold platinum and silver and diamonds of this rich land. But we do not see the wealth of our land at all. We want our kids to go to universities and become leaders of this country... so we must not be taken for granted because in a day they [the media] talk of billions that come out of the mines.” (Interview Zakhele, 3 November 2013)

A broader framework of systemic oppression emerged amongst mine-workers, a small pocket of whom believed it was necessary to overthrow the capitalist system.

However, it was women in the community of Marikana who would be at the coal face of the direct networks created to provide solidarity to mine-workers in Marikana. A middle-aged mother called Primrose Sonti was watching television in her shack at the time of the massacre. She had been a member of the ANC branch in her area and had consistently represented the community to press the local government councillor to deliver. On 16 August, as she saw on TV that a razor wire was being put by police around the mineworkers, she found a whistle and began to call the women of Marikana. She devised a plan: “Let’s go to the stadium near the mountain and go straight to the management to ask him to stop that thing because now our sons, our fathers are gonna die here.” Following the massacre, Primrose Sonti and other women formed the *Sikhala Sonke* (“we are crying together”) which created a network, and discourse, linking the struggles of the community, especially women, to the struggles of the mineworkers.

During the five-month-long strike, women and men who had depended upon the breadwinner salaries of the mineworkers were beginning to go hungry, but they devised plans for linking to solidarity campaigns. This was part of a process in which food was eventually delivered to 17 different

shafts in the platinum belt. Eventually, the Gift of the Givers (GOG) became involved and in merely one day alone more than 10,000 people who turned up at the site of the incoming GOG trucks received hot food or food parcels (Sinwell/Mbatha 2016: 157f.). The women of Marikana were the ‘invisible hands’ and minds who, according to Asanda Benya, “kept the strike alive” (2015: 555). Indeed, they had been experiencing a crisis of poverty and unemployment, lack of housing and water, many years before the massacre. When their husbands, friends, and neighbours took part in the strikes of 2012 and 2014, they did not sit back and wait. After this tumultuous period in the platinum belt, Sikhala Sonke consistently pressured Lonmin, and then later Sibanye Stillwater, which bought out Lonmin in 2019, to make progress not only in terms of wages, but in delivering basic services to mining communities more generally.

6. External community and trade union solidarity

A significant handful of community-based organisations in South Africa would also pledge their support directly to the mineworkers. NUMSA sought to unite the miners with workers of other sectors. In other words, the employed and unemployed instilled a sense of solidarity, momentarily, with the mining sector and specific local areas where miners were mobilising. Sipiwe Mbatha was one of the community-based leaders in a shack settlement called Thembelihle in the South-West of Johannesburg. For 20 years, Sipiwe and other community members had been demanding basic services such as water, electricity and housing from the ANC government. They too had experienced police brutality and Sipiwe himself was once shot with a potentially deadly rubber bullet which struck him in the knee (that was a year earlier in 2011).

Community leaders in Thembelihle sought to build linkages between their struggle, which he and others viewed as anti-capitalist, and the rest of the working class. When the miners of Marikana stood up, and were shot by the state for demanding a living wage, Sipiwe offered solidarity. In fact, he was present at a meeting in Magaliesburg (one hour’s drive from Marikana) when the massacre happened. He remembered that:

“We just saw this gruesome killing and it was shocking in South Africa because we were under a democracy. We couldn’t believe that this was happening in our country. So we wanted to see, is this really happening? [At that time] we were in the political school at Magaliesburg with the Democratic Left Front so they just elected us to go and see the situation.” (Interview Mbatha, 23 October 2013)

Their responsibility was to report back to those who remained behind in Magaliesburg, and then, collectively, they would decide a way forward. Although it was difficult to build networks in the context of a massive campaign of state violence, nevertheless they were persistent. On 22 August 2012, a public meeting bringing together about 150 worker and community leaders from Marikana, as well as community-based organisations, took place at the University of Johannesburg, where I was based at the time. The Marikana Support Campaign (MSC) was launched as a single-issue, education and legal campaign which demands justice for the miners killed in Marikana.

NUMSA, which was then the largest trade union in the country, the union’s members having seen what happened in Marikana, broke with the ANC and sought to build alliances with mineworkers (whom the union had previously had little success at organising). NUMSA was one of the most radical trade unions in COSATU. Founded in 1987, it has a strong tradition of shop floor organisation and education campaigns. After the massacre, the NUMSA became the largest trade union in South Africa, with approximately 350,000 members. At the end of 2013, the union made a decision to end its ongoing support for the ruling ANC. One key reason given was the assertion that the ANC had killed workers in Marikana. This set the stage for a historically monumental process which led to the union being expelled from COSATU and forming a United Front to bring together workers and community members across the country.

But the AMCU national leadership was not necessarily keen at extending solidarity through direct linkages with the working class beyond its own membership. Workers, such as Makhanya, who knew that they would be stronger with firmer links with other unions, nevertheless persisted. At a mass meeting of several thousand mineworkers at Olympia Stadium in Rustenburg (at the geographical and symbolic centre of the

three platinum mines), the great five-month strike of 2014 was about to unfold. The leaders, including Makhanya, were present, and he also spoke to the crowd. Attempting to obtain a wider and more potent reach for their collective mobilisation, Makhanya invited President Andrew Chirwa of NUMSA to speak at the rally, but he was prevented from doing so. For the AMCU executive, including its President Joseph Mathunjwa, it seemed it was either AMCU or nothing. These practices reflected a belief that while mineworkers should join and be united within the AMCU in order to fight the bosses, the AMCU should not unite with any political organisation or union. And yet Makhanya's previous experiences organising workers independently had taught him that "a worker is a worker", regardless of political affiliation, or trade, and that their strength lay in their power to unite with each other. He put it simply when he told me, "when workers come to support other workers, they must be given a chance to speak" (Personal communication Makhanya, 19 January 2014).

AMCU nevertheless took on a democratic character throughout the 2014 strike, representing militant workers that had only become more resolved since the Marikana massacre, which had taken place two years earlier. The union simply would not bow out of the strike without the consent of the rank and file. Five months into the strike, the workers and their union settled for major increases of R1,000 per year for the next three years (about 20 per cent increase per year). The five-month strike was impressive, perhaps even heroic, in the eyes of observers, who had hope that workers' agency could play a role in transforming structures that excluded the working class from a greater share in the money that their labour produces. AMCU's internal militancy amongst its members, however, was not matched by major attempts to nurture broader working-class movements during this period. While Sinwell (2016) documented the positive changes which have resulted from the wage increase, inflation severely undermined the gains (Bond 2019).

Outside South Africa, Marikana had a significant impact on left-oriented solidarity and political organisations in places such as the U.K., U.S. and Canada, which had supported the anti-apartheid struggle, and especially the ANC. The example of Marikana gained traction amongst German activists in relation to the chemical producer BASF, but this was not part of the core programme of ordinary strikers. The Socialist Workers

Party in London was perhaps more directly involved than others, because a group of its sympathisers resided in Johannesburg (near Marikana) and were part of the MSC. They produced statements written in support of the mineworkers and also sought connections to strike leaders. Indeed, a line had been drawn in the sand; it was now clear that the ANC had betrayed its own people when their police gunned down 34 workers. Some of the worker leaders, initially isolated in their shafts or specific platinum mines, had in that context connected with sympathetic organisations and individuals, such as the SWP. One of the leading mineworkers at Amplats, named Makhanya, provides a case in point. In the lead up to the 2014 strike, he was especially keen to create linkages between existing struggles internationally within an anti-capitalist orientation. By January he had attended Socialist Workers Party annual conferences in Britain on more than one occasion, and he was not only schooled in working class politics, based on his experience with the mineworkers' movement, but he was also a self-proclaimed Marxist. In London, he was met with applause by the international audience when he exclaimed "I am not just only the mineworker, I am the socialist, I am the freedom fighter." The struggle was no longer simply about individuals or solely about narrow economic concerns, but rather became symbolically about justice and the well-being of present and future generations:

"As the youngest mineworkers that have worked in South Africa, we have seen our father, our grandfather, even ourselves, working on the mines and becoming poor. We said, 'we are the last generation who are going to become poor in South Africa.' Our previous strike which took place [in 2012]... opened our minds to realise we have the power to demand everything... So we said in our next [national] election [in 2014] we want to vote out this capitalist [ANC] government." (Speech Makhanya, 22 August 2013)

7. Conclusion

What began as a narrow struggle around wages amongst one group of mineworkers, RDOs, in the shafts, spread to other categories of workers, to the broader community – especially women – and then to the plat-

inum sector in South Africa more generally. Workers themselves took the initiative to mobilise in small numbers: first two workers in the changing rooms, and then dozens of workers, before mobilising an entire category of workers (RDOs) at one shaft. When management's response to their wage demand suggested that their own local or 'narrow' issue could not be considered on its own at one shaft, RDOs called the other shafts at the company before uniting with virtually every category of the entire underground workforce. Miners then united (two years later) in the longest strike in South African mining history, under the auspices of AMCU. But the scale of organising reached other industries and communities in South Africa which had been marginalised by the state and could identify with the police brutality associated with Marikana.

The largest trade union in the country, NUMSA, broke with the COSATU federation, in part as a result of the Marikana massacre, and is now a core part of a new left alliance, the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), launched in April 2017. This relatively new workers' organisation consists of over 700,000 members in over 20 different unions, including the massive 350,000-strong NUMSA, but it has yet to prove that it is democratically driven by its membership. Most recently, it has experienced a leadership crisis. It has also failed to demonstrate that it will play a serious role in organising precarious workers who operate outside traditional union structures, and it has had very limited success in uniting community struggles such as those in Thembelihle, who joined in solidarity with the miners of Marikana. The same may be said for the United Front, which has, since NUMSA's announcement of its formation in late 2013, at best stalled and at worst become moribund. There is arguably a growing degree of working-class fragmentation in the country (see e.g. Kenny 2020).

The EFF's Julius Malema, and AMCU's president, Joseph Mathunjwa, have been most effective at tapping into the political space opened up by state repression (which mineworkers link to the ANC) and the perceived limitations of the NUM. Primrose Sonti, a key leader of the women's organisation, Sikhala Sonke, is now a member of parliament in the EFF, which suggests that there is a firm relationship between local level mobilisation in Marikana and electoral politics on a national level. And yet there are few, if any, signs that the EFF is playing a major role in the popular

mobilisation of mineworkers, other than through the building of electoral support. Moreover, according to my ongoing research into the nature of AMCU in the platinum belt since the 2014 strike, the union has not developed a programme for building democratic worker structures at the shaft level that are driven by and accountable to the rank and file. Once considered to be a democratic union, AMCU is in fact proving to be deeply authoritarian.

Nor is there any substantial evidence that AMCU, much like the vast majority of unions in the country, made any substantial attempt to extend beyond their relatively narrow boundaries by bringing together workers, communities and students under the United Front. SAFTU has also not obtained enthusiastic support from AMCU, thus suggesting that the new federation remains somewhat fragmented in its attempts to incorporate all the largest and most militant trade unions in the country. AMCU's top-down nature may also, in the relatively near future, lead to its own demise in a context where intra and inter-union rivalry means that workers within the mines are no longer organised as workers, but rather on the basis of trade union membership.

Firms have sought to create the conditions for their monopolisation of labour power. By making decisions on individual shop floors, or in this case at shafts within one company, other workers with similar issues toiling in other 'spatial geographies' are relatively isolated. Indeed, this can be seen as part of a 'divide and rule strategy' to reduce "labour's bargaining powers and makes it easier to exploit the locational rigidity of workforces" (Merk 2009: 603). And yet, "spatial strategies are by no means exclusive to firms" (Merk 2009: 600). The case of platinum mineworkers' mobilisation between 2012 and 2014 enables one to explore the ways in which "workers not only scale up their activities/strategies geographically in order to influence, challenge or resist capital, but [they] also expand the terrain of struggle outside the work-floor" (Merk 2009: 606). It also points to the limitations of a 'labour' movement which has tended to remain confined, with few exceptions, to one sector (platinum) at the point of production. A further limitation on the scale of organising is that it has tended to obscure the purchasers of platinum such as BASF in Germany. While other scales were invaluable in the exercise of labour power, the transnational scale of organising was not something workers used sufficiently to their advantage.

Still, the struggle at Karee shaft, in Marikana, for a living wage of R12,500 took on an “extra-local dimension” which enabled “labour solidarity across space” (Merk 2009: 600) and thereby the exercise of substantial symbolic and real power by workers over the labour process. Whether or not transnational activism and solidarity are able to find resonance amongst ordinary people at the forefront of militancy in South Africa is likely to remain a key factor in determining the extent to which existing struggles are able to constitute a sustained threat against the logic of capital.

1 Lonmin was acquired by Sibanye-Stillwater in July 2019.

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*ABSTRACT Zwischen 2012 und 2014 kam es in Südafrika zu einer bislang beispiellosen Mobilisierung von Arbeiter*innen, die in einem fünfmonatigen Streik bei den damals drei größten Platin-Bergbauunternehmen der Welt gipfelte. Auf der Grundlage von ethnografischen Untersuchungen und Interviews zeichnet der Artikel die verschiedenen räumlichen Ebenen (scales) nach, auf denen sich Bergarbeiter*innen kollektiv organisierten und eine Einheitsbewegung jenseits traditioneller Gewerkschaftszugehörigkeiten formten. Was als Forderung nach „existenzsichernden Löhnen“ bei einer kleinen Gruppe von Arbeiter*innen eines Bergwerks begann, breitete sich bald auf die gesamte Branche aus und eroberte die Herzen und Köpfe von 80.000 Platin-Bergarbeiter*innen. Die Fähigkeit der Bergarbeiter*innen, Macht auszuüben, ist auf ihre Entscheidung zurückzuführen, bestehende Grenzen zu verschieben und – teilweise über die Landesgrenzen hinweg – Brücken zu anderen Unternehmen und Regionen zu schlagen. Der Artikel beschreibt Formen der Solidarität in den Gemeinden, insbesondere von Frauen, und in der breiteren Gewerkschaftsbewegung. Abschließend geht der Beitrag auf die Zersplitterung der Arbeiterklasse in Südafrika im Allgemeinen ein. Trotz der umfangreichen Mobilisierung war die Macht der Bergarbeiter*innen, von wenigen wichtigen Ausnahmen abgesehen, relativ begrenzt und blieb auf die lokale Ebene beschränkt.*

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“Nothing about us without us” or “The most effective way to get it implemented”? Global South Workers’ Power in Australian Civil Society Initiatives in the Garment Sector

ABSTRACT Australian NGO and trade union initiatives seek to improve conditions for women garment workers in the global South. This small-scale study sought perceptions of Australian-based civil society staff about the power of garment workers within such initiatives. Deploying a feminist political economy perspective, the study draws on feminist notions of power and the power resources approach. It looks beyond long-established sources of power (structural, associational, and institutional) to explore coalitional and discursive power. The theoretical framework emphasises the importance of discursive power, including social norms that impact power. The study highlights the potential for Australian civil society groups to perpetuate the dominant discourse of women worker’s ‘docility’ or to challenge it, including through amplifying worker voice. The findings indicate that obtaining coalitional power (power workers gain by joining with allies other than workers) requires workers to have some associational (collective) power among themselves, highlighting the interrelations of power resources and the limitations of substituting associational with coalitional power. These findings have implications for global North groups seeking to prevent garment worker exploitation.

KEYWORDS feminist political economy, power resources, garment workers, global supply chains

I. Introduction

“Getting the worker voice...stops that...imperialism; ‘we know what’s best’...But once you’ve got... knowledge [about what workers want]...it’s just about pushing a campaign in the most effective way to get it implemented.” (Participant 4, P4)

“We have key principles,...one of the main ones is ‘nothing about us without us.’” (Participant 1, P1)

Both mainstream media and academic literature have detailed employment issues in global garment manufacturing, including curtailment of worker voice, low wages and health and safety issues (Wells 2009). Global competition between both garment manufacturing countries and manufacturing companies results in pressure on employers to keep labour costs low and on governments to limit labour regulation (Anner 2012). Relationships of power, such as gender or ethnicity, further entrench the disempowerment of garment workers (Elias 2005). Despite this, in the Asia-Pacific region, though conditions may be exploitative, garment manufacturing still may offer women workers greater autonomy than other employment options (Siddiqi 2009).

In response to issues for garment workers, transnational campaigns have connected local worker struggles to consumer campaigns worldwide, affecting consumers’ and brands’ actions. However, the extent to which worker power is exercised in shaping campaign claims is questioned (Kabeer 2015). As evidenced in the opening quotes, attitudes amongst participants in this study varied. Whilst both reflect a commitment to listening to workers, P4 (consumer campaigning) prioritises campaign effectiveness over worker involvement, in contrast to P1 (an Australian funded project dealing directly with garment workers).

This paper poses the following key questions: How do Australian trade unions and non-government organisations (NGOs), seeking to improve working conditions for global South¹ workers in supply chains view workers’ power within their campaigns and projects? To what extent is building worker power a goal of their work? In this small-scale study, we examine perceptions of individuals working in Australian-based civil society organisations (ACSOs)² seeking to end labour exploitation in the

garment industry through advocacy and campaigning in Australia or through funding projects with global South garment worker organisations (GSWOs). This study is limited to perceptions of ACSO participants. It is acknowledged that workers and GSWOs are best placed to comment on their own power in order to prevent perpetuating potential power imbalances between the global North and South. However, the limitations of this research prevented seeking their perspectives.

We adopt a feminist political economy (FPE) approach to explore the gendered nature of the garment industry and the potential impact on campaigns and initiatives. FPE demonstrates how garment manufacturing is socially constructed as “women’s work” (Elson/Pearson 1981: 92), leading to the undervaluing of skills, lower pay (Elias 2005) and the construction and enforcement of the myth of women workers “docility” (Wright 2006). To understand worker power from a gender perspective, we draw on feminist notions of power. We also employ the power resources approach (PRA) found in some “transnational labour alliance” (TLA) literature (see Brookes 2013). We explore perceptions of ACSO employees about regarding worker power within their campaigns or funded projects through this unique framework.

This article first draws on FPE literature to outline the gendered nature of the garment industry. We then explore sources of worker power in PRA, before discussing relevant feminist notions of power that can expand the PRA. This is followed by an overview of the methods of the research. An analysis of interviews is then outlined, and key conclusions provided.

2. FPE and global garment manufacturing

FPE explores the gendered dimensions of the relationship between both political and economic elements of globalisation; this paper looks at how gender has shaped the global garment industry. In an early study, Elson and Pearson (1981) argued that multinational corporations manufacturing in the global South used and reinforced existing local gender norms that undervalued women’s skills to pay women less than men in order to keep production costs low. Since then, FPE ethnographic research in various cultural contexts have demonstrated that conceptions of women

as innately “dextrous” and “docile” have been pervasive (Elias 2005; Wright 2006). This has led to the delineation of sewing as “women’s work”, in the process undervaluing workers’ skills (Gunawardana 2018). “Docility” is enforced for women workers and resistance is curtailed (Wright 2006). For example, Melissa W. Wright (2006: 34) found Chinese factory managers paternalistic in enforcing docility: “We have naïve girls. Here we are like their parents. They have to obey us...When workers make problems, we find other girls.” Local cultural norms that are used and re-created in global production arrangements dictate how the myth of women’s docility is perceived and enforced, but have been found in multiple studies in different locations and cultures (see Dedeoglu 2014; Elias 2005).

Early FPE approaches to export-orientated manufacturing are critiqued for not paying attention to how workers are represented. Siddiqi (2009: 156) argues that whilst “ground breaking”, some literature paints workers as “homogenous, faceless and voiceless creatures” (Siddiqi 2009: 157). Ethnographic literature in multiple contexts demonstrates the diversity of garment workers’ experience; for example, family run workshops in Turkey (Dedeoglu 2014) are a different experience to migration to Economic Processing Zones in Sri Lanka (Gunawardana 2011). Studies also demonstrate that, despite challenges, garment workers exercise voice and resistance (Marslev et al. 2021). Thus, how academics and campaigners working from the global North (including ourselves) write about global South garment workers matters. In the context of transnational campaigning, this also involves an opportunity for women worker’s leadership and to define key issues, input into strategy, and control public narrative.

3. The Power Resources Approach

The Power Resources Approach (PRA) comes from labour studies literature and has been adopted in some TLA literature (i.e. Brookes 2013). PRA research examines sources of worker power in order to aid union strategising (Schmalz et al. 2018). In this study, we seek to understand perceptions of worker power within, and as a goal of, transnational campaigns and projects in a largely unorganised sector. Thus, we apply this approach differently, as we examine the internal dimensions of societal power. In

doing so, we focus on associational, and societal power. Societal power includes coalitional and discursive power. We then draw on feminist literature on power to advance the PRA by demonstrating how social categories (including gender) affect power resources.

3.1 Associational and structural power

A key source of worker power has traditionally been associational power, defined as “the various forms of power that result from the formation of collective organisations of workers” (Wright 2000: 962) such as trade unions. Where workers join together in an organised fashion, they have more power than as individuals – this power is associational. Another key source of worker power has traditionally been structural power. Structural power comes “from the location of workers within the economic system” (Wright 2000: 962). This includes workers in high demand. It also includes workers whose absence can impact broadly when they take action, i.e., a dock worker strike impacts numerous industries, as goods are left on ships.

In some instances (including Vietnam and Cambodia), garment workers have used associational and structural power to improve working conditions (Marslev et al. 2021). However, changes to the global economy and the garment industry, including the globalisation of production, have generally diminished workers’ associational and structural power (Reinecke/Donaghey 2015). For example, if garment workers build associational power and successfully push their employer or government for higher wages, brands can source from another factory or country with lower labour costs; even the threat to relocate production can reduce worker power.

3.2 Societal power

Discursive and coalitional power are types of “societal power” of workers. Webster (2015), argues that worker power has not been lost but is changing, from traditional sources to societal power. Discursive power, as one of those new sources, employs narrative creation by workers and unions, as discussed in PRA literature (Lévesque/Murray 2010). Coalitional power is more often discussed in TLA literature and denotes the power workers obtain through alliances with non-labour actors including

consumers, investors or the community (Brookes 2013). PRA literature specifies that workers need some associational power to obtain coalitional power (Schmalz et al. 2018).

An example of coalitional power is highlighted in consumer campaigns. As power in garment supply chains rests with brands rather than manufacturers or workers (Gereffi 1994), IndustriALL, the garment workers Global Union Federation, has cooperated with consumer campaigns to influence brands (i.e., the Bangladesh Accord). Consumer campaigns exert pressure on brands to improve conditions or otherwise risk losing their custom (Connor 2004). Consumer campaigning referred to in the TLA literature is often described as the ‘boomerang’ model of campaigning (Keck/Sikkink 1999), whereby workers and GSWOs appeal to groups in other countries (i.e., consumers) to target relevant actors (i.e. brands) to pressure the brand, and by extension the factory employer. Thus, workers with low associational or structural power may gain power through such coalitions.

The boomerang model presumes that the campaign emanates from workers but case study research by Hertel (2006) and Brooks (2007) demonstrate that some consumer campaigns emerge from the global North. Kabeer (2015: iv) notes that “claims relating to workers...have been largely made on their behalf by anti-sweatshop campaigns led by Northern-based organisations.” Wells (2009) contends that global North contributions to outcomes largely resulting from local activism have often been overstated in joint campaigns.

3.3 Institutional power

Institutional power of workers comes from “formal and informal rules” (Brookes 2013: 187), including labour laws and to a weaker extent corporate social responsibility (CSR) standards, established over time. Although there has been some success in initiating wage setting institutions in countries such as Cambodia and Vietnam (Marslev et al. 2021), in the globally competitive garment industry there is significant market pressure on states to keep labour costs low and thus to have weak labour laws with limited power to for workers (Anner 2012). Similarly, whilst there are some good examples of CSR (particularly when in conjunction with civil society), evidence indicates enduring continuing difficulty for workers to build power using CSR initiatives (Rennie et al. 2017).

4. Feminist approaches to power

Above we drew on PRA literature which enables the analysis of worker power sources. However, it often assumes workers are a homogeneous group, without recognising power differentials between workers. We assert that worker power cannot be adequately understood without recognising intersecting social categories (including gender) which create power differentials between workers. Recognising how social categories interact with power is important in better understanding the power resources of workers. It is in accounting for the gendered nature of the industry that the importance of discursive power becomes apparent. Where dominant discourse (such as the perception and enforcement of women's docility) suppresses worker power, we argue that acts which challenge this discourse, e.g., the exercise of voice and collective organising contrary to being docile, may potentially provide discursive power.

Within feminist literature, the concept of power has been understood in various ways. For example, McGee (2016) seeks to understand power and resistance. She borrows Lukes' (1974) notion of "invisible power", described as "socially embedded norms, values and practices" (McGee 2016: 104). Thus, the construction of a discourse of women workers as docile is an exercise of invisible power. McGee draws on Scott's (1989) notion of "everyday resistance", where progressive acts of everyday resistance create a "constant pressure" until norms are changed (Scott 1989).

Empowerment, originally a feminist response to power differentials, also seeks to change norms. The transformative process of 'empowerment' allowed women to recognise existing power structures, personally and collectively, and then challenge those structures (Gaventa/Corwell 2015). Thus, focusing on consciousness-raising to expose and change social norms included overturning invisible power (Weldon 2019). Batliwala (2007) argues that empowerment has become a term co-opted as a verb for individual power, but we use empowerment to refer to a collective process seeking to challenge power structures.

Thus, though the PRA includes discursive power, we argue for a much greater focus on understanding the way this type of power (exercised through dominant social norms) can adversely affect a particular group of workers. Overturning dominant social norms that adversely affect

workers could increase their discursive power. Everyday resistance which challenges the dominant discourse may have the potential to change who has discursive power. Thus, we argue that when women garment workers exercise resistance and voice, the disempowering discourse of women's 'docility' (a form of discursive power) may be challenged. This also has the potential to occur where GNCSOs amplify such acts to a broader audience in campaigning.

A further relevant contribution from feminist literature about power comes from criticism within feminism. Critiquing the homogenous and simplistic discussion of women's oppression in second-wave feminism that arose from the 1970s in the global North, a range of diverse perspectives emerged, including those of transnational, postcolonial, third world and intersectional feminism. Whilst different, each seeks to understand how gender and other social categories, including race, sexuality and class, intersect in power relations (Crenshaw 1991). Intersecting social categories may produce different kinds and levels of power that are "interdependent and interrelated" (Patil 2013: 850). They may also be "mutually constituted, formed, and transformed" by "power-laden processes" such as colonisation and globalisation (Patil 2013: 847).

Pointing to discursive power, Mohanty (2003) argues that Western feminists writing about women from the global South can "discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the Third World" (Mohanty 2003: 19), robbing them of their "historical and political agency" (Mohanty 2003: 40) through writing about them only as victims (object status). This important critique has a two-fold relevance in this paper, as, with a similar point outlined earlier within FPE literature, it is a caution for us writing from the global North. Thus, we recognise the absence of worker voice within this study and have not tried to fill that gap by speaking on their behalf. It also points to the potential for ACSOs to "discursively colonize" rather than enable discursive power for garment workers, if their campaigns rob workers of agency (as per Mohanty above).

We argue that PRA does not account sufficiently for power differences between workers, differences that emanate from social categories. We have drawn on FPE and feminist discussions of power to demon-

strate how discourse can impact the power of particular groups of workers. We demonstrate this by examining the social construction of women's 'docility', which we recognise as a limitation to women's power resources. We therefore argue there is power to be gained (a power resource) from challenging discourses that oppress and disempower particular groups of workers. This is not recognised when workers are seen as a homogenous group and so creates a unique theoretical framework.

5. Methods

We take a constructivist approach in order to understand ACSO staff's perceptions about the power of global South garment workers within campaigns or projects. Eight key informants participated in a one-hour semi-structured qualitative interview in 2018. Participants included two academics, two union officials, two people working for NGOs campaigning in Australia, and two working for Australian NGOs funding (but not directly implementing) projects with garment workers. Many participants had traversed multiple relevant roles. We asked participants to reflect on their broader experience, not limited to their current role. Participants and ACSOs are anonymised and data presentation avoids identification. Thus, we have limited the detail about specific participants, projects and campaigns.

Interviews were coded using NVivo. Deductive coding included barriers and enablers to worker power, worker voice and definitions of power. Inductive coding indicated the importance of networks and differences between boomerang and systems campaigns. After further developing the theoretical framework, data was deductively coded for mention of activities that perpetuate or challenge the dominant discourse (women's docility) within or by campaigns and projects, as well as any mention of norms, culture and discourse that may limit worker power.

In focusing on perceptions of the worker power of staff at ACSOs, the study is clearly limited in scope. It does not assess worker power within campaigns or projects or the impact on improving working conditions.

The research also did not elicit perceptions of GSWOs, despite the importance of their perspectives.

6. Building associational power

Two participants were employed by ACSOs that provided funding to global South worker organisations. For both, building collective worker power was the “central thesis” (P1). Both described projects that aimed to increase power by building capacity to take collective action; one at the workplace and one at the community level. For example, they both funded projects that trained workers to be leaders in collective organising. Thus, though they did not use the term, projects sought to build associational power. Both projects included consciousness-raising amongst workers, consistent with empowerment. For participant 7 (P7), this was a precursor to building associational power: “the issue [the project is trying to address] is a lack of workers power, or a lack of knowledge that they have the power....The workers...are in a good bargaining position but they’re very unaware of what they can do as a collective.” However, participant 8 (P8) noted projects funded by GNCSOs centred on building collective power are “atypical”. Even where they may seek to build power, P1 critiqued some Australian NGO-backed projects that “develop resources... then leave women alone to use them, which we know doesn’t work...You can’t achieve anything without collective bargaining, without freedom of association, without the right to a written contract.” Enabling rights (freedom of association and collective bargaining) can be a precursor to, or an outcome of, building associational power.

All participants working for organisations campaigning in Australia sought power for workers as a goal, including through advocating for enabling rights. However, the extent to which participants prioritised this varied. Participant 3 (P3) noted a divide in Australian campaigners between those that prioritised enabling rights and others that thought “it was less important than ensuring the companies... have auditing systems.” Auditing systems are less likely to detect violations of enabling rights than other workplace rights (Rennie et al. 2017). Violations of enabling rights are also less likely to be remedied than other rights (Anner 2012).

7. Building conditional power

A difference in the involvement of GSWOs, dependent on the type of advocacy campaign, was identified. This impacts on the potential to develop coalitional power. We found GSWOs were decision makers in boomerang-style campaigns, but in 'system level' campaigns the role of workers varied. 'System level' campaigns include those around broad issues (such as a living wage) and improving supply chain practices of brands (as a group) through consumer pressure or legislation.

Whilst no participants used the term 'boomerang-style' campaigning, some described undertaking such work. Participants speaking about such campaigning in Australia described workers and GSWOs as decision-makers. For example, P₃ noted: "they will have the last say. We could advise them because we may know the company...but certainly it's up to them." This is consistent with other research on boomerang campaigning that indicates workers are involved in campaign decision making even when such campaigning occurs in the global North (den Hond et al. 2014). In this style of campaigning, where workers gain power in part because of initiatives in Australia, a growth in worker power through coalitional power would have occurred.

However, in system level campaigns, worker voice was "more filtered" (Participant 6, P₆). P₃ also recognised this pattern, noting that campaigning on accountability legislation (e.g., the Modern Slavery Act) occurs without worker involvement. Participant 5 (P₅) questioned the importance of worker power when campaigning on accountability, noting that various parties (e.g., workers, brands, employers, and consumers) have responsibilities: "I'm not saying that...[workers] should be disempowered but what we would say [is]...we all have a shared responsibility...and that...is both about what is our role in this piece, but also, how do we keep other parts of the system accountable." Participants working on system level corporate accountability campaigns listened to workers and GSWOs. However, participants did not speak of the ongoing participation of GSWOs within campaigns. P₄ noted that a GSWO critique of brands was more likely to occur in more transparent supply chains, as transparency made breaches more visible. P₄'s ACSOs were seeking brand transparency and thus were unlikely to alter their campaign based on a GSWO critique of brands.

Where there is no defined role or ongoing active participation of GSWOs, there is little opportunity for workers to gain coalitional power from campaigns. This supports literature that argues that, in consumer campaigning, power lies with global North groups (Kabeer 2015; Wells 2009) and is a significant limitation on the potential of coalitional power to replace traditional sources of worker power.

8. Barriers and enablers of worker power

“We all need to improve on [ensuring worker voice]. I don’t think anybody’s got it sorted...It’s just so hard to do...it’s just extraordinarily complex.” (P5)

It can be difficult for ACSOs to ensure worker power in campaigns and projects. Participants noted several factors that acted as enablers or barriers to worker power. The most significant were whether workers were organised (a prerequisite for ACSOs to link with GSWOs) and the day-to-day challenges faced by ACSOs in building networks. This points to the inherent challenges of building coalitional power.

As no participants worked directly with workers, a crucial enabler of worker power within their campaigns and projects were formal and informal networks with GSWOs. Without such networks there would be no potential for growth in workers’ coalitional power. Both P5 and P6 described a long, deliberate effort to build relationships with GSWOs. These relationships were complex. Language and cultural barriers, competition between GSWOs and some GSWOs that were not truly representative of workers, posed challenges. Working through a non-representative GSWO to enable worker voice and power could compound disempowering gender norms and reinforce relations of intersectional power, as noted by P5 and P6. For example, P5 stated: “If it’s mediated through a union in India, it’s going to be mediated through men who are probably of a different caste to the women whose stories are being told.” The complexities of operating through formal and informal networks with GSWOs demonstrate the significant challenges ACSOs face in enabling garment worker power in campaigns.

Organised workers (thus, those with some associational power) were an essential enabler of worker power in campaigns and projects. Participant 2 (P2) described a non-garment transnational campaign related to goods consumed in Australia that enabled worker power. It included a “well organised [global South] union” and leaders that were skilled at working internationally and “are very committed to rank-and-file control.” Conversely, the lack of a well-organised workforce (thus without associational power) in the garment sector was noted as a barrier to worker power in international campaigns. P8 highlighted the possibility that if GNCSOs exposed issues in a specific region it may create a “flurry of attention” which could create opportunities for organised workers but, in some instances, could have negative consequences for unorganised workers (i.e. brands may stop sourcing from the area without listening to workers). P8 argued that “if campaign groups are going to work with marginalised women workers, they...have to support them to build something... to have a voice in that process and if they’re not organised in any way, they can’t have a voice.” As noted previously, two participants’ organisations funded global South groups doing such work; other participants suggested greater Australian funding for GSWOs. P5, however, argued that GNCSO funding could change the nature of small, effective GSWOs “and not necessarily for the better.” Regardless, being organised, and thus having some associational power, was viewed as a precondition for workers having power in campaigns (thus developing coalitional power).

As noted earlier, Webster (2015) argues that sources of worker power are changing as traditional associational and structural power diminish. Coalitional power can grow as local and international alliances emerge (Brookes 2013). However, there are challenges involved in building and maintaining networks, including but not limited to the representation of particular groups of workers. Our study also shows that where workers cannot access associational power, ACSOs have little capacity to work with them to enable coalitional power. This is consistent with the PRA literature. In many locations where garment manufacturing occurs, labour activism is suppressed (Wells 2009); therefore, workers have greater difficulty developing associational power. This limits the potential of coalitional power.

9. Discursive power

ACSOs and GSWOs have the potential to challenge the dominant discourse of women's 'docility' and to use discursive power as a power resource for garment workers. However, as outlined, there is also potential for campaigns and initiatives to perpetuate, rather than challenge, this harmful dominant social norm.

In some instances, groups may deliberately seek to change the dominant discourse. For example, P1 described an attempt to change the discourse about garment workers from "poor rural women" that "now have jobs" (workers as passive beneficiaries of the industry) to the country has shifted to a middle-income country and has "international trade gains because of these women" (workers as active contributors to the nation's economy).

The idea that women garment workers are 'docile' (an exercise of discursive power) is challenged in FPE scholarship that documents how workers organise, lead, resist and activate voice (Gunawardana 2011). As outlined above, ACSOs have supported this by funding GSWOs that organise workers. Whether intentional or not, they are countering the dominant discourse that women workers are 'docile'. For example, P1 outlined how garment workers (through the Australian funded GSWO) were actively seeking to influence government policy. Garment workers that campaign and speak up challenge perceptions of their docility. Many participants spoke of activities that facilitated or amplified worker voice to a broader audience through research, campaigns, networks and media. Three participants organised direct contact between workers and brands in Australia or in the worker's locality. P8 noted: "being in the room together...[with] small groups of suppliers and brands about issues affecting their lives is giving them some symbolic power because they...for a temporary arrangement, have voice." Even where, as noted previously, such actions may not, on their own, have a dramatic effect, these actions can act as a form of everyday resistance, gradually shifting discursive power.

Nonetheless, power relations are present within any project or campaign activity. For example, mediation occurs when an ACSO produces a research report, even where the report amplifies worker voice (recognised by P8). P2

and P8 both noted the challenge of including emotive stories to gain media and campaign attention without portraying workers as victims. P2 said: “There is always an issue in this industry about people being constantly portrayed as victims and nothing else...I don’t think it helps build workers’ power.” One participant (speaking about forced labour) interchangeably used the words “victim” and “worker” within the interview. An important mitigation measure noted by P2 was to ensure that “as much as possible the direct voice of workers is heard.”

Within interviews, unprompted, participants spoke of norms, culture and discourse, including gender norms, rural origins and caste, that limited worker power. In this analysis, we have focused on the potential of ACSOs to counter the constraining myth of garment workers’ docility that is apparent in existing FPE literature. There are other dominant discourses (e.g. tropes about migrant workers) that can act to constrain the power of particular groups of workers. Thus, we argue that discursive power may be a valuable source of power for other workers where dominant discourse has acted to limit their power; and is worthy of greater exploration within PRA research.

10. Conclusion

This research contributes to TLA literature about sources of worker power. Relationships between ACSOs and GSWOs are a prerequisite for coalitional power to ensue. This limits the potential to develop such power in system level campaigns where GSWOs are not engaged. In addition, if workers are unorganised, it is not possible to establish relationships. Thus, the findings support the position of the PRA literature that the development of coalitional power requires a level of associational power. Hence, it problematises somewhat the assertion that new sources of worker power may compensate for the loss of traditional sources, given that one of the new sources (coalitional power) relies on the existence of a traditional source (associational power).

We further problematise the often-prevailing assumption within the PRA that workers are a homogenous group. We argue that gender and

other attributes, e.g. migrant status, impact power resources of particular workers where the dominant discourse acts to limit their power. Where there is a challenge to the dominant discourse, this may enable greater discursive power for workers. Thus, we contribute to PRA literature by outlining the potential to examine social norms and discourse which may disempower particular groups of workers, and overturn these as a source of worker power.

This is a small-scale study and further research is required. Research that includes the perspective of GWSOs and workers about whether they have power in transnational campaigns concerning their work would be beneficial. In addition, research that tests the framework in other industries with different worker attributes and oppressive social norms would add greatly to PRA literature.

- 1 In this paper the terms global North/South are used, though the problematic nature of the terms is recognised.
- 2 We include trade unions as civil society organisations (CSOs). This is consistent with the definition of CSOs by Salamon et al (2004), which includes groups that are organised, private, non-profit, self-governing, and voluntary.

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*ABSTRACT Australische NGO- und Gewerkschaftsinitiativen bemühen sich, die Bedingungen für Arbeiterinnen im Bekleidungssektor im Globalen Süden zu verbessern. Die Studie untersucht, wie zivilgesellschaftliche Aktivist*innen in Australien die Macht der Arbeiterinnen im Bekleidungssektor in solchen Initiativen einschätzen. Ausgehend von einer feministischen Perspektive der Politischen Ökonomie stützen sich die Autorinnen auf feministische Konzeptionen von Macht und den Machtressourcenansatz. Die Studie geht über die in der Arbeitsforschung gemeinhin verwendeten Machtressourcen (strukturelle, institutionelle und Organisationsmacht) hinaus und bezieht auch Koalitionsmacht und diskursive Macht mit ein. Der theoretische Rahmen unterstreicht die Bedeutung diskursiver Macht, die unter anderem in sozialen Normen angelegt ist. Die Studie verdeutlicht das Potenzial australischer zivilgesellschaftlicher Akteure, den herrschenden Diskurs über die „Fügsamkeit“ von Arbeitnehmerinnen fortzuschreiben oder ihn herauszufordern. Letzteres, indem sie insbesondere die Stimme der Arbeiter*innen selbst stärken. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass Arbeiter*innen über ein gewisses Maß an Organisationsmacht im eigenen Umfeld verfügen müssen, um Koalitionsmacht – also Macht, die durch Bündnisse mit anderen gesell-*

*schaftlichen Akteuren entsteht – zu erlangen. Das Ergebnis verdeutlicht die Wechselbeziehungen zwischen den Machtressourcen. Der Artikel zeigt auf, dass Organisationsmacht nur begrenzt durch Koalitionsmacht ersetzt werden kann. Diese Einsichten sind für alle von Bedeutung, die mit Arbeiter*innen zusammenarbeiten und für ihre Belange eintreten wollen.*

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Decolonial Readings of Platform Economies: The Organising of On-Demand Delivery Women Workers in Ecuador

ABSTRACT The article provides a decolonial and feminist analysis of a particular kind of platform economies, namely those working on location-based applications called on-demand delivery apps. The focus is on the impact of this platform work on women on-demand delivery workers in Ecuador. Through this analysis, the author aims to enrich the study of transnational organisational processes of platform labour by arguing for the importance of intersectional approaches, where gender and migration are essential categories. By drawing on decolonial theoretical and methodological approaches, this paper makes reveals that women face more vulnerability working with on-demand delivery apps, such as sexual harassment and care work overload, but also, that they must make their way into leadership positions in a highly masculinised sector. The article shows that women on-demand delivery workers have the capacity to organise and resist bad working conditions and that they utilise transnational networks to do so.

KEYWORDS platform economies, women on-demand delivery workers, decolonial studies

1. Introduction

Technological progress is frenetically transforming economic models, consumption patterns, social interactions, and even the construction of subjectivities. Many of these changes are generating greater inequalities, such as the intensification of labour flexibilisation, outsourcing and precariousness. One of the phenomena of this technological process is plat-

form economies, known also as digital labour platforms (Rosenblat 2018; Srnicek 2017; Scully-Russ/Torraco 2020). These are new business models that are developed through mobile cell phone applications called apps, where several actors, such as users/consumers, establishments/restaurants and service providers/workers, interact. However, the working relationships between those actors are unclear, because the app companies deny the existence of labour relations by using commercial contracts and discursive rhetoric, designating the latter actors as partners or as self-employed. Thus, these models leave bilateral relationships behind (Duggan et al. 2019; Koutsimpogiorgos et al. 2020) and instead establish trilateral interactions, where outsourcing occurs.

The International Labour Organization has created a classification of these platforms as one of two types: applications “where work is outsourced through an open call to a geographically dispersed crowd (‘crowdwork’), and location-based applications (apps) which allocate work to individuals in a specific geographical area” (ILO 2018). For this article, I will focus on location-based applications, specifically those that provide on-demand delivery services.

On-demand delivery companies present crucial challenges around issues such as labour responsibility, minimum wage, and workers’ affiliation to social security systems or private insurance. In this sense, the labour and dependency relationships are questioned, leaving workers unprotected. So, the notion of an existing asymmetry between capital and labour is lost, leaving the weakest party – the worker – unprotected. But, in addition, inalienable labour rights such as maternity leave, sick leave, and holiday are jeopardised; not recognising these labour rights is not only a problem on digital platforms but sets a precedent to stop doing so in other types of jobs as well. For this reason, to talk about digital work is to dispute the meaning of how these platforms are sold: presenting themselves as new ways to generate income, be your boss and manage your own time; as if they were innovative, entertaining activities, hobbies, or even entrepreneurship. They try, from the discursive point of view, to hide the labour rights violations they commit and instead present themselves as non-precarious activities.

The literature on platform economies – rooted in digital labour studies – comes mostly from the global North, which has established a monopolistic narrative of the situation on a global scale (Evans 2011; Gillespie 2008;

Rifkin 1995). However, it is essential to have specific analyses, and situated and geographically perspectives on the debates around platform economies that account for the complexity and difference of the socio-economic impacts on the global South. The impacts of these business models in the global South have been more detrimental to workers. On the one hand, the colonial heritage aggravates and intensifies the negative impacts of digital labour in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, where constant processes of dispossession and weakening of national-state projects by global North economic interests and multinational companies have generated major governance problems and weak legal frameworks. Thereby, these regions face major challenges to regularise these apps. On the other hand, in the global South, the forms of labour organisation coming from the colonial heritage, such as semi-slavery, *hacienda* logics, agribusiness, and informality do not find novelty in the effects of digital platform models. In fact, platform economies become just one more problem to solve.

Findings from the global South show urgent categories of analysis and contextual dynamics to more comprehensively understand platform economies on the peripheries of the world that are not discussed in the North literature, including issues such as unfavourable legal frameworks (ILAW 2021); intersectional and gendered perspectives on digital work (Hidalgo/Salazar 2021); cosmetics sales work as an step to app work (Abilio/Machado 2017); resistance and the bargaining power of platform workers (Anwar 2019); migration and human mobility as factors in the expansion of platforms (Arora 2014); reinforcement of neoliberal regimes and increased labour flexibilisation (Munck 2013); expansion of neoliberal subjectivity (Morales 2020); and the creativity, resilience, and recursivity of digital activists in our territories (Grohman 2020).

Just as we make visible the differential impacts in terms of regions and geographies, it is crucial to understand that these business models affect women, migrants, and other specific social groups in different ways around the world. As I will unpack in following sections, it is not the same to be a migrant woman working for digital platforms who rents a motorcycle, as it is to be a middle-class male university student who uses his car to work with Uber from time to time. There are significant differences in the experience of work among on-demand delivery workers. In other words, gender, race, class, nationality, sexual orientation, among other categories, work

in an intertwined manner, generating complex realities (Curiel 2007; Hill Collins 1998).

This research provides a decolonial and feminist analysis of platform economies with a focus on the impact on women delivery workers' lives in Ecuador, the challenges of organising processes among delivery workers, and how women workers in Latin America are taking on protagonist roles in organising initiatives. Thus, this text starts with a theoretical section on decolonial approaches. A methodological part on positionality and research methods follows. The third section is about platform work in Ecuador, and a final part on the national and regional organisational processes. The text ends with conclusions.

2. Decoloniality and platform economies

The decolonial wager I propose in this text is political and epistemic. Thinking from decoloniality implies a multilevel action that must always be conjugated with praxis. By this, I mean that decoloniality is not just theory; it is a daily task of rethinking all the practices of life. “[It is] a continuous posture and attitude – one of transgressing, intervening, in-surfacing and incising” (Walsh 2009: 14f.).

As part of coloniality, an international, sexual and racial division of labour has been established. But, in addition, a new international division of labour has crystallised where countries in the global South have become sources of cheap digital labour for multinational corporations (Fuchs 2016). As Lisa Nakamura brings to light “[c]heap female labor is the engine that powers the internet” (Nakamura 2015:106). In platform economies, these correlations are very evident. In several Latin American countries, the majority of on-demand delivery platform workers are migrants or from racialised populations; for example, in Ecuador, Colombia, and Argentina they are of Venezuelan nationality (Hidalgo/Salazar 2021; Jaramillo 2020); in Brazil, they are Afro-descendants and come from precarious neighbourhoods (Abílio et al. 2020; Associação Brasileira do Sector de Bicicletas 2019); in Mexico, they are a racialised population with dark skin (Jaramillo-Molina 2020); in the United States, they are mostly migrants coming from Latino and Asian communities (van Doorn 2017). In other

words, these business models are sustained by the migrant and racialised workforce.

These platforms arrive in Africa, Latin America, and Asia to exploit working people, invade, and conquer national markets by buying or investing in local apps, plunder data, and use forms of big data collection that are illegal in the global North. In addition, this exploitation does not occur equally in the global North and South. Several of these multinational companies guarantee a minimum of labour rights within European territories. For example, the Lieferando app provides contracts to its workers on German territory, but Lieferando is part of the Delivery Hero conglomerate, which in its international operations does not recognise delivery workers as workers (Koutsimpogiorgos et al. 2020). Instead, in the global South this company claims that the service providers are partners or self-employed, but that they are not workers in a dependency relation with the app. By using monopolistic practices, this same conglomerate has acquired apps such as Pedidos Ya and Domicilios – which were born in Uruguay and Colombia, respectively (Moed 2020), eradicating local companies.

Apart from these monopolistic practices, it is important to point out that these digital platform companies do not only have as their workforce those visible workers – i.e., riders or drivers. In fact, they have a whole operational network behind them that includes customer and user support, programmers, data analysts and a strong investment in digital marketing and product design and promotions. All of these sectors operate locally and/or offshore, providing remote services. Thereby, the central axis of their business model is data processing, algorithmic management of employment, and the monopolistic capacity – as I mentioned above – to generate agreements and promotions with payment methods, businesses, and outsourced companies. According to an ILO report, “work is outsourced on these platforms by businesses in the global North, and performed by workers in the global South” (International Labour Organization 2021: 46).

Talking about data processing, there are fewer regulations on their collection in our regions. So, these multinationals take advantage of legal loopholes to further profit their businesses in the global South (Couldry/Mejias 2019; Magalhães/Couldry 2020). Among the implications of this

generation, collection and sale of digital personal data, we see monitoring and control: surveillance society through GPS that report your location in real-time; analysis of human behaviour based on your consumptions, tastes, and online interactions. It is a process of data colonisation that invades our ways of knowing, producing, and participating in the world (Couldry/Mejias 2019). So, colonisation was a form of historical appropriation of territories, natural resources, and people; now, it is done with our personal information, transforming it into data, with or without our authorisation. These data enter a computer system of collection and analysis called an algorithm and generate products for purchase and sale in the capitalist world. “[T]he current infrastructural conditions have been insidiously designed by digital service providers to extract, circulate, and interpret this data as capital often without the informed consent or knowledge of their users who produce/own it” (Singh 2021).

These debates extend to algorithmisation and artificial intelligence as tools of imperial/colonial political economy and a nebulous ideology isomorphic to whiteness (Katz 2020). Or, as Paola Ricaurte says, platform economy and, in particular, Artificial intelligence (AI) are “necro-technopolitical tools” (Ricaurte 2019), because every stage of capitalism develops its key technologies (Mbembe 2003), and platform economy and AI are the key technologies of the current stage of capitalism – which is colonial/racist, and patriarchal, and exploitative.

Thinking about the colonisation of data from a feminist analysis of the digital industry, Jac Kee posits that one “can enter at the level of bodies, the labor they engage in, the data that they generate, the context of their economy, their histories of colonialism. This would shift the question from a simplistic understanding of ICTs [Information and communication technologies] as empowerment” (Faith 2018). The feminist perspective of the digital economy makes it possible to discuss the negative externalities and side effects of it: such as mining, manufacturing, natural resource consumption, and toxic e-waste pollution. Furthermore, it makes it possible to understand that women are affected to a much higher degree by the lack of access to communal resources, technology, the Internet, and private property (Federici 2012:143; Hidalgo 2020). But the algorithm goes further; multiple studies show how they apply sexist, racist, discriminatory biases (Chander 2017; Khurana 2020), because technology is not neutral

and develops based on prejudices already existing in society. For example, women Uber drivers earn less than men drivers in the United States (Cook et al. 2018).

I do not seek to compare – let alone equate – the processes of colonisation and those of the colonial past with these new forms of dispossession and accumulation. Falling into superficial parallels could generate trivialisation and dehistoricisation (Casilli 2017). However, it cannot be forgotten that the material inheritance of colonisation and the matrix of privilege and oppressions established with coloniality create indisputably different realities between the countries of the global North and South. These significant differences make it impossible to equate the impacts of unrecognised and unpaid digital labour among technology users in our different regions. As Anita Gurumurthy, Nandini Chami and Cecilia Alemany (2018: 1) say: “The phenomenon of platformization transforms production, distribution and social reproduction in ways that reinforce the concentration of economic and social power in the hands of digital corporations and countries of the global North.”

Thus, coloniality is not only about the invisible labour performed by all the people mistakenly called ‘users’, or about data mining. Coloniality – and even more so decoloniality – in the platform economies challenges us to unravel the neoliberal subjectivities that are being reinforced, the strategies of resistance and the alternatives that are proposed in each territory, the impacts on the psyche of the workers themselves, as well as to question the forms of knowledge construction, the interpersonal relationships with the workers, and the politics of enunciation and citation.

3. Methodology: positionality, devolution, and collective body

Decolonial methodological frameworks imply questioning the roles of power within academic and research practice, revealing how colonial practices are reproduced when doing research. Unfortunately, it is a widespread practice to extract information from people and communities, write about them without any qualms, publish texts that only have the names of the researchers, receive all the economic benefits and academic recognition, and never return anything to those people and communities, even if that

research was generated through their lives (Rivera Cusicanqui 2010). Is there retribution and return of what is written to those people and communities from whom that knowledge was extracted? Are they asked if what is written represents them? There is a vast historical tradition of decolonial, Chicana, black, and racial critical theorists who argue that “the hegemonic Eurocentric paradigms that have informed western philosophy and sciences in the Capitalist/Patriarchal Western-centric/Christian-centric Modern/Colonial world-system for the last 500 hundred years assume a universalistic point of view” (Grosfoguel 2011). In this sense, Western knowledge is capitalist, colonial, and patriarchal. Therefore, knowledge is in dispute, as are the ways of constructing that knowledge (Lugones 2003).

In this paper, all quotations and references that I make from the women delivery workers have been previously approved by them. However, the return of research does not remain in the previous reading, it must go out of the text to the material social life of the people who live the precariousness of the platform economies. The data and findings of this text will be disseminated in a pedagogical way within the *Observatorio de Plataformas* project, a space of articulation between researchers and platform workers that, from audiovisual languages, seeks to raise awareness about labour precariousness in apps.

Turning to language, these lines are written in the first person in an exercise of embodying the approaches that are made. From academic rigidity, which comes loaded with ideologies such as positivism, we have been taught that the use of the third person singular is formal. That is to say, we must subtract ourselves from the texts we write, hide behind that apparent neutrality. However, it is always someone who writes a text; people of flesh and blood who express in their research their principles, moral codes, ethics, ideologies. They are people with a specific gender, social class, skin colour, sexual orientation, from a particular country or territory, and with a certain corporeality (Kilomba 2010). All these characteristics of the people who write theories, even if they are not explicit in the texts, inform the totality of what they say.

So too, I speak from that first-person plural, from that *we*. Because knowledge is not made alone, even if individualistic capitalism has told us otherwise (hooks 1994), but rather every theory, every hypothesis, every approach is built with human interaction. In this case, it has been produced

with the women delivery workers and my colleagues from the *Observatorio de Plataformas*. But the *we* of the collective body is also the body of the organisation. It is from the organising processes of platform workers that theoretical and methodological praxis has been generated to understand the implications of these business models.

Moving on to research methods; since August 2019 I have collected an oral history archive of women delivery workers from two Ecuadorian cities: Quito and Guayaquil. Qualitative information from that archive is included in this text. In addition, I use quantitative information from two digital “Surveys of Working Conditions of App Delivery Workers” that we developed at the *Observatorio de Plataformas*. The first survey was carried out between July and September 2020 to one hundred and forty-eight responses of on-demand delivery workers. The second one was carried out between June and July 2021 to two hundred and three on-demand delivery workers in the two largest cities of the country: Quito and Guayaquil. These instruments were developed in collaboration with the first button-up self-organised group of delivery workers in the country, *Glovers_Ecuador*. This cooperation was in terms of the co-construction of the tool, pilot testing, and dissemination in social networks.

4. Delivery work in Ecuador: the situation in numbers

Three delivery apps are present in Ecuador: Pedidos Ya – formerly Glovo – Uber Eats, and Rappi. Glovo and Uber Eats arrived in 2018, Rappi at the end of 2019, and in March 2021 the acquisition of Glovo by Pedidos Ya took place. As was mentioned before, Pedidos Ya is part of the German conglomerate Delivery Hero, a global cluster of companies of this type that acquires brands around the world, seeking to establish a hegemonic and monopolistic market strategy. Uber Eats is a branch of the North American transnational company Uber, and Rappi is a Colombian regional-based company. On the other hand, the programming and maintenance of the algorithmic and data system may be delocalised and subdivided into one or several countries. In the case of Rappi, its scheduling services are divided between Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia (Hidalgo/Scasserra 2021).

These app companies arrived during one of the multiple crises in the Ecuadorian labour market (Salgado 2017). Given the commodity dependence of the economy in Ecuador, it is worth remembering that, in the last decade, the whole economy and employment were significantly affected by the fall in commodity prices, which triggered what was called “the labor market crisis” in 2016 (Salgado 2017). Employment in the formal sector fell 10 percentage points, from 41% in 2016 to 31% in 2021 (INEC 2016/2021). This drop is due, among other factors, to the implementation of neoliberal policies in the past five years and economic and political crises – not least caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Hevia/Vera 2021).

In this context of labour debacle, platform economies find the perfect niche to provide a supposed ‘salvation’, creating spaces for working people to generate income. However, this is under working conditions of exploitation and subordination. In fact, the number of on-demand delivery workers is increasing every day; for example, there were approximately seven thousand delivery workers nationwide at the beginning of the pandemic. Nowadays we are talking about twenty thousand. It is important to mention that the population of on-demand delivery workers is an estimate, because the app companies have not made this data transparent, even though they have held meetings with the Ministry of Labour, where this information has been requested. According to 2021’s Survey of Working Conditions of App Delivery Workers, which included the three apps operating in the country, 69% are migrants and 92% are men. 75% have technical, higher, or postgraduate education. As for the type of vehicle or means of transportation they use, 94 % use a motorcycle. However, it should be considered that 12% rent a motorcycle and 59% have debts to pay for the motorcycle acquisition (Hevia/Vera 2021).

It is important to note that, although the digital platforms claim that there is no employment relationship and that the on-demand delivery workers are “collaborators”, “freelancers”, “partners” or even “entrepreneurs”, 53.2% recognise themselves as workers, 17.73% strongly complain that they have no autonomy or freedom – and, even, some workers claim to be slaves (Hevia/Vera 2021). Ninety four percent do not have social security, and the 6% of workers who have it are paying through their own means. In terms of monthly income, the average is \$800. However, gasoline, motorcycle maintenance, and mobile data expenses, which amount

to up to 300 dollars a month, must be deducted from this amount. Therefore, the average profit earned by on-demand delivery workers is US\$500 per month. That is, their earnings are little more than a minimum wage, but they work more than 10 hours a day and seven days a week (Salazar/Hidalgo 2020). “We live to work, you know, all day on the street, from Monday to Monday. And what we earn does not represent the effort we make” (Marcela, in an interview with the author, 2020).

Likewise, we asked them how many days a year they have taken vacations: 81.7 % answered that they had not taken a single day (Hevia/Vera 2021). This is directly related to the fact that 85% of on-demand delivery workers depend solely on the income they generate with the app. For this reason, they not only have to work from sunrise to sunset without a break, but they also live in constant fear of losing their job. “The first thing we do when we get up is pick up our cell phone and see if our account hasn’t been blocked. We don’t see the time, we don’t see messages, we see the app! This affects us psychologically” (Yuly, Zoom meeting with the Platforms Observatory, 2020). As Yuly says, this causes a constant state of uncertainty and unease; something that has direct implications for the state of mind and well-being of the on-demand delivery workers.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ecuadorian government decided to implement mandatory quarantine at the national level with very strict mobility measures, including curfews. This change in the daily routine of the middle and upper classes directly influenced the increase in app consumption. It is not unimportant to recollect that even the President Moreno, in a national chain, encouraged citizens to use app delivery services to respect the #StayAtHome. 92.6% of on-demand delivery workers continued with their work in the pandemic. However, to the question “Do you feel at risk to continue working during the health emergency?”, 89.2% answered yes (Salazar/Hidalgo 2020). On-demand delivery workers have repeatedly complained that the app companies do not provide them with the necessary biosecurity supplies to protect themselves. As they say, “the pandemic came to increase the precariousness that we already live” (Yuly, in a press conference, 2020). This is one of the cruelest faces of neoliberalism within the logic of necropolitics (Mbembe 2003), in which certain bodies must be protected and others are disposable. For example, the on-demand delivery workers have been on the front line of the contagion; they have put their

lives at risk so that people who enjoy a specific class privilege can stay at home. However, for these people, neither governments nor corporations protect them. Thus, for this nefarious system, on-demand delivery workers – mostly migrants – are disposable lives.

The sector of delivery apps is highly masculinised, as the survey shows, related to the fact that there are activities that take place in the public space, a sphere historically denied to women. To this day there is stigmatisation, if, as women, we walk at night alone, drive or ride a bicycle. It would seem that these activities are only for men. In 2021 this should sound far-fetched, but women delivery workers every day report sexual harassment on public roads and countless insults that refer to “why are you on a motorcycle, you should be cooking?” (Fernanda, in an interview with the author, 2019), “where did you learn to drive? Better go home” (Marcela, in an interview with the author, 2020), and “women shouldn’t be on motorcycles, what don’t you have a husband?” (Yuly, in an interview with the author, 2020). Reading these phrases, it no longer seems far-fetched to think about the restriction of public space, established since colonisation, regarding women and feminised bodies. Nor does it seem illogical to wonder what percentage of women have driving licenses or own vehicles in their own name. Gender inequality in access to private property is one of the reasons for material inequality. For this reason, bringing historical analysis of the construction of inequality is imperative in order to give comprehensive and deep readings on the daily experience of digital platform workers.

Delving into this interweaving of oppressions, women delivery workers face constant sexual harassment, health problems, including urinary tract infections, absence of any maternity leave, and health insurance when pregnant. According to the 2021 survey, 66% of women on-demand delivery workers have been sexually harassed. In addition, migrant women are exposed to xenophobia, engendered racism, and racialised sexism on a daily basis (Viveros 2009). According to the 2021 survey, 48% of migrant women on-demand delivery workers have been discriminated against for their nationality. In the Ecuadorian context, Venezuelan women face constant hypersexualisation, eroticisation and exoticisation: “they see you as Venezuelan and they already think you are willing to do anything” (Yuly, in an interview with the author 2020). In short, sexual harassment and xenophobia should be thought of in an intersectional way in the debates on digital work and the platform economy.

In addition, pregnant women are working on these digital platforms, some of whom continue to work until their seventh month of pregnancy without any health insurance. They must hide their condition, because, if the companies find out they are pregnant, they block them from the app (Hidalgo 2021). This happens, even though in Ecuador, labour discrimination due to maternity is regulated by the Constitution in its Art. 43. Further, the on-demand delivery women workers know that during the months of childbirth and breastfeeding they will not have any income, since these platforms do not guarantee these rights. For this reason, it is crucial to have a gender focus when talking about work on digital platforms, where women face greater rights violations.

5. National and transnational organising

Faced with this extreme precariousness, multiple national and international strikes of on-demand delivery workers have taken place during the pandemic, to denounce the situation and make visible the violation of labour rights on a global scale. These strikes have succeeded in bringing the struggle of delivery workers to the forefront of society. The fact that these workers are using internet and mobile technologies everyday gives them a considerable digital skill which is very useful in the current context. In recent months, social movements of various kinds have embraced the struggle of delivery workers as their own: among the images, illustrations and designs.

In Ecuador, there have been several national strikes, and almost all of them were organised by the on-demand delivery bottom-up self-organised group *Glovers_Ecuador*. This workers' group is based in Quito, and was founded after the first strike of November 2019, when Glovo decided to reduce the rate from 1 USD to 0, 50 USD per kilometre (Bilbao 2020). After this important event for the delivery workers' organising process, the company refused to improve their rates. Months later, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Glovo worsened their conditions by reducing their rates once again. In response to these injustices, workers organised a strike that took place on April 17th, five days before the first international strike (Hidalgo/Salazar 2021). On the 22nd of July 2020, *Glovers_Ecuador* was able to convene the first national virtual assembly of delivery workers, with

99 attendees – of which, only five women attended; but the one who led the assembly was a migrant woman, the leader of Glovers_Ecuador: Yuly Ramirez. In 2021, the last strike was on May 31st with the participation of on-demand delivery workers from the major three apps: Rappi, Uber Eats, and Pedidos Ya.

It is worth mentioning that on-demand delivery workers in all the apps are paid for each order they place, based on mileage. Each kilometre travelled has a corresponding payment. However, in the case of the app Pedidos Ya – since March 2021 – the mileage is no longer counted based on the Google Maps GPS route travelled, but using a system called the Manhattan calculation. This new way of accounting is based on drawing a straight line between point A and point B, i.e., less mileage than the actual mileage. It does not consider the geography of the city, the direction of the streets, or traffic signs. For this reason, on the last national strike, on-demand delivery workers required a fair count of the routes and therefore of the payments (Ramírez et al. 2021).

According to the 2021 survey, 92% of on-demand delivery workers say it is important to organise: 41% consider that the best way would be through a union, 27% through an association, and 15% through a cooperative (Hevia/Vera 2021). This demonstrates the potential that exists in the country to consolidate the organisational processes of on-demand working people. In fact, on the 7th of October 2021, the first – and the only so far – platform workers' union was founded in Ecuador: FrenAPP (Frente de les Trabajadores de Plataformas Digitales del Ecuador). It is relevant to mention that the name of the union contains the non-binary pronoun 'les', making visible the feminist political commitment of those who promote this organisational process.

Regarding the transnational organisation of on-demand delivery workers – and location-based applications in general – Unidxs World Action is an international assembly of platform workers which is of great relevance here. Created in 2020, this international assembly allocates more than 40 organisations from 18 countries from the Americas, Europe, and Asia. It is the international space to discuss specific issues and coordinate international actions; but, also, their members “are very clear about one thing: in the fate of their struggles lies a good part of the

future of the working class” (Marinero 2020). In this sense, the organisations that are part of Unidxs World Action have a class-struggle discourse and know that the platform economy can grow to other areas of labour and backlash labour rights for all workers. However, within this international space, there are also discrepancies regarding the ways of organising and demanding labour rights. Some believe that union processes are the answer, while others do not support unions. In Argentina, Colombia and Ecuador, workers are currently organising into unions. Instead, in Mexico, workers are consolidated in civil society organisations but have no interest in creating unions. These tensions reflect different historical processes in each country. Different political positions are discussed in general assembly and specific agreements are generated for actions. What they all agree on is that they are workers, and not self-employed or partners as app companies typically call them.

It is worth mentioning that the international strikes of 2020 were conceived and organised at Unidxs World Action. The international strikes of delivery workers let us see the potential of cross-border exchanges: WhatsApp chats have been created with people from Brazil to Japan; virtual Zoom meetings have been convened with translation into two or three languages. All of this is self-managed between delivery workers and people who support their struggles. The first international strike of delivery workers took place on April 22, 2020, the second on May 29, the third on July 1, and the fourth on October 8. For the last one, the demand was extended to on-demand delivery workers and digital platform workers in general. The last international strike of delivery workers on October 8 was the largest action so far: 36 countries and more than 60 organisations raising their voices. In addition, while fighting for labour rights, other meanings were being disputed, such as feminist and gender perspectives; inclusive language; and solidarity with the peoples of Lebanon and Palestine, so that the potential of the struggle overflows and must be intersectional.

Latin American on-demand delivery workers organisations have some very interesting features. Women are leading platform workers’ struggles in several countries in the region, and they have been very visible among the international conversations and strikes. Yuly Ramírez is the founder of

Glovers_Ecuador and the general secretary of FrenApp; Carolina Hevia is the general secretary of UnidApp in Colombia, and Maru Fierro is the assistant secretary of Asociación del Personal de Plataformas (APP, Association of Platform Workers) in Argentina (Hidalgo/Salazar 2021). This fact sparks the possibility to change history regarding on-demand platform trade union and transnational workers' organisation dynamics; yet also, to rethink imaginaries in an intersectional way: being a woman, migrant, and organiser.

6. Conclusions

The impacts of platform economies are different in the global North and South. For this reason, it is imperative to create situated knowledge from our geographies. For example, in the global South, there are colonial inherited realities of marginalised labour and informality. So, for our regions, the arrival of digital applications does not generate frameworks of precariousness far from the realities we already know. In addition, there are different material realities between the countries of the global North and South that make it impossible to equate the impacts of unrecognised labour relations among on-demand delivery workers and unpaid digital labour among technology users in these regions.

Considering the above, I assert that digital platforms operate under a logic embedded in coloniality. They dispossess workers of their means of production: motorcycles, bicycles, cell phones, mobile data, insofar as they force them to make them available to work on apps; they dehumanise working people, apps denying them even the very recognition of their subjectivity as workers; these transnational and multinational companies articulate a logic of exploitation and extraction while they exert greater pressure on the markets of the global South; they apply forms of commercialisation of big data that are prohibited in European countries; they hide, do not recognise, and do not remunerate the work done by the users of the platforms; and they do not recognise minimum labour rights, such as labour contracts, while in countries of the global North they operate with other standards.

Over these pages, I have described the multiple violations of labour rights exercised by on-demand delivery platforms in Ecuador, as well as profiling who the delivery workers are. Based on the interweaving of oppressions, it is imperative to analyse the categories of gender, race, nationality, social class, among others, to understand the complexity of the lives of delivery workers. Thus, women on-demand delivery workers experience greater precariousness within these apps, and it is necessary to politicise these profound differences.

Finally, it is essential to highlight the capacity of articulation that app workers have in order to organise and resist. It is not insignificant that they have international connections and actions throughout the five continents, or that they are using technology to their advantage to generate dialogues, legal advice apps, international strikes, and multimedia production. In addition, on-demand delivery workers organisations are bringing feminist and gender perspectives to a transnational arena with strong female leadership. Furthermore, as they say, the struggle of the delivery workers is the struggle of all the workers of the world, because the precariousness that they now live will extend to all labour activities if a common front of struggle is not built. This internationalist articulation leaves much hope; knowing that, if exploitation is global, resistance is international.

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ABSTRACT Der Artikel unternimmt eine dekoloniale und feministische Analyse einer besonderen Art von Plattformökonomie, und zwar der sogenannten On-Demand-Lieferdiensten, die auf standortbasierten Technologien basieren. Der Fokus liegt auf den Auswirkungen dieser Plattformarbeit auf On-Demand-Delivery-Arbeiterinnen in Ecuador sowie deren Organisationsbemühungen. Die Autorin bereichert die Beforschung transnationaler Organisationsprozesse in der Plattformarbeit, indem sie in ihrer Analyse eine intersektionale Perspektive einnimmt, die Geschlecht und Migration als zentrale Kategorien berücksichtigt. Unter Rückgriff auf dekoloniale theoretische und methodische Ansätze wird in diesem Beitrag aufgezeigt, dass Frauen bei der Arbeit in On-Demand-Lieferdiensten von sexueller Belästigung und von Überlastung durch Haushalts- und Betreuungsarbeit betroffen sind. Darüber

hinaus müssen sie in diesem stark maskulinisierten Sektor um Führungspositionen kämpfen. Der Artikel zeigt aber auch, dass On-Demand-Delivery-Arbeiterinnen in der Lage sind, sich zu organisieren und sich gegen schlechte Arbeitsbedingungen zu wehren, und dass sie dazu transnationale Netzwerke nutzen.

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**Kitchen, Farm, Room – Spaces of Transnational Feminist
Theorising by Working Class Women in India**

ABSTRACT *The term “labour geography”, first coined by Andrew Herod (1997), sought to shift the capital-centric focus of economic geography to a more labour-centric focus. Feminist scholars have long argued for paying attention to the ways that labour’s social relations and lived experiences shape the politics of labour beyond wages or formal employment. However, labour geographers problematically continue to separate the larger questions of existence, analytically and ontologically, from the questions of work and everyday labour struggles. This article draws attention to the significance of quotidian processes of theorising by working class women in India as they labour and mobilise across disparate social, economic and cultural locations. The spaces of work discussed in this article are transnational, because, as spaces of knowledge production they are shaped by, and in turn shape, transnational narratives and strategies around global labour struggle. The article offers two key insights regarding a) the everyday knowledge production of working-class women, forged through work and struggle; and b) the significance of paying attention to the political thoughts and acts of working-class women, which holds possibilities for new solidarities and political alliances. These points are made through three illustrations – women farmers at the farmers’ protest in the outskirts of Delhi, women singing ovi in rural Maharashtra, and women factory workers creating radio podcasts in Tamil Nadu.*

KEYWORDS *labour geography, transnational feminism, working-class women, knowledge production*

I. Introduction

On International Women's Day on 8 March 2021, wrapped in yellow dupattas (scarves) to symbolise vibrant mustard fields, over 20,000 women filled the protest sites where farmers from across India have assembled since November 2020, just outside the Indian capital, Delhi. The farmers were protesting the new farm laws passed by the Indian parliament, which they claimed would destroy agriculture, their livelihoods and lives through market competition and the corporatisation of agriculture.

While the Indian and international news media have been reporting about the farmers' agitation, the images and voices that fill the news channels have overwhelmingly been those of men. Mostly missing are the women farmers and their allies who have joined the men in planning, mobilising, and organising in the villages; women who have stayed behind to work in the fields, produce food, take care of the animals, children, and the elderly so that others could travel to Delhi to participate in the ongoing strike. This effective invisibilisation of women's role and labour in farming is not merely incidental. Rather, it is materially manifested in the demonstrably higher rates of landlessness amongst rural women, who nevertheless form the bulk of the agriculture workforce. Indeed 56% percent of women-headed rural households are landless (India Exclusion Report 2016). And while 85 percent of rural women are engaged in agriculture, only 13% own land (Oxfam 2018). Moreover, landlessness is highest amongst rural dalit¹ households (Damodaran 2015; Meherotra 2019).

Despite this actual structural invisibility, there have been large numbers of women at the protest from the beginning. Indeed, their presence is strategic, well-planned, and well-organised. As many of them have said, they aspire to 'correct' the invisibilisation of their labour, their role, their knowledge, their politics, and their stake in the agrarian economy. "Women are never counted as farmers ... we are always counted as housewives, but not workers. More women work as farmers than men, but their work is not seen as equal. This is a major national protest and I joined it so people know that we are also farmers," said 39-year-old Sunita Rani, a woman farmer who owns less than an acre of farmland in the northern state of Haryana. Another farmer from the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, 27-year-old Kavita Kumar, explained why she and hundreds of

other women farmers and farm workers travelled 15 hours in trucks to join other women at Delhi's border on March 8. "We work from 7am to 5pm in the field, tilling the soil, cultivating, fencing fields but our contribution is not considered ... not a single woman in my village has land ownership. I have been a farmer since I was a child ... I can ride a bike, and a tractor. People will see if we can come forward for protests, we can also do farming" (Srivastava 2020).

At the protest on March 8, many women carried farm unions' flags. Many – especially those from the state of Punjab – also clutched close to their chest small photo frames: "the portraits of their sons and husbands who had died by suicide over the years when they were unable [to] repay the farm debt" (Singh 2021). This act reflects the fact that between 2000 and 2015, at least 16,000 farmers and farm labourers killed themselves across the 22 districts of Punjab. While the majority were small and marginal farmers, data show that landless farm labourers too are killing themselves in alarming numbers: 7,234 suicides. The report links their suicides to farm debts; servicing debt was found to take up 64% of the total farm income in the state (Chaba 2018; Singh 2021). This reflects Punjab's centrality in India's green revolution since the 1970s, which brought the introduction of capital-intensive farming practices with the use of high-yielding seeds, technology, and massive pesticides and fertiliser inputs. While this has meant an increase in Punjab's food production capacity, contributing significantly to the Indian and global food markets, it has also led to an economic and ecological crisis for small farmers and farmworkers, manifested as crushing household debt, suicide, crippling illness and destitution (Padhi 2012; Singh 2021).

The presence at the protest of women wrapped in mustard-coloured dupattas reflects not only their opposition to the farming laws, but is a powerful articulation of their specific lived experiences, identities, histories, struggles, and antagonisms as actors integral to agrarian economic and social life. By locating themselves, their stories, and their voices at the protest, the women not only aspire to make visible the ways that the local agrarian economy is profoundly connected to global food production. They also centre women's bodies, women's labour, and women's knowledge and opinions about that economy. They do so from a position, not as supplementary or subsidiary labour, but as workers who are fundamental to the

current forms of value extraction. For those who look closely, their active presence and voices at the protest highlight the complex social worlds of labour, in which their presence is not an isolated event but a “process” and a “living body” (Gago 2020). Here it is useful to draw attention to Latin American feminist scholar Veronica Gago’s reconceptualisation of the ‘*Ni Una Menos*’ (‘Not one [woman] less’) movement in Argentina, which drew millions of women, lesbians, and transpeople on to the streets between 2017 and 2020, as a feminist strike against “multiple and specific forms of violence faced by women and feminized bodies” (Gago 2020: 10). Gago suggests that “adopting strike as a lens” allows us to “deploy the strike’s political thought as we experienced it”, helping us to “understand its processuality and multiple geographies” (ibid.: 37). This can be a useful way of thinking about the presence of women at the farm protest – as part of a continuing political and intellectual process that they are experiencing. We will come back to this point later in the paper.

The focus of this article is not on protests or strikes *per se*, but rather to think about how such political acts are part of longer historical processes, spatial relations and practices of labour in a patriarchal-caste-class structured society that shape individual and collective consciousness, identity and agency. I seek to emphasise the importance of the lives and lived worlds of working-class women by arguing that they are not *just* labouring bodies. They are always also agential social and political beings who theorise in creative ways about their conditions of life, and their labour, including exclusions and hierarchies. To understand the political thought and activism of working-class women, I argue, with Gago, that it is necessary to pay attention to the processual and spatial nature of knowledge production (Gago 2020), which requires tapping into the myriad practices deployed by women to express, organise, agitate and theorise their own conditions of labour. Further, I emphasise that theorisation is simultaneously profoundly embodied and ‘local’, as it is also transnational – i.e., reflecting and contributing to the multi-sited global labour struggles and feminist thoughts and actions.

I locate my analysis within the sub-field of labour geography, which seeks to decentre economic geography’s capital-centric focus by foregrounding worker agency in shaping the geographies of work. However, this sub-field remains constrained by its “methodological timidity” (Thrift

2000) in studying everyday labour, aka “the ordinary” (Latham 2003). As a result, labour geographers have arguably been inattentive to the quotidian political thoughts and practices of working people. I emphasise the need to locate agency within the wider social worlds, practices, forms and expressions of everyday theorising and knowledge production of working class women, individually and collectively. Indeed, geographers and scholars from other disciplines have deployed creative approaches to access everyday spaces of activism and theorisation of the marginalised, racialised working-class people under diverse circumstances and in disparate locations (see Chari 2009; Cumbers et al. 2016; Dutta 2020a; Ince et al. 2015; John 2013; Kelliher 2014; Rogaly 2020; Rege 2006). These approaches include oral histories, photographs, archives, personal diaries, life stories, testimonies, poetry, theatre, songs, podcasts, social media post/forums and more. These ‘sources’ are not mere ‘research material’ for researchers to theorise about the conditions of others, but should be seen as ways in which people are themselves making sense of their conditions, and engaging and producing knowledge about their social worlds. Most importantly, these varied genre should be understood to be producing social-political critiques from *specific social locations* within which lie the desires, the politics and the potentiality for change and solidarities. In other words, I am suggesting that songs, poems and podcasts are spaces of intense theorisation, produced every day by ordinary people, experientially. These are crucial forms of praxis – the weaving together of theory and practice – yet they remain unvalued within the academy, too often ignored or shifted to the margins of mainstream knowledge production.

To counter this tendency, I seek here to illustrate the insights that closer attention to these modes of practice can offer. In the next section, I draw attention to two disparate locations beyond the Delhi state where women engage in everyday processes of theorising in very practical ways. First, while grinding grains to flour on grindmills in the darkness of their homes, and second, while sitting on the floor drinking tea in a small rented room after eight hours of gruelling shift work. In each case, the modes of theorising, meaning-making and articulation are distinct, but they nevertheless illuminate the multiple vocabularies and emotional repertoires that women deploy in the process of interrogating all forms of power (gender, caste, class), while offering critique and self-reflection. These illustrations

insist on more granular and creative approaches to understanding women's grounded experiences and knowledges, which then makes it possible to take, as Featherstone and Griffin (2016) note, "a pluralized account of labour agency, [that] is sensitive to its fluctuations...By combining a variety of labour experiences, it destabilizes the sense of who and what constitutes agency" (Featherstone/Griffin 2016: 387). In the subsequent section, I analyse the examples of women's theorisations in the light of feminist and labour geography theory. I conclude the paper by offering two key insights from this work: a) the everyday knowledge production of working class women forged through work and struggle; and b) the significance of paying attention to the political thoughts/acts of working-class women through such seemingly banal methodological entry points as stories, songs, poetry, conversations and so on, which are important because they draw from, are expressions of, and hold possibilities for, emergent global solidarities and political alliances for the oppressed classes.

2. Thinking beyond strikes

2.1 Grindmill songs²

At the crack of dawn, rural women in the western state of Maharashtra can be heard softly singing an *ovi* (a couplet in the Marathi language) in the dark as they grind grain into flour on a *jate* (a grinding stone) in their homes³. Sung over generations, passed down through grandmothers, mothers, and daughters, *jatyavarchi ovi* (grindstone songs) are marathi couplets (a poetic metre) that are composed and sung by women in which they express their views on life and labour, often using metaphors (Waikar 2017). As explained by 72 year old dalit farmer Kusum Sonawane, "These *ovi* show the real lives of women....We could not speak about it out in the open, so we spoke to the grindmill to share our *sukhadukkhha* [joys and sorrows]" (Sonawane 2021).

For instance, Sonawane's own *ovi* (she has composed many and continues to sing them), speak of a wide range of emotions and relationships, including those within household relations, solidarities between mothers and daughters, the precarity of women's positions in a patriarchal society, and their small joys:

“Wet wood burns in the kindled fire
How much can I work? Nobody cares for it in my parents’ home
Wet wood burns in the kindled fire
A woman may toil and toil, it has no value
Sharing of joys and sorrows between mother and daughter is the happiest thing
They get so engrossed in talking, they don’t realise that the stars have set

O woman, [I have a] black Chandrakala saree, its padar is modern, Mumbai style

I tell you, Tarubai, my dear sister, it’s from your son’s earnings
It has taken a long time to build our close friendship
If someone spoils it maliciously, it won’t take a moment to break.”

In speaking with PARI about her ovi, Sonawane explains how women feel about their labour not being valued: “Just as wet wood or the thick water-filled leaves of succulents will eventually catch fire if they are set alight, the continued neglect of a woman’s work and its worth ultimately makes her burn with rage and disappointment.” As another ovi singer explains: “I am the woman who sat at the grindstone, crushing grain to flour every morning to make bhakri [flat bread], the daily bread that fed the family. Singing makes it easy to forget the drudgery. So we sing. We sing what we learnt from our mothers and grandmothers. We sing away the thorny hedge that surrounds me and every other woman like me in the village” (Waikar 2017). Ovi are not just limited to daily life, however; they also chronicle almost every aspect of women’s lives, including child-birth, growing up, unequal land ownership, marriages, religion, caste oppression and commentaries on politics or political figures. For example, many of the ovi that are composed by dalit women are dedicated to Bhimrao R. Ambedkar, a dalit leader who wrote the Indian Constitution. Women sing of Ambedkar’s thoughts, writings, annihilation of the caste system, and dalit emancipation through education. Influenced by Ambedkar, Radha Borhade, a dalit landless farm worker, wrote and sang the following ovi:

“Keep moving along the path of emancipation,
In spite of poverty, do not give up education.

Put an end to enslavement; keep your self-respect alive,
Come together one by one, strengthen the collective.

How many songs should I sing, my voice is weak [from singing,]
One-lakh songs are not enough for my Bhim.”

Kusum Sonawane’s and Radha Borhade’s ovi, like thousands of others composed by rural women in Maharashtra, are deeply intellectual. They represent political thoughts that are intertwined with the everyday experiences of labour. As Namita Waikar writes, “For thousands of women, this was a creative space, a personal zone of free expression where the only sounds were their own voices milling with that of the two stones of the grindmill” (Waikar 2017). However, this intellectual work too often remains invisible, unheard and under-valued. Just like their manual labour, this theory-work is often seen as ‘folk’ and not part of the theory-building process. Nor is the grindstone ever envisioned as key site from where knowledge is produced by the bodies labouring over it. This invisibility has an effect: it deliberately renders the everyday theorisation of rural working-class women (many of whom belong to the oppressed castes, particularly dalits), as inauthentic. Without recognising these poems as theory work, we miss a vital opportunity to understand the everyday creativity of knowledge production from disparate social locations.

2.2 From farms to the factories

“Right from the beginning they have said women should be like this and men should be like that. Women are still not able to pull themselves out of this. You should not stand on the road; you must always keep your head down and walk; you must not speak to the boys. Some people don’t even send their girls to the shops. Even me! When I go to my hometown, they [parents] tell me I can’t go the shops. Why are you going? Your brother is there, let him go. But look, they have sent me here [to the factory]!

Now they have sent me out. Here, I am an educated girl, going to work. When I go home after a long time, I feel shy to go out even to the next street. They [parents] will not send me [out]. ‘Some boys might see you’, my mother would say. I tell my mother – ‘I have come to the city to work, so many people have seen

me. I travel in the night. These are not big problems to you? But going to the next street is a problem?' She would then say -- 'these are two different things. In the city, we don't know what you are like or what you do or where you go. As long as you are here, you're under our protection.'" (Lakshmi, 23 years old⁴)

Over a period of four months, seven women, five of whom worked in an electronics factory, created a series of radio podcasts discussing everyday ordinary things that in many ways profoundly shaped their lives, their identities, their views and how it was to be in a society that is deeply patriarchal and casteist. These conversations took place in 2014 in a small, rented room where the workers lived close to the factory in the town of Kancheepuram, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

In the above quote, reflecting on her experiences in her mother's home, Lakshmi draws attention to the specific and contradictory ways in which patriarchy and caste shapes everyday relations in households, where young women, especially from higher or dominant castes, are restricted from being seen in public places in their own hometowns or villages, despite the fact that they can be seen while labouring in faraway places away from their families. In this instance, Lakshmi draws attention to the gendered language of familial protection invoked by her mother in restricting her movements, which also reveals caste dynamics and sexual anxiety in the local community. Lakshmi's family belonged to the politically powerful and dominant Thevar (OBC) caste community in the Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu, which periodically erupts into caste violence over inter-caste marriages and love affairs between people of different caste groups. Therefore, while Lakshmi is in her parent's home, she is asked to conduct herself in a certain way that doesn't attract attention, especially from men of different castes. But when she goes to work in a distant town, working night shifts with men, travelling by buses at odd hours, or living independently with other young women (often from different castes), her parents are more willing to relax their restrictions. This lenience is mainly driven by economic need, since Lakshmi's factory wages were a key source of income for the family. Drawing on her experience, Lakshmi points out how values are not constant but shift with context. Clearly, Lakshmi is abstracting from her own experiences to theorise the complexity of her social world.

Like Lakshmi, other women in the rented room or in the factory questioned their social and economic conditions in very practical and ordinary language. For example, they made connections between the factory and their homes, especially in terms of the gendered nature of work and social relations. Speaking of their factory work, women spoke not only about its harshness, but they also emphasised the sociality of the workplace, which was produced through their everyday practices of care and emotion. For instance, 23 year old Kalpana said: “Our legs pain when we stand and work. But we talk, comment and laugh at each other...we don’t notice these difficulties.” 27 year old Pooja elaborated by adding:

“When we are working, we speak to each other and find out things about each other. Like who’s in your family, what do they do? What is your background? People will ask you these things. This way we get to know each other, we share both our difficulties and happiness. Work and money is needed, but people matter the most, they [co-workers] take care of us like a family...our friends. If I am unwell, they take care of me and ask me to take some rest. If I have not eaten, they scold me and ask me why I haven’t eaten?”

By drawing attention to their everyday spatial labour practices of work on the assembly line, what Kalpana and Pooja are emphasising is the possibility of transgression of an otherwise power-saturated, highly exploitative workplace by producing sociality and solidarity. This solidarity could in turn produce possibilities for subverting or resisting conditions of labour in the factory (Dutta 2020b). Again, the women here are using their experiences to theorise power, not as being unidirectional and constant, but rather as shaped and reshaped by ordinary acts such as care, emotions, and empathy.

3. Doing work, doing theory

I began this article with reference to the presence of women farmers and farm workers at the ongoing farmers’ protests at Delhi’s borders. This act of presence is not something that came about overnight; it has been in the making for a long time. Navsharan Singh (2017) points out that

while the present farm protest and contemporary peasant struggles in Punjab have historical roots, the public narrative of the same has mostly been about men, largely omitting the vital role of women in these struggles, especially dalit women and other women from marginalised peasant communities. Yet, Singh notes that women, landless dalits and marginalised farmers have been integral to the recent agrarian struggles in Punjab, which have been centred around the “rights of dalits over village commons, their right to live in the villages even when the distribution of resources is such that it leaves them no ownership of the land they live on and till, the recognition that Punjab’s agrarian crisis is being borne also by the landless and, above all for ending impunity for sexual violence which women and, dalit women in particular, endure as caste and patriarchal oppression.” (Singh 2017: 30) This coming together of dalit women and men and marginal peasantry, claims Singh, is “opening the possibility of building new solidarities and political alliance of the oppressed.” (ibid).

In emphasising the role of dalit and non-dalit peasant women, Singh notes the lack of scholarly writings or mainstream media attention to the political actions led by marginalised women. However, these struggles do get documented in the vernacular pamphlets and union records that circulate at protest sites, and in blogs, poetry, music, fiction and rural theatre. Adds Singh, “It is in these expressions that the marginalised people are finding the intellectual tools to comprehend what is going on with them” (Singh 2017: 31). As with the rural women in Maharashtra composing and singing ovi to work through their everyday labour, the dalit and non-dalit peasant women of Punjab are creating a solid body of knowledge, of political thought and action, based on their experiences. Therefore, the presence of women farmers and farm workers in Delhi (and elsewhere) is part of long-term political and intellectual work that women have always been doing but which remains persistently undervalued and unrecognised in public media and in academic discourse.

Thinking this way, all three illustrations – women farmers at the protest, rural women singing ovi, and factory workers creating radio podcasts about their labour and their lives – can be reimagined not just as *expressions* of political thoughts, but in fact, as a grounded praxis where theory and practice are interwoven into each other to create potentiality for change. This is praxis that is woven individually and collectively, through women’s strug-

gles and lived experiences, woven intergenerationally across multiple layers of oppression and across multiple sites of living, be it in homes, on farms, and in streets, factories, villages, and cities. Further, I argue that these practices, that “interweave critiques, actions, and self-reflexivity”, need to be envisioned as transnational feminist practices. I take this conceptualisation from Nagar and Swarr (2010:5), who describe transnational feminism as an “intersectional set of understandings, tools and practices” that “attend to racialized, classed, masculinized, and heteronormative logics and practices of globalization and capitalist patriarchies.” This conceptualisation of transnational feminism emanates from the critique of the monolithic notion of “Third World women” as passive victims by post-colonial feminist scholars such as Mohanty (1984). They emphasise the need to highlight Third World women’s activism and agency “to recast the category of Third World women to imagine new forms of transnational solidarities and collaborations” (Nagar/Swarr 2010: 5). As the cases above show, women are engaged in continuous processes of self and collective reflection, interrogation, and theorisation about their conditions of life and labour. While the enactment of thoughts and practices are specific to the context, they do not occur in a vacuum. They are produced and drawn from knowledge(s) circulating across spaces, places and times that create the possibilities for organising and solidarities. The women from the factories and farms interrogate the gendered nature of labour, social discriminations and exploitation that is both specific to the local/regional conditions and interconnected with the larger political economy of global production of commodities. This production of knowledge forms the basis for larger political actions, as is witnessed in the farmers’ protest in Delhi, and holds the potential for solidarity and political alliance with the oppressed, both nationally and transnationally. Defined as such, it is no leap to envision women’s songs, podcasts, and front-line protest as a process of “collective problematization” in which women bring attention to “the specific exploitation of women’s labour [that] becomes a point of view that allows for the reconceptualisation of the very notion of the bodies implicated in that work. That work is named, it becomes visible and recognised in its concrete manifestations” (Gago 2020: 41).

As important as this theorising is, it begs the question: how do we, as ‘scholars’, make visible these quotidian knowledges and practices of

working class women that have remained peripheral and at the margins of the academy?

To answer this question, let's first turn to labour geography, which has long been interested in understanding the many forms and modalities of labour agency (see e.g. Coe/Jordhus-Leir 2011; Cumbers et al. 2010; Cumbers et al. 2015). For example, Featherstone and Griffin (2016), citing EP Thompson's seminal work *The Making of the English Working Class*, urge labour geographers to "develop a more diverse, contested and plural sense of the 'agentic spatial practices'", emphasising the need to pay attention to "particular uses of space to produce and sustain agency" that move(s) beyond a "general invocation of agency, to think about the particular spatial practices through which agency can be co-constituted" (Featherstone/Griffin 2016: 386). To understand 'agentic spatial practices' requires a conceptual and methodological creativity that looks beyond the conventional forms of expressions, acts, and sites focusing on "unofficial sources and stories", which then "opens up a focus on diverse political antagonisms shaped through struggles and political practices", as Featherstone and Griffin point out (ibid).

There are instances where geographers have built bridges across the centre-margin divide to centre the political thoughts and ideas of the subaltern people. For instance, the geographer Richa Nagar, in her research with seven women workers in rural Uttar Pradesh, embarked on a self-reflexive journey, where writing autobiographical narratives and building trust between women became the key process for building critical feminist theory and knowledge (Writers/Nagar 2006). In the process, one of the decisions that the women collectively took was to write in Hindi, the language with which they connected more intimately everyday. Writing, and later publishing it, in Hindi was an explicitly political act for the women, for two reasons. One, it represented their own social location "in relation to the elite status of English meant that they always saw writing in Hindi as a political act". Second, writing in Hindi meant that their ideas and knowledge was being produced first and foremost for their communities, friends and allies (Writers/Nagar 2006: xxxv). In this way, they *sited* their work not in a transnational space per se, but in a space of Hindiness, their own space. Yet, through the process of reflection and writing this way, the women produced a scathing critique of international devel-

opment ideology and mainstream, so-called ‘transnational’, feminist politics, showing how aid agencies end up reinforcing domination over those people they claim to help.

In a recent review of labour geography’s trajectory, Kendra Strauss (2018) notes that the sub-discipline has remained true to its commitment of centring labour by paying attention to labour practices and to workers’ agency, and she cites a host of scholars working in this arena (e.g. Coe/Jordhus-Lier 2011; Dutta 2019, 2020b; Cumbers et al. 2008; Hastings/MacKinnon 2017; Herod 2003, 2017; Padmanabhan 2016; Ramamurthy 2000; Rogaly 2009; Sportel 2013; Sweeney/Holmes 2013; Warren 2014; Williams et al. 2017). Nevertheless, Strauss also argues that the time is right for labour geographers “to also examine the ontological and epistemological foundations of theorizing and some exclusions or path-dependencies they engender” (2018:152). This is an important reminder to theorise worker agency in new ways and from new locations, especially in contexts where workers’ agency is being conceptualised as embedded in the material practices of community building (Crossan et al. 2016). In practice, this means centring our attention on areas such as the social being of workers (Dutta 2016); mass strikes (Nowak, 2018); or the health and well-being of workers in global supply chains (Prentice et al. 2018) – to name just a few. Such work would respond to Strauss’s call to go beyond “defining, identifying and documenting agency and resistance”, and begin the challenging work of “asking what kinds of intellectual and political engagement this focus might preclude” (Strauss 2018: 153).

This work offers a preliminary response to Strauss’ provocation. While Strauss encourages labour geographers to more actively theorise labour from new spaces and peoples, I suggest we go further. I suggest that it is less the work of the labour geographer to theorise others’ labour. Rather, I see great potential in using our position within the academy to make more visible the long-hidden, long-marginalised theorisations that are already being produced, daily: those of the labourers themselves. In other words, I insist that we as scholars hold no monopoly over the ability to theorise or produce intellectual knowledge. Labouring bodies of all kinds are already linking their lives to transnational struggles, identifying the powers that shape their lives, and articulating paths forward towards a more emancipatory future. As I have shown here in the case of women in India, we have

much yet to see, to hear. Specifically, I identify two issues that deserve much more political and intellectual attention from labour geographers: (1) the processes and politics of knowledge production by subaltern marginalised classes; and (2) the possibilities for new modes of solidarity and political alliance with the oppressed.

Of course, these are not new ideas. Postcolonial, Race and Dalit scholars – in both the global North and South – have critically engaged with these ideas for a long time. In particular, they have explored the notion of difference, particularly in terms of how within highly racialised and caste structured societies, people produce knowledge from dramatically different social locations; those differences exist not only between but within the global North and South. In India, for example, feminist scholars such as Sharmila Rege (2006) and Smita Patil (2013) elaborate on difference from a dalit feminist standpoint. Patil articulates this clearly: “Dalit feminist thought has the epistemic vantage location to challenge the authenticity of knowledge that is generated for the emancipation of the oppressed through pointing out the caste-cum-class privilege of the dominant intelligentsia and institutional histories” (Patil 2013: 43). This is similar to the black feminist scholarship in the U.S., where social location and the experiences of black people, especially black women, puts them in a similar position; in other words, a position from which powerful knowledge is generated through everyday experience. The knowledge is powerful, not only because it is produced in the crucible of experience, but because – for that reason – it holds out the potential for action and solidarity/alliance-building amongst the oppressed. Therefore, the ontological and epistemological foundations for theorising agency must lie in these lived experiences and knowledges of oppressed and marginalised working people, especially women.

4. Conclusion

Drawing from three brief illustrations from India – the ongoing farmer’s protests; grindmill songs of peasant women; and women factory workers – I argue for greater attention by scholars to the theory-building that is a daily practice of women workers across disparate social, economic

and cultural locations. I show that knowledge is produced everyday by working class subaltern women as they labour and live in caste, class, gendered and racialised societies. Their political thoughts are produced in many visible and invisible ways: as women go about doing their daily chores at home, or labour in the fields, or mobilise against sexual oppression and violence on the street, or build relationships across generations or among co-workers. These spaces, with specific socio-spatial relations and power dynamics, shape modes of understanding, articulating, and opening up possibilities for global solidarities.

However, these micro-scale sites remain invisible due to the archetypal understanding of what constitutes a workplace, enduring binaries in how we 'see' productive and reproductive spaces, or national and transnational spaces. These sites of "working class feminism" often remain missing from the larger narratives of labour struggles or worker agency (Datta 2007; McDowell 2015). There is a large body of feminist literature that has pointed to the gender dynamics of the globalisation of production, which has produced new conditions of gender oppression. Bair has noted an analytical and epistemological shift in this feminist inquiry from "macro to a more micro-orientation" to examine the "diverse and context-specific constructions of gendered labour found at the global-local nexus" (2010: 204). These three illustrations go further by foregrounding the significance of paying attention to the everyday theorisation by working class women, that not only illuminates the context specific conditions of labour but emphasises the centrality of these practices in contributing to the multi-sited global labour struggles. Hence, they offer us an opportunity to reimagine and look afresh at the processes taking place at the microlevel that hold the possibility for transnational labour politics and solidarity.

As we see in this article, working class women don't necessarily abstract their worlds in conventional ways – say, by sitting quietly at a desk, writing. Rather, they adopt innovative, often non-textual genres in which to theorise their conditions of life and labour. The methodological implications for labour geographers are clear. To understand these forms and processes of knowledge production, both intellectually and politically, we need to adopt innovative and non-conventional forms of *doing* research. It's not just about using 'creative methods', but to think more ontologically and epistemologically about knowledge production. It is not my contention

that we look for theory everywhere or in every act, but rather that we pay more explicit attention to the everyday creativity of working-class women's theorisation, which is invariably forged in contexts of struggle. In doing so, we can make possible new ways to draw attention to the "relation between struggle, antagonism and agency in ways" as Featherstone and Griffin have argued, that gets foreclosed by "accounts drawing on the rather mechanistic linkages between structure and agency" (2016: 398).

- 1 Dalits are historically the most oppressed communities in India and continue to be socially, economically and culturally marginalised by other castes groups under the Hindu religion in India and other parts of South Asia.
- 2 'The Grindmill songs project' by People's Archive of Rural India (PARI) is a digital journalism platform which is compiling and recording Marathi language couplets from across rural Maharashtra. The ovi presented in this section are from PARI's website: <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/gsp-masterpage/>
- 3 In the last decade, hand-operated grindmilling has been slowly replaced by motorised grinding. <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/the-grindmill-songs-recording-a-national-treasure/>
- 4 Translated excerpts from Mobile Girls Koottam - 'Episode 1: Teashops', radio podcast series. Available at: Mobile Girls Koottam. Spotify: <https://open.spotify.com/show/6shRBBRr3KldP2lywTBkoI>

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*ABSTRACT Der erstmals von Andrew Herod (1997) eingeführte Begriff der „labour geography“ diente dazu, den kapitalzentrierten Fokus der Wirtschaftsgeografie durch einen stärker arbeitszentrierten Fokus zu ersetzen. Feministische Wissenschaftler*innen plädieren seit langem dafür, die sozialen Beziehungen und gelebten Erfahrungen zu berücksichtigen, die die Politik der Arbeit jenseits von Löhnen oder formaler Beschäftigung prägen. Dennoch trennen Arbeitsgeograf*innen nach wie vor auf problematische Weise die größeren Fragen der Existenz – analytisch und ontologisch – von den Fragen der Arbeit und der alltäglichen Arbeitskämpfe. Dieser Artikel lenkt die Aufmerksamkeit auf die Bedeutung alltäglicher Prozesse der Theoriebildung von Frauen aus der indischen Arbeiterklasse, die über unterschiedliche soziale, wirtschaftliche und kulturelle Positionen hinweg arbeiten und sich organisieren. Die in diesem Artikel diskutierten ‚Räume der Arbeit‘ sind als transnational zu verstehen, weil sie als ‚Räume der Wissensproduktion‘ transnationale Narrative und Strategien des globalen Arbeitskampfes prägen und zugleich durch diese geprägt werden. Der Artikel liefert zwei wichtige Erkenntnisse über a) die alltägliche Wissensproduktion von Frauen aus der Arbeiter*innenklasse, die durch Arbeit und Kampf geprägt ist, und b) die Notwendigkeit, die politischen Gedanken und Handlungen von Frauen aus der Arbeiter*innenklasse zu berücksichtigen. Dies birgt die Möglichkeit für neue solidarische Zusammenschlüsse und politische Allianzen. Zur Illustration werden drei Fallbeispiele herangezogen: i) Bäuerinnen bei Protesten in den Außenbezirken von Delhi; ii) Frauen, die im ländlichen Maharashtra Ovi singen und iii) Fabrikarbeiterinnen, die in Tamil Nadu Radiopodcasts erstellen.*

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