

Global Issues

Power Resources and Organising Informal Economy Workers

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An important debate in union renewal has to do with organising in the informal economy and its potential benefit to the survival of the labour movement. Perceived as a threat to organised labour, because informal economy workers were deemed unorganisable, studies on union informal economy activity began with a lament on barriers to organising. Traditional unions, however, expanded coverage to the informal economy in recognition of their responsibility to working people irrespective of their labour market location. In addition, informal economy workers, realising that their survival lay in tying up their struggles with trade unions, pushed for union coverage (Britwum, 2011). As a result, later studies acknowledge union ability to overcome the barriers, insisting that the problem lay with union structures and their inflexibility to absorb the emerging worker forms (Munck, 2002; Philip, 2005; Von Holdt and Webster, 2005; Meagher, 2010; Britwum, 2011).

The informal economy refers to the fusion of survivalist production activities characterising peripheral economies and insecure employment in private and public enterprises. Its antecedents in the informal sector were used to designate non-waged work like household work, subsistence production and self-employment. Arising from the ultra-liberal reforms of the private for-profit and the public workplaces were employment conditions of waged workers which bore the hallmarks of work in the survivalist sector (Husmanns, 2004; Sindzingre, 2008; Chen, 2012). Waged workers – the section of the employed who sell their labour in return for earnings – have been the predominant members of trade unions. The evolving forms of work and forces driving workplace changes made evident the unrepresentativeness of union core membership (Britwum, 2011).

Two concerns, political and conceptual, arise out of union extensions into the informal economy. The political is related to the liberating function of the working class in the immediate and long term. The conceptual concern is the analytical framing for capturing the situation of work and workers globally. A number of issues which come to mind as a result are union ability to frame the challenges of new members by expanding notions of work, workers, working rights and collective bargaining (Webster and Ludwig, 2017). Others are the political shape of unions evolving from the transformation and their ability to address workers' challenges posed by liberalised capital. No less important is the future of unions as viable vehicles for workers' struggles should their transformation alter the existing production relations. This brings up the need for analytical frames to unpack union and organisational efforts in the informal economy.

The power resources approach (PRA) has been employed to examine the bargaining potential of workers' organisational resources (Kellermann, 2005). The essays in this Special Issue represent attempts to unravel power resources in workers' organising. They show that the exercise of various power resources depends on a number of situations and connections with diverse actors. They provide a basis for further examination to enhance understanding of the strategies employed and what new power resources are emerging from union organising. I join these efforts through this paper, where I

aim to apply the PRA to highlight organising in the informal economy and the forms of resources expended in the exercise. I discuss some elements of the PRA in informal economy organising as a unification in labour organisational resources across the formal–informal work divide. I expect that this exercise will add to the discussion in this Special Issue on power dimensions of organisational attempts between unions and informal economy workers.

A few challenges emerge in this exercise. The first is the absence of a defined employer for the majority of workers in the informal economy. The second is the applicability of labour legislation and institutional cover where, as in a number of countries, informal economy work has little or no legal backing. Other challenges are conceptual: unpacking the dimensions of power and making them applicable to the study setting and contents. The most fundamental is the inability of the PRA to account for real social change, especially in the production relations that frame the international economic order. These analytical limitations of the power resources approach notwithstanding, I believe that applying the PRA to discuss certain union/informal economy organising initiatives might indicate how such efforts have enhanced the legitimacy and relevance of informal economy workers' claims. I want to submit that informal economy organising gives new vim and allows even greater space for the labour movement to tap into hidden sources of power.

Originally used to account for the role of the organisational resources of the labour movement in securing equality-related distributive benefits in Western industrial countries, the PRA has undergone revision allowing a focus on union strategies, approaches and capacities within the workplace (Korpi, 1985; Rothstein, Samanni and Teorell, 2012). For some, the PRA is an expansion of the Marxist debate on class struggle, to account for the specific use of power by workers in mediating interests against the might of employers and the state. For others it is a continuation of the Weberian conception of power, accounting for its use among individuals to confront more controlling actors (Korpi, 1985). Its analytical focus still remains limited, however, to examining the bargaining capacity of workers and other social movements for collective action (Kellermann, 2005). In deploying the PRA, the central interest for researchers remains an understanding of workers' agency to confront capital in its most hostile shape and the forms of power deployed in this exercise.

What the PRA brings to the analytical table is the dimensions of power – structural, associational, societal and institutional – and how they facilitate organising. In the specific case of informal economy organising, the PRA helps us to understand sources of power leveraged by informal economy workers. Further, it reveals how, in their struggle for their rights, informal economy workers move continuously into spaces that view them as not belonging, almost an aberration that proper planning and adherence to rules must be deployed to correct. Its detailed use to understand how workers' organising leads to realising their targeted goals can be found in works such as Webster and Ludwig (2017), as well as Webster, Britwum and Bhowmik (2017). They show how organising informal workers, far from serving as embryonic class transformation actions, pushes for a convergence of interests among a wider range of actors to extract concessions from capital in order to enhance living conditions. An application of the PRA to examine union organising success in the informal economy is imperative for lessons about expanding the struggle terrain for unions.

A look at the different dimensions of power resources allows us to set the frame for analysing a selection of trade union/informal economy organising forms. We begin with the first power dimension outlined, the structural power of the informal economy in national economies. As explained elsewhere in this Special Issue, structural power of labour is derived from its economic location either at work or in the marketplace. Neo-liberal market reforms have significantly undermined union structural power,

in particular the market and workplace dimensions. This was done mainly through the introduction of low-security employment and the fragmentation of production across the globe.

Despite its size in some economies, such as West Africa where the proportion of the workforce that the informal economy engages extends beyond 80 per cent, the formal retains higher levels of structural power in terms of its strategic location in the international political economy systems. In struggles for benefits beyond the workplace, unions have come to appreciate how informal economy workers can bolster their structural power. An example is the case of workers on a Ghanaian oil palm plantation where casual workers were drafted to strengthen the workplace power of the local union only to be ditched later (Britwum and Akorsu, 2017). Informal economy workers rely on the logistical power dimension of structural power to draw attention to their situation.

The second dimension, associational power, is characterised as the collective might of workers, their organisational ability and form. Unions can strengthen their weak structural power through this power dimension. Associational power depends on organisational infrastructure: basically, resources both human and material, bolstered by finances. Its deployment depends on union organisational efficiency and membership in terms of numbers, their commitment to deploy finances, their level of participation in union activities and decision-making. Internal cohesion, a requirement for union associational power, rides on solidarity, the underlying principle of trade unionism. This requires a continuous process of intermediation to balance the competing interests of diverse union members. To be effective, organisational strategies of unions have to be flexible and allow the coverage of new members beyond the union confines.

Informal economy workers have used various strategies to expand their associational power. These have come in the form of direct types of affiliation with trade unions or as cooperation with other workplace organisations or community-based movements. As Kumar and Singh in this Special Issue as well as Gadgil and Samson (2017) show, informal economy workers can be very resourceful in their attempt to compensate for the absence of certain power dimensions. Gadgil and Samson (2017) referred to this as hybrid organisations, with links established between non-governmental organisations, cooperatives and trade unions. In Ghana, for example, informal economy associations have sometimes predated union formation. They have shown in certain circumstances an ability to maintain their organisations, sometimes with little union support (Britwum, 2011). Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster in their introduction to this Special Issue mention the PRA's origin in new forms of worker militancy within and outside of unions. This they cite as marking the merger of unions with interests beyond the workplace, a situation evocative of pre-colonial nationalist struggles in Africa where unions took a lead role, integrating their workplace struggles with the political fight for self-rule (Kester, 2007).

Institutional power, the third dimension, is derived from compromises and state regulation. Union benefits are granted through legislative provisions and supporting institutions, and because it is born out of compromise with capital, its exercise calls for the containment of certain labour rights (Roper, 2004). Perhaps this is the area where the base of informal economy workers is weak. Most institutional structures and legislative instruments are largely couched to cover waged workers – that is, working people with identifiable employers. In countries such as India where legislative provisions exist, informal economy workers' capacity to employ them to their own benefit remains a challenge. This makes the provisions as good as non-existent. But in certain circumstances worker ingenuity has allowed the use of existing institutions to protect their interests. The South African casual workers' advice office is a case in point (Webster et al., 2017).

Societal power, the fourth dimension, is derived from direct cooperation with social groups or social support for union action. It is made up of coalition power and discursive power, the potential to mobilise other communities to support the union cause, and the ability to frame union concerns to derive legitimacy and support for union actions. Cultural norms and values compensate for shortcomings in structural power (connection with community). Beyond the community, informal economy workers' associations have also tapped into international networks in order to expand their associational power resources. International informal economy associations like Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) and the Self-Employed Women's Association of India (SEWA) that are affiliated to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) have members across continents. The Domestic Workers' Association in Ghana, for example, was affiliated to WIEGO and to a local NGO (Akorsu and Odoi, 2017).

The discussions here in this Special Issue show some synergies between unions and informal economy workers sources of power. We note how the extension of PRA to worker action in the informal economy has expanded an understanding of the deployment of power resources. Such additions include the symbolic and logistical power deployed by waged informal economy workers to compensate for structural and associational power limitations. Thus, while some power resources are deployed by trade unions, others have emerged through the efforts of informal economy workers. The leveraging of power resources for each part has been different. It is, however, from the connections of associational and societal power that they have derived power to support their work-related struggles. For the moment the deployment of power resources between unions and informal economy workers has succeeded in dealing with specific work-related concerns of the workers. What is left to be seen is how such power resources and the agency displayed by informal economy workers can, in their identification and deployment, form the basis for a broad worker movement to challenge the existing economic order.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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