

"Labour Is Not a Commodity" Today
ADAPT, Bergamo, November 2019

**RESISTING
COMMODIFICATION AND
INEQUALITY : TRADITIONAL
AND EMERGING FORMS OF
MOBILISATION**

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OVERVIEW

- **capitalist wage labour, 'Rhineland capitalism' and the precarious advance of decommodification**
- **post-decommodification ?
neoliberalism, financialisation and globalisation**
- **trade unions, precariousness and 'new social movements'**
- **(how) can solidarity overcome recommodification ?**



THE HISTORY OF CAPITALIST WAGE LABOUR : FICTITIOUS COMMODITIES AND REAL COMMUNIFICATION

- **labour power as a commodity :
freedom, equality, property and
Bentham...**
- **Polanyi : the violence of
commodification...**
- **... and counter-movements**

'RHINELAND CAPITALISM' AND ORGANISED INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

- **'stakeholder capitalism' : constraints on regulation by market**
- **'labour is not a commodity' : the fight for employment protection legislation**
- **'Rhineland capitalism' : bias to collective regulation**
 - **multi-employer bargaining and extension of agreements**
- **institutionalised workplace 'voice'**
- **'social solidarity' and 'social partnership'**



THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF SOCIAL RIGHTS ?

- where did decommodification come from?
 - intelligent design or *bricolage* ?
 - social consensus or class struggle?
- contingent historical balance of forces : *negotiated* accommodation, and/or concession to dampen protest
- institutionalisation of employment protections was a major achievement
 - but never sufficient, always precarious
 - its meaning is constantly reconstructed and renegotiated
 - it is easier to erode practical effect than to abolish formal existence

NEOLIBERALISM, FINANCIALISATION AND GLOBALISATION : POST-DECOMMODIFICATION ?

- **financialisation and 'deregulation' :
towards recommodification**
- **privatisation and hostile take-overs**
- **the 'platform economy' : the return of 'spot
contracting' in the labour market**
- **increasing inequalities of income, wealth
and power**
- **global value chains and 'modern slavery'**
- **the erosion of workers' collective strength**

TRADE UNIONS : THE EROSION OF 'OLD' POWER RESOURCES

- **decline in structural and associational power**
- **institutional power is superficially robust but precarious**
- **hence unions need new power resources ⇒ search for alliances, coalitions – and new forms of discourse**
 - **very different logics of action**
 - **can they be integrated ?**



**TOGETHER
AT WORK**

TRADE UNIONS AND PRECARIOUS WORKERS

- the 'curse of institutional security' : are trade unions insiders or outsiders ?
- 'crisis corporatism' : defending the 'core constituency' ?
- unions are almost universally weak among young and precarious labour market groups, worst affected by crisis
- yet in many countries, they have made important efforts to engage with the most vulnerable
- but often met with understandable suspicion



Jugend!

LAUT UND STARK

OPERATION
ÜBERNAHME


Tarifoffensive 2022:
Aktionshandbuch

**Bereit für
Streit!**

'NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS' : MORE EFFECTIVE PROTESTS ?

- the 'movements of the squares'
 - spontaneity, social media and 'orchestration'
 - transnational emulation
- youth protests against unemployment and precarious work (*San Precario...*)
- more general opposition to austerity and insecurity
 - but problems of aggregating diversity : there is no homogeneous 'precariat'

SAN PRECARIO



*Oh San Precario, Protettore di noi,
precaristi della terra*

Dacci oggi la maternità pagata

*Proteggi i dipendenti delle catene commerciali, gli
angeli del call center, le partite Iva e*

i collaboratori appesi ad un filo

Dona a loro ferie e contributi pensionistici, reddito e

BUILDING SOLIDARITY FROM BELOW ?

- **resistance or collective bargaining ?**
- **'defence of the commons' and the 'solidary economy'**
 - **solidarity from the grassroots**
 - **politicising the economic**
- **many social movements address (rhetorical ?) trade union agenda**
- **but (at best) ambivalent relationship with trade unions**

THE VARIABLE GEOMETRY OF RESISTANCE

- **if unions and social movements cannot act together, they fail separately**
- **but traditional rivalries between unions and social movements persist**
- **effective alliances must be based on mutual respect and autonomy**
- **a shared collective identity requires new understandings and new language**
- **from despair to hope : is there an alternative ?**



UBER LYFT
JUNO VIA
DRIVERS
ON STRIKE!

TAKE
THAT
W
STR

Hey Uber!
YOU CAN'T EXPLOIT US
YOU CAN'T BUY US
YOU CAN'T DIVIDE US
YOU CAN'T STOP US

INVEST IN
OUR LIVES
NOT IN
THEIR STOCKS!

NYC Strike Demands!
End Surge Pricing!
End Discrimination!
NYC Rates for All Jobs Outside NYC!
Stop Firing Us Without Notice, Cause
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DREW LANGER/GETTY IMAGES

RE-INVENTING DECOMMODIFICATION ?

- **beyond Bismarck and Beveridge :**
 - **to defend social rights, these must be (re-)invented**
 - **what social models fit the needs and aspirations of workers and citizens today ?**
- **in many countries, right-wing nationalists have captured the initiative**
- **it is necessary to challenge the dominant paradigm, not just negotiate within it**
 - **this requires an alternative, progressive narrative and discourse**
- **re-inventing decommodification demands strategic imagination – from both scholars and activists !**



Thank you for your engagement !

**THINK
OUTSIDE
THE BOX**

