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The dynamics of labour protest in an era of declining social protection

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This special feature brings together four papers that aim to uncover the particular contextual conditions within which the grievances of workers evolve into different forms of labour protests, each with a range of possible outcomes. The authors are motivated by a common concern that aggregate statistics on protest and general theories about national or transnational labour movements frequently miss the critical factors that trigger a protest movement in a particular sector and/or locale. In some cases, a protest grows in scale and evolves into a militant challenge that elicits violent repression involving the state. In others, grievances are channelled into more muted forms of activism aimed at extracting concessions through behind-the-scenes bargaining. In some cases, even within a single sector, specific situations engender varied grievances at separate workplaces, producing different kinds of outcomes. Yet, one thing seems to have become more apparent across developing and post-socialist settings: the strong sense that once-reliable employment guarantees and social protections are breaking down, with some segments of the workforce becoming more vulnerable than others as a result. The degree and character of that vulnerability, the authors find, can be fruitfully linked to the likelihood that workers' frustrations will lead them to protest, and to the particular forms that protest can take depending on specific contextual conditions at the sectoral or local levels.

The first paper, by Ian Hartshorn, examines the slow but steady rise of labour unrest within certain wings of Egypt's public sector, led by workers who once were well protected by the state but whose growing defiance would later prepare the way for much larger and more consequential protests at Tahrir Square. The

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second paper, by Allison Evans, explores the distinct forms of labour mobilization within post-Soviet Russia's seemingly docile steel sector when the first decade of privatization removed Soviet-era guarantees and created local, work-place-specific challenges that led to the development of distinct survival strategies by anxious workers and local union bosses. In the third paper, Teresa Wright traces the rise of grievances and strikes among workers in China's relatively new but fast-growing private sector in the context of market reform in a still nominally communist party-state. The final paper in the feature, by Rudra Sil, examines the reasons for the particularly intense and often violent spikes in labour unrest in South Africa's platinum belt, with a focus on the factors contributing to the 2012 massacre of dozens of mineworkers at Marikana.

Each of these papers engages relevant scholarship by country specialists and makes an original contribution to the study of labour protest in that country. Indeed, each can be read as a stand-alone piece of scholarship in its own right, bringing new findings and interpretations to bear on the study of labour movements and to the analysis of state-society relations in a given country. At the same time, the papers exhibit several common features that have implications for the study of workers' protests in an era when organized labour is increasingly viewed as becoming a relic of the past. These papers reveal insights about the articulation of grievances in a particular sector or work-place and about how these grievances might be framed in the course of specific forms of labour protest with a wide range of potential outcomes across different time- and space-bound contexts. They also converge upon a similar set of intuitions about the way in which these dynamics ought to be studied given the continuities and changes in economic policies and labour regulations over the past quarter of a century.

First – and most generally – the papers serve as a timely reminder that, in the study of protests and social movements, labour is not quite as *passé* as some have suggested. While no one has written worker protest completely out of the study of collective action, the declining membership density and political efficacy of organized labour across post-industrial societies over the last three decades have led many to focus on other kinds of protest movements, from environmental movements and women's movements to anti-corruption protests and demonstrations to advance the rights of certain groups. While it is only natural that these 'new' forms of protest receive serious attention from students of social movements as they become more visible, this does not have to come at the expense of more familiar 'old' social movements, including those rooted in labour's ongoing search for job security and a decent livelihood. It may well be, as Manuel Castells (2010) has argued, that labour is having to struggle more and more to advance its original project – conceived under 'old capitalism' – in a post-capitalist 'information age'. This does not, however, mean that long-standing basic concerns of wage-earners have suddenly gone away – particularly in late-developing or post-socialist countries that, far from being post-industrial, are still in the process of managing the transition to industrial capitalism and the related challenge of maintaining labour peace across a still expanding

manufacturing sector. In these countries, even as workforces continue to grow, workers face remarkably similar threats to their livelihoods as states embrace neoliberal reforms in search of deeper integration into the global economy, and as employers seek greater flexibility in labour relations (Sil & Candland, 2001). Whether or not one sees globalization and liberalization as novel, inexorable forces that have fundamentally under-cut organized labour, it is evident that workers' anxieties and grievances remain the key driver of labour protest, and that labour protest remains an important part of workers' struggle for dignity and rights worldwide (Evans, 2008; Munck, 2004; Tilly, 1995).

At least as importantly, those anxieties and grievances, although sometimes articulated in a different language and generating different strategies than was the case with union-led labour mobilization a quarter of a century ago, are not qualitatively different from those that prompted workers to join unions in an earlier era: the desire to protect their jobs, improve their wages and defend their basic rights. The authors concur with Ronaldo Munck (2004, p. 260) that 'it would be wrong ... to write labor out of this ongoing story, however "old" labor may appear in comparison to the new actors engaged against the commodification of society'. Indeed, the four studies that follow all suggest that the study of different kinds of social movements – whether 'old' or 'new' – need not be a zero-sum game. While the visibility and efficacy of labour movements may be diminishing relative to newer social movements in some places, the papers show that workers continue to initiate or join protest actions wherever they believe that social protections are disappearing and that their livelihoods are being put at risk by state and business elites. This is certainly true in the case of particular sectors that are exposed to pressures from global economic competition and thus are affected by fluctuations in demand and prices for particular commodities, as in the case of Russia's steel sector and South Africa's platinum belt. But, it can also be seen in the context of more widespread concerns among China's private sector workers and Egypt's public sector employees, both of whom have had to contend with the vagaries of shifting labour markets in ways that earlier cohorts of workers did not.

Second, whereas some view the current significance of labour unrest as embedded within a larger transnational programme of 'counter-hegemonic globalization' (Evans, 2000, 2008), the papers herein highlight the significance of local, sectoral and even workplace-specific contexts in tracing the origins and dynamics of workers' protests. The authors would likely concur with Donatella della Porta (2015, p. 3), who argues compellingly that to grasp the social basis, identity and organizational structure and strategy of a protest movement it is necessary to pay close attention to 'the specific characteristics of the socio-economic, cultural and political context in which these protests developed'. Looking particularly at labour movements, the papers herein emphasize the 'local and generative aspects' (Voss & Williams, 2009) of each case, so as to correct for the tendency in past social movement theories to analyse the contours of labour protest in relation to a national-level configuration of relations among

state, society and economy. At the same time, the authors in this special feature heed Munck's (2004, p. 263) reminder that it may be a mistake to *a priori* assume that local efforts at mobilizing labour protest are inherently more 'natural' or effective than efforts relying more on linkages forged with transnational actors. Munck points to the case of the Liverpool dockworkers' strike of 1995–1998: some view the outpouring of international support in that case as a distraction that limited the potential for mobilizing local solidarity, while others contend that better integration of global and grassroots efforts might have yielded a more positive result for the dockworkers. None of the papers featured here makes any prior assumptions about whether transnational or local solidarity is intrinsically more important for delivering pro-labour outcomes in cases of industrial unrest, or whether it is always more productive to have grassroots social movements link up with transnational alliances. When it comes to the *emergence* or *initiation* of labour protest, however, each of the authors draws attention to the specific conditions and factors contributing to frustrations among a clearly defined group of workers and to the particular manner in which these grievances are then articulated and transformed into collective action. Without the careful attention to the relevant contexts within which frustrations cumulate within a given category of workers, there is a risk of falling into the trap of limiting ourselves to sweeping generalizations about only the most visible and consequential instances of labour protest and missing the elements of local and sectoral factors that spark different kinds of collective action.

Thus, a key point of departure for each of the papers is the recognition that local or sectoral efforts to mobilize labour solidarity might not be reflected in national-level industrial conflict or aggregate protest data. Indeed, national labour leaders may well opt for a less contentious approach given their ties to ruling parties or elites or their positions within national-level corporatist institutions, suggesting that a great many industrial disputes in developing countries are initiated by union bosses or workers' committees at the enterprise or local level (Teitelbaum, 2010). Moreover, as James Scott reminds us, contentious politics does not only involve revolutions or protests that threaten the survival of regimes or other institutions; it can just as easily be found in 'everyday forms of resistance' or 'hidden transcripts' (Scott, 1985, 1990) shared by subordinate local actors who challenge the *status quo* in less overt yet potentially significant ways. While the papers herein are generally more concerned with forms of collective action that *have* become overt, they share with Scott a sense that local grievances, even when not rising to a point where a firm or government is threatened or forced to respond, are worth understanding on their own terms. Accordingly, each of the papers highlights the critical importance of contextual attributes in spurring labour protests within specific locales or sectors – protests that are worth studying in their own right, but that also reveal the possibilities for similar frustrations among workers producing quite different channels of mobilization leading to quite varied outcomes. The accompanying papers thus feature episodes of

labour protest that range from an escalating spiral of violence that attracts international attention (as in the case of the mineworkers' massacre in South Africa) and the emergence of political mobilization that challenges a faltering regime (as in the case of Egypt), to quietly engineered efforts to extract concessions from employers (as in the case of Russia's steelworkers) and appeals to national authorities for help in counter-acting measures taken by employers or local politicians (as in China's private sector).

Third, despite their careful attention to local or sectoral context, the analyses point to some overarching similarities in the nature of the threats to the livelihoods of the various groups of workers under study, and in the way in which the workers respond to the normative and practical aspects of these threats. Despite their local or sectoral particularities, all of the protests examined are, in one way or another, responses to the absence or unravelling of social compacts or safety nets that workers had previously enjoyed or believe to be necessary given the precariousness of their positions. Whether due to pressure from international financial institutions, policies adopted by national leaders to deepen neoliberal reforms or businesses' own pursuit of greater flexibility in employment practices, workers in some sectors or firms find previous employment guarantees and social benefits disappearing, while in other sectors they are frustrated over the absence of such guarantees and benefits given the rhetoric of political and business elites and the privileges reserved for certain other groups of workers. What used to be a part of at least a tacit understanding for industrial workers in many developing or socialist countries – that once employed in large-scale industrial enterprises, their jobs would be secure and they could count on steady wage increases and a host of social benefits (Sil & Candland, 2001) – now stands at odds with employers seeking greater flexibility in their efforts to contain labour costs and maintain global competitiveness and, in the case of private firms, shareholder value. In effect, the absence or disappearance of job and wage security, without compensatory efforts to extend social safety nets, appears to have generated a sense of betrayal or injustice in response to the erosion and/or violation of pre-existing understandings or social compacts among labour, employer and state (whether explicitly codified or tacitly encouraged).

In this sense, the labour protests analysed below may be seen as a sort of 'Polanyi-type labor unrest', defined by Beverly Silver (2003, p. 20) as 'backlash resistances to the spread of a global self-regulating market, particularly by working classes being unmade by global economic transformations'. Certainly, it has become commonplace to interpret the rise of protests in countries dealing with market reforms through the lens of Polanyi's concept of the 'double movement', which captures a sequence of a self-regulating market expediting the commodification of labour, only to be followed by the 'self-protection' of society (Evans, 2008). These papers go beyond this abstract 'model' of the Polyanian backlash to uncover the specific experiences and responses of workers once accustomed to the idea of good jobs in industry as 'protected' through long-term employment contracts and decent wages and benefits. In locales or sectors where that sense of protection has become increasingly elusive, labour

protest has been framed by workers in terms of appeals that *do* loosely evoke the Polanyian narrative of self-protection. However, for any given locale or sector, *context* remains crucial for specifying the ways in which the general idea of ‘protection’ is captured in the claims, discourses and strategies through which workers seek to build solidarity. In the case of Egypt’s public sector workers or Russia’s steelworkers, the anxieties have stemmed from social compacts that were either being dismantled by the regime (in Egypt) or disappeared overnight (with the break-up of the Soviet Union). In South Africa’s platinum mines and among China’s private sector workers, it is the aspiration for the wages and benefits enjoyed by some reference group – the former, with an eye on the compensation of mineworkers doing hazardous work in other countries, and the latter with an eye on employees in state-owned enterprises backed by a regime ostensibly committed to the general prosperity of workers under the rubric of ‘market socialism’. Each of these cases points to quite different processes through which frustrations begin to accumulate and grievances are framed in a given sector or locale. Yet, it is difficult to ignore the underlying sense of betrayal triggered by unmet expectations that were considered to be just and appropriate for the entire industrial workforce as recently as two decades ago. In addition, from South Africa’s platinum belt and Russia’s steel sector to public sector employees in Egypt and the growing private sector workforce in China, the awareness that some other category of employees continues to enjoy higher wages and better social protection only serves to magnify the sense of vulnerability and injustice that increases the likelihood of a Polanyian backlash.

Finally, although the authors are all formally housed in political science departments, each sees labour protest as falling within the category of phenomena that cannot be fully understood or explained through concepts, approaches, theories or narratives that are hermetically embedded within a specific discipline or research tradition (Sil & Doherty, 2000). As Munck (2004, p. 258) notes: ‘The world is changing rapidly and our theoretical lenses need to be adjusted accordingly to take account of the fluid and complex setting of labor and social movement activities’. The complex, contingent non-linear processes that lead from the emergence of grievances to the formation of various types of collective action require attention to, among other things, the constraints posed by political institutions and configurations of power; the short-term and long-term economic trends at various levels; the normative and practical significance of socio-economic inequalities; the constellations of material and ideal interests motivating different groups of actors; and the concrete expectations of various communities with discrete worldviews conditioned by particular historical experiences and reference groups. Moreover, deep engagement with countries and locales requires a degree of immersion in area studies communities that are intrinsically interdisciplinary, with the shared interest in particular places transcending commitment to discipline-bound stocks of knowledge and widening the channels of communication among political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians and scholars in the humanities. Accordingly,

the analyses presented below neither aspire to generate parsimonious models, nor endeavour to advance the accumulation of disciplinary knowledge. They simply seek to understand the complex interactions of the various forces that might motivate a group of workers to mobilize at a particular time and place to share their grievances and seek to protect themselves against the backdrop of broken promises and unmet expectations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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