



Introduction to the Special Issue

Workers' representation: challenges within and outside trade unions

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ABSTRACT

What happens to workers' representation when established unions see their central role in giving voice to workers diminish? This Special Issue takes up this pressing question by examining workers' representation confronting established trade unions and the new forms of organizing emerging in its wake. In addressing this question, the Special Issue advances the integration of industrial relations and social movement studies by bridging the gap between two fields that have historically developed in relative isolation. Contributions explore the transformations in workers' representation by assessing both the structural conditions driving change and the strategies workers and both established and grassroots unions deploy in response to shifting socioeconomic and political contexts. First, the articles highlight the diversity of actors involved in worker representation—from established unions to grassroots initiatives and social movement organizations—and show how they are redefining the union and organizational field. Second, they address challenges that emerge both within unions and in their broader environments. They shed light on the role of the contextual dimensions—including economic and political opportunities and constraints, and the institutional frameworks in which unions operate—as well as on their organizational dynamics, such as inter-union relationships involving cooperation, coalition building, and competition. They also highlight the role of individual actors, from workers' experiences to employers' strategic actions, in shaping contemporary forms of representation. Third, the contributions examine these dynamics across diverse sectors—ranging from male-dominated industries such as logistics and shipbuilding to female-dominated sectors such as care work—and across multiple European contexts, including Southern Europe, the Nordic countries, the UK, and Eastern Europe, where traditional models of representation are being renegotiated.

KEYWORDS Workers' representations; established unions; grassroots unions; industrial relations; social movement organizations

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, European societies have been confronted with a period of several harsh crises—ranging from the 2008 global financial and sovereign debt crises to the COVID-19 pandemic—that have intersected with long-term structural transformations in political economy and labor markets. These processes include, *inter alia*, a progressive deindustrialization, the broader reconfiguration of production regimes (Strangleman, Rhodes and Linkon, 2013; Atolia *et al.*, 2018; High, MacKinnon and Perchard, 2017; Clark, 2022), and the dualization of labor markets, manifest in the growing divide between secure, standard employment and increasingly precarious and nonstandard forms of work (Emmenegger *et al.*, 2012). This dualization has been reinforced by shifts in workforce composition, the expansion of service and outsourcing from the public sector, and the incorporation of migrant labor, driven by global dynamics of mobility and migration (Rodrik, 2007; Kofman, 2015; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). In parallel, political responses to successive crises—most notably the adoption of austerity measures—have involved reductions in public expenditure and the retrenchment of welfare provisions, significantly reshaping the social and economic landscape. These transformations have affected workers across both the private and the public sectors, contributing to deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and deepening inequalities (Emmenegger, 2014; Piketty, 2020; Chancel *et al.*, 2023; Giupponi and Machin, 2024). These developments cannot be reduced to exogenous shocks as they also reflect political and managerial strategies that have systematically prioritized labor market flexibilization, privatization, and competitiveness over security and redistribution (Baccaro and Howell, 2017; Signoretti, 2019; Greer and Humney, 2022; Coderre-LaPalme, 2024; Mori, 2024). The impact has been particularly severe for workers in vulnerable positions—those employed in precarious and nonstandard contractual arrangements—and concentrated in low-skilled occupations. Beyond economic deprivation, these dynamics have generated broader political and social rights grievances, ranging from citizenship and residence-related demands among the precarious migrant workers, to enduring struggles over housing, pensions, welfare entitlements, and access to public goods (della Porta, 2015; Kriesi *et al.*, 2020; Bojar *et al.*, 2021).

Taken together with the erosion of the Fordist model of work organization and the far-reaching transformations brought about by digitalization and technological innovation, these dynamics have deepened the crisis of representation faced by traditional trade unions, which have historically played a central role in coordinating industrial conflicts (Hyman, 1989; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013) functioning as both economic and political actors (Pizzorno,

1978; Shorter and Tilly, 1974; Crouch and Pizzorno, 1978; Emmenegger, 2014). This crisis of representation is reflected in a shifting and increasingly fragmented membership base, characterized by heterogeneous demands and employment trajectories. Concurrently, it has translated into a continuing decline in union density—a long-term trend that began in the 1980s and has affected most European countries for which data are available. In 2018, the weighted average density stood at almost 23.0 percent in the EU16 and 14.5 percent in the EU11, marking the lowest levels of union density recorded since 1945 (Meardi, Simms and Duncan, 2021). This has challenged the organizational legitimacy and collective bargaining capacity of established unions (Visser, 2019; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013), leading to a weakening of their institutional power and an erosion of their traditional role as central actors in worker mobilization. The position for trade unions within member states has also changed: “From involvement in national policymaking and securing gains for members and organization within Western Europe, unions became ‘part of the problem’ for advocates of neoliberalism who viewed them as a source of rigidity within the labor market” (Waddington, Müller and Vandaele, 2023, p. 74).

In this framework, as a large body of scholarship has demonstrated, the organizational field sustaining workers’ mobilization has also considerably expanded. While established trade unions still remain the primary organizers of protest—most notably through strikes—they are no longer alone in supporting labor contention. New mobilizing structures—including grassroots and independent unions, social movement organizations, and informal workplace-based collectives—have increasingly emerged, challenging the hegemony of traditional unions and contributing to a more fragmented and pluralized field of worker representation (Heery and Frege, 2006; Ness, 2014; Però and Downey, 2024). This diversification has reshaped the repertoire of labor mobilization, blurring the boundaries between conventional industrial relations and broader social movement dynamics.

Scholars in the social sciences have shown renewed interest in examining how unions confront these challenges, adapt to increasingly heterogeneous constituencies, and accommodate diverse demands, as well as in analyzing the evolving trajectories of worker representation and collective action processes (Martínez Lucio, Marino and Connolly, 2017). Industrial relations studies are well-equipped to account for concrete shop floor regulations as they focus on the interrelationships between collective labor agency, employers, and institutions that vary across countries (Doellgast and Wagner, 2022) while more recently also addressing within-country variations (Morgan and Hauptmeier, 2021; Signoretti and Wilkinson, 2025) and union action (Refslund and Arnholtz, 2021). At the same time, however, the industrial relations literature

alone proves insufficient to capture the dynamics of recent transformations in worker representation. In response, a growing strand of research has begun to integrate insights from industrial relations with those from the field of contentious politics, thereby offering analytical tools to examine forms of labor mobilization that extend beyond the workplace and beyond conventional union structures (Larsson, 2014; Gahan and Pekarek, 2013; Grote and Wagemann, 2018). In this framework, the literature on contentious politics and social movements provides valuable analytical leverage for understanding a broader repertoire of collective action that extends beyond traditional strikes and shop floor dynamics, for examining the involvement of a wider constellation of actors—not only workers but also civil society groups and social movement organizations—while accounting for an increasing diversification of claims that encompass both economic demands and broader political and social grievances (Gahan and Pekarek, 2013; Engeman, 2015; Holgate *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the contentious politics perspective can be fruitfully integrated with the organizational and comparative institutional views of industrial relations studies. Furthermore, industrial relations and social movement scholars frequently examine the same processes—such as recruitment, representation, and mobilization—even though within distinct analytical frameworks.

Building on these perspectives, the Special Issue aims to advance the integration of industrial relations and social movement studies by bridging the gap between these two fields, which have historically developed in relative isolation. Accordingly, the contributions included in this Special Issue underscore the potential for cross-fertilization between distinct scholarly traditions in a domain of increasing academic and political relevance: the study of worker representation. The contributions shed light on the complex interplay between established unions, new forms of organizing, workplace dynamics, and broader socioeconomic and political contexts, uncovering new insights into the changing nature of worker representation in contemporary employment relations. Exploring these dynamics across Europe represents the key contribution of this Special Issue. In this regard, the articles in this Special Issue provide evidence on a range of critical questions that shape the representation of workers by both established unions and emerging new actors across Europe.

Workers' representation transformed

Established unions have been frequently tied to their traditional membership base—male, full-time, and permanent employees—and sometimes prioritized the defense of historically protected groups where collective bargaining and mobilization remain more effective. This added to another trait of established

unions: the changing composition of union membership, marked by a decline in waged workers and a rise in nonactive members. As mentioned, established unions have therefore met some difficulties in coping with the change of the labor market and the needs of a more diverse and fragmented workforce (Heery and Williams, 2012). They have also been weakened by the introduction of neoliberal regulatory provisions concerning the labor market and structural factors such as the development of services and the contraction of the manufacturing sector, and by the increasing precariousness of employment (Carver and Doellgast, 2021).

To cope with these challenges, some established unions reacted by engaging in processes of revitalization through the adoption of novel policies of action aimed to expand their representation (Benassi and Vlandas, 2016; Pulignano and Signoretti, 2016; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017; Doellgast, Lillie and Pulignano, 2018; Keune and Pedaci, 2020; Natili and Puricelli, 2023). In particular, established unions have sought to reclaim their centrality by diversifying their repertoires of action. The traditional model of union-led strikes has evolved, and workers now employ a broader range of collective actions to defend their rights and advance their claims (Gentile and Tarrow, 2009; Pilati, 2025). These actions include demonstrations and reinvigorated forms of “street protest,” with general political strikes serving as a prominent example. Such strikes often encompass both economic and political claims, targeting not only specific employers but also state actors in their role as policymakers in opposition to labor market or pension reforms (Tarrow, 1989; Leonardi and Pedersini, 2018; Hamann, Johnston and Kelly, 2013; Vandaele, 2016; Bérout, 2018). Similarly, established unions have sought to forge new alliances, giving rise to forms of social movement unionism—collaborations between trade unions and social movement organizations (Baccaro, Hamann and Turner, 2003; Le Queux and Sainsaulieu, 2010; Tapia and Turner, 2013; Alberti and Però, 2018; Pilati and Perra, 2019, 2022b). Through these alliances, unions have been able to incorporate new claims from workers, especially those of “outsiders,” such as temporary or precarious employees, as well as concerns related to rising unemployment and broader civil rights issues (Moore and Newsome, 2018; Tapia and Alberti, 2018). At the same time, established unions have regained initiative by increasing efforts and resources to represent the precarious workforce (Holgate, 2005; Carver and Doellgast, 2021) further to the actions already undertaken, like the push for the approval of macro regulations favorable to migrants (Rinaldini and Marino, 2017).

Both the turn toward street protests and the development of cross-organizational alliances signal attempts by established unions to extend their reach beyond traditional constituencies and to engage with a broader spectrum

of social and labor struggles. However, established unions have often struggled to effectively address these emerging challenges, particularly with regard to outsiders and other precarious workers, who frequently perceive themselves to be inadequately represented. As a result, in some sectors many precarious and less protected groups—including migrant workers—have turned to grassroots unions or other forms of self-organization to advance and defend their interests and rights.

A substantial body of scholarship has documented these dynamics, highlighting the diversification of the organizational landscape of worker representation, showing that grassroots unions and movement organizations have provided alternative avenues for worker representation by implementing inclusive strategies and innovative forms of action that specifically target weakly or nonunionized workers (Carver and Doellgast, 2021; Meardi, Simms and Duncan, 2021; Tapia and Alberti, 2018; Cioce, Clark and Hunter, 2022; Bondy, 2022). Grassroots structures have emerged as particularly important channels of representation for specific segments of the labor force, mobilizing those who remain outside established union frameworks such as migrant workers, and employees in emerging sectors where formal systems of rights protection remain underdeveloped, thereby seeking to fill the representational gaps left by established unions (Carver and Doellgast, 2021; Meardi, Simms and Duncan, 2019; Tapia and Alberti, 2018; Cioce, Clark and Hunter, 2022; Cini, Maccarrone, and Tassinari, 2022). These unions have demonstrated a particular capacity to organize workers in some low-wage service sectors—including cleaning, security, and platform-based food delivery.

In addition to grassroots unions, civil society and social movement organizations have increasingly supported workers by forming alliances with unions, including initiatives targeting migrant workers through connections with ethnically based local communities (Fine, 2006; Danese, 2023; della Porta and Antonelli, 2025). Social movement organizations have also played a central role in broader political mobilizations, such as general political strikes, by collaborating with workers to contest austerity measures or neoliberal labor market reforms, as illustrated by resistance to the *Loi El Khomri* in France and the Jobs Act in Italy (Barron *et al.*, 2016; Andretta, 2018). Within this framework, the emerging repertoire of “labor street protests” has involved not only labor unions but also civil society and social movement organizations representing diverse constituencies, including nonworkers such as migrant communities, students, political parties, and loosely organized social groups such as social centers. The inclusion of nonworking actors has thus further complicated the organizational landscape of collective action and worker representation (Pilati and Perra, 2022a).

Overall, the repertoire of protest has diversified along multiple dimensions: it encompasses a variety of actions, a multiplicity of actors, and increasingly heterogeneous claims and targets. These claims often extend beyond traditional economic issues to encompass broader political and social rights claims. Moreover, the targets of these actions are no longer limited to employers; they also include public and political actors, addressed both as policymakers and as public employers (Perra and Pilati, 2023).

Contributions in the Special Issue

This Special Issue investigates transformations in worker representation in several European countries by integrating insights across the multifaceted dimensions of the aforementioned changes. In doing so, the contributions examine both the structural conditions driving these shifts and the strategies employed by workers and unions to respond to evolving socioeconomic and political contexts.

The contributions in this Special Issue examine different facets of the ongoing transformations in workers' representation. First, they focus on the diversity of actors and how they interact to redefine the landscape of worker representation currently involved in representing workers. The contributions of the Special Issue examine established unions and their evolving strategies for responding to workforce transformations (Signoretti, Pedaci, Perra, and Pilati), as well as emerging grassroots and new unions, their innovative approaches, and their efforts to engage historically underrepresented or marginalized workers (Signoretti, Pedaci, Perra, and Pilati; Però and Piro; Hau, Hansen, Molina, and Barranco; Hüttenhoff and Jaehrling). The contributions also highlight the role of social movement organizations in shaping the broader field of labor mobilization (Navrátil).

Second, in examining the underlying drivers of the changes in worker representation, the contributions offer a comprehensive framework for analyzing contemporary worker representation across Europe. By drawing on insights from social movement studies and industrial relations, the articles collectively capture a broad spectrum of factors shaping the transformations in workers' representation and address challenges both within and beyond established trade unions, thus highlighting the internal and external challenges of union transformation. They emphasize the contextual and organizational dimension of these processes as well as the role of individual actors in shaping contemporary forms of representation. In particular, the articles address the contextual dimension by examining the structural conditions and external factors that shape forms of worker representation. The contributions analyze both economic and political macro-level opportunities and constraints, ranging from the analysis of the types of political

conflict and political opportunities emphasized in social movement research (Navrátil), to the investigation of the re-regulation of European cross-border labor markets (Hüttenhoff and Jaehrling), and institutional frameworks such as national industrial relation systems (Hau, Hansen, Molina, and Barranco). Furthermore, the Special Issue explores interunion relationships—including cooperation, coalition building, and competition (Navrátil; Signoretti, Pedaci, Perra, and Pilati; Hau, Hansen, Molina, and Barranco). At the actor level, the articles incorporate micro-level perspectives that focus on workers' situated experiences (Però and Piro) as well as employers' strategies (Hüttenhoff and Jaehrling).

Third, the contributions in this Special Issue address the topic of worker representation by examining diverse sectors and national contexts. In particular, the articles explore new forms of organizing in male-dominated industries, such as logistics (Signoretti, Pedaci, Perra, and Pilati; Però and Piro) and shipbuilding (Hüttenhoff and Jaehrling), as well as female-dominated sectors, including care work (Hau, Hansen, Molina, and Barranco). Empirically, the contributions cover multiple European contexts where union representation is evolving, including Southern Europe, Nordic countries, the UK, and Eastern Europe, with specific country analyses of Germany (Hüttenhoff and Jaehrling), the UK (Però and Piro), Italy (Però and Piro; Signoretti, Pedaci, Perra, and Pilati), the Czech Republic (Navrátil), Spain, and Denmark (Hau, Hansen, Molina, and Barranco). This comparative approach deepens our understanding of the challenges faced by workers across diverse regions and industries. The Special Issue thus offers a comprehensive account of the evolving landscape of worker representation in Europe, identifying common patterns and dynamics that transcend individual national and sectoral contexts.

By crossing the macro-meso dimensions, more specifically, Navrátil examines the changing ability of organized labor to form alliances intra-sectorally (within the labor movement) and cross-sectorally (with other societal actors) using a relational approach to collective action. Specifically, Navrátil applies social network analysis to protest event data on economic contention in the post-socialist Czech Republic (1989–2021). Navrátil demonstrates how different combinations of political conflict types, political opportunities, and economic threats shape the coordination capacity of organized labor, both within its own milieu and in collaboration with other civil society actors. In particular, his analysis yields two key findings. First, organized labor increased internal coordination during periods of open political opportunities or heightened economic threats, particularly when the main source of conflict was economic. Second, cross-sectoral coalitions between labor and civil society organizations became more likely during systemic political transformations or under severe austerity policies.

Likewise, Hüttenhoff and Jaehrling show that the current context of increased re-regulation of European cross-border labor markets has prompted firms to develop more opaque contractual arrangements, generating additional obstacles and challenging experiences for organized labor, particularly among migrant workers. Focusing on trade unions and works councils in the German shipbuilding industry, the authors highlight how production systems and employer strategies shape union revitalization efforts and influence their success or failure, mediated by the dynamics of “limited solidarity” within a union stronghold. Specifically, to sustain a transnationalized, export-oriented production model, shipyards rely on an increasingly professionalized network of subcontracting firms, which facilitate the recruitment, training, and flexible deployment of peripheral, lower-cost labor.

Concerning the relationships and interactions between different unions, Signoretti, Pedaci, Perra, and Pilati examine interunion competition in the logistics sector. Their study investigates the evolving relational landscape of employee representation and its implications for effective advocacy on behalf of low-skilled workers. The authors demonstrate that grassroots and established unions are characterized by significant frame contestation, reflecting ideational incompatibilities. The examined grassroots union employed radical frames emphasizing labor–capital struggles, whereas established unions pursued a more moderate “just balance” approach, within which gains for workers are achieved by dialoguing with firms keeping into account their market-based requests. Interestingly, the findings suggest that this antagonism produced an unintended yet beneficial division of labor, revealing a complementarity between the differing union framings in addressing workers’ concerns.

Two contributions place particular emphasis on the new forms of unions and their innovative approaches to worker representation. Hau, Hansen, Molina, and Barranco focus on grassroots unions, while Però and Piro examine the workers involved in these emerging forms of unionism. Hau *et al.* demonstrate how grassroots groups leverage digital platforms to simultaneously sustain multiple forms of engagement: building collective identity among dispersed workers, challenging union leadership, and enhancing public visibility. They also argue that similar digital tools can produce divergent organizational outcomes depending on workers’ structural positions, highlighting the importance of institutional contexts and unions’ capacity for democratic renewal, particularly the role of union democratic practices. Their comparative analysis of two cases—the 2021 formation of *Foreningen af Danske Sygeplejersker* (FDS) by nurses in Denmark and *Las Kellys*, an association of Spanish hotel chambermaids—illustrates these dynamics. In Denmark, FDS’s targeted social media approach leveraged nurses’ professional cohesion to successfully influence union wage demands,

resulting in accommodation within existing structures. In Spain, Las Kellys' broader community-building strategy helped overcome worker isolation but led to organizational fragmentation, with some chapters becoming formal unions while others remained associations.

In contrast, Però and Piro examine workers' attitudes toward these new forms of organizing. They explore the understudied question of the appeal that participatory labor organizing characteristic of grassroots unionism holds for its participants. Drawing on an ethnographic fieldwork with migrant workers engaged in contentious initiatives of four independent unions in London (IWGB and UVW) and northeastern Italy (ADL Cobas and SI Cobas), they expand the concept of "appeal." While prior literature has focused primarily on framing efforts by social movements and labor organizations, their approach further investigated participants' perspectives and subjectivities, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of why workers choose to engage with these forms of mobilization. Theoretically, the article contributes to further the integration of social movements and labor studies by rethinking the idea of appeal in the study of contentious practices. In particular, the article suggests extending the idea of appeal from one that has mostly been about the framing efforts of social movements and labor organizations to one that—aware of the risks of methodological organizationalism—comprises the participants' perspectives and subjectivities.

Conclusions

The articles that make up the Special Issue provide a picture that reflects the complexity of labor disputes, which can be traced back to the characteristics of production systems, especially in nonindustrial sectors that have not experienced Fordist work organization or its social regulation mechanisms. Labor relations in the service sector (discussed in the Special Issue articles) are characterized by high levels of exploitation, which are facilitated by the absence of specific regulations and the difficulty of organizing collective action. Individual and market bargaining prevails, making it more difficult to develop solidarity among a highly segmented workforce and the willingness to delegate to established representative unions. For this reason, we are witnessing the emergence of new forms of interest organizations, often with direct participation and autonomous trade unions considered extraneous to the system of relations that are inevitably connected to the production system. In this sense, the contributions also highlight the political role played by trade unions and movement actors, which compensate for the gap created by the absence of political parties that currently seem to have no mandate to represent class interests or to organize them.

This aspect deserves further study because it marks a dividing line between labor contention in the Global North and the Global South.

At the meso level of analysis, the internal organizational issues within trade unions, especially established ones, are evident, as are certain problems of internal democracy that can have consequences for the ways in which workers' claims are represented and organized. The organization of the demand for labor rights in relation to civil and social rights, which on many occasions in the past were mainly represented by political parties, is also at stake.

At the micro level, the contributions have also highlighted that choices to participate in collective actions and to join trade unions do not always coincide. The capacity of trade unions to make, receive, or resist change and improve rights and working conditions does not depend only on union density, but also on the mobilization of workers (members and notmembers), nonworkers, and the civil society actors involved at different levels (supranational, national, and within the workplace). The growing appeal of grassroots unions in certain sectors, together with the still significant—though declining—role of established unions, underscores the need to examine more closely the motivations behind individual participation decisions, which today appear increasingly complex and fluid over time. These motivations can no longer be fully explained by the traditional logic of action identified in past interpretations, ranging from utilitarian calculations to the pursuit of social recognition of interests (Pizzorno, 1983; Hyman, 2015; Quondamatteo and Marrone, 2023). Understanding this evolving dimension is crucial for analyzing collective action, as it directly relates to how solidarity mechanisms are built within fragmented and precarious labor contexts.

Last but not least, this Special Issue focuses on European countries that have shared the experience of Fordism and of labor movements in which trade unions have played a leading role. Research conducted in other regions of the world—including Latin America, Asia, and Africa—shows that labor disputes take on distinctive features shaped by their institutional, political, and social contexts. These differences call for a rethinking of certain analytical categories, starting with the meanings attributed to formal and informal labor relations, the processes of building representation, the relationship between individual and collective actors, and the interplay between the political and economic spheres in shaping collective action (Ness, 2014, 2022). Important results in this regard have been produced within the global history of work (Hofmeester and van der Linden, 2019) and labor process theory (Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1985; Thompson, 1990; Newsome *et al.*, 2015; Rizzo, 2017; Smith and Ngai, 2018; Machado, 2020). Furthermore, the presence of multinational corporations and state-owned enterprises—as exemplified by the Chinese case—has generated processes of social regulation in which the economic and market dimensions

of labor conditions are inextricably linked to the political dimension of citizenship (Ngai, 2005; Pattenden, 2016; Mezzadri, 2016). Consequently, these contexts are characterized by heightened levels of labor conflict involving a multiplicity of actors, including self-organized and spontaneous groups of workers, who mobilize through repertoires of collective action that only partially converge with those predominant in European settings. Accordingly, there is a need to strengthen comparative research across the Global North and Global South, moving beyond within-country analyses to capture the diversity of labor dynamics across different institutional and socioeconomic contexts.

AI use disclosure

AI tools have been used only to assist with language editing of some parts of the text.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

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