

# Trade unions and precariat in Europe: Representative claims

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## Abstract

Trade unions have been charged with neglecting labour market ‘outsiders’, and alternative actors have emerged to represent these. In response, unions have stepped up their claim to be representative of all workers, without distinction. We review the theoretical and policy debates on this issue, and argue that representation as such has been under-theorized. We draw on Saward's concept of ‘representative claims’ to analyse the different grounds for competing assertions of representativeness. We identify four main forms of claims, and illustrate these with empirical examples. We conclude that these different claims are mutually reinforcing in stimulating attention to the outsiders; and in their interaction with institutional settings they have a performative effect in defining new social actors.

## Keywords

Trade unions, precariousness, representation, labour market, insiders, outsiders, claims

## Introduction

Labour market dualization has become a central issue for industrial relations (IR), especially in Europe (Emmenegger, 2014; Prosser, 2018). While divisions within the working class have always existed, recent developments have made them more manifest. The uneven effects of economic crisis, urban riots, protest votes and new social movements have questioned the capacity of western societies to provide representation and expression channels for the social groups most affected by economic uncertainty. Unions have therefore developed a variety of revitalization strategies to address uneven representation, and in particular the unionization gaps between sections of the workforce (Doellgast et al., 2018; Grimshaw et al., 2016; Keune, 2013; Keune and Pedaci, 2019). At the same time, new actors have emerged to represent precarious workers, with a variety of relations (collaborative, competitive or conflictual) with traditional unions. In addition, governments and employers have increasingly argued that their own policies and practices are in the best interest of outsiders.

We offer a theoretical reflection on the widely encountered claim that dualization derives from the under-representation of disadvantaged groups (outsiders) in trade unions and policy-making (Palier and Thelen, 2010). The concept of representation, we argue, is insufficiently theorized in existing debates on insiders and outsiders. By applying reflections from political sociology and political philosophy, and in particular the concept of the ‘representative claim’ (Saward, 2010), we explain the rise of concerns about dualization and the ‘representation of the unrepresented’ across disparate employment and IR regimes. We then illustrate the interpretative and analytical gains of studying representative claims with regard to marginal categories of workers through mainly European examples, looking more closely at the UK, Germany and Italy (chosen for their diversity and size), showing how heterogeneous claims have emerged and co-evolved in the last decade.

## Labour market dualization and representation

Labour market dualization and precariousness have been discussed since the 1970s, but particularly following the crisis of 2008 (Emmenegger et al., 2012; Kalleberg, 2018; Standing, 2011; Thelen, 2014). Labour market divides in terms of vulnerability are increasingly manifest, especially in Europe, where the status of employees had long been protected by industrial citizenship (Castel, 1995; Streeck, 1987) and workers on atypical contracts (agency work, zero-hour contracts) have suffered disproportionately from the economic crisis. Standing (2011) has called this group a new class, the 'precariat', distinct from the core 'salarariat'. In policy, the European labour market is increasingly portrayed as divided between insiders and outsiders. According to the European Central Bank President, Mario Draghi (2016):

In many countries the labour market is set up to protect older 'insiders' --- people with permanent, high-paid contracts and shielded by strong labour laws. The side-effect is that young people are stuck with lower-paid, temporary contracts and get fired first in crisis times.

While there is a broad consensus on the existence of a labour market divide, opinions differ deeply on the causes and hence the solutions. Within a diverse and fluid debate, we distinguish three broad analytical approaches which make different assumptions on the role of representation in the emergence of labour market division. For reasons of focus we do not include here accounts of labour market dualization which find explanations on the supply side (gender, age and ethnicity) because, while making important contributions to the understanding of specific forms of inequality in the labour market and in organizations, they do not contain generally applicable arguments on the role of representation.

Segmentation theory emerged in the 1970s and is employer-centred in its explanatory construct (Doeringer and Piore, 1971). It stipulates that, when industrial change shifts the focus of comparative advantage to flexibility and rapid market adaptation, employers respond by segmenting their workforces: creating a protected, committed core and a flexible, disposable periphery. Segmentation is thus expected to be stronger where industrial change is faster and, in particular, where employers have more discretionary power to determine terms and conditions of employment. Conversely, strong employment protection legislation and powerful, encompassing trade unions, by restraining employer freedom, should limit dualization by enforcing equal treatment and more security across all sections of the labour market. This argument converges with that of power resource theory, according to which labour's political power leads to more egalitarian outcomes (Korpi, 1983).

Insider-outsider theories became more prominent from the 1990s; despite some superficial similarities with segmentation theory, they make opposite predictions. Most specifically, the politics-based version elaborated by Rueda (2007) stipulates that social-democratic governments prioritize the interests of labour market insiders, and notably those represented by trade unions whose support is electorally crucial. While increasing protection for insiders, they reduce employment opportunities for outsiders, by depressing labour market demand and constraining the flows between employment and unemployment. Even if the proponents of this theory are keen on avoiding determinism in political preferences (Lindvall and Rueda, 2014), the underlying prediction is that where social-democratic parties --- and by extension, trade unions --- are strongest, the insider-outsider divide will be sharpest. This interpretation has been increasingly endorsed by international organizations including the OECD (2010) and European Commission (2011).

Between these approaches we can find a range of arguments focusing on more nuanced political factors, especially institutional rules, rather than simple party politics. Whereas institutionalists may disagree on a number of evaluations and explanations, the majority associate labour market problems such as segmentation with 'hybrid' institutional settings that fail to develop clear comparative advantages. In contrast to both segmentation theories that blame excessive employer freedom, and insider-outsider theorists that blame excessive trade union power, institutionalists have generally identified the intermediate cases as the worst situations: institutions are strong enough to protect *some* workers, but too weak to protect all (Calmfors and Driffill, 1988; Hall and Soskice, 2001). These contributions concur that more mixed institutional settings produce sub-

optimal results in comparison to the more neoliberal ones, which at least foster high employment rates for most people, and social-democratic ones, which provide better job quality for more people (Crouch, 2015; Thelen, 2014). A specific argument in support of this thesis is provided by Palier and Thelen (2010), for whom trade unions do try to defend all workers, but when they lose power retreat to the defence of the core as a least-worst option.

The three approaches differ in their policy recommendations and their analysis of how labour markets react to regulation, and in particular to union representation and collective bargaining. A growing literature aims to test such predictions (Advagic, 2015; Benassi et al., 2016; Benassi and Vlandas 2016; Emmenegger et al., 2012; Fervers and Schwander, 2015; Keune, 2013; Prosser, 2015; Thelen, 2014); but the conceptual aspect of representation has received little attention. The question which has been neglected is whether, and in what sense, trade unions represent all workers (as generally assumed by segmentation scholars), only insiders (as argued by insider-outsider theorists), or the insiders directly, and the outsiders only when convenient, as implicit in most institutionalist arguments.

Most approaches tend to make rather rigid assumptions with regard to the preferences and representation of actors and groups, whether employers, insiders and outsiders, or demographic groups. Yet it is empirically questionable whether insiders and outsiders see themselves as such, or, in other words, whether the precariat is a 'class for itself' in addition to an emerging 'class in itself' (Standing, 2011). In the USA, Milkman and Ott (2014) have detected complex and ambivalent relations between, on the one hand, traditional union organizing and, on the other, workers' centres, indicating a deep heterogeneity in the 'precariat'.

To address the link between representation and dualization, we need to reflect on the meaning of 'representation'. Despite the well-known differences in systems of employee representation, labour market institutions and performance among countries, the issue of uneven representation of labour market outsiders has emerged everywhere, even in the most 'encompassing' trade union systems such as in Scandinavia. It is clear, therefore, that putting aside institutional and political economy issues, there is some underlying tension in the practice of representation itself. It is to this that we now turn.

## **Problematizing representation: the dialectic nature of representative claims**

Representation of interests is central to IR, given the complexity, asymmetry and indeterminacy of work relations. In this context, the need for collective organization to express and channel employment disputes is central, and the problem of representation is implicit in core IR debates, such as in corporatist theories, that remained however concerned with interest intermediation more than with interest representation (Schmitter and Lehmbruch 1979). Yet only rarely has 'representation' been at the forefront of IR reflection. The main contributions have come from reflections on representation levels, legitimacy and efficiency, also in relation to inclusion (Hyman 1997a, 1997b), from investigations of the practice of representation across countries (Hege and Dufour, 2013) and from the perspective of employee voice (Wilkinson et al., 2015). But generally the meaning of representation has remained undefined, and the term has remained strikingly absent from IR handbooks and glossaries. Mostly, IR has implicitly understood employee representation (by trade unions, works councils, new actors) through the lens of legal and negotiating representation, involving a specific mandate such as solving a grievance or bargaining over pay. Yet many IR issues --- including, but not limited to, labour market dualization --- are complex, continuous political issues rather than time-limited and specific. Crucially from the perspective of dualization, they involve the (re)formulation of employee interests and their operationalization as bargaining objectives and priorities, which requires internal (implicit or explicit) mediation among the interests of different constituencies. Hence the need to conceive representation in a more political, rather than legal, sense. This in turn can help understand how precarious workers may not be represented: not organized, not defined, not actively defended.

Political reflection on representation is all the more timely as representative democracy more generally, not only in IR, has been put into question with increasing vigour in the last two decades. Within this context, political scientist Saward (2010) has proposed a more dialectic and dynamic approach to representation than the traditional, mechanical one usually employed in politics and in IR.

The mechanical approach emphasising the ‘substantive acting for others’ (Pitkin, 1969) is problematic in many ways. It assumes the pre-existence and unproblematic pre-definition of the ‘others’. But the character and interests of no constituency (nation, society, social class, citizenry...) can be taken as given without a prior process of political definition. A mechanical approach also neglects the ongoing, always problematic, dialectic between representative and represented. Finally, it focuses only on the mechanical enactment of specific institutional practices, notably elections, to the exclusion of other forms. This is particularly important in IR where elections, while common practice, are not universal and are rarely the central source of representativeness and legitimacy; consider for instance ‘closed shop’ traditions, or the *présomption irréfragable* of five main French trade unions’ representativeness between 1945 and 2008. The mechanical view ignores the symbolic, cultural and aesthetic dimensions that make representation understandable and legitimate. After all, the etymological sense of ‘representation’ comes from the arts (figurative and performative), in the sense of ‘making present’ something that is absent, through impression.

Saward’s alternative proposal focuses on the dynamic process of claim-making as constitutive of representation. This includes the dialectic between representatives and represented, and allows for the understanding of non-elective forms of representation such as ‘surrogate representation’ (Mansbridge, 2003), whereby representatives bring in interests and perspectives that are technically outside their formal territorial representation (for example ethnic or sexual minority representatives claiming to represent the views of all of those minorities beyond their electoral constituencies). IR These forms of representation are particularly relevant in the case of union activities on behalf of atypical (and rarely unionized) workers.

Non-elective claims may draw on three main arguments (Saward, 2010: 95): deeper roots (such as affinity and deep familiarity with specific groups), expertise and special credentials (the claim most used by established trade unions), and wider interests and new voices (the claim generally made by new actors, such as ‘alternative’ trade unions, but also by anti-union bodies). The debate on ‘represented’ and ‘non-represented’ workers is largely one between three different kinds of claims producing different categories and modes of action.

Here we add a note of caution. Focusing on the process of claim making and its possible performative effects runs the risk of falling into discursive analysis and losing track of the institutional and material constraints of employment relations. It need not do so, though. Claim making is a two-way relationship that is always contestable, and contestation draws on existing resources, especially when they are institutionalized. Considering claim making is therefore compatible with recent approaches to employment relations that advance on institutionalism by stressing conflict and dynamic power relations (Baccaro and Howell, 2017; Meardi, 2018; Wailes et al., 2003).

Representative claims do not create constituencies out of nothing. Rather, they make them visible, and provide images and names. Saward’s analysis is in line with the constructivist sociological intuitions of Bourdieu (1991: 204):

in *appearance* the group creates the [person] who speaks in its place --- to put it that way is to think in terms of delegation --- whereas in *reality* it is more or less just as true to say that it is the spokesperson that creates the group. It is because the representative exists and represents (symbolic action), that the group that is represented and symbolized exists and that in return it gives existence to its representative as the representative of the group.)

Other points are important here. First, representative claims made by organizations about workers can be positioned along a continuum ranging from representing the working class as a whole, to representing a narrowly defined specific employment status, occupation or demographic group (this is also complicated by variations in the *scope* of representation, e.g. health and safety, training, equality).

Second, representative claims involve both a constituency and an audience, but these do not necessarily coincide. In some cases the claimed constituency may be much larger than the actual audience (as with small organizations claiming to represent all workers of the world), or conversely it may be much smaller. Saward (2010: 51) illustrates the latter case with the example of Lech Wałęsa, who in the 1980s acted as a representative of Gdansk shipyard workers; but all the people of Poland, and possibly beyond, were his intended audience. In debates on precariousness too, representative

claims may be addressed to different audiences (voters or political activists) beyond the claimed constituency.

Saward offers some ways forward within the current crisis of representative democracy, including proposals for institutionalizing complex representation, which is consistent with the ‘intersectionality’ of interests, and attention not only to institutions, but also to the open set of relationships behind them (2010: 164-165), to argue that ‘the diversity, plurality and variety of representative claims supported by a vital system of non-elective claim-making, and the opportunities they provide to highlight social and political inequalities, resonate well with... the legitimization of claims (2016: 259). In other words, understanding representative claims can help address the emerging issues of the so-called ‘left behind’ and revitalize democracy (including in industry).

## Representative claims about the ‘precariat’

In debates on precarious workers, electoral arguments are generally absent, except in internal union affairs, where seats are often reserved for specific constituencies. Claims based on membership are also rare, which is unsurprising given that unionization rates of these groups tend to be low. But even in the exceptional situations when unionization is high (as in encompassing union models supported by the ‘Ghent system’, which gives incentives to membership among groups at higher risk of unemployment; or in unions that have successfully organized specific groups such as migrants), arguments based on membership representation are open to the objection that these workers may join trade unions to access services, rather than to be represented. It is therefore more useful to classify representative claims about precarious workers using Saward’s typology of non-electoral claims. We illustrate how non-electoral representative claims by unions about precarious workers have emerged in the last decade. We show how they have competed with initiatives by other organizations in ‘making visible’ precarious workers, and how competing claims dialectically reinforce each other. We have no ambition to comprehensiveness, or of ‘representativeness’, of countries or approaches, and select examples to maximize variation across countries and sectors.

### *Expert claims*

Expert claims to representativeness are based on the assertion of specialist expertise and widely recognized credentials. In employment relations, they are most likely to be used by traditional trade unions which have been accepted for decades as representative organizations and perform specialized services to workers on daily basis.

For a clear example, we can look at the German metalworkers’ union *IG Metall*. In the 2000s, observers had criticized German unions for overlooking their own segregation, the growing inequalities among and within sectors and the process of precarization (Greer and Doellgast, 2007; Hassel, 2007). The crisis of 2008-09 raised awareness that existing forms of employment protection (including through codetermination and collective bargaining) defended permanent employees but excluded temporary agency workers, who lost over a quarter of their jobs (Bosch, 2011; Hassel, 2014). Unions were forced to acknowledge the problem and respond quickly (Adamy, 2010). *IG Metall* traditionally resisted the use of agency work, rather than negotiating good conditions for agency workers. Post-crisis, it had to change approach and increase its efforts to organize and defend these workers, which resulted in 35,000 new agency worker members (Benassi and Dorigatti, 2015). But it is not this extra 4 percent unionization of agency workers that makes *IG Metall* ‘representative’ in a more substantive way than it was before 2008.

The union’s efforts involved representative claims in negotiations for new collective agreements with temporary work agencies, as well as legal action. As a result, in 2013 the Federal Labour Court (*Bundesarbeitsgericht*) issued two important rulings. The first invalidated the competing collective agreements signed by temporary work agencies with the Christian Temporary Work Trade Union (*Tarifgemeinschaft Christlicher Gewerkschaften für Zeitarbeit und PersonalService-Agenturen*, CGZP), considered by *IG Metall* to be little more than a ‘yellow’ union. In the second, it increased the competences of work councils over the placement of agency workers

(Artus, 2014). These claims merged into an organizational one, so that the union's new President could boldly state 'we have become the union of agency workers' (Wetzel, 2012: 190). The internet documentation posted by *IG Metall* about its agency worker campaign is telling. A webpage of 2013, with the subtitle '*IG Metall*, a reliable partner for agency workers' opened with ethics-based claims ('*IG Metall* cares') but moved swiftly to a focus on expertise, listing collective bargaining capacity, political influence over government and legal representation as reasons why precarious workers should join the union (IG Metall, 2013). It then linked to further webpages of information and campaigns over agency work, clearly addressed to a broader and different audience than the potential casual worker membership.

This example is replicated in other German union initiatives towards marginal workers, including the campaigns for a minimum wage and against bogus self-employment. Through these actions, unions affiliated to the DGB confederation maintained their representative monopoly, and even strengthened it through increased social legitimacy (Schmalz and Dörre, 2013) and more favourable legislation after 2013.

Expert claims can be found in many countries. In Britain in 2007, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) established a Commission on Vulnerable Employment to investigate treatment of workers and to uncover the worst cases of exploitation. The initiative was informed by recognition of the changing demographics of the labour force and that certain groups (notably migrant workers) might be more susceptible to exploitation (TUC, 2008), but the use of the neutral definition of 'vulnerable workers' aimed to avoid divisive targeted policies towards specific groups, and in particular migrants, who at the time accounted for the large majority of the estimated vulnerable workers. By performatively representing these groups as 'vulnerable workers' (a hitherto uncommon term) rather than migrant or ethnic minority workers, on whom unions had been focusing (Alberti et al, 2013; Anderson et al., 2007; Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010; Holgate, 2005), the risk of resistance from sections of the core membership was minimized: an apparent case of the target audience being different from the target constituency.

Several UK unions also stepped up their efforts on agency workers and self-employed, whose status is particularly precarious in the British employment regime, and whose number increased after 2008 (Forde and Slater, 2014). A series of campaigns targeted well-known employers (including Sports Direct, Uber, Amazon and some universities) for their use of zero-hour contracts, agency work and bogus self-employment. As in Germany, this included legal claims, as in the successful case brought by the GMB union against Uber in 2016, which awarded drivers the status of workers. In this case, the union represented 'self-employed' individuals, but as 'workers', redefining their identity in the public sphere and ultimately in the legal one too. GMB, which presents itself online as 'the union for Uber drivers' (GMB, 2018), has historically organized taxi drivers: in the process, it redefined Uber drivers from competitors to fellow workers.

These representative claim actions deserve attention beyond the widely studied organizing activities, which, since the TUC founded its Organising Academy in 1998, have largely been in 'core' sectors and have done little to alleviate structural imbalances in representation (Simms et al., 2013). A further example includes Unite's community-based membership scheme, announced in 2011, to give channels of representation to those traditionally not represented by the union movement (Holgate, 2013), offering membership based on 'place-based' communities, rather than faith, ethnic or age-based ones. This Community membership, despite some positive results, has not altered Unite's governance structures (Wright, 2013) and, in terms of member recruitment, has appealed mostly to retired union members.

In 'Latin' countries, the expertise claim has often taken the form of stressing and revamping the tradition of 'horizontal', class-based (rather than occupation- or industry-based) organizational structures that were typical of union movements originating in agricultural societies with mass precarious labour employed by the day. A noticeable example involves migrant labour. In France, the CGT (*Confédération générale du travail*) organized successful strikes of undocumented migrant workers in 2008-10 through the *Bourses du Travail* (institutions that had long lost most of their relevance but survived as visible physical structures) and claimed to represent the *sans-papiers* (undocumented migrants) in their status as workers (Barron et al., 2016). During those campaigns, not only did the unions assert that it defends members and non-members alike --- as 'workers' is the only category that matters --- but also used the traditional repertoire of 'occupation strikes' to the

advantage of undocumented migrants. As a higher-level, constitutionally-sanctioned workers' right, occupation strikes meant the police could not intervene against protesters despite their 'illegal' migration status. While the union's representative claim was contested (at one time undocumented migrants occupied the Paris *Bourse* against the union itself), it successfully changed the definition of the represented group from *sans-papiers* (as in previous civic protests in the 1990s and early 2000s) to 'workers'.

In Italy, the *Camere del lavoro* of CGIL (*Confederazione generale italiana del lavoro*) are stronger horizontal institutions than their French counterparts, and have been equally important, although more focused on services than on mobilization. In Spain, unions turned the previous, highly respected centres for information to emigrant workers into centres for information to foreign workers (*Centros de Información al Trabajador/a Extranjero/a*), while keeping the same acronym CITE, thereby creating a visible identity link between foreign and Spanish (mobile) workers. The three main Italian confederations also made specific organizational steps towards the growing number of precarious workers. In the 1990s, they created specific organizations to represent atypical workers and membership is around 200,000, which equates to a unionization rate of about 5 percent as against an official 35 percent for the total workforce. These organizations (Nidil, Alai-CISL and UIL-Temp) achieved only limited results in organizing and collective bargaining, but have gained a public profile through some popular campaigns, as in call centres. The largest, Nidil (*Nuove indentità di lavoro*), claims on its webpage 'to represent agency and atypical workers' and immediately adds that it fights the use of atypical contracts, in an attempt to redefine atypical workers as employees (Nidil, 2018). It then highlights its collective bargaining credentials, and explains how its hybrid organization combines representatives from the traditional industrial unions: a case of what Seward (2010) calls institutionalized complex representation.

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### 'New voices' claims

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Despite such efforts by traditional unions, who represents precarious and marginal workers remains contested. While traditional unions make the strongest claims in this regard in all European countries, their role is increasingly challenged by emerging (if not always new) organizations that claim to provide channels of representation for voices that are marginalized in large trade unions. This happens especially in pluralist representation systems such as the UK and Mediterranean countries, while in corporatist countries new actors, such as the German CGZP and organizations for refugees in Sweden, rarely emerge.

Alternative voices need not be in direct opposition to trade unions. In the UK, the Living Wage Campaign was launched in 2001 by an NGO, Citizens UK, in collaboration with community organizations, churches, charities and, subsequently, sympathetic businesses (Heery et al., 2017), with support from labour organizations. It did not make explicit representation claims --- it states that it 'organizes communities to act together for power, social justice and the common good' --- but indirectly it may have reinforced impressions that traditional unions do not sufficiently represent low-paid workers.

Representation challenges also come from non-union sources and from political parties, proving that worker representation has a political dimension, rather than merely interest mediation. In Italy, the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S), created in 2009, won 32 percent of the vote in the 2018 national election and entered government. It explicitly targeted youth and atypical workers and used anti-union rhetoric, while adopting many union demands. By choosing parliamentary candidates from humble occupational backgrounds, it played the 'genuine, deeper roots' representative claim card, but mostly it focussed on the 'new voices' claim as its social roots remain very thin and its organization occurs mostly on-line. In 2018 the party leader and deputy premier Di Maio issued an employment reform called the *Decreto Dignità* (dignity decree), with the declared aim of defending the interests of precarious workers, and in particular those of the 'gig economy', despite union reservations and with almost no consultation. He declared that in the March 2018 elections, 'Italians told me to repeal the Jobs Act [the 2014 law which liberalized the labour market]': a creative claim that transfers from the political-electoral to the employment relations arena and bypasses interest representation.

In Spain, the *indignados* social movement of 2011, while mainly protesting against corrupt politicians, also demonstrated against the two main trade unions that were engaged in negotiations with the government over employment reform. The protests, with the slogans ‘they don’t represent us’ and ‘down with the unions’, forced unions to leave the negotiations, out of fear of being delegitimized on the streets. The *indignados* produced a new trade union, *Somos* (‘we are’: in itself a ‘direct expression’ claim, but undefined), that remained very small, as well as a political party, *Podemos*, which gradually improved the relations with the traditional unions while still claiming to speak for the hitherto unrepresented Spanish youth.

### ‘Deeper roots’

Other organizations take a more competitive stance and claim to be genuine, direct expression of the constituency. Again, there is more institutional space for them in pluralist systems. In the UK, the new union Independent Workers of Great Britain has led some living wage campaigns and legal cases representing precarious workers, including against large employers such as Deliveroo. It does not spare criticism of the larger, established British trade unions, and some of its campaigns have been in competition with them. Their claim, on their webpage, focuses on their authenticity in being just like the categories of workers they represent: ‘We are the leading union for precarious workers. We are migrants, we are the so-called “gig economy”, we are foster care workers. We are the IWGB’ (IWGB, 2018). In this way, rather than limiting its claim to ‘new voice’, it uses one based on authenticity and on ‘deeper roots’.

Similar organizations exist in all countries, although their effective space is differentially constrained by the functioning of specific national institutions. Italy has witnessed multiple forms of self-organization by atypical workers and the self-employed (Armano and Murgia, 2014; Pirro and Pugliese, 2015). These experiences occur with varying degree of engagement with trade unions, from collaboration to competition to mutual indifference. Some of the most successful experiences are among highly skilled self-employed, and have varying orientations from professional to radical. The demonstrations by activist groups in the name of *San Precario*, the ‘patron saint’ of precarious workers, are particularly interesting (Colleoni et al., 2014; Mattoni and Doerr, 2007). The movement developed explicitly against established trade unions (with alternative May Day celebrations to the official ones run by the large union confederations) and it had an effective aesthetic and cultural representation effect, well beyond the narrow boundaries and short life of the mobilisation that created it. *San Precario*’s image is now well-known also outside Italy (although it is rarely appreciated in full beyond Catholic cultural contexts) and it decisively contributed to the establishment of the terms ‘precarious worker’ and ‘precariat’ in the English language. The large 8 March strikes in recent years in Spain and Italy, led by feminist organizations, also express a direct, unmediated identity, in this case of gender.

### ‘Non-representation’ claims

This review would not be complete without paying attention to different types of representative claims, not included in Seward’s typology. These are by actors who stop short of claiming that they are the representatives of precarious workers as such, but argue strongly that trade unions are *not* representative. These might be defined as ‘non-representation claims’, and they have increased in volume since the crisis. In particular, during the labour market reforms introduced during the Euro-crisis in Spain and Italy, union opposition was dismissed by most governments as insiders’ egoism and neglect of the unemployed.

French President Sarkozy, in a speech launching his failed 2012 re-election campaign, reserved his most vigorous attacks for the ‘intermediary bodies’ that make France ‘sclerotic’. Trade unions headed the list of such bodies (before parties, lobbies, experts, commentators) accused of creating a barrier between government and people. This kind of claim has the characteristics of populism, insofar as it reduces social complexity to unity, and delegitimizes representative



organizations of specific interests, notably workers (Kriesi, 2014). That claim has been repeated in different languages, styles and tones. British Conservative leader Theresa May defined her party in 2016 as ‘the workers’ party’ soon after it had introduced a draconian Trade Union Bill based on the claim that unions are not representative.

There is, finally, another kind of ‘non-representation’ claim that accuses trade unions not of ignoring marginal workers, but, on the contrary, of privileging them and forgetting the majority. This is the case of some emerging, if still very marginal, far-right worker organizations. In Germany, alternative trade unions with links to *Alternative für Deutschland* and the Islamophobic *Pegida* movement managed in 2018 to gain a handful of works council seats across automotive factories. Their argument is that established trade unions, by opening the doors to migrants and protecting them, have forgotten German workers, who remain therefore unrepresented. The *Lega* in Italy and the British extreme right made similar attempts at creating alternative nativist unions, with no success. Such arguments however have more impact in the political sphere than in employment relations, with traditional social-democratic parties suffering heavy losses in recent years, largely to the advantage of populist rivals.

In Table 1 we summarize these different types of representative claims.

[Table 1 about here]

## Discussion

We have contributed to important debates in IR by linking two discussions that have previously taken place in largely unrelated areas; debates about precarious workers, and about interest representation. In doing so, we argue that the claims made by unions and other organizations about representing the interests of precarious workers have changed and developed since the crisis. Examining these representative claims through Saward’s lens emphasizes the dialectical nature of interest representation within institutions of IR, lending further weight to arguments that institutionalist understandings of IR need to stress conflict and power dynamics (Baccaro and Howell, 2017, Meardi, 2018, Wailes et al., 2003).

Although we do not claim any broad generalizability from the examples chosen, they illustrate some of the tensions within the challenges facing trade unions as the labour force changes. They therefore show that representative claims do not emerge from ‘thin air’ but are constructed --- sometimes out of crisis, sometimes out of strategic positioning --- by key actors. Three actors have been shown to be particularly important in this process; trade unions (and their peak organizations), precarious workers themselves, and third parties from beyond the sphere of IR who make claims that challenge the representative capacity of unions. This both illustrates the empirical value of Saward’s typology and extends it to highlight that external actors can shape representative claims of trade unions by presenting an explicit and direct challenge to these.

We have shown that despite profound differences in models of labour market regulation and union structures, unions in many institutional settings have become increasingly aware of, and explicitly opposed to, labour market dualization. These are highly significant developments that demonstrate important changes of strategy and structure in diverse labour markets. Before and in the early stages of the crisis, unions tended to focus on core constituencies. The ‘crisis corporatism’ adopted by Germany unions is a particularly clear example, but even here they subsequently focused on organizing and campaigning efforts for more vulnerable groups. Italy is the most segmented of the three labour markets and here there is a notable reduction in political priority given to insider protection which is now perceived as politically difficult to justify. The representative claims of Italian trade unions, if not their actual membership, have therefore refocused more on outsiders.

Competition from other organizations such as of the self-employed in the UK and Italy, populist parties and some small radical unions have also helped prompt established unions to pay attention to precarious workers. This has required them to redefine their representative claims to appeal to and for both their core constituencies and also a broader political audience. Terms such as ‘vulnerable workers’ are helpful to unions as they do not exclude anybody: everybody is vulnerable to

some extent. In this context, employment status has become more relevant as a category for representative claims.

Expert claims, and opposing ‘non-representation’ claims, have been detected across all institutional settings, if in different forms (collective bargaining in Germany, horizontal organizations in Latin countries, general unions with specialist structures in the UK). This spread corroborates the recent observation by Keune and Pedaci (2019) that national intuitions are not so prominent, in comparison to sector-level power configurations, in determining unions’ responses to precarious work. By contrast, ‘new voices’ and ‘deeper roots’ claims are frequent in pluralist representation systems of liberal and Mediterranean countries but seem to be rare in corporatist countries. In all countries, though, competition to unions has come from the political right, especially of a populist kind, which stresses the importance of a political understanding of representative claims.

At this point, it is important to return to how these claims are linked to debates and theories about insiders and outsiders. The different social models across Europe have generated uneven representation of precarious and vulnerable workers in unions, politics and associations. This does not mean that insider/outsider theories are correct: the examples discussed illustrate how the dividing line between the two is blurred. ‘Insiders’ do not always act as such, and outsiders rarely express interests in opposition to insiders. The weakening of trade unions (as alleged insider organizations) has been accompanied by an overall increase in precariousness (Kalleberg, 2018), rather than the emergence of a separate social class as the ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2011), whether in itself or, even less, for itself. When traditional trade unions have been suddenly weakened, precariousness becomes a bigger problem (as in Germany in the 2000s, the UK, Spain and Italy in the 1980s and 2010s), which is consistent with insights from segmentation theory and power resources theory.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have presented examples of representative claims made on behalf of precarious workers by unions, new actors and politicians. We have demonstrated the utility of Seward’s framework and given examples of expert claims, new voices claims and deeper roots claims. We have added a fourth empirically-derived category; non-representation claims. The various examples indicate that established unions have at moments of crisis expanded their representative claims to precarious workers. At the same time, we see limited evidence of the emergence of a precariat class ‘for itself’. There are examples of new actors entering the field to make representational claims for precarious workers using ‘deeper roots’ claims of representing precarious workers as such, but even these actors fall well short of defining these workers’ interests as opposed to or competing with those of other workers.

It remains to be seen whether increased union attention at a time of declining power can have positive outcomes for vulnerable workers. Representation claims are dialectical, and the ways they are received both by those workers and more generally are still unclear. Institutional arrangements will certainly play a role in the outcomes for precarious workers, as in the case of the Ghent system facilitating higher unionization of agency workers in Belgium than in Germany (Pulignano et al. 2015). Yet those institutions are clearly not fixed and social relations are able to redefine them. The role of the representative claims and challenges made by both new and established actors will be central in how institutions of interest representation change and develop in future years.

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**Table 1. Competing forms of representative claims**

<i>Representative claim</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>Basis of representative claim</i>	<i>Definitions of outsiders</i>
Expert claims	Large trade unions: <i>IG Metall</i> Peak organizations: TUC	Expertise to produce tangible outcomes through strengthening or restoring institutional tools (such as collective bargaining)	‘Workers’, ‘vulnerable workers’
New voices claims	New campaigns or political organizations: Living Wage, M5S, <i>indignados</i>	Neglect of precarious workers by established organizations, need for new representation channels	Poor, left-behind, exploited workers
Deeper roots claims	New unions or actors: IWGB, <i>San Precario</i>	Direct identification through genuine roots with different categories from traditional workforces	Precariat, platform workers
Non-representation claims	Governments, international organizations, Far right	Unions representing insiders minority and forgetting majority	Citizens, nation