

Analysing Labour and the Crisis

Challenges, Responses and New Avenues

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Guest Editor's Introduction

Analysing labour and the crisis: Challenges, responses and new avenues

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'Once again, the rich were to be asked, without much effect, to defer cashing in their profits and dividends, while wage earners were to be pressed, with much greater determination, to forego 'unreasonable' wage increases altogether' (Miliband, 1972: 365).

More than four decades later Ralph Miliband's assessment appears not to have lost any of its accuracy, and seems more than fitting as epitome of reactions to the financial and economic crisis that has become manifest, mainly in the OECD countries, from 2007 onwards. Inspired by such a historical contextualisation, this special issue addresses the relationship between labour and the crisis on different levels and across variegated geographies of increasingly antagonistic class relationships. It seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate on the role and potential of labour in the social struggles that are characterising the unfolding of the crisis worldwide (for example see Burawoy 2010 and the related debates in this journal). The contributions to this special issue, in their own different ways, highlight the uneven development of capitalism and emphasise the agency of labour in the crisis. In doing so, the authors raise key aspects that a critical political economy perspective can bring to labour studies, and vice versa. In particular, the special issue addresses the fundamental theoretical-conceptual questions of the class character of the crisis dynamics and responses, and, secondly, the need to reconceptualise the relationship between labour, the state and the economy. Empirically, the contributions show via the use of case studies from different contexts, and theoretical contributions, how this relationship is actually played out.

Drawing on critical labour studies, geography and industrial relations, this introductory article, together with the articles in this special issue, highlights the need for a deeper understanding of labour within critical political economy (CPE) approaches (for example, Shields et al., 2011). In this introduction we argue that most approaches to labour within CPE are linked to the concrete praxis of labour unions, which are then unable to move across different levels of abstraction. This leaves the capital and labour relation limping, on labour's side. Capital appears as systemic, abstract and transnational, whilst labour is only considered in terms of its agency and concrete location. Whilst capital appears as a relationship, labour takes its form as a thing. This fetishisation of labour leads to studies that attempt to understand labour's weakness (or strength) vis-à-vis capital. Within such a framework labour tends to appear as a monolithic being and intrinsically weak.

In order to move beyond such conceptualisations of labour, this special issue aims to highlight the uneven development of labour within the crisis. In order to do so, it avoids the methodological nationalism that is inherent in much of the industrial relations literature, and which is often reproduced by others analysing labour. This has two key challenges, as pointed out by Kretsos (2011). On the one hand, much of the industrial relations literature focuses overwhelmingly on the UK and the USA, or other English speaking countries. On the other, and perhaps more importantly 'most of those analyses treat militancy and activism as an attitudinal and behavioural issue ignoring its dynamic and contextual dependent character' (Kretsos, 2011: 271). This leads to an understanding of labour based around organisational features, trade unions becoming the channel for working class demands, and therefore the unit of analysis within labor studies. We argue that this is problematic as 'trade unions are, (...) relatively powerless within the political sphere and have always been essentially defensive and reactive in terms of their political behavior' (Taylor et al., 2011: 299). Therefore, if we focus on unions (rather than labour) we are forced to stay within national boundaries, a concrete space which constrains and renders the unions almost powerless. This leads to two alternative options, either we upscale and focus on transnational union action (Bieler and Lindberg, 2010) or we think of labour in a different, more abstract way (Silver, 2003).

In relation to our discussion on labour we highlight another crucial aspect of discussions on the crisis. In this introduction, and in our choice of contributions to the special issue, the crisis is not considered as a particular historical moment, but rather as a key driving feature of capitalism. We contend that there has been a fetishisation of the crisis as if it was an exceptional period within capitalism, therefore assuming that the crisis could be solved without changing the existing relations of production (and reproduction). Instead, we propose an understanding of crisis as capitalism, as an intrinsic feature of capitalism. As the articles in this special issue show, capitalist social relations are in constant contention with moments of heightened conflict. In short, capitalism is crisis! Crucially, this allows us to go beyond dichotomising accounts of labour (pessimistic vs optimistic) and opens up possible avenues for class struggle.

Therefore, in the introduction to this special issue, we discuss both traditional approaches to labour and the crisis, as well as alternative options. As such, we consider *the challenges* labour faces and *the responses* it develops in concrete times and spaces before we then move towards a broader understanding which forces us to reconceptualise what we mean by labour. As challenges, the papers identify issues such as the role of corporatist structures, competitive wage pressures as well as the internal struggles that appear within labour organisations often due to either the concrete conditions of labour, or the organisational traditions of labour unions. Moreover, we identify the structural shift towards atypical forms of employment as well as increasing levels of unemployment which highlight the contradictions and tensions between waged labour and non-waged labour. At the level of responses, the papers highlight the divergent and often conflicting level of societal and union responses, in particular with reference to the class character mentioned above. Based on these discussions, the papers also refer to new avenues for labour in the crisis, pointing towards issues such as the importance of temporal/spatial strategy dimensions and the possibilities for new coalitions, for example between trade unions and community based social movements. In this context, several of the contributors emphasise the need to go beyond traditional organizational structures of labour, pointing towards the fact that co-optation and resistance can be two sides of the same coin. Understanding what labour means, enhancing its emancipatory potential at the conceptual level allows us to focus on the *new avenues* required for the configuration of challenges to capitalism, to the crisis.

Challenges and Responses

The challenges to labour from structural changes in the Global Political Economy have been well documented, in particular with regard to advanced industrialised economies (see for example, Silver, 2003; Dunn, 2004; Peters, 2011). In a period where there have been significant increases in labour productivity, labour's share of national incomes is actually falling (ILO Global Wage report, 2013; Economist, 2013). Moreover, current developments in the financial and economic arenas have had a direct and detrimental impact on workers, as many empirical studies show (see for example the cross-country European study carried out by the ILO - Vaughan-Whitehead, 2012; ETUI, 2014, or country specific studies such as Navarro and Clua-Losada, 2012). In such studies, the crisis is analysed in relation to which workers or sectors of society have been worst hit by the crisis. During the first few years of the crisis male, temporary, migrant and young workers have been the first to suffer layoffs and as the crisis deepens other sectors are also being affected (women and permanent workers). Additionally, and besides job losses, wage cuts are affecting those who are still in employment, whether as direct cuts or often as a reduction in performance related bonuses or forced reductions in working hours. The way in which the crisis is affecting workers' everyday lives is clear.

However, as with previous periods of capital's offensive against labour, we need to be careful with pessimistic accounts that highlight how badly labour is faring vis-à-vis capital. During the long neoliberal period, debates around the globalisation of capital were quick to emphasise capital's hypermobile capacities and a stark reduction in state's policy-making capacities which were rendering labour powerless. As Dunn (2004) argued, such approaches were often not sufficiently grounded in empirical evidence and were more often than not highly beneficial to capital's interests. 'If workers believe threats of plant closure, relocation, downsizing and global competition are the ineluctable products of economic change, they may become more willing to make concessions on pay, conditions and redundancies' (Dunn, 2004: 5). This led to a 'common sense' based around capital's unlimited power to outflank labour (Anderson, 1992) which had powerful implications for the ways in which the labour movement understood its position and possibilities.

In order to come to a more nuanced understanding of labour and the crisis, we draw on Cox (1981) to identify three dimensions of challenges: material, institutional and ideational. As we will argue, these spheres are conceptually often seen as distinct - but we need to be aware of their simultaneous nature, and the dialectic relation between them. This also applies to the discussion of different sources of trade union power, such as associational, structural or organisational power, the other set conceptual tools used throughout this special issue (see for example: Wright, 2000; Silver, 2003; see also the literature on trade union revitalisation, such as Phelan, 2007).

Resources and Material Context

Key to trade union and wider working class challenges and responses are those that can be considered to fall within the arena of the material context, or at least where concerns over resources may acquire primacy. This often leads to an understanding of workers interests in relation to their positions within employment relationships and within economic or industrial sectors, and therefore subjected to 'repeated challenges by employers as they try to redefine and realign worker interests with corporate goals' (Kelly, 1998: 4). As such, industrial workers may be seen to have conflicting interests to those in the services industry or vice versa. Yet, what is even more problematic is the way in which the rise of atypical forms of employment (for example, debates about insiders vs

outsiders in the labour market) highlight false dichotomies within the working class that serve to benefit capital's interests.

Unsurprisingly, struggles over the level of wages and working hours have been key, historically and today, to understanding workers' organisational objectives. In the current period wages have once again become the primary battlefield for the labour-capital relationship, even in specific geographical contexts in which there had been a steady increase in real wages prior to the crisis. Even within advanced welfare state, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of the 'working poor' (Pradella, 2013; ETUI, 2014), combined with the dismantling of social protection across Europe, and a financialisation of daily life which has affected workers' future hopes and organised labour in disproportionate ways (Peters, 2011). These 'really existing conditions' matter as they highlight the need to consider struggles over 'bread and butter' issues as crucial to improve the concrete conditions of labour, but also as struggles that go to the heart of the conflict.

In organisational terms, related to labour's resources, it has become customary to accompany studies of labour agency with figures of the decline in trade union density. Therefore, as recent statistics indicate, overall we indeed see a steady decline in trade union density, at least on average in the OECD countries (OECD, 2014). However, we argue that to equate trade union density with 'the power of trade unions', or even labour as social category as such, means to foreclose a discussion of alternative forms of power. Moreover, in particular in a conjuncture marked by increasingly antagonistic social relations, where previous compromises and concessions are breaking down and can hence no longer veil the underlying power structures, it becomes all the more crucial not to subscribe to a determinist, almost fatalistic narrative of how organised labour has nowhere to turn because of its material weakness in declining resources and membership. Rather, we need to turn to the institutional and ideational/ideological dimensions of labour and class power, and hence pay attention to the changing relationship between labour and the institutional context it is embedded in (for example, the state), and more importantly still, the ideological and discursive conjuncture. In Silver's terms, this would necessitate a focus on associational rather than exclusively on structural power, for 'if the significance of associational bargaining power is growing, then the future trajectory of labour movements will be strongly conditioned by the broader political context of which they are a part' (Silver, 2003: 173).

The Institutional Dimension

The ongoing crisis dynamics have thrown the changing relationship between organised labour and the institutional context, in form of state institutions or, in case of the EU, the supranational institutional ensemble, into sharp relief. Labour is increasingly marginalised from policy-making structures from which it had previously been a member of, or in the case of the Global South, it is becoming increasingly harder for labour to be invited to the negotiating table by key international and national actors. This means that labour has to fight in new terrains in order to achieve the improvement of working conditions.

Corporatist structures are increasingly being rendered useless by structural changes in the labour market and concerted political action. Social dialogue in a labour market where more and more workers are not covered by it deepens the structural divisions that make labour solidarity difficult. 'Workers on the margins of the labour market, such as temporary workers, agency workers, domestic workers and the self-employed, are traditionally not covered by social dialogue, which has only aggravated the effects of the crisis on these more vulnerable categories' (Vaughan-Whitehead 2012: 20). The breakdown of the social partnership model highlights the importance of considering

institutional structures for an understanding of labour and the crisis, and at the same time shows the limits of current labour strategies. As Wahl (2014) argues, 'social partnership and social dialogue have largely been developed into an overall ideology in dominant parts of the labour movement [...] social dialogue has been given an exalted position as the way to promote workers' interests, completely decoupled from an analysis of specific power relations.'

As the contribution by Julia Lux and Leo Bieling in this special issue shows, the institutional challenges and social terrain for responses are crucial indeed for an [analysis of the constraints labour agency is facing](#). Yet, these constraints should not be universalised, as they are representative of particular institutional set-ups and labour's responses in the Global North. Bart-Jaap Verbeek's paper here makes an important intervention by highlighting the need for a critical understanding of labour's institutional and political room for manoeuvre. For example in contrast to the highly institutionalised terrain in which trade unions in the EU operate, 'unions in the Global South have never operated in a world where they were not dealing with powerful foreign-owned transnational firms, closely supported by the military, trade, tax, employment, labor and investment policies not just of their own governments but of the governments of parent companies as well [...] it is therefore not surprising that labor issues then and now have been at the core of so many independent movements' (Bronfenbrenner, 2007: 214). In fact, Verbeek's article highlights the role of social movements and NGOs, as well as labour unions, in the configuration of oppositional blocs to free trade agreement negotiations.

In particular, with regard to narratives about a 'window of opportunity' for alternatives for labour in the current crisis conjuncture, the limits of institutional structures have to be taken into account. That is, we need to interrogate the relationship between initiatives, strategies and alternatives, and the social terrain in which they are being formulated and initiated. The question of whether labour can indeed transcend institutional confines that are more conducive to neoliberal restructuring than social protection looms large here. We also see this play out in the role and strategies of global labour organisations like the ITUC, TUAC or the Global Union Federations (McBride and Smith. 2013). The social power relations at the heart of capitalist institutions need to be taken into account, at various levels and idiosyncratic manifestations of crisis (Bruff and Horn, 2012). This, however, is not the case in many perspectives that seem to take institutions as given, as channels that configure labour interests, identities and strategies. For example, with regard to developments in the European Union, Wahl points out that, 'in effect, labour has taken very specific historical experiences and behaved as if these were true for all time in terms of ideological guidance' (Wahl, 2014). Responses to the crisis risk becoming like painting by numbers, assumed to be pre-structured by the very institutions they purport to change - unless there is a sustained engagement with the ideological undercurrents that engenders and drives labour interests and agency. And it is at this level that the interlinkages between material conditions and institutional context have to be underwritten by a focus on the ideational and ideological dimensions. This also renders it possible to overcome the limitations of an overly determinist understanding of how worker interests are perceived exclusively through their material conditions - most mainstream approaches to labour studies, by focusing at the industry level, identify common material and institutional interests for groups of workers in similar industries, and antagonistic material and institutional aims for workers in different economic sectors, or in different countries. In a sense, there is a deterministic expectation of shared or divergent ideas based on one's position within the labour market. We think this needs to, at least, be questioned.

Ideational and Ideological Vectors

As we have briefly explored when discussing the material and institutional dimensions of labour in relation to the crisis, material conditions and the type of formal institutions in existence in particular contexts matter. However, they are insufficient by themselves in explaining labour's key challenges and responses to the crisis. As we have already discussed, material and institutional conditions structure labour's agency in particular ways, yet they do not determine it. As Melanie Simms points out (2012: 99), we should move beyond identifying workers' interests as being directly and uniquely 'related to the immediate conditions of work in a specific workplace.' Workers and labour unions are not always able, or willing, to articulate different types of interests at different organisational levels, which would highlight an initial difficulty with emphasising material and institutional resources by themselves. Labour's contestation, and co-option, is driven by a multitude of factors, which include the two we have already explored as well as the ideological elements that relate to them.

Considering the role of ideational and ideological vectors when analysing labour becomes a crucial exercise when capitalism is determined to create as many different categories of workers as possible. The current crisis, and the neoliberal period that preceded it, are characterised by a combination of high levels of unemployment, and with high levels of workers who live below the poverty line. The literature has often termed the increase in these type of workers as 'atypical workers', workers who may go from being unemployed, to being in precarious employment interchangeably. This is a cause for concern as it erodes the sources of traditional trade union membership. Yet, it only does so if trade unions remain focused on the workplace. As Moody has argued, there is a need to move towards community-based unionism (or what has been termed social movement unionism). Experiences such as those of workers' centres in the US, based around the community but yet dealing with workplace issues (Moody, 2007: 216-223) can help overcome the moving ground in which unions are finding themselves.

Labour solidarity, following Hyman's concept of 'imagined solidarities' (1999) appears as something that is socially constructed, and therefore not inherent within labour. In a sense, it must be defined and worked at; otherwise divisions would be stronger than solidarity. Key divisions would appear between highly skilled and unskilled workers, or permanent and temporary workers, the latter much more characterised by marginalisation but neither of the two being particularly keen on organising jointly as they could feel threatened by the other. These internal divisions, these challenges to building imagined solidarities in Hyman's sense, appear as real problems in concrete struggles, as capital is able to exploit them for its advantage. As Jess's contribution in this issue highlights the struggle lies not necessarily in the construction of direct solidarities, but the ability to counteract capital's offensive in different contexts and with different types of workers. At a different analytical level, Bradanini's contribution shows that this also pertains to the relationship between societal and labour strategies, where trade unions in Italy struggle to transcend societal discourses of responsibility and blame directed towards organised labour.

Conceptualising Labour as Emancipatory Agent

Bringing together the spheres of material resources, institutional contexts and ideational dimensions allows us to conceptualise labour as an emancipatory and solidaristic agent in historically specific conjunctures, as contingent rather than automatic process. We very much agree with Featherstone in that "solidarities did not just produce abstracted political ideologies or

identifications. Rather, they were interventions in the material relations between places' (Featherstone, 2012: 18). Rather than a romanticised notion of labour solidarity and emancipation, our perspective should be on the simultaneous, fluid and dialectic relation between process of solidarity, cooptation and everyday organising. That is, we appreciate the fundamental 'messiness' of labour as social category and emancipatory actor at different levels and in different terrains. As Amoore argues (2002: 62), 'work (and by implication the restructuring of work) is conceived as everyday structured social practice through which the emerging social relations of globalisation may be enabled, contested or confounded.' It is possible to be reactive and emancipatory at the same time, e.g. participating in corporatist negotiations simultaneous with general strikes. Hence 'the important issue is thus not how to transform partial and fragmented consciousness into a universal, critical consciousness, but to enquire into what is it about the nature of labour in capitalism that results in partial and contradictory forms of consciousness.' (Taylor, 2002: 93)

Moreover, it is only through a fundamental engagement with class, with regard to the social power relations in production and reproduction, rather than with narrowly defined workplaces or social strata, that emancipation is engendered - even though material conditions might be divergent.¹ For, as Martinez Lucio points out, 'why should the changing nature of social boundaries, such as the emerging centrality of consumption, the changing nature of the workplace and the decline in traditional skill-based hierarchies at work be solely a challenge to labour? Do not the demands generated by rapid technological change, consumer identity, decentralized and global production and ongoing skill formation challenge the structures and identity of capital and management as well?' (Martinez Lucio, 2006: 206). The ongoing debate about the 'new middle classes' in the global political economy has to be seen in this context (see e.g. Radice, 2014). As Bieler's contribution to the special issue makes clear, once again it becomes crucial to point towards a relational understanding of class to begin to grasp concepts of labour solidarity and emancipation. We can only second Harvey when he insists that 'if it looks like class struggle and acts like class war then we have to name it unashamedly for what it is' (Harvey, 2005: 202). In many perspectives and approaches, this fundamental aspect is still lacking. As Dinnerstein and Neary (2002: 16) argue, 'the intellectual history of the 20th century is the history of avoidance of labour as a political category and its recreation as a sociological device which denies its critical capacity'. We would contend that this is still the case for many analyses of labour and the crisis - with this in mind, and drawing on some of the contributions to this special issue, we now turn to a brief discussion of new avenues for labour in the current historical period.

New Avenues - The Outflanking of Capital

As we have argued above, we reject a view that would attribute labour, workers, organised labour, trade unions or any of these category with innate, essential characteristics of solidarism and emancipation. Rather, these need to be formed, articulated, contested and reproduced, within the historical and social terrain in which labour as an agent is situated. At the same time, perspectives that would regard labour as at best a defensive actor, or mainly as the target of reforms in the context of the crisis, are clearly insufficient to understand the ongoing developments in capitalist power relations across the global political economy - in particular with regard to investigating new avenues and alternatives for labour. This is not to suggest, though, that traditional terrains of struggle, e.g. attacks on collective bargaining and agreements, health and safety concerns, and worker representation at the shop floor should receive less attention. Quite to the contrary, it is

here that trade unions are core actors for labour as a broader social group. By pointing to a range of new avenues that have emerged as complementary to, synchronous with, or instead of some of these established struggles, we want to open a debate on the relationship between them. In particular, we would like to address 'new avenues' at interrelated levels, drawing on our relational understanding of class and highlighting their simultaneous and possibly contradictory nature. At the macro-level, it is crucial to give renewed attention to labour internationalism; at the meso-level, we need to address the social movement unionism many observers see as one of the most promising avenues for labour; lastly, we flag issues such as sabotage and everyday resistance at the micro-level.

Exploring the contradictions and possibilities in labour internationalism offers the potential for a more nuanced discussion of solidarity. That is, one of the challenges certainly lies in the reconciliation of established form of trade union internationalism, and the more fluid and decentralised networks of labour activists that have emerged, often in concertation with social movements. Angelis's comparison (2000: 11) between 'Old' and 'New' Internationalism here provides a useful angle for debate, where the distinction between the international/national/local becomes less pronounced, and the marginalisation and subordination of other movements to labour movements gives way to the building of alliances and bridges. As he writes, 'an international process of recomposition of radical claims and social subjects has been under way, a process which is forcing every movement not only to seek alliances with others, but also to make the struggles of other movements their own, without first the need to submit the demands of other movements to an ideological test' (De Angelis, 2000: 14). This leads to an internationalism from below that is increasingly being researched (see for example Featherstone's historical review of internationalism, 2012) but, more importantly that is currently being practised (for example, the appearance of coordinated general strikes across Europe, such as the 14 of November 2012).

Social movement unionism is indeed frequently put forward as complementary or even alternative strategy for trade unions, and workers more broadly. This focus has increased in the current conjuncture, not least due to the emergence of 'new' social movements like Occupy or the Indignados/15-M. While the characteristics of these movements are being widely discussed, their relationship with labour has been less studied. Most accounts highlight the ambivalent or even initially hostile attitude of mainly trade union organisations vis-a-vis these horizontal social movements. The focus here is on the associational, and more specifically collaborative power resources of unions, as cooperative relationships with other groups, movements and organisations (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013). The linkages and opportunities for campaigning and organising are numerous, of course. The occupation of public space, for instance, echoes the debate about the occupation of production spaces. There is rather little attention, however, to the class character of these social movements, or rather, to the lack thereof. These new ways of protesting are highlighting the eternal discussion between the primacy of economic over political struggles, which had been problematised by most of our intellectual foremothers (see for example, Emma Goldman's discussion's with Alexander Berkman after the assassination of US President McKinley).

One of our core concerns in this introduction has also been to highlight the need to go beyond trade unions when analysing the agency of labour. In this context, one important avenue we would like to call attention to is the everyday forms of resistance, alternatives and muddling-through that we find among the broad spectrum of labour. 'Global social change', Amoore contends (2002: 57), 'does not simply 'happen to' people, it is experienced, interpreted and lived. The thoughts and actions of those living in the production structure, for example, become at least as central to the reproduction or undermining of that structure as the abstract entities of states, firms and technologies are currently assumed to be.' Harrod's contribution here emphasises the need to focus

on the social patterns of power relations, and how they impact on the agents moving within and through them. His illustration of the increase in acts of sabotage is a case in point - avenues for workers do not have to be underwritten by grand theorising or ideological blueprints. 'Disgruntled' immigrant workers calling in sick in the US, German workers blocking a supermarket by flashmob; these are everyday forms of agency that might even bear resemblance to ideas of 'weapons of the weak'. In any case they resist any totalising attempts into broader, traditional patterns of labour organising, and can stand in stark contrast, if not contradiction to the other avenues mentioned above. Unlike in previous historical periods, there also often seems to be a lack of a sense of impending change; some of the struggles at the moment are no longer calling for immediate big changes, rather moments of disruption that may seem unconnected between themselves. Yet, as Featherstone's reading of Gramsci suggests 'Gramsci's stress on the practices through which solidarities are constructed situates such practices as transformative' (2012: 27). This means that rather than analysing labour's agency in terms of its achievements we could move towards an understanding of labour based around the emancipatory potential of its practices.

Conclusion

In this introduction we have raised some key issues for the discussion of labour and the crisis. To sum up, the main arguments we have presented propose that *capitalism is crisis* and, therefore, to understand labour and the crisis is to try and understand the class character of capitalism. Hence we need to identify the dialectic relationship between the material, institutional and ideational aspects of labour in order to understand the challenges and responses it faces. We are aware that this is an ongoing discussion and that we have problematised more issues than we have provided answers for, however our aim has been to provide the initial platform for a much needed provocative debate for global labour studies. The current challenges are big, the responses uncertain and we need to analyse new avenues further. We have attempted to provide some pointers to these new avenues, as well as highlighting some of the key challenges and responses.

The contributions to this special issue address the themes raised above in their own ways, but also speak to each other in a transversal manner, cutting across the core concern of the class character of the crisis, as well as the challenges, responses and new avenues for labour. The first paper by Andreas Bieler assesses the uneven and combined nature of capitalism and the role of labour, and reflects upon the prospects of transnational solidarity. Jeffrey Harrod's contribution then considers conceptually how workers react and contest workplace pressures by using mechanisms from sabotage to adjustment. The second set of papers considers the crisis in the European Union. Hans-Juergen Bieling and Julia Lux explore the serious social and labour conflicts caused by the crisis in Germany, France and Spain. Davide Bradanini then analyses the changes to the collective bargaining system in Italy as an attempt by capital to restructure Italian industrial relations to its own advantage. The final set of papers shows the variegated geography of the conflict between labour and capital by going beyond the institutionalist approaches that dominate the labour studies literature. Carol Jess' paper exposes the 'Hobbit debacle' involved in the making of the film 'The Hobbit', where labour interests clearly clashed with the financial interests of the film producers. She also highlights the importance of transnational solidarity in this case. The paper by Bart-Jaap Verbeek rounds off the special issue by exploring the way in which social movements and organised workers find themselves marginalised from neoliberal political process, and points towards new avenues for contestation.

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NOTES

1. We are fully aware that this point is in need of further development with regard to the intersection of class struggle and class identification with gender and race, as well as the corollaries of e.g. culture and nationalism. The brevity of this introductory piece does not allow us to go into more depth, but we hope to be able to contribute to these debates at another point, and we would encourage readers to provide us with critique and suggestions

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