

Expanded abstract

The Need for Trade Union Revitalisation: An Opportunity for Other Organisational Proposals

Purpose

The aim of this article is to analyse the emergence of a series of wage salaried organizations which we have called New Union Movements (NUMs). The reason for this is that their creation is clearly relevant to the study and understanding of the contemporary revitalization of certain national trade union centres, which are the result of Taylorism and Fordism and who are tackling current important challenges. For this reason we focus on the contributions made by NUMs. Specifically, we study the criticisms levelled at the current model of wage representation based almost exclusively on supply-side theory, because their presence leaves an unanswered question: what are their organizational responsibilities? The creation of NUMs and their union actions seem to answer it.

Our hypothesis, therefore, is that although the aforementioned theory exclusively blames the current conditions brought about by globalization and neoliberalism for the supposed loss of union influence, it does not fully explain the current situation of the national trade union centres. It is for this reason that the existence of NUMs seems to incorporate demand connected to the activities of national trade union centres.

Approach

This qualitative study has been conducted in Catalonia (Spain). To analyse the situation, we have used a qualitative and transversal methodology involving semi-structured interviews with qualified representatives of major and minor unions, NUMs and members of business associations and academic experts specifically selected for their capacity to provide appropriate, detailed, in-depth and relevant information regarding the union movement. To improve the approach, this study has focused on two principal aspects: 1) the question of assemblies as an alternative means of internal organization, and 2) the NUMs' strategy of multiple affiliation.

A consensus seems to have been reached between academics who study union organisations and what used to be referred to as the workers' movement regarding the extreme difficulty facing the unions, which have on too many occasions been described as organizations from an earlier time who are of no interest to current workers. However, the appearance of NUMs has led to the need to rethink certain, long accepted assertions made about the union movement, such as their decline.

This study highlights the inconsistency between those who say that unions have disappeared and the reality that they have not, given that since at least the start of the 21st century new formulas have been emerging based on the main aspects of these workers' organizations, namely their capacity to form around certain working conditions that justify collective representation, and their capacity to reclaim and organize the conflict caused by different interests.

Therefore, the creation of NUMs, at least those linked to the services sector that we have studied, fundamentally questions traditionally pessimistic studies regarding the future of the union movement. In parallel, they question very prevalent aspects of the national trade union centres, which should challenge them to start a process of reflection regarding how they should orient their union activities to bring together the various different groups who have for one reason or another preferred to organize themselves separately and how they can appeal to minority unions and to those who have affiliated themselves with the large unions.

Finding

We have found that the appearance of these new organizations has questioned the discourse that their disappearance is inevitable and at the same time has revitalized the debate regarding *Labour Revitalization Studies* (LRS), these being "strategies that can broaden perspectives and reverse the decline" (Turner, 2004: 2). Specifically, we analyse two union behaviours that implement three of the strategies for revitalizing the union movement (Frege and Kelly, 2006), which are linked to the vision of syndicalism and unitary representation. On an internal level, we point to the existence of certain criticisms regarding forms of participation and representation, given that these forms continue to marginalise those gender, generational and ethnic groups that have historically been underrepresented, an issue that is clearly linked to the question of organizing, the need to recruit members and increase union presence, which is the purpose for which they were created. This is the situation that the NUMs seek to correct by establishing horizontal systems in decision taking processes.

Externally, attempts have been made to overcome the lack of intervention through multiple affiliation, which is closely related to collective bargaining, and participation in negotiations at both sectoral and business levels. Finally, we include political action as the nexus that unites both actions in their efforts to improve working conditions by turning to employment law.

Therefore, this text makes two contributions. In terms of internal aspects, we have focused on participation, a matter of great criticism among the NUMs studied. This argument questions the strategy followed by the unions since at least the 1990s, when they turned away from conflict towards negotiation, which in turn possibly gave excessive power to union leaders, who benefited from supply-side theory. In this regard, the NUMs' complaints regarding their limited and relatively unimportant participation have placed a new element at the heart of the debate regarding the loss of union power: how should they respond to this situation?

In terms of external aspects we look at negotiation within the ambit of business. Given the system of labour representation in Spain, which is designed to give greater representation to unions with more members, these NUMs seem to share a common strategy in order to be able

to participate, such as multiple affiliation, which enables them to combine their activities in the association with their participation in unions, thus ensuring that they are present in ambits that are usually off limits due to their limited representativeness.

Limitations

Unfortunately, given the current progress of our studies, we are not able to evaluate whether their working conditions have improved, despite the indicators that suggest a tendency towards improvement, as seems to be indicated by a series of laws that have been named after those they affect, such as the Riders' Law (food delivery riders) and Kellys Law (housemaids).

Practical Conclusions

The appearance of NUMs has been a significant change in the trade union movement insofar as they have questioned various behaviours which, linked to supply-side theory, have been shown to have caused the current situation. We refer to the importance of participation among central workers and to the excessive institutionalization of the most representative unions and the configuration and limits of collective bargaining.

In the face of all of these situations, the NUMs have managed to articulate a set of actions similar to those listed in the LRS, and they are based on two different but closely related ambits. Internally, the appearance of assemblies as a form of participation that helps to identify errors and deviations by basing its decision-making sovereignty on its affiliates as a whole, connected to the revitalizing strategy of organizing and political action, which can be in person for some, such as the contract staff at Movistar; at a distance for others, such as Kellys (housemaids); and at business level (cooperatives) for a small group of food delivery workers (*Riders*).

In terms of the external aspects, we point to multiple affiliation as the best tactic for participating in representation in a workplace that seems to be aimed towards traditional unions, linked to renovation through negotiation. The merit of their presence is equivalent to the astuteness of their flexibility to be able to join a closed system and to the use of lesser represented unions in their sector to organize union elections. Their merit also lies in the use of national trade union centres to participate in different workplaces, together with the use of an alternative union to organize people who sell their labour to others.

Finally, the two NUM behaviours that we have analysed have given rise to a means of negotiating through legislation, which we have included in the strategy of political action, because it is used by these groups, as is demonstrated by popular names given to the resulting laws ("Ley Kellys and Ley Riders") and which must be added to all attempts to participate in collective bargaining (at sectoral level and above all business level), and to regard them as another attempt to defend and improve their respective employment conditions.

Keywords: Unions, revitalization, representation, membership, participation.