

Trade Unions on the Reefs of Modernity

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to familiarise readers with internal and external risks currently faced by trade unions. The former include problems with the mobilisation of workers, unfavourable demographic structure and competition with other trade unions. The latter mainly include changes in the labour market and the growing role of multinational corporations, driven, to a large extent, by the next phase of the industrial revolution. The paper also proposes a solution to the problem. The key to getting out of this difficult situation is greater cooperation with civil society and new social movements. This requires overcoming many barriers, especially of ideological character, within the trade union movement.

Keywords: trade unions, fourth industrial revolution, multinational corporations, civil society.

JEL Classification: J5, J8, P16, Z13.

Introduction

In his book entitled *Culture of the New Capitalism*, Richard Sennett looks back at the research he carried out in the late 1960s in white, working class families in Boston, where he described them as far from being oppressed by the bureaucracy and anchored in solid institutional realities. Stable unions, big corporations and relatively fixed markets provided a frame for them. And he went on to say: ... *It seemed that big American capitalism had achieved a triumphant plateau and that on this plane working-class life would continue in its fixed grooves...* And then he admits... *I could hardly have been more mistaken...* Everything changed after the breakdown of the Bretton Woods currency agreements after the oil crisis (Sennett 2006: 6).

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Dramatic austerity measures have been introduced in most countries, particularly as regards spending on social welfare and public services. Soon followed the reforms of the labour market and attempts to make the rules governing the work more flexible. The conditions in which the trade unions operated at that time, i.e. growing role of companies and employers, with shrinking spending on the public sphere, increasing unemployment, pressure for flexibility and decentralization of rules covering employment and wages of workers, forced them to develop both defensive and offensive strategies. The purpose of the former is to ensure that unions have a place in the social and economic system. The latter support their active involvement in the decision-making process. It seems that the formula of 'social dialogue' in both national and international 'incarnations' has fulfilled the political ambitions of many trade unions. For many trade union structures, 'social dialogue' has even acquired a symbolic meaning as an alternative to the 'neoliberal' crusade in the realm of labour.

History will remember the beginning of the 21st century as the time of the rising tide of the fourth industrial revolution. Many researchers who study socio-economic phenomena believe that we are on the verge of major changes that will affect socioeconomic systems to an extent comparable to how successive industrial revolutions have changed living and economic conditions in the past. Undoubtedly, the changes taking place before our eyes are not a mere challenge for the trade unions, but perhaps the greatest threat to them. Changes in the structure of employment, forms of work and the boundaries of the economy give rise to doubts about the very future of trade unions, which are deeply rooted in the era of Fordism. Of course, this threat occurs in a varied intensity, depending on the situation in specific countries.

In the case of Poland and other countries which have followed a similar path of development, it can be assumed that the threat of extensive decentralization and complete marginalization of the trade union movement is very real. Therefore, the consequences of the fourth industrial revolution and the ongoing globalisation of the economy for the world of labour should be the main topic of discussion in the trade union movement.

The basic problem of trade unions is their bargaining strength in confrontation with the growing empires of international capital. In this respect, most researchers agree that the sustainability of trade union representation will depend on the extent to which trade unions are able to build 'healthy relations' with other civil society organisations. I put forward a modest thesis that only those trade unions that will be able to cooperate with organisations and new civil movements, whose impact and ability to influence reality will increase, will survive. Rapid changes of unpredictable direction and the increasingly severe mismatch between institutions and these

changes open up new spaces for active citizens, who are more and more willing to involve themselves and others in various forms of activities aimed at solving problems that arise as a result of these changes.

The aim of this paper is to present the most important transformations that are relevant from the point of view of the world of labour, and the threats that they pose to the trade union movement. An attempt is made to analyse the barriers to trade union development, where my attention is focused on the growing role of corporations and the possibility of trade union reaction in the context of problems with member mobilisation and the crisis of trust in the trade union movement. In the last part of this article I propose solutions, and give concrete examples of their implementation, that can strengthen traditional labour movement.

1. Types of Trade Unions

The question of the role of trade unions has been given a fairly substantial amount of attention that has resulted in a vast bibliography, starting with *The History of Trade Unionism* by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, published in 1894. One of the typologies is presented by Michael Salamon in his extensive handbook entitled *Industrial Relations: Theory and practice*. The author lists five types of unionism: expression of class consciousness unionism, social responsibility unionism, business unionism, welfare unionism and political unionism. In his publication he stresses that this typology is too rigid, which is why he promotes the concept of unionatess, a term coined by Blackburn. According to Blackburn, unions represent a broad spectrum of functions, including, on the one hand, the union's organisational capacity to respond to the expectations of its members. On the other hand, they are the carrier of traditional values that lie at the foundation of the trade union movement (Salamon 1998: 117–118).

The classic economic analysis of trade unionism, in turn, distinguishes three trade union models: the monopoly unions model, the right-to-manage unionism model and the efficient bargaining model (Garonna, Mori, Tedeschi 1992).

In the context of the challenges posed by the decline in the number of trade union membership, David Ost talks about three models. The first one is the organizing model, which presents innovative ways of recruiting new members. The second model is the social movement unionism, where unions work with partners outside the workplace and become part of a wider struggle for social justice. In the last model,

business unionism, unions provide their members with numerous services with the idea that the 'narrow' economic interests of workers must be defended (Ost 2003: 120–121).

Regardless of the adopted typology, it seems that the trade unions are stuck in search of their identity within the traditional framework, explained by Juliusz Gardawski, which is constituted by market, class and society. These determine the model of unionism. In the context of markets, unions stress the struggle between Labour and Capital. A class-based approach is adopted by service unions which are focusing on economic interests of workers, pay and working conditions. On the other hand, the socially-oriented type of trade union, as already mentioned above, assumes that trade unions are involved in a much wider range of issues than working conditions and wages (Gardawski 2009: 424). It seems that many trade unionists believe that it is possible to choose only one of these three options, forgetting about the 'Heraclitean' character of modernity, which Baumann conceived as liquid. Therefore, modern trade unions should skilfully combine these three forms, without fear of losing identity. In this way, their strategies, even if they may seem opportunistic to some people, will be better adapted to the ongoing transformations.

2. Growing Strength of Corporations and the Fourth Industrial Revolution

We are unintentionally witnessing the fourth industrial revolution. According to Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee (2015), Martin Ford (2015), Jeremy Rifkin (1995) and many others, the development of artificial intelligence, biotechnology and the Internet will lead to fundamental changes in the economic and social structure and in the labour market. At the same time, they stress that the greatest challenge will be posed by the future of millions of workers, who are slowly beginning to feel the state of uncertainty over their tomorrow and the material risks resulting from changes in the nature of work and employment.

According to Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, while automation brought about by the third industrial revolution has contributed to the virtual disappearance of the working class, the fourth industrial revolution can lead to the replacement of man with machines in services and financial sectors, or even in education.

These authors claim that understanding these changes requires looking at the three sets of winners and losers that emerge from technological progress. The first one

is high-skilled and low-skilled workers. The ongoing changes increase the demand for high skilled labour and eliminate the demand for the low skilled type. This is due, among other things, to the automation of factories. According to the latest report of the International Federation of Robotics, between 2010 and 2015 the average robots sale increased annually by 16%. Currently there are 69 industrial robots for every 10,000 employees. In South Korea, which is at the forefront of automation, we are witnessing a dramatic increase from 241 robots per 10,000 workers in 2009 to 531 robots per 10,000 workers in 2015 (Executive Summary World Robotics 2016; Industrial Robots 2017).

The second division is between superstars and the rest. In many industries, the winner takes the most, and sometimes all: several individuals 'get the lion's share of rewards'. As Brynjolfsson and McAfee put it: '... the talents, insights, or decisions of a single person can now dominate a national or even global market [...] The superstars in each field can now earn much larger rewards than they did in earlier decades...'. At the same time, they are pushing out good, but not great local competitors (Brynjolfsson, McAfee 2011).

The third division is between capital and labour. The essence of this phenomenon is the relation between decreasing relative importance of human labour in a particular production process and increasing profits of the owners of capital from the sale of goods and services (Brynjolfsson, McAfee 2011). It has been pointed out many years ago that technological progress strengthens the horizontal organisation of companies, allowing employers to coordinate the production process through networks of suppliers and subcontractors around the world. This gives employers complete freedom and independence from the vertical production chain. Outsourcing and subcontracting as well as focusing on core competencies, i.e. the most profitable part of the business, were considered the best business practices (Dau-Schmidt, Ellis 2009: 5). As a result, a significant number of workers are treated by companies as a 'peripheral device' which can be 'connected and used' and then 'disconnected' at any time. Thus, the labour, conceived in Marxist, terms gradually loses the right to its share of the surplus value.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is becoming the central element of public policies and strategies for labour market stakeholders: trade unions, employers' organisations and civil society associations. The stake in this game is the fate of employees and traditional institutions representing the interests of the world of 'labour'.

The trade unions have to implement these strategies in an extremely unfriendly world of global capitalism, whose avant-garde are multinational corporations. Let us

recall that these are the greatest beneficiaries of the implementation of the neoliberal project in the world economy of the 1980s, the important aspect of which was the maximum reduction of barriers in international economic relations. And they are the ones who currently have 'lion's share of rewards' alluded to by Brynjolfsson and McAfee.

Their influence is so great that some individual countries are not even partners for these 'global players', but mere petitioners seeking a bit of interest and possible investment, which will result in job growth. As is well known, sometimes quantity does not go hand in hand with quality, so the work and its conditions in many branches of concerns, scattered all over the world, leaves a lot to be desired. Wage dumping, lowering labour standards, environmental degradation and violation of the rules of fair competition accompany the activities of corporations in many countries. Especially in those places where governments are too weak or too deeply entangled in commitments to investors.

Their strength is evidenced by the fact that even the crisis of the size and scope of the one that affected the world in 2008 did not significantly affect the position of multinationals, to which we owe a kind of business regime consisting in investing only in countries where the most appropriate business rules for corporations are in place. As Ulrich Beck vividly described this situation: '... It is not the threat of *invasion* but rather the threat of *non-invasion* of investors, or the threat of their withdrawal, that constitutes the means of coercion...' (Beck 2014: 52). How relevant was the slogan of making the labour market more flexible, which, in its radical version, means 'systematically making employees more insecure claimed to be a necessary price for retaining investment and jobs' (Standing 2011: 6).

According to Colin Crouch, the growing role of corporations has led to a situation in which their representatives do not wait in the lobby, outside the real decision-making space of government. On the contrary, they are at the heart of political decision-making. They set standards, establish private regulatory systems, act as consultants to government, even have staff seconded to ministers' offices (Crouch 2011: 131). Sennett posits that 'global corporation has investors and shareholders throughout the world and a structure of ownership too complex to serve single national interests' (Sennett 2006: 18). Beck compares political decision making to a chess game in which capital gets two playing pieces and two moves, whereas everybody else gets only one piece and one move, as they did before (Beck 2014: 5).

Colin Crouch writes that subjecting a corporation to any, even minimal control requires breaking the triangle of state, market, corporation and building the

quadrilateral of forces: state, market, corporation and civil society. Civil society should be understood as all elements of human activity that go beyond the private sphere and, at the same time, are not connected with the main centres of power in the modern world: the state and corporations. Beck describes civil society as the counter-power to corporations (Beck 2014: 6).

3. Barriers to Trade Unions

The form and actions of trade unions seem to be largely inadequate for the challenges posed by the changing world of work. The trade union movement has to face numerous external and internal problems. Undoubtedly, one of the most important external problems is the breakdown of solidarity in the world of 'work' and the growing importance of national interests in the trade union strategies.

Instances of situations when trade union organizations in Western European countries support government programs aimed at limiting wage dumping by Eastern European companies can be multiplied (Estonian construction companies in Sweden, Polish construction companies in the Netherlands, Polish transport companies distributing goods across Europe, etc.). The goal of these efforts, achieving equal working conditions, is praiseworthy. Yet they do not always benefit employees with worse working conditions. However, this is most evident when, under pressure from politicians and trade unions, companies limit their activities abroad by relocating them to their home countries, even though production costs are much higher there.

For many, isolationism seems to be a more attractive answer to the more open labour market than the international solidarity of the trade union movement. As Beck puts it, those who play only the national card in the global meta-game will lose (Beck 2014: 9). The open labour market within the European Union has brought not only the opportunity of free migration in search of better jobs, but also the phenomenon of social dumping in more developed countries. Immigrants often agree to work for lower wages and in worse working conditions than native workers, often pushing the latter out of the market and lowering labour standards on a macro scale. The point, therefore, is not to clamp-down on unfair practices in Western countries, but to fight for better standards in less developed countries.

The most important internal challenge is the shrinking membership. Faced with this problem, many people ask trade unions if they really need a large membership

base. In asking this question, many researchers refer, for example, to the Nordic countries, where trade unions, on the basis of the 'Ghent' system, manage public unemployment insurance, which does not motivate trade unions to actively seek for new members. Others, in turn, refer to the French experience, where trade unions, despite a low level of unionisation, are able to mobilise a large number of French citizens to take an active part in the protests. But these examples do not undermine the basic principle that trade unions, as a social partner, are also a political actor whose strength depends on social legitimacy. The smaller trade union membership base is, the weaker its legitimacy and ability to influence the political arena are (Bernaciak, Gumbrell-McCormick; Hyman 2014).

Therefore, one of the most important challenges is to halt the decline in the level of unionisation and to search for new members, especially among groups of workers who are deprived of any representation or whose representation is fragmented. These are mainly young people and all kinds of precarians (Standing 2011)¹.

According to Vera Trappmann (2012), the union density rate among people under 24 in Poland is less than one percent, and among people under 35 it stands at eight percent. The trade unions lack young members, which is why sections of the public opinion see them as a relic of the past or, worse still, an organisation which is, at bottom, obsolete in the world of work and shows entitlement mentality. It is worth noting, however, that the unemployment rate among people aged 15–24 amounted to almost 18% at the end of 2016, while among people aged 25–34 it stood at about 6%, with the overall unemployment rate slightly above 8% (GUS 2016). Young people are under-represented in trade unions, among other reasons, because relatively often they do not have a job, or, if they have one, it is a part-time or fixed-term job.

Since the public sector and large and medium-sized state-owned companies from traditional sectors of the economy remain the natural membership base of the unions, it can be assumed that the latter will be shrinking if the unions do not succeed in setting up their structures in other companies.

Trade unions, both in Poland and internationally, are suffering from an ideological and identity crisis, as well as a loss of legitimacy (Hyman 2013). Describing the global situation, Richard Hyman emphasizes the need for a new narrative or even a change in the ideas of the trade unionists themselves. Revitalization of trade unions is a learning process, which consists not only of acquiring new knowledge, but also of simultaneously rejecting and forgetting certain elements of old knowledge. According

¹ Guy Standing conceives precariat as a social class in the making, which can be 'described as a neologism that combines the adjective 'precarious' with the related noun 'proletariat' (Standing 2011: 7).

to Richard Hyman, trade unions need a new language that allows them to break out of the shackles of old slogans and express their demands in a way that Facebook and Twitter users can understand (Czarzasty, Książkiewicz 2012: 62). It will undoubtedly be challenging to adapt both organisationally and ideologically to the needs of the new worker: employed on the basis of a 'flexible' civil law contract, pushed out by the market into self-employment and thus deprived of the guaranteed monthly salary, or working on peer-to-peer Internet platforms².

At this point, I would like to return to the issue of transnational corporations. Trade unions in our country, as those in other economies that underwent rapid systemic transformations, have to face a mature form of corporation. In contrast to Western trade unions that witnessed the rise of corporations. Polish trade unions therefore had no time to observe and learn. One could say that they climbed into the ring, knowing matches competitions only from television.

And they are climbing into the ring without being fully prepared. It seems, however, that the trade unions in Poland suffer primarily from another, equally serious disease, which is the politicisation of trade union organisations. There are two main reasons for this. First of all, the history of the trade unions that operate in Poland today, or, as a matter of fact, the moment of their birth, is of great importance.

It should also be kept in mind that the traditional trade union movement bases its actions on its ability to conclude collective agreements³. In the absence of this ability, trade unions try to influence legislation through informal channels, moving closer towards politics. In Poland, collective agreements play a marginal role, which is why trade unions focus on legislative initiatives and political lobbying.

The politicisation of trade unions in Poland has largely contributed to their weakening. A mature social dialogue should involve three independent parties: the government, the trade unions and the employers. Two of these partners became one entity in the 1990s, because the trade unionists were too close to politics. The Polish trade unions began to suffer from a kind of schizophrenia. As Juliusz Gardawski

² *The Union of the Future* report by Michelle Miller, founder of Coworker.org, available at Roosevelt Institute <http://rooseveltinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Miller-The-Union-of-the-Future.pdf>.

³ Analysing the emergence of a new model of collective bargaining in Poland at the turn of the 20th and 21st century, Wiesława Kozek noted that the conclusion of company-level collective agreement was a very strong factor in the institutionalisation of the trade union. Trade unionists participating in negotiations of these agreements began to redefine their trade union roles, and negotiating, signing and registering the collective agreement was a badge of their trade union pride, gave them a sense of being useful and a new meaning to their work (Kozek 2003: 28).

points out: ‘... after 1989, and especially after the rise of Tadeusz Mazowiecki’s government, the majority of the Solidarność elite undertook a mission to modernise the society and was not interested in increasing the trade union membership, especially among the large industrial working class. The complex origins of the trade union, which was a movement to modernise the country and at the same time a classic trade union, came to light at that time...’ (Gardawski 2001: 200).

This led to undermining of the trade union base and a loss of trust to trade unions from the society, especially among the sections disillusioned with the effects of the economic transformation. Already at the beginning of the 1990s, Juliusz Gardawski and Tomasz Żukowski talk about the emergence of an «abandoned society syndrome», which feels that the political elites have left it to its own devices. Neither would the workers feel supported by trade unions. At the beginning of the 21st century, the sense of lack of representation of the interests of the entire working class and the associated sense of social isolation only increased (Gardawski 2001: 102).

4. Towards Convergence and Going Beyond the Dilemma of Choice

There is no doubt, however, that in a changing world of work, where corporations (or, more broadly, the market) are increasingly appropriating democratic social institutions, the role and function of trade unions should be modernised. In order for the trade unions to be able to work effectively in favour of the democratisation of the economy, they should move away from increasingly less democratic politics and offer an alternative that is attractive for younger generations. This may require openness to social movements, including to those that transcend state boundaries.

In one of his writings, Juliusz Gardawski presents two theses concerning the development of the trade union movement. According to the divergence thesis, the differences between the trade unions are deeply rooted in history. The diversity of the trade union movement reflects different technological, organisational, social and political conditions. Therefore, any transformation must take into account the distinct structures and modes of action resulting from the union’s unique historical development.

According to the latter thesis, the convergence thesis, the patterns of trade unions are spreading and trade unions are getting more and more similar. This process is fuelled by the progress of globalisation and the rise of supranational institutions. As

a result of the spread of neoliberal policies, adaptation solutions are becoming more and more established (Gardawski 2009: 420–421). I do not want to declare which thesis reflects more adequately the transformations in the trade union movement. It seems, however, that the logic of convergence could be a better option than stressing diversity. It is easier to negotiate with corporations that have long since overcame their national borders by representing an international trade union or social organisations. In particular, because, as Ulrich Beck pointed out, ‘global civil society are originators, advocates and judges of global values and norms’ (Beck 2014: 238).

The integration of the trade union movement with other social movements or associations may be unavoidable. Researchers who study industrial relations (Ferge, Kelly 2003; Hyman 2013), as well as trade unionists themselves (Czarzasty, Książkiewicz 2012: 132), express the view that in an increasingly individualised and precarious world of work, it is the job of associations to represent employees and give the best possible platform for their demands. The associations are not restricted by the regulations that trade unions have to abide by, including those on the minimum number of employees required to form a trade union in an enterprise. The associations do not have to cover only those employed under an employment contract. Rather than waiting for the parliament to amend the Act on trade unions, these associations can reach people who are employed on the basis of the contract of mandate, who often change jobs, or the self-employed.

An interesting example of a Polish organisation that operates partly as a trade union and partly as an association, is the Workers' Initiative (Inicjatywa Pracownicza). This anarcho-syndicalist trade union, and as such regarded as radical in Polish conditions, was formally founded in 2004. Its ambition is to be where large trade unions are hard to come by and defend, for example, the interests of workers employed under civil law contracts. It also takes part in actions against racism, feminist demonstrations or pickets expressing solidarity with anarchists from other countries. The researchers believe that the activities carried out by the Workers' Initiative proves that even under unfavourable legal conditions, employees can be organised, regardless of their form of employment (Mrozowicki, Maciejewska 2017).

Martin Upchurch and Andy Mathers (Upchurch, Mathers 2011) also ascribe an important role to the radical trade union movements, believing that trade union radicalisation can be an important strategy for their survival in the epoch of neoliberal globalisation.

Another way to revitalise the trade union movement would be to form broad coalitions bringing together trade unions, civil society organisations and political parties, especially the new ones, coming from the outside of mainstream.

In the aforementioned study entitled *Trade unions in Europe. Innovative Response to Hard Times*, the authors devoted a lot of space to this issue. They believe that trade unions have lost many of their organisational attributes and their political bonds have become weaker, which, in turn, has led to a kind of ‘institutional erosion’ of the trade union movement. This is why the trade unions are increasingly looking towards civic organisations and religious associations. Cooperation with the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector is particularly important in this context (Bernaciak, Gumbrell-McCormick, Hyman 2014: 21).

In 2003, American trade union and civic groups launched a new set of standards: The International Right to Know. The aim was to force companies to publish information about the consequences of their activities on the natural environment, occupational safety, including the exposure of employees to chemicals, employers’ practices related to child labour or agreements with local security forces⁴.

An equally interesting event, which demonstrated the strength of a coalition comprising of diverse entities, was the strike under the slogan of European solidarity. Called by the European Confederation of Trade Unions (ETUC), it was held in 23 countries of the European Union. Trade unions, but also activists of the 15M movement, previously unrelated to strictly pro-worker activity, took part in this event. The organizers claimed that the largest strike, which took place in Madrid, involved up to a million of its inhabitants. Actions such as the Blocupy Frankfurt, Agora 99 or the general strike may represent the birth of a tendency in protest movements across Europe: broad cooperation between agents that have rarely formed coalitions so far. Independent social movements, such as Indignados, have started cooperating not only with groups that have organisational structures and are part of the long tradition of social struggles in Southern and Western Europe (such as anarchist groups), but also with institutionalised organisations (including trade unions) that have their roots in the broadly-conceived social democratic tradition.

This represents, to a certain extent, moving away from the model of representative democracy towards the model of participatory democracy. As pointed out by Alain Touraine, an outstanding French sociologist, representative democracy means that we can identify the interests to be represented and ensure the proper selection of their representatives. However, societies are no longer divided, as they used to be, into a minority capable of managing and an integrated majority, made up of

⁴ There are known examples when companies hire paramilitary forces to fight trade unions (Nace 2003: 219).

workers and professionals. There is a growing number of excluded groups and groups with precarious status. That is why it is necessary to return to the original path of democracy, which leads from the bottom to the top. In this way, participatory democracy will make it easier to defend those who are excluded in the name of universal principles. Social relations and practices should also be left open where there is need to speak out for the weakest (Touraine 2014).

Maybe this means re-discovering the formula of trade unions as a social movement, as conceived by Kim Moody in his book entitled *Workers in a Lean World. Unions in the international economy*. In a slightly modified formula, this would mean that the trade unions adopt an active strategy, mobilising the unemployed, precarians, civic organisations, i.e. those whose bargaining position is much weaker⁵.

Conclusions

Trade unions are facing a struggle for their survival. Whereas back in the 1950s they were the guarantor of the security of the entire middle class in the Western world, today this sounds like a memory of the mythical Atlantis.

I am far from spreading the rumours about the death of trade unions. In developed countries (OECD) there are still more than 80 million unionised workers and almost 155 million employees are covered by collective agreements. Trade unions are involved in the political life of individual countries and international structures, such as the European Union. It is difficult not to notice, however, that liberal reforms, technological development and the growth of the power of global corporations have weakened the trade union movement.

The fourth industrial revolution will cause irreversible climate change in the world of work and capital. In order to survive in this new climate, a weakened trade union organism has to adopt new measures. This can be done by broad, open cooperation with new social movements and other forms of civil society organisations. As explained by Richard Hyman, this requires a new narrative of the world and a new, trade union identity.

⁵ In his work, Moody mentions the unemployed, casual workers and community organisations (Moody 1994: 4–5).

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