

**Report from the conference ‘Theoretical approaches in labour geographies’  
14-15 May 2008 at the University of Oslo, Norway**

*Organised by the Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo and the IGU  
Commission on the Dynamics of Economic Spaces*

**Introduction**

The analysis of labour and its geographies has gained momentum in recent years, but there are still quite a few issues to be addressed, and this challenge formed the backdrop for the conference on ‘Theoretical approaches in labour geographies’ at the University of Oslo. The conference brought together 35 participants from many different countries, including postgraduate students, researchers, faculty and practitioners. The conference was divided into seven sessions focusing on the following key themes: the agency of labour, trade unions, labour market challenges and labour regimes.

The conference was opened by key note speaker Andrew Herod, whose work has been crucial in bringing labour into the heart of economic geography. The speech outlined his central argument regarding workers’ agency and how the collective struggles of workers actively contribute in shaping economic landscapes. He described different ways that the concept of scale can be operationalised and argued that this has implications for mental images of the possibility of collective mobilisation. He also pointed out that labour geographies should now move from focusing mainly on unionised labour to address workers in a broad sense and to include various forms of organising.

**The agency of labour**

The first session focused on the agency of labour. Ben Rogaly from the University of Sussex highlighted the need to bring unorganised workers and individual agency into labour geographies. This argument was illustrated by research on how migrant workers reshape workplace regimes in India and the UK, and how the stretched lives of migrant workers have implications for understandings of place-embeddedness, scale and class. In their presentation, David Christoffer Lier and Neil Coe from the University of Manchester suggested that a ‘fourth phase’ of labour geography is emerging. They pointed out that early labour geography had a tendency to give analytical importance to selective success stories, and argued that the agency of labour needs to be re-embedded with the community, the state and capital, in order to capture the variable and constrained agency of workers in different contexts. Andrew Cumbers from the University of Glasgow, and colleagues focused on the continued under-theorisation of labour in the Global Production Networks (GPN) approach. Their presentation showed how European trade unions tend to dominate international union federations and that senior union officials may have closer ties to business leaders and politicians than to local union activists. Moreover, unions can be co-opted into global production strategies and thereby reinforce exploitation. It was concluded that horizontal strategies with effective grassroots organisations are essential to improve employment relations in GPNs. Claiming that the role of labour and social movements in the restructuring of the East Asian economies has largely been overlooked, Jamie Doucette from the University of British Columbia conceptualised how workers’ agency can be brought into theories of state-spatial reform.

**Trade unions**

The second and third session discussed the opportunities and constraints of trade unions. Ann Cecilie Bergene from the University of Oslo challenged the dichotomous positions regarding trade union consciousness and the revolutionary potential of unions found in the classic literature. Illustrated by interviews with union leaders, she showed how this debate is still

relevant, but emphasised that these leaders are embedded in a variety of structures which needs to be taken into consideration when analysing the political potential of workers' organisations. Renewal and rescaling of union activity was highlighted by several presenters. Drawing on research on hospitality sector unions in Canada, Steve Tufts from York University proposed the concept 'Schumpeterian Unionism' in order to incorporate complex and contradictory initiatives of union renewal as well as multi-scalar union strategies. The need to move beyond local/global binaries of labour strategies was also raised by Mario Novelli from the University of Amsterdam. He illustrated this by research on the spatial praxis of the teachers unions in Columbia, which includes a variety of strategies from community alliances to transnational solidarity networks. Rebecca Ryland from the University of Liverpool and colleagues argued that membership understandings of trade union internationalism have received less attention. Using a public sector union in the UK as a case, they explored the possibilities for building collective identities and solidarity that transcend national borders. The potential for interregional union collaboration was addressed by Micha Neunzig from the German Trade Union Federation, and he reflected on collaboration across the German-Polish border region in light of the Europeanization of capital. Martina Fuchs and Dorit Meyer from Cologne University approached unions as 'learning organisations'. They talked about German unions' attempts to attract temporary workers as members and explored variations in learning processes between spatial units and at different scales. These two sessions also highlighted challenges of unions in Southern Africa. Jan Theron from the University of Western Cape addressed workplace segmentation in South Africa and argued that the unions mainly represent core workers. He then discussed the role unions could and should play in protecting the interests of temporary and informal workers. Xolani Simelane from the Human Science Research Council, Pretoria, analysed the limitations of unions in Swaziland when it comes to improving working conditions in the textile industry. Herbert Jauch from the Labour Resource and Research Centre in Windhoek was inspired by Gramsci's concept of hegemony in his explanation of the crisis of the Namibian labour movement following the acceptance of social partnership.

### **Labour market challenges**

The fourth and fifth sessions addressed various labour market challenges. Ragnhild Steen Jensen from the Institute of Social Research and and Kåre Skollerud from the Institute of Transport Economics in Oslo, challenged the dominating explanation based on national aggregate data stating that increasing participation of women in the labour market is due to growth in service sector jobs. They argued that more specific explanations at the scale of the local labour market are required so that crucial social processes are not missed. Sally Weller from Victoria University used data from Australia to illustrate the increased tendency to approach employment relations and labour market processes within a medicalised discourse which draws attention away from workers' material conditions and labour rights. The need to bring unemployed and retired workers into labour geographies was highlighted by Sue Easton from the University of Sheffield who explored mortality among working age benefit claimants across Britain. Mike Taylor from the University of Birmingham discussed labour and manufacturing sustainability in the West Midlands, where earlier successful niche production is being eroded from below by a dwindling supply of skilled labour. The labour force is aging, but there is no training and workforce development. The firms seek to avoid this form of sunk costs and the jobs are unattractive to the young generation. Susan Thieme from the University of Zurich addressed the livelihoods of illegal immigrants from Central Asia. She proposed a framework based on Bourdieu's theory of practice to analyse the global labour market as a social field in order to capture people's access to and use of resources. The issue of labour and alienation was raised by Sylvi Endresen from the University of Oslo.

Drawing on research from Namibia, she argued that labour hire through agencies increases the distance between employer and worker and the alienation of both parties, which facilitates the reproduction of this hiring practice. Niels Beerepot from Amsterdam University addressed labour market segmentation and employability in the Philippines. He demonstrated how workers who lose their job due to decline in manufacturing industry have limited access to new jobs created through the off-shoring of service sector activities. This contributes to increased duality in the labour market. The limitations of theories based on the experiences of Western countries in explaining the diversified and multifaceted characteristics of labour markets in developing countries undergoing economic reform, was raised by Tapati Mukhopadhyay from the University of Mumbai. She underpinned this point by presenting comparative data from Mumbai and Shanghai.

### **Labour regimes**

The fifth and sixth sessions were dedicated to labour regimes. Gunilla Andrae and Björn Beckman from Stockholm University argued that although the 'union-based labour regime' in the Nigerian and South African textile industry has been weakened with globalisation, the role of organised labour could be strengthened by forming alliances with informal producers. They also argued that unions are important in the struggle to achieve a productive institutional environment in contexts where existing public institutions are weak. Following up on Namibia, Ola Magnusson from the University of Oslo outlined different workplace regimes in the retail sector and explained these variations by analysing the power struggles between capital, labour and the state. Jamie Gough from Sheffield University argued that space is integral to labour process dynamics and pointed to the implications this holds for the politics of production and workers' strategies. A statistical evaluation tool to categorise Chinese enterprises according to harmonious labour relations was presented by Jufen Wang and Qun Zeng from Fudan University. Hege M. Knutsen from the University of Oslo and Eva Hansson from University of Stockholm highlighted some dimensions of the concept of labour regimes that could be of particular relevance in studies of agency and working conditions in transformation economies.

### **Discussions**

One question which was raised in the discussion was whether scale is over-fetishised, or given too much importance in geography. It was argued that taking away the importance of scale has a disempowering effect and that scale is crucial to understand different ways of organising. Regarding unions, it was emphasised that although a small proportion of workers are unionised, they are influential because of their organisational structure. However, class tensions, diminishing democracy and interest conflicts within unions, as well as workers' multiple identities and contradictory actions must be given analytical importance. Another issue which was brought up was the tendency to portray capital as hegemonic and the need to unpack the agency of business. This applies to labour intermediaries as well, which include a variety of different firms and agents, it was argued. The conceptual integration of human rights and labour rights was also discussed.

A significant number of participants remarked on the success of the conference and the lively and thoughtful discussion it generated. It was suggested that a follow-up meeting should be organised in one or two years' time.

*Annika Wetlesen*

*Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo*

*30 May 2008*