

Call for Papers

(Special Issue of Economic and Industrial Democracy)

“Trade Unions and Democracy:

In Memory of Giulio Regeni, 15.1.1988-n.d.2016”

Manuscript submission deadline: 15 September 2017

Between 25 January and 3rd February 2016, Giulio Regeni, PhD student at the University of Cambridge, was kidnapped, tortured and murdered while carrying out research on independent labour organisations in Egypt. His assassination has put in the spotlight the extreme sensitivity of research on trade unions and processes of democratization. Such research is of crucial importance to understand trajectories of democratic development in emerging countries. At the same time, it is also difficult and even dangerous for the researchers involved, as the tragic loss of Giulio Regeni demonstrates. This Special Issue aims to carry on the work that Giulio had started. It offers researchers in the field a forum to address some of the theoretical, methodological, empirical, political and ethical questions of the relationships between trade unionism, democracy and development.

The link between trade unions and democracy has been of paramount importance since the emergence of the ‘labour problem’, as reflected by the concept of ‘Industrial Democracy’ (Webb and Webb 1897). This concept, which was elaborated in different ways in different national contexts and periods (Frege 2005), systematically linked the workplace to the broader political context in which it is embedded. In recent years, however, the broad orientation of the early research has been somewhat lost. Research on employees’ organisation has tended to focus on employee voice and representation within the workplace only (Wilkinson et al. 2014), paying less attention to the political sphere and broader society. Yet the link between labour organisations and democracy remains critical across the developed and developing world, and even in advanced economies given the signs of democratic institutions losing its legitimacy in these countries.

Following the so-called ‘third wave of democratisation’ in the 1980s, political scientists Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992) compared 37 historical cases of democratisation to conclude that across the XIX and XX Centuries it had been the working class (rather than the bourgeoisie) to most frequently promote the full extension of democratic rights – and by working class, they meant the *organised* working class. Some cases of democratisation with a strong input by labour organisations received particular attention by scholars: Poland (Ost 1990), South Korea (Kwon and O’Donnell 1999), South Africa (Adler and Webster 2000; Buhlungu 2010).

Today, 25 years after Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens’ analysis, their argument deserves being re-examined and questioned. The geographical distribution of their cases was uneven, with only South Korea in the whole of Asia and no consideration of North Africa. Recent democratisation attempts in these areas have mostly been presented as spontaneous upheavals of the civil society against military regimes, religious fundamentalism and post-colonial ideologies (Dabashi 2012, Howard and Hussain

2013, Stepan and Linz 2013) rather than as expression of class struggle. While there is evidence of extensive labour activism, from Malaysia (Croucher and Miles 2016) to the build-up of the Arab Spring (Alexander 2010), its role in the democratisation process is still difficult to interpret - as Regeni's pioneering research was trying to do. At the same time China – and to an extent Vietnam – emerged as a problematic case for theories of labour and democracy, as labour conflicts in countries so enthusiastically embracing capitalism have been so far effectively insulated from the political sphere (Pringle and Clarke 2011; Cheng et al. 2012).

Moreover, some of the previous cases of democratisation have turned out to be more ambiguous. In Latin America, in Mexico and Argentina trade unions with an authoritarian past have been considered political allies of neo-populist parties and of corrupt and unaccountable political elites also in the neoliberal context (Brysk 2000, Atzeni and Ghigliani 2008), and in Venezuela, the conflictual relationships between trade unions, the poor, and democracy have followed an even more puzzling pattern. In post-Soviet Union countries, formally independent trade unions have supported the consolidation of authoritarian and oligarchic regimes (Borisov and Clarke 2006). Even in Poland – the country where democratisation was most clearly led by a trade union – subsequent developments led observers to speak of a 'defeat of Solidarity' (Ost 2005), and Solidarity's open support after 2015 for a government criticised for not respecting the rule of law shows the extent of working class' disaffection towards democracy. The post-transition experience of both Poland and Spain tells that trade union inclusion in democratising countries may have different functions than in established democratic and corporatist countries (Meardi, Gardawski and Molina 2015). Importantly, the complex relationship between labour and democracy in Asia, Africa, eastern Europe and Latin America cannot be written off as a side-effect of the weakening of labour: in fact, a shift of labour activism from post-industrial to late-industrial countries, or from 'North' to 'South', has been convincingly identified (Silver 2003). Yet the democratic traction of organised labour appears less clear than in the past.

This is not unrelated to a perceived crisis of democracy in established democratic countries. There, the weakening of trade unions has corroded a pillar of capitalism's democratic legitimation and hampered the potential of 'associational democracy' (Baccaro 2006). The critical position of labour is evident in the fact that new anti-system, populist or even far-right parties and candidates tend to gather particularly high levels of support among the blue-collar working classes, formerly the most unionised section of society (Betz and Meret 2013). However, other research suggests that trade union members are less likely to join right-wing populist parties (Rennwald 2013). Not only the fall of unionisation may weaken the attachment to democratic institutions and practices by reducing opportunities for workers' voice and representation; the weakening of trade unions' roles in wage setting is also a major factor behind rising inequality which, in itself, may threaten the legitimacy of democracy (Baccaro 2011).

Besides the distinction between established, young, and not-yet democracies, in recent years debates on democracy and labour have move to a new level. Within the context of 'globalisation', the possibility of transnational forms of democratic deliberation and associational governance has been discussed with particular reference to global labour issues (Hassel 2008; Meardi and Marginson 2014; Niforou 2014). The attempts by global union organisations and other forms of transnational unionism to create forms of democratic control of the global economy and in particular of multinational corporations is an emerging and fast-moving field of research.

These new theoretical and empirical questions are accompanied by renewed methodological and ethical questions. Nowhere is research in employment relations so intimately political as in its connection with democratisation. Methods such as 'action research' and 'participant observation', but also more arms-length ones, raise ever new questions of rigour, independence and validity. Ethically, they require attentive reflection on value assumptions, especially in cases of international research where the dominant value assumptions may differ between the country of origin of the researcher and the country that is being studied. But most urgently, the tragic case of Giulio Regeni is interrogating research institutions on their ethical responsibility of research in inherently dangerous environments: if on one side abandoning research outside the 'comfort zone' of established secure environments would constitute a dramatic failure for the social sciences, the ways such research must or must not be conducted deserves the utmost careful analysis.

We invite papers that make an important theoretical, empirical or methodological contribution to our understanding of the above issues. Papers from early-career researchers and from non-western countries are particularly welcome. Areas of interest include but are not limited to:

- Emergence, activities and roles of independent labour organisations in non-democratic countries
- Roles of labour movements in cases of democratisation
- Links between democratic practices within trade unions and work organisations and broader democratic institutions
- Roles of trade unions in boosting democratic legitimacy or containing far-right or new populist forces in established democracies
- Roles of trade unions in creating spaces for democratic governance at transnational level
- Methodological and ethical problems of research on labour movements and democracy

The manuscript submission deadline is 15 September 2017.

Submission is through Manuscript Central <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/eid-journal>

The guest editors welcome informal enquiries by email.

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