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RESEARCH

How work and workers influence politics: Analysing the nexus through power resource theory

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Abstract

The conjunctures between work, the economy and the political system continues to be a core issue within sociology. In this article we discuss how power resource theory can provide an analytical and theoretical lens that can enrich our understanding of the nexus between work, labour markets and politics. We emphasise how power and the power resources of labour (still) matter, such that workers and unions with more power resources can secure better conditions in the labour market, and we discuss the most important mechanisms through which the realm of work and political as well as broader societal outcomes are linked.

Keywords: Power resource theory, Political power, labour politics, trade unions, wage setting, organised labour

1. Introduction: Work, wage labour and politics

The connection between politics and economy has been a core topic in the social sciences since the work of Adam Smith and Karl Marx. The link remains a key research (as well as political) topic, but the understanding of the linkages between politics and economy has shifted over time. While recently much focus has been on macro-economic policy, financial regulation and housing market politics, the starting point for this article is that the sphere of work remains the most pivotal linkage between

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politics and economy. Whether formal or informal, work remains the main source of income and identity formation for most of the world's population, shaping the conditions for their material lives and thus affecting their political outlook. While different cleavages structure peoples' political demands (Lipset/Rokkan 1985), we argue that those derived from the labour market remain pivotal, although political behaviour and voter preferences are arguably turning more diverse. Through the world of work the economy thus shapes the political position of major population groups via demands for social protection, decent wages and gainful employment. And through political regulation of labour markets and employment conditions, politics has a major impact on the functioning of the economy (Burawoy 1985). However, in this article we focus on the connection from the sphere of work to the sphere of politics, and not the other way around. The interaction between work, the economy and politics was at the core of many political and sociological studies until the mid-twentieth century, but it received less attention in the last part of the century and during the early twenty-first century. One reason for the waning interest in work and workers in mainstream political science and economics is the declining power and political influence of workers and organised labour (mainly unions and political parties affiliated directly with workers) (Gumbrell-McCormick/Hyman 2013; Lehndorff et al. 2018; Visser 2019). In recent years, however, labour politics has gained renewed attention in the broader public and academic debates due to growing concerns about inequality (Atkinson 2008; Fischer/Strauss 2020; OECD 2011; Piketty 2013; Savage 2021). Obviously, inequality does not only stem from the labour market, but labour market inequality makes up an important component of the development. Yet, recognising the growing inequality does not explain it, and we believe that there is currently a strong need for an analytical approach that can explain developments in labour politics.

The aim of this article is twofold. Firstly, we want to argue that labour politics and work is still highly influential in explaining the intersection of economy and politics, and hence that labour and workers still matter. Secondly, we will argue that power resource theory is a valuable tool for analysing the nexus between work, economy and politics. Power resource theory analytically and theoretically emphasises the strong linkages between labour market configurations and industrial relations on the one hand, and political developments, in particular redistributive processes, but also conflict patterns, institutional settings and even the citizens' worldviews, on the other (see e.g. Korpi 1981: 21; Arnholtz/Refslund 2024b). In power resource theory, the power resource distribution and configuration is pivotal in explaining developments in labour politics, but also in the economy and politics more generally. There is obviously other strands of literature that have emphasised work and labour markets as central for connections between economic production and politics. This includes regulation theory (Boyer 1990; Boyer/Saillard 2002; Hollingsworth/

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Boyer 1997), marketization theory (Greer/Umney 2022), the varieties of capitalism framework (Hall/Soskice 2001) and the liberalisation school (Baccaro/Howell 2017). They highlight that theorising and understanding this linkage remains highly salient for explaining political developments, and underline that a strong separation between the political realm and the realm of work will always be artificial. Politics, the economy and the sphere of work must analytically be understood as entwined. This article accordingly discusses the strong entanglement of the developments in the labour market with the economic and political developments. This also implies a disciplinary entanglement that cuts across political economy, political sociology and industrial relations. However, beyond recognising this entanglement, we also need to emphasis the centrality of power and power resources in shaping the nexus between work, economy and politics. Some of the literature mentioned above tend to neglect power. Here we argue that by understanding the labour market in a power resource frame we can better explain how, for instance, declining wages and labour shares come about and how they affect politics as well as broader political developments in inequality, social cohesion and social stratification. This enables us to take into consideration the enduring importance of power and conflict, rather than assuming these have become redundant.

2. Power resource theory as an analytical lens to link politics and the sphere of work

Conflict and power were once key concepts when studying capitalism and labour politics. At least since the works of Marx, attention has been paid to the (overt and covert) conflict between capital and labour[1] under capitalism, and even if early scholars of employment relations did not subscribe to the full thrust of Marxist analysis, their starting point was typically a recognition of the crucial role power played in shaping labour relations and national labour institutions. However, in recent decades the concept of power has gained much less attention in most studies on political development and development in the realm of work. Wages have been viewed as the result of workers' productivity only (Rosenfeld 2021), while policy development has increasingly been interpreted as the result of coordination efforts under given institutional settings. We propose power resource theory as a theoretical and analytical

1 We use the terms labour and capital to describe the aggregated interest of workers and employers, as this article is mainly concerned with macropolitical issues. This is of course an oversimplification, and we cannot per se deduce from the level of workers and employers to the capital/labour aggregation, but for the sake of simplicity we use these terms here. See (Arnholtz/Refslund 2024a) for further discussion of workers' interests.

tool for refocussing studies of contemporary capitalism to the core dimensions of power and conflict.[2]

The basic tenet of power resource theory is that employers have a structural advantage over workers through what Korpi describes as "*potential and actual concentration, ease of mobilization, ease of transformation and range of applicability, capital and control over the means of production*" (Korpi 1978: 23, emphasis in original). While acknowledging this fundamental power asymmetry, the core assumption of power resource theory is that labour (and hence workers) can mobilise various power resources to reduce the employers' dominance in labour relations. Likewise, employers and capitalists can mobilise power resources beyond those inherent in their structural advantages. These can be analysed and understood in a power resource theory approach even if they do not per se mirror the power resources labour holds. The power of employers and capital should therefore be further scrutinised, as an emerging literature has recently done (Busemeyer/Thelen 2020; Culpepper 2010; Morgan 2022; Syrovatka 2024). However, the emphasis of this article is on labour and the power resources it can mobilise.

The conflicts that follows are embedded in the broader political setting and in societal structures. This has implications for our understanding of the nexus between work and politics as well as our understanding of the state (as we will elaborate below), but it also has implications for our understanding of what power and power resources are. While classical power resource theory understood power as actors' ability to punish and reward their direct opponents, we define power more broadly as *the capacity of social actors to promote, accommodate or resist change in accordance with their interests*. This broadening of the definition of power is aimed at acknowledging how actors may exert power in indirect ways by, for instance, changing societal institutions and discourses. Emphasising power as a latent capacity is important as this illustrates that power can be effective even when not exercised, as actors assess the power of other actors before they act, something that has been somewhat neglected by many contemporary power resource studies that emphasise overt conflict. We must therefore also study power even when it is not exercised.

Building on this, we develop power resource theory by explicitly defining what power resources are. We define power resources as resources *actors can mobilise to amplify their capacity to promote, accommodate or resist societal change in accordance with their interests*. We thus advocate a resource-based theory of power which mediates between practice-based theories of power and structure-based theories of power (for an elaboration, see Arnholtz/Refslund 2024a). Focusing on resources is

2 Many of the definitions and reflections used are developed in Arnholtz and Refslund (2024a), on which the following section draws heavily.

exactly what allows us to study power when it is not exercised. At the same time, we emphasise how actors must mobilise these resources to amplify their capacity and power. Power resource theory has often been criticised for viewing power resources as something actors have and which unilaterally determine their power irrespective of what they do with them. Our definition stresses the actors' ability to draw on these resources, rather than something actors have, and although resources can enhance power, they are not power in themselves. In such a manner, power resources do not guarantee the capacity to promote, accommodate or resist societal change – they only amplify that capacity.

These theoretical considerations help us open up power resource theory to more nuanced studies of power. Gradually, power resource theory has started to acknowledge different sources of power (Wright 2000; Chun 2009; Schmalz/Dörre 2014). Building on this, we define five fundamental types of power resources for studying contemporary labour politics. First, structural power is the capacity to control, structure and disrupt societal production and distribution. Second, associational[3] power is the organisational capacities often associated with trade unions that enables organisations to create and express unity of action among members and to affect outcomes in line with their interests. Third, we define institutional power as the capacity to use formal rules to enable one's own ability to influence labour politics and limit opponents' ability to do so. Fourth, we define ideational power as the capacity and legitimacy of actors to use ideas, frames and norms to promote societal and discursive change in accordance with their interests including influencing other actors' normative and cognitive beliefs. Fifth, coalition power is the actors' capacity to build relationships, align interests and define the spaces and scale of these coalitions with other actors in ways that allow them to promote their interests (see Arnholtz/Refslund 2024b for an elaboration).

It is important to have a more nuanced understanding of power resources by operationalising these five types of power resources for at least four reasons. First, without the distinctions, the structural and organisational/associational resources (in particular members) tend to be emphasised. While the structural and associational power resources have been the most recognised in the literature (and maybe also the most effective power resources), they are also the ones where workers' power has been most consistently exposed to decline. Overlooking other sources of power resources can provide a false understanding of the power resource distribution and can ignore potentially very important power resources. Second, the compositional effect of power resources will often explain both actors' strategic choices

3 We follow the established tradition in the literature by terming it associational power resources, however we do argue that organisational power resources would be a more accurate description.

as well as how successful they will be. Accordingly, not only the volume, but also the composition of power resources matters (Meardi 2024). Third, the interaction of different power resources varies. Strong ideational power resources can help build coalitional power, because actors can more easily convince others to cooperate. On the other hand, strong institutional power resources that regulate power struggles and protect workers are claimed to reduce unions' and workers' ability to apply structural power resources or sustain their associational resources (Hassel 2007). Fourth, some types of power have a more direct application and immediate effect than others. For instance, the exercise of structural power often has a very immediate and tangible effect, while ideational power has longer-term and more indirect effects (Arnholtz/Refslund 2024b). Ignoring something like ideational power will therefore imply ignoring drivers of subtle, long-term changes in labour politics. In sum, we arrive at a more nuanced understanding of contemporary capitalism by differentiating between types of power resources.

While power resource theory emphasises the unequal power distribution and basic antagonisms between capital and labour (Korpi 1978, 2006) – not only about wages but also about the organisation of work itself (Edwards 1986: 5) – this does not imply that employers and workers cannot cooperate. Rather than only focusing on conflict, power resource theory allows us to both study and theoretically explain situations where workers and employers share interests and make compromises beyond the zero-sum game. This is often true in individual companies, where workers and management have a common interest in ensuring the continuation of the company (Edwards et al. 2006, for elaborated discussions of the workplace level see Edwards 1986). It can also be true at a societal level, for instance in terms of improving economic growth or combatting stagflation (Korpi 1981). However, power resource theory emphasises that cooperation is conditioned on the distribution of power and actors' acknowledgement of each other's power resources (Refslund/Sørensen 2016; Wright 2000). Moreover, a contemporary power resource theory needs to acknowledge heterogeneity of employers as well as workers and their preferences (Arnholtz/Refslund 2024b). Overall, we argue that power resource theory should be used as a dynamic framework, where the actors' agency and positions matter, but where both workers' and employers' power resources shape the range and scope of the choices available to them to impact the political sphere.

3. Does labour (still) matter?

One objection against power resource theory is that its focus on labour, workers' and unions' power is obsolete because labour has become too weak and fragmented to really matter beyond the realm of the employment relation, and even in the employment relation it may not have much power, at least in certain contexts.

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Under Fordism, wage increases were instrumental for creating demand and growth, but this is no longer the case under post-Fordism (Boyer 1996; Howell 2021). This argument has been followed by growth model scholars, who emphasise how shifts from wage-led to debt- or export-led growth has undermined the position and importance of labour (Baccaro/Pontusson 2016). In the varieties of capitalism literature (Hall/Soskice 2001), the main focus has been on employers and their motivation for supporting national institutional setups. A similar trend can be seen in the shift towards electoral politics proposed by Iversen and Soskice (2015). They argue that we should shift our focus from corporatist institutions and the collective actors that populate them towards electoral politics based on other issues than traditional class-based ones.

These arguments are all important and relevant to consider, and most of them point to important issues that should not be ignored when re-emphasising workers' power. Power resource theory should not be reduced to a simplistic claim that power struggles and configurations of power determine everything, and least of all an argument claiming that workers can determine everything if they just organise. Nevertheless, the capitalist exchange in the labour market remains pivotal for understanding contemporary capitalism and struggles between labour and capital do indeed matter, whether it be power struggles at the workplace, sector or societal level. For instance, while macroeconomic policies, interest rates and export balance may be central to GDP growth, wages and jobs are particularly important because they are both central to economic growth but also remain pivotal for workers and their everyday lives. Jobless GDP growth via financialization does not satisfy workers' need for gainful employment. Therefore, workers will use both their individual and collective resources to improve their jobs and wages – to the extent that it seems possible.

No one denies that the number of strikes in OECD countries has tended to decline, nor that trade union density has dropped (Gumbrell-McCormick/Hyman 2013; Visser 2019; Waddington et al. 2023). However, this is, we purport, because employers' power has become so dominant in many places that workers have regarded the use of collective resources as too risky or straight-out meaningless. Yet, to conclude that labour struggle is over, and that labour is no longer relevant as a societal actor not only ignores the agency and interests of the workers and their organisations – in particular unions – on a theoretical level. It also seems highly untimely given the recent spur of labour struggles observed, for instance in the *great resignation* of workers from sub-standard jobs that followed the Covid-pandemic, the organising efforts and labour unrest in companies that were previously very little disposed to these, such as Amazon, but also in various platform work as well as the waves of strikes across Europe in the last couple of years. It would also be to ignore that those countries where workers are strongest (most highly organised, best placed in terms

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of collective bargaining, etc.) are also the countries where workers are doing best in relative terms and where inequality remains lowest. Thus, as Pontusson (2013: 803) argues, empirical data still "yields considerable support" for claims that union density (and support for left wing government) "promotes compression of market earnings as well as redistributive government policies". When we want to understand broader developments like the increasing inequality (Atkinson 2008; Fischer/Strauss 2020; OECD 2011), we must still understand what is going on in the labour market, and hence how (power) relations between workers and employers are developing.

Again, this is not to question whether the deterioration of working conditions highlighted in much political economy literature is occurring, but rather to argue that workers and their collective action still matter for *how* these developments play out. It may even be that the tide will turn at some point. Plenty of studies show that unions remain important for wages, benefits and reducing the risk of low pay (Wilmers 2017; Kristal et al. 2020; Brady et al. 2013; Keune 2021; Kollmeyer 2017; Western/Rosenfeld 2011), just as unions can counteract the erosion of employment standards in the face of, for example, technological change (Parolin 2021). Recent studies also show that labour can have the important effect of structuring national growth models (Bondy/Maggor 2024). Therefore, we argue that labour still matters, and the power it holds is well worth studying. We suggest that power resource theory is the best approach for doing so.

4. Understanding the nexus between politics and labour politics

Arguing that the development in work and labour politics is important for the political sphere only gets us halfway. We still need to provide some answers to the basic question: How do we get from the sphere of work to the political sphere? In the sections below we discuss some of the key venues and mechanisms that channel changes in industrial relations and labour markets into the political system through a power resource lens. However, before we can discuss how interests related to work and employment are channelled into the political sphere, need to elaborate our understanding of workers interests. Here we utilise the concept of labour politics[4], which we define as the political areas wherein an assumption that workers' interests are uniform is most likely to be fulfilled. This definition of labour politics is closely

4 Here the term *labour politics* broadly resonates with the theoretical framework by the Wissenschaftszentrum in Berlin in the 1980s of *Arbeitspolitik* (see Müller-Jentsch 2004: 20-21), as well as theoretical underpinnings of work and politics in the regulation theory school.

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related to the capitalist mode of production, where wage labour remains pivotal,[5] which accordingly requires us to address issues of interest and class. While it is beyond the scope of this article to fully engage with these debates, we need to consider how class and interests relates to work, politics and economy. The key question is how and when we can meaningfully assume uniform workers' interests. Assuming that workers share *all* interests may serve well for some analytical purposes and was a basic assumption in classic power resource theory (Korpi 1978: 202, 2006: 177), but it is of course a crude simplification of reality (which Korpi also acknowledges).

First, workers do not always share interests, not even at the company level.[6] For instance, some workers may be inclined to take industrial action to improve wages and working conditions, while other workers in the same workplace may emphasise the safety of having a job over trying to improve the conditions via industrial action. This heterogeneity of interests becomes even more pronounced once we turn to the societal level and the sphere of politics. Yet, differences in interests vary with the content of the policy at stake. On policy issues like unemployment benefits and pensions it appears safe to assume that workers' interests would to a certain extent be aligned around a measure of decommodification (Esping-Andersen 1990), while on issues like climate change, public support for culture or foreign relations it becomes much more problematic to assume uniform interests among workers.

Second, we need to theoretically reflect on how and when we can meaningfully understand different actors as promoters of workers' interest. In the classic power resource theory literature unions and social democratic parties were seen as class-based agents representing the interests of the working class and the workers (with the latter two typically being subsumed under the same heading) (Korpi 1978, 1981; Stephens 1979). This of course is also a crude assumption. As Wright (2000: 962) argues, classes as such do not have interests – these are formed by the interests of the actors in that particular class. The reach of the assumption of unions and social democratic parties as representatives of the working class has beyond doubt been weakened since the writings of Korpi, and we therefore need to reflect on whether making such an assumption is still helpful (Arnholtz/Refslund 2024a). We will discuss the link with the political system through political parties, especially the social democratic parties, below.

5 Although we recognise that there are globally many workers who work under different modes like forced labour, self-employment and work that is not renumerated in the capitalist system, like most household and care work.

6 This was also highlighted by Korpi, who stated: "However, the concept of class is not sufficient when we try to describe the current interest pattern of different categories of people" (Korpi 1981: 16 our translation from Swedish).

Third, and perhaps most importantly, we must consider the increasing diversification of the working class. Historically it has been argued that workplace collectives and working-class culture (Brody 1993; Lysgaard 1967; Thompson 1968) provided the foundation for class-based power resources (see also Korpi 1978). However, the importance of working-class culture and workplace collectivism is declining as identities derived outside the realm of work is growing in importance. Yet, while the impact of other identities is growing this does not preclude that work and working-class culture can remain influential (or regain prominence), and some growing working-class awareness among less traditional groups of workers like nurses and teachers can be observed.

When theorising the nexus between work and politics, we must have these three important caveats in mind. This further suggests that contemporary applications of power resource theory should also look beyond unions to identify sources of workers' power resources, in particular where unions' influence have declined and in endorsement of the increasing diversity of workers. Furthermore, we must recognise that interests need to be acknowledged, articulated and negotiated to be turned into real-life preferences, which in turn are fluid and may change over time (Arnholtz/Refslund 2024a; Meardi 2011). Therefore, articulating the interests and preferences becomes important in labour politics as well as in everyday labour struggles, which underscores the relevance of ideational power resources. This implies that establishing a sphere of labour politics, where workers have common interests, is itself an achievement for labour. Furthermore, it implies that this sphere of labour politics is malleable, since the articulation can change of what constitutes workers' interests and how they can be served.

5. Workers and unions in the political system

Having clarified our understanding of labour politics and workers interest, we now turn to the different channels and mechanisms that brings interests related to work into the political sphere. The most direct way for workers and unions to achieve political power is by engaging directly in the political system. Classic power resource theory literature (Korpi 1981) anticipated that labour would take the (industrial) struggle into the political sphere, and accordingly produce a peaceful outcome of the class struggle – what Korpi famously termed the *democratic class struggle*. Scholars of the original power resource theory strongly emphasised the role and impact of social democratic parties as the labour movement' extended political arm, where workers would vote for the social democratic parties, which in turn would represent the interests of the working class (Korpi 1981; Stephens 1979). Korpi argued that the strong tie between social democratic governments and the union movement opens an "inside track" to the state, which reduces the strike level, since unions' (and hence

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workers') interests were (at least to some extent) accommodated by the social democratic government (Korpi and Shalev 1979: 182). The strong ties originated from the history of the trade unions and labour movements, where the emergence of the trade unions went hand in hand with a demand for full political citizenship for the working class, including the right to vote. This, combined with the strong ideological links between trade unionism and political parties, in particular social democratic parties in the early formative years of the labour movements, historically resulted in very strong ties between social democratic parties and the union movement, to the extent that Ebbinghaus (1995) talked about the two actors as "Siamese twins" and Korpi earlier talked about "labour's two wings" (Korpi/Shalev 1979: 181).

Yet, there are some important caveats to this story. First, as Korpi (1981) recognised, there may be other cleavages than socio-economic ones (such as religion or ethnicity) structuring electoral politics (see also Lipset/Rokkan 1985). Even if he assumed that these non-class cleavages would decline in importance, they imply that workers voting for left parties were more prevalent in some countries such as the Nordics than others such as continental Europe, where non-class cleavages are more paramount. Second, the historical development since the formulation of classical power resource theory has shown that the importance of other political cleavages, such as ethnicity and core-periphery, have grown rather than declined along with the salience of other political issues like migration and identity politics broadly perceived. At the same time, far-left and far-right populist parties are regaining (their historical) appeal among working class voters, further challenging the classical labour parties. This has resulted in fewer workers voting for social democratic parties (Rennwald 2020), with significant shares of workers voting for far-right parties (Mosimann et al. 2019), leading to a weakening of social democratic or traditional labour parties in many countries. Third, Esping-Andersen (1985b) argued that workers could only very exceptionally rely on majoritarian political power and empirically this mainly materialised in post-WWII Sweden. Accordingly, even if broader political working-class interests could be defined, it was always in need of political allies and could never be taken for granted. Therefore, workers and political parties affiliated with workers (to a greater or lesser degree) need to engage in cross-class political alliances which, according to Esping-Andersen (1985b), together with the coherence of the right parties, have had great influence on how successful workers have been in different political systems. This in turn points towards the importance of coalitional power resources, which we introduce and emphasise as a unique power resource.

At the same time, the bonds between unions and social democratic parties (as well as other parties, including Christian Democratic ones) have radically diminished across Europe (Gumbrell-McCormick/Hyman 2013; Rennwald 2020; Upchurch et al. 2009), and even where the ties remain the social democratic parties have in many cases been greatly weakened. In most countries the formal ties between unions

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and social democratic parties have been abandoned concurrently with many social democratic parties abandoned their Keynesian heritage of, for instance, full employment (most prominently in Germany and the United Kingdom) (Allern et al. 2007; Upchurch et al. 2009). Besides trade unions increasingly engaging with other political parties and actors (Rennwald 2020; Spier 2017), it may also imply that political ideas aligned with workers' interests have less influence on social democratic politics (Mudge 2018). It can even be argued that the political systems' overall responsiveness to the interests of workers have declined (Elsässer/Schäfer 2022; Hacker/Pierson 2010). Nonetheless, workers and unions can impact the political system by ensuring unionists are elected for political representation. Historically there was often a high share of the political representatives that came from the union cadre, in particular in social democratic parties, but also very often in socialist and communist parties. This share might have declined, though unions' financial and public support may still be important for some political candidates.

Additionally, workers and unions have venues of political influence other than electoral politics. Often unions have a political entry point via corporatist institutions, where government attempts to coordinate societal governance with representatives from business and labour. While corporatism has been declining in Europe, there are examples of renewed attention being devoted to the formal incorporation of unions in policy deals (often termed social pacts). Ebbinghaus and Weishaupt (2021) argues the extent of social pacts and social concertation depends on unions' power resources, while Rathgeb (2018) argues that it is mainly weak governments that use corporatism to legitimise their policies. The former argument is clearly compatible with power resource theory, but the latter may also suggest that unions can increase their influence through corporatism when governments are weak. The more organisational/associational power resources unions have the stronger their capacity to influence political issues will be.

One particularly important element that follows from our advancing of a revitalised power resource theory is the ideational power resources. We argue that labour's ability to engage with and shape societal norms, ideologies and discourses have been broadly overlooked by classic power resource theory. Accordingly, we stress how unions and workers utilise various ideational dimensions to change and alter politics. This relates both to actual labour struggles, where ideational power resources can be pivotal for the outcome of the conflict (see for instance McLaughlin/Bridgman 2017), but it relates also to the more long-term perspective of the social imaginary. This includes unions' position as legitimate societal actors (Wright/McLaughlin 2022), perceptions and struggles of specific policies like unemployment benefits and broader societal discourses like neoliberal ideology and economic thought (Blyth 2002; Kinderman 2017) and the perception of the working class as such (Thompson 1968). We must therefore include labour as an important actor in the public sphere

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(Heiland et al. 2024) and in the formation of norms and beliefs about work, class and capitalism that can be used as ideational power resources.

While the connection between social democratic and left-wing parties and unions have decline across Europe, centre-left governments still in general appear to be more attentive to union demands and hence remnants of the *two wings of labour* can still be found. The bond remains stronger in countries with broad union movements, and where the parties are less dependent on state financial support (Allern/Bale 2017). But equally important from a power resource approach is the degree of embeddedness and historical legacy of unions in the management of society, as these have spilled over into contemporary institutions, state-roles and the position of unions in the public sphere. A power resource theory perspective on contemporary politics must therefore acknowledge and include a historical understanding of the political economy. The historical prominence of unions and social democratic (or labour-friendly) parties in the development of different political systems and in particular in developing egalitarian capitalist societies seems indisputable, particularly in the Nordic countries which have often been termed the social democratic countries (Bengtsson 2023; Esping-Andersen 1985a, 1990; Korpi 1978, 1981). The Nordic countries still feature more labour- and worker friendly institutions, and unions' political heritage provides them with persistently high levels of legitimacy. The Nordic unions' position as a legitimate political actor has so far never truly been challenged, and while the range of topics where it is *natural* for the union to be involved may have diminished, they are still perceived and acknowledged as a natural part of labour politics (and beyond), while in many other political systems unions are seen as irrelevant or an anachronism (Knudsen et al. 2023; Waddington et al. 2023).

6. Institutions as power resources for workers and unions

One of the criticisms often launched against classical power resource theory is that it paid insufficient attention to institutions. It is true that Korpi rejected the crucial importance ascribed to institutions, in particular collective bargaining institutions, by, for instance, the Oxford school of industrial relations (Clegg and Flanders), and instead argued that "institutions play much less of a strategic role and are of importance primarily as variables intervening between the distribution of power and the patterns of conflict" (Korpi 1983: 171). At the same time, Korpi (1981) also described labour market institutions as routinised distributive processes that allowed actors to minimise the cost associated with distributive actions (through mainly industrial conflict). In that sense, it can be argued that institutions become a power resource in their own right, as they secure actors' influence without them having to mobilise

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other power resources. Yet, the role of institutions is one of the dimensions where power resource theory needs substantial development, towards acknowledging the importance of institutions as power resources (O'Brady 2021), while retaining the insight that institutions are not neutral but have different effects for labour and capital.

Hence, institutions often have a stabilising effect on the relationship between labour and capital. This is often a resource for workers as it limits the discretionary power of capital, without the actors having to mobilise. For instance, labour laws often outline certain responsibilities employers hold in an employment relationship, and the institutionalised enforcement of such laws sets a limit to how easily employers can ignore these responsibilities to improve their competitiveness in product markets. However, the stabilising effect of institutions can also have the opposite effect, as it can limit workers' opportunities to renegotiate their terms and conditions and to apply their power resources – in particular structural power – as strikes may be regulated. This has implications in situations where labour is gaining in strength and would therefore potentially be able to demand real improvements. Yet the institutional constrains also matter in situations of institutional 'drift' (Streeck/Thelen 2005), where the employer responsibilities outlined by institutions become out of sync with economic realities – as when minimum wages are not adjusted to wage developments or when the definition of an employee is not adjusted to the rise of the platform economy. In sum, institutions can act as a resource for both workers and employers depending on the circumstances.

Institutional power may also stem from the political system, setting the frame for the labour market through, for instance, conciliation and regulation of the labour contract and status, wherefore state governance – and accordingly state tradition for industrial relations and regulations of the labour market – remain highly salient in industrial relations (Bosch/Weinkopf 2017; Crouch 1993; Meardi 2018). Institutions mediate and facilitates the outcomes of industrial relations and labour market bargaining, in particular institutions that facilitate and galvanise collective bargaining and collective agreement setting (O'Brady 2021; 2024). Hence workers and unions may have an institutionalised role in, for instance, unemployment benefits and educational training systems and to varying degrees in regulation and governance of the economy, in particular in regard to wage development. Thus, researchers must pay attention to various institutions and how they affect the power resource configuration and policy outcomes. The institutionalisation of power resources can be an important intermediating variable, so that emphasising national averages (on unionisation and decentralisation among others) may miss important institutionalised power resources.

While there is ample evidence that employers and other actors push for de-regulating and liberalising labour relations (Gautié/Schmitt 2010; Holst 2014; Kalleberg

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2009; Schmidt/Thatcher 2013; Weil 2014), there is also counterevidence of institutional resilience despite declines in the other categories of worker power (Kim et al. 2015; Meardi 2018). Institutions accordingly mediate these liberalisation pressures and thus the same factors may result in different outcomes in different institutional settings (Katz/Darbishire 2000; Riain/Flaherty 2020). Institutional changes may also strengthen workers, for example following European union political integration, for instance in Eastern Europe where institutional changes (at least temporarily) strengthened or at least reduced the decline in power of unions despite falling union density after the enlargement of the European Union (Magda et al. 2016). One can talk about the embeddedness of labour-friendly settings and institutions or institutional anchors, which reflects to some degree previous power configurations, so that more labour-friendly institutions may be stickier in certain contexts. The institutionalised power balance may however also change, reflecting shifts in other dimensions of power resources. An example could be the German minimum wage, where a sharp decline in unions' and workers' organisational and structural power resources led to the political system compensating the workers, although the changes came with some influence of the union movement (Bosch 2018).

Nonetheless, even if we recognise the importance of institutions and their function as power resources, it is equally important to maintain that the functioning of institutions can be affected by the distribution of power resources. For instance, while there is strong evidence that the level and centralisation of collective bargaining in itself has an influence on wage inequality and potentially even the labour share, the power of labour also matters for the outcome of collective bargaining and its eventual enforcement. While institutions matter, there is a certain variability in their functioning, which is determined by the distribution of power resources. The same is true for the broader institutional setup and economic growth models that characterise a given economy.

7. Wage setting mechanisms and power

Perhaps the most important and direct way trade unions and workers impact the economic and societal development is through their active role in wage setting, whether they be collective bargaining (Müller et al. 2019) or minimum wage systems (Grimshaw/Johnson 2024), including transnational discussions of, for instance, the European minimum wage (Seeliger 2019). However, the role of unions and workers in these institutions and the outcomes they produce are strongly linked to the power resources and power configuration across different settings. The more power resources unions have the more they can impact wage setting. Kollmeyer (2017), among others, argues that there is a correlation between power resources and wage growth. This is especially true in voluntaristic industrial relations systems where

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unions have a key role in the regulation of wages through negotiation as well as implementing, controlling and enforcing central demands at the local level, particularly the company level (Ilsøe 2012). However, even in less voluntaristic systems where wages are regulated via the extension of collective agreements or statutory minimum wages, unions often have some degree of influence (Grimshaw/Johnson 2024).

Wage regulating mechanisms have implications for politics because they influence the differences in earnings between different groups of workers and thus affect the chances that workers regard themselves as having common interests. Additionally, while much of the regulation school literature (Boyer 1990; Boyer/Saillard 2002) and growth model literature (Blyth et al. 2022) views wage setting mechanisms as subordinated to overarching economic developments such as the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism or growth model dynamics, we argue that wage setting institutions like collective bargaining backed by sufficient power resources also constrains and partially shapes a country's economic trajectory. High collective agreement coverage and trade union density will typically force companies to find business strategies that are compatible with higher wages (Barth et al. 2014). Obviously, there are limits to the effect that power resources channelled through wage setting institutions can have on redistribution as too much pressure for wage increases can undermine the viability of companies and lead to wage-led inflation. However, small, incremental improvements can certainly accumulate and thus affect the overall economic structure. This is one of the main points missed by predominant perspectives in comparative political economy – from Varieties of Capitalism to growth models (Blyth et al. 2022) – namely the incremental changes to economic institutions that are created by ongoing overt and covert power struggles in which power resources matter.

Korpi (1981) mainly focused on the major shifts in power balance occurring when labour-friendly governments held majority government over long periods of time, but a contemporary power resource theory needs to be much more sensitive to minor changes in power distributions, institutional setups and dominant coalitions. Some of this sensitivity is provided by focusing on several power resources. While the associational power of labour may be unchanged, workers may be mobilising other resources – such as ideational or coalitional resources – to influence labour politics and institutional change. And such changes may gradually reshape the conditions that companies operate under and thus impact the overall economy.

8. On the role of the state

The state has an important role in the regulation of work and industrial relations (Crouch 1993; Hollingsworth/Boyer 1997; Hyman 2008; Meardi 2018). State-led regulation shapes the labour market and can be supportive of workers' demands, like in

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the traditional social democratic societies, which emphasised de-commodification of labour (Esping-Andersen 1985a; Esping-Andersen/Korpi 1984), or in the current context when wages and working conditions reach certain minimums (Bosch/Weinkopf 2017; Meardi 2018). However, most states have also played an active role in facilitating liberalisation and de-regulation of workers' and unions' rights in the labour market (Howell 2021) as well as in marketization (Greer/Umney 2022). Some would argue that this has been the most prominent role played by most states in the advanced capitalist world in the recent decades; in some cases, states even engage directly in the repression of workers, unions and workers' rights, for instance as seen in some countries in the Global South. Moreover, the state is an important actor as an employer, with public employment making up large shares of the workforce in many countries. It is therefore imperative to investigate the role of the state, not least how it is affected by the configuration of power and power resources available to the actors.

The struggle between labour and capital is highly influential for the state and how it positions itself on labour issues (Poulantzas 1978; Jessop 1990), and we argue that the power resources available to labour and capital influences the position of the state – not just in terms of immediate policy outcomes, but also in the sense of state legacies. At the same time it is important to acknowledge that the state is not just an empty shell filled by the outcomes of the power struggles between workers and capitalists. For institutionalists, state institutions are path dependent and therefore difficult to change. We concur to some extent with the institutional position in that the historical heritage is important, and institutions, state traditions and the norms and perceptions in society influence how the state acts (Bosch/Weinkopf 2017; Crouch 1993). For example, the repertoire of policy solutions is flavoured by the state tradition, and while these may change, the potential policy responses remain sticky, and hence partly limited. Therefore, some states continue to act in more labour- and worker friendly ways than others, for instance on key aspects like strike regulation. Moreover, there are internal contradictions between state actors, like political actors, and different state authorities on what the state should do. We must therefore understand the state in the wider social relations (Hyman 2008; Jessop 1990). A fitting example here is ideational power resources, where actors seek to affect the state and the public discourse in ways that can be highly influential on state policies (Hall 1993; Kinderman 2017; McLaughlin/Wright 2024). This in turn helps explain the enduring variation in industrial relations and political economy across countries, which is also backed by empirical evidence that continuously shows national variation linked to power resources in comparative industrial relations studies (Keizer et al. 2024; Meardi 2018; Thelen 2014; Wagner/Refslund 2016). This reflects how many power resources are embedded in state traditions and institutions, and states and

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state tradition accordingly amplify or reduce the potential effect of the actors' – both labour and capital – power resources.

9. Conclusion

Despite the decline in the power of unions and workers, they still hold sufficient power resources to impact labour politics as well as politics more generally. Yet the impact is most important within politics directly related to work and employment. Labour politics occupies this sphere situated between the economy, politics (including the state) and civil society. The impact of workers and their interests still reaches into the other spheres, although the impact has declined, for instance in civil society where norms and values stemming from dimensions other than working class affiliations have become more dominant. In this article we have scrutinised how workers and unions impact the political system, with implications for political outcomes like redistributive and regulatory politics and hence with implications for key political issues like inequality as well as the regulation of daily working life. Likewise, the strength and institutional embeddedness of unions has varied the political effect of neoliberalism across Europe (Waddington et al. 2023). Scholars of political sociology who seek to understand broader political–economic developments within contemporary capitalism should therefore take into account the power configuration between labour and capital.

We have discussed some of most important channels through which labour and workers impact labour politics. There has historically been strong bonds between unions and political parties, in particular social democratic ones, however this relation has markedly waned, and unions have diversified their influence through democratic channels, which highlights the importance of coalitional power resources. While the relation between unions and social democratic parties has always varied across time and space, parties to the centre-left in general (still) appear to be more prone to accommodate unions' and workers' demands. Moreover, labour remains an important political actor through, for instance, participation in the public sphere – where the ideational power resources are important – through lobbying and cooperating with other political actors and by having union cadres elected to positions in the political system. Unions also have a focal, direct role in the wage setting systems, which are highly influential for economic policies, yet this role also varies significantly across countries. In many countries unions still hold enough institutional power through state and corporatist institutions to influence a broad range of political issues, including unemployment benefits, educational training and to some extent economic policies.

Power resource theory emphasises that workers and unions remain important actors – both directly through the political channels highlighted – but also indirectly

through, for instance, their structural power in the labour market often materialised in labour struggles and ideational power resources seeking to change societal ideas and norms. At the same time the theory builds on the assumption that power resources are unequally distributed, and that capital has the upper hand, but that through strategic application of the different power resources workers and unions can off-set some of disadvantages. By studying the different dimensions of power resources, we arrive at a more nuanced perspective on the changes in the sphere of work than that offered by, for instance, a purely deregulatory or neoliberal deterioration viewpoint. And while the influence of workers and labour has declined, in many countries dramatically, we do find numerous examples of enduring worker power – for instance in the Nordic countries – as well as surges in contemporary labour resistance and struggles across both the Global North and South. These remind us that if we seek to analyse and understand contemporary political developments, we must not neglect labour as well as capital's power resources and the configuration of these power resources in the given setting. Here power resource theory provides a useful lens for analysing labour politics.

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