Findings from the PhD project: The Social Collectivism of Everyday Life Among Precarious Migrant Workers in Denmark

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Introduction and context:

While industrial relations research has historically focussed on individual labour market strategies among labour migrants, migrant worker collectivism has only rarely been explored. In his impactful dual labour market thesis, Piore (1979) argues that labour migrants' reference group (Merton, 1968) remains within the country of origin and does not easily adapt into the country of destination, causing labour migrants to accept lower wages, inferior working conditions and general circumstances of precarity compared to those of nationals. This makes migrants less inclined to engage in collective action such as strikes, production stops, bargaining or unionism. While much research reaffirms that we still find ourselves in a dual labour market where migrants and nationals occupy distinct positions, recent research has recognised the need for a more nuanced understanding of both migrant worker collectivism (Berntsen, 2016; Però, 2020; Refslund and Sippola, 2020; Rydzik and Anitha, 2020; Alberti and Sacchetto, 2024) and worker collectivism more broadly (Stewart, Shanahan and Smith, 2020).

This recognition is particularly important as migrant workers arriving in Europe often find themselves in a precarious legal and social situation which makes them vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination and social dumping (Alberti, Holgate and Tapia, 2013; Martínez Lucio, Marino and Connolly, 2017). The present research forms part of a larger comparative research project, and the data for the PhD project was conducted in Denmark where trade unions are relatively strong and have a strategic outreach approach of organising migrant workers (Refslund, 2021). Still, migrants comprise a hard-to-access group (Friberg, 2016) with limited trust in Danish institutions including the union (Refslund, 2021). This poses challenges both for unions' outreach to migrants as well as for the Danish labour market as a whole, because migrants are often subject to social dumping, which risks eroding the Danish labour model (the so-called 'Danish Model'). Unionists' strategies towards migrant workers are therefore central in combating the dual and segmented labour market as originally cautioned by Piore.

Bearing this context in mind, the present PhD project has explored migrant worker collectivism in a context where we find both institutionalised as well as informal, bottom-up forms of collectivism. While the former mainly takes place within the union, the latter comprise practices that are self-initiated by the migrant communities (Però, 2020). Still, owing the vulnerability and issues with accessibility, migrant workers have only rarely been included in industrial relations research in a Danish context (although there have been exceptions, see Arnholtz and Hansen, 2012; Refslund, 2021; Spanger and Hvalkof, 2021; Hooper Overgård et al., 2023). This means that little is still known about how labour migrants mitigate conditions of precarity collectively both within and beyond collective institutions. The aim of the study has been to address this gap in the literature through empirically founded field work consisting of participant observation, semi-structured interviews and a vignette study. The research was conducted in **three sectors: agriculture, construction and transport (emphasising platform delivery services**) and total of 87 migrants as well as 22 stakeholders (mainly unionists with migrant background) have been included in the study. In the

presentation held at De Burcht, the focus was on how unions could successfully *build* collectivism among migrant workers based on these insights.

Results:

Even in a Danish context where unions remain comparatively strong, there is still challenges with organising migrant workers. Rapid replacement of the workforce, low expectations to pay and conditions, employer dependency and issues tied to everyday life such as housing, food and familial obligations coupled with low levels of trust (just to mention a few) often make migrants little inclined to engage with collective institutions. Following, Danish Unionists have a strategic approach to organising migrant workers where they 'hang out' on the streets and deliberately hire in organisers with the linguistic and cultural skills to disseminate knowledge about 'The Danish Model' and the migrants' rights and opportunities. In the three selected sectors, prominent cases of different organising forms were emphasised during the presentation:

Agricultural sector: Building collectivism in remote, rural areas

In the agricultural sector, especially two initiatives were noteworthy: 'The Ukrainian Network' and 'The Agricultural Network'. Both were led by union organisers with the linguistic skills matching those of the migrant workers in the local areas (Ukrainian in the former and Lithuanian in the latter) and focussed on rights and challenges tied to working in Denmark. In both networks, meetings were held regularly as a social event where selected themes were discussed: For instance, practical issues with how to open a bank account, get national identification papers, sorting tax papers etc., but also more rights-based questions such as sexual harassment at work. In both cases, personalised relationships with both the other participants as well as of the union organisers in charge was rendered important, and both events were often planned around a dinner or similar social gathering. Common among these initiatives was that both union members and non-union members were welcomed, and that it was often expressed by the migrants how these events made them join the union, as they could see the benefits with being part of such a collective.

Transport sector: Digital Platform Delivery Services and digital Migrant Networks of Coping

In the transport sector, two case studies of migrant worker collectivism stand out as prominent: The cases of Wolt and Nemlig.com. Both are platform food delivery services, yet they differ in terms of working structures and tasks; Wolt workers are couriers and ride on bikes or scooters and deliver mainly ready-made means, whereas Nemlig.com are truck drivers who deliver groceries. Common among them, however, is the spatial and digitalised nature of work, and the lack of physical working place, which at first glance makes collectivism unlikely to occur. Across the two companies, migrants overwhelmingly narrated how they would embark on digital migrant networks of coping in WhatsApp and Facebook groups. These groups provided them a social infrastructure to navigate their precarious employment. This showcases the paradox that the technology that fragments and segregates migrants socially brings them together digitally (Stewart, Shanahan and Smith, 2020). The two case studies further highlight that networks of coping can turn into labour organised resistance under given circumstances and that the union can strategically use these digital as well as physical networks in their organising approaches. In short, unionists can pay increased attention to various networks and their embeddedness to successfully 'open up' migrant networks. (For a thorough discussion of the cases, see Hau and Borello, 2023).

Construction sector: The case of Femern - Wildcat strike and outright Conflict

In Summer 2022, 2-300 Polish migrant workers initiated a wildcat strike and a blockade of Denmark's largest infrastructure project, Femern (an underground tunnel between Denmark and Germany). The strike was

embedded in a wage claim, but the migrants reported practices of discriminatory treatment and disrespect as crucial facilitators for the strike, including dissatisfactory housing- and food conditions. The strike was a wildcat strike as it breached the peace agreement in the Danish industrial relations system and therefore, the union could not formally support the strike. However, the union had an office placed adjacent to the construction site, and was highly present both before, during and after the conflict, through dialogue with the site manager and by negotiating a new agreement which met the migrants' demands. Unionists with Polish language skills were key actors in this process. Further, a solidarity fund was raised by volunteers to cover the expenses and fines following the migrant strike, which would otherwise have been imposed to the migrants. The case of Femern thus showcases how unionists and other actors can provide support when migrants self-initiate collective action, even in cases where these activities are on the edge the established industrial relations systems. It also showcases how feelings of injustice can spark collective mobilisation (Kelly, 1998) and that those feelings often take forms as disrespect prompting a quest of recognition (Borello, forthcoming).

Main take-aways:

Overall, the three sectoral case studies show different approaches unionists can take to the organising of migrant workers. The ability for the union to interact with the migrant networks stand out as crucial in all three cases, where language skills and cultural sensitivity and understanding of the migrants' challenges stand out as important. Further, the cases encourage researchers to pay increased attention to less overt forms of collectivism, and acknowledge acts of resistance in precarious working environments, even when the collectivism we expect to find manifests differently.

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