

Call for Papers

Focus issue: Industrial relations, labour unions and strikes in Africa

Guest editors: Ingrid Artus, Peter Birke, Bettina Engels

Western concepts of waged labour as well as historical experiences of industrialized European and North American economies have coined industrial relations as a field of research. Yet they only partially fit to the realities of live and work of the majority of working people all over the world; they have significant theoretical and empirical gaps and weaknesses, which matters also for the study of labour politics and unionism. Perhaps it is time to provincialize Western concepts of industrial relations. This provincialization has already been discussed critically for instance in Global Labour Studies and within the debate in the sociology of labour on concepts such as "informalization". It is thus obvious to develop methods and concepts of Global Labour Studies as opposed to research on industrial relations that is still rather orientated towards the nation state or cross-country comparisons.

In the context of such considerations, the journal *Industrielle Beziehungen* ("Industrial Relations") plans a focus issue on labour unions, workers' organizations and strikes on the African continent. We aim at bringing African experiences of organization and mobilization of the working classes to the centre stage of the study of industrial and labour relations. Most African economies are characterised by the high degree of informal and precarious work; the public sector is the most important employer for regular waged-labour, though neoliberal reforms and 'structural adjustment' promoted by the international financial institutions (IFIs) from the 1980s onwards urged massive cuts in public spending. Yet labour unions are, in many African countries, important political actors that have been involved in the struggles against colonialism and apartheid; against autocratic regimes, for political liberalization and democratization; against neoliberalization and IFI politics, and against neo-colonial influences. In many places, when popular struggles arise, unions are at the forefront and join up with other organizations.

Although labour unionism varies between sectors and countries, African trade union activities and struggles stand in contrast to the frequently lamented decline of trade unionism in the North, as it has been addressed in the transnational debate on strategic unionism and social movement unionism since the 1990s. Yet in many cases, organizing and mobilization particularly of informal, precarious, and self-employed workers – waste pickers, drivers of minibus and motorcycle taxis, sex workers, and others – happens in other organizations than labour unions. The question whether labour unions are the only and adequate organizations to represent workers and their interests ("labour union fetishism") is pertinent to African workers as it is in other parts of the world. With this in mind, in this issue, we are interested in both 'classical' labour unions representing the formally employed in the private and public sectors, and those organizing in the 'informal' sectors such as petty trade, informal transport services, sex work, farm work, and artisanal mining.

We are looking forward to proposals for articles dealing with, among others, the following questions:

- What do industrial relations look like in African countries? Which are the main actors? What institutional arrangements are in place?
- What labour-related conflicts exist on the African continent, and how do they become manifest? Which individual and collective actors engage in these conflicts? How do workers organize, mobilize and raise their claims?
- What conditions favour or hamper organizing? How can variation among countries and sectors be explained?

- How do gender relations shape labour relations, unions and other workers organizations and their activities?
- What challenges and prospects exist with regard to collaboration of unions and other organizations (e.g. community organizations or political parties)?
- How are African working conditions affected by international value chains? Which international regulations exist and are effective (also) for African working conditions?
- How do African labour unions deal with transnational influences? What are, on the one hand, the opportunities and risks of transnational collaboration of labour unions and other organizations? And what do, on the other hand, trade unions in the Global North learn from African experiences?

What can research in industrial relations learn from the study of African labour unions and workers struggles for its concepts and theories? In how far do 'Western' concepts and theories prove helpful; where do they fall short; what questions remain open?

Submission information

Please submit your abstract of no more than 500 words by 1st February, 2024

to: <http://indbez.nomos.de> AND send it to: bettina.engels@fu-berlin.de

Full texts of selected papers are supposed to be submitted by 15th September, 2024 and will be peer-reviewed. Publication of the issue is planned for March 2025.

Abstracts and manuscripts can be submitted in English or German. Article length is 10,000 words (70,000 characters) max.