

INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH SEMINAR



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Towards a Democratic Theory of Labour Unions

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Abstract

After decades where labour unions were on the defensive, recent years have witnessed a surge in union activity. Inflation and tight labour markets have sparked strike action across several sectors in the UK and Europe. All this raises the question of the specific normative justification and democratic function of labour unions. Here, I contribute to a democratic theory of labour unions. My goal is to try to analyse, at a relatively highly level of abstraction, the constitutive features of labour unions that can make them conducive to sustaining egalitarian relationships and protecting workers from overt forms of oppression and abuse. This analysis can then contribute to a better understanding of the location of labour unions—as well as their limitations—in struggles for a just and democratic society. To develop this account, I contrast my democratic interpretation with what I term a liberal and a radical defense of labour unions. While the liberal view focuses on market failures and the radical view on strikes as extra-legal modes of direct confrontation, the democratic view emphasizes unions as contesting control over production and investment decisions. Three institutional features of unions explain their capacity to advance democracy but also highlight some of their limitations: 1) unions can appeal to the short- and medium-term self-interest of their members; 2) unions are anchored in the material production process of capitalism; and 3) unions rely on ongoing solidarity and cooperation amongst union members. Each of these features helps explain the specific role

unions play in advancing justice, as well as the role they would continue to play in a just society, but also point to their potential limitations, as all create risks of exclusion and co-optation.