



WORKSHOP
"NEW INSIGHTS INTO
COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING"
12-13 FEBRUARY 2026

Trade Unions' Democratic Credentials: Bringing Organizing (Back) In

Lore-Marie Junghans
(Universität Hamburg)

Abstract

In the face of current democracies' pathologies, trade unions are slowly being put (back) on the agenda of political theorists. I argue that efforts to develop a democratic theory of trade unions benefit from integrating insights from labour studies on organizing as a promising tool for union revitalization and democratization. Organizing is a technique of uniting people for a cause associated with early 20th century radical labour practices and the civil rights movement. In contrast to mobilizing or advocacy strategies, the focus is on building long-term commitment to high-cost mass political action through bottom-up structure-building in face-to-face conversations. Championing organizing as part of a democratic theory of trade unions helps address 1) concerns regarding trade unions' democratic credentials and 2) questions of how to get the kind of institutions we need, increasingly discussed as the transition problem. Common concerns related to 1) include the worry that a) trade union bureaucracies constitute yet another form of worker domination, b) that trade unions serve the interest only of privileged to the detriment of precarious workers or the unemployed and c) that they protect the interests of their members at the expense of the general public. I highlight how organizing alleviates these concerns: organizing can against a) facilitate rank-and-file participation and leadership, against b) achieve the inclusion of the most precarious, and against c) bring about positive democratic change in the interest of the general public.

Regarding 2), I elaborate how organizing is not only a desirable approach of trade unionism, but functions as a unique bottom-up mechanism of transition independent of elite political will and top-down democratic reforms. Indeed, it is the mechanism through which many of our democratic institutions and rights were won by the labour and civil rights movements historically and through which unionization has been advanced in recent years.