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Labour internationalism and the public sector: The case of the Public Services International

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out the need to conceptualise labour internationalism in the public sector, given its distinct political character and orientation. Our analysis adds to a literature on labour internationalism that hitherto has mainly depicted strategies of unions in private sector industries. To better understand the reasons for upscaling trade union efforts in a sector where the main employer remains the institutional apparatus of the nation-state, we have interviewed office bearers in the most important global union federation organising across different public services – Public Services International (PSI) – asking them to explain their political and strategic considerations. We find that the distinct role of the nation state as an employer, the public character of work and specific relations between public sector workers and the users of services, are all determinants in shaping labour transnationalism in the public sector. This in turn leads to a greater emphasis on alliances with social movements and oppositional campaigns, representing a radical global political unionism. Neoliberal austerity and privatisation measures have reinforced the importance of such political relationships and power, but also challenged their organisational foundations. However, alliance-building is not PSI's sole strategy. We find that office bearers at the transnational level combines three strategic rationales through orientations that we have labelled the political-institutional, the movement-popular and the industrial-corporate. We also suggest that employing these sensitising concepts can bolster the scholarly treatment of understanding labour internationalism and its strategy repertoires more generally.

1. Introduction

Why do workers in the public sector, whose main employer is still the institutional apparatus of the nation-state, decide to pursue strategies of labour internationalism? And are these strategies differently motivated than transnational labour activism in private sector industries? The election of Italian trade unionist Rosa Pavanelli as elected general secretary of the Public Services International (PSI) in 2012 represents an interesting entry point from which to address these questions. PSI is a global union federation (GUF) organising 20 million public services workers in 163 countries. Pavanelli's election signalled a shift in leadership towards a more social movement and activist unionism tradition.

In the global surge of civil society protests since 2010 (Della Porta, 2015; Ortiz, Burke, Berrada, & Cortes, 2013), public sector unions have been central. Austerity measures and neoliberal policies have arguably restated the case for alliance-building between public sector workers and services users, even though solidarity between these groups are often riddled with tensions (Peck, 2012; Ross & Savage, 2013). Both subjects are concerned with the quality of services, the integrity of the public sector workforce and the legitimacy of salaries in the sector. This entails that the realisation of workers' interests in public sector unions increasingly depends on their relationship with other citizens. It ultimately requires the building of political capital, in order to countervail what is seen as an unprecedented global attack on workers and welfare alike. Faced with both neoliberal austerity and a growing right-populist discourse emerging transnationally in the context of economic crisis, Thomas and Tufts (2016) argue that unions need to construct a broader political alternative through alliances with community groups and wider segments of the working class. Sharing a mistrust in national governments from both the left and the right, such an alliance could also find common ground in global issues like free trade, structural austerity programs or the leaks surrounding global tax havens and unjust tax practices.

While there seems to be a clear link between austerity policies and social movement unionism in the public sector, we cannot automatically deduce from this that a broader movement-oriented union strategy

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would be most effectively articulated at a transnational scale. Neither is it clear what space there is for Pavanelli's strategy alongside more traditional forms of transnational labour activism, such as unions' participation in the processes of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), or recent innovations like global framework agreements with multi-national corporations. To learn how shifts in global union strategies are motivated among public sector unions, we have interviewed office bearers in PSI, asking them to explain their strategic considerations. Hence, this article takes the viewpoints of trade union officials as its empirical point of departure. Fieldwork was carried out in 2014 in London, Brussels and Ferney-Voltaire, in 2016 in Brussels and Ferney-Voltaire, and in 2017 attending PSI's 30th World Congress in Geneva. A total of 11 representatives of the Public Services International, their research unit and some of their regional as well as national affiliates were interviewed sometimes repeatedly. We have also reviewed documents representing PSI's campaign work, and drawn on notes from one author's participation as an activist within the global water justice movement, where PSI has worked closely with other groups. The interview recordings were transcribed, coded and analysed through the identification of themes guided by the questions posed in the introduction.

The article starts with a theoretical discussion, followed by an empirical investigation. The theoretical section is divided into two parts, where we first ask what characterises public sector workers, their political constraints and opportunities related to the role of the state as an employer. This section engages with theories of state rescaling, as we want to illuminate the black box that the public sector arguably still represents in comparison with other sectors of labour internationalism. Following from this backdrop of changing state geographies, the next section goes on to bring agency and relevant strategic orientations into focus. It does so, by using concepts from the power resources approach within labour sociology and revisit discussions around international strategies in labour studies. The discussion of extant literature then gives way to an empirical account of the strategies of the PSI, a case that offers a more nuanced appreciation of the politics *within* public sector internationalism as such, but also allows us to contrast public sector internationalism with private sector unionism. We find PSI's strategic character to be in the tug of war between an oppositional social movement unionism and more traditional social dialogue logic alluded to in the introduction. The article ends with a conceptual discussion that differentiates PSI's strategic rationales for operating as a GUF in public services, suggesting how this can also broaden the understanding of labour internationalism.

2. Theoretical discussion

2.1. Changing landscapes of public sector work

Labour scholars seem to agree that globalisation processes tend to limit the room for manoeuvre in national labour markets (Fairbrother & Rainnie, 2005; Herod, 2001; Hyman, 1999, pp. 94–115; Waterman, 1999). Munck (2004) points for example to "the Polanyi problem", which refers to the increased need to re-regulate the world market at a time when the institutions traditionally seen as capable of doing so (nation-states and national trade unions) are weakened by a scalar mismatch vis-à-vis the globalised operations of capital.

The literature on labour internationalism mainly revolves around industrial sectors marked by private employers, and the globalisation of production and competitive pressures in these (Bergene, 2007; Blyton, Lucio, McGurk, & Turnbull, 2001; Ghigliani, 2005; Lambert & Gillan, 2007). Industrial sectors have been suggested to achieve coherence through a common occupational identity and labour process (Lucio, 2010), by being subject to a particular set of competitive pressures (Anner, Greer, Hauptmeier, Lillie, & Winchester, 2006), or by their shared dependence on particular technological forms and geographical locations (Bergene, 2010). Neither of the above criteria are sufficient if we want to understand what characterises the public sector, as it encompasses a wide variety of occupational identities, technological forms and systems of distribution and service delivery. It is therefore worth reflecting on how we define and operationalise sectors in the study of global labour, and how does public sector work fit into such a frame of analysis? Rather than looking for common ground in the characteristics of the workforce or the labour process, we argue that there are two defining commonality of public sector workers: their particular kind of employer and the nature of the service they provide.

Public sector workers are employees whose terms of employment are directly regulated by an employment contract with a state or municipal body. A broader definition would also include employees whose conditions of work are intimately reliant upon the public sector through indirect governance mechanisms such as tenders, labour hire agreements and subcontracting arrangements. To understand what characterises the state apparatus as an employer, we take as our point of departure the interesting, but somewhat cryptic, formulation in Jessop's *State theory* (1990, p. 145) that the state "operates in terms of a political calculus which is quite different from the 'profit-and-loss' accounting of market forces". This means that state and local government workers are not directly subjected to the competitive pressures of private service and industrial sectors. Rather, they are formally mandated to serve a human need through providing the means of collective consumption (Carchedi, 1977; Carter, 1995). While ongoing processes of privatisation and marketisation of public sector services continue to blur, move and even question this demarcation between public sector and private sector labour, the notion of a political calculus remains relevant. Jessop offers few direct hints about what this political calculus entails for employment relations, even though he later expands on how the "specialized political rationality" of the public sector entails distinct status hierarchies and *ésprit de corps* (Jessop, 2016, p. 108).

Public sector workers are tasked with providing a particular set of services for collective consumption which set them apart from workers in the auto and garment industries. But even among workers in health, education, policing or central state bureaucratic functions, there are significant differences in their symbolic position in public opinion, the scarcity of their professional competence and the institutional framework in which they negotiate their conditions. Public sector employers are also subordinated to political leaders who strive to maintain democratic legitimacy amidst electoral uncertainty (Lopez, 2004). Hence, it is clear that these sectoral characteristics condition the politics of public sector workers in ways which are quite different from those of private sector workers.

Opportunity structures also vary across geographical scales. Organised public sector workers have to engage with the apparatus of nation-states. Local scales have also shown to be particularly important. Municipal workers, for instance, tend to share geographical location (and sometimes social networks) with service users and employers alike, opening possibilities for local political mobilisation. As long as the public sector of most countries do not transfer any significant portion of their employment relations to supranational state actors, an imagined community of fellow service users and producers need to be constructed for public sector workers pursuing labour internationalism (Tattersall, 2006).

Public sector workers have established international bonds of solidarity for more than a century, and the emphasis on transnational worker politics appear to be increasing. Anner et al. (2006) argue that labour internationalism is driven by push and pull factors: on the one hand, a reactive rationale, as unions respond to perceived threats articulated at scales and in networks that transcend the nation-state; on the other hand, a proactive rationale, where political opportunities are seized and cross-border solidarity is realised through the activities of the regional and global union federations. The need for knowledge sharing and related campaign coordination in a globalising information society represents the proactive logic in public sector internationalism, in a similar fashion to internationalism in other sectors (Lethbridge, 2012).

The reactive logic, however, is less self-evident. A meaningful employer counterpart has shown to be hard to detect at the supranational scale in the public sector. So what do public sector unions react to and who do they engage at the global scale?

State restructuring processes that manifest themselves across the globe might be key to understanding this tendency. Jessop (2016) argued that the geography of advanced contemporary capitalist states change along three intertwined, yet analytically distinct, trajectories. First, denationalisation signals an increased importance for local and transnational governance. Supranational forms of statehood are sought “to match the global scale of the market economy” (Jessop, 2016, p. 202), while subnational scales are strengthened to attract and anchor financial flows. Thus far, the rescaling of statehood has only to a limited degree entailed the rescaling of public sector employment,[1] but if the European Union and other regional governmental organisations are allowed to continue developing, they are likely to become more significant as employers and regulators in the future.

Second, destatisation “redraws the boundaries between state and nonstate apparatuses and activities” through increased outsourcing, public-private partnerships, privatisation and other forms of labour externalisation (Jessop, 2016, p. 203). Trade unions in the public sector are typically well-established in those parts of the local and central state that are being restructured, and their position and membership are threatened both directly, through job losses, and indirectly through their relative absence in private service delivery and the voluntary sector. In certain parts of the public sector, this has led to a transferral of employer functions to transnational actors, for instance through privatisation in health and water, where large multi-national corporations are actively present. Paradoxically, therefore, it is arguably the destatisation of politics, and not the denationalisation of statehood, that is most likely to present public sector unions with an industrial logic at the global scale.

Finally, the internationalisation of policy networks have increased the rate and speed at which public sector employers streamline and import employer policies across borders. As Jessop (2016) puts it, “the international context has become more significant strategically for domestic policy”. Discourses of commercialisation and New Public Management travel fast, and is reconfiguring the political calculus Jessop argued underpins public sector employment. This should encourage public sector unions to expand their presence in global policy arenas.

Each of these processes bring new incentives for public sector workers to articulate global campaigns and networks, as workers and their national union federations find themselves on the defensive. As such, changing state geographies provide an important backdrop for appreciating labour internationalism. But they offer us little in terms of understanding how workers can meaningfully engage in these processes, exploring relevant sources of power and strategies giving direction to such engagements.

2.2. Power resources and global strategies

If neoliberal globalisation and the changing state geographies accentuates the need to pursue labour internationalism, where can workers find sources of power in this context? A useful starting point for approaching trade union strategies at the supranational scale is to look for what has been characterised as different ‘power resources’ in labour sociology, and also consider categories relevant to the building of political power within the public sector given the role of the state as an employer and the publicly owned means of production.

Wright (2000) used the term *structural power* to refer to leverage imparted to workers through their position in economic structures, influenced by factors such as scarcity in the labour market or the location of the workplace in production and distribution networks. *Associational power*, on the other hand, was the power possessed through collective organisation and political mobilisation. Silver (2003) built on Wright’s concepts to show how the globalisation of industries have created global labour markets (often reducing workers’ structural power) and placed workplaces in complex divisions of labour (often increasing workers’ structural power). Different trade union strategies can be understood as attempts at mobilising structural power by better matching the spatial organisation of employers (e.g. through establishing new scales of negotiation or corporate networks), combined with efforts to build associational power through mobilising members and other sources of popular support.

In many national labour markets, public sector workers have been able to compensate for their relatively limited structural power by maintaining high levels of unionisation. Moreover, industrial action in the public sector can be effective due to their reliance on a single employer (the state), their integral role in the social division of labour (particularly education and health workers), and by being less threatened by relocation than many other workers (Jordhus-Lier, 2012b; Silver, 2003). Public sector unions are unable to paralyse global production networks through industrial action, like some autoworkers and transport workers have done (Herod, 2001). Yet, a global union federation like the PSI is not without ways to harness the associational power of members organised in their affiliate unions.

To better understand this we follow the so-called ‘second wave’ of the power resources approach, by identifying two complementary forms of political leverage. One path is when unions try to build what Schmalz, Ludwig, and Webster (2018, p. 121) label the *institutional power*, i.e. “power resources [that] have developed at the supranational level, as a result of International Labour Organisation (ILO) social and labour standards”. Although supportive of this tactic, the authors warn that while institutional power has the ability to make past struggles into lasting victories – they are not necessarily everlasting. Another form of power is defined as *societal power* by Schmalz et al. (2018). Societal power refers to the ability of trade unions to cooperate with other social groups in ways that build support for union demands. By working in the public sphere, unions can challenge hegemonic narratives and discourses to pave the way for worker-friendly policies. For global union federations to strengthen the societal power of its members, they need to be driving “a process of knowledge development that affects how issues are perceived over time”, to cite Lethbridge (2012, p. np).

‘Power resources’ were originally conceived of as a heuristic device to understand local and national labour struggles (Silver, 2003; Wright, 2000), but are relevant for the analysis of labour internationalism and global union federations. In order to understand how relevant power resources are mobilised at supranational scales, we look more closely at Munck and his ideal-type categorisations based on the socio-spatial character of labour movement strategy repertoires (Munck, 2004; 2010).

According to Munck (2004) organised labour have to find sustainable strategic solutions to the challenges resulting from neoliberal globalisation and the above-mentioned ‘Polanyi problem’. Munck criticises the strategic discussion in labour studies for a lack of spatial sensitivity, and pursues a more explicit geographical perspective by including a scalar dimension into this framework. Therefore, trade unions must simultaneously rethinking their strategic orientations and their scalar articulation. The purpose of including scale in this discussion is not to view the global as the only appropriate scale of action, but to view it as crucial to a process of union renewal without neglecting the importance of other spatial strategies.

He leans on a comprehensive industrial relations literature in outlining the strategic dimension, which is seen to stretch out between activities based on the logic of the market at the one end, and politics attuned to the needs of society at the other. At the market end of the spectrum, we find institutionalised cooperation with employers, including business unionism in the US and the European system of works

[1] As an illustration, only 0.0001 percent of the EU population were civil servants in the EU system in 2015. (‘How many people work for the EU?’ by Christopher Huggins, *The Conversation*, 3 June 2016).

councils. Social movement unionism represents its counterpoint. Munck has support from many progressive scholars in arguing that neoliberal globalisation forces trade unions to look towards the society end of the spectrum, by actively seeking alliances with civil society formations beyond the institutions of markets and states. Lying between these two "poles of attraction" are state-oriented strategies, and the institutionalised relationships often associated with so-called political unionism.

While we are broadly sympathetic to this reading, two aspects of Munck's critique are worth some further comments. Firstly, the scalar mismatch at the heart of Munck's argument is an invitation to a remodelled labour movement, not unlike the calls for a *global social movement unionism* (GSMU) in progressive labour studies, and what Upchurch and Mathers (2012) more broadly identify as radical political unionism. That being said, it is worth noting that GSMU has been criticised for being touted as a universal panacea for union revival. The actual conditions leading to this type of unionism in some contexts, and not in others, are less understood (see Fairbrother & Webster, 2008; Hyman, 2004). In the academic literature GSMU figures more often as an ideal-type than as an empirical phenomenon marked by a consistent and substantive commitment between unions and civil society organisations (exceptions are Dobrusin, 2014; Lambert, 2002). Munck even argues that the strategies of global union federations displays a move "away from the broader counter-globalisation movement currently organising outside the workplace" (Munck, 2008, p. 18). Such a tendency accentuates a market orientation pursued among global union federations in dialogue with multi-national corporations. While this can point to a certain strategic contradiction between two different forms of organisation (Munck, 2008, 2018), it contrasts with the realities within the public sector where both the conditions for building broader alliances and corporate dialogues are different.

Secondly, Munck (2004, 2010) refers to state-oriented strategies as operating within the parameters of the nation-state involving national unions and union federations, not unlike what Upchurch and Mathers (2012) has characterised as institutional political unionism. On the other hand, it emerges elsewhere that global unions can have strong relationships with organisations like the ILO or the EU (Munck, 2018). Through a relational approach we can appreciate how political unionism transcends the national domain through engagements with international political institutions and supranational forms of statehood. Such multi-scalar political couplings are of particular relevance to our case, given that the state is the main employer of public sector union members.

Altogether, we believe that the analytical distinction between state-, market- and society-oriented strategies could be maintained even when examining global unionism among public sector employees. In the remainder of the paper, we therefore seek to present an appropriation and extension of Munck's strategies. The aim of the distinction is to further specify, and thereby better appreciate, important orientations in labour internationalism – and understand how strategies in the public sector contrasts with the private sector. To inform this analysis empirically, we now turn to the case of PSI.

3. Labour internationalism through the Public Services International (PSI)

Established in 1907, PSI is a global union federation with a long history characterised by different periods of internationalism (Keller & Höferl, 2007). PSI's members are found in municipal services, local government and public administration. While other GUFs, like Education International (EI), are also representing public sector workers in specific occupations, PSI is unique in organising across the public sector. Its members deliver services in sectors like water and electricity, health, social services and education. PSI has 650 national affiliates in 165 countries, representing 20 million workers.

PSI elected Rosa Pavanelli as its general secretary in 2012. Pavanelli comes from the communist trade union movement in Italy, and represents a leadership tradition based on a more radical political analysis. Since her arrival, PSI has become a more vocal critic of neoliberal globalisation focusing the attention increasingly towards different oppositional campaigns. These campaigns are directed towards the mobilisation and actions of the federation's own member unions, but PSI also connects with broader mass movements and coalitions made up of different civil society groups.

3.1. Responding to global challenges

For the purposes of our analysis, it is interesting that PSI leaders motivate this shift by a reactive rationale, with reference to challenges articulated beyond national parameters. As Rosa Pavanelli puts it:

> *"The idea is that public services unions around the world are more or less facing the same challenges, despite differences in national governments policies; there is a global attack on public services. […] Our enemies are coordinating and deciding strategies at the global level. […] The challenge is global. If we do not organise and provide strong answers in response to the challenges, we will be defeated! I am almost convinced that this is a crucial moment in the conflict of classes. And I really think it is an issue of class conflict" (Interview, General Secretary, 26.06.2014).*

Asked to elaborate, two specific threats are identified by PSI's leadership, both of which are globally articulated and intimately connected. On the one hand, PSI opposes reform ideas entailing the marketisation of common goods. Second, they oppose the macroeconomic austerity programs reverberating through the public sectors, on the increase in developed countries after the 2008 financial crisis. Both are ascribed to the neoliberal agenda of leading international financial institutions (such as the IMF and the World Bank) and seen as an attack on public services, their unions and their users.

The above quote ends on a more structural critique. For the current leadership, concerns about neoliberal austerity are put in relation to the class-based concentration of wealth and corporate power in the international political economy. In the words of Rosa Pavanelli, addressing PSI's 2017 world congress in Geneva:

> *There is no mistaking the signs that democracy is retreating and that private economic interests take precedence over everything else. The gap between rich and poor has never before been so great, and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a very few - some of whom have more money than many states - represent almost in a physical way the intolerable level of injustice that has been unleashed by liberal globalization. Social conquests that we took for granted are being rolled back, or simply eliminated. (…) At the same time, we have seen the power of the multinationals grow to the point that they can often impose their will on states* (Pavanelli, 2017).

Corporate business interests and the financial system are perceived to wield pervasive powers over states and their strategic political calculations. The growing dominance of multinational companies has also enabled their entry into public service delivery, a key concern for public sector workers. This opposition to corporate globalisation is epitomised in PSI's slogan "people over profit" which was set as the main theme for its world congress in 2017.

3.2. Building a global movement

While PSI cite concrete global challenges they are forced to respond to, a proactive rationale is also outlined in justifying their strategic reorientation. Rather than merely confronting the transnational nature of their members' employers and the financial institutions regulating the services in which they work, PSI representatives stress the need to build solidarity and an alternative set of policies at the global scale. Through their campaign work, PSI has initiated transnational alliances with civil society groups around issues like corporate taxation, trade, water

services and privatisation.

Most of the federation's members are dependent on a publicly funded sector providing basic services to citizens. It is therefore unsurprising that the most concerted efforts to pursue global social movement unionism has focused directly on the delivery of public services, based on what is seen as a community of interest between workers and users:

> *The successful defence or improvements of working conditions of public sector workers can often be aligned with struggles for improvement of public services which benefit the public. That is actually a very strong material interest public sector unions have. (…) we [unions] have an interest in good quality public services because it means that workers are not over-worked and over-stressed; which means that you fund public services properly (Interview, Project Officer, 26.06.2014).*

In the same interview, the PSI official explicitly highlights the contrast to private sector unionism:

> *In a manufacturing company, there is a more detached relationship between solidarity as a worker and the people buying their cars.*

Overall, the most consistent expression of a coalition strategy has been within the subsector of water and sanitation. At the beginning of the 2000s, PSI started to engage in alliance building beyond the trade union movement, a strategy only later pursued more widely by its leadership. In the late 1990s, the number of contractual transfers of public services to MNCs peaked, particularly in the utilities sectors delivering electricity and urban water services. PSI sought to publicly expose the consequences of privatisation projects driving cuts in services, pay and jobs (Keller & Höferl, 2007). The global water justice movement, also known as the Reclaiming Public Water network (RPW), emerged in the early 2000s as a movement of movements and is still active. It has consisted of relatively loose transnational networks connecting unions, regional and urban grassroots movements, global social justice and right-based groups, and NGOs. The relationships that developed between different groups, created a transnational space based on the mutual political concerns of service users and workers often fighting water privatisation reforms (Conant, 2010; Terhorst, 2008).

The strategic framing has tended to bring broader equity and affordability issues for users to the fore, rather than immediate workplace demands.

> *"RPW is a chance for us as workers and trade unions to connect more organically with citizens in their various organizations in a way that allows us to change policy.» (Former PSI Utilities Officer, RPW-meeting in Brussel 01.03 - 03.02.2010, quoted in notes by* Conant, 2010, p. 3*)*

The global water movement converged around the rejection of privatisation and the commodification of drinking water, and has mobilised a human rights discourse in demanding universal access to basic services (Terhorst, 2008). According to David Boys, PSI's deputy general secretary and leader of its water campaign, RPW's focus on user concerns was based on a proactive rationale:

> *We [public unions] no longer have enough muscle on our own and need to work with civil society groups. (…) That is a growing focus and interest for PSI. For us a social mobilisation unionism is a practical fact of life. We have to deal with the communities (…) We cannot solve our fights for [workers] rights and interests without the people involved in our production [of services] (Interview, 28.11.2016).*

PSI has worked together with local unions and national PSI affiliates in this broad fight for social justice. The main role of the global union federation has been to provide international coordination. Information exchange is central to that, and PSI actively draws on its own research unit in exposing the problems of privatisation reforms and in formulating policy alternatives serving as an important resource within the broader global movement. Together with widespread popular protests worldwide since the late 90s, where the "water war" in Bolivia was the most noted case, the global movement contributed to water privatisation becoming a highly politicised issue. Water privatisation projects in many cities were cancelled and remunicipalised. Politicians became reluctant to this unpopular policy and its problems, while MNCs experienced economic risks and failed earnings particularly in developing countries. These factors made it difficult for the World Bank or MNCs to maintain their initial strategy and realise new projects (Hall, Lobina, & Motte, 2005; Magdahl, 2012).

3.3. Transcending sectoral boundaries

In 2017, PSI launched a new campaign related to another subsector, seeking to build on their success with social movement unionism in water. The global right to health campaign aimed to "build a mass global movement that could influence concrete policies towards attaining Universal Public Health Coverage (UPHC)" (PSI, 2016, p. 7). PSI's movement orientation has however also transcended the political terrain most immediately affecting the sectoral base of their member unions, as exemplified by a global campaign on taxation initiated in 2012.

Key demands of PSI's campaign is a transaction tax in the finance sector and measures to reduce tax avoidance by MNCs. While taxation might not seem like a core issue of a public service union federation, PSI officials argue that the redistribution of wealth is crucial for public services and in protecting them from ongoing austerity measures. As one official puts it, PSI "has a strong interest in tax justice, because we need to make sure there is income to fund public services". It takes part in broader international coalitions, such as the Global Alliance for Tax Justice (GATJ, 2019) and was a founding member of the coalition establishing The Independent Commission for the Reform of International Corporate Taxation (ICRICT, 2019). PSI's campaign contributes to the sharing of strategic arguments and research through reports, various joint conferences and international strategy meetings for example on reforms concerning tax avoidance or leaks about tax havens. PSI staff has also lobbied within forums on finance in the UN and mobilise unions to do campaign work nationally.

PSI has furthermore launched global campaigns against liberalised global trade. This is increasingly directed towards the new generation of free trade agreements emerging after the negotiations in the WTO have stalled during the last decade. They oppose the liberalisation of trade in public services and seek to avoid the entry of MNCs into the public sector. PSI (2017a, p. 2) presents itself as a proponent for an alternative vision of development and trade, and a staunch critic of the new free trade agreements, including the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), The Trade in Services Agreement (TiSA) and The Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA).

PSI has thus gone further in aligning itself with the broader alter-globalisation movement than more growth-oriented private sector unions, whose policies on free trade agreements have been limited to the introduction of a labour clause. The alter-globalisation groups have taken a clearer anti-systemic perspective on economic integration and free trade, involving mass popular resistance against important trade deals.

As in the campaigns on water services or tax justice, the role taken by PSI in targeting trade agreements is one of coordination and diffusion of knowledge. It has spread information about the secret negotiations conducted, and attempts to highlight the trade deals' threat to public services, in order to mobilise unions and the broader public (e.g. PSI, 2017b). The withdrawal of Uruguay from the TiSA negotiations in 2015 testifies to the role of public protests and political lobbying. An important catalyst was local unions' contact with PSI, and information received through its broader transnational networks like "Our World Is Not For Sale" - which consists of different organisations fighting the existing model of corporate globalisation reflected in the global trade system.

"In practical terms, the first contact on this issue was at a seminar in Geneva. PSI colleagues asked me if I was aware that Uruguay was involved in negotiations over a treaty on services, the TiSA? Neither myself nor the leadership of the trade union movement had any idea." (Fernando Gambera, International Secretary in the Uruguayan trade union centre PIT-CNT cited in PSI, 2017b*).*

3.4. A conflicted presence in global institutional frameworks

It is important to stress that PSI's increased efforts to build global social movement unionism complements, rather than replaces, their presence in extant global institutions dedicated to the extension of labour rights. Given its role as a global union federation representing public sector worker, PSI engages in various political-institutional spaces to improve rights and conditions in public services workplaces and beyond. This involves dialogue with employer representatives and regulatory bodies, which are anchored in the apparatus of nation-states. Therefore, PSI's approach to bargaining and lobbying is deeply political, as explained by its Policy Director:

"We need to exercise political power more than others. I would argue that all unions need to exercise political power, and some of them have forgotten that. But we exercise political power more because our employers are largely democratically elected" (Interview, 26.06.2014).

While PSI's leadership expressed support for transnational social dialogue, they also took a somewhat critical stance, arguing that social dialogue has proved to be less effective in countering the neoliberal agenda pursued by international institutions. They also see the status of social dialogue waning in the international system, which adds another incentive to use resources to oppose a global neoliberal agenda seeking to undermine trust in industrial relations systems.

Speaking at the PSI's world congress in 2017, the general secretary pointed out that they are working to defend ILO against perceived attacks coming from the World Bank and OECD in the form of parallel, non-ILO initiatives on work and labour standards. ILO is the only international organisation with a tripartite system where labour has equal status with employers and governments. PSI currently participates in several of its committees.

In the past, however, the leadership of previous general secretaries in PSI have been more committed to the idea of social dialogue. Such a social democratic union tradition contrasts with the conflict-oriented analysis upheld by the current Deputy General Secretary, which he argues was not made sufficient part of PSI's unionism:

The problem I have been dealing with since I came [to PSI] in 1999 and up until [the leadership of] Rosa is this concept; being clear that we have enemies. The recognition that there are institutions out there that seek to weaken and/or eliminate the [public] trade union movement. (…) The assumption has been that we can do more with the notion of win-win (…) because in the [dialogue] model everybody is a winner. (Interview, 28.11.2016).

Given this historical backdrop of strategic tension, it comes as no surprise that the current leadership now meets criticism from its Nordic member unions for giving less priority to PSI's engagement with global institutions on workplace rights and conditions. Representing the Nordic affiliates in PSI, Kjartan Lund expresses this concern:

The Nordic unions think it is positive that PSI now works more with civil society organisations, although we are not as committed to such campaigns as unions in other parts of the world. However, it is a bit sad that PSI currently gives low priority to global institutions and organisations, particularly the ILO that we think is very important. Here, we [unions] meet both employers and politicians from governments which to a large extent is an employer in the public sector, making the only framework we have globally to regulate labour issues (Interview, General Secretary Nordic Public Service Unions, 03.11.2017, our translation).

As this quote illustrates, the Nordic affiliates demonstrate a higher level of trust in institutional social dialogue and thus view PSI's strategic reorientation as a missed opportunity to achieve binding commitments from employers and politicians within the ILO's institutional mechanisms.

3.5. Lobbying financial institutions

Notwithstanding these qualms, PSI do engage global institutions, and they do so beyond the confines of the ILO. In fact, PSI has had a more active role in political lobbying than other GUFs (Müller, Platzer, & Rüb, 2010), targeting issues of privatisation, corporate taxation and the right to health. Various institutions are being engaged through lobbyism, as highlighted by PSI's General Secretary:

As a global organisation, one thing we do is lobbying international organisation at the global level (…) not only ILO. We are very much focusing on the financial institutions in terms of lobbying - the IMF, regional development banks which are almost the regional branches of the World Bank. (Interview, 26.06.14).

Lobbyism can also have domestic targets, where PSI encourages national union members to influence their respective governments in trying to change the policies of international institutions. As developed countries are important shareholders in institutions like the IMF, they can be held to account for their role in promoting privatisation in developing countries. The IFIs also represent targets for the inclusion of labour standards in the loan conditions they offer to developing countries. Here, too, the Nordic unions voice their concern over less support from PSI for a dialogue-based approach:

This [lack of strategic priority] is partly also the case for institutions like the World Bank, but also regional development banks. (…) Nordic unions have for example had a project with the Asian Development Bank, that we thought was fruitful by making them include loan conditions on fundamental ILO labour conventions. PSI has done a lot less to give active support for such work the last five years, whereas it did a lot more during the five years before that [under the previous leadership in PSI] (Interview, General Secretary Nordic Public Service Unions, 03.11.2017, our translation).

3.6. Targeting multinational private employers

Like many of their national affiliates, the PSI has to face a fundamental dilemma in their fight against privatisation of public services. Despite efforts to halt the erosion of public ownership related to their members' workplaces, an increasing share of workers in public services are working for multinational corporations.

We have sectors that are already organised trough MNCs. In water and energy, it is big MNCs winning the tenders for the management of services. And we have it in waste. In health it is expanding now. (Interview, General Secretary, 26.06.2014)

Yet, it is worth noting that most of their constituency remain with public sector employers. According to one of PSI's officials this share is likely between 85 or 90 percent of their affiliates' members. Compared to global union federations in other sectors, this is also a relatively new phenomenon for PSI. David Hall, the former director of PSI's research unit (PSIRU), explains how the MNC activity made the international dimension more important in general:

The development of MNCs in these sectors was the key trigger, I think. Whereas for many years in the industrial [unions] you need to be organised internationally because they [MNCs] had become employers.

That was simply not true until the 1980s in the UK, and the 1990s for the rest of the world [in public services]. Then, that started and triggered a much greater interest in international dimensions. The employer role gets privatised because of the existence of private companies, which are MNCs (Interview 29.01.2014).

As a result, PSI and other global union federations in public service delivery has been confronted with the choice of engaging these employers as partners in industrial relations. Also, it has encouraged some of PSI's member unions to argue for the establishment of global framework agreements, like those pursued by other global union federations such as IndustriALL. Starting in 2005, PSI signed an agreement with the French multinational EDF and has since then finalised negotiations with the French company SUEZ (now ENGIE) and Italian ENEL. These three MNCs are mainly in the energy sector, and the framework agreements may include requirements on fundamental working rights, social dialogue and corporate social responsibility (PSI, 2019b). More importantly, however, it also means that PSI has signed relatively few agreements, which is given limited priority. In comparison, other GUFs like IndustriALL has signed around 45 agreements (IndustriALL, 2018) and UNI global union more than 50 (UNI, 2019).

Still, the agreements signed have enabled unions and management representatives to engage in joint international training sessions to implement labour rights across the company, as stipulated in the renegotiated agreement from 2018 between PSI and the French electricity company EDF (PSI, 2019a). A related advantage is training or information sharing involving unions from different places within the same company, which can clarify issues like the lack of health and safety protections or the right to organise in specific countries.

4. Strategic rationales in the internationalism of public sector workers

After having shown how public sector landscapes represent characteristic political opportunities, constraints and resources for workers, and having explored how the current leadership of the Public Services International traverse these landscapes, we can return to the questions from which we set out: Why do public sector workers, or more precisely their international union representatives, seek to articulate a global unionism?

Our review of PSI's strategic orientations shows that this global union federation engages in a more complex set of activities that are hard to precisely pinpoint along the strategic and scalar dimensions of Munck's framework. In other words, a single label cannot do justice to the strategic orientation of PSI. Therefore, we will not use this analysis to hone in on a particular category. Rather, we will use the interview material to identify three parallel rationales that seem to motivate PSI officials, albeit to different degrees. These three – which we have labelled the *political-institutional*, the *industrial-corporate* and the *movement-popular* rationale – can be seen to appropriate and extend Munck's strategic dimensions mentioned earlier, all adapted to a global union context. While these rationales can co-exist in the strategies of global union federations, we argue that they are expressed in a particular way for public sector workers. The strategy rationales are also not equally important, which we will come back to in the conclusion. In what follows, we therefore treat each of these first in isolation. We place particular emphasis on how the leadership of the PSI justify them by implying the use of different power resources and by engaging with the employer counterpart in its many capacities.

4.1. The political-institutional rationale

The political-institutional rationale refers to the wish to build or maintain relationships with political institutions in order to affect public policy. A PSI officer made clear that this rationale of engaging the state as a political apparatus has a particular significance for their members:

"Decisions about working conditions for public sector workers are essentially political decisions and they always remain that - you can't just engage in a battle with capital the way you can within the private sector." (Interview, Project Officer, 26.06.2014).

One of his colleagues elaborates:

"Car workers that work in a factory and have a problem with their boss, can go on strike and harm their economic interests - that is how you bargain. That logic does not work quite the same way for public sector workers. We need to build coalitions and exercise political power, more than others." (Interview, Policy Director, 26.06.2014)

It can be argued, based on the quotes above, that the political-institutional rationale is primarily reactive in the sense that it responds to a set of challenges and possibilities seen in extant public institutions. But when these institutions become vehicles for securing rights such as universal access to drinking water, there is clearly a proactive element in PSI's internationalism. From a power resources perspective, the rationale rests on converting the associational and societal power of national unions into institutional power.

Many of PSI's member affiliates invest considerable resources into institutionalised social dialogue mechanisms at the national level. But the political-institutional rationale also guide supranational union actors. Not least is this the case in the European Union, where denationalisation has opened up regional institutional spaces for unionism through the European social dialogue system – within and across economic sectors. PSI's European affiliate the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) has built an organisational apparatus enabling them to engage in these dialogues. Outside Europe, regional offices of the PSI are less able to engage an employer counterpart and therefore focus their efforts on national policy processes. Importantly, the political-institutional orientation is not limited to institutionalised social dialogue, but also motivates the ad hoc lobbying of development banks exemplified above.

For PSI, the political-institutional rationale hinges on the public nature of their employer, as well as the public and collective nature of the services their members produce. They perceive the public ownership of service utilities and public goods to be threatened by neoliberal reforms. These in turn threaten the working conditions and rights of PSI's members, and limit public sector organisational rights. An example is when work in health, police or even energy is classified as 'essential services' and therefore exempt from the right to strike.

By way of conclusion, the political-institutional rationale continues to play an important role in PSI's politics, but their room for maneouvre appears to be shrinking fast in the present ideological climate.

"Typically, the position of public sector unions was very solid, in the sense of good industrial relations within the unit and the ability to influence multiple dimensions of conditions of working life - in a very good way. And both privatisation and marketisation and corporatisation of various forms start reducing that space. So, the unions no longer have that kind of internal bargaining position." (Interview, former director PSI's research unit, 29.01.2014)

4.2. The movement-popular rationale

The marginalisation of trade unions in institutionalised dialogue may encourage a second way of thinking. The movement-popular rationale is expressed through unionists' determination to address wider social problems beyond the workplace and, relatedly, in efforts to place workplace issues in a social context. This would be placed at the society end of Munck's strategic dimension. Primarily conceived as a proactive rationale, it seeks to build a political alternative to the traditional institutions of industrial relations. In terms of power resources, the movement-popular rationale rests on building societal power – for its own sake, and in order to maintain and expand the associational power

of unions and bolster the institutional power of workers in existing arrangements.

> *"Unions have to find different avenues of information and solidarity, and have to build solidarity and relationships with people outside the workplace. In PSI's view that is the most successful model of public sector trade unionism." (Interview, Project Officer, 26.06.2014).*

The PSI officials we interviewed explicitly stated this need to build societal power, both through organisational networks and through discursive strategies directed at the quality of their services. They argue that the movement-popular rationale can be particularly effective against public sector employers vulnerable to democratic pressure and electoral uncertainty. Ideologically, this rationale tends to be framed as a form of resistance towards neoliberal globalisation by the PSI leadership.

The public nature of the service provided by public sector workers is instrumentalised by unionists when seeking alliances with communities and civil society groups. Workers in public services arguably stand in a unique position to pursue the movement-popular rationale. Given the public character of work and consumption alike, unions and civil society groups may see mutual benefits in promoting publically funded, high-quality services. In contrast, there are relatively few cases in the literature where private sector GUFs have actively worked with social movements (exceptions include campaigns against free trade and the operations of mining companies, as documented by Dobrusin, 2014; Sadler, 2004).

The scalar dimension, however, presents a global union federation like the PSI with both challenges and possibilities. Public sector workers' unions have shown the ability to build local community support based on co-location and mutual social bonds (Jordhus-Lier, 2012a; Tufts, 1998) (Jordhus-Lier, 2012a; Pastor, 2001; Tufts, 1998), but their particular local politics may also undermine such alliances on different scales (e.g. McKinley, 2014; Novelli, 2011). Union-community solidarity cannot be automatically scaled up to the global level. Yet, framings that construct common dependencies around the delivery of local public services, and which show these to be threatened by neoliberal reform, have led to the construction of imagined communities forging international solidarity. Such broader movements representing 'transnational counterpublics' (Juris, 2008, p. 3), can engage in the scalar politics contesting the public policy articulation and transfer by institutions at the global level. They can also provide direct political or material support for specific local struggles. In this, PSI has for example chosen to harness societal power through its role as a coordinating apparatus trying to connect otherwise different local struggles (e.g. Wainwright, 2012).

4.3. The industrial-corporate rationale

When global union actors seek to construct meaningful relations with profit-seeking employers or networks of employers, they base their activities on what we label an industrial-corporate rationale. This rationale differs from the other two on several fronts. It is often an explicitly reactive rationale, responding to the globalisation of employer structures. Moreover, it is an attempt to convert the associational power contained in a global union federation into institutional power, for the sake of coordinating the structural workplace power of workers across national borders and along global value chains.

The industrial-corporate rationale has become a main tenet of GUF practices, as for example seen in the automobile industry, other manufacturing sectors and in services (Hadwiger, 2016). The overwhelming majority of PSI's members are, however, still within the public sector and negotiate with state and municipal employers. Therefore, this rationale is the one where the contrast between public and private sector union federations are most clearly expressed. For PSI, the industrial-corporate rationale is fraught with contradictions, but is at the same time born out of necessity following what Jessop would label the destatisation of public services – with privatisation efforts in health, electricity and water services. While the rationale remains marginal in public services, it is unlikely to disappear from the internal strategic dialogue of the PSI in the current political climate.

Still there is reluctance to engaging with profit-driven employers within the PSI system. This is not surprising, given that PSI's member unions have emerged from public sector employment relations and remain ideologically committed to resisting profit-driven public services. Building institutional dialogue with multinational companies risks undermining this norm within public services further.

Moreover, efforts to secure employer compliance with international labour rights and minimum standards can also stand in the way of building broader alliances with civil society groups. While the industrial-corporate rationale designates a narrow role to the GUFs as representatives of employees, the movement-popular rationale actively seeks to embrace positionalities beyond that of the worker (e.g. identities as users of welfare services, women, ethnic minorities or as members of indigenous groups). The industrial-corporate rationale might also conflict with the political-institutional rationale, not least when GUFs allocate their limited organisational resources. As a result, market-oriented strategies might limit the capacity of unions to target regulatory institutions and public policy. In this respect, the industrial-corporate rationale represents a narrowing of labour internationalism compared to the other two.

5. Concluding discussion

In showing how three strategic rationales are expressed by union officials in the Public Services International, the paper served two related purposes. First, these rationales offer a better understanding of *why* public sector workers pursue forms of labour internationalism, exploring their distinct political realities. Thus far, public sector unions have been largely missing from the literature on transnational unionism (although Bieler & Lindberg, 2011 do specify the distinct character of public sector unions).

Second, by situating our case in relation to the wider literature on global unionism, our study also informs the conceptual understanding of labour internationalism beyond the public sector. The political-institutional, the movement-popular and the industrial-corporate are also rationales that can be seen in accounts of private sector internationalism (Dobrusin, 2014; Hyman, 2005; Müller et al., 2010). We argue that they contribute to a fuller appreciation of the strategy repertoire within labour internationalism more broadly, and the diversified combinations constituting the strategies of global union federations. The analytical categories employed in this article may serve as sensitising concepts and can be useful in not reducing the complex politics of labour internationalism to singular labels. Besides this, union revival may necessitate a variety of strategies (e.g. Munck, 2018). The weight given to each of these orientations are likely to vary according to specific sectoral and structural characteristics, and the means of associational power harnessed by particular GUFs, regional or national unions. As indicated above, their dominance may also change over time.

By way of summary, our study finds that oppositional campaigns and alliance building with other social movements, motivated by the movement-popular rationale, has become particularly prominent in the public sector representing a more radical global political unionism. In PSI a 'society' orientation (Munck, 2004) has gained momentum, which has been championed by the new leadership that took office in 2012. Still, the political-institutional rationale continues to form an important part of PSI's global strategy. Both of these, in turn, contrast with an industrial-corporate rationale. PSI's activities towards multi-national corporate employers constitutes a minor strategy with some isolated efforts. Put simply, public sector internationalism is more politically orientated through their engagement with broader alliances, the state apparatus and supranational institutions. This finding is not surprising,

and aligns well with Jessop's assertion that state employers differs from private sector employers through their political calculus.

In many ways, PSI's approach turns the realities observed in private sector labour internationalism on its head. Here, different industrial-corporate business and global production orientations are often dominant (e.g. Cumbers, Nativel, & Routledge, 2008), political-institutional engagements are less pursued than in the public sector (Müller et al., 2010), whereas popular movement coalitions remain a minor tendency (Munck, 2008). Unions in manufacturing often fail to see the potential in alliances with social movements and NGOs, and these constituencies are furthermore difficult for them to mobilise (Anner, 2003; Lindberg, 2011). Moreover, private sector manufacturing unions situated within global production networks may be more concerned with national competitiveness than transnational solidarity. In this respect, Bieler and Erne (2015, p. 172) note for example that the broader European labour movement did not manage to agree on common anti-austerity actions after the financial crisis, while public sector unions forged a relatively strong alliance with civil society groups around particular public services.

Where alternative civil society coalitions do occur (like in the clothing and textile industry), they tend to be single and fleeting mobilisations rather than consistently pursued (Anner et al., 2006; Lambert & Gillan, 2007). Alliances may also emerge around attempts to challenge corporate employers on sweatshop working conditions (Bieler & Lindberg, 2011) and by promoting corporate social responsibility (Sadler, 2004). These efforts may thus diverge from the ideal type of global social movement unionism which represents a strengthening of civil society against neoliberal statehood to achieve common social gains (e.g. Lambert, 2002). When private sector union coalitions engage with the state, they are often on issues such as free trade policies (e.g. Dobrusin, 2014), whereas issues at the top of PSI's agenda – such as public sector austerity, corporate tax justice or the privatisation of basic services – are given less attention.

Trade unions have long sought representation in different transnational political arenas, particularly through the aforementioned dialogues in the ILO. This continues to be a prominent form of engagement, even with the power resources available to labour and the regulatory ability of nation-states on the wane in the face of global market forces (Hyman, 2005). The growing dominance of MNCs and the failure to introduce a 'social clause' into the WTO framework have however increasingly lead to an industrial-corporate approach towards multinational private sector employers (Helfen & Fichter, 2013). Private sector unions in some industries like in transportation have nevertheless been more active, exploring international governance arrangements on transport safety (Müller et al., 2010) and a certification of workers' skills to determine minimum wages for example among seafarers (Anner et al., 2006). Yet, political lobbying is particularly important in the public sector where labour rights and employment conditions are directly affected by neoliberal state restructuring, and by focusing on both institutional processes around workplace concerns and broader movement objectives (Müller et al., 2010).

Reflecting on the current situation of global labour, Munck (2018, p. 206) has recently called for a political rethinking. He observes for example the problematic movement away from the position as a countervailing power to capital in pursuing partnerships with corporations, while also failing to engage meaningfully with GSMU alliances despite a rising recognition in global trade union structures of the need for such collaborations. Our study also presents a differentiated sectoral analysis of the conditions for such orientations to arise and be maintained. PSI represents an interesting case transcending traditional concepts of "older" unions and "newer" social movements (e.g. Calhoun, 1993), moving across typical contradictions in their transnational strategies (e.g. Munck, 2018). It also sheds light on how political-institutional unionism can be meaningful even at the global level. By adding insights to existing knowledge on labour internationalism, we can hopefully inspire future analyses of public and private sector internationalism. A task ahead will be to also better understand the specific contradictions arising from different types of strategies as they develop over time.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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