

## **The Power Resources Approach**

**By Stefan Schmalz and Klaus Dörre**

A consensus has emerged in international trade union research that trade unions are not solely at the mercy of major societal trends like globalisation or rise of the service economy, but rather they have the option of making strategic choices. A new branch of research has since established itself under the label Labour Revitalisation Studies (LRS) emphasising the ability of trade unions to act strategically (for instance Voss/Sherman 2000; Frege/Kelly 2004; Turner 2006; Brinkmann et al. 2008; Schmalz/Dörre 2013; Lévesque/Murray 2013; Fairbrother 2015; Murray 2017). At the heart of this line of research is the question, what power resources are available for trade unions in a wide range of contexts while repositioning themselves as organisations. This debate has significantly shaped the way international scientists and scholars are dealing with the issue of trade union renewal. In this discussion, the power resources approach has emerged as a research heuristic.

The power resource approach is founded on the basic premise that the workforce can successfully defend its interests by collective mobilisation of power resources. Building on Max Weber's definition of power which is understood as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance" (Weber 1968: 53). Thus, power is perceived first and foremost as the power to do something (power to) and not as power to determine the rules of play (power over) (Lévesque/Murray 2010). It is true that the use of this power is always embedded in social relationships and power relations; in fact it can even be used in specific historical phases to significantly change these societal structures. But the primary concern of the power resource approach is not structural power relations of this kind, but rather the ability of wage earners to assert their interests within the given general context. Its main objective is to analyse the spaces of action of trade unions and employees under given circumstances.

The basic concepts of the approach were originally created by Erik Olin Wright and Beverly Silver (Wright 2000; Silver 2003). Two concepts, structural and associational power, lay the foundation to the power resources approach. In the ensuing debate with scholars and trade unionists additional sources of labour power have been discussed and the approach was further developed (Chun 2009, AK Strategic Unionism 2013; Gumbrell-McCormick/Hyman 2013; McGuire 2014; Schmalz/Dörre 2014; Brookes 2015, Webster 2015). Today the power resources approach is an established tool in trade union research.

In what follows, the power resources approach will be presented admittedly it has been heavily influenced by the German discussion, but which today is also used internationally. This approach emerged from a discussion between scientists and unionists. The objective of this debate was to contribute to strategy building and to counter the seemingly irreversible decline of German trade unions. The result was a research heuristic which added two further power resources, institutional and societal power, to the original two sources of labour power, structural and associational power (Brinkmann et al. 2008; Dörre 2010; Urban 2013; AK SU 2013; Schmalz/Dörre 2014; see figure 1). This variety of the power resources approach has since then been adopted in the education work and in the strategic discussion in Germany and Switzerland and was also used for research in trade unions and labour unrest in different

world regions such as Europe (Schmalz/Thiel 2017; Lehndorff et al. 2017), Africa (Webster/Ludwig 2017), East Asia (Xu/Schmalz 2017; Zajak 2017) and Latin America (Julian 2012; Melleiro/Steinhilber 2016). The text below is designed to introduce the key features of the approach to an international audience. We will proceed by first outlining the inventory of power resources from the literature and then by providing some thoughts on applying the approach for a global context.

## **Structural Power**

Structural power refers to the position of wage earners in the economic system (Wright 2000: 962; Silver 2003: 13ff.). It is a primary power resource as it is available to workers and employees even without collective interest representation. It arises “out of the type of dependencies between the social parties at the place of work” (Jürgens 1984: 61) and also on the labour market. Structural power rests on the power to cause disruption (disruptive power) and as such to interrupt or restrict the valorisation of capital (Piven 2008: Ch. 2). Workplace bargaining power and marketplace bargaining power are the two forms of structural power.

Workplace bargaining power depends on the status of workers and employees in the production process. It is mobilised by the refusal to continue working, in addition to strikes and sit-ins, can also encompass covert forms of industrial conflict such as sabotage or go-slows (Brinkmann et al 2008: 27). This means that workplace bargaining power is sometimes exercised decentrally or spontaneously. By stopping work, wage earners can cause major costs for capitalists and force them to offer better remuneration or working conditions. Wage-earners in sectors with high labour productivity, highly-integrated production processes or in important export branches have a particularly high degree of workplace bargaining power as local work stoppages have an impact that goes far beyond the work of just those on strike (Silver 2003: 13). Workplace bargaining power is hotly contested however - capital tries to restrict workplace bargaining power by relocating production sites, changing the way production is organised or through rationalisation measures (Harvey 1990: 96). Conversely, wage earners sometimes secure their power position by influencing the reorganisation and innovation process by lobbying the government or creating tripartite institutions (government, employers and unions) on economic and technology politics.

Workplace bargaining power is not only exercised in the direct production process, but also at other points in the capital cycle. For instance, wage earners (in the transport sector, for example) have circulation power or logistical power which can slow the circulation of capital and labour via certain transport routes or distribution channels. Circulation power can for instance be mobilised by street blockades of social groups who are not wage-earners (e.g. informal self-employed workers) (Webster 2015: 119) Employees working in the field of care and education, in nurseries, nursing or private homes exercise reproduction power by disrupting the ability of other workers to perform their wage-earning work and as such influence other sectors of the economy (Becker et al. 2017). Reproduction power often has contradictory effects. In some cases wage earners cannot cause high costs for employers (e.g. in public education). Also, they have to convince the “customers” (e.g. the parents of the children in a playschool) of the legitimacy of their demands for higher wages and better working conditions.

Marketplace bargaining power is the second form of structural power. It is the product of a tight labour market and as such the “possession of rare qualifications and skills demanded by employers, low unemployment” and the “ability to fully withdraw from the labour market and to live off other sources of income” (Silver 2003: 13f.). Marketplace bargaining power is exercised subtly and is only felt indirectly. Employees can simply change their job without fearing unemployment when marketplace bargaining power is high, thereby producing extra training costs and a loss of production for the employers, for instance. To prevent this, higher

wages are paid. Marketplace bargaining power varies depending on the structure of the labour market or in other words its segmentation into core workforces, those in vulnerable employment, the unemployed and other groups. Government intervention and regulation also imposes limits on the labour market, for instance through immigration policy, and influences the marketplace bargaining power of wage earners (Carr 1968; Silver 2003: 20ff.). The limits set are often tightened further by ethnic and gender-specific division lines or actually even enabled by these in the first place. The overall result is that staggered hierarchies prevail between individuals and groups of wage earners. These hierarchies arising from the varying level of resources the wage earners have at their disposal and the limits imposed on the labour market also harbour the negative risk of stripping workers of their sense of solidarity for each other. Such divides become clear in particular in the informal sector in the Global South: informal workers have limited workplace and marketplace bargaining power, while the powerful and relatively well paid workers in major industrial companies and are often considered to enjoy a privileged position.

What is required to successfully apply structural power, is the skill to optimally combine structural power with organisational capacities in the existing institutional setting and to develop an effective conflict and strike strategy. Conflicts can be dealt with more efficiently by deploying the weapon of striking in a targeted way instead of using it repeatedly without any real effect. Historically, changes in the accumulation of capital have always also influenced workplace and marketplace bargaining power (Silver 2005: 13ff.; Dörre 2010: 873f.). The introduction of Fordist assembly line work, for instance, meant that individual industrial workers could interrupt the production process virtually at the touch of a button. This influenced the trade unions' power to act. The decline of the American and of most European trade unions starting in the 1970s was ostensibly to the dwindling structural power of wage earners. Not only did relocations and the focus on shareholder value undermine their workplace bargaining power, the supply-side economic policies of governments like those of Thatcher (1979), Reagan (1981) and Kohl (1982), following the neoliberal watershed, contributed to cementing mass unemployment. In the age of flexible capitalism, in many countries the divides on the labour market between the core workforces and vulnerable groups on the margins have become ever deeper. Together with new approaches of "activating labour market policies" (workfare) these trends have reduced the marketplace bargaining power of the wage earners. However, there are countervailing global trends to be seen as well. For instance, the relocations away from the centres of global capitalism have contributed in some countries of the Global South (China, South East Asia, Mexico) and also Eastern Europe to the emergence of new worker milieus with a high degree of workplace bargaining power.

## **Associational Power**

Associational power arises "from workers uniting to form collective political or trade union workers' associations" (Brinkmann/Nachtwey 2010: 25). It pools the primary power of labourers and employees and can even compensate for a lack of structural power "without fully replacing it however" (ibid.). In contrast to structural power, this requires an organisational process to take place and collective actors to emerge who are capable of producing and executing strategies (Silver 2005: 13ff.). Erik Olin Wright distinguishes between three levels at which such actors come into play (Wright 2000: 963f.; cf Fig. 2): At the workplace – and as such in connection with workplace bargaining power – there are works groups or works councils. At the sectoral level – and as such closely connected to marketplace bargaining power – trade unions are the major players. Finally, in the political system – and as such in connection with societal power – it is above all workers' parties that represent the interests of wage earners. The relationship of the individual levels to one another may undergo historical shifts: decentralized groups at local level may gain influence if the umbrella associations at the national level are weakened, for instance. Above the levels described there are also other trade union actors at the supranational level (for instance in

the form of global union federations) acting transnationally and supporting wage earners above all in countries with weak organisational or institutional resources.

Member numbers are usually cited as a reliable indicator for determining associational power. Karl Marx was already aware of the fact that the “social power of the workmen” lay in the “force of numbers” (Marx 1974: 91). In spite of the great variations in the significance and relevance of membership of trade unions from country to country, the following trend does apply as a result - the higher the degree of unionisation in individual sectors, the stronger the works councils and the higher the number of members of workers parties, the higher the probability that they will successfully represent the wage-earners. Trade unions play a special role: because they offer the possibility of overarching coordination, larger than individual workplaces and autonomous representation of interests, which can counteract weak representation in the political system (Deppe 1979: 192). Associational power is not based solely on the number of members though. Other factors are also of crucial significance (Lévesque/Murray 2010: 336ff.):

**Infrastructural resources:** trade unions require material and human resources to be able to carry out their work. By material resources we mean the financial capacity of a trade union. This consists – alongside a full-to-the-brim strike fund amassed from reserves – of buildings for meetings, training and offices and regular income. Human resources are also important. Trade unions are not only reliant on the work of full-time staff (and exemption from work for works council members and active trade unionists on the shop-floor), they also need to pool certain staff capabilities to be successful. This includes technical specialist staff, scientific research institutes, education establishments and above all experienced volunteers and permanent staff.

**Organisational efficiency:** to exert associational power, efficient organisational structures are necessary (Behrens et al. 2004). Only then can trade unions deploy their infrastructural resources effectively and conduct work action. An efficient organisational structure implies an efficient division of labour in the organisation, established and functioning working processes and a sensible distribution of resources (ibid.: 125ff.).

**Member participation:** in addition to the “willingness to pay”, union members also need to demonstrate a “willingness to act” and play an active role in measures such as strikes, campaigns and in the internal discussion process (Offe/Wiesenthal 1980: 80). If the unions full-time staff are not representative of the grass roots members, this can be an obstacle (Lévesque et al. 2005). Participation can only be ensured if the relationship between active trade unionists and “normal” members is based on a well-established “system of expectations and accomplishments” (Beaud/Pialoux 1999: 363). The relationship between member participation and organisational efficiency is not one of simple correlation (Voss 2010: 377ff.). Without active participation, the trade union turns into a bureaucratic organisation, whilst a very high level of member participation is difficult to sustain and may in the long run undermine efficiency.

**Internal cohesion:** finally, associational power also builds on solidarity between trade union members (Hyman 2001: 169f.; Lévesque/Murray 2010: 336f.). The existence of a collective identity plays a key role in this. It is formed through close-knit social networks, shared everyday experiences and ideological common ground. Internal cohesion in the organisation is crucial to be able to conduct industrial action successfully, overcome crisis situations and to pursue political projects. However, collective identities of workers transform as social milieus change. This means that internal cohesion does not just grow automatically with the emergence of new “homogenous” working classes, it needs to be renewed constantly through activities and actions on the part of the organisation in order to cope with changing collective identities and social milieus.

To effectively harness their own associational power, the structures of the associations have to be optimised so that associational action can be reconciled with the underlying structural conditions and the interests of the members. Organisational flexibility can be enhanced by various strategies such as organising new member groups, deliberate and targeted reallocation of resources, changing the staff structure with a new generation of staff, new forms of member participation or “salient knowledge” (Ganz 2000: 1012), i.e. specific local, biographical knowledge and skills.

The decline of the US and many European trade unions was expressed most saliently through its dwindling associational power. The declining membership numbers attest to this in particular. This in turn led to the trade unions’ infrastructural resources shrinking. With the weakening of the traditional working class milieu in countries such as the US, France, Germany and the UK the internal cohesion of the organisations was also weakened; many members were less willing to get active and become involved. A low representation of groups such as precarious and female workers as a result of major social trends like precarisation, feminisation of work or the rise of the service economy also contributed to this development. Only few individual trade unions in industrial countries such as Germany have been able to defy this decline by changing their organisational structures and recruiting new groups of members (Schmalz/Thiel 2017). However, in some countries of the Global South, new trade union movements have been emerging since the 1980s (South Africa, Brazil, South Korea, South East Asia etc.). This had a great deal to do with the growing industrial sectors in these countries, which allowed them to recruit trade union members with a high degree of workplace bargaining power, who later also engaged in democracy movements, too (for instance in Brazil and South Africa) (Silver 2003: 58ff.).

## **Institutional Power**

Institutional power is usually the result of struggles and negotiation processes based on structural power and associational power. Such institutions, which as “a secondary form of power” constitute “a coagulated form of the two other primary forms of power” (Brinkmann/Nachtwey 2010: 21; on the concept of secondary power cf Jürgens 1984: 61), often result as a concession or event as an attempt at cooperation on the part of capital towards the workforce. New institutions usually arise at the end of combative cycles of the labour movement, historical-political breaks with the past (de-colonialisation) or were implemented when capital was dependent on the labour movement’s willingness to cooperate (Ramsay 1977; Schmalz/Weinmann 2016: 549). Institutional power is of a two-fold nature – whilst from time to time it may grant trade unions far-reaching rights, at the same time it restricts their power to act. The relationship between strengthening and weakening labour rights is always the product of a unique, one-off power balance between capital and labour which has been “solidified” in co-determination institutions (Poulantzas 1978: 123ff.). In the national system of industrial relations, struggles and agreements agreed in the past still echo today – the dual interest representation in Germany (works councils at the level of the workplace and trade unions at industry-wide level) originates, for instance, out of the compromise struck between the classes during the post-war period, whilst the historical centrality of state regulation is still felt in the major strike movements in modern-day France (Artus/Holland 2013: 135ff.). The dual nature of institutional power brings with it the challenge of reconciling the “two faces of unionism” (Webster 1988) – the focus on grass-roots and the movement on the one hand, and institutional representation of interests on the other, or mediating between the “logic of membership” and the “logic of influence” (cf Schmitter/Streeck 1981). It comes down to the ability to use institutions to one’s own ends through lobbying and by exhausting the legal possibilities available, whilst at the same time remaining politically autonomous.

If this is not successful, unions risk scenarios such as representation gaps or a loss of influence over daily politics. Containment of class conflict leads to their “institutional isolation” (Dahrendorf 1959: 268). This means that conflicts are separated from their political content, banished to the economic sphere and dealt with inside individual institutions. This produces specific action routines by collective actors, for instance by trade unions, employer associations and works councils. Here, the type of institutional regulation is key (Müller-Jentsch 1997). There are different types such as legal guarantees (freedom of association, the right to strike etc.), the legal institutional framework (labour courts, etc.), decision-making competences in individual policy fields (economics, labour market etc.) and the collective bargaining system or workplace representation (co-determination, health and safety etc.). Thus, the institutionalisation of class conflict goes hand in hand with its fixation in law and the emergence of different levels of institutional power. These are the same levels at which associational power is exercised and class compromises are forged (Wright 2000: 963): a) the political system; b) the arena of collective bargaining; and c) the workplace (cf Fig. 2). Here, too, institutional power resources have developed at the supranational level, as a result of ILO social and labour standards, for instance, which can play a role in disputes at the national level. Transnational trade union actors usually aim to mobilise and harness the institutional resources at various different levels.

The unique feature of institutional power is its steadfastness over time. It is rooted in the fact that institutions lay down basic social compromises transcending economic cycles and short-term political changes. Trade unions can even still use institutional power resources if their associational and structural power is shrinking. One key question therefore is how stable institutionalised resources are. There are different time horizons that apply here: sometimes they are extremely far-reaching, as they – like the freedom of association – are considered untouchable privileges with constitutional standing or have been enshrined by supranational regimes. Other institutional resources are also very stable as they constitute legal rules and as such can only be altered by going through parliament and legal procedures. There are, however, more fragile agreements. Many corporatist alliances are based on (tripartite) institutionalised dialogue procedures and can be rescinded rather easily (Haipeter 2012: 117f.). Consequently, institutional power does not last forever. There are three ways it can be weakened:

(1) Underlying economic conditions: changes in these also impact institutional power resources. The focus on shareholder value and relocations have undermined the workplace bargaining power of workers and contributed to works councils mainly having to negotiate wage cuts and job losses in this environment (Massa-Wirth 2007).

(2) Behaviour on the part of capital: For institutional procedures to work, the trade unions must be accepted as authentic representatives of employee interests by capital associations and governments. This means that if associational power declines there is the danger they will withdraw from dialogue procedures or that institutions will continue to exist as mere rituals (Ramsay 1977: 488).

(3) Attack on institutional power: This changes the institutional basis of wage earner power. The best-known example of such counter-reforms is Thatcherism, which eroded British labour law to such an extent that the ILO now talks of a “limited right to strike”.

Institutional power has remained rather steadfast in many countries though. For instance, the German case is characterised by the fact that the institutional structure has remained largely intact from a formal point of view, but that since the 1980s, the underlying economic conditions and the behaviour on the side of capital has changed. Dwindling workplace bargaining and associational power of the wage earners contributed to the slow erosion of the institutional structure of dual interest representation, rendering the negotiation processes between capital and labour increasingly asymmetrical (Dörre 2010: 894ff.). Conversely, it can also be very difficult to enshrine new institutional power resources: the Brazilian central-left

governments of “Lula” da Silva and Rousseff (2003-2016), for instance, faltered at the hurdle of fundamentally reforming the labour legislation that had been in place for roughly 70 years. But there are also historical situations in which radical changes do occur. In the wake of the euro crisis a rigid austerity policy was institutionalised at the European level, which in Southern Europe in particular has gone hand in hand with massive interference in collective bargaining autonomy, labour market reforms and the restriction of employee rights (Schulten/Müller 2013).

## **Societal Power**

By societal power we mean the latitudes for action arising from viable cooperation contexts with other social groups and organisations, and society’s support for trade union demands. The exercise of societal power is essentially a question of the ability to assert hegemony, that is to say to generalise the political project of the trade unions within the prevailing power constellation so that society as a whole adopts it as its own. This entails a deliberate departure from the level of the workplace and opening up the trade union’s social environment as a battlefield (Ganz 2000: 146f.; Lévesque/Murray 2013).

There are two sources of societal power – coalitional power and discursive power. These two power resources are mutually reinforcing. Coalitional power means having networks to other social actors at one’s disposal and being able to activate these for mobilisations and campaigns (Frege et al. 2004: 137ff.; Turner 2006; Lévesque/Murray 2010: 344). Essentially they involve pursuing common goals and entering into mutual commitments. Coalitional power is thus based on boosting one’s own associational power by harnessing the resources of other players or on the trade union receiving support from these actors. Relevant literature cites social movements, social associations, NGOs, students and churches as typical allies (Frege et al. 2004: 151; Milkman et al. 2010). Such coalitions can only work, however, if there are bridge builders (Brecher/Costello 1990; Rose 2000: 167ff.) – people who are equally rooted in the trade union and non-trade union context – and if alliances go beyond selective, occasional cooperation. Coalitional power can be harnessed in workplace disputes by affording employees support in the dispute they are involved in locally. Protests and joint initiatives can also allow trade unions to exert pressure in the political system. These types of coalitions range from local alliances against the privatisation of the water supply all the way to transnational protest networks against free trade and investment agreements such as the movement against TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership).

Effective exercise of societal power is also “expressed by being able to successfully intervene in public debates on historically established underlying hegemonic structures of the public sphere” (Urban 2013: 22) and in doing so to assume the role of opinion leader on trade union-related issues. Achieving a high degree of discursive power is subject to many preconditions. It builds on trade union issues being perceived as just by the general public, and this power is particularly potent “if the feeling of being treated unjustly amongst the workforce coincides with perceptions of reality shared by broad sections of society” (Haug 2009: 890). If moral ideas of legitimacy or the “moral economy” (Thompson 1971: 76) are being undermined, the trade unions can build public pressure. This happens above all through scandalisation of injustices, with trade unions waging classification battles over which working conditions are considered unfair (Chun 2009: 13ff.). This in turn, enables them to then influence the prevailing norms themselves.

The discursive power of trade unions is only effective, however, if it is in line with prevailing views of morality. These have developed historically and are embedded in everyday thinking by stories, myths and beliefs. Trade unions thus have specific narrative resources available to them that they can deploy to exercise discursive power (Lévesque/Murray 2010: 339f., 2013). They usually relate to struggles and fixed standards that are rooted in society’s consciousness. Such narrative resources may vary in terms of how pronounced they are

depending on the organisation and cultural context in question. From resisting Apartheid in South Africa all the way to the “golden age” of Fordism, relationships and references can be built to politicise feelings of unjust treatment.

Furthermore, trade unions also need to offer credible interpretation patterns or “frames” and solutions to problems and present these to the public. They usually refer here to the successes they have achieved through their work. The problem-solving ability of the trade unions is important to actually be able to deploy their own narrative resources in the first place, as otherwise the organisations lack credibility. This ability also contributes to renewing narrative resources, which would otherwise lose their mobilisation power, dismissed as “old hat”, which in turn would lead to the trade unions losing their appeal. A pronounced problem solving ability contributes to political opponents accepting trade unions as a negotiation partner or – in a situation of confrontation – to fearing them as an adversary. Public perception of the trade unions is thus key. If they are seen as defenders of just causes, their social influence will increase. For discursive power it is therefore a matter of trade unions providing patterns for interpreting or “framing” burning issues. The ability to frame problems is all about strategically and intelligently developing and using the societal power of the organisation. This means taking the initiative at the right time and selecting the right issues for social debates and mobilisations (Snow et al. 2004: 384). If the trade unions fail to produce new patterns of interpretation to make these politically effective, the foundations of their coalitional and discursive power quickly crumble and in turn the opportunity to deploy them in the battle for hegemony.

Changes in the underlying conditions also change the societal power of the trade unions. Structural economic transformation can disintegrate their social environment and erode their coalitional power. Discursive power, too, can be weakened by “factual constraints”. In many European countries and in the US, the discursive power of the unions fell relatively continuously as of the late 1970s. In the 1990s in particular, trade unions were increasingly perceived as outmoded reform saboteurs and “nay-sayers” who had no real alternatives to offer in the age of globalisation and the IT boom. The trade unions also had problems finding new cooperation partners. Not only were their own social milieus crumbling, new social movements like the green, neighbourhood, women’s and human rights movements had little in common with traditional trade union work, and in fact even tried to distance themselves from them. Conversely, the social movement unionism in many countries of the Global South (South Korea, etc.) was based on successful cooperation with social movements; there are also positive cases of an increase in discursive power. In the context of the economic crisis in 2008/9, for instance, German trade unions were able to influence the crisis management policy of the Federal Government to the benefit of large groups of employees and as a result were celebrated as skilled crisis managers by the public (Schmalz/Thiel 2017).

The brief presentation of the power resources approach implies that specific skills are needed to mobilise the individual resources.<sup>1</sup> Some scientists have discussed different capabilities and capacities in order to clarify how power resources can be used strategically (Ganz 2000; Lévesque/Murray 2010). Christian Lévesque and Gregor Murray (2010) for instance differentiate between four capabilities: a) intermediation, i.e. developing a collective interest (consensus building) out of conflicting demands both from within and outside of the union; b) framing, i.e. developing the discourse and formulating (new) strategies by defining a proactive and autonomous agenda within a larger context; c) articulation; i.e. constructing multi-level interaction and understanding, linking the local and the global across space; and d) learning capabilities; i.e. fostering the ability to learn and to diffuse learning throughout the organisation. Using insights from the past that can be applied to the present and considered for the future. In addition to these four capabilities there can be added organisational flexibility, i.e. adapting organisational routines and traditions to reflect and support changes in the policy needs as a fifth capability. The capabilities are related to power resources. Some

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<sup>1</sup> We owe this paragraph a discussion with Mike Fichter and Mirko Herberg.

are linked to specific power resources, and others are more generic. For instance, learning capabilities and articulation are quite generic. Learning capabilities strengthen all other power resources and capabilities, while articulation is crucial in bridging different levels of union action and power resources. Other capabilities are closely related to a specific power resource: Framing is helpful in developing societal power and organisational flexibility is crucial in strengthening associational power.

## **Labour Power in the Global Context**

The applicability of the power resources approach is not just limited to the reality of the countries of the Global North. In fact, its conceptualities mean it can be applied to a wide range of contexts (Julian 2012; Melleiro/Steinhilber 2016; Webster/Ludwig 2017; Xu/Schmalz 2017; Zajak 2017). The structural power of the workers and employees arises from the specific incorporation of a country into global capital accumulation, for instance. This means that individual groups of workers in semi-peripheral and peripheral countries are often particularly able to assert themselves as they occupy key positions in the economy, whilst equally there are large groups of informally employed people whose structural power is very limited. Strong trade unions in the transport sector (ports, etc.) can often cause huge damage to economies specialised in the export of resources and enforce their demands very effectively (Bergquist 1996). This means as a consequence that the power resources of wage earners in the global capitalist system are unevenly distributed and structured – with major ramifications for trade unions. Institutional power on the other hand results largely from the institutional system of the individual countries – the institutional power resources in states with corporatist labour relations (Argentina, Germany, Japan, etc.) are very pronounced whilst wage-earners in countries with regulatory patterns geared towards free market principles (Chile, Great Britain, US) often have fewer resources. These varying constellations in turn structure the power of the individual trade unions to act. It is similar when it comes to societal power, which is always the product of the specific set of actors, norm expectations and public discourses in a society. This means ultimately that when taking strategic action, trade unions are dependent on deploying their resources in such a way that the country-specific context is harnessed in an optimum way. It is not a matter of using all resources equally, but rather finding the right mix for the specific problem scenario. And here, too, the trade union players always have a strategic choice.

## Literature

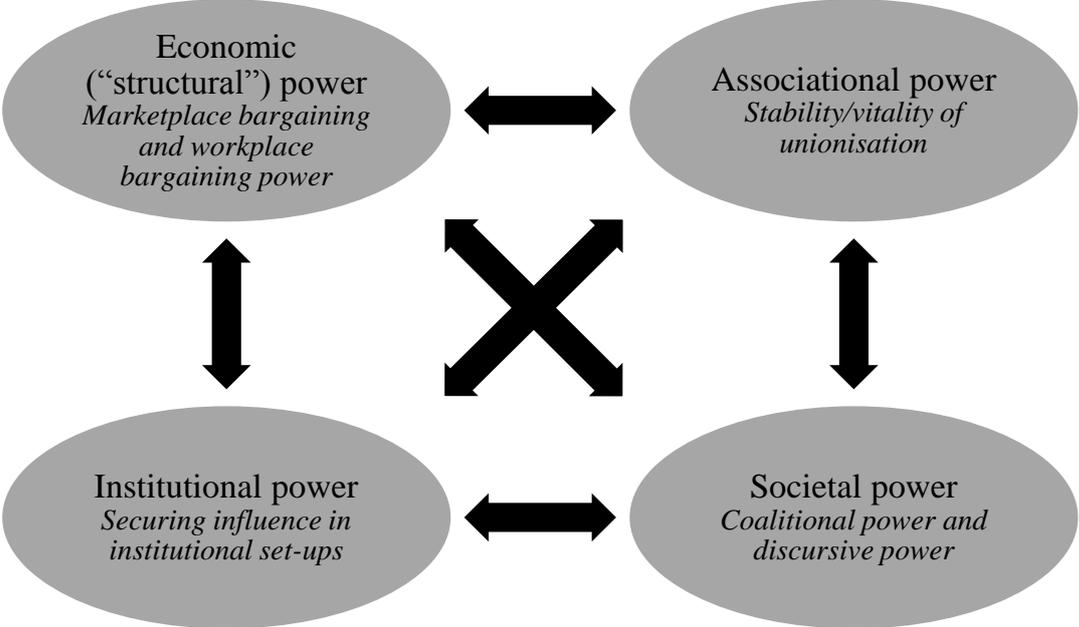
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# Figures

**Fig. 1: Trade Union Power Resources**



Source: Expanded chart based on Gerst et al. 2011

**Fig. 2: Levels of Labour Power**

	<b>Structural power</b>	<b>Associational power</b>	<b>Institutional power</b>	<b>Societal power</b>
<b>Applied in the form of</b>	Disruption of the valorisation of capital	Formation of workers' associations	Referring to legally fixed rights	Interaction with other social actors
<b>At the level of workplace</b>	Labour unrest Changing jobs	Grass-roots works group Works council Shop steward bodies	Works Constitution	Coalitional and discursive power by their very nature transcend the boundaries between the levels
<b>At the industry-wide level</b>	Economic strikes	Trade unions	Collective bargaining autonomy	
<b>At the level of society</b>	Political strikes	Workers' parties	Constitution Law and legislation	

Source: Own chart