Heather Connolly, University of Leicester

Unions and social movements – can they ever be brothers and sisters in arms?

Wednesday 8th May 2019

Meeting Room 1.005

14:00 – 15.30

This paper explores the relationship between labour and non-labour movements and whether the relationship is likely to be characterised by institutional rivalry or alliance and cooperation. To what extent are non-labour movements, including community-based, campaigning/single-issue groups and advocacy organisations replacing organised labour as the main dynamic force advancing workers’ interests? There are overlapping interests and methods between labour and non-labour movements but there is also the potential for and evidence of tension and rivalry. Existing research shows that much of the tension and rivalry is a result of institutional barriers rather than fundamental differences in interests and methods.

The paper draws on my research and the work of others to explore the argument that the primary (and potentially most sustainable) way in which labour and non-labour movements have come together is through ‘absorption’, where the labour movement has provided an institutional field upon which other movements can organise and campaign. The paper considers the significance of the ‘gilets jaunes’ in France – a non-labour based movement which emerged in November 2018 initially as a protest against rising fuel prices and which has enjoyed strong support from the wider population. There has been a shift in the movement’s approach from an explicit rejection of any connection with the trade union movement to the adoption of a more conciliatory approach on both sides. This rapprochement has the potential to develop synergies between the organisational capacity of the ‘old’ (the trade unions) and the imaginative spontaneity of the ‘new’ (the ‘gilets jaunes’). Drawing on the strengths of each is an important means to build effective resistance. The emergence of non-labour movements like the ‘gilet jaunes’ has important implications for trade unions reflecting on their role and their strategies for renewal.

Heather Connolly is Associate Professor of Employment Relations at the University of Leicester. Her research in France, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK, explores how trade union activists respond to contemporary challenges, particularly the innovative role that unions might play in the social inclusion of migrant workers. Her publications include *The Politics of Social Inclusion and Labor Representation: Immigrants and Trade Unions in the European Context*, published in May 2019 by Cornell University Press.

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