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DEBATE

A response to Gundula Fischer's comment

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I welcome the fact that my article, 'Informalisation and the end of trade unionism as we knew it? Dissenting remarks from a Tanzanian case study' (2013), has led to a debate about informalised workers and unions in Tanzania, and about how to research labour struggles. Gundula Fischer's comment raises two criticisms of my article. The first concerns what Fischer terms 'Rizzo's and Standing's (implicit) assumptions about labour history', a problem of overgeneralisation of the trade union experience, allegedly. The second is that its lack of contextualisation of the history of, and current debates within, the Tanzanian labour movement prevents 'a more sophisticated picture' to emerge. In this rejoinder I will explain why I find these two lines of critique unconvincing.

Presumed assumptions about labour history

Starting with Standing's and my (implicit) assumptions about labour history, Fischer makes a number of claims. One is that in my contribution it 'remains vague how Standing's and Rizzo's position relate to each other' and what my 'dissenting remarks actually oppose'. However, my paper explains at some length what I perceived to be the problems with Standing's (and others') view that 'due to increasingly informal relationships that do not conform to any direct employer–employee relationship, workplace labourism is no longer viable' (Rizzo 2013, 291). I then substantiate this critique through a case study on organising and partially succeeding in claiming rights at work in the informal economy. By reading the introduction to my paper, readers can adjudicate whether my dissent from rights-at-work pessimists is clearly articulated or not. For now, it is also worth noting that, against her own claim, Fischer paradoxically shows that she is actually quite clear about the way in which Standing's position and mine differ, when she writes that my 'starting point is Standing's thesis (2011) that the informalisation of work has made trade unions redundant. In particular, the growing absence of a clearly demarcated employee–employer relationship is seen as robbing trade unions of their target.' It is this thesis that my case study critically and explicitly engages with. Fischer clearly understands what my disagreement with Standing is about, so it is puzzling that she argues that it is not clear what I oppose.

This problem of internal contradiction with her argument aside, Fischer argues that the implicit assumption about labour history that Standing's work and my own share is an overgeneralisation of labour realities and of the trade union experience. In her words, 'a more critical distance from all too generalising tendencies would have further sharpened [my] argument.' However, as any reader of my 2013 article I think will agree, I too, like Fischer, have

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a concern about the overgeneralising claims over the impossibility of struggles around rights at work in the twenty-first century. The very last sentence of my paper states:

> While the circumstances and context in which these workers' mobilisation took place are necessarily specific, that such workers could command a degree of structural power stresses the importance of disaggregating the realm of possible for different groups of workers in different economic sectors and countries and, above all, of putting ongoing labour struggles at the centre of the reflection on the possibilities for action by precarious workers. (Rizzo 2013, 305)

So, what needs to be understood about Fischer's argument here is how my own work is seen to suffer from the very problem of overgeneralisation that it takes issue with. A close look at her argument is necessary to fully appreciate its weaknesses.

A big part of Fischer's claim that my work overgeneralises comes from 'the title, which refers to "the end of trade unionism as we knew it"'. Building on this, Fischer asks:

> But was there ever a common trade unionism, known to all, that could be said to have ended? And if so, what features did it have? Did the Tanzanian labour movement, or more specifically COTWU [the Tanzanian Communication and Transport Workers Union], have the characteristics of 'trade unionism as we knew it', so that it can be cited as an example of renewal or continuing significance? All in all, it remains vague who is meant by 'we'. Does Rizzo refer to the experience of countries in the North or the South, or even on a global scale? . . . How do these specific developments relate to 'trade unionism as we knew it'? (Fischer 2014, in this issue)

While cautioning against overgeneralisations, Fischer also suggests that she does 'not believe in the uniqueness and incomparability of labour movements across regions or historical periods. Global entanglements speak to the contrary.'

Unfortunately, Fischer omits to spell out what the general trends and key shifts in labour history and in trade unions realities are. This is a major omission, as without this, it becomes impossible to understand what is distinctive about individual contexts and their histories. One thus risks falling into a shallow relativism whereby individual countries' uniqueness is emphasised over and above their conformity/divergence from general trends. Munck, whom Fischer cites selectively as a voice against overgeneralisations in labour studies, actually identifies such general trends when he argues that momentous changes in the organisation of production and the remaking of the 'working class' associated with globalisation 'over the past 35 years' meant that 'traditional relations of representation and hegemony construction have been thrown in disarray and trade unions are no longer the undisputed articulators of mass discontent' (Munck 2013, 754,755). The way in which this trend has manifested itself in individual countries is context-specific, due to uneven patterns of incorporation of countries in the global economy and due to balances of power between labour and employers which are both country- and sector-specific. But the fact remains that a general trend all scholars working on labour and trade unionism must reckon with is the increasing elusiveness of clear wage relationships due to the increasing informalisation of work. This has posed major problems to trade unions whose primary activity, and main source of membership, was until the 1970s the representation of workers at the (mainly formal economy) workplace. As argued in my 2013 paper, some have argued that the challenges that globalisation and informalisation pose to organised labour have made redundant both trade unions as institutions and the defence of rights at work as a political agenda. It is in this sense, and without – in my opinion – overgeneralising, that I

write about trade unionism 'as we knew it': a trade unionism whose bread and butter until the 1970s was the representation of workers at work. My research engages with these debates and criticises despondent (over)generalisations of the impossibility of a rights at work agenda in the informal economy, through a close look at one specific context, that of the Dar es Salaam passenger public transport system and its informal workers' organisation to claim labour rights. Fischer's claim that I should have taken 'a more critical distance' from Standing's 'all too generalising tendencies' thus rests on very unconvincing ground.

The lack of contextualisation of the history of, and current debates within, the Tanzanian labour movement and its presumed causes

The second criticism by Fischer is that the lack of contextualisation of the history of the Tanzanian labour movement in my paper weakens its contribution. Key questions missing from my work are, as Fischer writes:

> What were the initiatives of COTWU before *daladala* workers approached them? Did the transport workers' union have plans or strategies in place to win members in the informal economy, and if so, how successful were they? . . . What were the effects on the union of the partly successful coalition? Was the cooperation between COTWU and the *daladala* workers a one-time issue or did it prompt unionists to pursue new recruitment strategies or forge more alliances? (Fischer 2014, in this issue)

Some of the questions that Fischer asks are actually discussed in my work. On the broader relationship between the Tanzanian Communication and Transport Workers Union (COTWUT) and informal workers, the paper mentions that the Tanzanian transport union attempted to organise other types of informal transport workers, when it documents that:

> COTWUT appears to be at the forefront of the struggle to engage with informal workers. It has attempted to organise lorry and taxi workers, in addition to *dala-dala* workers, to whom the analysis now returns. (Rizzo 2013, 297)

Some other questions put forward by Fischer, such as the broader effects of the partnership between *daladala* workers and the union on the union itself, and the discussions over this within the union, are indeed of interest but not addressed by my article. However, Fischer's objection to this suffers from two fundamental weaknesses. First, even in this case Fischer is too quick to make questionable assumptions about my work. Such assumptions are then instrumental to set up her criticism of it. Thus, Fischer writes that the lack of attention to such history 'could be due to the assumption that on a global level unions have a shared past and common features in the present'. I would argue instead that a glance at my own work on transport workers, focusing on the passenger transport system in Dar es Salaam over the years, and analysing through longitudinal research workers' shift from political quiescence up to the late 1990s (Rizzo 2011) to their organisation (Rizzo 2013), makes Fischer's assertion about my lack of appreciation of the importance of history pretty unreasonable. On the contrary, I would argue that understanding changes over time is one of its distinctive features.

Second, and more specifically on the history of organised labour in Tanzania, I also devote two paragraphs to present background information on the history of trade unionism in Tanganyika/Tanzania from the anticolonial struggles of the 1950s, through the socialist period and to the present day. This might not be a lot, but the intention was to acknowledge the importance of the longer historical context of the trade unions, within the space limits of a journal article. I explain how political liberalisation and the formal detachment of trade unions from the ruling party and

from their budgetary support explain trade unions' increased need to secure membership fees and, within it, their 'increased attention to the "informals"' (Rizzo 2013, 297). I also argue that efforts by unions to support the organisation of informal workers are characterised by 'limited success in reaching them at national level and [by] important differences in the degree of interest in informal workers across unions' (Rizzo 2013, 297). Thus, Fischer once more caricatures my claims, making them more optimistic about unions' interest in the 'informals' than they actually are, to then argue, unconvincingly:

> Studying the attitudes of labour leaders towards the above recommendation – with a focus on those unions known as most active in this endeavour – I have reached a conclusion that differs in some respects from Rizzo's results: union efforts at stemming informalisation do exist, but are sporadic. (Fischer, 2014, in this issue)

A second, and related, line of argument by Fischer to be considered is not so much the historical blindness of my contribution but rather that history is not granted enough space in my analysis, or as Fischer puts it, 'details are missing that would allow for a more sophisticated picture to emerge.' Yes, indeed, one can always improve the analysis, but Fisher's argument is made at an abstract level. The real issue is, what should be prioritised within the strict word limits of a journal article? It is not reasonable to expect the paper to deliver, *in addition* to its current focus, an in-depth discussion of COTWUT's broader position within the trade union movement in Tanzania, within it a detailed look at the relationship between unions and informal workers across the board and an assessment of how the partnership with the association of *daladala* workers impacted on the union.[1] One could have written a different, more historically grounded paper, but only by cutting back on other aspects, e.g., by providing less detailed empirical information, or by limiting engagement with wider debates. Fischer's advocacy for more attention to certain aspects of the historical analysis should been seen in that light. Researchers make choices about the goals of their research, which often evolve as research progresses, and about research strategies to collect evidence that allow them to contribute to the analysis of the themes that they opt to focus on. They should be judged on their goals, on whether they achieve them and, as part of that, whether the means through which they seek to achieve them are reasonable. So a considered criticism should consider whether the mix of means makes sense, not simply argue for the addition of extra means.

Instead, Fischer first wrongly identifies the goal of my paper and then takes issue with the evidence it presents. She writes:

> COTWU has the capacity to organise informal workers. This is what Rizzo's article intends to show. However, the description focuses more on the activities of the informal workers than on the activities of the union. (Fischer, 2014, in this issue)

As I hope readers will agree, my goal, rather than to show that COTWUT can organise informal workers, was, instead, to critically engage with arguments suggesting the impossibility of struggles for rights at work today, starting from a case study of one instance of attempts to claim labour rights by informal workers. A key research focus was therefore to understand, by drawing also on secondary literature, what types of workers are able to mobilise, and how. This drew my attention to the study of the economic and political sources of workers' power in a particular context and the strategy by these workers to claim labour rights. The study of the trade union partnership with the association of transport workers was in turn key to understanding

the sources of workers' associational power. Particular attention was paid to the way in which the two institutions constructed a 'shared meaning of the *daladala* worker', their tactics to make demands on employers and on the state and their results. As my goal was to understand how *daladala* workers organised, I did not prioritise the study of either the activities of the workers' association or of COTWUT. I opted to give centre stage to the process of organising and to its results as, in my opinion, the analysis of organising in the informal economy far too often lacks attention to the economic structures in which workers are located and/or to the detailed activities around which workers' organising takes place. Take, for instance, Fischer's latest work. It engages with the theme of trade unions and informal workers in Tanzania. Its primary research exclusively focuses on interviews with 10 leading unionists in Tanzania. As a result, Fischer has 'more data about respondent attitudes towards the topic than about their concrete activities' (Fischer 2013, 140) – and virtually no findings regarding the work of the unions and its results. Research designs like hers might help one appreciate those scholars who attempt the more challenging methodological approach of systematically triangulating interviews (with a wider range of informants) with archival sources, newspapers and grey literature. A second and final problem with Fischer's complaint that 'details are missing that would allow for a more sophisticated picture to emerge' is, furthermore, that it betrays a lack of appreciation of the time, research efforts and, most importantly, the value added of the more challenging methodological approach described above. In sum, Fischer's call for more details and more analytical depth is overconfident about how deep her research findings take us, undervalues the findings presented in my article and misrepresents what it actually argues.

Note on contributor

Matteo Rizzo works across the Departments of Economics and Development Studies as a lecturer at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. His main research interests are informal labour under globalisation, urbanisation, the political economy of agrarian change (past and present) and development aid. He is currently completing a monograph entitled *Taken for a Ride: Neoliberalism, Informal Labour and Transport in an African Metropolis, 1983–2010*.

Note

1. In a recent research trip I learnt that the partnership between COTWUT and the association of *daladala* workers came to an end in 2013, the year in which the *daladala* workers' association withdrew from COTWUT and was pivotal in establishing a new trade union, the Tanzania Road Transport Workers Union (TARWOTU). I will analyse what drove these changes and the two parties conflicting account of them in further work, as this short rejoinder is not the place to do so.

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