

Trade unions and the foundational economy: understanding shifting boundaries, politics and functions of economic participation and social action within industrial relations

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Summary

This article focuses on the changing role of trade unions in relation to ‘the foundational economy’ – the infrastructures and services that provide the basis for everyday life. While such initiatives have sometimes been considered as falling beyond the traditional remit of union action, examples of trade union engagement in and for the foundational economy are historically and currently evident across countries. The article argues that these are important in the realm of trade union strategies with attempts to widen engagement and participation in broader economic issues, particularly in post-2008 economic austerity and after the pandemic and the cost-of-living crises.

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The article explores these issues based on the intersection between different dimensions and levels of union action.

Résumé

Cet article est consacré à l'évolution du rôle des syndicats par rapport à « l'économie fondamentale » - à savoir les infrastructures et les services qui constituent la base de la vie quotidienne. Même si ces initiatives ont parfois été considérées comme sortant du cadre traditionnel de l'action syndicale, des exemples d'engagement syndical dans et pour l'économie fondamentale sont attestés tant dans l'histoire que dans le présent, à travers différents pays. L'article souligne l'importance de ces exemples dans le cadre des stratégies syndicales visant à élargir l'engagement et la participation à des questions économiques plus larges, en particulier dans le contexte de l'austérité économique de l'après-2008 et après les crises de la pandémie et du coût de la vie. Ces questions sont examinées à partir de l'intersection entre différentes dimensions et différents niveaux de l'action syndicale.

Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Artikel beschreibt die sich verändernde Rolle der Gewerkschaften in Bezug auf die „Alltagsökonomie“ (foundational economy), d. h. die Infrastrukturen und Dienstleistungen, die die Grundlagen für unser alltägliches Leben bilden. Obwohl solche Initiativen nicht unbedingt als Teil der traditionellen expliziten Ziele gewerkschaftlichen Handelns betrachtet werden, gibt es in Geschichte und Gegenwart vieler Länder Belege dafür, wie Gewerkschaften innerhalb und für die Alltagsökonomie agieren. Der Artikel unterstreicht deren Bedeutung für gewerkschaftliche Strategien mit dem Bestreben, Mitwirkung und Partizipation an umfassenderen ökonomischen Fragen zu erweitern, insbesondere mit Blick auf die Zeit seit Beginn der Austeritätspolitik 2008 und nach den Krisen der Pandemie und der rasant steigenden Lebenshaltungskosten. Der Artikel untersucht diese Fragen an der Schnittstelle unterschiedlicher Dimensionen und Ebenen gewerkschaftlichen Handelns.

Keywords

Foundational economy, trade unions, state, trade union identity, social dialogue, ideational environment, austerity, trade union strategies

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of workers providing essential services in health, education, care, transport, food and utilities, often in high risk and poorly paid roles. These services have been collectively referred to as the *foundational economy* (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018; Russell et al., 2022) because they provide the means for economic and social citizenship. Rapid inflation since 2022 has exacerbated a related crisis of affordability of these same essentials, notably housing, food and energy, for many citizens and especially low-paid workers. These two crises highlight both the relevance of foundational economic activities, as also recognised by the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the vulnerability of these sectors.

A broad and pressing challenge has therefore emerged about the renewal of the foundational infrastructures that organise and deliver everyday services, in relation to their funding, accessibility, quality, sustainability and cost. These issues vary depending on the service provided and the

context, because infrastructures, or reliance systems, are always embedded in specific places (Schafran et al., 2020). Attention has been paid to the actions of a range of statutory bodies and public authorities as direct providers, and to policy-makers or regulators of foundational services, but the role of industrial relations actors especially in terms of their evolving strategies related to foundational issues has been less researched.

The organisation of foundational economy services is generally not an explicit target nor a traditional sphere of union action. Moreover, and to a different extent depending on the context, a formalised or institutionalised union engagement could create political resistance from other actors, and possible conflicts (perceived and real) between wider social interests and more immediate economic issues of members. However, in practice, trade unions do engage with the foundational economy and not solely when supporting working conditions in foundational economy sectors. Union action, in fact, often addresses issues of a wider social interest to promote improved quality of, or access to, essential services either indirectly, that is by linking them to the deterioration of labour standards in the sector (e.g. privatisation of services) or directly by framing them in terms of social justice (e.g. affordability or access to essentials). Identifying this engagement – often implicit and sometimes unrecognised – is a fundamental first step to claim the foundational economy as a space for union action, the legitimacy of union action in the foundational economy and, more widely, the recognition of trade unions as social and political actors, with a fundamental role in shaping a more democratic and socially just economy.

Corporatist debates have to some extent addressed the ways in which unions engage with economic and social issues, but generally this is under specific conditions in terms of institutional prerequisites (consensual traditions among regulatory actors), organisational size of trade unions (strong and encompassing organisations) and *modus operandi* (economic and more recently political exchange). What is more, corporatist approaches broadly speaking are more focused on the institutional or process end of trade union roles and not the broader underpinnings of the economy. However, trade unions' interventions in and for the foundational economy are not limited to these experiences. They also include forms of engagement that have been happening across various non-traditional industrial relations issues for some time (Wever, 1998) but have recently addressed broader economic issues. If the widening of the scope of industrial relations, as explored by Meardi and Tassinari (2022), effectively pulls unions into questions about the operation of the economy, how can we understand the (implicit or explicit) framing and reframing of trade union actions in relation to the foundational economy and related issues?

The aim of this article is to provide a framework to recognise and analyse the diverse ways in which trade unions are involved with issues of the foundational economy – both implicitly and explicitly – and to explore the significance and relevance of the notion of the foundational economy in terms of industrial relations and industrial relations analysis. It does so by bringing together foundational economy and industrial relations literatures, and by drawing on examples of trade union actions to illustrate how these are not always sporadic and isolated actions but can contribute to more explicit emergent programmes linking together debates and action on public services or foundational sectors.

Our approach considers the relevance of trade union institutional, political, and organisational resources as well as established traditions and identities, which can contribute to (or hinder) unions' commitment in their engagement with the domains of the foundational economy. Our approach also takes on board the importance of how certain aspects of a trade union's character and organisational approach historically can contribute to the way it engages with broader economic and social issues. This is relevant to understanding how more socially oriented or class-based orientations may bring broader economic questions into the discussions and actions of trade unions. The challenge is to consider to what extent, how and under what conditions unions adopt a role as a

social and political actor in the foundational economy. In focusing on how unions use foundational economy issues as a space and strategy for action, we can reflect, first, on the way economic context is considered by unions and, second, how engagement in and for foundational services and infrastructures could be a significant means to underpin trade union strategies.

In doing so, the article provides brief illustrations from different national contexts. The aim is not to provide systematic national or sectoral comparisons, nor an analysis of development over time, but to indicate some of the forms and foci of such engagements, reflecting different contexts and union characteristics. The article draws on the different expertise of the authors in terms of geography – Austria, Italy, Spain and the UK – and spanning disciplines including industrial relations, economic sociology and management. The illustrations provided are ones that we are familiar with through our various research.

The first substantive section of the article introduces the foundational economy, its relevance for everyday social and economic life and the way this has been undermined both through political neglect and deliberate state interventions; it also draws attention to its value in discussing questions of economic participation. The second section outlines the potential of the foundational economy as a lens for understanding the spaces in which union renewal and intervention do – or could – take place: this underlines its relevance to such discussions of widening our understanding of economic and social participation. The third section presents our general descriptive framework, setting out how these actions can be mapped and understood across various dimensions of union action in terms of dialogue/negotiation, mobilisation, and knowledge-related activity. It points to the ways we can link such areas of development and action by unions to a wider notion of economic issues and change. The article then discusses the influence of contextual and internal union factors in framing union responses in relation to foundational economy issues. It concludes by discussing the need to move away from more static notions of state-labour relations and trade union participation with regard to economic and social issues; as well as to map the broader strategies and activities of trade unions in relation to their social and economic agendas and inputs, and their historical contexts. In doing so, the article argues that, using the foundational economy framework, we can better understand the ways in which industrial relations and forms of participation include engagements with wider foundational economy issues.

The relevance of the foundational domain for debates on trade unionism

The foundational economy is the economic space in which goods and services essential for individual and collective well-being are produced and distributed. It includes providential activities – health, education, care services – as well as material activities – water, gas and energy, food production and distribution, housing and public transport (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018). These goods and services are provided by a mix of state and private actors with informal labour particularly important in areas like care (Bärnthaler et al., 2021). The definition of ‘essential’ changes over time: consider the example of broadband, which has rapidly become a necessary infrastructure. Nonetheless, it is relatively straightforward to identify goods and services that are required as the basis of social and economic citizenship. Such identification can be supported conceptually through arguments about capabilities (Sen, 1999) as well as empirically through studies of ‘what matters’ (Salento, 2021).

The character of the foundational economy is a historical and political construction, dependent on choices about the regulation of product, labour and financial markets, taxation and public expenditure frameworks, as well as the extent and the content of citizenship. Such choices are in

turn dependent on the state of political dialectic and on the engagement of civil society (Barbera and Jones, 2019). The foundational economy in Europe has had two ‘golden eras’: the first, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, was the era of development of urban infrastructures such as water, which ensured a safer and longer life. The second was in the 20th century, when universalist welfare systems were established, along with the expansion and strengthening of the networks for the production and distribution of basic goods and services. While the national character varies, for instance in the extent of public vs private ownership of utilities and transport infrastructures, or the scale of social housing provision, the foundational economy is relevant across Europe. Characterised as the foundational part of the economy, the concept has been translated for example as *Die Ökonomie des Alltagslebens*, the *Economia Fondamentale* and *Economia Fundamental* in German, Italian and Portuguese respectively.

Public responsibility for provision of foundational goods and services has been reduced or subjected to austerity; many sectors have been liberalised, privatised or outsourced; and management of foundational activities has been oriented towards short-termism and profitability through cost reduction. The result is varying combinations of growing disorganisation, increased costs for citizens, reduced accessibility and increased territorial gaps in the distribution of basic goods and services (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018). At the same time, economic and industrial policy tends to overly focus on ‘frontier’ sectors (Bentham et al., 2013).

As a space for economic action, the foundational economy is significant. For example, providential activities (including health, care and education) employ 26.2 per cent, 24.1 per cent and 10.0 per cent of workers in the UK, Germany and Italy respectively. Material activities (transport, utilities, food and so on) employ a further 17.6 per cent, 17.2 per cent and 17.9 per cent in these three countries (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018: 24). While the pandemic was a reminder that access to good quality foundational services is an indispensable basis for societal well-being, many of these activities have underpaid and insecure workers, inadequate social and legal recognition as well as unsustainable business models (ILO, 2023; Jooshandeh, 2021). Indeed, the struggle for fair treatment of these ‘key workers’ has had a renewed impetus as a consequence of the pandemic (TUC, 2020). Alongside the social and economic emergency heightened by COVID-19, the need to address the environmental and climate crises provides a new imperative for renewal in the foundational economy (Bärnthaler et al., 2021; Wahlund and Hansen, 2022).

If the foundational economy provides the space for a progressive project (Russell et al., 2022), how can it be organised, and which actors are or could be involved? Renewal implies different scales of action. On a *macro level*, it covers reform of the rules or norms of economic action, such as the tendency towards marketisation, including of essential goods and services. This has been translated politically into undermining basic safeguards concerning work and social citizenship rights. Restoring a constitution for the foundational economy (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018) – redefining the principles and limits of economic action in the economy of everyday life – is therefore an objective that reflects the importance of quality in relation to provision of services. This resonates with previous attempts by European trade union federations, particularly ETUC and EPSU, to carve out a regulatory space for public services within the internal market (Clifton, 2005; Fischbach-Pyttel, 2017). On a *meso level*, innovative actions such as social licences can link corporate privileges, including market access or guaranteed profits through tariffs, to meeting general or sectoral standards for citizens and workers (Froud and Williams, 2019). While on a *micro level*, improving access to goods and services, while also promoting and enhancing the dignity of workers providing such services, can be developed in specific local contexts (TUC, 2021).

There is a body of studies exploring the challenges to the progressive transformation of business regulation, organisation and management in sectors of the foundational economy, especially in Austria, Italy and the UK. These include care (Burns et al., 2016; Plank et al., 2023), water (Getzner

et al., 2018), housing (Bricocoli and Salento, 2020; Getzner et al., 2024), food production and distribution (Barbera et al., 2016). Beyond these critical analyses of decline and dysfunction lies the important question of rethinking the role of key actors. How can the preconditions for radical social innovation (Unger, 2015) and transition be created, for example, through building alliances between social actors, economic actors and intermediary organisations? Given that the institutional foundations of democratic capitalism (Streeck, 2014) are severely weakened, other organisations or actors are attempting to build institutional environments capable of coping with the consequences of the crisis and this is why this discussion is relevant to matters of economic and industrial democracy.

Within this challenging context, intermediary institutions including trade unions have sometimes played an important role as actors, including in the renewal of the foundational economy, because they can bring together and develop activities at these macro, meso and micro levels. Across Europe there are examples of trade unions exploring innovative practices and ideas, which explicitly extend the focus beyond work to also include living conditions of citizens (Coote and Yazici, 2021). Nonetheless, renewal efforts raise dilemmas that challenge the cultures and traditions of trade unionism (Meardi, 2011), including the boundaries of trade union action and the dialectic between conflict or mobilisation strategies and social partnership approaches, or between bargaining and more symbolic forms of consultation.

Analysis of how unions have responded to – or in some cases promoted – the idea of a green transition, provides insights that can be helpful in thinking about engagement with the foundational economy. As noted for example by Kalt (2022), individual unions embody a range of views which reflect not only the more obvious questions about the nature of tensions between sectoral interests (in terms of the specific employment at stake) and the ideal of social justice, but also relations with political processes and government institutions, union internal democracy and the ways in which unions seek to use environmental unionism as a way to ‘help shape a new sense of union purpose’ including through new forms of solidarity (Snell and Fairbrother (2010: 412). At the most general level, the foundational economy is a different, more diffuse object than the green transition; and it is distinctive in the way that it does not immediately present challenging issues about a threat to employment in some sectors with uncertain job creation elsewhere (Goods, 2017). Nonetheless, we would not expect to find that all unions would have similar attitudes or approaches to foundational economy engagements.

Of course, trade unions have never been concerned solely with defending jobs and wages. As Touraine and Mottez (1963, v. II, 389) note:

The workers’ movement has rarely been a simple tool for the defense of wage earners [. . .] Even the most limited of trade unions cannot ignore the measures taken by the State [. . .] The more the workers’ movement manages to organize important masses of workers, the more it has to worry about the general, economic, social and political problems of the nation.

However, as these authors write, ‘it would be imprudent to affirm that no conflict or tension is possible between these two functions of unionism’ (Touraine and Mottez, 1963). The traditional vocabulary of trade unions focused on work, the workplace and specific regulatory features of the state is not always easily combined with the vocabulary of the community and everyday life, regardless of the interest in ‘community unionism’ (Wills, 2001). Moreover, a commonly accepted or dominant narrative has not yet emerged to legitimise both the idea that trade unions are relevant actors in the regulation of the foundational economy and the idea that intervention in the foundational economy is an important part of trade union action.

Even without such a connecting or dominant narrative, however, there is a commitment within many trade unions to consider broader foundational economic questions, even if implicitly. In

some cases, this reflects their history of pushing for a social and economically interventionist state, for example as seen in opposing privatisations or supporting welfare state services. While no systematic classification has yet been produced, a variety of examples can be identified. For instance, exploring and addressing questions about wider well-being, not solely one-dimensional aspects of economic growth (see, for example, TUC, 2013 or ÖGB, 2019). Or, arguing for the relevance of a focus on the quality and accessibility of basic goods and services, such as food (see, for example, Colás and Edwards, 2022) or housing (see, for example, Stad, 2019), which critically shape living standards of workers. In some cases, unions have developed relationships with social movements to build solidarity outside workplaces and transnationally, including around issues like human rights and social justice, or in alliances against developments such as privatisation (Etxezarreta and Frangakis, 2009).

These examples illustrate different ways of acting, both *in* and *for* the foundational economy. In some cases, unions address issues and build strategies with the specific, declared objective of contributing to the promotion of the quality and accessibility of the broader foundational goods and services. For example, where actions are framed as a ‘strategy for rights’. An illustration is the European Citizens’ Initiative ‘right2water’ which was instrumental in reinforcing the exceptional status of water and in excluding water services from the EU concession directive (Getzner et al., 2018). Trade unions can also mobilise arguments for quality and accessibility of essential services as a tool to justify better conditions and terms of employment. An example here is the campaign of German union Ver.di for better working conditions and services in local public transport, supported by Fridays for Future and other environmental NGOs. In the care sector there are examples of both explicit and more indirect linkages made between employment terms and conditions and the quality of services: see, for example, Unison’s (2018) Ethical Care Charter in the UK, or the CGIL FP (Funzione Pubblica) campaign in Italy, both based on the idea that ‘quality of work means quality of care’.

The foundational economy as a narrative and a point of intervention for contextualising union renewal and broadening its discussion

The previous section illustrated how unions are – explicitly or not and in different ways – acting in and for the foundational economy. How then could this alignment with the foundational economy assist in developing a narrative about such actions, support broader union objectives and ‘the transformative potential of a new and expanded repertoire of action’ (Murray 2017: 20)? And, while such forms of change and renewal need to be rooted or explained in terms of national traditions (Cumbers, 2004), how can this also help in developing a shared perspective in European (and broader) spaces? The aim is to develop a grounded understanding of the wider scope of union interventions and assist in enhancing a common European and transnational trajectory beyond national and path-dependent experiences.

In the extensive debate on ‘trade union renewal’, changes are generally understood as organisational manoeuvres, to address decline in union density, expand union capacity and develop new forms of involvement of unrepresented workers, for example (see Fine et al., 2018). By potentially connecting production and social reproduction, the conceptual framing of the foundational economy extends how we think about core aspects of state and economy; it also opens out the notion of union renewal and union participation beyond a static understanding of how unions’ reshaping of economy and society could be developed or sustained. First, it offers a relevant analytical basis for rethinking social dialogue: to ensure collective well-being, it is necessary to understand and change

business models and the dynamics of accumulation in the domain of the foundational economy. Secondly, it broadens the notion of collective well-being beyond isolated and minimalist welfare provisions. The foundational economy also includes economic sectors that are not ordinarily included in the concept of the welfare state but are vital to the reproduction of the workforce and society, including food, transport, housing and energy. With the price inflation of essentials like food, energy and transport, it can no longer be assumed that access to these is unproblematic: on a European scale, households are currently experiencing a liveability crisis with significant erosion of residual incomes (Calafati et al., 2023). Thirdly and consequently, it potentially helps to address the tension between economic growth, wages, and well-being in trade union policies (and also in the mainstream economic theories underlying them), as it shows that wage growth or income support is not a sufficient route to well-being (Calafati et al., 2023). Fourth, it makes it possible to re-establish the centrality of a broader and deeper view of industrial democracy in the domain of the foundational economy. This covers the inclusion of workers and their representatives in the decision-making process, but also makes production and accumulation processes relevant – and accountable – to a wider range of actors and communities. In this sense it is compatible with the needs of social reproduction and rights. It helps to move beyond the one-dimensional views of ‘social partnership’ and ‘social dialogue’ on specific working conditions, to ground participation and democracy in co-designing the reorganisation of foundational economic activities.

In this sense a foundational economy approach goes beyond contrasting systems of regulation or interactions of actors in binary terms (Hall and Soskice, 2001), or grand shifts from one paradigm to another (Baccaro and Howell, 2017). Instead, it looks at how the form and consequences of economic change might contribute to alternative agendas, issues, and challenges. On this basis it is helpful in capturing the mobilising, campaigning and information gathering aspects of trade unions as they face a more challenging economic context that draws them into new debates and concerns. It also allows us to consider differences in the forms of possible foundational economy engagements in relation to the nature of the challenges. For example, care systems are often commissioned and organised at the local level (although they may depend on transnational movements of workers). At the same time, they are structurally shaped by national rules and frameworks. Some systems – such as energy or long-distance public transport – require planning and organisation at different scales, often beyond the direct influence of workers and citizens at the local level. In this respect a foundational economy narrative can recognise the multi and transcalar challenges providing a challenge to unions’ attempts to find points of meaningful intervention.

Understanding overt and tacit union approaches related to the foundational economy

In this section we draw on literature related to trade union actions to highlight the forms and extent of union engagement with the foundational economy. This section, therefore, explores interventions that extend the realm of union action from their traditional role of economic actors, representative of the immediate economic interests of their members and workers, to their role as social and political actors, representatives of the wider economic and social interests of citizens. We build on aspects of Murray’s (2017) approach but focus on three specific areas of engagement as strategic ‘methods’ used by trade unions to influence aspects of the foundational economy: social dialogue and negotiation; mobilising and campaigning; and knowledge production and exchange. These strategies are not always compatible (and may not be equally feasible in any particular context), but they can be considered in relation to their use, development and inter-connection. We provide illustrations to support the points developed in this section. While these show different

national and sectoral contexts, and different kinds of engagement, a systematic analysis of such engagements over time, or across sectors and countries is beyond the scope of this article.

‘Social dialogue’ or ‘negotiation’: widening the social in processes of negotiation

Among the different strategies unions adopt to pursue their claims, partnership or social dialogue is perhaps the most useful for understanding their approach to the foundational economy. Labour-management partnership (Frege and Kelly, 2003) – which also defines corporatist practices, social dialogue and, in some contexts, more expansive forms of collective bargaining – is one of the most debated in the industrial relation literature. There is much written, in fact, on the formal voice of trade unions within the corporatist or social dialogue literature (see Martinez Lucio, 2016), covering both positive and critical perspectives on how the state, trade unions and employers work together at the macro (Lehumbruch, 1984; Panitch, 1981) or micro level (Ackers and Payne, 1988; Alonso, 1994).

In its more institutionalised form, social dialogue engages the central state, for example through tripartite decision-making bodies, or agencies with a particular remit such as those regulating specific areas of employment or consumer provision. These relations between unions and regulatory bodies are contingent on access to different types of institutional or political resources. The presence of the union movement within the organisations of the state and the way it organises across different dimensions merits greater attention, especially as much of the debate on ‘social dialogue’ and some aspects of neo-corporatism have tended to focus on the visible and tangible relations and transactions between organisations (Grote and Schmitter, 1997; Guardiancich and Molina, 2021). This can vary within and across national contexts, making path dependency relevant, whilst retaining sensitivity to how trade unions engage at this level.

However, social dialogue not only identifies the most formalised experiences at the level of the central state typical of the highly institutionalised context of industrial relations; it is also embodied in all those actions which entail a form of deliberate exchange between the ‘social partners’ with or without the participation of the (local) state, intended to produce a joint compromise. Such exchange can occur at different – sectoral, regional and company – levels and can take the form of collective bargaining *per se*, as well as less institutionalised forms of negotiations. It therefore includes both tripartite and bipartite exchanges at different levels with a different degree of formalisation/institutionalisation (e.g. forms of tripartite arrangements at the level of the central state, sectoral-level collective agreements, voluntary or ‘soft’ forms of regulation).

Examples of formalised interventions can be found across Europe as in the case of the first sectoral collective bargaining agreement for bicycle couriers and food-delivery workers, effectively regulating the newly emerging platform business models in local food delivery in Austria (ETUC, 2019). In a different way, the Social Care Fair Work Forum in Wales has a tripartite membership and seeks to improve terms and conditions (and thereby enhance care quality), but does not include collective bargaining (Welsh Government, 2023). Overall, as neoliberal and austerity policies have undermined the established spaces of social and economic intervention (Baccaro and Howell, 2017) in the forms of tripartite arrangements at the level of the central state, we see different kinds of union engagement and initiatives emerge.

In particular, the local state (local or municipal authorities) has been increasingly viewed as a space that can reproduce certain national state roles. For example, procurement strategies or ethical charters in the UK for social actors to influence local public service provision and related working conditions has been an emerging feature of local industrial relations developments (see Ravenswood and Kaine, 2015 on procurement strategies in general). In Italy, unions have been experimenting with a new form of social partnership: this is sometimes qualified as territorial social bargaining.

This takes place on a voluntary basis, involving local economic entities and state administration, addressing issues that include aligning local services, workers' needs and taxation (Fondazione Di Vittorio, 2019). This bargaining practice partly links to the experience of the Zone Councils (Consigli di Zona), which in the 1970s included union representatives, experts and other members of civil society in relation to negotiating improvements in foundational goods and services on a local level. Similarly, German trade unions have used multi-actor alliances to introduce and leverage a new set of regional and local procurement rules to address concerns of domestic and international social justice (Sack and Sarter, 2018); while use of procurement strategies at the level of the local state and in alliance with trade unions has been an emerging feature of the local state in parts of the UK (Grimshaw and Johnson, 2018). This dimension also covers actions related to the foundational economy through engaging with employers, although that engagement and its success may be premised on forms of mobilisation and pressure politics, as well as the use of institutional power resources (see Refslund and Arnholtz, 2022).

It is especially at a sector level that we can observe different kinds of roles and actions in or for the foundational economy, albeit in diverse and uneven ways. There are two important aspects here. First, the nature and extent of sector-level actions can capture a context-specific range of issues and questions. Second, the extent and form of union actions may reach beyond 'traditional' work-related issues to cover impacts on the organisation of services, including broader issues of social reproduction. For example, in England some activities such as care have no sector-level dynamic beyond voluntary charters and standards for work, which in a limited way attempt to link the quality and stability of services to the quality of employment, thus drawing trade unions into important debates on questions of access and quality (Martinez Lucio, 2013). Although unions lack a formal sectoral voice in this context, these wider interventions in discussions and actions around the funding and organisation of care provide an opportunity to establish voluntary agreements or even the possibility of regulation (Marino and Keizer, 2023).

Whilst some see these developments as being increasingly de-institutionalised (Baccaro and Howell, 2017), it is still important to note that there remain different ways in which such negotiations and/or social dialogue is structured in relation to wider economic questions. In considering how different levels of engagement come into play we would expect to observe interesting differences between sectors, including relations between unions, employers and other actors. Recent observations have pointed to a widening of trade union roles brought by strategic and structural shifts. These have led to growing interest in a renewed form of social dialogue, though its sustainability is uncertain (Dobbins et al., 2023). These developments also reflect a steady expansion of the collective bargaining content in recent decades (Martinez Lucio, 2024). Analysis by Meardi and Tassinari (2022) on the development of 'crisis corporatism' during the COVID-19 pandemic confirms this finding. These authors underline how the specific expertise of social partners and their input 'over the functioning of sectors, workplaces and production/supply chains were necessary to address substantive policy challenges' (Meardi and Tassinari, 2022: 98). Furthermore, in contrast to previous experiences of social dialogue in times of crisis, trade unions have shown a greater assertiveness on production issues (health and safety, reorganisation of work), on the inclusiveness of the proposed measures, and in terms of 'discursive resources mobilisable by unions regarding the value of public services and key workers' (Meardi and Tassinari, 2022: 98).

However, the articulation and combination of strategies and approaches that work across these levels are not always straightforward. Much may depend on whether at the sector or national level there is a clear framework and set of minimums that ensure that lower regional or company levels do not undercut or weaken such frameworks. The extent of any shared vision or set of economic demands that run through these different levels of engagement may also be relevant. The role of a clear identity and social or class orientation can facilitate a more coordinated strategy, but it may

not be a guarantee of consistent action as it is also contingent on the resources and orientation of the state across different levels.

Mobilising/campaigning: towards the social agenda in social movements

This dimension includes activities or initiatives from unions (with or without the collaboration of other associations or NGOs) as well as those organised by others involving active participation by trade unions as formal or informal partners. These initiatives are different in their form, scope and goals, requiring an openness to the way trade unions organise on specific themes, and can develop across different levels (international, national, sectoral, local). For example, the role of European trade unions in engaging with international NGOs such as War on Want or Oxfam, or employer-oriented organisations dealing with questions of social responsibility at work such as the Ethical Trading Initiative, illustrate these different forms and levels of campaigning across a range of broader economic issues.

This type of activity normally draws on collective action within organisations, but the focus can be extended through political lobbying of governments and other public authorities, political parties, broader social organisations, and employers as well as through public mobilisations and demonstrations (Kelly, 1998). The extent of the involvement of others is important in understanding trade union action in this dimension (drawing attention to competition and cooperation). In some cases, unions engage in coalition building with external actors (Tattersall, 2019), with the aim of increasing their political power vis-à-vis a range of actors. The literature has underlined the importance of campaigning and mobilisation in relation to issues of social relevance beyond the representation of labour rights, with the aim of exercising pressures on political parties or public authorities as well as influencing the social debate (Kelly, 1998). This social movement activity has been outlined in various discussions of trade union roles in the development of democratic societies (Holgate, 2015).

Heery et al. (2012) have pointed to the importance of researching these forms of political and social alliances when understanding how trade unions extend public interest in a range of questions relating to employment and social matters. In Italy, CGIL's participation in the mobilisation for the referendum in defence of public water in 2011 was one of the clearest examples of unions' engagement in broader social alliances in support of foundational provision. The mixed success of Fiom-CGIL's attempt to create a broad 'social coalition' with associations and movements in defence of social rights during the sovereign debt crisis shows how difficult it is to coordinate change at the level of confederations. However, a subsequent attempt at alliance building promoted by CGIL in 2023, with the campaign *La strada maestra* [the high road], underlines the importance of this approach from a trade union perspective (for a broader analysis of Italian trade union initiatives in the foundational domain see Salento and Costalunga, 2023). In the UK, the NEU schoolteachers' union has developed its *Free School Meals for All* campaign, which includes building a wider 'coalition' including civil society and political actors, as well as figures from sports and public life.

This dimension also includes various initiatives aimed at achieving (or preventing) change. This involves more indirect forms of mobilising to raise social awareness on specific issues, such as 'rights to' food or housing; or promoting social and political debate on questions that may not be at the heart of policy-making. Or it can be intended to reframe debates, such as around ownership or management of public service providers. For example, a campaign spearheaded by the Austrian Chamber of Labour and backed by transdisciplinary research projects, including *Die LeistungsträgerInnen des Alltagslebens* [the performers of everyday life] was instrumental in shifting the position on access to Austrian citizenship for key workers who experience exclusion and are deprived of rights (Krisch et al., 2020; Pirklbauer, 2020). In relation to

stopping change, the RMT rail workers' union in the UK campaigned with around 90 organisations representing disabled people and allies to prevent the closure of ticket offices at many railway stations. Overall, the analysis of mobilisation highlights processes beyond narrow or traditional economic and bargaining related actions to broader frameworks of campaigning, as is clear from the next dimension.

Knowledge production and exchange: mapping the broader terrains of the social and the economic

This dimension is concerned with outlining initiatives intended to increase and extend bodies of knowledge around specific social and economic phenomena. This includes discovering and highlighting socio-economic issues, exploring the suitability of existing provisions or interventions, and providing the foundations for future actions. The role of established information structures (trade union research offices, institutes, or foundations), as well as platforms for coordination of knowledge production across unions, or other actions and wider cooperation with third bodies, are relevant here. An analysis of the involvement of external actors (including experts in NGOs or academics) is also important to understand trade union initiatives across a broader area of knowledge-related influence. Overall, this dimension underlines how trade unions influence policy through their research, policy publications and public campaigning on questions such as foundational economy infrastructure and service issues, problems and possible alternatives. The use of expert and networked approaches (Meardi et al., 2021) is important when comprehending such developments in worker voice more generally, but the research function and media functions of unions can also be highlighted. Austria's Chamber of Labour – a close ally of trade unions and a unique institution based on compulsory membership of all private sector workers in Austria – has a large set of policy experts and advisers that also engage strategically in international research and policy networks, including the international coalition on the future of foundational sectors. In Italy, foundational economic issues are increasingly the focus of trade union think-tanks. The Di Vittorio Foundation, for example, has research strands dedicated to welfare, and to place-based analyses of community well-being. On a more modest basis, the research department of the UK TUC's recent reports include the case for a fairer (and greener) energy system, 21st century public transport and a more resilient health system.

Studies of the influence of trade unions also engage with the notion of the *ideational* dimension of industrial relations in terms of the role of think-tanks and other actors in framing issues (Morgan and Hauptmeier, 2021). This dimension includes the production and dissemination of formal union statements and documents aimed at reaffirming union political stances in relation to the foundational economy. The role of policy documents, formal union objectives and overarching plans are often seen as archival or bureaucratic artefacts (sources of legitimation for action or placating dissident voices), but these can also frame debates and objectives within trade union politics, linking workplace practice to the nature and purpose of trade union strategy. For example, the 19th Austrian national Trade Union Conference agreed a principle of *Gutes Leben für alle* [good life for all] (ÖGB, 2019) which sets out a potentially significant way of framing subsequent policy and action. This is an interesting and unusual example of a more explicit foundational economy narrative and framing that connects different sectors and services. These documents and research processes have an important function in building and reaffirming the identity and relevance of political memory, a central part of the 'cultural heritage' and identity of a union. The way such texts are used to frame strategy may be variable – and purely symbolic in many cases – but they can play a role in some national or sectoral contexts.

Conclusions: understanding the precondition for broader economic engagement

The previous section offered an exploration of union initiatives which are more directly relevant in furthering foundational economy claims and noted their varied nature. These actions go beyond working *in* the foundational economy to improve employment conditions, but to also work *for* the foundational economy to improve service quality for citizen well-being. While such initiatives are widespread across countries, differences exist in their extent as well as in terms of the strategies privileged by the unions and the level of actions. A critical consideration of such initiatives in the light of existing IR literature suggests the presence of specific factors which facilitate union engagement in and for the foundational economy within specific dimensions and levels. Issues of re-regulation and experimentation have been apparent as Murray et al. (2020) have argued. Yet any shift to a more foundational approach to the economy through the forms of action outlined above may still depend on a range of factors and resources.

Firstly, *contextual factors* including the institutional environment in which trade unions operate are fundamental in such respect. Depending on the degree of institutional strength, unions can use different methods and act at different levels to influence regulatory outcomes. For example, unions with less institutional strength will likely display a more limited role in the foundational economy, both in terms of breadth and depth of the issues considered (likely to be closer to workplace interests rather than wider social claims) and in terms of methods used (likely to privilege mobilisation and campaigning rather than other dimensions) (Refslund and Arnholtz, 2022). To the extent that unions are extending or changing their relations and actions, this may involve both organisational and institutional experimentation (Murray et al., 2020).

However, and secondly, *union cultures and identities*, are also fundamental in explaining an explicit engagement with foundational economy claims. Hyman (2001: 1) argues that trade union identity reflects ‘the specific contexts in which national organisations have historically emerged’ and this shapes development, agendas and resources. He underlines how the development of trade unionism has involved a triple polarisation of union identity: as business or employer-facing unionism founded on collective bargaining; as agents for the advancement of class interests; or as social actors with links to broader social struggle (with a contradictory mix between these ideal types). Those trade unions with an identity ‘between market and class’ display a much more limited role in the foundational economy, with less developed strategies of social dialogue and negotiations and a low engagement with the central state, compared to unions between ‘society and class’, or ‘between society and market’. Yet the initiatives outlined above suggest that even these unions engage with foundational aspects albeit in more fragmented and ad hoc ways through knowledge development, campaigns based on wide alliances with civic organisations and broader mobilisation of issues of public relevance to gain public support and exert pressures on public authorities. This points out how, in some cases, repertoires of contention (Tilly, 2006), and especially a tradition of involvement and fruitful collaboration between trade unions and other external organisations, can affect union action in the foundational economy and its outcomes. Class-based or socially oriented trade unions should, in theory, be more able or willing to engage on issues related to the foundational economy and related approaches by virtue of their view of the expansive state and de-commodified services, although there is always a possibility of internal tensions around how these strategies are pursued. For example, whether social dialogue should be prioritised over mobilisation and whether and how specific issues such as the green transition are linked to sacrifices in terms of employment within traditional sectors such as the oil industry and coal mining.

Finally, the question of *organisational memory* is key in terms of how unions recall moments of broad social and political engagement, as in their contribution to forging aspects of the

foundational economy and broader social forms of regulation and policy. For instance, the role of trade unions in housing struggles and urban development more generally may shape the way they approach key foundational and infrastructure issues and frame them at certain points. The importance of organisational and ideological legacies needs to be understood if we are to fully comprehend how broader, foundational, aspects of economy and society evolve. There are studies that point to this dimension of memory in terms of social movements, including how earlier struggles and interventions may shape their approach, although much depends on inter-generational relations between activists and actors (Whittier, 1995). Rowlinson et al. (2010) have pointed to the importance of integrating this aspect of memory into studies of organisations. The earlier examples of territorial social bargaining in Italy, where trade union orientation towards society has been historically strong, illustrates this point.

Therefore, institutional resources, a union identity oriented to society and/or a tradition of intervention in wider social debate and issues can facilitate union action on the quality and availability of services as well as ownership and financing of underlying infrastructures. Many of these have become damaged and fragmented over time due to varying combinations of privatisation, financialisation and austerity. In recognising a set of collective infrastructures as an important and distinctive – though often neglected – part of the economy, this article provides a way to think about how unions choose to act and what might prompt some unions at some moments to take a more visible role in developing such interventions.

While the foundational economy is a useful conceptual lens for exploring and understanding union actions at different levels, to date it is often implicit rather than the basis for an explicit narrative or strategy. These deeper foundational issues do emerge more clearly in some cases: the Austrian ÖGB's *Gutes Leben für alle* campaign; in the use of a public services frame in Germany or in the increased interest in universal public services. However, the framing of campaigns and interventions more commonly uses the notion of foundational or essential services in a more tacit way with some limited indications of more consistent linkages emerging across foundational issues. More generally, we are seeing a broadening of the field of industrial relations, while the content of economic regulation and the boundaries of the economy are changing. The focus on the foundational economy and the way it remaps and widens our view of the economy is one way to academically and politically enlarge the thematic visualisation and space of industrial relations and the study of employment regulation.

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