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IRJ book review by Prof. Tony Dobbins, Birmingham Business School

'Reconstructing Solidarity - Labour Unions, Precarious Work, and the Politics of Institutional Change in Europe'. Virginia Doellgast, Nathan Lillie, and Valeria Pulignano (eds). Oxford University Press Publications, 2018, 250 pp., ISBN: 9780198791843

This impressive book edited by Virginia Doellgast, Nathan Lillie, and Valeria Pulignano, brings together multidisciplinary scholars from political science, comparative political economy, sociology, labour and employment relations, and labour economics to examine the state of labour unions and solidarity in a turbulent political economy context of increasing precarity for many workers across Europe.

Work is widely perceived to have become more precarious in an era of neoliberalism, especially at the lower skill insecure end of the labour market where many firms compete on driving down cost. Worryingly, this trend seems to have accelerated after the 2008 financial crisis, evidenced by rising underemployment. This book provides valuable insights for those seeking to understand why precarious, exploitative work is expanding in Europe and beyond; as well as the scope for reversing its growth. It addresses the question are trade unions the answer to improving conditions for low-wage and precarious workers? If so, how can unions accomplish that goal in today's challenging labour relations environment, when it is widely accepted that unions generally now have less power to challenge capital and win labour struggles.

The authors challenge dominant narratives about trade unions and precarious work. They refer, for instance, to scholars in the dual labour market domain of comparative political economy who argue that unions often represent the interests of core protected workers (or 'insiders') in good jobs at the expense of precarious workers with insecure employment and low pay (or 'outsiders'). This book disagrees, arguing the opposite: that unions try to represent precarious workers through different creative campaigning and organizing tactics.

So how, according to the various authors, can and do unions try to represent the precariat? A range of empirical examples are chosen from fourteen European countries to illustrate how unions are engaging in struggles and mobilizing campaigning and organizing strategies to try to improve conditions for precarious workers in industries as diverse as local government, retail, music, metalworking, chemicals, meat packing, and logistics. The various chapters contest the zero-sum argument that unions act primarily to protect labour market insiders at the expense of outsiders. Unions are seen to best succeed in this endeavour where they are able to both build strong solidarity among different groups of workers and enforce high labour standards at industry and national level applying to all workers. In chapter 2, for example, Grimshaw and colleagues' research on local government in the comparative contexts of Sweden, Hungary, France, Germany and the UK, concludes that union success in reducing pay inequality between standard and subcontracted workers was highest in Sweden, moderate in France, lowest in Germany, UK and Hungary (but with strong local variation in Germany and UK). In chapter 10, Danag and colleagues' research on migrant workers in Finland, Italy and Greece shows that migrant worker paths out of precarity and union success in protecting migrant workers was highest in Finland, moderate in Italy, lowest in Greece.

Where unions can limit employers' ability to 'exit' labour market institutions and collective agreements, and build solidarity across different groups of workers, this results in a virtuous circle, it is argued. They succeed in these objectives when they can mobilize power resources derived from inclusive institutions and inclusive forms of worker solidarity. These factors are seen to be complementary: inclusive institutions make it easier for unions to organize and represent diverse groups of workers, while unions rely on inclusive solidarity to mobilize broad forms of collective action necessary to sustain or rebuild encompassing institutions. Most crucially, grounding labour power in inclusive solidarity depends on two factors: first, building or sustaining coordinated bargaining within the labour movement; and second, coalition building across unions and among organizations representing workers and their communities.

Where unions fail to do so, it can set in motion a vicious circle of expanding precarity based on institutional evasion by employers. *Reconstructing Solidarity* examines how unions construct, or fail to construct, inclusive worker solidarity to challenge this vicious circle and to re-regulate increasingly precarious jobs. It also considers the worrying growth in support for exclusive right-wing nationalism, populist identity politics, and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Part of the explanation often given (for Brexit, for example) is heightened economic insecurity among workers who feel left behind in deindustrialised regions, provoking a backlash against elite institutions and perceived outsiders like migrants who are seen as taking or competing for increasingly scarce good quality jobs.

The book suggests that trade unions need to play a vital role in combating exploitation and division by reconstructing solidarity and inclusive forms of collective action to bring about changes in the welfare state and the labour relations climate. Ensuring equal treatment for all workers, particularly those outsiders in precarious insecure jobs, is essential to the long-term viability of the labour movement.

The text makes a very important contribution to debates about the future of labour unions and their scope to represent precarious workers in increasingly fragmented flexible labour markets.

From the current vantage point (notably in the UK context, with the uncertain implications of Brexit for labour standards and worker rights, and regular instances of exploitation of precarious labour), it appears hard to be optimistic about the potential to reconstruct solidarity for collective and political action to improve the working lives of the precariat. Looking through a comparative institutional lens, all countries are embedded within a capitalist economic accumulation system, but some countries still have higher levels of institutional and regulatory labour market protections and stronger unions than others. It is important not to get sucked into totalizing pessimism. We need to retain hope that trade unions and their allies can help people in precarious jobs. For example, the small Independent Workers Union of Great Britain has proved it is possible to mobilize precarious workers and win labour struggles against goliath multinational corporations.