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Moral economy, solidarity and labour process struggle in Irish public transport

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Abstract

This article empirically applies Knut Laaser's integrated conceptual framework, combining Sayer's moral economy (ME) theory with labour process theory (LPT), to examine how two rival Irish unions engaged with an uneven moral economy and consciously sought to build collective worker solidarity during a dispute over competitive tendering and marketization. Using qualitative data from a case study of BusCo in Ireland's public transport sector, the article enriches sociological understanding of trade union solidarity, and how it is engendered, contested and experienced.

Keywords: labour process, moral economy, public transport, solidarity, unions.

Introduction

Worker solidarity and resistance have been extensively researched (Doellgast et al., 2018; Edwards, 1990; 2018; Fantasia, 1988; Jansen at al., 2017; Marino et al., 2019; Kelly, 1998). Similarly, moral economy (ME) studies have increased recently, with some identifying worker resistance (Breslin and Wood, 2016; Khurana, 2017; Laaser, 2016; Mulinari, 2019). However, very few empirical studies (see Laaser, 2016) merge Sayer's (2005, 2011, 2015) ME approach with labour process theory (LPT) (Thompson and Smith, 2009, 2010, 2017; Smith, 2016). Laaser (2016) pioneered a theoretical framework effectively integrating fundamental LPT and ME aspects, to examine changing social and moral employee-manager relationships in bank work. This article empirically applies Laaser (2016)'s novel and holistic approach to enrich understanding of the changeable dynamics of how union solidarity is constructed and

experienced. The study examines the question: How does fusion of a contested labour process and multi-layered moral economy shape collective (union) solidarity during a dispute over restructuring at BusCo in the Irish public transport sector?

By empirically applying Laaser's (2016) framework, two contributions are made. First, the article demonstrates the dialectics of how 'structured antagonism' (Edwards, 1990, 2018) within the labour process is fused with lay morality, social relationships, commitments, shared ideas and union/representative agency, to activate overt collective solidarity. It also illustrates how collective solidarity is further enabled or inhibited by contextual political economy forces. This provides a more contextualised and dynamic account of workplace conflict, by identifying multiple social, moral and political economy forces influencing worker solidarity. Moreover, Laaser's (2016) framework enables deeper theorization of workplace struggle focusing on human and moral (dis) connections. Applied to an empirical case study of BusCo, collective worker solidarity on the one hand reflects structured antagonism between managers and workers, underpinned by labour indeterminacy and competing concerns over control, as highlighted in LPT (Edwards, 1990, 2018; Thompson and Smith, 2010, 2017). Notwithstanding, on the other hand, collective worker solidarity reflects disconnected moral understandings between workers and employers around the nature and meaning of work and how employees and employers should treat each other. Collective workplace conflict in the Irish public transport sector also renders an interesting case study context to examine how collective worker solidarity is shaped by social and moral (dis)connections between co-workers, and between workers and passengers.

Second, the article advances ME scholarship by critically analysing unionized workers' dynamic and intricate moral economy during a concrete dispute over state-driven competitive tendering/marketization in the Republic of Ireland, and by empirically demonstrating how LPT's workplace/employment relationship-focused materialist analysis complements ME.

Laaser's (2016) integrated framework utilizes LPT to capture moral economy unevenness. Moral understandings are theorized as noteworthy attempts to humanise economic and social employment relationships within specific political economy contexts, but are incapable of eliminating 'structured antagonism' and labour process power imbalances, which may enable or constrain moral economies. This article applies Laaser's (2016) framework to analyse moral economy unevenness in relation to a case context of strong collective worker solidarity, where 'structured antagonism' surfaces more explicitly.

Section two provides a condensed review of 'moral economy' and LPT, outlining some key prior research and explaining how our framework was applied originally by Laaser (2016). Section three introduces the case context, data and research methods. Section four presents the findings under four solidarity themes: 1) solidarity background, 2) solidarity constraints, 3) developing overt solidarity and 4) solidarity outcomes. Finally, section five summarizes how applying Laaser's (2016) framework fusing Sayer's ME (2000) with LPT (Thompson and Smith, 2010, 2017) enhances understanding of dialectical tensions regarding worker solidarity.

The multi-layered moral economy

Studying 'moral economy' (ME) involves examining 'ways in which economic activities, in the broad sense, are influenced by moral-political norms and sentiments, and how, conversely, those norms are compromised by economic forces,' (Sayer, 2000: 80). In general, 'moral-political norms and sentiments' constitute 'the responsibilities and rights of individuals and institutions with respect to others [and include] the needs and the ends of economic activity' (Sayer, 2000: 79).

Polanyi's (1957, 1968) influential ME theory focusing on a late 19th century/early 20th century marketization wave, accentuates the destructive power of markets through commodifying three 'fictitious commodities', land, money and labour. He observes a 'double movement', where

economic liberals pursue disembedded self-regulated economies, while oppositional social groups (e.g., unions, communes, co-operatives) aim to protect society and workers from market fundamentalism by underscoring moral and social obligations (Bolton et al., 2016; Gajewska, 2013; Greco and Chiarello, 2014; Polanyi, 1957, 1968).

Pivotal to this study and influenced by Polanyi (1957, 1968), is Sayer's (2005, 2011, 2015) ME theory, stressing 'lay morality'. Lay morality assumes that understanding how people act in real-life contexts involves stretching human motivations beyond pure self-interest and focusing on multiple needs, commitments, relationships, and how people should treat others. It posits that humans make normative evaluative judgements about how their own and others' actions impact their own and others' well-being. Sentient beings continuously monitor and evaluate what is good, bad, fair or unfair about particular situations and what to do for the best, by considering human capacity to flourish/suffer.

Lay morality highlights dialectical relations where economic practices shape, but are simultaneously shaped by, human agency and lay morality (Laaser, 2016, Sayer, 2005). Lay morality and human agency are contested and enabled/constrained by power networks and other structural conditions (Bolton and Laaser, 2013; Sayer, 2000, 2011). Consequently, moral economies and norms, needs, values, ideas, commitments, relationships and behaviours they help define, constitute various social, political and ideological layers, potentially in tension and shaped, but not determined, by moral principles (Sayer, 2000). Even when economic/market relationships are enforced by politically-economically dominant social actors, this is never unanimous or ideologically hegemonic. Moral economies are sites of struggle and market rule is never total (McMurtry, 2013; Peck, 2013; Schröder, 2012).

Sayer's (2005, 2011, 2015) ME views employment as an economic, moral and social relationship, enmeshed in multiple networks of mutual reciprocity, power dynamics, political

tensions, ideologies, trust relations and social dependencies (Bolton et al., 2012; Fox, 1974; Khurana, 2017; Polanyi, 1957; Sayer, 2000, 2015; Umney, 2017). Sayer elucidates irreconcilable moral economy contradictions in capitalist organizations because capitalism's raison d'être is accumulating profit, not meeting moral human needs. Workers are social beings whose physical, psychological, economic and cultural well-being depends on collective cooperation with others (Sayer, 2007, 2015; Sennett, 2013). Moreover, employees can pursue divergent concerns from employers, which sometimes clash with organizational goals. Workers may resist due to deficient material extrinsic goods such as pay and conditions, but also due to inadequate intangible intrinsic moral goods, such as dignity, recognition, autonomy and trust (Hodson, 2001; Sayer, 2007).

Fusing Labour Process Theory and ME

Labour process theory (LPT) (Thompson and Smith, 2009, 2010, 2017; Smith, 2016; Thompson and Newsome, 2016) can enhance lay morality's capacity to analyse social relations of workplace struggle and the contradictions of conflict and cooperation. Contemporary LPT specifically captures workplace-based resistance at root-level and links it to broader political economy contextual forces associated with capital accumulation; including technology, financialization, dominant ideologies and globalization (Thompson and Smith, 2009, 2017).

LPT views employment relationships as embedding an enduring 'structured antagonism' dynamic comprising unequal employer-employee dependence, with employees subordinate to employer authority and control (Edwards, 1990, 2018). Nevertheless, managers and employees persistently negotiate content, duration and price of embodied labour power. Open-ended effort-reward exchanges are characterized by intricate conflict-cooperation tensions and are subject to internal/external contextual pressures (Author A; Baldamus, 1961; Bélanger and

Edwards, 2013). In specific contexts and at certain times it may become more overt and visible to workers that they have collective concerns that differ from employers and capital. Hence, particular internal/external situational forces intertwine to activate pre-existing solidarity and stimulate overt collective struggles over the frontier of control (Goodrich, 1920). Social scientists can explicitly adopt 'structured antagonism' as an analytical starting/anchor concept to examine how embryonic solidarity within the labour process evolves and becomes more observable at different points in time, in specific contexts.

Kelly's (1998) Mobilization Theory discusses social processes, which help stress common worker preferences and activate pre-existing solidarity within the labour process. Mobilization Theory posits that union agency and ideologies significantly shape mobilization, by influencing workers' evaluations of social categories they belong to (their social identity), and of 'out-groups' (e.g., employers) (Darlington, 2018). Taylor and Moore (2015) underscore how union ideological frames promote collective resistance and challenge employer narratives during a British Airways dispute. However, employer power over the labour process can prevent collective resistance and intensify managerial control (Author A; Burawoy, 2013). Furthermore, Bélanger and Edwards (2013) explain how consumerist ideology increasingly influences the labour process. Manager and customer control are mutually reinforcing, often leaving workers torn between both parties' demands and potentially eroding worker autonomy at the point of production/service delivery.

Some LPT scholars implicitly apply ME to empirically analyse workplace solidarity (Fantasia, 1988). Nonetheless, existing scholarship utilizing LPT to analyse workplace struggle and collective resistance has tended to downplay the complexity and significance of moral economy factors (Laaser, 2016; Sayer, 2000, 2015) in situations when employers/the state attempt to recalibrate the effort-reward bargain and shift the frontier of control in their favour.

Contemporary moral economy research

ME has emerged in recent scholarship on economic and industrial democracy (Bolton and Laaser, 2013; Breslin and Wood, 2016; Darr, 2011; Khurana, 2017; Umney, 2017). Our empirical case study applies Laaser's (2016) lay morality framework, which explicitly merges ME with LPT to explore conflictual employment relations in UK banks. Through this pioneering theoretical integration, Laaser (2016) connects changing manager-employee relationships after performance management systems (PMS) implementation, to broader political economy forces, while maintaining a focus on individuals as sentient and social beings with complex needs and concerns.

Laaser (2016) explains how the labour process in bank work during the pre-PMS regime constituted shared moral understandings between managers and workers who respected each other as reflexive lay moral actors; while simultaneously embedding more covert conflict through patriarchal workplace relations. He cogently shows how work intensification and tighter control regimes after PMS implementation degraded and commodified the labour process in-line with broader employment relationship marketization. This eroded shared moral understandings and provoked more hostile employee-manager relationships. Laaser's (2016) framework therefore captures the uneven and uncertain nature of moral economies. It enables us to appreciate the necessity of examining moral economy factors in work and employment relationships, while recognizing that uneven lay morality and unstable moral understandings inevitably operate within a structurally asymmetrical labour process and broader political economy constraints.

Relatedly, Laaser's (2016) framework encourages us to theorize manager-employee conflict not only as clashing concerns, but also as disconnected moral understandings. The concept of

human and moral '(dis)connection' is highly pertinent, because it does not overlook potential for shared moral understandings and social compromise between employees and managers. Indeed, Laaser (2016) discusses traces of re-connection between bank managers and bank workers after PMS implementation. Yet, equally, '(dis)connection' highlights the enduring fragility of shared moral understandings and human connections within uncertain political economy conditions. Analysing collective workplace struggle over organizational re-structuring in the Irish public transport sector, this article applies Laaser's (2016) framework to examine how moral (dis)connections and shared understandings between workers and employers, but also between co-workers and between workers and passengers, shape moral economies and worker solidarity.

Further empirical research is required in different country and sector contexts, which apply Laaser's (2016) framework and merge LPT with ME to fully capture the unevenness of moral economies and the contested nature of collective union resistance and worker solidarity. Some other recent studies have focused on moral economy, but do not explicitly combine ME with LPT as Laaser (2016) comprehensively does. For example, Bolton and Laaser (2013) provide valuable theoretical insight into Sayer's (2006, 2015) and Polanyi's (1957, 1968) ME theories, underscoring 'lay morality'. Combining ME with realist documentary analysis, Bolton et al. (2016) explore tensions between labour commodification and human flourishing in European employment policy. Umney (2017) examines freelancers' moral economy in increasingly competitive creative industry. Furthermore, Bailey et al. (2012) explain how Australian regulatory changes impact precarious workers' moral economy.

Some ME studies touch upon worker resistance. Breslin and Wood (2016) uncover rule-breaking and informal norms underpinning professional carers' moral economy. Mulinari (2019) identifies a 'tipping' moral economy, which entailed non-union restaurant workers collectively resisting by sharing tips. Moreover, examining female construction workers' moral

economy, Khurana (2017) observes that worker-contractor social ties prevent overt resistance, but co-worker relations occasionally fuel non-union collective protest. Darr (2011) touches upon IT sales workers' resistance, underpinned by moral values.

This section has reviewed moral economy, LPT, and existing ME empirical studies. This article contributes to knowledge by applying Laaser's (2016) framework combining Sayer's (2006, 2015) 'lay morality' with LPT (Smith, 2016; Thompson and Smith, 2009, 2010, 2017) to examine collective worker solidarity. Laaser's (2016) approach demonstrates that lay morality offers valuable theorization of how human capacity to reflect on and evaluate their own and others' well-being intertwines with political, social and ideological ME layers to unpredictably impact human agency, shared moral understandings and human connections. LPT can contextualize these ideas in specific workplace-based solidarity settings and material struggles, by conceptualizing solidarity as social relations expressing the inherent collective nature of the labour process. The next section outlines the research methodology.

Research Methodology

Case context

This article utilises a qualitative case study of a dispute over state-driven competitive tendering and marketization at BusCo between November 2013 and May 2015. To maintain confidentially, pseudonyms are used for respondents, unions, the organization and the relevant state-body.

BusCo, located in the Republic of Ireland capital of Dublin, operates within the Greater Dublin area and employs approximately 3,500 employees, including driver, maintenance, administrative, managerial and executive grades. It is part of the larger state-owned Irish Transport Group (ITG). In 2013, the Irish Transport Regulator (ITR) (a new state body formed

in 2009) proposed to competitively tender twenty-three BusCo routes. The plans were strongly opposed by BusCo drivers and their two rival unions, UnionA and UnionB. Consciously mobilized collective resistance involved campaigns, lobbying, a 48-hour strike in May 2015, and two deferred strikes. Representing public transport workers nationally, UnionA and UnionB possess significant disruptive and political power in this sector. Furthermore, very high membership density renders economic resources to organize strike action, mobilize campaigns, communicate with members, and fund strike pay. UnionB (a specific bus and rail union) is significantly smaller than UnionA (Ireland's largest general, union).

The Republic of Ireland provides a fitting case-study context because the findings illustrate how country-level systemic forces shaped uneven and contested worker solidarity against state driven restructuring. This took place against the background of the collapse of Ireland's national social partnership model in 2009 (McDonough and Dundon, 2010; Roche, 2009; Roche and Gormley, 2017), the 2008 financial crash, ensuing crisis of capital accumulation and assertion of neoliberalism and marketization (Author B; O'Riain, 2014). Moreover, this specific political-economy context captures how moral economies shape struggles extending beyond specific labour processes by spilling over to other workplaces and 'public realms'. Finally, where solidarity is present, our empirical case demonstrates potential worker capacity to secure concessions when contesting market mechanisms and state attempts to shift the frontier of control. The case emphasises major constraints and challenges unions/workers face during this process.

Methods

Studies rooted in positivism and quantitative number-crunching often obscure contextual richness of data by omitting political-moral dimensions shaping real life human agency,

including lay morality and social relationships (Sayer, 2005, 2007). Likewise, such studies often fail to reveal how contested and unequal employment relationships, intermeshed with political economy forces, enable/constrain collective worker agency (Godard, 2014). Uncertainties and ambiguities characterizing workers' moral economies, labour power indeterminacy and 'structured antagonism' are best captured by context sensitive qualitative methods (Burawoy, 2013).

The article applies triangulated qualitative methods to probe how workers' fluid moral economy shaped union solidary during the dispute. Semi-structured interviews lasting 30-90 minutes occurred in seven BusCo garages and two union headquarters between January and August 2017. Interviews with UnionA members included two union national executive members, two union officials, two other UnionA employees, and fifteen workplace representatives. Interviews with UnionB members included two union national executive members, fifteen workplace representatives, and one former workplace representative. Shorter interviews were also conducted with ten lay members from both unions. Potential respondents were contacted using on-line publically available contact details (e-mails, phone numbers). A snowball approach was then applied where interviewees (acting as gate-keepers) provided contact information for other respondents.

Observation was organized through gatekeepers and an ethnographic diary was kept. Visiting bus garages offered rich ethnographic visual data of the labour process and representative/ member relationships. Attending representative meetings in both union headquarters revealed various company and garage level issues, including UnionA-UnionB rivalry. Finally, observing drivers at work furnished invaluable ethnographic insights into labour processes and job demands (Burawoy, 2013). How driver-passenger interactions (positive and negative) and environmental factors (e.g., traffic) shape the labour process were noted, varying across routes

and time. Moreover, observing high passenger demand for BusCo services illuminated potential driver/union industrial power.

Extensive documentary material, including union press releases and collective agreements, was also analysed. A realist data analysis approach was adopted (see Bolton et al., 2016; Edwards, 2018). Realists explore 'the cause of something'. Analysis involved oscillating iteratively between interview transcripts, documents and ethnographic notes, to identify prominent contextual forces shaping uneven and changeable worker solidarity. Moral, political, ideological and social layers of drivers' inconsistent moral economy were fused with evidence of deeply-ingrained labour process tensions situated within a broader political economy context, to produce four interrelated solidarity themes.

Findings

By applying Laaser's (2016) framework integrating ME analysis with LPT, this section unpacks how BusCo drivers' moral economy shaped union attempts to foment common worker concerns, foreground divergent state-company-worker preferences and activate more overt workplace solidarity, during a dispute over state driven competitive tendering in Ireland. Unevenness and complexity of drivers' moral economy and the collective resistance it shaped are captured by four solidarity themes: 1) solidarity background 2) solidarity constraints 3) developing overt solidarity and 4) solidarity outcomes.

Solidarity background

Changes in Ireland's political economy context have shaped the background for worker (union) solidarity at BusCo. In 2000, politicians, particularly from the smaller neoliberalist coalition party at the time, the right-wing Progressive Democrats (PD), sought to privatize BusCo services, challenging drivers' shared moral understandings and public-service values. However, this was constrained by a centralised national social partnership tripartite pact

between employers, government, and unions, which had existed in Ireland since 1987. A UnionA representative emphasised that proposals to reform public transport had to be deliberated through social partnership:

> Because of social partnership, a widespread consensus existed that government had responsibility to discuss the proposals in a formal partnership transport forum. (George, UnionA representative)

The consensus ideology of social partnership foregrounded moral ideas about collaborative mutuality and deliberative and democratic power sharing; yet, in reality, the Irish version embedded neoliberal contradictions and was contested. Social partnership institutionalized workplace conflict and moderated wage growth, which encountered scepticism from powerful unions, such as UnionB:

> The feeling of having to struggle for wage increases and build solidarity wasn't the same under social partnership. Plus, we had power and resources to win more control over wages under free collective bargaining. (Cameron, UnionB representative)

Notwithstanding, because social partnership was widely perceived as essential for industrial relations stability it generated a degree of social compromise and shared moral understandings between government, employers and unions. Right-wing politicians pursuing a market liberalization agenda threatened social and moral connections between government and unions, and therefore lacked political and ideological resources to legitimize BusCo privatization. Taoiseach Bertie Ahern was a staunch social partnership advocate, who, as then Minister for Labour, instigated tripartite arrangements between his Fianna Fáil party, unions and employers during the mid-1980s, along with then Taoiseach Charles Haughey.

Nevertheless, the BusCo restructuring struggle re-surfaced in 2002 when then Minister for Transport Séamus Brennan proposed to privatize BusCo:

> A major national transport strike involving all ITG companies and Aer Rianta [Dublin Airport] was organized in 2004 to resist Brennan's plans. (John, UnionA representative)

However, UnionA's leadership rescinded the strike after Ahern committed to discussions. This ignited fury from union grassroots; but it may be that UnionA's leadership predicted Brennan's plans would fail given the depth of Ahern's and Fianna Fáil's political support for social partnership. Brennan also lacked political/ideological legitimacy to rupture the degree of social compromise fostered between unions and government through social partnership; and a cabinet reshuffle occurred shortly afterwards.

The period from 2003 to 2007 constituted the apex of the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom, with significant growth in Ireland and BusCo itself, putting restructuring proposals in abeyance. Nevertheless, 'moral' social partnership contradictions endured. Despite unprecedented economic growth, broader social inequality remained. Wage restraint, rising living costs and a property bubble increased indebtedness as many people borrowed beyond their means. This bubble eventually burst, culminating in the 2008 financial crisis. The 2008 crisis and subsequent recession hit BusCo (and the country) hard.

Ahern resigned as Taoiseach in April 2008. His successor Brian Cowen was less committed to generating shared moral understandings and social compromise with unions through social partnership, which was now seen as a tainted brand by many. Tensions underpinning collaborative mutuality surfaced intensely when unions strongly opposed the Cowen government's austerity measures and public-sector wage cuts, forced upon Irish workers by the external 'troika' of the EU-IMF-ECB to offset the failures of a broken banking system. Moreover, the Department of Finance, which contested trade union influence over an elected government's policies, re-gained economic policy control from the Department of the Taoiseach. The fragile contradictions of (voluntarist) social partnership culminated in its breakdown in 2009, repositioning state preferences more definitively towards neoliberalism and marketization. Respondents claimed that the breakdown of social partnership highlighted its weak foundations and diverse moral understandings between parties:

> ‘Real’ social partnership, wouldn’t have broken down. (Steven, UnionA representative)

Following the Cowen government’s ‘rationalization’ strategy and review of state bodies in 2008, the Irish Transport Regulator (ITR) was established in 2009 to oversee regulation and financing of public transport services, including BusCo. In November 2013, under a new Fine Gael-Labour (centre-right-centre-left) coalition, the ITR proposed to competitively tender twenty-three BusCo routes. This indicated the weakening bonds of social compromise between government and unions and the erosion of previously shared moral understandings enabling BusCo to operate as a public service monopoly.

Solidarity constraints

BusCo unions experienced various challenges when seeking to activate more observable solidarity. Drivers discussed how changes within the labour process potentially constrained moral and social co-worker connections and obscured mutual worker preferences. Removing conductors between the mid-1960s and late 1980s fractured and individualized the driver community.

> Driver and conductor pairs developed strong bonds. Many arrived in depots early to chat before shifts, some spent more time together than with family. (Cliff, UnionB representative)

Drivers also spent less time in garages interacting with co-workers because, as observing drivers on shift illustrated, new technology, together with BusCo strategies to improve operational efficiency and meet consumer-orientated ‘convenience’ demands, meant that passengers overwhelmingly used electronic payment. Consequently, drivers no longer visited garages after their shift with cash fares or machine readings.

Distinct garage cultures, observed during garage visits and union meetings and reinforced by garage-level agreements, potentially concealed shared concerns and moral understandings between drivers in different garages, thereby constraining work-group consciousness and

human connections. Elements of garage competition existed, further fuelled by sport competitions (e.g., football and golf). Drivers rarely interacted with other garage drivers on shift, not even at canteens:

> In the main canteen in Dublin centre, depots have their own seating areas, people usually keep to those areas. (Gavin, UnionA representative)

Within garages, different sub-cultures, diverse worker preferences, needs and commitments moulded attitudes towards union activity and colleagues. For instance, economic sacrifices regarding strike action potentially undercut collectivism, particularly with below inflation wage increases and rising living costs; notably since the 2008 financial crisis. Moreover, although the 1997 Working Time Act was designed to protect employee well-being by reducing long working hours, it also reduced driver earning potential (via overtime) and morale:

> It disadvantaged us. Many drivers earned high incomes from overtime. Some finished work at 12am and started again at 4am. (Will, driver)

Furthermore, during the tendering dispute, tendering twenty-three BusCo routes affected drivers/garages to different extents, thereby obscuring mutual driver concerns, shared understandings and divergent state-company-worker preferences.

Importantly, members experienced diminished union power over time and increased managerial control due to intensified neoliberalism and marketization**,** which potentially curbed driver confidence and inhibited collective solidarity activation. Additionally, drivers originally collected cash wages from garages on Thursdays, which became ‘union’ day, as it furnished union representatives with opportunities to mobilize members, cement their mutual concerns and develop human and moral connections. However, as witnessed during garage visits, electronic wage transfer meant that Thursdays were now relatively quiet, with only larger garages remaining relatively busy.

Observations revealed that garage-level union relations varied dramatically and often reflected dynamic fusions of representative personalities, specific day-to-day garage issues and garage manager styles. Moreover, deeply ingrained historical UnionA-UnionB rivalry also potentially overshadowed divergent state-worker concerns and weakened morale and social driver ties:

> UnionA-UnionB rivalry goes back to the 1960s, UnionB is a break-away from UnionA. (Mike, driver)

UnionA represents roughly 1,200 drivers and UnionB around 1,300, and there was frequent switching of membership between the two unions, which also created some hostility. Furthermore, although both unions shared a commitment to protect employee well-being, their values and identities were in tension:

> Both unions' traditions are alien, jet black and pure white. For example, we're not affiliated to Labour nor to the ICTU, UnionA is a general union, we're a specialised bus and rail union. (Craig, UnionB official)

Developing overt solidarity

Employees

Regular member communication was critical to overcome potential solidarity constraints discussed above, actively build morale and social worker connections and highlight divergent state-company-worker concerns. Unions communicated a collective ideology that encapsulated and articulated workers' overall preferences and shared understandings, including those not working on routes at risk, through face-to-face interaction, social media, e-mails and telephone conversations. Furthermore, because driver reflections on other frontier of control struggles shaped member-representative moral connections and union legitimacy among members, representatives juggled mobilizing drivers over tendering proposals with resolving other diverse day-to-day workplace issues around the effort-reward bargain.

Contesting the ITR's narrative to reveal disconnections between worker-state preferences and moral understandings was a crucial ideological component. While the ITR argued that only twenty-three BusCo routes were being tendered, unions warned that partial BusCo privatization was most likely a temporary strategy (a possible staging-post for full privatization) and that BusCo could face millions in legacy costs if they lost routes. Union counter-arguments were reinforced by member evaluations of other privatized Irish companies (e.g., Dublin bin collection, Air Lingus, Irish Ferries) and individual concerns about the future of BusCo and working conditions.

Union ideology emphasized workers' shared social identities as 'BusCo drivers', 'trade union members' and 'public-sector' workers, and constructed them as distinct to the ITR. This prompted driver reflections on the 'supporting co-workers' workplace norm, which had previously combined with union disruptive/political/economic power to secure some driver control over individual, garage and company issues. Drivers evaluated that 'strike-breaking' would violate shared driver understandings and threaten informal co-worker ties. Members reflected on how fulfilling normative co-worker commitments produced moral sentiments of pride and self-respect. Moreover, garage visits illuminated co-worker interdependence; for instance, to swap shifts/holidays and offer advice around work/personal matters. This helped justify the economic sacrifice of striking, generate social and moral co-worker connections and create a sense of 'collective' solidarity, rather than 'individual' sacrifice. Union economic resources to provide strike pay also helped.

Unions also developed more overt collective solidarity by emphasizing members' shared 'not-for-profit' ideas, public-sector values and concerns that tendering would shift drivers' social identities from 'public service workers' to 'private-sector workers'. Reflecting on past experiences as private bus drivers, discussions with family, friends, colleagues, and union discourse, members assessed that employees were instrumentalized as profit generators to a

greater extent in private-sector companies, impeding human connection and worker well-being:

> It's definitely not perfect here, but we get much better working conditions than in private companies and we're valued more. (Mark, UnionB representative)

De-humanized private-sector employment relationships were perceived as denying human flourishing and violating drivers' shared moral understandings by eroding pay, pensions, holidays, union representation, employer-employee reciprocity, autonomy, recognition and dignity:

> I have family commitments. You could be working all types of shifts in private companies… and be on low-pay. (Dwain, driver)

The ITR argued that if BusCo lost routes and workers transferred to a private operator, drivers would be protected under Transfer of Undertakings regulations (TUPE). Union counter-arguments, combined with driver lay evaluations of TUPE effects in other workplaces (such as Greyhound recycling), convinced members that TUPE was too weak to protect employees from possible managerial abuse and defend their interests in an unequal employment relationship.

A key union/driver concern was that because private-sector workers often lack strong union representation, they cannot fully utilize labour power indeterminacy to challenge exploitative managerial control, promote worker well-being and persuade employers to foster moral connections and social compromise with workers. This severely contradicted drivers' shared 'industrial democracy' ideals and mutual preferences to extend workers' democratic control over the workplace. Members shared moral concerns that without unions to collectively mobilize and voice grievances, workers would be extremely vulnerable to attack in private companies and divergent employer-worker concerns would be eclipsed:

> We're heard about as a company because we have unions that fight for us. (Kyle, driver)

As discussed, union ability to contest the frontier of control at BusCo and activate more visible collective solidarity was potentially inhibited by intense UnionA-UnionB rivalry. However, although this may have surfaced regarding concurrent day-to-day issues, UnionA-UnionB relations remained relatively stable during the tendering dispute, encouraging solidarity. This was largely due to union awareness that divisions between unions would feed ITR control, limit social and moral driver connections and constrain collective resistance to proposals that had significant implications for not only employees and passengers, but also for union power overall. Unions emphasized the difficulty of securing union recognition in private companies, in the absence of supporting national statutory recognition legislation. Employee transfers to private companies could decrease union membership and harm their economic, ideological and political power, a particular threat to the smaller UnionB. Furthermore, union failure to secure substantive concessions may have broader implications, by increasing state political/ideological power to privatize other organizations and encouraging 'a race to the bottom in pay and conditions for workers' (UnionB press release) throughout the transport industry:

> This was a major state affair, with significant potential implications for us as unions too, we had to go in together. (Craig, UnionB official)

Passengers

Unions also developed more overt collective solidarity by stressing drivers' shared moral understandings around 'serving passenger needs', rather than 'meeting customer demands'. When observing drivers in Ireland's busy capital city, constant driver-passenger interaction was evident. Union members felt morally disconnected from profit-seeking private operators who would transform 'passengers' into 'customers'. Members predicted a drive to remove unprofitable routes, even though passengers need them (particularly the elderly). Drivers also envisaged routes being restructured to prioritize busier main roads over ring roads, enhancing

cost-efficiency, but increasing danger for elderly passengers and children. Moreover, workers feared the abolition of senior citizen free-travel to enhance profit. Lower bus fleet quality in private companies was another shared moral concern, risking safety. Driver lay evaluations were mediated by individual experiences of privatized services, social interaction with friends, co-workers and representatives, union discourse and commitments to informal ties built with passengers:

> You wait a bit for them at the stop if they're not there. (Adrian, UnionA representative)
>
> I've got an agreement with a regular passenger that when we go on holiday, we bring each other back a present. (Cliff, UnionB representative).

Drivers characterized social and moral connections with passengers as benefiting driver well-being by breaking driving monotony and explained that receiving recognition as people, not just 'bus drivers', evoked moral sentiments of dignity and self-respect. Notwithstanding, researchers witnessed difficult disconnected relations between drivers and passengers, and met a recently assaulted driver. Moreover, they explained how dominant consumerist ideology shaped their labour process, and made driver-passenger relations more challenging; for example through stricter passenger complaint procedures. However, more observable solidarity was encouraged by shared 'anti-consumerism' ideas and union member evaluations that in private-sector employment relationships (where 'customers' significantly impacted profit generation), 'consumerism' and 'customer demands' rhetoric permeated deeply, potentially eroding social compromise and shared moral understandings between managers and workers and increasing managerial control.

To challenge the ITR's ideological discourse and highlight shared understandings between unions, workers and society, unions contested 'value for money' and 'service quality' rhetoric, arguing that tendering 'will be a bad deal for the citizen and tax payer' (UnionA press release). UK bus privatization was often mentioned to frame counter-arguments:

> UK bus privatization has been a disaster, tax-payers are paying more and more and service quality is poor. (Stuart, UnionA representative)

Overall, driver strike action received strong public support and drivers reflected on passengers who wished them 'good luck'. This demonstrated moral driver-passenger connections and strengthened union counter-narratives, while threatening the ITR's political/ideological legitimacy. However, some passengers had different moral understandings and engaged in depersonalized economic exchange relationships with drivers, with the sole purpose of fulfilling consumer demands (i.e., providing transport from A to B without disruption). Moreover, some passengers did not share not-for-profit ideas and absorbed hegemonic cost-efficiency and value for money rhetoric anchoring the tendering narrative.

Furthermore, political/ideological union resources were challenged by private operators sharing competing moral understandings. Private operators sought to secure ideological/political legitimacy and enhance their economic resources, by arguing that the government was acting immorally by distributing routes unfairly. Under political/economic pressure to articulate members' interests, a private operator representative body suggested tendering more routes:

> The current proposals are a step forward; however the proposal to limit competitive tendering to such a small proportion of the market until end-2019 at the earliest is not sufficiently far reaching. (Coach Tourism & Transport Council report)

Solidarity outcomes

Unions lobbied and campaigned against the ITR's decision to tender bus routes, but could not strike directly over this issue, because political strikes are illegal under the Industrial Relations Act 1990. This was a significant challenge unions had to overcome by developing a narrative which fully encapsulated drivers' shared anti-tendering ideas and moral understandings, while

legitimatizing strike action and avoiding fines. Unions assessed that they could legally strike over 'the security of bus drivers' terms and conditions of employment as well as the long-term future of public bus services' (UnionA press release), 'in the event that common sense does not prevail and it were to proceed' (UnionA newspaper). BusCo and the ITR still argued that this was a political dispute, but unions maintained their narrative (relatively solidaristic union relations at this time helped) and a 48 hour strike occurred in May 2015.

Further strike action was suspended after substantive concessions were secured. For example, a degree of social compromise between unions, management and government was fostered by a new legally binding Registered Employment Agreement (REA) established in the Labour Court, stipulating that:

> No employee will have to transfer on a compulsory basis to another operator…
>
> …any legacy cost, if any, which may arise from the tendering of bus services will not be borne by the employees [of BusCo]…..
>
> a performance regime whereby performance deductions/proportionate penalties will apply to payments to the contractor in the event of breaches of employment related contract obligations and could lead to the potential cessation of any such contracts awarded.

The REA also protected:

> the existing terms and conditions (including pensions) for any staff that choose to transfer to any new operator. (Labour Relations Commission 'Terms of Settlement' document)

This was important because despite drivers' widely shared public-sector values, drivers' concerns, needs and commitments were variable:

> There may be a small minority wanting to transfer. The shifts may suit them better, or they may seek part-time work, employee situations change. (David, UnionA representative)

Sectoral Employment Orders (SEOs) introduced in The Industrial Relations Amendment Act (IRAA) 2015 stipulated industry-level legally enforceable working conditions and pay. REAs had industry-level remit before being deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 2013.

The 2015 IRAA re-introduced REAs. Unions achieved assurances from BusCo management that they would jointly seek a SEO to benefit both parties, indicating a degree of shared preferences and moral understandings. However, respondents mentioned potential barriers. For instance, given financial accumulation imperatives (e.g., shareholders), external pressures (e.g., competition) and foreseeing their economic resources threatened, 'private operators would definitely resist' (Peter, driver).

Finally, unions secured concessions from the Minister and the ITR, who promised to refrain from implementing full BusCo privatization. Given that tendering could not be wholly prevented, union communications with drivers stressing the implications of the concessions for their common labour process preferences and shared moral understandings were imperative. Nevertheless, struggle over the frontier of control at BusCo continued. Unions engaged with BusCo driver roster and garage displacement issues after a UK-based contractor secured the tendering contract and commenced services in late 2018. Furthermore, given Ireland's increasingly neo-liberalized political economy, any social and moral connections between unions, government and managers are fragile and unions feared that concessions may be reneged on; particularly regarding full BusCo privatization.

This section has applied Laaser's (2016) framework combining ME with LPT to examine how overt collective resistance was activated during a state-driven tendering dispute. The evidence illustrates the changeable and multi-layered nature of drivers' moral economy and the solidarity it incubated, in response to the ITR's attempts to shift the frontier of control.

Discussion

This article adds contextual nuance and empirical detail to solidarity and moral economy scholarship by applying Laaser's (2016) framework integrating Sayer's (2005, 2011, 2015)

'lay morality' with labour process theory (LPT)/structured antagonism (Edwards, 1990, 2018; Smith, 2016; Thompson and Smith, 2009, 2010, 2017); and a realist analysis (Bolton et al., 2016; Edwards, 2018). It captures how dynamic collective union solidarity was activated and constrained during workplace conflict in an Irish public transport company, BusCo, and offers two interrelated contributions outlined below.

First, the article demonstrates the dialectics of how 'structured antagonism' (Edwards, 1990, 2018) within the labour process fused with lay morality, social relationships, commitments, shared ideas and union/representative agency, while being further enabled or inhibited by contextual political economy forces, to activate more overt collective solidarity.

Adding a new empirical contribution by applying Laaser's (2016) framework, this article encourages social scientists examining collective solidarity and industrial democracy to examine how unstable moral economies (Sayer, 2005, 2011, 2015) and their variable moral, political, social and ideological dimensions shape worker mobilization during workplace struggle over the frontier of control (Goodrich, 1920). Applying Laaser's (2016) framework reveals that collective conflict at BusCo not only reflected materialist structured antagonism within the employment relationship, but also disconnected moral understandings between drivers, their employer and the state around the nature and meaning of work and how employees and employers should treat each other. Our article illustrates how Laaser's (2016) framework can also examine human and moral connections between workers and between workers and passengers.

In line with ME and LPT analysis, BusCo driver agency was shaped by state preferences/policies (Sayer, 2000; Thompson and Smith, 2009). The national-level social partnership model present in Ireland between 1987 and 2009 was ideologically packaged as a moral, consensus-oriented tripartite power-sharing pact. In reality, however, it was contested

and in tension with burgeoning neo-liberalizing forces (Author B; McDonough and Dundon, 2010). Notwithstanding, for a time, social partnership partially prevented BusCo privatization and generated a degree of shared, but nonetheless fragile, moral understandings and social compromise between government, employers and unions, including BusCo management and BusCo unions. Social partnership collapsed in late 2009 after the 2008 financial crisis, which led to subsequent assertion and acceleration of neoliberalism, followed by economic recession and politically imposed austerity on the public (Author B; McDonough and Dundon, 2010; O'Riain, 2014; Roche, 2009; Roche and Gormley, 2017). The BusCo tendering proposals in 2013 fermented more disconnected moral understandings between the government, BusCo workers and unions; and the unravelling of compromise fostered by social partnership.

Exemplifying LPT's primary focus on workplace control dialectics (Taylor and Moore, 2015; Thompson and Smith, 2010, 2017), BusCo drivers' specific labour process has been shaped over time by multiple forces, including technological change, and dominant neoliberal and consumerist ideologies; which threaten to erode union power. These, together with unique garage cultures, diverse individual concerns and union rivalry, potentially curbed moral co-worker connections, concealed common driver preferences and limited worker solidarity. Nonetheless, overt collective solidarity was cemented by member lay evaluations of their common 'BusCo driver', 'public-sector worker' and 'trade union member' social identities, which unions helped construct and mobilize (Marks and Thompson, 2010). Less visible discursive struggle occurred between the ITR's market ideology and union public service ideology; which powerfully structured and collectivised drivers' concerns, lay evaluations and shared moral understandings. Union ideology reinforced member reflections on the 'supporting co-workers' workplace norm and generated moral co-worker connections (Hodder and Edwards, 2015). Drivers valued and depended on dignity, recognition, trust, reciprocity, and help extended by colleagues (Hodson, 2001; Sayer, 2007, 2016).

Private bus operators were perceived as heralding more exploitative and de-humanizing relationships than public sector BusCo. A key solidaristic collective concern among union members was that private sector employees often lack union representation to challenge inherently more powerful employers, emphasize common worker concerns and enable human flourishing. This can intensify managerial domination of the frontier of control, significantly limit potential for 'genuine' workplace co-operation/social compromise and obscure divergent preferences and observable conflict, as employers use ideological resources to manufacture consent and conceal power imbalances (Burawoy, 2013; Fox, 1974; Gramsci, 1971).

Unions also stressed members' shared moral understandings about tendering implications for passengers, mediated by driver reflections on informal ties and social connections with them (Breslin and Wood, 2016). However, as profit-driven employers and extrinsically instrumentalized employees are pressurized to meet heightened customer service-user expectations, workplace control regimes may intensify, limiting moral worker-manager connections and social compromise (Bélanger and Edwards, 2013). Significantly, public support was relatively strong during the BusCo dispute, constraining the ITR's ideological legitimacy, despite negative discourse on bus strikes in some media. Union ideology sought to strengthen moral connections between co-workers and between workers and passengers by framing worker solidarity as having broader implications beyond organizational-level; namely buses as a vital public transport service and 'public good' (Sayer, 2000). Unions/drivers feared that in a neoliberal political economy context of competition and marketization, tendering could threaten the effort-reward bargain of all transport workers, and enhance state power to implement further privatization at BusCo and elsewhere. Despite their conflicting union identities (Hodder and Edwards, 2015), relatively cooperative union relations during the tendering dispute helped BusCo unions project a coherent narrative, attain unity around

common worker preferences and shared moral understandings, sustain member solidarity and legitimize industrial action.

The case study demonstrates potential for 'social compromise' between the state, company management and workers (e.g., through the Registered Employment Agreement). However, worker solidarity and moral (re)connections are fragile in Ireland's neo-liberal political economy, particularly since the 2008 financial crisis (McDonough and Dundon, 2010; O'Riain, 2014). Struggles over marketization will likely continue. Neoliberal hegemony is never total, leaving terrain for contestation (McMurtry, 2013; Peck, 2013).

The second related contribution relates to advancing ME research (Bailey et al., 2012; Bolton and Laaser, 2013; Bolton et al., 2016; Breslin and Wood, 2016; Khurana, 2017; Laaser, 2016; Mulinari, 2019; Umney, 2017). Our article does so by applying Laaser's (2016) framework to critically examine unionized workers' contested and shifting moral economy during workplace struggle over tendering, and by empirically demonstrating how LPT's workplace/employment relationship-focused materialist analysis supplements ME in this context. Specifically, Laaser's (2016) important study combines ME and LPT in the context of UK banks. However, collective solidarity and surfacing of open conflict was more evident at strongly unionized BusCo in the Irish public transport sector than in Laaser's study. Therefore, our novel empirical contribution builds on the foundations set by Laaser.

Laaser (2016) explains that moral understandings cannot eradicate structured antagonism and labour process power imbalances (which are inherent to employment relationships), but are meaningful attempts to humanize social relations in particular political economy contexts. Uniquely, we bring ME and LPT concepts together to explicitly underscore how 'structured antagonism' within the labour process shapes social and moral connections between multiple actors during collective workplace struggle.

Advancing knowledge about unionized workers' moral economies and the collective solidarities they shape in different country and sector contexts provides greater understanding of the complex, uneven and contested reality of moral economies and collective worker solidarity. Moreover, despite their power having waned considerably since the 1970s, unions remain vitally important collective institutions to challenge market fundamentalism and managerial control. Additional empirical studies are required which apply Laaser's (2016) framework to examine how workers engage with lay morality in other contexts of solidarity and struggle, in order to stimulate future debates about the role of moral economies in enhancing the quality of working life, humanizing antagonistic employment relationships under capitalism and extending workers' democratic control.

Conclusion

This article enhances understanding of how the moral economy intersects with the labour process to shape collective solidarity at work. Our article contributes to Moral Economy (ME) and Labour Process Theory (LPT) scholarship by illustrating how LPT can buttress ME by offering a specific materialist employment relationship framework, which connects 'structured antagonism' at work to macro forces in the wider circuit of capital(ism). Combining lay morality with LPT offers a deeper fine-grained and multi-layered analysis of collective workplace solidarity and related tensions and struggles over the frontier of control in the context of wider political economy forces. Our research adds a new empirical contribution by applying Laaser's (2016) pioneering theoretical framework to analyse how BusCo drivers' uneven and fragile moral economy shaped contested union solidarity during workplace struggle over state driven tendering and marketization in Ireland's public transport sector. When dominant neoliberal forces threaten collective agency and consolidate managerial control,

unpacking worker solidarity unevenness and complexity is important. This can help identify solidarity constraints and potential ways to (at least) partly mitigate their effects. We urge other scholars examining collective solidarity and industrial democracy to broaden their research agenda by focusing on how interwoven moral, political, social and ideological dimensions underpinning workers' moral economies shape workplace struggle over changes in the labour process.

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