



**Worker Resistance and Media: Challenging Global Corporate Power in the 21st Century, by Lina Dencik and Peter Wilkin. Peter Lang, New York, 2015, 260 pp., ISBN 9781433124990, £98.00, hardback.**

Geelan, Torsten

*Published in:*  
British Journal of Industrial Relations

*Publication date:*  
2016

*Document version*  
Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Geelan, T. (2016). Worker Resistance and Media: Challenging Global Corporate Power in the 21st Century, by Lina Dencik and Peter Wilkin. Peter Lang, New York, 2015, 260 pp., ISBN 9781433124990, £98.00, hardback. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 54(1), 239.

***Worker Resistance and Media: Challenging Global Corporate Power in the 21st Century*, by Lina Dencik and Peter Wilkin. Peter Lang, New York, 2015, 260pp., ISBN: 978-1-4331-2499-0, Price £98.00, hardback.**

The relationship between worker resistance and new forms of digital communication (the Internet and social media) has been the subject of considerable academic debate since the turn of the century. Scholars in industrial relations and the sociology of media have noted a variety of opportunities for trade unions and labour organisations to bypass the often hostile news media during industrial disputes (Puette 1992; Martin 2004) and apply pressure on employers by targeting their reputations through digital campaigns. As well as formidable challenges, such as the corporate surveillance of workers to repress and control labour unrest on a hitherto unimaginable scale. The question this book seeks to answer is “how has the labour movement been able to take advantage of these changes in media platforms as part of the struggle to mobilise, organise and respond to increasingly global corporate activity?” (p. 1). The authors are guided by “a concern with the lessons that can be learnt from the history of the labour movement in order to address its future” (p. 5).

In the first two chapters, the authors set out the historical and structural context of “the global crisis of the labour movement” (p. 15). Focusing specifically on trade unions, they explain their development in terms of vision, strategies and tactics as a response to the changing nature of capitalism and the nation-state in the “modern-world system” (p. 6) during two waves of globalisation. In doing so, the authors begin developing the book's overarching theme: that both the Marxist and functionalist/pluralist views have lent themselves towards an interpretation of labour history that “reifies authoritarian modes of social organisation and practice” through a common denial of the libertarian idea “that there can be an effective labour movement that is *independent* and *autonomous* of the state, political parties and business” (p. 24). This is deemed to be especially problematic given the rise of corporate power, and the success of corporations and the state in undermining trade union power across the world.

In light of this discussion, the authors find that if the labour movement is to revitalize itself it needs to rebuild a more libertarian form of unionism which is more democratic, inclusive and progressive. The variants with the greatest potential are deemed to be global unionism, community unionism, social movement unionism and syndicalist unionism. The subsequent chapter considers their emergence alongside new forms of digital technology. This succinct and critical overview of the transformative potential of the Internet and social media will be useful to readers unfamiliar with these debates.

In the second half of the book, the authors present three case studies of low-wage workers movements which embody, to a greater or lesser extent, these four variants: the globalising Justice for

Janitors (JFC) and Justice for Cleaners (JFC) movement; the Fast Food Forward movement in the US; and the domestic workers movement in Hong Kong and Singapore. The empirical research was conducted over a two-year period and included “fieldwork and over 40 interviews with labour activists, trade union members, members of related social movements, members of Global Union Federations and academics and journalists specialising in the labour movement” (p. 6). It is debatable whether the authors should have spent more time gathering data; nevertheless, this reviewer felt that the main contribution of the book is to be found here.

So what does the reader learn about the media practices of these movements in the new digital environment?

In the case of JFJ/JFC, the authors show how “virtual forms of protest and mediated activism” (p. 134) are being used to supplement traditional organising. Examples include “coordinated emails to flood organisations’ strategic departments with questions about the treatment of cleaners” (p. 131); using digital platforms for “revealing the personal biographies of cleaners... to humanise the so-called invisible workforce” (p. 132) and raise the profile of activists who have been blacklisted; and direct actions orchestrated to generate favourable media coverage and garner public support.

Similarly, in the case of the Fast Forward movement, the Service Employees’ International Union in the US have helped foster a form of social movement unionism that has generated an unprecedented amount of public debate about low wages in the fast food sector. This has been achieved by combining the “extensive use of professionalized public relations” (p. 142) with ‘flash strikes’ organised through social media to create a narrative of “spontaneity, horizontalism and grassroots political organising” (p. 157) that has been reproduced in the mainstream media. Although the authors marshal convincing evidence to suggest that this is more a myth than an actual representation of how the movement is organised with much top-down management, and deftly include reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of trying “to locate power in public image rather than industrial power” (p. 142).

Finally, in the case of the domestic workers movement, social media (Facebook, WhatsApp and Skype) has been instrumental in helping labour NGOs and activists to connect disparate networks of migrants and give them a voice. But, the authors argue, “they remain within bubbles of communication that do not reach institutions of power and do not form into collective, organised networks of resistance” (p. 184). Thus in contrast to the other two cases, it seems that the relatively restrictive economic and political context of South East Asian countries, as well as considerable cultural and linguistic differences, poses a major challenge to improving conditions for migrants.