**Complexities of representation: learning from a conflict about housekeepers’ working conditions in Denmark**

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**Introduction: Representing the new ‘we’ in a changed labour market**

Collective bargaining, tripartite dialogue, service and participation are in focus in the discussion of representation. However, the globalisation and financialization of capitalism, changes in the organization of work, permanent high unemployment, migration and neo-liberal politics and discourses challenge and change interest representation. Neo-liberalism supports the structural power of employers resulting in an enforcement of the asymmetric relationship in favour of employers; consequently making interest representation of workers more difficult. At the same time workers’ communities have become more differentiated and fragmented. The ‘us’ is less homogeneous and the social ties less solid. To the existing power relations, which privilege white male in secure employment, are added new dimensions when migrants and precarious workers become union members. Therefore the discussion of representation have to include firstly classed, gendered and ethnic inequality dynamics both in the labour market and in society in general *and* in workers’ collectives and in the union, secondly workers’ and unions’ power resources, and thirdly the framing of interests and the building of a new ‘we’: the who, the what, the where and the how of interest representation have to been in focus of the discussion.

Commercial cleaning is a growing business both in Denmark and internationally (Kirov & Ramioul 2014). Housekeeping and commercial cleaning are characterized by intense economic competition and partly changed employer strategies, a workforce of which many are either migrants or ethnic minority women and in contrast to earlier with only few majority women, and a lower organization percentage than at the Danish labour market in general and few union activists, too. This results in pressure on pay and working conditions and complicates interest representation and the building of solidarity.

Taking off in a conflict about changes in housekeepers’ working conditions in a Danish based international hotel chain and how the union 3F dealt with this the paper discusses representation, power and union strategies in a changing socio-economic environment.

**The research**

The paper builds on research funded by the Danish Research Council for Society and Business. Data-production runs from 2013-2015 and consists of 27 interviews (32 persons) with trade union leaders, employee representatives, cleaners in mainly in hotels and hospitals and migrant network leaders; fieldwork in the trade union 3F, at organizing activities, in migrant networks and in workplaces; one memory workshop with female trade union leaders and officers; and one research circle with trade union leaders, officers and activists of different gender, age and ethnicity as well as from different positions and unions. The workplaces in the research are organised; this means that there is a collective agreement, yet, not all workers are union members and not all workplaces have a union representative/shop steward. The objective of the research is to contribute both to our knowledge about workers’ solidarity/ies today and to theory-building.

In focus is a conflict on changes in cleaning practices and the organisation of the house-keepers work in a Danish-based international hotel chain. However, the analysis and discussion will also include perspectives on representation in re to commercial cleaning in general as well as other types of manual jobs.

**Interest representation and worker solidarity in the Danish labour market**

Worker solidarity in Denmark *is* trade union solidarity and trade unions are, despite a decline in overall membership, still strong seen from an international perspective (69.6% with a small majority of women, LO-Dokumentation 2010, FAOS 2013). Solidarity is institutionalised through membership and in a mainly representative democracy. Worker’s interests are taken care of on the market through collective bargaining and by involvement in welfare society mainly through tripartite arrangements. Danish trade unions are more service unions than organising unions. However, membership participation is important not only for mobilisation and in elections, but also in the daily life as employee- or health and safety representatives. It has become increasingly difficult to get members to take up these positions, and you may say that the lack of active membership is as equally large a problem as the decrease in membership. Because of the membership problems and because of the general pressure on rights, representation and influence the Danish LO-labour movement[[1]](#endnote-1) and the affiliated unions are engaging in union renewal strategies.

Collective bargaining of pay and working conditions is the major form of regulation; however, other forms and levels of regulation have influence on the labour market, too. For example is health and safety regulated by legislation, but working speed are regulated in agreements; and equal pay is regulated by legislation, but the actual pay is negotiated. The September Compromise (1899) between the social parties made the basis for a system which has been able to function as an arena for the solution of conflicting interests, not only in the labour market, but in society, too. The compromise can therefore also be seen as a class compromise in which the unequal power relationship between capital and labour is balanced (Due, Madsen & Jensen 1993). However, this balancing is challenged by the changes in production, the organization of work, the global competition and neo-liberal politics which has led to a fall in trade unions’ organizational power, changed employer strategies and for both parties to a fall in political influence (also Jørgensen 2014).

Many workers in commercial cleaning, and in the Copenhagen area almost all, are migrants or ethnic minorities *and* women although an increasing amount of migrant men are working within the sector. Work is low-paid, high-speed, done on your own and with a rise in insecure contracts. The percentage of trade union membership is lower than on the Danish labour market in general, and not all workplaces have an employee representative (LO-dokumentation 2011). Furthermore, cleaning is often outsourced, there is a high level of staff-turnover, and employers have partly changed strategies.

Approximately 7.9 % of the members in trade unions affiliated to the LO are ethnic minorities. However, only 3% of the employee representatives come from ethnic minority groups (LO 2016). In general the strategy is to organize migrant and ethnic minority workers. In regard to domestic workers and in the cleaning industry, the strategy is on the one hand closely following the path of the labour market model and reproducing gendered and ethnic power relations within the labour movement *and* on the other breaking new ground in regard to how to organize and who to build coalitions with (Hansen 2010). In 2013 3F has 324.455 members of which 28% are women and 15% are ethnic minorities. 3F is the biggest union in Denmark.[[2]](#endnote-2) Women’s share of the leadership varies from only15% of branch chairs to 76% of the private service, hotel and restaurant service group in which they also are in majority among the membership. Women’s share of the leadership is falling, which is mainly the result of the end of the Agreement of Fair Representation. Only two persons with an ethnic minority (western) background have made it to the top of the union, none are branch chairs or vice-chairs. 10-15% of all branches (72) have ethnic minorities who are part of the branch board in one way or the other. In 6 branches these are women, and in 10 branches men. 12 branches have women staff-members with ethnic minority background, and 7 have men.[[3]](#endnote-3)

**Cleaning, Conflicts and Continued Concerns**

**The house-keeping case**

***Problem***

The conflict started in the early summer 2014. A group of housekeepers both union members and non-members and all women with migrants or ethnic minority background from three hotels in the same international chain came together for a meeting in the trade union office. The hotel chain had implemented a new cleaning system which had raised the already high working speed. The house-keepers felt that they could not do their job properly: the rooms were not clean and the customers complained, and moreover, they were not listened to by the management when they complained about the changes. But the straw that broke was when one of the women collapsed and had to be brought to the hospital. Therefore they got together and therefore the employee representatives in one of the hotels had contacted the union.

At the first meetings there was a lot of talking, worries, fear and the workers expressed strong feelings of disrespect, attack on job proudness, and exhaustion. One of the employee representatives was also a strong opinion leader, and she and other of the older workers had memoirs of better times and argued strongly for their rights to protest and act together. The union leader asked several times for ideas to what the housekeepers could do themselves, but they wanted him/the union to take action. Some feared the consequences, others weren’t able to see what could be done, others didn’t have the confidence and then the details in the agreement and the Danish system wasn’t clear to everyone. The first meeting ended with a written complaint to the employer, and the second with the forming of group of employee representatives, spokespersons, and union leaders which would meet up with the employer. By the end of these first meetings the group was very enthusiastic and committed.

***Course of events***

The group had several meetings. At the first meeting with the employers they agreed to try the new system for a couple of months to see if it would work better when the housekeepers got used to it. The solution to the problem was complicated both by differences in employment contracts and differences between the hotels in how the changes affected the workers *and* by the many management levels: two cleaning companies, the hotel management, and the international management. Because of these complexities and because of the expertise needed to understand the agreement and the negotiation culture the white male union leader kept a dominant position. However, according to the union leader the house-keepers, who took part in the meetings with the employers, had the crucial influence on the settlement. It wasn’t possible for the management to ignore their arguments and everyday experiences.

The housekeepers kept working during the conflict. However, in the autumn some were not employed any longer. In December the conflict wasn’t settled yet and the leading employee representative was crying of exhaustion and was very disappointed. The spokesperson at another hotel (which had no employee representative) had left the job after the daily leader had taken away job tasks which made the daily work easier, more interesting and influential. In general it was difficult to keep enthusiasm and collective pressure on the management, because of the constant replacement of the house-keepers. In the beginning of 2015 the conflict was settled. In the beginning of 2016 one hotel was planned to close, but in another the cleaning system had partly returned to the one before the conflict and work speed was reduced although still very high. However, there were differences between the working conditions for those who were employed by the hotel and those who were employed by a contractor. Those employed by a contractor was on a less favourable deal. This was a concern of all the housekeepers both because of mutual empathy and because future employees would only be employed by the cleaning company*.*

***Result***

The conflict was solved, but not in all parts, and still with different conditions between workers depending on contract and employer. Moreover, it is still left to the house-keepers to hand over rooms if they are not able to finish their list *and* to protest if this is happening daily and not only occasionally. This puts a pressure on the house-keepers both to keep order of their work and to keep the working speed acceptable. In addition, problems with precarious contracts, supervisors, and working conditions in general were not solved.

Political identification and collectivism raised but disappeared partly.

The union did not engage in community unionism or international action neither was other workers in the hotel contacted for joint action despite many are members of the same union.

**The cleaning business**

Commercial cleaning is a growing business both in Denmark and internationally (Kirov & Ramioul 2014). Many hospitals (and other public sector institutions) have outsourced and thereby also privatized cleaning, which mean a shift in agreement for the workers; also many hotels have outsourced cleaning. For both groups this means that they have another employer than the rest of the employees at their workplaces, and that they are marginalised from the workplace collective.

All the involved union leaders agree that cleaning is a hard job and has become even harder during the last 10 years. Especially the work speed is a problem, but also supervisors and daily leaders who are not qualified for the job make up a huge problem. Moreover, the male leader criticizes the employers for changing house-keeping from a regulated to a job with much more precarious contracts. The employers want workers who are young, without any social obligations and without knowledge about labour market rights. The hotel management are under international economic pressure, and when contracting out they don’t have to be concerned about how the workers are treated. There are differences between hotels and hospitals. Contracts are more secure in hospitals and it is easier to get training.

In the capital area there are only few cleaners with Danish majority background left. When asking the union leaders they say that cleaning is no longer attractive to Danish women; when asking the migrants they say that Danish women have other opportunities; but when asking the majority women, who are still working as cleaners, they tell about a fear of being fired, of being bullied by the daily leader, and of all sorts of punishment and being marginalised when standing on their rights. Moreover, older migrants from Thailand and the Philippines, who are union members and some also employee representatives (shop stewards) and active in the union, are also feeling more insecure about their job and have difficulties when they stand on their rights. A recurring method from the leaders was to point at the stacks of applications for jobs they had in the office. However, this was also experienced by one of the new work migrants from east Europe, who became a spokeswoman for the cleaners at one of the hotels. She had her job tasks changed and all her privileges taken, and she was also told about the pile of job applications.

In general the work collective is weak and traditions are eroding. In daily life it shows as problems with communication because of no or poor common language skills, as few opportunities to meet because of the pressure of busyness, and as difficulties in building lasting relations because of the high job turn-over.

**Union strategies**

3F works on many levels to meet new and old problems and to be more inclusive to the manifold of workers. Individual service and collective bargaining are still major activities, yet, organizing and coalition-building have priority, too.

**Collective agreements & the agenda**

Many of the daily issues are regarded as (too) difficult to handle within the agreements and at the bargaining table or to get the employers to agree to. Lack of respect, high working speed, unqualified supervisors, changes in work conditions and pushing the agreement to its limits in regard to for example contracts are much more difficult for the union to find solutions to within the agreement system. Yet, many cases are brought to labour court and won, but the variety of contracts, including zero hour contracts, and the substitute regulation in some agreements as well as accession agreements make the defence of rights and agreements much more complicated and time consuming. On top of that many workplaces within commercial cleaning don’t have an employee representative or/and are small subcontractors and therefore the branch has to do the daily membership service and moreover, only seldom get information about breach of the agreement. Moreover, the problems with the high working speed are complicated by two circumstances: that the agreement on commercial cleaning within hospitals includes the working speed 130 (normal is 100) which was accepted by the union in change for higher pay *and* that it fall in between two forms of regulation: the agreement and the health and safety legislation. The union leaders point at outsourcing as a big problem and they want top management both in hotels and hospitals to take more responsibility for the contracts. However, the union leaders also emphasizes that the individual cleaner has to stand on her right and contact the branch when they have severe problems. This is necessary if the agreement should work, and if cleaners should re/gain respect. However, this is difficult of many reasons, and as one of the house-keepers said: ‘No exists not, only yes’.

To support the workers and the keeping of the agreement as well as to build stronger links between the union and the members branch leaders have started paying monthly visits to workplaces. During the national collective bargaining round the union service group Private Service Hotel and Restaurants has negotiation committees for every agreement area in which the employee representatives have seats. On societal level the union has been successful in putting social dumping on the agenda. Moreover, the union takes part in the international ‘Justice for Cleaners Day’. This public event gives a lot of public support to the cleaners.

**Organising, empowerment & coalition-building**

The branch works intensively with organizing within commercial cleaning and in the private service sector in general. They do not have an organizing strategy as such. Emphasis is on activism, yet, getting new members and keeping old are also important. Organizing are done in mainly three ways: a group of organizers has it as their main activity, organizing days in workplaces with an agreement, and building workplace collectives around a common cause as for example in the hotel conflict. All activities include all cleaners/housekeepers also non-members. Yet, if cases have to be taken to court or the branch need to take action in other ways workers have to become union members.

The union has taken the consequence of the high job turnover and the precarious contracts within the hotel business and concentrate on empowering the individual member and employee representative. The idea is that when members change workplaces they take with them the knowledge about their rights and how to solve problems. However, this has not yet become a reality. One of the leaders suggests that the cleaners should form their own group within the branch.

Coalition-building takes form of working together with different migrant networks from Eastern Europe. The union offers the network to have meetings and parties in their buildings. These meetings start with a presentation of the union to the network members and give them the opportunity to ask the branch leaders about all types of concerns related to their job. However, there is a difference between the needs and interest of the migrants and what the branch/the union defines as their tasks. It is not part of the organizing to include a focus on particular migrant, gendered and ethnic minority problems and interests although when a woman leader on the organizing day underlined how important economic security was for women to stay independent of male partners the housekeepers responded positively. Actually, it is seen as respectful to minority groups to let the communication with women members and workers go through their husbonds.

The union as such are involved in international solidarity activities and the branch has supported the US fast food workers’ campaign. However, transnational action was not considered in the hotel conflict although the hotel chain is international and the new cleaning system came from the US; this despite one of the employee representatives underlining the need to do so. Neither was community unionism considered nor calling for support from other groups of workers at the hotel even though many of them are members of the same union. When asked about this one leader said he hadn’t considered it at all mainly out of habit, another leader that she didn’t believe that other workers would support the cleaners. However, in another conflict at a university students and academics had supported the cleaners. This was not the result of union strategies, but a combination of informal contacts and a young union organizer thinking in new ways.

**Gender equality, diversity politics and union culture[[4]](#endnote-4)**

A very important part of the making of the union 3F was the Agreement on Fair Representation. The Agreement determined several gender equality policy initiatives, and introduced proportional representation on all leadership levels. The proportionality related to the former trade unions (the KAD: 20%, the SiD: 80%), but since these were respectively an all women union and a male dominated union these were as close to gender proportionality measure as possible. Afterwards several unions have joined the 3F, the largest are the RBF (the union for restaurant and brewery workers) and the TIB (the union for carpenters and factory workers in the wood industry). 3F still has a male majority, but stands out because of the Agreement on Fair Representation which to a high degree has secured women’s proportional representation. Moreover, the merger created openings for negotiating leadership practices and union culture in the branches. In some branches the negotiation resulted in interactive and transformative leadership styles, in participatory democracy practices, and in openness to many different working and life experiences. But in others, traditional leadership styles and a closed union culture were reproduced giving women leaders from the former KAD a hard time (Hansen 2008, 2010). At the congress in 2010, 3F decided that the Agreement on Diversity was going to replace the Agreement on Fair Representation that expired by the end of 2012. The main objective in the Agreement on Diversity is ‘…to reflect the membership, to create commitment and equal worth and to develop the membership democracy’. The union must ‘promote real and equal access to elected and employed posts to increase the representation of underrepresented groups’. These are identified as women, ethnic minorities, young people, and in addition representation on the background of job should be included. It is underlined that changes in representation apply to all committees and boards on all levels of the organisation. The representation should be proportional in relation to the composition of the membership. Gender is traversing all the other categories as ‘representation of younger women and men’, and ‘women and men with ethnic minority background’. It is very different how and to which degree the service groups and the branches have implemented the agreement, and in many places only very little has been done.

The migrant and ethnic minority women who have been involved in the hotel conflict, and/or who are workplace union representatives, spokespersons, or just taking part in other activities within the union do all identify with the union although in different degrees. But they meet a union culture and procedures of representation which means that they are not fully included and some are cut off from taking part in union activities at all. It influences on the cleaners’ identification, attitudes and activism, but it has not let to stronger identification with migrant networks or other collectives. This happens despite the Agreement on Diversity and the wish of the branch leaders and chairmanship to get more migrant- and ethnic minority members to be active and to get into leadership. Lately the branch has recruited two officers with an ethnic minority background (one male, one female), who both have worked in the cleaning business, to be in particular involved in organizing. However, ‘deep’ organizing is limited. There are no proportionality measures, no self-organized groups, and meetings and the general assembly are held in very traditional ways – it is a closed union culture and difficult to navigate in. It makes it difficult for the migrants and ethnic minority members to get the experiences which created belongingness and continuous commitment among the senior leaders: friendships and interaction. In the national union there are spaces in which the culture is different, much more inclusive and diverse e.g. in the network/club for hotel and restaurant workers. This is also the case for the many networks and courses in FIU-ligestilling (the equality department of the LO labour movement’s internal training system). Despite the above problems the union activists among the cleaners felt empowered and saw the union as a safe space.

**Discussion & Conclusion: Complexities of representation**

First and foremost collective agreements and the formal and informal relations between respectively the trade union and employee representatives *and* the management are still able to handle conflicts in the workplace. Changes are not irreversible, rights and arguments still have a place. In one of the hotels the new cleaning system is more or less ‘forgotten’, and in some of the hospitals the management has decided to stop outsourcing of the cleaning. This means that the cleaners will change to another agreement with better working conditions. However, not all problems are dealt with, and workers do not benefit equally from the settlement of the conflict. Moreover, problems with empowerment, collectiveness and inclusion of migrant and ethnic minority workers are not solved.

**Representation, power and the new ‘we’**

As said in the beginning of the paper neo-liberalism has enforced the structural imbalance, and the question is if union power resources are strong enough to make up for this. The literature speaks of different form of power and power resources (Hyman; Jørgensen 2014). The fundamental power is employers’ structural power which is based on their ownership of the means of production; then follows institutional, organizational/collective and communicative/discursive power which moderate and regulate employers’ structural power.

One of the leaders believes that the agreement system is dissolving mainly because employers are withdrawing their support either directly by not making or not keeping agreements *or* indirectly by using their management right, which is written into the general agreement (Septemberforliget), to undermine workers’ rights with their changed view on who the good worker is in combination with changes in the organization of work. He sees activism as the only way forward. However, workplace collectives are getting weaker and they are not (yet) replaced by other forms of activism which could form into a new power resource. Coalition-building takes form of mutual support with migrant networks and it is not deep (see Tattersal 2005). Rather it seems like institutional power is still the strongest regulator of employers’ structural power. The socio-economic environment is not supporting unions however, most workers are still union members including many migrant and ethnic minority workers, and the labour movement has been able to define problems with pressure on pay and working conditions as social dumping and to get public support for this, increasing their communicative/discursive power.

The collective is weak in many cleaning work places, and this affects union power as well as the individual member negatively. In the literature national, gendered and religious backgrounds often explain the splitting of communities, however, the research points at employers’ strategies as the primary reason for the weakening of the collectives. Yet, this has something to do with culture, because employers’ strategies enforce divides along lines of nationality, ethnicity and migration status for example when ethnic majority women are pushed out of commercial cleaning or when daily leaders only hire workers of their own nationality. Moreover, the increase in work speed and precarious contracts affect the worker collective. In daily life it all shows as problems with communication, as few opportunities to meet, as difficulties in building lasting relations, as bullying and threats, and as fear of speaking out and as saying no to extra work tasks.

The union branch was clear in interpreting the hotel conflict and the other problems within commercial cleaning as caused by employers and not by the migrants; and in general the workers reached out for each other across nationality and migration status. Moreover, union strategies against social dumping, on organizing, and fighting for the interests of all cleaners meant that cultural differences didn’t turn into opposition and exclusion. But the continuous marginalisation of ethnic majority women from low-skilled manual jobs, the fear of becoming unemployed from almost all working in commercial cleaning, the physical and mental pressure at work, the daily pressure on rights, and the marginalisation from workplace communities because of the outsourcing of cleaning complicate the building of a new ‘we’. It points to the need of a new framing of interests and to rethink power resources. Coalition-building has increased worker power in other countries (e.g. Adler, Tapia & Turner 2014). Moreover, linking up with other groups could also compensate for the low status of cleaning and the cleaners. In a Danish context building coalitions could include both CSO’ and other unions as well as internationally. However, for coalition-building to turn into a real power resource, it has to include joint actions and campaigns. Building more and stronger coalitions could also underpin the strategy of empowering the individual worker because the worker then could seek support from a manifold of groups. Moreover, it would raise the

**Future of representation - what can we learn?**

The conflict about housekeepers’ working conditions and the changes within commercial cleaning in general as well as in the balancing of the unequal power relationship between employers and employees raise a lot of questions to interest representation in the future. It is clear, though, that collective bargaining systems and inclusive union strategies make a difference to cleaners’ pay and working conditions. Or in different words, mitigate the negative effects for vulnerable workers; this is also the case in other European countries where collective bargaining takes place within the industry (Kirov & Ramioul 2014:290). However, one thing is for sure: there is no single solution to workers’ interest representation. Also the making of new power resources and the building of a new ’we’ are of importance. Key to this is the framing of interests: How are interests represented? What is on the agenda? Who is included in interest representation? And where does interest representation take part?

***Bargaining and tripartite dialogue***

* How to cope with the many levels of employers/management, precarious contracts and new employer strategies e.g. new images of the ‘good’ worker?
* How to build a broader interest agenda which include more that economic interests e.g. actions against disrespect, bullying and union hostility?
* How to handle many different forms of regulation and their interplay e.g. in the case of physical attrition which is part of health & safety legislation, but working speed is included in some agreements?
* How to cope with, that actions within the agreement system demand specialist skills and good informal relations which are difficult to learn and build within a constantly changing workforce?
* How to define problems so they make interest representation broader, inclusive and stronger? E.g. in the case of social dumping which makes an opposition to the dominant neo-liberal discourse but still mainly focus on male areas of work the building industry?
* How to cope with different status of work and workers?
* How to make interest representation reflect the internationalisation of businesses and employer strategies?

***Service and participation***

* How to include the broad range of problems and interests migrants have?
* How to open up union facilities for all members and maybe also for non-members?
* How to balance respect for minority cultures without reproducing gender power relations?
* How to cope with the increasing daily pressure on branch leaders to take care of more problems, to rethink their practices, to be more inclusive for less economic resources?
* How to make union democracy more inclusive e.g. coping with no or poor common language skills and no knowledge of the union culture?
* How to make belonging and support the making of solidaristic collectivism (Healy et al 2004)? How to build lasting political identification with the union/the labour movement?
* How to strengthening activism, empower the individual worker and build relations among workers when there are little daily social interaction, when workers fear the consequences, or are exhausted from work and have many family obligations?
* How to make union structures and cultures working for the building of a new ‘we’ including migrants, ethnic minorities and ethnic majorities, women and men, young and old?
* How to build more community unionism, stronger coalitions and engage in collective actions across jobs, unions, central organisations and national borders?

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1. There are three central organisations: LO, FTF and AC [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The share of women decreased when TIB, an almost male only union, amalgamated with 3F in 2010. Source: 3F ligestilling and 3F i tal, [www.3F.dk](http://www.3F.dk), Diversity Audit 2010-2013, GE&D-team May 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Diversity Audit 2010-2013, GE&D-team May 2013. Numbers on gender and age are based on union statistics, numbers on ethnic minorities are based on a survey which 66 out of 72 branches have replied to. Not all ethnic minority branch board members are elected, some are in ‘inspiration-seats’ which give them the right to speak but not to vote. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This section builds partly on two earlier papers (Hansen 2015, Hansen 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)