

# **The changing world of work as challenging and changing workers' solidarity**

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WORK IN PROGRESS<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

The overall interest of the paper is how solidarity among a widely diverse group of workers is produced, maintained, changed and challenged today. The specific interest is on the making of political identity. The paper builds on the understanding that worker solidarity of today are developing from a dynamic relation between conflicts, connections and care. Furthermore, workers' solidarity has four mutually depended dimensions: societal dynamics, political identity, collectiveness, and organisation, mainly trade unions.<sup>2</sup>

In the traditional understanding of labour solidarity class consciousness was seen as the link between structures and agency. However, the understanding that there is a direct connection between individual experiences and class consciousness and in particular, the idea of false consciousness, have been widely criticised (e.g. Bradley 1996). The linkage between objective class interests and the individual worker's consciousness is neither fixed nor automatic, and in reality workers are shaped by their direct experiences and relations (Hyman 1999:2). So what is political identity today and how is it produced, maintained and maybe even dismantled?

The paper examines the basis of political identity. First, the making of a political identity is in focus; then political identity is discussed in relation to societal dynamics, collectiveness and trade

unions; next follows the discussion of what political identity is today and how it is made, maintained and challenged; and, finally, in the conclusion reflections on the relation between political identity and the making, maintenance, change and challenge of workers' solidarity/ies.

### **Data production**

The paper builds on research funded by the Danish Research Council for Society and Business. The case is commercial cleaning mainly in hotels and hospitals. Data-production runs from 2013-2015 and consists of app. 25 interviews with trade union leaders, activists and cleaners in mainly in hotels and hospitals; 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 jobs 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. Data production was still ongoing when the paper was written. The paper is the first analysis of the data.

### **Commercial cleaning on the Danish labour market**

Many workers in commercial cleaning, and in the Copenhagen area almost all, are migrants or ethnic minorities *and* women although an increasing amount of non-white men are working within the sector. Work is low-paid, high-speed, done on your own and with often with variable hours, contracts and mainly performed in smaller workplaces. 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, there is a high level of staff-turnover, and new employer strategies, which bend rules and regulations, are emerging partly following privatization and out-sourcing, too.

In comparison to most labour markets the bargaining system is strong and independent and the labour market is thoroughly regulated mainly through agreements; the labour market parties are directly and indirectly involved in welfare state policy-making; trade union density, despite a recent decline, remains high (69,6%) with a small majority of women among the organized (LO-dokumentation 2010; FAOS 2013). Approximately 7.9 % of the members in trade unions affiliated to the LO are ethnic minorities. However, only 1.1% of the employee representatives and 1.3% of the health- and safety representatives comes from ethnic minority groups; there has been no progress from 2005-2010 (LO 2010). The attitude to migrant workers from both inside the EU and from the global South and East has in general been one of inclusion. The strategy is to organize and represent 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 cooperate 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.<sup>3</sup> Women's share of the leadership is varying from only 15% of branch chairs to 76% of the private service, hotel and restaurant service group in which they also are in majority among the membership. In general women are holding their share of the leadership which is mainly the result of the Agreement of Fair Representation. However, the Green Group with 34% women among the membership has no women at all in the service group board. The average-age in the national leadership and committees is 55-58 years, and more than 50% of branch board members are between 51-60 years. Less than 2% of all branch board members are under 30 years.

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 with men.<sup>4</sup>

### **Political identity**

Bradley (1996:25-26) suggests that we speak about three types of identities: passive, active and political. Passive identities reflect the lived relationships in which the individual is engaged, but individuals are not aware about them and will only define themselves by them if an event occurs that show these important. Active identities include self-identification, but not continuously and not to the same single identity. It provides some basis for action, yet often as a reaction to actions of other people, and often as a defence for example against discrimination. Politicised identities include a constant self-identification and form a more permanent basis for action. Politicised identities develop from political action and provide the basis for collective organisation.

### ***The making of a political identity***

'I can't do my job properly, it is unhygienic', 'It is not clean and then the customers complain about me', 'I thought Denmark would be better', 'I have a no-life life', 'They don't listen to me', 'One of the women collapsed yesterday and had to be brought to the hospital'. This final event was the straw that broke for many of the migrant women cleaners working at a hotel chain which had just implemented a new cleaning system. Despite of fear of losing their jobs or getting no-hours they decided to take part in actions against their management together with the union. Very strong voices

came from the women who had lived in Denmark for a longer time and had the memoir of better times.

The high speed following the new cleaning system was a concern to them. Cleaning is physically hard work and they feared to be worn down if they had to work even faster, but just as much they could not do their job properly. Cleaning is placed in the bottom of the job hierarchy. It is women's work, looked upon as something everyone can do and always can do faster. However, good cleaning needs good skills either taught through courses or learned from colleagues or through long time experience. The women had job proudness and felt satisfied when they did a good job. This was not possible with the higher speed, and moreover, there was a hygienic risk. This was especially a problem at the hospitals, but also at the hotels. Even though the working conditions were better at the hospitals, the working speed was also rising here and the cleaners were told to skip some jobs and to do others less carefully. This was not only the concern of the cleaners, but also the nurses complained: one weighty argument being that the large amount of money used for treating the patients would be wasted if the cleaning was bad.

Affective dissonance was strong among the hotel maids in regard to their identity as a cleaner and for some also as a migrant. It showed as anger, feelings of disrespect, passion and a desire for connection. The maids reached out for each other across ethnicity, migration status, language skills and level of union involvement. The older workers, of which some were union representatives, had memoirs of better times and argued strongly for their rights. This was supported by the union which offered room meetings and contacted/negotiated with employers. All workers were included although some were not union members and others not members in 3F. The affective dissonance fed the critical reflexivity and the trade union leaders were offering a framework for the hotel maids' feelings of injustice. The trade union leaders tried to empower the women to take action themselves, yet, it ended up with the trade union leader being more or less in charge of further

action. But why? Some of the women feared the employers' reactions if they became visible as a group, others felt unsure about how to act in the Danish system, and some were feeling disabled by their language skills. Gendered and ethnic power relations might also have been in play: the women looked up to and felt safe with the help and guidance of the strong and committed male trade union leader. And they might rightly have done so because getting through with complicated cases like theirs need expertise and recognition.

In the literature trade union activism and political involvement of parents/the father are regarded as important for trade union membership and activism among workers today. This seems not to be so important for the cleaners and trade union leaders in this research. Being approached by a union representative at the workplace or the recommendation from friends, families and colleagues were the main reason for joining a union as well as a request to stand for a position from either the workplace union representative or the branch were the main reason to become active in the union. For the union leaders with an ethnic majority background and who were all above 50, trade union membership was a tradition and something natural: being a worker meant joining a union. This is to a certain degree still the case, and especially the ethnic minority women, who have been working in Denmark for more than 15 years, have taken over this understanding, although for some of them it wasn't so obvious in the beginning.

### ***Identifications and des-identifications***

The women workers identified mainly as cleaners and then as trade union members and/or activists. Working/class was not spoken about, although some of the older trade union leaders were quite happy to discuss class interests and conflicts when I brought it up in the interviews or at meetings; they could see the need for class based analysis and actions. A few trade union leaders also

identified themselves as coming from a working class background, yet, some were more likely to believe they belonged to the middle class when asked. However, identifying with cleaner/workers and the trade union will always have something to do with class (Hyman 1999; Klandermans 2001) We live class dynamics and therefore, although we do not identify with them, we also exercise the distribution of privileges and power linked to these Trade unions will in some way always be agencies of class, because they are founded on the basis conflict of interests in Capitalist societies (Lindberg 2011); in DK trade union membership has increased privileges and power resources for the individual worker.

But not only was working class identification or class based arguments mainly absent, also identification with other women or workers of the same national background or ethnic minority as a group was absent and even more likely to show as des-identification. The cleaners and the leaders took part in none or only a few activities together with people of the same national/cultural background. It was mainly the older women, which had earlier been members of the women-only trade union, KAD, who identified with other women and even among them some distanced themselves from seeing women as a political group/collective. Yet, some did feel a community with people from the same cultural background and others had got their job through a nation/family based network or helped friends and family to get a job. To some of the cleaners identification was negative and externally exposed as expressed in this statement: ‘They only treat us like this because we are foreigners’, but it did not lead to organising as migrants. This was especially the case for migrants from Rumania who were very aware about the negative stories about Rumanians in the media. Yet when identification with other women or ethnic groups was present it was not in opposition to identification with the trade union; they rather supported each other. A trade union leader committed to organising cleaners found the communities in the trade union and her ethnic

based network very much alike: both places offered support and help when needed. In general the union was looked upon as giving you protection, a community to belong to in a foreign society, and a place for empowerment and support. In Moore (2011) most of the activist identified with the trade union. A trade union identity transverses class, gender and ethnicity and could be termed a political 'coalition-identity'. It builds on both likeliness *and* diversity; and it is a flexible and dynamic category which leaves room both for shifting identifications *and* for traversing these. This is also the case for the Danish trade union identity, yet there is very little room for organised political single group identifications within the trade union just like problems at the workplace seldom are treated as based on gendered or ethnic inequality dynamics.

### ***Taking action, staying active, slowing down, withdrawing***

In the literature being a trade union member is equivalent to having a political identity; that means to have a constant self-identification as a trade union member and to take part in collective actions. In Denmark being a trade union member is for many mainly about tradition, security, service, professional identity, and belonging; and furthermore, believing that being part of a collective makes you stronger, and that collective solutions make a better society. Yet, it is not the same as taking part in collective actions; many do never take part in a collective action nor attend union meetings, general assemblies or other union activities. But what about the cleaners? The hotel maids were part of a collective action some for the first time, while others had been union work place representatives or union leaders for a longer time. The dispute with the workplace had run for almost a year yet without any clear solution to the problems. The hotel maids had kept on working throughout the time. However, some have left either because they didn't get enough working hours or their job tasks were changed to the worse. They were angry with the employers but they had not turned against the union even though it had not been able to solve their problems. This was also the

case for those who were still worked at the hotels and for the union representatives, too. They still identified with the union, yet, they were not so active any longer. They were exhausted from the work, some cried throughout the interview, anxious about their future and lonely because they did not have the energy to go out after work. One went to bed directly after having had dinner because she had so many pains, another was away from work with a partly work related damage. The strong voice and the cry for respect in the beginning of the conflict was replaced with a 'what can we do?' Some of the cleaners (also others than the conflicting hotel maids) told about barriers for staying active. The information from the union was not in a language they could understand or they didn't know about the opportunities for being active in the union. Others, who had some position of trust, told about how difficult it was to get into more senior positions e.g. the branch board. They lacked skills and closed union culture was closed. The women with a Turkish or a Pakistani background were spoken about as keeping to themselves and not taking part in union activities.<sup>5</sup> The reasons given were family responsibilities, cultural restrictions, and split loyalties because they had got the job through ethnic networks which included the daily leader at the workplace.

On the other hand, many of the trade union leaders have stayed active for decades, committed to the union agenda and struggling for social justice almost day and night. What kept them active?

There were many issues of belonging. For example strong traditions like the red flags and songs at congresses, demonstrations, and May 1<sup>st</sup>; a high level of interaction at actions, meetings and in the everyday life in the union; and making and staying friends with other union activists, leaders and members of left-wing parties. Feelings of success with actions against employers were important to their commitment and they had a high awareness about taking care of the inheritance. They felt empowered, happy, safe and proud. However, many of the women also spoke about a masculine culture in the union and at workplaces which had made life tough and had meant that they have had to fight harder to get into leadership positions, especially the more senior ones, as well as for their

rights at the workplace. To some of the women this had led to identification with women building a feminist collective identity.

### **Discussion: political identity in context**

It is already clear the making of a political identity and identification with trade unions or other workers' communities stands in a dynamic relationship to the three other dimensions of solidarity.

In the following these dynamics will be discussed.

### *Societal dynamics*

The Nordic class compromise is challenged from changes both in regulation and in employer strategies. Outsourcing and privatisation of the cleaning to independent contractors have been followed by a strong pressure on working conditions, job satisfaction, and workplace collectives. Focus is more on lowering costs and less on having satisfied employees. Moreover, it is indicated that the agreements is better to secure the payment than to protect working conditions.<sup>6</sup> The bargaining system builds on a high degree of trust between the parties and loyalty to the system, but some employers bend the rules and regulations to a degree which both put a pressure on workers' rights *and* other employers, and which in some cases could even be seen as union hostility actions. Also public employers and the state seem to be less interested in compromising, so there is a risk of bargaining being only about making minor improvements to already decided politics (see also Kelly and Frege 2004).

The hotel action and strikes as well as other types of collective action among care workers suggest that conflicts may lead to political identity and the revitalization of trade union solidarity. Yet, it is very difficult to say if it will stay so or if continued pressure and downfall in societal forces, which

support the making of connections, rather will lead to de-politicization and weakening of trade union solidarity. This could be a weakening of the bargaining system, cut-downs in care services, economic politics which undermine redistribution, and strengthening of the discourses on competition and individual merit and success. When reflecting on the differences between now and then the older trade union leaders point at the much more politicised and activist environment in the 1970'ties and early 1980ties as important for their political identity. The environment is becoming more conflictual and activism is reintroduced in (some of) the trade unions, but in contrast to earlier the societal discourse is less supportive to unions and to equality. How does this influence on the making of a political identity among the cleaners? And for workers' identification with the trade union?

### ***Workers collective***

Outsourcing and privatization have been followed by an increase in working speed and a decrease in the quality of the cleaning. Moreover, there is a constant flow of workers with very diverse backgrounds, and some have short term low hours contracts, too. This has meant that traditions like having lunch together or a chat before work in the morning as well as going out together after work for a cup of coffee or to celebrate birthdays do not exist any longer. In addition, outsourcing and privatization have meant that the cleaners are not employed by the same company or institution as the other workers and therefore they don't have a seat in the cooperation committees and they are not/seldom invited to workplace parties like Christmas lunch or summer excursions. Some of the cleaners experience that their former colleagues, e.g. teachers at the school, are complaining about them to the management because the workplace is dirty, and suddenly they become opponents instead of colleagues. Thus, the cleaners' workplace collective is weakened in many ways and there

are only few, if any, links to everyday collectives outside the workplace. This works against the making and maintaining of a political identity and collective action. In addition, language problems restricts communication between the cleaners and with the union representative; they, and leaders in the branch, are struggling with missing information or misunderstandings because only few speak Danish and none speak good English. In addition, the union representative/shop steward has only few opportunities to come with her interpretation of the workplace problems because interaction is limited, and many don't turn up at meetings. This means a pressure on the trade union branch to deliver community, interpretations and cooperation between the workers in the workplace.

### ***Trade unions***

The trade union 3F is trying hard to solve the problems the cleaners meet by servicing the individual member *and* through the labour market institutions e.g. negotiating with the employers or bringing cases to court. They are also trying to build stronger collectives in the workplaces, and their Agreement on Diversity lays out guidelines for making the union more inclusive and the democracy reflecting the membership to a higher degree. In addition, 3F is involved in different forms of coalition-building mainly with migrant networks, but also internationally. And finally, they have put social dumping on the agenda both in the bargaining rounds and in society incl. in the media. Danish trade unions still have strong institutional power and despite a fall in membership in the LO affiliated unions some organisational power, too. They use this and a general concern about rising unfairness in society to get more discursive power. However, the question is if this is enough to match the changed employer strategies and the strong neo-liberal discourse which permeates society and policy-making, too. It is also the question if they have the right measures to solve the

problems. How does this influence on the cleaners' identification with the union? And how do the new migrant members and activists influence the trade union?

Healy et al 2004 discuss different forms of collectivist attitudes and concludes that it is only solidaristic collectivism which will lead to a strong workers' collective in workplaces as well as in unions. However, attitudes are not fixed, but can be changed if expectations are not fulfilled or if activism does not lead to feeling included on equal terms in the union. Some of the cleaners have solidaristic attitudes and are committed to a broad social justice agenda while others have more instrumental attitudes turning to the union of self-interest or on the basis of the injustice they have met as a group. The women who have been involved in the hotel action, who are workplace union representatives or spokespersons, or who are taking part in other activities within the union do all identify with the union although in different degrees. But they also 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 led 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 experience which created belongingness and continuous commitment among the senior leaders: friendships and frequent interaction. In addition some of them have mainly experienced no or very limited success with action against the employer. Union culture is still supporting men's leadership

and traditional leadership performance e.g. showing strength and decisiveness, but negotiations of the white heterosexual masculine culture are ongoing almost daily. Furthermore, 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.

The union strategies against social dumping, on organizing, and fighting for the interests of all the cleaners also meant that division/splitting on the background of ethnicity, nationality or religion wasn't an issue. The union 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. However, there were conflicts within the cleaners' collective in the union lurking in the background. In the capital area there are only few cleaners with Danish majority background left. When asking the union leaders they said that cleaning is no longer attractive to Danish women; when asking the migrants they said 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 including being told of like a naughty child when standing on their rights. Moreover, older migrants from Thailand and the Philippines, who are union members and some also workplace union 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 away, and she was also told about the pile of job applications. This makes it clear that it is neither nationality nor culture which split the collective, but employers' strategies. Yet, it influences the relations among the cleaners, and the union seems not to have the measures to fight this type of employer hostility.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up: Political identity today arises from complex relations between conflicts, connections and care (please see Hansen forthcoming); and the same processes which produce political identity might also weaken it. The conflict in the hotel chain was the basis for the making of political identity among the cleaners and for a stronger identification with the trade union. For those, who were already union representatives and activists, it strengthened the feeling of being a collective and gave them back a position in the workplace. However, the conflict had run for a long time with no clear improvement of the working conditions. Moreover, some have left the workplace and are replaced by new workers who are not interested in the action, and others are worn out from the job and feeling helpless despite the support from the union. So conflicts are a source of protest and organization and of the making of political identity, but they do not necessarily lead to success, to a strong collective or to a more permanent political identity. It raises an interesting question about when exploitation produces worker's solidarity or when it dismantles it. The hotel maids had a desire to connect and the common situation made them into a collective. This was supported by the union which also offered a community to belong to. Both formed the processes of identification as cleaners/hotel maids and for some also as union members. However, connections were difficult to keep in the hotels as well as in hospitals and universities, and this seems to weaken identification and political identity just as the barriers to be fully included in the union did.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the first analysis of data produced until February 26, 2015. By the time of the congress the data production will have ended and the analysis in the paper will be further developed.

<sup>2</sup> Please see Hansen forthcoming for a thorough discussion of the understanding of solidarity and its' four dimensions

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> I am still trying to get in touch with cleaners with a Turkish or Pakistani background. But it is difficult because they do not turn up to meetings or the like.

<sup>6</sup> Working conditions are partly regulated by the law on health and safety!