

Panel: The Political Theory of Labour Unions

Although labour unions have been a key political player for well over a century, they have only received marginal attention in political theory (O'Neill and White 2018, Reiff 2020). That is all the more surprising since other areas of political science, especially political economy and industrial relations, have produced large bodies of research on the topic (See the overview in Ahlquist 2017). After political theory's recent applied turn and the increased focus on non-state actors (Laurence 2021, Hickey et al. 2021) and non-ideal theory (Valentini 2012), we think it is now time that political theorists fix this blind spot. A political theory of labour unions can build on related literatures on workplace democracy (Frega et al. 2019), strikes (Borman 2017, Gourevitch 2018), democratic innovation (Smith 2009), and economic justice broadly to determine the proper place of labour unions in a democratic society. A political theory of labour unions will determine the proper place of unions among the institutions of democratic society. In particular, it will determine their key function regarding justice and democracy as well as the tools unions may legitimately employ to achieve their goals. In this panel, we want to bring together political theorists and scholars from neighbouring disciplines like industrial relations and political economy in order to set the agenda for a political theory of unions. How can they be integrated into democratic theories that have so far almost exclusively focused on the relations between the state and its citizens? The panel aims to answer questions such as the following:

1. What is the place of labour unions in democratic theory, both ideal and non-ideal?
2. What makes labour unions legitimate, internally and externally, and how should they be structured?
3. What tools should labour unions be allowed to use and when?
4. What is the role of labour unions in combating injustice, economic and otherwise?

The paper is semi-open with the following two confirmed speakers:

Vincent Harting (London School of Economics): Unions, Corporatism, and the Contestation of Oligarchy

Philipp Stehr (Munich School of Politics and Public Policy): Rule or Resistance? On the Function and Structure of Labour Unions