

Unionism and everyday life in Retail: The experiences of grassroots union leaders in Chile

Sindicalismo y vida cotidiana en el Retail: Experiencias de dirigentes de base en Chile

Antonio Stecher¹, Lorena Godoy², Antonio Aravena¹

1 Facultad de Psicología, Universidad Diego Portales, Santiago, Chile

2 Universidad de Santiago de Chile y Centro de Estudios de la Mujer, Santiago, Chile

* antonio.stecher@udp.cl

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Background

The transformations and challenges of trade unionism in the context of the processes of productive restructuring, neoliberal modernization and labor flexibility, has been one of the central themes of the New Labor Studies in Latin America since the 1980s (Antunes, 2000; De la Garza, 2016; Julian, 2018). In Chile, since the return to democracy, there has been a long cycle of weakening of the union actor (1990-2005), linked to the great structural transformations instituted by neoliberal modernization (Frías, 2008; Garretón, 2012; Ponce et al., 2017; Ruiz & Boccardo, 2015). Likewise, for the 2006-2017 cycle, a significant process of revitalization of the collective action of workers and labor unrest has been realized, within the framework of a broader context of social mobilization, politicization and challenge to the model economic development (Aravena, 2017; COES, 2017; Gaudichaud, 2015). Said tendencies to strengthen union action have been heterogeneous and unequal in different productive sectors, and have not meant the end of the structural conditions of vulnerability, fragility, and job insecurity of the working classes and of the union actor in contemporary Chile (Campusano et al, 2017; Gaudichaud, 2015).

Aims

The article aims to contribute to this discussion on the transformations and challenges of unionism, presenting the results of a study that reconstructed the meanings and practices that shape the daily life of grassroots leaders of the retail sector from Antofagasta, Santiago and Concepción.

The study contributes to the union research field in Chile in two records. First, in a conceptual register, he proposes the use of the category of "daily life" as a fertile and pertinent analytical key to question the ways of doing trade unionism in different productive sectors. Returning to the contributions of the Latin America Social Psychology of Work (Coutinho et al., 2016; Sato et al., 2008; Sisto, 2009) and the socio-phenomenological and micro-sociological perspective of Berger and Luckman (2001), it is realized of the centrality of reconstructing the intersubjective field of shared meanings and practices that organize the daily work and "worlds of life" of the union leaders (Reguillo, 2000). Second, at an empirical level, it contributes to the understanding of the organization and union action in Retail in Chile, a strategic industry of the national economic model and in which central tendencies of the processes of neoliberal reconfiguration of the world of work, of the social structure and of the cultural orientations in Chilean society are expressed: expansion of employment in the service sector, insertion of women into the labor market, use of different strategies of organizational flexibility, forms of job insecurity in the formal and modern sectors of the economy, expansion of a new salaried working class in the service sector, and labor actors with new cultural orientations (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2012; Ruiz & Boccardo, 2015).

Method & procedures

The study was qualitative, descriptive and comprehensive, aimed at understanding the daily life of grassroots leaders of Retail stores (Flick, 2015). The participants were men and women union leaders of stores and intermediate retail organizations (federations and confederations), belonging to supermarket chains, home improvement stores and

department stores. The sample included 27 leaders, 14 men and 13 women. Eleven leaders were interviewed in Concepción, eight in Santiago and eight in Antofagasta.

The information production included semi-structured individual interviews (Flick, 2015) and group interviews with leaders. The field work was carried out between January 2019 and January 2020. A qualitative content analysis of the material was carried out (Ruiz Olabuénaga, 2003).

Results & discussion

The analysis distinguished five axes that account for the main meanings and intersubjectively shared modes of action that define the daily work of the grassroots leaders of Retail in the store space. (i) A distancing from political parties; (ii) a horizon of meaning for union action focused on the well-being and dignity of workers; (iii) a centrality of the stores as the main space for union action and where the leaders carry out very diverse actions; (iv) an experience of being constantly demanded and questioned, but at the same time of satisfaction for feeling necessary and important in the store; and (v) a main orientation towards dialogue and the construction of agreements with the company.

Conclusion

The aforementioned axes constitute the complex web of the daily life of the grassroots unions leaders of the Retail that supposes both a “common world”, an intersubjective field of reciprocal expectations that establishes the expected and legitimate forms of unionism; as spaces of heterogeneity, diversity and conflict. Within extremely adverse structural conditions, and from the production of new frameworks of meaning and shared modes of action, the base leaders consulted - who usually have fewer resources, experience and networks than unions leaders from other sectors - have managed to establish themselves, especially in the last decade, as an important actor, managing to establish certain counterweights to the power of large business holding companies, and favoring certain improvements in the working conditions of the sector (Bank, 2017). The results show, coincidentally with other studies (Gutiérrez, 2016; Julian, 2018; Ratto, 2019), a daily life of retail unionism that expresses both the structural fragility of the new salaried working class of the service sector in neoliberal Chile, as processes of articulation and relative strengthening of unionism in the last decade, based on the production of new frameworks of meaning, legitimacy and action for the union role in this sector.

Keywords: Chile, everyday life, neoliberalism, retail, unions

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