



Agency by exit: Swedish nurses and the “Not below 24,000” movement



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ABSTRACT

Hirschman's (1970) concepts of exit, voice and loyalty can be reworked to add further nuances to the understanding of labour agency. *Agency by exit* is of interest in demonstrating how agency is conditioned by structures and context that constrain and enable successful action. It may start as individual acts of coping and then enable and empower more collective actions of reworking and resistance. Agency by exit thereby expands our understanding of what strategies of coping, reworking and resistance entail. We base our arguments on a case study of the “Not below 24,000” movement among nurse students and newly graduated nurses for acceptable entry wages in Sweden. The movement has succeeded in raising the entry wage for a number of newly graduated nurses by turning individual and collective agency by exit into structural power. While the movement has managed to shake power relations, it has not fully changed the rules of the game.

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1. Introduction

Some labour geographers call for further conceptualisation of agency, especially more engagement with the terms and practices that constitute labour agency, the many expressions of labour agency and their different outcomes (Ince et al., 2015). Responding to this, we explore how Hirschman's (1970) concepts of exit, voice and loyalty can be reworked to add further nuances to understandings of labour agency. First, *agency by exit* is of interest for demonstrating how agency is conditioned by structures and context that constrain and enable successful action. Second, agency by exit may be used as a strategy of coping, reworking and resistance. It may start as acts of coping and then enable and empower more collective actions of reworking and resistance. Agency by exit thereby expands our understanding of what strategies of coping, reworking and resistance entail. We base our arguments on a case study of the “Not below 24,000” movement among nurse students and newly graduated nurses for acceptable entry wages in Sweden's public health sector. Nurses have received little attention in labour geography. They are professional workers with high skills, but employed in a predominantly feminised branch of the service sector offering low wages. Their emotional or affective work of creating a sense of being cared for by the patients requires them to hold back on resentments and emotions. This together with high expectations of work ethics inflicted upon them by their employer,

patients and themselves constrain their agency (Batnitzky and McDowell, 2011). The “Not below 24,000” movement has nonetheless succeeded in raising the entry wage for a number of newly graduated nurses.

The paper draws on an unpublished paper by Kiil and data from a research project addressing motivations, opportunities and proactiveness of Swedish contract nurses in Norway.¹ Empirical data on the organisation and achievements of the movement have been collected from the internet, primarily Facebook groups. Then in-depth interviews were conducted with two newly graduated Swedish contract nurses in Norway who are movement members; a movement spokesperson; and two representatives of the central leadership in the Swedish Association of Health Professionals (Vårdförbundet), that is, the union representing nurses vis-à-vis their employers. In addition, we use secondary material from Tuuloskorpi (2014, 2015) about the movement's development, and blogs and newspaper articles covering movement actions, the lack of nurses in Sweden, and the “exodus” of Swedish nurses to Norway. For a wider perspective on the nurses' agency and structural power, these information sources are supplemented with insights from our larger project: 18 in-depth interviews with Swedish contract nurses in Norway; interviews and information in writing from managers in four Norwegian health enterprises and hospitals; and interviews in two temporary work agencies. *Contract nurse* is a category of temporary nurse migrants working only for a short period or for repeated time-limited stretches in the destination country (Kingma, 2006).

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We begin by situating our approach in relation to earlier research in labour geography. The analysis starts with a presentation of the movement and its time-place context and then examines structures that have constrained and structures that have enabled higher entry wages. Regarding structures that enable, we pay particular attention to the use of new social media and the opportunity to exit to a more attractive labour market in Norway, and what these mean to the movement's structural power. In the concluding section, we discuss what structures and contextual conditions the movement faces in sustaining its struggle for improvements.

2. Agency and structure in labour geography

In the 1990s, labour geography emerged as a critique of passive approaches to labour agency in the geography of labour. Neo-classical economic geography in the 1960s and 1970s treated labour merely as an input factor, while Marxist geography in the 1980s treated labour as a reactive agent subject to the dynamics of capital accumulation (Herod, 1997, 2010).² In contrast, labour geography brings workers' interests to the analytical forefront, based on the notion that labour as an agent acts intentionally and proactively for its own benefit and has capacity to shape the economic geography of capitalism. Herod, a founding father of labour geography, argues that workers actively, indirectly, consciously and unconsciously produce economic space and scales in particular ways in their efforts to ensure survival and reproduction, and that "workers' ability to produce and manipulate space is a *potent force of social power*" (Herod, 1997:3, emphasis added). This does not mean that labour agency is fully autonomous. The point is that *both* capital and labour have agency to change the landscapes of capitalism and that *both* are restricted by structures beyond their control.

In labour geography's early years, research emphasis was on the collective agency of labour and the positive results workers obtained when they organised and mobilised against capital. There was little, if any, attention to structures that constrain workers from effecting changes in the economic landscape (Mitchell, 2011). Over time, the approach to labour agency has become more nuanced. For example, scholarships in labour geography address how working-class experience, identity, and intersectionality in terms of class, gender, race and ethnicity affect agency, how agency produces spaces of organizing, and that outcomes of agency can be both positive and negative for labour (Batnitzky and McDowell, 2011; Featherstone and Griffin, 2015; Ince et al., 2015). Outcomes can be positive in increasing solidarity and improving working and living conditions, and negative in the sense that no improvements are attained or in cases of counter measures such as termination of employment. Attention to individual agency form part of such approaches, but there has been little direct engagement with how individual agency and responses to working conditions affect outcomes of collective agency.

Introducing the concept of "constrained agency", Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) point to the need to re-embed labour agency in the time-space contexts of the structures of global production networks, the state, community politics, and labour market intermediaries. Inspired by Giddens (1984), we think that empirical research must engage not only with structures that constrain agency but structures that enable it as well. Giddens's structuration theory has been criticised for being too abstract to be translated into empirical projects (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011), and for not paying sufficient attention to spatial relations and unequal

power relations (Featherstone and Griffin, 2015). However, acknowledging the interplay between agency and structure, we agree with Creaven (2000) who depicts a never-ending interplay between agents and structure. In this process agency influences existing social structures and conditions by reproducing or changing them. In other words, agency entails power. The salient point, however, is how effective power is and under what circumstances, which we return to in Section 2.2.

In analysing the "Not below 24,000" movement, our point of departure will be how labour agency to improve entry wages is constrained and enabled by the relationship between labour, capital and the state. At the level of the concrete, the state's scope of economic action, new public management (NPM), the nature of the labour market for nurses, characteristics of the labour process, and new social media such as Facebook are social arrangements and institutions that affect and are affected by relations between labour, capital and the state. These *social arrangements* constrain and enable labour agency in the struggle for higher wages. We discuss how labour agency effects changes to the relationship between labour and the state and to what extent there are signs that this changed relationship changes the rules of the game between labour and the state.

Changing the rules of the game is a process in which capitalist social relations are directly challenged (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). In our study, changing the rules of the game means more than just redistribution of resources and a single moment of wage increase. Power relations have to change in favour of the nurses so that the wage increases can be sustained and spread to more groups of nurses and the nurses gain more control of their labour time and working conditions. The state's roles as regulator, employer, financial guarantor, service provider, political authority and democratic institution (see Jordhus-Lier, 2012) are all relevant in studying the Swedish health sector. However, most of our data are on the state's roles as regulator and employer.

2.1. Labour agency making an impact – how much of an impact?

Thinking along a continuum, one may speak of "big" societal changes when labour agency is capable of changing the relations between labour and capital, leading to significant improvements in wages and working conditions or material and social wellbeing outside the workplace (social reproduction). At the other end of the continuum, labour agency results in "small" changes in everyday lives when small, informal and ad hoc organised groups of workers challenge or pressure their employer in different ways, for instance to obtain better meals or to get paid as agreed upon. While seemingly small from a societal perspective, such improvement could be essential to workers concerned (Rogaly, 2009). This represents a broader understanding of agency and outcome than was common in labour geography's early phase. Operationalization of labour agency into different forms of resistance has become more nuanced, inspired by Katz (2004). As a side effect, this operationalization may help us to better capture what the smaller and bigger societal changes entail and the strategies behind them.

Unpacking children's, households', and local communities' responses to economic modernization and neoliberal capitalism in Sudan (Howa) and New York (Harlem), Katz (2004) argues that "every autonomous act cannot be an act of resistance" and that "feeling good is simply not enough to transform the social relations of oppression and exploitation that are cornerstones of so many people's daily lives" (Katz, 2004:242). She distinguishes between *resilience* which entails autonomous everyday acts to keep afloat; conscious attempts to *rework* oppressive and unequal circumstances but not by challenging hegemonic social relations; and *resistance* in the form of conscious opposition and collective action to disrupt conditions of exploitation and oppression. Importantly,

² For reviews of labour geography see, for instance, Castree (2007), Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011), Bergene et al. (2010), Jordhus-Lier (2012) and Knutsen et al. (2015).

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