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"You've Just Cursed Us": Precarity, Austerity and Worker's Participation in the Non-Profit Social Services

« Malédiction sur nous ! » : précarité, austérité et participation des travailleurs dans l'économie sociale

«¡Nos trajo la desgracia!»: precariedad, austeridad y participación de los trabajadores en la economía social

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Article abstract

Though not monolithic, the non-profit social services sector has been an arena where workers and management participated in various forms of shared planning, service development and organizing the labour process. This included: 1- formal participation processes such as collective bargaining with union representation, and 2- practice-profession or task participation. Drawing on 34 qualitative interviews undertaken with a variety of actors (Chief Executive/Senior Directors, senior operational management, Human Resource Managers, frontline staff, and, where available, union representatives) in two non-profit social service agencies in Ontario (Canada), the article traces how these forms of participation have changed as a result of government austerity policies alongside the expansion of precarious employment and funding in the non-profit sector.

Using exemplar quotes and qualitative analysis, the article shows that worker's participation in each form has declined, while management simultaneously has extended greater control over the labour process and removed or reduced forums and opportunities for input from staff. In terms of task participation, measurement and governance structure of New Public Management (NPM) and austerity have led to less autonomy and choice, especially in the area of working time. The study also found that unitarist approaches, intolerant of staff voice and possible dissent, have displaced earlier representative participatory approaches that either utilized the management chain, or embraced and worked constructively with unions. Though these pressures existed prior to the introduction of austerity policies, the data show that decreased worker's participation coincides and is further undermined by the financial and governance processes associated with NPM and austerity-linked cuts in government and other forms of funding. Overall, the data and analysis suggest that participation in the Non-profit Social Services (NPSS) may be another casualty of this current wave of neoliberalism.

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"You've Just Cursed Us": Precarity, Austerity and Worker's Participation in the Non-Profit Social Services

Ian Cunningham, Donna Baines and John Shields

Drawing on qualitative interview data from two case studies of non-profit social service agencies in Ontario, Canada, this article explores the impacts of austerity and precarity on worker's participation in the non-profit social service workplace. The article reveals that market-embracing austerity is driving the erosion of workplace participation, both in terms of the level of control workers exercise over their day-to-day task and representative security. In the latter case, this includes union and non-union forms of representation. Workers in each organization exhibited efforts to resist the continuing undermining of their terms and conditions, but an increasingly hostile and assertive management facing pressure to cut costs was less likely to accede to worker demands.

KEYWORDS: non-profit social organization, worker's participation, unions, New Public Management (NPM), precarious work, unitarism, neoliberalism.

Introduction

Participation, in terms of staff input to policy, work content and program/agency development, has been an aspirational, though not always realized norm in the non-profit sector (Alcock, 2010; Frumkin, 2005). The literature identifies these processes to include: 1- formal participative processes, direct and indirect, embracing forms of joint decision-making through collective bargaining, as well as managerially-led forms of involvement and consultation (Marchington, 1992); and 2- practice-professional participation, which embraces task participation (Baines, 2011; Charlesworth, 2010).

The non-profit social services sector (NPSS) in developed countries has experienced considerable instability over the last three decades, due to the imposition of governance and measurement structures associated with the use of New Public Management (NPM). NPM has generated purchaser-provider rela-

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tions between government and non-profit agencies characterized by competitive tendering, strict adherence to legalistic contracts and performance indicators, private-sector business practices, short-term funding and continued calls for efficiency, 'more for less', value for money and cost savings (Alcock, 2010; Shields, 2014; Kimel, 2006). This NPM-generated governance climate led to reduced staff numbers, heavy workloads and long hours, as well as extensive unpaid overtime in the sector (McMullen and Brisbois, 2003; McMullen and Schellenberg, 2003; Cunningham 2008). In turn, this governance structure has curtailed opportunities for the aforementioned processes of participation (Baines, 2011; Carmel and Harlock, 2008; Kimel, 2006).

The financial crisis of 2008, and its ongoing effects, represent one of a series of successive rounds of market-based restructuring and reform that deepened neo-liberalization and insecurity for the NPSS. The purpose of this article is to expand knowledge regarding the impact of the financial crisis on the NPSS by investigating the extent to which market-embracing austerity is further undermining workplace participation, both in terms of the level of control workers exercise over their day-to-day task as well as their representative security in the form of union recognition and other collective forums.

The article utilizes qualitative data from two Canadian case studies to address this issue. The two cases reveal that market-embracing austerity is driving the erosion of workplace participation, both in terms of the level of control workers exercise over their day-to-day task and representative security. The article is divided into four sections. The first provides a literature review that begins with outlining the impact of austerity in the NPSS sector, followed by prospects for employee participation among the Canadian/Ontario NPSS organizations in this context, and research questions. The next section outlines the study's method, followed by the findings, discussion and concluding sections.

Austerity and precarity in the NPSS sector

The 1980s represented the rapid integration of market forces into the provision of public services, with the NPSS sector central to this goal (Alcock, 2010; Hickey, 2012). The influence of NPM governance was clear, as non-profits were placed on a market-based footing, delivering services through top-down accountability controls and contractually-driven obligations (Carmel and Harlock, 2008). NPM has been identified as a 'transmission belt' through which waves of neo-liberal, marketized reforms were passed through to the non-profit sector (Shields, 2014; Cunningham and James, 2014). Fiscal discipline, competitive relations, and labour market flexibilization were key aspects of these waves of neo-liberalism (Brenner *et al.*, 2010).

The global financial crisis can be seen as a continuation of successive rounds of such market-based restructuring (Clarke and Newman, 2012; Camfield, 2008). Austerity policies, understood to be a series of government measures aimed at reducing public expenditures (Bach, 2012; Clarke and Newman, 2012), have formed the basis of the latest wave (Cunningham and James, 2014). Canada's experience of the global financial crisis and recession differs from that of countries like the UK. Although technically Canada experienced only two quarters of mild recession, it is commonly described as having undergone more than a year of stagnation and ongoing austerity and slow or no growth. After a brief period of economic stimulus, the federal government introduced radical deficit reduction strategies and passed these on to the provinces resulting in cuts to social funding, wage freezes or roll-backs, and massive public sector job losses.

Our understanding of the impact of this latest wave of market-led reform on the NPSS sector is just beginning. In other similar countries, such as the UK, it manifested in an intensification of some of NPM's market values in the shape of increasing efforts by NPSS funders to introduce greater competition (from the private sector), 'more for less', stricter accountability and the continued adoption of private sector management ethos and practices (Cunningham and James, 2014). In terms of employment policies, in the UK, these pressures have brought further insecurity in income and the degradation of other benefits, greater job insecurity and work intensification for NPSS workers (Cunningham and James, 2014). In many ways, the NPSS is beginning to exhibit precarity in not only funding, but in organizational and workforce security. If left unchecked, the outcomes of continued marketization on employment will include the proliferation of flexible employment contracts, the loss of control over working time, deskilling, a blurring of the boundaries between home and work, low pay, and the dismantling of occupations (Standing, 2011).

Worker's participation in the NPSS

Within this context of post-financial crisis and austerity, and increasing precarious employment, little is known about NPSS employees' opportunities to continue to participate in decision-making. This is a significant gap, as participative processes have been found to buffer less appealing aspects of working in the NPSS, such as poor wages and conditions (Nickson *et al.*, 2008).

With regard to task participation (Marchington, 1992), traditionally, the NPSS workforce expected greater participation in decision making regarding aspects of front-line care provision. These participatory processes draw on professional practice and front-line knowledge of the job, and permit employees to exercise discretion in terms of prioritizing tasks, making plans, and developing interventions (Charlesworth, 2010; Eikenberry, 2009). This necessarily includes

a fair degree of worker control over the pace, timing, intensity and content of work (Rubery *et al.*, 2015; Baines, 2011). In doing so, these forms of participation potentially provide workers with influence over work organization and constrain manifestations of precarity, such as pressure to provide more flexibility in working time, blurred boundaries between home and work, and the inability to utilize or update existing skills. Even prior to the financial crisis, however, managerial ideology under NPM restricted task participation through a standardization of work processes and various limits on worker autonomy (Alcock, 2010; Baines, 2004; Clarke and Newman, 2012; Eikenberry, 2009; McDonald and Marston, 2002).

The second form of participatory process involves joint decision-making through collective bargaining, as well as managerially-led forms of non-union consultation (Marchington, 1992), e.g. joint consultation, team briefings and the management chain. Unions provide some protection against precarity as they are an avenue for staff participation in setting work processes, levels of wages and conditions and job security. Unions, however, have been accused of being too narrow in their outlook, making only meaningless gestures to those employed in precarious work (Standing, 2011). NPM, moreover, is seen as inimical to collectivism, as its neo-liberal values do not regard trade unions as legitimate partners, but as marginal actors defending outmoded forms of service delivery and producer interests (Bach and Kessler, 2012).

The NPSS sector has had a chequered history of embracing unions (Capulong, 2006; Kimel, 2006; Peters and Masoka, 2000). It has been seen as a sector with potential for union revitalization (Passey *et al.*, 2000; Hemmings, 2011). Unions have, however, consistently found it difficult to organize the sector due to: the small size of many agencies; the lack of 'a factory gate' at which to organize dispersed workers; challenges in attributing degradation of employment conditions to the employer rather than to external funders; ambivalence among the workforce towards unions; and a lack of activists at workplace level (Hemmings, 2011; Simms, 2007).

Moreover, the relationship between unions and NPSS agencies is often not positive (Capulong, 2006; Kimel, 2006). Some NPSS organizations have exhibited unitarist views towards unionization and collective participation (Hemmings, 2011; Simms, 2007). Unitarism is an American model of human resource management that emphasizes management prerogative, and an organizational culture built around a team or family metaphor, where all members share the same (management) goals (Cullinane and Dundon, 2014; Van Buren and Greenwood, 2013; O'Brien and McDonell, 2002). Worker's participation, under this perspective, is constrained to meeting management ends. Conflict is viewed as pathological and a matter of poor communication, deviance or mischief. Unions are singled

out as unwelcome, a rival source of authority and a risk in terms of unwarranted conflict (Cullinane and Dundon, 2014; O'Brien and O'Donnell, 2002).

Unitarist values are evident in Canada in union avoidance strategies such as efforts to establish non-union forms of worker voice (Taras and Kaufman, 2006) and efforts to keep unions out or limit their influence. This can be seen in unfair labour practices such as employer discrimination against union activists and organizers, threats of job loss or plant closure in the case of union drives and activism, and failing to bargain in good faith (Taras, 2006). Non-union forms of participation in Canada claim to promote a unity of interest within organizations or to complement union structures (Taras and Kaufman, 2006). Many NPSS managers share harder unitarist, anti-union views, however. As Kimel (2006) notes, NPSS employers resist unionization, claiming they are a hindrance to mission and service delivery because they introduce division and a lack of flexibility in workplaces where otherwise everyone would be part of one big, happy "family" or "team" (Cunningham, 2000; Capulong, 2006). In NPSS workplaces where unions do exist, unitarist views can emerge in the language and actions of managers during periods of crisis, particularly when there are financial problems or the threat of strike action. Management has responded in some cases with threats of de-recognition of the union (Cunningham, 2008).

However, there are exceptions to this rule. In some cases, pre-austerity relations between government funders and NPSS agencies provided significant opportunities for participation. For example, in terms of task participation, an Australian study shows that worker discretion has managed to survive in situations where workers resisted innovation in services that they saw as harmful to service users (Baines, 2011). Moreover, the shared goals of social justice and equality mean that unions and more progressive NPSS agencies and managers have much in common, and sometimes build forms of social movement unionism (Baines, 2010; Kimel, 2006; on social movement unionism, see Camfield, 2008).

The Canadian NPSS Sector

As noted earlier, this article explores shifts in management's tolerance for forms of participation in Ontario, Canada in the current era of austerity. Here, the core non-profit sector (excluding charities in the public sector, such as hospitals and universities) contributed $66.9 billion to the provincial economy (Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2013: 10). Within the OECD, along with The Netherlands, the Canadian sector has the highest share of active paid labour force at 11.1% (Hall *et al.*, 2005). More recent estimates in 2012 find the Ontario NPSS employs almost three hundred thousand employees (295,027) (Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2013: 11). Overall, just over a quarter (twenty seven percent) of core non-profit organizations in Ontario are classified as social and

human service providers. This represents the sub-sector that is the focus of our study. These organizations make up fifty-two percent of the sector's workforce in Ontario (Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2013: 28, 32).

Within the NPSS workforce in Ontario, there is growing evidence of a reliance on precarious labour since the early 2000s: including contract, part-time, casual, on-call positions, but also unpaid care work (McMullen and Brisbois, 2003). In the latter case, latest figures have identified 274,200 volunteer posts (thirty-one percent of whom are in social and human service providers) (Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2013: 43). For many, taking on volunteer posts is a way of gaining access into the labour market, rather than an expression of altruism (The Mowat Centre, 2015). The majority of the workers (over eighty percent) are female (Zizys, 2011), and thirty percent of employees are part-time (Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2013: 34). Short-term contract workers make up thirty-three percent of the workforce (The Mowat Centre, 2015). Other concerns pointing towards precarity include an overall sense of lack of employment stability, questions over whether NPSS offer a fair income for front-line workers, poor work-life balance and a lack of training, career development and retirement benefits (The Mowat Centre, 2015).

Opportunities for representative participation for these workers also appear limited or largely at the prerogative of management, as figures for NPSS union density in Ontario are low at fourteen percent of the workforce: although larger workplaces are more likely to have higher membership (The Mowat Centre, 2015). This NPSS figure is considerably lower than overall union density in Ontario, reported as approximately twenty-five percent (Gomez, 2016).

In the light of the above, this paper addresses the following research questions. Is the current wave of austerity policies intensifying pressures on NPSS organizations and, if so, what forms do they take? Are task-based and representative forms of employee participation still present in this sector and, if so, in what forms and with what effects?

The Study

This qualitative study was undertaken between 2012 and 2014, and involved case studies in two large, multi-site, multi-service NPSS agencies in Ontario, Canada. The research design required that we seek cases with similarities and differences in order to collect the richest possible data (Kirby *et al.*, 2005). The two case studies fit this design as one was not unionized (which we call *Canadavol1*), and one was unionized (which we call *Canadavol2*). Management's shifting views on forms of participation could be evaluated from the onset of austerity to the present in these two different contexts.

Each case study involved interviews with a range of actors including Chief Executive/Senior Directors, senior operational management, Human Resource Managers, frontline staff (team leaders and workers), and, where available, employee representatives. In total there were 34 interviews undertaken, 17 in each agency as outlined in Table 1. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were asked to comment on their pathways and reasons for working and staying in the NPSS sector, their current contractual status, career aspirations and changes they had experienced in the last few years, their experience of austerity and the impact on their work. In particular, we asked respondents to comment on changes to terms and conditions, levels of insecurity, and opportunities for expressing their views either at the level of the task, or through collective forms of representation.

Table 1 also reveals that the organizations were large, with 120 workers in *Canadavol1*, and 200 in *Canadavol2*. *Canadavol2* was a multi-service provider. *Canadavol1* served immigrants who, throughout the remainder of the article, are referred to as 'newcomers'. Part-time workers made up approximately thirty percent of the workforce in *Canadavol1*, and it also relied on the services of around 200 volunteers. Though half of its workforce was part-time, *Canadavol2* had fewer volunteers (50).

TABLE 1
Profile of organizations and interview respondents

	Canadavol1	***Canadavol2***
Services	Advisory services to newcomers	Multi-service provider – homeless, substance abuse, newcomers
Senior managers	3	4
Frontline managers	3	3
Frontline staff	11	8
Trade union representatives	-	2
Overall workforce numbers	120	200

Data analysis took place through a constant comparison method until themes and patterns were discerned (Kirby *et al.*, 2005).

The findings reflect the research questions posed by this study and begin by exploring purchaser-provider relations between government and non-profit agencies, and funding under austerity. This is followed by a discussion of some the implications for other aspects of work and employment, such as job security and pay and conditions. The final theme explores implications for worker's participation in the NPSS.

Findings

Austerity funding and organizational security

Despite different funding profiles, the global crisis and austerity meant that finances were a permanent source of instability for the participating organizations. The influence of NPM governance, exacerbated by austerity, was apparent in each case as a tightening funding environment existed alongside increased demands from funders for higher levels of service provision. *Canadavol1* had a main state funder and several other smaller funders. The organization's main funder required it to increase the numbers of clients seen per worker from 500-600 per year in 2011/2012 to 800 in 2012/2013. Funding was explicitly conditional on these targets being met. This funding was inadequate, however, in that it failed to cover *Canadavol1*'s infrastructure, management and IT costs. In the year prior to the fieldwork, two of the organization's government funders, including its main one, cut funding so that projects only covered 11 months of funding, rather than the whole year.

Canadavol2, in contrast, relied on a complex patchwork of funding sources to maintain its programs, services and staff (approximately 40 funding contracts, including 17 government bodies as well as foundations, service groups, etc.). This type of funding arrangement made long-term organizational planning extremely difficult, as management had to focus on fund raising on a monthly and yearly basis with contracts ending and starting unceasingly. *Canadavol2* faced a similar problem of inadequate financial resources and support alongside the burden of continual reporting and admin work in the name of accountability and outcome measurement. As with *Canadavol1*, some funders set unrealistic outcome targets for non-profits, creating additional organizational insecurity. "It is a precarious sector and we're really in danger of becoming cheap government services with all the accountability of government and none of the infrastructure and stability" (Senior Management, female).

There was evidence in both organizations of the considerable stress placed on the individuals responsible for sustaining funding in this difficult environment. One respondent subject to multiple funding deadlines reported:

> Meeting all of those funding deadlines, there is a lot of stress and anxiety attached to that. When it comes to crunch time, even when you are sleeping, you're dreaming about it. It's in your subconscious. It is very stressful (female, front-line worker, *Canadavol1*).

Changes to Employment Conditions

Job Security

Austerity funding increased job insecurity in the two case studies. In *Canadavol1*, over the last two years, within the two projects subjected to funding

cuts, there had been a significant loss of frontline staff. In addition, the remaining employees in these projects received a reduction in working hours equivalent to four weeks' pay. Affected employees were subject to a two-week layoff, twice per year, with no reduction in workload.

> So we're laid off temporarily for two weeks in the summer and two weeks in the winter and it puts pressure on work-wise because you have to wrap things up and then start again (female, front-line worker).

Management tried to minimize the impact of these unpaid weeks by imposing them in two week intervals to preserve workers' benefits and in order to schedule them in the summer and winter when schools were closed (and when staff were expected to take unpaid vacation anyway). However, the two-week layoffs made staff ineligible for Employment Insurance (though a one-month layoff would have provided some benefits), which deepened the financial strain on laid-off workers. This manifestation of the impact of austerity cast a chill over other workers in the agency, who feared further layoffs or redundancies at a time of high unemployment.

> It's like a dark cloud, you don't know what's gonna happen. We're kind of living year to year, we can't really make any really long-term goals or plans to buy things cos we don't have the money for it or to sustain staff. No one's safe (front-line worker, female).

In *Canadavol2*, the organization sustained its programming and services without resorting to staff layoffs by creatively shifting around resources where and when needed. Where possible, some part-time staff positions were cobbled together from different funding streams in order to add a few more hours to total hours worked. Nevertheless, workers identified funding as a major issue with regards to their employment status and job security. Many expressed insecurity about the future of their jobs, as they were becoming increasingly aware of the precarity of the organization and the entire sector. This insecurity also led to increased feelings of stress and made personal/family future planning very difficult. Issues of job insecurity were particularly acute for part-time staff.

Pay and Conditions

Workers and managers from the case study sites reported problems with pay and conditions. Austerity meant that both organizations had suffered a three-year wage freeze and salaries had fallen behind inflation. Most staff expressed a desire for higher compensation in order to simply "make ends meet" (Frontline staff, female, *Canadavol2*), especially given the high cost of living in the large city where the agencies operated. Understandably, those

without dependents or with another secure household income felt they were better situated to cope with the very modest wages.

> My husband works at the bank so I have that security within our partnership…For other workers or anybody else that doesn't have that support system, then definitely I know you can't really plan. You can plan for the next three years, but you can't plan for five (Female front-line worker, *Canadavol1*).

Indeed, this same worker along with several others added that she had delayed having a family because of the low wages in the agency.

Further, some workers were keenly aware that they were paid less than they would be if they were doing the same work in the public or private sector (e.g. social workers, home care workers, etc.). As a frontline worker observed:

> My rate of pay is low, even compared to other job descriptions of similar basis with other organizations…when I'm 50 am I still gonna be making $43,000 a year living in (city's name)? It's very stressful for me, for sure, to think that. I love my job and I probably will always have something to do with not-for-profit and helping people. But the reality is $40,000 in (city's name) is crap. It's tough to live (Frontline staff, male with no dependents, *Canadavol2*).

Part-timers were worse off in terms of income, exacerbated by agency policies that provided much needed benefits only for those who worked over a certain number of hours per week (25 hours in *Canadavol1* and 24 in *Canadavol2*). In *Canadavol2*, precarity in income meant many of its part-time Personal Support Assistants had to have multiple jobs in order make ends meet. Low wages, insufficient hours and job insecurity, moreover, led to a number of these workers contemplating leaving the non-profit sector altogether.

> I've now been out of school for a year and I would do anything to have a full time job, to the point where I would leave the field that I was in school for because there's nothing out there. Especially in non-profits, and I've searched (Frontline staff, female, *Canadavol1*).

Management were very aware of the problems with pay. Within *Canadavol1*, when some money had become available, there had been an attempt to meet Pay Equity obligations and allocate wage increases to those at the lower end of the pay scale. Despite this, casual employees were still paid just twenty-five cents more than minimum wage. The agency's salary scale had also been restructured recently to link pay increases to performance, which is highly uncommon in the non-profit sector. Although it was acknowledged, somewhat disappointedly, that the three-year pay freeze had rendered the performance pay grid moot, it seemed to signal the further integration of private-sector practices in a sector where this kind of competitive incentive was previously eschewed.

Participation at Work

Autonomy and Discretion

In *Canadavol1*, there was evidence that practice-professional/task participation and worker autonomy were breaking down under the strain of austerity and NPM. Funders increasingly demanded every dollar be accounted for and measured against performance. Workers seemed increasingly trapped within the draconian, intensified targets introduced by the funding bodies and enforced, sometimes reluctantly, by management. Work content and processes were dominated by outputs (numbers of clients seen by the agency) rather than particular care or service outcomes. Management and workers reported that documenting, reporting and monitoring these targets took an average of thirty percent of their working time. In turn, increased targets, oversight and bureaucracy eroded the degree to which workers exercised control over how services were delivered, the ordering and pacing of their work tasks, and the quality of their work.

Management in *Canadavol1* compelled workers into taking on highly pressurised roles through a number of means. Part-time employees, for instance, faced trying to accomplish the high workload and increasingly stringent monitoring requirements from management.

> The trend in non-profit work is when there are the three days a week half time positions, really you're doing full time. You're totally doing a full-time job, there's just no resources (Female, front-line worker).

Many of the workers came from the newcomer communities the agency serviced. Coupled with the difficult external economic and labour market climate, this meant that workers, many of whom were permanent residents, though not full citizens, felt vulnerable and were grateful for even part-time employment and short-term contracts. Extended probationary periods and the use of fixed-term contracts were also explicitly used by management to weed out those not meeting expectations. The organization also had a pool of volunteers. Most of the volunteers were newcomers and many had been service users, whose next step into employment could be part-time posts at the agency itself. The existence of reserve pools of labour, so readily available to management, added to workers' sense that they could not refuse the mounting volume of work or protest poor conditions.

Work intensification also occurred through instances where staff felt they had to use their own personal time to complete tasks. Despite some staff reporting a degree of flexibility from their employer when having to go to personal appointments, the majority indicated lack of control and discretion over working time and general work-life balance. *Canadavol1* operated a time off in *lieu* system as overtime was not paid, but many respondents found themselves working considerably more hours than they were contracted for.

> I have young children, so after they go to bed and I take a nap with them, I wake at ten and usually then work from 10.00 pm until 2.00 am. You can't sustain it, so I'm having problems right now (female, front-line worker, *Canadavol1*).

Most workers reported that they were unable to take time off in lieu in order to meet targets and deadlines, and to better position themselves for employment opportunities in the future. The lack of control and uncertainty over working time was more pronounced for part-time workers. In *Canadavol2*, for instance, hours for Personal Support Workers were never guaranteed and could change from week to week, or even day to day, creating scheduling problems for workers. Often Personal Support Workers in *Canadavol2* were required to work sometimes six or seven days a week.

Other sources of intensification occurred in *Canadavol1* and were related to "volunteering" to help with larger agency events and fundraising. With regard to the latter, respondents reported that rather than an option chosen as part of their desire to go the extra mile for the service user and organization, "volunteering" had become an explicit management expectation. Those who did not demonstrate the required availability were punished by management in the form of insufficient hours, or longer or permanent lay-off. For frontline respondents, therefore, working additional time and volunteering was less about donating labour freely for the cause, but more about just keeping their jobs.

Representative Participation

Despite the above, when workers needed the security of representation at work, the prospects for union action were slim or under threat in our study sites. Austerity measures to cut services, achieve efficiencies, reduce jobs and terms and conditions provided an incentive for management to undermine or challenge the legitimacy of forms of representative voice that might challenge these measures.

Canadavol1 was non-union and managers voiced strong suspicion and antagonism toward collective bargaining. The unitarist values underpinning the organization's approach to employment relations was one that contained efforts to build the aforementioned 'unity of interest' (Taras and Kaufman, 2006). Management reported the organization possessed a transparent, caring 'team', 'family' and open style of dealing with employment relations. *Canadavol1* had established what was described as an 'open door' policy of handling grievances and communication with individual workers. The management chain served as the mechanism of representation for employees, with line managers believing they acted as a filter for any problems. In addition, individuals could speak directly to the Chief Executive if a matter was serious enough to require it. This 'open-

door' policy existed alongside a system of team meetings, employee engagement surveys, and a government-mandated joint health and safety committee.

> I like to think that we've created a culture where we're accessible and responsive… we try and be somewhat transparent and we try to be as supportive as we can (HR Manager).

Austerity and the impact of NPM measures was, however, leading to a hardening of managements' views, starting with an undermining of the above effort to develop a 'unity of interest'. The health and safety committee was reported as becoming increasingly ineffective in recent years. One worker, who was a member of the committee, reported how management were reluctant to accept employee views during meetings, even when there were relatively innovative suggestions being raised.

> No matter how much innovative thinking, they (management) say 'No' (front-line worker, female).

In addition, the use of the management chain to facilitate workforce participation was undermined as managers reportedly became intolerant of individual worker grievances about workload demands, arguing additional responsibilities could and should be managed effectively and individually by employees. Failure to do so was thought to be the result of individual shortcomings and not a reflection on management or the externally imposed workload.

Managers further reinforced this by modelling unsustainable work practices, often communicating that they worked throughout the night, whilst sick and on holiday, embracing self-sacrifice and overwork as a way to sustain and prove commitment to the agency. This culture transferred into the work practices of frontline employees. One worker illustrated how this meant there was a culture of being 'scared to go sick' because of the culture of self-sacrifice.

> When you're sick you go 'Oh my God', you have rights to so many sick days, but then you don't get the chance to take it… To be honest with you, I wish I could have actually called in sick today cos [because] my neck and everything is killing, but then I have a meeting with our librarian, we have to change one of our program spaces (frontline worker, female).

Moreover, any suggestions of union intervention were met with hostile unitarist rhetoric. Management pronounced that deep discord between themselves and staff would be introduced if unions were involved, particularly in situations where the agency was compelled to restructure or lay off workers. These unitarist values included claiming that unions: were troublemakers who disrupt the team and family culture of an organization; bring an 'us and them' relationship with staff; denigrate management's contribution to improving working conditions; reduce opportunities to gain flexibility from the workforce; and disrupt services and are

therefore harmful to clients. When the HR manager was asked about unionization she retorted: "You now have to go outside, turn around three times, and come back in, cos [because] you've just cursed us." (Senior management, female). Another senior manager added:

> Honestly, unions I don't think are really where we want to go… It would cause problems for us if we unionized. We'd lose a lot of our benefits, we'd lose a lot of our morale I think… I think unions make a lot of discontent within management and staff itself…we work well together. You put a union in that, I see a lot of different alliances developing.

Some employees shared managements' negative opinions of unions.

> I worked before in a unionized organization and I didn't see big benefits. I know there is a benefit, but also there is the union deduction. You have to pay and it's not a small amount. I think we are okay (front-line worker, female).

This position was not uniform across staff and many felt poorly represented within the agency. For example, staff on the mandatory two-week layoff felt angry at the 'take it or leave it' approach that management exhibited, and the lack of real consultation on this strategy. These staff argued that more consultation and negotiation would improve things.

In addition, some interviewees expressed frustration that managers took extended leave over and above that given to employees and, when they returned, in order to catch up, they seemed to increase demands on their subordinates. Others observed that management were rarely affected by layoffs or pay reductions while staff usually always were. Several staff contrasted their experience with the practice of a sister, unionized agency where management had engaged in close consultation with the staff about how to implement temporary layoffs and save jobs. There was also a group of workers who had come from countries where unionization was much stronger and felt that efforts should be made to organize. However, we were told that the last effort to unionize had ended abruptly when the staff member leading the drive was suddenly and permanently laid off.

Overall, management appeared in the ascendency at the time of the research (in 2013). The increasing unitarist trope and anti-collectivism favoured by *Canadavol1*'s management was also evident in its desire to move toward a performance pay system. There were also numerous reports that management was building a culture of fear where it was not safe to express opinions openly or to be critical of management decisions. Some staff perceived that anyone not well-liked by management was unlikely to retain employment at the agency. There were fears of reprisals should staff be unwilling to work additional hours, display weakness or otherwise underperform.

Canadavol2 presented a different climate characterized by emerging unitarism, rather than the intensifying hostility towards collective bargaining and other forms of representative participation seen at *Canadavol1*. *Canadavol2* had a long history of peaceful industrial relations and a participatory approach to collective bargaining. Management had, in the past, been supportive of worker demands for better conditions and even jointly campaigned in this regard.

Industrial relations changed once austerity began to impact on the organization's financial stability. Matters came to a head in the agency when the union tabled a claim for a pay rise to end the three-year wage freeze and the inclusion of part-time staff in the organization's benefits scheme. Workers believed that management would honour traditional participatory processes and agree to most of their bargaining demands. Management did not agree, however, and instead proposed a continued wage freeze, the reduction in benefits for full-time staff and no improvement for part-timers. Protracted negotiations broke down, and workers ended up on a ten-day strike: the first in the agency's history.

Some workers wondered whether the strike was the beginning of what might be a heightened union struggle in a sector increasingly under duress:

> A lot of agencies in this sector have shifted. They're a reflection of the financial climate, it is a non-profit agency but it's still affected by what's happening in the sector…it's also the political climate and right now labour is immobilized. If they see the union as strong, they would change their position at the bargaining table (Frontline staff, male).

Despite their previously more progressive outlook, senior managers revealed an emerging unitarist approach to unions and collective mobilization that involved a reassertion of "management rights" (Senior management, female,) and the notion that they alone should run the workplace. Frontline staff, in turn, confirmed that management had recently changed its approach to participation and power sharing, particularly during bargaining. As a senior worker and co-president of the union observed, "there seemed to be less willingness to share any power" accompanied by efforts to narrow the scope of collective bargaining (Frontline supervisor, female).

> We (management and the union) had agreed on a process at the beginning of how things would work, and then (the management lawyer) came in and said, "These are the things we refuse to talk about any more and these are the things that we'll still talk about. Which was not the process! So, the union continued to say, "Well, we're just dealing with everything in the way that we agreed to at the beginning" (Frontline supervisor, female).

Other unitarist attitudes overlapped with this reassertion of managerial dominance. For example, senior management continuously reported that the staff did not understand that voting affirmatively for the strike vote meant that

they may end up on strike. Highlighting this presumed naïveté, a manager who had been on the bargaining team told us that her staff voted yes on the strike ballot, "Not realizing when you voted, you gave permission for that bargaining team to make those decisions on your behalf" (Senior management, female). This quote reflects strong unitarist strands, by portraying workers as easily duped by aggressive and divisive unions.

Management and workers identified external collective bargaining parties as contributing to a more adversarial and confrontational tone during contract negotiations – specifically, the union's national representative and the management team's lawyer. Repeating a sentiment present in all management interviews, one of the senior managers identified the source of conflicted workplace relations as the national union, 'I think it was (the) national union. I think it was their tactics more than the staff, and I think that they wanted to make an example of us' (Senior Management, female).

In contrast, most staff blamed the lawyer management hired from a high profile anti-union law firm that had often been in the news in direct conflict with public and non-profit workers. Employees also expressed concern that the relatively new makeup of the agency's board (from the business community) represented an ideological shift to the right in the organization's leadership, and likely contributed to the decision to bring in the aforementioned lawyer. A manager agreed with this employee perspective by stating: "The board now is considerably, I think, more conservative than management is" (Frontline supervisor, male).

The ten-day strike was a pivotal moment for almost everyone interviewed as it highlighted the long term and growing financial precarity of the sector. While there was a strong mandate and support for a strike by workers, it had mixed consequences for workforce morale and perceptions of the value of collective action. Some felt that the strike brought workers closer together: "One of the best parts of walking the line was you could actually have the conversations about structural issues in a way that we can't do during work" (Frontline staff, female). Similarly, as a mid-level coordinator noted, in reference to her staff, "most of them were incredibly supportive of the union. There was definitely no breaking of ranks there" (Frontline supervisor, female).

There were emerging problems with morale, however. Many workers expressed surprise that management was willing to escalate the dispute. Some workers as a result "didn't want to deal with management" (Frontline staff, male), feeling let down, and rejected organizational efforts to re-engage with them. Some were unhappy with what the union had gained from their sacrifices while being on strike. Moreover, the dispute led to increased feelings of job insecurity, as staff members realized that agency funding and the overall organizational financial

situation had become far more precarious. As one research participant noted: "I think part of it was that nobody really knew what a precarious position we were in […] that was part of what upset people and that's partly why they're now feeling maybe my job isn't secure. And, if it's bad now, is it going to get worse?" (Frontline staff, female).

Discussion

This article has sought to investigate the extent to which market-embracing austerity is further undermining workplace participation in NPSS organizations. The study reveals that each organization faced intensified funding precarity and subsequent familiar NPM-based demands of value for money, greater performance and volumes of work. Employees subsequently experienced changes in working conditions and status in both agencies that increasingly resembled those of 'precarious workers' (Standing, 2011).

In terms of the implications for worker's participation in the climate of austerity, the data reveal that task and representative forms of participation have either been eroded or have had their legitimacy challenged by management. Task participation in the organizations has also been eroded in the face of the NPM-inspired requirements of monitoring, standardization, bureaucracy and calls for value for money, efficiency and cost savings. Choice and discretion for workers and volunteers can also be seen to have diminished and previously voluntary, freely-donated unpaid labour was increasingly compulsory. Workers, moreover, appeared to be losing their capacity to exert discretion over working time, content and pace, and to strike a reasonable work-life balance.

Although the two organizations had very different perspectives on the value of representative participation, there was a commonality in the direction taken by management under austerity. Specifically, each organization questioned the legitimacy of existing forums of representative participation. In *Canadavol1*, representation structures built around the management chain and an 'open-door' policy to foster the 'unity of purpose' were being degraded, alongside increasingly vociferous anti-union rhetoric. In response, workers employed some individual forms of resistance through quitting, but fear of reprisals and a lack of union-based representative security significantly constrained worker actions.

In *Canadavol2*, previously stable, participative industrial relations processes were significantly eroded. Instead, an increasingly hostile unitarist rhetoric emerged, stressing management prerogative and citing unions as mischievous, disruptive, and duping workers into unnecessary conflict. Yet, here, collective organization and resistance remained a central outlet for employee discontent, and led to some positive outcomes in terms of attachment to the union.

It is difficult to generalize the results of the two cases to the entire Canadian NPSS and beyond. The cases are useful, however, for a number of reasons. They confirm the continuing erosion of task-based participation through a standardization of work processes, and restrictions on worker autonomy (Alcock, 2010; Clarke and Newman, 2012; Eikenberry, 2009). This study also confirms the centrality of the management's control of working time in securing greater control over employees in the context of austerity policies. Further research needs to be undertaken to ascertain whether this particular wave of neo-liberal reforms is further squeezing workers' previously reported ability to resist.

The cases not only confirm that the current wave of NPM-driven public service workplace reforms breeds anti-union sentiments in management and some staff (Bach and Kessler, 2012), but they further raise questions concerning whether this context is hostile to all forms of representative participation, even those built on 'unity of interest' (Taras, 2006). This question is relevant to all public services, even those directly provided by the state. For here, unions have attempted to varying degrees to accommodate public service reforms that contain NPM elements through partnership agreements (Bach and Kessler, 2012). During austerity, these efforts may turn out to be merely tools for management to incorporate workers and their representatives into agreeing to their own work intensification and loss of influence.

The cases raise further questions concerning whether the type of union engagement and conflict evident in *Canadavol2* is sustainable, or whether the demise of non-union forums in *Canadavol1* could lead to unions stepping into the representational void. It is clear that *Canadavol2*'s union efforts regarding benefits for the precarious workforce was more than merely 'gestures' (Standing, 2011) and workers engaged positively with the strike. In addition, even in the non-union setting of *Canadavol1*, some employees saw the value of unionization. Perceptions of insecurity were on the rise in both case studies and ambivalence or hostility to unionism was apparent. In many ways, management appeared to be building regimes built on fear and leaving questions as to whether representative participation has a future in the NPSS sector.

Conclusion

Workplace participation has been a central aspirational aspect among workers and more progressive management in parts of the NPSS sector (Frumkin, 2005), and has been found to buffer less appealing aspects such as poor wages and conditions (Nickson *et al.*, 2008). This article revealed that market-embracing austerity is undermining workplace participation in NPSS organizations, both in terms of the day-to-day task and representative security. Coercive, "management

knows best" unitarism are consequences of the further integration of market-rule austerity into the everyday lives of those working in the NPSS. The article raises questions concerning how sustainable forms of participation are in the NPSS, and in public service organizations generally, in an era of increasing worker precarity and management hostility.

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SUMMARY

"You've Just Cursed Us": Precarity, Austerity and Worker's Participation in the Non-Profit Social Services

Though not monolithic, the non-profit social services sector has been an arena where workers and management participated in various forms of shared planning, service development and organizing the labour process. This included: 1- formal participation processes such as collective bargaining with union representation, and 2- practice-profession or task participation. Drawing on 34 qualitative interviews undertaken with a variety of actors (Chief Executive/Senior Directors, senior operational management, Human Resource Managers, frontline staff, and, where available, union representatives) in two non-profit social service agencies in Ontario (Canada), the article traces how these forms of participation have changed as a result of government austerity policies alongside the expansion of precarious employment and funding in the non-profit sector.

Using exemplar quotes and qualitative analysis, the article shows that worker's participation in each form has declined, while management simultaneously has extended greater control over the labour process and removed or reduced forums and opportunities for input from staff. In terms of task participation, measurement and governance structure of New Public Management (NPM) and austerity have led to less autonomy and choice, especially in the area of working time. The study also found that unitarist approaches, intolerant of staff voice and possible dissent, have displaced earlier representative participatory approaches that either utilized the management chain, or embraced and worked constructively with unions. Though these pressures existed prior to the introduction of austerity policies, the data show that decreased worker's participation coincides and is further undermined by the financial and governance processes associated with NPM and austerity-linked cuts in government and other forms of funding. Overall, the data and analysis suggest that participation in the Non-profit Social Services (NPSS) may be another casualty of this current wave of neoliberalism.

KEYWORDS: non-profit social organization, worker's participation, unions, New Public Management (NPM), precarious work, unitarism, neoliberalism.

RÉSUMÉ

« Malédiction sur nous ! » : précarité, austérité et participation des travailleurs dans l'économie sociale.

Bien que non monolithique, le secteur de l'économie sociale s'est avéré une arène dans laquelle travailleurs et gestionnaires participent, sous diverses formes, à la planification partagée, au développement de l'offre de services et au processus d'organisation du travail. On y retrouve : 1- des processus de participation formelle, telle la négociation collective avec représentation syndicale; et 2- la participation à la formation pratique ou aux tâches. À partir de 34 entrevues qualitatives réalisées auprès d'une diversité d'acteurs (directeur général, directeurs séniors, gestionnaire opérationnel sénior, gestionnaires en ressources humaines, personnel de première ligne, et, là où c'était possible, représentants syndicaux) de deux agences de services sociaux sans but lucratif en Ontario (Canada), cet article retrace comment ces formes de participation ont évolué à la suite de la mise en place de politiques gouvernementales d'austérité, parallèlement à l'évolution de l'emploi précaire et du financement dans le secteur sans but lucratif.

En extrayant un ensemble d'exemples de citations rapportées par les participants à l'étude et grâce à une analyse qualitative, cet article montre comment la participation des travailleurs a décru dans chacune de ces formes de participation tandis que, simultanément, les directions élargissaient leur contrôle sur le processus de travail et retirait ou réduisait les forums et les possibilités d'implication pour le personnel. En termes de participation aux tâches, la mesure et la structure de gouvernance du nouveau management public (NMP) et l'austérité ont conduit à

moins d'autonomie et de choix, particulièrement en ce qui concerne le temps au travail. L'étude met aussi en relief que les approches unitaires, l'intolérance face à l'expression du personnel et la dissension sont venues remplacées les approches initiales de participation représentative qu'on retrouvait dans la chaîne de management, ou qu'on avait adoptées et qui fonctionnaient de manière constructive avec les syndicats. Même si une certaine pression existait déjà en ce sens avant l'arrivée des politiques d'austérité, les données montrent que le déclin de la participation des travailleurs a coïncidé avec, et s'est trouvée davantage minée par les processus financiers et de gouvernance associés au NMP, de même que par les coupures liées à l'austérité gouvernementale et autres formes de financement. Globalement, les données suggèrent que la participation dans le secteur de l'économie sociale est sans doute une autre victime de la présente vague de néolibéralisme.

MOTS-CLÉS : organisme sans but lucratif, participation des travailleurs, syndicats, nouveau management public (NMP), travail précaire, unitarisme, néolibéralisme.

RESUMEN

«¡Nos trajo la desgracia!»: precariedad, austeridad y participación de los trabajadores en la economía social

Aunque no monolítico, el sector de servicios sociales sin fines lucrativos ha sido una arena en la cual trabajadores y directivos empresariales participaban, bajo diversas formas, a la planificación compartida, al desarrollo de la oferta de servicios y a la organización del proceso de trabajo. Esto incluía: 1 – los procesos de participación formal, tales como la negociación colectiva con representantes sindicales; y 2- la participación a la formación práctica o a las tareas. A partir de 34 entrevistas cualitativas realizadas con una diversidad de actores (director general, directores seniors, directivos operacionales seniors, directivos de recursos humanos, personal de primera línea, y, cuando fue posible, representantes sindicales) de dos agencias de servicios sociales sin fines lucrativos en Ontario (Canadá), este artículo reconstituye la evolución de esas formas de participación después de la implantación de políticas gubernamentales de austeridad, paralelamente a la evolución del empleo precario y del financiamiento en el sector sin fines lucrativos.

Ilustrado con un conjunto de citaciones extraídas de las entrevistas con los participantes al estudio y gracias al análisis cualitativo, este artículo muestra cómo la participación de los trabajadores ha disminuido en cada una de esas formas de participación mientras que, simultáneamente, las direcciones amplificaban su control sobre el proceso de trabajo y retiraban o reducían los fórums y las posibilidades de implicación para el personal. En términos de participación a las tareas, la medida y la estructura de gobernanza de la nueva gestión pública (NGP) y la austeridad han conducido a menos de autonomía y de alternativas, particularmente en lo que se refiere al tiempo de trabajo. El estudio pone también en evidencia que los enfoques unitarios, la intolerancia frente a la expresión del personal y el posible

disentimiento han remplazado los enfoques iniciales de participación representativa que se observaban en la cadena de gestión, o que se habían adoptado y que funcionaban de manera constructiva con los sindicatos. Aunque ya existía cierta presión en ese sentido antes de la introducción de políticas de austeridad, los datos muestran que la disminución de la participación de los trabajadores ha coincidido con su implantación, y se encuentra aún más debilitada por los procesos financieros y de gobernanza asociados a la NGP, así como por los cortes asociados a la austeridad que afectan al gobierno y a otras formas de financiamiento. Globalmente, los datos sugieren que la participación en el sector de servicios sociales sin fines lucrativos es sin duda otra víctima de la presente ola del neoliberalismo.

PALABRAS CLAVES: organismo sin fines lucrativos, participación de trabajadores, sindicatos, nueva gestión pública (NGP), trabajo precario, unitarismo, neoliberalismo.