

Call for Papers by the ELHN Working Group “Industrial and Economic Democracy” for the Panel

"Economic Democracy and Beyond: Re-thinking the role of democratic participation in industry and the economy, past and present"

6th Conference of the European Labour History Network, 16-19 June 2026, Barcelona

Panel Organizers: Aurélie Andry (Ruhr University Bochum), Thomas J. Adams (University of South Alabama), Philipp Urban (Ruhr University Bochum), Philipp Reick (TU Berlin)

Since at least the end of the 18th century, social reformers, labor leaders, organized workers, and political movements have promoted democratic control of the workplace, industry, and economic life as a crucial precondition not only for social justice and material security but also for political democracy more generally. In so doing, they have highlighted that when workers and employees lack effective voice at work and control over the labor process, their political participation and formal political equality is seriously curtailed more broadly. Indeed, many have argued that political democracy will fail to materialize or, where it existed, soon experience 'backsliding' should democratic rights over work, industry, and the economy be withheld or decline. Against this backdrop, intellectuals, political and trade union actors, and social movements proposed a wide range of theories as well as practical measures that underlined the participation of employees and labor in decision-making as a prerequisite for the sustainability of democratic rule. In light of the current attacks on democratic institutions, we believe that now is the time to re-think what role the improvement and expansion of employee participation in industrial and economic decision-making might play in the fight for the future of our democracies.

Today, growing fears of democratic erosion in the political sphere happen to follow on the heels of a general decline of economic democracy over the last decades. For this reason, we want to explore the role that 'democracy' has played in the thinking, organizing, and lived experiences of past and present-day individuals and movements pushing for greater control over individual workplaces, whole industries, and entire economies. Instead of concentrating on how workplace democracy has impacted economic performance, productivity, and employee satisfaction--the focus of much previous research--we want to go to the heart of our subject and ask: whether, how, and why democracy at work strengthens and improves democracy in a variety of other social spheres, from families and civic organizations to local communities, the nation state and the international arena? For this purpose, we are proposing a series of panels that go beyond the historical gaze of our working group's previous activities.

We invite contributions from a wide range of disciplines, including history, philosophy, sociology, law, political science, economics, and more. We are particularly interested in transnational and comparative papers and papers on non-Western and Global South debates and developments. We are open to case studies as well as theoretical and conceptual papers. We have no focus on a specific period. Rather, we hope to facilitate interdisciplinary debate that includes both past and contemporary perspectives. For case studies, we expect that presenters reflect on how their case(s) relate to some of the broader themes we explore in this panel.

We are looking for papers that deal with (but are not limited to) issues such as:

- the relationship between industrial and economic democracy on the one hand and political democracy on the other. How have theoreticians, political actors, trade unionists, and everyday workers conceived of the influence that industrial and economic

democracy would have on democracy in politics? How can the impact of industrial and economic democracy on political democracy be measured, studied, and interpreted? What are the conceptual and methodological challenges in such studies?

- the impact of democratic participation on 'democratic mentalities'. To what extent (and how) did/do theoreticians and practitioners believe that the subjective experience of being involved in decision-making at work infuses(d) employees with the spirit and consciousness that fuels support for democratic rule and sustained democratic engagement beyond the casting of ballots? Did/does active participation equip workers with skills necessary to participate in democratic deliberation and action outside their work environment? Are/were employees who participate in democratic decision-making at work more likely to accept majority decisions? Are/were employees who participated in democratic decision-making at work more likely--in their daily political lives--to actively counter authoritarian, fascistic, colonial or other anti-democratic political forms?
- the relationship between industrial democracy and economic democracy. Were/are some places or industries more likely than others to distinguish between democratic participation at the workplace and democratic participation in the wider economy? How did/do these two levels influence one another? Have distinct political movements been more likely to align themselves with one or the other?
- the meaning of participation, control and representation in industrial and economic democracy. What did/does active employee participation to decisions of workplace and economic management look like? What measures were/are implemented to facilitate active participation in decision-making? Who resist(ed) these measures, and why? How did past and present actors conceive of representation? What was/is the relationship between participation and representation?

The **deadline** for submission is **July 15, 2025**. Paper abstracts of max 300 words should be accompanied by a short bio. Decisions about individual papers will be communicated by mid-September. We will submit the panel proposals by September 30, 2025. The conference organizers will communicate the final acceptance of panels on October 20, 2025. Please send paper proposals as well as all inquiries to aurelie.andry@eui.eu.

The conference is organized by TIG (Work, Institutions, and Gender) of the University of Barcelona, Spanish Network of Labor History. The conference will be an on-site event. Hybrid sessions are possible under special circumstances. The conference fee is 180 EUROS (regular) / 150 EUROS (early bird) / 120 EUROS (students and participants without institutional funding) / 100 EUROS (early bird reduced fee). There might be a limited number of bursaries and/or support for student accommodation (which will be decided by the conference organizers). For more information on ELHN and conference logistics, see <https://socialhistoryportal.org/elhn>.