

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.

Keywords: labour agency; structure; exit; resistance; power; new public management

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 pro-activeness 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

¹ The impact of temporary work agencies on the politics of work. Funded by The Research Council of Norway, Ref. 227021.

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).

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

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

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, 2010). 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, the three categories of response are interwoven and mutually sustaining: resilience and reworking can lay the groundwork for resistance.

Recommending that labour geographers apply the same type of categorization in examining strategies of labour, Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) distinguish between coping strategies (resilience); strategies for changing the system on its own terms (reworking); and strategies for changing the rules of the game (resistance). Being concerned with outcomes of labour agency, the question remains whether these strategies, the way that they are implemented in different contexts, lead to the effects that they are intended or thought to cause by those who use them.

Operationalizing Katz's (2004) categorization and terminology to the local context and applying them in a study of labour agency and economic restructuring in the old industrial city of Glasgow, Cumbers, Helms and Swanson (2010) focus on creative practices of individuals and households in communities

disconnected from the labour market. They attributed all three categories of response – coping, reworking and resistance – to lack of work and poor living conditions. In terms of resistance, they argue that campaigns for a living wage and public housing campaigns indicate self-valorization and that class unity begins to recompose. Regarding outcome, however, they argue that “it is too soon to predict an upsurge in transformatory processes of class struggle onto a broader canvas” (Cumbers, Helms and Swanson, 2010:68), or a change in “the rules of the game”, according to the terminology of Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011).

Studying labour agency in the textile and garment production centre of Tiruppur in Southern India, Carswell and De Neve (2013) identify mainly individual coping and reworking strategies. Workers negotiate with employers for working conditions to fit their individual requirements and every-day lives, regarding when and how much to work and the terms of payment. They often prefer employment with a contractor that offers piecework. This means opportunities for more work and higher wages as well as more flexibility regarding working hours than that which modern factories, subject to stricter labour regulations, offer. Workers’ strategies are highly individualized, resulting in a decline in trade union activity and opportunities for collective agreements. This can hardly be considered groundwork for stronger resistance that leads to changes in the relationship between labour and capital. In the case of the “Not below 24,000” movement, however, we shall see how individualized strategies enable and empower collective strategies.

In the studies of Cumbers, Helms and Swanson (2010), Carswell and de Neve (2013) and Katz (2004), there is little evidence of acts or strategies of resistance that actually seem to change the rules of the game, at least not at the time of the studies. This paucity of evidence leads to the next question: What types and sources of power does labour have to succeed in their strategies of changing the system on its own terms and changing the rules of the game?

2.2 Types and sources of power

The impact of labour agency will vary with types of power and how power is conditioned by context. Power attained from the embeddedness of labour in economic structures is referred to as structural power (Wright, 2000; Silver, 2003). The first sub-type of structural power is based on the power labour attains from demand and supply conditions in the labour market, marketplace bargaining power. The higher the demand for skills, knowledge and other characteristics the workers possess, the higher their leverage vis-à-vis the employer. This type of power could be used both individually and collectively (Silver, 2003; Brookes, 2013). The second sub-type of structural power, workplace bargaining power, has to do with how production and services are organised. A large number of enterprises and customers can be affected and great losses incurred because of the domino effect when collective actions disrupt one node of the value chain (Silver, 2003; Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout, 2008). Associational power is collective power attained by being part of organizations and alliances that initiate or support action (Silver, 2003 based on Wright, 2000). Symbolic power is another type of associational power, attained when moral issues in the workplace are articulated as general social claims so that members of the public too can exert pressure on capital (Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout, 2008). This partly overlaps Brookes's (2013:192) concept of coalition power in which workers have capacity "to expand the scope of conflict by involving other nonlabor actors willing and able to influence an employer's behavior". In addition, Brookes (2013) introduces the concept of workers' institutional power as their capacity to invoke formal and informal laws and regulations, norms and values to influence the behaviour of their employer.

The various types of power can be combined and associational power has proved important in mobilizing structural power to attain positive results (Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout, 2008; Riisgaard and Hammer, 2011; Selwyn, 2012). The "Not below 24,000" movement too combines different types of power. We will address what the constellation of the different types of power tells us about the sustainability of the movement's achievements so far.

The argument that space is a source of power has three main dimensions. The first has to do with collective mobilizations and with the fact that labour can obtain support from alliances and

organizations in other places or at the national, regional or international scale (Herod, 2001). The second has to do with how labour and labour regimes are affected by laws and regulations at different scales, and with how local regulations are affected by extra-local regulations, and vice versa (Jonas 1996, 2009; Peck 1996). The third dimension is spatial mobility. In labour geography, spatial mobility has been treated as a strategy to find employment elsewhere to be able to save money and return home for a better life later (Rogaly, 2009). Using the exit option as a means of pressure to improve conditions in the labour market that they leave, the case of the “Not below 24,000” movement sheds light on an additional dimension of spatial mobility (i.e., as a source of power to improve conditions in the place of origin), and how workers attain and use power by producing and manipulating spaces and scales.

3. Conceptualizing agency by exit

In his conceptualizations of exit, voice and loyalty, Hirschman (1970) is concerned with the comparative efficiency of exit and voice for recuperating firms, organizations and states in decline. When dissatisfied customers, members and citizens respond by exit or voice, such responses provide awareness that improvements are required. Exit is primarily treated as an individual option by those who do not think that there is any scope for improvement, or those unwilling to wait for changes to occur. Voice, on the other hand, is an alternative to exit, representing proactive attempts to rectify the objectionable. Dissatisfaction can be expressed directly to those responsible, or as a protest to anyone who listens. Exit may follow voice if voice does not yield the expected changes. Loyalty is a condition that activates voice and makes exit less likely. The threat to exit and boycott lies in the borderline between voice and exit. Voice is strengthened by the threat to exit. Boycott is a form of collective exit to express discontent and pressure for improvements.

The concepts of exit, voice and loyalty have been further elaborated in labour studies and management studies (see Farrell, 1983; Rusbult et al., 1988; Davis-Blake, Broschak and George, 2003; Berntson, Näswell and Sverke, 2010). Such studies tend to distinguish between exit and voice as active mechanisms of employees to deal with job dissatisfaction, and loyalty and neglect as passive

mechanisms to deal with job dissatisfaction, or more precisely a passive impact of action on the problem (Rusbult et al., 1988). Loyalty is treated as a response where the dissatisfied suffers in silence, has no influence to rectify matters, but expects that conditions will improve (Farrell, 1983), and when the dissatisfied employee is doing what management thinks is best for the company, hoping for better times. Neglect entails behaviour such as absenteeism, tardiness and slow work (Berntson, Näswell and Sverke, 2010). In these studies, the authors discuss individuals' personal responses to declining job satisfaction, or "individual agency" in the terminology of labour geography. An underlying concern is the impact it may have on the employer if a large number of employees act similarly.

Smith (2006) addresses how work-effort bargaining, with acts such as reduction of work effort, and mobility-effort bargaining affect the labour process and are met by the employers. Mobility-effort bargaining is predominantly individual, but could also be work-group based, and entails acts such as withdrawal, threatened exit, increased job search and active networking for new jobs. Mobility power is power to move between firms. It requires a strong labour market demand and can thus be defined as a sub-type of structural power.

Translating the exit option into a labour geography perspective and framework, agency of exit includes both individual and collective agency. Moreover, agency of exit may form part of all of the main categories of strategies mentioned above: strategies of coping; strategies of changing the system on its own terms (hereafter reworking); and strategies of changing the rules of the game. Exiting an employer or a labour market could be an act of coping, a form of forced survival strategy. It is primarily an individual response, but may have collective overtones when groups come together to find new opportunities and to support each other in this endeavour. Agency by exit is an act of reworking when exit is applied as a threat at the individual level to attain better terms and conditions at one's current workplace, or when exit is proactively resorted to and effectuated in the search for better conditions elsewhere. Agency by exit as a strategy for changing the rules of the game entails collective action. Exit is a concerted, planned and voiced option in the form of a boycott or a threat and aiming to

improve unsatisfying conditions on a sustainable basis by changing power relations between employer and employees.

When many employees leave an employer or a profession solely on an individual basis, those remaining may resort to collective agency and use the situation to pressure for changes in the rules of the game, thereby reflecting how sources of structural and associational power are entangled. Moreover, when agency of exit causes severe labour shortages such shortages are a source of structural power that handled in the right way may lead to changes in the rules of the game.

4. “The not below 24,000” movement

The movement was born in spring 2011. At that time newly graduated nurses were offered an entry wage slightly above Swedish kronor (SEK) 21 000 a month in large Swedish hospitals (Sildén, 2015).³ Frustrated by low entry wages, last-year students in Umeå, Northern Sweden’s biggest city, decided to stand together and started an open Facebook group: “Newly graduated nurses, dare reject an entry wage of less than SEK 24,000” (our translation). Two student nurses in Stockholm followed up with a closed Facebook group to share strategic information about wage negotiations and other information that employers should not have access to. The initiative soon evolved into a large wage protest involving representatives at universities and university colleges that educate nurses. One of the movement’s spokespersons, Ulrika Blumfelds, got the lobbyist of the year prize in 2012, and by 2015 the movement had local groups in 15 towns (Sildén, 2015). In addition to the local Facebook groups, a national group exists. Local groups now use open and closed Facebook groups side by side. In Stockholm the closed Facebook group is predominantly for second- and third-year students. The students usually remain members until six months after graduation (interview movement spokesperson; Tuuloskorpi, 2015). In 2013 membership in the closed Facebook groups exceeded 6000

³ Average exchange rate in 2011: 1 SEK = EUR 9.0335; SEK 21 000 = EUR 2325; SEK 24,000 = EUR 2656 (<http://www.riksbank.se/en/Interest-and-exchange-rates/Annual-aggregate-Exchange-rates/?y=2014&m=12&s=Comma>) accessed July 2015.

(Hofstad, 2013). The figure is quite high considering that nursing is a three-year education and some 4000 students graduate annually (interview Vårdförbundet).

In 2013 the movement's general wage demand was raised to a minimum of 25,000 to compensate for inflation, but this did not change the movement's name. In a press release 3 July 2014, the movement reported that as many as 87% of newly graduated nurses starting work in Stockholm in spring 2014 obtained an entry wage of SEK 24,000 a month. Fifty-one percent of graduates obtained an entry wage of more than SEK 25 000 a month compared with only 29% of graduates in autumn 2013. By 2015, entry wages had reached SEK 25,000–27,000 in most places in Sweden (Vårdförbundet, 2014; Vårdförbundet in Dolonen, 2015). How then can the labour agency approach and agency by exit help explain the success of “Not below 24,000”, as well as the challenges to sustain and improve what has been attained?

5. The time-place context of the movement

In Sweden health care is primarily provided by the public sector, controlled by the government and financed by taxes. Twenty-one regionally elected county councils are responsible for running some 70 public hospitals at the county level. In addition, there are seven regionally run university hospitals in six regions. Some private undertakings receive public support to supplement the public sector and provide users with freedom of choice. In addition, there are a few private and fully profit-based undertakings. All undertakings are subject to control by the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen) (Anell, Glenngård and Merkur, 2012).

Nurses have become increasingly dissatisfied with their wages and working conditions. According to a study by Aiken et al. (2013) in 2009–2010, 34% of nurses reported an intention to leave their current hospital and 26% would not recommend their workplace to other nurses. In a 2010 study, 7% of Swedish nurses reported that they were interested in leaving the nursing profession altogether (Lindqvist et al., 2014). Of 121 000 registered nurses employed in Sweden in 2012, 105 000 worked in Swedish health care (Socialstyrelsen, 2014).

Dissatisfaction with wages and working conditions can be traced to the late 1980s introduction of NPM in the health sector and the 1990s financial crisis in Sweden. The Swedish Social-Democratic Labour Party, which ruled from 1982, was criticized for being “a bureaucratic nanny state” and “an ineffective welfare state, leaving little choice for the citizens” (Green-Pedersen, 2002: 283; 284). The government first responded by non-market reforms such as decentralization and a more service-oriented welfare state. Because criticism did not subside, it subsequently settled for market-oriented reforms, arguing that these would provide both cheaper and better public services. Those reforms paved the way for more radical market-oriented reforms when the non-socialist parties came to power in 1991 (Green-Pedersen, 2002).

6. Structures that constrain

With NPM the health sector was restructured to become more resource efficient, using strategies applied in the private sector. However, it proved to be difficult to reduce budgets in a sector where improved technology results in possibilities to cure more patients, possibilities which in turn create higher demand for services. Contrary to the incentive model of NPM, where those who operate efficiently are rewarded, budget cuts forced the units “to do more with less” (Harrison and Calltorp, 2000:230). During the 1990s financial crisis, the number of hospital beds was reduced. Patients spent shorter time in hospital, but they required more intensive care. Despite fewer hospital beds, patient turnover was the same in 1999 as in 1990 (Hertting, 2003). In addition, about 60 000 employees were dismissed, mostly auxiliary and assistant nurses, increasing the work load for those who remained. The 2000s have seen further specialization, concentration and coordination of the health services as well as more competition and privatization in the development of primary care (Anell, Glenngård and Merkur, 2012).

6.1 Individual wage setting

Individual wage setting was introduced for nurses in 1989 as part of a general shift from centralised negotiations and equal pay based on seniority to a more market-based system of wage setting in the

public sector, which started in the 1980s. It reflected frustration with the central labour union's egalitarian wage politics and its political influence (Elvander, 2002). Highly skilled public sector employees earned much less than highly skilled private sector employees, while low-skilled public sector employees earned much more than low-skilled private sector employees.⁴

The wages each nurse receives are to be determined based on what she/he can contribute in terms of her/his skills and experiences. This approach builds on an assumed positive correlation between wages, motivation and results. "The wages shall stimulate improved efficiency, productivity and quality of the enterprise" (HÖK, 2012). In contrast to many of its members, Vårdförbundet supported this approach, arguing that decentralized individual wage setting would benefit the nurses in securing higher wages and a better pay scale: It was local employers who had the economic resources, and if productivity increased and hospitals could operate within or below the budget, productivity increases could partly be taken out as higher wages for nurses (Ryman, 2007).

Two and a half decades after its introduction, nurses speak of individual wage setting as something that does not exist in practice. Quoting two nurses in our sample: "Each county has decided a wage for all newly graduated nurses, no matter" (interview with nurse). "The entry wage is decided by each county, but in practice it functions as a common minimum wage that everybody receives" (interview with nurse). The entry wage is identical whether nurses are 22 or 42 years old (Ritzén, 2012). Later, higher levels of responsibility, skills and experience result in only a "couple of hundred" (SEKs) more a month, and further education to become a specialist nurse does not pay off (interview with nurse). Both this nurse and Vårdförbundet (interview) refer to a report by two bachelor students at Stockholm School of Economics (Kennergren and Molin, 2010) that it takes 19 years for a specialist education to pay off. Sjuksköterska Nu (undated), however, presents an alternative estimate. Specialization may pay off in five years. One of the premises is to avoid study loans and work during holidays, when wages are high, such as taking contract work in Norway.

⁴ For a more comprehensive review of literature on the wage setting, see Kiil (2015).

The public health sector's objective is to serve the population's needs for health care. Unlike the objectives of private sector enterprises, the objective here is not to create profits but to keep within the limitations of public budgets determined by elected politicians. NPM forms part of neoliberal ideology and represents a new way of thinking and doing business in the health sector. It can be seen as a manifestation of structure understood as representing new rules, routines and habits. However, contrary to Vårdförbundet's assumptions NPM, with its new wage system, did not become an enabling structure for higher wages. The new wage system was introduced during economic crisis and a wage freeze for nurses in the 1990s. The problems of ensuring higher entry wage and a better pay scale for established nurses were exacerbated by the economic crisis in 2008. After a strike in 2008, Vårdförbundet succeeded in negotiations that monthly entry wages should not fall below SEK 21 100, but this was reversed the following year (interview Vårdförbundet).

6.2 The labour process

The nature of work that nurses do is highly labour intensive and very little of their value creation can be replaced by machines. Labour-intensive production becomes relatively more expensive when technological innovations make other sectors more efficient, and higher wages in other sectors lead to increasing demand for higher quality and more health services (Baumol, 2012). Another issue is willingness in society to pay for the work done, especially if the quality of the services does not fit the expectations of the users. Willingness in society to pay influence political priorities, policies of taxation and the struggle to be re-elected, highlighting tensions between the roles of the state as employer, financial guarantor, service provider and democratic institution. The context of a globally prevailing neoliberal ideology advocating privatization and cuts in government expenditure, and economic crises affect politics in most countries. This is so whether the ruling government tries to delimit the neoliberal influence on policy measures for the public sector, as the social democrats did, or to actively pursue neoliberal politics as the non-socialists did (Green-Pedersen, 2002).

7. From structures that constrain to structures that enable

About 90 000 nurses are employed in Norway, and 2013 figures reveal a shortage of 1200 nurses (Regjeringen.no, 2014). According to our interviews with managers in health institutions, they experience shortages of nurses throughout the year, but especially during summer months when “a recruitment war” is going on. Low wage levels compared to the general wage level in Norway, inconvenient shift work, and intense and stressful work in understaffed wards and units are often quoted as factors diminishing the occupation’s attractiveness (Dale and Skogheim, 2008; Berge et al., 2011). Seen from the perspective of a manager in the health sector (interview), hospitals are subject to tight budgets and it is difficult to find expenses to cut. It is, however, easier to cut personnel expenses than other fixed expenses such as bandages and medicines. In this context, Swedish contract nurses who can work when and as required are highly attractive. They are described as very well educated, as having high medicinal and technical competence, and as hard working. Another advantage they have is that Swedish is very similar to Norwegian (interviews with managers in Norwegian health institutions).

Swedish nurses began migrating to Norway for work in the 1980s (interview Vårdförbundet). The number increased when Norway legalized hiring out of labour by private work agencies in 2001 and with the onset of the financial crisis in Sweden in 2008. Public statistics on the flow of nurses from Sweden to Norway are scarce in both countries. Based on figures from Statistics Norway, one may speak of roughly 4000 Swedish nurses in Norway in the peak year of 2009, declining to 3500 in 2010 and 2700 in 2014 (Berge et al., 2011; Statistics Norway, 2011-2014; Statistics Norway, 2015a,b). These figures refer to a representative week in November and not the high season (summer) for nurse hire. Hence, the total number of Swedish nurses who worked in Norway the respective years was higher. As many as 23 715 Swedish nurses held Norwegian certification by May 2015 (Dolonen, 2015). In 2013, the total number of registered nurses in Sweden below the age of 65 was 139 514 (Socialstyrelsen, 2014), suggesting that some 17% of registered nurses in Sweden, whether employed as nurses in Sweden or not, hold certification to work in Norway. However, it is unknown how many actually use their Norwegian certification.

The main reasons for going to Norway are higher wages and less stressful working conditions (interviews with nurses, representatives of Vårdförbundet, managers of Norwegian health institutions, and temporary work agencies). The differences in wages have been a big issue in a number of Swedish and Norwegian news media. The annual Norwegian entry wage for hospital nurses was Norwegian kroner (NOK) 356 000 in 2013. A common monthly entry wage for nurses in Sweden that year was SEK 22 000 according to Vårdförbundet (or SEK 264,000 annually, which equals NOK 250 000 annually) (see Solberg, 2014). With a good combination of shift work and overtime, wages for 10–12 days in Norway equal a month's wages in Sweden (interviews with nurses; Rasch, 2013). Better control of one's own time is another important reason to go to Norway. Employment in Sweden has been severely reduced, and Swedish nurses are wary of stressful work and increasing pressure to work overtime due to low staffing levels. In Norway they experience a slower pace of work (interviews in Vårdförbundet and with nurses). The average patient-nurse ratio of 5.2 in Norway compared to 7.6 in Sweden corroborates this (Aiken et al., 2014). Moreover, in short-term work as contract nurses, there are issues and tasks that they, more easily than permanent employees, can avoid (interviews with nurses).

Norwegian employers prefer nurses with several years of work experience. Because of the exit to Norway of such nurses and frictions caused by high labour turnover among nurses who change workplaces within the Swedish health sector, Sweden experiences severe shortages of nurses. Wages differ to some degree between Swedish counties, but tight public sector budgets prevent any serious form of competitive bidding between them. At the end of 2014, the 68 acute care hospitals in Sweden were short of 2000 nurses and had to close 870 beds (Granstrand, 2014). In this particular time-place context, the individual agency of nurses exiting Swedish health institutions has contributed to a tight labour market that the "Not below 24,000" movement actively taps into as a source of power in its fight for higher wages. The demand for Swedish nurses in Norway and the attractiveness of Norwegian wages are more than a window of opportunity or a contextual factor. In profoundly shaking the Swedish labour market, they together represent an enabling structure for nurses who struggle for better conditions in Sweden. With constrained agency in the workplace and poor

conditions for work-effort bargaining (section 1 and 3 above) a large number of nurses resort to mobility-effort bargaining and use their mobility power actively.

In addition to the enabling structures of the Norwegian labour market and the fact that Swedish nurses possess qualities that fit Norwegian expectations of “good nursing” (the labour process), new social media represent an enabling technology changing the ways of mobilizing supporters and disseminating information, strategically used by the “Not below 24,000” movement. Using new social media like this the movement has produced space for its actions.

8. “Not below 24,000”: strategies and power

To convey their message, movement organizers decided to address a single issue: the demand for higher entry wages. A clear-cut objective like this would make it easier to recruit students across different political divides. While the success of the “Not below 24,000” movement depends on a number of measures that support each other, the closed Facebook groups constitute their core activity. The Stockholm group was the first to use a closed Facebook group to systematically collect data on wage levels and to share experiences from job interviews. The national group was led by about four enthusiasts who travelled to different universities and university colleges to inform and engage student nurses (interview). Part of this strategy is to encourage each class to recruit an administrator for the movement and ensure that the administrator finds a successor when she/he leaves (Tuuloskorpi, 2014). It is important to attract students in their first term so that they will have ample time to meet and discuss before beginning internships (interview with movement spokesperson).

The 15 local groups are all run independently (interview with movement spokesperson). Despite the movement’s somewhat decentralized structure, the groups actively seek advice and support from each other, anything from giving pep talks to assisting in arranging coaching evenings for job interviews (Tuuloskorpi, 2015). In addition to Facebook groups, movement members and supporters disseminate “the not below” message on other social media such as Twitter, Instagram and various blogs. Movement leaders contribute actively with chronicles, utterances and interviews in news media.

8.1 *Sitting for interviews – learning to negotiate*

Members were encouraged to sit for as many job interviews as possible. One group recommended 8–9 interviews each. Students were to express their discontent and refuse employment if they were offered less than SEK 24,000. Before job interviews they were prepped about how to negotiate, and advised that although it would be difficult to refuse a job offer the first time, this would become easier with more interview experience. Because of this strategy, employers were put under pressure by the large number of students refusing the same job. However, not every student managed to live up to the movement's requirements, and initially there were problems with nagging and criticisms of those who gave up too soon and accepted wages below SEK 24,000. To save the initiative and the Facebook group, organizers had to intervene to help members understand that different people have different commitments and that for some it may be impossible to refuse for long. Members were advised they should keep a good tone and congratulate those who had accepted a job offer, no matter the wage level (interview with movement spokesperson).

A small booklet *Den här lilla skriften* ("This little note", undated) is used by the movement. It was written for nurses more generally, and circulates anonymously on the internet with concrete advice and suggestions regarding how nurses may improve their working conditions and wages (the ironic tone of what follows is clearly intentional):

"This little note is secret. Very secret. So secret that you have to tell your colleagues, relatives, friends and the people that you pass in the street about it. Especially the employer needs to know about it. And to know that it is secret" (p. 2; our translation)

For example, there is advice never to sign a contract in February, but to wait until June when concern about the summer-time scarcity of nurses increases. In addition, *Den här lilla skriften* consoles and encourages those worried about not getting what they consider a reasonably paid job and acceptable working conditions:

"There are jobs.... There are other wards, other municipalities, other private or public employers. There are other towns, other counties, other countries (p. 15; our translation).

Based on their job interviews, members provided data on where they had been, whom they had been interviewed by, what wages they had asked for and what they had been offered. Only once a contract was signed did they report what they had actually attained. This information was entered in an Excel document, helping other members to plan their interviews. The records indicated where and when students were most likely to get the highest wages. Soon it was discovered that large hospitals had agreed among themselves to offer SEK 20 500–21 000 as the entry wage. Instead of competition for nurses leading to higher wages, hospitals seemed to cooperate to keep wages low, referring to “guidelines”. However, such cooperation has never been publicly confirmed by employers (interview with movement spokesperson). One factor making it difficult for students to negotiate higher wages, and in fact undermining the principle of individual wage setting, is that the person (head nurse) students meet in interviews has little influence on wages, which are set by the Human Resources Department (interview with movement spokesperson), and sometimes even overruled at the county council level (movement representative in Tuuloskorpi, 2015).

According to the Stockholm group of the “Not below 24,000” movement (Sildén, 2015), a majority of newly graduated nurses actively chooses *not* to work in Sweden. As the heavy workload is not commensurate with the low wages they are offered after three years of higher studies, they would rather continue with the jobs they had as students. Such jobs are better paid but they often do not require higher education. “Many” recently graduated nurses find work in Norway by themselves or with help from their networks, or they work for temporary work agencies. A young Swedish contract nurse in Norway said that 10 of 80 students in her class had left for Norway (interview with nurse).

Agency by exit to Norway represents an opportunity that makes it safer to be tough in wage negotiations. It is not only a threat, but a strategy that some of the newly graduated nurses resort to as well. More important, that so many experienced nurses travel to Norway helps enhance the structural power of newly graduated nurses remaining in the Swedish labour market.

8.2 Campaigns

Students arrange both local and national campaigns to recruit more members, to remind the respective county councils (“Landsting”) responsible for their wages about their requirements, and to create support for their case among the public. To honour the movement’s name and objective, national campaigns are held on 24 April (04.24). The national scale is important to attract national media attention, and opposition party politicians are often willing to give speeches (interview with movement spokesperson). The shortage of nurses in Sweden, the number of nurses seeking certification in Norway and the many that actually leave for Norway are part of the movement’s message in these campaigns.

According to a representative from Uppsala, movement members were aware that they would not win the battle for higher wages “with a megaphone on the barricades” (Eriksson, 2015:103). Campaigns create energy, solidarity, confidence and pride in their profession, which are important to mobilize efforts to endure the long struggle. The real battle occurs in interview rooms between the student and the head nurse, a situation that requires a highly confident student (Eriksson, 2015). Tuuloskorpi (2015) emphasizes this and argues that the movement’s strength lies in refusing job offers, which cannot be seen in isolation from its attempts and success in engaging “all”, not only the toughest students in class.

Using virtual technologies the movement has produced space for organisation and action. Moreover, combining physical and virtual actions at different scales from the local to the national, the movement has manipulated both space and scale and attained power in doing so. Announcing the different exit options to prospective employers, media and politicians is another way it has manipulated space and attained power.

9. Power that shakes structures

In their success in raising entry wages, the “Not below 24,000” movement has acquired associational power by skilful organization of fellow student nurses. The movement expanded its power base by

turning the demand and supply situation in the labour market into structural power. Marketplace bargaining power emanates from individual agency of exit, the number of nurses who silently left their workplace in frustration over low wages and deteriorating working conditions. The movement has turned agency by exit into a collective strategy as well, pointing out exit as a safety valve when wage negotiations fail. Recall *Den här lilla skriften* (section 7.1): “There are other towns, other counties, other countries”. Attracting attention to exit, and labour migration to Norway, may motivate more nurses to go. Opportunities to work elsewhere are a source of mobility power, and mobility power is channelled into a source of structural power the moment they leave for another workplace or location, and shortages of nurses occur.

The “Not below 24,000” movement has mobilized sufficient power to be able to shake structures. First, there has been a change in the relationship with employers. Initially students were unable to get employers to discuss higher wages at all; later employers could promise those who declined the job offers to contact them again if they could find ways to increase the wages. In some cases employers actually agreed to increase the wages to SEK 24,000 or above as part of the negotiations, but were overruled by county council politicians – representing the state as financial guarantor, business owner, service provider, political authority and democratic institution – before the job contract was signed (Tuuloskorpi, 2015). Ultimately, some county councils decided to increase wages to SEK 24,000 or more and some employers announced jobs with wages “not below 24,000”. Power relations between employers and students have definitely improved in favour of the students.

The movement’s public attention to the mismatch between the competence of the nurses and their wages and in getting opposition politicians on their side during campaigns (section 8.2 above) seems to be a source of symbolic power. When nurses are scarce to the extent that beds and wards must close and the public is aware of why nurses flee, it is difficult for politicians and public sector employers not to act. Hence, it makes sense to suggest that symbolic power has played a role in ensuring higher entry wages. Institutional power may also have been invoked in the sense that shortages of nurses are likely

to be perceived as undermining an important function as well as important norms and values of Sweden's welfare state.

Second, the "Not below 24,000" movement can be said to be contagious. In 2012, midwives established the Facebook group "Now is enough" focusing on burnout due to high workload. Their initiative was followed by "Nurses roar out" in 2013, a Facebook group against poor working conditions and low wages among nurses more generally (Andersson, 2013; Hofstad, 2013). At Sundsvall Hospital, 15 of 25 specialist nurses in intensive care and 25 of 35 nurse anaesthetists resigned due to low wages in 2015. Most intensive-care nurses withdrew their resignation after they had been offered higher wages (Vårdfokus, 2015). In their strategy of mass resignation, nurses sought advice from the "Not below 24,000" movement (interview with movement spokesperson).

Third, students initiated and organized the movement independently of Vårdförbundet. Vårdförbundet had not been very successful in raising the wages of nurses, nor had it represented students in their striving for higher wages. Hence, the establishment of the "Not below 24000" movement represents a critique and alternative to Vårdförbundet. It was also impossible for spokespersons in Vårdförbundet to openly participate in the movement's campaigns, as participation could be considered a break of confidence in the collective agreement. Instead, Vårdförbundet supported the movement behind the scenes with refreshments, pens, buttons, banners, relevant literature, documents and advice (interview in Vårdförbundet and with movement representative; Eriksson, 2015; Tuuloskorpi, 2015). After having discussed how to relate to social-media based movements and campaigns, Vårdförbundet has decided to support those whose objectives are in accordance with their own. In short, Vårdförbundet works for a better pay scale and higher wages for competence (interview in Vårdförbundet). Its support of the "Not below 24,000" movement is now official, and the movement's campaigns and achievements are presented on Vårdförbundet's web pages. Vårdförbundet's support of movements with a more aggressive wage strategy than their own suggests that students have contributed to some kind of rethinking and revitalization of Vårdförbundet. Vårdförbundet-Student was established in 2014 for students to address issues relating to their education and future work life. That the new social

media- based movements are free to act independently of the collective agreement may also strengthen Vårdförbundet in its negotiations for better conditions for nurses, another factor suggesting that power relations are changing in favour of the nurses.

10. Structure strikes back?

On the positive side, Swedish employers now offer higher entry wages than before and nurses who were previously active students in the “Not below 24000” movement know how to manoeuvre and negotiate higher individual wages. According to unpublished statistics obtained from Vårdförbundet, the average monthly basic wage of Swedish nurses (including specialist nurses, but excluding leaders) increased from SEK 26 200 in 2010 to 29 400 in 2014. By comparison, the average monthly basic wage in the Norwegian hospital sector increased from NOK 30 189 in 2010 to 34 624 in 2014 for nurses without specialization and from NOK 34 958 to 40 076 for nurses with specialization.⁵ Average wages are still higher in Norway, and particularly so for specialist nurses.

While some temporary work agencies recruit nurses from Latvia and other Eastern European countries to compensate for the lack of Swedish nurses, other agencies have recently found a niche recruiting Swedish nurses for work in Sweden by offering wages at the Norwegian levels. However, representatives of both the “Not below 24,000” movement and Vårdförbundet criticize employers and temporary work agencies for focusing more on offering high holiday bonuses in the summer than raising annual wage rates (Rogberg, 2015). From the angle of the nurses, the high bonuses reveal that “there is money in the system”. They argue that if the annual wage rates were raised there would be more permanently employed nurses in the hospitals, working conditions would improve and it would be easier to secure a sufficiently large workforce in the summer on “normal” wages. There are reports that employers attempt to prevent nurses from taking summer jobs abroad by persuading nurses to postpone their holidays. Some employers have even invoked “stabsläge” to force nurses to work (interview Vårdförbundet). “Stabsläge” is a level of crisis due to an event or threat in which the

⁵ <https://www.nsf.no/ikbViewer/Content/2198564/seefile> and <https://www.nsf.no/seksjonsunderside/lonn/sykepleierlonn> last accessed September 2015

demand for hospital resources is unclear and increased emergency preparedness is required (Mellgren, 2015). Such employer measures imply that there are still challenges ahead in the struggle for higher year-round wages for all categories of nurses.

Some signs indicate that the Norwegian labour market might become less of a source of structural power for the “Not below 24,000” movement. The number of Swedish nurses going to Norway continues to decline according to the cited figures of Statistics Norway. There are also examples from 2015 that Swedish nurses have skipped Norway and chosen to work for labour agencies that offer Norwegian wages in Sweden (personal communication anonymous). Since late 2014, the NOK’s value has plummeted because of the decline in international petroleum prices. In 2013 NOK 100 equalled SEK 90.22 as opposed to 99.10 in September 2015.⁶ Although the wage difference between Norway and Sweden is still substantial, a nearly 10% decrease in wages combined with opportunities for higher wages in Sweden may further discourage migration to Norway. However, whether it will suffice to reduce the Norwegian labour market’s role in leveraging higher wages for Swedish nurses remains unclear.

In 2015 students seemed relatively pleased with their entry wages. In Lund, however, students experienced that the hospital began tracking how many jobs each student had applied for and removed from their list of applicants those who had applied for many jobs (Tuuloskorpi, 2015). Sitting for many job interviews could thus be risky for those unable to move. If such strategies are systematized and widely applied by employers, students may lose some leverage obtained in wage negotiations. Another challenge is that “old” or experienced nurses have lagged behind and earn less than many new graduates (interviews with nurses; Tuuloskorpi, 2015). A struggle for higher wages for experienced nurses is long overdue, and this struggle may require that the newly graduated temporarily slow down on their wage demands. Any slowdown might affect the associational power of new generations of student nurses negatively, unless they find alternatives to maintain their collective spirit and the

⁶ <http://www.norges-bank.no/Statistikk/Valutakurser/valuta/SEK/> Last accessed October 2015.

leverage that present-generation “not belows” have skilfully built. However, whatever happens in the “Not below 24,000” movement in coming years and whatever structural constraints this single-issue movement faces, it has inspired other groups of nurses to continue battling for better wages and working conditions.

10. Concluding comments

The agency by exit approach in the analysis of the “Not below 24,000” movement demonstrates how individual and collective agency can be interlinked and create a source of structural power. Individual agency by frustrated nurses has created a labour market with shortages of nurses in Sweden where new graduates are in high demand. Using collective agency the movement has exploited the situation and acquired structural power of the marketplace-bargaining power type. This power is spatially and contextually conditioned by the match between frustration with wages and working conditions in Sweden and opportunities in Norway, where Swedish nurses are considered a highly attractive workforce. In addition, the movement’s structural power is further enhanced by the movement’s associational power when members use the exit option in their wage-negotiation strategy. Attracting public attention to their case in conjunction with the shortages of nurses, they have been able to invoke symbolic power.

The movement has been able to shake structures in the Swedish labour market, in the sense that it has been able to change power relations to favour paying newly graduated nurses higher wages. The change has affected the relationship between the state as regulator and the state as employer, the relationship between various functions of the state and Vårdförbundet, as well as the relationship between Vårdförbundet and the movement. The movement has clearly shown what Katz (2004) refers to as resistance: collective action to disrupt conditions of exploitation. And it has resorted to what Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) refer to as a *strategy* of changing the rules of the game. Having obtained a wage level of SEK 24,000–25 000 plus, representatives of local groups express feelings of victory and of having won the battle (see Tuuloskorpi, 2015), and the battle has spread to more groups of nurses.

The salient point, however, is that hegemonic social relations seem to remain: the movement has attacked and influenced how the state as regulator and employer *implements* NPM in negotiations for entry wages. However, NPM and decentralized individual wage setting remain. In practice, the rules of the game are only partly changed. Corroborating this, the signs of constraining structures striking back illustrate that the battle for higher wages and better working conditions is not fully won. New challenges are ahead.

In a broader perspective, the findings suggest that analyses of labour agency need to pay more attention to the role of individual agency as individual agency can both enable and empower collective agency. Moreover, explaining the outcome of labour agency in light of enabling and constraining structures, attention to sources of power and (changing) power relations are an important entry point.

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