

Union Power and the Populism-Austerity-Labour Nexus

Mark Thomas

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology
York University

Steven Tufts

Associate Professor, Department of Geography
York University

Paper presented at:

Union Futures: Innovations, Transformations, Strategies

International CRIMT Conference

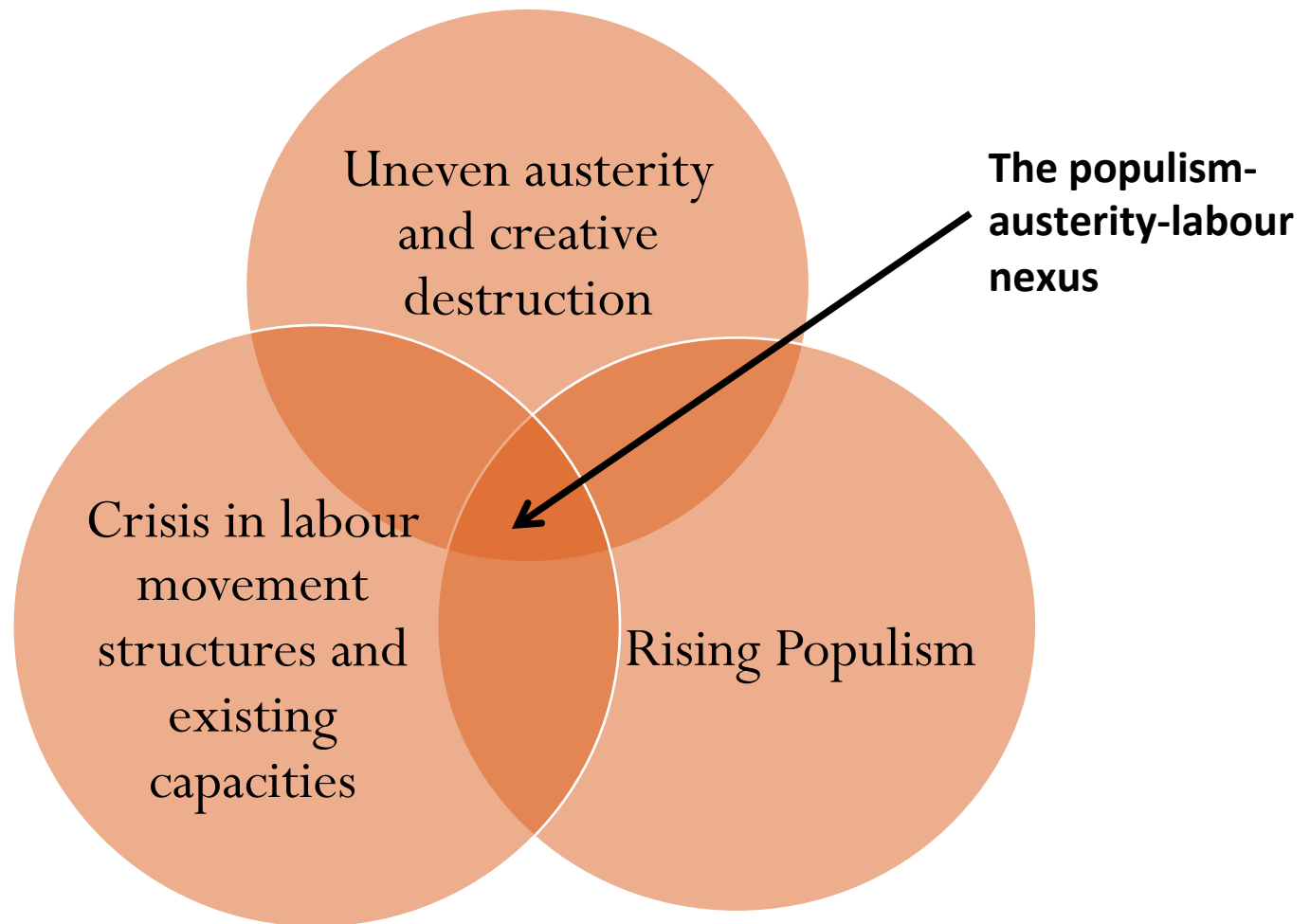
October 25th to 27th 2012

Montreal, Canada

Research Focus

- The *nexus* between ‘uneven austerity’, union strategic capacities, and rising populism.
- A systematic examination of the interplay among these processes may both explain current labour movement responses and guide future strategic directions.
- A case study analysis of the Christian Labour Association of Canada to examine the ways in which austerity and various aspects of populism reinforce one another, as well as the implications for labour and working-class formations.
- A discussion of the ways in which the *populism-austerity-labour* nexus can hint at future possibilities for labour movement revitalization.

Conceptual framework



The *populism-austerity-labour* nexus

Aspect of populism	Crisis and Uneven Austerity	Implications for actually existing labour movement	Strategic opportunities for the labour movement
Producerism	Decline of manufacturing sector	Sympathy for manufacturing workers Gendered services as intensive 'productive labour'	New sectors, telecommunications, labour intensive services as production (healthcare, hospitality)
Scapegoating	Rise of 1%, persistent financial capital	Backlash against 1% narrative, (anti-semitic, class-warfare)	Re-establishment of sustainable taxation regime
Conspiricism	Finance- State collusion	Austerity measures to support bailouts/stimulus spending	(re) organizing public sector workers
Apocalyptic narratives	Environment and apocalypse	Climate change as means of disciplining labour versus Triple E vision (employment, equity, environment)	Greening Work and Labour
Cult of leadership	Right with populist leaders (e.g., Ford)	Challenge to decentralized models of governance	Left leadership, diffused power
Authoritarianism	Security state, loss of right to strike, and protest in public space	Rise of back-to-work legislation, disciplining of dissent	Security guards, mobilization around legislated unions
Nativism	Anti-migration sentiment, discipline of migrant labour Local development, sourcing	Contradiction between rise of migration and decline of status	Alliances with migrant community groups Local procurement strategies

Christian Labour Association of Canada



- Founded in 1952 by Dutch Christian Reform immigrants
- Less than 1000 workers in 1960, more than 50,000 today
- Presence in Ontario and Western Canada
- Rapid expansion into construction, health services
- In 2011, suspended by the ITUC

CLAC: A Populist Union?

Aspect of populism	CLAC
Producerism	“A Union that Works”
Scapegoating	Unions
Conspiricism	CLAC ‘s suspension from ITUC at the request of the CLC
Apocalyptic narratives	End of organized labour
Authoritarianism	Anti labour-management conflict
Nativism	Canadians first, unless....
Cult of leadership	Limited, deference to the sovereign

Conclusion

- There are opportunities to identify new sectors and regions where workers have emerging power and to start thinking creatively about how to leverage that power against capital and the state.
- In this context, unions will doubtlessly have a role in new working-class formations; they just may not represent workers from the same sectors that lead the way in the past.
- Moreover, the potential and pitfalls of rising populism in the advanced capitalist core must be analyzed.
- This *populism-austerity-labour* nexus is a terrain upon which new strategies may be developed and initiated.