There is a widespread view that labour as a counter-hegemonic force has come to an end. We saw this in the work of Manuel Castells (1996) and his notion of the network society, then Guy Standing’s (2011) notion of the global precariat, and now Klaus Schwab’s (2016) idea of a ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’ (4IR). There is a lot going for these arguments; there is no question that there has been a decline of union membership and density in the Global North, although in some countries more than others. For example, in liberal market economies such as Australia union membership has declined from 50 per cent to 15 per cent, and in the United States from 20 per cent to 11 per cent. In coordinated market economies such as Germany it has declined from 35 per cent to 18 per cent. Even a social democratic country such as Sweden has lost union members, from 78 per cent to 68 per cent (Visser, 2019: 15).

But the problem with the pessimistic ‘end of labour thesis’ is that it reifies globalisation and the digital age, giving them a logic and coherence that they do not have. It adopts a form of linear analysis that takes little account of historic structural shifts and cycles, or what Karl Polanyi (1944) called the double movement, and what Marx saw as the relentless drive of capital to accumulate by exploiting labour and thereby generating ongoing struggles against it (Marx, 1990).

Most importantly, the pessimists present workers as victims. The result is that labour can only act defensively – fight militantly to defend a demand, even when it is unrealistic. The result is that labour is seen as an actor without agency that cannot think of alternatives or imagine a future towards which labour can work. We need to rethink the way we view digitalisation, and reject a preconceived notion about the development of globalisation.

An important event in this rethinking was a global project on innovation in trade unions, Trade Unions in Transformation (TUiT), initiated by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), with a focus on power resources (Herberg, 2018). The studies that form part of the TUiT project restore a focus on worker agency and demonstrate how workers are responding innovatively to globalisation. We draw on the power resources approach (PRA) to examine the new forms of worker organisation emerging among large swathes of
precarious and informal labour in Africa and South Africa. We identify examples where workers on the margins are beginning to cross the divide between the protected and the unprotected, the established workers and those marginalised by liberalisation.

In developing a Southern approach to work and labour, a research agenda evolved where we have begun to identify the new forms of organisation and sources of power that are emerging in the Global South. The focus of these studies has, we argue, not been the institutional setting of labour relations or the overall impact of major trends like globalisation on labour, but rather the strategic choice of workers in responding to new challenges and changing contexts.

We demonstrate in these studies that workers’ structural power has been constrained by increased competition between workers globally, by intensified managerial control at workplace level deepened by digitalisation and by unfriendly strike regulations. However, in addition to structural power we identify how workers are able to mobilise other sources of power. ‘Self-employed workers’ with low structural power tend to create new forms of associational power, which diverge from traditional trade unions. We identify modest but significant examples of the new forms of organisation and sources of power that workers are experimenting with in the Global South. To what extent they can form a counter-movement to liberalisation in the Global South remains to be seen. What is clear is that Southern workers are developing innovative responses to the challenge of an increasingly insecure world.

Instead of the bright new world painted by Schwab and others, like the global tech companies, what is emerging is a return to the working conditions of the nineteenth century. In many ways digitalisation, and what we call algorithmic management, is a return to Frederick Taylor’s ideas of scientific management. Management could strengthen its hand in the struggle to speed up production, Taylor wrote at the beginning of the last century, if ‘managers assume … the burden of gathering all of the traditional knowledge which had been possessed by the workmen and then classifying, tabulating and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws and formulae’ (Braverman, 1974: 12). A second principle was that ‘the work of every workman is fully planned out by the management … and each man received in most cases complete written instructions, describing in detail the task which he is to accomplish’ (Braverman, 1974: 118). In other words, management must use its monopoly over knowledge to control each step of the labour process and its mode of execution. Indeed, the current world of work could be described as a form of ‘digital Taylorism’.

As Kamath and Sarkar (2020) argue in their problematisation of algorithm-based decision making embedded in Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), ‘standardisation and modularisation of tasks have made wide inroads in
workers’ lives, resulting in a replication of Taylorist mass-production techniques’. They point out that the algorithmic nature of ERP technology has made work processes far more standardised and routinised, ‘making the modern skilled worker as replaceable as Braverman’s factory worker’ (Kamath and Sarkar, 2020: 116). However, a clear difference from the Fordist assembly line is that workers in the digital age are often atomised into micro or individual workplaces and are not easily able to combine in large numbers to build worker power and confront employers. This points to the need to target state and other national institutions which have the power to deliver services such as pensions, unemployment benefits and other forms of social protection.

Furthermore, the entry of China and former Soviet countries into the global labour force and the economic liberalisation associated with globalisation has resulted in labour and hence capital goods being cheap to produce in emerging Asian economies (Milanovic, 2016: 106). Consequently, although globalisation leads to income gains for the global top income earners and the middle class in emerging Asian economies, this comes at the expense of the working class of the Global North and the poor globally, with those in the lower percentiles of global income distributions experiencing minimal changes in their real income (Milanovic, 2016: 5). The implications of Milanovic’s research is that large parts of the Global South are excluded from the gains of globalisation and the new technologies; and, although the members of the working class of the Global North are poor, they are still wealthier than the poor in the Global South.

While the gap ‘between rich and poor nations, powerful and powerless nations … caused by colonization and imperialism is now slightly less substantial, a large citizen premium still exists with a lot of our income [depending] on the accident of birth’ (Milanovic, 2016: 139.) Not only is the number of hours worked by labourers greater in the poorer countries, but the real wage rates for the same occupations that involve the same amount of effort are also lower in the Global South (Milanovic, 2016: 140). This ongoing exploitation of Southern labour, colonialism’s legacy of global inequality, is what we mean by ‘working in the shadow of the digital age’.

The innovation in the volume lies in the way in which it links emerging forms of worker organisation – both formal and informal – that respond to the changing nature of capital and the world of work. In recent times we have seen the emergence of a new business model among the global IT giants, such as Apple and Amazon, that successfully evade nation state corporate governance codes, laws and policies (like anti-trust and competition policy). Control is exercised by a small, mathematically proficient elite dominating decision making and policy by owning and controlling the ‘algorithm’. In the process, even greater (income and wealth) inequalities are created and entrenched. This unprecedented concentration of wealth and power
is generating resistance to the precarious employment conditions in these giant tech companies, leading to increasing attempts to regulate the sector; this resistance is coming chiefly from global unions and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in combination with local worker organisations. As Tony Atkinson (2015: 303) argues in his last book, ‘The direction of technological change should be an explicit concern of policy-makers, encouraging innovation in a form that increases the employability of workers’.

This points to the importance of bolstering global institutions such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and Global Unions which are supporting the organisation of precarious workers. The ILO is the only tripartite United Nations (UN) agency that incorporates worker, trade union, and employer representatives. This is crucial, since it allows nation states to adopt empowering legislation such as Recommendation 204 (R204), which permits informal economy workers to transition into the formal economy. It also points to the importance of pressurising particularly weak nation states to adopt worker rights in a variety of areas including in laws governing migrants, social protection, labour, local government, small business and other arenas impacting on workers’ lives. If labour is to revitalise its role in relation to global capital, it needs to organise at different levels: global, nation state and local. This will involve new and experimental ways of organising and implementing worker rights. Crucially, nation states need to strengthen inspectorates to monitor state institutions in their delivery of worker benefits and services. Laws and regulations are useless without successful delivery, an area which worker organisations must oversee.

We take this debate further in four ways. First, we contribute to discussions on the future of work by filling a gap in knowledge on how new technology is shaping the world of work in the Global South. Second, we shift the debate from the dominant narrative of technological determinism to the power dynamics among precarious workers and what these dynamics mean for the future of labour. Third, we stress the importance of organisation at the local level to ensure that global and national rights and regulations are implemented and that bargaining with local state institutions can take place. This importantly includes the role of trade unions, as well as other players in cooperatives and associations. This level takes on a new importance as work becomes more precarious and the informal economy at a local level grows. Finally, we contribute to the debate on the forces driving the production and reproduction of inequality in the Global South (Kanbur, 2019). Today the South faces unprecedented levels of poverty and inequality without the safety net of the welfare state. As argued elsewhere, the study of inequality ‘must be rooted in the lives of those who experience inequality … and be informed by the experiences of those most affected’ (Francis et al, 2020: 17).
The central theme of this volume is the impact of new technology on the future of work(ers) and labour organising in the Global South. Our theoretical approach is quite eclectic and draws on global labour studies, inequality studies and African political economy. More specifically, it puts labour process theory in conversation with the PRA.

The methodology followed is predominantly ethnographic, drawing on the experiences of precarious workers through in-depth interviews and observation. We believe this is the most authentic way of uncovering the invisible world of the informal economy and precarious workers. It is their experiences that inform the search for new organisational forms and ways to respond to the challenges of new technologies.

What began as a journey of occasional collaboration has become a collective project drawing together joint research over the past six years. When I began researching the world of work and workers 50 years ago, the employment relationship was seen as a simple binary between an employer and employees. The growth of informal work and the increasing recognition that the majority of the world’s workforce are not organised into traditional trade unions set me off on a new journey into the study of precarious work and the future of labour.

I believe that all knowledge is collectively produced, and this book is no exception. The book grew in an ad hoc way. Six years ago I met Dr Carmen Ludwig, a German PhD student at the time, researching the increasingly precarious municipal workforce in Johannesburg. We began to collaborate on a number of research projects, defining and applying the PRA to trade unions. She contributes to Chapters 6 and 7 in this volume. In 2019, I undertook a joint study with Dr Kally Forrest on the response of traditional unions to vulnerable workers. A version of that research appears in Chapter 2. We have continued to collaborate on a number of research projects, and I have benefitted enormously from her extensive knowledge and deep insight into the labour movement. It has also been a great privilege working with Fikile Masikane on a pioneering study of the platform economy. Fikile is a PhD student and one of the bright emerging Black scholars being produced by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS). Our joint research appears in Chapter 5. Finally, I must acknowledge the contribution of PhD student Lynford Dor. I drew Lynford into this project after reading his Masters research report on organising casual workers east of Johannesburg. He had worked for five years as an organiser, and Chapter 4 was written by him. He also helped conceptualise and write Chapter 1, and on that basis I have included him as co-author of this book.

Of course, at the centre of the ‘hidden abode’ of the publishing labour process is our editor, Karin Pampallis. She played, and has played many times before, the crucial role of bringing it all together and advising on the
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