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Bilbao, Spain

Benjamín Tejerina,  
Cristina Miranda de Almeida  
and Clara Acuña  
Editors

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# Placial Thickness in Social Movement Coalitions: The Case of Ex-GKN for Future

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**Abstract:** *Alliances between climate activists and workers at the grassroots level are growing but remain marginal even though they may prove critical for climate change mitigation and a just transition. Our paper looks at the exemplary case of a coalition between metalworkers who were formerly part of the automotive industry and the Italian branch of the climate justice organization Fridays for Future. We argue that the coalition formed as a part of process of placial thickening where platially thick coalitions are those with high levels of shared values, identity, and ideas or solidarity. Place is typically not accounted for in coalition typologies and, unlike space, place emphasizes shared meaning that can only be arrived at from the participants within the space. Thus, placial thickness can change over time as participants' views change.*

*Through interviews of coalition partners and participant observation of coalition events, we argue for the importance of placially thick coalitions in establishing and deepening climate consciousness and actions across greater numbers of sectors and segments of the population. Furthermore, the case study demonstrates the critical role of solidarity within inter-movement or inter-sector coalitions where shared values, identity, and ideas require development.*

**Keywords:** *Climate justice, coalitions, place, environmentalism, labour*

## 1 Introduction

There are a variety of coalitions built with and for social movement organizations and collectives (Andretta, 2012) in order to achieve a range of aims and objectives these generally relatively resource-/power-poor actors have (Diani, 2013, p. 151-2). For one, organizations within the same movement can form *intra-movement coalitions* (Chironi and Portos, 2021). However, there are often problems that multiple movements all want to address. In those cases, movements form *inter-movement coalitions* with organizations and activists from other movements (Adam, 2017). These are sometimes in the literature referred to as 'cross-movement coalitions' (Staggenborg, 2013). Movement organizations, especially on the local level, often find themselves

in coalitions with non-movement actors who are all working toward (roughly) the same goal. With the movement-centered approach we are taking here, we can refer to these as *extra-movement coalitions* (Phillips, 1991). The differences presented here relate to the types of actors involved.

Table 1. Basic Typology of Movement Coalitions

|                    | Coalition Partners |                    |                   |
|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
|                    | Orgs in movement X | Orgs in movement Y | Non-movement orgs |
| Orgs in movement X | Intra-movement     | Inter-movement     | Extra-movement    |

However, we can ‘typologise’ coalitions not only regarding the actors, but also the ‘level’ of interactions between them. Some have used the spatial metaphor of thin and thick to describe different types of coalitions, even though not including social movement organizations. For example, a government can form a “wafer-thin coalition” (Boswell and Corbett, 2016) in relation to the size and governing rules of parliament. Elsewhere, coalitions have been described as being thin when ties are non-hierarchical, broadly distributed, and flexible (Bennett, 2003). Thus the ‘shape’ or ‘structure’ of these coalitions are horizontal and their connections aren’t ‘solid’, fitting in to the spatial dimension of the understanding of coalitions. Although the metaphor about the ‘depth’ of the interaction implies a spatial dimension, as we can see uses of thin coalitions also relate to those that are “ephemeral” (Earl, 2016, p. 384), “fleeting...sporadic and unstable” (Pastor, 2010, p. 253), whereas thick coalitions “represent long-term repeated interactions” (Storper et al., 2015, p. 160). Here, the depth of interaction is predicated on a temporal dimension. Thin coalitions don’t last as long as thick coalitions, and so the depth serves as a measure of time. In this paper we want to introduce another way of looking at coalitions, both regarding their typology and their processes. We believe that beyond the spatial and temporal dimensions, coalitional depth can be thought of *placially*.

Place is often contrasted with space as being a location of meaning alongside a physicality. Dourish (2006) argues that place is the persistent social meaning formed about the setting in which the interaction takes place. Regarding the placial dimension, coalitions can be thin or thick relative to the shared meaning they have. This relates strongly to the homogeneity of values, identity, and political culture. However, even without a high level of homogeneity, a high level of solidarity could also constitute a thick coalition regarding the placial dimension. Whereas the Venn diagram between values, identity and political culture has much shared space, solidarity bridges gaps through putting aside differences for the sake of others. True solidarity is not fighting for mutual goals

for different reasons but for fighting for other's goals or for other's reasons. Thus, a thin coalition placially speaking is a collaboration between social movement organizations and activists where there are few shared values, a wide range of identities and political culture, and limited levels of solidarity. Here, coalition participants come together even if they don't 'speak the same language' and they do so because they are pursuing shared ends often from different perspectives or purposes.

Placially thick coalitions would have shared values, political culture, and/or identity; or they would have a strong sense of solidarity where participation in the coalition is about supporting the goals of others. It is likely that coalitions, particularly smaller ones, would be thick placially because many coalitions are formed to benefit from aggregate numbers and resources while minimizing conflict or expansiveness of concerns which may appear as a product of heterogenous values or political cultures.

Table 2. Typology of Movement Coalitions Intersecting Space, Time, and Place

|                             |          | Coalition Type                                                                                |                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                             |          | Thin                                                                                          | Thick                                                                              |
| Dimension of categorization | Spatial  | Small in number;<br>Non-hierarchical;<br>Structurally Flexible                                | Large in number;<br>Hierarchical;<br>Structurally rigid                            |
|                             | Temporal | Short-term;<br>Infrequent contact;<br>Unstable                                                | Long-term;<br>Frequent contact;<br>Stable                                          |
|                             | Placial  | Diverse values;<br>Variety of identities;<br>Variety of political cultures;<br>Low solidarity | Shared values;<br>Shared identity;<br>Shared political culture;<br>High solidarity |

The relationship between the different dimensions of coalition-types is unsurprisingly connected, even if inversely. That is, thick placiality may correspond to thin spatiality in that focusing on shared values and identities may reduce the number of participants. The split within the First International is a case in point. If there are new splits with every disagreement, then increased placial thickness leads to spatial thinness. Temporality may be more likely when there is thick placiality because it is likely to have less substantial disagreements. As discussions shift from shared interests to divergences or as certain actors enter or exit the coalition, these dimensions can change.

Elements of the coalitions themselves, whether temporal, spatial, or regarding the actors, also affect the placial 'life' of the coalition. Interactions between actors are partially structured by the past of a coalition – or the lack thereof; they are informed by their numbers or relative strength alongside its structure. Indeed, different *interpretations* of these elements may affect the relations between the actors. Is the coalition *understood* as being for a short amount of time? Is there an *expectation* that the coalition would or should be bigger or smaller, more hierarchical or less hierarchical? Perceptions of these characteristics affect the placial depth of the coalition because people act and react to the coalition and its actors based on this understanding.

To bring this understanding of a coalition's placial depth to life, this paper explores a case study of the ex-GKN for Future a coalition formed between metalworkers of a (former) drive shaft manufacturing plant and local and national environmental movement organizations, particularly Fridays for Future. In this paper we will first introduce the case study to give the reader a better understanding of the context for the construction of the coalition. We will then proceed by explaining the methodology used to gain the actors' own perspectives. From there we will present the case study and highlight the importance of solidarity in this particular example.

## 2 EX-GKN for Future

The ex-GKN factory is in the industrial area of Campi Bisenzio, a small town in the outskirts of Florence, in Italy. The large auto parts plant, which produced driveshafts, shut down in 2021 as the company aimed to move production to developing countries. The 422 workers in Florence were informed about the closure of their plant via email on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July 2021. On the very same day, the workers called a large assembly in front of the factory's gate, inviting all people sympathetic to their situation to participate and express their solidarity. Here, Fridays for Future showed their support and subsequently formed a coalition with the workers. The aforementioned assembly was the beginning of the occupation of the plant, and of a permanent mobilisation that, as of late February 2024, is still ongoing after almost three years. In the short term, the factory occupation prevented the owners from removing the equipment, thus providing the workers with greater bargaining power in their attempt to save their jobs or at least receive decent compensation as part of the settlement for the closure. Later, it became the site for the collective elaboration of a plan of reindustrialization that envisages an eco-compatible future for the factory and its "social integration" with the surrounding territory.

### 3 Ex-GKN for Future and Placial Thickness

The placial thickness between the workers and the environmentalists is something that developed over time. It could be marked by a number of moments and indicators. First, the birth of a coalition started as an act of solidarity. Then, this act translated into trust and continued communication. This communication led to the development of shared understanding, and this shared understanding really manifested into an alignment of values.

When the workers found out that their factory was being closed, they called for support from across civil society. While historically environmental organisations demanded more from workers class mobilisations than they gave, in this instance Fridays for Future participated from day one. This was an act of solidarity. Fridays for Future had no direct shared interests based on their specific concerns regarding climate change. At the time, Fridays for Future could not have known of the possibility in promoting environmentally friendly production as a consequence of providing support. Essentially, Fridays for Future's participation was not about themselves but an act of support for others.

Some perceived a substantial shift in the way in which Fridays for Future (FFF) in Italy had engaged with others. One FFF activist said, "Consider that at the beginning Fridays for Future considered themselves the most brilliant and all decisions were taken autonomously" (Interview no. 2). But this changed, leading not only to the formation of coalitions but once in which solidarity played a central role. Such an act of solidarity endears oneself. It breaks down walls of skepticism that could have otherwise existed between the two movement actors. This is not how they generally viewed coalition experiences. Both the workers and environmentalists felt that the coalition that formed was particular. One worker described the level of solidarity between the two as a the "great novelty" of the coalition. "The convergence has made it possible that you come to 'my' event today, I'll come to yours tomorrow" (Interview no. 1). According to some of the activists, this shift was not done just out of a good will but rather through changes in the context under which they organized. In particular, the COVID pandemic was described as a reason for this perceived shift: "after the pandemic, they understood that they cannot [do everything on their own], they have co-decide with other movements" (Interview no. 2).

While engaging in solidarity, the two sides began to be affected by the politics of the 'other side' of the coalition. This is what the convergence truly meant. First it was a label and then it became a reality. It could be found in diverse ways. For one thing, they began organizing big joint events together campaigning for multiple things at the same time. "Do we want to organise a big event? We

do it! Such as in Rome, or the Climate Camp in Venice [in September 2022]" (Interview no. 1). Though partially a kind of simultaneous act of solidarity, it reached a point where these otherwise identity and culturally diverse activists began to internalize each other's points of view (Interview no. 1).

One worker expressed his own 'personal growth' in relation to the political change he experienced as a result of the coalition. Solidarity brought him in touch with Fridays for Future and Fridays for Future brought him in into personal contact with other environmentalists, some of whom were fighting local fights. Prior to these personal interactions, the workers could not sympathize with these struggles in the same way (Interview no. 4). In many ways, this first started with a way in which many of the workers thought about their own workplace through the environmental lens. As they interacted more with the environmentalists, they began to see that their (former) work manufacturing drive-shafts as part of the problem. Workers also began to see the possibility of continuing their profession as metalworkers but in line with environmental objectives (Interview no. 6 and Interview no. 1).

Where it first started as a focus on jobs in an economy seemingly turning toward sustainable development that incorporates environmental concerns. But as these interactions within the coalition continued, they became part of their own desires and demands for the future plan of the factory that they are 'occupying'. This is what occurred with the new production plan the workers came up with after meeting with experts and academics. They decided to entirely reshape their production, albeit with the restrictions of not being able to profitably produce driveshafts due to contractual restrictions within the industry. The workers faced a need to redesign their production but they credit their cooperation with environmental activists and the solidarity they showed as key to that process. Rather than support the fossil fuel reliant automotive industry, they decided to try and reshape their industry to worker opened and operated solar power, sustainable and ecologically-sound battery, and electric and manual cargo bike production. As one worker said: "The solar panels? This has been the fruit of a work of convergence, of our contacts with other groups" (Interview no. 4).

Environmental consciousness also affected individuals amongst the metalworkers and how they thought about their personal lives. They began to change their habits and thought differently about everyday matters that add up to having significant environmental impact. Though in our data collection we were primarily interested in obtaining information about collective and organizational impacts of the interactions between struggling workers and environmentalists, our interviewees could not help but notice these more personal affects (Interview no. 5). This was not an isolated incident of personal

behavioral change, but the personal quickly became collective even in matters such as these. Beyond attempting to reshape the future of their production, the affects of these more individual behaviors added up to changing their policies onsite (Interview no. 1).

At some level, the issues became felt as inseparable. Though this was still not true for the wider community and culture outside of the ex-GKN workers, they explained their rationale to outsiders. During one even in which they invited other struggling and successful workers struggles and cooperatives to share their experiences, though it focused on climate change, they still included the concern in the title of the event: Workers Conference, Assembly of Trade Unions and Climate Activism. To them, excluding the issue of climate and climate activists became unthinkable particularly in relation to workers struggles, but they explained their rationale to others as a necessity (Interview no. 3).

Even as they struggle for workers' rights, and advocated for rights of all workers, not only for their own futures, they still viewed this struggle within the context of climate breakdown. They understood that these objectives had to be fought as a common goal (Interview no. 1). But the workers don't see this as a one-way learning process. They also feel that the environmentalists have grown in their own knowledge and understanding of the workers' conditions and concerns (Interview no. 4). While they joined the workers' call for solidarity from some basis of compassion, the bonds strengthened throughout the course of the coalition, creating a placially thick coalition.

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## Methodological Appendix

Our data come from an inventory of qualitative sources<sup>1</sup>. First, we have conducted semi-structured interviews with six workers of the ex-GKN, and we have participated as observers at the national meeting of all Italian "recovered factories", meaning factories that were acquired by the workers after having been dismissed by their owners, becoming examples of "reindustrialization from below" and "self-management of the workers". The event was held on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2023 at the ex-GKN plant, and eloquently titled "Workers' Conference, Assembly of Trade Unions and Climate Activism". The introductory speech of the Conference, held by one of the metalworkers, was transcribed and analyzed for this article. In addition, other interviews were held with five members of the local chapter of Fridays for Future, two representatives of local environmental struggles, and a trade unionist of the public transport sector. Qualitative interviews are used to gather basic empirical data on the ex-GKN case and to give voice to its protagonists (della Porta, 2014) helping us to reconstruct their visions, their intentions, and the effects of their interactions.

## Data Sources

### List of interviews

- MM, Florence, 26/01/2023
- FI, GKN, Campi Bisenzio (Florence), 18/06/2023
- DD, GKN, Campi Bisenzio (Florence), 18/06/2023
- GB, GKN, Campi Bisenzio (Florence), 18/06/2023
- AT, GKN, Florence, 30/09/2023

- MP, GKN, Florence, 30/09/2023
- DS, GKN, Speech at the “Workers’ Conference, Assembly of Trade Unions and Climate Activism”, Campi Bisenzio (Florence), 18/06/2023
- TM, ex activist of Friday For Future (FFF), Florence, 27/01/2023
- AL, FFF, Florence, 30/09/2023
- GD, FFF, Florence, 30/09/2023
- DE, FFF, Florence, 30/09/2023
- PL, FFF, Florence, 30/09/2023
- ST, Comitato No Aeroporto, Florence, 30/09/2023
- FC, Mondeggi Bene Comune, Florence, 30/09/2023
- AN, Cobas (Union), Florence, 30/09/2023

## Abbreviations

- **FFF:** Fridays for Future

## Biographical Notes

Eugene Nulman is Assistant Professor in Political Science at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at the Scuola Normale Superiore and a faculty member of the Centre on Social Movement Studies (COSMOS). He is the author of *Climate Change and Social Movements: Civil Society and the Development of National Climate Change Policy* (2015) and *Coronavirus Capitalism Goes to the Cinema* (2021).

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## Notes

1. All empirical materials are listed in Appendix 1.