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Solidarity: A slow memory concept

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Abstract

This article rethinks solidarity as a "Slow Memory" concept, drawing on life-story interviews with retired trade unionists across Europe. While often framed as a cornerstone of labor history, solidarity has never held a singular meaning; its uses have shifted across ideological traditions and historical contexts. The article combines conceptual history with the framework of a Slow Memory approach, emphasizing how meaning emerges incrementally through lived experience, affect, and embodied recollection. It identifies how solidarity is remembered both as collective resistance and mutual support, and how its changes are reflected upon across varied working milieus. By framing solidarity as a Slow Memory concept, the article contributes to methodological debates of memory studies more broadly. It invites scholars to move beyond institutionalized and event-centered understandings of memory and foreground the multisited, affective, embodied, and practice-based ways in which memory sustains socially important values amid structural changes.

Keywords

collective unity, oral history, resistance, slow memory, solidarity, trade union

Introduction

The concept of solidarity occupies a central yet contested position in the history of European labor movements. Frequently invoked across various ideological traditions, from Marxist and Social Democratic to Christian Democratic frameworks, its meaning has never been singular or fixed. While solidarity is often associated with collective struggle and mutual support, its practical and symbolic functions have evolved in response to changing economic, political, and social conditions. As sociological studies have shown, solidarity is not an inherent attribute of workers' communities but a contingent, relational practice that emerges in specific contexts through shared experience and framing (Doellgast et al., 2018; Fantasia, 1988; Hyman, 2001). Drawing on life-story interviews with retired trade unionists from industrial sectors across Europe, this article explores solidarity as a general mnemonic concept whose particular meanings have developed

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differently across time and space. Rather than tracing these shifts through canonical unions' texts or programs, as in conventional conceptual history of solidarity (Kołtan, 2025; Stjernø, 2004), built on the traditions of Koselleck (2004) and Skinner (1969), or in the activities of social movements and political parties (Süß and Torp, 2021), we investigate how solidarity is evoked and remembered in biographical accounts. Approaching the memories of solidarity in this way allows us to grasp not only the values trade unionists articulate, but also the affective, embodied, and situational practices through which those values were lived, transmitted, and transformed.

Our study is informed by the Slow Memory approach that seeks to rethink how the past is remembered by shifting the object of memory from discrete events to unfolding processes, and by redirecting attention to memory itself – from fast, reactive responses toward slower, multi-temporal, multisited, and at times cumulative engagements with those processes (Wüstenberg, 2023; Wüstenberg and Wawrzyniak, Forthcoming; see also Braber et al., 2026; Davoliüté et al., 2024; Jones and Van de Putte, 2024). This perspective has been shaped in part by Rob Nixon's (2011) notion of Slow Violence, which highlights long-term, incremental forms of environmental harm that unfold across human communities and nonhuman life. As Berger and Wawrzyniak (Forthcoming) note, industrialization and deindustrialization form a paradigmatic case for Slow Memory, as they are long-term, multisited processes that have fundamentally transformed the foundations of planetary existence and involved forms of economic structural violence that reorganized labor, livelihoods, and systems of social provision. As deindustrialization has advanced, the traditional industrial *milieux de mémoire* have receded, and industrial memory has been increasingly relocated within heritage projects that seek to preserve that which is perceived to be vanishing. This pattern has been observed across numerous case studies in (post)industrial regions, revealing how such memory work is necessarily selective and uneven, shaped by power, funding, access, and competing interpretations of what from industrial pasts is worth remembering (Berger, 2020; Jaramillo and Tomann, 2020; Strangelman et al. 2025; Vega and Díaz, 2024). The Slow Memory approach, when combined with industrial studies, attempts to move beyond institutionalized heritage narratives by drawing particular attention to the evolving contexts, emotional dimensions, and temporal layers through which industrial past are recalled and reframed (see also in this special issue: Díaz Martínez and Vega García, 2025; Kërbizi and Rawski, Forthcoming; Konsbruck, 2025).

In this article, we focus on memories of solidarity, as solidarity is among the concepts that have changed throughout industrial history. It is also a social value that is, on one hand, seemingly familiar, yet on the other, pluripotent. Consequently, its memories are difficult to "pin down", a quality that, as Wüstenberg (2023) suggests, is characteristic of Slow Memory. As Morgan and Pulignano (2020) argue, solidarity is an "essentially contested concept" (Gallie, 1956) because its variations are deeply tied to different regional contexts, political projects, and moral visions. To name just a few approaches, for early Marxists, the idea of solidarity was connected to class struggles and understood as a tool of realizing class interests. Marxists also used and favored other terms instead, like workers' fraternity, unity, or internationalism. These ideas highlighted collective over individual priorities. Over time, however, solidarity evolved into a broader and more inclusive social-democratic concept of individual dignity, shared human values, and universal rights, incorporating concerns related to human rights, feminism, ecology, and transnational solidarity. These two trends were competing with Christian social ethics which emphasized a balance between individual responsibility and collective care for the common good, supported the idea of a social market economy, promoting social welfare while avoiding class conflict. This type of solidarity focused on moral obligation, social harmony, and strengthening democratic stability (Stjernø, 2004).

Importantly, solidarity is also one of those values whose remembrance frames both our notions of the past and the future. Sophie van den Elzen (2024) examined how solidarity served as a

vehicle of cultural memory. Drawing on conceptual history, cognitive linguistics, and memory studies, she introduced the notion of "lexical memory work"—the idea that language users, explicitly or implicitly, reshape collective memory by resignifying key terms through narrative framing and everyday usage. Focusing on the British heterodox Marxist journal *Solidarity*, van den Elzen showed how activists of the 1960s strategically worked to destabilize the established meanings of "solidarity" and imbue it with new historical associations, aligning it with alternative traditions of activist sociality. Rather than formal redefinitions, these shifts occurred through nuanced narrative practices and word choices.

Building on this insight, our approach similarly views the meaning of solidarity as historically dynamic and embedded in social words. However, whereas van den Elzen analyzed editorial strategies within a written, activist-intellectual context, this study traces how solidarity is reinterpreted within vernacular life stories. Rather than focusing on textual interventions by the writing elite, we attend to how storytelling—often fragmented, embodied, socially situated, and performative—renegotiates the meaning of solidarity in relation to lived experiences of industrial reorganization. Both approaches emphasize that solidarity is not a fixed concept but a site of ongoing conceptual labor; yet, by shifting the focus to life stories, we explore how memory work unfolds beyond formal discourse, within the slow, cumulative processes of personal and collective meaning-making.

The article is structured as follows. The following section details the methodological approach, emphasizing the value of biographical interviews for Slow Memory studies. We then present our analysis of interviews with retired trade unionists from seven European countries. We highlight that the multivalence of solidarity emerges from the ways in which it is remembered in relation to different social practices and contexts. The final section reflects on the broader implications of this case study for memory studies, particularly in relation to the remembrance of social values.

Method: narrative biographical interviews and slow memory

Our study draws on narrative biographical life story interviews conducted with retired trade unionists from several European countries. The narrative biographical interview, a method rooted in both sociology and oral history, invites individuals to recount their life trajectories in their own terms, typically beginning with a single open-ended prompt and allowing for interviewers' interventions in the later stages of interview. As a methodological form, it provides access not only to what individuals remember, but also to how they organize and ascribe meaning to past events through narration (Chase, 2005; Domecka et al., 2012; Mrozowicki, 2011; Schütze, 1983; Kaźmierska and Waniek, 2020). In this way, the method aligns closely with the premises of Slow Memory, remaining open to attentive, unhurried listening to how remembered processes unfold within narrative (Allen and Braber, Forthcoming).

The format of the narrative biographical interview enables individuals to navigate multiple temporal frames—those of interviewees' lived experiences and occupational, generational, and political contexts—whose relationships may shift, overlap, or remain separate. In contrast to institutionalized forms of memory that tend to fix narratives and impose closure, life-story interviews open space for hesitation, ambivalence, and the reconsideration of meanings. They also foreground the affective and embodied dimensions of remembering, conveyed both through narrated episodes related to emotions and bodily practices and through gestures, silences, and shifts in tone. This is particularly significant for studies of the memory of social values, such as solidarity, whose meanings are redefined and which become legible in interviews not as abstract categories, but as situated practices of remembrance.

For the purpose of this article, we analyzed 15 interviews conducted across seven European countries between 2023 and 2024 (Hungary (1) Kosovo (1) Italy (2) Luxembourg (2) Slovenia (2) Spain (5, including one interview in Catalonia), and the United Kingdom (2)). The interviews were

Table 1. Interviewee details.

Code	Interviewee	Interviewer	Country	Union	Industry	Gender
UK1	David Amos	Natalie Braber	United Kingdom	Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM)	Coal mining	Male
UK2	Mick Chewings	Natalie Braber	United Kingdom	National Union of Mineworkers (NUM)	Coal mining	Male
SP1	Carles Vallejo	Brian Rosa/Javier Tébar	Spain	Workers' Commissions of Catalonia (CCOO)	SEAT car manufacture	Male
SP2	Joaquín Uría San José	Rubén Vega/Irene Díaz Martínez	Spain	Workers' Commissions (CCOO)	Coal mining	Male
SP3	Francisco Prado Alberdi	Rubén Vega/Irene Díaz Martínez	Spain	Workers' Commissions (CCOO)	Steel	Male
SP4	Justo Rodríguez Braga	Rubén Vega/Irene Díaz Mart ínez	Spain	General Union of Workers (UGT)	Steel	Male
SP5	Ana García Carpintero	Rubén Vega/Irene Díaz Mart ínez	Spain	Left-wing Union Current (CSI)	Textile	Female
HUN1	Károly György	Tibor Valuch	Hungary	National Federation of Hungarian Trade Unions (MSzOSz)	General	Male
ITA1	Giuseppe Ruzziconi	Davide Carnevale	Italy	Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL)	Petrochemical	Male
ITA2	Marisa Baroni	Davide Carnevale	Italy	Italian Confederation of Trade Unions (CISL)	Food	Female
KOS1	Shasivar Begu	Vjollca Krasniqi	Kosovo	Union of Independent Trade Unions (BSPK)	Coal mining	Male
LUX1	Jean-Claude Reding	Zoe Konsbruck/Nicolas Arendt	Luxembourg	Independent Luxembourg Trade Union Confederation (OGBL)	General	Male
LUX2	Nando Pasqualoni	Zoe Konsbruck/Nicolas Arendt	Luxembourg	Independent Luxembourg Trade Union Confederation (OGBL)	Steel	Male
SLO1	Francka Četković	Nina Vodopivec	Slovenia	Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia (ZSSS)	General	Female
SLO2	Metka Roksandić	Nina Vodopivec	Slovenia	Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia (ZSSS)	Construction	Female

carried out by a team of international scholars collaborating within the framework of the "Transformation of Work" working group of the COST Action Slow Memory project (see Table 1 for details). Permission was given through consent forms to use interviewee names.

The selection of countries reflects both strategic and pragmatic considerations. Our aim was to capture a broad cross-section of European experiences of industrial transformation. This included countries with different political economies, industrial sectors, labor traditions, as well as, in some cases, those that underwent political transitions following the fall of authoritarian regimes. At the same time, the availability of interviewers and existing research networks within the Slow Memory COST Action inevitably influenced the final sample, introducing an element of pragmatic selection. Rather than aiming for representativeness, our approach prioritizes depth and diversity of narratives, providing an informed view of how trade unionists across varied contexts remember, reinterpret, and resignify solidarity in the wake of industrial change.

Within each country, the narrators were carefully selected to capture a generation of trade unionists born predominantly in the late 1940s and 1950s, whose professional lives unfolded during the decades of Europe's profound industrial restructuring, marked by varied paths of deindustrialization. Importantly, the interviewees held senior positions within their respective national or sectoral trade unions, having served as elected officials, negotiators, workplace organizers, or members of union leadership bodies. This methodological choice reflects our aim to engage with actors who not only witnessed industrial transformations firsthand but also played significant roles in shaping labor responses to these changes. Their perspectives offer insights into both grassroots experiences and strategic reflections on work and social change across different political–economic regimes. Our interviews thus capture memories of industrial reorganization as a heterogeneous and deeply politicized process, offering a rich ground for examining how the concept of solidarity has been understood.

The interviews were conducted in the native language of trade unionists by scholars who are experts in their fields of research in their respective countries. They followed a structured yet flexible four-stage process: a pretalk introducing the project's aims and methods; an open-ended, uninterrupted narrative; a phase of follow-up questions; and, finally, a discussion of specific themes central to the Slow Memory project, including the interviewees' understandings of solidarity. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English by automated programs with translations checked by interviewers. They are archived at the Social Data Repository of the University of Warsaw (for the metadata see Downarowicz and Wawrzyniak, 2025).

While the interviews addressed a broad range of themes related to work, industrial transformation, and political engagement, for the purposes of this article we have narrowed our analysis to the explicit meanings of solidarity. We examined the vocabularies through which solidarity was expressed, tracing how particular terms, metaphors, and narrative formulas shaped its meanings within the interviews' contexts. Methodologically, we conducted a focused thematic coding of the interview transcripts, identifying all fragments where the concept of solidarity was directly articulated. These excerpts were systematically cataloged in a coding matrix, organized in an Excel sheet, and subsequently grouped into several core thematic categories. In the following section, we present these themes, tracing how solidarity is recalled by trade unionists.

Themes of solidarity

Our analysis revealed three main distinct modes in which solidarity is remembered, shaped by political struggles, labor activism, and shifting economic realities. These themes are as follows:

1. Solidarity as collective resistance (where solidarity entails discussion of political struggles and strikes);
2. Solidarity as mutual support (where solidarity centers around collective survival and well-being as well as a form of social protection);
3. Reflection of solidarity in contemporary times (how the concept of solidarity has changed in today's society).

Solidarity as collective resistance: between struggle and stewardship

One of the oldest meanings of solidarity within labor movements is that of collective struggle—a binding force forged through shared opposition to what is perceived as exploitation, repression, and social injustice. Likewise, among the trade unionists interviewed in our project, solidarity is often understood as a weapon of struggle—a means of resisting economic exploitation, state repression, and/or neoliberal restructuring. This understanding is particularly evident in the narratives of the Southern European workers who were active in authoritarian political contexts, where trade union activism was not only about labor rights but also about broader political resistance.

The language used in those interviews emphasizes the idea of solidarity as a fight or struggle, often invoking imagery of violent conflict or even war. In some interviews, the trade unionists are referring to militant solidarity, whereas for others it is a metaphorical struggle. Yet across both usages, such combative language remains frequent. A striking example comes from Carles Vallejo, retired trade union leader and activist for democratic and workers' memory in Barcelona, who recalls how solidarity was the foundation of clandestine activism against Francoist repression. Vallejo, who was arrested and tortured in the early 1970s for his involvement in the labor movement at the SEAT plant, describes solidarity as the workers' only real source of protection. He states that: "Solidarity is the weapon that the workers have, it's the defence . . . the workers' struggle without solidarity has no way out." His account underscores how solidarity, in this context, was not just a moral principle but a practical necessity—expressed through strike actions, financial support for repressed workers, and clandestine networks of mutual aid. He also situates this form of solidarity within a long historical trajectory, recalling that earlier generations of workers, including his own father and in-laws, had relied on similar collective practices during strikes in the 1920s. This memory of militant solidarity aligns closely with broader leftist traditions that interpret collective struggle as both an ethical stance and a condition of political agency. Within this framework, solidarity emerges as a form of counter-power—a means through which the working class organized not only resistance but also mutual protection and social reproduction under conditions of repression. In Catalonia, these meanings have acquired a particularly enduring resonance. The region's long history of labor militancy, anarcho-syndicalist organization, and antifascist resistance has embedded solidarity deeply within its political culture. Vallejo's account thus links the clandestine practices of the late Francoist era to earlier and later moments of collective action, illuminating how solidarity has persisted as both a moral value and a pragmatic strategy within leftist imagination.

Other trade unionists also associate solidarity with direct action and resistance against structural injustices. In the United Kingdom, the coal miners' strike in 1984–1985 was sparked by plans to close unprofitable mines, threatening thousands of jobs and entire communities. The strike was marked by intense confrontations between miners and police and deep divisions within the labor movement and led to a schism between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the formation of a new union, the Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM) by those who had not supported the strike. Former mineworker and NUM member Mick Chewings defines solidarity as trust and collective commitment in times of conflict. Reflecting on the role of solidarity during the strike

he emphasizes: "Working with people that you can trust. If you're in a fight, they've got to be there with you." He adds "if you're divided, you've got no chance." Joaquín Uría San José who was part of the mining trade union Comisiones Obreras in Spain, specifically uses the word "scab" in this interview (someone who worked during a strike in the late 1980s, he mentions that it could be someone who took the place of a "comrade") and that this was a real insult, "In the mine, the worst thing they could call you was scab, because being a scab implied everything: to be a snitch, a creep, an ass-kisser, a cuckold." Nando Pasqualoni from the steel industry in Luxembourg states that a decisive time for him during his apprenticeship was realizing that participation in strikes is necessary, that not to do so is a "betrayal" of the workers, and that this was a message he received also at home as his father was a miner and his mother was a strong supporter of the strikes.

Ana García Carpintero, who was part of the textile unions in Spain, explains how such confrontational protests could be handled by women. Describing a strike at the cusp of the 1980s and 1990s at a factory employing 600 women, she explained that, while female workers learned from their male colleagues how to build barricades and organize collectively—since the men had more experience with such protests—they ultimately approached the struggle on their own terms. She recalled,

> We did it our way: each one of us went [to the barricades] with a tire and wearing high heels and a narrow skirt, but we did it. This work of solidarity could not be understood without that common link. We are all workers, we are of a certain class. And we are supportive. You are suffering and you are fighting and that is what needs to be attended to.

This image underscores both the constraints and agency of women in industrial labor movements: they participated fully in collective action while refusing to shed their everyday identities and conform entirely to masculine models of militancy.

These fragments highlight solidarity as an active commitment to struggle, a bond forged in moments of crisis and confrontation. However, the trade unionists do not only articulate a militant understanding of solidarity. They also frame solidarity as a collective, altruistic form of stewardship, grounded in sustaining and improving shared working conditions, rather than in confrontational action, as we explore in the following section. As David Amos from the United Kingdom, a former Nottinghamshire miner who joined the Union of Democratic Mineworkers after the strike, notes, this notion of altruistic solidarity was not always uniformly upheld. Reflecting on the 1984–1985 miners' strike, Amos describes how different mining communities had conflicting interpretations of solidarity, shaped by local traditions and union structures. His account reveals how even in contexts of collective resistance, solidarity can be internally contested and fractured. Amos interprets solidarity as being part of a "collective" and that this concept underpins what it should mean to be part of a trade union. This is in the context of the miners' strike in the United Kingdom where there are still strong divisions between those who were on strike and those who worked through the strike, even 40 years after the strike.

The trade unionists also reflect on how the meaning of solidarity shifts between the militant and stewardship modes. In Kosovo, trade unionism keeps memories of the 1989 Trepça miners' strike alive. The strike, in which hundreds of miners locked themselves underground to protest the abolition of Kosovo's autonomy by pro-Serbian Yugoslav authorities, became a powerful symbol of the miners' role as political actors in the late socialist era, amid escalating tensions between Albanians and Serbs. According to Shasivar Begu, a miner from Trepça, "solidarity is in our blood as a people, but we also had it as miners and as Albanians, we stood very much in solidarity." However, in his view, trade unionism has changed over the years. Although they originally operated as a union "under occupation," today the union needs to focus not on workers' political rights but on their wellbeing.

These excerpts reveal that solidarity is understood as a form of action that may take different shapes—ranging from confrontation and struggle to an altruistic and unifying pursuit of the common good. In the following section, we examine how these varying understandings of solidarity are evoked in recollections of practices of mutual support.

Solidarity as mutual support: from collective action to collective security

Alongside its longstanding association with class struggle and political resistance, solidarity has also historically carried meanings grounded in care, reciprocity, and mutual aid. From the early cooperative movements and workers' self-help associations of the nineteenth century to the post-war expansion of the welfare state, this more socially embedded conception of solidarity emphasized the maintenance of communal wellbeing, especially during times of hardship. Among the trade unionists interviewed in our project, this interpretation of solidarity emerges through remembered episodes of collective caregiving.

A vivid example comes from Begu, as mentioned, a former organizer of the 1989 Trepça Mines hunger strike in Kosovo, who recalls how workers shared scarce resources with one another during the strike:

> When we distributed aid, we went to someone and said, "Will you take this aid because we were told you are in need?" "What's in the aid?" "It's 100 kg of flour, two sacks." "Give it to someone else because I already have 25 kg of flour, and I don't need it right now." There were many such cases, and no one aimed to take more but aimed to survive—to survive longer as a collective.

This account illustrates solidarity as a practice of redistribution and shared responsibility, where workers prioritized communal wellbeing over individual gain. Similarly, unionists from Asturias, Spain, describe solidarity as an expression of generosity—as San José put it: "Solidarity means sharing what you have, fundamentally (. . .). Solidarity is sharing what you have and fighting for the same thing."

Marisa Baroni—who began working at the age of 17 years in the 1950s, and went on to become a lifelong trade unionist within the Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions (CISL), later serving as President of ANTEAS Ferrara (the National Association of All Ages Active for Solidarity)—recalled the social mutualism she learned from her mother. In her view, solidarity functions as a long-term, "slow" strategic resource for establishing credibility as a union activist. She stated that "solidarity is important because they must feel you are one of them (. . .). We do things together and for me that's credibility. That for me, as I can say, is the sincerity of doing things together." Moreover, Baroni, a pioneer in challenging gender barriers within Italian trade unionism and at the same time a deeply committed Catholic, articulated solidarity as a practical ethic of care, one that requires recognizing what others need and acting alongside them. In her view, emotional identification alone is not enough. As she observed, "crying together" changes nothing unless it leads to improving workers' circumstances. Emphasizing camaraderie as the core element through which solidarity was practiced and drawing on her experience of organizing young women workers in a food factory in mid-twentieth-century Italy, Baroni described how solidarity emerged through the repeated, everyday acts of support. In her account, solidarity was securing childcare arrangements so mothers could participate, organizing collective outings, or managing cooperative food provision, weaving together private, social and economic life in ways that enabled female workers to remain connected:

> The relationship with the workers was very camaraderie, very social. I mean, the attitude was: "I did this, I succeeded, so let's do it together." When I used to go in front of the factories and wait for them to come out – back then there were no meetings inside, there was nothing – and I used to wait for them to come out in front of the factories – the attitude was really: "Let's do it together, it's OK if it doesn't go well because we don't just do it but let's do it together." This reaching out and saying "We're there! I'm there too, we're there, together!" was what was needed. Blustering, on the other hand, was of no use to anyone.

Up to this point, we discussed solidarity primarily as practise on the ground: sustained through shared work and mutual support in everyday organizational life. Yet, for trade unionists from the stable economies, solidarity also operates at a broader structural level. It is articulated as a principle that should underpin social institutions expanded from a relational practice among workers to a foundational value of the welfare state. Several interviewees describe the union not merely as a vehicle for collective action, but as part of a larger social architecture designed to protect people across different stages of life. Jean-Claude Reding, former chairman of The Independent Luxembourg Trade Union Confederation (OGBL), explicitly says that solidarity cannot be restricted to the labor movement alone; it must be embedded in the very organization of society. Similarly, Francka Četković, former Slovenian trade union leader and later president of the pensioners' union, describes solidarity as an ethical foundation for public policy, ensuring that people facing vulnerability—whether through age, illness, or economic hardship—are not abandoned: "Without solidarity, we would burn up as a society. There has to be an element of solidarity built into the system, especially in pensions, in health care, in social welfare." Here, solidarity becomes a social guarantee. And yet, for some, this understanding still remains grounded in a shared emotional and empathic sensibility. As Nando Pasqualoni from OGBL put it: "For me, solidarity is simply a feeling when one is in a situation where one is disadvantaged as an individual. And when people come together, they are not longer disadvantaged."

In any case, in the welfare state register, solidarity is no longer the day-to-day practice of doing things together, but a principle of collective security, binding individuals into a system that protects them from isolation and precarity. Thus, solidarity appears not only as a stance of resistance, but also as a normative commitment to sustaining the social fabric beyond the arena of direct labor struggles.

Reflection of solidarity in contemporary times

A recurring theme across the interviews is the perception that both the meaning and experience of solidarity have shifted over time. This shift is not described as neutral: interviewees often speak of a society that no longer sustains collective orientations as it once did. Their reflections are not only evaluative but also mnemonic: they compare present practices with remembered pasts, drawing on lived experience to mark what has been lost or transformed. In doing so, they frame solidarity as something that must be transmitted, taught, and relearned across generations. The interviews suggest that younger members relate to solidarity differently, and this perceived alteration in how solidarity is remembered and enacted raises questions about the future of trade union life and activism.

In situating these shifts in meaning, the trade unionists point to a range of pressures that, in their view, complicate the practice of solidarity today. These concerns often revolve around the coexistence of different and sometimes conflicting understandings of what solidarity should entail. As Jean-Claude Reding notes, the social conditions that once made solidarity feel self-evident have shifted:

> One of the big things that have been challenging solidarity for the last twenty years is the fragmentation of society and the growing social disparities (. . .) Classically, the difference between a top manager today and someone in a company earning minimum wage is impossibly huge. It's crazy when you see that they're proud of the German railway if they have an average salary of 3,000, and then their railway manager gets, what did he get, a million something per year. Okay, good. Those are the things that drive our society apart. And that challenges the idea of solidarity. But conversely, the idea of solidarity can also help to overcome that fragmentation.

Reding's reflection points to how structural inequalities undermine the conditions for solidarity within the welfare state. In this view, solidarity is both challenged by contemporary fragmentation and posited as one of the few remaining tools capable of countering it. Mike Chewings frames the erosion of solidarity as a shift toward individual advancement and class aspiration among workers themselves, in which collective bonds weakened once some of them were able to improve their personal circumstances:

> Yeah, I'm repeating meself again, but I believe under Thatcher she created the "I'm okay Jack" attitude. And I'm afraid that's what happened with our union. We had people that bought the pit houses, who then sold them and went to live in West Bridgford and places and they thought they were better than what they were.

Metka Roksandić, former President of the Maribor Pobrežje Municipal Union in Slovenia, underlined that challenges emerge within unions themselves, where solidarity is not automatically enacted. In her view, collective support often materializes only in exceptional circumstances—"a disaster, a fire, a flood,"—whereas it is less reliably offered when trade unionists themselves face personal consequences for defending others:

> To have one union trustee thrown out on the street because he is fighting for others, his own colleagues do not step up for him. This basic solidarity, when something happens on a specific occasion, that is when we should show it, and we do not.

Spanish interviewees framed the weakening of solidarity as part of a broader cultural shift toward competitiveness and self-interest, which they see as threatening the very foundations of trade union action and of society itself. San José notes what he calls a movement toward "fierce individualism." He contrasts his childhood in a mining neighborhood—where "all doors were open and the neighbours were family"—with the present, in which even neighbors remain strangers. Francisco Prado Alberdi, drawing on his experience in the steel sector, underscored the gradual erosion of collective orientations as a defining feature of the period. As he put it, "Today we live in a society where everything tends to be individual—and not just individual, but about stepping over others. This loss of the collective is the real problem." Justo Rodríguez Braga, also from the steel trade unions in Asturias defined solidarity as a selfless, other-regarding readiness to act on behalf of the collective: "Solidarity is fundamental, and here it has been practiced very generously—solidarity between workers, between cities, between sectors (. . .) To be supportive means to be altruistic and generous." In his view, when this ethic weakened, solidarity gave way to isolation. Similarly, Carpintero warns that growing individualism has led trade unionists away from their core principles, taking them down a path that is not their own: "either we save ourselves with the collective soul or we are individually condemned."

Comparable views on the rise of individualism appear in some other interviews. Giuseppe Ruzziconi from Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) commented that solidarity should stay at the core of trade unionism:

> For the trade union organisation it is fundamental, but I think that solidarity – this attitude, this approach, this behaviour – is fundamental for the society in which we live (. . .) This is the importance of living together, of living in solidarity, that is, recognising that there is a person or persons in need.

At the same time, he reflected on how such dispositions have become more difficult to sustain, pointing to a growing emphasis on "an exaggerated ego and a manifestation of personalities in a more selfish manner." His moral framing remained distinctly Marxist, consonant with longstanding debates over the fragmentation of labor and the erosion of a collective working-class identity. By contrast, Nando Pasqualoni adopted a more Durkheimian register. He emphasized the need for individuals to speak out against injustice, yet lamented that this capacity has weakened over time, pointing to what he described as a "deeper malaise"—a form of social anomie—permeating contemporary society. As he put it, "today, it's more about looking away, not getting involved (. . .) if you're not united, you're not capable." Such formulations underscore solidarity as an existential choice. It is a way of being that resists the isolating pressures of neoliberal work cultures; solidarity emerges as a fragile, yet necessary, shared orientation—something that must be actively renewed if the collective to remain possible.

The increasing digitalization of social life is also seen as reshaping how solidarity is expressed. Vallejo recalls that, in his time, solidarity during strikes meant material support: being on the picket line, collecting money for those who had no income, and relying on neighborhood networks to get through weeks without pay. This form of solidarity, he explained, was essential for survival:

> It keeps changing (. . .) And nowadays, well, maybe solidarity is more, let's say, digital, when a "like" seems like exercising solidarity. Then, in practice, no, it does not help too much, but it doesn't stop being a form of solidarity.

This contrast between embodied, material solidarity with more symbolic, digitally mediated gestures, shows that while the latter may still signal support, they rarely carry the same practical force.

However, not all reflections take the form of decline narratives. Nando Pasqualoni, who complained of rise of individualism, shows that there are still areas where solidarity has continued,

> Fortunately, in our committee, it's one of those committees where we still have some people who are not retired and who are still active. And I think we already have a sense of belonging, where people say, "This is a team." Friendship is something else, but this team spirit, where people say despite differences in opinion or, "Hey, we're all pulling in the same direction", that's something that is incredibly important.

Francka Četković also stressed that, despite the broader shifts, solidarities forged in the past continue to shape relationships in the present. She describes how bonds formed through shared work and organizing persist long after the workplace itself has disappeared:

> I still, today, meet people from Svila [textile producer], and it's been so many years, but we remember that. And there are still trade unionists today. Yes, as I say, a member of a pensioners' trade union is a person of integrity, a true trade unionist at heart.

In this interview, solidarity endures as a memory anchored in lived relationships.

Giuseppe Ruzziconi mentions that solidaristic dispositions have not disappeared entirely from broader society, even if it must now be actively brought forth rather than taken for granted. Similarly. Károly György, activist and leader of the National Federation of Hungarian Trade Unions who was involved in trade unionism from the 1980s to 2023, emphasizes that solidarity needs to

be a part of general education, to bring to the forefront the importance of "community building" and "the power of community" in the world of work. He stressed that

> you have to start teaching here that you are not alone, that two are stronger than one. If you want to do whatever you want, you have rights and responsibilities, but if you act together with others, it will have a much stronger impact than if you are alone. It's about young people entering the world of work having a spirit and a willingness to stand in solidarity.

Taken together, these accounts complicate a narrative of decline. While interviewees describe significant shifts toward individualism and the erosion of shared orientations, they also point to spaces in which solidaristic practices persist: committee work sustained by a sense of belonging, relationships carried across retirement, and everyday acts of mutual recognition. They also express cautious hope that the education of younger generations might renew the value of solidarity.

Conclusion

The interviews analyzed in this article illustrate how solidarity rather than being recalled as a fully defined, fixed ideological concept ascribed to different political traditions, is evoked and reattached to different experiences across the life course of trade unionists. They share everyday conceptions that solidarity means "common struggle" and/or "mutual support," as well as doubts and hopes regarding its role in contemporary times. They also disclose emotional and embodied understanding of solidarity as a practice of "doing things together." The recollections of activities like marching on picket lines, distributing food during strikes, negotiating for childcare, or simply listening to each other infuse the concept with affective weight, anchoring it not only in political discourse but in the multisited memories of gestures, routines, and relationships that accumulate tacit significance. Such memories are also shaped by their negation, for instance, the figures of those who chose not to act in solidarity serve as powerful reminders of the emotional costs of fracture and betrayal within communities, whether real or imagined. If we were to build a definition based on these examples, solidarity can be understood as a social value—emotionally laden and historically grounded in collective labor struggles—that evokes both moral commitment and an affective attachment to the idea of standing together. At the same time, however, solidarity also becomes increasingly indirect in some interviews when associated with ideas of the welfare state, social protection, and collective provision. In this sense, it extends beyond interpersonal relations to signify broader institutionalized forms of mutual responsibility, mediated through policy and governance rather than direct personal ties. One respondent, Roksandić, observed,

> Last but not least – and this is fundamental for me today – the problem we sometimes have here is that we don't know what solidarity is. We have no idea. Our mouths are full of the word *us*, but we do not know.

This remark captures one of the key insights of this article: that solidarity is less a matter of explicit definition than of implicit understanding. Its meaning resides in the accumulated memories of actions that are felt more than theorized. Precisely because these practices carry emotional and social significance, solidarity proves difficult to pin down conceptually, even as—for those who have lived it—it remains deeply known.

This, in turn, brings us back to the framing of solidarity through the Slow Memory approach outlined at the beginning of this article. We foreground understanding of memory as a temporally extended and practice-oriented process. Although memories of solidarity are often narrated through specific episodes or moments of crisis, they are not confined to them. The sedimentation

of meaning of solidarity is rooted in affect, embodiment, social practice, and the dispersed settings in which its industrial imaginaries are sustained. At the same time, these memories also reflect the long-term effects of structural, slow-moving forms of harm—from the organized class exploitation of industrial societies to the individualized precarity and erosion of communal infrastructures characteristic of postindustrial neoliberal economies—that shape how solidarity is understood, valued, or mourned.

Viewed in this light, recollections of industrial solidarity point to forms of remembrance that may not endure or translate into present-day practices, yet still reveal what is worth studying within memory research more generally: the affective, moral, and social dimensions through which people imagine the positive foundations of collective life. What might first seem like residues of a bygone moral world thus invite reflection on the kinds of values that memory studies can recover. In this way—although from another vantage point—our findings resonate with those strands in memory studies that, as Ann Rigney (2018) famously argued, call for moving beyond the field's longstanding preoccupation with trauma and loss toward a "positive turn," one that highlights the remembrance of values that sustain social life. Similarly, Sindbæk Andersen and Ortner (2019: 8) urged scholars to "develop ways of studying positive, joyful, hopeful memories that are in danger of falling out not only of memory studies but also of official discourses about the past." Also, our approach intersects with research on nostalgia, but it is not identical to it. Studies of industrial nostalgia have demonstrated how idealized pasts can serve as cultural resources in the present (Berger, 2019; Smith and Campbel, 2017). Our perspective highlights the plurality of remembered solidarities, showing how the concept—rooted in the in political, social, and material worlds of industrial modernity and conditioned by their tensions—acquires different meanings across a variety of on-the-ground practices.

While our analysis has focused specifically on solidarity as articulated by trade unionists, the dynamics we identify are not confined to the labor movement. Similar processes of slowly accumulated, practice-based solidarity can be observed in other arenas of collective action, such as feminist organizing, disability justice movements, migrant support networks, and environmental or climate justice campaigns. Of course, the forms these solidarities take—the kinds of labor involved, the emotional registers they draw on, and the material and institutional conditions that sustain them—differ across contexts. Yet in each case, solidarity is cultivated over time through multisited sustained relationships and a sense of common purpose. Attending to the recollections of such slow-building solidarities allows us to understand memory not merely as the recall of past events, but as an orientation toward relationships and values that continue to make collective life sustainable.

We also wish to draw attention to the need for studying other related concepts—those fundamental to the transmission of meaning around wellbeing and social conviviality, such as care, trust, loyalty, and responsibility—and how they are remembered, reinterpreted, and enacted across different historical and social contexts. While these values are often articulated within political discourses, they are equally lived in vernacular ways: enacted through embodied, affective, and multisited practices. It is this latter dimension that the Slow Memory approach seeks to illuminate: a form of conceptual labor that unfolds across collective experience, practice, emotions, and memory, in which everyday participants engage in articulating the core values that underpin social life.

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Ethical approval

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Informed consent

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