



International
Labour
Organization

Executive Summary

Labour in the global South

Challenges and alternatives for workers

Edited by Sarah Mosoetsa and Michelle Williams

While the recent crisis has rightfully captured the attention of both the global elite (the 1 per cent) and the “have nots” (the 99 per cent), for the global South such events are nothing new; it has been experiencing crises due to neoliberal globalization for the last 30 years. Whereas the countries in global North have been called upon to intervene to save the system from itself, in the global South economies have been allowed to collapse (e.g. in Argentina, Mexico and South-East Asia), with devastating effects, especially for workers and the poor.

Labour in the global South brings together a group of leading labour scholars and practitioners who explore the challenges faced and responses taken by labour. The volume includes case studies from a number of countries, including Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, India, South Africa and Uruguay.

Part I examines the challenges labour is facing to counter growing dual threats of exploitation and marginalization. The essays here demonstrate that while global economic forces are crucial in determining working conditions for labour, these forces are still mediated through local and national processes, offering labour important avenues for organizing. Meanwhile, changes in the global economy, while posing potential threats, also present new opportunities for labour. One such area is green jobs. Using South Africa as her case study, Jacklyn Cock argues that there is an alternative that could benefit both labour and the environment, epitomized in the climate justice movement, and that this could also bring together workers and their organizations in transnational solidarity networks. Labour’s efforts to address environmental issues suggest an important step forward from the old green–red debate in which labour and ecology were pitted against each other in a zero-sum game.

Another significant challenge is the inadequacy of traditional forms of organizing in reaching new sectors in the economy, in particular marginalized workers and women. Despite their considerable numbers, trade unions have yet to address the issue of gender sufficiently, and the increase in women trade union membership around the world has not translated into representation in leadership structures. Drawing on bargaining agendas for gender from a range of countries that includes Canada, the Philippines and Turkey, Akua Britwum, Karen Douglas, and Sue Ledwith suggest that marginalized workers such as women, migrants and other disadvantaged groups are increasingly challenging unions to become agents of social change.

In addition, new forms of structuring work are increasing labour's vulnerability. In South Africa, for example, local government has outsourced work formerly done by government employees to call centres. Employing over 80,000 workers, these call centres have grown 8 per cent per annum since 2006. Call-centre workers work under conditions that are both precarious and perilous, yet South African unions have not organized this sector adequately. Across the Indian Ocean, a similar need for convergence exists between marginalized workers and trade unions in Bangladesh's garment sector. Over 3.6 million Bangladeshi garment workers have been largely ignored by trade unions since the 1980s. However, as Zia Rahman and Tom Langford argue in their essay, the massive protests in the sector in 2006 not only won partial victories, but also began to shift both the status and capacity of labour unions in the garment sector.

The volume's second part explores the various linkages between political movements and labour in Brazil, Germany, South Africa and Uruguay. Following the Second World War, welfare state systems in the global North have provided labour with important avenues for shaping industrial relations and social benefits. In the global South, however, relations between trade unions and political movements have often been mediated through struggles for independence from colonial rule (e.g. India, Kenya, Mexico and South Africa) or against authoritarian governments (e.g. Brazil, the Republic of Korea and Uruguay). Unions in the global South have often helped to build the political movements that later won places in government. Sadly, once in government, political parties often sideline their union partners.

Ruy Braga's study of telemarketers in Brazil, who grew by 20 per cent per year between 2003 and 2009 to an estimated 1.4 million workers (mostly young, Afro-Brazilian women and gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transvestites, transsexuals, and transgendered (LGBTs)) by 2011, reveals a highly exploited "sub-proletarian" class. This class has looked both

to “Lulaism” and the State for ways to reduce social inequalities and achieve better working conditions. In 2006 the situation began to change, with workers going on strike, developing a class consciousness and seeking new forms of organizing and building solidarity.

In her study of the Uruguayan labour movement, Jana Silverman shows how the post-1985 redemocratization of the country did not lead to a full restoration of the political and organizational capacity of the unions due to neoliberal policies. Instead, the State created a “voluntary” system of bilateral labour relations that did not take into account unequal power relations. Despite expectations that democracy would usher in a new era, real salaries declined between 1998 and 2003, massive job losses were experienced in the industrial sector and private sector unions lost members. The situation changed with the Frente Amplio Party’s 2004 election victory, which won it the majority position in government and allowed it to shift to a “neo-corporatist” State.

Christoph Scherrer and Luciana Hachmann compare the Brazilian, German and South African experiences. In all three cases, labour-friendly parties came to power that had long-standing relationships with progressive labour movements. Despite these linkages, in each case the left-leaning parties in government disappointed their labour constituencies with their macroeconomic policies. The authors further show that the reasons for this were due to economic constraints, and importantly, issues of politics and power.

Part III of the volume looks at creative and unexpected responses by labour that have emerged from these challenges. With rising unemployment and increasing numbers of workers pushed into precarious forms of work, new forms of power and leverage are being found, often by the most marginalized and sectors traditionally ignored by labour movements. This in turn raises questions about who constitutes the working class, and also about how global labour can increasingly share the synergies to be found in the innovative movements taking place around the world.

An essay by Bruno Dobrusin explores the recovered factories movement in Argentina as well as the links to Peronism that broadly permeate Argentine political culture. He argues that changes in labour politics, trade unions and the Peronist movement help explain the historical roots and current characteristics of the recovered factories movement, which emerged in the first decade of the current millennium. In her essay, Sarbeswara Sahoo examines the efforts of the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India, which has taken on the dual task of providing livelihoods for informal women workers

and protecting the environment in both rural and urban areas. She profiles four SEWA projects, showing how these informal workers have responded in a highly innovative way to opportunities created by the need to combat climate change.

As the cases of the recovered factories movement in Argentina and of SEWA in India attest, workers are responding in creative and unexpected ways to real and multiple challenges. The twenty-first century has raised serious structural challenges for workers and the poor, but it has also brought about renewed vitality in response. This volume contributes to global labour scholarship by documenting some of these experiences from the global South.

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