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A Global Working Class in Formation

By Pete Dolack
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With the rise of a working class rooted in the global South comes worker militancy in the same geographies. This is militancy that has yet to attract much notice in the advanced capitalist countries of the North.

One reason lies in the withering of labor movements across the North, and a belief in some circles, flowing from that withering, that the working class is shrinking and perhaps ceasing to be an instrument of social change. In part such viewpoints are due to a failure to see office workers

in “white-collar” professions to be part of the working class. (Surplus value is extracted from them just the same.) In another part it is myopia — believing labor acquiescence in the North to be universally representative while failing to appreciate the rise of militancy on the part of super-exploited workers in the developing world.

Workers in the South, however, are developing new forms of resistance, and are now an integral part of a global working class, under-appreciated developments brought to vivid life in *Southern Insurgency: The Coming of the Global Working Class** by Immanuel Ness. The industrial working class has not disappeared, but rather has been reconstituted in the South and in larger numbers than ever before, in contrast to scholars on the right and left who “declared the working class dead.” In his book, Professor Ness argues:

“While the right wing declared the working class dead and a false construct, leftist scholars were also challenging the legitimacy of the working class as a force for social equality and transformation. Yet, more than 40 years after the onslaught of the economic, political, and intellectual offensive against organized labor throughout the world, the working class has a heartbeat and is stronger than ever before despite the dramatic decline in organized labor. ... While it may be the case that the labor movements in Europe and North America are a spent force, it is their very defeats that have marginalized their existing supine and bureaucratic order and regenerated a fierce workers’ movement in the early 21st century.” [page 3]

The percentage of formal-sector workers holding industrial employment in the South has grown from about 50 percent of the global total in 1980 to 80 percent. This increase is of course central to corporate strategy in the neoliberal era — as organized labor achieved successes, capital responded by moving production. This process has repeated, as Northern multi-national capital continually seeks out lower-wage Southern labor to exploit. That Northern capital has intensified its exploitation is demonstrated by the fact that profits being taken out of the South are rising faster than the inflow there of investment capital.

Southern traditional unions lost whatever militancy they may have once had through their co-optation into state and capitalist institutions. But in contrast to working people in much of the North, workers of the South have begun to build new types of organizations. Professor Ness writes:

“In more and more industries in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, this new proletariat is forming bonds of solidarity through independent organizations demanding improved conditions for all workers, pushing existing unions to represent members and non-members, and forming alliances within communities to improve the quality of life for all impoverished workers. The workplace and community demands that are now made by the new industrial proletariat reveal the motivations of workers rooted in solidarity, and a fundamental opposition to neoliberal capital, inequality, and poverty.” [page 58]

Migrant workers are the most vulnerable, and suffer particularly unsafe and exploitative working conditions and pay. Liberal theories of migration ignore the structural reasons for migration, Professor Ness notes — neoliberalism creates unemployment and inequality, forcing involuntary movements; forced displacement in turns leads to slums, poverty and exploitation. Capital needs

these migrations, and immigration, to increase competition for jobs and thus make work more precarious. Guest workers tend to earn barely enough to ensure their own survival and don't contribute to their home economies, in contrast to World Bank and International Monetary Fund propaganda.

Precarious labor in India

The core of *Southern Insurgency* are case studies of three of the largest Southern economies: India, China and South Africa. The intensity of exploitation in each of these countries is high and resistance ongoing despite the use of force on the part of both capital and government. The first of these case studies, India, represents "a leading example of neoliberal imperialism," Professor Ness argues:

"The actions of the Indian state have been decisive for multinational capital and its local agents by facilitating foreign investment in new manufacturing industries, safeguarding foreign investments, and commonly using legal rulings against workers and unions and unions fighting for democratic representation at the workplace. Moreover, state police are readily available to intervene on behalf of multinational investors seeking to thwart labor organizations. In India, the state police and the criminal justice system are not impartial intermediaries but partisans in support of corporations against the working class as it seeks equity and humane conditions in the workplace." [pages 105-106]

Only about one-quarter of Indian workers enjoy regular employment and are eligible to be in a state-recognized union; three-quarters of workers are "contract workers" who have no security, are prohibited from unionizing and are paid 25 to 50 percent of the low wages of regular workers, barely enough to eat and pay rent. Although Indian law has permitted unions since independence, labor law has been flouted since the early 1990s by the state, capital and sometimes even unions. With traditional Indian unions, who are aligned with weakening political parties, failing to defend workers, a new independent formation, the National Trade Union Initiative, is attempting to organize non-union and informal workers, although the government refuses to recognize it.

Splitting the working class is at the core of multi-national capital's strategy in India, actively encouraged by the state. One example is a fierce fightback at a Suzuki auto plant in 1991. Workers there used hunger strikes and two-hour "tool-downs" to press their demands, which included an end to the contract system. Management responded with a lockout, enforced by a police blockade, and a demand that workers sign a draconian "good conduct" letter to be allowed to return. Ultimately, Suzuki restarted production with scabs, enthusiastically backed by the state.

When Suzuki opened a second plant, the same scenario repeated, but this time the company hired goons who instigated violence, leaving more than 100 injured but only worker leaders jailed. Organized resistance continues in India despite continued repression, Professor Ness writes, and organized fight-backs, which consistently include demands for equal pay and conditions, are building needed class consciousness.

Organizing beyond unions in China

Although Chinese workers face the strongest state among the three case-study countries, they are also making the biggest strides. The very weakness of the Chinese union federation, *Southern Insurgency* argues, may give workers there more space to act collectively outside the constraints imposed by union bureaucracies and labor law. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions has been the sole national federation since 1949, and because good benefits and security were the norm during the Mao Zedong era, member unions have little experience in negotiating. Local branches don't function as active organizations but respond only to rank-and-file disruptions of production. Unions are subservient to capital and negotiate without member input, but this makes them little different from Western unions, Professor Ness argues:

“Most existing union models throughout the world do not want competition from independent unions, so why should the [All-China Federation]? Labor unions in liberal democracies that fail to represent members' interests are thus a poor model for the Chinese working class.” [page 126]

Labor law is largely not enforced in China; in part this is due to enforcement being devolved to the city level. Struggles tend to be ignited by failures to pay wages and thus tend to be spontaneous single-factory actions. Ironically, because workers are circumscribed by an inability to revolt regionally, nationally or across industries, the number of local revolts is higher than it would be otherwise. Younger workers are becoming more assertive in demanding better pay and retirement benefits, and privatizations and layoffs at state-owned enterprises are also behind a rising number of strikes.

Workers in the heavily industrialized Pearl River Delta region, sometimes led by floor supervisors, have forced companies to pay back owed wages and retirement benefits. Police repression has been deployed outside plants but the state has also pressured companies to pay what they owe their workers. Throughout, workers have relied on self-organization as they have received no help from their unions.

Wildcat strikes are the standard model of Chinese workplace bargaining, Professor Ness writes, a “class struggle” unionism outside official channels. A future Chinese labor movement may be emerging from these battles.

State and capital vs. South African labor

Parallel to the contract-labor system of India and the hukou migrant-labor system of China, South Africa extensively uses contract and migrant labor at the behest of multi-national capital. Neoliberalism has an added bitter component there because harsh labor policies are enforced by the African National Congress (ANC), which granted political rights to the country's oppressed Black majority but left economic relations untouched.

The largest South African labor federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), formed as an ANC affiliate during the 1980s but became a “distinctly junior partner” to the ANC and the ANC-aligned South African Communist Party and began to lose credibility in the 2010s as it failed to oppose the harsh neoliberalism dictated by the International

Monetary Fund. Working conditions are particularly poor for miners — mining is controlled by multi-national capital and is by far the country's biggest industry.

COSATU and its National Union of Mineworkers affiliate have supported an increase in the use of informal labor because they can hold a dominant position by representing only regular workers and thus without the support of the majority of the workforce. When a wave of strikes nonetheless began in 2009, the unions declared the strikes “illegal” and backed management. In at least one case, the union called for a harsher punishment than management did!

Workers organized themselves, and asked a new union unaffiliated with COSATU, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union, to negotiate on their behalf, which in turn won much greater pay raises. The National Union of Mineworkers reached a new low in 2012, however, after striking workers left that union and joined the Association during a strike. When management obtained a court order against the strikers, the National Mineworkers sided with management and sent goons to join with company goons to impose a violent denouement; 34 were killed and scores injured in what became known as the Marikana Massacre.

A fresh wave of strikes commenced in 2014, with Association negotiators obtaining significant wage increases. In parallel, a metal workers union has called for more militancy and for nationalizations; in response, COSATU expelled it. Worker militancy continues to rise and with the fracturing of the union movement, a realignment seems to be coming. Professor Ness writes:

“While the future configuration of the unions remains to be determined, it is clear that rank-and-file workers are helping to build oppositional unions that are shaping a struggle against economic imperialism, insisting on ending the system of exploitation and inequality that remains a fixture in the post-apartheid era.” [page 178]

Strength in worker radicalism

Southern Insurgency concludes by asking if existing labor unions can contain the development of independent working-class organizations. The actions of Indian, Chinese and South African industrial workers are reshaping traditional unions, and workers can't rely on bureaucratic unions leaders to defend themselves, the book argues:

“It is the development of worker radicalism that will shape the form and survival of decaying traditional unions. ... [T]he results of these rank-and-file struggles are mixed, but the evidence ... demonstrates that these movements are gaining traction, and achieving real wage gains and improvement in conditions.” [page 189]

This latest book by Immanuel Ness is a needed corrective to the false idea that resignation to neoliberalism is universal, and the examples of militancy that he presents are not simply a necessary corrective but demonstrate that improvements are only possible with organized, self-directed actions. In a world more globalized than ever, workers of the world truly do need to unite — a global working class can only liberate itself through a global struggle.