

## INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

# Globalization and the Challenges to Labour and Development

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### Introduction

The rapid expansion of capitalism across the globe – in particular the current phase of turbo-charged, hyper-competitive ‘free’ market or neoliberal globalization<sup>2</sup> – pose severe challenges for the entire world. This is particularly so in terms of the threat to the natural environment, jobless economic growth, the informalization of labour, the reduced capacity of the state to regulate and improve labour and other social standards – as well as the rising social inequality within and between countries that increasingly threatens global security. The labour movement is consequently challenged to look beyond narrow workplace concerns, in order to more assertively address the broader social and environmental issues of our times, both nationally and globally.

To this end, the ILO sponsored Global Labour University (GLU)<sup>3</sup> network organized a conference in April 2007, at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa on the theme of *Labour and the Challenges of Development*, with an emphasis on the social and environmental limits to economic growth, the role of the state, and the role of ‘free’ trade in relation to the goal of inclusive socio-economic development.

### Labour and the Challenges of Development

Unions around the world operate in a complex and rapidly changing environment. The imagined certainties of the past – economic growth leading to full employment in secure ‘decent’ work – have been shattered by a debilitating process of economic globalization. Informalized labour and mass unemployment are no longer phenomena of developing countries in the periphery, but are increasingly threatening the developed countries at the core of the capitalist world system (see Bieler, Lindberg and Pillay, 2008). In other words, under conditions of neoliberal global-

ization or ‘free’ market capitalism, rapidly improving labour-saving technology has ensured that economic growth no longer guarantees secure and decent employment.

During the first wave of relatively unregulated capitalist expansion in the nineteenth century, workers organized themselves into trade unions and political parties, and fought for legislation and welfare provisions to civilize the ruthlessness inherent in a ‘free’ market. The aim was either to advance to a classless, ‘socialist’ society or to create a ‘social democratic’ class compromise. While the redistributive achievements of ‘ostensibly socialist’ countries during the last century were severely undermined by the erosion of democracy<sup>4</sup>, within ‘social democratic’ industrialized countries this struggle has been remarkably successful, with many achieving near full employment and a substantial social wage.<sup>5</sup> However, during this same period much of the developing world have experienced low or at best ‘enclave’ development, where a few cosmopolitan elites enjoy the fruits of development, while the majority experience massive unemployment, informalized work, low wages and poor working and living conditions. This experience of ‘underdevelopment’ is a direct result of colonialism and neocolonialism, which arguably was a necessary condition for the development of the core.<sup>6</sup>

Following Wallerstein (1974), however, it is useful to go beyond the simple core-periphery (or North-South) binaries, and to recognize a third category between the rich core and the poor periphery – namely middle-income ‘semi-peripheral’ countries that, particularly within their own regions, play important geopolitical<sup>7</sup> roles (for example Brazil, India and South Africa). Such countries have large and well-developed core or enclave sectors within their economies, which coexist with vast underdeveloped sectors.<sup>8</sup>

A crisis of profitability and rising inflation, exacerbated by two oil price shocks in the 1970s, saw the demise of Keynesian economic management. Over the past few decades a new wave of neoliberal globalization – driven by new technology and unleashed finance capital – has shifted jobs from the core to parts of the periphery or semi-periphery, particularly in Asia. While unemployment has increased in most developed countries, this has been partially mitigated by new jobs created in high-tech industries such as telecommunications and equipment manufacture, which draw on the high skills available, although an increasing

number of jobs are also in the low paid and increasingly informalized services sector (Bieler, Lindberg and Pillay, 2008).

However, as many semi-peripheral countries develop their own skills base, they are beginning to attract investment in some high-end manufacturing industries, given the relatively lower cost of living, and lower wages. In turn, many lower-end manufacturing jobs (such as in the clothing and textile sectors) are migrating from semi-peripheral countries like South Africa, Malaysia and India to countries in the outer periphery, such as Vietnam and parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Friedman, 2006 and Kaplinsky, 2005). These spatial shifts in economic development, with a few exceptions, have not expanded the developed enclave sufficiently to benefit all or most of the citizens of these newly industrializing countries (Jomo and Baudot, 2007).

The increasingly intense competition for jobs and investment in a globalized ‘free’ market, has led to an erosion of the regulatory capacity of the nation-state and the capacity of trade unions to defend social achievements. Most countries in the world now experience diminishing labour rights and welfare provisions, informalization of employment relations and growing inequality and, particularly in Africa, increased poverty. Indeed, on a global scale, the rich have become richer and the poor poorer (at least in relative terms).<sup>9</sup>

In other words, while wealth is largely still concentrated in the rich core of OECD<sup>10</sup> countries, the core-periphery distinction, which was never a mere spatial or geographical phenomenon, is now even more clearly a social phenomenon related to the division of labour *between* and *within* countries.<sup>11</sup> As such, it is primarily a *class* division that operates across the globe, with the main shareholders and top management of transnational corporations (TNCs) at the apex of wealth and power, and informalized workers, the unemployed and increasingly landless peasants occupying rural or urban slums at the bottom (see Amin, 2008).

This, however, is not (yet?) a borderless phenomenon, as the TNCs are still primarily located within a few powerful nation-states – in particular the USA but also the western parts of the EU and Japan<sup>12</sup> – who play a decisive role, with the help of agencies like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), in maintaining the current global hierarchy of accumulation and dispossession. The fact that Asia (in particular China and India) and Latin America (in par-

ticular Brazil and Venezuela) are potential threats to this hierarchy does not substantially alter the current configuration of global power (Harvey, 2005 and Peet, 2003).

The WTO in particular poses severe challenges for developing countries. It ostensibly aims to level the playing fields by providing a rules-based multilateral regime, where all countries have an equal vote to further the progressive elimination of all barriers to trade in goods and services. This is meant to open up opportunities for developing countries, according to the neoliberal argument that free trade enhances growth and reduces poverty. However, the reality is that existing global power imbalances are locked into the process, giving class interests (in particular the TNCs) in developed countries enormous power to influence decision-making, often against the interests of subordinate classes (or ordinary) citizens in both developing countries (Kwa, 2003 and Jawara and Kwa, 2003) as well as developed countries (Peet, 2003). In addition, semi-peripheral countries such as South Africa and Brazil, often acting in the interests of their own emerging TNCs, cannot always be relied upon to support poorer countries in the periphery during WTO negotiations. They have at times appeared to have been of two minds about the liberalization of trade in sectors they think their domestic companies might be able to exploit within their regions (see Keet, 2006).

In general, however, the imbalances of past agreements impose double standards that favour industrialized countries. On the one hand, developed countries pressure developing countries to open their markets, while on the other hand these same countries protect their own markets through non-tariff barriers and subsidized agriculture. This prevents developing countries from building their trading capacity, thus increasing their vulnerability, making many of them further dependent on aid and more vulnerable to pressure by developed countries and agencies such as the WTO, World Bank and the IMF (see Stiglitz and Charlton, 2005).

In other words, Ha-Joon Chang's 'ladder to development', used by industrialized countries to reach their current stages of development, is being kicked away by the ostensibly 'free' market policies of the past two decades (Chang, 2007). Instead, developing countries, he argues, should insist on the right to engage in their own development path, including the right of greater state intervention to make markets work for socio-economic development, rather than the other way round, and to

make it possible for developing countries to engage with the global economy on their own terms. Indeed, some argue, current imbalances should be reversed, such that rich countries are subjected to 'free' trade, while developing countries at their various levels of development should be allowed to protect infant industries and markets for periods of time (Keet, 2006).

Much of the debate around paths to developments, whether neoliberal or Keynesian, assume that economic growth is in itself an unquestionably good thing. The more growth there is, the more jobs there will be, and the more prosperity for all. The only issue for debate, it seems, is how to ensure an equitable distribution of the wealth that has been created. However, the phenomenon of jobless economic growth in a context of accumulation for the sake of accumulation, where insecure, informalized work is being created on a large scale, has caused many to ask whether dominant growth models can only exacerbate poverty and inequality. This question becomes even more sharply posed when the environmental limits to growth are considered (Bello, 2007). For example, is accelerated globalized trade sustainable, given the huge amounts of energy involved in transporting goods, particularly fresh produce, across the world?

Indeed, we are now obliged to confront anew the classic questions of: What is 'development'? What is 'work'? How does the traditional 'working class', located within the formal sector of the economy, relate to the broader working class of informalized and unemployed workers? As the privatization and commodification of social or public goods continues apace, how do trade unions relate their struggles at the point of production to the struggles within the sphere of consumption, social reproduction and environmental protection?

The failure of the market to deliver inclusive development has in recent years reinstated the state (and with it greater market regulation<sup>13</sup>) as a key actor in development, drawing on the historical successes of both social democratic and developmental states in different parts of the world, particularly the Nordic countries and East Asia (see Evans, 1995 and Vickers, 2007).

The key question is: what *kind* of developmental state is needed to achieve inclusive development, and what is the role of organized labour as a transformative actor in relation to the state, capital and the rest of civil society? Where the state has been

mainly embedded with an emerging indigenous industrial bourgeoisie, as in East Asia, labour and other civil society actors have often been excluded or suppressed. Even if organized labour is incorporated, the question remains whether development that is subordinated to a narrow conception of economic growth, in a context of extensive labour-saving technology and fierce global competition, will achieve inclusive or enclave development. Will a different paradigm, that of a *democratic* developmental state (for example Kerala, India)<sup>14</sup> that is embedded primarily with organized labour and other civil society actors – such that growth is subordinated to development (or human needs and environmental justice) – achieve holistic, balanced and inclusive development?

These challenging questions formed the backdrop to the 2007 GLU conference, and are in part addressed by the articles that follow, with case studies drawn from South Africa, India, Brazil, Columbia and the Nordic experience.

### **The Environment, Solidarity Economics and the Role of the State**

*Elmar Altvatar* alerts us to the impact of industrialization on climate change and the depletion of fossil fuels that has driven industrial development over the past two centuries. In a context of depleting energy reserves, he argues that accelerated financial globalization is unsustainable, as it is based on the logic of growth without any natural limits. The current pressures of global competition to increase productivity and improve competitiveness, he maintains, only creates more redundant labour. This serves to further aggravate the energy and climate crisis as well as the problem of employment. The time has come for an urgent appraisal of new forms of cooperative or solidaristic economic arrangements, where small and medium enterprises, which are more amenable to using renewal energy, can create more meaningful employment.

*Jacklyn Cock* continues the argument that development has to be grounded in the current environmental crisis which has extremely negative impacts on the health and livelihoods of the poor. She argues that the discourse of ‘environmental justice’ provides a radical alternative to the vague notions of ‘sustainable development’ because it questions the market’s ability to bring about social or environmental sustainability. The argument is

illustrated with reference to the Steel Valley struggle for environmental justice in South Africa, and concludes that the labour movement needs to engage more assertively in struggles for environmental justice.

*Vishwas Satgar* returns to the question of cooperative development, and argues that the cooperative sector has often been ignored or downplayed as an alternative source of employment, and yet it is the tenth largest sector of the global economy. Given the limits to what he calls ‘neoliberal primitive accumulation’, which threatens human society as well as nature, there is now a pressing need to organize production and consumption along cooperative lines. He, however, points to the dangers of the commodification of existing cooperative initiatives and the need for the labour movement to deepen their collaboration with the international cooperative movement to consolidate their gains and become a counter-hegemonic alternative to the model of pure global capitalism driven by transnational capital.

In the debate about the role of the state or the market, great faith is often put into the past achievements of corporatist strategies in Northern Europe, in particular the Nordic countries. They achieved remarkable levels of growth but, at the same time, distributed the surplus resulting from that growth to all its citizens. *Asbjørn Wahl*, however, warns against a romantic view of the possibilities of corporatist social democracy for the rest of the world. He fears that these achievements were the product of a particular era and cannot be repeated. Instead, working class movements must engage in direct struggles to delimit the power of capital to achieve substantive development and democracy, where people's needs and environmental limits become our guiding principles.

By contrast, *Saumyajit Battacharya* argues that organized labour in India has to work within the parameters of the tripartite arrangements with the state and capital as it is too weak to adopt a confrontational stance. His article provides a detailed critique of the orthodox case for flexible labour standards. As India increasingly enters the global economy, it has been obliged to relax many of the protections it gave to workers in the formal sector. In a context of an overwhelming informalization of labour (approximately 90% of all workers), trade unions face an uphill battle to preserve the gains won in a previous era.

*Christoph Scherrer* argues, however, that national solutions regarding the preservation or extension of labour standards are in the end futile. Competition is fiercest amongst countries of the South, given their similarities, and even the smallest increase in costs can render a country or sector uncompetitive *vis a vis* their counterparts elsewhere in the developing world. Only global regulation, where the floor of labour standards is effectively raised for all countries, will allow for a sustainable improvement of working conditions and still allow countries to be competitive.

### **The Dangers of ‘Free’ Trade and Capital Mobility**

As in the last two articles (Battacharya and Scherrer), the rest of them do not necessarily question the conventional models of economic growth and industrial development, but are more concerned with the impact of the neoliberal restructuring of the global economy. In particular, they deal with the threats posed by the liberalization of trade through the WTO and the various free trade agreements.

With regard to the WTO, developing countries are particularly concerned about the developmental impact of concessions they are being asked to make under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and in the Non-Agricultural Market Access (NAMA) negotiations. *Esther Busser* provides a detailed analysis of the tariff reductions contained in current NAMA proposals, and alerts us to the severe implications they have for industrial employment and development in developing countries. She argues for a differentiated approach that recognizes the different tariff and industrial structures of developing countries, and the need to shield sensitive and labour intensive sectors. Her article concludes with a recommendation that the trade union movement enhances its research and impact assessment capacities in order to make more strategic interventions at the various levels of policy making.

Industrialized countries are holding onto the extensive subsidies they give to their farmers which serves to undermine the competitiveness of the agricultural produce of developing countries, as well as denying them free access to the lucrative markets of the industrialized world. ‘Success’ in the agriculture negotiations, however, is a double-edged sword for developing countries. Besides the environmental implications of free trade in



agriculture mentioned above, many local farmers are concerned about the impact on agricultural livelihoods if multinational agribusiness seize all of the gains made through the agriculture negotiations. Most ominous, however, are the trade-offs – what will developing countries have to give up to secure access to the markets of developed countries?

*Alexandre de Freitas Barbosa* analyzes the impact of the WTO proposals on employment in the agricultural, industrial and services sectors in Brazil. He notes that Brazil under the Workers' Party has played a major role in drawing developing countries together in the G-20, to act as a counter-hegemonic power *vis a vis* the industrialized countries. This has achieved great success in stalling negotiations that could have debilitated the economies of developing countries. However, he warns that Brazil, as a major player in the agricultural sector, might be tempted to make unbearable concessions in exchange for agricultural market access. If it decides to open its internal market to goods and services produced abroad, the impact on the labour market could be devastating in terms of the rise of informality and unemployment, and worsening inequality.

Developing countries, however, also face the prospect of life outside the suffocating embrace of the multilateral system. Free trade agreements between powerful developed countries and weak developing countries can pose even greater dangers to developing countries. Many have revisited the European Partnership Agreements (EPAs) and the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas for their potential to achieve what the stalled WTO negotiations could not achieve – the opening up of developing countries for untrammelled exploitation by TNCs in the name of investment and trade (see Oxfam, 2007).

*Consuelo Ahumada* shows what the Andean Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) with the USA, signed by Colombia and Peru between 2004 and 2006, will mean for labour conditions and human rights in Colombia. She argues that the USA has obtained very favourable conditions of investment which will negatively affect the Columbian productive sector, including the social and working conditions of that country and the region. In addition, the agreement was signed within the context of the Doctrine of National Security of the Bush administration, paving the way for increased violence against union and social activists.

### **Conclusion: Future Struggles, Future Research**

In much of the developing world private corporations, particularly foreign transnational corporations, dominate the economy, particularly during the neoliberal era of ‘free’ market globalization, where, as shown by articles in this volume, agencies such as the WTO or ‘free’ trade agreements have played a key role in opening up developing economies. The re-emergence of the ‘developmental state’ as an alternative is a welcome departure from the There Is No Alternative (TINA) declaration of former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, when she introduced neoliberal market fundamentalism during the 1980s.

However, a number of articles in this volume warn against a narrow focus on traditional growth models which East Asian developmental states tended to follow. Economic growth, as measured by GDP per capita, is usually seen by mainstream economists as *the* key indicator of development, while issues of redistribution (who benefits from the wealth created in real terms, as measured for example by the Human Development Index) and even more so the natural environment (taking into account the externalized costs and the natural limits of growth) are often deemed to be of secondary concern.

Cock, Satgar and Altvatar urge us to consider alternative ways of conceptualizing ‘development’ that run against the logic of accumulation for the sake of accumulation. Altvatar refers to the local and regional ‘solidarity economy’ (*economia solidaria*), which arose in Latin America in the context of the debt and financial crises of the 1980s and 1990s. He feels that this is “a precondition for the transition to an economy based on renewable energy”, as the pressure of global competition, and with it dependence on fossil fuels, is lower than in the larger transnational sectors. Satgar reminds us that currently “close to a billion people are affiliated with cooperatives”, which is a key component of such a solidarity economy.

Current growth models propel the entire globe in the direction of ‘first world’ development, yet the earth’s resources cannot sustain such levels of consumption. Cock instead alerts us to what Wolfgang Sachs calls “the alleviation of wealth rather than the alleviation of poverty”, in other words the redistribution of resources (from rich to poor) and of power (from government and corporations to communities and citizens). Cock also refers

to the work of Joel Kovel, who argues that instead of growth, we must think of *sufficiency*, which means “building a world where nobody is hungry or cold or lacks health care”.

Working class organizations have an objective interest in promoting a substantive democracy that includes active civil society participation in the pursuit of inclusive socio-economic development and an effective developmental state at the national level. If we are to work within a new paradigm of Kovel’s ‘sufficiency’, as opposed to limitless growth, much more serious attention has to be given to measures such as shorter working hours, which creates both more jobs and increased leisure time for parents with their families. The late Andre Gorz (1994) has shown how this can be done without decreasing the effective income of workers.

Scherrer, in this volume, also warns us against the feasibility (or indeed the desirability) of nation-states to look mainly inward for development solutions, given the new objective global context. Can a suitable balance be struck between the state and market at both the national and the global levels, with appropriate regulatory instruments to facilitate both national and global development and in the interests of all the world’s citizens and the natural environment?<sup>15</sup> Democratic developmental states, in alliance with other social actors including the labour movement, will be obliged to seek the transformation or replacement of global institutions such as the World Bank, IMF and WTO, if they want to build an inclusive developmental regime at the global level. This would mean harnessing the surplus created by economic growth to achieve greater global equality and wealth redistribution, through instruments such as global taxation and a global social wage (see Bieler, Lindberg and Pillay, 2008 and Stiglitz, 2007).

These research areas in pursuit of real utopias require a mobilized and an organized labour movement that straddles the formal/informal and trade union/new social movement divisions; that critically engages with conventional notions of ‘development’ and economic growth; that is alert to the dangers of ‘uneconomic growth’ and tendencies towards ‘enclave’ development; and seeks balanced, inclusive development that creates enhanced qualities of life for all citizens (through decent formal work and/or alternative, meaningful livelihood strategies) without unduly harming the natural environment.

These are large and difficult questions which are being

increasingly posed in the context of the failed strategies of the past, whether statist or market fundamentalist. There are few certainties, and only bold, creative thinking by all social actors (in particular those representing the working class, the poor and the marginalized) acting with a realm of free and open public discourse, can arrive at meaningful solutions for the whole of humanity. These, of course, are issues of social contestation as well as future research.

### **Endnotes**

1. Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand.  
E-mail: [Devan.Pillay@wits.ac.za](mailto:Devan.Pillay@wits.ac.za).
2. Globalization is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that has strong historical roots going back at least to the fifteenth century, and as such contains contradictory impulses that simultaneously develops and destroys. Economic globalization refers to the current phase of intensified 'free' market capitalist expansion, which began with the computer chip revolution and the decline of state-led Keynesian and import substitution economic management in the 1970s.
3. The Global Labour University (GLU) is a network of trade unions and universities in different parts of the world. It aims to facilitate research, debate and qualification programs in order to address global labour issues. The GLU currently involves the University of Kassel and the Berlin School of Economics in Germany, the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, the University of Campinas in Brazil as well as the Tata Institute of Social Science in India. The main trade union centres in each of these countries, as well as global union federations, also form part of the network. More details can be found at [www.global-labour-university.org](http://www.global-labour-university.org).
4. Many Marxists today would dispute the claimed 'Marxist' or 'socialist' heritage of the Soviet and Maoist experiments, in the belief that socialism implies substantive participatory democracy. Nevertheless, much more objective research still needs to be done about the redistributive achievements of these societies.
5. These countries were inspired by the state-led Keynesian alternative to capitalist crises.
6. This, of course, does not mean that the external factor operated to the exclusion of a range of internal factors, including the abuse of power by post-colonial elites; the looting of state coffers; and the lack of local capacity exacerbated by an exodus of skilled professionals, particularly in African countries. However, where post-colonial governments tried to buck the trend and pursue independent, substantively democratic development paths, they were often subverted by external actors, in particular the US government and its

- agencies (see Klein, 2007, Perkins, 2004 and Hiatt, 2007).
7. Or what Patrick Bond (2001) prefers to call ‘sub-imperialist’ roles in relation to poorer and weaker states within their respective regions.
  8. These categories, of course, are not static, and operate in terms of a continuum (from an inner core at one extreme to an outer periphery at the other). A few newly industrialized countries, such as Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea, could be said to have become fully developed and thus part of the core group of economies, while others, like Argentina or Zimbabwe, have deindustrialized and moved further away from the core.
  9. It should be noted, however, that this is a *general* phenomenon, and some countries have bucked this trend.
  10. Organization of Economic Coordination and Development, a club of 30 countries formed in 1961, dominated by the core industrialized countries.
  11. See Von Holdt and Webster (2005) for an application of the core-periphery model to the segmented working class in South Africa (where the core consists of permanent employees in formal jobs, and the non-core (or semi-periphery) being informalized workers within the formal sector, while the periphery consists of the informal sector and the unemployed (see also Bieler, Lindberg and Pillay, 2008).
  12. South Korean TNCs have also become prominent over the last two decades, and new global players are emerging from India, China, Brazil and Russia, amongst others. However, the overwhelming number of TNCs come from the USA. Indeed, US companies bought up major companies like Daewoo during the 1997 Asia crisis (Chang, 2007).
  13. See DeLong (2004) for a neoliberal economists increased doubts about the benefits of unleashed financial globalization.
  14. See Heller (1999) and Williams (2008).
  15. See Hobson (1997) for a Weberian attempt to grapple with this issue, taking the state serious as an autonomous yet embedded actor at national and inter-state levels.

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