

Labour in the Global South: Challenges and Alternatives for Workers, 2012. Sarah Mosoetsa & Michelle Williams, Geneva: International Labour Office. 213pp.

Labour in the Global South is an exciting contribution to global labour studies. It identifies in ten clearly written chapters the innovative and creative responses to the challenges facing labour worldwide. What is especially gratifying is that the global South is beginning to produce its own understanding of the role of labour and this is clearly reflected in this volume in the excellent Introduction by Sarah Mosoetsa and Michelle Williams.

But its publication – and the rapid growth of global labour studies – presents us with a puzzle: in a context where the traditional labour movement in advanced industrialised countries is in decline, labour studies is thriving (Chun, 2012). For example, in the United States union membership rates declined from 30.9% in 1960 to 11.4% in 2010. Similar declines can be seen in Japan, the UK, Canada and, most dramatically, Australia. Here in South Africa, Margaret Thatcher’s death was greeted with pleas from journalists for a Thatcher-like crackdown on unions. John Kane-Berman wrote in South Africa’s leading financial daily, *Business Day* “We need our own Thatcher to handle toxic unions” (*Business Day*, 17.04. 2013: 9) and Justice Malala wrote in *The Times* “We could use an iron Zulu.” (*The Times*, 15.04.2013: 8).

How do we explain this paradox; the decline of traditional unions alongside the rise of global labour studies? The answer lies in the shifting dynamics of labour. We are, I suggest, in a situation not unlike 1932 in the United States when multiple and solemn pronouncements were made by august labour experts heralding the certain death of the labour movement. These dire predictions were, of course, issued literally on the eve of the dramatic and widespread upsurge of labour organising into industrial unions that began in 1934 (Cobble, 2002). The rise of fordism had led to a shift from craft unionism – where the power of workers lay in their skills – to industrial unionism, where their power lay in a new political subject, the semi-skilled worker, and their new source of power at workplace level.

In other words, global labour studies is identifying new initiatives, organisational forms and sources of power emerging at the periphery of traditional labour. There is, as Jennifer Chun argues,

a “growing interest in a new political subject of labour women, immigrants, people of colour, low-paid service workers, precarious workers ... Groups that have been historically excluded from the moral and material boundaries of union membership (Chun, 2012:40).

What is exciting about the Mosoetsa and Williams volume is that it demonstrates through research based studies this broadening of solidarity. Beginning with the chapter on women, who everywhere the authors argue, dominate in the 5 Cs: caring, cashiering, catering, clerical and cleaning. Yet men still dominate leadership positions in these unions in spite of woman’s growing dominance as union members. This leads to what the authors describe as a “gender democracy deficit”. It is also demonstrated in the volume’s focus on low-paid service workers; call centre workers in South Africa and Brazil, garment workers in Bangladesh, and self-employed informal sector workers in India.

These studies show how these precarious workers are finding new ways of organising and articulating new demands that expand the organisational terrain of worker struggles. The Self-employed Workers Association (SEWA) in India is not an NGO but a membership-based organisation. It performs a range of functions that go well beyond a traditional collective bargaining union. In its response to climate change, it organises waste pickers and builds green livelihoods including the creation of smokeless cooking stoves, solar lanterns and eco-tourism.

SEWA has played a pioneering role in recognizing that informal workers are different and require a different form of representation and mobilization. This has led to a broadening of the role of the union to include a range of new functions such as access to micro-credit and entrepreneurship training. Established trade unions remain sceptical of this attempt to reconfigure trade unionism and see it as “depoliticizing”. In particular some are critical of this approach as they feel it is compatible with “the neo-liberal prescription that the State should hand over many (welfare) functions to NGOs and civil society” (Gillan, 2010).

In the case of the chapter on telemarketing workers in Sao Paulo, workers in the industry are young, predominantly women, and black. Telemarketing is, in some ways Braga argues, a ‘refuge’ for vulnerable workers who are discriminated against. Yet, he argues, in spite of the difficulties of collective action, these workers are in

a permanent state of unrest. They mobilize around race, gender and sexuality and connect with the broader lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement (LGBT) in Sao Paulo. In their annual Gay Pride Parade through the city over three million people participate.

And then we have the well written and intriguing chapter on the relationship of the union movement to factory occupations (“recovered factories”) that began to emerge in the late nineties in Argentina and reached a peak of 170 in 2003. The authors locate this radical workers control movement in the history of Peronism arguing that the two main federations, CTA and CGT, represent different strands of Peronism. The one strand, the CTA, is related to the Resistance and figures from the Resistance, while the other, the CGT, chooses to negotiate rather than engage in confrontation.

Underlying these new forms of worker struggles is the ongoing hegemony of neoliberalism. This comes across clearly in the constraints on labour even in countries where historically labour-friendly governments are elected as demonstrated in the case studies included in the volume: Uruguay, Germany, South Africa and Brazil. But these chapters raise the intriguing question as to whether progressive political programmes are possible in what could be called social democratic versions of neo-liberalism. In the chapter on Uruguay, in the period from 2004, characterized by the authors as neo-corporatist, we see the introduction of widespread pro-labour legislation including the limitation of the work day for domestic and rural workers, the inclusion of domestic workers in the national social security system, the establishment of a new public institute for vocational training, and the prohibition of outsourcing labour in cases where this practice is principally used to reduce costs and disguise the *de facto* employer-employee relationship.

Similarly we see in Brazil under Lula, a reduction in inequality: “as the poor get richer, the rich get less so”; the vastly expanded conditional cash transfer programme, *Bolsa Familia*; the enforcement of basic labour laws; and raising the minimum wage while tying wages to pensions.

By way of a conclusion, I would like to point to two areas for further research: the first is historical. Precarious labour has deep historical roots and its re-emergence can be more accurately seen as a revival as labour markets have taken on features characteristic of an earlier period. Indeed precarious employment was a pervasive feature of labour markets in developed countries before World War

Two. Interestingly, the debates that took place in the thirties mirror contemporary debates on precarious employment. It was no accident that the disappearance of the term precarious employment in the North after World War Two coincided with the growth of organised labour and collective bargaining, as well as welfare states providing minimum standards, unemployment insurance, age pensions, state-funded education, and the like.

Secondly, if these new worker struggles on the margins identified in this volume are to be sustained, these new groups of workers will need to deepen alliances with civil society organisations. Trade unions have always had two faces, a sword of justice and a defender of vested interest. The balance between these two roles can change over time, however. The question I would put to the editors and authors of this book – indeed to labour scholars and labour activists everywhere – is this. Will this shift to a new kind of labour movement emerge from inside existing union structures – reform from within. Or will it, as happened with the CIO industrial unions in the United States some eighty years ago, lead to the formation of a new worker movement, with different strategies, different political values and different political subjects?

This is the question raised by this path-breaking volume: continuity or rupture, vested interest or social justice, or is there a possibility of a Historic Compromise, where traditional unions realise, as a matter of survival, that they need to broaden their membership and the nature of their demands?

Labour in the Global South provides a key point of departure in deciding which way global labour is going.

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