

The Global Restructuring of Labor Movements

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The widespread view that labor movements are facing a general and terminal crisis and have become irrelevant actors in the contemporary world is based on analyses which are short-term and core-centric. From a world-systems perspective -- that is, if we lengthen the temporal and geographical boundaries of analysis -- patterns can be identified that raise doubts concerning the wisdom of either generalizing from the recent experience of core countries to the entire world or projecting the current crisis of labor movements in the core into the indefinite future.

The sharp decline in overt expressions of labor unrest over the past two decades has been a strictly core phenomenon. Outside the core labor unrest has been rising during the same period (see the World Labor Group's special issue of *Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1995). This labor unrest has taken two main forms. First, as Fordist-type mass production has expanded in the semiperiphery, dynamic union movements emerged in countries as diverse as Brazil and Poland, South Africa and South Korea. These labor movements have not only been effective in demanding "more and better" for their members; they have also played a key role in pushing the democratization processes in these countries beyond the limits intended by business and political elite. Second, a wave of labor and mass popular protests has swept the Third World in response to IMF-type structural adjustment policies and austerity politics. Seen from this point of view, the 1995 general strike in France is not "the first revolt against globalization" - as *Le Monde* would have it - but the tail end of a major world-wide wave of resistance.

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These two types of labor unrest are rooted in two different (largely sequential) responses to heightened world-economic competition by corporate decision-makers in the post-1968 period. First, a handful of semiperipheral and peripheral sites with cheap labor and authoritarian governments were chosen as "safe bets" for industrial investment by U.S. and West-European mass production multinationals. However, as productive capital flowed into these countries, it also brought into being powerful new working classes and labor movements. Corporate decision-makers have responded to these new labor movements with a further round of "deindustrialization." For example, industrial employment in the ABC region outside Sao Paulo (and membership in Brazil's metalworkers union - the core of "new trade unionism") has been cut in half since the height of the mass strike movement in the mid-1980s. The new favored sites of investment are largely in East Asia (especially China); and if past experience is a guide to future dynamics, we should expect powerful new working classes and labor movements to emerge in those regions which are now industrializing rapidly.

By the 1980s it had become clear to corporate decision-makers that there is no such thing as an inherently docile working class. It was as if they had been chasing the mirage of cheap and disciplined labor around the world, only to find themselves continuously recreating militant labor movements in the new locations. As the limits of the industrial relocation "solution" became clear, a second response to heightened world-economic competition gathered force in the 1980s and 1990s: disinvestment from production, investment in finance and speculative activities, and pressuring states to redistribute resources from labor to capital. The growing financialization of capital, thus, has gone hand-in-hand with a rapid and unseemly polarization of wealth, both intra-nationally and internationally.

The limits of this "solution" are also beginning to dawn on the world's business and intellectual elite. Fear of a major popular backlash against "globalization" is growing. They draw their lessons from the protests against structural adjustment in much of the Third World, the growing social disorder in countries subjected to the "cure" (Yugoslavia being an extreme exemplar), and perhaps, from a reading of *The Great Transformation* (in which Polanyi links the "utopian" attempt to fully commodify labor and create a self-regulating world market economy to the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century).

Workers and workers' movements thus have been key actors shaping the historical development of the modern world-system. Moreover, there is every reason to think that this will continue to be the case. However, reliance on a simple repeat of past patterns would also be misguided. Most importantly, the responses of capitalists and states to worker resistance have continuously undermined old working classes and created new working classes. In core countries, the predominant transformations brought about during the past several decades have been (1) the feminization and internationalization (through immigration) of the labor force; and (2) the decreasing size and growing "flexibility" of workplaces. Just as the rise of a semiskilled immigrant factory proletariat and the shift from craft to mass production debilitated old forms of working-class organization and mobilization and required a major new rethinking of working class strategies, so recent transformations provide an analogous challenge for contemporary labor movements. There are embryonic signs that core labor movements have taken up this challenge after a long-period of denial (and hence, decline).

Finally, the promise of mass consumption - the extension of the "American Dream" to the workers of the world - had been a central prop legitimizing U.S. hegemony, as well as defining what is an acceptable goal for labor movements world-wide. (Even in communist states "catching-up" with the consumption standards of the West was a clearly stated goal.) However, it is clear that the world-scale generalization of mass consumption standards is limited, not just by the recent U.S. abandonment of its own hegemonic promise in favor of regressive redistribution, but also by increasingly tight ecological constraints. Given these constraints, and the enormous inequalities in world-income distribution now existing, a major reorientation away from consumerist dispositions is required. In sum, serious strategic rethinking on multiple fronts is crucial if labor (and

other social) movements are to contribute effectively to the construction of a more egalitarian and sustainable world.

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