Globalisation, Trade Unions and Labour Migration: Old Dilemmas, New Opportunities

Ronaldo Munck

ABSTRACT

As we enter uncharted waters in terms of the outcome of the global crisis of capitalism that began in 2007, we might well ask if it represents a new global opportunity for labour and the subaltern classes more generally. In particular, I seek to address the complex and, sometimes conflictual, relations between trade unions and migrant workers. In the first instance, I pose the Challenges which migration represents for trade unions in the context of globalisation. More broadly, I examine the challenges for progressive social theory posed by the current global crisis. I then move on to the Mutations of the global system since the 1990s on the basis of Gramsci's dictum that "the old has died but the new has not yet been born". This is the necessary framework for the subsequent analysis of Workers in the context of the processes of globalisation and precarisation. My hypothesis is that we are now moving beyond the categories of North and South in terms of the mutations of capitalism and their impact on the workers of the world. Finally, I turn to the sometimes under-rated Complexity of the way workers are responding to the mutations of capitalism and thus posing a very real challenge to the stable reproduction of capitalist rule. I outline the limitations of a rights-based labour response to exploitation and the opportunities arising for a new multi-scalar global social unionism.

KEYWORDS

Globalisation, Trade unions, Labour migration, precarisation

Preface

As we enter uncharted waters in terms of the outcome of the global crisis of capitalism that began in 2007, we might well ask if it represents a new global opportunity for labour and the subaltern classes more generally. In particular, I seek to address the complex and, sometimes conflictual, relations between trade unions and migrant workers. In the first instance, I pose the **Challenges** which migration represents for trade unions in the context of globalisation. More broadly, I examine the challenges for progressive social theory posed by the current global crisis. I then move on to the **Mutations** of the global system since the 1990s on the basis of Gramsci's dictum that "the old has died but the new has not yet been born". This is the necessary framework for the subsequent analysis of **Workers** in the context of the processes of globalisation and precarisation. My hypothesis is that we are now moving beyond the categories of North and South in terms of the mutations of capitalism and their impact on the workers of the world.[1] Finally, I turn to the sometimes under-rated **Complexity** of the way workers are responding to the mutations of capitalism and thus posing a very real challenge to the stable reproduction of capitalist rule. I outline the limitations of a rights-based labour response to exploitation and the opportunities arising for a new multi-scalar global social unionism.

Challenges

---

[1] MUNCK, Ronaldo. **"**Beyond North and South: Migration, Informalization and Trade Union Revitalization". *Working USA, The Journal of Labour and Society.* vol. 14, n.1, 2011, pp 5-18.

In the emerging field of "global labour history"[2] the question of labour migration within and between countries must surely be central. We now understand better the dual social and spatial dimensions of labour's expansion as labour force and labour movement. The global is now understood as a more complex domain than the one portrayed by the dominant Eurocentric perspective of a dynamic centre and a passive periphery. We are also much more attuned to the dialectic between class divisions and others, primarily those based on gender and ethnicity. We also now grasp the complexity of the subsumption of labour to capital and the very diverse forms the social relations of production may take.[3] However, we still struggle to bring migration studies and labour studies within the same global paradigm as most migration studies still maintain a complete divide between national and transnational migration processes, in a strange reflection of methodological nationalism perhaps.

In terms of the broad sweep of global history, the main difference between the mid-19th century and the current period is the shift from social class to social place as determinant of life chances. In very rough terms, in 1850 around half of the inequality between individuals globally could be accounted for by uneven development between countries and half by income differences between social classes. Today, according to Branko Milanović's calculations the split between location and class looks very different: some 85 percent is due to differences between mean country incomes and only 15 percent due to social class differences.[4] We do not have to accept as he seems to that "a new spectre haunts the world" not communism this time round, but mass migration from the poor countries, but clearly it

---

[2] DE VITO, Christian. "New perspectives on global history. Introduction". *Workers of the World: International Journal of Strikes and Social Conflicts*. n.3, May 2013.

[3] BANAJI, J. *Theory as History. Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011.

[4] MILANOVIĆ, Branko. *The Haves and the Have Nots: A Brief and Idiosyncratic History of Global Inequality*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. p.7.

means imperialism or neo-colonialism impacts on labour as much (or not more) than social class and that labour migration has a clear socio-economic logic.

Trade unions today face many challenges as a result of a quarter century of neoliberal globalisation and its resultant decomposition of labour. Migration – the free mobility of labour- has traditionally been seen as a problem for trade unions. Migrant workers have been seen as undermining well-established labour norms and, for that matter, are also viewed as a "difficult to organize" sector. Much as workers are divided by gender, age and ethnicity they are also divided according to national origin and citizen status. What I am proposing here, in terms of turning capital's global crisis into labour's global opportunity, is a decisive shift towards migration as a hinge in terms of the future of globalisation and as an opportunity for a trade union revitalization in pursuit of social transformation. At a historical conjuncture when national protectionism, xenophobia and racism are bound to come to the fore, this approach may, at the very least, play a positive role in terms of defending democracy and, perhaps, forwarding social transformation.

Trade unions – as organisers of the "factor of production" called labour – have throughout history, often in practice if not programmatically, displayed a protectionist attitude towards the free mobility of workers.[5] There are many historical examples of trade unions opposing the entry of foreign workers into the national labour market or seeking social

---

[5] Trade unions have a long tradition of opposing migration that is seen to undermine local bargaining strengths. Indeed, employers have historically imported "scab" labour to undermine strikes. In migration receiving countries – be it Latin America in the early 20th Century or Europe today – trade unions (and socialist parties) have been suspicious of state initiatives to encourage inward migration. Migrant workers can then become an integral part of the national labour movement, becoming "nationalized" as it were, or they can maintain and be kept at a distance. In Europe, right up to quite recently, there have been salient examples of migrant workers being prevented from establishing a significant union role. See PENNINX, R. and RUSBLAD, J., eds. *Trade Unions and Immigration in Europe, 1960-1993*. New York: Bergham Books, 2001. Trade unions – given their role in national labour markets – will also seek to influence the state in terms of what categories of workers may or may not enter the country. They may also, of course, change positions as they did in the US recently and become more "pro-migrant".

exclusion of those already there.[6] More recently, there has been a recognition, from within the trade unions themselves, that "solidarity with migrant workers is helping trade unions to get back to the basic principles of the labour movement".[7] One argument is that to "democratize globalization" the same level of movement by workers that applies at the national level should prevail. Latin American trade unions have committed to "promoting increasing, strengthening and guaranteeing the freedom of movement for all workers… to stay in their own land, emigrate, immigrate and return".[8] A dynamic labour movement should recognise that migrant workers are an integral part of the working class and that they have often played a pivotal role in the making of labour movements.[9]

In recent years, trade unions in most parts of the world have begun to recover from the impact of neoliberalism and its unregulated market approach. This has occurred at peak level with the formation of a unified trade union confederation as a result of the end of the Cold War. The old International Trade Secretariats also became energised as the new World Councils that organise internationally across a given sector. At the national level, there has been a certain resurgence by trade unions in some regions such as in Latin America, while in the US there was a marked political radicalization at peak level. The growing academic

---

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] DAVID, N. "Migrants get trade unions back to basics". *Labour Education*. n. 129. Geneva: ILO, 2002. p.2.

[8] GODIO, J. (2005) *Sociedades de trabajo y sindicalismo socio-político en América Latina y el Caribe*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2005. p. 56.

[9] **Migrants** are not, of course, an uncomplicated part of the national working class. By definition, they have left the productive world and social relations of the national society they were part of. Academic analysis has developed interesting accounts of the complex "transnational" lives of migrants. However, they are not only harbingers of new sociological positionality. Guillermo Almeyra has written about the way emigration has depopulated vast rural regions of Mexico, transformed its demography, left vast tracts of land uncultivated and, more controversially, created a massive "conservative" and "anti-national" social movement. Acting as a safety valve for rural discontent, emigration has arguably prevented the explosion of more Chiapas's, with the Zapatistas revolt lingering in isolation. Against the cultural anthropologist's extolling of cultural syncretism, Almeyra decries the way in which emigration perpetuates the vision that the US model is the one to aspire to and that individual as against collective solutions are the answer. Almeyra is a revolutionary Marxist of long-standing, it should be mentioned, in evaluating this implicit critique of migration studies orthodoxy. ALMEYRA, G. "Los vaivenes de los movimientos sociales en México". *OSAL*, IX,4. pp 87-101.

literature on trade union revitalization[10] has found evidence transnationally of advances in key areas of activity such as the organising of new sectors of workers, greater political activity, the reform of trade union structures, building of coalitions and, not least, an increase in international solidarity activity.[11] We could argue that we are at the start of a phase when trade unionism will yet again be reconfigured and revitalized to meet the new conditions it faces.

Labour has always been slow to adapt to capital's mutations and crises. That there has been a time lag of 25 years between the neoliberal capitalist offensive and labour's re-composition is not surprising and fits the pattern of 19th and 20th century waves of labour disintegration and recomposition.[12] This cyclical nature of labour-capital relations seems to have been ignored by analysts circa 2000 who perhaps reflected the mood at the time that U.S capitalism had really broken the cyclical nature of capitalism. Thus Castells argued that "The labour movement seems to be historically superseded"[13] because while capital is global, labour is local: "labour is disaggregated in its performance, fragmented in its organization, diversified in its existence, divided in its collective action".[14] While some of these points were conjuncturally correct, its overall analysis ignored that labour is a social movement. A

---

[10] The trade union **"revitalization"** debates have taken off in recent years in response to the different ways in which the union movement has begun to restructure itself after neoliberalism. Frege and Kelly summarise the main findings in relation to the industrialized countries around five main arenas: organizational restructuring (through mergers and internal reorganization), coalition building (with other social movements), partnerships with employers (new bargaining frameworks), political action (in relation to the state) and, lastly, international links (for example at the European level). See FREGE, C. and KELLY, J. "Union Revitalization in Comparative Perspective". *European Journal of Industrial Relations*. vol 9, n.1. pp 7-24. Of course, the results are uneven across countries and across the issues where new engagements have accrued. We can perhaps assume that many of these issues also apply in the semi-industrialized countries such as Brazil, South Africa and the Philippines. We may also wonder whether some elements lead backwards to more traditional collective bargaining or corporatist models while others with a social movement or international orientation point more towards a progressive role for labour.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] ARRIGHI, Giovanni. *The Long Twentieth Century: money, power and the origins of our times*. London: Verso, 1996. p.348.

[13] CASTELLS, M. *The Power of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997. p.360.

[14] CASTELLS, M. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. p.475.

more long-term view of the last century would show that trade unions have not only endured, but that they have also been "making society more democratic, more respectful of the poor, moving human rights above the claims of capitalist property".[15] That is no mean achievement given the brutality of the neoliberal counter-revolution.

If the current crisis poses a challenge to the organised labour movement, it also requires a more robust response from critical social thinking than we have seen until now. At one level, the current crisis of capitalism vindicates the traditional Marxist reading of capitalism and its contradictions. This has been recognised across the political spectrum – albeit grudgingly – since the outbreak of the crisis in 2007. Since the last major crisis of capitalism in the 1930s, the world system has embarked on two major policy regimes. Keynesianism led to the "embedded liberalism" of the Bretton Woods[16] regime that lasted until approximately 1975. It was characterised by market allocation of resources, but constrained by a political process that allowed for social need to a certain extent. This was followed by the neo-liberal "efficient market hypothesis"[17] which provided the rational for globalization and the extension of a new economic order across the globe. Today we are faced with the conundrum of 'financial regime change"[18] which the powers that be will find no easier to achieve than the "regime change" in Iraq carried out at the peak of U.S arrogance across the globe.

Classical Marxism allows us to understand the re-making of the working class on a global scale over the last 30 years or so. The dynamic (yet destructive) nature of this system

---

[15] FRIEDMAN, G. (2008) *Reigniting the Labour Movement. Restoring means to ends in democratic labour movement.* London: Routledge, 2008. p.10.

[16] RUGGIE, J. "International regimes, transitions and change: embedded liberalism in the postwar economic order". *International Organization*. vol. 36, n.2, 1984, pp. 397-415.

[17] FARMER, D and LO, A.W. "Frontiers of finance: evolution and efficient markets". *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. vol. 96, n.10, 1999, pp. 9991-9992.

[18] WADE, R. "Financial Regime Change?" *New Left Review*, n. 53, Sept-Oct. 2008, pp.5-21.

is evident not least in the rise of the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China) as vibrant centres of capital expansion and accumulation in a "classical" mode. New working classes are being forged in these regimes and the future of class struggle will depend largely on their outcome. As Mike Davis puts it laconically "Two hundred million Chinese factory workers, miners and construction labourers are the most dangerous class on the planet. (Just ask the State Council in Beijing.) Their full awakening from the bubble may yet determine whether or not a socialist Earth is possible".[19] What we need to add, however, to this Marxist perspective is an understanding of how "primitive accumulation" continues to operate through "accumulation through dispossession"[20], a "Third-worldist" perspective articulated before its time by Rosa Luxemburg against Lenin and the other orthodox Marxists of her day.

Karl Polanyi – coming out of the European socialist tradition, but also influenced by Christian thinking – developed a bold new paradigm of capitalist development following the Second World War. While much of his analysis of capitalist development is recognisably Marxist he departs from this analytical tradition in several key ways. His broad sweeping "double movement" thesis – market deregulation followed by society protecting itself – captured the mood that neo-liberal globalization had its limits. Protests against environmental degradation, movements against "free trade" agreements or struggles against factory closures

---

[19] DAVIS, M. "Spring Confronts Winter", *New Left Review*, 72, Nov-Dec 2011. p. 15.

[20] **"Accumulation through dispossession"** is a term coined by David Harvey to describe the current operation of "primitive accumulation" in the era of globalisation. This appropriation, of separation of production, cannot be restricted to the period of capitalism's emergence. Rather Harvey maintains that "accumulation by dispossession" is a continuing process within capital accumulation on a global scale. It achieves access to cheaper inputs as well as access to widening markets and this helps keep up profits and keep capitalism's tendency towards "over-accumulation" at bay. Harvey also updates Marx's original conception by showing how it might apply to intellectual property rights, privatization and environmental predation. The first is evident in the way pharmaceuticals appropriate traditional medical knowledge for example, and also the privatization of mineral exploitation, which constitutes the means whereby the "global commons" is passing into private hands for profit. See HARVEY, D. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003.

could find a unifying thread here. Polanyi argued explicitly against Marx that labour was not a commodity: "Labour is only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself, it cannot be shoved about, used indiscriminately, or even left unused without affecting also the human individual who happens to be the bearer of this peculiar commodity".[21]

It is in relation to "decommodification" that Polanyi probably provides his most powerful strategic insight into current movements beyond neoliberalism. The socially disembedded self-regulating market will inevitable be challenged by the self-protective tendencies in society. Thus, for example, according to Polanyi, the function of trade unions was not to get a higher price for the commodity of labour but, rather, "that of interfering with the laws of supply and demand in respect of human labor, and removing it from the orbit of the market".[22] All moves from within the social realm aimed at constraining the unregulated operation of market decommodification thus challenged the market economy in its fundamentals. The strategy of decommodification and of re-embedding the economy within society can serve as a "logic of equivalence"[23] acting to articulate a range of very diverse protective or defensive struggles by subaltern nations, classes and ethnic groups. This is, in my view, a necessary supplement to the classic Marxist analysis of capitalism and its contradictions.

Mutations

---

[21] POLANYI, K. *The Great Transformation: The Economic and Political Origins of our Time*. Boston: Beacon, 2001. pp.75-76.

[22] *Ibid*., p.186.

[23] The "**logic of equivalence**" forms part of the anti-essentialist critique of traditional Marxism by Ernesto Laclau seeking to reinscribe politics in the struggle for emancipation. It refuses class essentialism and a pre-given privileged role for the proletariat. Rather it builds on Gramsci's notion of hegemony and the need to build a radical democracy through a "war of position". In the discursive construction of antagonism, the logic of equivalence is one of condensation that divides the symbolic field into an "us and them". There are a plurality of relations of subordination that need to find a logic of equivalence if they are to be brought to bear for emancipation. We can find this process at work must clearly in the creation of broad popular (**pueblo**) identities through populist, anti-colonial and actually existing socialist revolutions. It remains to be seen whether the alter-globalisation might generate an alternative hegemony through a logic of equivalence, but at present that seems unlikely. See LACLAU, E. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso, 2005.

It seems clear we are now living a historical period similar to that which Antonio Gramsci characterised as one in which "the old has dying and the new cannot be born".[24] While neoliberal globalisation continues to dominate, it no longer has hegemony. Dominant class strategies are in disarray across the world, and in some regions this has reached crisis point. Are we at one of those conjunctures when major mutations of the system are about to occur? What are the prospects for the elaboration of an alternative hegemony emerging from the subaltern nations, classes and ethnic-religious groups? Whatever our answers to these difficult questions, I think we can agree on the need to pose them in an affirmative way. Too many interventions around workers and migrants (not to mention the "precariat") are posed defensively as a reaction to the violation of assumed human rights. Now is the time to forge alternative hegemonic thinking and put some shape on the hitherto rather vacuous formulation that "another world is possible".[25]

The dominant economic model generated massive social transformation via globalization, financial deregulation, privatization and commodification of the life course. The deregulation of financial markets – as the Eurozone now acknowledges – created a series of asset bubbles which came to a head in the United States in 2007. A shadow banking system had outstripped the regulated banking sector. So then, as Robin Blackburn puts it, "The banks' heedless pursuit of short-term advantage led to the largest destruction of value in world history during the great Crash of 2008. Government rescue measures were to offer unlimited liquidity to the financial sector, while leaving the system largely intact".[26] That is to say, neoliberal ideologies and their supporters have lost hegemony, but they remain

---

[24] GRAMSCI, A. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970. p.276.
[25] See, for example, SANTOS, B.S., ed. *Another Production is Possible, Beyond the Capitalist Canon.* London: Verso, 2006.

[26] BLACKBURN, R. "Crisis 2.0". *New Left Review*. n.72, Nov-Dec. 2011. p.35.

dominant. While Keynesianism is the intellectual inspiration for all types of critics of the crisis, a coherent alternative path has not yet been forged and, in fact, most counter-measures will simply accentuate the crisis through so-called austerity measures against working people.

In the early days of the crisis, mainstream commentators pinned their hopes on the BRICS that were seen as somehow detached from the financial crisis. China and India might slow their pace of growth, but they would act as engines of global recovery. There were hopes pinned on the informal sector, which would act as a safety net for those thrown out of work. The former Chief Economist of the IMF told us that "The situation in desperately poor countries isn't as bad as you'd think".[27] In reality, the crisis was very soon seen to be world-wide – an inevitable consequence of globalization – and thus it was clearly systemic. The much-vaunted technological New Age had not materialized. The flotation of Facebook and renewable energy would hardly generate a new model of accelerated growth. As to the BRICs, export led growth slowed down in the midst of a global recession and a "hard landing" for China is now forecast. "A thoroughly triangulated global recession"[28] now loomed with the US, Europe and the BRICs all involved in a "perfect storm" scenario that even Karl Marx could not have imagined.

The impact of the crisis on workers and migrant workers in particular was massive and unfolded very rapidly. Globalisation had created an economically, socially and spatially much more integrated world. Labour diasporas have formed dense social networks intimately integrated into the spatial expansion of capitalism. It is through these networks, as David Harvey puts it, that "we now see the effects of the financial crash spreading into almost every

---

[27] Cited in BREMEN, J. "Myth of the Global Safety Net". *New Left Review*. n.59, Sep-Oct. 2009. p.30.
[28] DAVIS, M. *Op.Cit.*, p.14.

nook and cranny of rural Africa and peasant India".[29] In the OECD countries, the role of

unemployment is climbing rapidly with systemic failures bound to multiply. When the young

indignados gather in the plazas of Spain, their life chances are not so qualitatively different

from that of their counterparts in North Africa. This was not the case in 1968: the social

distance between a Berkeley student and a Vietnamese peasant was unbridgeable. As to

global migration, the picture is quite unclear. We have certainly not seen the end of

migration. More likely, we will see a transformation of the migration regimes with new

countries emerging as sending and receiving units as well as a real "churning" of existing

flows.

While some analysts portray the subaltern masses as a "multitude"[30] they do not offer

an alternative hegemonic strategy. Towards the very end of *Empire*, Hardt and Negri gesture

towards the need for a political programme for the global multitude, but do not go beyond a

few platitudes. Indeed, they come up with little other than some issues – such as the right to

"global citizenship" – couched in the traditional language of rights and demands. How this

might be achieved, and via what political mechanisms, is not explained. Struggles are not

seen as connected horizontally; they all challenge Empire vertically and directly. This

thoroughly a-political vision might resonate with "autonomist" currents, but it is not capable

of articulating the various, very disparate struggles against the dominant order now under

---

[29] HARVEY, D. *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism*. London: Verso, 2010. p.147.

[30] The **"multitude"** is a term of Machiavelli's recently revived by Hardt and Negri as a new agent of resistance against global capitalism. The multitude is conceived as an unmediated, immanent revolutionary social subject contesting Empire. Universal nomadism has created new figures of struggle and new subjectivities which express and nourish a new constituent project. The deterritorializing power of the multitude is the productive force both sustaining Empire while at the same time expressing the force that makes necessary its destruction. Hardt and Negri do not offer a political programme or strategy: "only the multitude through the practical experimentation will offer the models and determine when and how the possible becomes real". HARDT, M. and NEGRI, A. *Empire*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000. p. 411. There is no logic of equivalence as all struggles are incommensurable. The revolutionary subject is immanent and thus we need not be concerned with political action or the construction of an alternative hegemony.

way. As Laclau puts it "any 'multitude' *is constructed through political action – which presupposes* antagonism and hegemony".[31] Spontaneous aggregation of disparate struggles cannot occur without the necessary political articulations and the establishment of a logic of equivalence between them.

Within the trade union movement – and even more within the international NGO's (incorrectly called "global civil society" by some) – there has been a tendency to answer the crisis from a rights-based perspective. A prime example is the Decent Work Campaign (DWC) promoted by the ILO, the international trade union movement and the European Commission. It is a concept and programme based on the understanding that work is a source of personal dignity, family stability, peace in the community, democracies that deliver for people and economic growth that expands opportunities for productive jobs and enterprise development. Its core objective is "to obtain recognition and respect for the rights of workers" (ILO). While I will return to its limitations as a contemporary labour strategy shortly, I here want to raise the limitations of a rights-based strategy more generally. This is not the place to assess the broader issue of whether the international human rights movement is more part of the problem than the solution. We must note though that the human rights regime reflects the ethics and politics of a particular period in Western Europe. It is also probably true that it promises more than it can possibly deliver. It has undoubtedly served at times to legitimate repression and bad governance. The only point I want to make here however, following Kennedy, is that: "human rights has so dominated the imaginative space of emancipation that alternatives can now only be thought …..as negations of what human

---

[31] LACLAU, E. *Debates y combates. Por un horizonte de la política*. México: FCE, 2011. p.133.

rights asserts – passion to its reason, local to its global, etc".[32] In brief, a human rights optic might hinder the development of a rounded politics of transformation for the current era. And we need to always bear in mind as Kennedy reminds us that "speaking rights to politics is not the same as speaking truth to power".[33]

Migrant workers are not only (or even primarily) organised through trade unions, but also by specifically migrant-oriented organisations, be they ethnic, faith-based or single issue campaigning organisations. There is a wide range of non-governmental or community-based organisations focused on the organisation of migrants *qua* migrants. Many of these are focused on migrants' human rights, in particular immigrants' citizenship rights. This is ironic because, as Piper notes, "migrants' rights are one of the, if not *the*, least clear and enforced group of human rights targeting marginalised groups".[34] Certainly, some migrant led organizations do focus on political organizing and are open to alliances with the organised labour movement, for example. Overall, however, most NGO activism on behalf of migrants has more often a crisis or relief orientation, and as Piper puts it "such crisis interventions or 'ambulance services' are generally not activist- oriented".[35]

There is a particularly noticeable rise of female migrant worker organising. The gendered dimension of these workers is now coming to the fore especially from the emerging regional and global campaigns such as those around migrant domestic workers.

---

[32] KENNEDY, S."The International Human Rights Movement: Part of the Problem?" *Human Rights Law Review*, 3, 2001, p.108.

[33] *Ibid*., p.121.

[34] PIPER, N. "Social Development, Transnational Migration and the Political Organising of Foreign Workers". UNRISD: Geneva, Paper No 39, 2009.

[35] PIPER, N. "Social Development, Transnational Migration and the Political Organising of Foreign Workers". Contribution to Committee on Migrant Workers, Day of General Discussion on the theme of *Protecting the rights of all migrant workers as a tool to enhance development*. <www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cmw/docs/piper.doc> Accessed on Dec.8, 2013.

Feminist oriented campaigns have taken up the gender rights of these workers albeit not always in alliance with those advocating for their labour rights. Until recently, much of the emphasis was on women migrants as victims, with the trafficking discourse and problematic to the fore. Increasingly, however, women migrants are developing autonomous agency in both the sending and receiving countries with some prospects that this might help overcome current fragmentation and mutual isolation. In the literature, there is a considerable gap between studies based on female migrants workers as migrants (migration studies) or as workers (labour studies) and, as Lyons puts it, it is rare to see a "focus on their complex identity as 'female migrant workers'".[36]

A general conclusion we might draw is around the need for more concerted alliances between trade unions, NGOs and community-based organisations around the claims and needs of migrant workers as gendered subjects. At present different organisational histories, lack of solidarity and no clear unifying perspective has hampered these efforts. A multi-level scholarly perspective is also needed to clearly articulate workers and women's rights at local, national and transnational levels. From these debates, there might emerge as Lyons puts it "the ability to find 'common ground' from which to address the needs of female migrant workers".[37] We can pursue this search in particular through the feminist lens of intersectionality[38] that focuses on the multiple – and often simultaneous – axis of identity that contributes to social inequality between women such as gender, race and class amongst

---

[36] LYONS, L. "The Limits of Transnational Activism: Organizing for Migrant Workers Rights in Malaysia and Singapore". University of Montreal, Transnationalization of Solidarities and Women Movements Workshop, 2006. p.3. <http://cccg.umontreal.ca/pdf/Lenore%20Lyons_en.pdf> Accessed on Dec.8, 2013.

[37] *Ibid*., p.15.
[38] LUTZ, H. et. al., eds., *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.

others. This multidimensional conceptualization is equally applicable to migrant workers and their intersectional positionality and identity.

Basically, the struggle of workers – through trade unions and other bodies – is not a separate sphere from the broader struggle for social transformation. Nor for that matter is labour migration a separate sphere as Stephen Castles[39] has recently argued but, rather, part of the overall process of social transformation. Thus, for example, the struggles for workers' rights in Egypt cannot be separated from the momentous social, political and cultural transformations currently underway in that country. A European "industrial relations" paradigm has very little purchase indeed in most parts of the world. A United Nations or NGO "human rights" perspective is also, arguably, quite limited beyond the rhetorical domain. The world of workers, which we now turn to, has always known the value of politics, of direct action, of mass struggles and an understanding that social transformation is based on struggle.

Workers

The working class – Marx's proletariat – came into being with the emergence of capitalism as a mode of production characterised by "free" wage labour. Extra- economic coercion gave way to the dull compulsion of market forces. The international dimension, and the role of migrant workers in particular, was crucial in this early making of the working class.[40] Free migration across national borders was considered natural and xenophobia was

---

[39] CASTLES, S. "Understanding global migration: A social transformation perspective". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. v.36, n.10, 2010, pp. 1565- 1586.

[40] See, for example, LINDEN, M.V. *Transnational Labour History*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003.

rare; internationalism in the economic sense was thus not forced. But this early internationalist phase was short-lived as state formation began to lead to the national integration of the European working classes in particular, culminating in the first inter-imperialist war of 1914-18. Trade unions were "nationalised" as it were, becoming an integral element of social and political cohesion within the boundaries of a given nation–state. The formation of trade unions in the so-called developing world, following the second inter-imperialist war of 1938-45, also took on a strongly national character with the workers and their organisations playing a key role in many national liberation struggles.

Both Karl Marx and Karl Polanyi understood that capitalism would not realize its full potential until it was globalised. For Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*: "The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self- sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations". Polanyi, for a different historical period was to write that "The true implications of economic liberalism can now be taken in at a glance. Nothing less than a self-regulating market on a world scale could ensure the functioning of this stupendous mechanism."[41] Globalisation – as it unfolded from the 1980's onwards – utterly transformed the world of work. There was, in first place, a massive increase in proletarianisation as millions more were brought under the sway of capital. National development regimes were soon to be superseded along with the state socialist system. This led to a shift from the formal to the real subsumption of labour. However, in the second place, we need to stress that this global proletarianisation took place under the aegis of imperialism and was thus marked by a racist template.

---

[41] POLANYI, K. *Op.Cit.*, p.145.

Labour in the global era is characterised, above all, by increased mobility, within and between nation-states. In 1970, there were 82 million people living outside their country of birth; by 2000 this figure had risen to 175 million. Yet it is good to remember that internal migrants in China and India are probably double that number and we should always take migration in the round from a development perspective. Migrant workers represent in some ways a return to colonial era forced labour patterns as the export of cheap labour (or its transfer within countries) becomes a viable and legitimate path to development. Hardt and Negri may sound apocalyptic, but there is a ring of truth to their proclamation that "A specter haunts the world and it is the specter of migration".[42] The problem is translating this complex new reality into a politics of transformation that goes beyond an extolling of flight as a response to oppression. The migrant is in a liminal position betwixt and between borders or the rural/urban divide, partly mobile, partly settled. They represent a challenge to the organised (settled) workers' movement as we have argued, but also for the managers of globalization and will be a test case in determining whether sustainable global development is achievable.

The other key feature of the labour condition in the era of globalisation is that of flexibility, the leitmotif of the neoliberal restructuring of labour. For globalizing capital, the flexibilisation of labour was a key imperative: this entailed functional flexibility, wage flexibility and numerical flexibility. This drive was global in nature even though it took different national forms according to the degree and type of labour market embeddedness and the strength of the labour movement. The latter responded with a call for a "social clause" to be included in multilateral trade agreements to prevent "social dumping" across borders. At the end of the day, there was little to show for this campaign beyond a few showcase

---

[42] HARDT, M. and NEGRI, A. *Op.Cit*., p.213.

agreements of European companies on paper. The old labour strategies were bound to fail

when the terrain set by capital had changed so dramatically. Flexibilisation was but a part of a

concerted strategy by capital to weaken labour through de-regulation across the board and a

so-called "informalization" of the relations of production.

Perhaps the most salient mutations of the global political economy of labour can be

encapsulated in the term "Brazilianization", first deployed by German sociologist Ulrich

Beck. For Beck "The unintended consequence of the neoliberal free-market utopia is a

Brazilianization of the West…the spread of temporary and insecure employment,

discontinuity and loose informality into Western societies that have hitherto been the bastions

of full employment". [43] Precarious, insecure or informal relations of production accounted for

maybe one tenth of employees in 1960s Germany, but that figure is now around 40% and

rising. There is a problem in the way Beck assumes the West is the norm and we may also

question whether the "golden era" of capitalism was really that secure for workers in the

West in the 1950s. Nevertheless, it is a useful way of bringing home the changes wrought by

globalisation and the impact of neoliberalism on the relations of production and the lives of

working people.

What Brazilianization might mean is a reversal of Marx's famous dictum that "The

country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its

own future". [44] Unregulated and informal relations of production and income generation are

not "marginal" to capitalist development or simply the dubious privilege of under-

development. The World Bank was simply wrong in theory and in practice when it stated that

---

[43] BECK, U. T*he Brave New World of Work*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000. p.1.

[44] MARX, K. *Capital Vol. 1.* London: Penguin, 1970. p.13.

"the informal sector shrinks with development".[45] Indeed, we can now posit the emergence of

a new global informal working class which, following Davis, "is about one billion strong,

making it the fastest-growing, and most unprecedented, social class on earth".[46] The great

expansion of the informal sector across the global South since the 1980s was accompanied by

its emergence in the North as "a stealth workforce for the formal economy"[47] with the likes

of Wal-Mart and other multinationals creating commodity chains reaching deep into the

informal sector across the South. What we see today is a pattern beyond the old formal-

informal (or North-South) divide, with a continuum of casualization as the global recession

continues to impact on the world of work.

Another major characteristic of contemporary labour migration is its so-called

feminisation. From the 1980s onwards, there was a marked increase worldwide in the number

of women entering paid formal employment in many regions. The new international division

of labour created an upsurge in female employment in the electronics industry of South Asia

and Mexico in particular. In the 1990s, these tendencies increased as export-led

industrialisation led to a more profound internationalisation of once peripheral economies.

That process – commonly known as globalisation – was based on "global feminisation

through flexible labour".[48] With the de-regulation of the economy, a retreat of the state from

economic offers and flexibility as the new watchword in labour relations, we also saw a

profound shift in gender patterns of employment. Inevitably, the gender composition of

migration within and between countries changed as well with women accounting for more

than half of transnational migration by 2000.

---

[45] World Bank. *World Development Report 1995: Workers in a Lean World*. New York: World Bank, 1995. p.35.
[46] DAVIS. Op.Cit., p.178.
[47] *Ibid.*
[48] STANDING, G. "Global Feminization through Flexible Labour". *World Development*. Vol. 17, n.7, 1989, pp 1077-1095.

Clearly, there were many variations behind this global trend and there have been counter-tendencies in the years since with men predominating in some migratory flows. In some countries, however, such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka women make up between 60 and 80 per cent of all migrants. As the International Organization for Migration (IOM) notes: "international labour contracts are highly gendered, with women workers being mainly recruited to work in the domestic sector".[49] Household structures are changing and "traditional" gender roles are being overturned, particularly in the sending countries. In the receiving countries, this phenomenon has given rise to a new wave of political self-organisation of female migrant domestic workers.[50] This domain, in particular, has proven fertile ground for new forms of alliances between trade unions, self-organised migrants and a range of support organisations, from which new models are emerging.

An emerging social paradigm we might finally consider is that of the "precariat", constructed as a hybrid term of a proletariat, subject to precarious working conditions. It is designed to capture the new norm of insecure work and fragile/fragmented life conditions.[51] Precariousness is now the norm in terms of tenure, working conditions, labour rights and, indeed, life itself, for increasing numbers of the world's workers. Temporary contract workers, undocumented migrant workers but also some of the new "teleworkers" (Information Technology-IT) form part of this new global precariat. Divisions between working people deepen as national, ethnic and gender differences are rearticulated. The feeling of precariousness extends to the once secure core of protected "standard"

---

[49] IOM. *World Migration. Costs and Benefits of International Migration*. Geneva: IOM, 2005. p.110.
[50] SCHWENKEN, H. "Respect for All: The Political Self Organization of Female Migrant Domestic Workers in the European Union". *Refuge*. vol. 20, n.3, 2003, p.45-52.

[51] HALL-JONES, Peter. "Precariat Meet'n'Greet". 2009.
http://newunionism.wordpress.com/2009/11/22/precariat/ Accessed on December 8, 2013.

employment. As Mario Candeais puts it "precarisation is a general process to dismantle and polarise the levels of social rights and standards of living"… which creates "a massive insecurity and weakening of individual agency and self-confidence".[52]

The term precariat undoubtedly has led to a flourishing of critical social thinking around the contemporary labour condition. It is drawing on existing paradigms of labour and development and has decisively broken with some Eurocentric conceits about its exceptionalism. However, there is still an overwhelming focus on the "new" precariat of the North on the fringes of the IT economy and less on the conditions of the workers in the majority of the world. I would also be wary of statements such as "The precariat is not part of the 'working class' or the 'proletariat'".[53] This seems to imply an essentialist understanding of the proletariat quite alien to the classical Marxist paradigm. It is the European image of the full time permanent male worker that seems to lurk behind this distancing operation. It is well to remember the theoretical and political problems associated with the ill-thought out Marxist category of *lumpen proletariat* [54] which served in another era to categorise difficult to place workers, but at the cost of theoretical incoherence in terms of workers and their role in the production process and within capitalist relations of production.

---

[52] CANDEIAS, F. "Double precariation of labour: perspectives of expanded (re) appropriation." 2010, p.4. <http://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/wgdw_uploads/Double_precarisation.pdf> Accessed on December 8, 2013.
[53] STANDING, G. *The Precariat. The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011. p.6.

[54] **Lumpenproletariat** is a term used by Marx to describe those who were on the margins of the working class and who were not productive. They included, for Marx, "swindlers, confidence tricksters, brothel-keepers, rag-and-bone merchants, beggars, and other flotsam of society". The category represents a theoretical problem for Marxism – much as the "non-historic nation" concept borrowed from Hegel did. The Marxist theory of history and its vision of the unfolding contradictions of capitalism are fatally undermined by both categories. More recently the term of lumpen-proletariat was appropriated by the likes of Frantz Fanon and some of the Black Panthers. As Huey Newton puts it "more and more of the proletariat will become unemployable, become lumpen, until they have become the popular class, the revolutionary". NEWTON, Huey P. "Speech at Boston College, 18 November 1970". In: HILLIARD, David and WEISE, Donald, eds. *The Huey P. Newton Reader*. Hilliard and Donald Weise. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002. pp.160-175. For Fanon, the lumpen proletariat was one of the "most spontaneous and the most radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people". FANON, Franz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1965. p.129. We could consider whether the "precariat" and talk of a new "classé dangereux" is following in the footsteps of this discourse and whether this is an adequate guide to transformation in the complex era of post-globalisation.

The long period of neoliberal globalisation, and its current unwinding under the weight of its own contradictions, has undoubtedly accentuated the insecurity associated with capitalist development. These fissiparous tendencies are now clearly present in the once secure capitalist heartlands of the West when once they were assumed to be an innate "Third World" condition where "marginality"[55] rather than incorporation prevailed. Yet there is something profoundly Eurocentric in a category which still sees the old proletariat as the norm and now seeks to equate the flexi-time European IT professional with the conditions of the "wretched of the earth" in the South's mega-cities. There is still a qualitative difference in terms of life chances between those living in the periphery and those in the core capitalist countries, albeit in crisis and with degraded welfare states. In brief, while tendencies towards "precarisation" are undoubtedly global we are a long way from the creation of a new global precariat.

Having examined the recent mutations of capitalism – as an eminently historical mode of production – and its impact on the world of work, the next section turns to the complexity

---

[55] **"Marginality"** theory developed out of modernization theory in the 1960s but with the early dependency theorists also contributing to the paradigm. While the first focused largely on the "culture of poverty" the latter emphasized the economic dimension. In particular Jose Nun argued that there was a growing separation between a labour elite and the growing marginal mass. The latter, attracted to the city by the prospect of goods, constituted an industrial reserve army of labour driving down wages and creating more poverty. NUN, J. "Superpoblación relativa, ejército industrial de reserva y masa marginal". *Revista. Latinoamericana de Sociología,* n.2, 1969. Empirical research in the 1970s soon disproved this thesis and showed that people were poor through a perverse and asymmetrical inclusion in the new order rather than exclusion. In theoretical terms it was also clear that there were many links between the formal and informal sectors with the latter playing a crucial, not marginal, role in capital accumulation. OLIVEIRA, F. "A Economia Brasileira: Crítica a Razão Dualista". *Estudos CEBRAP*. n.2, 1972. There were also Fanon-inspired analysis that the "marginal mass" or the shanty towns would act as a new revolutionary vanguard or, from above, the fear that they would be the new "classé dangereux". Current transformations under the aegis of neoliberalism have revived interest in the marginality problematic. See GONZÁLEZ, G. R. et. al. "From the Marginality of the 1960's to the 'New Poverty of today". *Latin American Research Review*. Vol. 39, n.1, 2004, pp. 183-187.

of labour's reaction. Capitalism does not unfold neatly and logically according to the schemas of the old Marxist-Leninist manuals. Workers, peasants and migrants – and hybrids of all three – have a degree of agency difficult to comprehend from a purely analytical perspective. International political economy – even in its radical versions – has tended to assume a workerless globe. Social movement theory – in the autonomist variant – sees amorphous multitudes, but writes off the organised workers' movement. Both currents seem oblivious to the political domain as though war, revolution, religion and geo-politics have little impact on society. In the next section, we will foreground politics in seeking to develop a complex political economy of labour for the transitional era we are living in.

Complexity

Globalization, if it did nothing else, brought to the fore complexity as a fundamental basis of critical social theory. For a while, the global was more or less taken for granted, as a nebula "out there" somehow impacting on what we did "down there". It was seen as a *deus-ex-machina*, something like the weather providing us with sunny skies (the sales pitch) or, more likely, the dark clouds of jobs migrating elsewhere. Rather than conceive of globalization as a unified, unambiguous entity, the complexity approach directs us towards the relationship between structure and process or between a system and its environment.[56] In relation to the fluid movement of people we call migration, the complexity approach conceives of it as "a series of turbulent waves, with a hierarchy of eddies and vortices, with globalism a virus that stimulates resistance, and the migration system a cascade moving away

---

[56] URRY, J. *Global Complexity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003.

from any state of equilibrium".[57] In terms of the workers movement, a complexity approach would direct us towards the uneven and combined nature of capitalist development and the need for a multi-scalar[58] labour strategy.

The main institutional response to the precarisation of work on a global sale has been the Decent Work Campaign of the ILO (International Labour Organisation) founded in 1919 to promote labour standards designed for varying national systems of production. These were designed to assist in regulating national labour markets and offer protection for employees assumed to be in stable full-time employment and comprised predominantly of male workers. There was also an assumption made that the Western European model of "social partnership" was universal. This was a labour policy for the Keynesian era based on built in full employment and the efficacy of macro-economic policy management. In the very different global order of the 1990s – after the collapse of Keynesianism, the death of full employment and the crisis of "competitiveness" – the ILO launched the Decent Work Campaign as a response to the global labour predicament. It was a step back from historic labour directives

---

[57] Papastergiadis cited by Urry. *Ibid*. p. 62.

[58] The **"multi-scalar approach"** to global labour studies emerged out of geography in the 1980s. Delaney and Leitner have defined scale as "the nested hierarchy of bounded spaces of differing size and as the local, national and global". DELANEY, D and LEITNER, F. (1997) "The social construction of scale". *Political Geography*. 16, 1997, pp.93-97. The social and political construction of spatiality is seen as a mayor contribution to an understanding of the complexity of globalisation. Scale categories should not however, be taken as ontological givens but as social constructions. In particular, one scale (for example the "local") should not be granted privilege or seen as more socially and environmentally "correct". Andy Herod's work on the scale politics of labour restructuring in the US shed light on how labour movements relate to the politics of scale. Technological change in the ports during the 1960s and inter-union rivalries led the longshoremen to shift from a regional to a national bargaining strategy. Since then a multi-disciplinary approach to the social-spatial dialectic of labour formation and resistance has produced the start of a new paradigm. See HEROD, A. *Labour Geographies. Workers and the landscapes of Capitalism.* Guildford: Guildford University Press, 2011 and MCGRATH-CHAMP, HEROD and RAINNIE, eds. *Handbook of Employment and Society: Working Space.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2010.

and posed a vague aspiration to "humanize" globalisation through a non-ideological set of aspirations.

However, the world today is not the world of 1919 or even that of 1969 when the ILO received the Nobel Peace Prize. As Guy Standing puts it, "the ILO was set up as a means of legitimizing labourism, a system of employer-employee relations based on the standard employment relationship, and a means of taking labour out of international trade".[59] Tripartite labour relations are hardly the dominant model today: the "standard" employment relationship survives only in small pockets, and labour is treated very clearly as a commodity on the global labour market. It seems utopian to posit a capital-state-labour tripartite alliance in today's crisis to create "decent work" for all. It would appear to be more part of the recent move by international financial institutions to create a so-called Post Washington Consensus designed to overcome the contradictions of the raw neoliberal model. For the international trade unions to invest energy in this campaign might seem futile from a worker perspective, although it may well form part of the system of political alliances that the union leaderships need to forge.

Critical social thinking – cognisant of complexity – might direct us elsewhere to develop a workers' strategy and revert the currently subaltern states of labour. A useful starting point might still be the so-called law of uneven and combined development[60] that

---

[59] STANDING, G. "The ILO: An Agency for Globalization?" *Development and Change.* vol. 39, n.3, 2008, pp 355-394.

[60] **"Uneven and combined development"** was a theoretical concept developed by Leon Trotsky to account for the particular development characteristics of pre-revolutionary Russia. Against the orthodox Marxists of the Second International, Trotsky was to show that revolution in a backward country was possible. Capitalism brought together under one system countries with very uneven levels of development. This not only speeded up the pace of development but also gave the backward country access to the highest levels of technology available worldwide. For Trotsky, the law of combined development means that "there is rapprochement of different stages of the journey, a combination of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with the most contemporary

was first developed by Trotsky in the context of the Russian Revolution. Following Lenin's understanding that capitalism always developed unevenly across space, he added the proviso that it was also "combined" in one world system. Imperialism, for Trotsky, "links up incomparably more rapidly and more deeply the individual national and continental units into a single entity".[61] Thus, a country like Russia at the start of the 20th century could present an amalgam of archaic production systems alongside the most contemporary forms. It also meant that the Russian proletariat could "skip stages" and begin the construction of socialism without having to go through the development of capitalism. In one stroke, Trotsky surpassed the dominant evolutionary perspective of both Second and Third International Marxism, which also of course underpinned mainstream modernization theory in the 1950s.

More recently, critical social theory has added a much needed spatial dimension to its analysis of the political economy of labour. The notion of "scales" emerged in the 1990s to challenge the traditional understandings of political and social processes. Globalisation had not produced a flat world and the local, national and regional scales of human activity were vital. The labour movement clearly operates at a local, national, sub-regional, regional, sub global and global levels through different organisational forms ranging from international trade union confederations to local union branches. These scales are not to be seen as a hierarchy and many false debates around "think global" or "act local" were now superseded.[62] What is clear is that workers organisations need to "make connections" across the scales. All trade unionists, for example, now agree that the global context is crucial whatever national or nationalist orientation they might have. Also, and vital for strategy, the

---

forms". TROTSKY, L. *The History of the Russian Revolution*. London: Pathfinder, 1970. In Russia, state and capital came into contact with the most advanced counterparts globally. The proletariat could also advance exponentially and be in a condition to lead a socialist revolution rather than wait for a democratic revolution and full industrialization to proceed. Currently this theory is showing a revival as part of the effort to create a Marxist theory of international relations.

[61] *Ibid.*, p.20.

[62] HEROD. *Op.Cit.*

same way countries can "skip stages", workers are now able to "skip scales", thus for

example moving from a local struggle straight to the global level.

In this complex capitalist world, not reducible to unilinear evolution, trade unions also

evolved through a variable geometr*y* taking different shapes across time and space. Trade

unions emerged as collective organisations representing the economic (or workplace)

interests of workers. Perry Anderson once wrote that "trade unions are essentially a *defacto*

representation of the working class at its workplace"[63] reflecting the capitalist division of

labour as a given. The development of political unionism reflected the rise of the socialist and

communist parties seeking to harness workers for their political projects. Later political

unionism reflected the nationalist politics of the anti-imperialist movements. Workers would

seek advancement through the benign influence of the state. More recently – in the context

of an industrializing periphery – we have seen the emergence of a social movement

unionism.[64] Trade unions, from that perspective, needed to engage with workers' lives

outside the workplace and in the context of a state that was not permeable. Thus, trade

unions might articulate wider community demands and forge close links with community

organisations of various types. The uneven and combined development of the working class

across time and space has brought economic, political and social unionism to the fore in

---

[63] ANDERSON, P. "The limits and possibilities of trade union action". In: CLARKE, T. and CLEMENTS, L. eds., *Trade Unions under Capitalism*. London: Fontana, 1977. p. 335.

[64] **"Social movement unionism"** was a term developed by the new international labour studies in the 1970s reflecting radical labour practices in Brazil, South Africa and, for some, the Philippines. See SEIDMAN, G. *Manufacturing Militancy: Workers' Movements in Brazil and South Africa.* Berkeley: California University Press, 1994. In the early manifestations, it reflected a critique of mainstream industrial relations theory influenced by English social history (E.P. Thompson). It also reflected a left critique of nationalist or state oriented unions, common then in both Africa and Latin America. It was only much later that it became codified as a strategy for the trade unions, notable by Kim Moody and his call for a "global social movement unionism". MOODY, K. *Workers in a lean World: Unions in the International Economy*. London: Verso, 1997. Today it is a term used quite widely by trade unions in the North and South to express a wish for a more "social movement" type of orientation. WATERMAN, P. "Social-Movement Unionism: A New Union Model for a New World Order'. *Review*. vol. 16, no. 3, 1993. In that sense, it reflects the influence of "new" alter-globalization and global justice movements on the organised labour movement in trade unions.

varying combinations. It is this variable geometry that needs to be examined concretely and not taken for granted.

South Africa provides a rich experience in terms of the repertoires of trade union activity. Both political and social unionisms were deployed in the development of independent black unions in the 1980s. Epithets flew back and forth about "economism" (the "workerist" tendency to emphasize the workplace issues), "populism" (against those who prioritised the wider anti-apartheid movement) and social unionism found its role through community boycotts of workplaces in struggles and through the so-called "stayaways".[65] In the post-apartheid period since 1994, the powerful Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) has found itself torn between its political role as a partner in the African National Congress government and its role representing its members' economic interests.[66] The divide between production politics and state politics at times seems acute. Another divide is that between the organised working class and the growing precarious migrant workforce. Here we have only seen the odd glimmer – or to be precise conference declarations – of the 1980s social unionism which played a vital role in forging a national-popular collective will against apartheid.

In Latin America – at a similar time and context – social unionism developed as a response to authoritarian military regimes and "savage capitalist" development. In Brazil this was most notable with the new unionism of the 1980s forging links with Church and community groups and then going to form the Workers' Party. Neoliberal restructuring weakened these and other labour formation in the 1990s. Since then, however, there has been

---

[65] WEBSTER, E and LAMBERT, R. "The Re-Emergence of Political Unionism in Contemporary South Africa". In: COBBETT, W. and COHEN, R., eds., *Popular Struggles in South Africa*. London: Currey, 1988.
[66] PILLAY, D. "Working class politics in South Africa: the return of social movement unionism*?" Labour, Capital and Society*. N.44, 2012.

a marked insurgence of labour with both vertical (from national to regional to city levels) and

horizontal (across sectors and wider social struggles) links becoming a feature at least in

Brazil and the Southern Cone Countries.[67] Another political current to emerge in this period

was that based on "autonomism"[68] represented most visibly by the Zapatistas in Mexico and

to a lesser extent, the *piqueteros* of Argentina. With its Nietzschean belief in a "multitude"

beyond politics this current has ultimately marginalised itself. Elsewhere in the Andean

countries (Bolivia and Ecuador), trade unions and indigenous movements have built political

articulations with a revitalized left to seize state power and begin a serious process of social

transformation.

Meanwhile, in the heartlands of advanced capitalism, the impact of neoliberalism –

with both the "export" of jobs and the "import" of foreign workers – led to the emergence of

a new or perhaps, re-invented "community unionism".[69] In the U.S., the mainstream AFL-

---

[67] FERNANDEZ, A. ed., *Estados y Sindicatos En Perspectiva Latinoamericana*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2007.

[68] **"Autonomism"** was a far-left political current organisation in Italy during the late 1960s from the workerist (**Operaismo**) wing of communism. Its main characteristic was a belief that the working class was, or could be, an autonomous agent of social transformation, independent of the state, trade unions and political parties. It also moved attention away form the rationalized labour movement repertoire of strikes and marches to emphasize more diffuse forms of working class resistance such as absenteeism and go-slow. Through the concept of "social labour" the Italian autonomists (Mario Tronti, Sergio Bologna, Antonio Negri et al) extended the traditional Marxist concept of the working class. Autonomist feminists (Mariarosa Dalla Costa) further extended the concept by incorporating unpaid female domestic labour into the category of work. Through Antonio Negri's current work and in a more general and diffuse manner the autonomist current influences current labour studies, not least in relation to emergence of a **precariat**.

[69] **"Community unionism"** is the term given in both the US and the UK to recent trade union practices of engaging with various community actors. While it has historical roots in labour movement practices, it is deemed particularly suitable for a period of labour market fragmentation and of polarisation within and between communities. Union-Community links can be short-term or longer term strategic alliances. One modality is represented by the Workers Rights Centres in the US often focused on the needs of migrant workers. These relationships can sometimes be fraught with community organisations (e.g. migrants) seeing the trade union movement as representative of a "labour aristocracy" while trade unions may view community organisations as unelected and unrepresentative and unaccountable. Nevertheless many long-term "community unionism" experiences have proven transformative for the trade unions who tend to acquire a more complex and broader notion of the world of work and the means to advance the workers' movement. See MCBRIDE, J and GREENWOOD, I. eds., *Community Unionism. A Comparative Analysis of Concepts and Contexts.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009 and MILKMAN, R. "Immigrant Workers, Precarious Work and the US".In:

CLO went through a leadership transformation which took it beyond the "business unionism" it was once characterised by and previously unthinkable alliances with Latin American workers ensued. Up and down the country local and national unions forged alliances with migrant workers' organisations giving rise to the workers' centres.[70] There was also an older U.S tradition of rank and file activity to call upon, such as the campaign for "union cities".[71] In the U.K., a strongly labourist trade union movement began to sporadically explore alliances with migrant worker's associations and the often faith based movements which supported these.[72] There also "community unionism" was the term which came to the fore to describe what was basically the social unionism we described above, building on (not necessarily superseding) the "bread and butter" economic unionism and the political unionism in support of the Labour Party.

This is not the place to draw facile conclusions: clearly the whole tenor of my argument is to present issues for debate. In many social and political arenas these and similar debates are being played out in practice. Their outcome is necessarily uncertain. In terms of the challenges posed at the start, I have sketched out a possible answer based on real social

---

MUNCK, R. SCIERUP, C and DELGADO WISE, R. eds., *Migration, Work and Citizenship in the New Global Order*. London: Routledge, 2011.

[70] See FINE, J. "Community Unions and the Revival of the American Labor Movement". *Politics and Society*. vol. 33, n.1, 2005, pp.153-199.

[71] **"Union cities"** are old/new forms of trade union operations at a city level, particularly common in the US and the UK. They are territorial (rather than workplace) expressions of trade union power and politics. In the US there are central labour Councils in most cities while in the UK they are called Trades Councils. They are the local expression of the national trade union bodies, the AFI-CLO and TUC respectively. Most often these bodies are weak and focus on routine local politics mainstreaming good links with local business leaders. However, they occasionally burst into action as the Milwaukee County Labour Council did in the 1990s through a leadership which was close to the civil rights movement and began to act as a serious counterweight to local business. With government powers now being devoted to local growth authorities, and city level urban growth coalitions forming the time is ripe for a revival of this territorial expression of the labour movement. They are now part of the broader movement creating "street heat" over the unfolding economic crisis.

[72] *Op.Cit.*

struggles and an open critical theory. Existing labour strategies, based on old models and a moribund Eurocentrism, will almost certainly fail to deliver in their objectives. The current global turmoil is throwing up an existential crisis for global capitalism as we know it and a serious challenge for the subaltern classes and nations. The precarisation of labour is but one strand of a complex mutation of capitalism now underway. Thus, trade unions will need to engage with the political economy of labour migration as we have argued, but also with a much wider range of dramatic events including war and revolution.