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Abstract

This special edition, which draws together studies of workers' struggles in Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Ecuador, India, Indonesia and South Africa, provides the basis for an assessment of the politics of organized labour at the start of the 21st century. The papers in this collection are drawn from a highly successful September 2011 Global Labour University conference on "The Politics of Labour and Development", held in Johannesburg, South Africa. On the basis of the studies, we argue for the importance of unions, despite their contradictions, as an irreplaceable force for progressive social change for the popular classes. Post-colonial ruling classes have been active authors of the neoliberal agenda, at the expense of the working class. The current context affirms the centrality of unions, and of organized workers more generally as it is union struggles – and alliances with other sectors of the popular classes – that make the Standard Employment Relationship possible. The more the fracturing of the popular classes is challenged by linking unions to other popular class forces, the more successful such struggles become.

Introduction

This special edition draws together studies of workers' struggles in Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Ecuador, India, Indonesia and South Africa, and provides the basis for an assessment of the politics of organized labour at the start of the 21st century. The papers in this collection are drawn from a highly successful September 2011 Global Labour University conference on "The Politics of Labour and Development", held in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Our introduction argues, on the basis of the studies, for the importance of unions, despite their contradictions, as an irre-

placeable force for progressive social change for the popular classes. It rejects notions that the world is in a "post-industrial", "information" phase, or in a post-neo-liberal era; it is instead essentially classic capitalism, with an ever-growing working class majority. The current context affirms the centrality of unions, and of organized workers more generally. It is, for instance, not the so-called Standard Employment Relationship that makes unions possible, but, on the contrary, union struggles – and alliances with other sectors of the popular classes – that make the Standard Employment Relationship possible. The more that the fracturing of the popular classes is challenged by linking unions to other popular class forces, such as community- and school-based movements, civil and political rights movements, the movements of the unemployed and marginal self-employed etc., the more successful such struggles become.

This raises the question of strategy: can unions form the basis for profound social transformation, or must they remain restricted to resistance and immediate defense? In our closing section we argue for the importance of a vision and a strategy to create a better world, because without a profound change in society, contemporary inequities and injustices will simply continue. Yet, many struggles today lack a vision of transformation and many of the visions on offer are disappointing. For instance, so-called "left" governments elected in recent years in Africa and Latin America with union support have, in general, an uninspiring record, despite some reforms. Postcolonial ruling classes have been active authors of the neo-liberal agenda, at the expense of the working class. Therefore, should unions *participate* in state forums and elections, in an orthodox labour and socialist mode, or build autonomous and *oppositional* bodies of counter-power that pressure the state for reforms from *outside*, but refuse to use the state, prefiguring a post-capitalist, self-managed future without a state, in an anarchist/syndicalist mode? Or are there other options?

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social democrats and anarchists/ syndicalists alike. However, should it do so through *participation* in state forums and elections, seeking to wield the state? Or through building autonomous and *oppositional* bodies of counter-power that pressure the state for reforms from *outside* (but that refuses to use the state), instead creating forms of struggle organization that prefigure a future *without* a state? Are there other options? Such questions need not, and should not, be answered abstractly, and the empirical data in the papers in this volume seems to be bear out the case against participation in the state.

Of course, such questions do not admit of simple answers, but since, as we have shown, the working class – and the unions – remains so central a force for change, answers are needed, and urgently. While individual, local and small spontaneous struggles are important, they are not a substitute for mass organizations, unified struggle to *transcend* the current order (*contra.* Hardt and Negri, 2000). These minor struggles lack the power to fundamentally change society because they are unable to defeat the wealthy, armed ruling classes whose very existence requires maintaining the status quo. Consequently, they are able to only limit – but not end – the very miseries against which they fight.

On this note, of opening new questions, we return to the papers in this collection, which provoked such questions, commending all contributors for their fine work, and inviting readers to share our excitement in engaging them.

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Given the large numbers of papers presented at the 2011 Global Labour University conference and their diverse topics, it was no easy matter to make a selection. Therefore, a number of other papers will appear in a forthcoming book edited by Sarah Moseotsa and Michelle Williams, to be published by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

For the purposes of this collection we chose papers that

- covered unions in Africa, Latin America and Asia;
- discussed contemporary union struggles against neoliberalism;
- examined how union struggles engaged with the power of the state; and
- considered how unions engaged in alliances with other popular constituencies.

Of particular interest in the papers chosen are the various arenas and ways in which organized labour acts as an organized force, and its various responses to local and national challenges. A major challenge facing organized labour is the question of so-called"informal" labour, a category that has traditionally been dealt with rather unevenly by unions. The papers also cover a range of labour-state scenarios, ranging from union links to ostensibly left-wing ruling parties (as in Brazil, Ecuador and South Africa), to situations of ongoing and outright repression (as in Bangladesh and China), and to situations where states effectively exclude large sectors of the labour force from nominally legalized union and worker rights (as in India and Indonesia).

Collectively, these papers question assumptions underpinning many recent discussions on labour. This introduction begins by reasserting the importance of unions, despite their contradictions, as a force for progressive social change in the interests of the popular classes. Strong claims have been made that

the world has entered a "post-industrial", "information" society or "new economy" that is profoundly different from the capitalism of the 19th century (e.g. Hardt and Negri, 2000: 285). However, we argue that contemporary capitalism retains essential features of the past, including authoritarian Fordist-style production, class conflict and crisis. Nor has the recent economic crisis brought down the curtain on neo-liberalism as neoliberal restructuring has persisted, if not accelerated.

The second section critically examines unions' experiences under the so-called "left" governments elected in recent years in Africa and Latin America. At times, these governments have instituted reforms – notably, expanded welfare – but have not marked a real break with neo-liberalism, nor signified a decisive shift in the balance of class forces and a break with the power of oligarchical ruling classes. On the contrary, these cases strengthen the argument that states have an elitist institutional and class logic that is difficult, if not impossible, to change through elections, or other forms of participation in the state machinery, like corporatism.

Union alliances with mainstream political parties are thus fraught with conflict, and then the question that must arise is what alternative strategies are possible or desirable? In spite of fierce popular contestation and the deepening economic crisis, governments, including "left" governments backed by unions, continue to cling to neo-liberal policies as a primary solution. Yet, unions often continue to cling to states and to political parties, despite the dismal record of "left" as well as right governments.

In the third instance the papers clearly show the complicity of postcolonial ruling classes in the neo-liberal agenda, at the expense of the working class. This stands in sharp contrast to the notion that neo-liberalism (or "globalization") is merely a code word for "imperialism" (e.g. Waller, 2010: 85) imposed upon unwilling postcolonial ruling classes (e.g. Brecher, Costello and Smith, 2000: 56, 71) – a logic that leads to the no-

SACP and COSATU strategy (like that, for instance, of CUT in Brazil) is participation in the electoral process, through backing a major party, in this case the ANC. Yet rather than change the system, the system has tended to change the unions to promote a top-down style of "political unionism" that makes it difficult to engage in a range of struggles, or articulate a range of political issues (as shown by Pillay).

As previously argued, there are strong reasons to believe that the state cannot simply be wielded from below. "Social movement unionism" – understood as a dynamic democratic union model – does not always adequately address this issue. A major advance on business unionism and superior to political unionism, "social movement unionism" can potentially manage to articulate a clear long-term alternative to political unionism. However, this has yet to be demonstrated judging by the COSATU and CUT experiences. It fights for rights, but is not necessarily anti-capitalist; it challenges oppressive governments, but in almost all cases, it has ended up in alliances with mainstream political parties that culminate in supporting neo-liberal governments; it has failed to undertake a radical social transformation anywhere, preventing the realization of the very rights to which it aspires. Is this sort of alliance politics adequate, indeed a solution to all ills, as some writers seem to think? In many ways, looking at the record, it seems the answer must be "no."

However, this begs the question of *what a left project today entails*: does it entail replacing an alliance with the ANC with an alliance with another left formation, which should contest elections? If the ANC (like the PT, *Alianza PAIS* and the CCP itself) started as a party with significant popular class support and a radical programme, quickly ended up as a party that reproduces the unjust social relations that the working class was rejecting, does it make sense to continue with statist politics?

In short, a trade union must inevitably confront the question of state power – appoint recognized by classical Marxists,

the causes of suffering, and a project to remove rather than just ameliorate these, such a politics is profoundly limited in its aims. In itself it cannot change the world. For instance in discussing China, Hui and Chan show that workers are increasingly confident, but they leave open the question of whether the workers will develop a "counter-hegemonic" consciousness that questions capitalism itself.

Part of the problem in developing such a consciousness in China is no doubt the identification of socialism with the "Marxist" claims of the CCP. The enormous weight of the Soviet model on the left has weakened the radical left project, by reducing "socialism" to statism and forced industrialization (e.g. Sherlock, 1996), by linking socialism to highly repressive states that have since either collapsed or moved to neo-liberalism (van der Walt and Schmidt, 2009: 9–13). Thus, in Bangladesh socialist ideas were weakened by loyalty to – and then by the collapse of – the Soviet Union, the pro-Moscow Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) being notably affected.

Therefore, there is a political vacuum in the heart of current struggles, which are often defensive and often lack a clear vision of transformation beyond some minor reforms. However, this same situation enables a profound renewal of the left project centred on participatory democracy.

But beyond this, there is much scope for debate. A vision of "socialism" continues to hold a substantial appeal in South Africa and parts of Latin America, often tied to a stress on democracy and self-management unseen for decades. Both the Brazilian PT government and Correa's *Alianza PAIS* movement draw at least some of their support from their one-time identification with a socialist project. In South Africa, the SACP has grown despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, and along with COSATU, is at least nominally committed to a radically democratic socialist vision (e.g. SACP/ COSATU, 1999).

However, strategy has enormous implications for the shape and indeed the feasibility of such aspirations. Central to the

tion that the popular classes would benefit from alliances with "national elites" in the "South" (e.g. Keet 2010). These ruling classes utilize cheap, repressed labour as their basic comparative advantage. Moreover, in doing so, they contribute to undermining the conditions of workers *everywhere*, including in the West itself.

Finally, a key demand of workers and independent unions in Africa and Asia is an end to flexible labour. It is not the so-called Standard Employment Relationship that makes unions possible, on the contrary it is union challenges to flexible labour that make the so-called Standard Employment Relationship possible. However, are mainstream unions adequate to this task? Informal labour in the grey or informal sector (as opposed to flexible and informalized labour in the formal sector) has responded to such unions' difficulties in addressing the needs of the unemployed and marginal self-employed by forming new forms of "unions" for these categories.

This indicates that in this neo-liberal period the relevance of unions has not diminished but increased. The ever-growing urban poor population may turn sometimes to crime, communalism, populism and religion, but just as it did a century ago, it also turns to stable mass class-based organizations – most importantly, unions (cf. Davis, 2005: 29–31). (Conversely, the working class of a century ago was hardly free of crime, communalism, populism and religion: see for example, Thompson 1968).

We argue that alliances between mainstream unions, these other "unions" and other class forces — such as community — and school-based movements, civil and political rights movements, and the movements of the unemployed and marginal self-employed– are essential to the development of a progressive front of the popular classes. Not only are such alliances essential to strengthening *specific* struggles – for example, against informal labour – but also to unifying the

popular classes *as a whole* by unifying struggles in and within and beyond communities, workplaces, schools and elsewhere.

But what should such a front aim at achieving? And how? Can these movements form the basis for a profound social transformation, or must they remain restricted to resistance and immediate defense against attacks? In our closing section we suggest some options as the basis for discussion and engagement, arguing for the importance of a vision and a strategy to create a better world.

Unions versus "Post-industrialism" and "Post-neo-liberalism"

Unions continue to play a key role in progressive and working class politics despite major setbacks and defeats since the 1970s onset of neo-liberalism, and often severe internal contradictions. This is a central conclusion of all of the papers in this volume and it remains true with the onset of a severe global economic crisis in 2008. Rather than signal "the end of neo-liberalism and the rise of aggressive government interventions", as some analysts believed (e.g. Bellamy Foster, 2010), neo-liberal regimes have used "aggressive government interventions" to accelerate austerity measures, retrenchments and liberalization (Hattingh, 2009). These measures have typically been backed up by authoritarian measures, of which the European Union's imposition of structural adjustment upon Greece is but one example.

In many countries, the popular classes have responded to neoliberalism by helping elect new governments with supposedly pro-working class sentiments and supposedly 'left' parties have ridden popular resentment of neo-liberal restructuring and of incumbent state officials to office. Among such governments, we may include the Barack Obama administration in the United States of America, the Workers' Party (PT) in

factories in Dhaka EPZs in Bangladesh. The WCCA demonstrates the value of developing a broad front of the oppressed classes through concrete coalitions with a clear set of political goals, using an understanding of the "working class" that does not reduce it to "male factory workers in heavy boots and hard hats" (van der Walt and Schmidt, 2009: 7). Building strong organizations of the self-employed poor is important to such coalitions, but essential when such coalitions do not exist.

Folkerth and Warnecke examine another exemplary case of such organizing with the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India. Founded in 1971, it was a founder of StreetNet and they argue comprises the largest "union" in the country. SEWA organizes home-workers as well as street traders, organizing both waged workers and the marginal self-employed. Besides organizing protests, engaging in lobbying (for example, SEWA was key to the ILO's 1996 adoption of a Home Work Convention), and building coalitions, SEWA also promotes cooperatives, and mutual aid schemes that provide welfare and finance. Such "mutualist" structures are a key – but often ignored – part of the history of the international working class (van der Linden, 1996), potentially providing both a means of social self-defence and a self-governed alternative to state welfare

In Conclusion: Transformative Working Class Politics, — If, Where and Why and How?

The Bangladeshi and Chinese cases illustrate that fighting for better terms for the sale of labour power can be highly confrontational. It may be "business unionism", and refuse to overtly raise political issues, but disrupts business-as-usual, and is implicitly profoundly political in challenging basic power relations. However, without a deeper understanding of

employed in stadium construction, and campaigns against evictions, supporting both street traders and squatters. In drawing in the municipal workers' unions, it also undermined the ability of the state to use municipal police for eviction. The WCCA engaged in direct actions like marches, and the use of publicity campaigns to question the official commitment to a model of "World Class" cities that seemed to exclude vast swathes of the urban population. It also participated in social dialogue structures like NEDLAC, where it also supported union demands. However, its proposed 2010 Framework Agreement was never signed by FIFA.

Çelik's focus is on the struggles of the street traders, a poor and largely self-employed group, and on their efforts to organize independent and democratic associations able to confront the state. In his view, these associations should be regarded as a *variant* of trade unions, as – to be more precise – the unions of the "marginalized labour force" in the informal sector. He suggests such bodies can play an important role in revitalizing existing mainstream unions and promoting "social movement unionism" both within and beyond those unions.

Such "workers", especially the marginal self-employed, cannot readily be included in mainstream unions –unlike the casual workers employed in the formal sector. Self-employed "workers" in the informal sector, working on the margins of the capitalist economy face different problems to that of waged workers, casual or otherwise, in the formal economy or even in the grey (or informal) economy (see Bieler, Lindberg and Pillay, 2008).

The street traders examined by Çelik make demands of the state, but the state is not their employer. These workers do not face an employer or a set of employers against whom they can deploy structural power through strikes and the disruptions of the production of surplus value. Therefore, the strategic tasks faced in organizing such workers are of quite a different order to those faced in organizing "hire-and-fire" workers in RMG

Brazil and the *Alianza-Patria Altiva y Soberana* (*Alianza PAIS*) in Ecuador (discussed in Daniel Hawkins's paper in this collection), and the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa (discussed in the papers by Devan Pillay and Ercüment Çelik). However, when installed these governments have instead maintained the basic neo-liberal framework that voters rejected.

In other countries neo-liberalism has remained state policy, despite transitions to parliamentary rule after periods of dictatorship or martial law. Among these we can mention Bangladesh (discussed in the paper by Pragya Khanna), and India and Indonesia (discussed by John Folkerth and Tonia Warnecke). Elsewhere, notably such as in China (discussed by Elaine Sio-ieng Hui and Chris King-chi Chan), no pretense of choice is maintained and neo-liberalism is simply welded onto one-party rule with state-run pseudo-unions integral to the repressive system.

Union mobilization and campaigning provides another response, one that has demonstrably played a major role in slowing down the neo-liberal offensive. In the West, mass strikes have been essential to deflecting austerity measures in Britain, Greece, Italy, Spain and elsewhere. Unions have been the key vehicles for such actions. While media analyses of the "Arab Spring" of the late 2000s focused mainly on the role of youth and students, unions were a major factor in the upheavals in Bahrain, Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere (Democracy Now, 2011).

Moreover, many "Arab Spring" protestors were not just demanding open elections, but also rising against neo-liberal measures. As with the struggles against austerity in the West, mass strikes were vital to many of these struggles, activating the decisive and irreplaceable power of the working class at the point of production. Such realities fly in the face of recent arguments that workers are more powerful when unions are weak, that workplace struggles are not especially

important, and that the isolation and "incommunicability" of local struggles is a mark of their strength (e.g. Hardt and Negri, 2000: 58, 269).

The contemporary role of unions and demands of the working class do not differ in any key respects from those of the 19th century. This reflects the continuity in basic social structures, as well as the parallels between the current epoch and the first period of modern globalization a century ago. World trade and output grew steadily from the 1870s to the 1910s, exceeding the levels of integration seen in the late 1990s. Meanwhile, in that era, instantaneous global communications developed alongside a tidal wave of proletarianization and migration (Hirst, 1997: 411; Lang, 2006: 924).

The same patterns are in evidence today. The ongoing power of unions is underlain by the fact that the waged working class–including but not limited to industrial workers–is the majority of the world population (van der Walt and Schmidt, 2009: 10). More people have been proletarianized in the last 50 years than in all the West's industrial revolutions (Ahmed, 2011: 14). The Fordist workplace, albeit "leaner" and more globally integrated, remains the bedrock of ever-expanding capitalist industry and employment (Moody, 1997).

This situation scarcely corresponds to the images of "postmodernization" and "postindustrial" society favoured by certain writers (e.g. Hardt and Negri, 2000: 285). Thus, union movements are neither outdated (*contra.* Gorz, 1982), nor relatively unimportant (*contra.* Laclau and Mouffe, 1990), nor declining representatives of a disappearing reality of industrial, capitalist, modernity (*contra.* Rifkin, 1995). On the contrary, they evidently remain a key force in 21st century politics, as in the politics of the 19th and 20th centuries before, with membership (by conservative estimates) of at least a quarter of a billion people (excluding state-run pseudo-unions) (e.g. Worldmapper, 2010).

However, like the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* unions have to run continuously to stay in the same place. In both Brazil and South Africa informal labour continues to exist in the formal sector, even expanding in some sectors and occupations. In the latter, nearly 70 per cent of companies outsourced from 1994–1998 — i.e. in the same period as major labour reforms were instituted — and it was mainly manual and menial workers who were outsourced, i.e. the core COSATU constituency (Kelley,1999: 1).

Furthermore, unions have struggled to organize the ever-expanding pool of casual workers in the *formal* sector, and manifestly failed to organize workers in the *informal* sector, including the self-employed poor. For example, COSATU, operated an Unemployed Workers Coordinating Committee in the late 1980s, and sponsored several worker co-operatives for unemployed union members, but these initiatives were short-lived.

New organizations have emerged in the informal sector as a result, often based amongst categories largely ignored by mainstream unions, like the self-employed poor and home workers. In his paper in this collection, Ercüment Çelik examines the self-organization of street traders in South Africa, a category that falls outside of COSATU. South Africa hosted the 2010 FIFA World Cup, and (as is quite common in such mega-events), the host cities moved quickly to erase the poor from the urban landscape. This particularly affected street traders, shackdwellers and inner city residents. In response, StreetNet initiated a World Class Cities for All (WCCA) campaign, building a coalition of street traders' organizations, COSATU affiliates (and other unions), and shackdwellers. StreetNet is an international alliance of street traders' organizations formed in 2002 in Durban, part of the eThekwini Municipality, and today it claims affiliates in 37 countries.

Centred on Durban, the WCCA provided a forum to coordinate campaigns for decent work, supporting workers

mitted to capitalist globalization and the CCP membership is predominantly drawn from capitalists. Such a situation provides many obstacles to independent unions, and limits the extent to which the party-state is willing to make serious reforms in industrial relations. As in Bangladesh, such reforms are openly opposed by employer lobbies, and as in Bangladesh, India and Indonesia, are often ignored in practice. Thus, attempts at union reform at the CHAM Honda plant in Foshan were carefully managed to prevent any real worker control over the plant union.

The "Standard Employment Relationship": Cause or Consequence of Unions?

A striking feature of the Bangladeshi and Chinese cases is workers' struggle to regularize employment relations i.e. *effectively to make "informal" labour formal.* Khanna shows that in Bangladesh, workers and unions have repeatedly demanded written contracts and factory/ identification cards, and an end to casual "hire-and-fire" relations, as part of their struggle for basic rights. Hui and Chan note that in China the party-state has made some efforts to formalize labour – a *response* to workers struggles, and an attempt to contain such struggles.

This is a very different situation to that of Brazil and South Africa, where unions have made significant gains in securing some basic protections – that is, making labour less flexible – and established a degree of power in controlling labour markets through wage bargaining and enforcing state regulations governing working conditions. In both cases, highly casualized working classes in the 1970s and 1980s (for example see Seidman, 1994: 62–63, 67, 77, 82, 88) were mobilized by unions, and union power sharply reduced casualization. The Standard Employment Relationship can *facilitate* union activity, but it is not the precondition for that activity, but its *outcome*.

Organized labour, as a key social force of the excluded popular classes, and one wielding enormous social power through its strategic location at the point of production, can and does play a critical role in developing progressive responses, in wielding counter-power to shift the balance of forces, and in uniting ordinary people against the rule of the few. In doing so, the unions also can and sometimes do challenge the multiple relations of power and oppression of subordinate classes, including racial, national, gender and sexual oppression – which imposes an extra burden on vast sections of the world's working class. In challenging the logic of the system, unions can also start to challenge the environmental degradation that accompanies militarism and elite accumulation. Yet, unions can also frustrate struggles, support anti-working class policies, and broker compromises and alliances at the expense of workers and the popular classes more generally.

Unions versus "Left" Governments

It is therefore important to assess the current state of unions, to examine how unions have responded to current challenges, and to consider some of these responses and solutions as well as problems. The papers by Pillay and Hawkins in this collection consider state-union relations in three countries: South Africa (Pillay), Brazil and Ecuador (Hawkins). In all three cases, the dominant union federation played a key role in the election of supposedly left-of-centre governments. These were South Africa since 1994, where the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU, formed 1985) has been central to the continued re-election of the African National Congress (ANC), in alliance with the SA Communist Party (SACP); Brazil since 2003, where the *Central Única dos Trabalhadores* (the Unified Workers' Central, or CUT, formed 1983) has supported the Workers'

Party (PT) and its leaders, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and his successor Dilma Rousseff; and in Ecuador in 2006, where many unions initially backed the *Alianza PAIS*. (As Hawkins notes, the "last decade in South America has witnessed the surprising resurgence and/or emergence of leftist political parties").

It is clear from Hawkins' and Pillay's papers that the Brazilian and South African cases bear some striking similarities. The dominant labour centres, CUT and COSATU, emerged from the new independent unions forged in the 1970s period of rapid industrialization. Both played an important role in the struggles that enabled both countries' transitions to parliamentary democracy: Brazil in 1985, and South Africa in 1994.

However, in both cases union-backed ruling parties have adopted neo-liberal economic policies, despite earlier intimations of radical economic and social policies. At the same time, the unions have been drawn into institutional arrangements with the state.

In the Brazilian case, many of these measures date to the authoritarian corporatism of the 1937 *Estado Novo* ("New State") of populist dictator, Getúlio Dornelles Vargas, an admirer of fascist Italy. These include measures permitting only one union per sector (with only that union legally recognized for collective bargaining), heavy court intervention into collective bargaining and the union "tax" whereby all workers are obliged to pay one day's salary as union dues. (Even today, Brazil does not comply with ILO Convention 87, on freedom of association).

All the main unions participate in various official tripartite structures. For example the CUT is also a backer of the PT, which provides another link to the state. Hawkins argues that a large sector of the labour movement chose to support the PT as a means of achieving progressive change, while also using existing institutional arrangements that supposedly gave the unions increased leverage over state policy. The PT gov-

However, while in Bangladesh there is a plurality of rival parties, each with their own unions, the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) has a legal monopoly of labour representation, and is essentially a wing of a party-state headed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The unions in Bangladesh are independent workers' organizations, which face ongoing repression by the state and capital, while in Indonesia the Suharto-era official unions still operate but face challenges from independent rivals.

In China by contrast, the ACFTU is part of the bureaucratic apparatus of the Chinese party-state. Thus, the ACFTU carries out CCP directives, and the plant / enterprise pseudo-unions affiliated to the ACFTU are directly subordinate to management. In this sense, the Chinese situation is very close to that of Brazil before 1985, and Indonesia until 1998.

As Khanna shows, while worker unrest in export industries escalated rapidly in Bangladesh from the 1990s, Hui and Chan date a similar escalation in China to the 2000s, identifying two major worker offensives: 2004 to 2007, and 2010–2011. Emboldened by labour shortages, workers demanded higher wages, better conditions and, increasingly, independent unions, most notably in a strike at the CHAM Honda plant in Foshan, Guangdong province in May 2010.

Hui and Chan argue that the CCP party-state now seeks to contain and manage these struggles through the "hegemonic" capitalist project called the "Harmonious Society". This concept praises stability and harmony in a social order where (to quote the official press) "each individual has his/her proper place". This ideology is backed by some investment in poor rural areas (a major source of cheap labour), reforms in the industrial relations machinery and the ACFTU, and limited concessions in wages and working conditions (notably, making formal labour contracts obligatory).

As elsewhere, there is in China a very close relationship between political and economic elites. The party-state is com-

As part of their contribution to this collection, Folkerth and Warnecke examine unions in Indonesia. The fall of the Suharto regime in 1998 opened space for free trade activity. The restoration of union rights and freedom of association enabled independent unions, which emerged from underground structures to challenge the state-run official union centre set up in the dictatorship. Labour law reforms and the ratification of ILO conventions have greatly improved the situation of workers in the formal sector. However, the old official unions continue to enjoy a close relationship with employers and the state, weakening the new unions and worker confidence, and helping create a situation in which overall union coverage is extremely low at around 4 per cent of the total workforce.

As in India and Bangladesh, employers in Indonesia (say Folkerth and Warnecke) "often discriminate against union workers and simply ignore standard legal procedures for hiring". Informal sector workers like home workers also have little protection from the new laws, and are poorly represented in unions. These workers have instead turned to structures like NGOs and the *Mitra Wanita Pekeria Rumahan Indonesia* (the MWPRI or the "National Network of Friends of Women Homeworkers"). Folkerth and Warnecke stress the importance of networking, international and national alliances, and publicity in winning gains for informal sector workers, including the self-employed poor.

The situation in China, discussed in the paper by Hui and Chan, has some similarities to both Bangladesh and Indonesia. Bangladesh, Indonesia and China are all manufacturing hubs, to which the local state attracts investment by the provision of cheap, flexible and largely rightless labour forces. As with its counterparts in Bangladesh and Indonesia, the ruling class in China has adopted neo-liberalism as a strategy to advance owner interests. Nor can this adoption be blamed on the IMF or World Bank, for it preceded China's accession to both bodies by decades.

ernment proposed reforms to the labour law system in its first term, but Congress rejected these. In 2007, there were some minor changes to the labour law regime, which democratized it somewhat but also enabled union breakaways, primarily affecting the CUT.

As Hawkins shows, state economic policy under the first Lula presidency did not change from policy in the Fernando Henrique Cardoso era as it "followed in Cardoso's footsteps". In Lula's second term welfare spending increased, but basic economic policy still did not change. Such policies by the PT divided the CUT, leading to severe internal conflicts as well as splits, such as the 2004 *Conlutas* (the "National Coordination of Struggles") breakaway.

By contrast with Brazil, in South Africa corporatist arrangements were demanded by the unions centred on COSATU, rather than imposed from above (see Webster and Adler, 2000). Formally linked to the ANC and SACP in a Tripartite Alliance, COSATU sought to increase its influence over post-apartheid state policy through state multipartite forums. It was involved in a number of sectoral forums in the early 1990s, and remains active in the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) formed in 1995. Under the ANC labour law and union rights were extended to encompass previously excluded categories (such as domestic workers), and include measures for workplace safety and affirmative action. The state also expanded welfare coverage (around a quarter of the population receives a grant), but as in Brazil, this has barely dented extreme levels of inequality, poverty and unemployment. Welfare helps alleviate poverty and can even reduce the rate of poverty (this is true of both South Africa and Brazil), and as such is a gain for the working class. However, it does not remove the structural causes of poverty or remove inequality (van der Walt, 2005). Thus, Brazil and South Africa currently share the dubious distinction of competing for the status of the world's most unequal society.

As with Brazil's PT, the new ANC government adopted a neo-liberal economic policy. COSATU's view that NEDLAC would provide a means of shaping key state policies proved hollow, as the fundamentals of this policy have never been open to debate in NEDLAC. Pillay examines COSATU's fraught relation to the ANC in this context. He argues that in the 1980s COSATU exemplified "social movement unionism" (a term that has also been applied in the past to unions like CUT), but has drifted towards orthodox "political unionism" under the ANC government of the last two decades.

For Pillay, "social movement unionism" has a very precise meaning. It refers to a form of unionism that is democratic and bottom-up, that forges alliances beyond the workplace in pursuit of progressive, democratic goals, and that participates in larger social and political struggles for rights without being subordinate to political parties. In short, it challenges business unionism, which reduces unions to negotiating better terms of sale for labour power. By contrast, "political unionism" refers to a situation where unions are effectively subordinated to political parties.

Pillay shows that COSATU has developed a tension–ridden relationship with the ruling ANC (and at times with the SACP). On the one hand it gives the ruling party unconditional support during elections, and seeks to reshape the ANC from within by "swelling the ranks" with working class members and by aligning to particular ANC factions. Most notably, COSATU played a central role in the rise of Jacob Zuma to head of the ANC, and subsequently to office as post-apartheid South Africa's third state president. However, union involvement in ANC factionalism readily leads to ANC factionalism being transmitted into the unions, and as Pillay indicates COSATU is currently divided over which ANC faction to support, rather than over whether to support the ANC as such.

While this entanglement in the ANC might suggest that COSATU is a typical case of political unionism, the federation

ism and *gheraos* i.e. preventing employers from leaving their premises until demands are met.

Union weakness in Bangladesh is partly due to labour market factors like rising unemployment, the use of highly flexible labour, and gender divisions. Privatization, repression by both military and civilian governments, and the flat refusal of many employers — both within and outside the Export Processing Zones (EPZs) — to tolerate unionism also play a major role.

However, Khanna stresses union weakness *also* arises from internal factors. Most unions in Bangladesh still operate as labour fronts for political parties, and the country has a vast number of parties. In Pillay's terms, Bangladesh is an extreme case of "political unionism". Some of the problems with political unionism have already been mentioned: the subordination of unions to parties, and the general failure of such parties to live up to their promises.

The Bangladesh case indicates a further problem, which is that the fragmentation of unions by political party allegiances generates a highly divided union movement. The resultant union weakness in turn reinforces dependency on the political parties. This problem of fragmentation is by no means unique to Bangladesh, as the splits and divisions in CUT and COSATU indicate. Khanna notes, in Bangladesh union links to parties also lead to the ongoing co-optation of union leaders into those parties and their governments, stripping union capacity and fostering mistrust of the leaders by the members. Of course, the outflow of unionists into the state is a problem elsewhere too. While it might be thought that relations with parties could provide Bangladeshi unions with some leverage over state policy, it seems parliamentarians of all political hues are deeply involved in the RMG sector as owners – another case of the close links between political and economic elites that frustrate unionism, already indicated by Brazilian, Ecuadorian and South African cases.

of International Monetary Fund (IMF)/ World Bank advice and / or conditionalities as an imperialist imposition against the interests and wishes of "Southern" or postcolonial states (e.g. Brecher, Costello and Smith, 2000: 56, 71).

However, it is clear that the dominant group of Bangladeshi state managers viewed neo-liberalism as essential to generating revenue for the state apparatus (not least the military) and as the key to promoting Bangladeshi capitalists. The local ruling class adopted neo-liberal measures and International Monetary Fund/ World Bank advice *because* it served to entrench and *expand* their class power. Therefore, contrary to views that see "poor country governments" as allies for the working class struggle against neo-liberalism (e.g. Brecher, Costello and Smith, 2000: 56), such governments are authors of neo-liberalism, as well as its *beneficiaries*.

Over time, Bangladesh's economy came to centre on the export-oriented Ready Made Garment (RMG) sector, which in turn became dominated by Bangladeshi capitalists. The rich rewards that Bangladesh's state managers and private capitalists have reaped from this industrial expansion have come at the cost of Bangladesh's working class. Labour is highly flexible, wages are lower than those in China and Vietnam, hours are long and working conditions dangerous, and the labour process is highly authoritarian. A large sector of the RMG workforce comprises poor women, often from rural areas. Also not only do factory owners foster divisions between men and women workers, but they also mobilize traditions of female subordination to closely control women workers.

Faced with conditions like these, workers did not ally with the local elite, but mobilized against them through a growing workers' movement that has emerged in the growing RMG sector. While focused on wages and working conditions, and generally avoiding engaging in overtly political issues, this movement uses militant methods, including mass strikes, vandal-

retains substantial autonomy, has engaged in mass strikes against the ANC government (notably in the form of debilitating state sector strikes in 2007 and 2010), and formed alliances with other "civil society" groups to contest a range of state policies (notably, policies on HIV-AIDS, media regulation and privatization). Pillay thus suggests, COSATU is caught between a robust, challenging social movement unionism mode, and a more subordinate political unionism.

The Electoral Road versus the Class Character of the State

In Ecuador, Hawkins shows, the scenario is rather more complex than that of Brazil and South Africa. The unions are fairly marginalized by a state that publicly eschews neo-liberalism in favour of so-called "21st century socialism". Union support for Correa was initially widespread, but the union movement does not have a systematic and structured relationship with the ruling party akin to that of the CUT in Brazil or COSATU in South Africa. Using rapidly rising revenues generated by rocketing world oil prices, Correa's government increased welfare programs, expanded protection for workers, and increased regulation of investors (and the media). It was initially seen as representing (Hawkins notes) as one of "the deepest and most vigorous processes of political change in the region".

However, soon the *Alianza PAIS* regime began to clash with its erstwhile supporters, castigated by many unions and indigenous rights groups for maintaining a basically top-down, capitalist and indeed often neo-liberal approach. There was no basic change in the political economy, nor any real shift in the balance of class forces. Rising oil prices enabled expanded welfare without any significant redistribution of wealth or power. Integration into the global oil monopoly also enabled the state elite to profit through lavish salaries, cronyism, and patronage.

The state was therefore set on a path of expanding mining and drilling, setting it on a collision with the popular classes. Social dialogue barely existed and the state-dominated petroleum sector did not respect the right to strike. Unions were soon deeply divided over support for Correa, and opposition to new mining and water laws spurred major protests in 2010 and 2012.

As with other governments in the so-called "Pink Tide" in Latin America, the Correa regime has arguably done little to change the basic structures of exploitation and domination, although there were some important welfare gains. Therefore, like the governments of Evo Morales in Bolivia, and of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, it has faced growing revolts from below (Robinson, 2011).

As in Brazil and South Africa, the worker-backed "left" government in Ecuador thus proved a grave disappointment for many. However, unlike Brazil and South Africa, Ecuadorian unions are not closely tied to the ruling party, and their autonomy arguably allows them greater freedom of action in openly confronting the state. A similar situation exists in Bolivia and Peru, where unions can trade a lack of formal ties to the ruling party, for a greater ability to openly mobilize against the state through direct action.

The failure of core union federations in all of these cases to exercise real control over the parties and governments that they have helped elect raises a number of key questions for labour strategy. The tendency of many unions to view the state as an enabling instrument that can be wielded by the working class through backing the right party at elections clashes with the lived reality that states are continuously wielded by economic and political elites.

For example, a growing literature on Brazil and Ecuador stresses the deep continuities in the role of the state regardless of elections, where new governments assume "the reins of corrupt, clientalist, bureaucratic, and oligarchic states of the ancient regimes" (Robinson, 2011, online). There is a

substantial continuity both in the basic class interests of state managers and private capitalists. Both at the national and international levels, election outcomes are always profoundly shaped by existing bureaucratic and business power, and the majority of state personnel are not, in any event, elected.

The many compromises of Lula's government can partly be excused on the grounds that the PT lacked a clear majority. It also confronted an entrenched bureaucracy steeped in conservative, authoritarian traditions and closely bound to industrial and agrarian elites. Yet this example simply demonstrates that all states have an elitist and undemocratic institutional and class logic, which simply cannot be changed by elections, or by coups. Moreover, incoming parties are usually swallowed by the "iron logic" of high state office to maintain the status quo (Bakunin [1873] 1971: 343). Thus, despite some progressive shifts during Lula's second term of office, the same basic policies continue under Dilma despite the PT's 2010 electoral triumph. This poses profound questions about the utility of "political unionism". If elections do not change the system, what can? How best can organized labour wield its power for the popular classes?

"North" versus "South" or Class against Class

These points are also raised by Khanna's paper in this collection, dealing with Bangladesh. Unions emerged as a major force in Bangladesh on the eve of the 1971 war of independence, and in the year immediately following. However, they faced increasing obstacles in the 1970s, as the state shifted towards neo-liberalism. The country was repositioned as a reservoir of cheap factory labour, attractive to local and foreign investors.

The reasons for this step are important. A substantial body of literature presents the adoption of neo-liberal measures and