Labor migration and worker organization, global North and global South

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This essay takes up both the challenges and the opportunities that labor migration poses for the organized labor movement. Labor has been dramatically restructured over the last quarter of a century but there are no signs of labor recomposition as trade unions seek different paths toward revitalization. Increasingly, the movement of workers across national boundaries might create divisions and can be deployed to undermine existing labor standards. However, we pose the possibility that it might also be a source of trade union revitalization, bringing in new members with new ideas but also creating a dynamic for raising labor standards rather than lowering them. In brief, internationalism begins at home.

We could argue that the global economic turmoil unleashed by the US banking crisis in 2007, and its subsequent viral spread across the world, will lead to a deepening of – rather than a retreat from – globalization. Maybe we are moving to a world “beyond North and South” in economic and political terms; after all, some of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) countries are now set to become part of the new global management system. The economic crisis seems more profound in the old heartlands of capitalism in the North, whereas in the South a new dynamic phase of development has appeared on the horizon. My approach to this question is a “bottom up” one, namely asking whether the labor movement might be revitalized through being forced to deal with the new work practices and the increased movement of workers across national borders.

The first movement of the argument presented below, “Labor restructured,” reviews the momentous reworking of the labor condition over the last quarter of a century: flexibilization, informalization, deregulation, and the emergence of what some have called the “precariat,” a precarious proletariat. Arguably this is now a worldwide process that cannot be confined to what is still anachronistically referred to as the “underdeveloped” world of the global South. Then, in “Labor movement,” I take up the issue of the increased movement of workers across national frontiers in recent decades as part of globalization. In theory this process should lead to an undermining of labor conditions by granting an advantage to capital. We can also see how precarious work is now often accompanied by a precarious form of citizenship for most migrants. But, on the other hand, what if the incipient moves toward trade union revitalization – “Labor resurgent,” the third part of the argument presented here – begin to lead to a practice of “internationalism starts at home” and a prioritization of the organization of this new precariat? As with the previous sections, I believe the main lessons in this regard will come from the global South where trade unions have dealt creatively with internal migration flows in the past. If we learn nothing else from the global recession of 2008–9, we should understand that we must now move “beyond North and South” in terms of a unified labor-oriented analysis, and build the global social counter-movements which have been shaped in response to the dominance of the self-regulated free market over the last 25 years.

Labor restructured

As Beck (2000: 1) said, “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.”
When sociologists in Germany become worried about the “Brazilianization” of their hitherto full-employment, developed, and advanced society, we can assume that some significant changes have been underway. Precarious, insecure, or informal relations of production accounted for perhaps 10 percent of employees in 1960s Germany, but that figure is now around 40 percent and rising. So does Brazil now show us what the future of Germany is, in a dramatic inversion of Marx’s classic dictum that industrialized England showed the rest of the world what its future was in his day?

Prior to the mainstreaming (Westernizing) of the distinction between the formal and informal sector in the 1970s (see Hart 1973), there had already been a vigorous debate in Latin America around the concept of “marginality.” The dominant modernization theory of the 1950s and 1960s found it hard to account for the vast numbers of underemployed internal migrants who surrounded the capital cities with their makeshift dwellings and who appeared to be in all senses “marginal” to the modernization of society. Even from the Marxist camp, authors such as José Nun (1969) argued that the marginal poor were “afunctional” to the system of dependent capitalist development. Unlike the classic Marxist “reserve army of labor,” the new, migrant-based, urban poor were not even potentially useful; they were simply marginal to the capitalist accumulation regime, or so went the argument. Gradually a critique of this Marxist modernization perspective built up and it was replaced by a more grounded and positive perspective.

It was Brazilian social theorist Chico de Oliveira who showed most clearly, in his “Critique of dualist reason” (Oliveira 1972), that the activities of the so-called marginal sector were in fact generated by and profitable for the modern capitalist system. Small-scale commerce facilitated the distribution of industrial goods, and the self-constructed dwellings of the shantytowns simply saved capital the cost of producing workers’ housing. More broadly, the urban informal sector (the self-employed petty bourgeoisie as much as the informal proletariat) should be seen as subsidizing capitalist accumulation through their high levels of self-exploitation. Rather than focus on an “informal sector” (which grants it a unity and coherence it simply does not possess) we should, perhaps, pay more attention to the process of informalization, a tendency now accentuated in the era of globalization as work increasingly is deregulated and workers dispossessed.

More broadly, we can show that the explicit dualism of the formal/informal distinction suffers from severe analytical weaknesses. It posits two hermetically sealed sectors which simply cannot be distinguished in practice, and it is unable to see intermediate or hybrid employment categories. That is not to deny the importance of an unregulated or informal relationship of production and income generation that is not “marginal” to capitalist development but, rather, an integral element of its dynamic. The point is that these relationships and processes are not an unfortunate carry-over from the premodern era or the dubious privilege of only the “underdeveloped” economies. They serve, rather, a key function for capital in weakening labor’s social power and of atomizing the workforce. The World Bank is simply wrong in both theory and practice when it states that, “The informal sector shrinks with development” (World Bank 1995: 35). The uneven but also combined development of capitalism has brought high-tech production to the global South but it will also at the same time reproduce and expand so-called informal work practices worldwide.

Today we can refer to a global informal working class which, following Davis, “is about one billion strong, making it the fastest growing, and most unprecedented social class on earth” (Davis 2007: 178). The crisis in the 1980s led to a massive increase in so-called informal work which was all that stood between the laboring poor and starvation in the global South. But it also now provides what Davis called “a stealth workforce for the formal economy” (Davis 2007: 178) in the North, with the likes of Wal-Mart and other multinational companies creating commodity chains reaching deep into the informal sector.
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in the global South. What we see today is a pattern beyond the formal/informal or North/South divide, with a continuum extending into the increasingly casualized workforce of the global South and the recession-ridden northern economies.

In terms of developing a labor-movement perspective in relation to this new global informal working class, we need to move beyond lingering North Atlanticist notions that this is purely a phenomenon of the South. In 2004 the International Labour Organization carried out a world global study of economic security and found that three-quarters of the world’s population lived in circumstances of economic insecurity (ILO 2004). The term “precariat” – an amalgam of the classic notion of proletariat with the adjective of precarization, which is creating a more precarious life – is essentially designed to capture the growing norm of insecure work. There is little security in terms of job tenure, working conditions, labor rights, and, indeed, for life itself for increasing numbers of the world’s workers. Today, as the impact of the 2008–9 great recession and the “shakeout” it is leading to becomes clearer, so we can expect the precariat and labor insecurity to grow.

With little exaggeration Peter Hall-Jones has stated recently that “The precariat is becoming the rule, not the exception” (Hall-Jones 2009). The ILO for decades has deployed the category of “atypical work,” but did it really capture the new norm of contingent, precarious, and insecure work? It implies that if we struggle for “decent work” somehow a pre-existing norm of typical work might be re-established, complete with stable tripartite relations between unions, government, and employers. In fact, it is doubtful if the ILO view of the world of work was ever accurate even for the social democratic heartlands in Scandinavia at the peak of the postwar boom. Certainly today the atypical prevails in the form of the unemployed, own-account workers, subsistence farmers, detached workers, and so forth.

Returning now to Brazil, how have trade unions responded to informalization and the rise of the precariat? Recall that, in the 1980s, Brazil led one of the strongest trade union movements in the world, which gave rise to the Workers’ Party and “Lula,” the workers’ president, from 2003 to 2010. Capitalist development in Brazil during the 1990s led to considerable labor restructuring with more outsourcing, home-based labor and flexible specialization in the formal sector. While the trade unions have retained the capacity to mobilize workers in the modern sector, they have been strongly disoriented by the restructuring process. Employment rates in the formal sector have fallen and so has trade union membership. In subcontracting firms, in particular, the rule of management is absolute and the frontier of control is beyond trade union reach. To say this has created an impasse for trade unions is most certainly an understatement.

As José Ricardo Ramalho puts it: “The precariousness of work has become widespread in Brazil and most unions have been unable to develop new forms of action. In fact, even their survival as collective organisations is at stake” (Ramalho 1999: 171). While organized labor in Brazil can, uniquely, claim a Workers’ Party leader as its representative, its influence in the world of work is becoming increasingly curtailed by restructuring and the rise of the precariat. There are trade union sectors which have gone beyond corporatism and taken on the wider problems of work, including those sectors not organized by trade unions. In this regard, what is probably necessary to respond to the current crisis is a revival of the type of orientation practiced by the emerging metal workers’ union in the late 1970s, with its practice of “social movement unionism” which related labor in a holistic manner, including the community context and not just the workplace setting.

Trade unions are certainly often bureaucratic (recall Robert Michels’ famous “iron law of oligarchy”), they may certainly sign “sweetheart deals” with employers, and they may also sometimes develop corrupt relationships with governments. They have, however, also almost universally been severely affected by the last 25 years of restructuring of capital and decomposition of labor. Despite their failings I would
argue that trade unions remain the major collective expression of workers’ interests, and retain, however unevenly, the capacity to reinvent themselves and play a positive role for social transformation. While the response of the trade unions has been slow in relation to the structural changes in the world of work, we can now note a concerted attempt to reach out beyond the bastions of formal employment. Thus in many countries we see unions organizing freelance workers (e.g. Canada’s main media unions), agency workers (most Scandinavian countries), the self-employed (Netherlands), self-employed women (SEWA in India), migrant workers (Spain and Italy), and, of course, the growing army of the unemployed (many countries). We do see at least the possibility of moving beyond a bureaucratic mainstream and a dispersed and powerless labor movement.

Labor movement

As Hardt and Negri said, “A spectre haunts the world and it is the spectre of migration. All the powers of the old world are allied in a merciless operation against it, but the movement is irresistible” (Hardt & Negri 2000: 213).

The specter of communism no longer haunts the world; now its role is taken by the global precariat on the move, with what Hardt and Negri call their “irrepressible desire for free movement” (Hardt & Negri 2000: 213). While exodus can indeed be seen as a powerful form of class struggle against the new imperial order, it is still a manifestly spontaneous if not unintentional form of struggle. Mobility and migration are seen as a disruption of the disciplinary constraints under which workers labor and thus as positive. Certainly labor is in movement in many diverse ways and its management is seemingly beyond even the most stringent border controls of most capitalist states.

At a more prosaic level, migration can be seen as an integral part of labor-market regulation in the era of globalization. Clearly the economies of the once affluent North still depend critically on the ready availability of migrant labor. These workers are often vulnerable and many basic labor rights simply do not apply to them. As Harold Bauder points out, “international migration is a regulatory labor market tool” (Bauder 2006: 4) that allows employers to drive down wages and lower labor standards through the introduction of a “cheap and flexible” migrant labor force. Are we seeing what Pierre Bourdieu referred to as a “global reserve army of labour” (Bourdieu 2002: 40) emerging? If that is the case, it should be incumbent on trade union movements to respond with an inclusive policy toward migrant workers and not with national protectionism, as happened quite often in the past (see Penninx & Roosblad, 2000), even though this is sometimes forgotten.

The precariat as a concept, which we discussed in the previous section, is now becoming manifest through the emergence of a new, precarious worker made global through migration in an age of recession. They are perhaps the cutting edge of neoliberal capitalism’s offensive against labor standards. Trade unions and other social movements can, of course, respond in different ways. They may incorporate these workers into their organizations and press for the leveling-up of labor standards, as against the “race to the bottom” of neoliberalism, or, conversely, they may go along with the mainstream racist and xenophobic discourse and actively lead the exclusionary offensive in the workplace. However, precariousness – as in informalization or irregularization – should not be understood in a simple binary opposition to a mythical stable/formal/regular worker status, but rather as a process with many gradations and dimensions affecting all workers (see Goldring & Landholt 2011).

Precarious work is matched by precarious citizenship status for many migrants today. The French sans papier (undocumented) are a salient example of this new mobile, temporary, and disposable workforce. In fact, we could argue that citizenship categories are probably the main source of division within the global workforce. Labor-market segmentation can be directly correlated to differential citizenship status. Van Parijs goes as far as to say that citizenship status has exerted a quantitatively
more powerful influence on the distribution of material welfare than wealth status or skills status (Van Parijs 1992: 162). We can certainly see a concerted move, since 2001 (9/11 and the so-called “war on terror”), toward what can only be called the irregularization of citizenship (see Nyers 2010) as once-secure boundaries between the citizen and the noncitizen become blurred and the state of exception becomes the norm.

The obvious question then is “What is to be done?” We could call for the re-regulation of the labor market, as some lucid capitalist sectors are doing in relation to finance. The ILO’s Decent Work Campaign provides a seemingly coherent response to the plight of the global precariat. Many national governments and the International Office of Migration are pledged to providing a clear access route to citizenship for migrants. Yet, on reflection, “managing migration” as a global project is an integral element of the new neoliberal strategy to save globalism from unregulated finance capitalism. There was in reality no “golden age” when labor rights for all were respected, as a state of affairs which we can now simply return to. What the 2008–9 global crisis allows for, however, is a more widely legitimate contestation of “there is no alternative” as accepted truth and the (re)construction of a democratic labor perspective where global, regional, national, and local outlooks are synchronized.

The global economic crisis is having a major effect on the movement of workers across national frontiers, and we cannot predict the end result. In the past the recruitment of migrant workers has been highly susceptible to the economic cycle. Since 2008–9 we have certainly seen a decrease in irregular migration particularly, and a sharp decline in economic remittances. Industries where migrants predominated, such as construction and services, have been particularly vulnerable to the global economic recession. However, it now seems clear that we cannot draw simple parallels with the depression of the 1930s or even the Western capitalist crisis of 1973 in terms of their impact on migrant workers. This is not least because the world of 2008–9 is much more integrated than it was, say, 20 years ago or even 10 years ago; thus the economic recession is more global and there is no obvious safe haven for migrants to return to.

Globalization has created an economically, socially, and spatially much more integrated world than ever before. Labor diasporas have formed dense social networks intimately integrated into the spatial expansion of this new global capitalism. It is through these networks that, as David Harvey puts it, “we now see the effects of the financial crash spreading into almost every nook and cranny of rural Africa or peasant India” (Harvey 2010: 147). The result of this unraveling in terms of its impact on economic remittances, now deemed crucial for development, is a particularly sensitive issue. The post-crisis global governance regime might just grasp this particular nettle. Certainly, as Castles and Vezzoli put it, we might see “new patterns of migration, new sending and receiving countries and the rise of a new migration order” (Castles & Vezzoli 2009: 74). Whatever the variants that emerge in practice, it is at least certain now that migration is not a flow that can be turned on or off by a policy tap.

If there was a truly effective global state – or, for that matter, a strong and recognized global labor movement – it would necessarily address the issue of global migrants. At the moment the movement of people seems unlikely to be subject to the regulation which, for example, the World Trade Organization seeks to impose on trade. However, according to Natasha David, “in response to economic globalization, trade unions are organising the globalization of solidarity in defence of migrants” (David 2002: 74). This is, to be sure, happening unevenly across the globe. South Africa’s trade unions reacted decisively against the persecution of migrants in that country in 2008. French trade unions, on the other hand, have sometimes been at the forefront of attacks on migrants. But there is no escaping the fact of migration, and the impossibility of a coherent trade union and democratic renewal strategy that does not take it into account.
Trade union engagement with migrant workers will be dealt with fully in the next section, where diverse forms of social and community unionism are explored. But, while still on the theme of workers on the move, I would like to remind readers that most migration is internal as well as international. So, while there are probably 200 million or so transnational migrants today (that is, people living outside their country of birth), there are probably 100 million internal migrants in China and a massive 300 million (30% of the population) in India. We should thus be wary of placing an outlined conceptual barrier between national and international migrants. The “age of migration” is also, quite clearly, an age of massive population movements within countries, particularly in the global South, which is probably the locus of the next phase of global capital accumulation.

Migration – in its full complexity – is thus intimately tied up with the prospects for global development. National governments currently focus on the international migration–development nexus, the issue of economic remittances, the so-called “brain-drain,” and the possible encouragement of circular migration. From a trade union and social movement perspective, internal migration – especially in the global South – should be seen as equally important. Historically, many southern trade union movements were built precisely on the incorporation of internal migrants into the labor movement. They became prime drivers of development – through their labor power – and also key promoters of democracy and national liberation. In the current era the necessary promotion of labor internationalism should not (I would argue) preclude the involvement of the labor movement in the promotion of national democratic development in those parts of the world historically and currently negatively impacted by uneven and dependent incorporation into the global economy.

Labor resurgent

“At its core, capital is global. As a rule, labor is local . . . Labor is disaggregated in its performance, fragmented in its organisation, diversified in its existence, divided in its collective action” (Castells 1996: 475). In a subsequent volume Manuel Castells expresses his position in even more categorical terms: “The labor movement seems to be historically superseded” (Castells 2004: 425). In the first section of this essay we examined the process of informalization that does indeed disaggregate labor and fragment its organizations. In the section examining workers on the move, we have shown that while labor might well be predominantly local it does also move within and between countries. What this section will take up then is the wider challenge posed by Manuel Castells, namely that the labor movement is today effectively superseded in the era of fluid networked capitalism.

We can start by reconsidering the contradictory role of trade unions in capitalist societies. Perry Anderson once wrote that “trade unions are essentially a de facto representation of the working class at its workplace” (Anderson 1977: 335). Within the parameters of the capitalist division of labor, the workers’ only weapon is that of absence (the strike). Against this negative view (which undoubtedly reflects a certain social reality) we can counter-pose a vision of trade unions as schools for socialism and champions of the poor. Gerald Friedman, in Reigniting the Labor Movement, referred to how the labor movement has for over a century been “building from strength to strength, making society more democratic, more respectful of the poor, moving human rights above the claims of capitalist property” (Friedman 2008: 10). Certainly this view seems very far removed from the negative view outlined above, but maybe it is contradictory without being incompatible with the classical view of economistic trade unionism. There is an old trade union poster from the 1920s showing a trade unionist with two faces: one burying a capitalist and the other acting as his doctor. Such is the contradiction of trade unionism under capitalism.

We also need to understand that trade unions did not come into being fully formed, complete with national headquarters and bureaucratic structures. From the very start
the international dimension was crucial and migrant workers were central. As Van der Linden puts it, “The printers and miners were pioneers [in the formation of the International Trade Secretariats in the 1860s]” (Van der Linden 2003: 158). Printers were skilled mobile workers with membership of long-standing transnational connections. British miners were keen to establish an international alliance with their European counterparts, given that their conditions and wages were better. Free migration across borders was considered natural and xenophobia was rare; internationalism in its economic and political senses was thus a natural development. This early internationalism was, however, to be short lived, as state formation began to lead to the national integration of the European working classes in particular.

Thus, at a certain point in history, trade unions were what we might call “nationalized,” in the sense of becoming an integral element of social and political cohesion within the boundaries of a given nation-state. By the time World War I erupted in 1914 this national integration had led to the almost complete collapse of labor and socialist internationalism in Europe. From now on, national organizations and the pursuit of social betterment through the national state became the dominant modality of trade unionism. Internationalism became relegated to ritual incantations at trade union congresses.

National (even nationalist) trade unionism took on a different complexion in the global South. There, particularly after World War II, the trade unions became in many cases vital components of the national liberation movements in Africa and Asia, while in Latin America they were drivers of national economic development. Given the asymmetric nature of the world system – colonialism, imperialism, globalization – this contradiction is hardly surprising and we need always keep the North/South divide to the fore, even if we are moving beyond it in terms of analytical categories and strategies.

Today, after 25 years or so of what we have called globalization, we can (re)consider whether trade unions and the labor movement are as obsolete as Castells believes. For one thing, the number of workers has increased exponentially in this dynamic phase of capitalist growth, from around 1.8 billion in 1980 to an estimated 3.6 billion in 2020 (ILO: 2004). While national trade unions have declined in membership in most countries, international trade unionism is more united politically than at any time since its origins. My own analysis (see Munck 2010, 2011) points me in the same direction as Peter Evans, who has recently argued that we are seeing “an ascendant arc of transnational mobilization rather than the sort of precipitous decline predicted in the nemesis thesis” (Evans 2010: 367). That there has been a time lag of 25 years between the capitalist offensive and labor’s recomposition is not surprising and fits the pattern of 19th and 20th-century waves of labor recomposition (see Arrighi 1996: 348).

We now see clear movements toward trade union revitalization more or less across the world. There is a clear understanding that globalization and its impacts are the key issue for trade unions everywhere. New linkages across national frontiers are proliferating both at global and regional (e.g. NAFTA, EU, Mercosur, etc.) levels. Much greater interaction with social movements and also NGOs – around labor rights, for example – is now evident. The growing academic literature on trade union revitalization has found advances in the strategic areas of organizing new sectors, greater political actions, reform of trade union structures, coalition building, and last but not least, international solidarity (Frege & Kelly 2004). Much like the New Unionism of the late 19th century – which reached out to unskilled and semi-skilled workers rather than the skilled elite, women workers and not just men – today’s new unionism is reconstructing itself to save itself from obsolescence.

Social movement unionism was one particular trade union strategy driven by mainly southern trade unions in the 1980s. Whereas economic unionism focused on workers as sellers of labor power and political unionism focused on the nation-state to advance labor’s
cause, social unionism recognized that workers were part of society and had to organize beyond the workplace. In South Africa under apartheid and in Brazil under a military dictatorship, the new social unionism flourished most clearly. In the 1980s, trade unions sought alliances within the wider community, with church-based groups and with single-issue campaigns. A democratic equivalent was the common denominator, and inner-union democracy also blossomed. By the late 1990s some analysts were calling for a “global social movement unionism” (Moody 1997). In a different context this southern-led initiative was heading toward being “mainstreamed” and adopted by once-conservative trade union movements.

One of the most spectacular forms of union revitalization has occurred in the United States, once the epitome of business unionism. The 1995 victory of the New Voice slate of John Sweeney marked a decisive turning point in US labor politics and opened the door to new thinking. It was in relation to community unionism – focused on migrant workers in particular – that the revival of the US labor movement found many of its clearest expressions (see Ness 2005). Community unions in the US context seem to be small-scale bridging or mediating institutions based in specific communities rather than the workplace. They are thus not trade unions in the traditional sense but spring from solidarity movements, faith-based movements, and legal or social services groups. Mindful of the overwhelming importance of legal status for migrant workers, they are, as Janice Fine puts it, “as likely to focus as much attention on organising to change immigration policy as they can on labor market issues” (Fine 2005: 154).

There is also clear evidence in the United States that poor people are unionizing and that trade unions have learnt lessons from the local movements of women, African Americans, Mexican farm workers, and so on. As Vanessa Tate puts it, “poor workers' unions ... value direct action, flexibility and collaboration ... over the bureaucratic and legalistic methods on which traditional unions have often relied” (Tate 2005: 310). In the current economic recession huge pressure will be placed on social alliances, and protectionism by the secure will be an expected reaction. There are, however, signs that the fusion of labor and the new social movements will continue, and “the next upsurge,” as Dan Clawson calls it, will see “a combination of trade unions’ commitment and democratic representativity with the imagination and energy of the new social movements” (Clawson 2003: 196). If this materializes then the South’s social movement unionism of the 1980s would have found a worthy northern successor. Labor would have moved “beyond North and South” much as globalizing capital has done so effectively.

In Britain also there have been extremely interesting moves toward what they call community unionism. The emphasis was placed on securing new members and using new organizational methods. Reaching beyond the workplace and the traditional collective bargaining mechanisms, some unions (particularly in the capital, London) began to reach out to migrant unorganized workers, in particular. The London minimum wage campaign launched in 2001 saw intense work at grassroots level and within trade unions to create a case for “community unionism” supportive of the mainly migrant low-paid workers. In the capital trade unions were slow to join what has been described as “ad hoc, spontaneous, localised or geographically-based organizations with local partners” (Holgate 2009: 66), but bureaucratic inertia was overcome and in the process the glimmer of a new unionism could be discovered. As Jane Wills has remarked, this new community unionism in the UK is for now incipient but it is allowing unions to find common cause with groups cemented around religious, ethnic, or other affiliations, effectively “linking the struggle for redistribution with that and recognition, the universal with the particular, the economic with the cultural” (Wills 2001: 469).

Looking to the past, we saw a pre-national era of labor-movement generation; looking to the future, can we envisage a greater renewal or revitalization of labor as a social movement? First, we need to acknowledge, as Karl Polanyi,
against all apologists, did: that the purpose of trade unions is “exactly that of interfering with the laws of supply and demand in respect to human labor, and removing it from the orbit of the market” (Polanyi 2000: 186). If the decommodification of labor – rather than getting the best price for labor power – becomes the driving force of trade unions, they will find themselves at the fore of a much broader global social counter-movement against the depredations of the unregulated market. This would need to happen at all levels of human activity, from the local to the global. To the extent that trade unions and the wider labor movement take up this task they will begin to pose a counter-hegemonic alternative once again.

**Conclusions**

Reviewing the above myriad surveys of informalization, migration, and trade union revitalization, we can draw some general assessments. We have now moved beyond a conception of North and South as separate universes with forms of capitalist development that were fundamentally different or subject to different laws of motion. The last 25 years’ growth spurt of global capitalism has, for good or for ill, produced a clearly unified system, albeit one subject to uneven development. This fact is corroborated by the global recession of 2008–9, where there was literally no place to hide for capital or workers alike.

Capitalism is not, however, a monolith and its development patterns are highly contradictory – not least in the fact that this last dynamic phase associated with globalization has generated a massive expansion of the working-class movement. While they are not necessarily capitalism’s gravediggers, their social interest (not least to survive) puts them in opposition to the dominant order. This provides, at the very least, an opportunity for trade union revitalization. Globalization has opened as many doors as it has closed for the social counter-movements its unregulated market expansion has generated. This does not mean that only a global labor response will suffice to contest the global capitalist order. An integrated multi-scalar response, from local, through subregional, national, and regional to the global, will all contest capitalist assumed superior knowledge of what is best for humanity. But they will be most effective when the global labor movement is capable of providing leadership and can move beyond defensive reactions.

Political will and decision-making are now crucial and nothing is preordained in this unstable interregnum of the capitalist global order. The Left, too, often assumes capitalism is more coherent and far-sighted than it actually is. Whatever structural obstacles exist, social and political agency still counts. To give a national-level example, Argentina’s working class nearly doubled in size between 1930 and 1945 as a consequence of import substitution industrialization. The socialists and communists in the unions turned their backs on the internal migrants who created the new working class. An obscure army officer, Juan Perón, was aided only by the syndicalist sector, and ever since we have had a Peronist working class. Things could have turned out differently.

Labor migration will inevitably be used by capitalists to undermine labor standards. The precariat is likely to become a global norm and its emergence will undoubtedly put severe strains on the organized labor movement. However, the new migration is also a huge opportunity for the labor movement. If it practices a belief that “internationalism begins at home,” and recruits migrants and advances their cause, it will assume the broader mantle of democratic transformation. The most risky labor movement strategy today would actually be “business as usual” and a hope that normal service will be resumed any time soon. Now the prudent choice is to seize the moment, to take risks, to pursue alliances previously unheard of (such as Teamsters and Turtles in Seattle, 1999), and to look at what unites the broader social counter-movements rather than what separates them.

Now is not the time to defend vested interests or rely on protectionism of any sort. Rather there is a need, in the face of a crumbling but increasingly desperate dominant order, to pursue a broader democratization agenda. We
are now playing for much higher stakes and we need to be bold, hoping to recover some of the fervor of early labor organizing and the emergence of the new unionism.

Social movement unionism is not a panacea and cannot provide a blueprint for all national situations. However, the organized labor movement needs to come to terms with the limitations of both an economistic labor strategy and a single-minded political unionism that places its faith in a reforming state. In doing so, it will need to explore the rich repertoire of social and community unionism.

SEE ALSO: European Union: enlargement and the free movement of labor; Informal labor and irregular migrant workers; Marxist theories of migration; Reserve army of labor and migration; Temporary migrant workers and labor organization

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