

Book Review

Hensman, Rohini (2011) *Workers, Unions, and Global Capitalism: Lessons from India*. New York: Columbia University Press. ISBN: 978-0-231-14800-9.

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Workers, Unions and Global Capitalism is an important book that challenges the dominant anti-globalisation arguments in the contemporary labour discourse. Much of the contemporary critical literature, Hensman argues, uses globalisation as a straw man for attacking either the right or the left. The extreme right opposes it from the standpoint of economic and cultural nationalism while the left wing groups associate it with neoliberal deregulation of the economy that turns a blind eye on inequality. The result is that many policymakers use the rhetoric of globalisation opportunistically to pre-empt economic, political and cultural competition from outsiders just as the aid donors and corporate strategists invoke it to justify the homogenisation of institutions and consumption across national borders. Underlying most of these responses is a lack of clarity about what is meant by globalization.

Hensman calls her method of research emancipatory action research, which surpasses the blanket condemnation of globalisation but also goes beyond romanticising a utopian idea of revolution. Instead, she turns to history. The Indian labour movement of the 1920s was closely associated with its national independence movement, both in terms of its ways of formulating the local idioms of resistance as well as in finding international alliances. Interestingly, alliances were found not only among the colonies in Africa and Asia seeking independence from Britain, but from within Britain itself.

Hensman rightly points out that casualization of work is not the outcome of recent globalisation alone, but has a much longer history in India. The Indian government inherited a segmented labour market from its colonial predecessor, where segmentation was achieved through differentiated policy treatment for large and small firms. As this policy differentiation was reversed in the 1970s, large firms either directly transferred jobs to the informal sector, or contracted their operations to outside parties, thereby ending employment of thousands of workers who eventually sought jobs in the informal sector. Informal labour constitutes the single biggest problem facing the global labour movement today.

The book investigates democracy within labour unions, arguing that they are often dominated by full-time unionists hired by central unions with party affiliations. While there have been clusters of strong factory-level union they have consistently had conflicts with the central unions. Yet, especially in mega factories within India, the former's technical qualifications and their insider status have often availed them with better understanding of technical and legal matters. As a result, employees' unions in India have been more effective in negotiating specific hurdles involving issues of work mechanisation, health and safety, industry mergers and equality of treatment, even as the broader trade union apparatus remains dominated by the party affiliates.

Two key bottlenecks of international efforts to deal with the effects of globalisation on labour are identified in this book: international migration and global corporate codes of conduct. Hensman finds the codes of conduct of limited value. In cautiously distancing herself from the reactionary utopian agenda seeking deglobalisation, she shows considerable awareness of the situation that labour movements will have to stand against several waves of neoliberal influences.

Workers, Unions, and Global Capitalism: Lessons from India makes an important contribution to the study of global labour. However, one of the major shortcomings of this book is that its scope is extremely wide and its organisation is not always easy to follow. Whether the book is situating the labour movement within the globalisation discourse (as in the first two chapters) or in calling for a redefinition of the role of the nation-state for a new global labour agenda (as in the last chapter), Hensman rushes through her arguments somewhat abruptly, sometimes leaving her readers wondering about the logic of her prescriptive order. While Hensman deserves credit for using India's labour movement as a case study to open broader discussions on a global movement, the way local and global are juxtaposed against each other is sometimes difficult to follow. A slightly edited version – possibly in its newer editions given that its contemporary relevance is set to make the first version highly sought after – would make this book a valuable resource material for those interested in the debate around labour and globalisation.

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