

## *Book Review*

Mosoetsa, Sarah and Williams, Michelle (eds) (2012) *Labour in the Global South: Challenges and Alternatives for Workers*. Geneva: International Labour Organization. ISBN: 978-92-2-126238-1

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The past thirty years have been tough for organized labor. New technologies have changed labor processes and intensified capital mobility; global economic pressures have altered relationships between states and capital, prompting global institutions to present economic policy in terms of a choice between jobs and labor protections. With a growing sense of desperation, labor activists everywhere are realizing that they may have to rethink strategies inherited from an earlier era, and look for new ways to assert labor's voice.

In their thoughtful introduction to *Labour in the Global South*, editors Sarah Mosoetsa and Michelle Williams note the challenges that an ever-more integrated global economy and new patterns of industrial production have created for traditional unions. New technologies mean that employers can move production easily, undermining workers' ability to threaten disruption. That threat is enhanced by new management techniques, as employers can easily outsource production to sites not covered by union contracts. Even the character of workers has changed: designed to represent largely male industrial workforces, unions in much of the world find it difficult to attract workers whose 'atypical' experiences don't fit easily into existing union culture. Outside the workplace, new challenges expose new vulnerabilities: too often, when shredded safety nets and global environmental degradation threaten workers' communities, traditional unions' workplace focus can become a set of blinders.

Unions everywhere are struggling in this brave new world, but perhaps especially so in the global South, in post-colonial societies too often marked by longstanding inequalities and authoritarian political cultures, where governments seem especially vulnerable to global pressures, and where, too often, labor protections exist only on paper. As the various research articles in *Labour in the Global South* make clear, new production processes and global pressures have combined to further erode workers' power to disrupt production, and reduce broad community support. Especially in the post-Cold War world, labor is struggling to mobilize workers and their communities, and to mount an effective challenge to market fundamentalism.

Several articles underscore the difficulties posed by new kinds of work, and new workers. Akua Britwum, Karen Douglas and Sue Ledwith describe the tensions many unions face as more women become workers: with leaders and organizational cultures long dominated by male workers, many unions find it difficult to fully incorporate women's concerns and women's voices into their bargaining agenda. Similarly, new technologies and new kinds of work can create new organizational puzzles; when the South African government decided to create municipal call centers, hoping to make government more accessible, the country's public sector unions seem to have been ill-prepared

to take up the issues confronting a very different kind of worker, and a different kind of workplace. And, perhaps most disheartening in the context of rapid environmental degradation, labor leaders often find it easier to focus on longstanding immediate concerns – that is, members’ wages and working conditions – than to take on new goals. In South Africa, Jacklyn Cock shows, even when they try to think beyond the workplace, many unionists find it hard to prioritize climate change over more traditional labor concerns like creating jobs.

Several articles focus on unions’ relationship to governments, often stressing the way long-standing ties to political parties can limit labor’s voice. In too many cases, especially where labor leaders are closely allied to political parties, political loyalties have restricted labor’s demands rather than strengthening them, limiting unions’ ability to articulate the goals of workers and their communities. Zia Rahman and Tom Langford have harsh words for Bangladesh’s mainstream unions, arguing that labor’s political ties prevented national labor leaders from supporting women workers in the country’s expanding garment industry. Even labor-friendly governments may disappoint union allies: Christoph Scherrer and Luciana Hachmann suggest that labor’s recent experiences in Germany, Brazil and South Africa left unionists disappointed, as labor-friendly parties won elections but adopted business-friendly policies.

If the challenges facing labor today are all too visible, the opportunities and alternatives remain a little murkier. As Mosoetsa and Williams suggest, sharing research on labor’s experiences in different settings seem a promising way to begin to think more broadly about different possible responses.

In the most straightforward alternative strategy offered in this volume, Jana Silverman says that Uruguay’s organized labor has found that what many Latin Americans are beginning to call ‘the post-Washington consensus’ moment may offer new possibilities: unionists have worked closely with a labor-friendly coalition, the Frente Amplio, to redesign Uruguay’s labor law, strengthening union protections and social programs.

For sustained gains, the volume suggests, labor activists may have to construct new forms of solidarity outside the workplace, and beyond the kind of political alliances that have so often demanded that labor acquiescence to business-friendly allies. Describing protests by telemarketers in Brazil, Ruy Braga writes that young white-collar workers first turned to the Workers Party government, and then to traditional unions for leadership and support. Disappointed, they have now moved outside a standard union repertoire, Braga writes, although his article remains surprisingly silent on the issues these protestors have championed, or what gains they might have won. Similarly, Bruno Dobrusin explores tensions within Argentina’s major union federations during the country’s economic crisis: workers who took over bankrupt factories seemed relatively isolated, and most observers assumed their efforts were simply staving off inevitable collapse. Surprisingly, several businesses have prospered. But what, precisely, explains their success? The businesses themselves were well-managed before the collapse, and, Dobrosin notes, these ‘recovered factories’ have also benefited from Argentina’s longstanding labor tradition as well as government ‘financial support and subsidies’ – but lacking details, it is hard to know what broad lessons labor activists in other settings might learn from the example.

Can a new labor movement take on alternative goals, beyond the workplace? In the volume’s final essay, Sarbeswara Sahoo discusses India’s Self Employed Women’s Association’s ‘green

livelihood' initiatives, stressing the organization's efforts to provide a voice for workers who are normally left unrepresented in national labor organizations. About 93 percent of India's workers are shut out of formal collective bargaining; SEWA has fought for expanded legal rights and social security, especially for marginalized women workers. Recognizing that environmental degradation poses real threats to the poor, SEWA has recently focused on creating forums to discuss 'green' alternatives, from promoting solar pumps to developing eco-tourism projects – again, offering a tantalizing vision of an alternative direction for labor, but lacking concrete details of what it would look like in practice.

That details for alternative visions are so blurry only underscores the importance of the questions that motivate this volume. In a rapidly changing world, on what basis can labor build new forms of solidarity? Do new forms of work offer new opportunities for mobilization, and can older labor organizations change to meet these new circumstances? What new forms of community might be mobilized to support workers' demands, and what should those demands be? Under what circumstances can political alliances be used to strengthen labor's demands, rather than submerging them? Can activists find ways to address environmental change without ignoring inequality or exclusion? It would be too much to expect volumes like this one to answer such large questions, but in provoking a conversation – by sharing research and raising questions about how activists have responded to these challenges in different settings – *Labour in the Global South* should help provoke important conversations.

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