

Book Review

Immanuel Ness (2016) *Southern Insurgency: The Coming of the Global Working Class*. London: Pluto Press.

ISBN 978-0-7453-3599-5

***Reviewed by Kim Scipes, Purdue University Northwest,
Westville, Indiana, United States***

Immanuel Ness has written a timely and very interesting book on the emergence of labour struggles in the Global South. Focusing on particular struggles in India and South Africa, and providing a larger view of labour struggles in the Pearl River Delta industrial belt in China, Ness is reporting a shift of class struggles from the (formerly) industrialised world to the industrialising world of developing countries. Ness sees the emergence of new labour movements in the Global South as an exciting development, one worthy of support by people around the world, and a hopeful one.

He begins by discussing global changes: “The rapid industrialization that has occurred in the Global South over the past four decades now dominates global working patterns” and, accordingly, “the industrial working class has not disappeared but has been relocated and reconstituted in the South in larger numbers than ever before in history” (pp. 1–2).¹ Ness uses this development to challenge efforts to dismiss the working class in general – by writers from both the right and the left – and to argue the importance of recognising and understanding struggles at the point of production, reasserting the validity of the Marxist political project.

Importantly, taking this global approach allows him to recognise that the super-exploitation of these workers is the latest development of Western/Northern imperialism, which gives his analysis a weight it would not otherwise have. It also joins the development of neo-liberal economics – beginning around 1980 – in both the Global North and South.

Ness also focuses attention on the role of migrant labour in the explosive expansion of this new Southern working class. Interestingly, he compares the role of migrants to those who traversed the Atlantic to help play a key role in industrialising the United States.

The heart of the book, however, is the reporting on the actual workers and their struggles in the three countries, setting up a comparative analysis among such struggles. Ness focuses on particular struggles in India and South Africa – on struggles by the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union in a multinational corporation-dominated Indian export processing zone, and by platinum miners in South Africa – and then discusses developments in China.

In India, attention is paid to the expansion of multinational capital and workers’ efforts to organise within the Special Economic Zones. Ness points out that the new industrial districts around New Delhi have expanded to over 2.5 million workers, permanent and contractual, who

¹ Citations that appear in this manner refer to pages in the book being reviewed.

work for the multinational corporations, which have been sought by the various Indian governments since the early 1990s. He focuses on the struggles at Maruti Suzuki, which is India's largest automobile producer, and details workers' struggles there since the early 2000s, although the union was ultimately defeated and replaced with a company union.

The chapter on South Africa focuses on platinum miners, paying particular attention to developments before and in the aftermath of the August 2012 massacre of thirty-four mineworkers at Marikana. Mining is certainly a central component of South Africa's economy, and provides over 30 per cent of its exports, and Ness details the development of struggles within this segment of the economy. He shows that the rebellion by rank-and-file miners was primarily against the mining companies, but that it also was against the complicity of the National Union of Mineworkers, the dominant union in this industry.

Ness's chapter on developments in China was the most interesting to this reviewer. Ness focuses on the adoption of neo-liberal economic policies by leaders of the Chinese Communist Party in the early 1980s, paying special attention to foreign investment: "Foreign capital has recognized the Chinese model of labor relations, which was capable of suppressing the demands of the seemingly inexhaustible supply of workers, as exemplary for reliable and stable investment" (p. 107).

Ness discusses foreign investment and workers' responses in considerable detail. He provides data related to the rise of China's increased exports and their value, discusses the particular situation of the Pearl River Delta, comments on state capitalism and the rise of the new working class, notes the role of migrant labour in China's rapid industrialisation, explains how young workers are utilizing labour shortages to gain some "space" for their efforts, addresses the role of the established national labour centre and especially its role in regard to workers in export processing zones, relates stories from the wave of labour protests between 1997 and 2002, reports the 2008 labour contract law, and then focuses on the massive struggle against the Yue Yuen company in Dongguan during March–April 2014 and considers its aftermath. This is a very strong chapter, putting things in a national (and global) context but then connecting them at a factory level, illustrating the linkages and the interconnected dynamics of labour struggles in China.

While the chapter on China is the strongest in the book, Ness's empirical work altogether is the heart of this monograph. He provides considerable detail for the struggles he discusses. I like that he provides case studies from three important countries in the Global South, and I particularly appreciate the inclusion of visual aids such as maps and charts in the book.

That being said, I would have liked to see more nuance in his analytical section, and a better historical perspective. He generalises his findings far more than I think he can support: he takes rather confined struggles – albeit important ones – and suggests that they are indicative of struggles across the respective countries, without supporting that larger claim. Similarly, while correctly noting the shift of production to the Global South, and the massive numbers of workers involved there in production, he suggests that these workers all are becoming class conscious and unifying, when he cannot and does not show that.

This ties into the lack of historical perspective: labour struggles and organisation have been taking place for a much longer time period than he relates. Ness sees the emergence of this "fierce workers' movement" developing only in the "early twenty-first century" (p. 3), totally ignoring the shift of industrial production beginning in the last half of the twentieth century (Argentina, Brazil, India, Mexico and South Africa), and later including Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan

and, to lesser extents, countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Turkey. Along with this industrialisation, we see the emergence of an entire new type of trade unionism – social movement unionism – during the 1970s and 1980s in countries such as Brazil, the Philippines and South Africa – along with militant labour struggles across countries such as Argentina and South Korea. Recognising these earlier developments would have given his larger claims more weight.

With a longer historical horizon, he could have then related his work to the theoretical work around social movement unionism which, as I showed in a 2014 article in *Class, Race and Corporate Power*, is really about trying to understand the nature of the development of labour struggles in the world, and particularly in the Global South.

We need to recognise the struggles of our sister and brother workers around the world, and to build global labour solidarity with them, which also means learning from them. Ness helps undermine the general conceptualisation that workers in the Global South are passive “victims”, showing that workers are struggling against tremendous exploitation and in the face of direct oppression, demanding respect, seeking a better world, and learning important lessons that should be of use to workers globally. Immanuel Ness’s book is a valuable contribution to building that global labour solidarity.

REFERENCE

Scipes, Kim (2014) Social Movement Unionism or Social Justice Unionism? Disentangling Theoretical Confusion within the Global Labor Movement. *Class, Race and Corporate Power*, 2(3): n.p.. Available online at <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol2/iss3/9>.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

KIM SCIPES is the editor of a volume of writings, *Building Global Labor Solidarity in a Time of Accelerating Globalization* (Haymarket Books, April 2016). He is also the author of *KMU: Building Genuine Trade Unionism in the Philippines, 1980–1994* (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day Publishers, 1996), and *AFL–CIO’s Secret War against Developing Country Workers: Solidarity or Sabotage?* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010 hardback, 2011 paperback). He is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Purdue University Northwest, in Westville, Indiana, USA. Additional material can be found on his web site, <http://faculty.pnc.edu/kscipes>. [Email: kimscipes@earthlink.net]