

## A Global Meeting of Labour Historians

**Veranstalter:** Global Labour History Network (GLHN)

**Datum, Ort:** 03.03.2017–04.03.2017, Noida

**Bericht von:** Lukas Neissl, International Conference of Labour and Social History (ITH); with a contribution by Susan Zimmermann, Central European University, Budapest

The Global Labour History Network (GLHN), established during a meeting of more than 40 representatives of labour history institutions from Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, Oceania and South America in Barcelona/Spain in June 2015, realised its first conference in Noida/India in May 2017. The first conference of the network brought together about 30 labour historians from 14 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and North and South America. It was hosted by the Association of Indian Labour Historians (AILH) and the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute (VVGnLI) in Noida.

The conference was opened by S.K. SASIKUMAR (Noida/Uttar Pradesh) on behalf of the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute (VVGnLI), Rana P. BEHAL (Delhi) representing the Association of Indian Labour Historians (AILH) and Marcel VAN DER LINDEN (Amsterdam) on behalf of the GLHN. In his opening statement, Sasikumar underlined the importance of the collaboration between the VVGnLI established in 1974 and the AILH founded in 1998. One of the aims of the AILH has been the digitization of records on the history of labour in India, and conference participants could visit the collection hosted by the VVGnLI. Behal underlined the significance of the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute for the work of the AILH. He also pointed to the involvement of some AILH historians with present-day labour issues and labour struggles.

Opening the panel presentations, MARCELO BADARÓ MATTOS (Niterói/Rio de Janeiro) started with an overview on the history of Brazilian labour studies (often carried out by sociologists in the early days) and new trends in Brazilian labour history, including both a transnational turn and a focus on additional historical regions within Brazil.

He also outlined the institutionalisation of Brazilian labour history within „Mundos do Trabalho (Worlds of Labour)“, a working group of the Brazilian History Association ANPUH. „Mundos do Trabalho“ regularly organizes national and international conferences and publishes a biannual journal under the same name. Prabhu P. MOHAPATRA (Delhi) opened his presentation with remarks on some striking chronological similarities as compared to Latin America regarding the development of labour history in India. While in the 1950s labour studies were still based in the paradigm of modernization theory, by the 1970s/1980s post-colonial critique had firmly established a place for peasant workers and the recognition of cultural factors shaping the history of labour in India. More recently, the history of labour before the modern period has attracted increasing attention. A lively discussion ensued on the relationship between the history of labour „out there“ (including the decline of the labour movement from the 1980s onwards) and the involvement of labour historians themselves in activism, on the one hand, and the development of the historiography on the other. The concepts of „precarious“ and „informal“ labour and their relationship to the politics from above of dividing the working class and the self-empowerment of labour from below were considered.

In the following session, JUN KINOSHITA (Tokyo) outlined the current state of labour historiography in Japan, stressing that currently there is neither an academic association, nor an academic journal dedicated exclusively to the history of labour. However, the „Journal of Ohara Institute for Social Research“ serves as an important publication forum for Japanese labour historians. Kinoshita argued that the lack of English translations of those contributions has contributed to the relative isolation of Japanese labour history. LONGHAU CUI (Shanghai) sketched a brief overview on Chinese labour relations from the beginnings of the Ming dynasty in the 14th century to the most recent developments in present-day China. The early development of a (partly „free“) contract labour market found a sudden end after the establishment of the People's Republic

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of China. State influence on labour relations constitutes a factor of long-term relevance for the history of labour in China. However, in the wake of recent labour struggles these actors have come under increased pressure from below. SILKE NEUNSINGER (Huddinge/Stockholm) presented the „European Labour History Network (ELHN)“ founded in 2013. The most recent developments in several European countries to create national labour history associations point towards a new trend of consolidation of labour historiography in Europe. The organisational structure of the ELHN is based on different autonomous working groups focusing on a wide range of themes and topics. TIBOR VALUCH (Budapest/Eger) argued that the historical peculiarities of the development of capitalism in East-Central Europe require specific approaches. He presented a synopsis on the current state of labour history in the region and pointed to decades of labour historiography under state socialism. Although social science research in East-Central Europe has emancipated from the former ideological and political constraints of state socialism, methodological nationalism characterized East-Central European labour history after the collapse of state socialism. Only during the last few years, attempts have been made to conceptually integrate labour history in East-Central Europe into the broader frameworks of global labour history. The discussion touched upon the relevance of a focus on the state when conducting research on the history of labour, and on questions regarding the institutionalization of labour history.

Outlining the present state of and debate in labour history in Senegal and French-speaking West and Central Africa, BABACAR FALL (Dakar) and OMAR GUEYE (Dakar) opened the third session on regional developments. In contrast to English-speaking countries on the African continent, there are no specialized research institutions or journals on labour history in French-speaking West and Central Africa. The history of the labour movement in the region has been closely connected to broader struggles for equality and democratization. Fall and Gueye emphasized the necessity to continuously decolonize labour history in Senegal

and French-speaking West and Central Africa from French historiography and illustrated the opportunities and challenges of the appropriation of global perspectives for regional and local history in the region. BRYAN PALMER (Peterborough/Ontario) presented a concise overview on the recent history of labour historiography in Canada, starting with initiatives from the militant labour movement and radical student movement in the 1960s. The foundation of the „Canadian Committee of Labour History (CCLH)“ and the journal „Labour/Le Travail“ in the early 1970s marked important milestones. Palmer emphasized the continuity between „old“ and „new“ labour history in Canada. The CCLH has always pursued a broad notion of labour, particularly embracing feminist studies. More recently, the CCLH has consolidated a working relationship with the „Canadian Association of Work and Labour Studies (CAWLS)“, a multi-disciplinary research network of mostly younger labour scholars. LEON FINK (Chicago) discussed labour historiography in the US. „The Labor and Working-Class History Association (LAWCHA)“ and their journal „Labor: Studies in Working-Class History“ serve as the most important organisational basis for US labour history today, laying particular emphasis on comparison and conceptual questions. In recent years, labour history in the US has turned to political and social forces constraining labour, to labour in borderlands and outside factories, and to labour in the history of capitalism. Fink stressed the necessity for labour historians to confront right-wing populism and to investigate the development of working-class conservatism and workers' right-wing agency. In conclusion of this panel, participants discussed the status of the white, male working class in past and present economies, whether labour history is still tainted by a conceptually problematic focus on this group and alternative paradigms of writing its history.

The first conference day closed with an evening lecture by DILIP SIMEON (Delhi) on „Contemporary Indian Society and Politics in Historical Perspective“. His discussion on the relation of class and caste, extra-economic coercion, communal violence and the history of

party politics in India was followed by a vivid debate on contemporary Indian politics.

The second conference day started with a presentation by ARUNA MAGIER (New York) on the challenges of documenting the history and struggles of grassroots organisations of workers from South Asia in the US, highlighting the importance of this immigrant group for the history of labour in both the United States and their countries of origin. The presentation discussed the relationship between workers' struggles and the need to document the efforts of advocacy organisations supporting them in these struggles. The conference then moved from reviewing the development and state of labour historiography in the various world regions to the presentation of several important research and documentary institutions. MATTHIAS VAN ROSSUM (Amsterdam) gave a presentation on the „International Institute of Social History (IISH)“ in Amsterdam/The Netherlands, describing some of the recent archival, collection and research policies and activities of the well-known institute. The effects of more recent restructuring measures in the Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), to which the IISH is affiliated since the late 1970s, are not yet fully visible. STEFAN BERGER (Bochum) presented the „Institute for Social Movements (ISB)“ at the Ruhr University Bochum in Germany. The institute is equipped with the most important specialised research library on social movements and regions of heavy industry in Germany, serves as a trade union archive and archive for the Ruhr region and publishes the biannual journal „Moving the Social – Journal of Social History and the History of Social Movements“. Berger outlined the most important ongoing research at the institute on the history of labour and social movements, mining history, industrial heritage and regional identity, nationalism and historical narratives, memory history and workplace history. ANDREAS ECKERT (Berlin) spoke on the „International Research Center Work and Human Life Cycle in Global History (re:work)“, part of the Käte Hamburger International Centres in the Humanities funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. Every year re:work grants fellowships to 10-15

researchers inviting them to Berlin/Germany and, thus, has turned into an important forum of labour history, which brings together researchers from all over the world. re:work organises workshops, international conferences as well as summer schools for PhD students. SUSAN ZIMMERMANN (Budapest) and LUKAS NEISSL (Vienna) presented the „International Conference of Labour and Social History (ITH)“ based in Vienna/Austria and particularly known for its annual conferences, each of them addressing a specific topic of labour history. They briefly outlined the history of the ITH from its function during the Cold War and its later transformation into a platform of global labour history. DONALD WEBER (Ghent) gave a presentation on the new opportunities for labour and social history involved in building Virtual Research Environments (VRE). After a brief explanation of the most important features of such virtual environments and resources, he pointed towards the numerous advantages for labour historians, particularly regarding the management of digital resources, and introduced the project „Heritage of the People's Europe (HOPE)“ co-funded by the European Union and the „Social History Portal“<sup>1</sup>. RAQUEL VARELA (Lisbon) presented the „International Association Strikes and Social Conflicts“, a network aiming to promote studies on labour and social conflicts in an interdisciplinary, global, long-term historical and non-Eurocentric perspective. Besides regular conferences every two years, the association also publishes the open access journal „Workers of the World: International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflict“. The experiences and challenges in the establishment of this association might be relevant in building of the Global Labour History Network (GLHN).

Participants asked many questions in relation to the past and present of the institutions of labour history presented during these sessions. The debate underlined the importance, but also critically interrogated the present „hype“ around the digitization of historical sources. As an extremely cost-intensive enterprise, digitization potentially drains away resources from substantive research and might

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.socialhistoryportal.org/> (24.05.2017).

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enhance inequalities in terms of access to sources and privilege some sources over others.

In the closing session, participants of the conference agreed that they had learned a lot about the past, present and prospects of labour history, its institutions and its debates in many parts of the world. This in itself is an important step in advancing global and regional labour histories. The conference elected a steering committee of the GLHN, consisting of Marcelo Badaró Mattos (Brazil), Longhau Cui (China), Kazue Enoki (Japan), Babacar Fall (Senegal), Aruna Magier (USA), Silke Neunsinger (Sweden) and Joan Sangster (Canada), as well as two senior advisors, Andreas Eckert (Germany) and Marcel van der Linden (The Netherlands). The second GLHN Conference is planned for 2019 or 2020 in Saint-Louis/Senegal, with a possible small preparatory conference in conjunction with an ITH Conference in Linz/Austria.

#### **Conference Overview:**

##### *Inaugural Session*

S.K. Sasikumar (V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, Noida)

Rana P. Behal (Association of Indian Labour Historians, Delhi)

Marcel van der Linden (International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam)

##### *Panel Presentations I*

Marcelo Badaró Mattos (Universidade Federal Fluminense, Brasil): Brazilian Labour History: An Overview

Prabhu P. Mohapatra (University of Delhi): Indian Labour History

##### *Panel Presentations II*

Jun Kinoshita (Kokugakuin University, Tokyo): Japan: Workers in Corporate Society

Cui Longhao (East China Normal University, Shanghai): The Difficult Transition from Status to Contract: An Overview of the Research about the Labour Relationship in China from 1500

Silke Neunsinger (Labour Movement Archives and Library, Stockholm): The European Labour History Network (ELHN)

Tibor Valuch (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest and Eszterházy Károly

University, Eger): The Contemporary Labour History in East-Central-Europe: Researches, Results, Trends and Possibilities

##### *Panel Presentations III*

Omar Gueye (Cheikh Anta Diop University, Dakar) and Babacar Fall (Cheikh Anta Diop University, Dakar): Building a Global Labour History Network in Africa

Bryan Palmer (Trent University, Peterborough/Ontario): The Canadian Committee of Labour History (CCLH)

Leon Fink (University of Illinois, Chicago): The Labor and Working-Class History Association (LAWCHA)

##### *Special Lecture*

Dilip Simeon (Delhi): Contemporary Indian Society and Politics in Historical Perspective

##### *Panel Presentations IV*

Aruna Magier (New York University): South Asian Diasporic Labour Organizations: Documentation and Archiving for Advocacy and Research

Matthias van Rossum (International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam): The International Institute of Social History (IISH)

Stefan Berger (Ruhr University Bochum): The Institute for Social Movements (ISB)

##### *Panel Presentations V*

Andreas Eckert (Humboldt University, Berlin): International Research Center Work and Human Life Cycle in Global History (re:work)

Susan Zimmermann (Central European University, Budapest) and Lukas Neissl (International Conference of Labour and Social History, Vienna): The International Conference of Labour and Social History (ITH)

Donald Weber (Amsab-Institute of Social History, Ghent): Building a Social History Virtual Research Environment

Raquel Varela (Universidade de Lisboa): The GLHN and the International Association for the Study of Strikes and Social Conflicts and its Journal Workers of the World

##### *Concluding Debate and Plans for the Future*

Tagungsbericht *A Global Meeting of Labour His-*

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