

Workers of the World – Exploring global perspectives on labour from the 1950s to the present

Veranstalter: Sociological Research Institute (SOFI) e.V., University of Göttingen; Volkswagen Foundation, Hannover

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Interest in „labour“ has risen again over the last years. This is not surprising, as the contemporary worlds of labour currently experience a series of shifts and profound transitions, among them the mere fact that the worldwide group of wage workers has increased sharply. These profound changes are also reflected in such keywords as „informalization“, „digital labour“, „rising unemployment“, or, once again, „the end of labour“. At the same time, research on the topic continues to be fragmented in different disciplines and approaches, often with little dialogue among them. In addition, and despite claims to the contrary, most enquiries remain limited to a national view, studying their cases only in terms of the nation-state they are located in. The Hanover symposium „Workers of the World“ thus took two bold ambitions as its starting point: First, to ask how global perspectives can be arrived at, perspectives which are able to actually link local constellations with overarching dynamics and which go beyond some preconceived ideas of labour in the age of „globalization“. Second, the organizers resolved to see researchers leave their „comfort zones“ of disciplinary backgrounds as well as area specializations. To this end, the conference hosted an impressive array of three keynote speakers as well as paper and poster presenters. The conference was clearly poised to stir debate and „alienate“ established ways of seeing one’s own object of research; as numerous participants agreed, it succeeded very well in this endeavour, turning into one of those relatively rare academic events which actually break routines and open new perspectives. In view of the large number of interventions, this summary will thus sum-up the lines of de-

bate emerging from the keynotes, survey and roundtable interventions and won’t be able to do justice to the diversity of knowledge contained in the papers, comments and posters.¹ The conference was divided in three larger streams, each of which represents established areas of study and different „scales“ through which to look at labour: the political regulation of labour; labour at the site of production itself; and collective action and the politics of labour.

Following the main imperative of the conference – bringing different disciplines and area specializations together – the conference was opened by four survey interventions of „field mappers“ which staked out varying dimensions of the situation of work, workers, and their movements, both today and in the past. NICOLE MAYER-AHUJA (Göttingen), representing one of the two conference organizers, pointed to some of the major themes of this conference: She highlighted how „workers“ are a category both with a tendency to be globally uniform (all workers share the need to sell their labour force to make a living) and – at the same time – sharply differentiated according to region, situation, and status. This opposition between a „flat“ world of common positions and shared trends, and a world of fragmentation, specificity, even incommensurability, ran like a red thread through the debates of the conference. It not only divided the scholars into what has often been labelled as „lumpers“ and „splitters“, but also pointed to burning academic and political issues: One of these is the question if there is a „race to the bottom“ with wages and labour conditions generally deteriorating vis-à-vis a capital that is both geographically and politically completely unbound. Another is the question if a common interest among labourers, working and living in such different conditions, can be articulated and made politically effective for improving labour rights. Mayer-Ahuja also pointed to the critical importance

¹For an overview of the broad scope of topics and cases discussed in the papers readers are referred to the conference programme resp. to a longer version of this report available at: <https://www.volkswagenstiftung.de/de/veranstaltungen/veranstaltungsberichte/berichte/documentation-symposium-workers-of-the-world-exploring-global-perspectives-on-labour-from-the-1950s-to-the-present.html>.

of „time“ and „historical context“ in the study of labour: Contemporary constellations and changes cannot be understood without placing them in longer developments. Here, the 1970s might be seen as a watershed: It divides a 30 year-long „before“ characterized by state policies to regulate labour and by strong labour movements, from an „after“ ever since with a push towards informalization by both states and enterprises.

From different perspectives, the three following „field mappers“ took up these themes again: PETER ALEXANDER (Johannesburg) asked how much „labour“ there is in today’s protest and politics. He highlighted the degree to which workers’ struggles have disappeared from popular struggles, at least in the perception and vision of the actors involved, while the pressures and urgencies of class differences continue to be present in all kinds of social conflicts.

RINA AGARWALA (Baltimore) introduced one of the main topics of this conference, informal labour. Research over the years has made clear that informality is neither a remnant of the past nor a mere product of recent neoliberalism, but a fundamental part of modern capitalism itself. Informality and informal workers thus should not be placed „outside“ the formal economy but be seen as closely related to the triangle of regulation (or non-regulation) that exists between labour, the state, and enterprises.

Meanwhile, MARCEL VAN DER LINDEN (Amsterdam) put forward some of the main tenets of the recent and vibrant field of Global Labour History: It aims at radically broadening the notion of „worker“ to include not only free wage labourers, but also slaves and other unfree labourers, as well as agricultural workers, the self-employed, informal, household, or subsistence workers. In addition, van der Linden suggested that we are living in a period in which a long cycle of struggle, starting in the late 18th century, comes to an end with labour-related movements and political parties in crisis all over the world, and the link between labour-related social conflict and ideological-political projects being severed. It is the task of labour historians to analyse, understand, and, if possible, learn from this cycle of struggles. In the debate, van

der Linden’s assertion of collapse and crisis was both greeted with affirmation and criticized as overly „pessimistic“ – giving way to a recurring controversy during the whole conference about the opposition of „pessimistic“ and „optimistic“ views.

In his keynote, JAN BREMAN (Amsterdam), one of the doyens of critical research on informal labour, gave further reasons for a more pessimistic view of the situation of labour today and its ability to defend its interests and rights: Taking the history of the welfare state as his point of departure, he stressed the degree to which the welfare state in the Global North had been both the result of struggles and the rationale of the state resp. enterprises. He analysed how it became an apparently stable arrangement after WWII during the *trentes glorieuses*, its very existence however being related in intricate ways to its non-realization in the decolonized Global South, and how it was revoked since the mid-1970s to usher in a situation in which labour appears ever more defenceless. A „race to the bottom“, Breman concluded, is indeed underway.

The three major streams of the conference continued the broad array of views brought up in the first round of interventions and deepened the issues raised there. In the first stream about „Political regulation of labour“, BOB HANCKÉ (London) gave an introduction to one of the major tools to understand „regulation“ on an interregional level, namely the „varieties of capitalism“-approach. This approach helps to understand „capitalism“ as something varying according to each region/country, highly shaped by institutions which regulate the way labour and capital interact. As the debate revealed, however, a more critical assessment urges researchers to go beyond institutional regulations and equally analyse other ways the capital-labour relation is shaped by (for instance on the level of enterprises, through financial streams, or through translational connections).

The second stream turned its attention towards „Labour at the site of production“. This concern is at the centre of one of the major approaches among labour studies, namely the „Labour Process perspective“. In an refreshingly self-reflective keynote one of its main

doyens, PAUL THOMPSON (Stirling), introduced some of the fundamental tenets of this approach: the labour process itself is a site of conflict; labour agency is not only articulated through labour movements but also on „lower“ levels; and „labour“ and „capital“ should be seen more as „local“ than universal categories. Thompson also developed a pungent critique of recent fashions to declare the „end of labour“ (through digitization and other new technologies) and the advent of a post-work world: labour processes, Thompson insisted, will continue to exist and remain contested. As a future conceptual framework he proposed a three-levelled analysis of labour, encompassing wider „accumulation regimes“, national or regional „regulatory regimes“, and „control regimes“ in the domain of production itself. On this level, everyday resistance more often than not takes the form of recalcitrance. Also, as recent support by industrial workers for right-wing populists in elections illustrate, there are no automatic links between the conflicts within the labour process and the sphere of institutional politics.

The third stream turned towards „collective action“ and the „politics of labour“. In her keynote about „Labour and Systemic Chaos: The End of British US World Hegemony Compared“ BEVERLY SILVER (Baltimore) outlined a comprehensive analysis of both the epoch we live in and the place of labour movements in it. Departing from a world-system perspective she described the current situation as a period of transition, ending the cycle of US-American hegemony. While previously the end of systemic cycles of accumulation and the ensuing transfer of hegemonic positions in the capitalist world-system corresponded with a period of extended war between major powers, the challenge of the current situation is not only to prevent such bloodshed but also to confront the double task of improving both workers' and ecological livelihoods. From the point of view of the cyclical movements of capital accumulation, long periods in which labour is too weak (like in the current situation) are not sustainable. Similarly to what the economist Thomas Piketty affirms, she stated that redistribution towards labour is due. At the same time, as

Silver admitted, it seems difficult to build the necessary solidarity and unity among workers worldwide as their situation is too uneven. In any case, following the newest results of her famous database projects about „labour unrest“ and „social unrest“ (databases which record incidents of unrest through their mentioning in major newspapers), there are indications that both labour conflicts and wider social protest have sharply increased over the last years and thus somewhat recovered from their global low point in the 1990s.

The closing roundtable about „Globalisation of Insecurity?“ illustrated once more that there is sound empirical evidence for quite diverging assessments of the current situation of workers worldwide: While BIRGIT MAHNKOPF (Berlin) highlighted the gloomy effects of an „oligarchic globalisation“ and the systematic exclusion of growing groups of the world's population (one of those mechanisms being precisely permanent unemployment), LUDGER PRIES (Bochum) pointed to contradictory processes of a re-formalization of work and even a renewed strengthening of workers' representation in certain sectors and locations. The degree social groups (and identities) overlap and mingle, especially in the Global South, was highlighted by GAOCHAO HE (Guangdong) who pointed to the large group officially denominated as „migrant peasant worker“ in China.

PRABHU MOHAPATRA (Delhi) stressed that informalization historically has seen very different temporalities: while in the Global North it has recently re-appeared, the Global South has a long history of a continuous presence, if not dominance, of informal labour.

„One of the problems of global approaches is that we cannot agree even on the basic definitions.“ This observation by RINA AGARWAL (Baltimore) may sum up the productively irritating effects of this conference. It made clear that labour and workers have, as issues full of contemporary urgency, been studied by different disciplines and approaches. These so far have not made full use of the potentials contained in their colleagues' works. Neither have inter-local, indeed global entanglements, been fully integrated yet. A continuing dialogue is necessary and the Hanover conference „Workers of

the World“ has achieved the start of such a conversation.

Conference Overview:

GREETING

Wilhelm Krull (VW Foundation and Foundation Council, University of Goettingen)

MAPPING THE FIELD I

Nicole Mayer-Ahuja (SOFI / University of Göttingen)

MAPPING THE FIELD II: From the perspective of ...

Peter Alexander (sociology of social change, focus on South Africa, University of Johannesburg, South Africa)

Marcel van der Linden (global history of labour, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands)

Rina Agarwala (sociology of informalisation, focus on India, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, United States)

Chair: Christoph Scherrer (University of Kassel, Germany)

Poster session and Poster Presentation of young researchers

KEYNOTE

Jan Breman (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands): The end of Social Welfareism?

Chair: Andreas Eckert (Humboldt-University Berlin, Germany)

SESSION I: Political Regulation of Labour: Trends and Contradictions

PAPERS AND DISCUSSION

Chair: Ravi Ahuja (University of Göttingen, Germany)

Sandrine Kott (Université de Genève, Switzerland): Growth and Productivity as Social Policy of the ILO

Bob Hancké (London School of Economics, United Kingdom): Beyond Varieties of Capitalism: Conflict, Contradiction and Institutional Change

Comment: Christoph Scherrer (University of

Kassel, Germany)

SESSION II: Labour at the Site of Production: Labour Process, Control, Quality of Work

KEYNOTE

Paul Thompson (University of Stirling, United Kingdom): Capitalism, Contradictions and Conflict: Reflections on Global Challenges for Work and Workers from a Labour Process Perspective

Chair: Martin Krzywdzinski (Berlin Social Science Centre, Germany)

PAPERS AND DISCUSSION

Chair: Nicole Mayer-Ahuja (SOFI/University of Göttingen, Germany)

Jörg Flecker (University of Vienna, Austria): Global digital labour - delocalized work and the international division of labour

Pun Ngai (University of Hong Kong): „Student-laborers“ at the Dormitory Labor Regime in China

Comment: Martin Krzywdzinski (Berlin Social Science Centre, Germany)

SESSION 3: Politics of Labour: Collective Action

KEYNOTE

Beverly Silver: Labor and Systemic Chaos (Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, United States): The End of British and US World Hegemonies Compared

Chair: Marcel van der Linden (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands)

PAPERS AND DISCUSSION

Chair: Martin Krzywdzinski (Berlin Social Science Centre, Germany)

Jennifer Jihye Chun (University of Toronto): Protest Cultures and Precarious Workers in South Korea

Rohini Hensman (independent scholar): Workers and unions confronting global capitalism: The need for internationalism

Sakhela Buhlungu (University of Cape Town, South Africa): Unions in South Africa

Comment: Ravi Ahuja (University of Göttingen, Germany)

gen, Germany)

POSTER SESSION AND PRESENTATION OF YOUNG RESEARCHERS

SESSION 4: Political Regulation of Labour: Trends and Contradictions (II)

PAPERS AND DISCUSSION

Chair / Comment: Andreas Eckert (Humboldt-University Berlin, Germany)

Ben Scully (University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa): Labour Migration in Comparative-Historical Perspective: Ghana and South Africa 1960s-Present

Nick Bernards (Queen's University, Kingston, Canada): Governing Irregular Labour: The Politics of 'Informal' Work and Unemployment 1970-Present in Sub-Saharan Africa

Irene Pang (Brown University, Providence, United States): Precarity as a Legal Construction: Lessons from the Construction Sectors in Beijing and Delhi

PAPERS AND DISCUSSION

Chair: Martin Krzywdzinski (Berlin Social Science Centre, Germany)

Paul André Rosental / Bernard Thomann (Science Po and Inalco, Paris, France): Job precariousness in the context of economic growth

Ralf Hoffrogge (Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany): Engineering New Labour: Trade Unions, Social Partnership and the Stabilization of British Neoliberalism 1985-2002

Iain Campbell (University of Melbourne, Australia): The challenge of casual work to labour movements: a two-step historical perspective

Comment: Lutz Raphael (University of Trier, Germany)

SESSION 5: Labour at the Site of Production: Labour Process, Control, Quality of Work (II)

PAPERS AND DISCUSSION

Chair: Nicole Mayer-Ahuja (SOFI/University of Goettingen, Germany)

Jonathan Pattenden (University of East Anglia, United Kingdom): Labour Control Regimes and Collective Action: Capital and

Labour in Bangalore's Construction Sector

Stefan Schmalz, Natalia Berti, Johanna Sittel (University of Jena, Germany and Universidad del Rosario, Bogotá): Precariousness and Informality in the Argentinean Automobile Industry: A Global Perspective

Elena Shulzhenko (Copenhagen Business School, Denmark): Paying for performance in Russia: between the customary and international approaches

Comment: Martin Kuhlmann (SOFI Goettingen, Germany)

PAPERS AND DISCUSSION

Chair / Comment: Kristin Carls (University of Göttingen, Germany)

Praveen Jha (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, India): Politics of Labour and Global Production Networks: Some Reflections from Experiences in India

Brigitte Aulenbacher, Fabienne Décieux, Birgit Riegraf (University of Linz, Austria; University of Paderborn, Germany): Capitalism Goes Care. The Commodification of Care and Care Work, Social Justice and Points of Resistance

Christa Wichterich (freelance author, researcher and lecturer): Transnational Reproductive Chains and Care Extractivism

SESSION 6: Politics of Labour: Collective Action (II)

PAPERS AND DISCUSSION

Chair: Marcel van der Linden (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands)

Chris Tilly and Rina Agarwala (University of California, Los Angeles, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, United States): Who defends informal workers? A comparison of the roles of trade unions, governments, and informal worker associations in improving labor standards for informal textile and apparel workers in Brazil, China, India, and South Africa

Adam Mrozowicki (University of Wrocław, Poland): Young precarious workers in Poland: the experiences of work and the patterns of coping with the capitalist trans-

formation

Ad Knotter (Maastricht University, The Netherlands): Precarious labour and trade union response in the cleaning industry: a transnational history (1988-2012)

Comment: Ingrid Artus (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany)

PAPERS AND DISCUSSION

Chair: Christoph Scherrer (University Kassel, Germany)

Peter Wegenschimmel (Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg, Germany): Socialist Bargaining: The Power Resource Approach in Socialist Economies

Chitra Joshi (University of Delhi, India): The Promise of the 1950s and the Politics of labour in the Post-independence decade in India

Thomas Goes (SofI Göttingen, Germany): A permanent revolution? Productive mobilizations, rationalization conflicts and the birth of competition-oriented labour relations in the (Western) German automotive industry 1980-2005

Comment: David Mayer (University of Goettingen, Germany)

ROUND TABLE: Globalisation of Insecurity? Workers of the World between Segmentation and Globalised Precarisation

Chair: Ravi Ahuja (University of Goettingen)

Birgit Mahnkopf (Berlin School of Economics and Law, Germany)

Ludger Pries (Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany)

Gaochao He (Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangdong, China)

Prabhu Mohapatra (University of Delhi, India)

FINAL REMARKS: Steering Committee

Tagungsbericht *Workers of the World – Exploring global perspectives on labour from the 1950s to the present*. 28.06.2017–30.06.2017, Hannover, in: H-Soz-Kult 10.01.2018.