

Biyanwila, Sumithra Janaka: *The Labour Movement in the Global South. Trade Unions in Sri Lanka*. London: Routledge 2011. ISBN: 978-0-415-58080-9; 214 S.

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S. Janaka Biyanwila is to be congratulated for producing a truly valuable piece of work on the development of trade unionism in Sri Lanka, thus filling an important gap in the scholarship of movement politics in Sri Lanka. Indeed since the pioneering work of Kearney, trade unions have never constituted a field of their own and have always been treated as accessories of political parties or by conservative historians as small footnotes in larger political tapestries.¹ More recent scholarship has been produced on specific labor regimes such as the garment factory but there again trade-unions appear as supporting actors rather than as main players.² Biyanwila's book focuses on movement politics of unions while inserting them within a larger counter-movement that strives to mobilize workers. His approach is both analytical and engagé. As he clearly states in his introduction, he writes as a scholar-activist, someone who wants not only to analyze but who is also part of a struggle to make a better world.

Much has been written on economic globalization and the flow of transnational capital across the globe that has resulted in the rolling back of welfare oriented states. In particular the mobility of capital, a phase of internationalization of production and work that began well over thirty years ago has spawned a huge literature, albeit general critiques of neoliberalism have rarely taken into account the specificities of countries of the South confronting a deregulated market.³ Biyanwila demonstrates convincingly the complicities between the spread of neoliberalism, increasing authoritarianism of the state and a controlled labor force. Sri Lanka's economy moved from a period of closed economy in 1956-75 to a period of open economy after the victory of the pro-market United National Party in 1977. Biyanwila engages deftly with this existing body of knowledge and usefully draws our attention

to the impact of global production chains in the transformation of labor in a country such as Sri Lanka where in the last decades one has witnessed both a casualisation and feminization of labor.

In a multi-ethnic and multi-religious island where the majority is constituted by Sinhalese who are predominantly Buddhist, Biyanwila argues, culling selectively from Marxist scholarship on ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, that under neo-liberal globalization class injustices are mediated through ethno-nationalist projects reproducing ethnic and gender hierarchies. He pertinently asks why unions behave in different ways, some adopting universalist and feminist tendencies, others adopting a movement orientation, yet others contentious collective action.

The book consists of three sections. The first chapter describes three phases in the history of unions from their emergence during British colonial rule linked to the transformation of the economy into one producing agricultural commodities to their growth and incorporation into the state and finally the restriction of unions during the period of open economy after 1977. The second chapter of the book reviews the state of unions in the present phase of labor market deregulation. The spread of non-union workplaces such as free trade zones (FTZ) is made possible, the author contends, by increasingly authoritarian and Sinhala Buddhist ethnocentric tendencies of the state. FTZ and other economic enclaves were not born recently since one can trace their origin back to colonial practices that led to the creation of special treaty ports and customs areas in dominated lands such as China.⁴

Biyanwila's study in the last section of the book, focuses on three independent unions exemplifying different kinds of labor regimes, a union of nurses in public sector hospitals, the privatized tea plantation unions, and unions in garment factories in the free trade zo-

¹ Robert N. Kearney, *Trade Unions and Politics in Ceylon*, Berkeley 1971.

² Sandhya Hewamanne, *Stitching Identities in a Free Trade Zone. Gender and Politics in Sri Lanka*, Philadelphia 2008.

³ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge 2000.

⁴ Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception. Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*, Durham 2006, p. 103.

ne or export processing zones. Particularly fascinating is the analysis of the faultlines of the nurses' union, the Public Service United Nurses Union, headed by a Buddhist monk where a paternalist and patriarchal culture and a narrow economic approach preclude larger alliances. The National Union of Workers, in contrast, apart from fighting for salaries and working conditions, also demands cultural and citizenship rights for the hill country Tamil community, thus adopting a movement orientation. The last example of an independent union in the FTZ, the Free trade Zone Workers' Union illustrates the possibility of a democratic and feminist agenda refashioning workers interests into wider demands. To what extent however does this particular example reflect the potential for democratic alliances in the free trade zone of the country? The author seems here to project his own wishes for a right to dissent upon a much less optimistic situation where recently the police fired at workers at the FTZ in Katunayake protesting peacefully against a pension bill. The book concludes that the complicity of unions with the ethno-nationalist project of the authoritarian state, alongside that project's notions of community and society that appeal to women, workers and peasants are the major obstacle to elaborating a counter-hegemonic project.

In Sri Lanka workers' political activity and trade union politics have been viewed by the state as disruptive activities rather than as a form of political participation that is intrinsic to democratic politics. This has prevented the emergence of unified labor movements in Sri Lanka as in other Asian countries. What this study attempts to demonstrate is that the contradictions of globalization that include the state's withdrawal from social welfare services have created the conditions for organizing along many common grounds. This resonates with what Karl Polanyi in *The Great Transformation*⁵ famously calls the 'double movement' that has shaped the development of market societies over the past two hundred years through which political movements respond to the developments in the economy and market. The first movement – expansion of the market and consequently the rolling back of the state – gave opportunity to

the second movement for regulating the ill effects of the former. What we think of as market societies or „capitalism“ is the product of *both* of these movements. The question remains however whether economic globalization can spawn conditions for labor resistance on a global scale or whether we are witnessing instead 'situated modes of labor control and politics'?⁶

This book contributes to forging an answer that is tentative yet empathic and hopeful. The richness of the data as well as the logical and theoretically informed analysis renders the book invaluable for scholars and activists looking for a comprehensive summary of trade union history in Sri Lanka and a compelling story of the potential power of the multitude in controlled spaces.

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⁵ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Boston 1957 (1944)

⁶ Ong, op. cit., p. 121.