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**THE REMAKING OF THE GLOBAL WORKING CLASS:  
THE POST-2011 UPSURGE OF CLASS-BASED PROTEST IN WORLD-  
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The dominant approach in the social sciences since the 1980s had been to assume that labor and class-based mobilizations are a relic of the past. ‘Globalization’, it was widely argued, unleashed an intense competition among workers worldwide, and resulted in a relentless downward spiral in workers’ power and welfare. The restructuring of production -- plant closings, outsourcing, automation, and the incorporation of massive new supplies of cheap labor -- was said to be undermining the established mass production working classes in core countries and creating insurmountable barriers to new working class mobilization everywhere.

This argument came to be known as the *race-to-the-bottom* thesis. It was an argument that left its proponents flat-footed when it came time to make sense of the worldwide upsurge of labor unrest and class-based mobilizations taking place since 2008. This new upsurge has taken a variety of forms: a wave of strikes by factory workers in China and other parts of Asia, militant wildcat strikes in South African platinum mines, occupations of public squares by unemployed and underemployed youth from North Africa to the United States, anti-austerity protests in Europe. These were just a few of the signs that the tide was turning. Indeed, it is likely that we are just at the beginnings of a new worldwide upsurge of labor and class-based mobilization.

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## **A Worldwide Upsurge of Class-Based Mobilization**

In order to make sense of what is unfolding before our eyes, we need an approach that is sensitive to the ways in which the recurrent revolutions in the organization of production that have characterized the history of capitalism, resulted, not just in the *unmaking* of established working classes, but also in the *making of new working classes on a world-scale*.

Those, who over the past several decades, have been pronouncing the death of the working class and labor movements have tended to focus single-mindedly on the *unmaking* side of the process of class formation. But if we work from the premise that the world's working classes and workers' movements are recurrently made, unmade and remade, then we have a powerful antidote against the tendency to prematurely pronounce the death of the working class every time a historically specific working class is unmade. The death of the labor movement was pronounced prematurely in the early twentieth century, as the rise of mass production undermined the strength of craft-workers; and it was once again announced prematurely in the late-twentieth century.

By focusing on the making, unmaking and remaking of working classes, we are primed to be on the lookout for the outbreak of fresh struggles, both by new working-classes-in-formation and by old working classes being unmade; that is, struggles by those experiencing both the *creative* and *destructive* sides of the process of capital accumulation, respectively. I have called these two types of struggles *Marx-type* and *Polanyi-type* labor unrest. Marx-type labor unrest is composed of the struggles by newly emergent working classes, challenging their status as cheap and docile labor. Polanyi-type labor unrest is the struggles by established working classes, defending

their existing ways of life and livelihood, including defending the concessions that they had won from capital and states in earlier waves of struggle.

In the current upsurge we see both of these types of labor unrest, with the strike wave by China's new migrant working class most closely corresponding to the *new working-class-in formation* type and the anti-austerity protests in Europe most closely corresponding to the *established working classes being unmade* type.

### **Struggles at the Point of Production**

The ongoing wave of strikes in China is the latest manifestation of a dynamic that can be summed up in the phrase: *where capital goes, labor-capital conflict shortly follows*. Put differently, the successive geographical spread of mass production across the globe from the mid-twentieth century to the present has resulted in successive waves of new working class formation and Marx-type labor unrest. We can see a déjà vu pattern whereby manufacturing capital moved into new geographical locations in search of cheaper/more docile labor, but even though labor was weakened in the sites from which capital fled, rather than creating a straightforward race to the bottom, the result was the creation of new working classes and strong new labor movements in each new favored site of production.

This dynamic was visible when the "manufacturing miracles" in Brazil and South Africa in the 1960s and South Korea in the 1970s, were followed within a generation, by the emergence of "labor movement miracles" that dismantled the labor-repressive regimes that had guaranteed cheap and docile labor. And it is visible in China today.

One response of capitalists to the wave of labor unrest in China has been efforts to relocate production to sites with even cheaper labor. Factories are being moved from

the coastal areas to interior provinces within China and to poorer countries elsewhere in Asia such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Bangladesh. But almost immediately, the thesis that *where capital goes, conflict follows* received fresh confirmation, with reports of strikes in the new favored sites of investment. It is more and more beginning to look like there is *nowhere left for capital to run*.

Another response of capitalists has been to accelerate the long-term trend toward automating production--that is, solving the problem of labor control by removing workers from the production process. Yet, labor unrest *at the point of production* continues to be an important component of overall labor unrest. The complete removal of human labor from the production process remains elusive. Moreover, the post-Fordist reorganization of production has actually increased the disruptive power of workers at the point of production in some sectors--notwithstanding the widespread tendency in the literature to exclusively focus on the ways in which these changes have weakened workers' power.

For example, just-in-time production, by eliminating all buffers and redundancies from the production process, has strengthened the disruptive power of workers at the point of production. In the automobile industry, parts are delivered 'just-in-time' from supplier to assembly factories. With the elimination of the buffer supply of parts, a strike that stops production in one key parts factory can bring assembly operations throughout the corporation to a halt within a matter of days or less. Indeed, this is precisely what happened in China in 2010, with a strike in an auto parts factory leading in short order to the shutdown of all of Honda's operations in China.

Likewise, the globalization of trade and production has increased the bargaining power of workers in transportation and communications, as strikes in these sectors raise the specter of disrupting regional and national economies as well as the entire

global supply chain. Thus, while the standard story of the February 2011 Egyptian uprising focuses on the protests in the street and the occupation of Tahrir Square, it was when the Suez Canal workers went on strike--with all the attendant implications for national and international trade--that Mubarak resigned from office.

### **Struggles in the Street**

While it would be a mistake to underestimate the present and future role of workers' struggles at the point of production, it would also be a mistake to underestimate the role of struggles in the streets. Indeed, the intertwined nature of these two sites of struggle can be derived from volume 1 of *Capital*. On the one hand, what happens in the "hidden abode of [factory] production" was Marx's focus in the middle sections of volume 1 of *Capital* -- where he catalogues an endemic labor-capital conflict over the duration, intensity and pace of work. The endemic nature of labor-capital conflict at the point of production remains relevant today. On the other hand, by chapter 25, Marx makes it clear that the logic of capitalist development, not only leads to endemic struggles in the workplace, but also to broader societal-level conflict, as the accumulation of capital goes hand-in-hand with the "accumulation of misery", most notably in the form of an *expanding reserve army of unemployed, underemployed and precariously employed workers*.

Seen from this point of view, historical capitalism is characterized, not only by a cyclical process of creative-destruction, but also by a long-term tendency to destroy existing livelihoods at a faster pace than it creates new livelihoods. This points to the necessity to conceptualize a *third type of labor unrest* in addition to the protest by working classes who are being made (Marx-type) or unmade (Polanyi-type). This *third type* (for which I do not have a name) is protest by those workers *that capital has essentially bypassed or excluded*; that is, those members of the working class who

have nothing to sell but their labor power, but have few prospects of selling it *during their lifetime*.

All three types of labor unrest are the outcome of different manifestations of the same processes of capitalist development. All three are visible in the current global upsurge of labor and class-based unrest, with protests by the vast numbers of unemployed youth around the world as a paradigmatic example of our third type. Finally, the fate of all three types of struggles is deeply intertwined with one another.

### **Unity and Division Among Workers of the World**

Marx's optimism about labor internationalism and the transformative power of proletarian struggles was in part grounded in his assumption that all three types of workers -- those who are being incorporated as wage workers into the latest phase of material expansion, those who are being spit out as a result of the latest round of restructuring, and those who are surplus to the needs of capital -- could be found within the same working class households and communities. They lived together and struggled together. Put differently, distinctions within the working class -- between employed and unemployed, active and reserve army, those with the power to impose costly disruptions on capital at the point of production and those who only have the power to disrupt peace in the streets -- did *not* overlap with differences of citizenship, race, ethnicity or gender. As such, the workers who were the embodiment of the three different types of labor unrest were one working class with shared power and shared grievances, and with the capacity to produce a post-capitalist vision that promised the emancipation of the world's working class in its entirety.

Historically, however, capitalism developed hand-in-hand with colonialism, racism and patriarchy; dividing the working class along status lines (e.g., citizenship,

race/ethnicity, gender) and blunting its capacity to produce an emancipatory vision for the class as a whole. Today there are some signs that these divides are hardening -- the rise of anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments, efforts to restrict migration flows and to reinforce privileges based on citizenship. But there are also signs that these divides are blurring if not breaking down, opening up prospects at the local, national and international level, for mobilizations that bring together in solidarity the protagonists of all three types of labor unrest and that have the capacity to generate emancipatory projects for twenty-first century.

### **Bibliographical Note:**

The arguments put forward in this piece are further elaborated in: (1) Beverly J. Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers Movements and Globalization Since 1870*, Cambridge University Press, 2003; (2) Giovanni Arrighi and Beverly Silver, *Chaos and Governance in the Modern World System*, University of Minnesota Press, 1999; (3) Beverly J. Silver and Sahan Savas Karatasli, "[Historical Dynamics of Capitalism and Labor Movements](#)" in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements* editors Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani) 2015; (4) Beverly Silver, "[Labour, War and World Politics Contemporary Dynamics in World-Historical Perspective](#)" in *Handbook of International Political Economy of Production* (editor Kees van der Pijl) Edward Elgar, 2015; (5) Beverly Silver, "[Theorising the Working Class in Twenty-First-Century Capitalism](#)" in *Workers and Labour in a Globalised Capitalism: Contemporary Themes and Theoretical Issues* (editor: Maurizio Atzeni) Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; (6) Beverly J. Silver and Giovanni Arrighi, "[End of the Long Twentieth Century](#)" in Craig Calhoun and Geogi Derlugian (eds). *Business as Usual: The Roots of the Global Financial Meltdown*. New York University Press, New York, 2011. Data on the long-term trends in labor and social protest from 1815 to 2016 are being collected by Silver et al with the support of a grant from the National Science

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