

SOUTHERN DILEMMAS: DEFENDING WORKERS RIGHTS IN A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

The goal of this paper is to provide a brief overview of the diversity of experiences and strategies of labour's engagement with state, corporate and civil society actors across a number of countries outside of the advanced industrialized core of the global economy. Most southern unions face serious challenges of governments engaged in liberalizing or authoritarian policies, shifting relations with political parties, aggressive corporations and labour market deregulation. The paper focuses its attention on leftist unions in a number of key developing countries.¹

Background

Traditionally, strong trade union movements have been associated with advanced industrialized economies. However, the 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of strong dynamic trade unions in a number of developing countries such as Brazil, South Africa and South Korea. The rise of manufacturing outside of traditional industrialized countries led to the growth of labour movements across the south.² These unions were often described as following a strategy of 'social movement unionism' which involved a wide range of social concerns beyond the immediate economic needs of its dues paying members.³ The vigour of social movement unionism in developing countries was seen as a possible path for northern labour movements to emulate.⁴

While some analysts continue to see the possibility of renewed labour mobilisation in southern countries⁵, southern unions face considerable hurdles in advancing the interests of their members. In recent years South Africa's trade union movement plunged into crisis as COSATU split with the departure of one of its largest members, NUMSA. The split reflected a much deeper tension within the ANC – South African Communist Party - COSATU political alliance, as well as a growing gap between workers and their union leadership over the economic toll of years of ANC

economic liberalization and austerity. In Brazil, the labour movement and Workers Party (PT) found itself under sustained attack as right wing forces orchestrated a legislative coup by impeaching President Dilma Rousseff and imprisoning former Brazilian President Lula to prevent him from running for in the Presidential election. In Korea, 2016 saw the government launch another wave of labour repression with the jailing of KCTU leaders. In India, trade unions launched the world's largest general strike in an attempt to slow the government's liberalization program.

Liberalizing or authoritarian states

Although each country's experience is different, some patterns can be detected amongst labour unions outside the West in the post-1945 era.⁶ A defining feature of labour's experience in the South has been the presence of European or American imperialism⁷. This has resulted in labour struggles taking place in three phases: i. pushing for decolonization and the ejection of Western powers; ii. a struggle to democratize national states in the face of authoritarian rule⁸; iii. the struggle against neoliberalism and the erosion of the developmental state. A difficulty for labour is that although the development state model advanced labour's interest in industrialization, it often did so at the cost of labour suppression (including considerable violence).⁹ Indeed, statist political economy development strategies have a long history of advancing 'development' at the expense of labour's autonomy.¹⁰ In contrast, recent democratization of the state which has brought more political freedom to labour has often been accompanied by neoliberal economic restructuring which has undercut its market and political power.

In some countries these struggles took place sequentially while in other countries two or more conflicts were wage simultaneously. In each case the particular struggle left deep impressions upon labour and the sense that the national project had not yet been completed. Examples from India, South Africa and Korea will illustrate the point. In India, the pattern was national liberation struggle against the British in the 1940s,

quickly building a democratic state upon decolonization and forty years later, conflict over the government's neoliberal turn. Disagreements about how the independence struggle should be waged and whether or not the UK should be supported during the Second World War led to the emergence of 'political unionism' in India. Each major party has its own trade union wing, while some unions are attached to particular individuals and a few independent unions struggle to represent other workers. The close union party links have allowed unions to fight neoliberal policies by exercising influence on their political partners, but they have generated infighting between unions, as well as curtailed broader social alliances and relations with the majority of workers occupying positions in the informal sector.¹¹

In contrast to India, the liberation struggle on the Africa continent was waged from the end of the Second World War until the early 1990s. In South Africa, the struggle against Apartheid combined the efforts to end white colonialism with the attempt to democratize the state. This necessitated a society wide mobilization. Shortly after these victories, labour faced a neoliberal onslaught in the 1990s initiated by their national liberation allies, the African National Congress. Other African countries faced the challenges of liberalization a decade earlier as they entered into structural adjustment programs following the 1982 debt crisis. Although state – labour relations have taken different forms across the continent, the national liberation struggle has been a defining issue informing labour's relationship with post-colonial African states.¹²

The pattern in Korea was different yet again.¹³ Here the anti-colonial struggle was against the Japanese rather than the Europeans and it was waged from 1910 until the allied victory over Japan in 1945. Labour played a leading role in anti-Japanese struggles and consequently took on a nationalistic persona. The struggle against Japan was replaced by a struggle against the Korean state as a US backed authoritarian regime took power and suppressed leftist and independent trade unions. Korean workers and trade unions played a significant role in the democratisation struggles in the 1970s and

1980s contributing to the 1987 democratic opening. Democratisation allowed Korean labour unions to initially improve wages and working conditions for their members. However, within a decade the East Asian financial crisis shifted the balance of forces against labour and the Korean state worked with the IMF to radically liberalise and deregulate the labour market, increasing unemployment and expanding the number of people working in casualized positions.

The significance of these southern struggles around the state is that labour groups feel that there is a substantial amount of work still to be done before southern states reach the potential for advancing labour's interests. Southern labour groups have not yet been able to use the state to build up welfare programs or protect national industries in the way that northern labour groups have done in the postwar era. They want to use the state to advance development and continue anti-imperialist struggles, but have found state structures both weakened and turned against them through the process of neoliberalism.

Relations with political parties

Southern unions have not discovered a particularly successful recipe for engaging with political parties. Rather, there are at least three varieties of relationships with political parties. The first variety is a close working relationship with political parties that eventually come to form government. In the case of Brazil, a very successful Workers Party (PT) was created by the CUT and was eventually able to win the presidency. When in the PT is in opposition CUT backs the party enthusiastically. However, when the PT is in government there is more tension. The unions have to push the party to the left because businesses are pulling it to the right. In South Africa the position is also complex as COSATU sits in an alliance with both the ANC and the South African Communist Party. Its alliance is under strain because the governing party (ANC) has liberalised trade and followed a series of neoliberal economic policies that have hurt trade union membership.

A second relationship is autonomy from party politics. This is the case of the CTA in Argentina. Although the union is ideologically on the left, it does not align with any particular political party. This is partially a result of the peculiarity of Argentina's history where many of the trade unions were dominated or absorbed into the Perónist movement. In this case alignment with the Perónist Party means sacrificing political independence. A different variant is provided by the KCTU. In 1997 the KCTU created the Democratic Labour Party (DLP) to provide workers representation in parliamentary politics. After some initial success in the early 2000s the DLP repeatedly split over issues of internal democracy and its relationship with North Korea. The KCTU is no longer connected to the party.

A third model is a scenario where trade unions are dominated by political parties. In some cases relationships are so close it is often unclear to outside observers if the trade unions could follow policies that went against the wishes of the parties. For example, the KMU in the Philippines has a history of close association with the Communist Party of the Philippines and many see it as still subservient to the party.¹⁴ In India, CITU is very closely and proudly entwined with the Communist Party of India (Marxist). This can lead to some union – party tension when the party holds power in a state (such as Bengal) and embarks on liberalization policies. It also influences CITU on a number of labour issues where it at times appears to be parroting the CPI (M) line.

Transnational corporations and labour market deregulation

Southern trade unions have faced the dual challenge of the increasing internationalization of their economies and the casualization of their labour markets. Both Korea and India provide good examples of countries that have shifted from relatively protected national markets to economies hosting and exporting considerable amounts of foreign direct investment. For many years the South Korean economy was heavily protected and concentrated on exploiting export markets. However, over time it internationalized as a result of Korean multinationals establishing production abroad and

through restructuring following the East Asian financial crisis in 1997. Korean companies increasingly invested in production overseas to take advantage of cheap labour or to avoid trade barriers.¹⁵

A similar development is evident in India. CITU's vice president notes the rising number of TNCs working in the 'Indian' electronics, automobile and chemical industries such as Hyundai, Ford, Dalmer, Nissan, Renault, Mitsubishi, Caterpillar and BMW.¹⁶ Whereas in the 1990s the focus was on fighting Indian companies, Indian unions now also fight TNCs. The struggle with TNCs was made more difficult by the government trying to maintain 'industrial peace' for investors. For their part, TNCs are trying to either set up 'yellow' unions or, like Samsung, prevent the establishment of unions altogether.

In addition to engaging with multinationals, southern unions are also struggling with the casualization of labour markets. South Korean unions have noted how the labour market has been transformed in the wake of the East Asian financial crisis. The KCTU observed that the push for flexible labour markets and privatizations advocated by the IMF and World Bank led to job losses and casualization for 52% of the Korean workforce.¹⁷ Many Korean workers experienced abandonment because of the weakening of relationship between corporations and their workforce hurt workers in an environment with a very weak welfare state.

At a meeting of southern trade unionists in 2018 many delegates expressed concern about the casualization of labour markets.¹⁸ In the Philippines the issue is framed in terms of 'flexible labour schemes' and 'labor contractualization' with contract workers outnumbering full time workers. There is also an attempt to extend the working day from eight to twelve hours. Argentinean unions expressed concern about the plight of almost nine million insecure and informal workers in their country. Indian unions highlighted opposition to their country's changes to labour law which supported outsourcing and contractualization. Brazilians noted changes in their labour law to

facilitate outsourcing and an extension of the working week to sixty hours. Another economic issue was concern about growing inequality and poverty. The South Africans, for example, highlighted the fact that their poverty rate is 50% with 10% of the population controlling 90% of wealth. In addition unemployment is over 25% with youth unemployment over 50%. The Indian delegation noted that in their country the richest 1% of population owned 73% of wealth.

Conclusion

A brief review of southern unions shows workers experiencing common challenges such as hostile states and damaging neoliberal policies designed to increase labour insecurity. One can see a common pattern of privatization, extended work hours, declining pay, fewer labour rights and growing inequality. In many of the cases the lives of labour activists are under threat of harm, death or imprisonment. However, countries do not face identical situations. For example, India and Brazil face serious challenges with poverty in large rural populations. Southern unions have adopted different strategies with regards to engaging states, political parties and corporations, heavily influenced by their own histories. None of the unions have yet hit upon a winning strategy.

¹ This paper draws heavily on Robert O'Brien, *Labour Internationalism in the Global South: The SIGTUR Initiative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

² Beverly J. Silver, *Forces of Labor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003).

³ Don Wells, 'Building Transnational Coordinative Unionism', in Huberto Juarez Nunez and Steve Babson (eds.), *Confronting Change: Auto Labor and Lean Production in North America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), pp. 487-505.

⁴ Kim Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the international economy* (New York: Verso Books 1997).

⁵ Immanuel Ness, *Southern Insurgency: The Coming of the Global Working Class* (London: Pluto Press 2016).

⁶ Teri L. Carway, 'Labor in Developing and Post-Communist Countries' in Orfeo Fioretos, Tulia G. Falletti and Adam Sheingate *The Oxford Handbook of Historical Institutionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) pp. 256-69.

⁷ In the case of Korea it is Japanese imperialism.

⁸ Gareth Curless, 'Introduction: Trade unions in the global south from imperialism to the present day' *Labor History* Vol. 57, No. 1 (2016): 1-19.

⁹ Frederic C. Deyo, *Beneath the Miracle: Labor Suppression in the New Asian Industrialism* (Berkeley: Berkeley University Press, 1989).

¹⁰ Ben Selwyn, *The Global Development Crisis* (Cambridge: Policy 2014).

¹¹ Emmanuel Teitelbaum, 'Was the Indian Labor Movement Ever Co-opted? Evaluating Standard Accounts', *Critical Asian Studies* Vol. 38, No. 4 (2006): 389-417, Christopher Candland, 'Labour Industry and the State in India and Pakistan' in

Ronaldo Munck and Peter Waterman eds., *Labour World Wide in the era of Globalization: Alternative union models in the new world order* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 175-196.

¹² Sakhela Buhlungu, 'Trade unions and the politics of national liberation in Africa: An appraisal,' In Bjorn Beckman, Sakhela Buhlungu and Lloyd Sachikonye eds., *Trade Unions and Party Politics: Labour movements in Africa* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2010), pp. 191-207.

¹³ Kevin Gray, *Labour and Development in East Asia* (Routledge New York: 2015).

¹⁴ Peter Waterman, 'On (Not) Understanding The KMU Trade Union Centre In The Philippines,' *Countercurrents.org*: 02 November, 2015.

¹⁵ Bénédicte Coestier and Serge Perrin, 'The Internationalization of Korean Firms: Strategic interaction and tariff-jumping when quality matters' in Edward Graham, ed., *Multinationals and Foreign Investment in Economic Development*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 119-144.

¹⁶ Author's Notes, 10th SIGTUR Congress, Perth, 3rd December 2013.

¹⁷ 'Sigtur's Strategic Orientation and Action Commitments' 6th Congress, Seoul, November 2001, p. 3.

¹⁸ Country Reports, 11th SIGTUR Congress, Buenos Aires, 4-5 April 2018.