

Labour movements in globalisation era



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SOME social scientists argue that the contemporary labour movements are in severe crisis. This crisis includes declining militancy, falling union densities, shrinking wages and benefits, and declining overall working conditions. Some common sources of these crucial problems in the era of globalisation are hyper mobility of capital creating a race to the bottom among nations; decline of state sovereignty, especially in the third world, undermining traditional associational bargaining power and welfare of the workers; and the new work organisation and technology, representing flexibilisation, creating a vast number of part-time, and/or contingent workers. The new flexible work organisation enhances managers' prerogatives, disciplines workers and introduces piece rate processes, thereby creating hyper competition among the workers. Furthermore, employing unskilled, malleable and 'backward' rural women undermines the traditional trade union role in the factories. Apart from the above causes, which are grouped together as the globalisation and labour thesis by Ronaldo Munck, neo-Marxist and world-systems theorists explain the contemporary labour crisis by examining the broad historical process of the development of capitalism with particular focus on changing hegemonic power in the world. In addition, the historical legacies of colonialism and military rule have severely impacted the development of labour unions, political parties and other civil society organisations. Hence I argue that countries passing through colonialism, militarism, and neoliberalism have seen the

development of more or less similar labour movements characterised by: an extreme exploitative relationship between the employers and employees; cooption of labour leaders and politicisation of labour unions (i.e., labour unions-political party nexus rather than labour unions-workers nexus); and excessive labour bureaucracy, corruption among the labour leaders, and mistrust of leaders by rank-and-file workers. In a broad sense, to the extent that traditional labour unions in the Majority World countries have become ineffective in defending workers, political space has opened up for the emergence of alternative, militant movements. Studies on Indonesia, Pakistan and India, Argentina, Chile, Philippines, Turkey and South Korea have demonstrated the inefficacy of traditional labour movements; alternative movements have emerged in some but not all of those countries. Notwithstanding the relative decline of labour movements, some recent labour insurgencies in the developed world, for example the anti-globalisation protest in Seattle in 1999 and the labour movements in the NICs (e.g., South Africa, Brazil, South Korea and Philippines) in the 1980s and 1990s, show labour's superior power over the irresistibility of globalisation at least at particular conjunctures. It goes without saying that social formations in various third world countries are complex, and as a consequence there are differences in labour movement development. For example, India and Pakistan were both ruled by the British for more than two hundred years, and politicisation of labour unions is a common characteristic. Yet India's allegiance with the Soviet Union

during the cold war, as opposed to Pakistan's allegiance with the United States, as well as the development of distinct political institutions (continual military interventions in Pakistan in comparison to the solid democratic political system in India) rendered two different types of labour movements in these countries. While labour unions in India successfully resisted the thrust of the Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) induced by the IMF, and forced the national government to abandon the program by not accepting any venture of privatisation in the 1990s, Pakistani labour unions accepted the SAP. The situation in Bangladesh has exactly paralleled the situation in Pakistan. To help explain the contrast between the efficacy of the Indian labour movement on the one hand and the inefficacy of the Pakistan and Bangladesh labour movements on the other, attention needs to be paid to differences in the structure of political opportunities, differences in the cultural environments related to the relative strength of the Indian Left and differences in the resources available to the respective movements. Resistance to neoliberal policies in the Majority World has often been led not by labour movements

but by militant movements of different types. For instance, a number of marginal groups, mostly formed by indigenous peoples, launched militant movements against the neoliberal policies enacted by the ruling elites of the respective countries and the world powers, mostly in Latin America. These movements included the Zapatista in Mexico, Rural Landless Workers of Brazil, the Cocaleros and Peasants of Bolivia, the National Pent Federation in Paraguay, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the peasant-Indian CONAIE in Ecuador. Since most of these movements have been established to defend a particular group's existence, one might label them as identity politics movements, though completely different from the identity politics movements developed by the Western new middle class. On the other hand, militant movements developed by some non-traditional actors such as barrio-based urban unemployed in Argentina or slum dwellers of Dhaka are mainly economic movements against unemployment, poverty, evictions and other social exclusions. James Petras, a Marxist writer and activist, demonstrated that alternative movements developed in urban Argentina rejected

the traditional patron-client relationship upheld by the established labour unions, political parties and state bureaucrats, and were highly successful in terms of securing thousands of minimum wage temporary jobs, food allowances and other concessions from the state. The situation of labour movements in Bangladesh in the era of globalisation is stagnant though not absolutely bleak. Labour unions in the public sector enterprises are moribund in nature characterising full of corruption, nepotism, politicisation and labour aristocracy. Using historical data, it can be identified that colonialism, cold war/imperialism and militarism played the main roles rendering inefficient and lumpen labour unions. Excepting broader movements such as the nationalist movements during the British colonial regime; movements developed against the West Pakistani regime during the 1960s; and movements developed against the Ershad regime during the late 1980s, most of which are dominated by the leftist labour organisations, labour unions in the public sector enterprises in Bangladesh have a very tiny little contribution in upholding the interest of the rank and file workers. This is why the educated middle class and civil society organisations in Bangladesh are apathetic, critical and hopeless about the public sector labour unions. Labour unions in the private sector enterprises, on the other hand, in Bangladesh are overwhelmingly marginalised, though not absolutely nonexistent. It is unthinkable that although the Bangladeshi Readymade Garment Industry owners exploit the poor workers violating the national and international laws

and conventions boasting that they provide the employment to thousands of the poor rural women, on very few occasions labour unions protected the rights of the workers. The legacy of the public sector trade unionism; the nature of the state in terms of inefficient resources and role; the selfish, lumpen and feudal nature of the Bangladeshi bourgeoisie; trade union imperialism (i.e., the influence of the AFL-CIO); civil society's weak role; lack of resources of the labour unions; and the nature of the women workers (i.e., backwardness, lack of formal education, timidity, allegiance and docility) are the main barriers in terms of forming strong labour unions that could have launched strong movements for the workers. Nonetheless, some contingent, relatively less organised and extremely militant movements rendered some concessions toward the workers; the May 2006 labour unrest in the RMG industry is such a movement. Relatively successful militant and extremely unruly movements indicate that unless the state preserves the interests of the workers regulating laws and conventions; unless the owners become sagacious in terms of building a healthy industrial relations based on national and international laws and conventions; unless the civil society has a telling and strong role in terms of building alliance with the labour unions, unruly, less thoughtful and extreme movements might be an evidence in preserving workers' interests no matter whether we desire such movements or not.

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SHIFTING IMAGES

Are some more equal than others?



EACH year, cherry blossoms herald the beginning of spring in Washington. For two fleeting weeks in

is to take a stroll along the Basin, preferably on a lazy week-day afternoon, when there is no mad rush of tourists and photographers. As I walk under the canopy of trees with the subtle play of light and shade on my face, I lose track of time and space and enjoy the breathtaking beauty of the pink and white flowers. This year, I took my spring walk in early April. It was a relatively warm day, but the soft breeze from the Basin mellowed the afternoon sun, making it pleasant for a leisurely stroll. The Jefferson Memorial, which rests on the arc of the Tidal Basin, was visible through the leaning branches of the cherry trees. The monument offered a perfect picture post card view. On an impulse, I decided to visit it yet one more time. The Jefferson Memorial, modeled after the Pantheon in Rome, has some interesting architectural features. Its marble steps and a circular colonnade of columns lead up to an inner open space which contains an imposing bronze statue of America's third President, Thomas Jefferson, look-

ing out toward the White House ... as if the Founding Father is overseeing the work of his successors. However, what I find most fascinating about the Memorial is the excerpt from the Declaration of Independence engraved on the panel of its inner wall. The passage starts with a powerful statement: We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men. As I stood inside the monument and revisited the lines, I marvelled at the wisdom, farsightedness and above all the compassionate fairness of this great Founding Father who, as early as in 1776, envisioned a nation where all men would have access to equal opportunities and equal rights. Jefferson's reasoning seemed sound -- since "all men are created equal" by the Creator, governments must act as catalysts to make it possible for everyone to

enjoy equal prospects for pursuing their dreams and ambitions. Stepping into the car to head back, I thanked God for this idyllic day. Lost in my thoughts, I took a wrong turn and realised that I was driving in a different direction -- away from home. Before I could get my bearings, I found myself in the South Eastern part of Washington DC, which is the relatively low-income section of the city. The houses and shops appeared more decrepit and run-down in comparison to the upscale environ of the Tidal Basin. Waiting to make a turn at a red light, I noticed an emaciated figure rummaging through a garbage dump at the street corner. Although I have witnessed extreme poverty in my part of the world, the sight hit me like a lightning bolt. It was difficult for me to reconcile myself to a situation where, barely a few miles from the beauty and magnificence of the monuments and the White House, a citizen of this great nation was searching for food in the trash. The sense of contentment and composure I had gained a few moments ago evaporated; there

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was a void within me. Thomas Jefferson's words "that all men are created equal" did not match the vacant look and apparent desperation of the hungry man! Confused and a bit shaken I asked myself: What happened to the equal rights and opportunities that the Constitution has vowed to provide each citizen of this country? And, what about the seductive pull of the "American Dream," which promises a better, richer and happier life for people of every rank? Has America, as a Nation, fallen short of living up to

the standards that the Founding Fathers laid down two hundred and fifty years ago? On my way home, I wondered whether there may be a more complex issue at play: is it indeed a "self-evident" truth that "all men are created equal" or was George Orwell correct when he declared in his satirical style that "some ... (men) are more equal than others?" I don't have an answer. Do you?

The writer is a former employee of World Bank