

JUNE 28 – 30, 2017

Symposium

Herrenhausen Palace, Hanover

## SUMMARY REPORT

**“Workers of the World –**

**Exploring global perspectives on labour from the 1950s to the present”**

Organizers: Sociological Research Institute (SOFI) e.V. at University of Göttingen and Volkswagen Foundation

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 focus on the major lines of debate and won’t be able to do full justice to the diversity of knowledge contained in the papers, comments and posters.

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 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 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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). A series of papers introduced some of these other scales and levels in which “regulation” works: From the International Labour Organisation and its attempts to build a multilateral policy framework for labour (**Sandrine Kott, Geneva**), to the state’s varying attempts of regulating labour migration (**Ben Scully, Johannesburg**), to, again, the intricate ways “informal” or “precarious” labour is not a sphere fully outside the state’s regulation but a domain of its politics (a theme which was in different ways developed in the presentations by **Nick Bernards, Kingston; Irene Pang, Providence; Bernard Thomann, Paris**). Other papers made clear that trade unions and other labour movement actors themselves have co-shaped the way the trend towards more precarious labour relations happened (**Ralf Hoffrogge, Berlin; Ian Campbell, Melbourne**).

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. How important it is to connect a thorough analysis of what happens in the labour process itself with overarching, often transnational production chains or networked enterprises was illustrated by several of the subsequent presenters, exploring such different arenas as “delocalized” digital labour, the Argentinian automobile industry, the Indian manufacturing sector, care work in Central Europe, or the highly exploitative and repressive hardware manufacturing giants in China (**Jörg Flecker, Vienna; Stefan Schmalz, Natalia Berti, and Johanna Sittel, Jena and Bogotá; Praveen Jha, Delhi; Christa Wichterich, Bonn; Pun Ngai, Hong Kong**). Meanwhile, the ways resistance emerges, sometimes only in the “niches” of the labour process, was explored for such different sectors and locations as the construction sectors in India (**Jonathan Pattenden, Norwich**), the Russian automobile industry (**Elena Shulzhenko, Copenhagen**), or care work in Germany (**Brigitte Aulenbacher and Fabienne Décieux, Linz**).

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. Most of the subsequent papers of the stream analysed more punctual and specific events of resistance without neglecting to connect these experiences to wider contexts of political processes. This included a comparative analysis of the struggle of informal workers in Brazil, China, India, and South Africa (**Chris Tilly and Rina Agarwala, Los Angeles and Baltimore**), the analysis of the impressively versatile protest repertoires of precarious workers in South Korea (**Jennifer J. Chun, Toronto**), the less visible but not automatically less effective strategies of “coping” with precarity by workers in Poland (**Adam Mrozowicki, Wrocław**), and the way the unionization struggle of janitors in the Netherlands was both inspired and framed by preceding campaigns in the US (**Ad Knotter, Maastricht**). The strikingly similar way in which unions dealt with the “rationalization politics” of introducing new technologies was revealed through otherwise very different papers on the textile industry in India in the 1950s and German export industries in the 1980s-1990s (**Chitra Joshi, Delhi; Thomas Goes, Göttingen**). Finally, **Peter Wegenschimmel (Regensburg)** reminded the participants that the experience of labour and collective action under state socialism needs its own analysis, although existing conceptual tools such as the “power resource approach” can be used with great benefit for studying these.

The **closing roundtable** about “**Globalisation of Insecurity?**” echoed many of the themes brought up during the two preceding days. The different interventions 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.

#### **AUTHOR**

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#### **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

<https://www.volkswagenstiftung.de/nc/veranstaltungen/veranstaltungsarchiv/detailansicht-veranstaltung/news/detail/artikel/workers-of-the-world/marginal/5136.html>

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