

LABOUR IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

CHALLENGES AND ALTERNATIVES FOR WORKERS

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edited by Sarah Mosoetsa and Michelle Williams

INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE • GENEVA

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First published 2012

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Labour in the global South: Challenges and alternatives for workers / edited by Sarah Mosoetsa and Michelle Williams; International Labour Office – Geneva: ILO, 2012

232 p.

ISBN 978-92-2-126238-1 (print)

ISBN 978-92-2-126239-8 (web pdf)

International Labour Office

labour relations / trade union / labour movement / developing countries / Argentina / Bangladesh / Brazil / India / South Africa R / Uruguay

13.06.1

ILO Cataloguing in Publication Data

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Front cover image: *El Vendedor de Alcatraz* by Diego Rivera © Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, México D.F. / 2012, ProLitteris, Zurich.

Typeset by Magheross Graphics, France & Ireland www.magheross.com

Printed in Switzerland

PREFACE

In the decades following the Second World War, the mature industrial relations systems of the advanced economies served as an example and even as a model for labour movements in the South. Informal employment in the South was largely seen as a problem of insufficiently regulated markets and high labour surpluses in developing countries, one which would disappear through the process of industrialization.

Trade unions in industrialized countries, with their long and proud history, were in many cases regarded and often saw themselves as representatives of a trade union practice that could also inspire and guide the labour movements of the industrializing South. Their potential to serve as role models has proved to be an illusion on several counts. In the age of globalization and financialization, the traditional industrial relations system has been undermined, and trade unions in the North are losing ground. Social dialogue, corporatism and collective bargaining are, in a growing number of instances, changing from institutions that ensure fair sharing of productivity gains to instruments that accommodate the demands of capital and governments to lower wages and erode working conditions in the name of competitiveness. Labour market reform, the downsizing of welfare state provisions and the return of mass unemployment created precarious employment for millions of workers, and the wage share in nearly all industrialized countries has been declining for decades. The current crisis has reinforced and intensified the pressures on the traditional models of trade unionism, social dialogue and collective bargaining, particularly in Europe.

In sum, instead of “good” labour market systems of the North acting as models for development in the South, features of unregulated and informal labour markets associated with the South have increasingly been adopted in industrialized countries.

At the same time, it is increasingly evident in the developing and industrializing countries that informality is not merely a transitional phenomenon. A relatively small formal sector is linked through outsourcing and sophisticated supply chains with large

numbers of workers in different forms of precarious and informal employment. Trade union movements face the harsh reality that this is not some backward model of industrial production, but rather cutting-edge twenty-first-century capitalism used by the most advanced multinational companies to maximize their profits.

Given these structural changes and new challenges, trade unions in all countries are discussing and exploring new forms of organizing and mobilizing, new means of international cooperation, and new alliances with other civil society organizations. Trade unions in the South have been pioneering many of these new strategies. SEWA in India shows that even the most vulnerable workers – women in the informal economy – can organize successfully. The Brazilian trade unions were an important partner in the launch of the World Social Forum, and the political achievement of the Lula Government would be unimaginable without the role of organized labour. COSATU is running one of the strongest campaigns against labour brokers and is a crucial pillar of democracy in South Africa. In Uruguay, the trade unions were instrumental in achieving nearly universal collective bargaining coverage and extending social protection to many vulnerable informal workers. And significantly, the new International Domestic Workers' Network has many of its key affiliates and leaders in countries of the South.

Industrial workplaces have also shifted to new destinations, which has had the inevitable effect of reshaping the international labour movement. The Global Labour University (GLU) itself is part of this shift in international trade union and labour research cooperation. GLU works as a global knowledge and research network to overcome the traditional concept of the North–South knowledge transfer. Working in close cooperation with the national and international trade union movements, GLU offers masters' programmes at universities in Brazil, Germany, India and South Africa, through which it provides the opportunity to look at the world and the labour movement from different perspectives, and it creates a forum in which to debate responses to the changing world of industrial relations.

Labour in the global South is an example of these debates. In their introductory chapter, editors Sarah Mosoetsa and Michelle Williams put today's challenges for organized labour in the context of the seismic changes in the global distribution and organization of work. Globalization has largely extended the possibilities for multinational companies to evade national regulations. However, the editors point out that this new world of corporate globalization is not so new for the global South, precisely because Keynesian capitalism, including the powerful institutional role for organized labour and a comprehensive welfare state, never made it to the South.

In a competitive race to provide ever more generous investment climates, even governments historically close to labour have shifted the balance of power further in favour of capital through a whole range of deregulatory policies. The current volume discusses the very different experiences of trade unions with governments they had mobilized to vote for. It shows that winning elections is not enough, and that real

change also requires a movement that has the strength and public authority to keep those elected accountable to their voters as well as to help them to withstand the lobbying pressure of the countervailing forces. This, as some of the authors highlight, will not be possible without trade unions that reach out and mobilize beyond their traditional strongholds. Facing a crisis that is not only economic and social but also ecological rules out the possibility of another century of global economic growth during which the South is supposed to catch up to the North by growing even faster than the North does. Labour needs new strategies to mobilize and organize and to build new alliances, but it also needs development concepts that question capitalism's insatiable appetite for growth, without denying the necessity of income growth for the billions of people living in abject poverty.

By selecting diverging and potentially controversial views on these issues, this book contributes the much-needed southern perspective to this essential debate, as well as to the global discourse.

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