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Incorporating Informal Workers into Twenty-First Century Social Contracts

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Alternatives from and for the Global South

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Introduction to Working Papers for New Directions in Social Policy: Alternatives from and for the Global South

This paper is part of a series of outputs from the research project New Directions in Social Policy: Alternatives from and for the Global South.

The project examines the emergence, nature and effectiveness of recent developments in social policy in emerging economies and developing countries. The purpose is to understand whether these are fundamentally new approaches to social policy or welfare systems which could offer alternative solutions to the critical development challenges facing low- and middle-income countries in the twenty-first century. This research aims to shed light on the policy options and choices of emerging/developing countries; how economic, social, political and institutional arrangements can be designed to achieve better social outcomes given the challenges of the contemporary development context; how the values and norms of human rights, equity, sustainability and social justice can be operationalized through “new” social policies; and how experiences, knowledge and learning about innovative approaches can be shared among countries in the South. For further information on the project visit www.unrisd.org/ndsp. This project is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

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Acronyms

SMU	Social movement unionism
NSM	New social movement
SER	Standard employment relationship
ICLS	International Conference of Labor Statisticians
SNA	System of National Accounts
SEWA	the Self Employed Women's Association
CWWN	the Chinese Working Women Network
KWTU	the Korean Women's Trade Union
SASEWA	South African Self Employed Women's Association
UFCW	the United Food and Commercial Workers
ACFTU	the All-China Federal Trade Union
MWDC	the Migrant Worker Documentary Center
AFL-CIO	the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
EOIW	Experiences in Organizing Informal Workers

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Abstract/Summary

This paper exposes and analyzes if and how informal workers serve as agents of change for emergent social policies around the world. Informal workers (variously termed “precarious”, “non-standard”, “irregular”, and “flexible”) have been defined as those operating outside standard employment relationships and are thus unprotected and unregulated by most labor laws. However, such workers continue to be regulated by other state laws that may also affect their work, such as housing, migration, and crime. Contrary to earlier expectations, assuming informal workers are unable to organize, recent evidence indicates that they are organizing to defend their humanity and affect change in the global North and South. Ironically, the political and economic ideologies and practices that have overtly sanctioned informal work since the 1980’s have also had the unintended consequence of opening spaces for informal workers to make demands on the state. However, questions remain regarding the political and economic conditions under which informal workers do/do not capitalize on this opportunity to demand new protective policies, the varying roles they play in shaping national-level social policies, whether and how they organize across national contexts, and the extent to which their organization efforts succeed or fail.

To begin answering these questions, this paper draws from an ongoing cross-national comparative project of informal workers' movements across eight countries of the global North and South to offer an initial framework of contemporary trends in informal workers' movements. Our findings suggest that present-day informal workers are mobilizing populations that were often excluded from 20th century labor movements. Such populations include workers operating within non-standard employment relationships (such as contract-based construction workers and garment workers, as well as self-employed domestic workers, transport workers, and trash collectors), within non-standard workspaces (including the street, private homes, and unregistered worksheds), and socially vulnerable groups (such as women, ethnic and racial minorities, and immigrants). By mobilizing these groups along class and social identity lines, informal workers are fighting to expand the definitions of “workers” and “employers” to include a larger and more diverse range of people, relationships, and occupations.

This paper aims to analyze informal workers' as change agents; this helps acknowledge the historically dynamic, relational nature of workers' movements across time and place, thus re-incorporating "workers" into conversations about new social movements and new social policies. Based on evidence from eight country cases, the author argues that contemporary movements among informal workers must be read in relation to 20th century workers' movements whose primary victory was to attain protected and formally regulated work, which spurred states and employers to evade formal labor regulations through informal employment. Today, informal workers' movements suggest efforts to remake the working class. This finding offers a corrective to mainstream depictions of the current landscape of labor, purporting the "end of labor politics" and the launch of "new social movements."

Furthermore, our findings indicate that this potentially transformative mobilization stage among informal workers is spearheaded by workers of the global South (individuals living in the global South, as well as those who migrate to the global North). Despite their heterogeneity, these workers share commonalities in (1) the types of work they are engaged in and (2) the types of movements they are launching. These commonalities are not geographically bound in the contemporary era, but are bound to a group of mobile people. Therefore, studies on contemporary social movements must expand to include new units of analysis that simultaneously capture the national-level socio-political

contexts and transnational-level human mobility. The conceptual framework and evidences on the re-making of the working class introduced in this paper thus offer both continuities and alternatives to 20th century labor movements and new insights into 21st century social contracts.

Introduction

Amidst 21st century global economic crises and widespread uncertainty, new social policies that promise to protect certain groups are emerging throughout the developing world. This is not surprising. History has shown that in times of crisis, discontent rises. Sociologists have portrayed that discontent can lead to regime change. To retain their legitimacy in the face of social discontent, states often make significant policy and regulatory changes. In some cases, discontent forces states to enact transformative policy changes of redistribution and security for masses; otherwise, the discontent catalyzes state repression alongside palliative efforts to attain consent from part of the population (Arrighi 1978; Moore 1966; Riley and Desai 2007). In both cases, a new social contract is inaugurated; welfare regimes thus emerge from conflict and collaboration between states and their societies.

Thus, analyses of the new social policies emerging in the contemporary era demand an examination of the state forces from above; furthermore, a thorough understanding of social movements pushing change from below is required. Once we understand exactly who is organizing, resisting, and attaining the state's attention, how, and in what capacity, only then can we truly understand the exact contours of changes taking place in the world's welfare regimes. There is a small, yet useful, literature emerging on states' role in enacting welfare regimes in the global South (Srinivas 2010). In contrast, this paper turns our analytical lens to the other side of the change relationship to expose and analyze a group of social change agents surprisingly under-examined in contemporary research on labor, development, and social change, i.e., informal workers.

Informal workers (variously termed "precarious", "non-standard", "irregular", and "flexible") are defined as those who operate outside standard employment relationship and are thus unprotected and unregulated by most labor laws. They have long existed as an essential feature of modern capitalist economies, especially in the global South. Since the 1980s, however, states in the North and South have loosened earlier labor regulations protecting the minority of formal workers, thereby increasing the informal workers' share of the global workforce further. Recent scholarship on neoliberal policies eclipsing labor protections have increased the attention to informality's role in facilitating economic growth. However, informal workers are usually portrayed in recent literature as victims, shorn of agency (Davis 2006; Harvey 2005). Labor movements designed to protect workers are assumed to be dying, since the increasingly informal structures of production

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