

Labour history revival

Learning from the past

Labour history in the 1990s suffered a decline. But according to **Nicole Ulrich** and **Lucien van der Walt** this is changing. A recent labour conference in South Africa marked this change and provided lessons for labour's current struggles in a globalised world.

The History Workshop and the Sociology of Work Unit of the University of the Witwatersrand recently held a highly successful conference on 'Rethinking Labour History: southern African labour history in global context.' With nearly 50 papers, and over 100 people from across the globe, including activists and trade unionists, it was the largest labour history conference at the university for over a decade.

Labour history went into decline in the 1990s. The general retreat of labour, linked to the collapse of models that labour looked to such as import-substitution-industrialisation, the welfare state and the Soviet bloc as well as the rise of neo-liberalism, and a changing South Africa all played a role.

The situation is now changing, partly due to revivals in labour struggles worldwide. As Marcel van der Linden of the International Institute of Social History noted, we can now see the outlines of a new 'global labour history' that looks at the working class as an international force. The older tendency to write separate 'national' labour histories is falling away; labour history is becoming globalised.

It is not possible to discuss all papers, but several issues stand out: the relevance of the 'first' globalisation of the 1880s to the

1920s to the present, the need to rethink South African labour history in an international framework, and the tricky question of what is meant by 'working class.'

From the start, the organisers wanted to link labour's past to labour's present, so the conference opened with the topic: 'Is labour history? Working class movements into the twentieth-century?' At the heart of the debate was the future of labour movements in the era of neo-liberalism. There are no easy answers, as labour everywhere is battered by free trade, flexible labour markets, fragmentation and a roll-back of rights. Moving from today's retreat to changing society is hampered by the crisis of the model of the state that labour looked to.

GLOBALISATION THEN AND NOW

Understanding globalisation today is one area where labour history can make a contribution. It is forgotten that today's globalisation was preceded by a 'first' globalisation from the 1880s into the 1920s, a period not very different to ours. It was characterised by enormous amounts of foreign direct investment and international trade. The world economy was *more* integrated than today, and characterised by major migrations.

If we only look at closed national economies, from the 1920s to the

1980s, it is easy to forget that the world of nation states was bracketed by two key periods of globalisation. It was in the 'first' globalisation that South Africa industrialised. Capital for the gold mines was raised in foreign markets, techniques used in mining were modelled on mass production industries, and a multinational and multiracial labour force was recruited across the British Empire, including southern Africa

INTERNATIONAL WORKING CLASS

So it has never been possible to understand labour movements in South Africa in isolation. Globalisation helped create the working class and link working classes across the world. Papers by Jon Hyslop and Karen Hunt showed that the early labour movement in South Africa was part of a closely interconnected labour world in the 'first' globalisation, with world tours by radicals, a radical press, and continual movements between countries providing a globalisation from below.

Lucien van der Walt made the point that the famous ICU (Industrial & Commercial Union) was not simply a South African union, but spread throughout southern Africa, following flows of labour across countries, and linking southern Africa into the larger

political world of international labour. The ICU was, in turn, influenced by working class America and combined the pan-Africanism of Marcus Garvey with the revolutionary syndicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW advocated organising all workers, including the unemployed and self-employed, like labour tenants, into One Big Union to overthrow capitalism.

Communism was another important connection, and Allison Drew, Andrew Flinn and Dan Johns looked at the role of the Communist International in shaping the Communist Party of South Africa. Other attempts to build international working class unity were noted by Chris Bolsmann, looking at autoworkers, John Stoner, on alliances, Gay Siedman, on monitoring schemes, and Geert van Goethem on trade union internationals. Papers by scholars like Jens Andersson on Malawi and Bongani Gumbo on Botswana drew attention to the centrality of immigration in labour history.

One of the major implications is that our knowledge of the history of local labour can benefit from comparisons to labour elsewhere in the South. Indian scholar Sumit Sarkar

showed how comparison shakes assumptions. The British in India, for example, never provided mass housing for the working class: South African-style townships are rare. Looking at collieries, Peter Alexander found that while African labour was cheaper than white labour in South Africa, it was considerably *more* expensive than in colonial India. Phil Bonner meanwhile looked at Communist Parties in both countries.

Wazha Morapedi developed comparisons to Botswana, Miles Larmer for Zambia, while Andries Bezuidenhout, Eddie Webster, and Franco Barchiesi looked at the larger postcolonial experience in Africa, and its relevance to understanding contemporary South Africa.

WHAT IS THE WORKING CLASS?

Such points warn us to steer clear of slogans.

What is called 'normal' employment, secure jobs, good contracts and so on is not 'normal' at all.

In the 'first' globalisation, the use of forced or indentured labour was common, as was an extreme degree of insecurity. Chitra Joshi showed how Britain used Indian convicts for road building, Gopalan Balachandran looked at 'coolie' labour bonded by debt, David McCreery outlined the

role of unfree labour in Latin America, and Tu Huynh looked at Chinese indentured labour. These studies underline the need to examine what we mean by a 'working class.' Karl Marx saw 'free' wage labour as the capitalist norm, but before the mid-twentieth century, most workers

worldwide were unfree.

Van der Linden's address took up this theme. If we look at labour history globally, we find a wide range of forms of labour control and labour processes, including outright coercion, indenture, home-working and subcontracting. It was not 'normal' employment that made unions possible, but class struggles and it was unions which helped *establish* the 'normal' relationship.

How, then, can labour organise casual and informal workers today?

One answer is to look at ways it was tackled in the 'first' globalisation. Some responses were narrowly exclusivist, such as craft unionism and the colour bar, while others aimed at working class unity, such as revolutionary syndicalism and Communism. More recently, there have

been initiatives, like the Self-Employed Workers' Unions in India and South Africa discussed by Annie Devenish.

However, a complex working class has complex divisions, and the importance of family, the neighbourhood, race and gender for class politics should not be underestimated, as noted by Bridget Kenny, Rudzani Mudau and others. There are no simple answers: the question of labour politics is contested and decisive.

SIGNIFICANCE OF CONFERENCE

The hard work of the conference organisers, Peter Alexander, Andries Bezuidenhout, Philip Bonner, John Hyslop, Noor Nieftagodien and Ulrich and Van der Walt, paid off.

The organisers of the conference worked for more than two years to make it happen, and an edited book will follow. Importantly, the conference laid the foundations for the local revival of labour history, and closer connections between scholars in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America.

The SA Labour Bulletin hopes to continue this revival in labour history by providing regular labour stories from the past that will entertain, educate and hopefully provide some lessons.

