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Labour's Response to the Informalization of Work in the Current Restructuring of Global Capitalism: China, South Korea, and South Africa

Rosalind Boyd

ABSTRACT — *This article focuses on “the informalization of work” that is proliferating in all regions of the world. How and why has it come about? What are the effects? What are the implications for the labour movement? The article has three interconnected parts: first, I provide some explanations of concepts and terminology, especially to distinguish the process of “informalization of work” from the paradigm of the informal/formal sector, which may never have been an accurate way of viewing; second, three examples — China, South Korea, and South Africa — are given to ground more concretely this current informalization process; and finally I analyze strategies undertaken by labour to address the indisputable adverse consequences of this current phase of global capitalism.*

RÉSUMÉ — *Cet article examine « l’informalisation du travail » qui prolifère dans toutes les régions du monde. Comment et pourquoi ce phénomène est-il apparu? Quels sont ses effets? Quelles sont ses conséquences pour le mouvement ouvrier? Cet article comprend trois parties interconnectées. D’abord, je clarifie quelques concepts et terminologie fondamentaux, de façon à distinguer le processus d’informalisation du travail de celui du paradigme portant sur les secteurs formel et informel, ce dernier n’ayant jamais été approprié pour analyser l’informalisation. Ensuite, je présente trois études de cas — la Chine, la Corée du Sud et l’Afrique du Sud — de façon à mieux cerner le processus actuel d’informalisation du travail. Enfin, j’analyse plusieurs stratégies utilisées par les travailleurs pour confronter les conséquences indubitablement négatives de cette phase actuelle du capitalisme global.*

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world we are witnessing the restructuring of global capitalism propelled primarily by the neo-liberal agenda of transnational corporations and international financial organizations, tied to unprecedented militarism within US hegemonic power, which has resulted in catastrophic changes worldwide, particularly for labouring people. The complexity of these processes is often difficult to accurately capture with our existing concepts and analytical tools. However, in all regions of the world, particularly in the countries of the South, there are well-known objective realities — massive dislocations of labouring people, dramatic increases in inequalities, obscene income disparities, worsening poverty, and destabilizing trends, especially the weakening of the state and increases in civil conflicts — that signify a major transformation of the world as we have known it.

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Communities are being destroyed while countless landless people migrate in search of new sources of basic livelihood. In China, alone, between 1996 and 2000, 176 million people migrated from rural to urban areas, without any form of secure livelihood. As is well known and clearly observable, restructuring is having disruptive effects on all societies. After the collapse of Argentina's economy in 2002, over 175,000 Argentines ended up in Miami, Florida, in search of work. These current upheavals are taking place within revolutionary technological changes (Amin 2002, 2003) that consolidate interconnectedness in multi-faceted ways for some, while excluding and dispossessing other large sections of our populations.

In this period, there have also been profound changes in the labour process, in the world of work, notably characterized by increased unemployment and underemployment, the feminization of work, casualization, rising informalization, and "flexibility," undermining secure jobs, labour rights, and trade unions in the South as well as the North, though the consequences are far more dramatic in the countries of the South. Labour, workers, and their worker organizations are struggling to resist, to seek alternatives, and to establish new forms of democratic organizations in order to confront the indisputable adverse effects of the current moment of global capitalist power.

One of the most serious problems brought about at this stage of global capitalism is the troubling proliferation of the so-called "informalization of work," which refers to a *process* whereby working people are pushed out of secure jobs into precarious, temporary work situations or no work at all, hustling to make a living as huge job losses throw their lives into turmoil. Why has it happened? Downsizing, flight of capital, closing of state factories through privatization, and deregulation. What are its negative effects? Primarily breaking secure employment, undermining the power of trade unions, impoverishing working people, lowering labour standards, not providing a "living wage," and producing societal instability and insecurity.¹

This current process is very different from what was described in the more static paradigm of the informal/formal sector originating in the early 1970s ILO (International Labour Office) Kenya report (1972) and Keith Hart's work on Ghana (1973), although there is a lot of conceptual slippage in the literature. In some respects, we could say that informal work and informal workers have been with us since the beginning of work itself, especially women workers in the household, in cottage industries, and so on. Thirty-five years ago in the stages of industrialization, informal sector work was seen from the limitations of this paradigm as a temporary situation. It was believed that those self-employed, unemployed, or underemployed would join the formal economy once the "working poor" became educated or acquired skills. They would then become permanent workers and part of the regulated "formal" economy. The solution was to modernize the economy, and all would be well. For many, this way of viewing has never been accurate.

The difference that I am asserting to the earlier formulation of the informal sector is that the current informalization process is directly related to capital investment in the most raw way — export sector needs using the cheapest labour possible, in order to integrate into the modernizing global economy. Domestic labour regulations are undermined (or deregulated), but those in this new informalized process are not marginalized from capital's needs or capital's production. They become the new, cheap source of labour that is often very skilled, is often well-educated, and often had a previous level of security in their livelihood and life's expectations, through trade unions. That was seldom the profile of those in the "informal sector."

1. Neo-liberal strategies for corporate capitalism are closely connected to militaristic ideology, which pervades our global world, adding to this societal insecurity. The appointment of Paul Wolfowitz, former US deputy secretary of defense and avid military hawk, to head the World Bank is an explicit symbol of these close connections.

In fact, this informal/formal sector paradigm was and is a narrow capitalist view from the limited theories of economics. Restricting our definition of labour or even the working class in this way tends to cover up or disguise social reality. Too often we continue to “read reality from the paradigm” rather than establishing new concepts and terminology from the observed reality. For example, women have always *worked*, but theirs has been unpaid labour in support of wage work (Waring 1988). Earlier, subsistence agricultural workers made it possible for any form of economic industrial transformation to take place. These hordes of subsistence workers or marginalized workers were excluded by the capitalist view of the world of work, which has always linked work to money or wage income. It is worth returning to the writings of the renowned Hungarian economist Karl Polanyi, author of *The Great Transformation* written in 1944, in which he stated, “Labour is only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself ... The commodity description of labour ... is entirely fictitious” (cited in Munck 2002, 176).

The labour/work debate has a long history, which is important to bear in mind in our current context as well (see Dinerstein and Neary 2002 for a radical reinterpretation of Marx's social theory), because “capitalism has always coexisted with a combination of labour regimes” (Cohen 1987, 3) and continues to do so. Also, I cannot help but agree with Hardt and Negri (2004, 106) — and it may be one of the few points with which I agree — that the “working class is fundamentally a restricted concept based on exclusions,” especially its exclusion of the unwaged, the unemployed, the underemployed, and those “informalized” (see also Boyd, Cohen, and Gutkind 1987).

In addition to these contested concepts, I want to distance my analysis from Rifkin's thesis (1995) that we are moving towards “a near workerless society.” Like Hardt and Negri, he has some interesting insights about the changes that technology has brought about, but his analysis and predictions are wrong, in my view. Even those jobs of the high-tech revolution are precarious and are outsourced to lower-wage-paying locations (Bangalore, India, for example). But jobs are continuing to be established; they are not disappearing. Robots on the scale Rifkin envisioned are not replacing the need for people to do the work. It is simply that that work is being found where labour is cheaper and exploitable.

Indeed, significant changes have come about in the world of work since the introduction of neo-liberal policies of deregulation and privatization under the current general restructuring of global capitalism. These dynamics have led to the intensification of the process of informalization worldwide, though uneven and differently executed depending on the country's political/economic situation.

I. GUIDING DEFINITIONS

As stated, the informalization of work today is very different from three decades ago. What we are seeing from China to Argentina to South Africa to South Korea and India, around the world in all regions of the global South, is the deepening of this process, which is encompassing more and more of the formerly organized workforce, pushing them into increasingly insecure and precarious situations, where they struggle for their basic livelihoods and are excluded from the benefits and job security that they once had. Workers are becoming increasingly downwardly, not upwardly, mobile. The direction of the “modern capitalist global economy” for increasing numbers of people is the inverse of what some believed was happening thirty-five years ago.

There are different degrees of informality and vulnerability for this labouring component. As well, there is also a range of work activities under this process that an increasing number of labouring people must engage in to barely survive. Day labourers hawking on the streets, hustlers, workers in the home, as well as unregulated factory workers and precarious workers in outsourcing or

subcontracting are all part of this informalized labour. This last category challenges those who call this work “marginal” and “outside the new global economy.” In fact, this new process of informalization is essential to capital’s needs and contributes directly to the increased income disparities that we see worldwide.²

The terms “feminization of work,” “casualization,” and “labour flexibility” are all interconnected to the overarching informalization of work, which has given new meaning to the working class. Some additional guiding definitions are in order, for these terms frequently take on different meanings in different contexts.³

“Labour flexibility” (which is interchangeable with “casualization”) is used to ensure that workers are available on an occasional basis (often contracted under terms that are seldom respected) in order to reduce costs — flexible hours, flexible wages, flexible skills. This “flexibility” also reduces or eliminates labour rights, benefits, and security. “Flexible” is one of those nice words that suggests being considerate and compromising, rather than being “rigid.” Yet actually what happens is that any protection for labour is removed. Workers are simply to be hired (or “redeployed”) when needed in periods of capitalist expansion, then let go when not needed.

“Feminization of work” is another term with several meanings, most often interpreted to mean an increased number of women in the workforce, but in fact, women workers, if they are more numerous, are in the lowest-paid, least-secure, temporary work situations. In many countries, during the 1970s and 1980s, women did increase in the waged workforce. Under the current informalization process, they are certainly the hardest hit (Sparr 1994; Boyd 2000), unemployed first, underemployed, and regressing often from semi-skilled to unskilled work. Over and over, the vast majority of women workers was unprotected by legislation and was seldom even counted (Waring 1988). While the excessive burden on women in all regions continues under restructuring, the irony is that the notion of a full-time permanent, skilled male job has also disappeared under this informalization process. There are no fixed meanings to these terms; rather, they represent different strategies used by capital at different times and in different places.

II. MAGNITUDE OF THE ISSUE GLOBALLY

The global situation is potentially highly explosive, particularly as a consequence of this informalization of work. Let us look for a moment at the scale of the problem in percentages in regions of the global South up to 2000.

2. There are currently a record number of billionaires in this terribly unequal world (691 billionaires, of whom most are Americans, 17 are Canadians, and a Mexican, Carlos Slim Helu, is no. 4 on the Forbes list). The Human Development Reports have for some years statistically documented these growing income disparities.

3. The terminology we use is important to pay attention to because it “deeply saturates our consciousness” (to borrow from Antonio Gramsci [1971] and Raymond Williams 1981) and is integral to hegemonic control. Throughout neo-liberal policies, one finds this agreeable, comforting terminology used to mask the reality of the strategy. Maybe I should not even have used the word “informalization” in this article as it has a rather pleasant personal touch; most of us would not want to be too formal. Such polite discourse clouds the social reality; what we are actually discussing within this “informalization of work” are new forms of exploitation and human degradation. A more accurate term might have been “immiseration of work.” I am also reminded of Marx’s warning about language in *The Poverty of Philosophy*: “Do not let yourselves be deluded by the abstract word ‘freedom’. Whose freedom? It is not the freedom of one individual in relation to another, but the freedom of capital to crush the worker?” (Marx 1848).

Table 1. Informalized and Informal Employment in Non-agricultural Employment, by Sex 1994–2000

Region/Country	Informal Employment as Percentage of Non-agricultural Employment		
	Men and Women	Women ^a	Men ^b
North Africa	48	43	49
Algeria	43	41	43
Morocco	45	47	44
Tunisia	50	39	53
Egypt	55	46	57
Sub-Saharan Africa	72	84	63
Benin	93	97	87
Chad	74	95	60
Guinea	72	87	66
Kenya	72	83	59
South Africa	51	58	44
Latin America	51	58	48
Bolivia	63	74	55
Brazil	60	67	55
Chile	36	44	31
Colombia	38	44	34
Costa Rica	44	48	42
El Salvador	57	69	46
Guatemala	56	69	47
Honduras	58	65	74
Mexico	55	55	54
Dominican Republic	48	50	47
Venezuela	47	47	47
Asia	65	65	65
India	83	86	83
Indonesia	78	77	78
Philippines	72	73	71
Thailand	51	54	49
Syria	42	35	43

Source: International Labour Office (2002).

^aAs a percentage of women's non-agricultural employment.

^bAs a percentage of men's non-agricultural employment.

In table 1, the ILO study on informal employment provides the percentage of people informalized in non-agricultural employment. While the ILO recognizes the limitations of the methodology used for arriving at these estimates (countries usually have no data, their data may be highly unreliable, and so on), they do provide some sense of the magnitude of the problem globally. The ILO has conducted other studies on every technical aspect to be explored in relation to informalization. While we need these studies, their important conventions — especially on core labour standards — and commissions, unfortunately what we are witnessing is not a technical problem but a political issue that requires a political response.

In order to ground my central thesis more concretely, I shall examine three countries in relation to this informalization process currently underway, thus demonstrating the increased immiseration that it is producing within their societies, even though they are differently constructed in their labour regimes and their political/economic systems.

III. THREE COUNTRIES AT A GLANCE: CHINA, SOUTH KOREA, AND SOUTH AFRICA

The primary site of struggle for labour is still the nation-state, in spite of the numerous books, debates, and commissions devoted to “globalization,” often declaring the end of the state.⁴ Ronaldo Munck, in his *Globalisation and Labour* (2002), criticizes the analysis of left scholars in *Monthly Review* (Wood 1997) for their dismissal of “globalisation as a framework of analysis and simply repeat(ing) timeless Marxist nostrums” rather than developing what he calls “a transnational labour strategy adequate to the needs of the time” (Munck 2002, 19). What I hope to demonstrate is that the two perspectives are not at odds with each other. In fact, a transnational global strategy for labour must encompass domestic or national priorities and vice versa.

The working class — or labouring class, as I prefer to call it — exists in particular societies and locations with particular histories of struggles with capital. Currently it is a new or altered labouring class, inclusive of these “informalized” workers, as I intend to illustrate through my three cases. Furthermore, it is not simply a question of labour “going global” or “transnational” to counter capital’s mobility. While global concerns about international migrants — legal and illegal migrants, undocumented workers, guest works, and so on — are an important consequence of this informalized labour strategy, with implications for countries in the Americas, I do not intend to treat those issues in this article. The remittances from these migrant workers have a huge impact on the economies of their countries of origin (Mexico reportedly “receives on average \$17 million a day in currency sent from nationals abroad” [Longoria, 194, in Wise et al.]) But there are growing restrictions on international labour mobility by nation-states, unless one is highly skilled or there is cheap labour needed for the OECD countries.⁵

Labour movements are building new forms of alliances and initiating complex strategic responses to transnational contexts, but these struggles are situated within local work economies. Labour has also been affected by the new regional and global alliances that are interconnecting with the World Social Forum, and anti-globalization and anti-war campaigns. These protests and exchanges are important in what some see as a revitalized labour movement emerging as “social movement unionism.” Some labour movements are increasingly returning to their social movement roots, beyond just issues of wages. Among the many new initiatives of international labour movements is the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR), a new labour network developed over the past decade, which involves democratic unions from Latin America, Southern Africa, Asia, and Australasia (see Lambert and Webster 2001), which I discuss at the end of this article.

I chose to examine the informalization of work process in China, South Korea, and South Africa because they represent very different types of polities or states, but all have some industrial base, therefore with implicit comparisons to Latin American countries and other regions of the world (see Sassen [1997] for a discussion of informalization in advanced market economies). China is moving from a centrally planned political economy to state capitalist integration with profound changes in its labour regime, especially since the mid-1990s; South Korea, one of the much-lauded East Asian “tigers” with good social indicators changing course, especially since the 1997 financial crisis, and

4. A recent book by the Canadian author John Ralston Saul (2005) persuasively argues the end of globalization, noting it has been a colossal failure in not ensuring the public good.

5. See Griffin, Fine, and others for an interesting debate in *Development and Change* about labour and economic globalization.

adopting aggressive neo-liberal policies severely undermining its workforce; and South Africa, where after the transition in 1994 from an apartheid racialized regime to a democratically elected government supported by strong militant trade union organizations, choosing to introduce a full neo-liberal model with dire effects on the labouring people over the past decade.

While my examples demonstrate the combined and uneven effects of the informalization process, especially when nation-states and labour regimes are so differently organized, the trends towards increased immiseration, poverty, unemployment, and underemployment are devastating in these countries (Davis 2004). And I would add that these trends are indisputable.

A. China

The state here is integrating into the global market capitalist economy and selling off state-owned enterprises while encouraging foreign direct-investment enterprises.⁶ This neo-liberal strategy has occurred in two waves; dismantling began in the 1980s,⁷ then moved more aggressively in the 1990s. It is this latter stage that has led to the emergence of profound and disturbing changes in China's dominant labour regime. There are two central phenomena to examine when positioning the struggles of labour in relation to China's informalization process: first, migrant workers or "rural labourers" moving from the countryside to the coastal cities as the state lifted the ban on their mobility; and second, dismissed urban workers from the closing of state-owned enterprises (SOEs). As already mentioned earlier, over 176 million people are estimated to have migrated from the rural to urban areas in search of work between 1996 and 2000. These migrant workers do not and have never benefited from the labour regime protections that employed urban workers previously had in China. They are irregularly employed without contracts in these new foreign direct investment (FDI) enterprises (or if they have contracts, they are not respected) where they are highly exploited, work long hours in unhealthy conditions, are paid less than other workers, and lack residential and other welfare entitlements. There were over 380,000 such enterprises established between 1980 and 2001.

As migrant workers began to flow into the cities after the state ban on residential mobility was lifted, another state policy ordered the closing of state-owned enterprises, putting millions of urban workers out of any secure employment (referred to as "enforced dismissals"). He Qinglian (2000, 84) observes, "Workers in state-owned firms have seen their social status sink swiftly and drastically, losing their once protected positions day by day. The result has been a major shrinkage in the middle layers of Chinese society, and a rapid expansion of its lower layers, an obvious formula for social instability." Now large parts of the informalized worker class are also laid-off urban workers either self-employed or day workers.

These two groups of workers (migrant and dismissed city-born urban workers), who are part of this informalized sector, are often played against each other as they search for work. In Shanghai, China's largest industrial city, a recent study⁸ has shown that hiring a migrant worker is one-third the cost of employing city-born Shanghai workers, because employers are not required to pay social benefits to migrant workers. In 2000, my field discussions estimated that in Shanghai alone over a million SOE workers had been dismissed from the state without adequate compensation. During my visit to Shanghai in 2000, I also learned that those workers who remain employed in the state sector are charged a fee to pay compensation to the laid-off workers, resulting in greater poverty all around

6. In addition to my own research, the two key sources for this section are Solinger (2001) and Zhu (2004).

7. See Howell (1990) for an assessment of China's policy in the first decade, in which over 10,000 foreign investment enterprises, involving US\$22 billion of pledged foreign investment, were established in China.

8. Study by Zhang Xinmin and Wang Yuanfu (1997), cited in Zhu (2004, 1014).

(Boyd 2000, 6).⁹ Long-term investment in secure employment in state factories has been lost, while short-term speculative capital (“hot money”) by transnational capitalists from the United States, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong has taken hold in these FDI enterprises, dependent on this “informalization” strategy that ensures cheap wages, long hours, and degrading conditions of work for the “competitive advantage.”

Statistical estimates in China are very difficult to obtain and are often unreliable. Estimates of unemployment from 1995 to 2000 range from 30 million to 100 million. It is also estimated (Solinger 2001, 12) that over 65% of those informalized are women, whereas they represented only about 45% of the workforce in the SOEs before these “enforced dismissals.” The point to be made is that this situation is new in terms of the magnitude of increased poverty and immiseration for China over the last 40 years, increasing social stratification, changing the nature of the working class, and undermining the social protections of past labour regimes. It also calls into question Stiglitz’s (2003) thesis of gradual reform introduction being preferred to the “shock therapy” in Russia; both are to be challenged, in my view, as they are both irresponsible policies that have impoverished many more people in their societies and contributed to obscene inequalities.

Labour’s Response

The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), which is composed primarily of state functionaries, is not equipped to adequately respond to this informalization process that is changing China’s labour regime and causing major social disruptions. The three primary issues are unpaid wages, absence of contracts (or even with them, still highly exploitative conditions of work), and bureaucratic corruption. Through its official program of enforced dismissals and “informalized” migrant labour, the Chinese leadership appeared to be ignoring the very working class that laid the foundation for its present prosperity (see the Postscript on China at the end of this article for recent developments that confirm my basic analysis). China is now at a critical juncture: migrant workers have developed some informal means to organize for basic protection (for example, on the basis of worker’s place of origin). There have also been wildcat strikes, petitions, militant protests, and significant challenges to their exploitative situation. In 2002 and again in 2004, there were several major strikes. Workers attempted to form independent alternative unions but were arrested and jailed. Yuchao Zhu interprets trade-union organizational possibilities in the following way:

If we read China’s Trade Union Law, which was amended in 2001, it does not explicitly say that to organize independent trade unions outside the All-China Federation of Trade Unions is illegal. But from Article 2 and Article 56 especially, it implicitly indicates that ACFTU are the only trade unions legitimately operating in China. Moreover, most part of this trade union law is actually about the organizational principle and operational mechanism of the official trade unions. On the other hand, when China finally ratified the International Covenant of Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights, it entered reservation about the article of free trade unions. It obviously means that China does not accept real independent, free trade unions other than the official ones. Thus, in fact, there is a kind of legal ban on organizing non-official trade unions, though the ban is not that explicit. (Yuchao Zhu, email correspondence, 17 March 2005)

9. It is important to point out that since 2000, the Shanghai Municipal Government has taken a pro-active role in dealing with the rising unemployment through the establishment of “informal labour organizations” within a “favourable policy and regulatory environment” for the informalized. See Howell (2002).

Legal challenges, with the assistance of Hong Kong Chinese organized workers, have been increasingly successful but only as a one-on-one experience. Case interventions and minor attempts to reform ACFTU by electing progressive leaders at the grassroots branches are tactics increasingly employed by the workers. These are signs of new opportunities and potential organizing space, though limited. Resistance or challenges from migrant workers and laid-off SOEs workers are emerging in order to protest their lack of rights and benefits. Whether they will alter China's basic neo-liberal strategy and direction is uncertain.

B. South Korea

Korea developed its industrialized economy under a highly authoritarian and regulatory interventionist state, backed by the military and the United States (Chang 2002; Koo 2001). Speaking of the East Asian economic achievements as a "miracle" is, to me, a misnomer. For whom was South Korea's improved living standard a "miracle"? Certainly not the workers. Factory workers may have had adequate wages and some job security, but their daily experiences in the factories was that "of a highly exploited and abused workforce" (Koo 2001, 4). State and labour tensions have a long history in South Korea. Following the destruction of leftist forces after the Korean War, militant unions were destroyed and their destruction was justified by anti-Communist ideology, which continues today with close US support. Throughout the 1960s up to the 1980s, brutal experiences at work, notably "the extremely abusive and despotic work relations in the factories" (Koo 2001, 48) led to a wave of labour militancy and a high level of workers' political consciousness in South Korea (see articles also in Teal 1990).

A distinctive aspect of labour struggles in South Korea was the involvement of large numbers of students, women's organizations, church organizations, and intellectuals as part of a broader movement for democracy. Following "a temporary suspension of authoritarian state intervention in the labour regime" (Koo 2001, 162) there was an explosion of labour unrest (with an estimated 40,000 Hyundai workers joining the protest). In 1987 the Great Worker Struggle, "spontaneous and unorganized" (Koo, 162), erupted in South Korea — a milestone in the history of the labour movement, for unions and strikes were illegal, and workers seemed previously divided. The struggles over that decade until the financial crisis of 1997 were intense.

Like other countries in Asia, South Korea was severely affected by the 1997 financial crisis, and capital once again, with the collusion of the military-backed authoritarian state, introduced more aggressive neo-liberal policies, severely undermining the workers and placing the burden of the crisis on them. In 1998, organized workers temporarily co-operated with the state for the "national good," making concessions on "flexible labour," only to be betrayed shortly thereafter. Official statistics from Korea's Ministry of Labour (ICFTU 2000) state that in 2000, there were 6.95 million workers affected by the informalization process (4.41 million were part-time and 2.54 million were daily workers), while there remained 6.15 million full-time workers. The Ministry of Labour euphemistically admits that the informalization of work is due largely to "companies' desire to reduce labour costs in structural adjustment." The OECD reports that only 30% of workers are full-time, far less than the percentage given by the ministry.

Labour's Response

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU)¹⁰ came into being in 1995 (its predecessor, the council, was founded in 1990), when unions were legalized, though as already mentioned, organ-

10. There are actually six other state-connected federations in South Korea.

ized labour struggles predate that period. Casual or informalized workers, representing at least 55% of the labouring class, have begun to organize their own unions with the assistance of the KCTU. The KCTU currently devotes 35% of its federation budget to these informalized workers and has recently trained over 1500 new labour activists to help organize their unions. The Korean labour movement has always had strong social movement alliances. It has links with the Korean National People's Solidarity Front against neo-liberalism and the Korean People's Action, united against privatization of the railroads, exploitation in the export-processing zones, the free trade agreements with the United States, and the new WTO (World Trade Organization) interventions. As mentioned, the labour movement also has a history of strong links with women's organizations and issues, due in part to the extreme exploitation of women in the textile industries in the early 1980s. The Korean Women Workers Association United and the Korean Women's Trade Union have developed innovative strategies to help organize women in the informal and part-time workplaces to inform them of their rights. Two activists usually go to these sites in order that one can continue the work while the other discusses rights. The KCTU continues to demand the protection of the rights and benefits for these informalized workers. The KCTU is also an active member of the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Right (SIGTUR, discussed below) and hosted its 2001 meetings in Seoul.

C. South Africa

South Africa has been part of my political formation for over 35 years, from when I began work with the anti-apartheid movement. As is well known, South Africa developed strong militant trade unions, especially the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Throughout the decade from 1984 on, it was linked to the national liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC), and the South African Communist Party (SACP). When the ANC was elected in 1994, many COSATU leaders were also elected to Parliament and had the opportunity to influence the direction of the economic choices for the newly deracializing and democratizing South Africa. While it is recognized that the outgoing apartheid leaders plundered the state coffers (as also happened in Uganda after Obote's reign), many were surprised when the new ANC government essentially followed the neo-liberal model of deregulation and downsizing, under their Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy introduced as a "non-negotiable" economic strategy.

The GEAR was designed to move South Africa towards a globally competitive economy, "to help re-integrate South Africa into the global markets by changing workplace practices toward more efficiency and productivity" (Naidoo 2003, 14). Large sections of the leadership of organized labour appear to have been neutered or "professionalized" (the more polite term) as they joined the state power apparatus.¹¹ Throughout the 1990s, there were, however, important legislative changes in the labour relations regime, designed essentially to eradicate apartheid and to provide equal opportunities.

Now more than a decade after the ANC came to power, there is devastating unemployment and poverty in South Africa in part attributable to those neo-liberal policies.¹² A review of some statistics, which are quite reliable in South Africa, unlike many other countries, attests to the worsening

11. There are interesting parallels between the labour movement leadership in post-apartheid South Africa and that of Brazil under Lula (see de Oliveira [2003], among others).

12. There is also a major HIV/AIDS crisis that has affected all of South Africa but is claiming mainly the labouring class. As early as 1988, many activists were trying to alert the labour movement to the looming AIDS crisis (without success), especially with the migrant labourers working in the mines from southern African countries and living in single-sex hostels.

employment situation over the decade. In 1995, unemployment was officially 16% (though likely higher); in 2002, it was up to 30% or more, based on narrow definitions of unemployment, and 45% with the broader definition (Webster and Omar 2003). The recognized "informalized sector" in 1997 included 965,000 workers, and by 2001 had grown to 1.8 million.

The trade union picture for COSATU is also relevant to view statistically. In 1994, COSATU membership was 1.3 million. By 2003 it had risen to 1.7 million (three-quarters of that growth was in the public sector, while there was a significant decline in mining and manufacturing unions as their workers were "informalized"). Between 2000 and 2003, there was a decline of over 100,000 members, who moved into "informalized work." Roughly a third of South Africa's "working population" is informalized, notably in what was the dominant secure employment in manufacturing, footwear, and mining. There have been major shifts in the labour force due to retrenchment from downsizing. Subcontracting or outsourcing activities, which are informalized, now predominate the workforce, with a potentially explosive situation building as the gap between the rich and poor widens. The income for black workers, already low, has drastically fallen over the decade, estimated to have declined between 16% and 20%. Hardest hit is the marginal or casual labouring class and dispossessed jobless, where once again women predominate. The country is slowly deracializing capital and the workforce, but the inequalities and poverty have worsened over the past decade.

Labour's Response

The response from COSATU has been complicated and often contradictory. In 1997, COSATU argued in its Commission on the Future of Trade Unions for "strategic engagement, a strategy for engaging with restructuring on the basis of a union agenda and union independence" (Webster and Omar 2003, 210). Now, COSATU is slowly attempting to address this dire situation and certainly is recognizing the policy disasters of GEAR. With a history of strong militancy and community-based alliances, new social movements have emerged with which the labour movement is once again aligning itself to take forward the "redistribution" agenda, notably through the Basic Income Grant Coalition, People's Budget Coalition, and the revival of the "living wage" campaigns that were part of the 1980s. Whether COSATU will re-invent itself to aggressively challenge the neo-liberal agenda or continue to play out the elite liberal compromise with the ANC is still uncertain. What is certain is that hardships, degradation, and unemployment continue for large sections of the poorest South Africans.

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR LABOUR MOVEMENTS

The implications for labour movements of this current phase of capitalist restructuring are highly complex and go beyond what I have presented here as "labour's response" for the three cases. Strategies by labouring people and by labour organizations to address this stage of global capitalist restructuring are taking place locally, regionally, and globally, each impacting on the other. I chose to focus on some primary struggles internal to the nation-states. However, labour movements are also connected through official international organizations and new global forums, whether they be the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU with over 125 million members and three regional affiliates, in Asia, Africa, and the Americas), and of course the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). All of these organizations are engaged in rethinking their mandates as labour rights and benefits are increasingly eroded, and as the global picture of immiseration worsens.

One of the most innovative responses by organized labour at the international level is the

Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Right (SIGTUR), which is a new labour network emerging over the past decade involving democratic unions from Latin America, Southern Africa, Asia, and Australasia. The COSATU, KCTU and Brazil's Central Unica dos Trabalhadores (United Workers Central) are all active members and have hosted meetings of the network in recent years (Johannesburg in 1999, Seoul in 2001, and Porto Alegre in 2004). The precursor to SIGTUR was the Indian Ocean Regional Trade Union Conference in 1991, which brought together unions bordering the Indian Ocean region. It gradually broadened its scope and in 1999 relinquished its regional focus to encompass the global South. The primary objective of SIGTUR is to share experiences on the pertinent issues that trade unions are facing under the pressures of globalization, to highlight the key struggles being fought, to provide a basis for strengthening campaigns by social movements, and to exchange information, especially on multinationals or transnationals, and to develop cross-border solidarity actions.

We are living in a constantly evolving context where capital is mobile, thanks in part to its powerful organizations (World Bank, International Monetary Fund, WTO, and the US Treasury) that do its bidding. But systems are always under construction, never static or set. The selected examples of China, South Korea, and South Africa were intended to provide a perspective on labour and the labouring poor by examining a dominant strategy of capitalism: the informalization process.

From the three cases presented and my own observations globally, there are at least two dominant tendencies in positioning labour struggles, which are not mutually exclusive, but they do represent different values or agendas or strategic choices in relation to restructuring.

Let me summarize this first tendency: *constructive engagement with capitalism or the "liberal elite compromise" to integrate within the global capitalist economy.*

It is surprising to me how often strong trade unions, with all their global exposure, experience, and hard evidence, become so co-opted by the state, as though integration into the global capitalist economy is inevitable and therefore we need to work with it.¹³ I am especially thinking of Brazil and South Africa in their recent political and economic histories.¹⁴ Also, under this first tendency, there are organized responses that are designed to give the acknowledged negative side of globalization a "human face," to address the deteriorating labour concerns, poverty, and hardship. Many of these initiatives are contested by labour, while others have the support of labour leaders or trade union representatives.

Let me explain by mentioning a few examples. First the North American Agreement on Labour Co-operation (NAALA) of NAFTA has been an abysmal failure. Then the much-lauded World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization (2003), supposedly a new initiative of the ILO, promised to address the dire effects of globalization on labouring people. However, an examination of their report reveals a clear reformist argument where the "neo-liberal efficiency model [is] enshrined as a basic good" (Munck 2002, 153). Then in the new reforms by the ILO, "decent work"

13. An insightful explanation can be found in Gonzalez Casanova (1996, 45), in which he argues that "the state was able to persuade workers to prefer exploitation to exclusion." However, as he explains, this choice was not based on reality; the state in fact put forth an erroneous choice. With the state's integration into the global economy, workers continue to be excluded from benefits and rights, as well as being highly exploited as my evidence also demonstrates.

14. More recently, James Petras states that, in Brazil, "the trade unions representing public employees, metal workers and civil construction workers founded a new dynamic labor confederation CONLUTA in May (5–7) 2006. With over 2,700 delegates from 22 states representing nearly 1.8 million workers, CONLUTA represents an alternative social pole for the tens of millions of Brazilian workers and poor abandoned by Lula's embrace of bankers, agro-business and foreign MNCs. CONLUTA has adopted a social-movement type of organization including employed and unemployed workers organizations, neighborhood and rural workers movements, students, women, ecology and landless workers organizations within its operating structure. Representation at the Congress was based on direct elections from democratic assemblies." See Petras (2006).

became their organizing concept, recognizing, as they state, the “dire effects of globalization, the new realities.” They introduced a much-needed ethical element and made women’s work more visible, and they produced endless strategies for combating informalized labour. Beyond that, as representatives of states, employers, and unions, they cannot be expected to work outside of “the liberal compromise.” But certainly their work is important, maybe keeping us from global anarchy.

Finally, we have the debates about the “social clause,” which is an attempt to include the core ILO conventions in international trade agreements to ensure that core labour rights are respected. The basic argument is that trade liberalization promoted by GATT and the WTO undermines workers rights, that without such a clause investment would just move to where workers rights and labour standards are weakest. Opposition to this “social clause” has been strongest from the South, where it is argued that it would provide a protectionist advantage to developed economies and that it excludes consideration of women working differently.

Let us turn to the second dominant tendency: *re-inventing worker organizations and constructing new international labour movements*.

A shrinking formal sector does not negate the need for the labouring class — whether working for wages, underemployed, or informalized — to struggle to obtain rights and benefits, to a full livelihood with dignity. And it does this most effectively if it is organized. So a key question has become how to organize or reorganize informalized workers. Strengthening internal democracy of labour organizations (national trade unions) and recognizing the changed nature of the labouring class, notably being more inclusive, is the first essential point. Second, unions are organizing more widely, connecting as many of them are doing with anti-globalization and anti-war campaigns as well as social and community movements (e.g., World Social Forum and its actions, such as the participatory budget and basic income campaigns). Third, organizing directly with “informalized” workers has become part of the labour movement’s inclusiveness, as is shown with the example of KCTU. Finally, although not a new strategy, transnational solidarity efforts are increasingly important, not only as protest but also as concerted organized actions through information exchanges. Education exchanges, especially about the global behaviour of multinational organizations in local sites (e.g., Rio Tinto and Wal-Mart), are increasingly being shared. This involves studying the experiences of capital (recall Susan George’s advice given long ago to “study the rich and powerful”), and joint actions against trade agreements (such as NAFTA and APEC). Alliances between unions of the North and South continue to be part of the cross-border struggles around NAFTA (see Obrera [2003] and Boyd [1998]).

There is a third scenario that is worth paying closer attention to, and was hinted at, throughout my discussion of the three cases. Though not dominant, it is emerging in countries and regions all over the world. And it returns us to one of my opening statements by Karl Polanyi that “labour is a human activity” and not simply a commodity, that labouring people exist within societies, with multiple connections to their communities, not just as producers and consumers. I am thinking here of the dismissed workers who are repossessing abandoned, closed, or bankrupt factories and enterprises, making them work again under their control and ownership. In Argentina, there is the National Recovery Movement, which started in the garment factory. In South Africa, with its long history of community-based popular struggle, new forms of worker control of failed enterprises are also evident. And even in Jonquière, Quebec, reputedly inspired by the Argentinean movement, laid-off workers have taken ownership and control of an aluminum plant closed by the Canadian multinational ALCAN. Dismissed workers, downsized workers, and those underemployed in this current stage of “informalization” often feel betrayed by both the state and bureaucratic trade unions, viewing them as corrupt; and they want to remain in their community base, so they are organizing co-

operatives or collectives locally to take control of their labour.¹⁵

Worldwide social rights struggles, popular struggles against globalization and wars, and the struggles of the international women's movement all indicate the known connections between increased militarization and corporate capitalism, these powerful systems of control. However, collective resistance and new forms of labour organizations represent a strong counter-movement for global justice and the common public good. With the current upsurge of worldwide resistance and counter-hegemonic movements, the capitalist system surely cannot go on forever.

TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

The wind got up in the night and took our plans away.

—Chinese proverb

POSTSCRIPT ON CHINA

Since this article was written, primarily in March 2005, many new policies and regulations have been introduced by the National People's Congress (NPC) of China through the standing committee on migrant farmers-turned-workers, in response to their plight. During this period, social unrest has increased dramatically, with a record number of protests concerning, for example, rural land confiscations, dispossession of farmers, and unpaid wages and poor safety conditions of migrant rural workers. There is a draft law currently being debated that is designed to ensure that these migrant workers are protected with labour contracts that are upheld. If passed, the law will be the first in China to provide specific provisions on work contracts. The purpose of the law is to safeguard the legal rights and interests of labourers.

The standing committee of the NPC acknowledges that the existing labour contract system, set up in accordance with the Labour Law and enacted in 1994, requires an update as "employees' rights and interests are frequently abused as their employers can terminate work contracts at will, dock workers' pay, refuse to renew contracts with employees and decline to pay interns" ("Contracts of New Workers" 2006).

In addition, China is undertaking a series of important measures to further protect the rights and interests of rural workers in cities, including timely wage payment and the right to education of their children. Social benefits, such as free education and insurance benefits, that were never accorded to rural workers have been introduced and debated by the NPC in a high-level meeting chaired by Premier Wen Jiabao himself. More specifically, the governing body of Shanghai, which has an estimated 3.75 million rural migrant workers, has pledged to make services available for rural migrant workers and to take other measures to better safeguard their legitimate rights and interests. Though the rural migrant workers have been playing a vital role in local construction and development of Shanghai, their social and political status has been acknowledged to be appalling. To change the situation, the city government has promulgated a series of policies to address such outstanding problems as salary default, industrial injury insurance, and education for migrant workers' children.

Finally, during this period the All-China Federation of Trade Unions has also stepped in more publicly by agreeing to play a more active role in protecting the legal rights of migrant farmers-turned-workers. "According to statistics published by the ACFTU, the number of migrant workers in China has

15. Maybe one could also see the CEPCO coffee producers in Oaxaca as part of this emerging movement that is developing new innovative organizational responses to neo-liberal state policies. See Bezaury (2003).

exceeded 120 million, mostly in private enterprises. Migrant workers represent 71% of all the workers in the construction industry but only 13.8% of them have joined the labour union ("More Efforts" 2006). The federation will seek to have more of these migrant workers join the union and also provide legal services to migrant workers whose rights are infringed, giving priority to their health and safety.

Clearly, the Chinese leadership has recognized the crisis that was emerging and has begun to take important direct measures through the highest body in the country, the NPC, to rectify an untenable situation for millions of workers. Unrest in China is acknowledged by the leadership to be due to the growing disparity between the rich and poor, as China transforms from a predominantly agrarian society undergoing modern urbanization. However, it is important to point out that China's "socialist character" is enshrined in its constitution and its overall legal system, which, among other provisions, recognizes that "the state creates conditions for employment, strengthens labour protection, improves working conditions and, on the basis of expanded production, increases remuneration for work and social benefits" (Article 42). Tensions will continue to arise in this evolution, but what must be acknowledged is the active way in which the leadership is continually returning to its constitution and seriously attempting to address the discrimination against migrant workers with new measures.

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About the Contributors

Henry Bernstein is Professor of Development Studies in the University of London at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). He has longstanding research interests in social theory, the political economy of agrarian change, the maize economy, and issues of land reform in South Africa, on all of which he has published widely. He was co-editor for 15 years with Professor T.J. Byres of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* and is founding editor, again with Professor Byres, of a new *Journal of Agrarian Change* (2001). Recent publications include “The Boys from Bothaville, or the Rise and Fall of King Maize: A South African Story,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 4, no. 4 (2004); “Rural Land and Land Conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa,” in *Reclaiming the Land: The Resurgence of Rural Movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, ed. Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros (London: Zed Books, 2005); and, with Liam Campling, “Commodity Studies and Commodity Fetishism,” pts. I and II, *Journal of Agrarian Change* 6, nos. 2 and 3 (2006). <hb4@soas.ac.uk>

Rosalind Boyd is currently the Special Advisor on International Research in the Office of the Vice-Principal (Research and International Relations) at McGill University, Montreal, while continuing as an independent researcher. She was formerly Director (1996–2004) of the Centre for Developing-Area Studies (CDAS), the founding editor of the journal *LABOUR, Capital and Society/TRAVAIL, capital et société* (1979–2004), and the Director/Principal Investigator of the CDAS Gender and Human Security program (2000–2004) funded by the Community-University Research Alliance Program (CURA) of SSHRC. Her research and publications cover critical studies of economic globalization, human security, women workers, child labour, refugees, labour migration, human rights, knowledge systems, and resistance literature. <rosalind.boyd@mcgill.ca>

Craig Cameron holds a master’s degree in physical education that focused on international development through sport. He was an inaugural volunteer with Right to Play as Co-program Coordinator – Benin, and is currently an Action Canada Fellow. Cameron plans to pursue PhD studies on ethical decision-making development through sport. <r24cdc@mun.ca>

Peter Eglin is Professor of Sociology at Wilfrid Laurier University. He has taught at WLU since 1976, principally sociology of crime, human rights, theory and practice, and ethnomethodology. He does research in membership categorization analysis — on which he recently published *The Montreal Massacre: A Story of Membership Categorization Analysis* (Waterloo, Ontario: WLU Press, 2003), co-authored with Stephen Hester, which was shortlisted for the Harold Adams Innis Prize for best

English-language book in the Social Sciences in 2004 — and on intellectuals' responsibility for human rights violations, notably in East Timor, El Salvador, and Palestine. <peglin@wlu.ca>

Harriet Friedmann is Professor of Sociology and Fellow of the Centre for International Studies, University of Toronto. Her research over 30 years has explored many aspects of food and agriculture, mainly through the historical framework of “food regimes.” These include the structure of family farms; international political economy of food and agriculture; agricultural policy from local to national, regional and international; changing patterns of trade and specialization; diasporic cuisines, agronomies and food practices; and international trade rivalries and institutions. Her current research is on the politics of certification and standards both globally and locally, and on the creative community of food practice in Toronto, including networks and institutions. She was recently a Fellow of the Agrarian Studies Program at Yale University, of All Souls College Oxford, and of the Rockefeller Centre in Bellagio, Italy. <harriet.friedmann@utoronto.ca>

Ishara Mahat is a freelance consultant. She was a research scholar with the Institute of Women and Gender Studies at the University of Toronto after completing her PhD in development studies at Massey University in New Zealand in 2004. Her research interests are gender and resources, social change, and indigenous development. <ishara_m@hotmail.com>

Mohamed Ali Marouani is *maître de conférences* at the Institut d'étude du développement économique et social (IEDES) of the University of Paris I – Panthéon-Sorbonne, and research associate at DIAL (Development, Institutions and Long-term Analysis) (France) and at the Economic Research Forum for the Arab Countries, Iran and Turkey (ERF). His research focuses mainly on the impact of public policies on employment and income distribution, and on the links between international trade and development. <mohamed-ali.marouani@univ-paris1.fr>

Philip McMichael is International Professor of Development Sociology at Cornell University. His research interests over the past decade have focused on food regime analysis as a lens on the political history of capitalism; and the transformation of development from an international to a global project in the era of neo-liberalism. He has authored or edited six books, presided over the International Sociological Association's Research Committee on the Sociology of Agriculture and Food, and recently worked with the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) on the question of food security, nutrition, and the supermarket revolution. He is currently studying the phenomenon of global counter-movements, with particular attention to agrarian resistances. <pdmi1@cornell.edu>

Miguel Murmis is Senior Researcher at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, CONICET) at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, FLACSO) in Buenos Aires, Argentina; Professor of Sociology (retired), University of Toronto; and Honorary Professor at General Sarmiento National University (Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, UNGS), in Los Polvorines, Argentina. Recent articles include “Institutionalization of the Social Sciences in Argentina,” *Social Science Information*, 2005. He is co-editor, with Mónica Bendini and others, of *El campo en la sociología actual. Una perspectiva latinoamericana* (Buenos Aires: La Colmena, 2003). His research interests include poverty and unemployment; rural multiple jobs (pluriactivity); rural towns as centres of economic activity; changes in the national agrarian structure; and Marxism and rural studies. <miguelmurmis@gmail.com>

Marc Raffinot is *maitre de conférences* at the University of Paris–Dauphine’s Équipe Universitaire de Recherche “Institutions: Coordination, Organisation” (EURISCO), and research associate at DIAL (Development, Institutions and Long-term Analysis) (France). His research focuses mainly on the indebtedness of developing countries, poverty reduction strategies and development financing. <raffinot@dauphine.fr>

Francisco Rodríguez served as Chief Economist of the Venezuelan National Assembly from 2000 to 2004. He has taught economics at the University of Maryland at College Park and at the Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Administración in Caracas. His publications include “Trade Policy and Economic Growth: A Skeptic’s Guide to the Cross-National Evidence” (with Dani Rodrik), *NBER Macroeconomics Annual 2001*; “Why Do Resource-Abundant Economies Grow more Slowly?” (with Jeffrey Sachs), *Journal of Economic Growth*, September 1999; and “Inequality, Redistribution and Rent-Seeking,” *Economics and Politics*, November 2004. Currently he is Assistant Professor of Economics and Latin American Studies at Wesleyan University and Visiting Researcher at the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. <frrodriguez@wesleyan.edu>

Salah El-Sheikh is Professor in the Department of Economics, of which he is a former Head, at St. Francis Xavier University. He also formerly served as Advisor to the President of Egypt’s statistics and census agency (CAPMAS). His primary research interest being the theory, policies, and philosophy of economic development, the focus of his research has been the econometric policy modelling of developing countries (with special reference to Egypt) as well as the relationship between religion and culture, economic institutions, and governance. He has authored two books: *Islam and Economic Philosophy*, Economic Book Series (Cairo: Al-Ahram Press, 1992, in Arabic), and *Globalization, Arabo-Islamic Culture and Socioeconomic Development* (forthcoming), and numerous articles in scholarly journals, including *Economic Modelling*, *Empirical Economics*, *Economia Internazionale*, *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, *The Muslim World*, *The International Journal of Middle East Studies*, and *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, among others. <selsheik@stfx.ca>

Henry Veltmeyer is a Professor of International Development Studies at Saint Mary’s University, Halifax and at the Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas in Mexico. His research interests include: the theory and practice of development; globalization, transnational corporations and the world economy; development and class; Latin America; and the Caribbean. He is co-editor of the *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*. <hveltmeier@smu.ca>