REFLECTIONS

Speaking Globally

Marcel van der Linden
International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam

The recent growth of the working classes in various parts of the Global South (or what was called the Tricontinent of Africa, Asia, and Latin America some years ago) has important consequences for labor historians. For a very long time labor history was mainly based in the North Atlantic region, though there have also been important nuclei in the so-called socialist countries, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, and some institutional labor history could also be found in other parts of the world at least since the 1920s. Now, however, the Global South is playing an increasingly important role in the development of working class historiography.

A personal recollection illustrates this trend and the role of international networks in facilitating it. In 1991 Jan Breman, a specialist in South Asian sociology, organized a conference on Indian labor relations at the University of Amsterdam. Jan introduced me to three Indian labor historians attending the event: the very senior Ranajit Das Gupta, who would soon publish his enormously important collection of essays *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India: Studies in Colonial History*, and two younger scholars, Rana Behal and Prabhu Mohapatra. The four of us discussed a variety of issues and found that we shared many interests. It was the beginning of a serious friendship and collaboration. (Sadly, Ranajit passed away in 1999.)

In the mid-1990s Prabhu returned to the Netherlands on a fellowship. When we met again, he proposed that we jointly organize a workshop on Indian labor history—the first workshop ever to be held on that topic. As I had no prior knowledge of South Asia or its labor history, I focused on the logistics and Prabu on the substance of the conference. In October 1995 the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam had the honor to host the conference "Global and Local Linkages: South Asian Labour." Among the participants were some of India's most prominent scholars in the field, including Dipesh Chakrabarty, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and Sabyasachi ("Bappa") Bhattacharya. Inspired by the workshop's success, it was suggested that we hold a second workshop in India and it was proposed that we also establish an Indian labor history association which could stimulate further activities.

In December 1996 about fifteen of us met again at the campus of Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi and founded the Association of Indian Labour

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Historians (AILH). Bappa, Rana, and Prabhu were appointed as the chairperson, the treasurer, and the secretary, respectively. At the time, I believe that we all shared the same feeling that we were doing something quite special, even important. After more than a decade, it seems that that initiative was a step in the right direction. The AILH quickly became a focal point for Indian labor historians. Since 1998 it has organized successful biannual conferences, providing excellent opportunities for dozens of junior and senior scholars to present papers on a gamut of topics. In addition, AILH has hosted numerous events including symposiums, workshops, conferences, and the Arvind Narayan Das Memorial Lectures. The organization is also in the process of planning a book series on labor history, which will be published by the left-wing Tulika Publishing House.[1]

While the Indian labor historians have thus been developing their project—which, from the outset, included the history of Indian and overseas indentured laborers—labor historians in other parts of the Global South were engaged in similar enterprises. The most critical of these efforts was the History Workshop movement in South Africa, which took off in 1977, organized its first conference on "Labour, Townships, and Protest" in 1978 and has been running conferences ever since.[2] The History Workshop was part of a larger local upsurge in social and labor history in the country, especially, but not exclusively, in the academic centers of Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg and in its neighbors, notably Zimbabwe. The interest in the past of the working class is very much alive in the region, and several very promising research projects are going on at the moment.

Developments in Brazil have been different, although of similar importance. In 2000 labor historians from Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Sul, and São Paulo founded a network known as "Mundos do Trabalho" (Worlds of Labor) inside ANPUH, the Brazilian national association of historians. I attended ANPUH's national congress in Niteroi on June 22–27, 2001, and was deeply impressed. Mundos do Trabalho had by then grown to be the second largest ANPUH network. Of course, scholars from São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro were very influential, but a serious attempt was made to root the organization also in the country's predominantly remote areas, for instance in the Northeast. Mundos do Trabalho has been engaged in organizing biannual conferences in 2002, 2004, 2006, and 2008, gaining recognition at home and abroad. Cooperation with colleagues in neighboring Argentina and Uruguay is developing. There are local networks in at least seven Brazilian states and the members' productivity is most impressive.[3] Mundos do Trabalho aims to launch its electronic journal, the *Revista Mundos do Trabalho*, before the end of 2008. It will be published biannually and feature articles, book reviews, interviews, and analyses of primary sources, as well as information about conferences, debates, and events.

Although in other "tricontinental countries" things have not advanced as far as they have in India, South Africa, or Brazil, first steps have been taken. In late December 1999 the Pakistan Institute for Labour Education and Research (PILER), an NGO that is partly funded by Dutch sources, organized a mainly historical conference on "Labor in Pakistan" in Karachi. Efforts to develop this initiative further have not yet met with much success. Iranian

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labor historians in the diaspora organized a pioneering conference on "Twentieth Century Iran: History from Below" in Amsterdam in April 2001. It seems that there is quite a lot of research underway in South Korea, but the universities are often like scattered "islands" and tend to operate with little connection to one another, thus diminishing the very crucial interaction between scholars. Yet, from time to time, some stimulating activities take place. A good example was the conference on "Cultural Histories of the Korean Working Class," held at Hanyang University (Seoul) in June 2001. Also, at the end of the same year a pioneering Indonesian conference, entitled "Reconstructing the Historical Tradition of Twentieth Century Indonesian Labor," was held in Bali.

Initiatives like these are still somewhat precarious, because much depends firstly on the efforts of energetic individuals (the trade-union organizer Karamat Ali, the historians Touraj Atabaki and Lim Jie-Hyun, and the anthropologist Ratna Saptari in Karachi, Amsterdam, Seoul, and Bali, respectively). Much also depends on the availability of very much-needed external funding—which in the above-mentioned four cases was secured by or with the assistance of the International Institute of Social History (IISH). One can only hope that more research projects will ensue. There is evidence to suggest that innovative research projects have been launched in many countries receiving a significant number of bids for funds. In Turkey, for example, a lot of interesting work is currently being done by working-class historians, and it certainly would make sense for them to build a supportive structure. One hopes that a gradual institutional transformation will increase the spaces of academic freedom in the Chinese People's Republic, promoting freedom of expression and independent scholarship.

Unlike their colleagues in many advanced capitalist countries, labor historians in the Global South frequently have to work under difficult circumstances. A problem of special importance is the maintenance of archival materials, which are either uncollected or improperly stored (problems with climatized and vaulted storage and inventory management, etc.). Mundos do Trabalho has the good fortune to be well connected with the Edgar Leuenroth Archives at the University of Campinas, a very important and growing collection, the foundations of which were laid by the anarchist militant Edgar Leuenroth (1881–1968), a dedicated chronicler and archivist of Brazilian labor.[4] The labor movement itself is equally interested in keeping records and supporting historical research. The Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), the Brazilian umbrella trade union organization, recently held a large conference on "The Workers' World and its Archives" (São Paulo, September 9–11, 2008), with the support of the Leuenroth Archives and the National Archive.

In India the AILH, shortly after its birth, started negotiations with the state-funded V.V. Giri National Labour Institute in Noida (near Delhi) resulting in the foundation of the Indian Labour History Archives in July 1998. In Indonesia a group, working with the historian-activist Hilmar Farid, is collecting documents for the small Jakarta-based Institut Sejarah Sosial Indonesia

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(ISSI: Indonesian Institute for Social History). In South Africa (Johannesburg) the founding of a labor history association is now being prepared that will have as one of its main tasks the building of an archive for the Southern African region.

All these activities have substantial implications for labor historians in both the North and South. Obviously, intellectual exchange is central to progress in any discipline and has been increasing. Collaborative initiatives among Tricontinental scholars are now offering opportunities for improved international networking to foster a dynamic research and information-sharing environment for academic and professional partnerships. Silvia Hunold Lara and other historians of the University of Campinas are currently preparing an edited volume with translations of Indian studies in labor history. In November 2005, the AILH organized a conference in honor of its president Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "Towards Global Labour History: New Comparisons," at which scholars not only from South Asia but also from Trinidad, Brazil, Britain, Chile, China, Senegal, South Africa as well as Europe and North America took part.[5] In July 2006, the South African History Workshop held a conference in Johannesburg on "Rethinking Worlds of Labour: Southern African Labour History in International Context," where Sumit Sarkar (Delhi) gave a keynote on affinities and contrasts between Indian and South African labor history.[6] In September 2008 the same group organized a second conference in Johannesburg on "Labour Crossings: World, Work and History," which had a significant presence of the Brazilian and Indian colleagues.

South-South meetings of this kind provide unique opportunities to examine closely historical experiences that are different from those in the North. In fact, the vast geographic expansion of the discipline is prompting a re-evaluation of the older labor history everywhere. The labor historians of the South have been the first to become aware of this. Influenced and often trained by labor historians in the North, they quickly discovered the inadequacies of North-Atlantic approaches. The Indian history of castes or the South African *apartheid* system reveal problems associated with the study of class structures and labor relations, which are barely familiar to most European and North American historians. Similarly, the Brazilian experience of slavery, which is so different from that of the United States, gives a lot of food for thought on intermediary and transitional forms between "unfree" and "free" labor. Social groups that in the eyes of "traditional" labor history are quantitatively not significant—exceptions which prove the rule—*are* the rule in large parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The debates in the South reveal that we need a new conceptualization of the working class, less oriented to the exclusion than to the inclusion of various dependent and marginalized groups of workers. What is most arresting and rewarding is that new source materials, intellectual capacities, and international networking are opening up entirely new perspectives on global labor history.

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NOTES

1. See www.indialabourarchives.org/ailh.htm.
2. Phil Bonner, "New Nation, New History: The History Workshop in South Africa, 1977–1994," *The Journal of American History*, 18 (December 1994), 977–985. See also: http://web.wits.ac.za/Academic/Humanities/SocialSciences/HistoryWorkshop.
3. See www.ifch.unicamp.br/mundosdotrabalho (October 28, 2008).
4. See www.ifch.unicamp.br/ael (December 22, 2006).
5. A selection of the papers presented can be found in Marcel van der Linden and Prabhu Mohapatra (eds.), *Labour Matters: Towards Global Histories* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2009).
6. A selection of the Johannesburg papers has appeared in Philip Bonner, Jonathan Hyslop, and Lucien van der Walt (eds.), *Transnational and Comparative Perspectives on Southern African Labour History*, a special issue of *African Studies*, 66 (August–December 2007).

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