New Directions in Labor History Around the Globe: Introduction

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With this section, we have something very much in the vein of the original editions of *ILWCH*. When one looks at the tables of contents for the first decade of *ILWCH*, they're brimming with excitement for a new field coming into being, coalescing, excavating long-buried voices, events, and transformations. Half of each issue would be reports from the field, informing readers about emerging questions and research from different regions. David Montgomery, as editor, or others reported on symposia and thematic meetings where scholars from different countries met to take on large questions and to determine if they saw the matters of labor, capital, class power, and class politics similarly or irreconcilably differently. The emphasis of the journal was on debate: What were historians saying to each other, especially in cross-national conversations? What was at stake in having discussions about socialism, workers' resistance, women's organizing, patriarchy? Why did it matter and for whom? The journal offered an actively engaged history. The questions mattered for democracy in the present and future, not just for clarity of the past. So it's appropriate we end, in a sense, with the beginning. The authors in this "New Directions" section convey the same sense of energy, enthusiastic exploration, and forward momentum.

This section also shows how much *ILWCH* has stretched beyond its origins, geographically and topically. Within recent years, the journal has published an unprecedented special issue on Chinese labor history, which brought to an English-speaking audience the work of labor scholars in China. Another issue on Middle Eastern labor history combined essays on migrant workers in the Middle East with an additional section on the communities of the migrant workers back in South Asia. We are currently planning future special issues on India and Africa. So our "New Directions" section presents some perspectives on where scholarship might be headed in the fields of Chinese, Indian, Latin American, and Southern and South African labor history.

Despite general allegations of fracture and drift—either because of the crisis of the Marxist paradigm or postmodernism—these essays reveal a surprising degree of unanimity, or at least constructive convergence. They reflect on what it has meant that labor scholars themselves were often active in labor, democracy, or socialist movements. Labor historians in these various locales responded not only to cross-currents of intellectual ideas and methodologies but to on-the-ground social politics and organizing. Each offers us a reminder of why the work of labor historians has been and must be affected by

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contemporary political and economic affairs—and the crises faced by working people today. In turn, as Alexandre Fortes and John French (writing on Brazil and Latin America), Xiaodan Zhang (on China), and Ralph Callebert (on South Africa) show us, the political context certainly contributes to the visibility of labor themes and issues in academic work. It also means labor historians now have sought to address the varyingly cooperative or tense relationships between trade union movements and other social movements—in the past and present.

One of the clearest points of convergence is the emerging emphasis on non-industrial labor. On one level, it embraces those looking at service labor, unfree and convict labor, sex work, as well as paid and unpaid domestic work. On another level, it entails "challenging the distinctions between formal and informal labor," writes Prasannan Parthasarathi in his essay on India. Callebert calls on us to look for the "complex livelihoods" of the world's laboring people, since the livelihoods of so many workers' households are not based on wage labor alone. As households "straddle the formal and informal economies," Callebert suggests, historians will have to learn how to tell an intertwined history.

What has it meant for labor scholars to shift their lens from "labor history" as a history of proleterianization and trade union organizing to one of "work"? For Parthasarathi, Fortes and French, and Callebert it necessitates not only uncovering a wider range of activities of labor but also stretching back further in time. Labor history has been, for the most part, bound to the era, or eras, of industrialization. The dominant figures who shaped the field wrote about industrial workers. Not surprisingly, they analyzed class formation, dramatic strikes, and the institutional history of trade unions. With the embrace of social history, they turned more toward worker culture, consciousness, and community; still, the primary subjects didn't really change. Even with the dominance of social history through the 1980s and into the 1990s, the essays here argue, labor historians overemphasized industrial revolution, modernization, and male industrial workers. If historians let go of that imperative, it opens up a number of fruitful and essential avenues of exploration—not only for understanding work, but also gender, the state, and capitalism more broadly.

Nor would it mean that if we shed the assumption of a unilinear and progressive shift from informal to formal labor, we could only discuss less industrialized economies. Although there's been greater industrialization and enmeshment in the global economy for these regions, it has been accompanied by the dramatic increase in casualized or precarious employment and even unemployment all over.

While acknowledging the deep importance of ethnic and gender identities, these historians affirm the continuing, or perhaps resurgent and newly clarified, importance of the class experience and class politics. Zhang exposes a range of factors that have reshaped Chinese working-class life. Zhang compels us to consider the class formation and ideological processes generated by the friction between a new version of state paternalism and the emergent forms of

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resistance of the most recent generation of industrial and service workers. Zhang takes the question of ideology and views it from a number of different angles, bringing the state and labor unions into the same frame. Various union practices, she argues, can only be understood if they are situated with state authority that is articulated and justified in a particular reform era.

Here Zhang converges with a key point brought up by the others: We cannot lose track of an overall structural picture. For Fortes and French, it brings us back to an imperative once raised by Emilia Viotti da Costa: Labor historians will have to seek "bridges between structuralist and cultural approaches."

Moving into the next decade of ILWCH, we look forward to seeing the fruits of these labors.

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