

Introduction: Trade unions in the era of globalisation

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The crisis of Fordism, understood as a method of capitalist regulation, led to the emergence of a new paradigm in the late 1970s and early 1980s: globalised capitalism. It is not that globalisation is a new phenomenon in the history of capitalism, given that capitalist development tends to extend beyond the borders of the nation state. However, globalised capitalism occupies a specific period in historical terms. We shall observe some of its principal features.

A central characteristic of globalisation is deregulation; deregulation of the movements of goods and capital as well as the deregulation of labour. Deregulation is not a natural phenomenon, as if a storm had struck or night had fallen suddenly; it is the result of a specific type of intervention by governments and international bodies, one that is often alien to democracy. It leaves states without the capacity to act in many aspects of economic life. In this way, deregulation appears as re-regulation.

Moreover, globalised capitalism is characterised by the primacy of financial capital over manufacturing and services. This has generated a type of speculative capitalism, which is often described as “casino capitalism” and whose proliferation produced the international economic crisis of 2007. In addition to the hegemony of finance, North America and Europe underwent a process of deindustrialisation. Of course, this did not spell the end for

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manufacturing but created new industrial locations in peripheral and semi-peripheral countries within the global capitalist system.

Overall, the story of globalised capitalism – this contemporary phase of capitalism – is also the story of privatisation. Initially, major state companies in strategic industries like gas, oil, iron and steel, metal or electricity were privatised. They were followed by services: health, education etc., which have been targeted by private business.

Less industry and an increasingly smaller public sector has inevitably affected the working class. First, in the field of employment, remembering that Fordist industry made great use of the workforce. The result is the end of full employment. Second, labour has been affected in terms of contracts and employment protection as both big industry and the public sector were strongly regulated in Fordist capitalism. Here, there has been a weakening of individual and collective employment rights. Thirdly, it has affected trade unions, given that the organisation of workers has been eroded as a result of these processes.

The deregulation of labour was presented as something flexible. From the ideological standpoint, this description is an attempt to show deregulation as a modern, positive phenomenon in the face of supposedly obsolete and inefficient rigidity. However, the legal modifications introduced in the name of flexibility have, primarily, not only reduced workers' employment rights but also restricted their bargaining power and eroded their social position.

Thus, changes in legislation in the core countries of the capitalist system have led to the rise of atypical forms of recruitment, as in the case of temporary and part-time employment. This has gone hand in hand with the limitation of rights such as access to subsequent unemployment benefits and pensions. Similarly, states have promoted the individualisation of industrial relations, rather than the regulatory power of collective bargaining. They have also replaced the employment relationship for the commercial one, promoting the mode of freelance and self-employed work. It would seem that there is a trend towards convergence with the working conditions of the new industrial enclaves, where deregulation, very low wages and feeble self-organisation of labour in the workplace also prevail.

Consequently, trade unions have been hit in Europe and North America by a loss of members, a decline in bargaining capacity and an erosion of social power. But beyond the effects of the changes in working processes and in the composition of the working class, trade unions have been affected by a direct assault from the neoliberal governments that have attempted to

minimise their activities through legislation and political campaigns. This has placed global trade unionism at a crossroads.

Moreover, the deep-rootedness of globalised capitalism has represented a global political victory, which was capped by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the USSR. In political and cultural terms, this triumph of capitalism has been translated into the hegemony of neoliberalism. This cultural hegemony is so powerful that it has corroded the left itself, which has been in retreat, with the exception of Latin America up to now.

It is from this scenario that we have undertaken an analysis of trade unionism after having received an invitation from the editorial team of *Workers of the World* to prepare a monographic dossier on trade unions. We are historians by trade, but we regard the study of trade unions in the present context of globalisation as being of the utmost urgency. Unions now represent the last line of defence for workers in the face of capitalism's imperial victory. We acknowledge that this type of study is not easy in a context in which academic research has also been culturally contaminated by neoliberalism. The analysis of the world of work and workers' organisations has become a very minor concern. Moreover, we have witnessed the introduction of approaches of a post-materialist type and these are often in line with neoliberal hegemony.

We would like to thank *Workers of the World* for its invitation and extend our gratitude to the colleagues whose articles have made this issue of the journal possible. Of course, it can rightly be said that it is incomplete and even ethnocentric to the extent that it includes as many as three articles on EU countries. However, we feel satisfied that the final result – which is always within the framework of globalisation capitalism and the hegemony of neoliberalism – provides a variety of interesting cases. Moreover, the articles also respond to plural methodological approaches. Compare, for example, the narrative perspective employed by Trópia and Souza in their work on Brazil with the statistically-anchored argument on the Spanish case offered to us by Beneyto. Our desire for diversity is displayed by the fact that the dossier contains works on trade union experiences in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe.

Consequently, we present work on countries that occupy different positions in the European Union, like the United Kingdom, France and Spain. We also include examples of emerging countries such as China, India and Brazil. There are two cases from Latin America: Chile and Brazil itself. Similarly, we have paid attention to “Communist” countries whose markets have been penetrated by their own state and party apparatus, like Vietnam and China

once again. Finally, the dossier includes two classic examples of the informal economy: Nigeria and, again, India.

It is generally believed that trade unionism can only develop in the contexts of economic and social regulation. However, Martinez Veiga's text proposes two case studies on union action in the scenario of the informal economy. Initially, he elucidates the concept of the informal economy itself from a theoretical point of view, explaining that this is not a marginal sector of the capitalist economy. He then goes on to study two trade union experiences from India and Nigeria respectively. The former concerns a trade union organised by women who make cigarettes, while the latter looks at the actions of a typical guild in decline, that of tailors. What is interesting about the cases is that both these female and male workers direct their action at the government, rather than at their employers.

Meanwhile, Rocha and Boix analyse two singular cases in Vietnam and China. These are two countries inserted into the global market and globalisation but which have Communist regimes. Here, the state and the Communist Party have restored the market. In both countries, there are official trade unions, which are subordinate to the Party although it is true that in Vietnam the right to strike is recognised – despite its limitations – and there is a less repressive atmosphere there than in China. An industrial proletariat is growing in both countries as a result of the surge in manufacturing and stoppages and strikes have occurred at industrial plants. These phenomena place the official apparatus, especially in the case of the Chinese unions, in difficulties insofar as they cannot integrate them. A dilemma then appears. We do not know yet whether in the future the official unions – or significant tendencies within them – will be capable of escaping from the party's tutelage and genuinely represent the interests of workers. The other possibility is that mobilisation and organisation into workshops will give rise to the emergence from the grass roots of new autonomous types of trade unions that, one way or another, could break with the apparatus of the regime.

A very different case, that of a major emerging country, is Brazil. Analysed here by Souza and Tropia, who focus on the Brazilian trade union movement's stance in the face of neoliberal policies in which neoliberalism is regarded as a stage of capitalism –which, in essence, we have termed globalised capitalism. Examining a period that opens with Collor de Mello's government in 1990, the authors believe that *petista* governments have largely continued with neoliberal policies. Within this framework, they analyse the direction of the *Central Única dos Trabalhadores* (CUT-

Unified Workers' Central), which is closely linked to the PT (the Brazilian Worker's Party) and *Força Sindical* (Trade Union Force), which is openly pro-capitalist. Until the arrival of Lula's government, the CUT's stance was always anti-governmental, as opposed to *Força Sindical*. With the PT in government, the CUT lent its support. However, when the government began to take unpopular measures, the CUT's position was compromised and was decided through mobilisations.

Rodrigo Araya provides an interpretation of the evolution of the Chilean trade union movement during the current democratic period, which commenced in 1990 as the country embarked on its particular political transition. With his analysis focusing especially on the action of the *Central Unitaria de Trabajadores* (CUT- Unitary Workers' Central), Araya examines the dynamics that were established between the adoption of a framework of social dialogue and the debate produced by labour reforms over this period. He argues that the CUT's evolution went through an initial stage of collaboration with the government and then shifted with the adoption of a critical stance with regard to the neoliberal model. This path led to an internal crisis in the union as the problems of adaptation to the new context manifested themselves. However, in the 21st century, the trade union movement and other social actors were instrumental in the maintaining of protests with a view to making the democracy more inclusive. This helped the CUT to become a reference point in the opposition to neoliberalism, which in this case meant questioning the legacy of an incomplete transition.

The crisis of contemporary trade unionism in France is addressed by José-Angel Calderon. Membership rates of French unions are the lowest in the OECD, but it is also true that French trade unionism has never been characterised historically as a mass phenomenon and this has its own explanation. However, debate on this in France, both on the right and the left, has been reduced to "excessive" union institutionalisation and marked by the paradox in which the loss in numbers and low membership contrasts with a progressive implementation in companies and administrations. For this reason, Calderon raises the need to again take up the analysis of the institutionalisation of the wage relationship from the perspective of production models. This analysis leads him to argue that it is not so much the institutionalisation of French trade unionism that might explain its crisis as the deinstitutionalisation of the wage relationship in the context of the individualisation of industrial relations and the casualisation of the labour market.

Miguel Martínez Lucio looks at the British case. The country is undoubtedly the mould for the neoliberal policies introduced since the 1980s – and subsequently adopted by other states – whose consequences in a new state regulation of the individualisation of collective rights directly affected the heart of the British trade union movement. The author proposes a multilevel analysis of its causes and consequences. He also raises the need for new approaches to social protest, which take into account both the expression of new forms of conflict and the building of alliances by the trade unions. The difficult context of trade union policy in the UK is marked, in his view, by the problems of an unbalanced trade union “revitalisation” and a lack of social support. The analysis of these two aspects leads him to conclude that isolation is now the major challenge that British trade unionism has to overcome.

We conclude the dossier with an article on Spain by Beneyto. The country’s trade union model is distinct from the British one within the EU as a whole. Furthermore, it is a southern country. This means that workers have endured a harsh austerity programme since 2010. This has produced an exponential growth in unemployment, cuts in essential public services like health and education, a lowering of wages and, last but not least, a harassment of the unions by the political, economic and media powers unprecedented since the post-Franco political transition. Beneyto’s study enables us through a series of indicators to observe how Spanish trade unions have responded to this set of difficulties.

We believe, in the final analysis, that this dossier on trade unions in the era of globalisation offers a varied set of cases in different regions of the planet. It provides us with an approach to the direction that the union movement has taken during this most recent stage of capitalism.

