

## **WORK, EARTH AND GLOBALIZATION**

### **An Introduction**

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This series of articles concerns itself with the convergence of three key features of the global capitalist economy and its relation to labour in both rural and urban areas. The first of these features is the commonly recognised fact that contemporary capital is less constrained by the limits imposed by space, geography and time than previous periods. With the loyalty of the 21<sup>st</sup> century company first and foremost to shareholders, the ability to ‘up and leave’ is a heavy bargaining chip used to lever concessions from the state and most significantly, organised labour. Furthermore, the decisions of 21<sup>st</sup> century multinational companies that operate on a global scale that their colonial predecessors could not have imagined, are taken states or indeed continents away from the point of production. This has dramatically increased the asymmetry of power between capital and the only component of the production process that has the ability to protest, resist or disrupt it: labour.

Secondly, the rapid advances in technology have accelerated the substitution of manual tasks by machines, have facilitated lean production models that downsize workforces and the instantaneous transmission of information across virtual networks have allowed for business to control and co-ordinate a range of tasks across a widely dispersed workforces, most often motivated by suppressed labour costs. The third dimension of the contemporary economy explored here however, provides an important counterpoint to the above phenomena and to overly prescriptive discourses of automation, digitisation or indeed ‘the end of work’. This is because that for every new technological application, whether it is harnessing solar energy on the roofs of our houses, charging batteries for our electric car, or mobile phone, there is a linked chain of production, a period of construction and almost always some labour intensive, extractive industry. Mines for lithium in Bolivia, cobalt extraction in the Congo, felled forest and families underpin the ‘new’, ‘gig’, ‘green’ economies. Where, for example, large infrastructure or energy projects require considerable initial investment, or agro-industrial projects require suitable expanses of land and water, the nature of the enterprise is not so readily mobile, the option to ‘up and go’ is not so viable. The industry is, at least in the short term, relatively fixed.

However, companies have learned their lessons from previous periods of industrial concentration where a stable and locally sourced workforce could organise with relative ease, where neighbourhoods grew around workplaces and workforces, cultural and social activity was linked to organised labour, unions and other movements. The changing fortunes of the auto industry, mines and textile factories are a case in point. Contemporary capital insists upon, coerces or enforces a flexibility of labour. It seeks to organise the men and women performing essential tasks in a manner that provides least resistance to its accumulation of wealth while limiting the capacity of these workers to militate on their own interests. In Europe a casual glance across the economies of Spain, Italy, Ireland, Greece and UK reveals the increasing normality of temporary work, job casualization, and the zero hour contract that have been enshrined in state legislation and underpin the phenomena of ‘uber jobs’, while migrants continue to be fundamental as both labour for functioning of these economies and as scapegoats for social ills in troubled economic times.

In Brazil, a country of continental scale, regional inequalities have historically supported an internal rotation of labour has long been relied on to provide this flexibility to unscrupulous employment as latter articles will explore further. Following a brief period between 2003 and 2010 when Brazil was commended by OECD as one of the few countries (along with Bolivia, Venezuela and Ecuador) for reducing the inequality gap, it is now deepening again under the current regime. Along with cuts to public services and pay one of the bastions of labour law, admired by many observers abroad, has been dismantled in order to maximise labour flexibility. What precisely the ending of any limits on outsourcing (terceirização) will mean when 1.5 million of the lowest paid workers are in some form of debt to their employer, or where only 34.7% of agricultural workers hold a legal working document remains to be seen.

The data from Ministry of Work and Employment consistently the makes clear, however, the inverse relationship between efforts to eradicate slave like labour, and entrenchment of flexible working conditions in favour of the employer. In the last 20 years in Brazil 90% of the 50,000 workers found in slave like conditions were outsourced workers.



In the articles that will follow we will hear from rural workers in sugar and ethanol production in São Paulo and Goiás, those who protested labour conditions in hydrodam construction in Acre, Haitian construction and agricultural workers in Sao Paulo and Parana, and also land reform workers from both Brazil and Scotland determined to find autonomy from this capital-wage relation. The purpose of this modest contribution is to make visible the often hidden implications of the new developments that are deemed by a range of state and transnational institutions as being progressive yet hinge on the further and untenable exploitation of natural resources and human beings. It is also to make visible the struggles of those living with, encountering and resisting this expansion on agricultural and industrial frontiers, imagining and creating a different reality. The aspiration is that readers will share the conclusion of the contributors that these accounts are not ‘interesting’, but vital, that the injustice is not theirs alone to confront but that humanity requires a more determined co-production of knowledge across our own constructed frontiers. For the research community, professionals involved in planning, construction, education, other and emerging sectors of the economy who do not accept the status quo the accounts challenge us to consider how we

breach walls between us and alongside communities, social organisations, workers organisation this inform the construction of much needed alternatives.

For as Ursula Huws (2011, p. 4) states,

“Seen from the perspective of women, and, indeed, from the perspective of the majority of the workforce in many developing countries, precariousness is the normal condition of labour under capitalism. Given the enormous asymmetries between capital and labour, what needs to be explained is not so much how this precariousness has come about but how it is that in certain times and places certain groups of workers have managed to organise themselves effectively enough to achieve some degree of income security and occupational stability.”

(Huws, U. 2011 ‘Passing The Buck: Corporate Restructuring and the Casualisation of Employment’, in *Work, Organisation, Labour and Globalisation*, 5:1 pp 1-10)