

# Labour and Working-Class Organisation

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Two widespread and almost self-evident assumptions will be challenged in this lecture. The first concerns the almost total consensus that workers, and dominated groups in general, will see their positions advanced if they organise. The second, almost as widespread, is the assumption that a causal link exists between working-class organisation and the democratisation of a society. In order to qualify those assumptions it is necessary to investigate them at the levels of logic and of history and in the most general way. Two questions will be posed: Why organise? Does working-class organisation lead to democracy?

## Limits of the topic; definitions

As you know, labour may refer to several things. First, the very act of purposeful transformation of nature for individual or social use. Involved here is the *labour power* of one or several persons. Second, labour also refers to the collective of persons involved in these acts: we talk about the *labour force*, being found at the level of society on an (almost always fictitious) *labour market* .

*Working-class organisation* in turn, refers to the gaining of consciousness by the labour force, as defined by its position within the relations of production, as producer of surplus value, of belonging to a "class" and its organisation as such as such in trade unions or working class parties. It is useful to distinguish between these and other workers organisations (e.g. strike committees, *commissions obreras* etc.) which can be more like any other interest or action group.

Labour, as defined here, is a broad concept. I shall, however, limit myself to dealing with industrial labour, for reasons which have to

do with the centrality of this category of labour for social science and development studies (see my "Introduction" to Brandell ed., *Workers in Third World Industrialization*, Macmillan 1991). As a consequence I shall not talk about rural labour, nor about domestic labour. The first term in the title of the lecture is accordingly narrowed, while the second will be given a broad understanding: Working-class organisation will be discussed together with other forms of workers' organisations. Given our definitions and limitations, the two initial questions can be reformulated into one: What is the relation between free labour, industrial work, and democracy?

### The logic of workers' organisations

What happens when people (under most historical circumstances former peasants, but also former domestic workers) become participants in a free labour force? This process, generally labelled the process of proletarianisation, involves three different and not necessarily parallel aspects: First, the establishment of insecurity in employment (in a peasant economy there is no individual insecurity), and as a consequence competition between proletarianized people. Secondly, the establishment of a new ideology and system of domination (people who obeyed the elders must now be made to obey the foreman). And finally, the existence of exploitation, i.e. production of a surplus by the proletarianised which is accumulated by someone else (cf. Etienne Balibar, "De la lutte des classes à la lutte sans classes ?", in Balibar and I. Wallerstein, Race, nation, classe - les identités ambiguës, Paris 1988, pp. 217).

Evidently, people resist the three aspects of the process of proletarianisation, and they try to have an impact on it in order to better their own position. Now, this can be done in many ways. What should be stressed here at a general level is that in my opinion only the conflict over the first aspect of proletarianisation, i.e. insecurity and competition, requires organisations encompassing workers in a whole industry or even nation-wide trade unions. The mechanisms and forms of domination and the level of exploitation can be dealt with inside a single factory and require only temporary organisation of the labour force (in strike committees or workers' commissions etc.). Much could of course be added to the issue of the links between resistance to insecurity and resistance to domination and exploitation. Likewise, the possibility and opportunity of in-

dividual action could be investigated. This is, however, not necessary for the sake of the argument which follows.

### **The history of working-class organisations**

For historical reasons three types of trade unions developed during early industrialization: craft unions, continuing a pre-industrial tradition of guilds and corporations based on craftsmanship; industrial/compound unions based on the industrial site, often including within its territory lodging for workers (and their families); and finally general labour unions for workers moving around, as e. g. gas workers or railway workers. All three types of trade unions developed with the specific purpose of controlling the labour market (combat insecurity and competition), having as an ideal the "closed shop" (a factory or an enterprise which only recruits members of a specific trade union). The more or less paternalist vertical house unions, which developed here and there, were for evident reasons an answer to the formation of independent unions and the threat they posed. This was also the case, at a national and political level, with the state-controlled corporatist unions which were established under fascism. It should, however, be borne in mind that also the latter types of trade unions in fact decreased to some extent the insecurity and the competition of the labour market.

However, all types of unions and in particular craft unions were deeply threatened by the development of new production and labour processes at the beginning of the century. With "scientific" management and organisation, the splitting-up of work tasks and new norms of performance, it became possible to employ "unskilled" - i.e. unorganised - labour where only people with recognised skills had been employed before. Their weakened position on the labour market induced craft workers and their organisations to try to defend their position through the state and political action, which might - depending on other circumstances - in some cases become revolutionary and in others reformist.

For two different reasons, the workers integrated into the new type of production processes did not have the same reason to organise and act through trade unions. First, the despotism of the market (i.e. total insecurity and competition) disappeared as a consequence of the deepening and the broadening of capitalist industrialisation

and the diminishing competition between capitalists on the commodity market. In short, there was less surplus labour and less pressure on the capitalists to compete by employing ever cheaper labour. And, secondly, the bargaining force of the new workers was rooted in the very organisation of the labour process. The integration of the labour process, making many workers dependent on each other, made the process itself vulnerable and strengthened the workers as a producing collective in the workshops. Their actions came to concern the level of exploitation (wages) and the content of domination (hierarchy, discipline etc.) more than issues of insecurity and competition. Workers' commissions, basis groups and strike committees were the corresponding forms of organisation.

In such circumstances, later democratisation involved a political exchange between the state and capital on the one hand and trade unions and working-class political parties on the other. These organisations obtained influence at different levels of economic and political institutions in exchange for the reestablishment of order and discipline within the realm of industrial production, including their acceptance of a radical restructuring of capital investment and of the labour process.

### **The problem in the context of the former colonies**

Now, what about the process of proletarianisation, trade union organisation and, at a more general level, the issue of the connection between working-class organisation and democratisation in Third World societies? My frame of reference consists essentially, but not exclusively, of examples from an African context. In Africa, the process of proletarianisation during colonialism was not only enforced through economic pressures (introduction of taxes, obliging people to earn cash), but involved physical coercion as well. In the latter case, when people most of all wanted to get back to their initial environment and economic activities, there was no need for working-class organisation, no plan to improve conditions in a medium or long-term perspective.

The proletarianisation occurring in such circumstances was often, and sometimes still is, a kind of semi-proletarianisation. It took, and still takes, different forms - the most well-known being migrant temporary work in mines and on plantations, interrupted by longer periods of return to the villages. In cases like the North African

migration to Europe after the First World War, this semi-proletarianisation through temporary migration was organised through the extended family, in such a way that one male, but not always the same one, would go to France to work. A second form, more well-known from South-East Asia, but existing also more recently for example in Tunisia, consisted in young girls leaving school and going to work for some years before marrying.

At a more general level, labour can be considered as semi-proletarianised as long as even industrial workers keep sufficiently close links with their village of origin to be able to consider a return to peasant life as an option. In a situation where competition and insecurity are not that high, because of the scarcity of labour, even this aspect of the process of proletarianisation can be rationally resisted through the maintenance of close links with original, non-proletarian networks. These remain not only an insurance for survival, but are also used as a tool to get access to industrial work and even to put pressure on the conditions of domination and the level of exploitation (cf. Jeff Guy and Motlatsi Thabane: "Basotho Miners - Ethnicity and Workers' Strategies", in Brandell (ed.), *Workers in Third World Industrialisation*, Macmillan 1991).

The activation of non-proletarian forms of social organisation even within capitalist production did not mean that there was no labour unrest during colonial time. On the contrary, the decision by British colonial authorities to introduce trade unions in their colonies in the 1930s must be seen against the background of wide-spread unrest (cf. Beverly Silver, "World-scale Patterns of Labour-Capital Conflict", in Brandell, op.cit.). Trade unions developed also in the French colonies at about the same time - first as sections of the national French unions, and later as independent organisations.

Some factors deserve to be kept in mind in this context:

- First, trade unions did not in such circumstances have any links to existing forms of social organisation, as in the European case guilds and corporations. On the contrary, where such organisations existed within craft production, colonial authorities had generally tried to suppress them. The Latin American situation was probably different in this respect for a variety reasons (settlement colonies, early decolonisation).

- Secondly, in the Asian and African colonial context, trade unions merged very rapidly with the nationalist anti-colonial movement. In fact, in some cases trade unions were the most dynamic part of the nationalist movement, and even, as in the case of Algeria (or South Africa), gave a politically progressive legitimacy to the armed struggle for independence. When independence was achieved, this meant in most cases that trade unions had to comply with the legitimising ideology of national development and often lost most of their autonomy.

- A final factor to keep in mind concerns the type of labour process which is characteristic of Third World industries. As a result of the homogenisation of technologies and the role of transnational companies, the labour process is generally of a modern, rational type. As mentioned earlier, it does not necessarily demand skills of a more traditional type, but it does demand, a) adaptation to the industrial organisation and discipline, and b) know-how linked to the specific work-task. This type of labour and production process implies that the labour force has a stronger bargaining power within the factory than on the labour market. However, the possibility can not be excluded that the introduction of automation, computer-design and flexibility may valorise certain types of skills and give a better bargaining position to some groups who are already on the labour market.

### **Implications for ongoing struggles for democratisation**

It seems to me that the issues posed by the movements in favour of democratisation which have been emerging from the late 1980s can be summarised under two headings, citizenship and freedoms. Citizenship concerns what Barrington Moore calls the limitation of arbitrary rule, but is seen from its positive side: It has to do with the different ways found by people to establish the basic principle that the rulers rule on the citizens' behalf, and that the citizens are by their very citizenship entitled to a part in common goods and resources. Freedoms concern the establishment of certain rights of the individual: Right of expression and organisation, but also to move about freely and not to be harassed for any reason. With the possible exception of some Latin American countries, the movements and actions in favour of democratisation express in the first place a demand for citizenship and freedoms. Liberalisation of the economy

and development of representative democracy are for evident reasons more rarely the first focus.

The actors in such movements are primarily what we may call "middle classes" (essentially professionals and civil servants), workers, and what is sometimes called the urban masses. Our task here is to place the logic of workers' actions within the process of democratisation and to put forth, in a somewhat speculative manner, some reflections on the possibilities of alliances between workers and other social groups to be achieved on objective and therefore lasting grounds.

Let us first recall that workers and their organisations contributed to earlier movements of democratisation, in the early 20th century, by taking political action in a situation of increasing insecurity and competition on the labour market, and in the period after World War II, by waging conflicts over the level of exploitation within the units of production to such an extent that social order was threatened and that political exchange took place consequently, integrating working class organisations at all levels of decision-making in society.

As evidence shows, there is not surprisingly diffuse and on-going resistance against the insecurity of employment and the competition on the labour market in industrialising Third World countries. In informal and illegal industries, action is taken to obtain what the law states as minimum conditions of employment. In industries hit by recession, workers and trade unions defend agreements on retrenchments, temporary close-downs and lay-offs in general. As a result, the resistance against insecurity and competition often takes the form of demands for the respect of law and already concluded agreements.

Application of the law, respect for contracts and negotiated agreements are evidently part of the process of democratisation, principles which can be at the basis of alliances between workers and their organisations and other groups in society. Such principles are in fact related to a basic idea of society as constituted by free individuals, having established society by their free will through a sort of contract - what Rousseau named the social contract. All other agreements and contracts have their legitimacy by way of this basic social contract and must be respected accordingly if citizens are to remain citizens. Workers' resistance against lay-offs, if taking the form of demands for the application of existing rules and

agreements, and workers' insistence that the law be applied in their workshops can easily be conceptualised within, and in practice integrated into, that part of the process of democratisation which concerns the recognition of citizenship.

The conflict of wage levels - Balibar's term for exploitation - is not as evidently a possible basis for an alliance in favour of democratisation. In economies which are growing and where the demand for higher wages for workers has a certain legitimacy, the alliance may include as part of democratisation the right of organisation for trade unions and the waging of struggles over salaries. In such a situation, there may even be a political exchange between an authoritarian regime and the workers, giving them higher wages and access to decision-making, a situation resembling the (social) democratisation in Western Europe after World War II. This possibly requires a capacity to remove more labour-intensive forms production to other countries.

The struggle over wages in crisis economies may, on the contrary, lead to a split in the democratic alliance between the workers and the middle classes. In societies facing economic crisis, the movement in favour of democratisation easily adopts a demand for national unity and mobilisation to come to grips with the crisis. In such a situation, workers' demands for higher wages, or even just maintenance of wages and employment, run the risk of being given low legitimacy among other groups and may consequently lead to the break-down of the alliance.

When it comes to the issue of domination, workers' resistance against oppression in the work-place and elsewhere, contesting hierarchy and the kind of discipline which is not supposed to be required by the very process of production, this can evidently be an input into the general movement for democracy. Once more, the respect for contracts and accountability, the demand for equal treatment of all citizens, are part of the establishment of citizenship. The expression of grievances over bad treatment, injustice and unequal standards become part of the establishment of basic freedoms of expression, opinion and organisation. However, if the movement seems to endanger the functioning of the economy, if it seems to threaten the basic organisation of production, it may, just as the demand for higher or maintained wages, be opposed by the middle classes. Further, even when workers' resistance to domination is not seen as endangering production and where the alliance with the

middle classes is therefore maintained, there is a concrete risk that the alliance for democracy will exclude the unemployed, people employed in the informal sector, and those who are considered marginals. The reasons for this are implicit in the analysis proposed here. This is however not the concern of this paper and analysing it further here would lead us too far away from the main argument.

These final reflections on the position and role of proletarian resistance within movements for democratisation have been formulated independently of the discussion of forms of organisation, trade unions etc., developed earlier in the lecture. As a concluding remark, let me just stress that within my analysis, the form of organisation less important than the logic of action and conflict, and that those last elements must be understood first - while history, ideology, efficiency and, of course, the existing legislation and institutions explain why different ways of organising are chosen in the search for similar goals.

