

**INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE:  
LABOR IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH—  
A SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS**

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The articles included in this special issue of the *Journal of Workplace Rights* were originally presented on May 27 and 28, 2011, at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), as part of the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment conference “Labor in the Global South: A Search for Solutions.” We chose to organize the conference and guest-edit this journal issue because we believe the subject is a critically important and emerging area for scholarly inquiry. Forty years ago, discussions of the global South focused largely on agriculture, but changes in the organization of work, including the incorporation of large parts of the developing world into global supply chains, have created a large and important laboring class in the global South, working in all sectors. Amidst growing urbanization and rising average standards of living, the lives of workers in the global South are now more connected than ever before to the lives of workers in the global North. But despite the growing connections between North and South, growing specialization within regions has remade and sharpened the international division of labor while the extremes of global inequality have also been increasing.

We believe that the papers presented at the conference and re-presented as articles in this volume represent a significant contribution to this growing discussion. With coverage of developments in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and North America, these articles form an outstanding collection of recent research from around the world by emerging scholars engaging in discussions of critical contemporary issues such as globalization, inequality, neoliberalization, development, and labor rights. When we read these articles as a collection, despite their diverse settings and subjects, several important themes emerge: informalization of work, the changing roles of the state, community as a key shaper of labor struggles, and new organizational forms. Below we elaborate on each of these themes separately, though the connections between them will also be immediately apparent.

### INFORMALIZATION

As the neoliberalizing world economy has intensified the instability of labor markets, the informalization of labor has risen as one of the major social and economic issues across the world (see Bacchetta, Ernst, & Bustamante, 2009; Guha-Khasnobis & Kanbur, 2006; Marcelli, Williams, & Joassart, 2010; Pfau-Effinger, Flaquer, & Jensen, 2009), and this shift is reflected in the articles in this volume. Informal labor accounts for an increasing proportion of the labor force, yet workers in the informal economy are still left without proper employment security or workers' compensation in many cases and suffer serious social inequalities (Maiti & Sen, 2010; Muntaner et al., 2010). Among the articles in this volume, three studies, one each from Asia, South America, and Africa, present particular opportunities to understand the possibilities for informal worker resistance, alliance with formal workers, and unionization.

In the global South, where the informal economy has traditionally been a large part of the national economies, its expansion is particularly significant and takes varied forms. Su (2011) presents a striking case of labor informalization at Foxconn, the world's largest electronic component supplier, in China. Based on interviews with the workers, Su finds that many of the employees at Foxconn are actually interns from local technical colleges. The dual commodification of labor and education by the manufacturer of some of the most popular electronics goods sold today has led to cases of suicide and widespread reports of stress, loneliness, and depression. Su shows how labor informalization in deepening global commodity chains negatively affects the lives of teenage informal workers, and describes worker protests to effect change at Foxconn.

In the face of growing formalization, informal workers have recently begun to organize themselves in coalitions with formal workers, since informal workers on their own often do not have an adequate capacity for mobilizing and voicing their concerns as a substantial social force. Elbert (2011) presents the example of an informal workers' movement in Argentina, where solidarity between informal and formal workers successfully improved the

status of the former. Elbert's research suggests potential for informal workers' unionization and their successful mobilization against the neoliberalization of labor markets. At the same time, he also indicates the significance of formal organized labor as proactive promoters or substantial supporters of informal workers' struggle for status enhancement.

Notwithstanding some positive cases of informal workers' mobilization, the prospects for cooperation between formal and informal workers do not yet allow for unbridled optimism. Many attempts to promote workers' solidarity have been unsuccessful, due to the conflicting interests of formal workers and informal workers. Chinguno (2011) examines such attempts to construct formal-informal solidarity in Southern Africa. While formal workers in Southern Africa have acknowledged a moral need for workers' solidarity, they have only half-heartedly put the idea into practice. This uncertainty about solidarity between formal and informal workers draws attention to the importance of building strong informal workers' organizations as independent social forces.

## STATE

The neoliberalization of global labor markets and corresponding acts of local resistance and global solidarity raise the question of the role of the state in perpetuating labor inequality in the global South. Deregulation has weakened the willingness and ability of the state to create solutions that redistribute resources and support worker voices. Power has shifted from the individual nation-state toward transnational governance institutions, most notably, the United Nations, the International Labor Organization, and multinational finance institutions, like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank (Conca, 2005; Kay, 2011; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Seidman, 2009; Tarrow, 2005). Yet the state is still an important actor. Seidman's (2011) contribution to this volume directs our attention to the shift in labor scholarship away from a central orientation and toward democratization, state policy, and law. Seidman notes that discussions of political power have been replaced by research on the dynamics within labor movements, and reminds young scholars that research addressing state power and responsibility has always been most helpful to labor activists on the ground.

Reading cases in this collection from across the global South, we are struck by the tense and ambivalent relationship between the state and workers. In many cases, the state is not a strong advocate and partner for labor, but also it is not always a clear foe. Certainly, this collection makes clear that the state is not irrelevant for labor today. Rather, it remains a key force in shaping working conditions—whether actively or through neglect—and has huge potential for creating and supporting solutions to many of the challenges facing workers today. One challenge that will remain for scholars and labor activists is how to assess shared lessons about solutions when dealing with a range of regime contexts and opportunities for worker power and labor activism.

In this collection, we see examples of the complicated role the state plays in different situations. Two examples from India suggest that the state can dampen or prevent labor organizing. McCallum (2011) illustrates the influence of the state in the case of a unionization drive in two different Indian cities, Bangalore and Kolkata, showing that unions in Kolkata are much more embedded within the state and thus de-emphasize organizing. Far outside these huge cities, it is the government of India itself, through the Border Roads Organization, which acts as the primary offender against worker rights (Demenge, 2011). This is a particularly cruel irony, since the rhetoric of providing development assistance with the road itself, and the employment generated in building it, contributes to the urgency of the project. This urgency helps perpetuate dangerous working conditions and low compensation, even while workers are forbidden to organize.

Parreñas' (2011) contribution to this issue shows how even the most pro-labor state policies can have unintended consequences. In this case, the watershed United States Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, along with the strategies of divergent movement actors and their moral attitudes, subject Filipina migrant workers to increased scrutiny, inadvertently enhance the precariousness of their situation, and decrease opportunities for migration.

Though there are examples of the state failing workers, we also see clear examples of alternative movements arising and workers challenging and remaking the state. Shorette (2011) describes the efforts of activists to overcome official inaction on the issue of global Fair Trade standards, and traces the rise of the Fair Trade movement as a way to strengthen small producers in reaction to the excesses of the market. Even in the most authoritarian contexts, workers find ways to stand up to state failures, sometimes in self-destructive ways, other times in truly revolutionary ways. Su (2011) suggests that the Chinese state is responsible for the dual commodification of education and labor, and the rash of recent suicides at the Foxconn factories can be read as one response to state negligence. Kamel's (2011) firsthand account of Egypt's Tahrir Square demonstrations in 2011, and the labor activism leading up to it over several years, reveals how workers attempt to remake the state via revolution and at the same time build unions independent of the state and the ruling party.

## COMMUNITY

Given the previous two themes, with increases in the number of informal workers and the prevalent lack of strong state support for labor, the role of community emerges as an influential factor for workers. Informal workers, in particular, often move in and out of workplaces, may be underemployed, or are self-employed and styled as entrepreneurs rather than laborers. Informality, instability, and precariousness generally mean less bargaining power within the workplace, so these workers must seek support from other sources. But as Fine (2005) argues, a lack of economic power does not automatically translate into a

lack of political power. A key contributor to the success or failure of local struggles to improve working conditions and pay is the role of community. Communities, based on ethnicity or geography, can act as a more stable category of shared experience than industry or trade, helping workers endure and face the challenges of precarious working conditions. This kind of shared experience, outside the workplace itself, can be the basis for organization, even for workers traditionally considered to be unorganizable (Black, 2005; Fine, 2005; McKay, 2006; Milkman, 2006; Soja, 2010; Walsh, 2000). While there are cases where community does not support labor struggles, we can also see clear examples where the explicit cultivation of community and use of community as a frame for worker rights can be a strategy for organizing.

Community can be a vitally important factor in improving workers' lives. In his analysis of informal and formal worker solidarity, Elbert (2011) describes how social bonds play a key role in informal workers' efforts to gain necessary support from formal workers in their labor organizing efforts. But community is not just a haphazard factor in formal-informal worker solidarity. The grass-roots activists behind the two successful examples Elbert describes make community building part of their organizing strategy, setting up barbecues and soccer tournaments involving both formal and informal workers, and holding meetings and discussions at a local bar.

Another explicit example of the use of community in organizing strategy comes from Frambach (2011), who describes a case in which the workers are nominally in the formal sector. Frambach's article examines the lives of, and prospects for, maquiladora workers, and in it she describes how organizing efforts for independent unions have often had to come from the wider community. Geographically based worker centers and NGOs educate workers on their rights, helping them to protest poor working conditions including sexual harassment in the workplace, lack of safety equipment, unpaid overtime, reductions in wages, and speed-ups. Here we have a case where community serves a vital role in organizing a strategy for workers who are unaware of their rights and are working in areas with little or no state enforcement of existing labor laws.

In the absence of state enforcement, the role of community can be critical, but it can also generate both positive and negative results. The struggles of the road construction workers in the Himalayas include temptations stemming from the community of workers, such as gambling and drinking, which often consume the workers' meager incomes (Demenge, 2011). While these activities in the camps may temporarily alleviate some of the stress of facing the constant threat of violent death, community, in this example, does not help workers to communally escape the deep trap of poverty. But there are also positive aspects to community, aspects that support life itself in these extremely adverse circumstances. The wives and children of the road workers often accompany the workers, helping to cook and acting as an informal banking system, lending money to other families when necessary. While many families do seem truly to be trapped,

some are able to save money and support the road workers in the hope of someday being able to leave for a better life.

### NEW ORGANIZATIONAL FORMS

A final recurrent theme in this journal issue is the need for, and rise of, alternative organizational forms to advocate for workers' rights. Variation in form is nothing new for labor movements. Organizational forms in the labor movement have evolved over time: for example, in the global North, guilds of small producers have been succeeded by craft unions organized around specific trades, and later by industrial unions gathering together all the trades in a particular industry (Brody, 1993). And labor's organizational template varies across countries based on law and history, encompassing majority and minority unionism, enterprise-based and sector-level agreements, and unions with varying relations to the state (Bamber, Lansbury, & Wailes, 2004; Cook, 2007).

The issue of organizational form for worker organizing is linked to the theme of informalization (see above), and more broadly to the organizational form of business. Milkman (2006) argues that as subcontracting and other processes fragment workplaces, a craft union form based on shared occupational identity may gain new relevance. Fine (2006) explores the growth in the United States of worker centers, a form of community-based minority unionism that particularly targets public opinion and the state, in the absence of other sources of leverage. Similarly, Agarwala (2008) and Chun (2009) show that as employment has become informalized in India, Korea, and the United States, workers have increasingly formed organizations to appeal to the state rather than seeking to bargain collectively with employers. Evans (2010) points out the complementarity between the institutionalized labor movement's "trees" and the more agile "rhizomes" made up of NGOs and grassroots groups; Eade and Leather's collection (2005) examines in detail the frictions and potentials in such collaborations.

In this issue of the *Journal of Workplace Rights*, new forms of organization arise in three types of situations. The first is precisely informal employment and industries dominated by small producers. Indian street vendors (Saha, 2011) and informal workers in Southern Africa (Chinguno, 2011) are organizing associations as informal workers; small producers of coffee, crafts, and other traded items have associated with the Fair Trade movement to gain market power (Shorette, 2011). A second spur for alternative organizations is a closed, corporatist union system in which unions are tightly linked to employers, parties, or the state. This is the context for the growth of worker centers like the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras in Mexico (Frambach, 2011) and SACOM in China (Chan, 2011; Su, 2011), as well as for the emergence of independent unions in Egypt (Kamel, 2011) and India (McCallum, 2011). As Hermanson's (2011) commentary points out, Elbert's (2011) Argentine case straddles these first two categories: rank and file groups have organized to bypass the official Peronist unions,

subcontracted and temporary workers have organized to demand rights, and the two new formations are working together in large formal-sector companies. A third stimulus for new types of organization is powerful and intransigent employers. For example, in response to concerted resistance to unionization by the G4S security company in India, the U.S.-based SEIU worked with two Indian union federations to form the Indian Security Workers Organizing Initiative, which is carrying out U.S.-style union organizing but has registered more results from shaming the company and winning state legislation, tactics more commonly linked with worker centers (McCallum, 2011). This set of cases of organizational innovation points to the creativity of labor movements confronted by seemingly insurmountable obstacles, but also to the continuing difficulties posed by those very real obstacles to organizing and advocacy for worker rights.

## CONCLUSION

The subtheme of the conference at UCLA was “A Search for Solutions.” One of our hopes for this conference and the articles in this volume is that they will raise awareness of these issues and provide both inspiration and guidance to activists and practitioners working at the forefront of the most difficult labor issues today. The articles point to prospects or possible strategies for bolstering worker rights in the global South, while also at times pointing out the protracted and severe nature of the difficulties facing workers who seek to improve their lives. Clearly, there is no magic bullet, but along the important dimensions identified by these articles—the state, community, informalization, and new organizational forms—we see several suggestions on how to improve the conditions of workers’ lives. Whether through international campaigns (McCallum, 2011) or efforts to establish independent workers’ movements (Chan, 2011; Frambach, 2011; Kamel, 2011; Su, 2011), unionization remains one of the most important avenues for workers looking to improve their situation (Hermanson, 2011). Unionization also serves as an option to counter the growing informalization of the workplace (Chinguno, 2011; Elbert, 2011). Demenge (2011), Elbert (2011), and Frambach (2011) point to the critical role of community organizations and the role they play in providing support for workers, whereas Shorette (2011) and Chan (2011) point to the importance of consumer support. Finally, Seidman (2011) raises the need for greater state involvement in enforcing labor rights and for attention to be paid to state and legal forces—though Parreñas (2011) cautions that well-meaning regulation can sometimes imperil the intended beneficiaries. It is not surprising that these articles do not settle for easy solutions; conversely, it is a credit to the authors that they avoid suggestions that face little prospect of working in the real world. Greater understanding of the circumstances and prospects of workers in the global South can also aid the search for solutions, and it is here that we hope this special issue can make its greatest contribution.

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