

ACTIVIST PERSPECTIVE: ENGAGED SOCIOLOGY AND LABOR'S STRUGGLES

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The Labor in the Global South conference, which generated the papers in this issue of the *Journal of Workplace Rights*, was a great conference for me for several reasons.

The subject matter was really labor *struggles* in the global South, and the approach was to seek to understand the diverse struggles and to learn from them in order to guide future struggles. The participants were young and not so young scholars, mostly grad students but some established faculty, with a few “practitioners”—trade union and NGO activists—mixed in. A number of the scholars were also seasoned practitioners. The general attitude toward the struggles analyzed was critical but not cynical or negative; engaged, partisan, but not sectarian or dogmatic.

The result was a conference with papers, presentations, and discussions that advance our understanding of labor struggles in the global South, in countries as diverse as Turkey, China, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, India, and South Africa, and that provide many lessons for future work and struggle, whether scholarly or practical. Here are two examples.

The paper by Rodolfo Elbert, “How Do Unions Respond to Nonstandard Work Arrangements?—Relations between Core and Non-Core Workers in a Food Processing Factory (Argentina, 2005–2008)” chronicles the struggle of workers at a unionized factory in a working-class Buenos Aires community against “flexible employment.” Flexible employment—outsourcing, subcontracting, employment of temporary workers either directly or through agencies—is one of the key elements of the neoliberal economic program implemented

by many governments and corporations in recent years, especially in the global South. While economists speak of this trend as “removing and reducing labor market rigidity,” for workers it means lower wages, fewer (if any) benefits, and reduced job security. Elbert asks whether workers can resist or counter employer efforts to expand flexible employment by developing relations of solidarity. The answer, in the case of these workers, is yes, by grassroots organizing at the factory level, building solidarity between temporary workers, outsourced workers, and subcontracted workers and their permanent employee colleagues, and acting collectively in job actions around specific issues, using each victory to encourage further actions.

Elbert documents how, over the three years covered by this study, rank and file activists used shop floor conversations and community social events such as birthday parties and soccer matches to build relations that developed into weekly meetings of hundreds of workers, and how they used job actions that progressed from a refusal by temporary workers to work overtime, to two-hour and three-hour work stoppages, and finally to a full-scale factory-wide strike and the blocking by workers of the Panamericana Highway near the plant. As the actions grew in size, duration, and intensity, the workers’ demands grew from increasing temporary workers’ wages to incorporating all temporary, outsourced, and subcontracted workers into the company’s permanent core workforce. They won what they demanded in spite of their national union’s acceptance of flexibilization, demonstrating the power of plant level activists to act autonomously when they have the broad support of the rank and file workers.

The presentation by Sze Wan Debby Chan of the Hong Kong NGO Students and Scholars against Corporate Misbehavior (SACOM) described the ongoing crisis in the situation of workers at the huge Taiwanese IT manufacturing company, Foxconn. Foxconn is the world’s largest contract manufacturer of consumer electronics—laptops, tablet computers, and smart phones, for companies like HP, Dell, and Apple, including the iPad and iPhone—employing perhaps one million workers, mostly in China. After a disturbing wave of young worker suicides in Foxconn’s Shenzhen factory—perhaps the world’s largest manufacturing facility, with between 300,000 and 450,000 workers—the company management increased wages significantly and relocated part of the company’s production to a rapidly constructed factory of 100,000 workers in the Chinese interior city of Chengdu, Sichuan. SACOM’s investigation of the new Chengdu factory exposed serious health and safety problems, including excessive accumulations of aluminum dust in the iPad polishing department. Days after SACOM issued a public report on its investigation, citing the problem of excessive aluminum dust in that department, the dust exploded, killing three workers and injuring seventeen.

Subcontracting manufacturing to a legally independent company like Foxconn is a more and more common approach being taken by multinational brands like Apple, Nike, and others, as they seek to distance themselves from responsibility for the production of their products and for such realities as the suicides in

Shenzhen and the accident in Chengdu. After finishing her participation in the Labor in the Global South conference, Sze Wan traveled to the Cupertino, California, headquarters of Apple to confront management with the demand that they should take responsibility for the conditions in the factories where their goods are made.

This is engaged sociology, research, and analysis being used as instruments in labor's struggles, seeking the lessons of experience to guide our actions. The themes tackled in these two presentations—confronting flexible employment and exposing the conditions under which branded items are manufactured—are among the most important of our time.

As someone involved in organizing workers in the global south and participating in their struggles, I believe this is the approach and the result that is needed—at least it's what I need.

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