

PREFACE

This thirty-seventh volume of the *Socialist Register*, ‘Working Classes: Global Realities’ follows naturally from last year’s volume, *Necessary and Unnecessary Utopias*, which explored visions and strategies capable of transcending the pessimism prevailing on the Left and rekindling the socialist imagination. Socialist renewal remains, in our minds, inextricably linked with working-class emancipation. This must mean the working class in the broadest possible sense; and it must also mean transcending the limits of old forms of working-class organization and politics.

Hundreds of thousands of words have been written by Left thinkers over the past decade on the penetration of capital throughout the globe and the triumphs of the neoliberal project; and from Chiapas to the ‘Battle of Seattle’ much attention has also been devoted to the emergence of an ‘international civil society’ opposed to globalized capitalism—an opposition we heartily support. But the authors of this literature have too often accepted capitalist markets as the necessary organizing principle of modern economic and political life, or been too speculative and too minimally reformist in propounding ways in which capitalist markets might be managed, through taxes on financial speculation or international labour standards, for example. Such a truncation of political horizons was perhaps inevitable after the ignominious collapse of Communism and social democracy’s embrace of ‘third wayism’, but seems to us profoundly misguided.

Against these intellectual and political currents it seemed to us important to devote the present volume to the state of the global proletariat at the beginning of the new millennium, since any serious reconstruction of the socialist movement must begin by confronting the realignment of class structures and the impasse of working-class politics that have taken place over the last quarter of the twentieth century. Class analysis as a mode of intellectual discourse, and social class as the pivotal axis of political mobilization, have both suffered marginalization, although certainly not complete collapse, in the face of the

casualization of work, trade-union decline and the fracturing of socialist political formations, not to mention the impact of neoliberal and post-modernist ideas. This has undoubtedly been the case in the core capitalist countries, and it is hard to avoid drawing similar conclusions for other parts of the world as well.

Yet this period has also been marked by acute social inequalities ‘growing directly out of capitalist production itself, as Marx put it, a point conceded even by the international agencies and states leading the drive for globalization, while the absolute numbers of proletarians, and indeed workers in trade unions, have never been greater. As a set of social relations, then, ‘class’ is as central to understanding the dynamics of contemporary capitalism as it ever has been. But class as a political relation—in the sense of workers consciously forming a class ‘in so far as they engage in a common battle against another class’, i.e., as an agency advancing political and economic alternatives to neoliberalism and capitalism—remains deep in crisis.

So it seems important and timely to try to assess as honestly as possible the state of the global proletariat. One dimension of this is certainly to refresh class analysis, developing the theoretical capacity to understand a world in which an emerging ‘cybertariat’ coexists with ‘peasantries’, not to mention an increasing number of factory workers worldwide. And if this means overcoming the weaknesses of Marxist analysis, not least in relation to office workers and farmers, it also means overcoming a tendency to take the class structure of the ‘North’ as a model for the ‘South’. A second task, therefore, has been to try to register the varied experiences of the contemporary working classes, and to do this in a way, moreover, that not only recognizes the importance of spatial differences and determinations, but also understands that this pertains to workers’ diverse ‘ways of living’ as well as to experiences at work. A third task we set ourselves was to look at working-class organization, identity formation and politics in various zones of the world, and assess their significance. Here too, we have tried not only to note trends that are common, but also those that have specific resonance for particular groups of workers and for particular places.

Conceptually, this volume challenges at least two items of current academic and political conventional wisdom. It challenges the claim—beloved of both conservative thinkers and Third Way politicians—that we live in a post-class age, that the working class no longer exists, and that to think in class terms is to remain trapped in the mental furniture of the old millennium rather than the new. It also challenges the tendency of much contemporary scholarship and political discourse to treat globalization as simply a matter of the increased mobility of capital. In our view this is to make three linked mistakes. It is to think of capital in a fetishized form, to forget that capital is necessarily always a social relationship, and to ignore the way in which the growth of capital in general is possible only through the expanding extraction of value from labour power. Capital is not suddenly more globally mobile because of the revolution

in information technology or the deregulation of financial markets; capital is more geographically diversified than it used to be because it now has more working classes to exploit. Those who declare that we live in an age without classes need to count the growing numbers of those sections of the world's producers who now depend—directly or indirectly—on the sale of their labour power for their own daily reproduction. The World Bank in 1995 put that number at 2.5 billion. The global proletariat is not vanishing but expanding at a rate that has doubled its numbers since 1975.

It is not the absence of proletarian numbers that is the defining feature of the age so much as the unprecedented combination of old and new proletariats in face of global capital. Throughout the history of modern capitalism, the proletarian experience has always been complex and many-layered; but never has it been as complexly structured as it is now. For within the modern global proletariat at least several new and complex forms of class construction and experience overlay each other. In the proletariats of the core capitalisms—in labour movements with their own long history—the current conjuncture is one of work intensification, class restructuring and growing employer and state offensives. Across each of the major economies of North America, Western Europe and Japan, differentially nuanced by national circumstance, the positions previously won by labour are now heavily under challenge. In each the work-effort bargain at the point of production is being intensified, job insecurity is rife, older and more unionized work groups are being replaced by newer and less organized ones, and the social settlement established by proletarian pressure in post-war capitalism's golden age is everywhere being eroded. In large swathes of the eastern and southern zones of what once was an undifferentiated Third World, no such social settlement exists to be defended, for there it is processes of early proletarian creation that are widely evident. There the working conditions, pay and social rights of the emerging labour forces share much in common with those typical of the core capitalisms earlier in the twentieth century: long hours for low pay, extensive use of child labour, the movement of workers from country to town, the denial of union and democratic rights and heavy state repression. Add to that the entry into the world labour market of 'Second World' workers hitherto sealed off by cold war divisions and whose experience of full-scale industrialization (in the case of the former Soviet Union) or initial industrial development (as in Vietnam and China) either was (or in the latter two cases, still is) mediated through the rhetoric and political structures of Communist regimes.

Old and new interact dramatically in the labour experience of the newly industrializing economies of the East and the South: where different groups of workers find themselves exposed, alongside one another, to a range of different but equally daunting material conditions: the rigours of advanced factory production, the demands of modern service employment, the insecurities of petty trade and the desperate poverty of marginalized employment. Old and new interact even within the labour experience of the core capitalisms, as

migrant labour becomes progressively more important for the reproduction of capital in basic industries and service employment, and as the capacity of capital to relocate to ever cheaper and more exploited sources of labour ratchets down wages and conditions of even well-organized groups of workers.

The modern proletarian condition is thus more obviously a global one than at any previous time in the history of capitalism. It is also still one that fosters divisions as much as unity within the working class. The organizational questions of working-class politics remain as critical as ever. Class diversity and diverse class situations have also produced new kinds of struggle and new kinds of organization. Careful reflection on the promise and limitations of these has also been one of the main aims of this volume.

A stock-taking of the global proletariat obviously required contributors from a wide range of locations. Ursula Huws is a writer and researcher who is director of the independent social and economic research consultancy, Analytica, and Associate Fellow of the Institute for Employment Studies at the University of Sussex. Henry Bernstein teaches Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London; and both Beverley Silver and Giovanni Arrighi are in the Sociology Department at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Andrew Ross is Director of the American Studies Programme at New York University. Barbara Hariss-White teaches development studies, and Nandini Gooptu teaches South Asian History and Politics, both at Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford. Patrick Bond teaches in the Graduate School of Public and Development Management at Wits University in Johannesburg, and Greg Ruiters teaches Political Studies at that university; Darlene Miller, who is affiliated with the Sociology Department there, is also a doctoral candidate at Johns Hopkins University. Steve Jefferys has recently taken up a research chair in Employment Studies at the University of North London, and David Mandel teaches Political Science at the University of Quebec in Montreal. Haideh Moghissi and Saeed Rahnema teach Sociology and Political Science respectively at York University, Toronto. Huw Beynon is Director of the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University in Wales; and José Ramalho teaches in the Department of Sociology at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. Gerard Greenfield is a labour research activist based in Hong Kong; Rohini Hensman is a feminist labour activist and researcher working in Mumbai, India. Eric Mann is the Director of the Labour/Community Strategy Centre in Los Angeles; and Justin Paulson is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and founder and Web-master of the ¡Ya Basta! Web page. Judith Adler Hellman teaches Social and Political Science at York University Toronto; and Peter Kwong teaches Political Science at Hunter College, City University of New York. Brigitte Young teaches in the Institut für Politikwissenschaft at the University of Münster in Germany; and Rosemary Warskett teaches in the Department of Law, Carleton University, Ottawa. Sam Gindin, recently retired as assistant to the president of the Canadian Auto Workers union, is now

teaching in the Department of Political Science at York University, Toronto.

In thanking all the contributors, we should mention that for the first time in the *Register's* history drafts of many of the essays for this year's volume were first presented at a workshop, held in Toronto in January 2000 and funded with the assistance of York University the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. We want to express our appreciation to those who participated, including the graduate students of the Political Science Department who acted as rapporteurs, while making it clear that neither they nor the contributors themselves necessarily agree with everything that appears in this volume. Marsha Niemeijer, the *Register's* assistant at York University, played an especially important role in organizing this workshop for which we are very grateful, as we indeed are for all her excellent editorial and promotional work as well. As before, we have also been able to call on Alan Zuege's editorial skills in preparing the essays for publication, for which much thanks once again; and we also have to thank Vince Pietropaolo and Shuster Gindin for help with the photos used on our cover, as well as Louis Mackay for the cover design itself. And thanks again too to Tony Zurbrugg, and his staff at the new Merlin Press, who have brought enormous enthusiasm, skill and commitment to the production and distribution of the *Socialist Register*.

This has been one of the largest and most challenging volumes of the *Register* in many years, reflected in the sharing of editorial responsibilities by Greg Albo and David Coates alongside Leo Panitch and Colin Leys. But beyond this, without the further active support of the *Register's* other contributing and corresponding editors in defining the theme, suggesting contributors and in a number of cases undertaking to write essays themselves, producing a volume on this scale would hardly have been possible. We thank them all. We want also to extend special thanks to George Ross and Reg Whitaker who have retired as contributing editors (but not, we want to assure our readers, as contributors of essays to future volumes). We are extremely pleased to welcome Ursula Huws and Alan Zuege as new contributing editors as well as Aijaz Ahmad as our new corresponding editor in New Delhi. Readers of the *Register* will already be aware of their contributions in recent years and will want to join us in welcoming them to the *Register* collective.

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L.P. C.L.
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