

Southern Insurgency – The Coming of the Global Working Class

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The Global South and its new working class[1]

Perhaps long before Gorz's (1982) seminal *Farewell to the Working Class* many have started wondering where – if anywhere – the once mighty working class went. Did the working class simply disappear? Was it absorbed into Galbraith's (1958) petit-bourgeois middle class of an "Affluent Society" with, as Marcuse (1966/1991) predicted, a one-dimensional non-class consciousness? Others wondered whether Karl Marx's forecast of rising class conflicts leading to the inevitable overthrow of capitalism's class society was simply a fallacy.

Perhaps the Fordist "big-labour-big-capital" class compromise had successfully appeased and repressed the working class (Aglietta, 2000; Pearson, 2016)? Or was it Ford's second invention of mass production linked to mass consumerism, supported through the rising ideological power of corporate mass media, that incorporated the working class into Althusser's (1984) ideological consumerist apparatus of capitalism? Here workers service their mortgages while seeking the next model car rather than engaging in strikes, revolts, and revolutions. Was all this possible despite the fact that the continuing inhumanity of capitalist production was accelerated through neo-Fordism (Dorary, 1988)? Finally and most devastatingly, is it at all conceivable that the 500 year old utopian idea (Moore, 1516; Campanella, 1623/1981) of a better society with "A Post-Managerial World" (Klikauer, 2013) was a mere hallucination?

Furnished with three empirical company case studies from India, China, and South Africa, Immanuel Ness argues that the working class has not vanished from the face of the earth. Instead, it has simply been removed to the Southern hemisphere working in Southern sweatshop factories. And there might even be a "Southern Insurgency" – the book's main title – and a "Coming of the global working class" – the book's subtitle (see also Barber, 2016). Perhaps against the working class' north-to-south move, Karl Marx might like to argue that as long as those in the Northern (and in the Southern) hemisphere are forced to sell their labour they will continue to be the working class. This remains so even though – and this might be courtesy of the global corporate mass media – too many no longer carry a distinctive class consciousness with them. As a consequence of the rising media capitalism, perhaps even Marx's (1859, p. 1) time-honoured dictum (see below) has to be somewhat redefined:

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.

Perhaps under the mass media guided capitalism consciousness and existence may not be so closely linked. The "ideological apparatus" (Althusser, 1984) of schooling, managerial



regimes, consumerism, and mass media reaching into every train station, car radio, and bedroom has simply – but also highly successfully – disconnected the actuality of working life (*das Sein*) from class consciousness (*das Bewusstsein*). We remain sociologically as well as economically working class but we – the working class – have been made to believe that class no longer exists. And indeed, the two main ideologies of the twentieth century feast off the “no working class” ideology:

- (1) first, there are the believers of the social-democratic daydream of a third way between capitalism and labour; and
- (2) second, there is also a crypto-religious congregation of neo-liberalism with the hallucinogenic fantasy of class-less hyper-individualism.

In reality neither social-democratic pipedreams nor hard-core neo-liberalism has ended class society even though this is what many have been made to believe. Historically however, the class of capitalists has always been sure about the existence of class. And they are sure about their position in class society. And even today the capitalist class carries its class consciousness forward rather relentlessly. It is in no doubt that class still exists. The great Adam Smith (1776, p. 321) has made this clear enough when writing, “All for ourselves and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind”. And more recently one of its key representatives recently noted rather openly and candidly:

“[...] there’s class warfare, all right,” Mr. (Warren) Buffett said, “but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning” (Stein, 2006, p. 1).

So, perhaps Immanuel Ness may not be quite on the mark suggesting a “north-to-south” move of the working class as there still is a working class in the north – just with a deformed and suppressed class consciousness as the philosophers, Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) correctly analysed all those years ago in their classic *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*. Perhaps class consciousness could simply not withstand the comprehensive onslaught of the multi-billion-dollar ideology machine of global advertising, the likes of Hollywood, Murdoch, and Fox put into motion around the middle of the twentieth century (Greenwald, 2004).

The success of the Althusserian ideological apparatus can almost be measured when, for example, “on April 5, 1911, 400,000 New Yorkers, 1 out of 10” attended a demonstration after “100+ Women Burned to Death” in a garment factory (*Z-Mag*, 2016). But when roughly 100 years later 1,000 were women burned to death in a garment factory fire in Bangladesh, not even a tenth turned out in New York to demonstrate while ten-times more women died. One is tempted to ask: is this a sign of “The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda” (Chomsky, 1991)?

But Immanuel Ness is very much on the mark with the analysis of capitalism’s expansion to the south. Historically, the recent move might signify a three stage process leading to imperialism/globalisation. Today’s corporate mass media and Hayek’s neo-liberal apostles have successfully – but also ideologically – re-framed capitalism’s expansion to the south as globalisation camouflaging what really happened is an imperialist expansion. The ideology of globalisation demands not only the concealment of the inherent contradiction of capitalism’s globalisation but also its historical origins. In historical terms, globalisation’s predecessor – imperialism – as well as global trade has an extremely cruel and brutal history that proponents of free trade and globalisation are eager to eliminate from our consciousness.

Historically, all this might have started when Christopher Columbus arrived at a little island beach in the Bahamas in 1492. Subsequent to this, the first wave of modern imperialism was set in motion. With this, Euro-centred capitalism became a truly global

affair. But Columbus' discovery also kick started the first historical stage of today's globalisation when imperialism was defined simply by pilfering, plundering, robbery, rape, violence, brutality, massacres, and torture as European gunships arrived to steal whatever companies of mercenaries could find (e.g. Spain in the Americas). Incidentally, the very term "company" originated in "bread" (pane) "sharing" (con) groups of mercenaries. But soon the plundering stage of early globalisation was to end.

Stage two might be called "resource imperialism". When European powers noticed that there was not much left to pillage, they quickly moved on towards extracting resources – human and material. It occurred as European capitalism started to develop into a full-fledged system of surplus extraction. Material resources came in the form of mining (silver, gold, copper, tin, etc.) and agriculture (e.g. sugar, cotton, etc.) while human extraction took the form of slavery under the triangular slave trade. Cheap manufacturing goods from Europe entered Africa to be exchanged for slaves; slaves from Africa were transported (under horrific conditions) to the Americas where they were sold as chattel (human resources) to work on farms. Sugar, tobacco, and cotton were transported back to Europe to be sold raising the money to buy cheap manufacturing goods. But this second stage was eventually replaced.

The third form is ideologically labelled globalisation. Today, the defining factor is no longer plundering and an overt focus is on resource extraction. All the while globalisation is still plundering the earth for minerals with all the environmental vandalism attached to it. But increasingly global capital started to focus on investment – foreign direct investment (FDI) – setting up manufacturing facilities overseas. Managerialism labels this off-shoring and outsourcing. The move towards FDI and manufacturing marks the current stage of imperialism. This is where Immanuel Ness' book provides a most illuminating discussion of the new global workforce labouring in southern factories sweatshops so that Northern consumers can happily buy a cheap shirt (Morgan, 2015).

This increasing Southern manufacturing working class, laid out by Ness, follows the well-known trajectory laid out by Karl Marx: wherever there is capitalism, there are workers; wherever there are workers there are organised workers; and wherever there are organised workers there are fights between capital and workers over the three classical fields of interest confrontations:

- (1) wages: individual capitalists have an interest in low wages while the system of capitalism and workers demand high wages – the former to keep consumerism going and the latter to sustain life as a worker (Harvey, 2014; Benson and Kirsch, 2010);
- (2) the second "worker-vs-capital" contradiction is that of working time with capital seeking long working hours while workers seek short working hours; and
- (3) finally, a conflict over general working conditions with workers viewing these as a decent working life while capital sees this as costs to be avoided.

Given the historical development of capitalism, Ness is correct in suggesting that "migrant workers often cross [internal] boundaries" (p. IX). They have done so since capitalism came to light somewhere in the English Midlands more than two centuries ago. Rising capitalism was soon followed by Irish workers moving there for work. Today, capitalism – often supported by unsustainable trade policies, neo-liberalism, and globalisation – still causes mass movements of people, e.g. from Eastern Europe to Western Europe, from South America to the USA, and from Africa and India to the Middle East.

Meanwhile, the influx of FDI has turned many developing countries into manufacturing countries, meaning that capital flows to cheap labour rather than labour flowing to capital. Today, these developing countries are clustered together as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) as the north retains its defining power over the south. Ness' book examines three of the five BRICS: India, China, and South Africa. In all the three countries

“investors [hope] that low-wage workers pose no threat to corporate profit margins” (p. 1). Historically, capitalism’s labour repressing strategies stretch from the English Midlands (eighteenth and nineteenth century) to China, India, and South Africa (twentieth and twenty-first century). The current strategy is to employ “peasants and their families who have moved to industrial zones” (p. 1) as these often lack any forms of class consciousness.

With that Ness reaches his first core argument, namely “that the industrial working class has not disappeared but has been relocated and reconstituted in the South” (p. 2). His second argument emphasises that “the North applied models of representation in the South that contained the scope of workers” representation within narrow boundaries, restricting workers’ mobilisation’ (p. 3). This is the traditional labour and industrial relations (IR) approach focussing on three actors (employers, the state, and trade unions) with many “official” unions often deliberately designed to split the working class into craft, skill, industry, etc. based micro sections.

As Ness shows so pointedly, many workers of the South are reaching beyond the limiting mind-set of traditional IR’s research agenda (Bartram *et al.*, 2015, p. 127). Meanwhile, IR holds on to a semi-academic discipline that is not much more than a method to support capital and management (Dunlop, 1958; Bartram *et al.*, 2015; Tapia *et al.*, 2015). It delivers what Lockwood (1964) once called the “system integration” of workers into the apparatus of IR, semi-dictatorial states, and above all staunchly undemocratic corporations. While Ness correctly argues that workers are forced to organise resistance outside of the confinements of traditional IR, IR traditionalists meanwhile adhere to their script when arguing for “the ability of the IR frameworks and trade unions in these countries to adapt to the practice of foreign-owned enterprises” (Bartram *et al.*, 2015, p. 136).

IR (as an academic subject) was more or less invented in advanced Anglo-Saxon countries such as Great Britain, USA, Ireland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Hence, there still is a strong focus on those countries where IR was set up and is institutionalised, where IR researchers live, where most IR conferences are held and most IR journals are published. As a consequence, IR still seems to focus more on OECD countries rather than non-OECD countries. This has, at least partly, resulted in the fact that “for more than 40 years researchers and journalists have pondered the working class mostly without consideration of the vast majority of workers who are labouring in the Global South” (p. 5) as Ness convincingly argues. This focus together with IR’s traditional view still makes many IR researchers see trade unions predominantly in a rather conventional role. Not surprisingly, the maxim that “the role of trade unions is the protection of the workers” (Bartram *et al.*, 2015, p. 139) comes with the hidden, if frequently unintentional, transcript: do not fight corporations and capitalism whether in the Global North or in the Global South. In addition, the limiting view of labour is seen as a function of the IR triage (employers, management, and trade unions) which tends to exclude the wider context such as, for example, what might be called the “community-union-resistance” interface, which Ness identifies in his own case studies. Thankfully, Ness’s work is not restricted by IR traditions. He writes:

[...] the imposition of neo-liberal reforms includes imperialist funding of police and private militias to suppress workers and peasants who oppose the new system, which is dominated by multinational foreign investments that rebound to the benefit of the global south (p. 16).

But FDI creates not only negative pathologies as Ness acknowledges when noting that “some developing countries have reduced extreme poverty (but) by and large big businesses in the imperial world are the prime beneficiaries of FDI” (p. 21). Perhaps without the return of investment) returning to the North there simply would be no FDI (Mander, 2001). But while “extreme poverty” (starvation) – not necessarily “relative poverty” (living with less than 60 per cent of the average income in a society) – has eased in many countries of the South, “FDI demonstrates that new investment does not offset underdevelopment and

structural poverty” (p. 21). This is neatly camouflaged through the infamous “rising of all boats” ideology. Simultaneously, the second neo-liberal ideology of a “trickle down” effect has created the exact opposite. As a recent Oxfam’s (2016, p. 3) report noted “far from trickling down, income and wealth are instead being sucked upwards at an alarming rate”. Oxfam (2016, p. 2; e.g. Oxfam-USA 2016) substantiates all this further when reporting:

Credit Suisse recently revealed that the richest 1% have now accumulated more wealth than the rest of the world put together. This occurred a year earlier than Oxfam’s much publicised prediction ahead of last year’s World Economic Forum. Meanwhile, the wealth owned by the bottom half of humanity has fallen by a trillion dollars in the past five years.

But Ness’ book is not dedicated to the history of imperialism and globalisation, it is not about the shortcomings of traditional IR, and it is not about economic figures that have been so pointedly and brilliantly composed by Oxfam. Instead, Ness writes:

[...] the purpose of this book is to document how workers in the early 21st century are countering exploitative corporate labour practices in the Global South, challenging autocratic systems of control which work through FDI (p. 25).

To achieve this, the chapter on “the industrial proletariat of the global south” starts with a harsh critique on trade unions and emphasises:

Given the concentration of mass production in North America, Europe, and Japan during the 20th century, existing trade unions unflinchingly aligned with big business in their industrial sectors to prevent free trade. These efforts to preserve industrial production in the North failed miserably, as trade unions typically became aligned with national manufacturers to defend shrinking industrial turfs from further outsourcing of production to the South (p. 31).

Perhaps these compliant trade unions even lost twice. First, they became part of corporate managerial regimes accommodating capital rather than fighting for workers. Second, Northern trade unions failed by not creating alliances with Southern trade unions. Perhaps the Northern unions were unaware that outsourcing might not be a threat to their capability to organise but, if they could form global alliances, a strength. Ness notes:

In 1980 half of the world’s industrial workers lived in Europe, Japan, and North America, i.e. the imperialist nations. Since then, in just three decades, their numbers have declined in absolute terms by around a quarter, while the export-led expansion of the industrial workforce in low-wage countries has grown rapidly and now comprises 80 percent of the world’s industrial workers. The scale and speed of this global shift, and even more so the form it has taken, are strong evidence of the significance of the outsourcing phenomenon (p. 38).

To some extent then “the centre has been able to displace its own contradictions of accumulation to the periphery” (p. 45). These contradictions are now played out in the Global South: “to lure multinational capital, local state managers and politicians either ensured that new industrial enterprise zones were union free, or permitted employers to form company-dominated unions” (p. 49).

In the South, therefore, many rank-and-file actions have escaped IR’s traditional three-dimensional mind-set of unions, employers, and states. On this, Ness notes the existence of: worker’s organisations outside the traditional IR structure, the so-called “worker assemblies”; the independent trade unions outside official codified IR-systems; and workers pressuring the “traditional unions” (p. 55) kept inside the official system to pacify workers. While standard IR follows the hegemonic bandwagon of “we are in the service industry now”, today “more workers are employed in manufacturing than at any time in history” (p. 58) – just that most of these workers are located outside of the Global North and the focus of traditional IR. With this, Ness enters the first of three case studies.

India – the country where British colonialism was handed over to a corporation (Dalrymple, 2015) – remains a classical case for much of what has been said above. Being the “colonial administrator” (Kerr *et al.*, 1996, p. 383) and the economic exploiter for a very long time before releasing India into the later stages of financial/manufacturing imperialism, this is not surprising. Historically, “labour was managed by [Indian] states through a combination of repression and institutionalised bargaining” (p. 86). Moreover, “94% of all workers work outside of the formal sector of labour regulation” (p. 86). This includes children as well as bonded labour, i.e. modern slavery (ASS, 1998; Sheth, 2010). On top of that “corporate hostility to unions is reinforced by government policies” (p. 87). The traditional system of IR thus seems inadequate for Indian workers.

Interestingly, “85% [of workers] were employed by contractors and 80% of all permanent and contractor workers earn less than the statutory minimum wage of \$83.28 a month” (p. 89) – the cost of a bottle of good wine at a New York, London, or a Sydney business lunch. In other words, it would take an Indian worker six years to pay for Tyco-CEO’s “\$6,000 shower curtain” (reuters.com, 15 June 2012). There are also permanent workers in India’s industry but the wage gap between contractors and permanents is somewhere between 4:1 and 5:1. Meanwhile the productivity of these underpaid workers at the car factory of Maruti/Suzuki, for example, increased from 77 cars per worker (1995) to 105 cars per worker (1999/2000). While worker productivity has increased, corporations have successfully “removed the link between productivity and prosperity” (Oxfam, 2016, p. 13) with gains not passed on to workers. Despite all this, the workers at Maruti, without the support of a conventional union, won a hard fight against the corporation with a substantial win. In the end, global capitalism keeps workers on starvation level wages dividing them into permanent and contract labour while showering itself with monetary rewards and stratospheric CEO payments. Above that capital has successfully removed the “productivity leads to prosperity” idea, but some workers managed to organise and resist outside of the conventional IR system.

The case study of China depicts a similar story where massive number of workers migrated to the Pearl River Delta, opening up China to the Northern corporations. Ness argues that “the Chinese revolution merely interrupted the colonial system of extraction[...] this pattern returned in the 1980s” (p. 113) with a vengeance. Much of this has been supported by China’s trade unions because China’s sole legal union federation the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), “[...] acts as an outside force that is[...] loyal to capital and the state” (p. 126). While “in most cases grassroots unions are controlled by the ACFTU during periods of protests and unrests, rank and file workers mobilise on a case-by-case basis” (p. 128).

Ness’ case study centres on Yue Yuen, “the world’s largest manufacturer of athletic shoes [and] principal manufacturer of shoes for Adidas, Asics, Nike, Reebok, Solomon, Timberland, and other brands [with] an average export price per pair [of] \$20” (p. 135). Profit margins in athletic footwear are high. But as Yue Yuen was not happy with its profits, the company engaged in the “theft of social security payments” (p. 137) causing a massive backlash in strikes and protests by its workers. During these, “the ACFTU has been entirely unhelpful to the striking workers” (p. 142). But despite the lack of support provided by the official union system, the workers carried the day.

Finally, there is the case of South Africa where the “production of primary products is almost always dependent on the cost of labour and the ability to exploit and plunder eco-systems without consequence” (p. 150). Much of this has not changed significantly with the end of apartheid. What has also not altered is the working life of miners as “a fundamental feature of South Africa’s mining economy both pre- and post-apartheid has been the isolation of mineworker communities in dilapidated housing near the mines” (p. 152). This remains largely the same despite – or perhaps because of – the “1994 ANC election victory” (p. 157). What continues – to some degree – is that mine owners such as Marikana can still engage in

atrocities such as the “massacre of 34 [striking] mine workers on Thursday August 16, 2012” (Davis, 2015, p. 169). While the official union NUM was, “staunchly opposed to workers” movement, the NUM was outflanked by the AMCU, a new rival independent union (p. 177) leading to a “22% wage increase” (independent.co.uk, 12 September 2012).

The above successful cases of mobilising action against corporations servicing the Global North therefore occurred via “independent” trade unions and/or outside official union channels. To explain this, Ness draws some rather insightful conclusions. First, “the vast majority of workers in new industrial zones are young people from rural areas who are unfamiliar with their rights and typically isolated from other workers” (p. 182). This has been a common anti-union strategy ever since capitalism came to light. But surprisingly, “in India’s industrial zones, the career (sic.) of an industrial worker may not last more than five or six years, and by the age of 25 workers are considered old and replaceable” (p. 182). While this might hamper the organisation of independent trade unions, on the other hand, it might also be a source for workers’ mobilisation. Second, in the early twenty-first century, “industrial workers in the Global South frequently live in dormitories managed by contractors” (p. 183). These dormitories are used to control labour and act as a tool of oppression. Leaf (2012, p. 241) has provided a most illuminating insight into the hidden world of such dormitories using the example of Walmart:

Walmart is the largest American company. Walmart operates sweatshop factories in Saipan bringing in Chinese women from the mainland to make clothing for sale in Walmart stores in the US. At Walmart’s sweatshops women were paid \$3 an hour and could be fired and deported if they “fell in love; got married; became pregnant (terminate pregnancy or be deported); participated in political or religious activities; failed to meet their daily production quota; refused to work overtime, including unpaid volunteer hours; participated in any activities which lessens their energy for work; refusal to lie to inspectors regarding safety conditions at work, the number of hours worked, and the true number of women living in a each barracks room; asked for higher wages; and tried to organise a union”.

However, the togetherness and shared consciousness that these dormitories may create can also act as a spur for worker mobilisation. Ness’s exquisite book shines a light on many such contradictions, but it also makes the reader aware of the following. First that the most insightful writings on IR can come from outside of standard IR scholarship. Beyond that, Ness also increases our awareness of the realities of today’s industrial manufacturing world. Workers in today’s Global South face the harsh capitalist realities so pointedly described by Engels (1892). Ness shows, however, that despite the best efforts of capital and states, identified in the opening to this article, some form of working class consciousness is arguably alive in the Global South. This consciousness is capable of organising workers and fighting against global corporations, although this may occur outside of traditional IR institutions.

One of the very few negatives of Ness work is that he – like so many others – somewhat missed a crucial “blind spot” (Smythe, 1977). There is a reason why Northern consumers buying the next \$5 shirt will never know the true state of the working conditions of those making that t-shirt in Walmart Saipan’s sweatshops. This is the massive global ideology apparatus capitalism has amassed. This global ideological media apparatus is not just dead set against trade unions, workers’ rights, strikes, and a working class consciousness but it has also the proven capability of eliminating the truth laid out in Ness’ work about the Global South. The fact that more than 1,000 women died at Rana Plaza only three years ago while making t-shirts, sports jackets and other items has already been forgotten. Meanwhile we are plastered with “Kim Kardashian suffers a serious fashion fail as she wears an evening dress over a sports jacket” (www.news.com, 18 April 2016).

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Note

1. All references to page numbers occurring without a reference to an author are from the book under review.

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