

Review on: Raising the voice of workers in global supply chains. Global leverages in the organising strategies of three 'new' labour unions in the Indian garment sector

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How can international labour cooperation contribute to the success of workers involved in local struggles in the Global South? This guiding question of Tandiwe Gross stimulates her paper published in the RLS Southasia paper series "Thought Factory". Like the previous contributions to this series it strengthens the profile of RLS South Asia in the field of international labour solidarity. Doing so, this paper looks into the organizing strategies of three Indian trade unions in the textile sector and the ways, in which cooperation with international NGOs is integrated into these strategies.

The unions looked at in this paper are the Garment and Textile Workers Union (GATWU) from Bangalore, the Garment and Fashion Workers Union (GAFWU) from Chennai and the Garment and Allied Workers Union (GAWU) from Gurgaon. All are part of the New Trade Union Initiative, a relatively new Indian trade union trying to develop a (more) militant and democratic way of unionism in India. A factor of their success (and a manifestation of this "new" way of unionism) is that organising does not only take place in factories, but also e.g. in residential areas with the help of organisations linked to the unions. Compared to the development of unionism in the last decades in India (and western capitalist countries as well), this approach is in fact new. But on the other hand it is a strategy already successfully implemented e.g. in 19th and 20th century Germany when the labour movement developed 'pre-union' organisations to address nearly all social (and cultural) needs of workers and also to circumvent political repression against unions. A difference is, that in the analysed cases the respective unions actually emerged out of the 'pre-union' organisations (and not the other way round) and that the 'pre-union' organisations

are not only financially supported by the membership fees of workers but also by (project based) funding of international donors. For further research it would be interesting to find out, if / in how far this financial dependency on international donors shapes the activities and strategies of these organisations and also what relevance it has for both organisations, when the unions is born out of the 'pre-union' organisation and not the 'pre-union' organisation out of the union. In other words: In how far is it the voice of workers and in how far is it a voice in support of workers which is raised by these organisations? Tandiwe Gross also provides a critical look into corporate codes of conduct. Given that workers and trade unions are not participating in ng, one can raise the following questions: Is it an intentionally ineffective system? Why do large retail companies (in the capitalist centres like Western Europe and North America) establish normative systems which are meant to have no profound outcomes in terms of better working conditions? A counter question to this could be: Why should a company be interested in reducing its profit? The main idea is that establishing the image of a responsibility towards the workforce involved in the supply chain avoids negative economic impacts of public campaigning against bad working conditions. Both actions of corporates – developing codes of conduct and making them intentionally ineffective – thus actually derive from the same source of profit maximization and are necessarily bound to each other.

Against this background (strikingly faded by out by the author!), Tandiwe Gross reasons about the integration of trade unions from countries like India into the social auditing mechanisms of retail corporates, to make these mechanisms effective. Furthermore she argues for integrating the cooperation with international NGOs into the organising strategies of trade unions to take retailers responsible for working conditions in their suppliers' factory. This is understood not as a substitute of trade union organising on the ground, but as a 'leverage' to make this organising more effective or possible at all and to defend freedom of association and other rights.

The metaphor 'leverage' in regard to such attempts conveys the impression of a very strong means, which needs small power to use and nevertheless generates remarkable effects. But looking at the current practices, it seems to be a means which needs a large effort to gain some successes on a case by case basis. It is in the nature of things that only a very small number of cases of 'labour rights violations' can be addressed by a public campaign. A public campaign needs to focus on a particular case to gain public attention and so the majority of day-to-day attacks on the working class has to be left out. Therefore it requires further analysis, in how far these attempts can be generalized. Moreover, to avoid paternalism of NGOs (from the centres) towards unions (from the peripheries), there is a need to develop frameworks of cooperation, in

which this 'leverage' is operated by the trade unions, i.e. unions are in control of this whole process.

In the context of global labour solidarity, we need to consider that the direct and brutal physical violence against workers which unionists from India and from other countries report may lead to a perception in the global North that trade unions from the south need 'help'. A more brutal and direct way of suppressing the working class in capitalist countries like India by using physical violence on a daily basis in comparison to countries like Germany could easily be perceived in an inadequate way and lead to wrong paternalistic conceptions of "global labour solidarity": The misleading picture would be that of an advanced, fair and responsible mode of capitalism in the centres and a backward and brutal mode of capitalism in the peripheries. In such a picture, the mode of capitalism in the centres would be seen as a role model for the future development of capitalism in the peripheries. But such a conception leaves out various crucial aspects of the development of global capitalism. One is that the diverse developments of capitalism in the centres and in the peripheries are bound to each other, i.e. the different modes of capitalist development depend upon each other and none of these modes could thus be a general mode of capitalist development applicable for centres and peripheries as well. A second aspect is that physical violence against workers cannot be particularly attributed to peripheral capitalism. The history of capitalism e.g. in Western Europe is full of examples of physical violence against workers by the state and corporate thugs. Only due to a period of class collaboration and a substantial weakening of militant trade unions after WWII, there was often simply no need to exercise violence. But violence is however still present as a potentiality in Western Europe.

The weakening of the labour movement can also be found in its self-restraint towards the use of the term '(workers') rights' - and this is somewhat crucial in the context of 'labour rights violations' and legal frameworks which supposedly should prevent them. 'Workers' rights' can refer to the social aspirations of the working class like social security, a good life without substantial fears and (for this purpose) the control of the wealth produced through their labour. But the term can be also used in a different, very limited sense, not meaning the aspirations and demands, but only the concessions already granted to the working class and recorded in labour laws. The equation of demands and (legal) concessions leads to a situation, in which labour is in the defensive and only struggles to keep or to get the concessions legally already granted. Of course, it is necessary to defend what previous generations were able to achieve, but even this won't be

successful, if there are no further aspirations which are able to create the momentum needed for the success of any social movement. With regards to the paper it has to be observed, that it becomes not quite clear what the understanding of workers rights of the author is. The 'freedom of association' mostly referred to is of course a legal right. With regards to aspirations this is would be more considered as a means to achieve aspirations than an aspiration itself. This is somehow of importance, since it seems e.g. not realistic at all, that aspirations like an end to exploitation and the workers' control over their produce will be achieved by publicly blaming retailing companies for selling products produces within the exploitative system of wage labour. Given this general context, this paper deals with crucial issues of global labour solidarity and brings together experiences from the ground in the Indian textile hubs of Bangalore, Chennai and Gurgaon with an assessment of current modes of global governance of workers' rights. The collection of experiences from the ground and linking them up with the global governance of (mostly legal) workers rights is a major strength of Tandiwe Gross' paper.

Nevertheless, some general weaknesses are there as well: It is catching one's eye, that after often remarkable observations the author avoids to come to a proper evaluation and make her own point of view transparent. But objectivity cannot be reached by avoiding opinions but by developing transparently lines of arguments taking all relevant information and circumstances into account. This brings me to a second general point of critique: The subject matter is analysed as if it would not be part of larger (economic and political) power relations. This leads to an overassessment of the possibilities of integrating the cooperation with international NGOs in the organising strategies of trade union.

In spite of some weaknesses the present paper "Raising the voice of workers in global supply chains" is a thought provoking step in a continuing debate and thus highly recommended to everyone interested in the field of international labour cooperation and solidarity.

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