



Dario Azzellini (ed.)

If Not Us, Who?

Global workers against authoritarianism, fascism, and dictatorships

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Cover photo: activists demonstrating at Kilusang Mayo Uno in the Philippines (see page 136ff.).

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# Preface

Dario Azzellini

Authoritarian policies and governments are gaining ground around the world. As the systemic crisis intensifies, so too does authoritarianism. At the same time, humankind is faced with the task of having to fundamentally change the predominant models of production and consumption – above all in the Global North – in order to overcome inequality and exploitation and avoid ecological collapse. Bourgeois forces are neither able nor willing to impede this authoritarian advance and take the necessary steps to protect the environment; on the contrary: in times of crisis throughout history, the majority of them have always preferred authoritarian solutions to the question of redistribution. It therefore makes little sense to appeal to the bourgeoisie to overthrow capitalism. But nothing less will do in the long term, for, as Marx rightly points out: “Capitalist production ... only develops the technique and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker.” (Marx 1992: 638)

While there was once a consensus on the left that organizing workers was the primary tool in the fight for social change, workers today are frequently seen to support authoritarianism. The advent of neoliberalism has led not only to a decrease in the unionization of workers<sup>1</sup> and the bargaining power of trade unions, but also a decrease in the belief in many sections of the left and the social sciences that workers could play a pivotal role in social transformation. The prospect of overcoming capitalism often vanished in the same breath. Class was abandoned as both an analytical category and as a point of political reference – even labour was no longer considered to play a key role. To take just one example among many,<sup>2</sup> Manuel Castells explains that in the “information age”, labour has changed in such a way that the labour movement has lost its ability to act as “a major source of social cohesion and workers’ representation”. As a result, workers are no longer capable of being the emancipatory subjects of the future. According to Castells, the future belongs to identity movements not based on class; they are the “potential subjects of the information age” (Castells 1997, 354, 360).

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<sup>1</sup> In this volume, the terms *worker* and *working class* are used in the sense of the opposition between capital and labour. The term *worker* thus refers to workers in the broader sense.

<sup>2</sup> Zygmunt Baumann, Jeremy Rifkin, and Richard Sennett, for example, also make similar arguments.

This analysis is problematic in a number of respects. It evidently only takes into consideration the Global North – and even then, only its core industrial nations. The global regions in which the majority of humans live and work are excluded from the analysis. But even in the former core industrial states, the Fordist standard employment conditions were never enjoyed by the majority of workers, just as the industrial worker has never formed *the* working class in the industrial centres, let alone on their peripheries. Industrial labour undoubtedly forged a proletariat in the core industrial states with highly homogenized working and living conditions and brought its members together in large masses, thereby also facilitating its organization. Entire societies were later organized on the model of the Fordist factory – from kindergartens, schools, and universities, to social security systems and pension schemes. But both the forms and the relations of production have changed drastically in recent decades, as has the prioritization of certain sectors in individual regions and on the global level, and also the demographics that now make up the working class.

Since the 1970s, the relationship between capital and waged labour has been continually changing, which has led to an increase in structural unemployment and escalating levels of precarization. The extent of industrial labour in the city centres has rapidly diminished; instead, informal labour and precarization have increased, particularly in the service sector. The end of the Fordist era is transpiring within the context of a structural and systemic crisis (Mészáros 2009; Wallerstein 2011). This crisis has yet to be overcome, which is why we are continually plagued by new crises and collapses. We are currently facing a global crisis that is being attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic was, however, merely the trigger and intensifier of a crisis whose arrival had previously already been heralded by declining container shipping volumes, overproduction, capital surplus, and an apparent lack of investment opportunities. And all of this at a time when not only the world's poor, but also considerable sections of the middle classes – on a global scale and in the relationship between the Global North and South, but also within the different global regions and countries themselves – had not yet managed to fully recover from the repercussions of the crisis that began in 2008.

The weakness of the labour movement cannot be overlooked here. The advent of neoliberalism and changes in production have significantly undermined the old models of organization. The crisis of the labour movements should, however, be viewed as cyclical; it will be overcome with the consolidation of the new emerging working classes (Silver 2005) and with the development of organizational models and forms of struggle that are adequate to the challenges faced. A significant part of the new composition of the working class that is emerging in the capitalist centres is made up of migrant workers.

As Beverly J. Silver noted at the beginning of this millennium, this provides a structural basis for the international spread of labour disputes and class conflict generally, thereby opening up the possibility of creating new transnational forms of associative power (Silver 2003).

New struggles and organizational structures are already emerging all over the world – this is also the subject of this book – but they have yet to establish themselves as a unified front. This has led to the development of a complex situation, as Domingo Pérez and Sebastián Osorio concisely put it in their article on the uprisings in the once model neoliberal country of Chile: “... weak and fragmented popular organization in neoliberalism has paradoxical political effects: it contributes both to the emergence of violent social uprisings in extreme neoliberalism, but also helps prolong uncertain political situations that can have dramatic counter-effects for the working class.”

Despite all these changes, interrupting profits on a large scale remains the most powerful tool the working class has at its disposal to have its demands met. Collectively achieving this from within the workplace may not be the only option available to workers, but it remains the most obvious, effective, and straightforward. It therefore comes as no surprise that studies conducted on the relationship between the unionization of workers and democratization in Europe, Latin America, East Asia, and Southeast Asia concluded that authoritarian regimes are generally hostile towards labour movements (Caraway et al. 2015: 2).

A 2019 study that examined almost 200 opposition movements in 150 countries between 1900 and 2006 concluded that instances of urban mobilization – and upon closer examination, especially those by industrial workers – were central to democratization (Dahlum et al.: 2019a). The results of the study were summarized as follows: “Current debates on the recent rise of authoritarian populists may point the finger at the working classes – but our research suggests that industrial workers have been crucial to the historical progress of democracy. ... Industrial workers have been key agents of democratization and, if anything, are even more important than the urban middle classes” (2019b).<sup>3</sup> If we apply a broader interpretation of the concept of the worker here – one not restricted to industrial workers – it becomes evident that workers’ participation has almost always been crucial for democratization.

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<sup>3</sup> The study – which also examined the movements for women’s suffrage at the beginning of the 20th century – involved a detailed analysis of the social composition of 193 larger opposition movements in 150 countries. The social groups involved were divided into peasants, public servants, military personnel, religious and ethnic groups, industrial workers, and members of the urban middle classes. Urban mobilization, and more specifically the involvement of industrial workers, was found to be crucial for subsequent processes of democratization (Dahlum et al. 2019a).

This has been confirmed by recent experiences, whether it be the new class-specific branch of feminism that has emerged in a number of different countries, or the mass protests that have flared up from Chile to Lebanon to France. These developments give rise to the question of the role trade unions and other forms of workers' organization could play in the current context.

This essay collection brings together a selection of examples from around the world of the ways in which workers – both historically and in the present – have used trade unions and other forms of organization to resist fascism, dictatorships, authoritarian regimes, and authoritarian movements. The volume is intended to help raise awareness of the centrality of workers and their organizations in the fight against authoritarianism, and provides readers with an opportunity to study a series of different experiences, tools, and tactics. This also involves examining how trade unions and other forms of organization relate to other social and political organizations. The anthology focusses on the ways in which workers advocate for democratic change, even from a position of weakness. Their struggles were not always successful, and where they have been, they have rarely accomplished all of what they sought to achieve. However, nobody has managed to achieve as much and as quickly as workers have when they have organized – a fact that has not changed to this day.

The majority of the 29 chapters, with the exception of the first three, deal with individual countries. Some explore the more general role of workers' organizations during specific periods of history, for example, in the fight against dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, or in the transitional periods that followed their overthrow or fall; others examine specific trade unions, workers' organizations, or labour struggles. Some chapters explore significant historical events and struggles of the 20th century, but the majority address struggles in the past ten years. Instances of non-union-organized mobilization, pressure exerted from below upon traditional trade union apparatuses, and non-traditional tactics and organizational strategies – which in some cases even involved the formation of new unions or other kinds of workers' organization – play an important role in all of the chapters.

It was particularly important to me that this collection reflect the diversity of left-wing political and organizational approaches to workers' organization around the world and invite as many authors as possible from the countries and regions in question. As such, the perspectives and terminology in the articles may differ, especially from those of the increasingly dominant Global North. This diversity and variety is entirely intentional. Furthermore, my own research, activism, and engagement with movements on five continents in recent decades has taught me the importance of looking at a movement's actual tangible practice, while taking into consideration its historical context and specific conditions. A shared perspective on liberation will only

be able to emerge once we perceive and understand our differences, and we also have a lot to learn from one another.

Humanity is currently faced with the task of averting the destruction of the very basis of its own existence on planet Earth, at a time when the forces oriented along the traditional axis of capital and labour in the old industrial centres in the Global North, as outlined by Klaus Dörre in the first chapter, and also in parts of the Global South, are weaker than ever before. This is also explained throughout this book by a number of authors for vastly different contexts. In recent decades, however, a number of new movements have emerged along other lines of conflict and contradictions: workers have been organized who were not covered by the traditional workers' organizations, and with forms of action and organization that differ significantly from traditional labour organizations.<sup>4</sup> These mobilizations and movements can no longer be overlooked, nor can the movements against ecological collapse; this has most recently been made abundantly clear by the popular<sup>5</sup> anti-austerity protests and uprisings that have gripped almost the entire world ever since the economic crisis of 2007–8.

It is therefore a case of forging new alliances and new politics of resistance; of creating a new socialist project that must necessarily be feminist, environmentally sustainable, anti-racist, and decolonial if it wishes to constitute a broad and global alternative to existing political and social systems. The issue of labour (without the concept being separated into production and reproduction) is central to this, because it constitutes the basis upon which life and humanity are built, and because the question of who can have a real interest in dismantling and overcoming capitalism is still tethered to the opposition between labour and capital.

I would like to thank the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung for making this publication possible, and especially Boris Kanzleiter and Till Bender for being such excellent collaborators. I would also like to thank the authors, who had to field a constant stream of queries due to the English and German versions of the texts being edited simultaneously. My thanks also go to all my comrades around the world who have supported me by providing invaluable information and contacts, and to my son Camilo for the joy he brings me, and the energy he

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<sup>4</sup> On this, see also Kanzleiter 2020, who offers a good overview of the many different forces of global resistance and global alternatives, and the axes along which these are forming.

<sup>5</sup> The term "popular" is employed here (and in the rest of the volume) in the Gramscian sense and in the Latin American usage.

has given me during this global pandemic. And last but not least, I would like to thank my parents.

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