

CONFERENCE REPORTS

“Transnational Labour, Transnational Methods”

Carolyn Brown

Rutgers University

In June 2008, more than sixty junior and senior scholars, graduate students, and labor union activists from fifteen countries in both the global North and South met for one week to discuss the best ways of facilitating collaborative research and interactions among labor historians with a variety of regional and chronological foci. The workshop sought to correct the limitations of conventional labor history, which is usually framed within a national context, by creating an opportunity for scholars from different regions to interact and, it is hoped, plan subsequent collaborations.

Held at New College, University of Toronto, this international workshop on “Transnational Labour, Transnational Methods” was sponsored by New College, in collaboration with the Toronto Area Council of the United Steel Workers and the International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam, Netherlands), the Centre for Asia Pacific Social Transformation Studies (CAPSTRANS), and a Labour Studies concentration that is part of the Social and Equity Studies Programme at New College. The workshop was the third meeting organized by an international working group of scholars in transnational history; the first having been held in Hyderabad, India (July–August 2005), and the second in Campinas, Brazil (June 2006).¹ The original working group was formed by scholars who were concerned that although “globalization” is the dominant conceptual (spatial) frame for studies of capital and economy, labor history, as currently construed, is locked into a fragmented historiography dominated by studies of individual nations and regions. Additionally, they challenged the “presentist” perspective of “globalization,” which ignores the global movement of labor and capital in earlier historical periods. A final goal of the workshop was to engage both more established and beginning scholars from the global North *and* South to explore new ways of conceptualizing labor history.

The Toronto meeting was envisioned as an opportunity to begin addressing the problem of scholarly parochialism by thinking of ways that new methodologies and historiographical approaches to labor history could reflect the strength of transnational and global connections between production and labor. The workshop was highly experimental in structure and process and sought to address the ambitious challenge of synchronizing disparate historiographical traditions and levels of scholarly accomplishment. Although the

complex and often cumbersome structure became a challenge, it was a good first attempt to create an important global dialogue on labor historiography.

The organizing committee, headed by Rick Halpern, Principal of New College, and Daniel Bender, Canada Research Chair in Urban History, designed a workshop structure that was complicated and, at times, perplexing. There were two categories of attendees: facilitators (usually senior scholars who often functioned as group leaders) and participants (graduate students and junior scholars). Each attendee was also assigned to two discussion groups: (1) a Home Group, whose members had a heterogeneous mix of scholarly specializations and experience, and (2) a Working Group of participants whose work and experience related to a central theme but had geographical, chronological, and thematic diversity. Additionally, there were plenary sessions, which included “state of the field” presentations and reports on large global collaborations.

The Home Groups met for about an hour each day to discuss the presentations given at that day’s sessions, which featured scholars, activists, and trade unionists who discussed a particular problem, activity, or condition that confronted or engaged scholars and activists in their country. Several were exemplary. For example, two representatives of the United Steel Workers (Toronto Council) spoke about their union’s program, “Labor and Environmentalism,” that has launched a Canadian national campaign to make the case that environmental destruction is destroying jobs.

At another plenary session, João Trevisan, General Secretary of the 20,000-member National Conference of Workers in the Mineral Sector (CNTSM) of Brazil, described an exemplary initiative of labor internationalism. His organization has just signed an accord with the USW-Toronto, whose members work in mines recently acquired by a Brazilian mining firm. This agreement will enable the USW to benefit from CNTSM’s experience protecting its workers’ interests with this Brazilian firm. Another plenary featured Prabhu Mohapatra of the University of Delhi and Ravi Ahuja, SOAS-UK, who spoke about the evolution and challenges of transnational labor law.

The most focused discussions occurred in the extended (two- to three-hour) Working Group sessions. These were divided topically: Laboring Culture, Globalizing Production, Migration and Diaspora, Labor and Empire. These groups produced fascinating discussions between scholars of the global South and North. Organizers charged the working groups to accomplish several tasks: (1) to suggest twenty-five key primary sources in their field; (2) to present a list of key secondary sources (3) to present their field’s key historiographical theses, and (4) to present a list of the “best books” *that have not been written yet!* Additionally these groups were asked to suggest how thinking globally would help scholars produce new histories, organizational structures, and perspectives. These were formidable challenges, and many of the working groups charted their own paths, creating a rather unwieldy patchwork of discussions. Some devoted their time to definitional discussions on the meaning of “global,” “transnational,” and “international” labor history. Others, like my group, Labor and

Empire, produced a document—in our case, a timeline of important events, laws, strikes, repressions in the history of labor within empires.

Some groups focused on the research problems confronting graduate students and provided excellent opportunities for the types of mentoring and cross-regional exchange that was envisioned by the organizers. For example, several graduate students of South Asian labor whose projects focused on small-scale and producer-owned enterprises of the working poor, benefited from the contributions of one senior scholar of Africa, Ibrahim Abdullah of Sierra Leone, who agreed that labor historians need to document the histories of the “informal sector.” Scholars of South Asia and Africa noted that this was actually the largest category of economic activity in the global South and that historians need new analytical tools as well as theories to analyze and document it. A lively discussion/debate arose over the most accurate and useful categories with which to capture the contradictory consciousness and political contingencies of these unstable sectors.

The volatile political role played by young people excluded from gainful employment was tragically noted in relation to the civil wars in “failed states” such as Sierra Leone and Liberia in Africa. My group, Labor and Empire, engaged in a fascinating cross-regional exercise in creating a transnational timeline of relevant labor activities across historical space and time. Our discussions focused on the Ottoman Empire as well as the more “modern” imperialisms of nineteenth-century Europe and the United States. Although the group’s more contemporary (i.e., nineteenth- through twenty-first century) focus reflected the interests of its members, we recognized the need to push back historically into the ancient periods—e.g., Rome, Greece, Mugal Empire, Aztec, Songhai Empire—in recognition of the deep historical roots of various forms of labor mobilization, resistance, and control.

Among the highlights of the workshop were the discussions between graduate students and senior/junior scholars. In both the Home Groups and Working Groups, students engaged established scholars and presented challenges in their own work, ranging from the initial definition of the problem to resolving conceptual questions (such as, who exactly is a worker?) in countries in which farmers oscillate between employment and self-directed production. South Asian students could consult with Ravi Ahuja and Prabhu Mohapatra. Students of Brazilian labor met with Barbara Weinstein (NYU), Sydney Chalhoub (UNICAMP), and Paulo Fontes, who have developed innovative materials for popular histories of Brazilian labor. Several Cuban students raised methodological and theoretical problems they confronted in developing dissertations in the context of the US blockade that marginalizes them within the evolution of the field internationally. This deprives them of access to relevant resources that are important for historical analysis and prevents their access to crucial conferences in which current debates, trends, and discussions of global labor history occur.

While the conference goals were ambitious and admirable and there was clearly need to refocus the field, many participants found the overall structure

to be too amorphous and cumbersome to facilitate useful, focused discussions. We had hoped to begin the process of creating an online global labor history portal, but most working groups failed to produce the proposed Web-based product that was meant to initiate that project. Some graduate students expressed disappointment that they were not able to have a more useful level of engagement with senior scholars. This might have been facilitated if the junior scholars/graduate students had been able to give a fifteen-minute presentation of their work and the problems they confronted. Or, alternatively, more time could have been scheduled for individual consultations.

Despite these problems, the workshop was quite exciting. The dynamism of labor history among South Asian scholars was clearly evident in the exceptional quality of graduate students from that area. Their topics included the consciousness of women lace-makers, the history of labor regulation and evolution of labor law in late nineteenth century Bombay, and the twentieth-century urban history of labor in railway towns. Several African graduate students in attendance raised important questions about the definition of “working class” and the best methodologies to follow when writing about such a diverse group.

The workshop was partially successful as a first attempt at such a wide-ranging consultation. One of the most productive outcomes was the participants’ recognition of the symmetries in the historical narrative and range of analytical problems confronting scholars of the global South. In recent times, neoliberal economic policies have produced commonalities among Asian, African, and Latin American/Caribbean societies that have created new categories of labor and new forms of production and exploitation. These include a resurgence of slavery and other forms of bonded and unfree labor. These trends indicate that the field must make adjustments to incorporate these resurgent forms of precapitalist labor systems within a highly developed global economy. We understand from the organizers that another workshop is being planned for 2010. We look forward to participating.

NOTE

1. The meetings in India and Brazil produced a working document that reviews the discussions and perspectives of those meetings. This can be viewed at <http://www.newcollege.utoronto.ca/programs/global labour.htm>.