

## **COMMENT: KEEPING THE POLITICS IN LABOR RESEARCH**

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The papers presented at the UCLA Labor Studies Center’s “Labor in the Global South” conference, many of which are compiled in this issue, are outstanding. Insightful, varied, and thoughtful, they explore a broad range of issues related to work and development in the early 21st century, reflecting on fieldwork in settings as disparate as factories in Buenos Aires and street vendors in Mumbai, examining workers’ and unions’ responses to the challenges of globalization and social change.

But the silences during the conference were also striking—a reflection, perhaps, of the way in which two decades of post–Cold War globalization have rewritten the script for emergent labor movements, and thus for labor scholars. Twenty years ago, labor movements seemed to stand at the center of movements for democratization and social change; labor struggles seemed to be redefining citizenship, as workers struggled for political and social inclusion. Political power seemed central: democratization seemed to promise a first step toward protecting labor rights and improving citizens’ lives.

Twenty years later, as multiparty democracy has become more widespread, it has become ever harder for policymakers to offer alternatives to the economic package often described as the “Washington consensus”; labor’s access to political power seems less salient. In an increasingly integrated and competitive global economy, even labor-friendly political parties find it difficult to conceptualize real alternatives to policies aimed at attracting international capital.

In this context, perhaps it is not surprising that labor sociologists are tending to focus more on the dynamics within labor movements and poor communities—on issues like the relationship between “informal” and “formal” sector workers, or union responses to downsizing.

Over the past few decades, business associations around the world have worked hard to weaken legal protections for union organizers and workers. In an era when labor organizations are already struggling, states everywhere have faced employer pressure to make labor law more “flexible,” eroding worker protections and changing the rules of the game for organizers. Labor laws protecting individuals have been steadily weakened, either through legislative changes or through states’ failure to enforce laws that are on the books.

This seems to me an area in which labor scholars can make a real contribution. Even in this “post–Washington consensus” moment—when the 2008 financial crisis has undermined the force of the neoliberal policy prescriptions that dominated the 1990s—policymakers still insist that labor laws and “labor market rigidities” could scare off investors. But these claims have surprisingly little empirical support, and, indeed, some studies suggest that raising labor standards will not affect employment levels. By contrast, few would disagree with the fact that labor law enforcement can improve working conditions and strengthen workers’ abilities to organize and speak for themselves.

Activists are often focused on immediate tactical decisions and concerns, and they are generally attentive to local community concerns. In my experience, when labor scholars include questions about how broad political contexts and legal frameworks shape that local context, their work is more likely to offer activists information they need. A recent reminder of the importance of these questions comes from very close to home: in Wisconsin, a Republican governor recently signed legislation removing the collective bargaining rights of most public employees, a step that has forced American unionists to reexamine their relationship to political and legal reform. But in places like India—where more than 90% of the workforce is technically “informal,” working in establishments that for one reason or another fall outside the legal framework for collective bargaining—the “rules of the game” often determine which workers can organize, and how and where they can find allies. As Michael Burawoy pointed out in his classic *Manufacturing Consent*, workers’ lives are shaped by state policies which play out inside workplaces, often without comment. Labor scholars can make that process visible, offering insights that activists can use in their organizing efforts.

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