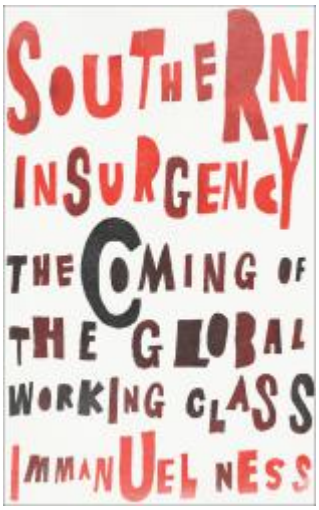
Can Workers of the Global South Change the World Labor Movement?

written by Dan La Botz | November 19, 2015



Immanuel Ness. *Southern Insurgency: The Coming of the Global Working Class.* London: Pluto Press, 2016. 226 pages. Tables. Notes. Index. Paper $28.

Immanuel Ness, professor of Political Science at City University of New York and a prolific writer on labor, has written an important new book whose title, *Southern Insurgency: The Coming of the Global Working Class*, should, I think, have ended in a question mark. Manny, a friend and a colleague—who, when I have seen him lately, has been in a state of jetlag from his travels to centers of worker activism around the globe—argues that those interested in labor should direct their attention from the stagnant and declining labor movement of the Global North to the migrant and contract laborers in places like South Africa, India, and China who are building democratic, militant, rank-and-file movements from below—struggles that, Ness suggests, are laying the foundations of a new global labor movement.

While labor unions in the Global North and in the Global South have long been bureaucratic or corporate organizations—whose partnership with their governments and employers has not saved them from decline—new workers' movements in the South, Ness argues, more resemble what he believes to have been the prototypical model of democratic and militant unionism: the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Labor's future, Ness believes, lies, in the enormous new industrial working classes of the Global South.

Ness's *Southern Insurgency* poses very important questions at several levels. First, will the southern insurgency that he describes be able to win higher wages, better conditions, and build rank-and-file organizations and labor unions throughout the Global South as it has in some places? Second, will a revived labor movement in the Global South be able to revitalize the labor movement throughout the world as the title suggests? Third, will such a revitalized global labor movement be able to prove Karl Marx was right, that industrial workers do have the ability to lead the working class, farmers, and all of the exploited and oppressed in that revolution that will liberate not only themselves, but all of humanity? While cautious in his assertions, Ness implies that the answer to all three of these questions is "Yes." Certainly he hopes that that will prove to be the case. There are, however, counter-tendencies that would inhibit such developments, arguments that he has not addressed and

which we raise here.

Ness establishes a framework for his study based on a theory of imperialism and monopoly capitalism that he has in a very general way taken from Vladimir Lenin and Harry Magdoff. While he doesn't elaborate on these theories, he suggest that imperialism today operates in the form of neoliberal globalization as corporations seek profits through the capture of natural resources and the exploitation of cheap plabor on a planetary scale. Globalization has also created a vast migrant labor force, an industrial reserve army, that employers take advantage of to keep wages low.

The force driving the fundamental shift of working class power from North to South, Ness argues, is finance capital's search for profits, a quest that has led to massive foreign direct investment in the Global South, the building of enormous new industrial cities and enormous factory complexes that employ a relatively a relatively small core of permanent, full-time, and more skilled workers and hundreds of thousands of temporary contract workers, many of them internal migrants of immigrants from abroad. The multinational corporations' drive for profits has frequently pushed these workers to the wall, and they have fought back, but outside of the framework of the labor unions.

Three Case Studies

Ness's book concentrates on three cases taken up in three separate chapters that form the heart of the book. They are: 1) the Maruti Suzuki auto plants in Haryana State in India; 2) the Yue Yuen shoe manufacturing plants in the Pearl River Delta of China; 3) the platinum mines of South Africa. Each of these nations has its own history of imperialism, of domestic capitalism, and of labor unionism which Ness briefly and clearly explains. India's unions formed during the colonial era and in the struggle against colonialism represented workers in the historic industries, but failed to take on the challenge of organizing the migrant contract laborers. So between 1999 and 2013 workers repeatedly formed rank-and-file labor organizations and independent labor unions in the Maruti Suzuki plants in Haryana State to fight for higher wages and better conditions. Yet, despite their heroic struggles, Maruti Suzuki destroyed the workers' organizations, though labor organizing and strikes continue in Haryana State.

In China the situation has been quite different. The Chinese Communist Party's All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), created initially for workers in the state-owned industries, and designed to prevent independent labor action of any sort, responded to the economic reforms and expansion of private industry by signing up hundreds of thousands of workers at newer plants, also with the goal of controlling workers and preventing strikes. But as workers began to engage in widespread strikes at workplaces throughout the country, the Chinese government responded by passing the labor reforms of 2008. Those reforms allowed workers to form rank-and-file groups at the local plant level, as long as they did not attempt to either leave the ACFTU and form independent unions and didn't attempt to form links with other workers in other plants. At the Yue Yuen shoe plant 30,000 of a total of 43,000 workers organized just such a rank-and-file movement and went on strike for weeks, eventually succeeding in winning such things as employer pension contributions and higher wages. Their strike was just one of thousands in the strike waves between 2009 and 2014.

Ness's third case is that of the South African platinum miners. South Africa's black workers' labor unions had been formed in the struggle against the white apartheid government in the period between the 1950s and the 1990s. When the African National Congress (ANC) came to power, supported by its historic allies the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), it adopted neoliberal economic policies. The ANC worked with COSATU in an attempt to keep the South African working class under control, while its constituent unions such as the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) collaborated with multinational employers

in squelching rank-and-file omvements and firing workers. Platinum miners nevertheless organized rank-and-file groups that cooperated with the independent Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). The miners' strikes between 2009 and 2014 culminated in the ANC government's massacre of 34 Marikana miners on August 16, 2012. Workers organized in their rank-and-file groups and working with the AMCU continued to strike and won significant wage gains. The South African miners movement not only fought the company but also challenged the ANC government.

In these three central chapters, Ness describes the workers' struggles in some detail, arguing that in each case—either because of the opposition or neglect of the dominant labor organizations—workers built rank-and-file movements and in some cases independent labor unions. While in some cases those workers won victories—an expansion of labor right to organize and bargain in China and wage gains in both China and South Africa—in no case does he make the case that the movements he so much admires have succeeded in turning the corner and building a new militant and radical labor movements in their respective countries that can turn back the tide of imperialism in the form of neoliberal capitalism and of multinational corporations, and they are far from overturning their own neoliberal governments much less their capitalist states. The movements that Ness describes remain contained, sometimes within one plant and sometimes within one industrial region, and they seldom result in a national independent labor organization—except, one could argue, in the case of South Africa where they have created an alternative national mine workers union. In India and China we see no creation of a national union movement in even one industry.

So far, at least, the southern insurgents have not built a powerful, autonomous labor movement in any of the countries that he discusses. And it is not clear how a victorious labor movement of industrial workers in the Global South would have an impact on the world labor movement. While international labor organizations and networks of various sorts exist—such as the international trade federation—genuine international labor solidarity to fight the corporations is really quite rare. Finally, unless one can show that workers can take power and reorganize society, Marx's proposition of workers liberating humanity remains in question.

The Marxist Proposition

We might briefly reconsider that Marxist proposition. Karl Marx and his followers agued that the industrial working class, whose labor produces products for society, stands in a privileged position at the point of production where at the same time it also creates profits for the capitalist class. At the same time, capitalist industry brings workers together in factories, mills, and in mines where management organizes them into virtual armies of production that have the power to bring a nation's industry to a halt. The employer's exploitation of these workers leads them to form labor unions to demand higher wages and better conditions, and to form political parties to fight for legislation to establish maximum working hours, minimum wages, and to take on other issues such as child labor. Workers as a class have a comprehensive understanding of their workplaces and industries, and together have the knowledge to reorganize production on a new democratic and socialist basis. Their privileged position in the workplace, the economy, and the society as a whole gives the industrial working class a social weight that allows these workers to lead other wage-earners in other sectors (services, public employment) as a class forming the majority of society to fight to take power and lead the nation, to collectivize the economy and to establish socialism, and thus to liberate humanity. So argued Marx, Friedrich Engels, and their successors.

The transformation of the economies of the Global North in the late twentieth century—the declining role of the industrial sectors, the reduction in the size of industrial workplaces, the automation of industry and the deskilling of labor, the movement of many major plants and entire industries to the Global South, and the increase in precarious employment—raised the question in the North of

whether or not industrial workers unions remained as central as they had once been, whether or not the labor movement more broadly remained significant, and whether or not Marx's dream of a working class fight for socialism was possible.

If a militant labor movement and the dream of socialism now seemed to some impossible in the North, Ness argues that in the Global South multinational corporations' investment has created even larger industrial zones, bigger plants, and a huge industrial working class far larger than that ever known to Marx. In the Global South, Ness argues, the most oppressed and exploited workers—migrant and contract workers—have formed rank-and-file organizations and independent unions, such as those described in his case studies, that do not share in the traditional labor unions' bureaucratic structures, partnership with the employers, and corporative relationships to the state. Ness believes that these unions resemble the Industrial Workers of the World or, as he says in another place, the Council Communists of Germany in the 1920s. That is the kind of labor movement than can liberate the world, and once again, he seems to believe capital is recreating it.

Counter-Tendencies

While it is true that neoliberal capitalism and the multinational corporations operating on a global scale have created an enormous new industrial working class, there are also countertendencies that should be taken into account. First, while China's industrial working class has grown, its future is not completely clear. The working class is not the only class in formation in Chinese society; there is also the rapid growth of the service sector accompanied by a decline in size of the industrial sector as a percentage of total production and employment. Throughout the history of capitalism from its origins in Europe to its spread to North and South America, Asia, and Africa, nations have generally experienced an initial surge in the growth of the size of the industrial sector, though soon the service sector grows even more rapidly than industry, as agriculture shrinks in importance (as measured in GDP). Today in China the fastest growing sector is not industry, but services, and it is not at all clear that service workers can play the same role in the labor movement and in society as China's militant industrial workers.

It should also be taken into account that as the Chinese workers' movement is successful in winning strikes for higher wages, Chinese employers will, as employers have always done, turn to the use of more automated machinery, thus reducing the number of industrial workers necessary to produce the same amount of products. It is also to be expected that Chinese capitalists will move their plants to other lower-wage areas in South and Southeast Asia, further reducing the size of the industrial working class. We even have cases such as Brazil where the rise in commodity prices for agricultural products has led to disinvestment in industry and the expansion of agriculture. The future of the Global South's industrial working class is not clear.

Second, there is the problem that successful labor organizations, those that begin to achieve permanence and to engage in collective bargaining, will in all likelihood tend to become bureaucratic. As labor unions develop, they tend to elect officers and to hire staff both of which no longer work in industry while they often receive higher salaries than the workers they represent. This labor union leadership thus becomes a social caste that mediates between the employers and the workers, and as such a caste it develops an ideology: it comes to believe that its privileged position of contact with bosses and workers allows it to know what's best for the industry and for the workers as a whole. One has to ask why the rank-and-file groups and incipient unions and actual independent unions described by Ness will not tend to follow the same path of development.

These new labor movements may through their industrial economic activity help to open the way to democracy in China and to greater and more genuine democracy in countries like India and South Africa. If that happens, wouldn't we expect these rank-and-file labor movements to lead not only to

independent labor unions, but also to labor politics and labor parties? Clearly the development of an economic and political crisis in one of these nations might give these rank-and-file movements greater impetus, leading them to become a political factor. Very likely new labor parties would tend to become part of the existing party systems and governmental structures as they have in other nations.

Then, too, there is the question of a revolutionary party. Wouldn't we expect the development of democratic and revolutionary socialist movements? In fact, we know what some of the current labor organizers working through the labor NGOs in China (several of which were recently shut down) do consider themselves to be socialists. Ness's discussion only extends as far as the current syndicalist movement.

Finally, there is the question of the Global North. The rise of manufacturing in the Global South since the 1980s, with increasingly sophisticated technology contributing to high value added, has put pressure on the capitalist of the Global North to impose austerity and work to drive down wages as well as the social wage (unemployment insurance, workers compensation, health and pension plans). The Global North comes more and more to resemble the Global South—except that its industrial plant has been dramatically reduced. One can see that developments in the Global North could lead to a revived labor movement, even if one led by teachers, hospital workers, and restaurant employees and not industrial workers. While they have less economic clout, public employees directly confront and challenge the political system.

Ness's book provides an account of some quite important labor struggles taking place in countries of the Global South where clearly there is a Southern Insurgency. And it raises important and interesting questions about the future of global labor. Yet, he has failed to convince us that the admirable and heroic struggles he describes constitute a genuine alternative to the bureaucratic labor unions he quite rightly disdains. Perhaps developments will prove him right, and a powerful syndicalism will develop, but it is not here yet. And even if it does, it will need a political force if it is to change the system that so oppesses and exploits global labor today.