

# Workers of the World: Growth, Change, and Rebellion



The working class of the twenty-first century is a class in formation, as one would expect in a world where capitalism has only recently become universal. At the same time, Marx himself reminded us long ago, in speaking of the development of classes in England where they were “most classically developed,” that “even here, though, this class articulation does not emerge in pure form.”<sup>1</sup> The working class, of course, is much broader than those who are employed at any one time. Relying only on workforce figures obscures important aspects of the broader working-class life, including its reproduction. Nevertheless, those in and out of employment form the core of the working class, once seen as a male domain but today nearly half composed of women. Furthermore, both space and research limitations dictate that this article will focus on the employed and near-employed sections of this global class. With these caveats in mind, we look first at the growth of the global working-class labor force in the twenty-first century.

The contemporary driving forces behind this dynamic have been the uneven globalization of capitalism generally with the simultaneous rise of multinational corporations following World War II; the falling rate of profit that began in the late 1960s, drove capital beyond its older boundaries, and produced recurring crises; the opening of the former bureaucratic “Communist” economies to capitalism; and more recently, the deepening of global value chains (GVC). The last mentioned have been developing for some time but in the last couple of decades have shaped economic growth and change in many developing economies by pulling the formerly unpaid homework of reproduction, petty commodity production, and pre-

existing domestic supply chains into the sphere of the value-producing chains of multinational capital. This has dislocated some industries and jobs in the developed economies but has mostly resulted in expansion into new areas. So, for example, although the share of world production in the developed countries has fallen, both the United States and the EU produce more added value today than twenty or thirty years ago.

### **Growth of the Workforce**

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the world labor force grew by 25 percent from 2000 to 2019. Those “employed” for an income grew from 2.6 billion to 3.3 billion over those first two decades of the twenty-first century, also by 25 percent. Of those “employed” in ILO terms, 53 percent were wage or salary earners, up from 43 percent in 1996; 34 percent were considered “own-account” workers, up from 31 percent in 1996; 11 percent “contributing family” workers, down from 23 percent in 1996; and 2 percent employers, down from 3.4 percent in that year.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously not even all of the non-employers in this ILO count are working class. Many are salaried professionals or managers of various sorts, others are small-business owners, street vendors, and so on. Here it is likely that about two-thirds, or a little over 2 billion, of those considered employed by the ILO are working class. These working-class employed workers are not just those in the wage and salary sectors, however. Many of those considered “own-account” or self-employed workers, as well as “contributing family” workers, are in fact locked into the capital-labor employment relationship via the expanded and deepened domestic and global value, or supply, chains that have characterized capitalist growth for some time. “Own-account” or self-employed workers are often simply misclassified by employers to dodge taxes, benefits, and responsibility for these workers. Women are far

more likely than men to be informally employed.

This informality, however, is a legal definition of workers outside of most forms of state regulation of employment. By this definition, most workers in Marx's time were "informal." As Ursula Huws puts it concerning various forms of unpaid labor of reproduction or of "unproductive" (of surplus value) individual service provision, "The history of capitalism can be regarded synoptically as the history of the dynamic transformation of each of these types of labor into another, with (as Marx predicted) the overall effect of driving a higher and higher proportion of human labor into the 'productive' category where it is disciplined by, and produces value for, capitalists."<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the World Bank notes that "homebased" workers, who are disproportionately female, make up a considerable proportion of the lower end of global corporate value (supply) chains. Furthermore, studies of the impact of such supply chains show that a huge involvement of "informal"-sector workers classified as "own-account" or "contributing family" employees in South Asia, Africa, and across the developing world are commonly incorporated into GVCs.<sup>4</sup>

These corporate-dominated supply chains don't just connect developing economies to multinational corporations. They reconfigure the local economy and workforce to corporate needs. Even if the majority of workers in a country are not directly connected to a corporate value chain, the levels of informality, wages, pace of work, and gender balance are set for most workers by the dynamics and speed of the multinationals' "just-in-time" GVCs. As Bhattacharya and Kesar point out, the growth of capitalist manufacturing in India has increased the informal sector because it is cheaper to source from formerly petty commodity producers and to deal with household workers, where the women provide both (poorly) paid labor and the unpaid labor of reproduction that reduces the

cost of each worker. Far from being “pre-capitalist,” such informal employment is a product of universalizing capitalism.<sup>5</sup>

GVCs grew from about 45 percent of world trade in the mid-1990s to almost 55 percent in 2008, before falling somewhat to about half.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the fastest growing sectors have been those associated with the infrastructure and operation of these GVCs. According to ILO estimates, employment in transportation and communications grew by 83 percent, and that in construction by 118 percent, in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, faster than any other major sectors. In terms of direct employment, these sectors are composed largely of male workers. Nevertheless, an important result of the growth of GVCs has been the rise of women, from 40 percent of the employed workforce in 2000 to almost half (49 percent) in 2019, while in manufacturing that depends on these value chains, women increased from 41 percent to 44 percent by 2019.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, more and more workers have also been drawn “inside the knot” of capital’s social relations of production, as Huws puts it, via the growing commodification of both public services and the previously unpaid labor of social reproduction, that is, via the capitalist organization of services previously performed by the state for wages or in the home or community without pay. Disproportionate numbers of these workers are women, who compose two-thirds of workers in education, health care, and social services globally.<sup>8</sup> An indication of this trend is the rapid increase in “market services,” from 20 percent of employment in the ILO’s definition in 1991 to 31 percent in 2018. Another is the decline of “public capital” and assets as a share of national wealth in all of the leading industrial countries to less than 10 percent for most.<sup>9</sup>

When looking at the recomposition of the working class in the

developed countries, it is common to point to the rise of services and the decline of goods production, assuming this amounts to a diminution of the working class. In fact, the line between the two is largely an obfuscation of how value is created by the global working class in contemporary capitalism. Service production is also increasingly dominated by giant corporations and involved in GVCs, with its share of value-added trade rising from 31 percent in 1980 to 43 percent by 2009. It is important to bear in mind that goods production is essential to the provision of services and vice versa. There are no services performed without “things” and there are no goods produced without the input of “services.” The labor involved in both is meant to produce surplus value. The use value of the commodity it produces is secondary. While global service sector employment has grown by 61 percent in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the international industrial workforce has increased by 40 percent.<sup>10</sup> This relative difference in growth is partly due to the continuing rise of productivity in global manufacturing at a faster rate than the world economy as a whole, rather than a diminution of industrial output.

Indeed, even in this period of slower growth, worldwide manufacturing value added, far from disappearing, grew by 123 percent in current dollars, or about half that in real terms, from 2000 to 2019. Overall, contrary to the notion of a “post-industrial” world, the manufacturing workforce grew from 393 million in 2000 to 460 million in 2019, while the industrial (manufacturing, construction, and mining) workforce grew from 536 million to 755 million over this period. This does not include workers in transportation, communications, and utilities, who are also essential to goods production and composed an additional 226 million workers by 2019, up from 116 million two decades earlier. Together this industrial “core” amounted to 41 percent of the world’s nonagricultural workforce as of 2019.<sup>11</sup> In other words, *the industrial workers*

*of the world, to borrow a phrase, remain a massive core of value production and the working population. Their global distribution, however, has changed.*

### **Geographic Dispersion and Inequality**

The growth of the world's production and, therefore, its working-class workforce, however, was not evenly spread across the globe. While the developed countries still produce the largest share of manufacturing value added (MVA), the developing countries have increased their share from 18 percent in 1990 to about 40 percent in 2019, while that of the industrialized nations fell from 79 percent to 55 percent over that period. The EU share dropped from 33 percent of world MVA output in 1990 to 22 percent in 2018, while that of Asia rose from 24 percent to 37 percent over that period. China alone rose from about 5 percent of world MVA output in 2000 to 20 percent in 2018. Recently, much of Asia's increased share of MVA went just four countries: China, India, Indonesia, and the Republic of Korea. Employment followed suit, with the industrialized nations' share of manufacturing jobs dropping from 30 percent in 1991 to 18 percent in 2018.<sup>12</sup> In the twenty-first century, the growth of "informal" work, that of goods production, and the growing role of women in both have occurred primarily in the developing world.

At the same time, economic, political, and war-related dislocation and dispossession have produced a growing international migrant population. The number of people living outside their home country has grown from 173,588,441 in 2000 to 271,642,105 by 2019, an increase of 57 percent. Most of these migrants were of working age, and 48 percent, almost half, were women. About 111 million were classified by the International Organization for Migration as migrant workers in 2017, returning remittances to their homeland of \$689 billion in 2018.<sup>13</sup> At least a half billion people receive these remittances, contributing significantly to the social

reproduction of the global working class and thus lowering labor costs to international capital. As Ferguson and McNally have pointed out, missing the role of migrant labor “loses sight of international processes of dispossession and primitive accumulation, which, among other things, generate *global reserves of labor-power* whose cross-border movements are at the heart of the worldwide production and reproduction of capital and labor.” Thus, an additional 111 million workers move in and out of the ILO’s static figures on employment, and the process of class formation, particularly in important centers of production like the United States, Europe, and the Middle East.<sup>14</sup>

Capital as a whole has done extremely well by the geographic changes, technological advances, reorganization of production and the labor process, and even the crises of the system as a whole. Overall, in most developed and in developing economies, whether real wages fell or rose, the *share* of labor income in GDP fell from the mid-1970s, with some ups and downs, to 2019. Hence, that of capital rose. As an indication of this, the share of national income of the top 10 percent rose, while that of the bottom 50 percent fell, in all the major economies.<sup>15</sup> Poverty remains a central feature of labor in developing nations despite claims of its reduction achieved largely by manipulating the definition of poverty. Even in Europe, once the pinnacle of the welfare state, social-democratic theorist Wolfgang Streeck notes, “What follows will analyze the trajectory of European social policy over the *longue durée* as it has mutated from a projected federal social-democratic welfare state to a program for competitive adjustments to global markets.”<sup>16</sup> In short, the working class has lost out everywhere.

Much of this increased inequality was due to the relative decline of unions and the subsequent wage stagnation in the developed economies, the continued increases in manufacturing

productivity across the world, and the increasing incorporation of low-wage formal and informal workers in developing countries into the world's production systems. These trends have contributed to increased rates of exploitation everywhere. As political economist Anwar Shaikh argues, "The overall degree of income inequality ultimately rests on the ratio of profits to wages, that is *on the division of value added.*"<sup>17</sup> Boosting this ratio for capital were advanced methods for the surveillance, measurement, quantification, and standardization of work that ultimately impact workers everywhere.

### **Technology and the Control of Labor**

For hundreds of millions of workers across the globe, labor remains primarily a draining physical effort seemingly removed from the high tech regime of automation and digital management that has come to intensify work. No matter where or how a worker is employed, however, their speed and effort are driven by this digital measurement and direction of work all along the vast "just-in-time" corridors of capital that now span the world.

What has changed most in the nature of work in the last two decades is the degree, penetration, and application of digital technologies that monitor, quantify, standardize, modularize, track, and direct the work of individuals and groups.<sup>18</sup> These build on, but transcend, the efforts of Taylorism and lean production to quantify, fragment, standardize, and thereby control individual and collective labor, regardless of what product or service it produces. The digitalization of much work-related technology means work can be measured and broken down into nanoseconds, as opposed to Taylor's minutes and seconds, and given a precision absent from lean production's simple elimination of "waste" via "management-by-stress." It also means that every aspect of work becomes quantified. Simplification via quantification enables speed, and speed



demands quantification. Stress can be measured but not emotion, the effects of professional training, or the tacit skills of all workers.

All of this applies to services already transformed in the twentieth century from domestic service and jobs performed by local tradesmen or small firms to corporate providers, then reorganized along lean lines, and now digitally driven—from call centers to hotels to building maintenance. Today's digitally driven measurements also apply to professional work in fields such as health care and education. Data is harvested from workers and then used against them in these fields as in a factory or warehouse. So, teachers are measured by student grades (allegedly the teacher's product) on standardized tests based on "standardized knowledge," and they are forced to "teach to test." Meanwhile hospital nurses can be tracked by GPS and directed by algorithmic Clinical Decision Support Systems that recommend standard treatments. Or, in both cases, they can be replaced by less qualified and less costly workers performing standardized tasks. Because these are mostly women workers performing "emotional labor," the emotional content of the job is taken as an unacknowledged freebie for capital—the unpaid aspect of labor of social reproduction performed on the job rather than in the home.<sup>19</sup>

Amazon is the most-cited exemplar of digitally driven workers for good reason. A recent study of an Amazon fulfillment center in California described the context in which employees work: "In order to choreograph the brutal ballet that ensues once a consumer clicks 'place your order' for next-day delivery on Amazon Prime, the company leverages its algorithmic and technical prowess within its massive network of communication and digital technology, warehouse facilities, and machinery, as it numerically 'flexes' its workforce up and down in sync with fluctuating consumer demand." In identical facilities across the globe, the work itself is guided by scanners and hand-held or wrist-mounted computers that track, time, and

guide workers to the correct product. Workers are allowed thirty minutes a shift of “off task” time, that is, time when they are not in motion. In addition, they are pushed by Kiva robots who also pick products.<sup>20</sup> It is the prototype of work everywhere unless worker resistance curbs it.

Another dimension to today’s workplace technology is seldom mentioned: Like the global workforce itself, that in the Amazon warehouse is multiracial and multinational. As the international Black Lives Matter upsurge of 2020 underlined, race and racism, while particularly deeply entrenched in the United States, are worldwide and embedded since the days of slavery and colonialism. Racism under capitalism is not only a means of dividing working-class people but of imposing working-class status on those racial or ethnic groups whose “life chances” are limited by racial or ethnic barriers. It is a force in class formation. Hence African Americans are disproportionately working class and poor. While capitalism may have inherited racism from the era of slavery and colonial conquest, it has nevertheless allocated work and workers on unequal racial, ethnic, gender, and national bases for generations.<sup>21</sup> Like management practices in general, the technology that sorts out workers by occupation, rank, skill, attitude, and so on bears the marks of that heritage.

Artificial intelligence and algorithms are programmed by human beings raised in this historic context, who more often than not possess many of its age-old, often unconscious assumptions while at the same time using data necessarily based in the past. As one analyst put it, “The past is a very racist place. And we only have data from the past to train Artificial Intelligence.”<sup>22</sup> A mathematician’s argument about the racial outcomes of AI programs used by police to “predict” high-crime areas applies in every aspect of life: Racially biased data “creates a pernicious feedback loop” reinforcing racial stereotypes and, hence, worker allocation and racial “life

chances.”<sup>23</sup>

One of the more outrageous examples is that of facial-recognition technology, which is used by employers and police departments and which routinely fails to distinguish dark complected individuals from one another.<sup>24</sup> It is scarcely an accident that most of the poorly paid, overworked workers in that California Amazon warehouse are Latinx or black. Racism, after all, is one of capital’s weapons of class struggle now embedded in its technology. The same applies to gender and sexism. For example, the Clinical Support Decision Systems imposed on nurses are based on clinical studies that “systematically excluded women and minorities.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Labor and the Control of the Corridors of Capital**

The technology, employment patterns, and flows of goods, services, and capital that characterize domestic production and shape the world of labor, rest, in turn, on a deepening international material infrastructure for moving products and value throughout of the world. These material corridors of capital consist mainly of familiar roads, rails, shipping lanes, ports, pipelines, airports, and traditional warehouses. But they now include massive urban-based logistics clusters of facilities and labor, miles of fiber-optic cables employed widely only since the late 1990s, data centers that are even newer in application, and warehouses reconfigured for movement rather than storage and transformed by technology. This mostly embedded infrastructure is created by and dependent on the labor of millions of workers who build and maintain it. If technology imposes controls, the dependence of infrastructure on continuous labor inputs provides workers with their own potential control—the ability to slow down or stop capital’s relentless movement of value and, hence, the process of accumulation.

Marx saw transportation and communications as part of value

production.<sup>26</sup> So, the tens of millions of workers across the world in these embedded repositories of fixed constant capital, and in the trucks, trains, ships, planes, cable stations, and data centers that move commodities, data, and finances across this infrastructure, are production workers as much as those in factories or sites of service delivery. They make the circuits of capital function and provide much of the speed at which those circuits turn over. It is over and through these paths of transportation and communication that these circuits of capital move with Marx's familiar formula, M-C-M', being sequentially and simultaneously repeated millions of times a day. The speed at which this happens determines the potential profit.<sup>27</sup> And, of course, driven by global competition, speed and "just-in-time" delivery have become major features of contemporary production and logistics.

This is as true of those working in the movement of data, information, and money as those driving on a road, steaming a container ship, maintaining a pipeline, or working in a factory, that is, all those workers who are merging living labor power with accumulated dead labor to produce value. None of this infrastructure, nor the capital equipment that runs over and through it, comes to life without the hand and mind of labor. Even the most automated system requires constant maintenance and repair. For example, as of early 2020, Amazon's 39 supposedly fully automated data centers in the United States and Ireland employed ten thousand workers to keep them humming.<sup>28</sup>

What is called "the cloud" or cyberspace is nothing more than an extended material complex of fiber-optic cables, data centers, transmitters, and computers. As a *New York Times* article argued, "People think that data is in the cloud, but it's not. It's in the ocean." Actually, it's also on and under the land as well as under the sea, following paths originally

laid in the mid-nineteenth century for telegraph cables. Today's fiber-optic cables carry 95 percent of internet traffic. The whole connected material system and its parts are highly vulnerable, and breaks or disruptions are frequent.<sup>29</sup>

The system is laid and repaired by workers on cable ships, those in cable stations around the world, workers employed by national telecom companies, and those in the proliferating number of huge data centers that, as James Bridle put it, "generate vast amounts of waste heat, and require corresponding quantities of cooling, from acres of air conditioning systems."<sup>30</sup> All of which, in turn, require human labor to run. At every point in this seemingly immaterial movement of data and money there are workers of various kinds and differing skills without which there would be no motion. There is no digitalization without human manipulation.

In a period of relatively low levels of capital investment, countless billions have been poured into the extension and deepening of this infrastructure. Looking at a somewhat broader measure of infrastructure, Price Waterhouse Coopers estimates that \$1.7 trillion was invested by private sources in infrastructure from 2010 to 2017, in a sector in which government investment often plays the major role.<sup>31</sup> New cables are laid regularly, harbors and canals dug or dredged, new cross-continental rails embedded, more airports constructed, and old ones expanded.<sup>32</sup> As large as these new investments are, they represent only the initial cost and labor input. As Akhil Gupta argues about the many new infrastructure projects around the world, "As soon as the project is completed, and officially declared to be open, it starts being repaired."<sup>33</sup> That is, the "dead" labor involved in infrastructure requires the constant input of living labor over its entire functioning "life."

A major force of this infrastructure expansion has been

Chinese President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013. This has funded, largely through loans, a network of super highways, rail lines (three from China to Europe), ports, and airports that "spreads into the Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and deep into Africa" as well as the Middle East and Europe. By 2015 China had set aside \$890 billion to spend on 900 projects.<sup>34</sup> By 2019, it was "focused on energy, infrastructure, and transportation with an overall potential investment estimated at about \$1.4 trillion—a scale never before seen," according to analyst Daniel Yergin.<sup>35</sup> Such ventures mean the employment of huge numbers of workers across the vast spaces of Central and South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, who bring these projects to life and, through collective action, can shut them down as well.

### **An Era of Rebellion: Class or Multitude?**

All of this has occurred in a period of economic turbulence and recurring crises, a climate crisis that can no longer be ignored, and most recently the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of these has contributed, to one degree or another, to a dramatic upsurge in social activism, strike action, and mass mobilization in opposition to the status quo. Almost everywhere these strikes, mass demonstrations, and mobilizations have resulted from economic change, dislocation, and distress sometimes exacerbated by war. But they have been political in that they were mostly directed at governments and the neoliberal policies and accompanying corruption that have inflicted pain on the majority of people across the globe. The international upsurge that began with the Arab Spring 2011, and continued and even accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, has been far too massive to be described in detail here. Rather, I will try to analyze some of its major characteristics and the role of the working class in this general upsurge.

According to an analysis of "civil unrest" in 2019 by the

risk-assessment firm Versisk Maplecroft, 47 countries, or almost a quarter of all nations, saw major civil disruptions in 2019 alone. This count shows these protests sweeping every region of the world other than North America.<sup>36</sup> However, it missed some important actions in North America, including several large strikes, the huge Black Lives Matter upsurge, and the July mass street mobilizations and strikes in Puerto Rico.<sup>37</sup> Adding to this “civil unrest” were new, highly visible mass mobilizations and on-going demonstrations in 2020 in Belarus, Thailand, and Russia’s far east; mass strikes in Indonesia; as well as the Black Lives Matter upsurge across the United States and much of the world.<sup>38</sup>

Many of these mobilizations were started by students or activists of various class backgrounds, so the question of just what role working-class people and organizations played in all of this “civil unrest” needs to be addressed.

David McNally has analyzed “the return of the mass strike” in considerable detail. Looking at mass strikes since the 2008 recession, he writes in 2020,

Across the decade since the Great Recession, we have witnessed a series of enormous general strikes (Guadeloupe and Martinique, India, Brazil, South Africa, Colombia, Chile, Algeria, Sudan, South Korea, France, and many more) as well as strike waves that have helped to topple heads of state (Tunisia, Egypt, Puerto Rico, Sudan, Lebanon, Algeria, Iraq).<sup>39</sup>

In addition, there have been mass strikes of various sizes around the world, often linked to issues of social reproduction, including the 2018-2019 teachers strikes in the United States. As McNally emphasizes, the mass strike has also been adopted by the women’s movement, notably in the International Women’s Strikes that swept 50 nations in 2017 and 2018 in the name of the “feminism of the 99 percent.” Some

mass strikes, he reports, have occurred in the midst of broader mobilizations in streets and squares across the world, such as those in Hong Kong, Chile, Thailand, Ukraine, Lebanon, and Iraq.<sup>40</sup>

That working-class action has been at the center of the upsurge can be seen in a few general figures. The European Trade Union Institute calculates that between 2010 and 2018 there were 64 general strikes in the European Union, almost half of them in Greece.<sup>41</sup> More broadly, the ILO, looking at just 56 countries, estimates there were 44,000 work stoppages between 2010 and 2019, mostly in manufacturing. The ILO author notes, however, that given data limitations, the number of strikes “could be far greater than 44,000.”<sup>42</sup> In China alone, the *China Labour Bulletin* counted some 6,694 strikes between 2015 and 2017 in a wide variety of industries. Lu Chunsen estimates 3,220 strikes by manufacturing workers in China from 2011 to May 2019, despite the precarious nature of work, the mass internal migration to the cities, and the government’s ban on strikes.<sup>43</sup> Here we see a clear example of the merging of informal migrant workers with the formal workforce—and their subsequent actions.

We know that unions played important roles in many of the recent struggles, even where middle-class leaders put themselves in front of the masses. In Belarus, for example, an interview on the BBC with a union leader revealed he was one of the top leaders of the rebellion. Furthermore, participants report that the demonstrations were “expanding into a wider working-class movement involving widespread workplace mobilizations.”<sup>44</sup> In a detailed analysis of the Arab Spring, Anand Gopal notes that while unionized workers played a key role in most Arab rebellions, in the initial stages of the Syrian upsurge the fragmented working-class masses came first from the shanty towns and that “the movement’s rank and file consisted of precarious, semi-employed workers who simply did



not possess the structural power to threaten the Syrian elite.”<sup>45</sup>

In other words, much of the mass base of 2011 came from both the organized working class and the informal workers in most Arab countries, many of whom, as we saw above, would have been at one time or another drawn into the GVC of multinational capital working in the oil fields, on the pipelines, on the Suez Canal, and in the many ports of the Middle East and North Africa. Gopal argues that their very precariousness and informal employment means they had little power. Yet, in many developing countries, such workers have organized themselves in their neighborhoods and through national trade unions, informal workers' associations, migrant worker organizations, and cooperatives, as well as in workplaces, to storm the streets and squares as workers have done for generations.<sup>46</sup>

The seemingly mixed-class appearance of many of the mass strikers and demonstrators was also a result of the “proletarianization” of educated people, such as teachers and nurses, whose jobs had been standardized and subjected to tighter management by the processes described above, as well as the descent of many educated “millennials” into working-class jobs. Here, the lines of class appear blurred, but the social destiny of the majority of this generation and the next is clearly working class. Some of these show up in strikes of “platform” workers, or delivery and other workers, newly discovered as “essential” to social reproduction in the context of the pandemic, which is likely to accelerate this social transformation.

What seems clear is that whether or not students played an initiating role, and middle-class professionals and politicians co-opted leadership roles, the mass base of most rebellions of the last decade was working class in composition, and that to a considerable extent they employed the traditional weapon of the mass strike. This was the case

whether or not they were union members or held permanent employment, much like the masses Rosa Luxemburg analyzed in the 1905 Russian Revolution, whose strikes “display such a multiplicity of the most varied forms of action.”<sup>47</sup> This whole period has been an example of working-class self-activity with both economic and political demands.

Yet, nowhere did the strikes or mass mobilizations seek political power for the workers themselves or a program approaching socialism. Nowhere were the working class or mixed classes in transition organized for such goals. In some cases, there did not appear to be recognizable leaders. Yet, the participants were organized in “a multiplicity of the most varied forms of action” and organizations, often through networks enabled by social media.

The difficulty in analyzing the potential of this era of rebellion is compounded by the uncertain impact of the three crises of capitalism, and in particular the effect of the pandemic, on a variety of industries and the GVCs. Such speculation is for another article. The most useful understanding of the potential of the current upsurge is best described by McNally, who writes, “The new strike movements are harbingers of a period of *recomposition* of militant working-class cultures of resistance, the very soil out of which socialist politics can grow.”<sup>48</sup> Whether this recomposition will help produce a general working-class upsurge is impossible to predict. But as United Electrical Workers representative Mark Meinster writes in *Labor Notes*, “Working-class upsurges often happen in the context of deep social changes in society as a whole, such as abrupt and widespread economic dislocation, a profound loss of legitimacy by ruling elites, or abnormal political instability.”<sup>49</sup> That just about describes the situation labor faces across the world today.

Notes

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