

# Conference Report of the 53<sup>rd</sup> ITH Conference

## “Worlds of Labour Turned Upside Down – Revolutions and Labour Relations in Global Historical Perspective”

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On 21-23 September 2017, the 53rd International Conference of Labour and Social History (ITH) took place in Linz, Austria. The title of this year's conference was “Revolutions and Labour Relations in Global Historical Perspective”. ITH (International Conference of Labour and Social History) is a longstanding international cooperation between academic and non-academic labour history institutions, which started in 1964 as a platform for knowledge exchange across the Iron Curtain. Today, it functions as an important meeting point for studying labour from a transnational and global perspective. The historic roots of the ITH as embracing more than a strictly academic context were still visible in the venue, the recently renovated educational centre of the Upper Austrian Chamber of Labour, the audience which came from a broad range of labour-history institutions, and the visit to the exhibition on forced labour in the still operative steelworks in Linz during Nazi occupation.

Of course, the choice for this year's topic reflects the widespread attention to revolution in the centenary of the Russian Revolution, still the epitome of political and social upheavals in the twentieth century. Starting from a broad definition of revolution, which for the preparatory group included “failed or attempted revolutions, revolutionary situations, as well as those imposed from above or through war”, the conference aimed to offer a wide range of papers covering revolutionary crises on a global scale. Exploring the question of the connections between political revolutions and changes in labour relations is much less self-evident than it might seem in this context. While there are, of course, innumerable studies that look at the participation of labourers in revolutions, or at the place of labour in revolutionary ideology, the actual alignment between the changes that revolutions bring forth at state-level and the ways in which work is organized are much less frequently explored.

This raises difficult questions. For example, how to explain the apparent mismatch between aims and outcomes in cases such as the Russian Revolution, where the “emancipation of labour” was inscribed on revolutionary banners, but the new state soon turned to promoting new forms of (Taylorist) work discipline? When does revolution, in the process of state-led transformations in labour relations, end, and when does the central dynamic become one of post-revolutionary consolidation or even counter-revolution? What is the role of larger, perhaps even global cycles of change, such as the one instigated by the eighteenth-century Age of Revolution that saw the spread of both revolutionary and moderate variants of Abolitionism or the global critique of Fordism and Taylorism that emerged around the year 1968? And how do working-class politics during revolutions reflect such wider cycles? The latter question was raised on the opening night by **Immanuel Ness** (City University of New York) in his keynote address. Ness, who is the editor of the eight-volume *International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest: 1500 to the Present* addressed the relationship between globalization, industrialization and the rise and decline of strong working-class organizations at the heart of twentieth-century revolutionary processes. Ness highlighted the importance of a critical rethinking of the various forms of labour's organizing from a global perspective. He argued that in light of the decline of trade union organizing and trade union power – which in turn reflects the

increasing instability of labour relations – as well as the power of the state, there are tendencies of and a need for renewed political organizing, i.e. a new type of a “workers’ party” Not unexpectedly this thesis gave rise to lively discussion.

Signifying their intention to broaden perspectives and ask large, comparative questions, the conference organizers invited a broad range of presenters covering a time-frame from the mid-eighteenth century to the present (with the centre of gravity in the twentieth century) and case-studies including Asia, Northern Africa, and South America as well as Europe. Unfortunately, due to a number of last-minute cancellations, the balance during the days of the conference tilted further towards European cases than the programme had indicated. In time-frame, the conference was perhaps also not as broad as the theme suggested. Only the papers of **Pepijn Brandon** (International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam) and **Niklas Frykman** (University of Pittsburgh) and **Gabriel di Meglio** (University of Buenos Aires) dealt with subjects pre-dating the rise of “modern” labour movements. But overall, the presentations laid the ground for a discussion that looked beyond national boundaries or regional and temporal specializations.

Of course, a conference focussing on the changes of labour relations through revolution could not take place without a substantial amount of papers dealing with the more commonly addressed question of the role of labourers in revolution. A distinctive feature of the papers presented was the detailed attention on the consequences of state-rhetoric on actual labour processes. One interesting aspect that clearly came to the fore was the difficulty that post-revolutionary regimes often have in dealing with working-class militancy, especially when the militants themselves employ slogans drawn from the repertoire of the revolutionary states themselves. **Dimitriy Churakov** (Moscow State Pedagogical University) showed how the Bolsheviks tried to overcome the problems this created, when confronted with a workers’ uprising in Izhevsk by claiming that the participants belonged to a special category of “half peasants, half workers”. A quite different discursive strategy was followed by the early Islamic State in Iran. As **Sepideh Nekomanesh** (Stockholm University) showed, the regime consciously tried to substitute the politicized term “worker” with the notion of “downtrodden masses”, more easily adaptable to their political-religious aims. **Felix Wemheuer** (University of Cologne) gave a lively sketch of the twists and turns with which the Chinese Communist Party tried to ride the wave of the Cultural Revolution, at the same time stoking the fire of independent rebel organizations, and insisting that the best way to further the revolution was to increase industrial production. **Renate Hürtgen** (Berlin) (not attending in person) touched on the same paradox from exactly the opposite end, highlighting the organization and demands of workers’ committees in the German *Wende*, in which the language of class was side-lined as belonging to the old regime. **Leo Kühberger** (Graz), **Wolfgang Häusler** (University of Vienna) and **Matthew Galway** (University of British Columbia, Vancouver/University of California, Berkeley), also looked at the often contradictory discourses of labour and revolution, but did so by looking at revolutionary individuals.

Presentations by **David Palmer** (University of Melbourne) and **Adrian Grama** (Central European University, Budapest) raised the important question what constitutes the boundaries in the broad definition of revolution given by the organizers. Palmer dealt with the state use of forced labour in Imperial Japan, and social protest movements that erupted after 1945. Grama drew thought-provoking parallels between the politics of productivity in post-war Eastern Europe and Western Fordism. In each of the cases, significant political transformations instigated by the Second World War clearly had an important impact on the actions of the respective regimes in the field of labour, but whether and how much revolution as a process of mass activity from below came into play

remained a bit unclear. In the case of the papers by **Marine Dhermy-Mairal** (Grenoble Institute of Political Studies) and **Jesper Jørgensen** (The Workers' Museum, Copenhagen) revolution did figure quite centrally, but only viewed from the outside: through the critical gaze of ILO observers of labour relations in Bolshevik Russia, or the political sympathies of Danish anti-fascist seamen in the 1930s.

An interesting, and perhaps unexpected topic that emerged from the conference is the question of revolutionary activity as work itself. Revolutionary processes consist of sometimes years-long mass activity, involving a long chain of labour that stretches from the efforts of militiamen and -women, ordinary camp cooks, smugglers and spies on the frontlines, to the white-collar work of clerks and typists in party headquarters or the offices of socialist newspapers. As eyewitness-accounts of many revolutions attest, labour relations in these contexts can be examples of the horizontal ties of solidarity sought for by participants of these struggles, but can also become the testing-ground for new hierarchies and alienating forms of "shock labour". **Tiina Lintunen** (University of Turku) in her presentation of female social networks sustaining women's participation in the Finish Red Guards in 1918 gave a thoroughly researched example of the former. The relatively secluded working environment of the Comintern's permanent staff that formed the central topic of the research of **Bernhard Bayerlein** (Institute for Social Movements, Ruhr-University Bochum) tended much more towards the latter option. In a case study farther removed from the actual moment of revolutionary regime-change itself, **Katja Praznik** (State University of New York at Buffalo) compared the working conditions of self-employed avant-garde artists and state-employed artists in Yugoslavia, with especially the first group working under conditions that did not seem to differ greatly from those encountered by "autonomous" artists in societies that did not claim any revolutionary origins.

The aim announced by the preparatory group in the Call for Papers was to "realign the focus" in revolution-studies from the circulation of ideas, persons, commodities and practices, and to discuss "the specific interrelation between revolutions and labour relations". As could be expected, discussing this interaction also entails quite a lot of global circulation of the above-mentioned factors. But by bringing labour relations back into the study of the politics of revolution, and politics into the study of global shifts in labour relations, the conference did indeed manage to break new ground.