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Article:

Ioannou, G. (2017) Book Review: Southern Insurgency, the Coming of the Global Working Class by Immanuel Ness. *Capital & Class*, 41 (3). pp. 591-593. ISSN: 0309-8168

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0309816817735719i>

Ioannou G. Book Review: Southern Insurgency, the Coming of the Global Working Class by Immanuel Ness. *Capital & Class*. 2017;41(3):591-593. © 2017 The Author. doi:10.1177/0309816817735719i. Article available under the terms of the CC-BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

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Immanuel Ness: Southern insurgency, the coming of the global working class

The book is built on a Marxian analytic framework and situates its narrative in the context of the huge increase in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the Global South which has integrated previously excluded areas and populations into the global capitalist economy. Ness argues that FDI replaces foreign aid as the key form of development finance and that this reshapes imperialism. The movement of capital to the Global South is driven by the search for low waged workers and the highest possible extraction of surplus value but the profits produced there are primarily repatriated to the imperialist countries. Moreover the penetration of capital restructures the societies changing the form of rather than reducing the prevalence of poverty as industrialization is based largely on temporary migrant labour and on destroying pre-existing subsistence modes of life.

The main argument is that workers' resistance is a constant parameter in this process and that global capital is only able to maintain this system through the use of direct force, social repression and indirect coercion. More importantly it illustrates how workers' contestation of their employment terms and conditions is constant, determined, resilient and sustained in time, ingenious and creative and utilizing multiple and plural resources and techniques and assuming a variety of forms. This argument is substantiated through three case studies which overview the recent big strikes and extended worker mobilizations in India's auto manufacturing, China's shoe manufacturing and South Africa's platinum mining industries.

One of the main tenets of Ness' argument is that the expansion of FDI is tied to increased proletarianization and enhanced urbanization in the Global South and the expansion of the world's industrial workers in absolute terms as well as in relative terms. This occurs through the subcontracting networks that feed into major multinational corporations. Through statistical data Ness illustrates that the inequality between developed and developing countries resting on imperialism and capital flows further accentuates poverty and social inequality while Northern capital comes to depend on low-waged Southern labour. Multinational corporations take advantage of systemic unemployment and the lack of unionization in the extensive southern informal sector and relocates industrial production to the Global South as the Global North shifts to services.

Trade unionism, its condition, forms and limits constitutes a thread that traverses Ness' narrative. It is approached both as an organizational form in historical terms as well and in terms of its actual current political function in different regional and national settings. This allows Ness to both compare forms of trade unionism on issues of composition and density, degrees of institutionalization and political leverage, militancy and effectiveness, providing insights as well as critical comments based on the observation of practices. Ness examines the implications of the weakness of traditional trade unionism and concludes that the militancy of the new industrial proletariat of the Global South transcends traditional trade unionism through the formation of worker assemblies, the formation of new independent unions and through pressurizing traditional trade unions forcing them to change their approach.

The notion of the "reserve of army of labour" is the key conceptual tool employed in the book in order to explain both capital's strategy as well as the terms and conditions of work that workers' have to face globally. Ness argues that migration, both internal and international has

always been tied to capitalist expansion and has taken different forms according to the patterns of global history shaped by imperialism. It was migrant labour that turned the USA into the world's biggest economy, that rebuilt Europe after the II World War and it is on migrant labour, internal as well as international that neoliberal globalization is currently built.

The main weakness in the book is the overt focus on the global south and on industrial work. While Ness documents very well the industrialization processes in the global south and emergence of a militant industrial working class, in his attempt to situate his findings in and against the dominant western discourses, he takes for granted the equation working class=factory workers used by liberal claims about the working class being an "outdated" notion. Ness adheres to a classic late 19th C Marxist conceptualization of the working class tied to industrial and manufacturing work and defends it through an exclusive focus on the global south. Although he substantiates his claim and justifies his approach both analytically and empirically, he omits to link this with proletarianisation processes under way in the service sectors in the global north as well as to smaller extent in the global south and thus weakens the generalisability of his argument concerning "the coming of the global working class". Even when he discusses developments in global north, he restricts his references to proletarianisation processes to the past and present of migrant work. The absence of even a rudimentary discussion of major processes occurring in the global north, such as the rising social inequality and the shrinking of the so called middle class or labour aristocracy, is in my view a significant omission that, although carrying the danger of diluting the argument, could have enriched the scope and projected implications of the book's analysis.

The second weakness concerns the balance between and within the three case studies and between the descriptive and explanatory function of the analysis employed. Ness undertakes a very ambitious task: to account for recent developments in three big sectors and three countries, two of them really having the size of continents. While this empirical strategy allows Ness to make the necessary projections and identify global theoretical and political implications, the huge volume of data necessary for the understanding of the historical, economic, political and social context in each case study, leaves insufficient room for discussion of the issues. Although the richness of the empirical data used is valuable, at certain points the analysis becomes thin as the weight falls on contextual description, chronicling of events and narrating facts.

Overall Ness' book is a valuable one as it analyses very recent developments covering hitherto uncharted ground and expands the scope of existing knowledge. It offers a comparative discussion across sectors and countries and empirically refutes a series of Western-centric "post Marxist" discourses about the declining significance of industrial work and of the working class as an analytic category and a social force. It provides detailed accounts of new forms of struggle by informal workers, outside traditional trade unions which can expand and enhance our understanding of mobilization processes and social movements. Ness argues forcefully that the demise of traditional trade unionism is structural and that it cannot in its current form have organizational success, challenge neoliberal capitalism or express workers' interests and that more attention and energy must be spend in new and innovative forms of really-existing worker mobilization as they appear primarily in the informal labour markets in the global south.