

THIRD WORLD WORKERS:  
AN OVERVIEW

*by Peter Waterman*

STRUCTURE

The process of what is called modernisation in Europe was one of a comparatively rapid transition from an economy based on small-scale agriculture to one based on large-scale industry. Along with this went the creation of a wage-earning majority in the population and a mass working class in mining, factory production and transport - and often in agriculture itself. It was in this new mass, engaged in social production but deprived of social ownership, that socialists saw the potential for the overthrow of class-divided society and its replacement by one of abundance and equality.

The process of what is called modernisation in the third world follows a strikingly different pattern. Industrialisation here means the development of extractive industry (petrol, rubber) for export purposes, the importation of capital-intensive import-substituting industry, the creation of export-oriented assembly plants, and possibly the development of a small highly-capitalised agricultural sector. Whilst the 'green revolutions' create unemployed peasants as fast as agricultural workers, the capital-intensivity and narrow local market of productive industry fails to provide sufficient new jobs. This implies a wage force growing slowly or even negatively in relation to population. Within this wage-earning force, secondly, the working class may not predominate numerically. The 'revolution of rising expectations' amongst the masses means that even if there is little productive base there must be a mass of white-collar workers either to serve the masses (sanitation, health, education) or to control them (police, army, bureaucracy, and again education). Even if the working class proper does predominate over the middle-class wage earners, it is unlikely to have a solid core in industrial production.

Thirdly, the pattern of urbanisation without all-round industrialisation means that the wage-earners as a whole may well be a minority of the urban population, the rest being petty-entrepreneurs in the 'bazaar sector'. In less extreme cases there might be a wage-earning - or even a working class - majority, but most of these are likely to be employed in tiny units of 10 or less.

Formation of a homogeneous working class in Europe required the overcoming of various 'vertical cleavages' amongst the workers, such as those of religion, language, etc. But in most cases the ethnic and cultural homogenisation of the population has already been occurring over 100 or 200 years. In the case of the third world these processes are almost everywhere occurring simultaneously. This means that one finds workers divided from one another by such structures as those of caste (typically India), race (Malaysia), language (Peru), religion (Lebanon), sect within a religion (Senegal), or be several of these simultaneously.

This is, then, frequently a minority working class, growing but little in relation to the population, thinned out by the high proportion of white-collar workers, surrounded by a mass of non-workers in the cities, and internally divided. And yet, on the other hand, we nonetheless see taking place a process of homogenisation and consolidation. This is partly a function of time and the birth of second or third generation workers. Partly it is a function of the wage-employment situation, in which workers in many occupations and industries nonetheless find themselves in a common situation of domination and exploitation by employers and managers. And partly it is a function of the strategic position occupied economically and politically by even a small working class, so that workers and other wage-earners have their attention rapidly and dramatically drawn to the power they have simply by all stopping work at the same time!

The process that in Europe produced a mass working class also simplified social relations in another

way, by producing a fairly homogeneous class of industrial-financial-commercial capitalists that came to dominate economically and socially and increasingly to control the state. The relationship of conflict between labour and capital became *the* social and political issue, and it remains so today. The lack of a thorough-going industrialisation in the third world means that a comparable simplification of social structures and social relations has not in general occurred. The new working class finds itself subordinate not to one ruling class, but conflicting capitalist and feudal classes (Ethiopia, Thailand), or such 'modernising elites' as capitalists, bureaucrats and politicians who have not yet coalesced into a stable power bloc. The crude exhibition of great wealth and power by the dominant strata do tend to alienate the working class. But this is not true of the middle class of teachers, clerks, students and professionals. The fact that many of these are themselves wage (or salary) earners and that they have skills (literacy in the official national language, legal or financial expertise) the workers lack leads to some kind of dependence on them. But, whilst these strata might themselves be unionised and have some considerable interests in common with the workers, they have their own specific class-like interests and may abandon the workers if and when they achieve these. The relationship with the rest of the poor is even more complex.

There exists a multiplicity of ties and divisions between the workers on the one hand and the non-working-class majority of the poor on the other. The typical third world worker is himself an ex- (or future-) farmer, petty-trader or unemployed man. Whilst a worker he will continue to have family members in these other positions. He usually inhabits the same districts as the rest of the urban poor and faces many of the same problems as they do. He will commonly send cash gifts back to the village or receive food gifts from it. Yet the workers have a highly specific relationship to production, and their ways of seeking protection and improvement are highly distinctive. One does not have to assume that

the regularly-employed modern-sector workers are privileged (a tricky problem both conceptually and empirically) in order to understand that in normal conditions their demands may divide them from their unemployed brothers, their peasant fathers or their petty-trader wives.

### CONSCIOUSNESS

We have noted some characteristics of working-class structure in the third world. These features create obstacles to the development of the kind of consciousness that could be considered appropriate to its present situation and condition as well as necessary to overcome it. Non-consciousness of class is not, of course, confined to third world workers, but the extent and variety of 'other-consciousness' is much greater than in industrialised capitalist or post-capitalist countries. One writer concerned to stress the existence of class conflict in Senegal nonetheless recognised the existence amongst workers of the following allegiances, loyalties, values or aspirations: ties of kinship to the extended patriarchal family; those of ethnic group; those of age group within a clan; petty-bourgeois aspirations; 'macro-racism' and 'micro-nationalism'; adherence to a particular religion, or even to one sect within a religion (Diop 1967: 100). Amongst Latin American workers we may note the absence of a distinct working-class culture, and the presence of patron-client relations under which a worker will enter into a personal relationship of dependence and obligation to an employer. Research in Nigeria suggests that it is general for industrial workers to aspire to petty-entrepreneurial status. Algerian workers reveal fatalistic and magical attitudes that spring from rural life. In Algeria, however, it has been stressed that such attitudes are reproduced in the city by the irrationality, violence and arbitrariness of modern life. (Although such a situation was exaggerated by the effects of the long colonial war in this case, the point has a general validity).

Why refer to all of these as 'other-consciousness'? Because they either have a pre-working-class

origin, or express the direct interests of non-working-class strata, and in neither case can be shown to serve the long-term interest of workers as a permanent class. The point will become clear if we contrast other-consciousness with working-class consciousness. Perhaps it would be better in this case to talk rather about working-class consciousnesses. This is to indicate that one is not talking about a *thing* so much as a *process*. There are, in fact, different levels of consciousness which are yet distinctively working class. And one can also identify a process of development or escalation, occurring either gradually or explosively, from a low level to a high one (reverse processes are also possible).

The lowest level of working-class consciousness is one of simple definition of oneself as a worker, sharing common interests with others similarly defined. We can identify the existence of this first level when we see, for example, workers of different ethnic origins in a Nigerian factory rejecting tribalism in the workplace despite their confinement to ethnically-limited friendship circles outside it. The second level is the identification of a class to which the interest of one's own class is opposed. In Nigeria such an identification is not universal, but it is general amongst workers in the longer-industrialised South, and amongst the workers in larger enterprises. It must be noted, in the Nigerian case, that identification of such an enemy is usually in terms of 'big men' (the rich and powerful) rather than in terms of a specific capitalist class and pro-capitalist state. Later, and higher, comes the definition of one's total social universe in terms of this class opposition, the vision of an alternative society and the demand that society be transformed to fit this vision. This level is rare but is nonetheless significant. It was reached by the working class of Shanghai in the 1920's. It developed amongst Chilean workers under the Allende regime. And one can find evidence of it either *sporadically* amongst a national working class or *sectionally* within such a class in the history or present of most third world countries. At such moments we see workers

occupying factories, creating their own forms of government, or prepared for insurrection.

#### ORGANISATION

Just as we can talk of class-consciousness and other-consciousness amongst third world workers, so can we talk of class and non-class organisation amongst them. In terms of stable organisational forms, the 19th century process in Britain was one from the guild and benefit society to the craft union and cooperative, and eventually to the national trade union movement and mass worker-based labour party. In the third world, too, one could find guild-type organisation amongst wage-earners in China in the 1900's, in Latin America around the same period, and in the Middle East as late as the 1950's. Whilst these have not survived in conditions of large-scale industry, other organisations - specific to the third world - frequently have. The 'common-origin association', such as the regional clubs of Peruvian workers, the town or village improvement unions of West African ones, are typical forms of self-protection for the migrant worker, unfamiliar with the urban and industrial environment. Such associations offer fellowship, information, and they frequently provide benefits, loans and other kinds of assistance. In Nigeria they have been said to hold the loyalty of the workers better than do trade unions. The reason why these may be called 'non-class' organisations even if they exist *primarily* amongst workers is that they are not restricted to workers. The guild is by its very nature an organisation of owners and employers as well as their craftsmen and apprentices. The improvement association will typically include the unemployed, the petty-trader, the civil servant and some 'big' or 'prominent' men amongst its member.

The contrast is clear with the trade union, an organisation of wage-earners as wage-earners, united on the basis of their occupation, skill or industry, in order to protect and advance their common interests vis-a-vis an employer. Or is it?

Although these organisations were originally created in Europe by *workers*, they are there today multi-class organisations, including many middle-class wage-earners. This seems to me even more true in the third world. It is not only that, given the structure of employment, it may be the teachers, bank clerks and other white-collar workers who are amongst the earliest and best organised. Nor that they may represent a very high proportion of trade union membership. In the case of Nigeria we find that with the unions of minibus drivers or taxi drivers, who are also in some cases owners, we find *petty-entrepreneurs* in the movement.

It is also necessary to consider the question of leadership. In India it is well-known that unions are often led by lawyers and other university graduates. In Nigeria they are frequently organised by entrepreneurs, individuals for whom union organisation is just one business amongst others, and who may be serially or simultaneously involved in commerce (and in one particular case known to me it was commerce in union secrets). Furthermore, national trade union organisations have often been created from above by nationalist politicians (Africa from the 1940's), by anti-landowner, pro-capitalist politicians (Latin America from the 1930's), or by a corporatist state seeking effective control over the workers (Egypt after 1952).

Finally, we need to take into account the fact that some movements are heavily dependent on international trade union organisations or other foreign bodies (CIA prominent amongst these) whose values or interests coincide to a greater or lesser degree with those of a major power or power bloc. Whilst in many cases this is done covertly, particularly where money is concerned, in Cyprus the sums concerned are published in the Annual Report on Trade Unions as 'income from other sources' and prove to be some 60 percent of total union income.

In each of these cases doubt is thrown on the working-class nature of the organisation or movement.

Of course, these non-working-class individuals, classes or organisations may help the working class achieve some of its own interests, but they have their own distinctive concerns which can and do conflict with those of the working class in the third world.

Whilst this creation of unions from above or outside is a common feature, we have a myriad of examples of individual movements and unions created by ordinary workers from below. And this is often after prolonged and bitter struggle against a vicious colonial power or local ruling class, both of which have been capable of using exile, imprisonment and the execution squad to prevent the working-class from organising itself in this simple but fundamental way. A good example might be the trade union movement in South Yemen. During the 1960's there existed and developed a powerful and radical trade union movement in Aden that had to face not only the repressive measures listed above, but also the organised use of torture by the British army, and the bombs and bullets of Egyptian-financed groups. The movement built up during this time had a determining influence on the post-independence regime.

Even if the trade union movement has been built from below in this way, however, we must still note the multiplicity of problems created for its consolidation given the structure and consciousness mentioned earlier.

We should note, firstly, that whilst unionisation rates may compare not unfavourably with those of more industrialised countries (in Latin America rates are 10-45 percent of the wage force, in the industrialised capitalist countries they are 22-54 percent), that union members are only a tiny proportion of the labour force (in Latin America - excluding Cuba - they are 0.4-31.7 percent of the labour force). Furthermore, commitment to the unions and participation in them is usually low. Whilst 19th century British workers might have been giving 5-10 percent of their income to their unions, workers in India in the 1960's were giving only 1 percent. Whether the reason is that the



state is providing many of the services and security that unions had to provide in the 19th century British case, or whether it is that the common-origin association is providing them, the effect is to reduce the importance the worker gives to his union. The evidence for this is provided by the low rate of membership participation in third world unions. Indeed, in the case of Africa, it has been suggested that the most effective control exercised by members over their leaders is by splitting away or abandoning the union.

This leads naturally into the second problem, the multiple fractures and divisions affecting most union movements not created or supported administratively from above by the state or ruling party. Both in Africa and India an increase in union membership has gone alongside a process of 'mushrooming' under which there appear increasing numbers of unions with a decreasing average membership. At national level we find the union movement frequently divided on strategy lines (moderates versus radicals), on ideological lines (Marixists versus Liberal Democrats), on power-bloc lines (Prague-Communists, Peking-Communists, Brussels-Reformists, Washington-Reformists). And this is not to mention the local or international activities in the trade union movement of such states as Egypt and Nkrumah's Ghana, of the ex-Christian World Confederation of Labour, and of the myriad national political and religious movements.

Despite all these problems and ambiguities, however, unions remain the typical and universal organisation of the worker, the one that he cannot do without and through which he both discovers himself and imposes himself on society. The efforts made to capitalise on them to influence, control and smash them, are all witness to their significance for the working class. Even in the most adverse conditions, such as those of South Africa, in which unions are banned and the workforce structured on ethnic lines under 'tribal representatives', worker protest breaks through and the demand is for independent and democratic trade unions. And one finds that movements

deeply marked by their administrative creation and incorporation, such as that of Ghana, nonetheless keep repeatedly taking direct and specific action in the interests of workers as workers.

Before going on to consider the nature of working-class action, however, something must be said about party organisation amongst workers. Attempts in the third world to create worker-based parties on the European Social-Democratic or Communist model have in general been dwarfed by the development of massive multi-class parties: Congress in India, TANU in Tanzania, the Peronistas in Argentina after 1945. But revolutionary socialist parties with a solid working-class base have long existed in a whole series of third world countries. Although there have been a number of interesting deviations from the pattern, these have mostly been parties affiliated to the international Communist movement with its head-quarters in Moscow (exceptions include the Trotskyist movement in Ceylon, the independent Marxist leadership that developed after independence in South Yemen, or that has long led the Bolivian mine-workers). It was amongst the workers of Shanghai that the Chinese Communist Party gained its first mass base and won cadres necessary for its peasant-based revolution. The Cuban Communist Party, based on plantation and other workers, was involved in an insurrection in pre-war Cuba and has always had considerable influence amongst the workers. The Sudanese Communist Party retained a working-class base despite severe repression, until the destruction of the Party and execution of its leaders in 1971. One must beware, however, of assuming that parties such as these are revolutionary just because they say they are. The only one of the above three that both initiated and concluded a successful anti-capitalist revolution was the Chinese one. The two others have both been involved, at one time or another, in compromises with authoritarian and pro-capitalist regimes. The support that these parties receive from workers may be based on the fact that they are effective reformist parties rather than seriously revolutionary ones.

## ACTION

It seems to me that the activity of the working class in the third world can be divided into three categories. The first is *reformist* in the sense that it seeks gradual incremental improvement within an existing socio-political system. Demands for higher wages, better conditions, more rights are all expressed in quantitative terms and are understood by those demanding them to provide a 'fair' share, or 'equal' rights within the system. These demands represent the immediate self-interest of the workers involved - and this can be workers in one factory, one craft category, or one industry. If cooperatives are proposed, then, as in Singapore, it is not as the seed of a future socialist society, but in order 'to become capitalists ourselves' (Elliot 1974: 52). Such demands and actions are necessary, and they *may* have radical implications, but there is nothing essentially radical about them. And, in general, they are sectionalist in nature, being limited in the sector covered, and failing to connect up with the very different interests and demands of the non-wage-earning majority of the poor. In one Indian case in which attention was directed by reform-minded unions toward the landless poor, the form was the typically paternalist one of 'bringing them enlightenment' rather than an act of solidarity with a mass peasant struggle against landlords. The 'Aurangabad Experiment' was an educational and training scheme, backed by the state and international organisations, based on the concept that the sufferings of the peasants are due to their 'extreme poverty, unnecessary idleness, caste and family organisation' rather than to state-supported landlordism, and could be overcome by family planning and individual self-improvement (see Gunnar Myrdal's introduction, *Aurangabad Experiment* 1973).

The second type I would call *radical-democratic*. By this I mean action that directly challenges the rich and threatens their power whilst failing to define them as capitalist or without seeking to

replace them by socialism. Radical-democratic action can occur in a series of third world situations. One is that of colonial rule. In much of Africa it was the organised urban working class that provided the main mass base for nationalism, mass strikes signalled the beginning of mass nationalism, and its threat was enough to make the colonial power settle with those whom the French called *inter-locuteurs valables* (responsible intermediaries). Another is that of imperialist intervention, as in Dominica in 1965, when workers from the giant El Romano sugar mills played a major part in resisting US occupation. Another is that of oligarchical or aristocratic rule, as in Ethiopia where trade union action was the beginning of the movement that led to the fall of Haile Selassie in 1974. A fourth is that of self-styled radical regimes that are in fact elitist and authoritarian, as in Ghana where the port and rail workers of Sekondi-Takoradi went on prolonged strike against the Nkrumah regime in 1961. In all these cases we clearly see the workers speaking and acting with the masses or for them, leading one commentator to describe Nigerian factory workers as the 'political elite' of the masses (Peace FC). But the results of radical-democratic action are at best a political revolution rather than a social one. At best they lead to the introduction of such a regime as that of Peron in Argentina of the 1940s. Whilst addressing itself to the workers and introducing significant social reforms, this regime eventually abandoned them to a conservative military coup rather than provide them with arms for its own defence. It was right to do so. To have enabled them to take armed action on their own initiative against reaction might have led them to transcend to radical-democratic action and pass to the next level.

This type I would call *socialist-revolutionary*. As a historical parenthesis we may note that all the successful anti-capitalist revolutions of the 20th century have taken place in conditions approximating those of the third world today (the exceptions prove the case: the Czechoslovak and East German revolutions took place 'under the Soviet umbrella').

A tiny working class combined with a landless peasantry to bring about the Russian Revolution in 1917. An even smaller working class was involved in insurrection in China in the 1920s, acting (as noted above) as the first mass socialist force in that country. In agrarian Yugoslavia revolutionary Communist workers provided the core of the peasant guerilla army that introduced socialism in 1945. In Cuba it was the Communist-influenced working class that ensured the anti-capitalist development of the revolution after 1960. Such socialist-revolutionary activity is, naturally, rare. It takes an exceptional crisis or combination of crises to prepare workers to abandon ingrained customs, values and practices in order to risk all for a future that may be desired but which cannot be known. Such a situation nonetheless appeared recently in Chile. Here the electoral victory of a radical-reformist alliance of Communists, Socialists and left Christian Democrats was based on appeals to a well-organised and experienced working class permeated with socialist ideas. The bitter reaction of foreign and local capitalists and landlords to the moderate reforms introduced led the workers to transcend the radical-democratic phase and surpass their traditional organisations and leaders. They then began to take control of factories and to develop their own forms of worker-led government in the industrial councils (*cordones industriales*) and communal councils (*comandos*). The depth and extent of this movement can be judged by the extremity of reaction by the US-backed military coup. This felt it necessary not only to arrest and execute leaders or activists and party members, but to decimate the working class itself in order to control it.

But even in such radical actions of workers and unions we must note complexity and ambiguity. Just after independence in Algeria there were widespread takeovers of industrial and agricultural enterprises by the workers. This would seem to have been a revolutionary socialist action of a most ambiguous nature. Unlike the Chilean case, however, this did not so much represent an *attack* on capitalism as an act of *self-defence*. The French

owners had abandoned these enterprises and in the absence, at least for some time, of Algerian bureaucrats to replace them, workers had to take them over if they were not to starve. Reformist action can also be ambiguous in implication. An initially limited action for a straightforward economic demand can develop into a radical-democratic (or revolutionary) one if there is resistance by the ruling class, if that class is weak, and if there is a radical (or revolutionary) leadership to hand. The 1963-4 wage demands in Nigeria provide a case of escalation, temporarily, from a reformist to a radical-democratic level. The weak, corrupt and arbitrary regime of politicians and businessmen then in power failed to take the strike movement seriously and rejected the workers' demands. This enabled the socialist labour leaders to find a ready echo amongst the workers for the demand that the government resign. The demands, demonstrations and criticism of the regime by the organised workers found considerable support amongst the rest of the urban poor.

#### CONCLUSION

I see a determinate process occurring. This is the development of the one *necessary* modern class. It is obvious that modernisation demands industrialisation and that industrialisation demands workers. It is not in this that importance of the working class resides but in the fact that whilst one can conceive of enterprises run without a capitalist class or a managerial caste (foreshadowed in the workers' councils of Yugoslavia, the Israeli kibbutz, the Chinese commune), we cannot conceive of industry run without workers! If modernisation in the third world means the overcoming of Mao's 'Three Great Differences' (mental and manual labour, large-scale industrial and small-scale agricultural production, town and country) then it must also imply the increasing number and power of the working class, including the self-transformation of the peasantry into an agro-industrial working class. Should this not occur, the countries of the third world will either remain in a stagnating or worsening situation, as

in India, or imitate the inegalitarian, violent and increasingly-crisis-ridden pattern of the industrialised West, as - possibly - in Singapore and Hong Kong.

The multinational companies and ruling strata in the third world, equate development with growth of industry and of GDP. It is therefore a puzzle and concern to them that the organised working class should not contribute to this 'essential' and 'rational' process in some way or other. It appears that both the liberal theorists and the (usually less-liberal) politicians are prepared to use any strategem in order to get the workers to devote themselves to increased production - to use material incentives, possibilities for individual social mobility, bribes and power for labour leaders, divide-and-rule, unify-and-control, the threat of violence, the use of terror - everything except *access to* the means of production and of power. So long as this is not achieved, I would argue, working-class turbulence and attacks on ruling-class legitimacy will continue.