

For the global emancipation of labour: new movements and struggles around work, workers and precarity

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Marikana: a massacre and a symbol?

At about 4 pm on 16 August 2012, one hundred kilometres northwest of South Africa's largest city Johannesburg, the state used lethal force in order to suppress a worker's strike at the Lonmin platinum mine. The massacre of 34 mine workers (Anonymous 2012) gained global attention because of the deaths, as well as the injuries to many more miners, but also because many of the workers were shot in the back (Laing 2012). The massacre also occurred some distance from the mine, when workers were not "not blocking mining operations or any other facility, and although they were on an 'unprotected' wildcat strike, the workers had a constitutional right to gather" (Bond 2012).¹

This was not the first time in recent years that police and the state have murdered workers in the course of them taking industrial action in South African mines; but it now seems that prior to these widely-reported events, the antagonism of workers to the once-revolutionary NUM, now closely tied to the state and management, had been confirmed by an earlier phase of the strike in which union officials had opened fire on their own wildcat-striking members, killing two (Sacks 2012). Eight people were to die over the next three days, between this attack and the final massacre. Adding insult to injury, legal authorities brought charges against the miners they had arrested, asserting that they were themselves responsible for the shootings.

At one level Marikana (and associated strikes elsewhere in the SA mines) represent a very classic assertion of the power of mass working-class resistance and solidarity, in one of the world's strategic industrial nodes. At another level the relationship between the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the African National Congress (ANC) and indeed the company involved, Lonmin (in the shape of Cyril Ramaphosa, one-time NUM and COSATU leader, now a leading "tenderpreneur") to say nothing of the wider mining industry and global agreements going back to the pre-1994 period, says a lot about the process of movement-become-state .

¹ For immediate responses to Marikana, see the Church Land Programme's powerful collection, available at <http://churchland.org.za/padkos%20articles/Marikana%20resources%20final.pdf>. For ongoing critical coverage, the *Daily Maverick* analyses by critical academics and activists are a fundamental resource: <http://dailymaverick.co.za/>. See also the *Debate* mailing list from South Africa, a <http://lists.fahamu.org/cgi-bin/mailman/listinfo/debate-list>. For a critique of media coverage, see Fogel 2012. For some useful background, see Breckenridge 2012 and Gentle 2012.

The efforts of independent / rank and file union activism to break out of the stranglehold of "official" unions has parallels across the world, from Germany to China. In some ways Marikana symbolizes the catastrophic decline of three major emancipatory forces of the late 19th and 20th centuries – the party, the national independence movement and the trade union.

As we go to press, the commission of inquiry is in progress and disturbing evidence of weapons planted on the bodies of the dead has emerged (Marinovich 2012). Meanwhile, the South African mining strike wave (Hartford 2012), and the ripples from the massacre, are continuing and will shape movements in the future.

Geographies and articulations of labour movements in the 21st century

Once, the labour movement was seen as *the* international social movement for the left (and it was the spectre haunting capitalism). Over the last century, however, labour movements have been transformed. In most of the world membership rates have dwindled, and many act in defence of, or simply provide services to, their members in the spirit of interest or lobbying groups. Labour was once a broad social movement including cooperatives, socialist parties, women's and youth wings, press and publications, cultural production and sporting clubs. Often it was at the core of movements for democracy or national independence, even of social revolution.

Today, however, despite the rhetoric of "socialism", "class and mass trade unionism" or, alternatively, technocratic "organising strategies", most union movements internationally operate strictly within the parameters of capitalism and the ideology of "social partnership" (i.e. with and under capital and / or the state). Hence new labour organising efforts increasingly take other forms, as we shall see below.

These changes relate to the neoliberalisation and "globalisation" of capitalism, and its result in restructured industry and employment. And while neoliberalism is often associated with the efforts of the Right, in some countries it was the political parties of social democracy and labour that implemented radical restructuring. In some notable cases, such as in Australia, this was done with the active consent of the official trade unions. These changes have led to a disorientation of the left.

Transformations at the political and economic level have not, however, meant the disappearance of labour movements and neoliberalism has seen reaction from below. In considering the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, trade unionist and democracy activist Sasha Simic concluded "that Egypt's revolution...was a response to years of neoliberalism which have made a tiny elite there obscenely wealthy but which have impoverished the vast majority of its 85 million-strong population" (2012: 3). Multiple new expressions of labour discontent arise from the bases and the margins of the world of work.

Actors in the workers' movements of the 21st century

If at the level of formal organisation trade unions remain unchallenged as the leading actors of the labour movement, today we see many other movement forms emerging from the bases and the margins of labour, often with far more active participation. The relationship between "old" and "new" labour movements varies hugely from country to country and industry to industry; here what we want to stress is that a simple identification of "the labour movement" with "trade unions" is both politically and intellectually unhelpful.

Firstly, from the *bases* we find movements of workers, often in alliance with local communities or other social movements. They are to be found not only in advanced industrial and "postindustrial" economies, but also — more dramatically — at the capitalist periphery. Labour movements were important in the recent Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings (2010-2011). In the world's second biggest economy, China, labour has been flexing its muscles in the most repressive of circumstances. Labour struggle has also begun to revive in the United States, and in the most dramatic fashion with the occupation of the legislature in Wisconsin (2011) and the strikes of Chicago teachers (2012).

Secondly, we see those who are situated at the *margins* of labour markets and who experience continuous uncertainty. Increasingly addressed as the "precariat", this includes both high- and low-skilled workers in the old metropolises of the global North as well as in the slums and fields of the global South. The precarious are often younger people, women and migrants, but increasingly those previously full-time workers whose rights and conditions are under attack due to the current economic crisis.

The margins also include the un- and under-employed. Since the end of the long boom, orthodox economics accepts a higher rate of unemployment in the global North as "full" employment. Meanwhile, the reserve army of labour in the majority world also lays the basis for precarious and marginal work. As Shaikh puts it,

Finally, as capitalism develops, so too does its level of mechanisation, so that it is progressively less able to absorb labour. In the developed countries, this manifests itself as a growing mass of unemployed people at any given "natural" rate of unemployment. In the Third World, as the incursion of capitalist relations lays waste to earlier social forms, the mechanised processes which replace them are able to pick up only a fraction of the huge numbers previously "set free". Thus the rising productivity of capitalist production is accompanied by a growing pool of redundant labour all across the globe. The presence of starving masses in the Third World, as well as of floating populations of unemployed in the developed capitalist world, are bitter reminders of these inherent tendencies. (1990: 77)

New movements are taking place at the local, national and transnational level, signalling the ongoing transformation of workers' struggle all over the world. As capitalism reorganises, expands and reinvents, so too does resistance to its

exploitation and subjugation. Some trade unions are struggling to organise amongst workers who do not conform to the model of the full-time, male, family-wage-earning worker, and are seeking new ways of mobilizing and organising. This appears to be the case with "informal" workers in Ghana and Zambia, as with "undocumented" or "excluded" labour in California. Yet both trade unions and the labour movements at the bases and at the margins of the labour realms, women, men and youth are experimenting with radical new forms of struggle, new demands, new places / spaces of articulation, and perhaps re-discovering or re-inventing a global movement for "the emancipation of labour"².

Some places to start?

In this issue of *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, we aim to reflect both this immense richness of experiences linked to workers' movements and to articulate what has been learned in one place in ways that may be useful for activists elsewhere. The articles in the special section provide a wide range of perspectives on workers' struggles across the globe. In doing this, they reveal the complex patterns of political organization and political resistance that show the geography of labour struggles in the 21st century, from the local mobilizations of precarious workers who engage in the autonomous organization of conflict to the transnational coalitions in which trade unions engage in international advocacy actions.

A related question, when looking at the role of trade unions in international labour struggle, is their role at the global - or at least transnational - level. The recent coordinated strikes, protests and general strikes against austerity measures in 23 European countries (14 November 2012), show that after years of economic crisis national trade unions are taking a first shy step towards the construction of common struggles at the European level³. But this is not the only way in which trade unions position themselves in the international space of labour struggle.

The voices in this issue are as varied as the shapes and trajectories of current workers' movements. Our perspectives, and those of the authors who contributed to this issue, are multiple ones but all in different ways shaped by our new context. Some authors are active trade unionists of long standing; others are researchers on or in labour movements of different kinds. Some voices represent the discontents of "actually-existing" unions and the struggle to break the stranglehold of social partnership; others speak from newer organizing processes and the world of precarity. Others again, as participants in other movements, are coming to recognise the importance of "work" as a major site of alienation, of workers as agents of emancipatory movements, and of new or renewed labour movements as partners and allies in the global struggle for

² See the just-published collection on the new global labour solidarity (Waterman 2012).

³ <http://roarmag.org/2012/11/14-n-european-strike-austerity-protest-clashes/>

human liberation. Taken together, the voices to be heard in this special issue of *Interface* help us to consider some crucial questions when it comes to workers movements in the 21st century.

Themed articles

The themed section of this issue starts with Wolfgang Schaumberg's reflections from German-Chinese labour solidarity. Germany has long been one of the world's industrial powerhouses and centres of the labour movement; in recent decades China has become both. Schaumberg's action note highlights the contradictory nature of labour struggles in both countries in the context of pressures to compromise. Growing inequality, converging workplace experiences and closer contacts enable the development of bilateral and international solidarity but much remains to be done.

Dae-Oup Chang's article discusses the paradox of East Asian development: how the integration of most of the population into capitalist labour relations has not meant an integration into an organised working class but rather into many segmented labouring classes fragmented by insecurity and other survival activities. The article discusses a series of social movements of labour in East Asia to understand what possible alternatives to neoliberalism they can create. The emergent movement of the poor in Thailand has played an important role in linking local and anti-globalisation struggles, while the strikes of Chinese migrant workers are moving from defensive to offensive struggles. Irregular workers in South Korea are increasingly unionising in a variety of innovative ways, while informal and formal workers in Cambodia are finding effective ways of organising together. Such movements do not constitute a unified working class, and often struggle to overcome the constraints of local politics. Nonetheless they show a significant capacity to cut across their diverse working situations in innovative organising campaigns. In this way, the struggles of workers in the East Asian "workshop of the world" highlight the need to resituate the labour movement as part of the wider movements of labour.

Joe Sutcliffe's action note warns against writing premature obituaries for labour. Labour movements in the global South remain key to anti-neoliberal struggles, and have adapted both to informalisation and to new social movements. His note identifies some ways in which Southern trade unions have managed to navigate the challenges of their context and discusses some general principles of practice.

Stefania Barca's article reflects on the possibility to understand working-class environmentalism within an environmental justice (EJ) framework. Highlighting the analysis of social inequality vis-a-vis the environmental costs of economic activities, EJ links occupational, environmental and public health. Her article explores the intersection between EJ and labour struggles in three different countries. In the US, alliances between labour and environmental activists were important in the 1970s but subsequently undermined by corporate attempts to counterpose jobs and the environment, in turn overcome

in the 1990s. In Italy, too, a new working-class environmentalism marked the later 1960s and the 1970s in the development of a "class ecology" paradigm which remained active in a wide range of struggles around toxic workplaces. In Brazil, finally, rural workers played a particular role in the formation of popular environmental consciousness, with urban struggles and the EJ framework taking root in the 1990s. Barca proposes a work-centred theory of environmental justice highlighting workers' subjectivity, the classed distribution of environmental costs, the centrality of sustainability and the need to incorporate workers and the labor process within EJ theory.

Nora Räthzel and David Uzzell's article also challenges oppositions between labour and environmental movements, in which union activists saw the environment in terms of leisure and health and environmentalists saw a fundamental conflict between production and ecology. This opposition has been mirrored in both labour and environmental studies. The article argues for overcoming this opposition in the context of climate change and that this entails changed power relations between Northern and Southern trade unions.

Melanie Kryst's piece discusses the interaction between labour unions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in coalitions aiming at fair transnational regulations of labour standards. She focusses on the investigation of the German branch of the Clean Clothes Campaign against the use of sandblasting to fabricate vintage jeans - an infamous technique that causes lung cancer to workers. Through a longitudinal analysis of the campaign's demands, Kryst shows the different types of coalitions and networks that can emerge between trade unions and NGOs at the transnational level. She illustrates how the campaign, and its protest targets, changed over time: from the initial focus on confrontational collective action to the more recent use of collaboration and negotiations with corporate and state institutions. Oscillating between social movements and interest groups, the campaign's experience sheds light on how trade unions work with NGOs to have an influence on labour regulations at the transnational level.

In contrast, Jean Faniel looks at how trade unions interact with the unemployed at the domestic level. He proposes a dialectical approach to the dynamic and often disputed relationship between trade unions and the unemployed. Discussing numerous examples in different European countries, Faniel considers both the internal processes in the life of trade unions and the external processes that characterize trade union interactions with other political actors. In particular, he discusses the constituency of trade unions, their organizational characteristics, the relationship between unions and the capitalist system in which they are embedded, and finally the interactions of trade unions with political parties. In analyzing these four dimensions, the author grasps the ambiguous attitudes of trade unionists towards the unemployed in both past and present times.

Three other articles in this issue show that while traditional trade unions might not represent the unemployed - or those workers who do not have open-ended and full-time contracts - new forms of struggles within the vast workers'

movements across the world also emerge as a response to the crisis of unionism. Taken together, these three articles show that grassroots organizing in workers movements is an important element in the creation of voice and visibility for those who are at the basis and at the margins of the labour market. Each of the articles shows how the self-organization of these workers enables the construction of shared representations - not only at the political, but also at the public level - as well as the coordination of effective struggles within, and more often beyond, specific workplaces.

Focussing on the childcare service sector in Quebec, Martine D'Amours, Guy Bellamare and Louise Briand illustrate how changes in the nature of work within contemporary societies contribute to the development of a unionism that goes beyond the traditional boundaries of the single factory (and the single company), ceases to represent only the traditional unionized workforce, and leads to alliances with political and social actors usually outside the sphere of unionist activities. The authors show that when unions embrace these transformations they shift the logic of action to demands and claims addressing identity issues and the whole lives of workers, also outside their working place.

Considering the case of Italy, Annalisa Murgia and Giulia Selmi discuss two recent struggles of precarious workers that did not involve the presence of traditional trade unions as agents of bargaining in the workplace: firstly the "network of precarious editors", a group of precarious editors working in different publishing houses and secondly the "SEA girls", a group of precarious hostesses working in the main airport of Milan. The two case studies highlight the ability of self-organization and self-advocacy of precarious workers beyond traditional trade unions. Murgia and Selmi, in fact, argue that the problem is not really the impossibility of organizing precarious workers. The real challenge seems to be to imagine and then bring into existence unions with structures that take into consideration the peculiarities of the living and working conditions of precarious workers.

On a similar vein, Alberto Arribas Lozano discusses the concept of "social unionism" through the experience of the Oficinas de Derechos Sociales, a loose network of activist groups spread in different Spanish cities. First organized in 2004-2005, the Oficinas de Derechos Sociales elaborated a political praxis rooted in the daily lives of precarious workers, going beyond the "politics of the [protest] events", to produce and circulate critical knowledge on precarity. In particular, Arribas discusses one of the main aim of the Oficinas de Derechos Sociales: the production of connections between migrant and non-migrant precarious workers in the attempt to construct common collective struggles.

In his thought-provoking contribution about the rhetoric of job creation in times of crisis, Franco Barchiesi deconstructs some of the rhetorical devices that emerge in discourses - and policies - concerning precarity. Barchiesi starts from postcolonial Africa to explain how expressions like "dignity of labour" and "decent work" have been frequently translated into coercive and repressive practices against the African labour power. Criticizing work-centred approaches to precarious labour, Barchiesi argues that precarity opens up radical discourses

able to trigger processes of decommodification and redistribution, like the introduction of non-work related universal income.

Elise Thorburn's article discusses the changing composition of the working class and proposes that the assembly is distinguishing itself as an emergent mode of organising in recent struggles, by comparison with party and bureaucratic union models. She argues that this may open the possibility of a "politics of the common", not mediated by the state or capital. Thorburn explores the theoretical and historical lineages of autonomist discussions, using the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly as an example of an effective process of rethinking working class organising pointing towards the creation of a new world.

Godfrey Moase's action note looks at the crisis of representative trade unionism in the context of the state's carrot-and-stick strategies, and the impact of increasing precarisation on traditional union strategies. He argues that "direct unionism", combining the political strategy of insurrectional unions with the everyday foundations of representative unionism through tools like the action conversation may point the way forward, as can the creative use of new IT technologies and the building of common campaigning infrastructures.

Nicolás Somma's event analysis explores the dramatic Chilean student movement of 2011-12, arguing that this was an unintended consequence of the marketisation of higher education, unexpectedly rebelling against broad features of neoliberalism and maintaining relative unity thanks to an intensely participatory approach.

Tristan Partridge's action note looks at the organization of everyday life in an indigenous village in Ecuador. He shows how community-based collective projects aim to counter the negative effects of precarity and temporary labour migration in remaking a dignified and sustainable way of life.

Finally, Peter Waterman's article critiques the social-liberal orientation of the "new global labour studies" as it has emerged around a series of specific intellectual contexts. In a passionate engagement with a series of contemporary authors, he argues for a genuinely emancipatory approach. Discussing the particular role of IT work and cyberspace in new struggles and research, he discusses some relevant cases in which emancipatory elements can perhaps be found. The paper concludes with an extensive list of relevant resources.

Non-themed articles and reviews

As always, this issue of *Interface* contains a number of general articles on topics other than the main theme, as well as book reviews.

Jackie Smith's article discusses how the current global upsurge of struggles can be maintained, arguing for the need to explore the lessons and resources of earlier movements, in particular the global justice movement and the World Social Forums. Smith highlights the earlier movements' combination of resistance to neoliberalism, articulation of alternatives and working to build

counter-power as a future strategy, arguing for Occupy activists to connect with these earlier strands of organising and movement development work.

Kenneth Good's piece explores some aspects of the history of struggles for democratisation, contrasting liberal-parliamentary and participatory forms. The article discusses the Portuguese Carnation Revolution of 1974-5 and in particular the interaction between the popular movement and the armed forces movement, the experience of democratisation struggles and their aftermath in Eastern Europe in 1989 – 90, and the experience of Egypt and Tunisia from 2010 on.

Maysoun Sukarieh's article discusses the paradox whereby Arab youth have gone from being discussed as potential terrorists in the wake of 9/11 to now being presented as revolutionary youth. Exploring youth programmes in Jordan, Sukarieh argues that the focus on youth is geared to neoliberal models of reform which places the responsibility for broader structural and regional inequalities on young people, relying on an Orientalist "cultural deficit" model.

Corey Wrenn's paper on abolitionism within animal rights – a complete cessation of the use of nonhuman animals – contrasts this approach to other animal rights movements and discusses its current prospects, both in terms of its marginalisation by animal welfare approaches and its prospects for online mobilization and other successes.

The article by Ángel Calle Collado, Marta Soler Montiel, Isabel Vara Sánchez and David Gallar Hernández explores challenges to the global agro-food system in the light of recurring food crises in the North and South. Some of these are visible protests, while others involve the exploration of alternative food production and consumption approaches. The authors discuss the spread of these critical networks with particular reference to the Spanish case.

Tomás Mac Sheoin's article tackles the issue of the relationship between local campaigns and transnational NGOs, which is often criticised as being simply a hierarchical one, often discussed in market terms. In the case of the movement for justice in Bhopal, a coalition between various local actors, the interaction with Greenpeace was at times a tense one, particularly in terms of claiming credit. Despite the power imbalance, local actors were not afraid to challenge Greenpeace. Mac Sheoin argues that this was due to their experience of transnational coalitions and the major symbolic and local capital of the Bhopal campaign.

Finally, this issue sees reviews of Ben Selwyn's *Workers, state and development in Brazil: powers of labour, chains of value* (Ana Margarida Esteves); of two edited collections by Jai Sen, *Interrogating empires* and *Imagining alternatives* (Guy Lancaster); of Janet Conway's *Edges of global justice: the World Social Forum and its "others"* (Mandisi Majavu); of Alan Bourke, Tia Dafnos and Markus Kip (eds.), *Lumpencity: discourses of marginality* (Chris Richardson); and of Craig Calhoun's *The roots of radicalism: tradition, the public sphere and early nineteenth-century social movements* (Mandisi Majavu).

Reflections

The contemporary world continues to be shaped, and reshaped, by *work*: by the rapidly-changing production and reproduction of what we as human beings need to live, flourish (or waste our time) - however material or immaterial this is (Lebowitz 2003). From micro-level resistance and sabotage - or the non-capitalist forms of mutual support which are necessary for even the most instrumentally-organised corporation - the struggles and tensions around work continue to underpin human activity.

At a broader level, if European anti-austerity struggles show the continued significance of both organised and disorganised labour, the same is no less true where (as perhaps in the US bailout of the car industry, or where a right-wing Irish government prefers to ally with union leaders against workers rather than to directly attack the organisations themselves) employers and states take the power of labour into account in advance, so that it has less need to appear as a visible actor.

More broadly, we see across the world - from the Oakland general strike and its links to Occupy to the role of the Mahalla workers in the Egyptian revolution, chronicled by Austin Mackell (2012) in our last issue, and most recently to the strike wave in the South African mines, against which the Marikana massacre was targeted but which repression has not, at time of writing, subdued.

Labour struggles in general continue to be a central part of the big politics of our time as well as a key means of securing ordinary people a decent existence (or not, where they are absent). Intellectually we need to reconsider the forms of labour struggle, widen our conception of their subjects, and as activists rethink how best to organise ourselves and how to form broader alliances (Anonymous 2012b). In the most general terms, "the global emancipation of labour" - how we can not only produce the world but become genuinely free agents within it, in our paid work as in whatever caring and free time we have - remains an unfulfilled vision.

It is of course important to avoid simple celebration or condemnation. Bored activists at British labour conferences came up with the phrase "THIGMOO" - This Great Movement Of Ours - to count the number of occurrences in self-congratulatory speeches by conservative union leaders. Conversely, celebrating "newness" for its own sake and condemning "the old" is simply to repeat the gestures of contemporary capitalist style.

Rather, we need to focus on how far emerging forms of struggle, solidarity, organisation, agency etc. seem to be expressing genuine needs and having real political impact, or not (see e.g. Senalp 2012 on the role of peer-to-peer communications in recent movement struggles). It is in this terrain that experienced union organisers can find a wider sense of hope, and that activists in other movements can find the elements of common ground and alliance with labour.

On the basis of an increasing wave of news, longer reports and the revival of labour studies it seems clear that labour is beginning to be reborn as part of the broader global justice and solidarity movement against neo-liberalism.

Next issue and call for papers

The next issue of *Interface* will be an open issue with no themed section. We hope to receive submissions on any aspect of social movement research and practice that fit within the journal's [mission statement](#). Submissions should contribute to the journal's mission as a tool to help our movements learn from each other's struggles, by developing analyses from specific movement processes and experiences that can be translated into a form useful for other movements.

In this context, we welcome contributions by movement participants and academics who are developing movement-relevant theory and research. Our goal is to include material that can be used in a range of ways by movements — in terms of its content, its language, its purpose and its form. We thus seek work in a range of different formats, such as conventional (refereed) articles, review essays, facilitated discussions and interviews, action notes, teaching notes, key documents and analysis, book reviews — and beyond. Both activist and academic peers review research contributions, and other material is sympathetically edited by peers. The editorial process generally is geared towards assisting authors to find ways of expressing their understanding, so that we all can be heard across geographical, social and political distances.

We can accept material in Afrikaans, Arabic, Catalan, Croatian, Danish, English, French, German, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Latvian, Maltese, Norwegian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish and Zulu.

The deadline for this open call is 1 May 2012, with publication in November 2013. For details of how to submit to *Interface*, please see the '[Guidelines for contributors](#)'. All manuscripts, whether on the special theme or other topics, should be sent to the [appropriate regional editor](#). Submission templates are available online via the [guidelines page](#).

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