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The taming of organized labor

There are more workers today who work for wages than was the case fifty years ago. And yet, ironically, the increase in size of the working class has not increased the ranks of organized labor. Workers' unions today have considerably less power over the conditions of production. Indeed, one can go further and say that countries like the Philippines have less control over the fate of their own economies than before. It is important to ask why as we go through the rituals of another Labor Day.

May Day is the special day that is set aside to honor workers all over the world. The very first celebration was held on May 1, 1890. The world-wide demonstrations and parades held that year were organized explicitly in support of the eight-hour working day. Labor Day or International Workers' Day has since become one of the most important dates in the calendar of workers' movements, becoming the occasion for the expression of the manifold grievances and demands of labor everywhere.

At the height of the Cold War, May Day parades became closely associated with the struggles and achievements of socialism. Wanting to dissociate the United States from the Soviet Union's apparent appropriation of this event, the US Congress designated May 1 as "Loyalty Day" instead, preferring to celebrate Labor Day on the first Monday of September. May Day celebrations, as expected, became somewhat muted after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rest of the Eastern European socialist bloc.

But there have been developments in the system of production and in the world economy as a whole that are responsible for the decline in the power of organized labor everywhere. New technologies have made it possible to fragment and re-structure the labor process in such a manner as to undermine existing labor organizations.

I first saw this in the mid-60s in Britain while doing research on workers in the shipping industry. It was the heyday of the trade unions, and the British dockworkers' unions were among the largest and most powerful workers' organizations. Traditional waterfront work involved loading cargo from the dock onto the ship's holds using old-style pallets pulled by winches. This was tedious and labor-intensive work. A dockers' strike was certain to bring all waterfront activity to a halt, and with it, all shipping.

All this changed with the advent of steel containers. Cargo now could be loaded into huge containers far away from the docks, and by workers other than members of the dockers' unions. Instead of pallets, powerful machines were needed to hoist entire containers onto the ships. Only a handful of workers were needed for this task. Almost overnight, the power of the dockworkers' unions evaporated before their eyes. The crucial change was the disintegration of the dockworker's job into tasks that could be handled away from the port.

This kind of re-structuring is what is now occurring on a global scale. It is the template for what is today better known as "business process outsourcing." Using the broad range of new Internet-based technologies, nearly every business can now reduce their manpower needs by going global. The first to go are the sales and technical support personnel. These services are routinely farmed out to "call centers" located in different countries. Higher-level operations usually follow. Large architectural and engineering firms outsource their drafting operations. Companies outsource their accounting and payroll operations to data processing centers around the globe. International firms requiring large volumes of research no longer need to keep full-time employees to do research for them. They can now outsource this to a virtual global army of anonymous workers without having to attend to the complex labor problems that direct hires pose.

Workers in so-called BPO companies are typically unorganized. Employee turn-over is quite fast. Except for the people at the supervisory and

managerial levels, “call center” agents typically do not stay at their jobs longer than two years. The young people who are drawn to these jobs usually think of BPO jobs as transition employment, preparatory to working overseas. The working hours, usually at night, are difficult to sustain as they require a drastic alteration in lifestyle. The work is intensive, fast-paced, and closely-monitored, allowing little room, if any, for extended interaction among the employees themselves.

In many ways, the BPO worker represents the new face of the proletariat in the age of the Internet. She has little control, if any, over the conditions of her work. She has replaced the male mass factory worker – that “paradigmatic figure” historically associated with the industrial working class. “The proletariat is not what it used to be, but that does not mean it has vanished,” write Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their book “Empire.” “It means, rather, that we are faced once again with the analytical task of understanding the new composition of the proletariat as a class.”

There seems no way of arresting the further emasculation of the working class except by forging new unities at different levels, particularly at the global level. Yet, this seems almost illusory in the face of the dizzying changes in the global organization of capitalist production that make labor everywhere insecure. The May Day tradition started with the struggle for the 8-hour day. Today’s working class struggles are enormously more complex, but the solidarities they require are the same.

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