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The paper identifies a new labour paradigm emerging where decent work is not seen as an obstacle or add-on to development , but is integrated into an alternative developmental path. It is argued that decent work is not something that can be immediately realised in developing countries . Instead, the paper develops a framework for the progressive realisation of decent work by identifying three phases .

But there are no great social advances without the backing of powerful social movements in combination with state capacity. Without these two forces working in **some sort of a combination** the goal of universal coverage of social security and the progressive realization of decent work will remain elusive. **What is required is a social and political alliance between the state, labour and social movements.**

## **DEVELOPMENT , GLOBALISATION AND DECENT WORK: AN EMERGING LABOUR PARADIGM .**

There is a widespread view that the concept of decent work has no relevance to developing societies . With its large scale unemployment and even larger informal economy, most workers it is believed are happy to have any source of income. Better a bad job, they argue, than no job at all!!

In fact there are governments in the Global South , such as India, where decent work is seen as a Eurocentric concept designed to protect jobs in the North. By

**insisting on certain labour standards it is argued , these countries are taking away the only comparative advantage the poor have – their cheap labour.**

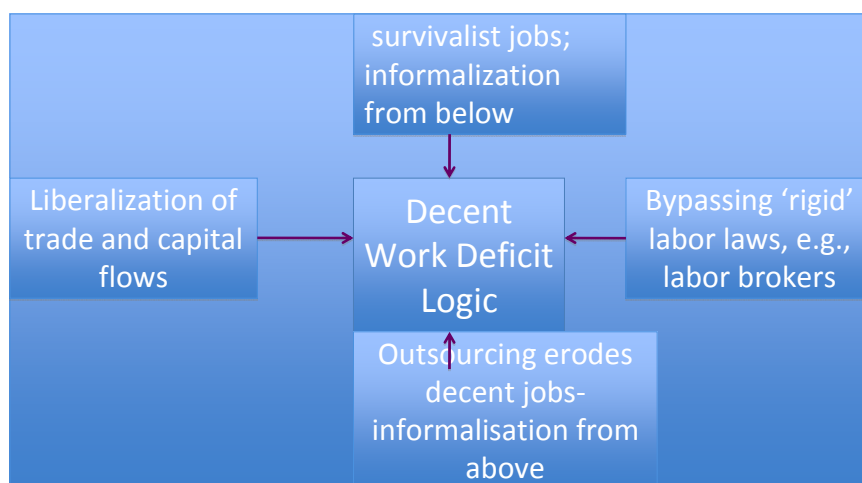
After all, it is argued, is it not on the back of labour exploitation, including child labour, that the North industrialized. Indeed , some argue rhetorically , is the demand for decent work not a form of non-tariff protection !!

Interestingly it is not only developing societies who see decent work as an obstacle to economic growth. In the heartland of social democratic Europe ,employers and governments – including labor governments - have responded to global competition by lowering the cost of labour through introducing precarious employment and eroding the hard won gains won by working people through the welfare state, (Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout, 2008: 50-77: Mankopf, 2010) However this re-commodification of labour is not happening without resistance from workers . Indeed in Germany the Harz reforms that reduced welfare benefits led to a split in the Social democratic party and the formation of De Linke, a coalition of ex –communists , labour movement activists and left social democrats.

**One could argue that we are experiencing an era of unprecedented hyper-commodification of labor** . It is , therefore, somewhat ironic that it is at the height of this period – 1998 – that the ILO introduced its driving mission , the goal of decent work for all! (Standing, 2008)

I would argue that there is a logic at work in the global economy that is leading to a decent work deficit . I illustrate this in the diagram below

## The Decent Work Deficit Logic



Source, Webster, 2010a.:234.

The economic crisis begun in late 2008 has accelerated this logic leading to the widespread bail out of banks and now austerity programmes with cut backs on public sector jobs and benefits. Many countries, such as Greece, no longer hire permanent public sector staff and appoint on short term contracts. For those in the informal economy the situation is worse with their incomes being cut by an estimated 50% ( Jhubvulla, 2010)

I have painted a very gloomy picture but I am not a pessimist. I am a cautious optimist. Something has been happening in the Global South over the last few decades that I believe holds the key to a future, more labour friendly, world order.

Workers in the South – and this goes back to the seventies and eighties in Brazil, Korea and South Africa- became the **architects of their own futures**. (Lambert, 2010) No longer willing to accept their designation as either victims or as a labour elite, they took control of their lives, went out on strike and started to struggle for democratic trade unions. While the ILO was debating their ‘discovery’ of the informal sector in Kenya in 1972, Ela Bhatt had begun to organise these workers into a union, the Self employed Women’s Association ( SEWA). By successfully organising the self employed in India, she transformed the way we think about trade unions as well as the household. The home is not, for these women, simply a site of reproduction; it is also a site of production, a workplace and a source of income. It was Ela Bhatt and the SEWA that helped pioneer the ILO convention on home work, a crucial feminist advance for working class women in the Third World. (Webster, 2010b)

But it would be quite wrong to see this as a case of Indian exceptionalism. Throughout the developing world informal workers are beginning to find a voice, sometimes incorporating informal workers into existing unions, sometimes forming their own or coalitions with existing informal organisations. (Lindell 2010) Of course there are many more failures than there are successes as workers search for the appropriate organisational form, not unlike English workers who, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, experimented with a variety of responses – Ludditism, the Chartist movement, co-operatives and trade unions. In the event it was only the trade union that was to endure as a permanent voice for workers in the workplace.

I could give many examples of other experiments, especially linking workers globally in new networks such as SIGTUR. The Global Labour University ( GLU) under the co-ordination of Frank Hoffer, is another example.

Not for the first time in the history of labour **the practice of workers struggles and innovative organisational forms is ahead of current theories of labour** .

Indeed all three dominant theories – neo-classical liberalism, the current anti-globalization movement and development statism – treat the struggle for decent work as either an obstacle or an add-on.(Bowles, 2010) It is interesting that in drawing up the MDGs the UN did not include full employment and decent work until lobbied by the ILO.

This is the missing link in the current discourse; none of the dominant theories integrate the struggle for decent work into their economic growth paths. **A new labor paradigm will have to integrate decent work into a new ecologically sensitive and employment creating developmental path. In order to undertake this ambitious task labour studies will have to connect with development studies.** This is why , in introducing the GLU masters programme at Wits in 2007, I insisted on two semester long core courses , one on labour and development ( drawing on sociology and political science ) and the other in development economics .

**How can decent work be integrated into a new development path?** The central problem is that , in the eyes of neo-liberalism and its model of market led growth, trade unions are an obstacle as they push up the costs of labour by creating a “rigid” labour market. What is required, it is argued , is greater labour market flexibility so that employers can hire and fire with minimal restrictions .

This is a deeply entrenched argument . **The decent work deficit logic will only be reversed if we develop a longer term vision into the policy making process.**

In other words the goal of decent work should be seen as an objective to be progressively realised Quite simply this involves accepting that decent work is not an immediately achievable goal . Each country will have to take into account its specific social and economic context and set itself a series of immediate, medium and long term goals.

Countries , together with their labour movement and employer associations, must begin by setting themselves **goals that can be achieved immediately.** Indeed the ILO has begun precisely such a process through its Decent Work Country Studies . In the short term it is possible to imagine building a global social floor – a basic pension, child benefits, access to health care , temporary employment guarantee schemes or income transfers for the long term unemployed.

This attempt at imagining an alternative development path is not some way out revolutionary adventure , titling at windmills as it were. Instead it is swimming very much with the current by grounding our political innovations in successful social policy initiatives in countries such as Brazil ( Bolsa Familia), India (

NREGA) and South Africa ( EPWP and child grants )(Bhowmik and Kumar, 2010; Seidman; 2010; Webster and Fakier, 2010; Fakier and Masondo, 2010)

These emerging welfare regimes are different from the European Welfare State that was constructed around the equal contribution of three pillars: permanent full time employment , a strong professional public service and the nuclear family. Instead the emerging welfare regimes of the South – what Ian Gough calls **informal security welfare regimes** – rely on informal work as well as a variety of livelihood strategies such as street trading , the extended family and the villages or communities within which they are embedded. (Gough, 2004: Savant, 2010: Saha, 2010) As Sarah Mosoetsa describes in her pioneering book **Eating from the same Pot** these households and community networks provide a form of social protection , what she calls a form of **fragile stability**. ( Mosoetsa , forthcoming; Fakier, 2010)

The crucial point in constructing this social floor is that social security is seen as an investment ; it generates growth by increasing aggregate demand . In times of economic crisis it maintains aggregate demand through providing temporary short time employment . It is an **automatic stabilizer**.

To suggest that this social floor will provide a disincentive to work , as neo-liberals do, is disingenuous as it

- targets the non-active population
- it is self selecting
- 30-40% of the unemployed are long term unemployed. (Hoffer, 2010)

But building a social floor is only the first step along the road to progressively realising decent work. **In the medium term** governments will need to develop economic strategies that prioritize meeting domestic and regional markets , rather than the export of manufactured goods to fuel over consumption in the North. These strategies should focus on labor intensive manufacturing , green jobs and agro=processing , as well as economic activities that improve core physical and social infrastructure. (Cock, 2009)The aim should be to reduce the cost of living for working people through cheaper food, public transport and public health care. Resources should be mobilised domestically to fund priority investments , not short run inflows of capital through the stock and bond markets. It will also require a more strategic engagement of labour in the decision-making process, and a greater willingness of employers and government to engage in genuine social dialogue . Militancy without a long term vision of how productivity can be raised hardens employers and government attitudes and entrenches the low trust dynamic that exists in most developing society industrial relations systems. ( Webster, 2010c)

**In the long run** – say twenty years – countries can move to productivity knowledge enhancing economies. This will require a human resource development strategy that draws on indigenous knowledge and skills and promotes value added industries.

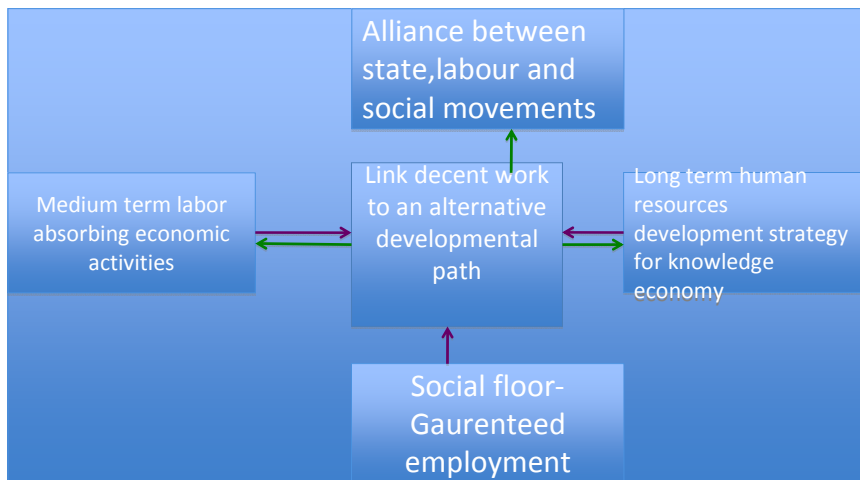
**To progressively realize decent work requires two conditions :**

- firstly **a democratic and efficient development state** . The nation state is more essential than ever in the age of globalisation but the 21 st century development state , argues Peter Evans , will be different from the model developed in East Asia . The source of wealth , he argues, is no longer machinery and the export of manufactured goods , but in ideas and people. ( Evans , 2010) Capital, he argues further, is no longer a reliable ally . there is no longer a national bourgeoisie to collaborate with in national development . Both social democracy and the development state assumed capital as an ally.
- **secondly a broadened and autonomous labour movement that helps construct this state and is able to engage strategically with the policy making process. This can best be done if unions mobilise as citizens with constitutional rights , rather than as members of a political party. (Agarwala, 2006; Agarwala, 2006: Agarwala, forthcoming)**

**Let me conclude;**

Let me illustrate my argument with diagram two –

## Reversing Decent Work Deficit Logic= Progressive realization of decent work



The world is not flat, it developed under colonialism into a highly uneven and unequal world. Indeed these inequalities, particularly the North/South divide, have deepened in the era of globalisation. Not surprisingly we seen the re-emergence of the classic discourse of imperialism and the works of Rosa Luxemburg popularised by David Harvey (Munck, 2010). An acceptance of this inequality must be the point of departure for a new labour paradigm

But there are no great social advances without the backing of powerful social movements in combination with state capacity. Without these two forces working in **some sort of a combination** the goal of universal coverage of social security and the progressive realization of decent work will remain elusive. **What is required is a social and political alliance between the state, labour and social movements.( Southall and Webster, 2010:)**

It is this challenge that is exciting a growing number of scholars and activists from Europe and North America, as well as from Asia, Latin America and Africa. This emerging paradigm embraces political traditions from all regions of the world and dissolves the blunt reification of North and South. It recognises its diverse political origins and political context. It has a political imagination that is being forged through collective and collaborative practices with groups, organisations and movements in and beyond universities. It sees the global through the local. It recognizes that the destructive impact of the unregulated market on the local environment – the land, the water and the air – is the greatest collective action problem that the world has ever faced!

These are the daunting challenges that face labour in the age of globalisation. They are challenges that require a new relationship between researchers and teachers in the universities and those who make policy and those who engage with these policies in the world of work. It requires also a new research method, what has come to be called global ethnography. This allows one to ground the global in specific places whilst achieving a deeper understanding of micro processes and how they interact with macro global forces. Above all, it requires that our role go beyond the primary role of producing new knowledge, to include making sure that these ideas impact on those engaged in progressively realising decent work and creating a global social floor of minimum income and social security (Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout, 2008: 225-226)

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