

Racing to the bottom? Precarisation of employment relations in the Indian and South African Auto industries

Within what appears a generalised race to the bottom, characterised by a widespread erosion of labour standards and workers' rights both in the Global North and in the Global South, processes of casualisation and precarisation seem to have touched even what used to be the most protected industrial segments. Not even the auto industry, once stronghold of formal employment relations, unionised workforce and relatively high salaries, has proven to be immune from such trends. On the contrary, atypical forms of employment, informal relations between assemblers and suppliers, deterioration of social protection, and frequent anti-union behaviours now seem to be the norm rather than the exception. Within a deepening onslaught on labour, often facilitated by a stronger subjugation of state institutions to private capital, the possibility to dispose of a casualised workforce actually appears as a desired competitive advantage, pushing the frontier of the lean manufacturing model towards new shapes of labour exploitation.

This work analyses different manifestations of labour precarisation, in two structurally different contexts. On the one side, building on a labour survey conducted in the NCR auto cluster in 2011-12, it discusses the political use of the contract labour system in India. Here, capital strategies to fragment and depoliticise labour, obstacles to labour organising, and potential challenges to casualisation are highlighted. On the other, it reports preliminary findings of an ongoing research in the SA auto industry. In this case, the objective is to show how even in presence of a strong metalworkers union, processes of outsourcing and the use of casual workers are still happening, and affecting labour standards in the sector. Overall, the work aims at comparing the condition of casual workers, capital-state dynamics, and union responses to the matter. Ultimately, inputs for a discussion on trade union renewal in direction of more inclusive practices towards casual workers are provided.

For what concerns methods of data collection, the work draws on a field research carried out in India (NCR), which included a questionnaire survey, interviews and focus groups, and on an ongoing round of interviews being conducted in South Africa (Gauteng).

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