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The origins and persistence of decent work deficits

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Job insecurity and vulnerability to exploitation are widespread throughout the world. Despite the adoption of the International Labour Organization's (ILO) decent work agenda in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as Goal 8: 'Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all', conditions for most workers have not improved. In a September 2023 update on progress toward SDG 8, the ILO wrote, 'Prospects for achieving SDG 8 are estimated to be "good" or "moderate" on only 8 of 23 indicators, based on the 2010 to 2022 trend.' In other words, 'The world is off track on nearly two-thirds of these SDG 8 indicators of progress' (ILO, 2023: 4). This assessment is supported by the 2024 ITUC Global Rights Index.

War and class struggle

How can we explain the emergence and persistence of decent work deficits? One answer might be found by first answering the question of how it was possible to achieve decent work in some places. The colonial powers and some of their neighbours enjoyed the fruits of exploiting the colonised countries, their people and their resources, which contributed to the successful capitalist industrialisation of the colonial powers (Bhambra, 2021). However, industrialisation uprooted peasant and artisan communities and impoverished large segments of the population. The forced colonisation of the temperate zones provided a safety valve for the surplus population, and high rates of infant mortality (and of childbearing mothers), as well as an overall slow increase in life expectancy, dampened the impact on the labour market in the 19th century. By the end of the nineteenth century, the resistance of the emerging working class enabled at least parts of it to share in the productivity gains made possible by industrialisation and the mechanisation of agriculture.

The first welfare state measures were a response to the growing militancy of the working class, which threatened to overthrow the capitalist system. A case in point was Bismarck's introduction of old-age pensions while outlawing the then Marxist-inspired Social Democratic Party of Germany. But they were also a response to the exigencies of war, to the question of the size of future soldiers (Prussia limited child labour partly because of its effects on stunted growth), and for legitimising reasons, for example by providing pensions to widows of fallen Union soldiers in the case of the United States (Skocpol, 1992).

But the key demiurge for the emergence of decent work in the "West" was the wars and revolutions of the 20th century. The horrors of World War I delegitimised the feudal and capitalist rulers of Europe. At the same time, the Russian Revolution offered an alternative. It led not only to the creation of the International Labour Organization and the beginning of the formulation of international labour standards, but also to economic and political concessions for the working class in many countries.

These gains were largely lost in the Great Depression of the 1930s. It took another world war to usher in the golden age of Fordism in the West, an era marked by the Cold War against the consolidated and rising Soviet Union and the newly established Communist People's Republic of China. While militant, communist-leaning sections of the working class in the "West" were repressed, material concessions were made in response to working-class militancy within the framework of capitalist relations. These concessions included participation in productivity gains and the expansion of the welfare state.

Legacy of colonialism

In recounting the events that led to the transatlantic welfare states, it becomes clear why decent work deficits persist on a global scale. Colonialism had enforced a global division of labour that left most of the world in the position of raw material suppliers. Displacement in agriculture and rapid population growth (driven in large part by an increase in life expectancy) fuelled a labour surplus that was much less absorbed by industrial development than in the days of the early industrialisers. The high productivity levels of modern industry require far fewer workers to produce the same output. Moreover, the migration safety valve is not as open as it was for the early industrialisers. The latter have imposed global economic rules that favour them and make it difficult for other countries to catch up — and with the end of state communism, there is less pressure on the elites of the catching-up countries to make material concessions to their respective working classes.

After the Cold War

The end of the Cold War also affected the position of the working class in the "West". While the fall of the Iron Curtain

and the demise of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s was rather swift, the threat of communism was diminished much earlier. On the one hand, postwar prosperity based on the fruits of mass production and a bargain between capital and labour had pacified the working class and reduced its ability to resist the rise of neoliberalism. On the other hand, the split between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China in the early 1970s and the opening of the People's Republic to capitalist relations in the early 1980s reduced the external threat to the "West". When India opened up to world capitalism after the collapse of the Soviet Union, transnational corporations gained access to the labour force of almost the entire world.

Enabled by the spread of neoliberal policies, the emergence of global chains of exploitation promoted labour competition on a global scale. The impact has been felt especially among low-skilled workers in the capitalist centres, but even more so in the capitalist periphery. Competition is fiercest among places that produce under similar conditions (e.g., surplus labour and low technology) and target similar market segments.

The one country among the few that has succeeded in challenging the technological supremacy of the early industrialisers, the People's Republic of China (PRC), has done so in part by setting the rules of engagement with transnational corporations. From a decent work perspective, however, China's success has also been based on the exploitation of its migrant workers and the continued suppression of the key dimensions of the decent work agenda, namely freedom of association and the fundamental human right to freedom of expression (Hui, 2018). Moreover, the scale of its industry and its international competitiveness have exerted considerable pressure on other countries seeking to enter low- and medium-tech markets. In doing so, the PRC has made it more difficult for other countries to implement the decent work agenda, while its success encourages elites in these other countries to pursue economic catch-up through authoritarian means as well (Duggan, 2020).

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that decent work deficits remain widespread. Fortunately, there are also countervailing forces at work. Workers' strike activity has been on the rise since the 2010s, and trade unions, together with NGOs, have been effective in exposing and addressing the appalling working conditions in some of the global exploitation chains. Their activities have contributed to various initiatives at the national and international levels to hold governments and corporations accountable to human rights. The WageIndicator Foundation's Labour Rights Index 2024 strikes an optimistic note, noting an improvement in labour laws in many countries. Hopefully, the better laws will be vigorously enforced.

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Many of the topics in this column are treated in depth by: M. Moore, C. Scherrer, & M. van den Linden (eds.), *The Elgar Companion to Decent Work and the Sustainable Development Goals*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

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