GRASS ROOTS ORGANISING IN GARMENT AND ELECTRICAL GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS IN SOUTHERN INDIA

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PROBLEMS AT THE ROOTS

In a range of global settings, we see that the established union movement struggles to successfully attract and represent new constituencies of labour.

India’s fragmented and politicised union movement is no exception.

It has largely neglected the low skilled and the vulnerable, and women’s interests in employment have been seriously and adversely impacted by this neglect.

Workforces that are cheap and compliant are portrayed as essential prerequisites for inward investment.

Women are associated with both these qualities, plus ‘a greater tolerance for monotonous work’...
DEVELOPING A ‘REPertoire OF OPPOSITION’

Organising on workers’ terms rather than pre-conceived notions of organising.

Highlights importance of localised social networks for mobilisation, but also integration of the ‘local’ with the ‘global’ and the artificial nature of any division between these two spaces.

Global value chains span transnational space.
SITES OF GRASS ROOTS ORGANISING.

Mobile phone manufacture - SEZs of Chennai.

Garment manufacture – the export facing factory zones of Bangalore.

Labour forces – employers generally target young, female, unskilled labour in both chains.

‘Spaces of exception’ for different reasons – on SEZs, firms are given wide ranging exemptions from regulation. In garment factories, laws which do exist are simply not enforced with any rigour.

Great hardship, but suspicion of established unions.
THE ‘GARMENT WORKFORCE’

Female, rural migrants are drawn in to Bangalore.

This process becomes part of the pattern of a young woman’s life – “from karment to garment”.

Recruitment problems currently, with some factories moving to the outskirts of the city – “but that brings them other problems – local politicians may get too close…”

Detached from family support structures.

Patterns of life are integrated into patterns of employment.

The factories meet targets because of the flexibility / vulnerability of this labour force, rather than good managerial practice.
THE ‘MOBILE PHONE WORKFORCE’

Young, mainly female, rural workforce is recruited through agents and flyers distributed around villages some distance from the SEZs.

Move to villages closer to the SEZ and get factory transport to work each day.

Semi-detached from family / villages.

19 young women in one house - unable to pay for power or groceries.

Generally a five year pattern prior to marriage.

Purpose to support the family, but wages so low that little economic benefit is fed back.
THE TASK OF THE ORGANISER

Has to overcome:

Employers’ deliberate targeting of specific sources of labour as part of their control strategy.

The complex dynamics associated with the dislocation of workers from the support of community structures, while socio-cultural controls affect the potential for contestation.

The use of fear – of closure / of being criminalised / of being physically harmed or emotionally abused.

Activists said the fear of closure was perhaps more imagined than real, but was nevertheless very effective in inhibiting organisation.
EXAMPLES OF EMPLOYERS’ REPERTOIRE ...

Use of local networks in organised protection against independent collective organisation

- Police – ‘we will fit you in ... to a crime’.
- Thugs

Use of community to control workers away from home - letters to parents over strike action.

Cultivation of ‘management’ unions.

The courts
ORGANISATION AND LOCAL NETWORKS – ORGANISERS’ REPERTOIRE

The workplace is a dangerous place to organise
Living spaces
Activists are workers
Embedded in communities of workers
Addressing life experiences
Patient organising
Use of the framework of regulation as leverage
CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION POINTS

Grass roots mobilisation is immensely difficult, risky and laborious and can take years of nurturing – “I didn’t understand patriarchy ... Now I do, and now I accept we have to begin within the home ...”

To split the local from the global is a false dichotomy, which employers already appear to recognise and exploit.

People do organise, at great risk, but effectiveness is undermined by fragmentation.