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“Mass Strikes and Social Movements in Brazil and India: Popular Mobilization in the Long Depression” by Jörg Novak, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) A Review Essay

Abstract

A review of Jörg Novak's “Mass Strikes and Social Movements in Brazil and India: Popular Mobilization in the Long Depression” published by Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Keywords

Mass Strikes, Social Movements, Book Review, Jörg Novak

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Jörg Nowak has written an important book that should be of interest to all labor activists and scholars, whether focusing on domestic or global struggles. By investigating two strikes in the Brazilian construction industry and two strikes in the Indian automobile industry that took place between 2010-2014, and then identifying important findings from his comparison between both, Nowak produces an excellent account of these struggles and gives activists and scholars much to think about regarding contemporary struggles and studies of labor wherever it might be located.

This is a theoretically-informed study that tries to tease out all that can be learned by studying these cases.

Nowak overall is arguing that labor scholars need a new model of strikes, and one that rejects the Euro-centric Model. He recognizes that the majority of workers in the world are located today in the so-called developing countries of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, and he thinks we need to learn from their experiences, especially regarding strikes; hence his cross-national study of particular strikes in two industries in Brazil and India.

Key to his examination is his willingness to delve critically into these strikes; he seeks “to understand and analyze forms of popular organization that often remain invisible.” He seeks to discover “what types of organization facilitated those strikes and which types of organization and coordination did emerge in the course of the strikes” (p. 3). In other words, he rejects the idea that mass strikes such as these under examination are “spontaneous,” and he desires to understand them.

This approach is critical for his purpose, which is to argue that the European/North American model of business unionism that limits strikes overwhelmingly to the workplace will not “work” in the Global South.

Key to developing this understanding is not only to examine workers’ actions, but also academics’ action in trying to analyze these actions. As he points out, “Reflection, education and communication are not neutral processes of scientific representation,” but sees “The role of the researcher and of theory construction is thus rather one of an adviser or ally but also of providing visibility for certain processes of popular organisation and popular construction of knowledge” (p. 10).

He elaborates:

I adhere to Chandra’s insistence on thickness, complexity, contextualization and realism in what I call a “reckless” but nonetheless sympathetic analysis earlier. The analyses in this book nonetheless run the risk of identification with the subjects or imposition of a political-theoretical framework. The person of the researcher is never a neutral one, and the researcher’s own perspective and context will inevitably form part of the enterprise. But at least the reflection about this relationship between the researcher and the activities of the objects of research--in their role of subjects--might serve as a guard and warning sign against an overly

blunt imposition of theoretical and political frameworks on the density and thickness of everyday social relations of conflict (pp. 12-13).

And further, "... it is for sure a hall mark of progressive and left politics to permanently question types and forms of representation and to not take them for granted, since representation if inevitably tied up with domination," and concluding "Thus, the role of representation that scholars assume has to be put in question permanently" (p. 13-14).

Accordingly, in this study, Nowak argues that to understand what is really going on among workers in the Global South, researchers of global labor need to quit seeing the trade union as a necessary actor and the workplace solely as the place of labor organization and mobilization of labor; these are blind spots that he argues researchers must reject, "decentering" them. He argues this is necessary to be able to see what is actually occurring.

From here--in an attempt to build a theoretical model that better understands these "southern" developments--he suggests it is necessary to build a theory of strikes. After an intensive and extensive survey of the literature, he develops "three forms of mass strikes in terms of organizational form and goals: *demonstrative mass strikes, centrally coordinated mass strikes and worker-led fighting mass strikes*" (emphasis in original-p. 16).

Before he delves into these three forms of mass strikes, he examines the larger political economy in which the strikes he examines take place. He focuses on the changes in the global production and the global economy has changed since the 1970s, "towards a system based on imperialism, global production networks, unequal exchange and a labour regime of informal precarity," as "the global dispersion of supply chains and subcontractors allowed to escape lower rates of profit in core countries, resulting in the global quest for the lowest possible wage level." He argues that "this model of production ... represents the long-term context for the mass strikes that erupted in the wake of the global economic crisis." With this, he also examines the "short term" impact of the 2007-08 crisis had on emerging countries and especially on Brazil and India" (p. 97).

In other words, Nowak is carefully positioning his research findings, both in the theoretical literature on strikes, and in the global political economy.

His chapter on strikes in the auto industry in India is quite interesting. He compares the strikes in the passenger car company Maruti Suzuki with one in the motorcycle and three-wheel producer Bajaj Auto; the former occurring in 2011 and 2012, while the latter took place in 2013. Nowak puts this into a larger context:

What has been taking place since the 1990s, and then more pronounced during the 2000s, has often been term as an "informalization of the formal sector" Between 1999-2000 and 2009-2010 informal employment across all sectors increased from 91.5 to 91.9 percent while the share of the informal sector in total employment decreased from 86 to 84 per cent during the same period. This seemingly contradictory tendency accounts for the increasing overlap of informal and formal work. "According to data from the Annual Survey of Industries, contract labour

constituted only 16% of all workers in organized manufacturing in 1999. It rose to 20 per cent in 2000, 27 percent in 2004 and 33 percent in 2009-10. Between 1999 and 2004, non-agricultural employment attracted forty million new workers which all ended up in the informal sector” ... (p.130).

What this means for workers is that employers are consciously dividing the workforce into two different groups: permanent workers and contract workers. And management is playing the interests of the two groups against each other, while the workers have not able to unify the two groups of workers and direct them against management.

Nowak did an in-depth investigation of each of the two cases he studied. He focused first on Maruti Suzuki, discussing the company’s development over time; the conflict in 2011 and 2012; the forms of organization that emerged from the strike, including the internal organization of the union, alliances on the local and national levels, international alliances, new organizations that emerged from the internal conflict; and then concluded this section by relating these findings to the questions put forth at the beginning of the chapter.

In his section on Bajaj Auto--which this study was the first of the motorcycle sector--basically followed the same template as the study of Maruti Suzuki.

Yet, following these detailed studies, Nowak compares the two. Arguably the most important factor was that a large network of people beyond the workplace that supported the Maruti workers:

The relative success that the [Maruti Suzuki Workers Union] had at the level of the workplace, albeit only for the permanent workers, was based on this network and the repercussion of the strike in the media. We can thus state that a focus on unions, employers and the state is insufficient to understand the dynamics that emerged during the strike at Bajaj Auto and in the course of the mobilization around the Maruti workers for the whole period from 2011 to 2017.

While there emerged a common perspective when strikes and other actors cooperated, it was mainly focused on the issues of the strikers and did rarely combine the issues of strikers and the issues of those strike actors. Thus, the class content that emerged from workplace mobilisation did not combine with a larger popular content of mobilisation.

In both strikes, formal union organisation was based on informal workplace organisation which confirms the approach to go beyond a strike distinction between both. Informal workplace organisation [served-KS] as a basis for decisions of the formal trade union leadership during both strikes. Thus, we can conclude that informal workplace organisation is essential, and that informal networks beyond the workplace can be an important resource (pp. 183-184).

Nowak follows his intensive examination of these two automobile sector strikes in India with a similarly intensive investigation of mass strikes in the construction sector in Brazil. He begins:

The Brazilian construction sector saw a wave of mass strikes since 2011 that extended into the year 2014. The high number of strikers--540,000 in 2011, 467,000 in 2012 and 420,000 in 2013 ...--was accompanied by other remarkable features: most strikes have not been organized by trade unions but erupted from the rank and file and were often accompanied by large scale rioting and property destruction (193).

In parallel to his two cases in India, Nowak examines large scale construction projects in Brazil, at Pecem and Belo Monte. He examines each group of strikes in depth, as well as various factors that might affect different outcomes. (While done well, it's not necessary to delve into them for this review.)

In evaluating this book, what pleasantly surprised this author was finding that Nowak was aware of and related to the struggles of the CUT of Brazil, KMU of the Philippines and COSATU of South Africa during the 1980s; it was these efforts--really extending from the 1970s to the early 1990s, and which continues today in the case of KMU--that created the basis for the concept of "social movement unionism" or SMU. Nowak recognizes there is much to be learned from them, and this is particularly gratifying to this researcher of KMU and SMU theorist. Having an understanding of this broader type of trade unionism helps provide Nowak with a stronger base for this study.

When he compares the four strikes together, he sees some interesting things. First, different than the struggles by COSATU, CUT and the KMU in the late 1970s-'80s, "however wound the trajectory of social movement unionism in the 1980s was, its result was a coherent political project which cannot be identified in the wave of mass strikes between 2010 and 2014" (293). In fact, "the lack of a political project and a coherent narrative limited the effectivity of the strikes beyond the economic realm" (295). He refers to Andre Singer, one of the proponents of Lula's reign in the Workers' Party (PT), and writes, "Singer notes specifically that neither [Dilma] Rousseff as president nor the PT or the trades unions tried to politicize the strikes and other popular protests..." (295). Further, "We can conclude that the strike movements both in India and Brazil were unable to create a larger narrative and ideological framework, in spite of or because of their mass character" (296).

In other words, he finds an "ideological vacuum on the left" (297), in which the mass strikes did not fit and from which could not amplify the impact of these struggles. He also discusses industrial concentration, as well as the global conjectures, on strikes.

He joins these findings into a section on "Theoretical Conclusions" (pp. 309-312):

- "The usefulness to include non-class relations and social relations beyond the workplace into a theory of strikes has been proven" (309).
- "... a narrow focus of strike analysis on the state, employers and unions would not be able to capture the multiplicity of actors and social relations around those strike movements" (309).

- “While there are specific dynamics emanating from the workplace, once a strike has started, factors beyond the workplace become more important, which does include not only the wider social environment but also the insertion of the specific workplace into production networks, and thus the ability of workers to impinge on profit-making” (309).

In other words, his general arguments--that strikes cannot be confined to the workplace, separate from larger social connections and networks, and that the union is not the only force for successful strike organization--have been confirmed. These are useful findings. But, he notes, “... the mass strike as a sectoral strike wave, even when embedded into a larger scenario of record numbers of strikes, as was the case in Brazil from 2011 to 2014, will run up against limits if the national political scenario is not favorable” (313).

This, to my way of thinking, requires that we step back and think about this: ultimately, if not crudely, he suggests that the success of mass strikes is dependent on a favorable national political situation. This is *not*, in my opinion, what the research on social movement unionism has shown; in fact, it showed the opposite: the research on CUT, KMU and COSATU has each shown the development of determined trade unions to force open societies has been what has led to significant success. Each of these three labor movements played central roles in the overthrowing of dictatorships; they were not founded in periods of favorable national political situations but, over time, worked to *create* such.

[The “retreat” from social movement unionism as found in Brazil and South Africa came when the unions subordinated themselves to multiclass political organizations, which were the Workers’ Party (PT) in Brazil and the African National Congress (ANC) and its “tripartite alliance”--ANC, the South African Communist Party, and COSATU, with the ANC dominant--in South Africa. The KMU has not subordinated itself to the Communist Party of the Philippines or any others, and remains engaged in social movement unionism; for the latter, see Scipes, 2018.]

Again, Nowak distinguishes mass strikes in the early twenty-teens from that of developments associated with social movement unionism:

Other than in social movement unionism in the 1980s, the political anger of those strikes was not national dictatorships, but companies protected by weak reformist governments aligned with neoliberalism. Thus, the adversary in these cases was rather the global model of capitalism than one of its national variants. While the strike movements in the 1980s saw capitalism as its adversary, too, it was the popular protest against dictatorships that gave the mass strikes their dynamic and context. In the 2010s, the main dynamic was the inclusion of India and Brazil in the global economy and workers primarily strived to participate in the wealth they created. The labor unrest resulted from the fact that this participation was not part of the prevailing model of capitalism, and less so in the right-wing governments that succeeded the ‘weak reformists’. Thus, the strikes expressed that workers took the words and proclamations of governments at face value. It is important to note that the neoliberal state offered no place for these workers’ demands. Regulation

in favour of workers was weak, often absent, or insufficient, especially in terms of health and safety procedures in all its facets. In contrast to this, governments were quick to send the police, often special troops, if conflicts escalated (297).

I think this is an extremely important finding with global implications far beyond India and Brazil: “the neoliberal state offered no place for these workers’ demands” (297). In fact, I believe the implications of this finding extend across and far beyond the Global South, including into most of the countries of the Global North today. The “powers that be,” both in corporations and in respective governments, will not allow workers to generally improve their situations nor will they protect workers unless workers can organize themselves to *force* such.

I don’t think Nowak understands the importance of the finding immediately above.

So, how to tie all of this together?

While Nowak’s argument that we need to see what workers are actually doing in their “mass strikes” in the Global South is absolutely on target, and I agree that we need to move from a European/North American model to one(s) based on the reality workers are facing today in the Global South, I think Nowak is giving too much weight to his particular examples: he picks from interesting cases, but they really are only two cases in two particular industries in two countries; two disproportionately large and economically developed countries. He may, ultimately, be found to be correct with his analysis, but that will only be possible to determine when there are many other cases to consider.

Plus, his countries are among the more developed countries in the “developing world”--Brazil and India--and how do they apply to other, less developed countries? He does not address that question.

Nowak takes theory seriously, and tries to wring all he can out of existing theory. However, I think he focuses on a tactic--the phenomena of the mass strike--but does not consider how such strikes fit into a larger strategy, much less a vision for a society in which the working class is “emancipated” or “liberated,” much less suggesting how these workers are going to achieve such. And it is my sense that this larger vision for workers is what Nowak seeks. In other words, in my opinion, his chosen theory--working from that of Rosa Luxemburg--actually diverts him away from where he wants to go.

I think his next step in regards to these struggles is to try to understand how these particular struggles have affected the local society nearby, and how they have affected the workers who participated in them. What is the respective aftermath? To me, besides signaling to society that something is seriously “amiss,” a particular strike is important for how it lays the groundwork for progressive organization and subsequent struggle in at least that area. And if its existence has been spread beyond the local area--say through the mass media or through individual travels, dispersing outcomes--how has this affected workers’ and social movement activists’ goals of countrywide organization?

It is this issue--worker organization--which I believe Nowak is truly seeking to elaborate: what is the organization that emerges from these respective mass struggles that can not only support future strikes but go far beyond them? A strike, in and of itself, no matter how big or important, is simply not enough.

I want to return to the point that I found in Nowak's work which I believe he overlooked in his effort to address his concerns: The "powers that be," both in corporations and in respective governments, will not allow workers to generally improve their situations nor will they protect workers unless workers can organize themselves to *force* such. What this means is that we need to discard any notion that governments or corporations--whether run by our enemies or, should they prevail, our allies--are going to solve our problems for us. After all, "the neoliberal state offered no place for these workers' demands" (297). This means two things: (1) working people and our allies need to build organizations determined to address our problems and/or issues; and (2), to be ultimately successful, we must create solutions for the overwhelming majority of human beings on the planet in addressing oppression and the related problems of capitalism, war, climate change, imperialism, classism, racism, misogyny and homophobia--and we have to use our determined organizations to begin addressing these issues (for one example of the latter, see Scipes, 2017).

And finally, there is one more issue to be mentioned. While Nowak positively noted some of this author's work--which is both unusual and highly appreciated--he only considered my earlier work from 1992 and 2001, giving him ultimately only part of my work when he needed considerably more. In fact, my 1996 book was an effort to empirically establish the concept of "social movement unionism" by examining in depth the experiences of the KMU between 1980-1994; my 2014a article was designed to share what I think other workers could learn from the KMU; and my 2014b article was an effort to disentangle the "intellectual goulash" that had been made of the SMU concept particularly by writers from North America. My 2018 article was based on field research that found that KMU was still guided by the concept of social movement unionism (see Scipes, 1992, 1996, 2001, 2014a, 2014b, 2018). Had Nowak seen these works, he would have seen that I had taken a similar approach to that he advocates in my efforts to understand the development of the KMU, by examining what the workers actually did and not putting them in a European/North American framework, and he certainly would have seen how workers had organized and developed their organizations in the face of extensive violence.

The point here is not to disagree with Nowak, but to let him know there's at least one other researcher than has approached "Global South" labor in a manner he advances; however, this work was started a few years earlier. In other words, I agree with him and his efforts to understand these workers' struggles--and incorporating my previous research to his would only strengthen his own extremely important argument.

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