

Capital, Migration, and the Left

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Few topics are as politically charged as “international migration”. This ITH Conference wants to discuss the issue from a global and historical perspective, reaching from the sixteenth century to the present. Changing employment opportunities and income inequalities within and between countries will be its starting point. The agency of migrants and the relationship of the political left (ranging from left-liberal to radical anti-capitalist) to the phenomenon of migration will be situated and discussed within this large frame. We use a broad definition of migration, including free and unfree labour, temporary and permanent migrants, as well as the full variety of status ranging from sans papiers and asylum seekers/refugees to classical migrant workers.

Over the last two centuries international wage differentials have grown enormously and national labour markets are divided into more or less impermeable segments, with migrants usually predominating the low-wage sectors (and sometimes trying to move upwards into higher segments). Workers in the higher-placed segments and some sectors of the political left tend to see the low-wage sectors as a threat. They can respond to the challenge posed by badly paid competitors in three different, but frequently connected, ways: 1) exclusion, i.e. the attempt to block immigration; 2) institutionalization, i.e. the confinement of low-wage workers to certain occupations and economic activities; or 3) solidarity, i.e. the attempt to raise lower wages to higher levels; this includes demands for global redistribution (at the expense of capital/propertied classes and/or at the expense of the labouring classes) in order to improve conditions in the emigration countries. The first set of questions is: Under which conditions do higher-paid workers prefer which response? How has

the labour movement responded to this condition? How do migrant workers relate and respond to these varieties?

From the perspective of migrant workers there is a second set of choices. For them there are several options or at least they can choose between different plans and strategies when migrating: 1) permanent immigration of the worker him/herself and, if possible, with his/her family; 2) commuting in a wide range of temporal rhythms, depending on the distance between workplace and home and on job requirements (daily, weekly, monthly, seasonally, annually or multi-annually). These options, of course, overlap and the migrants' plans and strategies may change due to changing conditions, personal expectations and preferences, or experiences. (Potential) migrants also develop strategies to negotiate, sidestep or alter migration regimes; for instance, they may migrate as refugees, or engage in cross-border marriages, when facing restrictive migration regimes. Alternatively, potential migrant workers can choose to focus on the improvement of their conditions at home. They can use a variety of strategies: 1) collective struggle for the improvement of working conditions and higher wages; 2) individual strategies of upward mobility; 3) demands for global redistribution (at the expense of capital/propertied classes and/or workers in privileged countries). The second set of questions is: Under which conditions do migrant workers prefer which strategy? How are their choices affected by the preferences and actions of their autochthonous competitors on the labour market? How has the political left, including organizations involving migrants, related to the agency of migrants?

Third, there are the strategies pursued by employers. Wage increases in general and rising wages in the low-wage sectors in particular may induce businesses to develop at least six different strategies to maintain profitability: 1) the geographical relocation of production or certain components of production (commodity chains) to regions with cheaper workers and less regulated work; in doing so, capital may develop strategies to ensure more advantageous regulations concerning capital movement and labour law; 2) the reduction of the number of labourers through the transformation of labour processes; 3) a shift to new economic branches and product lines; 4) the shift of capital from production and trade to the finance sector ("financialization"); 5) the shift to other labour relations, e.g. selfemployment; 6) influence on migration regimes in order to secure additional influx of cheap labour. The third set of questions is: Under which conditions does capital opt for geographical relocation or geographical re-composition? Under which conditions does it opt for one of the other strategies? How has the political left responded to these various strategies?

Naturally, the relocation of capital has social consequences both for the old and the new locations, and both for autochthonous and migrant workers. At the old locations unemployment will probably increase. Families of unemployed workers may use several methods to cope with the job loss, including e.g. increased subsistence activities; migrant workers may return to their (former) homes –perhaps attracted by the relocation of capital to their home region. Both groups

may also decide to move to more promising locations, elsewhere in the country or abroad – thus leading to new forms of migration. The new production site will often not only attract workers from nearby, but also from further afield. So, in various ways capital moves may lead to workers' moves. The fourth set of questions is: Under which conditions does the movement of capital lead to out migration and/or immigration? How have migration regimes shaped these processes?

The aim of the conference is to discuss these questions at an empirical and a conceptual level and invites papers which duly situate their empirical case or conceptual inquiry within the larger frame of the discussion of capital and labour on the move as summarized in this Call for Papers. Which migration and labour market theories shed light on the interrelationship between (non-)moving capital and (non-)moving workers? Which empirical case studies refine our understanding of the interaction between the mobility of capital and of labour? How have labour movements and/or other social movements contributed to shaping these interactions? What has been the role of (state-operated) migration regimes in shaping these interactions? How has the political left discussed the question of capital and labour on the move?
