Domestic workers, informal construction workers, and the state...and almost everything else

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Experiences Organizing Informal Workers (EOIW)

www.irle.ucla.edu/research/ExperiencesOrganizingInformalWorkers.php

Current Research: Experiences Organizing Informal Workers

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Research Partners: UC Berkeley; University of Massachusetts; University of Campinas, Brazil; Cornell University; Peking University; Hong Kong Polytechnic University; Johns Hopkins University; Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa, Mexico; Center for Research and Higher Education in Social Anthropology (Mexico); University of Witwatersrand, South Africa; University of Toronto; York University; CUNY; Rutgers University; and UCLA Departments of Urban Planning and Sociology.

Informal work makes up the majority of employment in the Global South, and a growing share of jobs in much of the Global North, including the United States. Though informal work by definition falls beyond the reach or grasp of labor regulations, informal workers around the globe have sought to organize for better conditions, in forms ranging from worker centers, to cooperatives, to traditional trade unions. Experiences Organizing Informal Workers brings together scholars from a varied set of countries to draw comparative lessons about which strategies work and which do not, where, why, and how. Research products to date include ***Informal Worker Organizing as a Strategy for Improving Subcontracted Work In the Textile and Apparel Industries of Brazil, South Africa, India and China***. Ongoing studies include research on informal workers' struggles for the right to make use of public space, and global patterns in domestic worker and informal construction worker organizing.

Domestic workers (DW) and informal construction workers (CW)*

- Differences (gendering) and commonalities
- Draw on literature, especially on six-country comparative study of informal DW and CW organizing (includes Agarwala and Chun)
- Plan of presentation
  - Developments on the ground, by sector
  - Theory, research, strategy--broader

Developments on the ground: Domestic work

- Growing in some countries (e.g. China), declining in others (Mexico, US)
- Recent expansion (local, national, global) of:
  - DW organizations: International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) launched 2013 (earlier antecedents: CONLACTRAHO 1988 [Goldsmith]; Atlanta strike 1893! [Nadasen])
  - Regulation of terms of DW: ILO Convention 189 adopted 2011 (again, antecedents: New York State 1976, China 2000, Peru 2003, etc.)
  - Roles of WIEGO and IUF[ood] global union
  - But: Most DW still lack organization and protection

Developments on the ground: Informal construction

- Widespread global shift of construction work to informality
- Global union, Building and Woodworkers International (BWI), has identified the problem, but so far limited success in organizing or protecting informal CW
- Most responses localized
  - Small successes: China (wage theft), Guatemala (advocacy)
  - More institutionalized: India (welfare funds-Agarwala), USA (job centers)
  - Most substantial: Korean Construction Workers Union (collective bargaining—Lee and Chun), Qatar-BWI World Cup (2022) agreement (mega-sporting events campaigns). (Both achieved by unions!)
  - Holes: Mexico, South Africa

Theory and research theme 1: Recognition as workers

- Domestic workers: women, often migrants, doing reproductive/care work
  - *"Trabajadora del hogar"* (household worker) - CONLACTRAHO
  - "The work that makes all other work possible" – NDWA (USA)
  - Identity cards (Agarwala and others)
- Both sectors: "Othering" of migrants, especially unauthorized migrants
  - Korea's split domestic work sector (Chun)
  - Proposed legislation specifically targeting day laborers (USA 2000s)
  - Job centers as recognition

Theory and research theme 2: Appropriate levels, forms of regulation

- Level: “liberate entrepreneurship” vs. “ensure a floor” (etc.—Meagher)
- Form
  - Formalize informal work or upgrade it? (Agarwala)
  - Control of public space (day laborers, plus street vendors, waste pickers...). USA—other?

Theory and research theme 3: How do they mobilize and win?

- The nature of movements
  - Counter-movements (Polanyi)
  - Variety of forms. IDWF breakthrough to multi-form; BWI stuck?
- The nature of their leverage
  - Vote banking (Agarwala)
  - Symbolic power (Chun)
  - Alliances, including with formal unions
    - Self-organization → Alliances → Political power (Sarmiento et al)
    - Funding
- Intersectional identities → mobilization, symbolic power, allies (Rojas et al)

Strategic dilemmas: The two S's and the two A's

"NGOs"

- Sympathy without solidarity
- Advocacy without accountability

"Unions"

- Solidarity without sympathy
- Accountability without advocacy

Research imperatives

- Generalization, including via cross-national and cross-sectoral comparison (watch for Agarwala-Chun special issue of PPST)
- Research dialogue that is interdisciplinary, global
  - Engage researchers on formal work, on labor precarity
- Researchers must catch up with the activists!
  - Research Network on Domestic Worker Rights, DOMEqual, EOIW...but IDWF in > 40 countries!
  - Construction?

Thanks!