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CHAPTER 9

MASS STRIKES IN A GLOBAL CONJUNCTURE OF CRISIS: A LUXEMBURGIAN ANALYSIS

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On 8 and 9 January 2019, an event occurred in India that was not covered much by the media outside the country. What took place was probably one of the largest strikes in global history. According to estimates, 150–200 million workers took part. Ten main union federations – different party affiliations notwithstanding – supported the two-day general strike. The main demands were that the Modi government revoke plans to liberalise labour law and abandon the idea to further flexibilise labour markets in a country with a vast informal sector, roll out a national minimum wage of ₹18 000 and stop privatisation measures. In 2015 and 2016, Indian workers had already staged general strikes of a similar magnitude (Chattopadhyay and Marik 2016; Hensman 2017: 173; Miyamura 2016: 1922; Shyam Sundar 2019; Woodcock 2019).

The Indian general strikes follow a pattern that is currently visible in many parts of the world: there are large-scale stoppages framed as political confrontations between working people and governments (see Gallas and Nowak 2016; Nowak and Gallas 2014). For instance, there was a general strike on 14 November 2012 throughout Portugal and Spain, which was directed against the politics of austerity imposed on the two countries in order to address the sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone. Again, this was historic because it was based on a truly transnational mobilisation. Similarly, there was a strike wave in the South African platinum belt in recent years. It started with the events leading up to the Marikana massacre in 2012 and included a five-month stoppage in 2014–2015. This was not only the
longest and most costly labour dispute in South African history, it also represented an (at times very violent) confrontation between the repressive state apparatus and tens of thousands of workers.

What comes to mind, in this context, is Rosa Luxemburg’s famous pamphlet *The Mass Strike* (1906). In it, she provides a conjunctural analysis of workers’ struggles in the run-up to the first Russian Revolution in 1905 and discusses the strategic implications of the events for the labour movement in Germany and beyond. Obviously, it would be a mistake to draw simplistic analogies between struggles that took place in just one country in the early 1900s and those that occur all around the world over 100 years later, at the time of a global crisis of capitalism – all the more since Russia was about to experience a revolution, whereas at present, labour movements seem to be on the defensive in most parts of the world. But there are also a number of similarities: the struggles are based on mass mobilisations; they have a wide geographical spread; they impact directly on the political scene and they articulate different forms of protest. The similarities suggest that there are general conditions and patterns of the mass strike in capitalist surroundings, which may be relevant for understanding why it emerges in the current political conjuncture, and what its effects are. Correspondingly, my wager in this chapter is that some of Luxemburg’s insights help us explain the present-day strategic significance of mass strikes for labour.

THE MASS STRIKE FROM A LUXEMBURGIAN PERSPECTIVE

According to Luxemburg, there are two features that set the mass strike apart from other modes of labour struggle, most importantly the sectoral economic strike for higher wages. First – and this is obvious – the mass strike is characterised by mass participation. Second, we are not looking at a singular, clearly defined instance of protest action, but at waves of stoppages and other forms of protest that are connected because they all contribute to creating a thrust towards revolution. This becomes clear when we look at Luxemburg’s observations on the Russian Revolution:

> Political and economic strikes, mass strikes and partial strikes, demonstrative strikes and fighting strikes, general strikes of individual branches of industry and general strikes in individual towns, peaceful wage struggles and street massacres, barricade fighting – all these run through one another, run side by side, cross one another, flow in and over one another – it is a
ceaselessly moving, changing sea of phenomena. And the law of motion of these phenomena is clear: it does not lie in the mass strike itself nor in its technical details, but in the political and social proportions of the forces of the revolution. (Luxemburg 1906: 140–141)

It follows that the ‘mass strike’ in a Luxemburgian understanding is an umbrella term for a range of practices of protest connected through a general political thrust, and the fact that they are carried out by workers and are somehow associated with their capacity to exercise power through the refusal to work.

Jörg Nowak (2019: 49–50) argues that Luxemburg’s description allows us to identify five features that characterise the mass strike as a mode of struggle. This concerns, first of all, its aims, which are neither strictly economic nor strictly political but shift back and forth over time. It follows that the mass strike is a form of conducting working-class politics that is an alternative to operating within the official channels of political decision making often used by workers’ parties (Cortés-Chirino 2016: 379). Consequently, it questions the separation between the economic and political domination that is constitutive of the capitalist mode of production (see Poulantzas 1978: 54).

This also suggests, second, that the mass strike disrupts the political scene. It directly impacts on political discourses and decision making, and politicians, in one or way or another, will react to it.

Third, it has a mobilising effect on workers as a class, not just on specific sectors – and it results in a class confrontation that is discernible as such for the workers involved. Put differently, the mass strike is a collective practice of workers that acts as a catalyst of working-class formation: through engaging in struggles, they develop what Luxemburg calls ‘class feeling’ (1906: 129). They experience that they are connected to fellow workers, and that their collective interest is opposed to the interests of capital.

Fourth, it expands beyond localised focal points and proliferates.

Significantly, features one to four all have potentially destabilising effects on the capitalist mode of production. So fifth, and most importantly, the mass strike takes place in the context of a revolutionary conjuncture and is a mode of struggle reflecting the revolutionary aspirations of the working class.

All of this suggests that the mass strike is a highly specific mode of struggle, and that not every strike with mass participation qualifies as mass strike, according to Luxemburg. In order to avoid misunderstandings, it makes sense to speak of a revolutionary mass strike, which is offensive and driven by class feeling and working-class politics.
The implication is that the mass strike as a mode of struggle was the adequate response of workers to the tendencies at work at the level of the conjuncture in Luxemburg’s day – adequate in the sense that their strategic choices were likely to bring results in line with their collective interests. This also suggests that it cannot be transferred easily to other times and places, which is in line with Luxemburg’s critique of anarchist, voluntarist positions that simply want to ‘switch on’ the revolution by promoting the idea of a mass strike (1906: 115–116). In Luxemburg’s words, ‘the mass strike does not produce the revolution, but the revolution produces the mass strike’ (1906: 147). Luxemburg suggests here that conjunctural circumstances invite specific modes of struggle, not the other way round – and that any strategic reflection must start from assessing those circumstances and finding out how to best intervene in them. In other words, the mass strike as defined by Luxemburg may function as a driver of working-class formation in revolutionary conjunctures. It would be a grave mistake, however, to believe that it would emerge under other conjunctural circumstances if one simply called for it.

THE GLOBAL CONJUNCTURE: AN ONGOING CRISIS

Luxemburg’s line of argument suggests that the Russian mass strike was successful insofar as it contributed to a revolution under the leadership of the working class. In fact, her optimism about the prospects of labour-led insurrections seemed vindicated when the October Revolution shook up Russia and the world in 1917. And yet, the failure of revolutionary movements across Europe in subsequent years – including the smashing of the Spartacus Revolt in Germany in January 1919 that culminated in the murder of Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht – and the rise of the far right in Italy and Germany signalled the end of the revolutionary conjuncture in early twentieth century Europe. The working class was now on the defensive, and what represented adequate modes of struggle had shifted.

In his book *Fascism and Dictatorship* (1970: 156–165), Nicos Poulantzas shows that the failure of leading representatives of party communism to understand this conjunctural shift and to embrace an adequate, defensive mode of struggle in the new conjuncture – the united front – paved the way for the victory of fascism. This suggests that asking what the lessons of Luxemburg’s analysis are for the struggles of today requires us, firstly, to gain an understanding of the current political conjuncture and secondly, to evaluate whether the collective activities of workers are adequate to it.

When I speak of the current political conjuncture, this gives rise to the question of scale. Conjunctural analyses are often conducted at the national level (see,
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for example, Ege and Gallas 2019) – in particular since many institutions heavily affecting class relations are still national institutions. If we consider the spread of the crisis of capitalism in the last ten years, however, it makes sense to speak of a global political conjuncture.

Obviously, it is beyond the scope of a book chapter to provide a detailed conjunctural analysis of the state of labour in global capitalism. Nevertheless, my wager is that it is possible to circumnavigate the insurmountable challenge of producing a complete picture. I propose identifying key elements of the global conjuncture of labour through taking a two-staged approach: as a first approximation, I provide a rough sketch of important labour struggles in the age of crisis from around the world; and in a second step, I compare labour struggles in the US and India – two countries that represent the global North and South respectively and play a key role in global geopolitics. If it is possible to discern common trends in these vastly different countries that also resonate with the global picture, it can be argued that they have a general relevance.

But before launching into a detailed discussion of labour struggles, I would like to make three general, admittedly impressionistic, remarks about the current global conjuncture. First of all, it is still marked by a protracted crisis of financial capitalism, compounded by a deep ecological crisis. The magnitude of the latter is only starting to come into view, and the international community and national governments have failed, so far, to curb carbon emissions (Satgar 2018). The former first emerged in 2007, in the form of a global banking crisis. Global GDP growth may have picked up since then, but the institutions of global capitalism have not been restructured much. Scholars point out that attempts to re-regulate the financial sector have been limited (Christophers 2016; Rixen 2013); that the ‘too big to fail’ problem has not been addressed properly; that profitability in the banking sector remains weak (Bell and Hindmoor 2018) and that attempts to act against financial crime have been lacklustre (Ryder 2016). Put differently, the crisis is ongoing, and financial capitalists have so far been able to defend the deep integration of finance across national boundaries and its leading position. Correspondingly, finance-oriented accumulation strategies still dominate at the level of economic, fiscal and monetary policy (see Palley 2016: 124–127; Scherrer 2011). As a consequence, the room for manoeuvre of organised labour is seriously constrained. In recent decades, a scalar incongruence has emerged between the often global networks of capital and the mainly local and national associations of workers. Under conditions of a deep crisis and the resultant insecurity for capital, the negative effects of this incongruence for workers are magnified. They are exposed to even fiercer international competition, and productivist arrangements with capital, which are characterised by relative surplus
value production and the translation of productivity gains into increasing living standards, are difficult to achieve.

Second, there is a realignment at the level of geopolitics – with a move from a unipolar world characterised by US supremacy to a multipolar world under US dominance. There are new contender states such as China and Germany playing a key geopolitical role in their region and beyond – and an old adversary of the US, Russia, that has gained weight again in recent years. The global predominance of the US is not seriously threatened due to US military might, the US economy still being the largest in the world and the US dollar serving as world money (see Panitch and Gindin 2012). But there are various frontiers where it is tested and contested – not just in geopolitical conflict zones like Syria and the Ukraine, but also inside international organisations marked by US predominance. This concerns, most importantly, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the UN and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The stance of the Trump administration on countries like Iran and Syria, international trade and the Paris Agreement has been met with open opposition from countries usually seen as reliable allies of the US. In the context of heightening geopolitical tensions, there is extra room for nationalist interpellations, which work directly against working-class formation – across but also within national boundaries.

Third, concerning class politics, power blocs across the world are launching fierce attacks on labour – be it in the form of attacks on the right to strike, austerity agendas hitting public spending or direct attacks on organised labour involving repressive state apparatuses. Left organisations and parties have, on the whole, been unsuccessful in terms of thwarting these offensives, and there is a rightwards trend in politics in countries across the globe. Accordingly, authoritarian populist political leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro, Rodrigo Duterte, Sebastian Kurz, Viktor Orbán, Narendra Modi and Donald Trump can build on broad popular support, including the support of certain groups of workers.

THE POLITICS OF THE MASS STRIKE

In the wake of the crisis, governments across the globe have been working to restore the profitability of investments for capital. Attacks on organised labour have been an integral part of this mode of crisis management. There have been direct attacks, such as the imposition of restrictions on the right to strike, but also indirect attacks such as decreases in the social wage resulting from cuts to state expenditure.

In this situation, a pattern of resistance from labour has emerged that resembles the revolutionary mass strike in Luxemburg’s sense, but is fundamentally
different in its purpose. This is the defensive mass strike. I use the term to refer to a politicised strike wave, with a mobilising effect on the entire working class, that is aimed at thwarting government interventions made on behalf of capital. It is a collective act of resistance that builds on mass participation and disrupts official politics. In other words, it contributes to working-class formation – just like its revolutionary counterpart.

Importantly, strikes with mass participation become politicised in the current conjuncture almost by default – either from the outside, that is, through other political actors, or by the workers themselves (see Gallas 2018: 239–240). On the one hand, the repression against organised labour is an important driver of politicisation. As Luxemburg (1906: 150) observed with reference to Russia, ‘In a state in which every form and expression of the labor movement is forbidden, in which the simplest strike is a political crime, it must logically follow that every economic struggle will become a political one.’ More generally speaking, one can say that any strike wave of a certain size becomes a pertinent political issue because it disrupts everyday life to such a degree that political actors will feel compelled to comment on it, be it approvingly or disapprovingly. On the other hand, strikes also become politicised through the strikers themselves. The neoliberal age is marked by a supremacy of capital that is reflected at the political level in the neoliberal turns of social democratic parties; the erection of legal and institutional safeguards that shield the field of monetary and fiscal policy from political interventions not in line with neoliberal orthodoxy, for example through the existence of independent central banks and debt brakes that are enshrined in constitutions; and, most importantly, through people’s difficulty in envisaging an alternative political project. Under these circumstances, it is hard for workers to air political grievances through official political channels, which creates a strong incentive to use the strike weapon for political ends.

Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that the defensive mass strike has great significance for organised labour in the conjuncture of crisis. In a nutshell, a defensive but political mode of struggle with mass participation is the adequate reaction of labour to the dominant pattern of political crisis management.

MASS STRIKES AROUND THE GLOBE

Despite the fact that strike incidence has been falling in the US and Europe for a long time, there have been politically charged strike waves with mass participation in the global North in recent years. Among them are general strikes against
austerity in western Europe, which took place in Belgium, Britain, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Portugal and Spain (see Gallas and Nowak 2016; Nowak and Gallas 2014); a strike wave in Germany in 2015 that mostly affected the railways, the postal service and childcare (Birke 2018) and triggered broad political debates on the right to strike and on care work; and the 2018 stoppage in France, which was directed against Emmanuel Macron's decision to restructure labour relations in the railway sector and open it up to foreign companies competing with the state-owned railway service SNCF.

Likewise, there have been huge strikes in the global South, and like the strikes in the North, they are often politically charged – either because they take place in countries controlled by authoritarian regimes or because they are similar to the strikes in the North in the sense that they are directed against neoliberalisation and neoliberal crisis management.

When it comes to mass strikes under conditions of authoritarianism, the Egyptian case stands out: strikes with mass participation played a crucial role in the emergence of a revolutionary movement in 2011 (Adbelrahman 2012; Alexander 2011; McNally 2011; Schwartz 2011; Zemni et al. 2013). Large strike waves are also visible in East and Southeast Asian countries with authoritarian governments that have been integrated into global production networks in recent decades. In Vietnam, there have been 6,000 illegal strikes since the country enacted a Labour Code in 1995 (Thi Thu 2017). For example, 90,000 workers in Ho Chi Minh City downed tools in order to protest changes to social insurance in 2015 (Anner 2018: 63; Bell 2017). Likewise, there have been several waves of strikes in Cambodia, with mass participation of garment workers, against poor wages and working conditions and authoritarian politics, and for the right to unionise. In late 2013 and early 2014, 350,000 workers went on strike for two weeks, protesting against what they saw as a rigged general election a few months earlier, and for a significant increase in the minimum wage, in the course of which several workers were killed by armed forces (Pratap and Bose 2015: 3; Reuters 2014; Thul 2014). In China, there have been significant strikes as well. A well-known strike took place in 2010 at a Honda factory in Guangdong, which kick-started a strike wave throughout the province, resulting in significant wage increases for workers of up to 40 per cent. In 2014 in Dongguan, a city in the Pearl River Delta, 40,000 workers in seven shoe factories run by a company called Yue Yen, which supplied Nike and Adidas, went on a successful strike over pay and social security contributions (Pringle 2016: 139; Yunxue 2018: 45).

But the dynamics of labour struggles do not neatly map on the divide between authoritarian and formally democratic regimes. Arguably, there is an authoritarian
convergence: formally democratic regimes are curbing civil and labour rights in the name of security and economic prosperity, and despotic regimes are accommodating for the fact that working-class agency cannot be suppressed fully. Correspondingly, labour struggles in formally democratic countries in the global North and South are often about asserting the right of workers to organise and collectively fight for their interests.

In Indonesia – a country generally seen as a democracy, but one with a long history of repression against labour movements – there were general strikes in 2012 and 2013 with two and three million participants respectively demanding not just a hefty increase in the minimum wage and an end to outsourcing, but also legal changes in favour of labour (Panimbang and Mufakhir 2018: 26–28; Pratap and Bose 2015: 4–10). Between 2011 and 2014, there was a strike wave in the Brazilian construction sector over wages and working conditions, which was the largest since the downfall of the military dictatorship in 1985 and involved hundreds of thousands of workers. It had a political dimension not just because of police repression against the strikers, but because many of the stoppages took place at building sites for large-scale, state-funded infrastructure projects (Nowak 2018: 115–116, 127). Last but not least, in Argentina in April and December 2017, general strikes directed against the restructuring of labour relations under the Macri government took place.

Admittedly, this description is impressionistic, but it is also backed up by data. Obviously, strike incidence at the global level is hard to measure. Based on a systematic examination of coverage in five key newspapers from the Anglophone world, Şahan Savaş Karataşlı et al. (2015) argue that there was a global explosion of social protest from 1991 to 2011, and that labour struggles played a key role in driving up numbers. Similarly, Fernando Cortés-Chirino (2016) asserts that political mass strikes increased significantly between 1919 and 2014 across the world, and that they spread from Europe to the global semi-periphery and periphery.

From a qualitative perspective, one may argue that there have been waves of defensive mass strikes against neoliberalism and neoliberal crisis management across the globe. In the conjuncture of crisis, in particular, a politicisation of industrial action has occurred from the inside. Workers are using the strike weapon as a means of political protest, and their interventions are often loosely linked with other protest movements that have sprung up in the course of the crisis. From a Luxemburgian perspective, the questions that emerge against this backdrop are: what patterns of labour struggle are visible in the conjuncture of crisis, and are they adequate to it?
THE US: REARGUARD ACTION AND NEW FRONTS

In the US case, the claim that the working class has been on the defensive for a long time is hard to refute. Important indicators point to this direction: union density fell from 20.1 per cent in 1983 to 10.7 per cent in 2017 (BLS 2018a). Strike incidence has also decreased significantly, which, under conditions of shrinking labour organisations and weak wage development for workers in the US in the last 40 years (Palley 2016: 120), can be seen as a sign of working-class agency being curbed. In 1983, there were 83 strikes involving more than 1 000 workers and lasting for more than one shift; in 2017, the figure was seven, the second lowest number since records began in 1947 (BLS 2018b). For 20 odd years, labour scholars have been discussing strategies aimed at revitalising US labour (see, for example, Clawson and Clawson 1999; Milkman 2006; Milkman and Voss 2004; Voss and Sherman 2000), with a heavy emphasis on the importance of organising strategies for unions.

From a Luxemburgian perspective, these debates should surely be welcomed. But following Luxemburg, tactics and strategies of labour cannot be chosen at will and always have to be discussed in the context of a conjunctural analysis. Ideally, such an analysis should operate across scales. In light of this, it may be worth shifting the focus of the debates somewhat: one could focus on identifying patterns of labour struggle that are garnering mass support, examine their situatedness in a distinct national-cum-global conjuncture and assess their class effects – no matter whether they are taking place inside unions, on their periphery or outside of fixed organisations.

In my view, at the moment there are at least three patterns of labour struggle in the US worth mentioning. First of all, there have been several waves of struggle in the public sector in recent years. These struggles are hugely important for the overall strength of organised labour in the US today because union density in the public sector is far higher than in the private sector – 34.4 per cent as opposed to 6.5 per cent in 2017 (BLS 2018a). In 1954, union density in the private sector was still 39 per cent (Clawson and Clawson 1999: 97), and its decline can be attributed to the fact that the US power bloc orchestrated an offensive against labour from the 1970s onwards (see Clawson and Clawson 1999: 102–103; Cohen 2006: 62–65). This was accompanied by financial market liberalisation, labour market flexibilisation, de-industrialisation and the proliferation of precarious work, which all contributed to union decline, in particular in the private sector. Importantly, in the global conjuncture of crisis, these trends have not subsided, quite the contrary.

Generally, the struggles in the US public sector are about defending the institutional supports of public-sector trade unionism and improving working
conditions in areas of service provision that have been starved of funds thanks to the predominance of free-market ideas, enmity to public expenditure and neoliberal practices of crisis management.

In 2011 in Wisconsin, there was a wave of protests against a ‘right to work’ bill joined by tens of thousands of public-sector workers and their supporters. The bill was aimed at banning public-sector unions from collecting fees from non-members benefiting from collective bargaining agreements. It also contained provisions that seriously restrained their collective bargaining rights. The protests included not so much traditional strikes, but ‘sick-ins’ where public-sector workers took to declaring themselves not well and staying away from work in order to join demonstrations. The demonstrations attracted people not just from the public sector, but from a range of constituencies. In the course of the protest, the state Capitol was occupied (Collins 2012: 6, 10, 11; Moody 2012). The protests were unsuccessful in terms of thwarting the legislative drive against public-sector unions. As a consequence of the new law coming into force in 2015, union density at the state level had dropped, by the end of 2016, by 3.5 percentage points (Manzo and Bruno 2017: 3). But the protesting workers still managed to influence public opinion significantly and, in so doing, contributed to national debates on workers’ rights and the role of organised labour in US society.

In 2012, teachers in Chicago walked out; again this was not an economic strike in a narrow sense because they did not only protest against poor pay and working conditions, but also against the corporate influence over education and for better learning conditions (Cantor and Gutierrez 2012; Kamper 2018: 157–158). Similarly, there were teacher strikes in Arizona, Kentucky, Oklahoma and West Virginia in 2018 that also connected the economic issue of low pay with the political issue of poor learning conditions in public institutions. Remarkably, there was a dispute in Los Angeles in January 2019 where teachers clearly prioritised their political over their economic demands: they went on strike for better learning conditions for students and won significant improvements (Wong 2019).

Against this backdrop, a significant legal challenge to US public-sector unions has emerged – the ruling in a Supreme Court case called Janus vs. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). The case was decided in June 2018 and ruled on an issue already at stake in the Wisconsin protests: it prohibits public-sector unions from collecting fees from people who are not members but still benefit from collective bargaining agreements (Richman 2018; Scheiber and Vogel 2018). The implications of the ruling are ambiguous: the abolition of ‘agency fees’ could heavily dent union funding, but there is also a possibility that unions will start to reject no-strike deals (which are common today) and embrace
more militant strategies (Richman 2018). After all, some of the recent actions by teachers were wildcat strikes, and they had a political dimension insofar as they highlighted the importance of public education, the threat of privatisation and lack of sufficient funding for schools. These recent public-sector struggles can be said to contribute to restoring and consolidating working-class agency.

Second, there have been serious attempts to extend union coverage in the private sector by achieving recognition at non-unionised production sites in the US South. German telecommunications company T-Mobile, an enterprise known for using union-busting techniques in the US, has faced a campaign for union recognition carried by the Communication Workers of America (CWA), which was supported by German public- and service-sector union ver.di (Compa 2015: 19–22; Daley 2014; Scheytt 2012). Likewise, in recent years the United Automobile Workers union (UAW) has campaigned for recognition at a Volkswagen plant in Tennessee and a Nissan plant in Mississippi (Brooks 2017, 2018; Fichter 2018; Scheiber 2017). On paper, these drives have not achieved their aims so far, and questions can be asked about whether a legalistic orientation towards recognition is the way forward (Kamper 2018: 161; Richard 2017). But they have contributed to politicising the issues of poor working conditions and collective rights of workers (see Sanders 2017), potentially preparing the ground for future attempts to expand working-class agency.

Third, struggles of precarious workers have sprung up in recent years, and they take a distinct form. A campaign that has made headlines is Fight for $15. The two main demands of the campaign are a living wage for workers of US$15 an hour and the right to unionise. It was launched in 2012 by fast food workers in New York with the support of community organisers and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and quickly spread to other sectors, in particular retail. The campaign involves demonstrations, strikes and other types of protest. From a union perspective, it amounts to a shift in strategy. The primary target of interventions is not employers, but legislators, and activists aim to build broad coalitions that also involve organisations and platforms usually not seen as being linked to labour. In 2017, on the forty-ninth anniversary of Martin Luther King’s assassination, Fight for $15 and Black Lives Matter activists joined forces for demonstrations and teach-ins under the slogan ‘Fight Racism, Raise Pay’. Importantly, the campaign has produced tangible results: by the end of 2017, the states of California and New York and several big cities (which can set minimum wage rates in some states) had passed legislation aimed at increasing minimum wages to US$15 an hour (Chen 2015: 43; Hannah 2016; Luce 2015: 72–75; NELP 2017). However, it remains a critical issue that the campaign has not contributed to unionisation or to stable forms of organisation in the sectors affected (Kamper 2018: 158).
In sum, we are mostly seeing rearguard action and attempts to resist attacks by capital in the US. In class theoretical terms, the conjuncture of crisis in the country is characterised by the prevalence of defensive mass strikes for the protection and restoration of working-class agency. They are not revolutionary mass strikes in Luxemburg's sense, but aim at defending and rebuilding organised labour as a collective actor. In so doing, they are politically charged and signal fundamental dissent to the neoliberal status quo, according to which rights at work are individual, not collective rights. In a nutshell, the dominant mode of struggle appears, on the whole, adequate to the conjuncture. But considering that the relations of forces are heavily favouring capital at the moment, the question remains how stronger links between different sites of struggle can be established so that it becomes possible to stop the barrage of onslaughts on labour orchestrated by the US power bloc. In all likelihood, attacks by capital will intensify in the next years because it is emboldened by the Trump administration. And yet, the Trump era has already given rise to some of the biggest social mobilisations in US history. If organised workers manage to build alliances with other actors, it may be possible to shift the relations of forces somewhat in favour of labour.

INDIA: MASS ACTION AND NEW LABOUR ORGANISATIONS

After India shook off the yoke of colonialism and became an independent country in 1947, the socialist and nationalist Indian Congress Party dominated the political scene. The country's economic policy was characterised by a mixed economy approach that aimed to establish a large state-owned sector and constrained markets with the help of state interventionism, quantitative restrictions and economic plans. In the mid-1980s, the Congress took first steps towards liberalisation when it reduced corporate and import taxes, removed price controls, eased access to loans for large corporations and opened up the public sector for private investment. Foreshadowing the neoliberal turns of centre-left parties in the global North in the 1990s and 2000s, prime minister PV Narasimha Rao, also representing Congress, triggered a full regime shift in 1991. He instigated the transition of India to a market economy. This created the political environment in which Hindu nationalism began to thrive. Between 1998 and 2004, during the first government led by the far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), threats were made to directly attack workers' rights, which did not really come to fruition. After another ten-year period of Congress rule, the BJP, now under the leadership of Modi, won an absolute majority in 2014. As in other countries across the globe, the conjuncture of crisis has resulted
in rights of workers coming under attack. After taking power, the Modi government has made consistent attempts to undermine the consultation rights of trade unions and to flexibilise labour relations. For example, it liberalised child labour in 2016. At the level of states, new bans on cattle slaughter and the consumption of beef have come into force, which have thrown hundreds of thousands of Muslim and Dalit workers in the meat and leather industries out of work. Likewise, the decision of the government to abolish ₹500 and ₹1 000 notes, allegedly in order to combat corruption and forgery, had the effect of stripping the poorest segments of the population of jobs, wages and savings (Hensman 2010: 112–113; Hensman 2017: 173–174; Ms 2019; Remesh 2017: 106; Sarker 2014: 417–418). It follows that as is the case in the US, workers in India are on the defensive.

What has remained in place throughout this whole period, however, are two deep divides in the Indian workforce that have been enshrined in law since independence, as Satoshi Miyamura (2016) observes: first, the divide between formal and informal employment – with the latter, as of 2011, accounting for 92 per cent of the Indian workforce; and second, the divide between the ‘organised’ and the ‘unorganised’ sectors of the economy, that is, large and medium-sized as opposed to small business units. Notably, even in the organised sector, only 45 per cent of workers were formally employed in 2012, down from 62 per cent in 2000. Indeed, there appears to be a strategic pattern on the side of India-based capital of responding to the existence of organisations forcefully representing the interests of workers by replacing formal with informal employment. This is also motivated by the fact that under the dominant understanding of Indian labour law, collective rights, such as the right to be represented by a union that engages in collective bargaining, apply to only formal workers (Miyamura 2016: 1923–1925; Monaco 2017: 129). In other words, the fact that labour is on the defensive is also reflected in the ongoing process of informalisation that is taking place in an economy already characterised by a huge informal sector.

These divides characterising the Indian working class are also visible in a much discussed strike wave, which has been taking place in the country’s automotive sector since the mid-2000s. The stoppages are of strategic relevance both for organised labour and for the power bloc because the sector is responsible for seven per cent of India’s GDP, and the country is the seventh biggest manufacturer of automobiles in the world (Remesh 2017: 105). In recent years there have been strikes or slowdowns at the plants of well-known corporations, such as Ford, General Motors, Honda and Hyundai (Sinha 2017: 214). Probably the most fiercely fought conflict, however, erupted in 2011 at a Maruti Suzuki plant located in Manesar, which is close to New Delhi. Here, confrontations were triggered when management tried to block
the establishment of an independent union at the plant, to which both formal and informal workers responded with strikes and protests. In 2012, these culminated in physical confrontations at the plant, during which an HR manager was killed. The circumstances of his death are not entirely clear, but the events had severe effects on the workers: more than 2,000 of them were sacked and 148 arrested. Whereas the big, party-affiliated trade unions were ambivalent about supporting the workers, smaller political groups, left-wing intellectuals and the grassroots-oriented New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI) did. The strike transformed itself into a political protest against the repression of organised labour by the authorities – and workers politicised themselves in the process, as Nowak’s detailed account of a protest march in 2014 shows.

In 2017, 117 of the people arrested at the Manesar plant were acquitted – and 13 were sentenced to life for the murder of the HR manager, among them 12 representatives of the union. The sentences led to a one-hour strike in the region and protests in 35 cities across India (Hensman 2017: 172–173; Miyamura 2016: 1933–1934; Monaco 2017: 132–133; Nowak 2014, 2016, 2017a: 970–974, 2017b). In keeping with Luxemburg’s argument, a strike triggered an openly political struggle due to the repressive environment in which it took place – and it involved both formal and informal workers from the plant, plus the mass support of other workers and activists. Furthermore, the types of intervention shifted over time and consisted of picketing, sit-in strikes, demonstrations and riots. The overall thrust of the action was to assert workers’ rights in the context of the power bloc’s sustained attack on labour.

Similar points can be made about the general strikes in recent years. In total, there have been 18 demonstrative general strikes in India in the last quarter of a century, culminating in the 2019 mass protest against the attempts of the Modi government to change labour law. What is remarkable about this most recent general strike is its breadth and size. Ten of the main union confederations supported it – as well as a number of smaller, rank-and-file initiatives (Woodcock 2019).

Notably, other social groups also carry out large-scale protests in India. Examples are a march of 100,000 farmers to Delhi in November 2018, demanding higher prices for their produce and debt relief, and a human chain, 620 km long, formed by millions of women in the southern state of Kerala in support of two female worshippers who entered a Hindu temple that had not been open to women before (The Economic Times 30 November 2018; Withnall 2019). This raises the question of how the struggles of agrarian and non-agrarian workers can become articulated, and what role women’s rights play in the struggles of organised labour (see Shyam Sundar 2019: 24).
What becomes clear is that Indian workers are attempting to find new, politicised forms of action and organisation in response to the offensive of the power bloc. Similar to the US case, their activities can be seen as efforts to defend and restore working-class agency – and in this sense, they are adequate to the conjuncture. Importantly, however, labour in India remains fragmented – due to the divides inherent in the organisation of the economy; due to the fact that there are numerous union umbrellas with widely diverging political standpoints, among them a large Hindu nationalist organisation; and due to the fracturing of the left at the party political level. The general strikes have served to bring workers together, albeit for a very short period of time. The principal problem with this type of mobilisation is that even if turnout is high, it is fairly easy for a government to ride it out (see Shyam Sundar 2019: 24).

Consequently, the challenge for labour in India remains to translate the impulses to resist attacks from the power bloc into more permanent and wide-ranging alliances. The Modi government is pursuing a right-wing authoritarian project that is serious about constraining the rights not just of workers, but of various groups and individuals in Indian civil society who do not fit into the Hindu nationalist agenda. In light of this, organised labour will have to find ways of connecting with other social movements voicing fundamental dissent (see Hensman 2017).

CONCLUSION

Luxemburg's pamphlet on *The Mass Strike* is informed by an implicit theorisation of working-class formation and agency that is highly useful for analysing the state of labour in the global conjuncture of crisis. As is visible in a number of countries around the world, among them the hugely different cases of the US and India, governments are exploiting the global crisis to deepen neoliberalisation and attack workers’ rights. Channels used by working classes to influence political decision making have been closed. In this situation, defensive political mass strikes emerge that manifest worker discontent with neoliberalism and the neoliberal and authoritarian political management of the ongoing crisis. In class-analytical terms, they contribute to working-class formation insofar as their general thrust is to exercise and strengthen forms of action that amount to the exercise of working-class agency.

But the question of the age remains how these mass strikes can be amplified and extended to such a degree that they pose a real challenge to the power blocs around the globe. In the conjuncture of crisis, workers, activists and other groups of people discontented with the status quo have not managed to seriously threaten the existing
modes of crisis management or even the existing structures of social domination. As Luxemburg made clear, it would be a serious mistake to resort to voluntarism in this situation and simply call for all-out resistance or even a revolution. Quite to the contrary: the task is to analyse the global conjuncture together with national cases in order to identify cracks in the prevalent government strategies and to find narratives and forms of action, in an experimental fashion, that promise to expand working-class agency and the agency of any subaltern forces prepared to challenge the status quo. In this context, it would be important for workers to find effective ways of using the strike weapon politically.

REFERENCES


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