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BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

Latin American Labor Studies: National Contexts and Lived Realities

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This essay reviews the following works:

Politicized Enforcement in Argentina: Labor and Environmental Regulation. By Matthew Amengual. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. vii + 285. $110.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781107135833.

Walmart in the Global South: Workplace Culture, Labor Politics, and Supply Chains. Edited by Carolina Bank Muñoz, Bridget Kenny, and Antonio Stecher. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018. Pp. ix + 280. $29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781477315682.

Continuity Despite Change: The Politics of Labor Regulation in Latin America. By Matthew E. Carnes. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014. Pp. viii + 256. $65.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780804789431.

Precariedad y desaliento laboral de los jóvenes en México. Edited by Dídimo Castillo Fernández, Jorge Arzate Salgado, and Silvia Irene Arcos Sánchez. Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, 2019. Pp. 5 + 167. $10.00 paperback. ISBN: 9786070310041.

Redeeming the Revolution: The State and Organized Labor in Post-Tlatelolco Mexico. By Joseph U. Lenti. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. Pp. ix + 402. $70.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780803285590.

Labor Politics in Latin America: Democracy and Worker Organization in the Neoliberal Era. By Paul W. Posner, Viviana Patroni, and Jean-François Mayer. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018. Pp. vii + 253. $80.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781683400455.

Living and Working in Poverty in Latin America: Trajectories of Children, Youth, and Adults. Edited by María Eugenia Rausky and Mariana Chaves. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. Pp. v + 187. $97.13 hardcover. ISBN: 9783030009007.

Made in Baja: The Lives of Farmworkers and Growers behind Mexico's Transnational Agricultural Boom. By Christian Zlolniski. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. Pp. ix+ 255. $29.70 paperback. ISBN: 9780520300637.

Labor studies continues to be a dynamic interdisciplinary research field in Latin American studies. The eight books under review reflect this vibrancy, coming from anthropology, history, sociology, and political science. The four monographs, one multiauthored book, and three edited volumes, published between 2014 and 2019, are heterogeneous in their research focus, theoretical orientation, and methodology. Some cover familiar terrain such as labor codes, wageworkers' mobilizations, workplace relations, modes of control, and the relationship between organized labor and party political systems. Others disrupt the worker-wage equation, reminding us that the large majority of working-class people in Latin America,

and their dependents, cobble together a livelihood through modalities of unwaged labor and were never covered by the social contract that shaped state-labor relations prior to market reforms.[1] Collectively, the works discussed in this essay illustrate a conjuncture of political and socioeconomic processes aimed to dismantle a twenty-century labor regime shaped by Keynesian state-building projects. The outcome of these processes has been to intensify, and even to legalize, labor precarity through the solidification of *flexible labor regimes*—that is, an assortment of strategies including market reforms, trade liberalization, privatization, labor laws, and diverse mechanisms at the macro and micro levels that cheapen labor and aim at preventing workers' mobilizations. While a number of different labor regimes have shaped capitalism's *longue dureé*, "flexible" highlights historical specificity in relation to David Harvey's theorization of "flexible accumulation."[2] The significance of labor regimes exceeds working conditions as they also shape the conditions of social reproduction.[3] Workers continue contesting the implementation of flexible labor regimes, yet, as a result of how this regime targets their mobilizations, workers have reconfigured their forms of organizing.

Four books focus on the relationship between labor and party politics. *Continuity Despite Change: The Politics of Labor Regulation in Latin America* (by Matthew E. Carnes) and *Labor Politics in Latin America: Democracy and Worker Organization in the Neoliberal Era* (by Paul W. Posner, Viviana Patroni, and Jean-François Mayer) each comparatively analyze labor legislation in relation to neoliberal reforms. *Politicized Enforcement in Argentina* (Matthew Amengual) focuses on how labor legislation is put into practice. *Redeeming the Revolution: The State and Organized Labor in Post-Tlatelolco Mexico* (by Joseph U. Lenti) presents a historical account of the clientelistic relationship between organized labor and a political party.

The three edited volumes offer empirical studies of a generation of urban workers. *Walmart in the Global South: Workplace Culture, Labor Politics and Supply Chains* (edited by Carolina Bank Muñoz, Bridget Kenny, and Antonio Stecher) discusses the labor practices of a transnational corporation and the mobilization of workers under flexible labor regimes. *Living and Working in Poverty in Latin America: Trajectories of Children, Youth, and Adults* (edited by María Eugenia Rausky and Mariana Chavez) analyzes, via a series of case studies, the working trajectories of children, youth, and adults outside of the wage relation. *Precariedad y desaliento laboral de los jóvenes en México* (edited by Dídimo Castillo Fernández, Jorge Arzate Salgado, and Silvia Irene Arcos Sánchez) focuses on younger people unable to get jobs or discouraged from job-seeking. These books offer empirical data on a younger generation of Latin American urban workers who have come of age in the era of market reforms.

The last monograph—*Made in Baja: The Lives of Farmworkers and Growers behind Mexico's Transnational Agricultural Boom* (by Christian Zlolniski)—ethnographically analyzes the exploitative labor conditions shaping Mexico's export agriculture. This ethnography illustrates how labor mobilizations are constituted beyond "official" organized labor and workplace politics.

Discussing these books in relation to their particular disciplines is beyond the scope of this review essay. Instead, this essay highlights how each book employs different scales of analysis in order to examine the historical realities, uncertainties, and vulnerabilities currently faced by working-class people in Latin America. I underscore the country-specific aspects of flexible labor regimes in Latin America: the processes leading to the creation of such regimes, the implicit and explicit mechanisms through which they are implemented, and how they are accommodated and contested. In order to refine scholarly understandings of contemporary labor precarity, the essay foregrounds generation as a category of analysis and differentiation alongside class, gender, and race. Finally, it notes how these books register an important shift in the aim of research: *Walmart in the Global South*, *Living and Working in Poverty in Latin America*, *Precariedad y desaliento laboral de los jóvenes en México*, and *Made in Baja* seek to transcend academic boundaries by including normative interventions in the form of policy recommendations, or by positioning themselves as potential tools for workers' struggles. This essay underscores the need for cross-disciplinary conversation, if not collaboration,

[1] On the decentering of wage relations, see Michael Denning, "Wageless Life," *New Left Review* 66 (2010): 79–98; David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2013); Leslie Gill, *A Century of Violence in a Red City: Popular Struggle, Counterinsurgency and Human Rights in Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); and Sandra C. Mendiola García, *Street Democracy: Vendors, Violence, and Public Space in Late Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

[2] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989). Harvey situates this form of accumulation from the 1970s through the present.

[3] Tania Li, "The Price of Un/freedom: Indonesia's Colonial and Contemporary Plantation Labor Regimes," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59, no. 2 (2017): 245–276.

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and the necessity of holding conversations beyond the academic context—two imperatives that are all the more pressing in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic.[4]

Labor Codes in the Era of Market Reforms

In *Continuity Despite Change*, the political scientist Matthew E. Carnes argues that, except for Chile, Colombia, and Peru, market reform policies implemented in Latin America after the 1980s economic crisis were not followed by significant policies to deregulate the labor market. To arrive at this conclusion, Carnes compares individual and collective labor laws in eighteen countries from the moment when structural reforms were introduced to the first decade of the twenty-first century. To develop a theory to explain the continuity of labor legislation, or, conversely, its restructuring, Carnes focuses on Argentina, Chile, and Peru. Providing brief historical accounts, he illustrates how labor legislation has evolved between the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century. According to him, the more skills workers have across industries (measured by years of schooling) and the higher the capacity of organized labor to defend protective legislation (measured by union density in the nonagricultural sector), the less likely it is that labor legislation reform favoring flexibilization will happen. Carnes's monograph, however, runs the risk of reading labor legislation as if it reflected conditions on the ground: his argument obscures a number of mechanisms, including forms of violence, that make the working class "compatible" with market conditions. Nevertheless, Carnes's conclusion that most labor codes in Latin America have not been rewritten to make them compatible with market reforms is significant. His work, further, shows how the industries deemed key for twentieth-century projects of nation-state formation (such as mining) had the most protective individual labor legislation (for instance, provisions structuring hiring and dismissal).

Carnes shows that labor legislation is a key site where fragmentation and inequalities form among the working class. Fragmentation and inequalities are not solely the result of unregulated areas, unprotective labor laws, and/or citizenship status: by juxtaposing individual and collective labor provisions from the same country, Carnes illuminates contradictions. For instance, Chile—where current labor legislation is a retreat from Allende's attempts to strengthen both individual and collective labor rights—has strong individual protections for those who are formally employed in particular industries, but weak collective legal protections, undermining collective organization. To illustrate the consequences of this shift, Carnes turns to the 2010 mining accident in Chile's Atacama Desert. A year after their rescue, miners deployed one of the strongest legal provisions in individual labor legislation to return to their jobs: the principle of *inamovilidad* (immobility), "the right of a worker to keep his or her position" (97), overturned during Pinochet's dictatorship and restored by the first Concertación government (1990–1994). *Inamovilidad* makes it harder to dismiss workers by requiring a severance package of one month's wage per year of service and a clear justification for the dismissal. However, at the collective level, a movement of miners demanding safe working conditions, the enforcement of safety codes, and labor inspectors (there were only sixteen safety auditors for the country's 4,500 mines) never took form. Unionized miners were only able to demand lost wages and benefits as well as the relocation of miners after the mine's collapse.

Distinguishing between De Jure and De Facto Labor Flexibilization

Whereas Carnes focuses on how labor legislation has remained unchanged despite market reforms, *Labor Politics in Latin America* examines how labor market flexibilization has been implemented in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Venezuela. The coauthors, political scientists Paul W. Posner, Viviana Patroni, and Jean-François Mayer, argue that, of these five countries, only Chile has legal mechanisms to adjust the labor force and wage rates to market conditions. An introductory chapter by Patroni provides a comparative historical overview of the global and regional transformations that impacted workers. This is followed by five chapters that describe deteriorating working conditions in relation to political and economic factors in the five countries since the 1990s, and illustrate how flexible labor arrangements have been imposed, often via coercion or violence. Importantly, the authors also trace organized labor's contestations over labor flexibilization and offer an assessment of the tactics, strategies, and resources available to organized labor movements. They also highlight the shortcomings of organized labor in incorporating and representing workers under the scheme of labor flexibilization. Regardless of their critical assessment of the current state of organized labor movements, the authors argue that strengthening unionization is the only way to secure a more balanced relationship between organized labor and capital.

[4] For an earlier call for interdisciplinary research see John D. French, "The Latin American Labor Studies Boom," *International Review of Social History* 45, no. 2 (2000): 279–308.

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The book presents an argument against the supposed benefits of labor market flexibilization. Against claims made by proponents and supporters of neoliberal reforms, the authors argue that, rather than ending income inequality, informality, and unemployment, labor flexibilization has only increased them (7). Rather than understanding labor flexibilization as the path to creating jobs in the formal sector, *Labor Politics in Latin America* maintains that flexibilization is best understood as a mechanism for undermining and subverting the strength of organized labor and workers' organizational capacities while increasing the power of business elites. The strength of the book lies in its schematic elucidation, showing comparatively how labor flexibilization policy, put forth by international financial institutions, has taken diverse paths and implicated different processes. A central intervention is the crucial distinction it draws between de jure and de facto flexibilization. Through this distinction, the authors capture the ways in which flexible labor arrangements are imposed regardless of whether labor codes remain protective.

Of the countries studied, Chile and Mexico exhibit the highest rate of labor market flexibilization, yet their path to flexibilization has varied substantially. Chile, under the Pinochet regime, legislated labor flexibilization, and none of the Concertación governments rewrote or legislated substantial changes to Pinochet's 1979 Plan Laboral. Mexico, by contrast, up to 2012, had one of the most protective labor codes.[5] However, de facto flexibilization has shaped labor relations, especially since the 1980s economic crisis and the subsequent economic liberalization and structural adjustment programs. Mechanisms for flexibilizing labor relations included refusing to implement protective labor regulations, declaring strikes illegal, keeping wages artificially low, and bargaining at the factory level instead of by sector. Whether de jure or de facto, unemployment, informality, and income inequality continue to characterize Mexico and Chile.

Structural conditions have fragmented and weakened labor organization, but the authors also highlight other factors connected to union decay. In Chile, Posner shows, collective rights and the labor movement were fragmented at the level of legislation and weakened through a military dictatorship. The inability or unwillingness of the Concertación governments following the dictatorship to alter radically the status quo that privileges corporations and business elites has eroded the ties between organized labor and center-left political parties. The labor movement has been further weakened and the working classes further fragmented by competition between business unions and militant unions as well as the failure of the workers' union federation to develop strategies to incorporate, organize, and represent the large number of Chilean workers—most of them women—subjected to precarious employment. Workers' unions continue to operate with a model of labor activism forged prior to the Pinochet regime to address the working conditions of import substitution industrialization and a "worker identity based on the predominance of the male wage-earner working in mining and manufacturing" (58).

Mayer shows how in Mexico, the historical alliance between the state and organized labor, which had generated benefits to the working classes in the industrial sector, mutated into a clientelistic relationship between the government and union leaders that undermined working conditions and the strength of the labor movement. To maintain "labor peace" and their privileges, union leaders have for years signed protection contracts stipulating forms of labor flexibilization. The corporatist and clientelistic model of labor relations has further divided and weakened the labor movement while also undermining union democratization. This model did not disappear with the end of the seventy-year rule of the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional). Instead, the two PAN (Partido Acción Nacional) governments that came after the return to democracy in 2000 reconfigured this clientelistic relationship so as to implement labor flexibilization more forcefully, to go along with the free-trade market model while continuing to marginalize independent labor movements opposing neoliberal policies.

Unfortunately, Posner's chapter on Venezuela is more concerned with testing a theory of populism than with elucidating the complexities among working classes—unionized workers, cooperatives, and what the author calls the unorganized masses co-opted through welfare programs. These complexities remain implicit: for instance, union bosses sell jobs to workers and, as a result of controlling this lucrative business, union leaders are killed. Posner considers cooperatives a means of de facto flexibilization as they are subcontracted labor for state-owned industries, thus undermining organized labor. In light of the convoluted landscape shaping organized labor in Venezuela, questions emerge but remain unanswered: Are cooperatives a path for working-class people to gain access to jobs without having to buy them? Can cooperatives, as a form of collective organization, disrupt the detrimental effects of flexible labor relations? Do the "unorganized

[5] Mexico legislated outsourcing and subcontracting in 2012. In 2019 the labor code was reformed, but this reform only strengthens collective legislation and not individual legislation.

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masses" have neighborhood organizations? How do these three working-class groups illuminate current class transformations in Venezuela?

Labor Law Enforcement

De facto flexibilization shows that protective legal provisions are not always fully implemented: hence, enforcement is key to the effectiveness of labor legislation. In *Politicized Enforcement in Argentina*, the political scientist Matthew Amengual delves into how labor regulations are enforced in countries that lack an ideal bureaucracy in the Weberian sense (state autonomy, meritocracy, competitive salary, administrative resources, and no external influence). Shifting the gaze from labor codes to the implementation of legal provisions, Amengual presents a number of cases across four Argentinian provinces to examine how individual labor laws are enforced in a nonideal bureaucracy.[6] In Argentina, government officials are hired because of their personal connections, salaries in the public sectors are low, there is a shortage of administrative resources, and conflicts of interest shape social relations. Yet Amengual finds that individual labor provisions are nevertheless enforced.

This monograph offers a detailed snapshot of how labor legislation was put into practice during Argentina's Pink Tide. During this period, there was a push to enhance the regulatory role of the state, unions recovered their strength, and the reformation of the labor code restored individual and collective protections removed in prior years as part of market reforms. Protections were reestablished, among them severance pay of one month for each year a worker was employed, collective bargaining, and *ultractividad* (automatic renewal clause). The latter is a principle stipulating that previous collective agreements stay in place until a new agreement is reached, which allows unions to keep labor-friendly provisions.

At the provincial level, enforcement took different paths. Drawing on interviews and participant observation with labor inspectors, politicians, union representatives, and neighborhood organizations, as well as archival research, Amengual shows how labor protections have been implemented in relation to local government, resources, and alliances between state and society. In provinces governed by the PJ (Partido Justicialista), enforcement was enabled by the alliance between the party and organized labor. Union representatives directly called inspectors and drove them—as the local government lacked cars and other resources—to workplaces known for unsafe working conditions and for not registering workers in the social security system. In the garment industry, known for employing Bolivian undocumented and trafficked workers in clandestine workshops, labor inspectors worked closely with the neighborhood organization La Alameda to enforce labor legislation and to shut down hundreds of clandestine clothing workshops. Implementation of labor provisions is more than a simple reflection of national politics and protective labor codes. Instead, strong linkages between the government and society—such as unions and collective organizations providing labor inspectors with information as well as material and political support—were crucial to the enforcement and implementation of protective labor provisions.

Changing political landscapes affected the linkages between government and society. Under Mauricio Macri (2015–2019), structures and administrative resources for enforcement were not drastically reduced. However, few unions worked with union inspectors as the new administration sought to cut social linkages with unions and NGOs that were a political force during the Néstor Kirchner government (2003–2007). Labor inspectors who worked closely with NGOs to shut down clandestine clothing workshops were replaced. Under these circumstances, enforcement declined.

Amengual's monograph forces us to think beyond pro-labor national politics and protective legislation. Without enforcement, protective labor legislation is unlikely to affect workers and working conditions. Enforcement mediates between the realm of labor laws and the realm of the daily lives of workers and their dependents. Limitations to the scope of labor legislation and lack of enforcement, Amengual argues, mark the difference between health and illness, prosperity and poverty, and life and death.

Clientelistic Relations between the State and "Official" Organized Labor

In *Redeeming the Revolution: The State and Organized Labor in Mexico*, the historian Joseph U. Lenti examines the close alliance between Mexico's main labor confederation and the government of President Luis Echeverría (1970–1976). During these years, organized labor experienced a renaissance crystalized in the New Federal Labor Law. After being a pillar in the constitution of post-revolutionary Mexico, the political weight of the Mexican labor movement dwindled. This decline was partially the product of an intensive period of industrialization favoring the interests of capital over labor. The renewal of the

[6] Amengual compares the enforcement of labor and environmental laws. This review focuses solely on labor law enforcement.

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relationship between state and "official" labor was how, as Lenti argues, the Mexican government sought to overcome a crisis of legitimacy after it committed a student massacre in Mexico City on October 2, 1968.

By implementing protective labor legislation, as well as exalting the working class in political speeches while making incendiary comments about business elites, Mexican president Luis Echeverría established his government as the heir and defender of the ideals of the Mexican Revolution. A complex, close relationship developed between the Echeverría government and the leaders of the largest official labor confederation, the Confederación de Trabajadores de México (Confederation of Mexican Workers, or CTM). In exchange for political leverage to secure benefits—for leaders and for workers in the form of social programs—CTM leaders rallied workers to show their support and loyalty to Echeverría at parades and celebrations. Through its media outlet, CTM leaders sought to construct, after the 1968 student massacre, an antagonistic relationship between workers and students. Students were represented as "communist pawns" (55) and as the "youthful members of the nation's privileged classes" (53). Workers, on the other hand, were represented as actors in an ongoing class struggle who professed love and loyalty to the nation (55).

The friendliness toward working classes, Lenti argues, was "more rhetorical than real" (209), and selective. While there was an expansion of popular stores selling subsidized groceries and, at request of the CTM, the National Workers' Housing Institute (INFONAVIT) was created, this does not mean, as is usually assumed, that during these years workers carried out a large number of strikes. Perusing newspaper articles, political magazines, the CTM newsletter *Ceteme*, declassified US intelligence records, and interviews, as well as records of labor suits and disputes, Lenti finds that during the period known as the "strike years" (1973–1974), the labor arbitration board approved a lower percentage of strike petitions than during previous years.

Nevertheless, pro-labor rhetoric and protective labor legislation did have an effect. Members of big and small unions as well as nonunionized "free workers" threatened to strike and engaged in labor arbitration to address labor violations and detrimental working conditions, and to force employers to comply with labor contracts and the labor code. A number of suits were dealt with privately, which leads Lenti to suggest that workers were successful in solving labor grievances. Readers may also wonder, however, whether intimidation and threats to workers could have prevented them from taking their cases to the labor arbitration board.

The selectiveness of pro-worker legislation is made visible by the position of workers engaging in labor arbitration. A strike in a textile factory carried out by a largely female unionized workforce affiliated with the CTM received no support from the confederation or the state's labor authority, which declared the strike illegal. Both opponents and supporters tried to downplay the struggle of female workers: even progressive local media outlets used sexualized images to represent female strikers. Lenti's account illustrates the selectivity of labor-friendly legislation by showing how patriarchal ideas structure who is seen as a unionized worker or as a breadwinner. *Redeeming the Revolution* therefore makes visible the gendered divisions among unionized workers.

Work, Labor, and Unemployment: Intersections of Class, Gender, and Age

Living and Working in Poverty in Latin America tackles the question of what it means to live and work in the context of structural socioeconomic inequality. The authors draw into view the complex relationship between work, age, and gender and elucidate the realities of poverty and work in Argentina, Cuba, Brazil, and Mexico. Methodologically, the chapters follow the life trajectories of people living under conditions of structural poverty and marginality in order to empirically identify obstacles to the achievement of the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals—the reduction of poverty and inequality and the elimination of child labor. By way of participant observation, combined with statistical data from Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), the authors situate the participants in their particular sociohistorical context and geographical location. The book speaks to a body of research in inequality and poverty studies that argues that the solution to inequality and poverty is "work." The case studies reveal that participants have worked since childhood in remunerated and unremunerated activities, yet continue to live in conditions of marginalization. "Work" here includes peddling, caring for a sibling, selling flowers, and housekeeping. The book points out the interplay of ideologies of gender and age in relation to forms of work: care and housekeeping work, for instance, fall onto girls and adolescent women.

The problem of inequality and poverty, the authors argue, is not lack of work but "the type of work and the material and symbolic rewards obtained from it" (6). In this respect, the book seems to argue for the value of jobs in the formal economy, which would provide people with wages, social security, and health coverage. This is arguably a shortsighted suggestion in light of the critical literature examining workers' labor conditions in the retail and agricultural sector included in the final section of this review.

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The strength of the book, however, lies in the rich empirical material, which shows how urban working classes in Latin America cobble together a livelihood navigating between waged and unwaged labor, sometimes with the support of social assistance programs. The book illuminates the types of remunerated and unremunerated work outside of the scope of protective labor legislation that many people perform from an early age. The focus on life trajectories captures the constant rotation between precarious jobs in the informal sector that characterizes the work and life experiences of 53.1 percent of the population in Latin America.[7] Besides decentering the idea of work as tied to wages, the book also shows that the "worker" is not always an adult: a number of the case studies focus on children and youth working in subsistence practices such as peddling, domestic work, washing dishes, scavenging (including food), piece-rate work at home, and even begging, since "this activity has the characteristic of other jobs such as temporal regularity, direct participation in the process, and retribution, monetary or otherwise" (33n11). Focusing on children also highlights the ongoing historical significance of children's work to the reproduction of households.

Precariedad y desaliento laboral de los jóvenes en México brings into view another aspect related to work and age. The coauthors Dídimo Castillo Fernández, Jorge Arzate Salgado and Silvia Irene Arcos Sánchez delve into the opportunities and possibilities that Mexican high school and college graduates between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine face on the labor market in light of Mexico's 2012 labor reforms. The authors argue that this age-group—which makes up 28 percent of the population (137)—is the most severely affected by the 2012 labor reforms. These reforms aimed at facilitating hiring practices by making it easier for employers to dismiss employees. As a result, they generated labor precarity and unemployment among a segment of the population considered to be in their productive years. In 2015, the unemployment rate among people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine was 7.1 percent, according to Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI). Yet 78.9 percent of people were employed in precarious jobs, 40.2 percent lacked labor benefits, and 63 percent were in temporary jobs and/or subcontracted positions (42).

People from this age group are prevented from entering the labor market as there are not enough jobs, and when they do find a job, it tends to be of short duration and low paid. These precarious post-labor-reform jobs do not meet people's expectations regarding remuneration and type of work, and, alongside unemployment, disrupt life plans and erode social capital. The authors suggest that social policies must be oriented toward labor-market-focused education, better labor conditions, and higher wages (133). Through interview excerpts quoted in the book, readers get a glimpse into the life (and labor) trajectories of a younger generation. The penultimate paragraph contains an underdeveloped and unsupported yet important observation: "the absence of the State explains why 'family' is central as an institutional support in our Mexican society" (165). This observation opens up an avenue for further research on working-class household economies in relation to flexible labor regimes.

A promising aspect of this book is its attempt to focus on people under the category of *desalentados* (discouraged job-seekers)—15.2 percent of the population between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine. The ILO defines discouraged job-seekers as those of working age who decline to look for work because they feel that they are unlikely to find it.[8] Unfortunately, the book's attention to desalentados is undeveloped, as basic questions remain unanswered. How do desalentados survive? How does gender intersect with being employable, unemployed, or desalentado? Does graduating from a private university as opposed to a public university make a difference? As an ethnographic window, the category of desalentados could shed light onto the effects (and affects) of unemployment in relation to generational identity among Mexico's present-day working classes.

Flexible Labor Regimes: Retail and Agricultural Workers

The edited collection *Walmart in the Global South* presents eight case studies qualitatively examining labor practices and modes of control at retail stores and food suppliers in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Mexico, Nicaragua, South Africa, and Thailand. The volume offers an assessment of the current state of labor organizing among workers employed under flexible labor arrangements. The editors situate the book as a resource for workers' struggles in the service economy and an assessment of how workers employed under regimes of labor flexibilization organize and resist through tactics, strategies, and legal mechanisms at the store level. Walmart is the largest employer and retailer in the world (1) and is known for its poor working conditions and efforts to deter workers' mobilizations. However, it has been legally bound to

[7] Juan Chacaltana, "Formalization Policies in Latin America," paper presented in the seminar "New and Old Forms of Informality," ECLAC, Santiago, https://www.cepal.org/sites/default/files/presentations/201904-04_11._chacaltana.pdf.

[8] "Discouraged Job-Seekers," Labor Statistics Glossary, ILOSTAT, https://ilostat.ilo.org/resources/concepts-and-definitions/glossary/.

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accept unions in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. Except for in Mexico, the corporation's practices of labor control and working conditions have prompted collective responses, though these responses have faced obstacles. Most Walmart workers have no experience with unions or union politics. Their formation as wageworkers has been through domestic, agricultural, or retail work, and for many, a union is the same as the company's department of human resources, a perception encouraged by Walmart. On the other hand, militant workers have become politicized through their engagement with community-based social movements and anti-dictatorship organizations.

Walmart retail workers' struggles range from low wages, layoffs, and intimidation to contesting requirements to smile, to conform to normative gender/sex-specific aesthetic appearances, or to use English instead of Spanish. The struggles these workers are engaged in have stakes that go beyond Walmart. In Argentina, ex-military officers formerly involved in the military dictatorship are employed in Walmart's managerial positions, such as director of security. Abal Medina shows that challenging features of labor flexibilization—companies' power over the length of the working day, or their policy of paying the regular day wage instead of a supplemental wage for Sunday work—simultaneously contests a 1978 decree issued by Argentina's military dictatorship (1976–1983).

In Chile, militant workers contend with a union allied with the corporation. Yet, in an unexpected twist, workers deploy a law from the Pinochet era allowing different unions within the same workplace, a law that aims to fragment workers and prevent the formation of a strong labor movement. As Bank Muñoz rightly points out, having several unions in the same workplace is not a long-term solution for strengthening the workers' movement. However, for now, Chilean retail workers at some Walmart stores are laying the path for union democratization while also gaining wage and bonus increases (for the birth of a child or following the death of a spouse, as well as transportation allowances). At a Walmart store, Chilean workers legally forced Walmart to use the term *trabajador* (worker) instead of "associate" or "collaborator," terms that the corporation uses globally to address employees. Importantly, the cases of Chile and Argentina demonstrate the value of combining on-the-ground research with examining labor codes to illuminate how the violence of military dictatorships continues to percolate and to shape the working and living conditions of working classes.

In *Made in Baja: The Lives of Farmworkers and Growers behind Mexico's Transnational Agriculture Boom*, the anthropologist Christian Zlolniski examines how Mexico's current agricultural boom was implemented in one of the country's most arid regions—the San Quintín Valley, Baja California—to grow nontraditional crops year-round. This monograph is the result of long-term fieldwork (2005–2017) with mestizo, Mixtec, Triqui, and Zapotec farm laborers in their workplaces (Driscoll and Monsanto and local growers) and in their neighborhoods. Of the books profiled in this essay offering normative interventions, *Made in Baja* provides the clearest assessment of the problems faced by farm laborers and the most grounded policy suggestions.

Zlolniski's ethnography raises the important question of what "stable worker" currently means. In much of the recent anthropological literature examining working people within the context of labor flexibilization, "stable" is used to map out differences between generations of workers: a generation of waged, tenured, unionized workers were subject to pre-market reforms, and a generation of workers in precarious labor arrangements post-market reforms and labor flexibilization. As Zlolniski shows, "stable" in the current Latin American context means a steady workforce year-round. Growers encouraged migrant farmworkers to invade land, as the workers' permanence in the valley meant securing a labor force without having to rely on labor contractors who recruited people from Oaxaca and Guerrero. Though they are "stable" in this sense, farmworkers continue to experience precarious working arrangements, sometimes without knowing how companies cheat them. Companies do not register all workers in Mexico's social security system and manage two account systems, one internal and one in case they are audited. In this "dual labor system" (91), some workers accumulate seniority, pension benefits, and access to public health care (including for their dependents), while others do not. Zlolniski's point regarding features of a stable workforce is a valuable call to discern carefully the differences between workers under distinct labor regimes and to move beyond a simple typological dichotomy.

Made in Baja contributes to studies of how political struggles, mobilizations, and collective forms of solidarity emerge within a precarious labor force under flexible labor arrangements. Migrant labor made possible the formation of export agriculture enclaves. Over the years, indigenous and mestizo migrant farmworkers became permanent inhabitants of the San Quintín Valley, leading to the end of labor camps and indentured labor. In the process of becoming permanent inhabitants of the San Quintín Valley and a year-round workforce, people built houses and *colonias* (both of which take years of work and labor), brought their families or married among themselves, had children and sent them to school, and created social relations

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in their neighborhoods with their coworkers. They collectively struggled for basic services including water. In this way, indigenous and mestizo farmworkers engage in a process of community formation. As workers *and* as inhabitants of the San Quintín Valley, they connect labor and community politics. Demanding better labor conditions and independent unions along with basic services in their neighborhoods, these workers illuminate how labor and civic struggles entail the struggle for social reproduction.

To capture the process of farm laborers' establishing roots in and populating the San Quintín Valley, Zlolniski uses the category of "settler." This is indeed a process of settlement. However, *settler* is not a neutral term: it denotes a relation of domination and is tied to processes of colonialism and empire. Given how carefully Zlolniski situates farm laborers within Mexico's landscape of class and race relations, "settler" is a surprising word choice. Farm laborers are an impoverished group, displaced from their places of origin in part by the end of subsidies supporting subsistence farming, and they are among the most precarious labor forces. Within this landscape of disenfranchisement and dispossession, it is hard to see indigenous and mestizo farmworkers as settlers. This critique aside, Zlolniski's ethnography vividly captures the structural conditions shaping indigenous and mestizo farm workers and the ways in which these workers have mobilized to challenge these conditions.

Zlolniski traces how class transformations are shaped in the San Quintín Valley. Under the Temporary Agricultural Workers program, US agribusinesses now recruit farm laborers from this agricultural enclave. Through this program of temporary labor migration, labor is cheapened. Yet Zlolniski also points out to how the militarization of the Mexico–US border and the criminalization of undocumented Mexican workers intersect in giving rise to this program as well as to a new class of transnational workers.

Conclusion

The country-specific data found in these eight books offer insight into the particularities of pre- and post-neoliberal processes relating to the formation of flexible labor regimes. These specificities are important for refining examinations of labor precarity in the Latin American and Caribbean context, and attending to the multiplicity of ways in which labor deregulation has been imposed, implemented, and contested. This review essay has deliberately placed different disciplinary angles into conversation. Collectively they bring into view the different scales affected by Latin American flexible labor regimes—from labor codes to everyday lived realities.

The insights gleaned from these works are especially pressing in the context of the current global COVID-19 crisis. The majority of Latin American and Caribbean working classes are facing aggravated socioeconomic uncertainties and vulnerabilities. By the end of 2020, around 30.1 million people (10.6 percent) were unemployed—an increase of 2.5 percent from the previous year.[9] This is the highest rate recorded in recent decades.[10] CEPAL estimates that the number of poor people was 209 million (33.7 percent), 22 million more people than in 2019. Of that number, 78 million (12.5 percent) were in extreme poverty, 8 million more people than in 2019.[11] In a (post)pandemic world, a cross-disciplinary understanding of the working classes and their working and living conditions is all the more urgent.

The books discussed in this essay present several promising avenues for further research. In light of union decay and the fact that strong unions were formed under different socioeconomic conditions, research on cooperatives and other forms of organizing is needed in order to elucidate how people are contesting or accommodating themselves to flexible labor regimes. At the workplace level, research on different and uneven flexible labor regimes—such as the "dual labor system" that Zlolniski traces—could focus on how different labor regimes coexist and how they shape relationships among workers. Examinations of working classes must encompass an analysis of social reproduction—household economies, kinship relations, and care as well as forms of differentiation between employed and unemployed members of the household in relation to class, gender, and generation. One important (yet difficult to document) research agenda is unfree labor. *Walmart in the Global South*, *Politicized Enforcement in Argentina*, and *Made in Baja* all mention in passing trafficked, coerced, and debt-bondage labor, pointing toward the ongoing significance of unfree

[9] ILO, *2020 Labour Overview: Latin America and the Caribbean; Executive Summary*, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/documents/publication/wcms_764633.pdf.

[10] ILO, *2020 Labour Overview.*

[11] Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Social Panorama of Latin America, 2020* (LC/PUB.2021/2-P/Rev.1) (Santiago: ECLAC, 2021).

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labor for processes of capitalist accumulation. In 2012, the ILO estimated that 1.8 million people in Latin America were in forced labor.[12]

The books profiled in this essay that seek to transcend academic boundaries indicate that current critical engagement involves an examination of forms of marginalization, oppression, and exploitation and, simultaneously, an attempt to reach those struggling—either directly or in the form of recommendations for solving pressing problems faced by workers and their dependents. Seeking to transcend academic boundaries means continuing with grounded and meticulous scholarship while simultaneously laying out the ethical dilemmas and attempting to ensure that research has a material impact. In this light, the books profiled in this essay that write both *about* and *for* the working classes and that offer constructive interventions raise the stakes for the future course of Latin American labor studies.

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[12] ILO Newsroom, "Fighting Forced Labour in Latin America," *International Labor Organization*, May 18, 2005, https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_075511/lang--en/index.htm; see also Felipe Calvão, "Unfree Labor," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 45 (2016): 451–467; and Genevieve LeBaron, "Unfree Labor beyond Binaries," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17, no. 1 (2015): 1–19.

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