

## REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

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### Labor Movements and Social Change in Latin America and the Caribbean

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In celebration of its tenth anniversary, the Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean (CERLAC) held an international conference on labor movements and social change in the regions 13–15 October 1988 at York University. Forty-four academics and trade unionists from nineteen countries gave presentations, which were organized into twelve sessions, on a range of issues, including labor and development problems, women's relationships to trade unions, and labor and democratization.

In a session on "Labor, the Multinationals, and Development Problems in Periods of World Crisis," Cecil Paul (Trinidad, Oil Field Workers Trade Union) examined the role played by international finance capital in obstructing efforts to recover from economic hardships throughout the Caribbean region. International Monetary Fund (IMF) stabilization policies, in particular, have led to widespread austerity measures and a general decline in state welfare functions. Efforts to ensure debt servicing have been further accompanied by a massive retrenchment of the Caribbean trade union movement, with existing conditions similar to those of the pre-1930 period. Of particular concern are employer refusal to engage in collective bargaining, legislation restricting the right to strike, and the "increased media portrayal of trade unions as antinational, sectorial, and outmoded." Pedro Andres Wasiejko (Argentina, Rubber Workers Union) complemented Paul's approach to labor and development issues by calling attention to the difficulties faced by trade unions operating in subsidiaries of multinational corporations. Focusing on the heightened mobility of capital under the new international division of labor, Wasiejko detailed the manner in which management strategies, such as posting the production figures of "rival" plants, use the spectre of relocation as a way of disciplining labor and fostering a spirit of competition. In a departure from the practical considerations of Paul and Wasiejko, Jean Carriere (the Netherlands, Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation) offered a theoretical critique of Latin American labor studies. Carriere argued that the academic literature on Latin American labor movements has been unduly influenced by theoretical models that assume a dual economy and the isolation of workers in a modern manufacturing sector. Such a focus results in a failure to examine seriously the relations between wage earners and urban informal sector workers and their implications for trade union organization. In place of imported evolutionary frameworks on development and the labor movement, which assume the "exis-

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tence of a history or a logic of conflict in advance of the historical data," Carriere offered the work of the class-formation school. Through historical analysis of the ideologies that inform working-class protest and of the forms of organization labor has forged and reformed over the years, the latter sheds light on the practices of existing Latin American labor movements such as popular mobilization and a preoccupation with legalism.

A session on "Gender Roles in Employment and Organized Labor" addressed issues of women's participation in trade unions, the organizational form their resistance has taken in free trade zones, and the role of feminism in processes of revolutionary transformation. Marysa Navarro (U.S., Dartmouth College) reported on her efforts to reconstruct the history of women's participation in the Argentine labor movement from a feminist perspective. Content analyses of two newspapers dating from the early twentieth century, *La Protesta* (anarchist) and *La Vanguardia* (socialist), give evidence of women labor leaders, women's participation in strike action, and efforts to create resistance societies for women workers, which counter the sentimentalizing accounts of women workers found in the literature on the Argentine movement written by male historians and participants. Kathryn Kopinak (Canada, King's College) focused on the organizational efforts of *maquiladora* workers along the Mexican-American border who have "found the ability of unions to defend their rights weakened by state control and the easy availability of cheap labour." The two centers under examination, the Centro de Orientacion de la Mujer Obrera (COMO) in Juárez and Mujer Obrera (MO) in El Paso, show similar commitments to self-management and worker cooperatives. However, ideological differences centered on COMO's embrace of charismatic Catholicism and MO's socialist orientation, as well as the former's growing relationship with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) have prevented relations of solidarity from developing between the two centers. Alba Palacios (Nicaragua, Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo [ATC]) examined the changing nature of the debate regarding the relationship between gender and class struggles in Nicaragua as articulated in successive national assemblies of the ATC. Early efforts of women activists in the ATC concentrated on increasing women's role in social production and organizing around issues of domestic labor. In the past two years, this focus has been accompanied by efforts to establish a public sexual politics over issues such as abortion and sexual harassment in the workplace, as well as by efforts to construct the struggle against machismo as one of society as a whole, not just of women.

In a session on "Labor, Democracy, and Dictatorship," Nanda Gopaul (Guyana, National Association of Agricultural, Commercial, and Industrial Employees) interpreted the recent split of the Seven Union Movement from the Guyana Trades Union Council (TUC) as a response to the latter's failure to develop a politics of independent trade unionism. State co-optation of the TUC dates back over a twenty-year period, throughout which the People's National Congress has successfully manipulated national and trade union elections to consolidate state

power and gain control of a majority of delegate positions in the TUC. In analyzing independent trade unionists' shift away from labor strategies grounded in parliamentary democracy and conventional relations between unions and political parties, Gopaul highlighted the precipitative role played by a series of unsuccessful Guyanese court battles over antilabor government policies, during which initially favorable Court of Appeal decisions were revoked by act of parliament. Inés Murillo (Honduras, International Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Honduras) built on this discussion by affirming the need to incorporate the national experiences of the popular classes into critiques of conventional understandings of democracy. In a brief discussion of the political economy of Honduras under both democratic and dictatorial governments, Murillo noted that the problem of widespread poverty has remained a constant. On the basis of escalating human rights violations and the growing militarization of Honduras since the reestablishment of formal democracy in 1980, Murillo further argued for a significant recasting of the democracy/dictatorship dichotomy. Alejandro Rojas (Canada, York University) further extended the reconceptualization of democracy by calling into question the model of socialist democracy advocated by trade union movements throughout Latin America. He noted that the goals of modernization, widespread urbanization, and technological progress that permeate the vision of future society articulated by the region's labor movements do not depart radically from the character of postindustrial capitalist society. While differences exist in class relations and in the exploitation of labor, consumptive and appropriative relations with nature are common to both projects. Summarizing his position, Rojas underscored the need to incorporate the struggle against private property relations with struggles against centralism, racism, sexism, and other modes of domination.

The conference closed with a comparative session addressing the key issues raised in previous sessions from a cross-national perspective. Beyond this, the linking of academic and trade union approaches throughout the entire conference helped move toward a more complete analysis and practice of social change. Information on conference publications can be obtained by writing to CERLAC, 204 Founders College, York University, 4700 Keele St., North York, Ontario, Canada, M3J 1P3.

## “People at Work”: Lowell Conference on Industrial History

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Every year since 1980, the Lowell Conference on Industrial History has addressed a new topic in a loosely defined study of industrialization. Conference programs are organized to promote dialogue, among not only historians and scholars from