



GRIP ACADEMIC 2023 WORKSHOP ABSTRACTS

KATE ALEXANDER (University of Johannesburg) - Thousands of Years of Mining, Protest and Politics in Africa

The paper starts with the claim that mining provides a valuable lens with which to explore our global past. It was present at the start of labour history, and may yet be implicated in its end. This point is illustrated with examples from Africa, notably Ngwenya, probably the oldest site in mining history, where production began more than 40,000 years ago. Four substantial sections reflect on the intersection of class, race and politics in four key moments of South Africa's mining history: the strikes of 1920 and 1922, of 1946 and 1947, 1987, and 2012. By way of conclusion, the paper shifts gear to, first, notes of disappointment and despair about South Africa's present, and, secondly, a new analysis of protests in Africa and possibilities these pose for radical transformation.

JAIRUS BANAJI (SOAS, University of London) - Rethinking the Origins of Stalinism. On Zoom

The regime that came to be known as Stalinism wasn't born overnight but emerged in a succession of fatal steps over the greater part of the *early* 1920s. If this was not sufficiently clear from the existing literature, it is now abundantly evident in most recent accounts, notably Simon Pirani's methodical analysis of the period from 1920 to 1924. That the October Revolution ended in the monstrous counter-finality of Stalinism remains a real challenge for the Left, especially those sectors of it that claim some part of the Revolution's legacy. To learn from October is to learn from and about its *defeat*.

JOHN BARZMAN (Université Le Havre) - Questions on 200 Years of Socialism

The ambitious approach reminds one of Charles Tilly's *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*. While I have always believed that such broad synthesis is necessary, the vagaries of my academic career have led me to produce narrow, detailed empirical studies. On the other hand, my trajectory as a revolutionary Marxist militant often led me to raise fundamental questions: what is the working class? What groups are its components or allies? Are we approaching the end of the cycle of emancipatory struggles opened by 1968, or 1917 or the 1880s (i.e. the first generalization of trade union confederations and labour parties)? Can the history of





working people in one country be studied fruitfully without sustained attention to world trends and interactions? In this context, I am more likely to contribute to debates on the intrinsic limits of organizational forms such as the trade union, political party and cooperative.

GEERT VAN GOETHEM (Ghent University) - Social Democracy in Belgium – a Historian - Participant's Analysis

Socialist movements in Belgium had a genesis and evolution broadly similar to that of sister movements in large parts of north-western Europe. In this short contribution, I would first like to look at some characteristic elements of that Belgian socialism. These have to do both with organisational forms and methods, but also with the country's political context. Starting from a critical interrogation of that past, I want to highlight some evolutions or key moments that have been decisive for both the present and probably also the future of social democracy.

I will supplement this historical analysis with testimony from myself as a participant because I think it is useful to look at the central question of this workshop from the micro level as well. Over the past 40 years, I have been active within the Flemish Socialist Party - which changed its name four times during that period - from the local to the national level. From local board member to national council member, from local councillor to MP. I have witnessed the evolution of that party, deep moments of crisis and short-lived periods of success. Without harbouring the illusion that this personal story can provide unequivocal answers to the central questions, I think, the bottom-up perspective can be enriching and contribute to the wider debate.

ROHINI HENSMAN (independent researcher) - How the Abandonment of Democracy and Internationalism Has Decimated the Socialist Movement. *On Zoom*

According to Marx and Engels, socialism – synonymous with communism – was the product of a revolution carried out by the working people of the world, or the movement which brought about such a revolution, simultaneously democratic and internationalist. Social-democratic parties were democratic but support for their own states in World War I negated internationalism, while Lenin's substitution of the party for the whole working class seriously undermined democracy but not internationalism. Stalin's proclamation of socialism in one extremely authoritarian country destroyed both democracy and internationalism. These legacies have dominated most of the left ever since, aiding a drift to the right.





RAGNHEIÐUR KRISTJANSÐOTTIR (University of Iceland) & SILKE NEUNSINGER (Swedish Labour Movement Archives and Library & Uppsala University) - Socialist Women's Activism for Equality. *On Zoom*

Women were not always welcome in socialist circles and the labour movement. At the beginning, many trade unions thus excluded women. As time passed, some of the separate women's trade unions and women's committees, which had been founded in the late 19th and early 20th centuries became part of the earlier all-male organisations. In other cases, women workers joined middle-class women's organisations where they found support in organizing trade unions. Criticised among their comrades for focusing on gender instead of class and criticised for focusing too much on class by their feminist sisters, socialist women had to carry out a balancing act for the larger part of the last 200 years.

In our contribution, we want to look at the role of socialist women in the dramatic transformation of women's economic, political, and social citizenship during the 20th century. We state that the outcome of these turning points were the results of years of struggle and therefore not a coincidence. At the end of World War I, a period which marked a dramatic extension of political citizenship, socialist women had made important breakthroughs in putting the ideal of gender equality in general and equal remuneration in particular on the agenda of international organisations (most importantly, the ILO) and socialist politics (e.g. the international Communists movement and its member parties). Another turning point was during the aftermath of World War II. During this period of democratisation and decolonisation, international decisions were made to commit governments to equal remuneration. Here, socialist women, and their worldwide struggle, had been instrumental.

DAVID MAYER (University of Vienna) - Cycles upon Cycles – Labour's 200 Year Arch in Connection with "Political Ecology" and "Revolution"

As challenging as it is in itself to think a 200-year cycle of socialism, for a full understand of its dilemmas it seems inevitable to connect the particular cycle of socialism with other cycles. In my contribution, I will suggest to bring two particular fields of enquiry into the debate which seem, almost self-evidently, relevant for an understanding of a proposed 200-year cycle of socialism: the history of revolution (and counterrevolution) as well as the recent forays in historical political ecology. Both seem highly congenial to any debate about socialism's cycle – not least, because they are commonly conceived of as following a more or less a similar temporal arch of 200 years.





LUCAS POY (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) - Kautsky's Unexpected Comeback: Understanding the Re-emergence of the Second International in Contemporary Debates

This paper focuses on a particular tradition with a classic “bifurcation point”: the Second International and its collapse in 1914. For decades, nobody within the diverse families of the radical left seemed interested in studying, let alone promoting, the years of the Second International. In the last five or ten years, however, it has become fashionable to vindicate pre-1914 social democracy, and Karl Kautsky in particular. This recent and quite unexpected revisionism found expression in the pages of *Jacobin*, an influential political journal linked to the Democratic Socialists of America. The aim of this paper is to reconstruct this debate and understand the reasons that motivated scholars and activists to vindicate Kautsky's ideas, in the context of the surprisingly popular (although ultimately unsuccessful) campaign of a faction of the Democratic Party to secure a nomination for the presidency of the United States. The paper will also argue that other, less well-known “bifurcation points” of the history of the Second International, such as discussions about racism and migration, could be more interesting for activists seeking to deploy a more global (and anti-imperialist) perspective in the 21st century.

LEWIS H. SIEGELBAUM (Michigan State University) - Soviet Inflection Points – a Play in Three Acts

This paper is about contingency and determination. It identifies three “inflection points” – tipping points or points of no return – in the not-so-*longue durée* of Soviet history: 1929, 1959, and 1989. The paper thus reflects on the collectivization of agriculture and associated brutalities; the promise and limitations of Khrushchev's reforms as well as the appeal – again, limited – of the Soviet Union to the emerging Third World; and the opportunities presented by perestroika and glasnost' to reconfigure relations and purposes of production before the waves of nationalism and neoliberal market madness washed over the Soviet Union.

DILIP SIMEON (independent researcher) - Militant Capitalism, Bad Infinity, and the Longing for Total Revolution

The Bolshevik confiscation of the Russian revolution was indeed a ‘bifurcation point’ – but it was the French revolution that launched the age of ideology, millenarian doctrines and annihilationist warfare. If the ‘bad infinity’ of capital accumulation was accompanied by an economic theology; the subjugation of the labour movement by vanguardist doctrines represented another bad infinity: the ‘end of history.’ The bourgeois enlightenment was attacked from two sides, signified symbolically by Marx





and Nietzsche. By taking up residence in an eternal waiting room; the labour movement was tied to an authoritarian politics which replaced philosophy with sophistry and infused real possibilities with ideological phantasms. Meanwhile the capitalist system launched its own revolution.

REINER TOSSTORFF (Johannes-Gutenberg University Mainz) - The Spanish Civil War as a Bifurcation Point for the International Left: Civil war, social revolution or geopolitics (as test run for World War II)?

The SCW will be discussed as the last offshoot of the revolutionary wave following WWI. Though it did not crystallize in workers councils (soviets), but nevertheless at least initially found an expression in the quasi hegemonic role of the „syndicato“ (as a substitute for them) and was thus to a certain extent an „anti-state revolution“. But due to the international context this was superimposed by the logic of „antifascism“ and state reconstruction, at the cost of the revolution (developing models like the „united party“ etc.). Another aspect of its importance for the left (and therefore for its failures), was the lack of support for the independence of Morocco.

SJAAK VAN DER VELDEN (International Institute of Social History) - The Future of Strikes and Trade Unions

While workers, especially the unskilled ones, in many countries were already striking against low wages and long working hours, trade unions were mainly a form of organisation invented by skilled labour. For over a century the two merged. Since the crisis of the 1970s both have been on the defensive, which can be seen from lowering union density rates and the disappearance of strikes in many Western countries. Since many trade unions have been connected to social democracy which in turn connected itself to the existing political and socioeconomic form of capitalism we can doubt if the rising movement of the workers will again find expression in trade unionism. Is there a future for trade unionism or will another form of organisation arise?

JAMES WICKHAM (Trinity College Dublin) - The Long Shadow of the Working Class Movement

The post-World War II period saw responses to earlier class insurgency which marked Western Europe as a distinctive set of societies. The paper discusses as class power (1) the working class presence on the national stage – from 1945 to 1960s as a positive counter-hegemonic social identity (2) the forgotten revolt – the upsurge of class conflict in Europe in the late 1960s and the difference between US and European





responses (3) the consolidation of West European welfare states in the 1970s. The working class has left the stage, but its achievements live on.

On the one hand, these moments of change can be seen as the result of local and national processes that led to a redefinition of citizenship, but on the other due to a new commitment to international organisations and agreements fought for by socialist women. Here, we take our starting point from Nira Yuval-Davis, who has argued for an understanding of citizenship as a multi-layered construct. Yuval-Davis shows that „one’s citizenship in collectivities in the different layers – local, ethnic, national, state, cross- or trans-state and supra-state – is affected and often at least partly constructed by the relationships and positionings of each layer in a specific historical context.” And she claims that this approach is particularly important when examining gender in a “non westocentric way”.

