

Can the New Global Labour Studies Stimulate a New Global Labour Movement? Two Discussion Drafts

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Here are two very different draft reviews of two related books. I am making them available to the authors and to you in the hope of feedback that I might be still able to feed into one or other. Additionally, I may later do a review article that joins them (with others?) in more structured fashion. (☹ Please respect the reproduction limits indicated).

GroundingGlobReview

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Eddie Webster, Rob Lambert and Andries Bezuidenhout, *Grounding Globalization: Labor in the Age of Insecurity*. Oxford: Blackwell. 261pp. ISBN: 978-1-4051-2914-5.

Introduction

Grounding Globalization (henceforth GG) is a highly original and ambitious work, certain to provoke discussion and encourage further work amongst labor-oriented academics and research-minded activists in coming years. Despite one of its authors, Rob Lambert, living in Australia, it must be considered to represent the ‘SWOP School of Labor Studies’. This is the Sociology of Work Unit at the University of Johannesburg, directed until recently by Eddie Webster and with which the other two have been associated. It could, more broadly, be considered as a - if not the first - contribution from the ‘Global South’ to the widening Left efforts to reconceptualize and reinvent the labor movement worldwide in the age of globalization (Bieler, Lindberg and Pillay 2008, Employee Rights and Responsibilities Journal 2008, Munck 2002, Phelan 2006, van der Linden 2008, Waterman and Wills 2001).¹

Karl the Second: a critical reading

GG depends on a critical reconsideration of the theory of 20th century Left sociologist and social historian, Karl Polanyi, with his currently much-cited work (compare Munck 2002) on ‘the great transformation’ brought about by the first industrial revolution; of the ‘double movement’ in which the capitalist economy came to dominate society; and how this provoked a movement to ‘re-embed’ the economy in society. GG marshals many other theorists to supplement or correct Polanyi. They include, notably, Sidney Tarrow on transnational social movements, and Michael Burawoy on both

¹ Another Southern exception comes to mind, the English/Spanish ‘Labor Again’ list <http://www.iisg.nl/laboragain/index.php>. After a promising start, however, it seems to have fallen into disuse. It is nonetheless worth a visit...and a revival!

movements against globalization and the relationship of socially-committed academics to the people and movements they study. They also make much use of such radical social geographers such as David Harvey, with arguments concerning capital's spatial strategies and the necessity for multi-spatial and multi-level counter-strategies. Whilst they do not synthesize their theoretical sources, far less draw from them a set of initial propositions, they do deploy them throughout the work with elegance and effect. Curiously, GG does not conceptualize, in its theoretical introduction, two related notions that nonetheless repeatedly reappear throughout the book, 'social movement unionism' and 'the new labor internationalism' (although the latter is defined in Chapter 9). Yet these two concepts actually seem to underlie or at least inspire their work. More limiting, however, is their failure to deal with computerization/informatization as a fundamental characteristic of neo-liberal globalization and a crucial terrain of labor and other social movement struggle against this. Informatization depends on and creates *another space* – cyberspace – which emancipatory social movements ignore at their peril. The implications of this void in the theoretical peregrinations of GG, become evident in the chapter on a new labor internationalism.²

Three cases from the South, but which South?

The theoretical introduction is followed by three major sections: Part I: Markets Against Society, Part II: Society Against Markets and Part III: Society Governing the Market?

Parts I and II consist of three case studies of corporate strategy, of labor downsizing and/or repression, and of labor's response in the 'white goods industry' (refrigerators, washing machines, cookers, etc) in three cities of the 'Global South', Ezakheni in South Africa, Changwon in South Korea, Orange in Australia. The authors innovate in these case studies by considering not only the workplace but the community and the household.

Part I presents a fascinating political-economy of the corporations present in the three sites, showing that despite significant differences between them, all three companies have adopted or benefitted from strategies of 'market despotism' (Chapter 3) toward their again very different labor forces. Chapter 4, 'Citizenship Matters', actually moves beyond the affected communities to show how neo-liberal globalization has led to brutal attacks on what were (or in South Africa were promised to be) citizen rights, in the sense of access to water, electricity or other essential services. The book uses new concepts to analyze all this and could be recommended for this part alone.

² The key text on informatization and networking is, obviously, Castells (1996-8), which deals both with the present revolution in capitalism and new forms of cyberspace resistance to such. Increasing Left writings, however, concern themselves with cyberspace and social movements in general or with labor movements in particular. Apart from the Eric Lee (1996) classic, consider Dwyer-Witford (1999), Martinez (2006), Robinson (2006), van Donk, Loader, Nixon and Rucht 2004. Hale and Wills (2005) deals not only with another globalized industry, garment production, but with a largely female workforce, and one in which global resistance is promoted by feminists and takes the networking form.

Part II consists of a political-ethnography of labor/community adaptation or resistance to this corporate and globalized capitalist onslaught. It shows how, in very different ways, workers and communities are trying to fight back by spreading their struggle to the local community (social-movement unionism?) and/or globalizing their struggle (the new internationalism?). In each case they find – despite much passivity or fatalism – shoots of hope. In the case of Ezakheni, they state that

Our analysis of the role of the less formal community based organizations...is that, in alliance with the trade unions and the local ANC, they could provide the basis for an alternative local development strategy to that of the current neoliberal orthodoxy. (126).

There is here either trust or hope in a possible radicalization of the ANC, something increasingly contested by the autonomous Left in South Africa itself.³ In the case of Changwon, GG places its bets on the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) which, whilst in Changwon a minority confederation, addresses itself energetically to the issues of female and precarious workers. In my admittedly limited experience, the KCTU is certainly the most radical and the most sophisticated of the three national trade union centers considered by GG. It is also appears to be the most seriously internationalist, as suggested by the importance given international issues on its website.⁴ The KCTU is, however, in the ‘privileged’ position of being the one of the three mentioned centers subject to harsh repression by the state, and has therefore most distance from it. In Changwon, a major industrial city, GG recognizes, moreover, that

The dominant response among the workers we interviewed...was to work harder and increase their overtime work. (140)

The major value of Part II (summarized on pages 157-8) is its recognition of the extent of labor’s retreat or adaptation to the onslaught. As for the mobilization efforts, I note the extent to which GG places their hopes for re-assertion in trade union organizations and left political parties (in Australia the Labor Party, in South Korea the Democratic Labor Party).⁵ Yet these are political/associational/institutional forms inevitably shaped by the

³ See an undated (2008?) piece by Dale McKinley at <http://links.org.au/node/1154>. Others can be found in the Online Library of the Centre for Civil Society, Durban, <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/CCS/default.asp?3,28>.

⁴ <http://kctu.org/documents>. This was, admittedly, just after the KCTU had hosted an international conference on trade unions and the crisis, May 2009. When I briefly visited the KCTU, 2008, I was impressed by its willingness to admit that its leadership was significantly more radical than its own worker members, haunted as these were by the threat of casualization.

⁵ The Democratic Labor Party suffered a split (between a more-moderat majority and a more-radical minority, leading to the formation of a new party in 2008. In 2009, the KCTU was under pressure due to 1) the cover-up of a sexual harassment case, leading to the resignation of the leadership, 2) the de-affiliation of unions, complaining that the KCTU was not defending (regular?) workers, and 3) complaints from casualized workers that the KCTU was not taking their problems seriously. Information here is from or via Wikipedia (consulted late-July 2009), is dependent on mainstream media, and is in imperfect English. It therefore needs to be treated with appropriate care. But even if these accounts are exaggerated, they do

20th century capitalism against which they fought - and with which they bargain. My conviction is that whilst one can by no means write these forms off, and whilst I accept that they may now be moving from retreat/adaptation to cautious mobilization, they are structurally unfit for a struggle against and beyond a globalized capitalism that is not only neo-liberal but *computerized and networked*.⁶

Although GG does not pretend to produce ‘a blueprint for action’ (xi) Part III seems intended to remove the question mark from ‘Society Governing the Market?’ by pointing readers in a general, progressive, direction. This part of the book consists of three chapters, one on the significance for labor struggles of strikingly different local histories, one on the necessity for ‘grounding’ a new labor internationalism in such locales, and a third on the importance of a ‘realistic utopianism’ in finding effective alternatives for labor.

Grounding globalization and resistance to such

The history chapter (Ch. 8) makes the simple but important point that any new labor movement globally will have to take account of significant differences between local places/cases, and to build from these (instead, presumably, of imposing some universal model on them top-down?). It only leaves here out of account the fact that: 1) the traditional union hegemons *have traditionally exported* such universalistic strategies from the West-European heartland (‘Social Partnership’, the ‘Social Clause’ and, currently, ‘Decent Work’); and that 2) such counter-hegemonic concepts as the ‘new labor internationalism’ and ‘social movement unionism’ originated in West-Europe also!⁷

Union internationalism, old and new

suggest that one needs to avoid over-identification with even militant trade unions and even new Left political parties.

⁶ For attempts to re-think the relationship between the social and the political under present conditions, see Adamovsky (2009) and the Networked Politics site, http://www.tni.org/detail_pub.phtml?&know_id=39&menu=11f.

⁷ I initiated the international exchange on ‘social-movement unionism’ in the 1980s and have played a continuing role in that on the ‘new labor internationalism’. The three authors of GG, in South Africa, picked up and ran with the concept of ‘social-movement unionism’ (Waterman 2004). But, in both cases, I think, the dialogue has continued most energetically in the ‘Global North’, with North America making major contributions on or around the concept of ‘social-movement unionism’. The difference between the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ‘exports’ mentioned is, of course, that the first emanates from the international trade-union hegemons. Indeed, in the ‘Decent Work’ case, the Northern-based international union hegemons received it, pre-packaged, from an *inter-state organization*, the Geneva-based International Labor Organization! In the anti-hegemonic case, any message exported depends on the power of the ideas proposed. In relation to ‘social movement unionism’, moreover, any North-to-South message is one that was 1) drawn also from Southern ideas and experiences, and 2) intended to provoke dialogue, both on the North-South axis and on the academic-activist one. Currently the phrase scores over 11,000 hits on Google. ‘New labor internationalism’, ‘new union internationalism’ and related phrases score together less than 1,000. It has had most success, ironically, *within* the modernized International Trade Union Confederation – a body that actually reproduces the old practices (for which see Hodgkinson 2005).

The internationalism chapter (Chapter 9) depends on a rather schematic opposition between an old and a new labor (actually *union*) internationalism (Table 9.1), in which the characteristics of the new are: a (new?) generation of activists, the network form, decentralization, open dialogue, mobilization, coalition with new social movements and NGOs, and ‘predominantly struggling Southern Afro, Asian and Latino workers’. Whilst this is an acceptable rhetorical or polemical device (of a kind I often myself employ), it leaves out of account a series of features necessary for a wider and deeper understanding: distinctions between different *bearers* of internationalism (the union organization? the broader labor movement? the new global social movements more generally? labor-oriented activists/researchers?); the *axes, directionality, reach and depth* of international solidarity actions or campaigns; the distinct *possible yet problematic types of solidarity* within either the old or the new (Waterman 2001:57-63, 235-8).⁸

I am also not convinced, by either this chapter or a wider reading of the literature, that a new union internationalism is or will be *primarily* carried by the Southern workers (Waterman 2001:Ch.5). Indeed, it could be seen as a requirement of any new union or labor internationalism that it develop out of a dialectic and dialogue between all world areas (including a customarily forgotten (ex-)Communist one that includes China!), between radically-democratic social movements, as well as between labor organizations/movements and socially-committed academics.

The ‘new internationalist’ cases this chapter offers are all from the Geographic South, though Australia is, actually, part of the Socio-Economic North, and South Korea in the Geographic North (Seoul is on approximately the same latitude as Lisbon)! Even the most Socially Southern of the three, South Africa, is a clearly atypical member of the Global South. So any Manichean, or even a simple binary opposition, between North and South is here either totally undermined or at least made seriously problematic. (Used metaphorically, as does Souza Santos (2007), ‘North’ and ‘South’ can be said to exist also within each world region or even individual countries).

⁸ One specialist on labor and social-movement internationalism reminds us that the union internationals today only represent between *five and ten percent of the world’s wage-earners* (van der Linden 2008:280)! This is clearly a case of the emperor’s new (actually old) clothes, since no labor or even anti-labor institution wants to make an issue of this! Van der Linden also warns us, concerning his own recent piece on labor internationalism, that

Since the historiography of trade-union internationalism is far more advanced than the historiography of the world working class, I focus on the development of labor organizations here. In the longer term, however, that approach should be reversed, i.e. the development of the world working class will have to become the analytical background against which trade-union internationalism is analyzed. (261, footnote 6).

Earlier in this work, Van der Linden argues that Marx’s working class was only a small proportion of the then - and, I would add, currently - existing working classes and he proposes another theoretical basis for including these others (Ch. 2).

The major case offered for the new union internationalism is the Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR). It is no coincidence that this network links major unions in the three case countries in this book. Nor that one of the GG authors, Rob Lambert, is the founder and continuing keystone of this network, nor that he and Eddie Webster have been its major academic promoters (see the co-authored entries in the book's bibliography). As a sympathetic but critical follower of SIGTUR, however, I regret to say that this project has international visibility *primarily* in the work of these two academics! It has no presence within the World Social Forum (unlike KCTU and Cosatu it has attended only one WSF) and after almost two decades of existence it has a weak and non-dialogical web presence.⁹ Yet a dialogical web presence is today surely another requirement for any new labor internationalism. Nor, in the presentation of SIGTUR, here or elsewhere, is there any serious discussion of that 'North/South' relationship *between* the three countries that the authors consider 'the fundamental challenge to a new labor internationalism' (209). SIGTUR is in fact trapped in an undiscussed and undiscussable contradiction: of trying to build a new *networked* labor movement internationalism on the basis of leadership relations between trade union *organizations* that themselves reproduce the state-national base of the Old Labor Internationalism!¹⁰

This is clearly not a problem for SIGTUR alone since the phenomenon is more or less reproduced in the 'alternative' Globalization and Labor network within the World Social Forum (Waterman 2009). This latter experiment may, however, turn out to be more productive than that of SIGTUR since: 1) it is not hung up on a binary opposition between North and South; 2) it is open, without condition, to trade unions, other labor movements (or NGOs), to both movements and academics, to the North and South; 3) it is sited within that pressure-cooker of the 'global justice and solidarity movement', the World Social Forum; and, finally, 4) it has a web presence open to dialogue.¹¹ Both experiments are, I believe, limited by their prioritization of the trade union organization. Now, neither experiment is to be written off. They represent the largely pragmatic (i.e. unconceptualized, untheorized, historically-unreflective) efforts of a new generation of

⁹ http://www.sigtur.com/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1.

¹⁰ SIGTUR membership consists primarily of national union centers of some unspecified 'left', 'progressive' or 'democratic' nature. In the case of the Philippines, this is the Kilusang Mayo Uno, long associated with the (Maoist) Communist Party of the Philippines (http://jpe.library.arizona.edu/volume_6/westvol6.htm). In the case of India, it is the two major Communist trade union federations, one of which is associated with the Communist-led Government of West Bengal, itself responsible for land clearance and peasant massacres in the interest of major Indian corporations (<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2007/apr2007/beng-a21.shtml>). At a SIGTUR conference in South Africa in 1999 I witnessed a walkout by the two Communist Indian unions in protest against a Hong Kong-based NGO's exhibition on factory fires in China (I have to presume that protest against factory fires in Thailand would have been acceptable). Members of SIGTUR can also act as national gatekeepers, preventing SIGTUR relating to other unions or labor movements in what they seem to consider as 'their' nation-states. Indeed, I heard one Indian Communist leader at this conference proclaim, in bourgeois-nationalist mode, the principle of non-interference in Indian labor matters.

¹¹ <http://openesf.net/projects/labor-and-globalization/lists>). And, thanks to one of its participants, Labor and Globalization is even present on You Tube. http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=world+social+forum+labor&search_type=&aq=f.

activists from within and around the unions to create a new kind of union internationalism. I believe, however, that the innovatory force for such comes primarily from international labor organizations, support-groups and networks autonomous from the old inter/national union institutions.

The return of utopianism in labor studies, but which utopianism?

It is a pleasant surprise to discover the word 'utopia' used in a positive sense in a book about trade unions internationally (Chapter 10). This is a reaffirmation of the potential power of desire and imagination in a movement that, over a long historical period, has been drained of such. Interestingly GG asserts, on the basis of its three cases, that due to the loss of workplace- and market-bargaining power, union organizers are beginning to draw on symbolic or moral power. They say that

To effectively use this source of power, unions have to engage more directly in the public arena, form coalitions with other civil society actors and become part of a broader counter-movement. Importantly, the commoditization of society and environment affects not only organized workers; it cuts across all strata, including farmers and small business. A facet of union struggle as it emerged historically is the transformation of the insecure commodity status of persons who experienced devalued lives into the recognition of their creative potential. (214)

This leads them to offer six crucial elements of a 'new developmental vision' (216) concerning: Nature; Work; Socially-Responsible Corporations; an Active Democratic Society; Fair Trade; and a New Global Politics. Whilst this is a welcome contribution to a dialogue on an alternative orientation for the trade union organizations, its horizon is evidently that of a 'socially-responsible' capitalism.¹² Paradoxically, GG considers that it is nonetheless surpassing any new social-democratic alternative in favor of something more radical:

a counter-hegemonic politics that extends the role of civil society and seeks to establish alternative forms of social organization, political and logics of accumulation. (224)

Whilst I can understand why the authors might be nervous here about using the word 'socialism', I would have thought that, because their utopia allows for 'socially-responsible' corporations, it well represents a 21st century social-democratic alternative! This feeling is reinforced by the frequent GG references to the African National Congress (ANC) government of South Africa as either favoring, or - in this chapter - hopefully

¹² My Global Labour Charter Project (Waterman 2006) includes these possible demands: A Six-Hour Working Day; Global Labor Rights (including the right to strike and inter/national solidarity action); A Global Basic Income Grant (empowering women, rural and precarious labor); A Centennial Reinvention of the ILO; A Global Campaign for Useful Work; All in Common (extending common ownership); A Reinvention of Mayday as a Global Labor and Social Movements Day; Developing the Principle of a Solidarity Economy; An Open World Labor Forum (to discuss this or other such proposals).

shifting direction toward ‘an alternative developmental path, including an unprecedented investment of human and capital resources in education, and industrial policies that re-direct investment towards labor-intensive sectors’ (217). Here, as elsewhere in the book, there is a dependence on institutions that have been either directly functional to the spread of the globalized and neo-liberalized capitalism they condemn, or that have proven largely incapable of effective defense against it. This may not be, a ‘reactionary utopia’ (e.g. a fundamentalist religious one), nor a ‘conservative utopia’ (e.g. a neo-liberal one), but neither is it a ‘critical and self-critical utopia’. It is, I would say, an ‘incrementalist utopia’, in the sense of accepting the limits of the given and eschewing a socially emancipatory orientation and emancipatory action.¹³

Conclusion: Toward a global dialogue on an emancipatory global labor movement!

I hope this review will not be taken as praising with loud damns. I said initially that I welcome this book and I take it very seriously indeed. I hope the review might lead more to read, be provoked by and review this book.¹⁴ I hope, and indeed expect, symposia around it. I would even propose, in the light of the GG utopia above (and Footnotes 12 and 13) an open global dialogue on emancipatory or utopian labor movement strategies. In cyberspace as well as locally grounded, of course! Finally, I not a welcome and appropriate innovation: the book is itself instantly available online at round US\$40, some 30 percent off the hardcover price!¹⁵

¹³ I am here embroidering on the binary opposition between conservative and critical utopias offered by Souza Santos (2003). Compare, further, the issue of *Socialist Register*, devoted to utopia (Panitch and Leys 1999). The editorial piece subtitled ‘Rekindling the Socialist Imagination’, ends with this list of requirements or aspects of a utopia going beyond the parameters of capitalism: Overcoming alienation; Attenuating the division of labor; Transforming consumption; Alternative ways of living [the feminist one - PW]; Socializing markets; Planning ecologically; Internationalizing equality; Communicating democratically; Realizing democracy; *Omnia sint communia* [‘all in common’, the ancient egalitarian one - PW]. Whilst not confined to a union or labor alternative, this is all clearly relevant to such. Note, further, that it has a feminist component, whilst GG has no index entry on feminism, nor, for that matter, on women (the clear majority, surely, of the world’s workers).

¹⁴ An excellent short review is that of David Lier (2009).

¹⁵ See Books on Board <https://www.booksonboard.com/index.php?BODY=viewbook&BOOK=406227&v=synopsis>.

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**Draft submitted for consideration of *Development and Change*.
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Comments welcome.**

Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labour History*. Leiden, Brill. 2008. 469pp.

Life must be understood backwards. But...lived forwards
Soren Kierkegaard, (1813-55)

‘Workers of the World’ is a work of considerable theoretical depth and empirical novelty yet structured, presented and written with admirable clarity. It deals in turn with conceptualisation (e.g. who, beyond Marx’s proletariat, is – have been or are - the global working class?); with what I would call survival- or life-strategies internationally (e.g. mutual insurance, cooperatives); with the more familiar forms of worker resistance or counter-assertion worldwide (e.g. strikes, unions, internationalism); and, finally, with the possible contributions to a Global Labour History (GLH) of sociology or anthropology (e.g. World-System Theory). Van der Linden works his way systematically through each particular case or literature, and proposes many new concepts, categories, or unexplored aspects of the subject. These are typographically identified, making this an easy read and a commendable teaching text.

The argument of the work is suggested by the title and subtitle themselves. It can be also simply laid out: historical labour studies need to be extended both geographically and socially. Given both the past and the present of labour globally, van der Linden says, we

need a new conceptualisation less oriented to the *exclusion* than the *inclusion* of various dependent or marginalised groups of workers. We have to recognise that the ‘real’ wage-workers with whom Karl Marx was centrally concerned, i.e. workers who as free individuals can dispose of their own labour-power as their own commodity, and have no other commodity for sale, represent *only one way among others* in which capitalism transforms labour power into a commodity. (10).

Building on Kierkegaard above, it is evident to me that this is a work written backwards from the age of capitalist globalisation and its dramatic de- and restructuring of labour worldwide. It is obviously intended to have implications for future labour history writing. Whether it also has for ‘living’ future labour movements I will consider later. The argument is, in any case, that we need to surpass Eurocentrism and Wage-Workerism (my term) in labour studies. It may seem paradoxical that a work of Marxist political-economic historiography should represent a critique of two crucial limitations of the work of Marx. But then, of course, Marx did say ‘criticise everything’ and, in so far as he was also a thing, numerous serious Marxists are criticising him too (another

contribution of a complex globalised networked capitalism to Marxist historiography?). There is a third limitation in traditional labour history that van der Linden identifies: Methodological Nationalism, which, amongst other misdemeanours, conflates ‘society with the state and a national territory’ (p.7). Given Marx’s ‘methodological internationalism’, I do not think we can blame him for this one.

What may be missing from this work are two elements traditionally present in that of Marx, Engels and the major Marxist labour historians. This is their evident emotional identification of and with a heroic historical endeavour (compare Mason 2007) and their common prescriptive element. We are, however, still in the Age of Sobriety for serious Marxists, as long required by Eric Hobsbawm’s ‘Forward March of Labour Halted’ (1978). This book could be read as if it was an archeological study of a vanished or vanishing species. There is here only one chapter which ends with at least some ‘speculations about the future’ (p.280) and that is the one on labour internationalism (Ch.12). Granted this chapter confines itself to *union* internationalism, its thought-provoking periodisation and categorisations lead, it seems to me, to a surprisingly timid spelling out of the ‘transnational internationalism’ (281) that van der Linden favours. The author is perhaps here not free from an ‘Institutionalism’ he himself recognises as having also overly marked labour history – particularly the history of labour internationalism.

But this *is* a work of historiography. And I see no reason why a future development of the GLH project should not add to ‘Workers of the World’ the classical Marxist injunction *Unite!* What this book uncovers or opens up will make the spelling out of any such prescription a challenging task. To start with, it seems to me, however, it will require abandoning the concept of ‘transnational internationalism’ (sic) in favour of something like ‘global solidarity’ - with ‘global’ taken to be socially holistic as well as (cyber-) spatially universal.

‘Living forward’, finally, will also require the finding of ways to make a book costing some 100 Euros available to the movement-oriented intellectuals (outside the academy or outside the West) and the research-minded activists who could most benefit from it.¹

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¹ An online introduction to the concept of Global Labour History, can be found at <http://www.iisg.nl/publications/globlab.pdf>. As for a model of the simultaneous publication of radical writings on paper and online, see <http://www.re-press.org/content/view/12/27/>.