

New Perspectives on Labour History – An Interview with Marcel van der Linden

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Marcel van der Linden was research director of the International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam) until 2014, and is now Senior Researcher at the Institute as well as Professor of Social Movement History at the University of Amsterdam. He is also President of the International Social History Association and chair of the Editorial Committee of *International Review of Social History*. He has published widely on various aspects of left-wing intellectual history (e.g. *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union: A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates since 1917*), social movements and labour history. He is a chief advocate of global labour history, a new paradigm in the writing of labour history, which has been taken over by several labour historians. This paradigm is less well-known in Eastern Europe where labour history became a stepchild after the change of regimes and it is only recently that there has been a growing interest in this field among social historians. In the interview I asked Marcel to introduce this paradigm and tell us something more about the social and political implications of a global labour history.

E. B.: *The International Institute of Social History is mainly known to experts in Eastern Europe. Can you introduce us briefly to the history of the Institute?*

M. L.: The Institute is a very old institution. It was founded in 1935 as a rescue operation for archives from Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. It was a privately financed initiative, financed by a life insurance company that had connections with the Dutch Labour Party.

Originally, it collected archives like the archive of the German Social Democratic Party, the SPD (also comprising the original Marx-Engels papers), which was travelling through Europe after Hitler came to power, and then later archives of the defeated anarcho-syndicalists in Spain and Menshevik archives.

It has grown significantly since then, so now the total collection of the Institute amounts to about 55km of shelf space and it is now part of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences. It goes on collecting materials especially in the global South, Africa, Latin-America and Asia but with the policy that we try to keep the materials where they come from. If we find interesting material, let's say in India, then we first try to bring that to an archive in India itself. If that is not possible, then we bring it to Amsterdam. Most of the time we succeeded in finding places at the location itself, where you can deposit these materials.

Since 1986 the Institute has also been pursuing research projects. That's a much later development. Since that period we have been building a research department, officially established in 1993, and that department focuses mainly on international matters and since the late 1990s, on global labour history, which means that we try to reconstruct the history of work and workers movements and working-class politics across the globe from about 1500 up to the present.

E. B.: *For those of us, who are less familiar with your work, the concept of global labour history might require some more explanation. What is this new paradigm, and how does new labour history-writing differ from the old working-class histories?*

M. L.: Our approach to global labour history has been developing gradually out of traditional labour history. Traditional labour history very much focused on certain groups of workers, industrial workers, dock workers, miners, sometimes agricultural workers, especially wage earners and it had a very institutional approach, it focused mainly on strikes, parties, unions, resolutions. The new approach is that we broaden the notion of the working class, so that we include also slaves, share-croppers, and the labour of people, who make this whole working class possible, and this includes housewives and all those who do unpaid work for the maintenance of families and the households. So this is a much broader approach. And we not only study many more forms of organisational initiatives (all kinds of self-help, cooperatives, mutual aid societies, attempts like self-employed women's organisations in India and South Africa) but we also try to expand the notion of the working class so much that we include non-European parts of the world as well, where we can only recently speak of a huge expansion of the traditional working classes, which had been the focus of old labour history.

E. B.: *You recently held a very inspiring lecture at the Central European University.¹ Why do you think that it took so long for labour history to discover the global South?*

M. L.: Because we were very Euro-centric. For instance – let me tell you this from my personal development. Already in the late 1980s I started to think about labour movements in a more global way. The project that I want to tell you about was on the history of revolutionary syndicalism, and a book came out of it, which I edited together with a colleague from Canada.² We wanted to have an international perspective but at that time we only focused on Europe in the wider sense – European or European settler colonies. We included the United States, Argentina, Australia, and so on, but we did not think of the possibility that there would have been any revolutionary syndicalist movements in East Asia. Only in recent years has it become clear that movements like this and also anarchist movements have been much more global than we had thought. Gradually you have to step out of this framework of Europe and its settler colonies and see that you have all kinds of developments elsewhere that were neglected. And I think that the classical problem of Euro-centrism is that we are always looking for things that are like what we already know from Europe, which includes North America in this case. Thus, Europe is showing the way, it has done and achieved great things, and other countries and movements have to catch up and do the same things and in the same way as we did them in the past. And this is a problem for historians especially so in the global South because then they are confronted with the problem, which the Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has called the problem of the ‘not yet’. All the time Indian historians, for instance, will have to say that this happened in India but not yet this because – and then they compare India implicitly with Britain or another European country. The attempt is now to leave all these separate cases in their own right and try *not to have* this unilateral perspective on history.

E. B.: *The typical working-class image then, is that of a white (European), male wage-earner. Can you tell us some examples, where this image has been challenged?*

M. L.: One example could be the history of labour management, where we usually assume that the great innovations like Taylorism or Fordism originated in the US or in Western Europe, while now through the study of the history of slave labour we know that many of these forms of labour disciplining and creating labour incentives started earlier in slave plantations, for instance, in the Caribbean where you already had synchronised labour but without an assembly line, you had time measurement to see what was the most efficient way of doing a certain job. So many of the inventions and labour management, that we consider to be of the North, were first tried out on unfree workers in the South. The same goes for job description. It is attributed to Mr and Mrs Gilbreth around 1910. But originally we know now – it was an invention of

¹ Caribbean Radicals, a new Italian Saint and a Feminist Challenge. 1 February 2016.

² *Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective*. Edited with Wayne Thorpe (Aldershot: Gower/Scolar Press, 1990).

Governor Lachlan Macquarie of Botany Bay (now Sydney) in Australia where he used job descriptions to discipline the policemen in the colony. These policemen were all convicts paradoxically, who half time worked as policemen and half time as labourers. For the half time they worked as policemen, they needed a job description – the governor thought. And later he expanded this to other occupational groups in the convict colony as well. So many management methods have been tried out on unfree workers first, and I think that there is a logic to it, because it is easier to try out new methods on unfree workers, who cannot object so much as free workers, and when it works – you found out how it can be done – you apply it to free workers.

E. B.: *I already mentioned your lecture, where you spoke of the feminist challenge. What can you tell us about the gender bias of old labour history and how was it challenged?*

M. L.: There was absolutely a gender bias, and it was a very long-term bias because labour history in the modern sense – traditional labour history – started in the 1880s, and certainly until the 1960s, and maybe the 1970s, the history of labour and labour movement was mostly written from the perspective of the male bread-winner, and only thanks to the second wave of feminism of the 1960s and 70s did we begin to see how important the work of women was – not just women workers, which is in itself a very important category – workers in factories, for instance, in the textiles were often women – but also the women who ran the households and families and facilitated the male worker in his earning the money wage for the household. So in many respects the second wave of feminism has contributed significantly to this changing outlook of modern labour history.

Let me tell you some examples! Women even in the advanced capitalist countries were for a very long time unfree. For instance, in the Netherlands until 1956 women could only have a paid job until they married. That means that as soon as they married, they had to leave the job and become a housewife. Or they had to choose not to marry. The Netherlands is not an exception. In many cases the women were tied to their husband in several ways, certainly also economically. They could not run a shop, and so on. There has been a whole wave of emancipation since the mid 20 century, which contributed to the partial emancipation of women.

But I can mention another example from old labour history. Chattel slaves were predominantly male, which created a gender imbalance in the colonies. This meant, so to speak that women were in a demand – but of course, very often, they were subject to sexual violence. While in the old labour history, this story was not written, the oppression of women should also be part of a global labour history.

E. B.: *You mentioned that the work of housewives, that enables the male worker to work full-time, should also be part of labour history. Without getting into the long debate about the nature of reproductive work, can you clarify your position?*

M. L.: Reproductive work is also productive work, in the sense that it also produces goods and services, services like the so called productive work does. In that sense there is no difference between the work in the household and work for wages and I

note here that reproductive work is a basic condition without which it is impossible to have the so called productive work. A wage-earner cannot earn a wage unless he lives in a house, which is cleaned a bit every day and where he has food, which is prepared for him, so even if we assume a male bread winner, so a man, who earns the money for the whole family, there is still a lot of subsistence labour - household labour - necessary to maintain this unit for which he earns the money.

E. B.: *To a large extent, old labour history focused on the achievements of workers' struggles - be that in the form of strikes, social movements or revolutions. How do you see these achievements from a historical perspective?*

M. L.: We have to differentiate between different parts of the world. In Europe - including the socialist bloc - there were significant achievements for the working classes after the Second World War. They managed to get very good social security arrangements, there was a reduction of unemployment until the 1970s. In the East, unemployment was unimportant for a long time.

Standard employment relationship was part of this development from the 1940s till the '80s, when the working-class position improved in parts of the world. There you have this situation that workers can have a full-time job where they earn enough money to support a small family, with some social security attached to the job and some influence on the shop floor, co-determination or other forms of interest representation. In this period, the working class had a strong position, relatively speaking.

The neoliberal counter-offensive started in the late 1970s, which in several waves in Western Europe reduced these achievements of the working class by introducing large-scale unemployment, reducing social security arrangements, making them more rudimentary, for instance, Hartz IV in Germany. The standard employment relationship is gradually being broken down everywhere in the world, I would say, although there still remain islands of standard employment.

And then we have the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe, which led to the deterioration of working-class conditions, at least for significant parts of the working class. So I would speak of the rise and fall of working-class power - from a historical perspective.

In other parts of the world it is very different. Take the example of Brazil! The labour movement of the working class gained a lot of strength in the 1970s and '80s, and it could even build a new workers party, which came into government, and then became a victim - well, supporter - of a kind of neoliberalism, so now we see a deterioration of working-class conditions in Brazil as well. So you have different rhythms in different parts of the world regarding the achievements of the working classes.

I might add here that I am also involved in the International Panel on Social Progress - a new initiative, chaired by Amartya Sen. Our task is to write a report on the social developments in the world in three years' time. This might answer your question.

E. B.: *Thanks, I am very much interested! But speaking of Eastern Europe, I have a question. Some authors think that neoliberalism was, in fact, tested in Eastern Europe after the change of regimes. What do you think?*

M. L.: Neoliberalism is in fact a current, which has developed since the 1940s. Hayek was one of the founders of the Mont Pèlerin Society in 1947, which then met every year, where they prepared a plan for a neoliberal revolution. When Thatcher and Reagan came into power, they could serve them the recipes for introducing more market forces on a plate. This also contributed to the undermining of state socialism in Eastern Europe. But the beginnings were in the West.

E. B.: *The neoliberal turn in the West was paralleled with a massive reduction of the traditional working classes. How do you see this development on a global scale?*

M. L.: Well, you should not forget that much of the industry, which has disappeared from Europe, went to other parts of the world, especially to East Asia. In the 1950s Britain was the largest ship-builder in the world. By the end of the 1950s, early '60s Japan had taken over.

Now more than 90% of all ships are built in East Asia - China, Korea, Japan. There has been a massive shift of work - employment - from Europe and United States to East Asia. So there is a massive process of proletarianisation going on in the global South, for instance in China - at a grand scale - but also in India, South America, parts of Africa. So I would rather speak of a shift, which is also reflected in the trade union movement, which became relatively stronger in the South - sometimes unions are growing significantly, while in the North they are weakening. And perhaps it is interesting: within this working class, female labour is increasing. 40 per cent of the world workforce (wage earning class) is female. So back to the report on social progress: in general the position of women in the world seems to be slightly improving. More and more women learn to read and write, they have more access independently to labor market, they can work for wage if they want or become self-employed. Although this is a limited development, a slight positive trend can be observed.

E. B.: *Where do you see the place of Eastern Europe in this global division of labour?*

M. L.: I really don't know the answer. I don't know enough about it. You have a very contradictory evolution. Wages are lower, so there is a relocation of Western industries to Eastern Europe, but these countries also witnessed a massive de-industrialisation after the collapse of state socialism - and I don't know enough about this region to draw a balance.

E. B.: *The world-system school has strong ideas about the inequalities within the structure of the capitalist world-economy - I am mainly thinking of the unequal exchange between the centre and the periphery. How do you see the relationship between the global North and the global South?*

M. L.: I think that on a global scale we see that income differentials are flattened, the global Gini coefficient is becoming smaller but within countries – and this is partly of course through the rise of China and India, which means that there is more wealth and more income in parts of the global South – at the same time, within the countries you see an enormous increase of social inequality. I have somewhere in my computer a Gini index graph of the United States, where you see that from the early twentieth century till the present it got really huge – it was low in the 1950s and ‘60s and now it is really going up and it is the same as it was in the early twentieth century. Within the countries inequality is increasing – so you have a double movement. On a global scale you see a reduction of inequality between countries – there is still a large amount of inequality but less than it was – but within countries you see an increase of inequality. This is not to deny that there are still important differences: in Vietnam GDP per capita is now eleven hundred dollars a year, and in Germany forty thousand. So you have an enormous gap between these two countries, although we should also recognise that there is also precarianisation in the North now, which means that some aspects of the labour relations become a bit more similar. I spoke of the breakdown of standard employment relations – well, this is a huge challenge which workers of the North have to face. And of course, there is a lot of terrible inequality in the world, and this contributes to the problem of mass labour migration, migrants searching for a better future somewhere else.

E. B.: *You spoke of the rise and fall of working-class power - at least in Europe. How do you see the political and interest representation of labour from a global perspective?*

M. L.: On a global scale trade unions are weakened, together with the traditional working-class parties. Social democracy is globally in a crisis – Communist parties have to a large extent disappeared or merged or they went bankrupt like in Finland, and unions are declining, too. Although there are new initiatives to have a different type of unions – new social movement unionism in parts of Brazil, India and Korea – but global union density now, according to the International Trade Union Confederation, the ITUC, is 7 per cent. Of the 2.9 billion strong workforce in the world 2 hundred million are organised in unions. We exclude from this calculation the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, which is larger than the ITUC, but which we do not consider to be a trade union. 7 per cent of the workers is organised in unions and this percentage is declining. In Europe union density is relatively high – in Norway 70 per cent or so. In the global South this is even lower than 7 per cent. In India it is, for instance, 3.2 per cent.

The traditional labour movement is extremely weak now, but there is a paradox because there is a lot of working-class protest. Examples: there was a very large strike

in India two years ago when more than a hundred million workers were on strike for two days, you had a general strike in the area of Jakarta, Indonesia, when the whole region was paralysed, you have enormous amount of strikes in South Africa, an upsurge of struggles in South America, but all these are not translated into organisational forms yet. We have a transitional period when the traditional labour movement seems to be disappearing and we have not yet found an alternative. And in this situation we see that all kinds of - let me call them - pseudo-alternatives come. In Latin-America and South Africa you see a dramatic rise of pentecostal churches. In Brazil one quarter of all people is in the pentecostal church. Hamas in Palestine would be a similar thing. Or the Shiv Sena movement in India - that is a Hindu fundamentalist movement. They also provide social support for the people - they create social networks, people help each other in cases of emergency, and so on. They partly do what trade unions should and could do. This is combined with a strong belief, which also gives people a sense of usefulness, and of direction, so they know, I am part of this movement, I am a real Hindu, I am doing the right thing, I can be proud of what I do and at the same time I have some support. This is what my Indian colleague Sabyasachi Bhattacharya called the vernacularisation of labour politics. Non-traditional organisations take over part of the things labour movements did in the past. That is what we see now due to this crisis of the labour movement.

E. B.: *How does global labour history translate into political activism?*

M. L.: Well, in labour history we try to study five centuries but when we talk about the present, I would say, we are now studying working classes and labour movements that are in a deep crisis. You know, if I want to be optimistic, then maybe we can help to give some orientation for the future. You also see it in a more general sense that separate states have less influence on economics because of globalisation. We are also here in a transitional period that social movements, for instance, Occupy - they generally emphasise the things that they do not want - they do not want the bankers to cheat and so on - but they do not say what the positive solution would be. And that is because if separate states can no longer be the solution, and there is no supranational state, which can be the solution, then you have nowhere to address many of your demands. In the past labour movements and other social movements addressed their demands to the state but now it is much more difficult to do this. Here there is a significant change happening in politics.

E. B.: *If I may paraphrase what you said, you mean that the old left has suffered a defeat in organisational terms, and this has led to the rise of nationalism and religious fundamentalism worldwide.*

M. L. I agree.

E. B.: *While there is a crisis of the labour movement, can we also speak of a crisis of capitalism?*

M. L.: There is no crisis of capitalism. There is a crisis of capital. Capitalism would only be in crisis if there were an alternative. There is no alternative. In fact, there has never been so little alternative as there is now. And capitalism has shown in the last 150 years that it can overcome every crisis, and it will also overcome this crisis if we just give it a few more years,

10 or 20 years, it will overcome this crisis as well because it is not threatened from the inside. Or another option would be - and this is of course what people like Wolfgang Streeck would say - he wrote this article 'How will capitalism end?' in the *New Left Review*.³ In 2016 it will also appear as a book. He says that even if there are no enemies of capitalism any more, and he also includes state socialism here, capitalism will collapse because it reaches the limits of what it can do in its expansion - commodification of labour, land and money, all the Polányian things - it exhausts its possibilities, and then it is not very clear what will happen. And my guess is that we would only see the end of a certain kind of capitalism, but not of capitalism as such. That's why there is no alternative. But that's speculation, of course.

E. B.: *You wrote a very illuminating and thorough book about left-wing criticism of state socialism. How do you see the place of state socialism in global labour history?*

M. L.: A divergent past? A bifurcation? I am just joking. My book is on what Western Marxists thought about the Soviet Union, especially the Western Marxists who thought that the Soviet Union was not socialist. And what was it then, if it was not socialist? And in the first 70 years, no, in the first 50 years of the existence of the Soviet Union there were mainly three approaches. One approach said, well, it's just a form of capitalism, state capitalism. Another theory said it's a new form of class society, with a new kind of ruling class, which has never been seen before. And thirdly, Trotsky's position was that it was a degenerated worker state. So it's still a workers' state, but it is corrupt and bureaucratised ... and so on, so it needs a political revolution.

And because the three theories all have their theoretical problems, which I cannot go into now, in the 1960s and '70s you get a fourth current which says, well, classical Marxist categories are not enough to understand what's happening in the Soviet Union, we need a new kind of approach. And the most interesting approach that was then developed, I think, was the one by Hillel Ticktin, a South-African British economist, who had studied in Kiev, and so studied the Soviet Union from the inside. He argued that in the Soviet Union you saw at that time, in the 1970s already, a dramatic increase of waste. So that in his time two-thirds of all the industrial output was useless. And this situation was deteriorating further so that he predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union within a few decades in 1973.

³ The book, *Gekaufte Zeit. Die vertagte Krise des demokratischen Kapitalismus* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2015), has already been published.

Of course, that prediction has come true. I think that was a good analysis. The Soviet Union was at first, in the first decades, showing a staggering growth of the economy, but this growth itself paralysed the possibilities of further growth, because through this growth planning became more and more complicated and since there was no reliable information coming from bottom up from the factories, of what they really could produce, and wanted to produce, planning became more and more kind of 'quasi' planning. And waste increased, and growth then went down, from the 1950s on already you see the decline of the growth rate, then around 1978 or 1980 growth reached zero, and then went below zero. Then it was only a matter of a few years and the whole thing collapsed. So it was an industrialisation dictatorship I would say, which then in the end reached its limits and therefore also partly failed. It has never been, I think, a real alternative to capitalism. As Ticktin would say, it was a society in limbo, a dead-end street.

E. B.: *Many Western Marxists expected that a kind of democratic socialism would develop in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the rule of the Communist Parties. What did you think would happen, at that time?*

M. L.: I didn't expect that, no. I was not so optimistic because I thought, well, it will depend on the workers what will happen, and the workers would have to really change society. But society was not changed by the workers. Society was in crisis and it was changed from the top down. And of course you had some worker struggles in the Soviet Union, Russia, after 1990, especially the miners were very crucial, but they were kind of labour aristocracy. For the rest, I think, workers didn't protest so much, so that the oligarchs could become kind of capitalists without much resistance from below. And what we now see, I think, also because of this lack of working class resistance, is that we have a kind of further bureaucratic degeneration, where the social forms are very similar to those of the late Soviet Union. Some people, for instance Ticktin, even say that this society is still not a capitalist society and it's also not a worker society, it's still a society in limbo, but it can survive because of natural resources.

E. B.: *Do you speak of Russia, or the whole of Eastern Europe?*

M. L.: Russia, not about the rest of Eastern Europe. Russia, as I said earlier, is a special case of course. It's different from EU countries and Eastern Europe.

E. B.: *So you wouldn't call Russia capitalist?*

M. L.: If it is a kind of capitalism, it's a very strange kind of capitalism, a completely new form of capitalism. I'm not sure how to characterise Russia. But it's not a 'normal' capitalist society.

E. B.: *What would you call a 'normal' capitalist society?*

M. L. The Netherlands! Even though we have still lots of subsistence labour going on, and we still exploit free nature, which we do not buy, but just destroy...

E. B.: *What do you think of the Eastern European societies? Without Russia?*

M. L.: You are on your way... you have now been transformed into capitalist societies, I would say... but I would not consider Eastern European capitalism as the most advanced form of capitalism; that I would say more for north-west Europe, or parts of the United States and Canada, but yes, Eastern Europe is developing along the lines of capitalist logic.

E. B.: *How would you explain the fact that there was such weak working-class resistance to capitalism in Eastern Europe?*

M. L. I think that partly Stalinism is to blame for this. Because if you only show, constantly, for many-many years, you show in the mass media, stories about the misery of capitalism, and then people get to know about all the shopping possibilities, the wealth, and so that is also in the West, then people start to mistrust the information that they get, and they think that capitalism is a good thing, it gives you freedom and money and so on, so people had a lot of false hopes of capitalism I think. That's part of the explanation.

E. B.: *Do you think that the same explanation exists in the global South? Is there a belief that capitalism is somehow good, or should be good...?*

M. L.: Well, most people, of course, envy Japan or the United States and so on, because they think that life is better there. And also, Norway, since the refugees now coming to Europe - Slavoj Žižek wrote a nice essay on this - most of them want to go to Norway, because they think that is the wealthiest country in the world, and social inequality is the lowest and - of course, Norway is perhaps the most pleasant variant of capitalism that exists in the world, although it's a bit cold there.⁴ So - yes, people have these dreams about a better life in advanced countries.

E. B.: *Why should one fight against capitalism if it is held to be good also in places, where you don't have the most advanced forms of capitalism?*

M. L.: But people do not fight against capitalism; they fight for better wages, better working conditions, and so on. People do not fight against capitalism. I don't think that ever in history workers have fought against capitalism as such. There's a very nice analysis of this in *The phenomenology of perception*: do you know that book? It has a chapter where, at the end somewhere, Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that in the Russian revolution for instance, you have the peasants who were dissatisfied with the

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, 'The Non-Existence of Norway', *London Review of Books*, 9 September 2015.

situation and then started to demonstrate and walk to the city, and so, and workers were doing the same, and then suddenly they realised: my God, we have made a revolution! But they didn't know that they were toppling down the government and then were transforming society, that was not their intention, they just wanted their small things! Suddenly, this unintended consequence was a huge transformation of society, and that's, more or less, what happens all the time. People do not have these grandiose ideas, 'We will overthrow capitalism', or whatever. They have more modest wishes.

E. B.: *Yes, but you can argue: you had leaders who had clear ideas...*

M. L.: Yes, but then, of course, another question here would be, what do you think of the October revolution. I would say it was not really a revolution. I think that it was a coup d'état, with mass support.

It was not a social revolution in the sense that the masses themselves did something, they supported something that others, the vanguard did. So in that sense I would call it a hybrid of coup d'état and a revolution. And the real revolution was the February revolution. That was a real revolution. But I know that here I have a very dissident opinion.

E. B.: *One can also argue that dictatorship was an outcome of the economic backwardness of Russia...*

M. L.: You have situations in history where there is no easy way out. That's what I would think. That in many situations there is no real solution in the short term. And this also means that progress of politics has also to build on long term pedagogy. I think to have a really democratic society, you need decades or maybe hundreds of years of education where people learn to rule themselves. For instance, I think that the reason why in Scandinavia democracy is so strong - relatively speaking - is also because already in the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries they had lots of free peasants, who were not in any feudal relationship, and they decided their local affairs among themselves, at the village level, more or less democratically, of course with a male bias. And so the later achievements and the whole social democratic movement and the building of parliamentary democracy and welfare state: they could build on this foundation. So it was those hundreds of years of training, acting in (limited) free ways, that anticipated, pre-dated democracy. While if you introduce democratic structures in situations where this kind of pre-history does not exist, then it's much more difficult to do this. Well, I would guess. That's also why I think that the left should think more in these terms, also of how do we raise the self-awareness, self-consciousness, and the democratic level of populations, and this means that we have to do a lot of experiments with cooperatives, and small-scale initiatives in the kindergarten and whatever, as part of this longer term project.

E. B.: *How do you see the relationship between labour history writing and political activism?*

M. L.: Well, most colleagues will deny that there is a relationship. Most labour historians at least in Europe will not consider themselves, working as scholars, as part of an activist thing. At the same time, I think that many-many labour historians are also politically engaged on the progressive side of the political spectrum, whatever that may mean... As individuals, people will often not see the immediate connection. But I think if we develop global labour history in the way I just described, then we will automatically be, I hope, of help in finding a political orientation. And therefore to direct activists in the right direction.

E. B.: *You said that you don't really see an alternative to capitalism.*

M. L.: True, yes.

E. B.: *So how do you see the future of the left? The global left? Can we speak at all of a global left?*

M. L.: Well, there are left people everywhere in the world, so that's yes - but I think that we will have to start anew. We have to reform the trade unions, if that is possible, you see trade unions now have an orientation towards collective bargaining, that's the main task that many unions have: to negotiate with employers and make a contract for three or five years or whatever... That doesn't work for the largest part of the working class in the informal sector, these are people who have two or three jobs at the same time, or for a short time, (for a short period, two weeks maybe, or a day), so collective bargaining is not something they are interested in. What we need is new forms of organising, for instance also through the creation of mutual benefit societies, aid societies for sickness, unemployment, and so on. You can see that many self-employed people in Europe are now organising. So trade unions have to change, they have to become much less autocratic, so that they could become part of this project of democratic education, they have to become more open to coloured people and they definitely need more women in the leadership, so - trade unions will have to change fundamentally. For the rest I think, we should try to do as much grass-roots organising as possible. To build new forms of organisations.

And then we have all these people in the informal sector, self-employed people who are in fact informal wage-labourers... if you are self-employed and you have only one or two customers, then you're kind of wage-labourer for these people, although officially you are an employer of yourself. So I think we should move away a bit from this orientation towards the traditional working class, the miners, the factory workers. We should widen the modern wage-earning class to a large extent, to the largest extent to include all people, who live from their work. In services and so on.

And then of course you have another point, that for instance in our kinds of societies, the large majority of the work force is in wage labour. Maybe 80% or so of the people does wage labour. Most of these people we would not consider traditionally as working class. And the huge difference is that the CEO of a

multinational organisation also receives a wage. But we would no longer consider him to be a worker, of course. So we have a differentiation of the working class, which has become in this sense the wage-earning class, which is enormous, and the very varieties within it are large, so what we also need to do is to better understand the different milieus within this wage-earning class. Some sociologists have been working on this, for instance, Michael Vester, do you know him?⁵ So we need to understand that better. And then see what the possibilities are for organising.

E. B.: *Do you think that we can still speak of a working class?*

M. L.: I would, yes. I would speak of a working class and - my definition of the working class is the same as that of Karl Marx and that of Max Weber: all those people who have to sell, have to hire out their labour power in order to survive. In that sense I would say, yes, we still have. The large majority of the working population is working class, in that broad sense. Yes.

E. B.: *Class consciousness has been a favourite term of the old left. Is there any of it left after the fall of this discourse?*

M. L.: No, no, true, there's not so much class consciousness, certainly not of this group as a whole. Small group-consciousness is what one can encounter... But we shall also see that in the past in the traditional working class, the blue-collar working class, there was also not often that really broad class consciousness. Also, what we could observe was mostly group consciousness. That has been exaggerated under the influence of Marxist ideology. The presence of a real social and class identity among workers was often not class consciousness in that sense.

E. B.: *So you would rather speak of group consciousness also today?*

M. L. Yes. And the point is of course to extend the group as much as possible.

⁵ Michael Vester et al, *Soziale Milieus im gesellschaftlichen Strukturwandel* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2001).