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Emerging political subjectivities in a post migrant labour regime: mobilisation, participation and representation of foreign workers in South Africa (1980-2013)

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2018

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/26156

Munakamwe, Janet (2018) Emerging political subjectivities in a post migrant labour regime: mobilisation, participation and representation of foreign workers in South Africa (1980-2013), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/26156>

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Abstract

The study aimed to examine the key factors shaping political subjectivities amongst foreign workers in South Africa between the period 1980-2013. It builds on the 1970s studies of the migrant labour system (Wolpe, 1972, First et al, 1972, Arrighi, 1973, Legassick, 1975; Burawoy, 1976) and raises new theoretical debates on how political prejudices have shaped mobilisation, participation and representation of foreign workers today. In particular, the thesis interrogates trade union responses to foreign labour, including foreign workers' position and receptivity to unions and how state crafted laws and policies shape political subjectivities among foreign workers. Two unions; the South African Commercial & Catering Workers Union (SACCAWU) and National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) were chosen because of the high density of foreign workers in their sectors and again, the sectors have a historical trajectory in attracting foreign labour to South Africa. While unions' responses are not homogenous, the study revealed that the two aforementioned unions somehow elicit a more optimistic approach towards organising foreign labour. Through a critical analysis of the class content of workers, migrancy and mobilisation, the study interrogated two grand theories propounded by Marx and Gramsci. The findings revealed that the Marxist theory is fixated on class and thus, views this variable as a mutually uniting force and as underpinning solidarity among the subaltern. In contrast, Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony and domination juxtaposed with the theory of intellectuals, argues that class is not the only social marker that could bring workers together to forge solidarity. In his theory, Gramsci (1971) elevates the conversation beyond class to include the concepts of power and hegemony as essential to explaining workers' struggles - as he also postulates that civil society stands as an alternative voice to workers outside of organised labour, which has since abandoned their socialist agenda. Furthermore, Gramsci acknowledges the role played by employers in creating passivity among workers and this is reflected in this study in which the prerogative to monitor foreign workers in the country solely rests on employers. This policy framework emasculates foreign workers' agency with the ultimate result of weakening bargaining power while promoting patronage. In essence, Marxist theory fails to acknowledge that the class as a social category is not homogeneous and as such, our analysis needs to rethink other factors that shape political subjectivities and mobilisation in contemporary society. In a way, Gramsci's theory persuades us to appreciate the fact that economic needs are not the only stimulant to mobilisation of workers as there exist other

factors such as ideology, political, social, gender, culture and race. In light of this, my study shows that besides 'bread and butter' issues, at the core of foreign workers struggles is the issue of documentation. Following Fine (2014), the study found out that trade unions prefer the Universalist approach to organising foreign workers thus neglecting the particularistic view which advances appreciates the notion that immigrant workers have their own particular needs. Furthermore, as the study shows, unions are still ambivalent about including and organising foreign workers, drawing more on state crafted laws and policies that emphasise 'legality' in relation to documentation and permission to work in the country. Yet, foreign workers are keen and ready to join unions although some (in particular highly skilled foreign workers in the hospitality sector) are caught up within the liminal phase (see Underthun, 2015) as a result of job mismatches, such that they believe they could only join unions once they secure employment in the sectors that are in synergy with the skills they possess. Drawing from unions' rhetoric of a Universalist approach to organising foreign workers, there is however, overwhelming evidence from the study to suggest that restrictive immigration laws and policies in their current form point to lack of commitment by unions in influencing development of immigration policies which are favourable towards equal full participation of all workers. Here, we witness a new consensus and a continuation of the politics of draconian exclusionary immigration laws and policies - dated back to the dual contract labour system into the post migrant labour regime. Thus, I argue here that failure to address the 'special' needs of foreign workers in accordance with the particularistic view undermines unions' efforts and strategy to mobilise all workers falling outside of standard employment relations. Instead, this further reveal some hypocrisy as unions seek legitimacy in terms of compliance to the principles of international solidarity with the ultimate goal to discourage self-organising among foreign workers and alternative modes of representation. Emerging forms of worker representation are associated with the leftist socialist agenda which has since been abandoned by traditional unions since the introduction of neoliberal policies which have resulted in workplace restructuring, retrenchments and shrinking employment opportunities. Nevertheless, against all these challenges, as the study revealed, foreign including local casual workers (Dickinson, 2017), still exercise their agency and have begun to self-organise and seek other alternative models of mobilisation and participation in the workplace to fill-in the representation gaps left by unions. This has been facilitated at large by social networks and emerging social media platforms, migrant rights organisations including other civil society collectives, which in a way, have forged new forms of solidarity among local and foreign workers based on identity.

Key words: foreign labour, migrancy, political subjectivities, agency, mobilisation, participation, representation, solidarity, liminality, universalist and particularistic approach to worker organising.