

BOOK REVIEW

Just Work?: Migrant Workers' Struggles Today. Edited by Aziz Choudry and Mondli Hlatshwayo. London: Pluto Press, 2016. \$43.69 CND, paper. ISBN-10: 0745335837. Pages: 264.

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Just Work: Migrant Workers' Struggles Today is a collection of articles edited by Choudry and Hlatshwayo that highlights the difficulties that migrant workers face around the world. The book dissects the global political economic and social conditions that create large groups of precarious worker populations, who ultimately must migrate to find work, and paints a picture of the common injustices that they face and the social and political responses to those injustices. As demonstrated throughout the collection migrant workers are subject to gross human rights violations compounded by the dynamics of racialization which construct migrant workers as less than human as compared to local populations. Many of the chapters outline governments' complicity with the creation of a precarious underclass of migrant workers as a pool of and for perpetually exploitable, expendable labour.

The book has sections on Africa and the Middle East, Europe, Asia and the Pacific, and North America. The collection as a whole demonstrates the commonalities in how, and under which (deplorable and dehumanizing) conditions, migrant workers are taken up as labour sources. Most chapters read as case studies of particular countries and take the reader through histories and policies specific to the region. Contributors use various methodologies, including ethnographic studies, statistical analysis, interviews, and participatory action research. There is little theoretical analysis, however. Most of the authors restrict their accounts to providing descriptive overviews of migrant workers' resistance movements including union organizing. Given the limited space available to each author, the collection reads like an introduction to its subject. It is best suited for readers who are new to the study of migrant labour issues, as it provides an excellent overview of case-specific histories and issues. Through reading the entire collection the reader acquires a good sense of the common issues faced by migrant workers globally. The text is also a great resource for migrant worker organizers, and activists working with migrant workers, as it outlines diverse strategies taken up by different groups around the world.

Several themes repeat themselves across the geographical regions. First, all authors identify migrant work programs as an initiative and strategy of capitalism and neo-liberalism. The need to migrate for work is a result of neo-liberal policies that put workers in precarious states of non-employment in their home countries, and the perpetuation of precarious status keeps migrant workers as an exploitable labour pool or what some have referred to (though not in this book) as the precariat.

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Thus, many of the chapters take up the violence of capitalism and neo-liberalism arguably inherent in the use of temporary foreign work programs. Choudry and Hlatshwayo articulate this point in their introduction when they write, “The creation and maintenance of categories of workers with different sets of rights tied to their immigration status is a standard policy feature and capitalist strategy which is fundamental to the functioning of many economies, facilitating the provision of reduced labour costs to employers” (5). Neo-liberal capitalist regimes have within them a systemic reliance on exploitation based in race and citizenship or status. This clearly applies to migrant workers and is addressed as such by many of the book’s contributors. It is through racialization that workers come to be understood as an underclass not deserving of basic human and workers’ rights. This in turn spills into a second predominant theme of the collection, namely how migrant workers are taken up as a murderable class by host country employers and governments.

All chapters include an analysis of the ways in which migrant workers live as expendable labour. The authors recount many stories of migrant workers’ deaths and bodily harm as well as the development of chronic illness, disability and/or psychological trauma. Also in their introduction, Choudry and Hlatshwayo articulate this point: “From the murders and displacements in South Africa to the drownings in the Mediterranean, migrant deaths are not random incidents, but rather they are manifestations of the intentional violence of border policies and anti-migrant racism” (3). While the book succeeds in pointing out injustices there is little theorizing of this racist dynamic as an inherent strategy of the programs using foreign workers who are always expendable and ultimately murderable with impunity. Still, many authors articulate the xenophobic consequences of migrant worker programs that keep workers isolated as a tactic to protect the national population but also as a tactic to reduce the opportunity for organizing across groups.

The third predominant theme of this text is an overview of what tactics migrant workers have used to assert their rights. Where organizing has been possible migrant workers everywhere report that it comes with great risks, including possible deportation and death. In Hlatshwayo’s chapter *Xenophobia, Resilience, and Resistance of Immigrant Workers in South Africa*, he notes how none of the 30 migrant workers interviewed were members of a union, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation. He further notes that because of this lack of communal organization resistance to the challenges migrant workers faced tended to be highly individualized. This is a common story throughout the chapters. Many note how migrants are isolated from each other and from local communities, and are closely monitored by employers as a way to discourage organizing amongst themselves. Other contributors focus on external actors helping migrants organize. For example, in his chapter on migrant work in the Gulf Arab States, Hanieh notes the importance of international solidarity in labour protest: “international links have presented important opportunities to target foreign corporations and institutions around poor working conditions or repression against strike action in the UAE” (52-53). Other contributors, like Pedrina in his chapter *Lessons from Migrant Workers’ Organization and Mobilisation in Switzerland*, are more concerned with migrant workers’ ability to integrate into national workers’ rights groups including unions. Lagnado and Francisco, in their respective chapters, demonstrate the importance of education in regards to mobilization. Lagnado, for example, explains how the Latin American Workers Association in London was integral to the disseminating of information to workers

through educational workshops and classes that informed migrant workers about their rights. The Association also organized English language classes for migrant workers, as a way to further empower them.

While this collection covers the greater part of the world, it is not comprehensive. For example, it would have been interesting to include indigenous perspectives on the question of temporary foreign worker programs and the fight of many migrant workers for status. Some have argued that temporary foreign work programs are a legacy of colonial settlement, or rather a dynamic that takes up the same logics of land and bodies as property of the imperial state, following colonial tradition. Ayelabola does provide an historical context of migration in Nigeria during the colonial period. He briefly touches on how colonialism changed migration patterns (63). None of the authors in this collection, however, make a theoretical argument in regards to the logic, legacy and continuation of colonialism as a driving force behind the use of migrant workers. Indeed, as previously noted, there is limited theorizing of the dynamics of migrant work and more emphasis on pointing to where, and how, people migrate, where and how they experience injustice, and where and how they organize in response to injustice. There is little theoretical analysis of the logics of the programs, or the ways in which the programs are part of a larger history and in turn perpetuate specific economic logics and traditions.

Overall this is an excellent read recommended for any inquirer interested in learning more about common dynamics in the use and exploitation of migrant workers. The book also illuminates the strength and power of organizing against injustice and exploitation while not painting an unrealistic picture of full success.