

Imperialism, Unequal Development and Forced Migration

The Migration and Labor Question Today

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It is impossible to disentangle the migration and labor question today without a deep understanding of the nature of contemporary capitalism, namely, neoliberal globalization. One of the main features of the new global architecture, boosted by the emergence of one of the most distressing global crises since the Great Depression, is the assault on the labor and living conditions of the majority of the global working class, and in particular the migrant workforce, which is among the most vulnerable segments of this class. This essay will analyze some key aspects of the system that contemporary migration is embedded in, with emphasis on the process of segmentation and the growing precariousness (precarization) of labor markets worldwide.

The aim is to unravel:

- a) the re-launching of imperialism (policies of global domination) in search of cheap and flexible labor, as well as natural resources from the South;
- b) the growing asymmetries among and within countries and regions;
- c) the increase and intensification of social inequalities;
- d) the configuration of a gigantic global reserve army of labor associated with the emergence of severe forms of labor precarization and exploitation; and
- e) the predominance of forced migration as the primary mode of human mobility under conditions of extreme vulnerability.

From this perspective, the migration and labor questions are two sides of the same coin, whose currency translates into unbearable conditions of systematic oppression of the working class. To combat this, there must be, among other things, a unity of social organizations and movements in alliance with progressive intellectuals in order to foster a process of social transformation.

Imperialism Today

In the neoliberal era, the capitalist world system revolves around the monopolization of finance, production, services, and trade—as well as labor exploitation and environmental degradation. In expanding their operations, monopoly capitalism's agents have created a global network of production, finance, distribution, and investment that has allowed them to seize the strategic and profitable segments of peripheral economies and appropriate their

economic surplus.

Monopoly capital has become, more than ever, the central player. Through mega-fusions and mega-strategic alliances, monopoly capital has reached unparalleled levels of concentration and centralization: the five hundred largest multinational corporations concentrate between 35–40 percent of world income.¹ Closely associated with this trend is that the “top one hundred global corporations had shifted their production more decisively to their foreign affiliates [mainly in the South], which now account for close to 60 percent of their total assets and employment and more than 60 percent of their global sales.”² This means that, “A ‘new nomadism’ has emerged within production, with locational decisions determined largely by where labor is cheapest.”³

In opposition to the myth of “free markets,” at least 40 percent of world trade is subject to such operations.⁴ Two key landmarks characterize the current capitalist restructuring process:

1. The creation of *global networks of monopoly capital* as a reorganization strategy led by the large multinational corporations, who through outsourcing operations and subcontracting chains extend parts of their productive, commercial, and services processes to the South in search of abundant and cheap natural and human resources. This strategy entails the establishment of export platforms that operate as enclaves in peripheral countries, such as the maquiladora plants installed in the north-border states of Mexico. It is estimated that between 55 million and 66 million workers from the South work in such plants.⁵ Additionally, monopoly capital helps to avoid direct price competition among multinational corporations by searching for low-cost positions through taking advantage of low wages.⁶
2. The *restructuring of innovation systems*. This aspect of neoliberal capitalism involves the implementation of mechanisms such as outsourcing (including offshore-outsourcing) in the sphere of scientific and technological innovation (for example, innovation-based firms in Silicon Valley and Route 128 in the United States and IT-export platforms in Bangalore, India), allowing multinational corporations to have southern scientists at their service, reduce labor costs, transfer risks and responsibilities, and capitalize on the benefits of purchasing and concentrating patents.

Closely related to the two aforementioned aspects, we also find:

1. The unleashing of *financialization* as a major consequence of the new global architecture, aimed at increasing the power of financial capital by extending the supremacy of its institutions over a slowly but increasingly deregulated global economy. The end result has been a disconnection between the “real” economy and a ballooning economy of “fictitious capital” based on the operations of speculative funds.
2. An intensification of *environmental degradation*, which, with the deterioration of ecosystems and the emergence and deepening of climate change due to the privatization of natural resources and irresponsible deregulation, is reaching or has reached crisis proportions.

Neoliberal capitalism is facing a profound multidimensional crisis that undermines the main

sources of wealth creation—labor and nature—to the point that it can be characterized as a crisis of civilization, with a potentially catastrophic outcome. It is crucial to realize that this crisis demands both that we engage in a process of radical social transformation and in the construction of a social transformation agent capable of confronting the current dominant imperialist power.

These responses are all the more needed because the responses to the crisis by the governments of developed countries and by international agencies are greatly constrained by the fact that they are still promoting neoliberal globalization. As a result, their approach has been short-sighted, elitist, and exclusive. Instead of addressing the root causes of the crisis, they have implemented limited strategies that seek to rescue financial and manufacturing corporations facing bankruptcy. And since key elements in their response have been the promotion of labor flexibilization and regressive fiscal adjustments, the living and working conditions of most of the population have been negatively impacted. These measures are desperate attempts to maintain an ever-more predatory and unsustainable form of capitalism and prolong the privileges and power of the ruling elites.

The Labor Question Today

One of the main engines of the new imperialism at the heart of neoliberal capitalism is cheap labor. Corporate strategies, enhanced by government policies, aim to lower the cost of labor by any means, so that businesses can take advantage of the massive global oversupply of labor. With the dismantling of the Soviet Union, the ascent of China and India in the world economy, and the “freeing” of labor through the implementation of structural adjustment programs in the periphery of the system (the global South),⁷ the labor available for capital’s exploitation over the last two decades has more than doubled (from 1.5 to 3.3 billion). This has led to the disproportionate growth of a *global reserve army of labor*, which absorbs between 57 and 63 percent of the global labor force.⁸ The outrageous dimension of this reserve army of labor is dialectically interrelated to the abysmally low wages and chronic insufficiency of decent employment that characterizes contemporary capitalism. According to estimates of the International Labor Organization, the number of workers in conditions of labor insecurity rose to 1.53 billion in 2009—encompassing more than half of the world’s labor mass—with 630 million receiving a salary of less than \$1.25 per day. These workers find themselves in situations of extreme poverty. Meanwhile, the global number of unemployed has risen to 205 million.⁹ This in turn has led to growing pressures to emigrate internally and/or internationally.

The quest for cheap labor, and the mechanisms employed to create it, has reconfigured the global working class:

- There has been the creation of a dispersed and vulnerable proletariat attached to the global networks of monopoly capital.
- A covert “proletarianization” of highly qualified scientific and technological workers has taken place.
- There has been the real or disguised proletarianization of the peasantry.
- The reserve army of labor has greatly expanded. With this has been an increase in new forms of poverty and an underclass of workers without hope or possibility of any (let alone decent) work, many of whom have been disabled or made ill through the process of capital accumulation and economic growth. There has been the semi- and sub-proletarianization of migrant workers forced to migrate by the capitalist development of production.¹⁰

- Under these circumstances, when the labor conditions of so many workers are eroded and much of the working class is excluded from the social welfare system—such that the subordinate classes cannot fulfill the most basic of their social needs, and are unable even to secure basic subsistence—then we may say that capitalist development entails the superexploitation of labor. We have, in other words, a situation of *systemic violence* and *human insecurity* affecting the majority of the world’s population. In human terms, this is what the new imperialism has wrought.

The Mushrooming of Unequal Development

A major and inescapable feature of neoliberal globalization and the new imperialism that is such a major feature of it is *unequal development*. The global and national dynamics of capitalist development, the international division of labor, the imperialist system of international power relations, the conflicts that surround the capital-labor relation, and the dynamics of extractivist capital have all made economic, social, political, and cultural polarization more extreme between geographical spaces and social classes than ever before in human history. This inequality is reflected in many kinds of data. For example, a conspicuous outcome of this unequal development is the disproportionate concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a small elite within the capitalist class. Nowadays the richest 1 percent of the world’s population controls 40 percent of total global assets.¹¹ Moreover, there is an enormous disparity in growth rates between core and peripheral countries. “From 1970 to 2009, the per capita GDP of developing countries (excluding China) averaged a mere 6.3 percent of the per capita GDP of the G8 countries.”¹²

Global labor arbitrage has become a key element of this new global architecture. This refers to the advantage of pursuing lower wages abroad. Capital in the rich nations “earns” enormous monopolistic returns (imperial rents) by taking advantage of the relative immobility of labor and the existence of subsistence (and below) wages in much of the South. Hourly wages in China are but 4 percent of hourly wages in the United States and 3 percent of those in the European Union. Wages in Mexico are a mere 16 percent of those in the United States. Through labor arbitrage, geographic asymmetries are reproduced on an ever broader scale.¹³

Social inequalities are one of the most distressing aspects of unequal development. The unprecedented concentration of power and wealth in a few hands forces a growing segment of the world’s population to suffer poverty, exploitation, and exclusion (from schooling, healthcare, housing, leisure, and the like). Increasing disparities are also expressed in forceful racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination; reduced access to production and employment; a sharp decline in living and working conditions; and the progressive dismantling of social security systems.

A fundamental mechanism in the promotion of the new global economic structures and the trend toward unequal development has been the implementation of *structural adjustment programs*. These have been the vehicle for breaking apart or disarticulating the productive apparatus in the periphery and, in effect, making it a part of (re-articulating it to) the core economies, under sharply asymmetric and subordinated conditions. The direct and indirect *exportation of labor* is a key element for conceptualizing this process. On the one hand, the *indirect or disembodied* exportation of labor is associated with the establishment of global networks of monopoly capital in the South through outsourcing operations, as previously

mentioned.¹⁴ In this case, the main input of national origin in exported commodities is the labor used in the assembly (or service or commercial) process. On the other hand, the *direct* exportation of labor refers to international labor migration, mainly composed of South-North and South-South flows. In fact, 156 million migrants of the existing 214 million (72 percent), come from the periphery.¹⁵

The exportation of labor in its two forms shapes a *new international division of labor* that resembles a new edition of enclave economies in the periphery, and encompasses the emergence of *new modalities of unequal exchange*, much more severe than in the past: the net transfer of revenues to the North through outsourcing operations in the South, and the South-North transfer of the educational and social reproduction costs of the migrant labor. For example, estimates of the educational costs and social reproduction costs of the Mexican labor that emigrated to United States during the NAFTA era (considering only public education expenses and basic consumption goods), were twice the accumulated amount of remittances received by Mexico in the same period.¹⁶

Forced Migration Under the New International Division of Labor

Migration has acquired a new role in the labor division of neoliberal globalization. Mechanisms of unequal development produce structural conditions, such as unemployment and inequality, which catapult the massive migration of dispossessed and marginalized people. Compelled by the need to have access to means of subsistence or at least minimal opportunities for social mobility, large segments of the population are in practice expelled from their territories to relocate within their own country or abroad. Labor oversupply and worsening living conditions turn migration, particularly from peripheral countries, into a form of *forced displacement*.¹⁷

Forced migration flows have four characteristics: a) they take place on a national and international level, and move mainly from deprived peripheral regions toward relatively more advanced areas in peripheral or core economies; b) they primarily affect the vulnerable, poor, and marginalized, who are barred in their place of origin from satisfying basic material and subjective needs; c) they generate an oversupply of cheap and disorganized labor, exploited by employers and corporations interested in keeping costs down; and d) they fuel mechanisms of direct and indirect labor exportation, both among low- and high-skilled workers.

The number of migrants (most of whom come from peripheral regions) has increased over the last three-and-a-half decades, from 84 million in 1975 to 215 million in 2010. The main flows are in a South-North direction (82 million), followed by South-South (74 million). There is also a significant contingent (750 million) of domestic (within the same country) migrants. Taken together, these migrations have reshaped the labor map and turned migration into a keystone of the capitalist restructuring process.¹⁸ Documented migration that flows in a South-South direction, including transit migration at an intranational level in peripheral countries, exposes migrants to conditions of utmost vulnerability. These migrants occupy the lowest echelons in the displacement dynamics generated by the processes of accumulation by dispossession, that is, where peasants are forced from their lands.

In line with the above considerations, it is possible to distinguish four types of *forced migration*:

1. Migration due to violence, conflict, and catastrophe.

2. Smuggling and trafficking of persons.
3. Migration due to dispossession, exclusion, and unemployment.
4. Migration due to over-qualification and lack of opportunities.

The first category involves 43 million refugees and internally displaced people; the second 2.45 million victims; the third, 72 million, not counting the bulk of internal migrants; and the fourth, 25.9 million.¹⁹

The conditions under which forced migrations develop involve multiple risks and dangers, particularly in the case of the most vulnerable groups. These involve permanent exposure to conditions of labor insecurity and instability, and social exclusion in host societies. Furthermore, as has been mentioned, international migration is increasingly subjected to criminalization policies and practices, racialization, and race- and gender-based discrimination, which not only increases vulnerabilities and risk, but also often endangers life itself.²⁰

The safeguarding of human rights is still a pending issue for most governments in countries of origin, transit, and destination. Few nations are exempt from this responsibility. Either because of the stigma of illegality or due to racial prejudices—and, in fact, mainly because of economic interest—destination countries espouse tacit ignorance regarding the labor and human rights of migrants. They also put up obstacles that hinder or bar them from easily obtaining legal residence and citizenship. Countries of origin or transit function under a double-standard: while governments denounce violations of the rights of their citizens in destination countries, the rights of foreigners in their own land are systematically violated.

Even though international migrants have certain legal means of protection, such as the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families—still not ratified by any of the important migrant destination countries—there are still no effective mechanisms for their implementation. And, unfortunately (but expectedly), instead of adequately categorizing migrants in terms of the problems to which they are exposed, governments classify these groups as “economic migrants,” in a context that presupposes the existence of individual liberty, social mobility, and a truly free market.²¹

The Win-Win-Win Fiction

The relationship between migration, development, and human rights is a topic of growing interest among international organizations, academics, and civil society organizations. To varying degrees, international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Organization for Migration see remittances from migrants back to their families as an essential tool in the development of migrant-sending, underdeveloped countries. They also envisage international migration management as a core element in the design and implementation of migration policies that are apparently beneficial for all parties. This perspective, which has dominated both academic and policy agendas, has multiple flaws. It is essentially one-sided, decontextualized, and misleading. It overlooks the neoliberal globalization and unequal development in which contemporary migration is embedded. It also disregards human and labor rights as central and intrinsic elements of coherent migration and development policies, as well as the exploitation, social exclusion, human insecurity, and criminalization suffered by international migrants. In addition, it masks most of the fundamental contributions made by migrants to the destination countries and ignores the costs of migration for the countries of origin, costs that greatly outweigh the

overemphasized “positive” impact of remittances. Despite the insistence of international bodies and governments regarding the alleged positive effects of migration and remittances as detonators of development in countries of origin, there is no empirical evidence to warrant this assumption.

Among the cardinal elements of the dominant discourse, we can mention remittances, microfinance, human capital (a term that reflects a narrow economic view), and, perhaps more importantly, the pretention to govern or manage migration without changing or even mentioning its root causes.

It is worth adding that the practices and discourses under the label of *migration management* advocated by the International Organization for Migration and other multilateral agencies, have been promoted through new narratives that distort reality, depoliticize migration, negate the existence of divergent interests or asymmetries of power and conflicts, and promote an unsustainable and incoherent triple-win scenario in favor of the interests of the migrant-receiving countries, and more specifically, the large multinational corporations rooted in such countries. In this view a “good migrant,” regardless of his or her status and condition, is respectful of law, flexible to market needs, and eager to contribute to the development of his or her country of origin.²²

Towards an Alternative Agenda

The development of social alternatives must address two fundamental aspects. The first one has to do with deconstructing the power of capital and the state—a constituent, structural power that acts as a hegemonic force that must be confronted. Not doing so will nullify any attempt to develop alternatives and justify illusory, naïve, and irrelevant positions. The second consideration involves detecting points of weakness or rupture, or spaces from which subordinate social segments may generate social development alternatives. This challenge is at the center of the debate between those who attempt to achieve social change without seizing power (for example, by limiting change to institutional reform or developing non-capitalist economic forms of organization within capitalism) and those who propose the need for a thorough change: another world, a different economy and society, and a development that is more equitable and socially inclusive, and sustainable in terms of both the environment and livelihoods. Without going into details, it must be stressed that, from a South-based perspective, the current social order (or disorder) is perceived as an unfair, inhumane, and predatory system: there is a need for alternatives that contemplate genuine development.

From a critical perspective (that is to say, one that questions the institutional structure of neoliberalism and, more fundamentally, the structural dynamics of capitalism in order to promote development alternatives that benefit the majority of the population), sustainable human development is understood as a process of social construction that starts by creating awareness: the need for change, organization, and social participation in order to generate a popular power that can then strive for social emancipation. This involves eschewing socially alienated relations that deprive people of their merits, destroy the environment, and damage social coexistence.

There are several essential characteristics of sustainable human development. First, it must be centered on human life and conceived in opposition to capital and its demand for the highest possible profits. The realization of this first element is necessary but not sufficient, since it can remain in the realm of abstract humanism. Real human development requires

social conditions that can enable equity and social justice on all social and spatial levels. Sustainability requires, in turn, that the strategy of development be feasible, realistic, and long-lasting, with solid social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental foundations.

Second, human development cannot be defined *ex ante* as a globally applicable model; it is not a prefabricated, one-size-fits-all design. It requires proposing and specifying concrete strategies, having initially addressed structural barriers, institutional restraints, local peculiarities, regional cultures, and the practices of involved social actors.

Third, building a strategic platform for social transformation capable of fuelling a counter-hegemonic social power demands the confluence of collective knowledge and intelligentsia at the service of the working class in alliance with social organizations and social movements. This project has already seen important advances, as evidenced by initiatives from within civil society such as the People's Global Action on Migration, Development and Human Rights, the Global Coalition on Migration, and the World Social Forum on Migrations, among others. We need academics that reject being imprisoned in an ivory tower and are willing to work, hand-in-hand, with civil society organizations. For this crucial task much more networking through the development of alternative research agendas is needed. This implies the education of new generations of working class intellectuals or organic intellectuals.

To round-up our argument, the following theses set forth a series of strategic elements for advancing towards sustainable human development:

The current model of world accumulation and its power system cannot be dismantled nor shifted without the development of an autonomous and independent social power. There is currently no collective agent that can confront the power of big business (that is, the major multinational corporations, imperialist governments and their armies, international financial organizations, and the associated actors that provide them with ideological, diplomatic, and political support). There have been, however, major local, domestic, and international efforts to organize social groups and movements that have defended their rights from the neoliberal onslaught and proposed some alternative ideas and projects. Strategies for real human development will result from social construction processes carried out by organized groups, civil society, and progressive academia on the local, national and, above all, international level. The project for a counter-hegemonic social power cannot be postponed; it requires free, autonomous, and independent civilian organization. This project has already seen important advances, as evidenced by initiatives such as the International Peasant Movement Vía Campesina, the World Social Forum, the People's Global Action on Migration, Development and Human Rights, and the World Social Forum on Migrations, among others.

The neoliberal state, guarantor of corporate profitability, should be replaced by the social state, promoter of human development. The resources of territories, nations, and populations are offered as low-priced ("competitive" in neoliberal jargon) raw materials in order to guarantee high profit margins, while institutions and public policies act as guarantors of corporate demands. This is why the reconstruction of the state is a fundamental requirement for true human development. Democratizing access to power through legitimate, legal, and transparent means and promoting a parliamentary agenda and a legal framework related to popular interests must be the first steps toward responsible state-based social development (e.g., a network of social protection that can guarantee that social efforts meant to generate surplus can be channeled toward redistribution mechanisms that aim for equality). The social state must safeguard the

peasant economy, as well as universal public education, social security, decent employment, and the satisfaction of social needs such as food, education, and health. The social state bears social responsibility for power, capital (now redefined socially and not as an agent of class oppression), and the protection of labor and nature.

Elite democracy must be transformed into a truly representative and participatory democracy. The formal democracy embedded in many countries that have embraced neoliberalism has been confined to elections. Citizens, reduced to their minimal expression, are ritually called to deposit a ballot for a member of the political class that has been previously selected to represent the economic and political elites in the areas of government or parliamentary power. Encouraging the larger population actively to participate in public issues is an unavoidable requirement of alternative development. In addition to access to reliable information, said participation requires spaces for public reflection and decision-making. The system must encourage social organization and participation, and promote instruments of participation inherent to direct democracy (for example, affirmative action, plebiscites, referendums, and citizen initiatives).

The neoliberal strategy of global expansion must be replaced by a social transformation strategy centered on social sustainability. In the dominant accumulation model, labor and nature have been blindly overexploited to the point of unsustainability, with a complete disregard of the social and environmental costs. In contrast, social sustainability must fully guarantee human reproduction. This is not possible without encouraging a symbiotic relationship between the human population and nature—one that goes beyond radical conservationism. A strategy for sustainable human development also requires shifting the state's developmental management so that it can control foreign investment, establish equitable and complementary commercial treaties, produce its own infrastructure for scientific and technological development, and, in general, fight all forms of unequal exchange and surplus transfer. New modes of integration and regional cooperation must be undertaken to exercise sovereignty.

Against the dominant trend towards structural unemployment, job insecurity, and superexploitation, a decent work agenda should be promoted. Driven by the compulsive quest for profit, private capital resorts to flexibilization, subcontracting, and unemployment to lower labor costs. Additionally, technological innovation tends to make workers dispensable. Extremely precarious categories have emerged in the labor market. We must disassemble the strategies behind labor instability and insecurity by demanding labor rights that will include access to a decent job, restitution of the social security system, and the advancement of human development in both the peripheral and core nations. Labor sovereignty is essential; we need state policies that guarantee full and decent forms of employment and working conditions.

Given the climate of structural violence and human insecurity, the defense of human rights should involve civil society as well as the state. The rights of big business openly surpass those of the population and the environment. A radical change in the system of values is needed to grant precedence to human rights across economic, labor, social, political, and cultural realms. Furthermore, we should consider the right to human development as a way of guaranteeing the fulfillment of basic needs; access to a decent, safe and well-paid jobs; the nurturing of analytic, creative, and artistic abilities; and access to participatory decision-making spaces. The problem of forced migration demands that we address the rights of migrants and their families in places of origin, destination, transit, and return. The right not to emigrate should be in place in the countries of origin. This implies creating a material and

subjective infrastructure that allows the population to settle in an environment of generalized human development and common welfare capable of transforming migration into an option rather than a necessity.

The conclusion that we draw from the analysis is that the capitalist system in the current conjuncture is in crisis and given that every crisis weakens the social and institutional structure of the system, generating forces of change, it is important that the global working class not take a purely defensive position against the current imperialist offensive, but go on mobilizing the forces of resistance. It is also important that in this counteroffensive the global labor movement be strategic and form alliances with other forces of resistance that share its vision of a world beyond neoliberalism, imperialism, and, ultimately, capitalism.

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Notes

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