

Call for Papers

‘The Future of Work in the Mirror of the Past’

XII INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON LABOUR HISTORY ORGANIZED BY THE ASSOCIATION OF INDIAN LABOUR HISTORIANS AND V.V. GIRI NATIONAL LABOUR INSTITUTE, 26-28 MARCH 2018 AT V.V. GIRI NATIONAL LABOUR INSTITUTE, NOIDA/NEW DELHI, INDIA

The broad theme for the conference is ‘The Future of Work in the Mirror of the Past’. The focus of the conference will be on the relation of technology with changing forms of work and work relations in the past and the present in the light of possible future trends.

The world of work is in a churn. According to one well-rehearsed script, four decades of globalization, financialization and neoliberal state policies have corroded the carefully crafted safeguards around work and the workplace; even as they have plunged the world economy into repeated crises. The recession triggered by the last financial crisis of 2008 has spread in waves across the world bringing in its wake political and social crisis of unprecedented magnitude to wit, the massive refugee crisis in Europe, debt crisis in Greece, political turmoil in Latin America. Advanced capitalist countries have not been immune to these recurrent crises. Right wing and xenophobic movements based often on the core base of a declining industrial working-class have led to a massive backlash against globalization and free trade.

There is however a paradoxical and coeval narrative that sees not the crisis of the past but the future in the bright light of technology. This technological revolution, often touted as the Second Machine Age or Industrial Revolution 4.0, is seen as heralding a new era of unprecedented productivity growth and deep transformation in the relation between work, workers and society. What do these portend for the future when new challenges are coming up with digital technology, Internet of Things, rapid robotization and automation of the workplace. Do the contemporary political and social crises have their roots in the way work and work relations have changed driven by technology? While the technological optimists think of a new utopia, which shall free humans from toils of physical labour, pessimists point to a world of self-learning machines that would subjugate humankind. To many however this focus on the ‘big Technology’ seems overhyped. They argue that incremental changes in work practices and work organization induced by ‘small technologies - may have had more permanent impact on the productivity and life world of workers. More importantly we need a broader definition of “technology “ that would include not just material instruments and processes but also knowledge, skills and craft implicit in wide range of human activities. Broadening the definition of technology allows us to include work beyond “industry and factory” and stretch it across all sectors of human activity and in all historical periods.

While the issue of technology substituting human labour and generating mass ‘technological unemployment’ is much discussed, there is less discussion on the profound consequences of technology on work relations in the future. Will digital technology and automation make traditional jobs and concomitant employment relations redundant and render the much vaunted employment contract (even in its depleted form in informal and casual work) antediluvian? Given the galloping spread of “ Non Standard employment” and Informal work in both the Global South and the North it may be pertinent to ask if the much vaunted technology driven change deepen and widen the spread of global precarity ? How will the vast majority of workers still in rural areas and agriculture be impacted by this technological change?

While people may disagree on the impact of technology, whether it is good or bad for society in general and workers in particular, most seem to agree that given the ‘disruptive’ character of the current wave of technological change, past trends are a poor guide to the future. Similarly, technological change has given rise to the notion of a ‘flat world’ - both the West and the rest are inexorably drawn into the vortex of ‘convergent’ technological change. If ‘industrialization’ of the West in the past was experienced as ‘deindustrialization’ in large parts of the colonized world, a ‘flat world’ prognosis today discounts such uneven and spatially disruptive experiences.

Both the above assertions regarding the quantitative and qualitative impact of technology of course seem to exclude the way workers themselves have experienced and shaped the changes induced by technology in the past and in the present. What are the implications of the changes in work for the processes of socialization and working class movements? How have these changes led to responses ranging from radical individualism to collective and co-operative formations in the past? Have workers in different spatial and social contexts responded differently to technology? Technology has always been embedded in social relations be that of gender, class and race; aggravating and attenuating disparities in different historical contexts. Women and men have been historically impacted differently by technology and responded variously in the past. So have rural workers as compared to the urban. Putting the workers and their experience at the centre might allow us to illumine the future with the lamplight of the past. It also might allow us to have a more nuanced understanding of the spatial unevenness of the global course of technology and its surprising impact on work and work relations both in the past and the future. In looking at such issues we need to be wary of over-valoring big technology. The history of the small, the everyday will be an important focus of the conference.

With this framework in mind the conference seeks papers from scholars, activists and practitioners in the field of labour studies and labour history and allied social sciences to address some of the following themes with both contemporary and historical focus:

Technology, Labour Process and Work relations:

- a) What is the relationship between technology and changing work organization from domestic work to cooperatives? How does technology impact on transportation and on factories? Is the impact of technology gender specific?
- b) How do workers respond to technological change? How have Labour movements responded to technology in the past?
- c) How does technology impact on processes of informalization? What is the relationship between intermediaries and technological change? How has inequity in conditions of work, income and health and safety been impacted by technology in the past and present.
- d) What does everyday technology mean? How do social movements define the shape of everyday technology?

Migration and Mobility:

While technological change has often triggered migrations, workers mobility has also impacted on the adoption of technology.

- a) What is the relationship between migration and technology in the rural and urban context?
- b) International Migration of workers has been significantly impacted by changes in technology of transportation. How has that changed in the present?

Resistance and Regulation:

- a) How have workers resisted or responded to technology in the past?
- b) How have regulations especially state regulations adapted to or hindered the adoption of technology?
- c) Legal regulations have acted often as forms of technology. How have they explicitly aided social control of workers and worker movements?

We invite papers from scholars, activists, and individuals who have engaged intimately with the world of labour and work to participate in this conference. International and comparative experiences will be especially welcome. We will also welcome papers on the pre-colonial and pre-modern and contemporary historical experiences. While the conference organizers will be able to host all the selected participants for the duration of the conference we are, however, unable to finance international travel costs.

Schedule for submission of abstracts and papers:

Those desirous of participating in the conference must submit a maximum of 500 words abstract clearly indicating the focus of the paper and its main arguments and research methods adopted by *October 15 2017* electronically to ailhconference2018@gmail.com. Those selected for participation will be informed by last week of October. Final papers must be submitted by *February 15 2018*

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