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### Welfare in Crisis

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Lin, J.; Arnold, D.; Nguyen, M.T.N.

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## *Introduction*



# Welfare in Crisis: Labor and Social Protection in the Global South

*Jake Lin* | ORCID: 0000-0003-1109-480X

Department of Political Science, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley,  
Edinburg, TX 78541, USA

*Corresponding author, e-mail: jake.lin@utrgv.edu*

*Dennis Arnold*

Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam,  
Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018 WV Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
*d.l.arnold@uva.nl*

*Minh T.N. Nguyen*

Faculty of Sociology, University of Bielefeld, Universitätsstraße 24,  
33615 Bielefeld, Germany  
*minh.nguyen@uni-bielefeld.de*

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## **Abstract**

Welfare expansion in the global South is partly in response to the social crises caused by neoliberal restructuring since the 1980s, with the 2008 global financial crisis escalating them, and the covid-19 pandemic further exposing the impact on the most precarious working populations. What are the new dynamics of labor struggles against these structural, industrial, and health crises under the expansion of social protection

or the lack thereof? How do the state and non-state actors manage recurring and new capitalist crises by reconfiguring labor and social policies? The contributions in this special issue address these questions by engaging with workers' lived experiences across the global South and post-communist states. They show that current labor and social policies fail the test under various crises. We argue that the neoliberalization of labor and welfare reconfigurations and the recurring crises of global capitalism have reproduced each other in these global South countries.

### Keywords

capitalism – crisis – global South – labor – social policy – welfare

## 1 Introduction

Labor relations and social protection have undergone major reconfigurations across the global South. In the past decades, social protection, which emerged as part of the welfare state in the North, has developed in the global South, and extended from the working populations to other eligible citizens, including forms of universal social protection through programs such as cash transfers, health and employment-related injury insurance, and basic pensions (Kwon, 2011; Tillin and Duckett, 2017). Welfare expansion in many places became necessary partly in response to social crises caused by neoliberal restructuring since the 1980s, with the 2008 global financial crisis escalating them, and the covid-19 pandemic further heightening the impact on the most precarious working and non-waged populations. The crux of initial neoliberal labor market reform was the strangulation of labor power at the workplace, alongside public expenditure cuts, decentralization, and privatization (Harvey, 2007). Labor and welfare reconfigurations have been unfolding in the context of labor retrenchment of old industries, the rise of new global factories and the service sector, labor casualization and precarization with penetrating yet volatile global capital flows, and mass internal and international labor migration. This structural crisis of capitalism resulting from the rise of neoliberalism leads to workers and their families' increased exposure to the volatility and uncertainty of the global market, while the thin social protection within national borders does not catch up with the realities of hyperprecarious labor, especially among transnational migrant workers. The structural contradiction of capitalism can spill over into a mess of combined crises at any time of industrial or health disruption. Covid-19, for instance, has been not merely a public health disruption, but one in which environmental, political economic, social and

medical factors (Gammeltoft-Hansen et al., 2022) intersect to generate an augmented crisis situation in which those realities are exposed. This special issue was conceived and written as the pandemic unfolded, and the direct impacts of the pandemic on all of us, based in universities across the globe, allowed us a shared vantage point to consider how the existing conditions of labor and welfare give rise to the multiple vulnerabilities of the majority of working people in the global South in the face of an impending crisis.

What are the new dynamics of labor (paid and unpaid) struggles against these structural, industrial, reproductive, and health crises under the expansion of social protection or the lack thereof? How do states and other actors fare with recurring and new capitalist crises by reconfiguring labor and social policies? Contributions in the special issue address these questions by engaging with workers' lived experiences across the global South. In their article 'Social Protection as Technocratic Fix? Labor Precarity and the Crisis of Capitalism after Bangladesh's Rana Plaza Collapse', Rebecca Prentice (University of Sussex) and Mahmudul H. Sumon (Jahangirnagar University) examine the limits of the Rana Plaza Arrangement (RPA) that provided work-injury compensation benefits to injured survivors and the families of those killed, funded by global apparel brands after the 2013 collapse of Bangladesh's Rana Plaza garment-manufacturing building. Andre Thiemann (Czech Academy of Sciences)'s study 'Fledgling Farms and Failing Health: How the Polypore State Transforms the Multispecies Relations in Serbia's Raspberry Fields' demonstrates the existential troubles of a Serbian farm to continue raspberry production for the global market, as his ethnography interrogates the intertwining of human and non-human labor production with socio-economic policies and care reproduction of the seasonal farm workers in Serbia.

In 'Labor Bilateral Agreement with Gendered and Unfree Labor: Vietnamese Women Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia', Angie Ngoc Tran (California State University) makes a case that the Vietnamese labor brokerage state works together with Saudi Arabia's Kafala sponsorship systems to create conditions for structural violence, demonstrating the failure to provide social protection for Vietnamese domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. Rano Turaeva (Ludwig Maximilian University)'s article 'Capitalizing precarity: Migrant labor's welfare in Russia' demonstrates that welfare of central Asian migrant workers in Russia is de facto non-existent and largely self-organized under the *propiska* household registration regime, whose exploitative conditions, also contributed to by police officers and fellow migrants, at times resemble those of slavery.

In her timely article 'Unemployment Insurance Claims during the Covid-19 Pandemic: The Experiences of Migrants Employed in South Africa's Formal Economy', Chioma Joyce Onukogu (University of the Witwatersrand

Johannesburg) provides a critique of the acclaimed universal social protection system of South Africa. As key providers of essential services during the covid-19 pandemic in their country of residence, Onukogu finds, Zimbabwean migrant workers in South Africa continued to face xenophobia, discrimination and denial of access to social protection. Finally, Dennis Arnold (University of Amsterdam) critically engages with the debate about the role of social protection for the laboring poor in the global South in his article 'Precarity as Common Sense: The Laboring Poor, the State and Social Protection in the South'. Utilizing Gramscian and Polanyian concepts, the article analyzes how precarity has become engrained as common sense among the laboring poor despite apparent efforts to de-commodify labor and social protection. It probes into the politics of select conceptualizations of social protection and the rationale for their implementation, from efforts to deepen and extend the reach of markets to marginalized populations, to notions that social protection represents a new logic to development, as well as perspectives on the state legitimating effects of social protection policy.

The contributions in this issue collectively show that the current pro-business and sovereign-centric<sup>1</sup> labor and social policies encircled by national borders largely fail the test under various crises. They not only are insufficient to protect workers from the whims of global neoliberal marketization but also increasingly become the instrument of the state to boost ruling legitimacy, maintain social and political control, and sustain global capitalist accumulation. In this issue, we seek to underscore social policy as the key site of struggles between labor, capital and the state by sketching out the systemic problems that plague the social reproduction of labor in the global South, including how welfare systems are designed to facilitate economic growth as a cornerstone of nationalist accumulation regimes as well as androcentric reproduction of capitalism that normalizes risk and precarity for working people in the global South. As such, the precarization of labor and the structure of current welfare systems not only work together to produce vulnerabilities for working people, but also to lay the groundwork for chronic crises in people's everyday lives, which can culminate in larger-scale crises that implicate the whole global society, as the pandemic has done. Together, this special issue argues that the restructuring of labor and welfare in the global South and the recurring crises of global capitalism mutually constitute each other.

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1 The control over the movement of people has become the last bastion of sovereignty in the present era of globalization. See, for example, Sassen (1996) and Dauvergne (2004).

## 2 Welfare as Key Site of Labor Struggles

While the welfare state was originally developed to salvage capitalism from crises, the very state of workers' welfare has been in a prolonged crisis in the global South. Marx observes that the inherent contradiction of capitalism determines that economic growth is unstable and characterized by cycles of boom and bust, with an industrial and commercial crisis manifest in the latter (Marx, 1976: p. 236). Although the debate on whether the welfare state can fundamentally transform capitalist contradictions continues (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Mishra, 2014; Nilsen, 2021), there is little doubt that the working classes under penetrating global capitalism in the post-war era have suffered a long crisis, exacerbated by the rise of neoliberalism, which has brought about an increasingly asymmetrical balance of power between capital and labor, and more so a political project to restore the class power of capital (Harvey, 2005). On average across OECD countries, 30% of the workers were members of a union in 1985. The corresponding figure almost halved to 17% in 2017.<sup>2</sup> Union participation also suffered across the global South, with a rate of 11.9% in Bangladesh and 29% in South Africa in 2019, while being dominated by state-affiliated unions in authoritarian regimes, such as Vietnam, Russia, and Saudi Arabia. While the assault on labor unions is one of the main themes in Marxian literature (Biyawila, 2010), Polanyian scholars (Goodwin, 2018) see welfare policy as a critical part of a societal countermovement to neoliberal marketization, although in reality it is often trapped in cycles of commodification (Lin and Nguyen, 2021). As unions' power declined (Edwards, 2011), increasingly social policies across the world, particularly in the global South, struggled to deal with a mixture of issues including the rise of informal workers, subsistence farmers, rural-urban migrants, international labor migration, unwaged labor, under-employment and unemployment (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013).

Welfare and labor, though inseparable, are often treated as distinct areas of study. While labor studies tend to focus on workplace struggles (Silver, 2003; Wells, 2009), conventional welfare studies are often fixated on redistributive measures and policies aimed at mitigating the exploitation of labor and supporting the reproduction of labor as the cornerstone of capitalist society (Fraser, 2011; Tillin and Duckett, 2017). We underscore in the issue the intertwined nature of labor and welfare struggles. The essence of labor studies is the welfare of workers not only at the workplace but also in the extensive landscape of social reproduction of labor power. However, these two struggles

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2 See <https://www.oecd.org/els/emp/Flyer-Collective%20bargaining.pdf>.

often antagonize each other. While labor movements such as those with emphasis on the unions are rejected as obsolete class politics, civil movements advocating broader social justice and welfare such as gender equality, homelessness, immigration, and so on, are often shrugged off as lacking revolutionary potential to transform capitalism. We contend that the struggles around welfare policy making and those around workplace labor relations have to be brought together under unified principles and logics if they are to become genuine societal counter-movements to the social consequences of labor commodification.

The crisis of capitalism for the working classes is essentially a crisis of labor's social reproduction (Mezzadri et al., 2022). Feminist scholars have demonstrated the necessity of paying attention to the wider struggles of welfare beyond matters such as wages and labor conditions at the workplace (Fraser, 2011, 2012, 2013). As Federici (2020) points out, unpaid care and domestic labor at home, largely performed by women and those outside of the waged workforce, are at the heart of the reproduction of the capitalist system. The lack of recognition and redistributive compensation for these activities and people's insufficient access to care facilities, such as health, education, basic income and pensions means that the whole system is vulnerable and quite easily gives in under crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. We have seen multiple issues arise during the pandemic—under-valued essential workers, shortage of labor, the great resignation, inflation-inflicted hardship, the near-collapse of public care systems and so on, problems that clearly arose from the misrecognition of the social costs of labor reproduction. Workers need both decent wages and welfare to cover the costs of wider social reproduction of labor, since either sick workers or their sick children could lead to paralyzing essential services and global supply chains under the pandemic. We contend that it is overdue in labor studies to put social policy back at the center of not only the working class's struggles in the context of social reproduction, but also wider social movements for all members of society.

The contributions of this special issue, which delve into how the state and capital respond to everyday struggles of labor welfare with growing hyper labor mobility, suggest the need to have a better conceptual understanding of the apparent rise of social protection in the global South. This can be further understood through the theoretical lens of uneven and combined development, which offers insights into the globalization of social policy. Under pervasive uneven development, meaning the 'privilege of historical backwardness' (Trotsky, 1980), less developed countries were forced by the pressure of their lack of development to follow those countries who had advanced in capitalist development. This leads to combined development, in which a previously

'backwards' society will take on aspects of the more advanced in historically distinct ways, while also holding on to the legacy of the past. In the case of social policy, for instance, its formation in one developing country was not made in that country alone but through its relationship with global capitalism.

In other words, the unevenness of global capitalism is the underlying force that determines that the nature of social policy in the South is primarily to serve an economic purpose since developing countries' primary focus is the fierce<sup>3</sup> competition to integrate into and advance in global capitalism. Thin social protection, in addition to low wages in the South, is a new instrument for value extraction to sustain the heightened accumulation of global capital. Despite the rhetoric of universalism, countries in the global South (Table 1) still lagged behind the core capitalist countries when it comes to public spending on social protection, particularly in Bangladesh (Prentice and Sumon, this

TABLE 1 Social Protection in Selected Countries

	GDP per capita (USD) recent years available	Poverty rate (%)	Public expenditure on social protection % of GDP	Effective coverage (%)
Bangladesh	1816	24	0.7	28.4
Vietnam	3416	7	4.3	38.8
South Africa	5978	56	5.5	49.3
Saudi Arabia	20110	12.7	4.9	N/A
Serbia	7666	14.3	1.6	73.8
Russia	10126	12	10.7	78
OECD	42099	9	20	90+

SOURCE: DEVELOPED BY AUTHORS. DATA OF BANGLADESH, VIETNAM, AND SOUTH AFRICA IS FROM <https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/gess/ShowCountryProfiles.action>. DATA OF SAUDI AND SERBIA FROM <https://www.worldbank.org/en/data/datatopics/aspire/country/>. DATA OF RUSSIA AND OECD FROM [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---inst/documents/publication/wcms\\_646048.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---inst/documents/publication/wcms_646048.pdf).

3 Hence the notion of 'race to the bottom'. See, for example, Ross and Chan (2002) and Mosley and Uno (2007).



issue) and Serbia (Thiemann, this issue). While low wages are considered the key reason for transnational capital to expand in the global South as a new form of imperialism (Foster et al., 2011), less understood are the costs of social reproduction outsourced by the North in developing countries as a critical component of that expansion. Governments and businesses in these countries have to strike a balance between maintaining low wages that attract foreign investment and providing thin layers of targeted social protection that partially compensate for the low wages to sustain a relatively stable and pacified working population. Some even assert that they collude with the global capital and governments of the North to enrich the elite, forming a new transnational capitalist class (Robinson and Harris, 2000; Parisot and Lin, forthcoming).

Combined development, by contrast, denotes that the 'internal' workings of a given society are shaped by 'external' pressures which are internalized (Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, 2015: pp. 44–47). External pressure from the global North shapes the process of socialization of care (Tronto et al., 2006) as capital expands toward the South where developing countries adopt social policies based on the local labor market's characteristics. Böger and Leisering (2020) rightly highlight several pronounced drivers for the expansion of social policy in the South, including the diffusion of global norms from the North, and regimes' use of social policy to solve social problems and secure their rules. Because of the changing dynamics between developed and developing countries under neoliberal globalization, trajectories are discernible in that a decrease in the depth of welfare provision has taken place in the North and an increase in the breadth of population coverage across the South. Narratives of universal social insurance schemes have been promoted in the South by International Organizations, although scholars question the substance and efficacy of universalism (see, for example, Marten et al., 2014; Shen et al., 2020).

The uneven power relations between the North and South, coupled with the expansion of global capital and the increasing entrepreneurship by local governments, contribute to the rise of social policy in the South. Although the initial purpose of social policy was to de-commodify labor, many countries across the South, such as Vietnam and China, tended to fuse marketization with social policy to re-commodify labor, leading to more precarity and insecurity of labor (Lin and Nguyen, 2021). The priority of social policy was directed to ensure countries' competitiveness in participating in global trade, particularly providing cheap and pacified labor. Social policy that aims for labor security is inherently a threat to the foundations of capitalist globalization, for example, in the case of MNCs' involvement in labor protection in Bangladesh (Prentice and Sumon this issue), and in Serbia, which struggled to provide decent

care while its citizens fled to the EU for better wages (Thiemann, this issue). Social policy in the South shares some common agendas—often primarily for integration into global capitalism, regime legitimacy, social stability and political control. This partially explains the large gap between the government budget and the necessary funding for decent public welfare programs, resulting in an accumulated welfare crisis for workers. The following sections dissect a variety of rationales behind labor and social policymaking at the national and international levels, and how they contribute to shaping the welfare crisis for workers and families.

### 3 Welfare for Neoliberal Economic Growth

The fundamental purpose of social policy is to protect labor from precarity amid market-driven economic development. In other words, labor welfare and security are the objectives, rather than the means to pursue neoliberal economic growth. The welfare state, including the labor social protection programs, was designed to re-embed the overly marketized economy, and most importantly, to de-commodify labor. At the most basic level, de-commodification represents a process in which a person can maintain a livelihood without immediately submitting their subsistence needs to the whims of the market (Esping-Andersen, 1990, pp. 163–165). The so-called productive model of the welfare regime in some developmental states risks turning the whole welfare state logic upside-down. The ‘inclusive neoliberalism’ literature (see Arnold, this issue) demonstrates that many developing countries utilize welfare as an instrument of neoliberal economic growth. It describes a social assistance approach to poverty reduction centered on incorporating growing proportions of populations into market-driven development dynamics, with the fundamental understanding that the problem of the poor is too little access to the market, rather than their precarious engagements with the market.<sup>4</sup>

In trade-led and labor-intensive economies, such as Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia, minimal labor protection is used as a free pass for MNCs and labor agencies’ expansive operations. In these countries, cheap labor and poorly regulated labor markets are key components of their economic growth models. The labor market in Bangladesh, for instance, is regulated by a patchwork of public and private regulations, including voluntary corporate codes of conduct and multi-stakeholder initiatives that prioritize the interests of global brands and local capitalists over workers (Prentice and Sumon, this

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4 See, for example, a similar discussion in Nguyen et al. (in press).

issue). The state underwrites this arrangement with business-friendly policies and periodic crackdowns on labor organizers. The co-dependency of labor between Vietnam and Saudi Arabia presents a curious case of social policy as an instrument of national development for both governments at the cost of transnational domestic workers' welfare (Tran, this issue). Tran's paper shows how the Vietnamese labor brokerage state (LBS) and the Saudi Arabian Kafala systems, which bind workers to their employers through legal provision regarding sponsorship, create conditions for structural violence and fail to provide social protection for domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. Apart from foreign exchange earnings, the Vietnamese government promotes labor export policies as a strategy to create employment and reduce poverty, especially in poor rural areas inhabited by ethnic minorities. In reality, it often results in labor exploitation and suffering for the workers while enriching the state and quasi-state institutions as they benefit from fees, loan interests, kickbacks from recruitment agencies in labor-receiving countries, and the economic effects of remittances. In the meantime, the social reproduction costs of labor, such as health and childcare, are left to migrants' home villages. This issue will be further elaborated in the following sections.

In post-communist countries of Eastern Europe, national governments either completely disregarded labor welfare in their economic restructuring or failed to rebuild a robust welfare system to protect labor from competitive free trade in global capitalism. In Serbia, as Thiemann (this issue) demonstrates, privatization and marketization (through integration into the EU labor market) during the country's transition to capitalism have meant that municipal cooperatives in raspberry farming were replaced by private entrepreneurs dependent on cheap seasonal labor and incoming foreign capital coincided with (brain drain) outmigration to the EU, where wages are higher. Meanwhile, Russia has become the prime destination for labor migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus (Azerbaijan) after the fall of the Soviet Union, as the country has a high demand for cheap Central Asian labor. The war in Ukraine 2022 made migrants an even more attractive source of manpower for recruitment as soldiers who were offered fast-track citizenship (Turaeva, this issue). In the meantime, the provision of welfare for labor migrants in Russia (both for internal Russian migrants and for foreign migrants) is *de facto* non-existent, and migrants must rely on themselves.

Seen by some as the poster child of welfare state in the global South, South Africa's post-apartheid social policy is shifting away from institutionalized racial discrimination to a more liberal, inclusive and non-racialized policy, including a rights-based approach to social policy focused on redistribution and building human capabilities (Ferguson, 2013; Tillin and Duckett, 2017).

However, as Onukogu (this issue) shows, the effectiveness of South Africa's social policies in addressing poverty and inequality is questionable (see also Friedman and Niekerk, 2016, already mentioned). South Africa's universal health coverage program, for instance, is designed to be highly unequal to incentivize neoliberal development, as over half of the public health expenses went to the upper 16% of the population and half to the remaining 84% in 2015–2016 (Fusheini and Eyles, 2016). The neoliberal pro-growth nature of South Africa's social policy, according to Onukogu (this issue), sets the stage for a discriminatory and nationalist approach to migrant labor's social protection.

#### 4 Welfare for Sovereign Territorial Capitalism

Social policy has increasingly become a key terrain of labor discipline and control by sovereign nation-states in the age of labor market liberalization and labor migration both domestically and transnationally. Welfare policies that are fragmented by national and sub-national borders have become a new instrument for capital, both international and domestic, to generate relations of dependency for value extraction—a large part being, again, the costs of labor social reproduction—between the peripheries and the core regions, capitalist hubs in the North, where MNC's headquarters are located. As our authors demonstrate, this dynamic can be observed in the relationship between peripheral countries and the EU (Thiemann in this issue), the US (Prentice and Sumon this issue), and increasingly between poorer and wealthier developing countries such as central Asian migrants in Russia or Vietnamese migrants in Saudi Arabia (Turaeva and Tran, this issue). Although extending social protection and social security to international migrants and their families based on the principle of equality and non-discrimination is one of the top agendas in different ILO conventions, the role of ILO in migrant labor rights advocacy is called into question (Tran, this issue; see also Standing, 2008). Thus, there is an urgent need to revitalize labor internationalism and solidarity at both the institutional and grassroots levels to unify social policy for transnational migrant workers.

Focusing on the dire suffering of Vietnamese domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, Tran (in this issue) demonstrates that the Kafala systems are linked to what she terms “the labor brokering states” of Vietnam and Saudi Arabia, who fail to provide social protection for Vietnamese domestic workers, let alone to compensate the costs of their labor social reproduction. Both the Vietnamese and Saudi governments aided and stabilized the LBS-Kafala systems and reproduced the dispossession of workers. These transnational systems are

not arbitrary; they are systemic and enable the absolute power of the *Kafeel* sponsors and the unregulated and inhumane practices of Vietnamese recruitment companies and their state representatives. While acknowledging the ILO's positive impact on international advocacy and regulation on migrant labor, this timely study calls out the ILO which has been turning a blind eye to abuses and violations suffered by Vietnamese domestic workers in Saudi Arabia and being complicit with the LBS system by working closely with MOLISA and DoLAB.

In the case of seasonal and day laborers in Serbia, Thiemann (in the issue) elaborates the damaging impact of outmigration toward the EU on raspberry farming, which represents a significant part of the country's agricultural production. While the first and second waves of privatization in the 1990s and the 2000s weakened the welfare state and the economic system, the most recent illiberal reform since 2012 has resulted in the increased emigration of both unskilled and skilled labor, threatening the reproduction of the farm labor necessary for the raspberries to thrive. The failing health care for farmers, Thiemann argues, demonstrates the resources for supporting labor production and reproduction relations have been increasingly divested into promoting other political agenda by a polypore state.

Despite supplying the country with much needed cheap labor, as Turaeva (this issue) shows, the migration en masse (estimably over 10 million, more than 70% of which are undocumented) from former Soviet Union nations to Russia has been met with growing xenophobia and Islamophobia. Compounding their problems, all migrant workers, both domestic and international, suffer from a lack of access to decent welfare due to the *propiska* household registration regimes that originated in the former Soviet Union. The Russian state capitalized on the precarity, turning it into lucrative sources for profits and possibilities for abuse by those in power over the workers. According to Turaeva, there are more police officers on the streets than care provisions for migrants in Russia. Even after paying monthly fees to police officers, migrant workers do not have guaranteed safety from police raids.

In South Africa, the Covid-19 pandemic has similarly exposed the plight of foreign workers to access social security (Onukogu, in this issue). Not only were temporary residents excluded from the country's social assistance programs, but they were also found to be deprived of accessing the social security to which they had contributed as employees. Applications by foreign workers with work permits and asylum seeker permits who contributed to unemployment insurance funds, both of whom qualified to access such social rights but did not have South African identity documents, were rejected. Additional factors that prevented foreign workers from claiming Covid-19 TERS

included the inability of the UIF system to recognize foreign passport numbers and the lack of transparency and negligence on the part of employers, agents or government officials.

The inability of welfare systems to account for the issues of labor mobility is also demonstrated by Prentice and Sumon (this issue)'s analysis of factory workers in Bangladesh. Many Rana Plaza workers are rural-to-urban migrants, with translocal lives that remained embedded in the social relations of their home villages as the nests of social reproduction even as they lived and worked in garment jobs. A garment worker's potential to use labor migration for social mobility versus becoming mired in precarity and exploitation depends on a variety of factors, such as whether the worker's family owns land and other resources back in the village, and the nature and type of her social networks to facilitate job opportunities. At a time when new experiments on social protection are being devised (cf. Huda 2021), this study addresses urgent policy questions about the adequacy of "universal" compensation benefits in the Bangladesh context, rather than assuming such standards are incontestable. Furthermore, they contribute to a wider set of debates on the legitimacy of operationalizing international standards in hybrid governance in industries where the economic precarity of workers is built into the business model.

## 5 Welfare for Androcentric Reproduction of Capitalism

The avoidance of the costs of social reproduction of labor, which are highly gendered, is another defining characteristic we highlighted in social policy making in the global South. While the gendered nature of the welfare state in the North is well discussed (Fraser, 1989), we underscore the superficiality of social policies shaped by the androcentric reproduction of labor as part and parcel of global capital's expansive operation in the global South. The limited coverage by labor protection policies, such as health care, industrial injury, and casualties, puts most of the costs of socially reproducing labor on workers and families' shoulders, often at the expense of women. Welfare policy in the South evolved as a result of the gradual internalization of earlier social policy ideas and models from the North, with a constant compromise between global capital's evasion of labor reproduction costs and maintaining their local supply chains operational.

In Bangladesh, Prentice and Sumon (this issue) show that rural areas underwrite the profitability of the garment industry as sites of social reproduction where generations of workers are prepared for employment,

and reabsorbed when they are too old or ill to continue working, a common situation in other contexts of migrant labor (Nguyen and Locke, 2014). As a young survivor named Farida put it, “we came to Dhaka for poverty at home.” Migrating from rural poverty for garment jobs in the city, survivors often have little to fall back on during a crisis. The survivors who succeeded at investing in land or creating a new livelihood mostly had previous savings, a network of family members to rely upon, or additional assistance from a third party, such as an NGO. More importantly, the victims of the well-known Rana Plaza collapse were by and large women. The differential bargaining and negotiating power of women shapes survivors’ experiences, as it is common for fathers and husbands to make decisions about how to spend the RPA compensation. The RPA intended to replace the income lost due to injury, permanent disability, or death. The medical assessment evaluated how a survivor’s injuries would affect future earnings, and these financial losses were calculated as part of the compensation amount. However, there are many ways in which injuries affected earnings remain unaccounted for. For example, disability can be a barrier to employment if workplaces are unable to accommodate disabled workers as in the case of Farida, who was 13 years old when she lost her leg in the collapse. Some injured workers used the RPA money to pay for medical treatments. This demonstrates that the androcentric system of social protection developed by the state-capital alliance in Bangladesh failed to cover the broader costs of social reproduction, which fell back onto the shoulders of workers and families.

In Serbia, Thiemann’s study (this issue) lays bare the crisis of public health and welfare in rural areas. His case of two local raspberry subsistence farmers demonstrates that social security provision by the government is poor, as the 100-euro benefit per month they received from government social security provision for their dialysis treatment barely covers part of the actual costs. In 2016, Vasilije and Marko received a donation of a used home dialysis machine (worth four thousand euros) from someone’s humanitarian *akcija* (humanitarian action), a post-socialist form of charity which supplants rights to social security with a gift-logic. The donation turned out to be hardly sufficient to help them through the pandemic, which put Serbia’s social policy into a real test. The government first treated the covid-19 virus as a joke but later in an about-face imposed a very harsh lockdown. Subsequently, owing to low trust in the Serbian government, local residents had a very poor participation rate in the vaccination campaign. High-risk, high-priority patients, such as Marko and Vasilije, never received a first jab. In early 2021, both contracted the disease and after two months of struggle, Marko succumbed to it.



In South Africa, Onukogu's research (in this issue) revealed that many of the essential workers who were excluded from the covid support policy under the pandemic were female immigrant workers. With a family of four, including her husband and two children, Agnes, a 40-year-old from Zimbabwe had been legally working as a high school teacher with a work permit. As her husband had lost his job in 2019, Agnes became the sole breadwinner of her family. She had contributed to the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) every month since her arrival in 2007. However, she did not receive benefits from the Covid-19 Temporary Employer-Employee Relief Scheme (Covid-19 TERS). According to Onukogu, Agnes was the victim of bureaucratic xenophobia that manifested both at the level of policy enforcement and the employer's intentional discrimination. This case demonstrates the discriminatory implementation of social policy, whereby female essential workers from other countries were particularly hit hard during the health crisis.

In Saudi Arabia, Vietnamese female domestic workers' suffering reveals how state-sponsored labor exploitation coalesced with misogyny. As Tran (this issue) shows, female workers' passports were confiscated by the Saudi sponsors as soon as they arrived. Most did not receive daily necessities, such as clothing, sanitary napkins, and medicines, which were to be provided by the sponsors, as stated in the contract. These Vietnamese domestic workers were not given enough food and often went to bed hungry after working for over 15 hours a day. More crucially, they were exploited repeatedly by the multiple actors in the expansive Kafala sponsorship system. Most of them came to Saudi Arabia in the hope of raising money to support family or pay off the debt in Vietnam, as they had to pay a fee to the recruitment agency or give up the first three months' wages.

## 6 Welfare for Normalizing Risk and Precarity

Social policy and welfare regimes are increasingly functioning to normalize social insecurity under neoliberal globalization. Against the backdrop of stagnant economic growth, industrial overcapacity, and chronic underemployment across the world (Benavav, 2019a,b), Dennis Arnold (this issue) conceptualizes precarity as a common sense, which is a norm rather than an exception, in terms of labor market participation and expectations, or lack thereof, as the required conditions for the access to social protection provided by the state or related institutions. He observes that structural causes of poverty are erased by the constant reinforcement of neoliberal common sense about the need to reform flawed individuals and unleash their 'natural'



economic ambition. Governmental projects on social protection that are limited to surplus populations (i.e., the ‘deserving poor’, or very poor) can work against solidarities by individualizing and differentiating people in a society. In this sense, welfare expansion in the South is integral to this logic of neoliberal globalization with complicit national governments.

As a result, people have to resort to alternative ways of maintaining wellbeing and care. In Russia, where health insurance coverage is highly inconsistent across the population, migrant workers with no *propiska* registration, which is one of the institutional origins of precarity for those workers, rely on ethnic and religious entrepreneurs for their needs (Turaeva in this issue). These entrepreneurs put to use religious and non-religious practices in providing health care and treatment such as Hijama (Islamic blood cupping), using knives, Koran, blood, animals, papers and ink, also medical tools found and brought into the healing room, objects, Esfand and other herbs, oils and medicines produced in Arab countries which are also sold in Halal shops near mosques.

Prentice and Sumon (this issue) argue that Rana Plaza is a consequence of the state’s failure to regulate and the absence of corporate liability for risky work conditions in supplier factories. The collapse of Rana Plaza, which housed five garment factories, exposed the deadly consequences of governance gaps in outsourced global supply chains. At least 1134 workers were killed when the eight-story building caved in. Against the deadlines for global fashion brands, garment workers were made to return to work after cracks in the building were discovered. Workers had no trade unions and were threatened with a loss of monthly wages due to be paid that day. Companies that sourced from Rana Plaza were signatories to various social responsibility initiatives on business and human rights, but their hyper-competitive purchasing practices and lack of due diligence set the stage for the disaster. In the public outrage that followed, workers and activists put pressure on the Bangladesh government, global apparel companies, and other industry actors to make changes, which offers a glimpse of hope beyond the old welfare model that normalizes precarity.

## 7 Bringing Welfare Back to Labor Studies

Welfare reform towards superficial universalism alongside the liberalization of the labor market in the global South has been integral to the spread of neoliberal restructuring and the globalized commodification of labor. These structural changes have gutted the majority of the industrial working class in the global North and contributed to the rise of new working classes in

the global South and post-communist East Europe (Ness, 2016). National and transnational migration regimes are configured in ways that facilitate the supply of cheap industrial labor, as in the sprawling global factories of Bangladesh (Prentice and Mahmood, this issue), and service labor, as in the case of domestic workers in the gulf countries (Tran, this issue) and central Asian migrant workers in Russia (Turaeva, this issue). These new working classes of industrial and service workers in the global South, now subjected to the neoliberalized labor governance, union-hostile laws, pro-business industrial policies, faced extra adversity to organize collective resistance. The recent rise of platform economy across the North and South only exacerbates this. If the west had bid farewell to the working class (Gorz, 1982), the working class arguably had never become fully-fledged in most of the global South countries in the post-1970s era, or had hardly developed their collective solidarity to coalesce into any meaningful labor movements to challenge transnational capital (Lin, 2019). In this historical context, it is not surprising that scholarship of global South studies is divided between labor struggles at the workplace and welfare struggles based on social policy analysis. Social policy and welfare reform increasingly have become the renewed focus of the 'worker question' (Breman et al., 2019), even though they are considered as the periphery by conventional labor studies in the orthodox Marxian sense. Social policy and welfare reform have always been intertwined with labor struggles in the global South. The struggle for better social protection is no less significant than that of workplace labor resistance. We contend that social protection has increasingly become the bedrock of labor power struggles that relates not only to labor production at the workplace but also to social reproduction in societies integrated into global capitalism. It requires coalition building, for instance, between industrial working classes and other non-waged precarious populations, domestic activists, and international advocates to galvanize a societal countermovement against capital and market forces (Tsogas, 2020).

What are the possible paths forward if we maintain our faith in the welfare state's ability to reform or transform capitalism, considering the very state of workers' welfare has been in prolonged crisis in the global South? As demonstrated by the contributions in this issue, social protection in the global South has been inherently weak, merely serving to establish and perpetuate these developing countries as peripheral production and service centers, whereby resources and profits are extracted towards the core in the North and increasingly in some of the accumulation centers in the South and post-communist states, such as Dubai and Moscow. Workers' welfare crisis across the global South is essentially a crisis of capitalism, the crisis of state regulations and transnational governance, set in motion by the continuous decline of labor

power against capital and the neoliberal state, and the defeat of organized trade union movements. However, this does not imply that resistance is futile. A societal countermovement galvanized by the universal struggles of waged and unwaged workers can pave the way for a more promising future of emancipation for the working and unemployed poor, by reimagining new forms of resistance.

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