



Universal Social Protection and Labour:
AEPF International Conference by the Thematic Cluster:
Social Justice
Kathmandu 4-6 April 2019

Narrative Report (Draft) written by Ms Francine Mestrum

Participating Organizations: Transform! Europe, Attac France, Global Social Justice, IT for Change, Action Aid, World Solidarity Movement, Home Based Workers Concern Society, Institute for Popular Democracy, AMRC, AIDWA, Dalit Network, NGO Forum on ADB, Working People’s Charter, Institute for Human Development, Asia Network on the Right to Social Protection, StreetNet.

The AEPF Kathmandu conferences were attended by members of parliament from Nepal, key political figures including advisors to the Nepal foreign ministry, policy makers and many civil society activists including labour and women’s groups.



The papers presented and the videos will be put up on social media. The video of the opening speech by Rt.Hon Pushpa Kamal Dahal (‘Prachanda’) key figure of the Nepal revolution was put up on social media platform and viewed more than ten thousand times in first three days itself.

Report

The conference of the Social Justice Cluster was back to back with a conference of AEPF Peace and Justice Cluster, commemorating the foundation of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1919, stating in its preamble that ‘lasting peace is not possible without social justice’.

The joint opening session took place in the presence of the Rt Honorable former Prime Minister, Mr Pushpa Kamal Dahal and the former Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Narayan Kaji Shrestha. Both speakers referred to the 10 year long people's war in Nepal and the successful peace process. Referring to the ILO, they stressed the links between peace and social justice, mentioning that social justice is not utopian. The current government is working on political change and hopes that this conference can help to bring out the proposals and promises of the new government.



Julie Ward, MEP, stressed that indeed we can change the world.

The keynote address was given by Ms Dagmar Walter, ILO representative for South Asia.

Speakers were Anuradha Cheney from India, Nimalka Fernando from Sri Lanka and Daman Nath Dhangana, former speaker of Parliament of Nepal (see programme). They all stressed the importance of the links between peace and social justice, especially in the case of Nepal with a new government and many migrant workers in the rest of the world.

The conference of the Social Justice Cluster had four sessions.

Session one was meant for stocktaking: what is the situation in Asia and Europe concerning economic and social rights?

Social spending is high in **Europe**, up to around 30 % of GDP (without education) and around 15 % in Central Europe. This does not mean there is no poverty, precariousness or inequality! The benefits of globalisation largely went to the rich. We also see industry to be dwindling (less than 20 % of the labour force) and agriculture with less than 3 %. Services on the other hand takes up more than 70 % of the labour force, though it is a

dual labour market with lots of vulnerable jobs at the lower side. Unemployment remains high, especially in countries of Southern Europe.

As for **Asia**, after the crisis of 97-98 and after the global crisis of 2008 and the World Bank's privatisation efforts, a strong demand for social protection was heard. Thailand introduced some exemplary policies, though in most countries and because of budgetary problems, governments adopted Private Public Partnerships. In many cases however, this led to private monopolies with dire social consequences. Due to high urban unemployment and the displacement of landless rural poor people, migration remains very high.

To-day, the climate crisis and the new technological revolution could make an end to 'Factory Asia'. What is needed is a transition programme with the fiscal space needed for it, so that the neoliberal straitjacket can be abandoned. The region needs a new paradigm for regional and global integration.

Special attention went to the influence of **China** in the region and the role of new initiatives on labour rights and social protection. There is little unemployment, but social protection policies have been frozen and wage rises have slowed down. With the emergence of a platform economy, labour is informalizing rapidly. Workers have many rights on paper, but in practice there is no freedom of association. We have seen a sharp rise in labour protests and peasants' protests against land grabbing. There has been a major decline in the labour share of incomes, major income gains go the 10 % richest part of the population. The control over civil society has been strengthened. The Belt and Road Initiative is mainly due to a crisis of over-production and half of overseas investments are not profitable. China wants to become a global leader by 2050 but its combination of neoliberalism and state capitalism is now leading a race to the bottom with a repressive labour regime.

In session two the conference looked at the productive transformation of the economy and the future of work.

An industrial sector is necessary, also from the perspective of state power since, along with trade policies, they determine the sovereignty each country and people has. As for the digital revolution, there are two major trends: (1) planetary boundaries, which go beyond simple CO2 emissions. (2) Privatised Keynesianism is finished.

The digital revolution concerns the merger of the internet and manufacturing systems. Its goals are:

1. Higher workers exploitation – since Europe has strict rules, many companies move to China, controlling workers in three dimensions (with wristbands monitoring your movements)
2. Control of each single produced good along the value chain: chipping each item to connect it to workers
3. Autonomous production, with artificial intelligence (AI). Hence, strikes would be neutralized. What would the labour movement then do?

All this leads to further pressure on extractivism in the Global South + rising energy demands + longer value chains with more transport. In one word: enhanced concentration of productive assets in the Centre (Germany vs Italy). In the III. World: premature deindustrialisation, See for example, the garment sector and AI.

In the IT sector, we witness a platformisation of the economy. Amazon is a good example, since it didn't start as selling of books, but as a tool to replace retailers, creating the market, not occupying a single marketplace. It created a monopoly, which is the end game, creating shareholder value. As its first strategy, it is involved in multiple, unrelated businesses, like making movies, fashion, selling books etc. Each part of the business strengthens another section. It gathers information which it can use to sell its own goods. As a second strategy, with Alexa, it becomes omnipresent.

All this negatively impacts on jobs. Other businesses shut down, and also hawkers in India express concerns whether they will be pushed out of business. This also happens in the tourism sector, for example, with TripAdvisor.

What is the role of civil society? We can't continue as before. How to hold transnational digital corporations accountable? New labour standards have to be updated, as well as labour laws. We need to stop the free flow of data and protect. People can claim their data as theirs, like New Zealand farmers saying they "own" their data, which is a new perspective.

Three practical things to do:

- a. Lobby politicians to stay out of any form of e-commerce in trade negotiations
- b. Do mass education
- c. Dedicate budgets for alternative platforms, either from public sector or cooperatives

Reflecting **on the future of work**, a good idea can be to think of liberating work to heal the world and develop a politics for living labour.

Living labour is the big strength of the left. They bring death, we have to bring life. There is a polarization of jobs, with increasing informalization and precarious types of work. The routinization of labour implies lean production, standardization and control, as well as "bullshit" jobs doing useless things while being well-paid or invisible work. From the left, we present parallel resistances: against inequality (like Indignados, Occupy, gilets jaunes...), against the ecological demise, against the degradation of work.

Could we find a common cause between the parallel resistance movements? Themes like living wage, decent work, or living labour? What is work and how to define it? Work should be to disobey, when workers are confronted with an unpredictable world. These unforeseen aspects are what dead labour cannot deal with. It requires commitment, creativity etc. The social power of living labour is necessary for profit, not controllable by capital and vital for workers. It is empowered by our aspiration for autonomy and our aspiration to defend life. What could these politics of living labour contain: What matters

for us in work? As workers, but also as citizens, humans, inhabitants of earth? For our health, for democracy, for nature?

If we manage to position these questions at the center, we could build a natural convergence of these struggles, based on common interests. This would lead to liberating work in defence of life.

For instance, the movement of youth for climate is a major opportunity for workers and unions to create a new common agenda around living labour.

Looking more particularly to **the Dalit people** in Nepal, it is noted that the new Constitution of Nepal provides a lot more rights for Dalits. Still, many problems remain. Dalits are underrepresented in politics, with no Dalits occupying major posts inside political parties or commissions, nor in parliamentary bodies and administrative bodies or the judiciary. 44% of Terai Dalits are landless and 15% of Hill Dalits. The traditional skills discriminate Dalits. In the social and cultural sector, data shows that Dalit literacy rate is only 33%, compared to the national average of 54%. Even though there is democracy and formal human rights, these problems still prevail.

How can digital democracy serve and include Dalits, provide positive discrimination? Their movement sees three solutions: strengthening organisations of Dalits, promote grassroots education and promote mutual understanding among Dalits, because many differences exist among Dalits.

Session three turned to the sector of re-production and its value creation.

Reproduction is seen as the entire cycle of activity generating and re-generating the human for the market and the social world. Re-production takes place in post-patriarchal times. It is the blind spot of the economic and political tradition of western modernity. It is on this blind spot that the conquest of capitalism, that is inequality, exploitation and injustice reconstitutes itself.

We need then to re-think the economic, the cultural, the natural-material, the social, the juridical and the political. They are interwoven inside a comprehensive and complex valorisation process for which responsibility must be taken.

Reproduction, then, must be seen as a paradigm.

In **Nepal** the status of women has markedly been improved, though many problems remain. The status of women varies according to caste, but the constitution enhances women's rights.

As for **Vietnam**, many problems remain for migrant women, whether they work in the formal or the informal sector. Very often they are not aware of their rights and have no access to social protection. More work has to be done in the policy system and the statistics.

In session four we looked at the [Global Charter for Social Protection Rights](#).

Social protection today means something different from what it was in the past. What it means today is a social protection that is compatible with neoliberal policies and even with austerity. It is a minimal protection for survival and reproduction. What it means is: deregulation of labour markets, privatisation of public services, the enclosure of all 'commons', including our common human, economic, social and environmental rights. What it means is, in short: social protection at the service of markets and of growth. It is neoliberalism with a human face.

The social protection we want is different. It is not the social protection of the past, because times have changed, because societies and economies have changed, but it is based on the same valid principles of the past, mainly human rights and solidarity.

Our social protection consists of insurances and assistance, of labour rights and public services.

In this charter, we see social protection as a commons, as something that belongs to us, to us all, as something we have to decide on.

Our social protection is really universal, it is by all and for all, without any exceptions. This means it is not only for the poor, it is also for the rich and the rich should be obliged to contribute. It is emancipatory and transformative. It is based on human rights and solidarity.

The situation in **India** is characterised by high growth but also by deprivation

Nearly 93 per cent of the workforce is informally employed. This rising informalization means that the percentage of workers without any formal contract had risen even in the public sector and public limited companies.

The percentage of wage/salaried workers outside agriculture with social security had declined between 1999-00 and 2011-12.

There is low social security coverage. Formal social security measures cover only about 7 per cent of the workforce. According to the NCEUS, only about six per cent of workers in the un-organised sector had any social security / social assistance to cope with contingent risks (2006).

The high levels of deprivation/vulnerability and the low (and declining) coverage of social security provide a strong rationale for adequate and effective social protection, along with other measures to improve the quality of employment.

Unequal coverage across sex and social groups. Much remains to be done to have a rights based social protection.

In the **closing session**, the declaration from social justice cluster was read out. It forwarded the following urge for meaningful social protection leading to social justice.

1. Re-define labour and to 'free' it from capital, since the logics of accumulation and profit maximisation are not compatible with the transition towards a more sustainable way of life,
2. Generate a new economic thinking based on the priority of reproduction, a crucial issue in order to connect different struggles and movements,
3. Counter emergence of rentier class by democratisation of economic life, a condition of social justice,
4. Establish and promote regional and global learning centres for education and generation of new knowledge needed to enrich our social movements based on empirical evidences,
5. Establish and strengthen campaigns and networks among the people of the regions, engage in the political and social dialogue, based on strong trade unions, on discussion on how to create the changes we need and want, for greater solidarity for united struggles, movements, people to people cooperation and coordination,
6. Fight against climate warming, the crossing of the planetary boundaries and we struggle in favour of the Global North paying its climate debts to the developing world. We must build bridges to the climate justice movement as climate destruction will be the most important political factor for the future, therefore, we must link our arguments with this movement. The climate debt most probably can be said to be the biggest social injustice to emerge in the future, and the term "climate debt" builds a bridge there to an ongoing struggle, and
7. Realise and materialise the global charter for social protection rights.

The conference participants believed that any move towards social justice is social protection, to be understood in an emancipatory and transformative way.

The Conference adopted the [Kathmandu Declaration](#)

There was a rich exchange of information, convergence of agendas, mobilisation for the **AEPF Peoples Agenda**.



This conference was produced by the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the Asia Europe People's Forum and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.