

The European Labour History Network (ELHN) Conference, Turin 14-16 December 2015

Labour & Empire Working Group panel: 'New Directions in Imperial Labour History'

Over the past thirty years, the study of empire has been revitalised. The “cultural turn” and the rise of global history, among other academic trends, have changed our ways of looking at empire, in particular in relation to issues such as race and gender. It seems, however, that the historians involved in the mutation have too often left aside the concepts of labour and class. Such neglect is hardly surprising but it is detrimental both to the study of empire and to the exploration of how the possession of an empire affected metropolitan societies.

The impact of the labour factor on the territories colonised by the European powers, especially as regards race and gender, can hardly be underestimated: racial hierarchies were used by the imperial authorities to justify racially segregated labour regimes, while the introduction of new forms of production often had a disruptive impact on gender relations within colonial societies. In the metropolises too, empire and labour came to be part and parcel of the imperial experience, workers from the colonies or ex-colonies becoming more and more (if problematically) integrated within the domestic working-classes – while labour organisations strove to define a correct attitude towards empire, imperialism and later decolonisation.

Colonial labourers were not passive bystanders in the process: racial hierarchies could be subverted through the establishment of multi-racial associations, while the circulation of migrant labour helped to facilitate the transmission of ideas, discourses, and militant practices within and between empires, over which the imperial authorities exercised little or no control. As for the organised labour movement both in its metropolitan and colonial settings, it played a part in the rise and fall of empire (notably in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean after 1945) that needs to be re-evaluated.

Therefore, in view of the importance of labour to the history of empires, the aim of this conference is to reintegrate the study of labour into imperial historiography and consider its relationship to recent developments in the field. With this in mind, the organisers of the Labour & Empire Working Group invite papers that address one or more of the following topics:

- Colonial labour regimes, including the relationship between labour and racial identity, workplace surveillance and resistance, and the political economy of colonial labour relations.
- Attitudes towards empire in the metropolitan labour movement, ranging from 'reformist imperialism' to overt anti-colonialism.
- Strikes, riots, and workplace stoppages in colonial settings; imperial responses to labour unrest, including both its violent suppression and supposedly 'non-violent' methods, such as increased social welfare provision.
- The colonial workers' experience in the metropole; their relation to friendly societies, cooperatives, trade-unions and political parties.
- Empires, migrant labour and the development diasporic networks and identities.
- The role of labour uprisings and organisations in anti-colonial and nationalist movements.
- Transnational networks of labour activists, including both 'indigenous' labour leaders and metropolitan ones.
- The relationship between the labour rights in colonial contexts and the emergence of the global rights order, particularly after 1945.
- Labour after empire, including, for example, the relationship between the labour movement and the independent regimes of Africa and Asia during the 1950s and 1960s.

The contributors invite proposals for 20-minute papers that consider these issues in any of the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century European empires, as well as Latin America and the contiguous empires of the United States, Russia, and East Asia. Proposals, which should include a 300 word abstract and one page C.V., should be submitted to:

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The deadline for proposals is 31 August.