



International Conference of Labour and Social History

Internationale Tagung der HistorikerInnen der Arbeiter- und anderer sozialer Bewegungen
Conference internationale d'histoire ouvrière et sociale

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Call for Papers

60th ITH Conference

Workers and Worldmaking: Labor in the Era of Decolonization

Linz, Austria

25–27 September 2025

Conference Languages: English / German

The success of decolonization in the post-World War Two Global South depended greatly on the ability of national(ist) political leaders to rally local labor movements behind their cause. Similarly, solidarity with anticolonial movements, or the lack thereof, showed by the labor organizations and workers' political parties in the Global North, played an important role in the "battle for the hearts and minds" inside the metropolises. Labor movements in the center and periphery were not isolated, with rich exchanges taking place via political events, international conferences, delegation visits, and material aid. Parallel to the struggle to assert their geopolitical importance, governments in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean sought to establish social contracts with their working classes and control trade unions domestically, while using connections with organized labor and political actors in more developed countries to attract development cooperation.

The global turn in the historiographies of decolonization and the Cold War helped move studies of labor in the Global South beyond their old focus on the formation of national working classes. Recent research on competing labor internationalisms, communist support for decolonization, transnational developmental entanglements, and South-South solidarities opened new vistas for thinking about the working classes of the emerging Third World as constitutive makers of global modernity. Popularized by authors such as Łukasz Stanek (2020) and Adom Getachew (2019), the concept of 'worldmaking' has proven particularly fruitful in encompassing the wealth of simultaneous and often competing practices of transnational collaboration in the peripheries during the Cold War. This conference aims to look at the role of workers and workers' movements situated in the Cold War 'South', 'North', 'East', 'West', and 'in-between', in these practices of worldmaking triggered by decolonization between the 1950s and the 1990s.

Most historians applying global perspectives to 20th century decolonial and anti-imperialist struggles, as well as postcolonial 'nation-building' recognize labor's

symbolic and actual importance in these processes. Getachew, for instance, dedicates a chapter of her book to the efforts of the leaderships of newly independent countries in the Global South to alter the international division of labor by making analogies to domestic class politics. Parallel to considering the urbanists' imaginaries applied to decolonized urban spaces, Stanek is attentive to the labor practices of the cosmopolitan experts involved in these projects. Authors dealing with Cold War trade union networks pose the question of how the transnational contacts, mainly reserved for union functionaries, translated to rank-and-file members (see for example: *Journal of Social History* 53:2, 2019). In their own ways, scholars from different historiographical fields are thus currently tackling issues traditionally pertinent to labor historians. Nevertheless, there have been very few platforms to bring these strands of scholarship together and communicate directly with historians practicing Global Labor History.

The conference seeks to address such themes, including (but not limited to):

- The interplay of labor and nationalist movements during and after decolonization: How did nationalist political leaders integrate labor into pro-independence movements? How did this relation evolve after decolonization when newly independent countries were trying to navigate the challenges posed by the radicalism of the labor movements at one end, and the pressures of global geopolitical competition of the Cold War at the other?
- Strikes, boycotts, mass mobilizations: What was the role of local organized labor and its methods in decolonization struggles? Did these methods and conceptualizations of local labor leaders differ from the metropolitan theories and repertoires of labor struggles?
- Late colonial authorities and organized labor: In the aftermath of World War Two, colonial administrators tapped labor expertise from the metropolises to assist setting up local labor institutions in attempts to reorganize colonized societies to kick-start 'development'. How did these early exchanges shape the outlook of workers and workers' leaders in the colonies?
- Experiences of women workers and trade unionists: Transnational connections between women workers, labor and women rights activists within the anticolonial, socialist, and non-aligned global networks. Women's struggles to enter male-dominated realms in the workplace, union leadership, education, and training.
- Labor and development aid/cooperation: What were labor relations and conditions of work on various projects of economic cooperation in the self-professed developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America?
- Trade union internationalisms during the Cold War: The agency of unions from the Global South in finding support for their causes between rivaling international federations (WFTU, ICFTU, WCL), but also forming their own networks in the spirit of Afro-Asian, Pan-American, Pan-Arab, Pan-African and Non-Aligned solidarities.
- The intersection of labor movements with the struggles of other marginalized groups: The trajectories of labor movements in the Global South were often intertwined with anti-caste/anti-racist movements, indigenous rights, women's movements, etc. What does the intersection, or lack thereof, between these different movements tell us about the nature of labor organizing in the Global South? Furthermore, how do the ongoing efforts to decolonize historiographical knowledge production impact the way we look at the past instances of 'workers' worldmaking'?

SUBMISSION

Proposed papers should include:

- Abstract (max. 300 words)
- Biographical note (continuous text, max. 200 words)
- Email address

The abstract of the suggested paper should contain a separate paragraph explaining how and (if applicable) to which element(s) or question(s) of the Call for Papers the submitted paper refers. The short CV should give information on the applicant's contributions to the field of labour history, broadly defined, and specify (if applicable) relevant publications. For the purpose of information, applicants are invited to attach a copy of one of these publications to their application.

Proposals (in one docx-file) to be sent to Laurin Blecha: conference@ith.or.at

TIME SCHEDULE

Submission of proposals:	31 January 2025
Notification of acceptance:	3 March 2025
Full papers or presentation version:	15 August 2025
Conference (on-site) in Linz, Austria:	25–27 September 2025

PREPARATORY GROUP

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