Introduction between Citizens' and Workers' Rights

Struggles for the Recognition of Home Workers as Workers

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The history of home work carries with it an important history of resistance that makes an important contribution to labour history in general and, specifically, to feminist labour history. The struggles of home workers—whether in the garment sector of the nineteenth century or in today's digital/internet trade channels—show several similarities, such as that they are all dispersed workers, not identified as “real workers”, and that they work from their own homes. But they also provide examples of conditions that can be changed. The history of women workers' resistance has for long been under-researched and has not been incorporated into the narratives of resistance within labour history. Rather, the trope of women workers as being “difficult to organize” has been reproduced in the views of both trade unionists and labour historians. This is all the more so in the case of home workers, as they are stamped as “victims” to be saved by placing a ban on their work, rather than being organized.

The contributions in this section of the book are concerned with the history of the struggles, the resistance and the organizing of home-based workers. The forms of organizing include subcontracted workers and self-employed workers; the latter are not covered either by the ILO Convention on Home Work or by labour legislations where they exist. Both groups of workers have many shared concerns and others that differ. The struggles of home-based workers have often been—and still are—linked to the development of regulations related to home-based work, with the aim to improve working conditions and wages. Grievances, to a large degree, were—and are—concerned with the lack of implementation of existing regulations. Home-based workers have mobilized themselves many times in protest. They have also organized in trade unions, though trade unions have not always supported their struggles, with home workers not being regarded as being real workers. As providers of cheap labour, they were seen to be posing a threat to workers' movements.

The grievances of home-based workers were brought to the table of international trade union organizations early on, only to be largely ignored. However, over the last forty years and more, home workers have again started to organize themselves, with an important impulse for this coming from the organizing

of self-employed women in the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India from the beginning of the 1970s. As Chris Bonner, who has been a part of this organizing process shows, the growth of home-based work in the world has led to new forms of organizing, often at a regional level, growing from local initiatives, first seen in Asia and spread to Latin-America and Africa, that culminated in the formation of an international network, HomeNet International, launched in February 2021. The new regional organizations, as well as the international network, have come out of collaboration with women unionists in global unions, international trade union confederations and women's organizations. The home-based workers' organizations were mainly led by women and supported by NGOs such as WIEGO (*Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing*), whereas formal unions with the exception of the IUF (International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations) have not been very supportive.

This section seeks to lay out the contextual background for the current struggles being waged by home-based workers all over the world, and to develop an understanding of the specific forms of resistance developed by informal workers. We would like to point to the fact that this is a category of workers brought into the arena of labour history almost exclusively through the works of labour historians in the global South. The essay by Kalpana in this section especially highlights the importance of looking at the struggles of informal workers, and understanding the success and failure of resistance among home workers, by

FIGURE 10.1 May Day Rally organized by the Home Based Women Workers Federation in Pakistan in 2020 during the pandemic with social distancing

focusing on the relationship between citizens and the state in a typical situation marked by the absence of employers.

1 **Cherchez la Femme: A Contribution to Labour History**

The resistance of home workers has not been part of mainstream labour history. One of the reasons for this is that home workers were struggling at two ends: against exploitation by their employers and, in the best cases neglect and in the worst cases, the undermining of the importance of their struggles by traditional workers' organizations. Stories of failing solidarity in the trade union movement are in general not part of early trade union historiography. The reason for this is simple: these histories were written by the trade unions themselves, and served to mobilize and keep up a sense of solidarity among existing members of the organization. Despite acquiring the character of chronicles rather than historical accounts, these early works played an important part by laying the ground for later academic research. They have been used to delineate the contours of the struggles waged by these organizations, thereby reproducing the absence of women.

The history of Jeanne Bouvier, analysed by Maria Tamboukou in her essay, illustrates this very well. Bouvier, who had worked as a home worker in the garment industry in Paris, had enough experience of the exploitation, bad working conditions and precariousness of home-based work to put it on the agenda of trade unions not only in France but also at the international level, at platforms of trade union organizations. However, despite being one of the most famous trade unionists internationally in her time, Bouvier was dropped by her male comrades in France and excluded from the arena of international struggles, as the union denied her access to the necessary resources.

The history of Jeanne Bouvier illustrates how home workers were silenced not only within trade unions, but also in history. These women workers and their struggles remained unrecorded and unrecognized, yet feminist labour historians critically questioned the absence of women workers in labour history and looked at alternate sources, going beyond traditional trade union documents and histories.

These conditions show clear similarities with developments in home work in Italy after the Second World War, as Eloisa Betti shows. This study points to the fact that the history of declining home work in Europe after the War needs to be rewritten. In Italy, home work was the backbone of the Fordist system. Betti shows how Italian home workers, for a long time, were hesitant to make their work public. One of the reasons for this was the same as elsewhere: when

work moved from factories to private homes in order to lower production costs, there were protests by trade unions, for it would be much more difficult to organize workers in their homes. Clearly, it was the important role played by home work during the industrialization process in Italy after the Second World War that enabled home workers, supported by women's organizations, trade unions and political parties, to protest and change legislation in a way that would place them on an equal footing with factory workers.

2 Grievances of Home Workers

What were the main grievances of home workers and how did these change over time?

The primary grievances of home workers, as in the case of other workers, had to do with time and money. At a later stage they increasingly became concerned with the regulation of home work, and then, over time, with the lack of implementation of the existing framework for regulation of their working conditions.

Maria Tamboukou shows in her essay on Jeanne Bouvier how changes in wages were linked to the vicissitudes of insecure incomes in general. Low wages and long working hours were a real problem. Moreover, conditions in the home-centred industry did not follow a teleological development—of progressing towards improved conditions—but in fact became worse by the beginning of the 1900s as compared to the mid-nineteenth century, especially when it came to working hours. In addition to higher wages and the regulation of working hours, Italian home workers demanded the end of informal working conditions, asking for contracts, health and safety-related precautions, formal rules both for employment and termination of employment, and rights such as sick and pregnancy leave. As was the case with the Parisian *lingères*, Italian home workers fought for job and income security, and against precarious working conditions.

The demands concerned issues of workers' dignity, but they were thereby also demands for recognition as workers by the unions and by the state.

3 Strategies of Resistance

The renewed spread of home-based work in the second half of the twentieth century and its continuing growth in the neoliberal era have at the same had a mobilizing effect on the workers. The chapters in this section suggest that it is

resistance and coalition-building that enables these workers to refer to international conventions in advancing their rights and changing their situation.

This section marks an important contribution in the effort to make the longstanding grievances of home-based workers and their history of protests visible. Some of the strategies remained the same even as others were added. The chapters show how home workers organized themselves in their own separate organizations and unions, even as they built alliances or coalitions with women and men from other organizations to highlight their cause.

Home workers have used a range of traditional methods of protest, from spontaneous struggles to organized trade union strikes. These actions served not only to project the demands of home workers in the public domain but also made them visible on the streets. This becomes very clear from the instances of striking Italian home workers. In most cases protesting home workers built alliances, with bourgeois women at the end of the nineteenth century—with female members of the Italian parliament, with membership-based organizations such as Home-net Thailand or WIEGO, and with global unions—to build capacity and greater strength, as Eileen Boris has shown in her chapter on the history of international regulations of home work.

A second important strategy has been the collection of data on the number of home workers, which increased in scale and importance after the Second World War, their wages and working hours, through research and an academic approach. As Tamboukous's chapter focusing on the work of Jeanne Bouvier shows, she drew on data from the mid-nineteenth century to write a history of home work. The international conference on home work held in Brussels in 1910, and the International Office for Industrial Home Work, founded in the process leading up to the conference, illustrate the importance of the approach to measure, analyse and make visible.

4 Outcomes of Resistance

The resistance of home workers has resulted in their recognition as workers both locally and internationally, as many contributions to this volume have shown. Their struggles have also contributed to strengthen the citizens' rights of home workers in negotiations with governments about recognition, and also in relation to social rights. In India, SEWA, for instance, has provided home-based workers with identity cards. Home workers have either managed to be registered as informal workers, like in India, which has improved their status, or they have been recognized as formal workers through the law of 1958 and as factory workers through the law of 1973, like in Italy. In South Africa, home

workers have become part of the bargaining machinery of industrial councils; however little is known about the implementation. Over time, the attitude of trade unions towards home workers has changed, especially at the international level. Whereas SEWA was expelled from The Indian Textile Labour Association (TLA), a member of the ITLGWF (International Textile, Garment and Leather Worker's Federation) at the beginning of the 1980s, by 1994 the wheel had turned full circle, and, together with the ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions), the IUF (International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations) and the ILO, the ITGLWF fully supported an initiative to set up an international network of home workers. Overall, home workers have started to gain a political voice, not least through visibility of the exploitative character of home-based production under neoliberalism. Home-based work is no longer seen as backward but as a convenient form of production for employers. With the spread and growth of this form of work, the resistance that home-based workers have built up over the years has been growing as well. While home-based workers are in the main still not recognized as workers, home workers in supply chains have made some progress towards legal recognition, although implementation remains a problem. The pressure on firms to take responsibility for decent work along supply chains may result in a move to do away with home work altogether.

Finally, this section contributes to giving home workers of the present as well as those from the past a place and a voice in labour history.