Socialist Register 2001: Working Classes: Global Realities
Edited by LEO PANITCH and COLIN LEYS
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The thirty-seventh volume of the Socialist Register takes up the theme of the state of the working class at the beginning of the twenty-first century – and, just for that, it deserves to be warmly welcomed.

The Preface (co-authored by Greg Albo and David Coates as well as Panitch and Leys) locates this collection in the renewed debate about globalised capitalism, a debate brought about by the impact of the global movements of resistance to neoliberalism. This intervention by the Socialist Register starts with the importance of the working class today, picking up on the huge scale of the contemporary global proletariat (2.5 billion according to the World Bank in 1995 – a doubling of numbers since 1975), but also speaks about the different experiences and circumstances of the working classes of the world. The Preface promises to make connections between the tasks of reconstructing the socialist movement and a serious and ‘refreshed’ take on class analysis, facing up to all the problems of speaking about the class being ‘for itself’ after the long period of neoliberal advance and the retreat of both class analysis and the working classes themselves.

The Preface also clearly sets out the intention to address issues and problems around the increased complexity of class issues, partly because of articulations between new and old forms of class structure, perhaps summed up by the development of a ‘cybertariat’ of IT workers alongside the continued existence of ‘peasantries’, but also because of the very complexity of dealing with so many different experiences and structures.

These promises are made in under four pages of the Preface and that makes this Socialist Register an exciting project. It starts in so many of the right places for anyone interested in Marxism, but offers sufficient complexity, especially in dealing with the interaction of multiple forms of diversity, to provide a potentially convincing take on a complicated world. The question is whether the next 390 pages live up to this promise.

The Contents pages suggest a feast – its twenty chapters cover a suitably wide range of topics: individual attention is given to different aspects of the working class in the US (three essays), India (twice), South Africa, Russia, Iran, Brazil, East Asia and
Western Europe. We might have complaints about other examples and experiences not being covered, but this is, of course, unfair to the volume and its editors – they did not set out to provide an encyclopaedia. There is a continuing debate about the relevance of Chiapas and Zapatismo. Other chapters take up more general or theoretical themes – the ‘cybertariat’, issues between North and South, peasiantries, gender and feminist issues. Migration is dealt with in a very specific-looking chapter about Chinese workers in New York, so I had an initial feeling that this crucial area was going to be underrepresented. Finally there is a contribution to the latest debate about the work of Robert Brenner and an editor considers questions of strategy.

The very diversity of the material set against the claims of the Preface produces problems for any reviewer. However, I am going to give each chapter some detailed engagement, as I think that it is worthwhile.

Ursula Huws provides the opening theoretical essay, on ‘The Making of a Cybertariat? Virtual Work in a Real World’. Huws’s framework is the vast question of whether a single global capitalist economy and single global proletariat with a common consciousness is emerging, especially in terms of the wave of new information and communication technologies and associated workforces. Huws gives a brief and illuminating run through of the mostly sociological debates about ‘office work’ and class categories and gender, and the notes provide an excellent introductory guide to the literature. She goes on to discuss a variety of issues and confusions about how to conceptualise IT work and workers in the ‘delocalising’ economy. Her conclusion, although there is a cautious note about the need to know much more, is that there is ‘considerable potential for the emergence of a common class consciousness among information-processing workers, based in a common labour process, common employers and a common relation to capital’ (p. 19). On the other hand, she claims that there are also powerful counter-forces; Huws emphasises racism, but, from her own account, you could add employer strategies. Overall, this is a useful contribution that addresses and even does begin to clear the underbrush of conceptual confusions (as she promised) in an increasingly important area of analysis.

If Huws addresses one of the newest developments in class structure, Henry Bernstein deals with one of the oldest (but not doomed to extinction, in this perspective) in “The Peasantry” in Global Capitalism: Who, Where and Why?’. Bernstein’s starting point is the way that many traditions of Marxism, exemplified here by Eric Hobsbawm in Age of Extremes, have treated the peasantry as a residual, backward and anachronistic class – a social category to be treated as ‘persistent’ in a negative sense, weeds in the garden of clearer and more progressive social forms so to speak –, although the traditions associated with Maoism, or the relationship argued by Teodor Shanin between the late Marx, Narodnism and the Russian peasantry are not explored here. An alternative and, for Bernstein, a clearly superior approach, is to use Marxist categories to investigate the constitution and reproduction of peasiantries through