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Commentary

Declining Labour and Strengthening Capital: an Analysis of the ILO Wage Report and ITUC Rights Index

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Abstract

The *Global Wage Report* and the *Global Rights Index* are published by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Geneva and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) in Brussels. This article analyses the global data and results presented by these publications and explains how they portray the ineluctable deterioration of workers' wages and labour rights within the capitalist mode of production. Capitalism implies a tendency towards the dissolution of labour rights and super-exploitation (with wages closer to and below subsistence level). Trade unions' struggle for labour rights and the improvement of workers' material conditions and wages only makes sense in relation to a struggle against absolute capitalism.

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Even though mainstream media and power-prone intellectuals are constantly declaring that workers and employers are 'in the same boat' when it comes to paying for capitalist failures, the reality is the opposite. This is because labour and capital, like electrical poles, are both complementary and opposing forces. The energy they produce is the result of repulsion.

The fundamental dialectical relationship between workers (labour) and employers (owners of productive capital), in the capitalist production process, sits on the evidence that workers and employers struggle for different and opposing ends: profit for the employers, and wages for workers. Both employers and works look to improve their rights. Employers demand rights to protect profit and wealth, while workers demand rights to protect wages and well-being. From this relationship a struggle arises that benefits capital. Extreme levels of inequality in today's societies are the result of employers and workers serving capital, which has increased while wages have declined.

This is clearly illustrated by two important international labour institutions: the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). The ILO and ITUC are among the few, if not the only, formal international organisations dealing with labour as a fundamental global issue. In 2022, the ILO published the *Global Wage Report 2022–23* (*GWR*), and a year later, the ITUC released its *Global Rights Index* (*GRI*).[1]

Both reports – the last of a long series – conclude that, at a global scale, the situation of labour is not improving, even if the world registers unprecedented levels of economic growth. The ILO's and ITUC's findings are very revealing for those interested in labour studies. However, rather disappointingly, the reports fail to highlight the fundamental labour question, that is, the capital–labour dialectic and their fundamentally problematic relationship. In fact, while the ITUC mainly blames governments for declining rights, the ILO points the finger at the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine for the deterioration

1 ITUC, *2023 ITUC Global Rights Index* (Brussels: ITUC, 2023), https://files.mutualcdn.com/ituc/files/2023_ituc_global_rights_index_en.pdf [As a complement see also the ITUC Survey: https://survey.ituc-csi.org/?lang=es]; ILO, *The Global Wage Report 2022–23: The Impact of COVID-19 and Inflation on Wages and Purchasing Power* (Geneva: ILO, 2022), https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_protect/@protrav/@travail/documents/publication/wcms_862569.pdf.

of wages. There is hardly any mention in the reports of the war that capital and employers conduct daily and globally against workers.

The ILO's *GWR* presents trends in the purchasing power of households and concentrates only on wage workers. The definition of wage workers is a big issue that is not dealt with in the report. It is also unclear whether the report includes the wages of informal workers and whether wage workers are workers employed in other kinds of labour relations – informal and precarious workers representing the vast majority of workers globally.[2] As argued by the global labour history school of the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, wage workers can have other occupations that do not imply the earning of wages as such.[3] There exist in fact hybrid forms of labour relations that make the conceptualisation of wages and wage workers rather complicated. This is why it is always necessary to be as specific as possible when dealing with 'wage labour'. However, the *GWR* departs from the consideration that wages remain the best measurement of the cost of labour, regardless of the nature of employment. The ILO *GWR* is preoccupied with the price of labour and less concerned with the nature of the relationship that exists between the worker and their employer.

The problematic nature of the labour–employer relationship is clearer – but not made explicit – in the ITUC *GRI*. This qualitative index serves as an instrument to monitor the situation of labour rights and workers' organisations around the world. From the ITUC's point of view, the index reveals how trade unions remain important societal actors, and how their role is ever more crucial in contemporary societies. Other studies conducted in rich countries have already revealed how the main factors driving the wage–GDP ratio are trade union density, bargaining power and government spending. The latter also depends on trade union political power.[4] The ILO repeatedly reiterated

2 On labour relations, see the International Institute of Social History, *Taxonomy of Labour Relations*, https://iisg.amsterdam/files/2018-11/Taxonomy%20of%20Labour%20Relations%20%282015%29.pdf.

3 See M. van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008).

4 See A. Guschanski and Ö. Onaran, 'Determinants of the Wage Share: A Cross-Country Comparison Using Sectoral Data', *Greenwich Papers in Political Economy*, 2016, https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Determinants-of-the-wage-share%3A-a-cross-country-Guschanski-Onaran/7c89e1955b793239fc5a40afc49ac0ec6fdddaad; E. Barth, A. Bryson and H. Dale-Olsen, 'Union Density Effects on Productivity and Wages', *The Economic Journal* 130 (631) (2020), 1898–1936; P. Mac Flynn, 'The Impact of Collective Bargaining on Pay in Northern Ireland', *NERI Working Paper Series* 66 (2020); Ö. Onaran et al., 'Working for the Economy: The Economic Case for Trade Unions', *Greenwich Papers in Political Economy* 14101 (2015), https://ideas.repec.org/p/gpe/wpaper/14102.html.

the same concept, that is, how collective bargaining can support wage growth and reduce income inequality.[5]

This article firstly analyses the ITUC labour rights index and the accompanying report as well as the ILO report on wages. Secondly, it seeks to explore whether a causal relationship exists between rights and wages. Thirdly, it discusses what is missing in these reports that could shed light on the global labour question, that is, the analysis of labour productivity and the digital revolution or digital turn.

Deteriorating Labour Rights

The ITUC *GRI* 2023 is clear: three-quarters of the 149 countries indexed violate the most basic workers' rights.[6] The ITUC *GRI* index surveys and places countries into five categories. The worst scores are from 3 to 5+ (see Table 1). However, it is worth noting that in top countries, categories 1 and 2 where the labour rights situation is more positive, workers' rights violations still occur.

From a tripartite point of view – workers, employers, governments – deteriorating labour rights mean that two parties, employers and governments, are allied against the other, the workers. This is simply because the state is called on to protect rights by passing and enforcing labour legislation. In other words, the ITUC *GRI* signals a dangerous imbalance in the equilibrium of power

TABLE 1 ITUC Global Rights Index, country classifications

5+	No guarantee of rights due to the breakdown of the rule of law
5	No guarantee of rights
4	Systematic violations of rights
3	Regular violations of rights
2	Repeated violations of rights
1	Sporadic violations of rights

SOURCE: ITUC *GRI*, P. 15

5 See Q. Mathys, *Beyond the Numbers: Exploring the Relationship between Collective Bargaining Coverage and Inequality* (Geneva: ILOSTAT, 2023), https://ilostat.ilo.org/beyond-the-numbers-exploring-the-relationship-between-collective-bargaining-coverage-and-inequality/.

6 ITUC, *Global Rights Index*, 10–11.

between the three elements that constitute the modern governance of labour – employers, workers, state – at least according to the reformist approach to industrial relations. Such an unbalanced equilibrium of forces seems to be a generalised phenomenon, which includes countries that fall in the best *GRI* categories, in which freedom, rights and collective bargaining are the most protected.[7] The alignment of the state with capital (the employers) inevitably undermines the tripartite approach that governed industrial relations for a century or more.

The ITUC *GRI* lists practices that damage labour rights. These range from direct attacks on trade unions – imprisonment, beatings, breaking strikes and so forth – to more subtle forms of attack – for example, mobbing, dismissal, threats. Countries with a problematic situation in terms of rule of law tend to have higher scores on rights violations. There also exist more 'creative' ways to reduce labour rights and weaken workers. One is free trade agreements. In the United States, almost 700,000 high-paying and unionised jobs in the manufacturing sector moved to Mexico as a direct result of the introduction of the North American Free Trade Agreement.[8] The reduction of rights via a bypassing legislation involving delocalisation contributes massively to the deterioration of labour rights. Free trade agreements as an instrument of labour rights deterioration has been insufficiently studied and debated. The broad support granted by international and regional trade union organisations to free trade agreements demonstrates how oblivious workers' organisation are vis-à-vis this issue. The transfer of production from places with high labour rights standards and high trade union density to places lacking these features can occur with delocalisation of production as well as with free trade.

The current academic debate on trade unions divides scholars and practitioners into two camps: the declinists and the revivalists. Trade union support for free trade, even in the absence of or with minimal labour provision, is one argument that favours the declinist camp.

More obvious observations are present in the ITUC *GRI*. The report points out that in countries devastated by war – Libya, Afghanistan, Syria and so forth – workers' rights are said to be non-existent. These are wars fomented by the Western powers with the highest concentration of capital. In military dictatorships, such as for example Myanmar, the government tends to side solely with investors, and this also results in the repression of labour rights to cheapen and control labour. The dependence on capital (foreign direct

7 ITUC, *Global Rights Index*, 26.
8 J. Hickel, *The Divide* (London: Windmill Books, 2018), 137–8, 206.

investment, FDI) therefore results in the state absolving itself from protecting workers in order to protect investments and profit.[9]

An interesting case study is China (rated 5 = 'no guarantee of rights'), where the distinction between public and private in the economy is unclear to say the least. According to the ITUC *GRI*, China's labour rights violation ranking is high because workers in China have no or restricted access to justice. However, how is it possible that in a country which such a negative record, real wages increased and living conditions improved for hundreds of millions of people? No answers to this question are given.

For the ITUC, labour rights, and their quality, are based on legal provisions passed by the state. Since the state is increasingly not a neutral arbiter, the struggle between labour and capital becomes clearer. The enforcement of laws to the detriment of labour rights is a general historical trend. The difference between liberal democracies and non-democracies becomes thinner. The problem in the liberal-democratic world is that a hegemonic anti-labour discourse is put forward by mass media – traditional and digital alike – which are controlled by private corporations. Freedom of information becomes the freedom of capital to acquire the major means of circulation of such information. The only limits are put on the state and politics, to stay away from mass media assets. An example of this is the European Media Freedom Act (2024), which regulates political interference in public media but does not deal with capital interference. The risk is that this conceptualisation of freedom becomes labour unfreedom.

Labour rights depend on the role of the judiciary system in the state apparatus. The weight of judicial power – in relation to executive and legislative power – determines the rule of labour law and labour rights in a given country. Judicial power is stronger in those countries where the executive power (the power to repress) is under control. The United States and the United Kingdom are ranked as systematic violators of labour rights precisely because in these countries the executive power is preponderant.[10] In contrast, the situation is considerably better in Northern Europe – with the exception of Belgium – where judicial systems are more independent and more advanced.

The ITUC report also highlights that in the last decade there has been a steady increase in direct and indirect attacks on workers' rights. This is evident across economic and geographical regions.[11] The ten-year trend indicates that the number of countries with high scores on violations (3 and above) is

9 ITUC, *Global Rights Index*, 16.
10 ITUC, *Global Rights Index*, 16.
11 ITUC, *Global Rights Index*, 8.

increasing while the number of countries with low scores on violations (1 and 2) is decreasing. A colour-coded world map is presented that visualises this situation and the existing divide between Global South and Global North.[12] This is a worrying trend, and regions such as the Middle East and North Africa, and Asia and the Pacific, are most affected.[13] An example of the dreadful situation is a 2022 strike by a large number of workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh, demanding higher wages in response to increased inflation. The strike lasted four days. Strikers were arrested and violently attacked by the police. The Prime Minister, far from criticising the police, accused the workers of wanting 'to topple our government'.[14] This type of state-capital anti-labour relationship is omni-present.

A question remains: if workers' rights are respected and workers have the freedom to organise, negotiate and advocate for fair wages, does this mean that labour productivity improves and therefore wages increase? Is super-exploitation – low labour rights and high profits – what determines low wages? What is the role of trade unions in all this?

Declining Wages

As noted already, another problem for workers globally is the steady decline in real wages. The *GWR* report found that in the first half of 2022, real wages fell worldwide by 0.9 per cent and within G20 countries by 2.2 per cent. These are indeed dramatic numbers.

The trend can be identified by comparison with previous ILO reports, even though there are differences between regions, countries and social groups. For example, those earning low wages tend to be more affected by the decline. Next to real wages decreasing, low wage earners suffer from the highest levels of job loss. Interestingly, China registered an increase in real wages; for this reason, the country is often kept out of the ILO *GWR* computations in order not to spoil the global results, especially in relation of middle income countries.

Significantly, the ILO report's sub-title is *The Impact of COVID-19 and Inflation on Wages and Purchasing Power*. The report in fact points the finger not at the relationship between capital (employers) and labour (workers), but at the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

12 ITUC, *Global Rights Index*, 15.
13 ITUC, *Global Rights Index*, 15.
14 ITUC, *Global Rights Index*, 29.

In explaining these negative (for workers) trends, the ILO focuses largely on factors exogenous to the world of labour and industrial relations. The ILO report attributes high inflation to 'global shocks' such as supply bottlenecks during COVID-19, the effect of stimulus packages adopted during the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The ILO held the pandemic and the war responsible for the cost-of-living crisis. However, more could have been said about the fact that wage workers – especially those with low wages – paid relatively more than high earners for the global health crisis. This is the nature of every inflationary crisis in capitalist societies.

If inflation means a generalised pricing increase, it also implies that someone loses, and someone else gains. Like the wind that is generated by differences in high and low atmospheric pressure, money moves according to social power relations. The problem of the global decline in wages cannot be attributed to the inflationary burst caused by the pandemic, because wage decline is a decades-long trend.[15]

According to Oxfam, inflation in the US, EU and Australia has largely been driven by corporate price profiteering and has outpaced wage rises for over 1.7 billion workers worldwide. Oxfam has dubbed the impact of inflation a 'cost-of-profit crisis'.[16] Similarly, the ITUC argues that global shocks have provided a smokescreen for companies to obscure the greed for profit that underpins price hikes. Inflation cannot be understood in isolation from what happens in society. Indeed, it is the result of a power struggle; this is the same struggle between labour and capital that is key to understanding the fall in real wages as well as declining labour conditions and rights.

Finally, the ILO *GWR* shows that there is a strong correlation between absolute levels of pay and geography, with some disadvantaged regions bearing the cost of global capitalist crisis. Africa has the lowest wages in the world in absolute terms, and it is on this continent that a sharp fall in real wages is registered: -10.5 per cent in 2020, -1.4 per cent in 2021 and -0.5 per cent in the first half of 2022.[17] These trends depend on the 'quality' of labour more than labour rights violations – in this respect Africa is no worse than Asia or the Americas. This means the core problem is labour productivity. The unavailability of skilled jobs – both on the supply and on the demand side – and high unemployment are typical indicators of economies with low labour

15 ILO, *Global Wage Report*, 12.

16 M. Christensen et al., *Survival of the Richest: How We Must Tax the Super-Rich Now to Fight Inequality* (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2023), https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621477/bp-survival-of-the-richest-160123-en.pdf.

17 ILO, *Global Wage Report*, 12.

productivity. Unskilled workers' wages tend to be more rigidly connected to shocks than those of skilled workers. Since low labour productivity is still a crude reality in many African societies, it is possible to understand why African workers pay more for the global capitalist crisis in terms of declining wages. This is of course the result of a long historical process.

What Is the Relationship of Labour Rights with Wages?

Although China ranks poorly in terms of labour rights, Chinese workers have experienced elevated levels of real wages, since the cost of living and inflation are kept artificially low. Therefore, the resulting purchase power of Chinese workers is higher than in other countries with comparable levels of per capita income. The ITUC *GRI* rates China as a 5 (the next-to-lowest rating), while the ILO reports that Chinese real wages grew consistently for 20 years.[18] Turkey, one of the 'ten worst countries for working people' according to the ITUC, had in 2022 the second-highest minimum wage corrected for purchasing power parity, slightly lower than Switzerland and above Iceland, according to data provided by ILOSTAT.

Wages and labour rights are both crucial factors in contemporary societies. Qualifying and measuring the existing relationship between these two variables therefore becomes socially important. For example, to continue with the Chinese and Turkish examples, significant differences emerge between these countries. Both China and Turkey are ranked high for labour rights violations. However, Turkish workers continuously struggle not only to hold on to their rights but also to meet their basic needs. In Turkey wages are stagnating while inflation is rampant. In contrast, workers in China experience higher living conditions, thanks to growing wages amid low inflation.

Is the lowering of wages the result of deteriorating labour rights? Is respect for labour rights a precondition for higher wages? The above-mentioned examples, although extreme case studies, demonstrate how difficult it is to establish a fixed correlation. Among those who insist that a correlation exists between rights and labour are, on the one hand, liberal scholars who maintain that labour rights exist in high wage societies, and vice versa; and, on the other hand, conservative free-marketers who claim that high levels of labour rights protection might result in wage moderation.

It is worth remembering that wage is not simply the price decided by demand and supply. In *Capital*, Marx argues that the value of labour power is

18 ITUC, *Global Rights Index*, 12.

determined by two factors: one is the necessary costs of reproduction – what the worker needs to be able to live and come to work the next day; the second part, which stands in contradiction to other commodities, is a 'historical and moral element'. What is the historical and moral element? Wages depend on historical processes of class struggle, on consumption habits, and on the levels of comfort to which the working class is accustomed. These elements produce the distribution of the social product. Wages therefore reflect the strength of a class in relation to the other. According to this view, while labour rights and trade union freedom are important elements of the working class struggle, there is hardly a correlation between wages and rights. What is essential for understanding how wages are set is to understand the relation of force or the balance of power in society.

The ILO and ITUC reports clearly illustrate the differences between the regions of the world. This means that what is known as the international division of labour has led to a divided world, and a country's position in the global hierarchy is determined also by the condition of labour. The largest regional categories are those of the so-called Global North and Global South. In general, the Global North experiences higher wages and better protection of rights. Workers in the Global South, on the contrary, are less protected and earn lower wages. This is a generalisation, and generalisations are often simplistic and incorrect. As noted earlier, China offers a clear example of this.[19] Again, in the United States, higher wages exist amid low levels of labour rights protection, and the contrary is true in countries such as Ghana and Malawi, which score relatively well in the ITUC *GRI*.

Finally, while the ITUC *GRI* provides interesting insights on the role of trade unionism worldwide, the ILO *GWR* does not mention the role of labour organisations in wage determination. The diverse nature of these international organisations may be the reason for this difference. The ITUC represents trade unions, while for the ILO trade unions are only one element of a tripartite structure that includes employers and governments.

Missing Factors: Labour Productivity and Absolute Capitalism

It is interesting to note that wages have declined in Europe and the United States, where high scores of labour productivity are registered. Western Europe consistently receives the best (albeit worsening) scores on labour rights. Furthermore, Western Europe has shown some impressive reductions in the

19 ILO, *Global Wage Report*, 37.

share of wages of the gross domestic product and an increasing gap between labour productivity and real wage growth.[20]

After the Global North lost some of the industries that constituted the backbone of the tripartite consensus, Daniel Bell coined the term 'post-industrial society' to describe economies based primarily on services. Service sectors range from low-skilled jobs (cleaning and logistical) to high-skilled and highly paid business work. At the same time, parts of the Global South – led by China – experienced industrialisation and increased labour productivity. However, the developmental agendas of these newly industrialising countries did not include liberal-democratic rules based on tripartism and collective bargaining. Today's global division of labour is rooted in these processes. Capital investors are now free to exploit service economies of the Global North as well as industrial production of the Global South. Capital exerts pressure on labour in both areas to increase productivity and maximise profit. This has produced massive inequality and wealth concentration, measured by the global wage decline reported in the ILO *GWR*. Furthermore, although large swathes of the global population escaped poverty via industrialisation,[21] most parts of the Global South remain non-industrialised and have low labour productivity. This system has produced the oxymoron of an opulent and unequal global society.

Today's capitalist production combines traditional forms of exploitation with the most technologically advanced forms. Capitalist technological developments produced an innovative reorganisation of labour exploitation, called digital capitalism, techno-capitalism or surveillance capitalism. Costanzo Preve coined the term 'absolute capitalism' to describe the immanence of capitalism.[22] Absolute capitalism pushes towards labour super-exploitation or something close to absolute surplus value (the condition of the slave).[23] The ITUC calls upon trade unions to resist and push against violations of rights based on ruthless control systems imposed on workers (electronic bracelets, badges, points systems, etc.) and on increasing competition through the use of algorithms.

20 ILO, *Global Wage Report*, 40–50.

21 As Milanovic illustrated in his famous 'elephant graph'; see B. Milanovic, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 11.

22 See C. Preve, *Il nemico principale*, ed. Alessandro Monchietto (Rome: Inschibboleth Edizioni, 2021).

23 The concept of 'super-exploitation' has existed as long as the idea of labour exploitation. However, Ruy Mauro Marini (1932–1997) popularised the concept with regard to Latin America and within the dependency theory movement. Recently this work was republished as R. M. Marini, *The Dialectics of Dependency* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022).

Labour organisations, such as trade unions, are still the only human institutions that can help mitigate the radical changes occurring in the workplace. But time and space have also changed radically. In the last 20 years, a new capitalist oligarchy has come into existence. FAANG companies move with exceptional speed, unmatched by the operational slowness of trade unions and society.[24] However, trade unions function as reconstituting elements for workers. They are antidotes to individualisation, disintegration and fragmentation of the working class. In their reports, the ILO and the ITUC fail to highlight these aspects.

Concluding Remarks

The ILO report and the ITUC index are extremely important periodical publications for workers, administrators and analysts. Both portray a generally negative picture of labour. Many workers do not earn enough to sustain a decent standard of living for themselves and their families. Systematic attacks on workers and trade unions are a constant. The ITUC index and the ILO report dent the hegemonic idea of a converging or common interest between workers and employers. The reality is that employers and workers do not have and cannot have the same interests. Globally, they do not even have the same bargaining power. This is because governments are abdicating their role as mediator between labour and capital, siding increasingly with capital and employers.

Trade unions play and must continue to play a crucial role. Trade unions, reformist or radical, are a product of class struggle, not vice versa. The recognition and realisation that a class struggle is ongoing, globally, is the point of departure for any pro-workers policy. Any policy and any struggle aiming at reversing the balance of power in favour of labour must depart from this consideration, from the fact that the interests of labour and capital run in opposite directions. The ITUC and the ILO, drawing from their own studies, ought to revise their positions.

In today's world, people live longer, have more amenities and are more educated. However, the quest for social justice that the ILO and ITUC promote for workers cannot rest on these premises, because the world has never been more unequal than it is today. If wages continue to decrease and labour rights continue to deteriorate, it may once again be possible to state that capitalism

24 The FAANG acronym refers to prominent American technology companies: Facebook (now Meta), Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google (now Alphabet).

is contrary to social justice, and fighting social injustice means fighting capitalism.

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