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**Workshop 14**

***Workers' Struggles and Nationalist Movements in the Arab World, 1900-present***

**directed by**

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***Workshop abstract***

Workers' movements present a problematic when considered internationally, as their context has been defined by national liberation in the Middle East and across North Africa. When workers carried out strikes in colonized areas, sustained agitation against the managers of the enterprises that hired them meant indigenous workers' struggles for better wages, safer working conditions, and more secure contracts were seldom simply for their own well-being. Migrant workers' protests also fueled larger national liberation movements by defining inclusive national communities and articulating progressive directions for such communities.

So how do we assess the significance of the strikes that took place outside what have now become postcolonial states? Calling for acknowledgement of the colonial-era split (both in the theoretical realm of law and the practical realm of political institutions) between metropolitan and indigenous workers, and recognizing that the movement's history exceeds both institutional histories of labor unions and political parties, this workshop addresses labor and affiliated issues both in a comparative framework and transnationally.

Since transfers of populations--whether for labor, military service, settlement, or in response to induced environmental disasters--characterized colonialism, many Arabs from colonized parts of West Asia and North Africa worked as émigrés in the various *métropoles*. We propose to address the link between labor and national liberation bridging across the national histories that have fragmented common aspects of modern Arab experience. Furthermore, we seek to address labor and nation with the inclusiveness of new social movements, since workers developed strategic alliances with other

organizations and political interests (whether miners from Algeria, dock workers in Aden, or Palestinian factory workers) to strengthen and broaden collective consciousness across gender and class.

### *Workshop description*

It is well established that labor agitation contributed to national liberation movements across the Arab Middle East, from the North African *maghreb* to the Mesopotamian *mashreq*. A strong consensus has emerged among scholars that workers' agitation played a significant role in Nile Valley national movements. Cigarette workers', tramway conductors', and students' strikes were part of the effort to legitimize trade unions in particular and the national struggle in general. Even the poetry of Egypt's working class supported national liberation (Badran 1995, Beinín and Lochman 1987, Beinín 1990, 1994, Goldberg 1986, 1992, 1996, Lockman 1988, 1994).

Arab migrant workers' organization has not yet received the attention it deserves, neglecting the internationalism of workers' rights struggles in favor of the nationalist aspects. Algeria is a prime example (see also Lockman 1996). During the period of French colonialism, millions left North Africa for the Hexagon, whether conscripted for military service or recruited as workers in the construction industry and employment on public works, or as an attempt to better their lives by taking jobs in factories and mines. Some scholars have identified preliminary roots for the Algerian national liberation movement to agitation among workers living in the industrial suburbs outside Paris (Bourouiba 1998, Der Thaim 1993, Haddour 2000, Henry 1955, Laroque 1956, Simon 2002, Stovall and Van den Abbeele, 2003).

We recognize the historiographic challenges present in such a transnational direction of inquiry. Workers' struggles remain outside the dominant narratives of nationalist historiography, which tend to exalt individual leaders to the detriment of the collective. While the nation-state protects institutionalized locations for workers' struggles (such as labor unions, syndicates, and political parties) and their administrative records, archives and publications, transnational groups' contributions to this common struggle are not so well documented. We invite discussions of current labor struggles as well.

Postwar economic decline and partition of the *sham* into separate League of Nations mandates marked a rise in Syrians labor migration. Many moved overseas, where they were hired into factories of the US automobile industry. Arab labor history has not responded to their contributions with the attention they merit (Abu-Laban and Zeadey 1975, Cooke 1996, Gualtieri 2001, 2004, Himadeh 1936, Hourani 1946, Khouri 1987, Longrigg 1958, Maktabi 1999, Thompson 2000).

So, too, did Yemeni migrant laborers' agitation strengthen the national liberation struggle in their homeland. While Aden was still a Crown Colony, migrant workers (most from the Yemen) carried out a series of dramatic and crippling strikes in protest of wages paid by the Port Trust. The predominantly homeless porters who unloaded the Empire's ships demonstrated their ability to organize. In the face of their success, British administrators created a Department of Labor and Welfare in order to limit dockworkers' demands. In spite of the authorities best efforts, the workers established thirty unions and three employees' organizations. Later, laboring experience in Aden

would prove formative for Yemeni nationalists (Chaudhry 1997, Douglas 1987, Halliday 1984, Mawby 2005).

Even following establishment of the Palestinian National Authority, Palestinian workers find their wages and working conditions governed by the labor codes of the five states of the *sham*. A combination of Jordanian law and PNA decisions are in effect in the West Bank and Gaza, while Jerusalem residents are subject to Israeli labor law. Under such circumstances, working Palestinians are subject to legal vulnerabilities similar to those of migrant laborers. In Gaza and the West Bank, trade unions continued to coordinate with grassroots organizations, women's committees and professional organizations since 1948 (Abed 1990, Hiltermann 1990, Gluck 1995, Lesch 1990, Lockman and Beinun 1988, Robinson 1993, Swedenburg 1995).

In Iraq, an outlawed Communist Party and trade unions articulated workers' and other citizens' needs for economic development and national independence. While considerable disparities were evident among various directions that characterized the emerging middle and lower middle classes' thinking and social consciousness, common opposition to the British-sponsored monarchy granted all a certain degree of cohesion (Batatu 1978, Farouk Sluglett 1993, Fernea and Lewis 1991, Gabbay 1978, Al-Hizb al-Shuyu' Al-'Iraqi 2001, Al-Khurasan 1993, Sibahi 2002, Zuhur 2006). At present, Iraqis live and work under military occupation. Coalition Provisional Authority Order No. 1 (of 16 May 2003) disestablishes the Ba'th party by eliminating the parties' structures including the general Federation of Trade Unions and the General Federation of Iraqi Women. Without legal or institutional protections over their rights, Iraqi workers have been left as vulnerable as migrants in the borders of their own country (Amnesty International 2003, Salucci and Arnove 2004).

We propose to address the struggle of workers and migrant workers as more than simply a search for an improvement in individual conditions under colonialism, but as contributing toward the understanding of postcolonial communities political viability (see Kitroeff 1980, Lavie and Swedenberg 1996, Vitalis 2007). We feel that the conversations across disciplines (in both English and French) will enrich our individual contributions, as well as yield fertile directions for future inquiry. Recognizing the limitations present in strictly historical approaches, we call for a cross-disciplinary approach informed by anthropological, economic, legal, literary, political, and sociological perspectives.

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