Jörg Nowak, joerg.nowak@gmx.de

Post-doc Research Fellow at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

A state-theoretical approach to the current limitations of transnational solidarity: The mass strikes after 2008 in India, Brazil and South Africa

The years after 2008 saw the most militant labour struggles since two decades in India (struggle at Maruti Suzuki plant 2011/12), Brazil (strikes in the construction sector) and South Africa (miners strike 2012). These mass strikes shared a lot of features in spite of the impact of national path dependencies. But transnational solidarity did not emerge either between the actors of the mass strikes itself nor between the actors of the mass strikes and other trade unions or workers. Although, for example, the labour unrest in the Indian Maruti Suzuki company in July 18, 2012, happened just a few weeks ahead of the strikes and the massacre at the Karee mine in Rustenburg in early August 2012, there was no exchange or mutual reference between the activists involved in the mass strikes. But, on the other side, the workers at the Maruti Suzuki Manesar plant compared their occupation of the factory in June 2011 with the Occupy Wall Street Movement that emerged in the same month and that they saw on TV during their own occupation. The decisive support of these (to a large extent successful) mass strikes from outside of the workplaces did not consist in transnational labour solidarity, but rather came from the local, regional or national level.

So, how can the non-contemporaneity of common global causes and common forms of struggles on the one hand, and the largely national political arena of these struggles on the other hand be explained? I propose to extend Beverly Silver´s approach that explains labour unrest with reference to power resources, product cycles and spatial, financial and technological fixes. A state-theoretical approach inspired by the works of Nicos Poulantzas and Bob Jessop can provide for explanations to the largely successful containment of labour struggles to the national terrain. While the organization of the economy and political regimes are dominated by transnational strategies, the reproduction of political legitimacy is still confined to the national level, as is most of labour law. This spatial separation of labour mobilization disables the rather strong workplace bargaining power that is given with global production networks. Although the main trade unions of the BRIC states start to hold common meetings and define common frameworks, these efforts do not translate into effective transnational solidarity of the respective trade union bodies in the case of major labour unrest and labour repression. How can more immediate channels of communication translate the synchronicity of struggles into effective solidarity?