

How to achieve Decent Work?

by Ben Selwyn

The question of Decent Work (DW) – employment under conditions of freedom, equity, security and dignity – is, fundamentally, a question of human development. The Decent Work Agenda (DWA) has become part of the Millennium Development Goals, many of the world's governments have signed its core conventions, and international institutions have incorporated the DWA into their development discourses. Despite these achievements the possibilities of achieving Really Decent Work (RDW) for the world's labouring class appears distant. There are several reasons for this, but one is the limited and conservative nature of the DWA and the ILO's conceptual inability to link RDW to broader processes of human development. DW's conceptual weakness stems from its authors' inability to see beyond labour's subordinate relation to states and capital. DW does not generate a vision of a fundamentally different world, but an ameliorated version of the present. This accommodation to the present leads to a deep theoretical and conceptual weakness at the heart of the DW concept, so much so that it undermines its own immediate objectives. Put differently, the ILO's efforts to promote DW are valuable, but their inability to adopt theoretical categories that explain reasons for indecent work undermine their objective and hamstring the efforts of labouring classes as they attempt to ameliorate their conditions.

This contribution focuses on three weaknesses of DW – the ILO's inability to enforce its norms and the dangers of co-option of the DW agenda by elite institutions, the ILO's inability to properly explain reasons for indecent work, and, most fundamentally, its weak conception of class relations under capitalism. The remainder of the contribution uses Better Factories Cambodia as a case study to support the above critique, and then concludes by explicating an alternative agenda for RDW.

Weak Enforcement and Vulnerability to Elite Co-option

The first, dual, weakness is the danger of DW's co-option by elite institutions and the ILO's inability to enforce its norms. There has been a convergence between the ILO and World Bank recently. In its 2013 World Development Report (World Bank: 2012), entitled 'Jobs', the Bank suggests that job creation is a developmental policy, that employment protection legislation and minimum wages contribute to reducing income inequality, that higher trade union densities reduce wage inequality, and that voluntary labour standards are insufficient to protect and enhance the quality of jobs in an economy. The report does not, however, discuss strategies of trade union mobilisation, and discounts the effects of trade unions on poverty reduction. Similarly, the ILO does not conceive of workers' struggles as either de-

velopmental or capable of advancing the implementation of DW. The ILO's inability to enforce DW enables elite actor co-optation of its principles as strategies of brand image enhancement, whilst negating the ameliorations campaigned for by the ILO.

Inability to Explain Causes of Decent Work

The Decent Work Agenda is relatively devoid of analyses of the causes of indecent work and processes contributing to its amelioration. It is assumed that combinations of incorrect policy choices and inappropriate micro-institutional arrangements are the cause of bad work. For example, Frank Hoffer (2011) argues that 'the violation of workers' rights does not result in better trade performance'. Patently, this is not the case. Contemporary China offers the prime example of rapid economic growth based upon intense labour exploitation and denial of basic workers' rights.

Weak Conception of Class Relations Under Capitalism

The most fundamental problem in the DWA, is its weak conceptualisation of class relations and its inability to identify the systemic processes of exploitation characteristic of capitalism. This problem derives from its assumption that given the right institutional context, capital does not exploit labour. To cite Hoffer (2011) again, 'markets need to be governed: otherwise they govern us'. Similarly, as DW's 'founder' Juan Somavia (2010) suggests, it is not capitalism per se, rather its particular neoliberal variant that is at fault. The arguments here are that it is the nature of the governance of markets, rather than their intrinsic properties, that is the target for DW advocates.

Better Factories Cambodia and the Limits of the Decent Work Agenda

As a consequence of these three weaknesses, there is often a gulf between the adoption of DW principles and their practice. The example of Cambodia is instructive here.¹ In 1999 the governments of Cambodia and the United States signed a three-year, quota-based trade agreement covering textiles and apparel exports, on the basis of improvements to Cambodian workers' conditions. Miller (2009: 14) notes that the resultant Better Factories Cambodia project 'is arguably the most comprehensive and systematic monitoring effort governing any national garment supply base in the world'. Payment of wages became regularised across much of the sector, exports boomed, and employment rose to around 265,000 by the mid-2000s.

Despite these successes, Miller notes that other much-needed ameliorations to workers' pay and conditions, such as freedom of association, collective bargaining and reduction in excessive working hours, remain distant hopes, with numerous cases of unfair dismissal of workers and harassment of shop stewards, leading to widespread discontent, manifested in strikes, across the sector. He also notes how, despite not being part of the ILO's objectives in the Better Factories Cambodia project, the demand for a living wage lay at the heart of many of the strikes. This is because '[i]n an economy where the monthly living wage is estimated at US\$82, garment workers earned an average wage equivalent to US\$65 per month in 2005, including overtime and bonuses' (ibid: 22). Workers' productivity (or the rate of exploitation) has increased across the sector as it has expanded. The Better Factories Cambodia experience reflects firms' willingness to use Decent Work and Corporate Social Responsibility-style arrangements as reputational brands to enhance their global market penetration, whilst intensifying their fundamentally exploitative labour practices.

Really Decent Work

An alternative conception of RDW would start from an analysis of the capitalist labour process. Because firms relate to each other through constant competition, the labour process is characterised by an endless productivity drive designed to maximise the speed and intensity of the performance of tasks. Capital continually reorganises 'a system of power relations... to define and enforce the discipline of the labour process' (Brighton Labour Process Group, 1977: 13). These social relations explain why capital will seek to reduce to a minimum, if not eliminate altogether, activities by labour that might limit its profits. In late developing countries firms need to intensify further the labour process if they are to achieve international competitiveness. The global spread of capitalist social relations has led to the incorporation of billions of workers into global production networks, based on poverty and near-poverty wages.

How then, is RDW to be achieved? The enhancement of democracy, establishment of the welfare state and rolling out of workers' rights in post-war Europe was a result, not of an elite pact around conceptions of decent work, but of the ruling class's fear of mass struggle from below: "If you don't give the people social *reform*, they will give you social *revolution*," the future Lord Hailsham told the UK's parliament in 1943.

Mass class struggles in Brazil, South Africa and South Korea in the late 1970s and early 1980s led to the (re)introduction of democracy in these countries, and significant improvements (for a while at least) of workers conditions. Similarly, fear of rebellion and/or struggles from below are the sources of real enhancement to workers' livelihoods under contemporary global capitalism – from the widespread strikes in China that are slowly pushing up wages and gaining small increases in worker representation within the state-run All China Federation of Trade Unions, to the struggles by workers in Brazilian export agricul-

ture (Selwyn: 2012). Class struggle - by firms from above (to deny RDW) and by workers from below (to achieve it) - is the key conceptual ingredient that DW advocates (purposefully?) exclude from their description of contemporary global labour dynamics.

For RDW to be achieved, the concept needs to be reformulated through an analysis of the intrinsically exploitative capitalist production process, and rooted in a conception of labour-centred class struggle from below. By analytically prioritising institutional arrangements between states, capital, and itself, over workers' self-activity, the ILO and advocates of Decent Work contribute to demobilising the very actors that can bring about the kinds of improvement they wish to see. An alternative approach is to analytically prioritise workers' attempts to ameliorate their conditions and to understand that institutional arrangements between capital, labour and the state are, in part at least, outcomes of these struggles from below. Labour movements need a short, medium, and long-term conception of the struggle for RDW. In the short term, immediate struggles for pay and conditions need to be supported (by organisations such as the ILO) and won. In the medium term, trade unions and labour organisations need to transform themselves into movements capable of formulating and forcing implementation of a human development agenda, nationally and internationally, that incorporates DW principles. In the long term, labouring class organisations need to think of themselves as primary movers in human development, principally through the struggle to expand democracy into the economic sphere and to determine the conditions under which the production, distribution and consumption of wealth occurs.

¹ See also the excellent work by Dennis Arnold on this subject, e.g. Arnold (2013).

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