

Construction Workers and Mega-event ‘Development’

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Introduction

The growth of cities in recent decades and the accompanying increases in poverty and inequality have pushed scholars, anti-poverty activists, environmentalists and policy makers to focus on the issue of urban development. As early as 1996, UN Habitat declared that, “urban poverty and its attendant human cost is perhaps the single greatest challenge of our time”.¹ Estimates vary, but what is undeniable is that virtually all population growth in the coming decades will be in urban areas, mostly in the cities of the global South. Despite the massive of growth on many cities over recent decades, relatively little attention is given to those behind it: construction workers. The changes in cities is the result of a deeper change, as formerly rural workers migrate to cities in search of work. Their exploited labour constitutes the foundation of world class cities and aspiring world class cities.

The new wave of urbanization is occurring at the same time as many cities are being drawn more tightly into transnational economic, cultural and political networks. For numerous scholars, this process is best summarized as the ascendance of a market-driven or neoliberal approach to urban governance that is global in scope. One important aspect of this transition is that individual cities become more divided internally while cities collectively become more homogenous. For example, the neoliberal city has been linked to increased inequality and spatial fragmentation, while at the same time the new built environments associated with it show a stunning similarity across what are otherwise quite different national and regional zones. In general, the more central the city is to transnational networks, the more advanced this process.

The goal of this paper is to discuss some of the conditions facing workers in three major cities, each preparing for a major event, or what urban researcher call mega-events, in 2010: the World Cup in Cape Town, the World Expo in Shanghai and the Commonwealth Games in New Delhi. The reason for this focus is that each event is described by proponents as being developmental in nature, but a type of development which gives priority to downtown areas, affluent residents, and international tourists. The promise this approach to development carries with it is that, as wealth increases (through investment, for example) development for all will follow. While existing research shows that rarely, if ever at all, do these events generate genuine development, little attention has been paid to what happens in preparation for them. Looking at the situation of construction workers, however, will give us important insight into these events, which are increasingly sought after by urban elites in the global South, and their relationship to development.

My primary focus here is on the latter two cities, which are perhaps less familiar to conference attendees. After describing some of the conditions facing workers in the cities, I conclude with some thoughts on how to confront future “development” projects

that fail not only to significantly improve the lives of workers and their families but also to generate genuine urban development.

The events and their impact on workers

Cape Town

The World Cup, the second largest sporting event in the world after the Olympics, is expected to bring upwards of 450,000 foreign visitors to South Africa. Understandably, the strike by construction workers in Cape Town and around the country in July 2009 made headlines around the world. Much of the coverage missed the significance of the strike by focusing on the threat the labour action posed to successfully hosting the event and by continuing to tie it to the nation and even the continent's reputation.² The real significance of the strike, however, had nothing to do with sport and much to do with labor activism and elite responses to it in the neoliberal age. While Cup proponents inside and outside the country worked diligently to keep the focus on the sporting aspect of the event, the strike revealed that the massive spending (and profit) associated with the event is part of a continued redistribution of wealth upwards across South African cities and beyond. While Fifa, has already earned \$3.4bn in commercial revenue from 2010, the more than 2,100 workers at Cape Town's stadium earn an average wage of R2500/month, well below the subsistence wage of R4000.³ In addition to the very real gains won by labour, the strike also posed a challenge to claims that the success of 2010 is more important to the future of the average South African resident than a vibrant labour movement.

The strike's wider significance is linked to the economic, social, and political dimensions of hosting these types of events. It is difficult to ignore the massive amount of money the country is spending on the event, and the steady increase in projected cost over the years. In fact the original estimate in 2004 was that 2010 would cost approximately R3bn, but that has since increased to R15bn according to officials themselves.⁴ The final cost of the Cape Town stadium alone, the largest expenditure for the city, will be R4.4bn, four times the original estimate and a 2006 "maximum" estimate of R4.1bn, and R1bn more than the original estimates for the entire event. Although the bulk of the funds come from the central government (i.e. the people's money), the city will still have to spend over R700 million collected from local taxpayers, which residents are assured will be recouped in the long run.⁵ Academic studies of the financing of these types of events are fairly clear: original estimates are not only wrong most of the time, they are marked by manipulation, deceptive accounting and outright fabrication. There is a strong case to be made that these original projections are more political than economic in nature, intended to ease a wary public into accepting the event rather than to provide a reasonable and honest estimate of how much they will end up paying.

The events can also have serious social costs. Although the construction sites in South Africa have been relatively accident free, the death of a worker in Cape Town this past January, the second worker to die on a 2010 site, underscored the dangerous nature of the work.⁶ More broadly, the strike itself was spurred by the living conditions and future prospects of workers who for the most part live in the peripheral townships

surrounding the central cities, and will only see indirect, if any, benefit from infrastructure development downtown. While the end of apartheid brought with it the promise of a new economy and a new social order, the conditions of many construction workers are a reflection of how little some things have changed. While they, sadly, are fortunate to be employed, they also earn too little to change their overall situations, for themselves or their children. The World Cup may promise development but there is little if any evidence thus far to suggest it will deliver.

Cape Town and the other South African host cities are, as we will see shortly, quite different from Shanghai and New Delhi. But the commonalities are difficult to ignore, and these other cities also struggle with working conditions, worker safety, low wages and social marginalization. What this suggests is that these events, and the types of development they represent, demand a strong and unified response from the working class. While the strike in South Africa ended in victory, it is a partial one, and the struggle for a more equitable society is still, in many ways, in its early stages. But it did underscore the reality that victories are possible and that the economic and political power of elites is far from total.

Shanghai

Shanghai is a massive city, with between 18 and 22 million people spread over 6300 square kilometers (Cape Town is about 2400). Add to this ethnic homogeneity – over ninety-nine per cent of the population are from the Han ethnic group – and China's history of communist revolution and it would be hard to image a city more different than Cape Town. Yet the situation of construction workers involved with preparations for the 2010 World Expo will sound familiar in many ways.

The World Expo will take place between May and October 2010, and the city expects between 50-70 million total visitors, and 3,5 million foreign tourists.⁷ Construction on the Expo site, which is just over 5 square kilometers, began in 2004, when site clearance and preparation were initiated. The overall budget for the Shanghai Expo is 28.6 billion yuan (R33,5bn/US\$4,19bn), twice as much as the Beijing Olympics. This includes 18 billion yuan for the construction of the Expo site and 10.6 billion yuan for running costs during the May to October event. Officials are predicting the event will break even, and promise that if there is a profit, it will be used to build affordable housing on the Expo site.⁸ Additionally, the Expo is projected to create 85000 jobs.⁹

According to chief planner Wu Zhiqiang, there are an average of 15000 construction workers on any given day at the Expo site.¹⁰ Most of these are migrant workers from other provinces, and many are from rural areas. While both men and women migrate to Shanghai, men make up a higher proportion of overall migrants. Over one-third of male rural migrants end up in construction, while the figure is less than 5 per cent for women.¹¹ They face a somewhat unique challenge as China's *hukou* system regulates the movement of people between rural and urban areas. Intended to control urbanization, the system in effect makes many rural migrants to urban areas illegal migrants, unless they have acquired the appropriate, usually temporary, registration. The demand for labor over the past few decades has been so high, however, that the city has been flooded by people looking for work. Shanghai has, according to official counts, over

7 million migrants living in the city and construction work is one of their primary occupations.

The explosive growth of the city over the past twenty years has been driven by the work of migrants. Construction workers in the city averaged just under 29000 yuan (R34000) per year in 2006, significantly higher than the national average, although it is not clear if this includes unregistered migrant workers.¹² Working conditions in the construction industry are often dangerous and silicosis, a respiratory illness caused by exposure to airborne crystalline silica dust, is the most prevalent occupational illness in China.¹³ According to the Shanghai Environmental Protection Bureau, after an inspection of hundreds of construction sites across the city, the Expo site is one of the two most polluted in the entire city based on resuspended particulate matter in the air, primarily dust from the construction process (the other is Shanghai Hongqiao Integrated Transport Hub site). This is somewhat ironic given the Expo's emphasis on environmentally sustainable cities. Although Bureau officials say all violators will be fined, regardless of if they are government or private ventures, the maximum penalty is \$2,933 (R23400), a very low cost of doing dirty business. Of special significance is the Bureau's observation that some major sites neglect worker protections in order to stay on schedule, a major concern for events like the Expo which have very firm deadlines. The city government says it will shut down sites that refuse to comply after being warned.¹⁴

Living conditions for workers vary, but the average migrant workers has less than seven square meters per person and rent for a one-bedroom apartment averages 1,500 yuan (R1765) a month, far higher than most migrant workers can afford. According to the China Labour Bulletin,

In cities with a high concentration of migrant workers, such as Shenzhen, Beijing and Shanghai, more than half live in enclaves known as "urban villages" (chengzhongcun) often characterized by high density, poor quality housing, limited infrastructure, poor safety and hygiene and social disorder.¹⁵

There are, however, signs of improvement. The Shanghai city government has gone further and acted faster than most Chinese cities in relaxing restrictions on migrant workers and their children that prevent them, for example, from accessing social services, jobs and schools. While progress is slow, this is a move in the right direction. Furthermore, new labour legislation has been introduced at the national level and workers are making use of this to agitate and improve their conditions. According to the China Labour Bulletin, official trade unions are largely ineffectual in advancing the interests of workers, and the result has been an increase in labour unrest. Labour disputes rose thirty per cent in the first half of 2009 according to the Supreme People's Court.¹⁶ Examining one hundred collective labour protests between 2007-8, the Bulletin identifies three trends: workers taking matters into their own hands and bypassing the official trade union (the All China Federation of Trade Unions), strikes often sparking additional protests in other regions and industries, and worker demands becoming broader and more sophisticated.¹⁷ They write,

Previously, disputes were mostly related to clear-cut violations of labour rights, such as the non-payment of wages, overtime and benefits, but in the last two years collective interest-based disputes came to the fore, with workers seeking higher wages and better working conditions, and protesting arbitrary changes in their employment status and pay scales. One of the major causes of discontent was, for example, attempts by managements to circumvent the new Labour Contract Law by forcing employees to relinquish long-term contracts and rejoin the company on short-term contracts or as temporary labour.¹⁸

As we saw with the South African strike, Chinese workers are far from being passive workers, and stereotypes about absence of political spaces and struggles in China are clearly inaccurate. The situation for migrant workers in Shanghai is still very difficult, however, and many continue to contend with social marginalization, a lack of political power, poverty and painful separation from family. While formalization of their legal status in the city is a step forward, there is still a long way to go.

New Delhi

New Delhi is another mega-city in the midst of explosive construction and expansion. The city is home to almost 14 million people and is spread out over 1480 square kilometers, part of a broader urban region with a population of 17 million. There are approximately 800000 construction workers in the city, mostly uneducated, lower caste migrants from India's destitute rural areas. Of these about 300000 are working on projects for the 2010 Commonwealth Games, including 100000 unskilled construction workers, of whom 10000 will be women with approximately 20000 children.¹⁹ The cost of the event will be approximately 70 billion rupees (R11.2bn/\$1.4bn) but officials predict it will create an estimated 500000 jobs. Although the Games will be spread around the city, the centerpiece construction is the Games Village on a 1 square kilometer site along the Yamuna River.

Unlike many migrants to Shanghai, Indian workers in Delhi have a legal right to be there, but they still are disadvantaged by a formal registration system, overseen by the Delhi Construction Workers Welfare Board. The Delhi Board formed in 2002, "to ensure that the law is fully implemented, which involves among other things, the enforcement of rigorous safety norms, the registration of all construction workers and provision of social security benefits to them on the basis of a cess collected for that purpose." However, as Jayati Ghosh points out, the Board rarely meets and lacks the staff to fulfill its mandate.²⁰ Funds specifically collected for workers in line with labour law are not being released, according to Subash Bhatnagar, secretary of Nirman Panchayat Mazdoor Sangam (NMPS), a national workers' union syndicate, leaving workers in desperate need of housing, social security and identity cards.²¹ Furthermore, only 1 per cent of Delhi's 800000 workers are even registered with the Board.²²

Workers generally paid below legal minimum wage, and women are paid lower wages than men, restricted to largely to "unskilled work". According to one survey, seventy per cent of women and children in the construction sector are malnourished.²³

Living conditions in general are very poor. Visits to the Commonwealth Games site by researchers from Mobile Crèches, a local NGO, in February 2008 found severely inadequate living conditions. At Tyagraj Multipurpose Indoor Stadium, Sevanagar, workers and their families,

... are living like animals in unhygienic rented rooms provided by their contractors. 15-20 workers are accommodated in one room. Around 200 workers are living in tin sheds provided by their contractors on the bank of Sewa Nagar Drain in horrible situation without amenities like toilets, bathrooms, and kitchen. Their life is unsafe and some workers were found sick from malaria and fever. There is no crèche facility for the workers who are living with their families.²⁴

Although the city suffers from a massive housing shortage, migrant workers have already built 5000 flats to help accommodate the 100000 expected visitors.²⁵

In addition to squalid living conditions, workers also face dangers associated with the need to complete construction in time for the event.²⁶ Of the three cities, Delhi is furthest behind, with government officials in July 2009 acknowledging that 12 of 17 Games projects are less than half finished. The delay is being blamed by some for pressure to speed up work, which has contributed to at least 41 deaths and 78 accidents, including ten people, some of them workers, killed in the last few months.²⁷

As in Cape Town and Shanghai, workers and activists are confronting these challenges. Citizens for Workers, Women and Children-Commonwealth Games-2010, a coalition of NGOs and community groups that includes Mobile Crèches, has been agitating for services on 2010 construction sites. In 2008 Mobile Crèches was able to secure three worksite crèches funded by the Delhi Board, though they continue to struggle with city government over future funding. Although this is a small victory given the huge number of women and children in need, it does indicate what is possible, and represents a point from which to continue to move forward. Labor agitation by construction workers is complicated by the severe poverty which marks the lives of rural migrants back home, and some activists I spoke with acknowledged that for many workers, just having any job, regardless of pay or working conditions, is seen as being fortunate.

Still, workers have organized recently. In December 2008 a worker was killed, sparking a protest by workers, aided by unions, and a two day work stoppage.²⁸ According to the Peoples Union for Democratic Rights, although a negligence complaint was filed, as of March 2009 there had been no response from city government.²⁹ Workers and union representatives from the Delhi Asangthit Nirman Majdoor Union and the Mahanagar Asangathit Majdoor Union (both affiliated with the Building and Woodworkers International) began negotiations with the contracting company, Ahluwalia Contracts, over a series of demands related to wages, on site food, compensation for the family of the deceased worker, medical services, and other issues. Although the negotiations led only to verbal agreements, they did demonstrate the potential power of organized workers.³⁰

Even more recently, in August 2009, the entire city was rocked by the strike of over 55000 auto-rickshaw drivers, who are key to the daily commutes of millions of city

residents.³¹ Although not directly related to the Games, the drivers were responding to attempts by the city to clamp down on the informal sector in the drive to create a “world class city” prior to 2010. The strike appears to have involved a high degree of cooperation between more than 17 driver associations/unions. This strike raises an important aspect of organizing in the cities of the underdeveloped world, as more and more people live and work in the informal sector, making it an important site of labor and other struggles that formal sector workers would be wise to partner with.

Moving forward in the city that wants our labour but not our lives³²

Different as they are, these three cities form part of a global network of cities defined, in part, by their leaders’ commitment to neoliberal urban development, leaving social development up to the “market”. But the contradiction underlying this feverish push to emulate, and perhaps even surpass, the New Yorks, Londons, and Tokyos of the world are bursting forth to ruin the illusion that an obsessive focus on economic growth will create enough wealth to share with everyone – if indeed this is an honest illusion. Aspiring global cities in the underdeveloped world are all facing the reality of growing inequality, fragmentation and soon, if not already, ungovernability.

At the heart of the contradiction is this: while the poor are needed for the cheap labor they provide, their needs as people – individuals, families, communities, children, women, men – have no place in the rationale of the neoliberal fantasy city. The recent announcement that Delhi will use bamboo curtains to hide slums during the 2010 Games is only the most tragic-comic expression of a theme central to all three cities and beyond: keep the poor close, but out of sight, extract their labor, but deny their right to the city they have built.³³

Who needs to be hidden and who is allowed to be seen tells us everything we need to know about the planned urban future and much about what we need to do. Appropriately, the Hazards Centre, a Delhi based research and support centre for community and labour organizations, titled its 2005 critique of the Delhi 2021 Master Plan, *Blueprint for an Apartheid City*.³⁴ Future progress against this trajectory which casts the poor to the urban outskirts will require more coordination across various borders: national, regional ethnic, gender, race. As many of the examples here demonstrate, it will also require operating outside and through formal structures and processes. Three aspects of struggle should inform our thinking in confronting the neoliberal city. First, the defense of important existing rights, territories (resisting evictions and displacement for example), and livelihoods (rights for formal and informal sectors workers). Beyond this, it is vital that we expand or reformulate existing rights (to address issues of national chauvinism and the rights of im/migrants, for example). Finally, as the world is not static, we need to develop new conceptions of rights that reflect changing realities, resonate with the various communities we represent and ground the struggles of tomorrow. National citizenship, for example, while it continues to provide one path for social justice, at the same time can cut off others and be used to divide communities that otherwise share many immediate and long term interests.

The success of future struggles will to a large extent depend upon our ability to build networks that are stronger, more flexible, more dynamic and, ultimately, more

human, than those in which millions today are ensnared. Also, as these case studies show, once events have been secured, the political maneuvering room quickly diminishes, as the tight deadlines produce incredible pressure on cities, which trickles down to degrade the working conditions of construction workers. Resisting these pseudo development projects will thus require very early mobilization, as soon as rumors of a bid surface! Social movements, unions and other progressive formations must share with each other strategies and tactics across regional and national borders, as well as alternative development frameworks. Such rapid and unified action is the best defense workers have against these predatory events.

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