FROM WORK TO WELFARE

A New Class Movement in India

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ABSTRACT: The rigidity of early class analysis and the recent demise of any type of class analytics have turned attention away from examining the growing population of informally employed workers as a class. By not examining informal workers as a class "*in* themselves," we are losing insights into how they are translating their positions into a class "*for* themselves." As a consequence, the recent literature on globalization and liberalization is increasingly concluding that the decreasing proportion of formally employed workers (and the subsequent rise in informal employment) the world over signifies a decline in all class-based organization. Such arguments have obscured our understanding of the current social dynamics of exploitation and resistance. In an attempt to begin filling this gap, this article recovers class as an important analytical tool with which to examine (1) the current relations of power between the state, employers, and the majority of India's workers, and (2) how the structures of production within which informal workers operate affect their collective action strategies. A reformulated labor movement model is offered to expose the underlying mechanisms through which informal workers translate their location in the class structure as a class "in itself" into a political group as a class "for itself." Insights into how informal workers organize can have profound implications for our understanding of changing state-labor relations as national governments attempt to liberalize their economies and simultaneously rein in their welfare functions.

Two global trends have shaped the fate of the world's workers since the late-1980s. One is an unpredicted decline in formally employed labor and subsequent growth in informal labor; the other is an unprecedented decline in state welfare rhetoric and policy. These simultaneous trends have resulted in an increase in the proportion of workers who do not receive secure wages or social benefits either from employers or from the state. Such informally employed workers represent one of the poorest and most marginalized populations of the liberalization era. Yet little is known about these workers' lives.

In this article I argue that the rigidity of early class analysis and the recent demise of any type of class analytics have turned attention away from examining the growing population of informally employed workers as a class. As a consequence, the recent literature on globalization and liberalization is increasingly concluding that the decreasing proportion of formally employed workers (and the subsequent rise in informal employment) the world over signifies a decline in all class-based organization. Such arguments have obscured our understanding of the current social dynamics of exploitation and resistance. It particular, they overlook (1) the changing composition of the class structure in countries that are implementing economic reforms, and (2) the class-based political strategies that informal workers are using to improve their current situation. In other words, by not examining informal workers as a class "in themselves," we are losing insights into how they are translating their positions into a class "for themselves." In an attempt to begin filling this gap, this article recovers class as an important analytical tool with which to examine (1) the current relations of power between the state, employers, and the majority of India's workers, and (2) how the structures of production within which informal workers operate affect their collective action strategies. Insights into how informal workers organize can have profound implications on our understanding of changing state-labor relations as national governments. attempt to liberalize their economies and simultaneously reign in their welfare functions.

1. Defining Informal Workers

Perhaps the largest impediment to work on the informal sector to date has been the lack of consensus on how to define and count informal workers. Since 1973 when Keith Hart first coined the term "informal sector workers" based on his research in Kenya,[1] scholars have used various approaches to understanding the population of poor, marginal workers that Hart sought to highlight.[2] As a result of the lack of agreement about the informal sector concept, few national-level data sets have attempted to collect information on the informal workforce.

Recent studies, however, have begun to reverse this trend by establishing definitions that are consistent at both the theoretical and operational levels. Much of the best theoretical work on the informal sector has come from scholars of Latin America. In 1989, Alejandro Portes, Manuel Castells, and Lauren Benton provided the following definition:

> The informal sector consists of economic units that produce goods and services legally, but engage in operations that are not registered or regulated by fiscal, labor, health, and tax laws. Informal workers include the self-employed, who own and run a business in the informal sector with few or no employees, as well as casual labor, who work through subcontractors either for an informal or a formal sector enterprise. The primary

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1. Hart 1973.
2. Weeks 1975; Mazumdar 1976; Sethuraman 1976; Bromley and Gerry 1979; Moser 1978; Peattie 1987.

difference between informal and formal workers is that the latter are protected and regulated under state law while the former are not.[3]

The key advantage of this definition is that by focusing on the level of state regulation, rather than the type of enterprise, it ensures the inclusion of informal workers in both informal and formal sector enterprises, as well as regular workers in informal enterprises. In addition, it includes the vast numbers of (often women) workers who work alone either at home or in multiple locations (such as street vendors). This definition has been largely accepted in much of the recent literature on informal workers in developing countries. In 1999, the National Sample Survey Organisation of India operationalized this definition in its National Sample Survey (NSS) on Employment and Unemployment by including, for the first time, detailed questions on employment status, location of work, and enterprise characteristics.[4]

Since India launched its economic reforms in 1991, informal workers have replaced traditional factory workers as the government's *ideal* worker. Similar trends can be found across nations attempting to compete in the global market with cheap, flexible labor. Although informal workers operate outside the state's jurisdiction, the Indian government is supporting firms in hiring fewer formal workers and more informal workers by urging early retirement options for formally employed workers and failing to enforce laws that protect job security. Recent government reports in India stress "the important role informal labor plays in ensuring the success of India's reforms."[5] By the end of the 1990s, India's informal sector was estimated to account for over 60 percent of gross domestic product.[6] In 2002, the Indian government recognized the informal sector as the primary source of future employment for all Indians, and in 2004, the Central Government appointed a high-profile committee to examine ways to further increase productivity in the informal sector.[7]

As a result of these trends, the proportion of informal workers in the labor force is growing.[8] The significance of the growth lies not only in its absolute amount, but also in its stinging contradiction to early development theories predicting the demise of the informal sector with economic growth.[9] Between 1987 and 2001, the Indian economy grew at an annual rate of approximately 5 percent; yet the number of households in self-employed and casual labor increased, and households engaged in formal wage and salaried jobs decreased.

Within the category of informal workers, this study focuses on one group — namely casual workers who have to sell their labor as a commodity in a buyers' market. In the Indian context, it is important to qualify the Portes et al. definition of informal workers with a greater emphasis on the lack of protection from

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3.   Portes, Castells, and Benton 1989.
4.   NSSO 2001.
5.   Ahluwalia 2002; Gupta 2002; NCL 2002.
6.   Kulshreshtha and Singh 1999.
7.   NCL 2002, 1969.
8.   Kundu and Sharma 2001; NCL 2002.
9.   Harris and Todaro 1970.

the *employer,* and not just the state. As I illustrate below, casual workers in India are indeed fighting for protection from the state. However, it is their employers' continuing lack of responsibility toward their livelihood and welfare that distinguishes them from formal sector workers. Further research is needed to see if this caveat is generalizable to other regional contexts.

2. Informal Workers: A Class *"In* Themselves"

In trying to understand the lives of the growing mass of informal workers in India, this study uses a class-analytic approach. Drawing from existing studies, focusing on Western Europe and Latin America, I first incorporate informal workers into the mainstream class structure of India. Doing so highlights the key links between informal workers and capitalist accumulation. Specifically, formal sector accumulation relies heavily on informal workers, because they absorb much of the reproductive costs of formal and informal labor, and they help constrain the expansion of the relatively costly formal sector working class. As a result of their strategic role in the processes of accumulation, class theories predict that informal workers likely have unique interests and interactions with formal sector workers, capital, and the state.

In the early twentieth century, Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg asserted that informal workers are an integral part of the working class, rather than a marginal group of temporary workers, in advanced capitalist economies.[10] Recently, Alejandro Portes and Kelly Hoffman explicitly mapped informal workers onto the unique class structure of developing economies during the neoliberal era.[11] As in advanced countries, Portes and Hoffman define capitalists, executives, and professionals as the dominant classes in Latin America. Also similar to advanced countries is Portes and Hoffman's categorization of the formal proletariat as both skilled, salaried white-collar employees, as well as unskilled waged workers with labor contracts. While these classes no doubt hold a disproportionate amount of power and resources, in developing countries they account for only a small proportion of the population. In India, they account for approximately 7 percent of the entire labor force (or 18 percent of the nonagricultural labor force).[12]

The remaining 93 percent of the labor force (or 82 percent of the nonagricultural labor force) in India is comprised of informal workers. While most analyses of class structure in advanced countries do not include informal workers, thereby emphasizing their marginality to the modern economy, Portes and Hoffman add two classes of informal workers to the contemporary class structure of developing economies. In India, the first class of informal workers, called "petty bourgeoisie" or "micro-entrepreneurs" (in India this group is re-

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10. Luxemburg 1951; Lenin 1939.
11. Portes and Hoffman 2003.
12. The 7 percent figure was first asserted by informal workers' movements attempting to increase their salience and is now cited in numerous scholarly articles and government documents (see Kundu and Sharma 2001). The 18 percent figure is calculated by the author using the 55th Round NSS.

Table 1. Informal Workers and Class Structure in India

Class	Percent of India's nonagricultural labor force*	Percent of India's nonagricultural informal labor force
Dominant Classes (capitalists, executives, and professionals)	n(18)	—
Petty Bourgeoisie/Micro-entrepreneurs or Self-Employed	45	54
Formal Proletariat (skilled and unskilled workers with wage contracts)	j(18)	—
Informal Proletariat (casual workers and regular workers in informal enterprises)	38	46

*These figures are calculated by the author using India's 55th Round NSS. Currently, informal workers in India can only be calculated in the nonagricultural sectors. In addition, the NSS does not yet allow a distinction between professionals in the dominant classes and those in the formal proletariat. Therefore, percentages for dominant classes and formal proletariat are presented as an unknown percentage (n and j) of the sum total (equal to 18 percent).

ferred to as "the self-employed"), make up 45 percent of the nation's nonagricultural labor force and 54 percent of the nation's nonagricultural informal labor force (see Table 1). As Portes and Hoffman note, in developing countries this class performs the critical "function of linking the modern capitalist economy, led by the three dominant classes, with the mass of informal workers at the bottom. Micro-entrepreneurs organize [informal] labor to produce low-cost goods and services for consumers and low-cost inputs subcontracted by large firms."[13]

The second class of informal workers, called "the informal proletariat," is located at the bottom of the class structure and includes casual workers and regular workers in informal enterprises. In India, this class makes up 38 percent of the nation's nonagricultural labor force, and 46 percent of the nation's nonagricultural informal labor force. These workers lack control of capital and means of production, and they are predominantly unskilled. They have less access to economic or political resources than other classes. That these workers lack formal contracts with an employer renders their work insecure and unregulated by definition; their insecurity, in turn, makes them highly vulnerable to exploitation by the other groups that sit above them in the class structure. This class of informal proletariats is the focus of this article.

Especially significant for those concerned about development is the relative deprivation the informal proletariat faces compared to the formal proletariat in India. As shown in Table 2, informal workers have a significantly larger share of illiterates than formal workers; formal workers, in contrast, are more likely to have a graduate education than informal workers. As well, the Provident Fund,

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13.   Portes and Hoffman 2003, 45.

India's social security system, covers only 6 percent of informal workers, while nearly 80 percent of formal workers are covered under the same program. Consistent with claims that poverty is becoming increasingly feminized, the share of female workers employed in the informal sector is slightly larger than the share of male workers in the sector.

This depiction of the class structure in developing economies defines the informal proletariat as a separate class-*in*-themselves. Doing so acknowledges the important (and growing) relations between informal workers, formal workers, and modern capital. In addition, it helps scholars identify informal workers' life chances and their unique sources of poverty. Finally, it provides a more accurate depiction of the current social dynamics in developing economies undergoing economic reforms. This study, however, is concerned with the two-step cognitive mediation process that arises *from* class structure: recognizing membership in a class with coherent common interests and acting politically on those interests. In other words, if informal workers are acknowledged as a class-*in*-themselves, how do they organize to improve their livelihoods as a class-*for*-themselves?

3. The Dwindling Role of Class in India's Political Mobilization Literature

Surprisingly few studies have examined how the recent changes in employment and class structures have affected the political activities of workers. Until the early 1950s, the Indian labor movement was heralded for its contribution to India's fight for independence.[14] As a testimony of laborers' struggles, values of class equality and progressive laws protecting workers' rights featured prominently in the new government's constitution and institutions. Formally, the new government emphasized collective bargaining as the central method for Indian labor relations, and national unions emerged in every sector to represent workers in front of employers and the state.

By the mid-1950s, however, labor organizations began to split over political power, and the Indian class literature also split on whether or not workers' organizations could ensure substantial gains for their members. Some highlighted the movement's ability to organize with few resources and handle immediate disputes on wages and working conditions as proof of the empowering nature of India's new democracy.[15] Others pointed to the lack of militancy and lax implementation of labor laws as evidence that the labor movement had become a mere disciplinary weapon of the state.[16]

Since the 1980s, the debate on class politics has largely subsided, and scholars increasingly point to the near dissolution of class politics in India.[17] In place of class, Indian scholars are now debating the effectiveness of one-issue, inter-

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14. Punekar 1948.
15. Fisher 1961; Park 1949; Kennedy 1958.
16. Mehta 1957; Morris 1955, 1960; Weiner 1962.
17. Rudolph and Rudolph 1987; Omvedt 1993; Bardhan 2001.

Table 2. Education Level and Social Security Coverage by Employment Status (ages >5)

	Not in Labor Force	Not in Labor Force (%)	Unemployed	Unem- ployed %	Employed in Informal Sector	Employed in Informal Sector (%)	Employed in Formal Sector	Employed in Formal Sector (%)
Illiterate	152,900,000	34.4	467,385	5.7	34,169,363	29.8	1,625,676	6.5
literate below primary	122,600,000	27.6	424,715	5.2	14,384,426	12.5	1,256,738	5.0
Primary	66,008,255	14.9	676,078	8.2	16,356,019	14.2	1,599,158	6.4
Middle	52,137,411	11.7	1,679,605	20.4	20,985,693	18.3	3,455,788	13.8
Secondary	27,362,937	6.2	1,825,245	22.2	13,870,854	12.1	5,409,274	21.7
Higher secondary	14,631,106	3.3	1,288,657	15.7	6,588,301	5.7	3,715,881	14.9
Graduate +	8,744,497	2.0	1,859,712	22.6	8,473,706	7.4	7,895,521	31.6
Total	444,384,206		8,221,397		114,828,362		24,958,036	
Covered by Provident Fund					5,098,336	6.2	14,604,949	79.0

Note: Calculated by author from NSS 1999–2000

est-based movements on (among others) women's rights, environment, and development needs[18] or identity-based movements organized along caste, religion, and ethnicity lines.[19] Little consensus has been reached on the effectiveness of these new movements.[20] Similar trends can be seen in Latin America.[21]

The most common explanation for the supposed demise of class politics in India is that liberalization policies encourage firms to hire informal labor, because it is cheap and flexible and thus helps firms remain competitive in the increasingly liberalized and globalized marketplace.[22] Informal employment, in turn, disperses the site of production through home-based work, complicates employer-employee relationships through multiple subcontracting arrangements, and atomizes labor relationships by eliminating the daily shop-floor gathering of workers. Scholars argue that these changes in structures of production have made it impossible for workers to organize along class lines, which, in turn, has undermined the relevance of traditional class-based organizations.[23]

Implicit in these arguments is a traditional, static model of labor movements. As illustrated in Figure 1, the primary nexus of tension is between the organized formal proletariat and employers, and the state serves as a buffer between the two. The informal proletariat is depicted on the side as an expression of Karl Marx's notion of a "reserve army of labor" — i.e., those who perform odd jobs while waiting to be formally employed.[24] Because informal workers are not viewed as occupying a distinct location in the class structure, they are assumed to have the same interests and goals as formal workers. Only once informal workers are formally employed, so the argument goes, will they become an integral part of the workforce and be able to join the labor struggle to attain those goals.[25] This view of the informal sector has marked labor literature since the early 1900s, thereby limiting most studies to urban formal sector workers and, in some cases, rural peasants.[26]

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18. Ray 2000; Basu 1992; Lind 1997; Kamat 2002; Katzenstein 1989.
19. Chandra Forthcoming; Varshney 2002; Katzenstein, Kothari, and Mehta 2001.
20. For differing views in the effectiveness debate on new mass politics in India, see Frankel and Rao 1989; Heller 2000; Migdal, Kohli, and Shue 1994; Weiner 2001.
21. Roberts 2002; Sandbrook 2006; Cross 1998; Fernandez-Kelly and Shefner 2006.
22. Other arguments made earlier are: (1) that opportunistic union leaders have made labor organizations into authoritarian spaces that fight for monetary benefits, rather than democratically driven spaces of class ideology (Ramaswamy 1988), and (2) that class politics has never been strong in India, because unions mirror the competitive pluralism of Anglo-American interest groups, rather than the Continent's corporatist structures of collective bargaining (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987).
23. Berger and Piore 1989; Gugler 1991; Chowdhury 2003; Harriss-White 2003; Hyman 1992.
24. Marx 1906.
25. Geertz 1963; Bairoch 1973; Harris and Todaro 1970; Lewis 1954; Marx 1906.
26. Herring and Hart 1977.

To the extent that the informal sector has been studied in India, the focus has been on its definition and measurement.[27] Among the few studies that examine the social and political lives of informal workers in India, there is support for the global literature indicating that despite the difficulties, informal workers are organizing politically to improve their conditions.[28] According to the latest round of the NSS (1999–2000) in India, 8 percent of the nation's informal workers in the nonagricultural sectors are unionized.[29] Still, little remains known about the strategies informal workers use to improve their lives.

In contrast to existing studies arguing for the demise of class politics in India, I argue that a more dynamic approach to understanding forms of class-based exploitation and resistance is vital to understanding the conditions under which workers continue to retain or give up power. In particular, I show that the earlier victories of the formal sector labor movement, along with the recent initiation of economic reforms, have ironically pushed the Indian state and capital to increase unprotected employment. However, changes in the structure of production do not necessarily signify the end of all class struggle (and thereby the utility of class analytics). On the contrary, I argue that the circumstances of informal employment have pushed workers to initiate an alternative form of class politics that articulates their unique class-based interests and attempts to improve their basic security.

4. Informal Workers: A Class *"For* Themselves"

Using two sets of over three hundred in-depth interviews, one with labor leaders and government officials, and the second with workers in the *bidi*[30] and construction industries, I examine seven informal workers' organizations across three states in India. Six of the organizations are trade unions, registered under the Trade Union Act (1926), and one is a nongovernmental organization (NGO), registered under the Trust and Societies Act. The three cities/states I examined (Mumbai/Maharashtra, Kolkatta/West Bengal, and Chennai/Tamil Nadu) share a deep history in India's labor and independence movement, and they represent the three birthplaces of India's largest trade unions. All 140 workers interviewed are poor women, who are casually employed by a private employer through a chain of subcontractors. The interviews focused solely on women, because over 90 percent of the lowest rung of workers in the tobacco

27. Kundu and Sharma 2001; Oberai and Chadha 2001; Mahadevia 1998; Sundaram 2001; Unni 1999, 2000; Kulshreshtha and Singh 1999; Joshi 2000; TISS and YUVA 1998.
28. Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala 1996; Sanyal 1991; Sharma and Antony 2001; Chowdhury 2003.
29. The author calculated these figures using the NSS. They include only regular workers (in the case of formal workers) and regular and casual workers (in the case of informal workers). These figures change only marginally when self-employed own-account workers and employers are included (along with regular and casual workers).
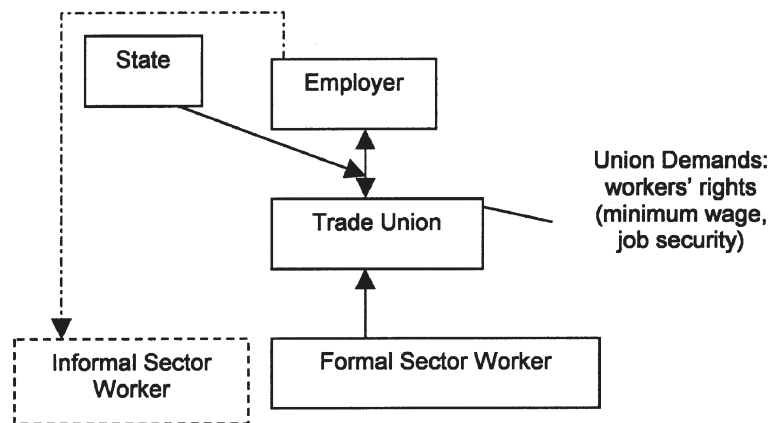30. *Bidi* is a local Indian cigarette made of a rolled leaf and roasted tobacco.

Figure 1. Traditional Labor Movement Model

and construction industries is comprised of women contract workers. All interviewees earn between US$ 0.25 and US$ 2.00 per day. At the national level, the tobacco and construction industries represent the most organized among the informal workers' movement.[31]

Contrary to much of the current literature on labor and on social movements, I find that in India informal workers are organizing to improve their livelihoods through state-supported benefits. Using a class analytic approach, I find that the shifts in production structures have pushed informal workers' organizations to make two strategic changes to their mobilization strategies in order to fit the conditions of informal employment and to retain their membership. The first change is to target their demands to the state, rather than the employer, and the second change is to make demands on welfare benefits (such as health and education), rather than workers' rights (such as minimum wage and job security). In the following sections, I summarize findings on the historical evolution of these labor movement changes as the recognized structure of production in two very different informal sector industries (bidi and construction) shifted from a formal to an informal one.

Beginning with a Traditional Workers' Struggle against an Employer

From the 1930s to the early 1970s, the labor movements in the bidi and construction industries focused almost exclusively on formal sector workers, although many of the workers in both industries were informally employed.

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31. Construction workers comprise 8 percent of India's labor force, and bidi workers comprise 2 percent. Although employment is growing rapidly in both industries, the bidi industry is under strong pressure from domestic and international campaigns against smoking. To reduce costs, most of the bidi production has shifted to rural areas (to avoid municipal taxes and fees). Urban bidi production may be considered a "sunset" industry, while urban construction work is a "sunrise" industry.
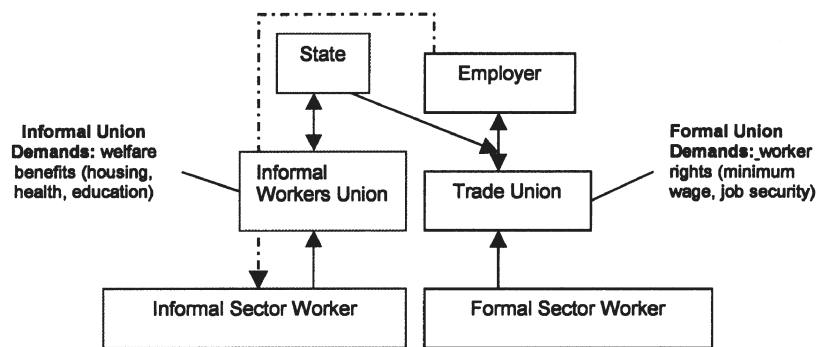
Figure 2. Alternative Labor Movement Model among Informal Workers

Employers in both industries had worked hard to avoid the labor laws that the formal labor movement had managed to get in place (such as the 1926 Factories Act for bidi and the 1923 Workmen's Compensation Act for construction). To avoid costly labor regulations, employers hired informal labor by dispersing the workforce into smaller, unregulated units or hiring workers only for short-term tasks.[32] In other words, informality was in part an outcome of capital's strategy to avoid workers' rights legislation. Despite capital's response to traditional class struggles, the labor movement continued to ignore informal workers. Nearly all the workers involved in the early movement were formally employed, literate, skilled men who were recruited by the union at the factory.[33] By 1960, registered membership in both the construction and bidi unions was 98 percent male.[34] To the extent that unions targeted informal workers at all, unions strove to formalize them. They did not attempt to build a unique class consciousness among the informal proletariat as a class-for-itself.

In their commitment to formal recognition of work from the employer, bidi and construction unions strove to follow the traditional labor movement model depicted in Figure 1. The government was held responsible only for enacting and enforcing laws that held employers accountable to their employees, providing last-resort conciliation services in industrial disputes, and passing protective legislation for certain industries. This model implied a contract between capital and labor where employers formally recognized and provided for their employees, and in return, workers provided their labor for production with minimal strife. Within the unions, leaders focused on educating workers on a class consciousness that viewed provisions from employers as "workers' rights." Because the contract was between labor and capital, the fair returns that workers demanded centered on what employers could provide, such as mini-

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32. GOI 1929. For an in-depth account of employers' use of informal labor in the textile industry during India's early industrial history, see Chandravarkar 1994.
33. Although bidi manufacturing is not mechanized, the workshops in which workers sat to roll the bidis were referred to as "factories."
34. GOI 1960.
35. Interview with Ram Ratnagar, 1 July 2003. Similar sentiments were expressed in Girija, Ramakrishnan, and Ramakrishnan 1988, 94.
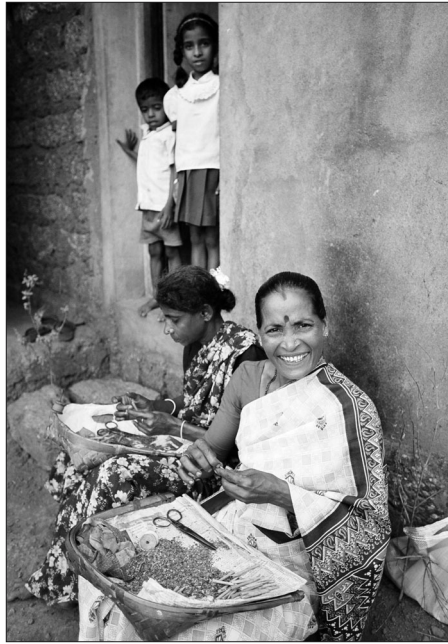
Making *bidi* cigarettes at home, in the village of Puttige. Research shows that in India "informal workers *are* organizing to improve their livelihoods through state-supported benefits." (ILO/Crozet M. March 2002)

mum wages, bonuses, and decent working hours. These provisions were considered sufficient to the broader goals of justice and human dignity. As Ram Ratnagar, general secretary of the All India Bidi and Cigar Workers Federation recalled, "At that time, our main demand was a minimum wage from the employer. We thought everything else could only follow from that."[35] By 1969, nearly 50 percent of all industrial disputes focused on the issue of minimum wages and bonuses.[36]

Unions framed the attaining of these rights as a necessary conflict workers needed to engage in against capital. The first recorded strike against capital in the bidi industry took place one month after the first bidi union was formed in Kerala in 1934. For the next three decades, the strike served as the most popular form of workers' resistance. In 1951 alone, the Government of India reported 120 registered strikes in the bidi industry; hundreds more were said to have taken place on a spontaneous basis.[37] Even when the strikes did not result in economic gains, they were heralded as a means of bolstering solidarity.[38] In the construction industry, workers also held strikes at worksites to increase wages and bonuses.

To enact protective laws, organized workers sought representation in the government through left-oriented politicians. Therefore, the form of organization was almost always as unions tied to left-wing parties.[39] In 1966, bidi unions' efforts climaxed with the passing of the first national-level legislation to protect bidi workers. The Bidi and Cigar Workers Conditions of Employment Act forced all employers to provide their workers with a minimum wage and work benefits

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36. GOI 1970.
37. GOI 1952.
38. Isaac, Franke, and Raghavan 1998.
39. Each of the two primary left-wing political parties in India has its own federation of trade unions. The Communist Party of India (CPI)'s federation is called, All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M)'s federation is called Center for Indian Trade Unions (CITU). While unions affiliated to right-wing and center parties also existed, their strategies were less revolutionary, and they did not make major gains in the bidi or construction industries.

(such as an annual bonus, maternity benefits, social security, and safe working conditions). The passing of this Act was largely due to the collaboration between bidi unions that were tied to left-wing political parties and A.K. Gopalan, then-member of parliament from Kerala's Communist-Marxist Party. Among construction workers, the radical Maoist movement of Naxalites recruited unskilled workers, while guild associations organized skilled workers. Construction unions operated more independently than the bidi unions during this period.

Unions targeting informal workers followed a similar model as those targeting formal workers. In 1962, Sundar Navelkar, one of the earliest female lawyers in India and a member of the Communist Party of India-Marxist-Leninist, started India's first construction workers' union for contract workers in Mumbai, Maharashtra. While the union's focus on informally employed workers was unique for the time, the union's organizing model and membership of literate men mirrored that of formal sector unions. The union fought to enact the National Contract Labor Act, which limited contract labor to "essential" cases and was viewed as a "second-best" option to formal employment. Where contract labor was deemed essential, the Act ensured decent working conditions, which were framed as a "worker's right" and were identical to those sought for formal workers. Provisions included timely payment of wages and the provision of canteens, restrooms, drinking water, and first-aid boxes on the work sites.[40]

By the early 1970s, these movements had succeeded in attaining some protective legislation at the national level.[41] However, these apparent victories soon boomeranged against unionized workers. In order to avoid being regulated by the new acts, employers in both industries hired many more informal workers that fell outside the jurisdiction of the laws. Moreover, unskilled women were increasingly targeted to perform menial tasks, such as carrying bricks and cleaning and mixing cement in construction, and rolling and manufacturing *bidis* in tobacco. This population of unskilled women workers had not been actively involved in the labor movement, they were desperate for employment, and, most importantly, they were willing to work informally, outside the jurisdiction of the laws.[42] Subcontractors were used to veil the employer-employee relationship, and employers were not held responsible for their workers under the new Acts.

As predicted by traditional class literature, the bidi and construction movements became relatively dormant once the labor force overtly shifted from a formal to an informal one. The number of registered industrial disputes continuously fell from a high of thirty-five hundred in 1973 to fewer than seventy-five in 2001. Registered bidi disputes were sporadic between the 1950s and 1970s, but

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40. Interview with Sundar Navelkar, 4 August 2003.
41. In 1970, the Minimum Wages Act of 1948 was extended to include the construction industry. In 1972, the Contract Labor Regulation and Abolition Act was passed to hold principal employers and contractors responsible for providing casual labor with minimum wages and decent working conditions; this Act was to be applied directly to construction workers. By the early 1970s, almost all states had passed the 1966 Bidi Act. Samant 1998.
42. Vaid 1999.

they generally maintained a high level. After 1967, however, they show a marked decline, and from 1973 onward, the Minister of Labor no longer even reported the number. Registered disputes in construction show a rising trend till 1970, after which they steadily declined.[43] The circumstances of informal employment, such as shifting employers and unregistered workers, made it nearly impossible for unions to hold employers accountable to the Acts.

Launching an Alternative Struggle against the State

The setback in workers' organization in India's bidi and construction industries appears to have been temporary, because both movements were revived by the mid-1980s, albeit in new terms. A dynamic class-analytic approach sheds light on explanations for this continued class resistance. To accommodate the shifts in structures of production, the new movement aims to protect workers *within* their informal employment status, rather than trying to transform them into formal sector workers. Moreover, it includes the new labor force of illiterate, unskilled women and men, working on both government and private sector projects. Finally, since employees' workplace can change daily, it identifies and recruits members by going through slums, rather than work sites. To make these changes, informal workers have organized as a unique class-for-itself by shifting its target and demands.

Significantly, informal workers' organizations have had to shift their primary target from the employer to the state. Informal workers operate through subcontractors and often do not even know who their employer is; their work is spatially dispersed in homes and work sheds; and most of them are too frightened to risk losing their jobs by making demands on their employer. Therefore, holding an employer responsible for workers' benefits is difficult. Instead the new movement directs its demands toward the state. The state is viewed as a target that all workers can share.[44] To make demands on the state, informal workers' unions appeal to state responsibilities to *citizens,* rather than to *workers'* rights.

As the following testimony illustrates, even bidi organizations that remain tied to left-wing political parties have altered the movement frame from worker vs. employer to citizen vs. the state. Vajeshwari Bital Iravati, a 55-year-old member of Mumbai's bidi union, has a typical background for women bidi workers in the area. She is a member of the weaver caste. Her family had originally migrated to the state of Maharashtra from the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. Although Vajeshwari grew up in rural Maharashtra, she moved to Mumbai with her husband and in-laws shortly after her marriage thirty-five years ago. In Mumbai, the men in the family got jobs in the textile mills, while the women continued to roll bidis at home. Although the mill work sustained the family for some years, once

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43. GOI 1990; 1952; 1960; 1970; 1980.
44. The parallels between these recent movements among informal workers and earlier peasant movements and the Employment Guarantee Scheme should be noted. For more, see Herring and Hart 1977.

her husband died, Vajeshwari was responsible for raising their two sons and caring for her elderly in-laws. The mill did not provide any pension. Vajeshwari joined the bidi union shortly after arriving in Mumbai. She learned about the union from the other women with whom she rolled bidis. As a member of the Mumbai Bidi Union, which is affiliated to the Communist Party of India (CPI), Vajeshwari was raised in the traditional class struggle philosophy. She proudly recalled the early days of the bidi struggle when she participated in militant strikes. Despite her traditional labor politics background and experience, however, Vajeshwari's focus has now shifted to targeting the state for her demands. "We always sit outside some parliament building to make sure those fat government officials give us what we need. There is no use in going to the employers. They are all thieves. They don't even admit we work for them. They will just kick us out of our jobs if we ask them for anything. But the government cannot kick us out of the country for making demands!"[45]

Because the new movement has shifted the target from the state to the employer, it has also had to shift its demands to those that the state can provide. Rather than demanding workplace benefits alone, the new movement also demands welfare benefits at home for the entire family. Appeals to the state for these welfare benefits have been operationalized in the form of industry-specific workers' Welfare Boards.[46] The bidi board is implemented by the labor departments of the central and state governments, while the construction board is implemented by the state government alone. Bidi employers (of branded items) must contribute Rs. 2 per one thousand bidis to the welfare board, and construction employers must contribute 1 percent of the costs of each construction project that exceeds Rs. 1 million. Workers pay Rs. 25 per year to become members of a Board, and the central and state governments make varying contributions (depending on the industry, year, and state politics). The Bidi Board's annual income is estimated to be Rs. 1 billion, and worker membership is approximately 4 million. Construction Boards' income and membership varies by state. To date, Tamil Nadu and Kerala have fully implemented their Boards, and Delhi, Pondicherry, Haryana, and Madhya Pradesh have initiated theirs. In 2005, Tamil Nadu's Construction Board had 630,000 members.

In return for their membership contribution, informal workers receive benefits, such as education scholarships, neighborhood-based health care clinics, grants for daughters' weddings, houses in women's names, funeral expenses, and pensions. The central and state government use unions to ensure that all members are indeed workers.[47] Benefits are thus extended to workers, *regardless of who their employer is.* In Tamil Nadu, the Construction Board spent Rs. 39 million in benefits in 2003.[48] In 2001, the Bidi Board spent approximately Rs.

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45. Interview, 27 May 2003.
46. I have detailed elsewhere the historical development of the welfare boards, which first began in 1934 for dock workers. The earlier boards, however, were designed for formally employed workers.
47. Interview with Manohar Lal, director general of Labour Welfare Organisation, 2 June 2003.

560 million throughout India. Nearly 80 percent of this amount was used to build health care clinics and provide education scholarships for workers' children. By 2002 the Board had provided identity cards to nearly 4 million workers and had built four new hospitals with 160 beds and 210 dispensaries and respiratory clinics designed especially for bidi workers. The hospitals and dispensaries are all located in the heart of the slums and villages, where the majority of bidi workers live.[49]

The most publicly lauded success of the Bidi Welfare Board has been the housing projects created for bidi workers. The state and central governments contribute Rs. 40,000 toward the construction of a one-room kitchen tenement plus a courtyard, and each worker must contribute the remaining costs (approximately Rs. 10,000). Land is donated from unused government land, and developers are allowed to sell remaining portions of the land for commercial use. Each home is formally owned by the woman bidi worker. In March 2004, the president of India, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, inaugurated a project that would construct ten thousand homes in Shoalpur, Maharashtra. Uttam Khobragade, chief executive officer of the Maharashtra State Housing and Area Development Authority, wrote, "[This] is a wonderful experiment executed by the collective efforts of the poor."[50] In 2003, Tamil Nadu's state government initiated the same project in its state.

Since the mid-1990s, both construction and bidi workers' struggles in India have shifted away from holding strikes against capital, and focused instead on pressuring the government to create and implement these welfare boards. Welfare boards do not ensure the structural changes necessary to eradicate social injustices, nor do they represent a perfect substitution for worker demands (such as minimum wages and job security). Worker and welfare demands would ideally be met in conjunction with one another, and indeed some informal workers' unions are continuing both struggles simultaneously. At the moment, however, India's informal workers are attaining more success in mobilizing members and attaining state attention based on their welfare demands. Employers do not resist the contributions they must make to welfare boards as much as they resist paying minimum wages; states are increasingly implementing welfare boards, as they are repealing laws on labor protection; and informal workers are more willing to make welfare demands on the state than worker rights demands on the employer.

To ensure proper implementation of welfare boards, informal workers in both industries have held multiple demonstrations and hunger strikes in front of politicians (not judges or civil servants). Unlike the earlier movements, workers ensure that production is not disrupted during their rallies. Rather, it is the work of the politicians that is disrupted. Ramakant Patkar, general secretary of the CITU Mumbai Bidi Union, recalled with great pride a rally he led of

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48. GOI 2002; Government, Tamil Nadu 2006.
49. GOI 2002.
50. Singh 2004; Pandhe 2002.

thirty-five hundred bidi workers in front of the Parliament, "We rolled our bidis outside all day. Finally, the labor minister and the housing minister come out to speak with us. This gave the ladies a lot of confidence. They offered to get us tea, but I warned them not to make these ladies' heads hotter than they already were!"[51]

The tone of the new movement is nonviolent, framed as a bargain between the citizen and the state. Although leaders of the earlier movements critique this strategy as a tacit approval of employers' exploitation, the members and leaders of the new movements view the welfare-oriented struggle as strong as, and even more appealing than, the violent struggles of the past. Geeta, founder and head of the Tamil Nadu Construction Union, recalled her union's efforts with pride: "We gathered thousands of angry workers outside his [the labor minister's] door. We were immediately arrested and spent twelve days in jail. But we were so happy we had made him scared and angry."[52] Leaders and participants of the new movement expressed this shift in attitude as their only alternative, given the new structures of production. They argue that if they stop production in order to protest, they will not only forfeit their already low incomes, but they will also risk being fired.

This model of a welfare-oriented movement targeting the state spread across construction and bidi workers' organizations throughout the country in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1979, in response to government inaction to increasing labor vulnerability, a group of informal construction workers in Tamil Nadu formed the Tamil Nadu Construction Workers Union (TNCWU),[53] which has been heralded in recent media as the forerunner of a new informal workers' movement.[54] TNCWU has organized labor activists from across the country to pressure the Central Government to require all states to implement the Construction Workers Welfare Board. They have held nationwide rallies in front of government offices and have worked to incorporate their interests into politicians' election manifestos. In 1989, they submitted a petition with the signatures of four hundred thousand construction workers from across the nation demanding the protective legislations. Unlike the earlier union movements, which were tied to left-wing political parties, the revived national construction workers' campaign is lauded for transcending political and ideological affiliations. Most construction workers' organizations today are independent of political parties, and they hold the state, regardless of their party, responsible for workers' well-being.[55] On 19 August 1996, then-prime minister H.D. Deve Gowda enacted the Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Cess

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51. Interview, 31 March 2003.
52. Interview with Geeta Ramakrishnan, head of TNCWU, 9 July 2004.
53. While the Tamil acronym for this union is TKTPS, I will use the English translation for the sake of clarity.
54. Reporter 1999; Manchanda 1993; Reporter 1994.
55. Interviews with M. Rajaram, labor commissioner, Tamil Nadu (12 June 2004); Ashok Khot, labor secretary, Maharashtra (25 March 2003); and Mohand Dhotre, national welfare commissioner (7 May 2003).

Porter in the vegetable market of Okhla, Delhi. "This study finds that informal workers identify, articulate, and demand [their] unique interests. Class remains an organizing and mobilizing principle for these workers as their access to resources, their relationship with other classes, and the structures of production within which they operate influence how they organize as a class-in-themselves." (ILO/Crozet M. March 2002)

Act, which called on each state to create and implement its own Construction Workers' Welfare Board.[56] The announcement received substantial media coverage, as it was the first action of this kind.[57]

In the case of bidi, organized workers pushed to enact a Bidi Welfare Board during the 1960s. At that time the aim was to provide workers who were formally employed with additional welfare provisions.[58] In 1976, the Government of India passed the Bidi Workers Welfare Cess and Fund Act.[59] However, by 1979, the collection of the cess designed to fund the welfare board was stopped. Bidi unions did not focus much on ensuring the implementation of the Welfare Act, but rather, concentrated on first trying to implement the Bidi Conditions Act, which aimed to ensure that employers formally recognize and protect bidi workers.[60]

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56. Note on the same day, the government also enacted the Building and Other Construction Workers' Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service Act, which catered to the requests of the Builders Association to apply minimal protections on work conditions.
57. Gopinath 1997.
58. Similar struggles were pursued by workers in coal and mica mines, docks, railway loading, sugar, and tea plantations.
59. Unlike the construction boards, the Bidi Board is controlled by the Central government, under the Directorate General of Labor Welfare (DGLW) in the Ministry of Labor. In addition to the Bidi Fund, the DGLW overseas four additional welfare funds: Mica Mines Labour Welfare Fund Act (1946), Limestone and Dolomite Mines Labour Welfare Fund Act (1972), Iron Ore, Manganese Ore and Chrome Ore Mines Labour Welfare Fund Act (1976), and Cine Workers Welfare Fund Act (1981). State governments are responsible for implementing these Acts.

During the 1980s and 1990s, however, bidi unions revived their struggle to pressure state governments to re-implement the Welfare Boards for informally employed bidi workers, regardless of the Conditions Act. The struggles included widely publicized rallies in front of the offices of labor ministers at both the state and national levels, as well as marches through city centers.[61] As a result of the struggles, the cess collection (which the earlier labor movement had not focused on) was resumed on 22 May 1987. In addition, the Bidi Welfare Fund Act was amended to make the failure to issue worker identity cards to bidi workers an offense under the Act. Finally the revised Act made family welfare one of its primary objectives.[62]

A New Informal Workers' Identity

The strategic changes that informal workers' organizations have made in order to survive have had an important impact on organization members' class identities. This identity articulates the unique interests faced by informal workers in their specific class location. The informal worker's identity is based on work status, not income or occupation. To be a member of an informal workers' organization and a Welfare Board, and to attain the welfare benefits outlined above (i.e., health care services, education scholarships, pensions, and housing), one must prove her/his status as an informal worker to the union and the government.[63] Once proof is provided, informal workers attain an identity card. Forty percent of the respondents in this study who had received this worker identity card said it was one of the most important benefits they had received from the organization. The identity card ensures informal workers' eligibility to receive the welfare benefits.

However, workers appreciated the card, even if they had not yet received any direct welfare benefits from it, because they claimed that attaining state acknowledgment of their membership in the working class (even when the employer refused such acknowledgment) legitimated them as worthy citizens. This legitimation in turn allowed them to make citizen demands. Like formal workers, informal workers in India do not own their own means of production. Unlike formal workers, however, informal workers operate outside state jurisdiction, and they are building an identity that connects them to the state through their social consumption needs. Significantly, their emerging identity simultaneously asserts their informality *and* their position within the working class. Their identity is not expressed as an antithesis to capital. The importance

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60. Interviews with Ram Ratnagar, general secretary of the All India Bidi and Cigar Workers Federation, and Rajangam, general secretary of CITU Bidi Federation for Tamil Nadu.
61. Staff 2002.
62. GOI 1990.
63. Although the welfare boards were designed to reach all workers (those in and not in an organization), the government has increasingly turned to organizations for assistance in finding and reaching workers. As a result almost all recipients of the board benefits are members of an organization.

of an official acknowledgment of their work status, even when it is unskilled and informal, was expressed by workers as a means to social legitimacy, especially when their other identities (such as caste and gender) tend to demote them on the social hierarchy. In other words, being a worker legitimates people as active participants in the social contract between the state and citizen.

Take Jyotsna Bhoya, a member of Kolkatta's Communist Construction Union, for example. Jyotsna's mother and father were construction workers who had migrated to West Bengal from the neighboring state of Bihar before she was born. Because her family moved from site to site, and she is a member of the lowest caste in Hindu society, Jyotsna did not attend school and is illiterate. At the age of thirteen, she was married to a family of sweepers. She is now twenty-eight years old and a mother of four girls; she has no sons. At the age of seventeen, Jyotsna began working as a construction worker because her husband's income was not enough to sustain the growing family. Each day, Jyotsna commutes four hours on the train by herself to find work in the city. In order to complete her work shift, she must ride the train before dawn and after sunset. As a young, lower-caste, illiterate, Bihari migrant woman, traveling alone at odd hours, Jyotsna is incredibly vulnerable to abuse. Four years ago, a fellow worker convinced her to join the union, because they promised to "empower" her. [64] The most empowering benefit Jyotsna felt she had received from the union has been the identity card. "With this card, I don't feel scared walking home from work at night. If the police stop me, I can show them that I am a construction worker, and not a prostitute or some wasted woman," says Jyotsna. [65]

For Badhrunisa, a member of Chennai's Bidi Union, the worker identity card legitimates her as a vital part of modern, urban society. Badhrunisa is thirty-two years old, illiterate, and Muslim. Badhrunisa was born into a bidi-making family and began rolling bidis by her mother's side when she was seven years old. When she was twenty, she married and gave birth to a daughter the following year. Shortly after her daughter's birth, her husband left her. Today she lives with her mother and her 12-year-old daughter. Like many of her neighbors, Badhrunisa's most important goal in life is to educate her daughter. Still, however, she needs to rely on her daughter's help in rolling bidis as soon as her daughter returns home from school. Living in an all-female home, Badhrunisa must constantly face the charges that she was a "bad wife" because she could not keep her husband happy or bear any sons; a "bad daughter" because she could not help to keep her father alive; and a "bad mother" because her daughter is still working in "the dirty bidi profession." Five years ago, Badhrunisa joined the union because they helped connect her to a new bidi contractor. Badhrunisa was adamant that she "did not join the union to fight." "I don't want to fight," she told me. The biggest benefit of the union for Badhrunisa has been the iden-

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64. Jyotsna used the English word "empower," although she does not speak English.
65. Interview, 16 December 2003.
66. Interview, 14 July 2003. Speaker's emphasis.

tity card. "This card proves that I am a *good* worker. I show it at the municipal office, when I have to ask for water. I show it when I register my daughter at the school. I show it at the bidi workers' hospital so I can get help faster than at the corporation hospital. With this card, everyone knows I work."[66] To Badhurnisa, a government-issued card that proves she is a worker arms her with an identity of legitimacy that she would otherwise have lost by joining the informal sector. Although her wages are not enough to meet her reproduction needs, being a "legitimate" member of society allows her to demand at least some of her basic consumption needs.

These changes in the labor movement among informal workers can help us adjust the traditional labor movement model that India's early unions relied on. As outlined in Figure 2, the new model provides a parallel structure to the traditional formal sector labor movement in which informal workers are also organizing into class-based entities. While they continue to engage in economic activities outside the jurisdiction of the state (just as they did under the traditional model), their organized demands negotiate directly with the state. While the employer continues to serve as the primary target of formal sector workers' movements, the employer remains outside the direct interaction of informal workers' movements. The focus of demands among informal workers has shifted from workers' rights to welfare demands at home and for the family.

5. Conclusions

These findings reassert class as an important analytical tool with which to examine continuing differences in life chances and resistance against exploitation, especially in developing countries. Policies that transfer the economy from public to private control (liberalization) and policies that integrate one economy with another through increased free trade and foreign direct investment (economic globalization) alter the structures of production. Such alterations in structures of production necessarily redefine class structures, class relations, and class interests.

Based on this dynamic understanding of class structures and interests, this study offers an alternative labor movement model to explain current forms of political activity among the majority of the world's workers. The alternative model tested in this study, using in-depth interviews of labor leaders and organization members in two Indian industries (bidi and construction), incorporates the informal sector as an active participant in capitalist growth. Informal workers occupy their own position in the class structure (as a class-in-themselves), and therefore have unique interests. Despite scholars' claims to the contrary, this study finds that informal workers identify, articulate, and demand these unique interests. Class remains an organizing and mobilizing principle for these workers as their access to resources, their relationship with other classes, and the structures of production within which they operate influence how they organize as a class-in-themselves.

The alternative model presented in this study also illuminates changing relations between capital, labor, and the state. In India, the victories of formal workers' struggles resulted in increased legislation on labor protection; formal

workers ensured that employers were held responsible for their workers' rights. Ironically, such protection of formal workers pushed employers to rely more heavily on unprotected informal workers. Recently, the state has supported capital's reliance on informal labor. This study shows that informal workers, in turn, are forcing the state, rather than the employer, to decommodify their labor power. Fully commoditized labor is inseparable from the ways the commodity is treated. If there is no demand for labor power, there is no return to the living bearer of labor power and in the end no claim on subsistence. Capital is no longer being held responsible for this dilemma. Therefore, informal workers in India are trying to hold the state responsible for meeting their basic, social consumption needs, *regardless* of their informal labor status, by demanding welfare benefits. In other words, if the state will not ensure a wage that will allow poor workers to meet the costs of their social reproduction, then the state must directly ensure that such reproduction is possible. Acknowledging and understanding the development of these interests is vital to ensuring an adequate response from policy-makers and scholars.

The informal workers' movement is now at a critical juncture in terms of its future growth. On the one hand, the movement could grow to shape the state's role in workers' lives across all sectors of the economy. On the other hand, the movement could fall backward into a scenario where the state continues to extend its responsibilities to its workers, but in an ad hoc manner that eventually mirrors traditional patron-client relations. Further research into the sustainability of informal workers' movements and the conditions for their success in a liberalization context is essential to understanding the myriad of problems arising in the implementation of state benefits for workers and differences in organizational structures.

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