



ROUNDTABLE

Planetizing the Labor Movement

A contribution to an exchange on [Workers of the World Unite \(At Last\)](#)

Ariel Salleh

April 2019

In joining the discussion on Ronaldo Munck's piece "Workers of the World Unite (At Last)," I identify myself as a feminist political ecologist rather than Marxist economist or industrial relations specialist. As such, I would like to focus on the "relations of reproduction" which sustain labor under capitalism.

As things stand, when we reflect on the meanings of the word "labor," can we even speak of a single working class, let alone one with a capacity to "unite?" For example, according to the "domestic labor debate" promoted by socialist women a generation ago, housework certainly deserves the sociological status of labor. By servicing "the working man," housework even contributes to the generation of surplus value in an upward appropriation of time spent—or better, time gifted. Women's free economic services are perhaps one reason why unions are unlikely to mount a campaign on behalf of "precarious labor" any time soon. Given that most part-time casuals are wives and mothers, offering the "feminized" precariat the privilege of full employment simply runs counter to worker self-interest. Without this "patriarchal deal at the very core of capitalism," the working man would have to buy his daily meals, pay for weekly laundering of clothes, employ a domestic cleaner, and purchase sexual relief at the local brothel.

In the late twentieth century, unions did begin to move towards working class unity—at least in the "liberal" sense of giving women "equal rights" to enter the employment sector. However, decades later, women still tend to occupy part-time jobs or earn roughly twenty percent less than men in comparable work. When unions concede that "the labor movement" is crossed by gender and ethnic differences, they indulge in liberal "identity politics." Rather, what needs to be acknowledged is the fact that the social marginalization of both women and other colonized peoples is indispensable to the functioning of capitalism as a system.

So to open up reflection on the "meanings of labor," we should attend to its qualitative aspects. That is, we may distinguish between labor in the exploited proletarian sense versus capacities which Marx called "labor power." A further way in which invisible gendered and racialized "relations of reproduction" support existing relations of production becomes readily apparent with capital's ecological crisis. The very logic of an industrialized economy means that the wage of both proletariat and salariat relies on extractivism, drawing heavily on the destruction of Earth-wide natural "resources." On the other hand, positive life-affirming reproductive labors exist outside of industrialization—and they include regenerative agriculture, childbirth, and cultural socialization. The skilled agents of this bio-socio-economic sphere are mothers in every known society, as well as peasant farmers, and indigenous gatherers, half of which workers are also women. They actualize their "labor power" in building community life. Moreover, this essential work is non-monetized.

What is rarely understood, even by thinking people, is how the entire edifice of international capital ultimately rests on the material regeneration of global thermodynamic cycles by reproductive labor power.

Child care, elder care, forest nurture—by such functions, housewives or indigenes catalyze not exchange value, not use value, but a “metabolic value form” that flows into and sustains the essential bio-infrastructure of the capitalist system. On this basis, I argue that these workers, in maintaining “relations of reproduction” constitute a “meta-industrial labor class.”¹ By acknowledging this hitherto unnamed class—not to mention its currently uncounted contribution to capitalist surplus value—we open the way towards theorizing a truly democratic ecosocialism. By population numbers, meta-industrials actually make up the global majority of workers on Earth. Are they an ecological proletariat? No, they are much more than a proletariat, which term is fully subsidiary to capital and negatively charged.

Speaking as a sociologist by training, I can say that our standard disciplinary categories of “class, race, and gender” lock us into a single-issue world of labor disunity and competition based on identity politics. The union movement at present buys into this confusion. Likewise, regular global summits on Sustainable Development project the “other” experience of caregivers, small farmers, and First Nation Peoples, as “cultural,” not economic. Their labor is unspoken in the mainstream policy discourse of international agencies, governments, and unions.

How can unions, political ecologists, green thinkers, Marxists, ecological economists, feminists, and other committed people, better support a globally inclusive and life-affirming politics? Certainly, the great nineteenth-century theoretic foundation bequeathed by Marx begs a broader analytic frame, one that can conceptualize socioeconomic justice with ecological sustainability and cultural autonomy. An emerging exemplar of this sort of counter-imperialist organizing might be The Global Tapestry of Alternatives.² The old “relations of production” model papers over the complex of values provided by meta-industrial labor. What is needed to protect life-on-Earth and its material commons is an eco-centric understanding of labor processes and of how these are embedded in natural systems.

More than that: it is time to step up and admit that we are, ourselves, nature-in-embodied-form.

¹ Ariel Salleh “Ecofeminist Sociology as a New Class Analysis,” *Global Dialogue* 9, no. 1 (2019): 35–37; also Ariel Salleh, ed., *Eco-Sufficiency & Global Justice: Women Write Political Ecology* (London: Pluto Press, 2009).

² Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria and Alberto Acosta, eds., *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (New Delhi: AuthorsUpFront, 2019).

Get our bimonthly bulletin



Ariel Salleh is a Visiting Professor in Culture, Philosophy & Environment at Nelson Mandela University; Senior Fellow in Post-Growth Societies at Friedrich Schiller University; and Research Associate in Political Economy at the University of Sydney. Her books include *Ecofeminism as Politics* and *Eco-Sufficiency & Global Justice*.

See more contributions to this Roundtable:
Planetizing the Labor Movement

Workers of the World Unite (At Last)

Ronaldo Munck



As a forum for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.

Journey to Earthland

The Great Transition to Planetary Civilization



GTI Director Paul Raskin charts a path from our dire global moment to a flourishing future.

Read more and get a copy.

Available in English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish

Follow us



Copyright © 2019 Tellus Institute

