

## **INTERVIEW**

### **“We see a strong upsurge of labor history in the Global South”**

***A dialogue with Marcel van der Linden about history and politics***

*by Lucas Poy*

Marcel van der Linden is senior researcher in the International Institute of Social History (IISH), in Amsterdam. Until 2014 he was director of research of this prestigious institution, one of the most important archives and research centers in labor history worldwide. He is the chair of the Editorial Committee of the *International Review of Social History*, edited by the IISH, and belongs to the advisory and editorial boards of many journals devoted to the history of the working class and the left around the world, *Archivos* among them.

He has published scores of articles and books, such as *Workers of the World. Essays toward a Global Labor History* (2008), *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union. A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates since 1917* (2007), and *Transnational Labour History: Explorations* (2003). The latter is the only one that has been published also in Spanish (*Historia transnacional del trabajo*, Valencia, 2006).

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*—Although you were born in Germany, near Hamburg, in 1952, you were raised and educated in the Netherlands. What can you recall about your years in school and college in the context of the sixties in Holland? What would you say were your first influences in academic and political terms?*

—I was a very right wing pupil at the secondary school, pro NATO. My father was very right wing. He would take me to pro NATO demonstrations where music of the armies from different countries was

played, we would enjoy military music. People were distributing leaflets against armaments and against NATO, but I would refuse to accept them. That was until I was 15, and when I was 16, suddenly, maybe it's the influence of '68, I turned to the left, and I became a member of the Pacifist Socialist party (*Pacifistisch Socialistische Partij*), which then existed here. It was a kind of principled radical socialist party, which had two seats in Parliament, it was a tiny party. Very much to the disagreement of my father. That was when I was in secondary school.

–*So when you were in the university you were there...*

–No, I had left that party already. I tended to anarchism, and then in 1973 I became a member of a group called the Proletarian Left, which in 1974 became the official section of the Mandeliste Fourth International. I stayed in the section until 1982, or 1983. I was even candidate for Parliament, with a hundred votes...

–*And in the field of history, which would you say were your influences at the time? The Spanish-reading public is probably unfamiliar with the peculiarities of the Dutch historiographical traditions...*

–I should tell you that first I was trained in astrophysics, and then I changed to sociology, so that to get the bigger picture. I studied astrophysics for two years, 1971 to 1973, and then I changed to Sociology, because it was the science of revolution. And only when I finished these studies, and I did also Economics, I became active in studying History, so I'm a late historian. I started studying History in the late 1970s and I finished my PhD in History in 1989, earlier I didn't have a diploma in History. In the meantime I was a teacher in secondary school, for Economics, and in 1983 I started working here in the Institute, as an assistant for the *International Review of Social History*. So I wrote my Ph.D. thesis in the evenings, I was also politically active at the time, of course, and that took a lot of time. The Ph.D. was done in the University of Amsterdam, it was the first time I studied in Amsterdam, before I had studied in Utrecht. The title was "Western Marxism and the Soviet Union", it is an early draft of the book I published later, it was in Dutch.

–*In the broad context of the 1970s, studying Sociology, and doing the Ph.D. in History in the 1980s, what would you say were your influences?*

–My main influence was Ernest Mandel, not a historian. He lived in Brussels and he was regularly teaching here at the International Institute for Research and Education. He was a professor in Brussels but most of the time he was traveling. Sometimes we had discus-

sions, but I was mostly influenced by his writings and his examples. And the second person who influenced me in this respect was Fritjof Tichelman, who worked here at the Institute. He was also a member of the Fourth International. He was the head of the Asian department of the IISH. My teachers were more the people that I read than the people that I listened to in classes.

*–In the field of history, what do you think were the influences at the time for a 30-year-old Dutch Trotskyist? British, German, French?*

–We were both influenced by British, American and Germans. More in terms of political economy than social history, let's say Maurice Dobb, or Elmar Altvater, that kind of authors. Marxist political economists, with also a strong historical aspect in their work...

*–Your research, in that period, was very closely related to the history of Marxism, and Marxist topics. And you were connected to the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, you are still in the board of Historical Materialism book series. How would you describe your relationship with the Trotskyist movement and the political left since the 1980s?*

–Well, you might know that Trotskyism doesn't mean a lot in the Netherlands. Maybe, at this moment, there are 150 people, divided in two groups. So, it's not comparable to Argentina. But I must say I'm not a real Trotskyist anymore, I think I have moved a little bit more to the left... How can I explain? I don't think anymore that the Leninist type of party... I think the Bolshevik party was not Leninist. I mean, that the prescription that Lenin had given on how a party should function, that's not how the Bolshevik party worked. Democratic centralism, the central committee has decided something and everybody must follow, etc. I mean the Bolshevik party before and immediately after the Revolution. And I think that part of the success of the Bolshevik party was partly due to the fact that they were not Leninist. They were much more undisciplined. For instance, there was this decision that the Bolsheviks would separate from the Mensheviks, that every branch should make a separate branch. But in 1919, 1920, there still existed significant branches of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks together. So they just didn't do what the central committee had decided.

*–I'm thinking of Lars Lih's book, about What is to be done...*

–Yes, I agree with Lars in that.

*–So the Bolshevik party you are portraying was maybe more similar to the German SPD...*

–I think that maybe the German party was more disciplined than

the Bolshevik party. But I think, and this is the important point, that the success of the Bolshevik party in the Russian revolution was only possible because they were not Leninist. They were more sensitive to what was happening on the ground among people. There was more *spontaneism* in Bolshevism than what is usually admitted.

–*So you were saying that these conclusions, in a way, moved you away from the Fourth International...*

–Well, I had already left the organization for other reasons. One of the main reasons was that I had to work in the factory, and I didn't want to work in the factory. That was in the early eighties, I left in 1982. And another thing was that at the time you couldn't disagree on the nature of the Soviet Union within the Fourth International. If you had a different opinion on the Soviet Union, it was a major divergence.

–*And still you would say that in the 1980s, when you were working on your Ph.D. about Western Marxism and the Soviet Union, you were still influenced by Mandel, even though you had left the organization?*

–I'm still today influenced by Mandel. And I still have very close connections with the comrades here of the USFI and the IIRE, that's not a problem. Maybe nowadays it would be possible for me to rejoin the Fourth International, because they are more... undisciplined. So I moved towards a more *spontaneist*, autonomist direction, that's the point I wanted to make.

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–*Your name is associated with the idea of “global labor history”. That concept is not so familiar to scholars in Argentina. How would you briefly summarize the intellectual origins of this idea and its evolution? How did it come to being, and when?*

–Before the 1970s, labor historians mostly wrote about the history of national working classes... so the Argentinian, the Brazilian, whatever. You had some people who studied international things, that is the Communist International, the Second International, from a very institutionalist perspective. And then, due to the student movements, and the radicalization in the 60s and 70s, you get more people who tried to transcend this, in different ways. One way was to make comparisons between different countries. So in the 1970s you get more of this three or two countries comparisons, mostly in the English language field, because in that case you only needed one language, you could compare US and Britain, for instance. And

another thing is that you see more interest in transnational actions. In 1969 you had a very significant international strike in the glass company Glaverbel, so people got interested in these transnational connections between labor movements and labor actions.

That was the beginning. And building on that, when I came to the institute (in 1983, although I only became a researcher in 1986), Tichelman and I tried to develop a comparative project on the history of labor movements, worldwide. That became two books, that I did with Jurgen Rojahn, *The Formation of Labour Movements, 1870-1914. An International Perspective*. But these books were still focusing and working on the assumption that we had the European type of labor movements (with trade unions, social democratic or communist parties, and so on), that was a model, and then you had countries that had that too, and countries that didn't have that. So we only studied countries that had that too, including Argentina, for instance (Richard Walter made a contribution to that volume). That was our first attempt, and it was an attempt to look globally, but from this Eurocentric perspective.

And then in the 1990s, when I started working with Indian colleagues, in 1990 I met three Indian labor historians, which I became good friends with, and it made me think again about the differences. Because they don't have strong unions, they do have a Communist party but very different to our own situation here, so that made me think to what extent it was a very limited approach to do it that way. And then, in discussions here in the house with Jan Lucassen, who is not a Marxist by the way, we developed this idea of the global labor history. And in 1999 Jan and I published this pamphlet, *Prolegomena for a Global Labour History*. It was a kind of first attempt, now we see of course that it had many weaknesses, but in 1999 we introduced this idea of global labor history. At the time it was also by the way a matter of discussion, as we called it 'global', because many people thought that this idea of *global* was a kind of an US invention, and belonged more to the right than to the left. But we used the term anyway, and I think it was a happy choice, and now it has lost any negative connotations.

-In the books published with Rojahn in 1990, with a comparison about labor movements, there you also mentioned that it was related to some transformations in the IISH. What was it about?

-The IISH is very old, from 1935. Originally it had a so-called cabinet structure, so you would have a department that did Central Europe, for instance. And then they would collect books on Central

Europe, archives on Central Europe, and they would make source publications, and articles, etc. So everything was done in one department. This became very unwieldy over time and since 1983 the institute went through a reorganization procedure, which was also related to the fact that we had become part of the Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, the Royal Academy of Sciences (KNAW). And from then on we had a stream organization. We have one department that collects materials, books, archives and journals, etc., another that processes them, so to make them available, with inventories, etc., then we have the people in the reading room who make possible for you to consult these materials, and we also have a Research department. The Research department in 1986 was maybe 7-8 people, much smaller than now. And there was also no research director at that time. In 1993 we got a real department, with a real research director.

*–Going back to these changes in terms of the global labor history. Political history of the left organizations (not only trade unions, but left currents in a broad sense) was also a main topic of this “traditional” historiography. And you did research on this topic (the book you mentioned with Jurgen Rojahn, also one about Revolutionary Syndicalism with Wayne Thorpe). They are also international. What would you say is the place, if any, of this political history in Global Labor History?*

–Much of the emphasis has been now in labor relations, exploitation, etc. The expansion of labor history to nontraditional areas, like history of slavery, etc. But I would say that more recently we see a return also to the more political history of labor. First there was a move away, and now I think there is a turn back to a possible interest in more political aspects of the labor movement.

*–What do you think is the reason?*

–The crisis, I think. Another thing to take into account is that, in the Netherlands, Marxism has always been very weak, especially in the academia, unlike the United States, which by the way is a contradiction for Marxists. They have a superstructure which is strongly influenced by Marxism and a structure that is not. Here Marxism has always been very weak in the academia, certainly. In fact for a long time there had only been two professors with Marxist inclinations, one was a philosopher and the other was me. And that’s it. In the whole country.

*–For the people in Argentina, the Institute is basically a place with sources, that’s the idea many people have, because there is a very important collection on Latin American materials. The academic public in Argentina is less aware of the research traditions and changes here. How would you briefly describe the evolution of the IISH since the 1980s?*

–The Institute has become more global in the sense that we stopped collecting in Europe. Our most important collections are of course in European labor history, including Marx, Bakunin, etc. But we stopped collecting in Europe, and we tried to establish a network in Latin America, Asia. That started in the 1990s, but we only have representatives in different parts of the world in the last five years, I think. The general idea is that we try to collect as much material as possible on labor history and social movements across the globe, but preferably leave them where they come from. We don’t want to be cultural imperialists who take everything to Amsterdam. We leave it preferably in a good archive somewhere in the region. But we also want to digitize as much as possible so that it becomes available to everybody, cheaply.

And parallel we have the research, which is also globalized. There is of course always a tension between collections and research, a very complicated relationship. In collections what also counts is that you have some strong points, for instance you have things on Marx. So if somewhere one little paper of Marx is available, we do our best to get it. If only because we already have so much, and we want to complete the collection. So it’s another dynamic than research. You can also not collect only what is of interest of researchers now, because maybe in five years you will have a different interest.

*–A “crisis of labor history” has many times been mentioned, maybe it’s still mentioned and it is usually associated with a political context of crisis of Marxism and a downturn of popular movements. However, and you mentioned this earlier, maybe since the 2007-2008 crisis, especially in Southern Europe, things are changing. How would you assess in this context the current situation and perspectives of labor history as a field?*

–I would say that still in Europe it doesn’t amount to much, there’s not so much interest, although it’s gradually increasing. Also in United States and Canada, it doesn’t have a stronghold in academia. But we see a strong upsurge of labor history in the Global South. Main countries are Brazil, also Argentina of course. In Brazil I think it is especially strong, they have this brilliant network, *Mundos do*

*Trabalho* since 2001. But also an association of Indian labor historians was founded in Delhi, it was based in things that happened here a year before, actually the association started in Amsterdam. They have a bi annual conference which is very good, I've been there almost every time. We have networks in West Africa, in South Africa, and so on. I've been in conferences in Karachi, Pakistan, in Seoul, South Korea, in Jakarta, Indonesia, in Dakar, Senegal, in Johannesburg, South Africa.

*–How would you explain this difference?*

–I think it has to do with the rise of new labor movements in the Global South, that is a crucial thing. There is a contradictory thing. On the one hand, for instance, originally when the Indian founded this movement it was a defensive move, because labor history, which was done in a very traditional way, apart from the subaltern studies, which is a different story, it was on the defensive. Now they see a new upsurge, tens of Ph.D. being written, and so on. So it can be defensive and can also be offensive, and sometimes they dialectically intertwine.

*–Now also a “history of capitalism” seems to be a thriving field, at least in the US, which works such as Sven Beckert’s Empire of Cotton. It also seems to be related to the crisis of capitalism.*

–David Montgomery always said “I study labor history because I want to study capitalism”. You can study it from the perspective of the bankers or from a working class perspective. And that is a very legitimate way of doing it. I think that many labor historians in fact want to be historians of capitalism. I'm just finishing with Jürgen Kocka a volume called *Capitalism. The resurgence of an historical concept*. We have this title because in many parts of Europe, “capitalism” was a dirty word. In the US capitalist called themselves capitalists. But here was different. For a long time, when we had to write grant applications here, we would not use the word “capitalism”, we should use the expression “market-oriented societies”, otherwise you would get no money. Now this shyness disappears, and you see people dare to speak again and study capitalism as a topic in itself. And you understand that when looking at capitalism as a concept you see connections that you would not see if you just talked about market, which is only an aspect.

*–You have been part of the editorial committee of the International Review of Social History for many years, and you also belong to the advisory board of many other labor history journals around the world. What is your appraisal about this kind of publications? How do they*



*fit in a market increasingly controlled by big publishing houses that usually don't offer free access? What is the relationship between this journals and a broader audience that go beyond the academic sphere?*

–It depends from journal to journal, of course. First, about the capitalist enterprise taking control of the journals: our journal, the *International Review of Social History* is property of the institute. Cambridge University Press publishes it but it's not the owner, so we can always change to another publisher. It's different to some other journals that are owned by publishers, I think that's the case of the *International Labor and Working Class History*, although I'm not completely sure. As far as the access, we have a moving wall, I think after two years, everything is fully available to everybody on the internet. And I must say that being with a publisher like Cambridge has been very good for the journal, because Cambridge also sells these packages of a number of journals together to university libraries. So that means our circulation has tripled over the last years, because of the electronic versions that are sold in packages. This is also true for the *ILWCH*, by the way, they have a roughly a similar circulation. It must be around 2.500/3.000 paid copies.

*–In Argentina the relationship between journals devoted to labor history and the movements is closer, maybe more similar to the 1960s or 1970s, like the Radical History Review, that started more as an activist publications...*

–This was never the case of our journal. We started in 1936. It has always been very academic. But *ILWCH* comes more from the movement of the seventies, and you can still see that, they usually have more contemporary issues. *Working USA* is also more popular. We have more of this, like *Zapruder World* in Italy. More for a broader readership.

*–Going back to the theoretical questions of global labor history. You made a strong point that not only waged labor should be assessed. And your current project is a history of precariousness...*

–I'm doing this together with Jan Breman. Our central idea is that the "standard employment relationship", which we had for some time in Europe, and partly also in the US and other advanced capitalist countries (steady income, unlimited contracts, enough money to sustain a small family, a male bread winner image, social insurance, some worker's rights in the company), all this is breaking down, of course in different speeds, in Germany still 70% of the population have a standard employment relationship. Gender is important here, because women are more often not getting this

kind of contract. What we now think, and we have to work on it, is that the standard employment relationship was only possible for the 20% of the population, over 30-40 years. Now it will not completely disappear, you will always have a core of workers, that will have special treatment because of their knowledge or special importance for the firm, but in general precarianization and informalization are increasing. The hypothesis is that the normal situation under capitalism for free wage labors is precariousness. And that only under special circumstances, and for short periods of time, it is possible to have a deviation from the norm.

*–In some ways it's an argument similar to Thomas Piketty's. That the post war growth is the exception, and not the rule. And don't you think that is kind of an orthodox interpretation in terms of Marxism?*

–It's very orthodox. Marx himself would have agreed with us on this. He didn't anticipate this standard employment relationship...

*–You also mentioned that this global labor history project at first was more oriented to labor relations. This project that you are now working on is also related to labor relations in a broad sense. Do you think that it implied a movement from the previous interest in the IISH, more related to the agency of workers? Or is that also coming back? What are the possible links between both spheres?*

–As far as precarianization, I think there is a direct connection with the defense of interests by trade unions. On the one hand, the weakening of trade unions supports precarianization. On the other hand, precarianization furthers the decline of trade unions. From a global perspective, nowadays, and this is what the ITUC says, 7% of the world's labor force is organized in unions, which is a very low figure. And it's declining, because in most countries trade union density is going down. So you see a decline of the traditional labor movement, but at the same time you see all these mutual organizations that I describe in *Workers of the world*, mutual insurances, against sickness, etc. So in a way it takes us back 150-200 years, to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the labor movement had a lot of this, also in Argentina. Maybe it's the origin of a new labor movement, of the precariously organized workers. I think that if the current world of trade unions wants to remain or be vibrant, they will have to adapt their style to this new situation. The traditional trade union movements, the AFL-CIO or whatever, they are all focused with collective bargaining, so you have a group of employers sitting together with the unions. But for casual workers and so called atypical workers who sometimes have different employers at the same time or change

employers every few weeks, this does not work. So you need new kinds of interest policies for trade unions than before. That's part of the challenge.

And connected to this, socialdemocrats are declining everywhere, or if they are not declining they do not know who they are. Communist parties are weakened, as far as they still exist. I have a very nice graph of the French Communist Party, where you can see that it goes up until 1951 and then it goes down until today, so actually it has nothing to do with the Cold war, it's a longer process. So the traditional working class parties are disappearing, somehow. So the traditional ally of the unions is also disappearing. So this also call for a new kind of political organization, and here we are again. We need an international political organization, radical, to the left of the social democrats and the communists.

*-Where do you think such perspective or organization would draw upon?*

-One lesson in history is that instantly successful parties or organizations had a quick start. Usually are partly built through taking over parts of previous organizations. If they have to build from scratch, it takes much longer to build a viable organization. So if you can take over part of existing organizations, it's easier...

*-I find this similar to what you said before about the Bolshevik party not being Leninist. When you say it's better to make a quick start I can't help but think that this idea of "starting from scratch" is more related to the tradition of WITBD... There are clearly two experiences in Europe everybody would think of, Podemos and Syriza, in a way they took over part of other organizations... What would you say about them?*

-They are signs of change. After this crisis of the traditional parties, new solutions are being sought. But at the same time you see that what we need for this political parties is a clear line, that's the problem with Syriza, of course, I don't know much about Podemos. You need a clear policy, which is in a way uncompromising. Of course in politics you always make compromises, but you need to know why you make them and where to stop making compromises, because they are unacceptable. And a clear vision of what has to be done, and how you want to reorganize society. This is a nice circle you made from bolshevism to bolshevism.