On Circulation Struggles

Today’s left is beset by a lack of strategic reflection. After decades of being weakened, the various forces that comprise the left have been set on the back foot, reacting against the active forces of capital and the state. They have been fractured into a plurality of small-scale and independent actions that rarely merge into anything larger. In particular, there has been the decline of strategic thinking—the self-reflection on the relationship between means and ends, tactics and goals. This article is intended as a small contribution to the reinvigoration of strategic reflection, examining the recent popularity of the blockade as a potent political tactic. As with every tactic, however, there are limits to its effective use, and the mindless application of this tactic in every situation risks reducing its power and overlooks the opportunity costs involved in channeling scarce political energy into ineffective avenues. That is to say, a lack of strategic reflection not only hinders political success; it actively militates against it.

In recent years, it has become a dogma to claim that struggles around the point of production are largely over. In the West, there has certainly been a significant decline in the share of manufacturing employment—and as a result, a significant decline in industrial action in this sector. Union density has dropped across the Western world, though with marginal holdouts in the public sector. But while it picks out some truths of our situation, the claim that production struggles are over is only a partial perspective. The decline in production struggles in the West has been matched by the rise in other countries. China is perhaps the most notable case, where the labour movement has managed to gain significant increases in real wages through their struggles. A similar story holds for much of Latin America and South Asia as well, and looks likely to take hold in Africa as China and American capital flows into the region searching after new cheap labour sources. So the claim that production struggles are over is a peculiarly Eurocentric conceit. However, to say production struggles still have importance is not the same as saying they will be the revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat. The latter claim, for a variety of reasons, does not hold.

Moreover, even within the core capitalist countries, production struggles still have some notable efficacy, particularly in sectors dependent on lean production. The reduction in inventory and reliance on just-in-time supply chains means that these sectors are highly susceptible to worker agitation. Yet all this must be set in the undeniable context that manufacturing is in decline in the Western world. And indeed, in relative terms, even developing countries are reaching a turning point where manufacturing employment is in decline. The phenomenon of premature deindustrialisation is likely to be one of the key events these economies will have to face up to in the coming years, and this will have direct economic costs for the employer (or the workforce involved in circulation). In a recent report, the ILO notes that in the wake of the 2008 crisis, supply-chain-related jobs have dropped and have yet to return to pre-crisis levels. A sluggish turn in global trade, combined with increasing (though still distant) parity in wages between places like China and the core capitalist countries, along with increased automation are likely behind the drop in supply-chain employment. The rise of fully automated ports, self-driving vehicles, and automated warehouses portends even further diminishment of jobs in this sector. Certain stages—such as the picking stage in warehouses—remain labour-intensive, but even this is the focus of immense research to overcome. If one of the classic arguments against the strength of production struggles has been the decline in manufacturing employment, a similar conclusion must follow for circulation struggles as global employment in this area declines. This, in other words, poses a long-term constraint on the power of these struggles.

Despite these qualifications, circulation struggles are likely to become more and more important as surplus populations grow, and as movements around inequality, police brutality, racism, and sexism continue to seek potent points of leverage. Point of production struggles have been significantly constrained in many cases, and point of circulation struggles offer a new avenue for political struggles. But the use of this tactic, as with any tactic, must be situated within a broader strategic reflection on how to build the power of these movements. Only this will enable a better future to be built.