

Panel 24: Contemporary and Historical Aspects of Labour Regulations and Labour Standards

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Abstract: The panel addresses contemporary and historical aspects of labour regulations and labour standards. The historical section of the panel focuses on the histories of colonial and early pre-colonial labour regulation and social policy in South Asia. It seeks to combine an analysis of the general principles of labour legislation and regulation in their various forms with specific work-regimes and spaces: cotton mills in Bombay, for instance, or maritime labour on board ship in the Indian Ocean. Thematically, it invites diverse contributions, e.g. on the evolution of labour contracts between the eighteenth and twentieth century and the principles they encased; the emergence of factory legislation at the end of the nineteenth century and its impact upon the shape of industrial relations; the reshaping of urban spaces and housing in the early twentieth century at the confluence of state initiatives, industrialists' strategies and popular politics. All these themes foreground the importance of a many-sided understanding of regulation – of work, capital, and space – and the establishment of standards and principles, both legal and informal, that came to govern industrial relations in the colonial period.

The contemporary section of the panel moves the spotlight on to how labour regulation and labour standards have developed in the context of globalisation. It takes its cue from the contradiction between the 'race to the bottom' that can be the consequence of globalisation, and the international agenda for improvement in labour conditions which aim to create 'decent work' for all. This has now been complicated further by the on-going global economic crisis.

The international decent work agenda has received a good deal of attention by South Asian governments, social activists and scholars, as have some of the consequences of globalisation for labour and self-employed in South Asia. On this backdrop, the panel seeks to combine specific case studies with considerations of the overall relationship between globalisation and the 'decent work for all' agenda in the Region. It will be concerned with labour standard developments in all sectors of the economies of the South Asian countries, and will cover issues such as increased labour market flexibility and deregulation in the formal economy, labour relations in the informal economy, migrant labour conditions and bonded labour relations.

Specifically, the contemporary section welcomes contributions which can deepen our understanding in two interrelated areas.

- The interaction between liberalisation, economic deregulation, and labour market flexibility on the one hand, and labour market regulation and informalisation of the economy on the other.
- Moves to counteract greater flexibilisation/informalisation through individual resistance or collective actions organised by unions, movements, the corporate sector, NGOs and political parties and the role/policies of the state actors, both national and international.

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