

people in China. Indeed, the Chinese government estimates in 2004 that 114 million people had already exited the countryside, fleeing poverty and expropriation in search of employment as migrant workers in the cities. Some government experts believe the number of displaced, landless workers will hit 300 million by 2020 and eventually reach 500 million.²⁹³

Dispossession, Enclosure, War, and Displacement

What we are witnessing in China, in other words, is the most gigantic process of “primitive accumulation” in world history. Dispossessed peasants, driven from the land, are being transformed into urban proletarians on an unprecedented scale—literally in the hundreds of millions, massively exceeding the scale of the earliest process of original accumulation in Britain.²⁹⁴ In the twenty-five years after 1978, China’s employed working class tripled, growing from 120 million to 350 million.²⁹⁵ Huge numbers of these workers—perhaps 150 million at present—are rural migrants, lacking the right to residency and to health care and education in the cities in which they work. And, as we have seen, hundreds of millions more will be on the move in the coming years, as market relations continue to remake the Chinese countryside.

Moreover, displacement is not just a rural phenomenon in China. As the real estate market booms and land prices rise, older working class residents are also being driven out of their homes in urban centers. Between 1990 and 2007, a million and a quarter residents were evicted from plebeian quarters of Beijing to make way for upscale housing, shopping malls, high-end restaurants, and Olympic construction projects.²⁹⁶ Similar processes of displacement have been engineered in Shanghai, including mass demolitions of traditional housing in preparation for the city's 2010 Expo, in some cases to provide space for the likes of Starbucks and Krispy Kreme donuts.²⁹⁷ Not surprisingly, dispossession of this sort has sparked protest and pitched battles in a rising stream of clashes over land grabs.

That other ostensible economic success story of our moment, India, has also been the site of significant battles over land and displacement. When talking about the Indian "miracle," it is worth reminding ourselves that, while the country has certainly produced its super rich—forty wealthy Indians were worth a total of over \$350 billion in 2007, or nearly \$9 billion apiece—more than three-quarters of the population lives on less than \$2 per day. The *Global Hunger Index 2008* reports that 200 million Indians suffer from hunger. Notwithstanding all the hype about India's booming economy, the country's ranking in the U.N. Human Development Index has actually fallen—to 134th place today.²⁹⁸ In this context, land expropriations have sparked major confrontations in states such as Punjab, Jharkhand, Orissa, Maharashtra, and Gujarat, among others. In Orissa, tribal peoples at Kalinganagar have valiantly resisted a bauxite plant, while at Jagatsinghpur protests against land expropriation for a Korean steel company have included kidnappings of company officials. But the most sustained and courageous resistance to displacement in India has come from the hundreds of thousands who are being forced from villages along the banks of the River Narmada and its tributaries. Around fifty million people in India have been dispossessed due to giant dam projects in the last half-century, and a majority of these are *adivasis*, indigenous peoples often referred to as *tribals*. The scale of the Narmada development is overwhelming: thirty

major dams and over one hundred medium-sized ones, as well as three thousand minor dams, all part of a project that will displace two hundred thousand people by 2040. Organized under the banner of the Save Narmada Movement (NBA), these people, frequently led by women from the affected communities, have for more than twenty years used sit-ins, marches, court challenges, and hunger strikes to stop evictions.²⁹⁹

But the most controversial struggles over displacement in India—at least for the Left—have been those in West Bengal, which have pitted the Left Front government, promoting industrial “development” by domestic and foreign capital, against peasants in Singur and Nandigram, who have resisted eviction from lands that hold their farms, schools, temples, and mosques. These struggles have repeatedly erupted in violence, most tragically so in March 2007, when the government sent thousands of police into rural Nandigram, provoking a conflict in which fourteen peasant protestors were killed.³⁰⁰ These battles highlight the price of “development” under neoliberal capitalism, as even governments of the electoral Left court corporate favor in desperate bids to woo investment. And with a slumping global economy reducing investment projects, governments will feel even more pressure to ignore environmental regulations, repress labor rights, and expropriate land and resources in order to attract capital.

If forced displacement is one part of the story, so is economic dispossession caused by the neoliberal devastation of agriculture in the South. As part of structural adjustment, the IMF and western leaders compelled countries in the South to remove subsidies to farmers and open up markets to mass imports of food from the West. Yet while farmers in the South are denied government support, agribusinesses and in the North receive \$300 billion in subsidies every year. These funds, combined with technological advantages, enable them to undersell Third World peasants. The result has been a cataclysmic collapse of agriculture in the South, displacing farmers from the land in the face of rising costs and falling prices for their goods. “Free trade” with Canada and the U.S. has destroyed farming in Mexico and driven hundreds of thousands from the land. Coupled with plant closures and public

sector layoffs, peasant dispossession has resulted in half a million Mexicans emigrating to the U.S. each year since NAFTA came into effect. Marketization has had equally devastating effects in India. So desperate have things become that two hundred thousand farmers committed suicide in the decade 1997–2007—two suicides every hour.

After decades of heeding the neoliberal bullies, fewer countries in the world are able to feed their own populations. Since 1990 food production has consistently failed to keep up with world population growth. Of course, less supply has been marvelous news for agribusiness and food merchants, who have enjoyed soaring prices and profits, but not for the more than one billion people on the planet who are undernourished.³⁰¹ The intensifying wave of global enclosures will only make all this worse.

Prior to the crisis, governments and giant food companies were scouring the planet for arable land. The most publicized of these land grabs have been in Africa, where twenty million hectares have been bought or leased by state agencies from Saudi Arabia, China, the Gulf states, and South Korea among others. Impoverished Sudan, which has already handed over a million hectares to South Korea and the United Arab Emirates, intends to forfeit fully a fifth of its cultivable land to Arab governments. China meanwhile has become especially active in this area, negotiating scores of deals of its own for African land.³⁰² But it is not just land that is at issue here—water may be just as big a story. With the world confronting an emerging water crisis, command over land becomes a key means of controlling water. Describing the recent wave of global land deals, the chairman of Nestlé argues, “The purchases weren’t about land, but water. For with the land comes the right to the water linked to it.” As much as we are witnessing a global land grab at the moment, we are also in the midst, he insists, of “the great water grab.”³⁰³

Although it is African land sales and leases that have captured headlines, they may be exceeded in scale by parallel phenomena in Latin America. Here, food corporations and biofuel firms frequently lead the way, though mining and oil companies also figure prominently. Tens of millions of hectares across

the region, much of it communal lands of indigenous peoples, have passed into the hands of foreign multinationals.³⁰⁴ Indeed, much of the upsurge of indigenous militancy in Latin America in recent years has been a direct response to government efforts to sell off land to resource corporations. In Peru, this has led to military conflicts with the Shuar people over plans to drill for oil in the Amazon; to disputes in Chile with the Mapuche over logging; and to armed confrontations in Ecuador with native peoples resisting mining companies. In the Central American countries of Guatemala and El Salvador, peasants and indigenous peoples have been killed as well, while protesting the actions of Canadian-based mining corporations.³⁰⁵ Many of these conflicts crucially involve indigenous resistance to the environmental degradation that accompanies such dispossession, as land is converted to soil-depleting industrial farming, rainforests are logged, water systems polluted, land strip-mined, species killed off, and biodiversity reduced. In all these regards, capitalism truly reveals itself as "the enemy of nature," to use Joel Kovel's apt term.³⁰⁶

At the same time, we need to realize that many so-called "natural disasters" are seized upon as pretexts for corporations and governments to dispossess people. After Hurricane Mitch killed five thousand and displaced two million in 1998, for instance, the Honduran government repealed legislation prohibiting the sale of indigenous lands. Huge private mansions were then built on territory that had belonged to 150,000 Garifunas, the descendants of African slaves, who have lived on the Atlantic coast for over two hundred years. Governments in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia engaged in similar manipulations after the tsunami of 2004, seizing coastal areas for hotel development. Two years later, New Orleans became the scene of widespread displacement of African-Americans as a result of Hurricane Katrina. One hundred billion dollars in government funds may have been allocated for disaster relief, but huge chunks were funneled into the hands of giant firms like Blackwater and Halliburton, which have also raked it in from government contracts in Iraq. Meanwhile, perhaps a third of the residents of New Orleans, the bulk of them African-American, have been displaced throughout the

U.S. Many were evicted by landlords while they were in shelters or homes of friends and relatives elsewhere. At the same time, given the housing shortage created by the destruction, rents rose by almost 50 percent. To make matters worse, the New Orleans City Council used the rebuilding process to attack public housing. In the face of dispossession under “disaster capitalism,” communities mobilized to resist.³⁰⁷ Sensing what was coming, the Community Labor United coalition issued a prescient statement while the city was still underwater: “The people of New Orleans will not go quietly into the night, scattering across this country to become homeless in countless other cities while federal relief funds are funneled into rebuilding casinos, hotels, chemical plants, and the wealthy white districts of New Orleans . . .”³⁰⁸ As government moneys have been used overwhelmingly for everything but rebuilding working class communities, social justice advocates have raised the right of return as a fundamental demand for the displaced of New Orleans.

Economic coercion and manipulated “disasters” have become key mechanisms of accumulation by dispossession. So has war. Wherever land and water are being seized—along with the timber and mineral, gas, and oil deposits they contain—violence lurks. Across the planet, regional wars and civil wars are flaring over lands and resources, and all of this is likely to get much worse in the context of global slump. In much of Africa, wars are repeatedly fuelled by battles over lands that contain diamonds, copper, oil, and more. Now, conflicts are raging over control of the water resources of the Lake Victoria/Nile River system.³⁰⁹ Of course, few countries have endured such prolonged histories of civil war as a weapon of dispossession as has Colombia. Across the generations, peasants, indigenous peoples, and Afro-Colombians have been violently evicted from their lands so that capital could exploit minerals, oil fields, and commercial agriculture. In recent years, the Colombian military and right-wing death squads, in collaboration with the U.S. military and its “war on drugs,” have dispossessed another two million Colombians.³¹⁰ While mainstream commentators view the displacement of millions of Colombians as a side effect of war, it is in fact its central

purpose. As Colombian economist Hector Mondragon explains, "There are not only displaced people because there is war, but rather there is war in order that there be displaced people."³¹¹

Most of these millions, in Colombia and elsewhere are internally displaced. But tens of millions are forced by war, poverty, and landlessness to migrate across borders. After years of civil war and repression, for instance, there are more peoples from El Salvador living in Mexico and the U.S. than in their country of birth. The plight of such migrant workers is one of the urgent political issues of the era of neoliberal dispossession.

Capitalism, Migrant Workers, and the Global Slump

There is nothing very complicated about it. Displace people from their lands; contaminate their water systems; bring in armed thugs, troops, and death squads to enforce evictions and crush resistance—do all this and people will flee if they can. Lacking influence and connections, and concerned for their lives and those of their children, they will often cross borders with only a bag in hand, handing over their earnings to human smugglers who promise safe passage to a new life. Some will perish at sea on overcrowded boats, as have many Haitians; others will die of severe heat or suffocation in trucks or train cars. Even more will be raped, beaten, or robbed en route, and many arrested, thrown into barbaric detention centers—Australia has set up barbed-wire camps in the sweltering outback—and separated from children and loved ones. Incarcerated for years, subjected to beatings by guards, denied medical attention, their hearts and bodies frequently break down. In a six-and-a-half-year period from 2003 to 2010, for instance, 107 migrants died in the custody of U.S. detention centers, while officials often lied about the circumstances.³¹²

The criminalization of global migrants is among the most obscene features of the world in which we live. Rather than prosecute mining, energy, and agribusiness firms from the West, many of which carry armed thugs on their payrolls,³¹³ for stealing lands and destroying ecosystems, governments in the North instead arrest, detain, humiliate, and terrify the millions of people forced

from their lands by death squads, troops, civil wars, hunger and poverty. In the U.S., immigration authorities direct a militarized system of border patrol, spending \$2 billion per year building walls and posting armed police along the border with Mexico. Every year, hundreds die trying to cross through that militarized zone. Of those who make it across that or another border, hundreds of thousands are apprehended—more than three hundred thousand men, women, and children every year in the United States. Once arrested, these terrified migrants are held in a system of four hundred private detention centers that are not subject to any binding regulations. Immigration detention is big business in America, with private security corporations receiving between \$70 and \$95 per day for each person they lock up. As with every other capitalist enterprise, it all pivots on minimizing costs (such as food and medical care for detainees) in order to maximize profits. Adhering to this script, Corrections Corporation of America, formerly known as Wackenhut, enjoyed a 29 percent jump in 2007 profits.³¹⁴ Meanwhile, detained migrants suffer and die in centers that a former agent for the U.S. State Department describes as “hell-holes.” Conditions in these centers, he argues, “can only be described as subhuman—dangerously filthy, and without the most rudimentary sanitary facilities or basic medical care. Those occupying these hell-holes,” he continues, “include thousands of legitimate refugees and asylum seekers—who pose no threat to the United States and who have committed no acts of wrongdoing.”³¹⁵ True—except that, in the Global North, to be a poor refugee or immigrant of color is a crime.

Of course, businesses and government do not actually want to get rid of immigrant labor. As many as fourteen million undocumented laborers may be working in the United States—cleaning hotels and office buildings, cooking in restaurant kitchens, caring for children in the homes of the wealthy, doing the back-breaking work of picking fruits and vegetables in fields and orchards, sewing garments in backstreet sweatshops, doing heavy lifting on construction sites. As one *New York Times* reporter has noted, were all these workers expelled tomorrow, the economic results would be devastating: “thousands of hotels, restaurants, meat-

packing plants, landscaping companies, and garment factories would likely close.”³¹⁶ So, business wants these workers, and government knows it. But deprived of basic civil and human rights, these workers can be paid below minimum wages, worked excessive hours without overtime pay, denied medical and vacation benefits, kept out of unions and generally bullied and intimidated. Always, the threat of arrest and deportation hangs over their heads. Indeed, Immigration and Customs Enforcement harassment, raids, and arrests have been regularly used in the U.S. to break union drives.³¹⁷

While looking at the plight of immigrant and undocumented workers in the United States, it is important not to let other governments off the hook. Italy, for instance, has more than four million undocumented migrant workers, working as nannies and picking fruit for less than \$30 a day. In early 2010, thousands of these migrants were apprehended and sent to makeshift detention camps in the midst of a frightening wave of racist violence.³¹⁸ In all these contexts, rightless migrants are the ideal neoliberal workers: insecure, bullied, low-paid. In their case once more, state power is mobilized to create the fear essential to market discipline.

Most recently, governments around the world have been rewriting immigration policies in order to create huge pools of legal but precarious immigrants. In so doing, they arrive at something approximating a capitalist utopia for the regulation of labor: temporary migrants on limited work visas who labor for capital but receive neither citizenship nor even an enduring right to stay. This is flexible, precarious labor at its best: brought in when needed, expelled when not. Unlike the undocumented, temporary migrants are registered, processed, documented and tracked, but they remain effectively without rights. By bringing in migrants on temporary work visas, western states construct a subclass of rightless proletarians, workers who, while physically here, are meant to be socially and political absent, i.e. denied basic rights and access to citizenship.

American policy has been moving persistently in this direction since the late 1990s, under pressures from employer groups like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Hotel

and Lodging Association, and the National Retail Federation. Europe too has seen the expansion of so-called "guest worker" programs—as if it is "guests" that are overworked, underpaid, denied healthcare, stuffed into decrepit housing, and evicted at the whim of their "hosts." East Asia is also increasing contract labor programs, with hundreds of thousands of domestic, factory and construction workers from countries like the Philippines now toiling in South Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Meanwhile, about ten million migrant laborers, many from India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Eritrea, toil in the Gulf states, where they are denied basic social rights and frequently subjected to long hours, physical abuse, and unpaid wages.

Then there is Canada, a nation whose rulers like to present themselves as caring and compassionate. In recent years, Canadian governments have halved refugee acceptance rates while shifting markedly to a migrant labor system organized through the so-called Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP). This system severely limits the rights and length of stay of migrant workers, keeping them in a state of precariousness with respect to their residency in Canada. While workers brought in under this program pay taxes, they are denied access to basic social services. In 2007, Canada brought in four times more temporary migrant laborers than permanent residents. Then, as the world recession hit, the Canadian government got into the business of conducting American-style armed raids on farms and factories employing undocumented workers. Held on buses and shipped to detention centers, many detainees were deported without ever seeing a lawyer. At the same time, the government was advising employers to lay off temporary migrants before Canadian citizens or permanent residents.³¹⁹

All of this serves to remind us that capitalism remains as racialized as ever, and that one of the principal manifestations of racial capitalism today is the regulation and persecution of migrant laborers. Millions of poor workers of color from the Global South are hounded, arrested, detained, bullied, mercilessly exploited in homes, sweatshops and on farms, denied social services and civil rights, and subjected to racist attacks of the sort

that broke out in Italy in early 2010, when African migrants were shot and beaten with metal rods.

And yet, with amazing courage, migrant workers are standing up and fighting back. African migrants in Italy did just that in early 2010, stoning police and smashing shop windows to protest racist assaults. And in France around the same time, thousands of undocumented workers joined strikes and sit-ins at restaurants and building sites, demanding legalization of their status. Hundreds squatted in a Paris building, where they cooked and cleaned in common while enjoying classes in philosophy, immigration law, and the French language provided by retired teachers and political activists.³²⁰ Perhaps the largest and most inspiring mobilizations by migrants and immigrant workers have come in the United States itself where, in 2006, up to a million people reclaimed May Day as a genuine moment of working class internationalism. Marching and demonstrating in the streets, immigrant workers organized by progressive union locals, workers' centers, and social movements reclaimed the streets in a militant and celebratory protest against second-class citizenship. While much immigrant rights organizing shifted to the grassroots level—where groups like the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance helped unionize poultry plants employing new migrants, and overturned discriminatory laws³²¹—it burst forth on the national scene again in 2010 in response to legislation in Arizona designed to use racial profiling to target immigrants. As tens of thousands took to the streets on May Day 2010—150,000 in Los Angeles, 65,000 in Milwaukee, 20,000 in Chicago—the spirit of workers' solidarity was in the air. "Todos somos Arizona," chanted the crowds: We are all Arizona. "No somos ilegales," they shouted: We are not illegal.

We shall pick up that story in the next chapter. For it clearly demonstrates that the fight for migrant justice has become a touchstone for any truly transformative politics of the Left. The attacks on migrant workers today show us the real face of neo-liberal capitalism in an era of global slump, just as migrant workers struggles for justice show us the possibilities for a genuinely radical form of working class politics. As financialized capitalism

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accentuates racialized dispossession around the globe, the only authentic politics of working class resistance and social transformation will be those based on unyielding solidarity with the displaced, the racially oppressed and the undocumented. Joined to movements for a living wage, for land and water, for healthcare and education, for gender and indigenous justice, for housing and environmental sustainability, such struggles might engender a Great Resistance that could chart a way out of the displacement, poverty, and insecurity that will otherwise be hallmarks of the decade of austerity.