

## Interwoven Threads

### Building a Labour Countermovement in Bangalore's Export-Oriented Garment Industry

**Keywords:** industrial relations, garments, resistance, gender, identity, organising, international solidarity, Bangalore

*This paper approaches globalisation as a contradictory and dialectical phenomenon, one in which the tools of exploitation are being subverted into instruments of labour resistance. Through a study of the Garment And Textile Workers' Union (GATWU) the paper observes how feminised workplaces are bringing to the fore issues of gender oppression, flexible conditions are expanding union organisational capacity and the universality of capital has led to transnational links between workers. While the global neoliberal regime weakens traditional paths to unionisation, it has concurrently facilitated alternative strategies of worker organisation and resistance. GATWU members both battle immediate economic issues while transforming worker organisation from an atomised factory workstation, to assembly line, to outside the factory gates, and finally into social movement and transnational spaces. The research takes note of how GATWUs organising strategy both supplements and comes in conflict with struggles of gender and class, the local and global.*

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Along with the constantly diminishing number of the magnates of capital, who usurp and monopolise all advantages of this process of transformation, grows the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, exploitation; but with this too grows the revolt of the working class, a class always increasing in numbers, and disciplined, united, organised by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself...Capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of Nature, its own negation

- Karl Marx (1867)

The era of late neoliberalism has witnessed the large-scale relocation, or 'globalisation', of capital from the global north to south resulting in dramatic changes in emergent 'global cities'<sup>i</sup>. Burgeoning cities in the global south are at the receiving end of the transformation from peasant to proletariat, from proletariat to precariat, from public to private, are now being reconstituted from centres of production to spaces of consumption. This has led to incalculable misery, but has also facilitated new forms of social and economic struggle. The mounting downward pressure of globally fluid predatory capital alongside gendered workplaces compounds superexploitation with oppression, whilst simultaneously opening up vistas and innovations of resistance in the new international division of labour.

India's traditional trade unions were able to proliferate under capital's previous manifestation, which was marked by import substitution industrialisation, a heavily regulated industrial relations system and a sizeable public manufacturing sector. However, conventional methods of organisation/unionisation have failed to make inroads in a global garment sector that embodies some of the most extreme conditions of the neoliberal workplace. The export-oriented garment sector remains heavily 'feminised' with women comprising a disproportionate number of the factory's lowest rung; is highly 'flexibilised', meaning employment is increasingly open-ended and the work-force temporary; and with outsourced production the sector remains one of the most 'globalised' in the world (Hale and Wills 2005). These factors have made the sector largely insulated from the establishment of workers' rights, a fact not limited to India, and have led to contracting wages, ineffective bargaining and the almost universal obsolescence of unions in the global garment sector (Ballinger 2009; WRC 2013).

It is within the backdrop of feminisation, flexibilisation, and globalisation that garment workers began to look for innovative methods by which to organise. The paper begins by outlining a geographic and economic history of Bangalore. It is through this lens that the paper argues that the position of workers under globalised and flexibilised capital has seen Bangalore's garment workers incorporate a strategy of community and gender-based organising alongside internationalism, which are not borne out of romantic illusions of international proletarianism but out of necessity and out of survival. The paper maintains that the internationalism grows out of the mobility of dis-integrated transnational capital, and similarly gender-based community organising arises out of internal capital mobility, urban spatial change and the feminisation of the industry. Indeed, decentralised and agile trade union strategies are a reaction to a decentralised opponent.

Marx (1867) argues that subjective agency is borne out of the working class whose location in production gave them the power to act and that the very force of hardship (partially) precipitates revolt. The paper supports a number of Marxian claims, but, in addition, maintains that it is workers' agency that leads to innovations within capital, concepts conceived by the Italian political theorist of the *Operaismo* ('workerism') and popularised by some world systems theorists and labour geographers (Silver 2003; Herod 1997; Tronti 1966). The innovations of capital are, in part, a response to the subjective agency of labour. Indeed, contemporary changes in capitalist production unearth their own methods of resistance (Hardt and Negri 2005). Arguing that innovations of capital are shaped by the actions of labour and that labour is also shaped by capital, the paper traces the historical geography of capitalism and analyses the global garment sector in particular.

Since the mid-2000s, members of Bangalore's Garment And Textile Workers Union (GATWU), as part of a new network of trade unions and social movement organisations have begun injecting into the landscape their own spatial vision winning power from below against the employer, the state, and, most significantly, against transnational capital. The union has reached beyond

spheres of material production (factory floor) into social reproduction (home/community) in order to resist capital at disparate vantage points. Their campaigns are transcontinental and cross-sectoral: they attempt to organise workers at the disparate points of production and consumption, opening new avenues to resist an intensifying global race to the bottom.

This paper outlines the ways in which GATWU has incorporated strategies of traditional trade unions as well as NGOs, to build collective power on the shopfloor and shantytown, on issues beyond the workplace, while developing organic links with international allies to successfully increase union density and win material gains<sup>ii</sup>. The paper develops a number of lines of inquiry, specifically looking at three phenomena: feminisation, informalisation, and capital fluidity, to understand how capital's obstacles have been transformed into aids for organising labour.

The strategies employed by GATWU expose 'globalisation' as more of a double-edged-sword than either defeatist organised labour or triumphant organised capital will admit. Seen dialectically (*ex malo bonum*: the idea that good things sometimes come out of very bad ones), what began as a mechanism to counterweigh capital's profitability crisis (Harvey 2005) is now exposing its own duality. Marx maintained that capitalism's central contradiction of bringing workers together to amass ever-larger profits resulted in the coalescing a workers' struggle, as capital's toilers evolve into its own gravediggers. However, sectional divides and geographic unevenness meant that working class organisation fought only for their immediate advances rather than longer-term change, union members rather than the working-class as a whole (Gindin 2014).

Karl Polanyi states, 'for a century the dynamics of modern society was governed by a double movement: the market expanded continuously but this movement was met by a countermovement checking the expansion in definite directions' (1944, 130). Now such 'countermovements' are showing early signs of transforming liberalised borders into labour internationalism, converting feminised workplaces into intersectional emancipatory devices, and disrupting flexibilised practices by utilizing them as a means to expand shop-by-shop and into the community. In a practical application of Karl Polanyi's 'double movement', GATWU subverts the tools of exploitation in their organising to the 'actually existing working class'. After decades of failed attempts to make inroads in the most female-dominated, outsourced and mobile sectors, Bangalore's garment workers are now presenting their own coherent and organic opposition, transforming instruments of immiseration into ones for liberation.

The research is based on six months as a participant observer, working as a labour organiser with GATWU between 2012 and 2013, as well as weekly follow-up calls with GATWU organisers into 2014. I remained a Kannada translator for International Union League for Brand Responsibility ('League') conference calls. In addition, during my research I doubled as a translator on factory investigations for the Workers' Rights Consortium, an independent labour monitoring organisation, which gave me unique access to the factory floor and allowed me to ask questions of company managers and security guards. The

study also compiled data from primary sources like court cases, union meeting notes, and district labour office documents, alongside thirty-five interviews with workers, trade union leaders, factory owners and brand representatives.<sup>iii</sup> Some information was gathered through freedom of information due to suppression orders (also known as a 'gag order'), such as the FFI/JKPL-CCC case.

### **Bangalore's Labour Landscape**

Asia's surplus population and low-cost materials drove the engine of global capital into the new century and led to a 'great doubling' (Freeman 2005) of the global labour force since the 1970s. Karnataka, India's eighth largest state by area and its ninth by population (with roughly 55 million people) has been a case study in neoliberal structural adjustment for over two decades now. Modern neoliberal vernacular has even begun using verbs like 'bangalor'ed' (a general term for lay-offs caused by outsourcing) emphasising the high regard in which the state of Karnataka and its capital city Bangalore are held by investors as a 'global city'. Further, Bangalore has seen the greatest feminisation of labour in India, in which 85% Bangalore's garment workers are women (Chetty 2012), and continues to enable rapid capitalist development due to its abundance of cheap and flexible labour (Tewari 2008).

Bangalore's postcolonial industrial development can be described in three phases. The first phase began in the 1940s when Bangalore became a ministerial city and saw the establishment of a large public sector, primarily to defence manufacturing. Each of these factories was spatially scattered, employing thousands of workers across the city. Disaggregated spatial production led to an expansion of the city.

The next phase, beginning in the 1960s, transformed Bangalore into a centre for higher education with many research facilities, colleges, and important business and engineering institutions such as the Indian Institute of Science. This development led to an influx of students to the city from other parts of India and a expansion in infrastructure. By this point the public sector workers, which had developed robust trade unions and job protection could now afford to send their children to become engineers in these budding education centres, with students receiving training in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Electronics. Soon these public bodies and schools alongside cultural institutions began to form their own synchronised agglomerated clusters. This development made Bangalore appealing to international capital, easing the transition from a tech capital to a 'global city'. The final phase, starting in the 1980s, was the culmination of the previous developments and the introduction of a series of market reforms which led to an influx of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in both labour intensive blue collar sectors such as the garment sector, as well as labour intensive white-collar jobs in call centres and as ICT specialists. Each phase has built on previous stages whilst at the same time cleared the ground for new terrains of profitability. As an All India Trade Union Congress AITUC leader<sup>iv</sup> stated, 'Through a series of reforms, such as the introduction of the Voluntary Retirement Scheme, they were able to kill off public sector manufacturing'.

Most trade unions in India are affiliated to the twelve labour federations and almost all of these are highly bureaucratic, centralised and embedded within one of India's many political parties (Hammer 2010). One notable exception is the independent federation New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI) that formed in 2002, under the banner of 'Internationalism, Democracy, and Militancy', announcing a break from the rigid, politically entrenched sectarianism that plagued India's traditional trade union federations in order to agitate effectively. The NTUI, of which GATWU is a member union, brings together several independent unions around the country with leaders from various different tendencies from the Leninists to Maoists, to social democrats, and the so-called 'Ghandian socialists' (see Hensman, 2011; Menon & Nigam, 2007; *NTUI - Report of the Founding Conference*, 2006). Some, however, are not buying the hype: One AITUC leader<sup>v</sup> in Karnataka claimed that the NTUI would never be taken seriously until they affiliate to one of the political parties, saying 'it is bound to get politically aligned sooner or later. Trade unions cannot stand without political support'.

Trade union activity in the garment sector is based in the four primary garment industrial centres in India: Delhi, Tiripur, Chennai and Bangalore. However, independent factory-level unions and collective bargaining in the Indian garment sector remain almost entirely absent. The practical experience of garment trade unions begins at the point at which they attempt to gain recognition at a factory after reaching a union membership density of 10% of the workforce. The recognition of a 'charter of demands' has the practical effect of a binding agreement reached through collective bargaining between management and workers. But in Karnataka not a single garment factory has had their charter of demands successfully recognised. As GATWU organiser Pratibha attests, 'every single charter of demands we've submitted results in the immediate repression of workers at the factory, with our leaders being intimidated or dismissed, making it impossible to sustain the union and to win collective bargaining'. After the unions submits a registration application under section 6 of the Trade Union Act of 1926 to the office of Registrar, a phone call is usually made from the District Labour Commissioner to factory management. GATWU organisers suspect that management is informed of the details of the application in which union leaders are disclosed. This results in the leader being either illegally terminated or forced to leave 'through a payout or harassment'. Factory management use a number of methods to suppress union activity. If attempts to break the union internally are unsuccessful, factory management is known to use the local police force and hired gangsters or thugs to intimidate or assault workers and their family members<sup>vi</sup>. Sometimes factory management simply institutes an illegal factory lockout of union leaders and members<sup>vii</sup>.

### **From Production to Consumption**

To understand the ability of workers in Bangalore's garment sector to gain power a deeper analysis of the position of garment workers in global dis-integrated supply chains is necessary. Beverly Silver (2003) references Erik Olin Wright's work in differentiating the two sources of workers' power: associational and structural. Associational power is sourced from collective organisation usually through trade unions or political parties, whereas structural power is obtained simply through the position of particular workers in the

economic system. Structural power is broken down into two forms. The first is what Silver (2003, 13) calls 'marketplace bargaining power' which is based on labour market limitations: one example can be found in Bangalore's skilled ICT workforce in which a selection of the labour force possess the scarce skills demanded by employers. The second form is based on the strategic location in the economy. An example of this type is found with dockworkers that are able to conduct a large-scale disruption in circulation since ports cannot be relocated. Historically, the export oriented garment sector are more 'globalisable', with disintegrated value chains, and low-capital intensity, meaning that garment workers remain largely outside Wright and Silver's notion of structural power. Instead, gains within the sector have historically tended to come about through associational power (Kumar and Mahoney 2014), which have also been severely undermined by the hypermobility of capital under globalisation (Silver 2003). This hypermobility has also helped accelerate the growth of 'global cities' in the global south.

Since 1991, an in-flow of capital and labour resulted in a dramatic transformation of the social and economic geography of Bangalore and its surrounding areas. Indeed, Bangalore remained as a key site of export-oriented production throughout the 1990s, but by the late 2000s it emerged as a city for consumption. Through state-sanctioned land grabs, public-private partnerships, speculative development and the selling off of public land (Halbert and Rouanet 2013), Bangalore is undergoing a process, of what Harvey (2014) calls 'neo-haussmannisation', just as Paris' was under Georges-Eugène Haussmann's direction in the late-1800s. The process redefines capital-labour relations and reconfigures the city to optimise a consumption-oriented landscape mediated by a 'middle manager class'. The city is transformed into, what Henry Lefebvre (1991) described as, erected for the benefit of the 'rentier class', in which workers are transmuted into 'maggots in the rotting apple', dislocated from the core fleeing to the 'periphery' (symbolically and geographically), refitting the metropolis from a source of production into a point of consumption.

Bangalore has undergone its own a relocation of production in recent years. Since 2009, large export oriented garment suppliers, such as Shahi, Bombay Ryne, Gokaldas Exports, and Go Go International, have relocated production out of Bangalore to neighbouring cities due to a combination of labour market and macroeconomic policy rationales. Crucially, garment factories in Karnataka tend not to be in Export Processing Zones (EPZs), other than in the Hassan district, with entire regions assuming EPZ-like conditions through changes in macroeconomic state policy. Unlike many Delhi-based firms, where production networks are subcontracted to a number of smaller producers, relocating adds enormous 'sunk costs' for Bangalore's large garment firms. The three primary reasons for such relocations, described further below, are labour deficit, increasing property prices, and state policy.

First, beginning in 2006, Bangalore began to experience labour scarcity in both the skilled sector (Rai 2006) and the unskilled sector (FLA 2012). What had been a worker surplus feeding frenzy in the 1990s saw FDI outstrip labour in

Bangalore within two decades. Now workers find work in the sector with little effort.

Second, the ICT industry contributed to a real estate boom that has led to the relocation of industrial capital first to the city's dusty outskirts and then to neighbouring and regional cities. But the conversion of Bangalore from a site of production to one of consumption began in 1985 when then-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi introduced the Textile Policy (Srinivasulu 1996) decentralising the textile industry, which witnessed a 'corporate planning' policy which transformed Bangalore's large textile factories, many located in the city centre, to shopping malls, high-end restaurants, and luxury apartments to service the consumption practices of the middle class (Heitzman 1999). Much has been written about the effects of these policies on Mumbai's textile industry (Date 2006; Mukhopadhyay 2005) with little attention brought to similar consequences that befell Bangalore's textile industry. For example, Bangalore's Minerva Mills, Raja Mills, and Binny Mills employed more than eight thousand workers. Here, militancy can be traced back to India's anti-colonial struggles when workers undertook large-scale industrial action against British occupation (CB 2010). By the early 2000s, these mills were closed down and dismantled, with the land rights leased to well-connected private investors under the auspices of 'public-private partnerships'.

One apt example is found at Mantri Square, a shopping mall that opened its doors in 2010 as one of the largest in the country. The mall, built on the site where the textile factory Mysore Mills once stood, neighbours the wealthy residential area Kumara Park and Sheshadripuram and is owned by the Hindu-nationalist party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) supporting Venkaiah Naidu and Sushma Swaraj. The developmental and democratic process interweaves with patronage networks, particularly around traditional powers, a relic of colonialism further institutionalised in the post-colonial compromise (Cohn 1996). The two most powerful families in Bangalore that also own and operate many of the shopping malls in Bangalore are Mantri and the Prestige Group<sup>viii</sup>. Employees in these new developments are sometimes the very same workers who once laboured on the textile factory floor. Mantri Mall security guard Rajanna<sup>ix</sup> once worked at the Mysore Mills site as a machine operator, stating:

They closed the mill down even though production and profits remained high. I worked there for five years, our union was strong, and we went on strike to prevent the closure but to no avail... Today I receive Rs. 200 a day as an old watchman at the exact location where I received Rs. 1000 a day as a young factory worker... this is my karma.

Unlike the textile mills that were located in the centre of Bangalore, the garment industry emerged in the city's periphery. The on-going relocation of Bangalore's garment factories is an expansion of the domain of rentier Bangalore to its outer rims and a monopolisation of urban space.

Another potent symbol of this massive transformation is found in the booming private healthcare sector. Companies like HealthCare Global

Enterprises Ltd. (HCG) a chain of private cancer treatment centers, is part of a larger valorization of Indian healthcare (Chakravarthi 2011). Silk production and distribution sites once lined Sampangiram Nagar's roads but have been replaced by the glistening HCG Towers which have seen soaring profits and expansion, with a clientele that serves Bangalore's elites alongside a burgeoning health tourism market (Kaur, Vaidya, and Bhargava 2007). Nonetheless, the CITU officials, whose organization's headquarters operate under the shadow of the HCG Towers, talk of making organizing in-roads with cleaners and other staff in private healthcare companies like HCG.

Thirdly, Karnataka state government policy has incentivized production to move out of Bangalore. Between 2009 and 2014 the Karnataka government introduced a five-year subsidy called 'golden fabric opportunity' (*suwarna vastra neethi* in Sanskrit) for factories built in rural areas. Karnataka state instituted a subsidy rate for factories built on 'industrially backward districts', such as Kolar in Magadi Thaluk that witnessed a sharp rise in factory construction. If a factory was 100% export-oriented there was an additional subsidy for water and electricity, as well as the voiding of the land registration fee. Additionally, minimum wage variation between Bangalore and 'industrial backward districts' is 10 rupees a day, or 260 a month, further incentivising the shift from urban and rural.

Bangalore's shifts from a production to consumption centre and from public to private has led to a further weakening of traditional working class organisation and bases of power. Changes in the production process at the base generate their own neoliberal subjectivities at the superstructure. For instance, Bangalore shopping mall workers' sense of self now conforms to the logic of neoliberal policy and governmentality (Gooptu 2009). Retail workers are highly dismissive of trade unions, stable public sector workplaces and collective action as the failed organisational forms of their parents' generation. Instead flexible work conditions have been deployed, normalised, and discursively constructed as a career-development strategy, in which they internalise the 'enterprise form' of individual consumption, workplace upward mobility, and the thawing of class antagonisms. Under a similar logical extension, Harvey (2006; 2014) argues that forms of organisation that oppose capitalism tend to reflect the changing structures of capitalist modes of production itself. In this sense, workers in Bangalore's garment industry increasingly mirror the prevailing structure of neoliberalism away from traditional trade unions, with their emphasis on the state apparatus, political parties, and hierarchical organisation, towards horizontal, political autonomism, with a scepticism towards the state and its sectorial and national boundaries.

### **GATWU Organising History**

GATWU has made significant inroads and dramatic membership gains in Bangalore's garment sector, however union recognition has remained a challenge. In fact, there is not a single Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) in the Indian garment sector outside of Chennai where CBAs are a classic case of 'protection contract'<sup>x</sup>. In the case of Chennai these agreements merely restate the minimum wages and conditions delineated in the state and national law.



Minimum wages in India's garment sector operate more as maximum wages with widespread employer intransigence in the absence of effective trade unions. In the case of Chennai, for example, many of these CBAs have been documented to have agreements below the national wage averages of garment workers.<sup>xi</sup> The lack of trade union recognition is especially highlighted in Bangalore where there are 1,200 garment factories and not a single recognition agreement. While trade unions can register a factory via the state, the factory owners are the only ones who can recognize the union<sup>xii</sup>.

GATWU was founded in 2006 by Pratibha and Jayram two former garment workers after they broke away from the workers' rights NGO called 'Civil Initiatives for Development and Peace' (CIVDEP) due to 'strategic and political differences'<sup>xiii</sup>. GATWU has since grown, gaining around a thousand members a year. GATWU's entry into the Bangalore garment sector was the first effort by a union since the Communist Party of India – Marxist (CPM)-affiliated Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU) attempted to organise Ashoka Exports, owned by German Edith Kumar of EK brands, in 1999. Ashoka Exports was the largest factory in Bangalore and CITU had organised nearly all of its seven thousand workers into the union. The factory closed in 2000 and while there is an ongoing court case, 'the family holding the ownership of Ashoka Exports is no more' and 'no one comes on behalf of the management and no one is available to proceed with the auctioning process, making remuneration for workers an onerous process... we have not attempted large-scale unionising of garment workers since Ashoka'<sup>xiv</sup>.

These events, together with a lack of trade union organisation, led NGOs to step in to advocate for workers. One NGO employee, who had previously been an active trade unionist but now worked with an organisation that assisted construction and garment workers described the NGO method as, 'friendlier techniques to relate to workers. They do not resort to pressure tactics of trade unions such as *bandhs* [general strikes often called by affiliated political parties], demonstrations, and threats. These NGOs act like trade unions, providing benefits without putting pressure'<sup>xv</sup>. Some see NGOs as the only vehicle by which to establish workers' rights in the garment sector. Narayana Chetty<sup>xvi</sup>, Chair of Labour Research at Bangalore University, claimed that, 'trade unions have failed to unionise garment workers; whenever strikes have been organised they have always failed. The only organisations that have made any progress in the sector are the worker-friendly NGOs'.

Whilst class antagonisms are clearly articulated by many left-wing trade unions, namely the CITU and the Communist Party of India (CPI)-affiliated AITUC, NGOs tend to veer away from class confrontation. Instead NGOs frequently direct their energies towards initiatives such as microcredit, self-help groups, women's empowerment and entrepreneurship, often working alongside state agencies and corporate actors (RoyChowdhury 2005). Indeed, whilst some NGOs have been lauded for work on women's rights (Madon and Sahay 2002), they have also been heavily criticised as being funded by the very corporations they are supposedly organising against (Incite! 2007), with little internal democracy

(Gitau et al. 2010) and operating mostly as charities with little critical engagement with 'class' (RoyChowdhury 2005).

Despite GATWUs critiques of the NGO method, political independence opens up its own class tensions and contradictions within GATWU. For example, one of the key organising methods that GATWU uses is offering workers the option to join microcredit schemes, or so-called 'self-help groups', a holdover of its NGO beginnings. These schemes have been condemned for indebting the poor as a deceptive substitute for genuine welfare provisions (Chatterjee 2008) and for being irreconcilable with organising on a political or class basis. As one CITU leader stated, 'some of these new unions tell people about self-help loans, we don't do that... Why are both the large companies and these unions offering workers these loans? It means trade unions move away from militancy towards bureaucracy. Heavily indebted workers will not strike'.

In lieu of trade union organising in the sector, NGOs began to get workers together into associations. As one NGO employee<sup>xvii</sup> indicated to me: 'we are not a union. We fight for workers, we get workers together, but we don't believe in violence and we aren't imposing our political agenda on them'. But seen another way, a Bangalore based CITU official<sup>xviii</sup> responded: 'These NGOs serve themselves. Who funds them? Some rich person? Some American? Some company? They exist to support the rich. They are not a union, funded and supported by workers – its members'.

### **Gender and Class**

Work in ever society is gendered, and India is no different. In one illuminating interaction (Jobs with Justice 2007), a Gurgaon factory manager explained the reason they prefer women on the shop floor:

Researcher: why are your workers mostly female? Are there significant differences in productivity?

Manager: No, no significant differences in productivity. Just, men together tend to form groups and lobbies because they have spare time.

Researcher: I don't understand. What groups?

Manager: Oh, they get involved in politics...women are easier to handle. They're docile; easier to control.

To an outside observer it makes little economic sense for factory owners, who are almost all men, to actively seek out women for their workplaces, after all the additional costs of providing a legally mandated crèche for large female workplaces caring for children (Factories Act 1948) or maternity leave (Maternity Benefit Act, 1961) has disincentivised the hiring of women (Frankel 1997; Rangaraju and Kennedy 2012). However, the benefits of hiring a workforce amongst whom workplace control and low pay is a social expectation makes the economic benefits high and the liability associated with workplace action low (Ghosh 2009). Decades of women-only hiring practices have resulted in deeply gendered factories: highly skilled tailors, security guards, and managers are positions filled by men, whilst cutters, tailors and helpers (the

lion's share of the factory workplace) are now seen as 'women's work' which is always characterised as 'unskilled'.

Yet the acute feminisation at the behest of global capital compounds existing gendered social norms and issues of gender and class are interwoven within the factory. Women cut, sew and clean what men design; women operate machines that men service, women work on the factory floor whilst men stand guard, women toil while men manage, and so forth. 'Women's work' invariably results in less pay than what is defined as 'men's work'. Within the factory women constitute the lowest rung of work, and this status is utilised to justify low wages<sup>xix</sup>. Company policy rigidly preserves gendered demarcations, which engenders an additional form of antagonism between different types of workers.

In order to resist the inherent inequity of gendered workplaces, GATWU has attempted to use this apparent drawback advantageously. As Mangala, a seamstress at a leather good factory on Mysore Rd stated, 'We are trying to organise the union, but some skilled tailors don't want to join us because they are above us, the security guards are with the management who beat our brothers and husbands, they are men just like the management, and we are women, we organise as women workers because that is who we are'<sup>xx</sup>.

Trade unions often mirror the patriarchal factory and larger society. Rohini Hensman (2011, 22) claims that in her studies on Indian trade unions women are heavily disadvantaged, where the number of women in meetings 'could be counted on the fingers of one hand or, at most, two'. Hensman continues that, 'it goes along with the notion of the working class that ignores the work done in the home (mostly by women) and with a notion of class struggle that marginalises working-class women and children and fails to challenge the gender division of labour and relations of domination and subordination between men and women'. Indeed, tension between class and gender as a target of garment organising is found around the world in which much of the union bureaucracy and leadership are men while the workers are women, a reality observed by Mark Anner (2011, xvii) in his research of the garment sector in Latin America. Rohini Hensman (2011, p. 22) attests throughout her research on the Indian labour movement it 'showed very clearly that the problems of women as wage labourers could not be separated from their subordination in the family and broader social oppression, and therefore a labour movement that neglected these latter concerns (domestic violence, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination, for example) was not genuinely representative of the working class as a whole'. Indeed, within the Indian context gender oppressions are further compounded at the intersection of caste, religious, and linguistic background.

Being borne out of the NGO-fold has heavily influenced GATWUs organisational strategy. Consequently, gender oppression, which remains peripheral in the strategic and theoretical analysis of established unions, plays a central role in GATWUs praxis. In a radical departure, GATWU combines its organising with community-based third-sector organisation *Mahila Karmikara Munnade* (simply 'Munnade'<sup>xxi</sup>) or the Women's Garment Workers Front. Munnade was formed in

2004, and educates about and responds to domestic violence, sexual harassment at work and patriarchy in the daily lives of female garment workers. Munnade has a separate office and a shared organiser to address issues such as sexual harassment and discrimination at the workplace, as well as debt and domestic violence at home. Munnade and GATWU organiser Madina Taj<sup>xxii</sup>, a former factory worker at Texport Overseas, maintains that gender, and its intersection with class, remains the first entry point, 'most of the membership of GATWU come through Munnade. Women's issues and the economic issues are of equal concern to our members, but sexual harassment is often what workers want to confront most pressingly'.

One reason for GATWUs membership growth is a result of this bifurcated organising strategy. The approach breaks sharply with Bangalore's traditional method of trade unionism where, at most, women's caucuses remain subsumed within the union. Nirmala<sup>xxiii</sup>, a worker at Arvind Mills distribution centre, described her experience with Munnade and GATWU:

In the area we live in a women worker had family violence issues and it was confronted by members of an organisation made up of other women workers who fought, not outsiders coming in. That is when I heard about Munnade and I joined, and most of the women in my section joined as well. Shortly after we became activists in the GATWU union.

A greater emphasis on organising women by trade unions in Bangalore reflects larger changes in the labour market. Although traditional trade unions have failed to make in-roads in Bangalore's garment sector they have made membership gains in other historically marginalised sectors. For example, CPM-affiliated CITU has doubled their membership in Bangalore in the past decade and of the 250 thousand members 150 thousand are women. As the organised sector has been increasingly converted into the unorganised sector, and the public sector has become valorised towards private profits, some trade unions have successfully left the security of the industrialised and public sectors, entering areas of the labour market they historically avoided. As one CITU leader<sup>xxiv</sup> stated, 'the destruction of social protections, contractualisation and privatisation has meant we are now organising construction workers, domestic workers, rolling 'bidis' (rolled tobacco) workers and even peasants'.

### **Flexibility Expanding Organising Terrains**

'Globalisation' has been widely documented to have accelerated the 'informalisation' or 'flexibilisation' of the labour market, a standard in the garment sector (Mezzadri 2010). Informalisation has resulted in the growth of a workforce largely unregulated without legal access to benefits (Benería 2001) empowering management to set the employment terms, resulting in labour market insecurity, restrictions on collective bargaining, temporary or short-term contracts, and a reliance on migrant 'reserve army' (Hensman 2011). Deindustrialisation in the global north resulted in the emergence the 'precariat' class (Standing 2011), whilst in the global south flexibilisation resulted from intensified industrialisation (Chang 2009). In both cases it has dented workers' solidarity, undermining existing trade union power, and left workplaces largely

impenetrable to traditional models of organising (Campbell 2013; Standing 2011). However, flexibilisation has also witnessed the emergence of organising strategies that go beyond the sharp edges of labour-capital conflict of wages and employment, into new realms of activism on issues of domestic violence, education, health, and housing, in which the community rather than class becomes the protagonist (RoyChowdhury 2005). GATWU's flexible organising strategies should be placed within the context of a spatially segregated Bangalore, with its sharp class, caste, and linguistic residential cleavages, and in which historically disadvantaged groups disproportionately live in slums (Vithayathil and Singh 2012)<sup>xxv</sup>.

Because of intensifying hostility to unions at the workplace, GATWU's organising reaches beyond the workplace to build a movement oriented toward broader community concerns of workers. The seemingly insurmountable challenge of gaining workers power through the traditional modes in neoliberalism has meant the broadening out of tactics beyond the workplace. Extending workers' demands from the workplace into the shantytowns which workers call home has been elucidated by social movement theorists. Seidman (1994) cites the cases of South Africa and Brazil in the 1970s and 1980s to argue that gains by labour led to innovations by capital and a comprador state. This led to the development of worker organisation outside of the workplace, what has broadly come to be known as 'social movement unionism'. Indeed, GATWU presents a union not bogged down by the routine and bureaucracy that plague many highly centralised and politically affiliated Indian trade unions. However unlike NGOs, which are rarely staffed by former garment workers, or the other unions of Bangalore, which are 'manned' by men, GATWU is led almost entirely by the rank-and-file women from the factory floor.

GATWU combines the organising traditions of NGOs and traditional trade unions and in doing so is able to utilise the flexibilised regime advantageously. For example, the informalisation of the workplace means that workers have less agency to use laws to prevent the shutting down and relocation of factories even within the state. While GATWU organisers recognise this industrial relocation diminishes the unions negotiating power, weakening its organisation in Bangalore, it has concomitantly forced the union to expand their organisational capacity. GATWU organiser Pratibha stated, '...in rural areas there is too much exploitation and very little organisation....but we have been contacted from workers from all across Karnataka, like Ramnagara, where we have membership committees for the first time in our history'<sup>xxvi</sup>.

Short-term employment is a key ingredient in regime of flexibility. Temporary employment makes employment insecure inhibiting the establishment of bonds of solidarity between workers. However, as GATWU organiser Raju reflected, this has led to a shift in GATWU strategy:

My father was a CPM trade union activist in an auto factory. There you spend 20 years with the same workers; it is good to build militancy and strength but it also makes the union protectionist. It becomes harder to spread the union to other factories ideologically and strategically... Now

everyone knows that all garment workers here need a union, not just one strong factory union, or no one's lives will improve. Also, we have activists who have worked in many different factories and everywhere they go they organise their unit....We've even begun asking some of our activists to work in certain factories, which would have been very difficult in my fathers time because everything was more permanent<sup>xxvii</sup>.

Within Bangalore the power of workers varies considerably depending on the industrial cluster. GATWU focuses on workers primarily in three separate industrial areas: Mysore Road, Hosur Road, and Peenya Industrial Area. Although the bulk of GATWUs membership is based on Mysore Road, 40% of garment factories in Bangalore are located in Peenya District. Peenya was once Asia's biggest industrial area when we started off 5-6 years back.

There are a number of spatial and demographic differences between Peenya and Mysore Road. The characteristics specific to Peenya embody both the difficulties and opportunities of garment sector organising. Workers in Peenya are younger, unmarried, newer arrivals from villages, and reside in dispersed areas. Many commute to and from the factory gates in company-provided buses. Most workers at Peenya work for only short periods, as Jyoti, a cutter in a Peenya factory, stated:

I have been working for two months because we have debts from my sister's marriage. I'm staying a few hours away with some relatives, and I'll work three more months and head back to my village after I have enough money to pay off these debts... Most of us find jobs here because it is easy to get work, but the pay is very low, none of us want to stay here longer than we need to<sup>xxviii</sup>.

The short-term employment and atomised places of residence mean relationships between workers are more fleeting, challenging long-term strategic organising. At the same time, the younger, unwed, newly industrialised workforce tend to be less invested in a specific workplace, with fewer familial obligations, increasing the potential for unruly, often militant industrial action and 'hot shop' organising, a reactive strategy in which the union responds to workers' agitation. As Veena observed, 'its difficult to convince the Peenya workers to come to join the union or come to a meeting but they are far more willing to confront management collectively and directly'<sup>xxix</sup>.

In contrast, Mysore Road is one the oldest of the sites of garment production in Bangalore and is where GATWUs office and large proportion of its membership are based. The typical garment worker on Mysore Rd is older with a family, many reside within walking distance of their workplace, and production cycles are far more standardised. These factors support longer term organising, as well as strengthening union through community-based networks, but these factors can also restrain militant worker action.

This poses two distinct garment production regimes. Mysore Rd retains its more 'formal' character while Peenya maintains a more 'informal' production process.

These result in changes in organisational strategy as well as labour resistance. Indeed researchers such as Stephen Campbell (2013) in Thailand and Eli Friedman (2012; 2009) in China have noted that informal workplaces in large export-processing zones result in their own forms of collective informal self-organisation that while unwieldy and autonomous are manifesting their own 'politics of social disorder' (Campbell 2013, 148). Similarly, the flexibility of Bangalore's garment sector has obstructed traditional trade union methods whilst simultaneously crystallising an implicit case for cross-sectoral organising to workers, opening up new possibilities for organisational capacity and collective action.

### **Internationalism**

The transnationalism of capital is a primary tool to undermine the efforts of workers, trade unions, and states to gain power and establish rights yet it has also seen the beginnings of its own strategic opportunities for transnational labour organisation (Evans 2010). Since its formation, international pressure has remained a key component of GATWU's ability to ensure dual pressure points on the direct employer from the shop floor and on the *real* employer, the brands. International links to organisations, such as the Dutch-based Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) and the newly formed League, have influenced GATWU strategies from purely 'hot shop' organising towards 'strategic organising', a method that actively goes after specific employers and brands at the disparate points of production. From GATWU's earliest days 'hot shop' organising was its primary mode of campaigning. Hot shop organising is the preferred method of Bangalore's traditional trade union as well, and is the result of capital-intensive, vertically integrated, and geographically disparate and often atomised production networks, which do not necessitate the same kind of supply chain pressure tactics. Similar to other traditional trade unions, GATWU organisers would stand outside factories and pass out information cards and contact information, and when issues arose in a particular factory, workers would contact GATWU organisers. This strategy addressed the immediate concerns of workers such as a potential factory closure, the non-payment of minimum wage, and so on.

The efficacy of GATWU's hot shop strategy is one explanation for its membership increase. Indeed, the strategy led to GATWU's first major campaign, linking GATWU with international allies, resulting in GATWU deepening networks with established workers' rights organisations. It began in 2005, when GATWU instigated a campaign at the five-unit facility owned by Fibre and Fabrics International (FFI) and its Bangalore subsidiary Jeans Knit Pvt. Ltd. (JKPL), a major contractor for transnational brand G-STAR. Exceptionally, JKPL was one of the few factories in Bangalore that invested heavily in modern machines and was said to have the highest level of production, with a large geographically concentrated workforce of three thousand, as well as remaining highly specialised manufacturing jeans almost exclusively which includes stone washing and dyeing units. This relatively high capital-intensity production process could explain FFI's wariness to simply walk away from its investment, reverting to unconventional methods to repress the campaign, and the power of GATWU to place pressure largely at one unit and succeed. The issues began

when GATWU and Munnade received complaints from workers in the JKPL washing unit of forced overtime and physical abuse. When GATWU intervened, even attempting to organise workers at various FFI plants across south India, their organisers were threatened with violence. At a plant in Tirupur GATWU organisers Jayram<sup>xxx</sup> recounted, ‘the factory hired a retired air force officer who confronted me and threatened to shoot me... he demanded to know how much money I was after and to settle the matter or face the consequences’.

After protracted management intransigence, GATWU organisers approached CCC for assistance. GATWU had developed initial ties with international labour organisations during their time at CIVIDEP. Dutch-based CCC would begin a campaign targeting the brands to stop contracting with FFI, whose largest source of production was for the Dutch-based brand G-Star.

By August 2006, CCC had initiated a corporate campaign against G-Star, placing social and economic pressure against the company, including staging pickets in front of G-Star retail shops. Shortly after the global campaign against FFI began, FFI took the unprecedented step of initiating a court injunction against the union organisers, as well as the organisation of GATWU, Munnade, SAVE of Tamil Nadu, and NTUI, which immediately drew international attention to FFI and GATWU. GATWU found itself going against an extraordinarily powerful employer with deep pockets and connections. The company’s lawyer in the case was Pramila Nesargi, who was an ex-Minister of Legislative Assembly in the city. Despite a number of attempts by GATWU to begin talks with management, they continued to ignore GATWU’s letters, harassing workers, and failed to give legally mandated employee identity cards. Critically, a court enforced gag order prevented GATWU members and other organisations listed in the court injunction from speaking out about conditions at FFI/JKPL.

After a prolonged court battle, which involved a subsequent case filed by FFI officials against CCC resulting in both the European Parliament and the Dutch Prime Minister weighing-in on the side of GATWU members, the dispute was resolved and the case was withdrawn. While G-STAR continued its relationship with FFI, brands Tommy Hilfiger, Ann Taylor and Gap eventually ended their production at FFI. While the immediate concerns of workers were met, the protracted nature of the court campaign had taken its toll: it weakened the unionization attempt beyond repair. Nonetheless, a strategy that inculcated the power of internationalism began to crystallise amongst the members and organisers of GATWU, which informed all of their future campaigns. The case opened up GATWU in its formative stages to international workers rights organisations hungry for an independent union in the Indian garment sector that shared their commitment to internationalism.

In the beginning of 2012, GATWU was approached to join the League which was formed through the initiative of the Honduras’s CGT union following their victory at Fruit of the Loom factories in 2008 (Kumar and Mahoney 2014). As of May 2014 there were fourteen member unions from countries as varied as Argentina, Turkey and Cambodia. As a requisite to joining each member union agreed to strategically organise at least one subcontracted factory that has been



chosen by the unions as the target transnational brand. In the case of GATWU they chose three export oriented factories that produced transnational brand Adidas and began organising workers at those factories in January 2013.

League-oriented organising was a further absorption of a US-led 'organising model', which had come to become the modus operandi of organising since the SEIU-led Justice for Janitors campaign beginning in the mid-1980s. As part of what McCallum (2013) calls the 'globalisation of the organising model', GATWU adopted forms of mapping, a process of discerning the industrial landscape and organisational terrain through comprehensive research. Mapping meant that GATWU would try and understand the supplier companies across the supply chain in order to understand weaknesses and target critical chokepoints. The union began by surveying workers at Adidas supplier factories. This process allowed them to both gather the research they needed but also to build a list of contacts in different units within the factory. Research areas included: finding out the brands that were produced, what percentage of it was being produced by whom, labour density, where most of the workers lived, the company's financial assets, and whether there were factories with high union density nearby. This kind of mapping also shaped GATWU's strategic vision. It allowed it to move away from a service-oriented union and increasingly towards one that was interested in expanding its membership, winning a 'charter of demands' from factories that were part of international campaigns, and increasingly saw themselves giving strength to, and being strengthened by, an international campaign.

Again, this strategy breaks sharply with that of established unions. However, one Bangalore CITU organiser<sup>xxxii</sup> remained critical of GATWU's strategy, 'In CITU we have organised workers on a political program, not by being deceptive or two-faced. People know us. They know we go on strike, they know we win for workers. We don't do things in secret. We do not tell people to sign up to some loan, or survey, or some other service, we believe that is the job of the government not a trade union'.

Unlike CITU's model of organising, GATWU campaigns begin with a phase of clandestine organising, similar to its US and Latin American partners. The second public phase occurs when the union has built-up significant density, or where the employer becomes aware of the union campaign which forces the union to go public prematurely. GATWU had also intended to organise workers outside of its state of Karnataka. GATWU contacted their national federation, NTUI, who initiated its own covert organising strategy at an Adidas plant, known as 'salting' in North America, which, like GATWU, is made easier because of fluid and flexible employment practices.

The League assisted in coalescing disparate struggles and put pressure on a common target, a singular transnational brand, Adidas. For example, on October 7<sup>th</sup>, workers at Adidas soccer cleat-producer PT Panarub Dwikarya in Indonesia mobilised at Adidas' Jakarta head office to rally against the dismissal of 1,300 union members who had struck after the supplier company had refused to pay the legal minimum wage. A number of League member unions, including GATWU

were able to provide material solidarity with Indonesian workers and place pressure on Adidas to reinstate the workers by picketing the company's retailers in Bangalore.

Bangalore's garment workers picketing a brand shop were inconceivable even a decade ago. What brown hands produced, white bodies consumed. This was part of the design of the global economy, part-and-parcel of colonial legacies and uneven development. Consequently, there was a clear spatial gulf between the where value production and value capture. Thus brand pressure campaigns required that southern workers reach out to northern consumer activists, which enmeshed and perpetuated their own asymmetries (Brooks, 2007). However, the League's campaigns reveal a glimpse at the possibility of south-south worker cooperation capable of placing pressure on brands at both the points of production and consumption. Concurrently, the campaigns also expose a reconstitution of Bangalore, and indeed other southern "global cities", being transformed from a city produced by the working class into centres of consumption for the middle and upper classes.

### **Conclusion**

The process of globalisation has seen union density and power fall and organising efforts thwarted; yet the number of wage-labourers globally has doubled increasing the potential power of the 'worker' as a social force (Freeman 2005). While women have been forced into wage-labour due to economic necessity, the process has also meant that addressing issues of gender oppression have become more dominant. Additionally, while the erosion of national borders in the face of globalised capital has intensified the competition among national workforces, at the same time capital fluidity, workplace uniformity, and technological advances in communication have also opened up new vistas for international solidarity (Munck 2008). The universality of capital underpins the development of a universality of labour. Indeed, internationalism has become less about the hitherto-central symbolism of 'solidarity' and, instead an increasingly fundamental strategic asset for labourers across the world in their fight for their own survival. Established trade unions in the global south, working within the constraints of the nation-state, have found the challenge of organising against transnational capital nearly insurmountable, especially in low-capital labour-intensive industries (RoyChowdhury 2005). In particular, a central question for workers has been how to establish workers' rights given fluidity of feminised and flexibilised transnational capital.

GATWU organising remains alive and its campaigns are on going. GATWUs successes are minimal in relation to the broader working class but monumental to the export oriented global garment sector. The union's failure to be recognized by even a single factory may have even broadened the unions' possibilities. Indeed, such recognition often enforces and coheres to the logic of management. Independent unionism is in effect facilitated by the state and capital failing to acknowledge the union. This lack of formal legal power has stimulated a range of mutually reinforcing strategies that have helped GATWU emerge as a countermovement that gains power by organising at the points of production, reproduction and consumption.

GATWU model fuses many traditionally accepted, seemingly antipodal, binaries between trade union and NGO, gender and class, consumer and producer, shopfloor and shantytown, strategic and hot-shop and indeed between global north and global south. In GATWUs attempt to challenge capital they have broadened their base within Karnataka, expanded organic links with garment workers across the global south, and hardened their material connections with activists in the global north. Yet one conspicuous conflict that continues to remain central to GATWUs praxis is the class antagonism between worker and bosses.

GATWUs strategies are an application of Marx's observations on the contradictory nature of capitalism. Both the assembling of workers in factories as well as the relocation of those factories have resulted in the necessary 'objective connections' (Marx 1867) between workers to instigate and carry on struggle. To Marx this was an outgrowth of the emergence of a 'world market', culminating in recurring crises of overproduction that only intensifies the antagonism between capital and the growing mass of producers, thus accelerating the process of revolution. Indeed, to Marx, without antagonism there is no progress (Marx and Engels 1848).

The election of Narendra Modi's BJP in 2014 will see a accelerated march away from the last vestiges of a protectionist state only to intensify neoliberal working conditions (George 2014). In this context, workers' organisational strategies are a reaction to the powerful nexus between capital and a chauvinistic state. And yet, the innovations of capital grow out of the actions of labour. History has revealed capital's capacity to accumulate by incorporating spatial, organisational, technological or other innovations that suppress workers' struggles for organisation. Indeed, it remains to be seen whether the culmination of disparate struggles, of which GATWUs' is but one important one, will be able to strengthen the power of garment workers in order to decisively challenge transnational capital in the global garment sector.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The author is grateful for the valuable feedback provided by Linda McDonnell, Craig Jeffrey, Danny Dorling, Adam Elliott-Cooper, Musab Younis, Charlotte Gerada, and Amber Murrey-Ndewa in an earlier version of this paper

<sup>ii</sup> Officially recognised as a union in 2006, GATWU has gained significantly, with 6,000 members in over 300 factories.

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- iii All of the interviews in this paper were translated from Kannada by the author. Some of the names have been changed to protect identities and prevent possible employer retribution.
- iv *Interview*, January 27th, 2013
- v *Interview* November 9th, 2012
- vi *Interview*, Pratibha from GATWU, December 16th, 2012
- vii *Ibid.*
- viii As one community activist stated, 'the Mantri family has always been with BJP and the Prestige Group leads directly to [Congress Party leader] Sonya Gandhi'.
- ix *Interview* February 6th, 2013
- x A protection contract is an agreement between pro-management union representatives and the company, often without the knowledge of the factory workforce.
- xi *Interview* Manodeep Guha, South Asia coordinator Workers' Rights Consortium, January 4th, 2013.
- xii This is the case in every Indian state except for Maharashtra, where if a union fulfills the conditions stipulated in a state act of 1971 then the employer must grant the union the status of 'sole bargaining agent' (Hensman, 2011).
- xiii *Interview* with Pratibha and Jayram October 24th, 2012
- xiv *Interview*, CITU official, October 23rd, 2012
- xv *Interview*, January 7th, 2013
- xvi *Interview* November 23rd, 2012
- xvii *Interview* October 22nd, 2012
- xviii *Interview* December 12th, 2012
- xix For detailed work on the notion of gender and skill *see* Phillips and Taylor (1980)
- xx *Interview* December 23rd, 2012
- xxi Munnade translates directly to 'forward moving'
- xxii *Interview* March 6th, 2013
- xxiii *Interview* November 3rd, 2012
- xxiv *Interview* December 12th, 2012
- xxv The proliferation of slums is nothing new to Bangalore and is typical of the early stages of industrialisation (*See* Engels (1987)). Of course, the persistence of caste into the industrial era is a uniquely Indian phenomenon.
- xxvi *Interview*, January 12th, 2013
- xxvii *Interview* March 4th, 2013
- xxviii *Interview* October 22nd, 2012
- xxix *Interview* March 12th, 2013
- xxx *Interview* October 20th, 2012
- xxxi *Interview* December 23rd, 2012