

## Changes in the Composition of the International Working Class

### *Some interesting findings from a new report of the UN's International Labour Office*

Article (with 2 Tables) by Michael Pröbsting, International Secretary of the Revolutionary Communist International Tendency (RCIT), 30 June 2021, [www.thecommunists.net](http://www.thecommunists.net)

For many years our tendency has pointed to important changes in the composition of the international working class. To encapsulate our main theses in a few sentences, the RCIT states:

- 1) Contrary to various post-modernist theoreticians, the international working class continues to grow.
- 2) Global capitalist production, and therefore the world proletariat, has shifted during the past half century from the old imperialist metropolises (i.e., North America, Western Europe and Japan) to the semi-colonial countries in the South as well as to rising imperialist powers like China.
- 3) More concretely, the focus of the world proletariat has shifted to the region of East, South-East and South Asia.
- 4) The mass of the working class are not highly skilled laborers but rather low and medium skilled workers.
- 5) These developments have important consequences for the strategy of revolutionaries. They must be reflected in the politics of the international workers organizations, i.e. they must have a specific focus to the liberation struggles in the South as well China.
- 6) Related to this, the building of a new Revolutionary World Party must have its focus in these regions (and not in Western Europe and North America).<sup>1</sup>

We have elaborated our analysis in much detail in several RCIT books and pamphlets.<sup>2</sup> At this point we do not intend to repeat our lengthy analysis. Rather, we want to draw attention to the latest report of the UN's International Labour Office which strongly confirms the Marxist analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> We have dealt with the consequences of these issues for revolutionary party building in various works. See e.g. Michael Pröbsting: *Building the Revolutionary Party in Theory and Practice. Looking Back and Ahead after 25 Years of Organized Struggle for Bolshevism*, RCIT Books, Vienna 2014

<sup>2</sup> The most comprehensive elaboration of the RCIT's analysis of the changes in the world proletariat and the resulting consequences for the revolutionary strategy can be seen in Michael Pröbsting: *The Great Robbery of the South. Continuity and Changes in the Super-Exploitation of the Semi-Colonial World by Monopoly Capital Consequences for the Marxist Theory of Imperialism*, 2013, <http://www.great-robbery-of-the-south.net/>. See also chapter III in Michael Pröbsting: *Marxism and the United Front Tactic Today. The Struggle for Proletarian Hegemony in the Liberation Movement in Semi-Colonial and Imperialist Countries in the present Period*, RCIT Books, Vienna 2016, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/bookunited-front/>. Furthermore we refer to the following articles by the same author: *On the Composition of the International Working Class. A new report of the UN's International Labour Office with interesting figures about social developments between 2000 and 2018*, 25 February 2020, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/on-the-composition-of-the-international-working-class/>; *Once again on the Composition of the International Working Class. Some additional information which confirm the shift away from the old imperialist countries towards the South as well as China*, 10 March 2020, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/once-again-on-the-composition-of-the-international-working-class/>

Before doing so, we need to repeat that the bourgeois categories of the ILO (wage laborers, labor force, etc.) are not identical with the Marxist definition of the working class. Neither do they recognize the existence of specific strata within the working class like the labor aristocracy. In addition, categories like “*High-Income Countries*”, “*Low-Income Countries*”, etc. are not identical with the Marxist categories of imperialist and semi-colonial countries.<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed explanation of these problems, we refer to other works.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, as we have explained in these works, the ILO categories are despite their weaknesses useful as an approximation to the developments of the global proletariat and its composition.

So let us turn to summarizing the most important findings of the latest ILO report.

First, the report shows the ongoing growth of the international working class – both in absolute figures as well as a share of the labor force. As Table 1 below demonstrates, the share of wage laborers among the labor force grew from 45.7% (2000) to 53.3% (2020).

There are 1,701 million wage laborers today in absolute numbers. Of these, 509 million live in the old imperialist countries (North America, Western Europe and Japan). They represent a share of 29.9% which consequentially means that 70.1% of the world working class live in the South and China. In fact, this share is even larger as a substantial part (approx. 1/3) of the wage laborers in the old imperialist countries belong the salaried middle layer and not to the proletariat. This becomes evident if we look at the shift within the global industrial proletariat. While 30.2% of manufacturing workers lived in the old imperialist countries in 1990, this share dropped to 17.5% in 2018.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Here are the countries as categorized by the ILO (See: ILO: World Employment Social Outlook, Trends 2021, Geneva 2021, p. 118).

**High-income countries:** Australia, Austria, Bahamas, Bahrain, Barbados, Belgium, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Channel Islands, Chile, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, French Polynesia, Germany, Greece, Guam, Hong Kong, China, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Kuwait, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macau, China, Malta, Mauritius, Netherlands, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Norway, Oman, Panama, Poland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Qatar, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, China, Trinidad and Tobago, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom

**Upper-middle-income countries:** Albania, Algeria, Argentina, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belize, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Brazil, Bulgaria, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Equatorial Guinea, Fiji, Gabon, Georgia, Guatemala, Guyana, Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Jamaica, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mexico, Montenegro, Namibia, North Macedonia, Paraguay, Peru, Russian Federation, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Samoa, Serbia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Suriname, Thailand, Tonga, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

**Lower-middle-income countries:** Angola, Bangladesh, Benin, Bhutan, Plurinational State of Bolivia, Cambodia, Cameroon, Cabo Verde, Comoros, Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, El Salvador, Eswatini, Ghana, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, People’s Democratic Republic Lao, Lesotho, Mauritania, Moldova, Republic of, Mongolia, Morocco, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Solomon Islands, United Republic of Tanzania, Timor-Leste, Tunisia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu, Viet Nam, Western Sahara, Zambia, Zimbabwe

**Low-income countries:** Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tajikistan, Togo, Uganda, Yemen, United States, United States Virgin Islands, Uruguay

<sup>4</sup> See on this the above-mentioned article: On the Composition of the International Working Class

<sup>5</sup> See on this the above-mentioned article: Once again on the Composition of the International Working Class

The figures of the new ILO report also underline the RCIT' thesis of the strategic importance of the proletariat in East and South Asia. Today, 866 million – this means 50,1% of all wage laborers on this planet – live in this region. (See Table 1)

The ILO report also shows the dramatic consequences of the Great Depression beginning in late 2019 for the working class. <sup>6</sup> While the numbers both of the global labor force as well as of the wage laborers are continuously growing, both categories suffered a massive decline in the year 2020. From 2019 to 2020, i.e. within a single year, the average number of total weekly hours worked declined from 2,850 to 2,617. Likewise, the total labor force was reduced from 3,490 million to 3,409 million, i.e. by 81 million. The number of wage laborers also declined from 1,768 million to 1,701 million, i.e. by 67 million.

Finally, the ILO report also demonstrates the fact that the large majority of the world report are low- and medium-skilled laborers. Their share among the global labor force is 78.9%. (See Table 2) They constitute a majority even in the old imperialist countries (56.8%). <sup>7</sup>

We conclude this article by emphasizing once more that the RCIT considers it as crucial for revolutionaries to pay particular attention to the working class in the South and the East, i.e. outside of the old imperialist states in Western Europe, North America and Japan. The huge weight of the Southern proletariat must be reflected not only in their massive participation in international workers' organizations, but also in the leaderships of these forces. And questions of particular importance for the Southern working class – their super-exploitation, their national liberation struggles against imperialism, etc. – must play a central role in the organizations' propagandistic and practical work. <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See on this e.g. Michael Pröbsting: No, the Corona Virus is not the Main Cause of the Global Economic Slump! Bourgeois Media Officially Recognize the Beginning of another Great Recession, 3 March 2020, <https://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/global/corona-virus-is-not-themain-cause-of-global-economic-slump/>; Chapter "Another Great Recession has begun" in RCIT: World Perspectives 2020: A Pre-Revolutionary Global Situation. Theses on the World Situation, the Perspectives for Class Struggle and the Tasks of Revolutionaries, 8 February 2020, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/world-perspectives-2020/>; Michael Pröbsting: Another Great Recession of the Capitalist World Economy Has Begun. The economic crisis is an important factor in the current dramatic shift in the world situation, 19 October 2019, <https://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/global/another-great-recession-of-the-capitalist-world-economy-hasbegun/>; by the same author: The Next Looming Great Recession. Observations on the Latest Stock Market Slump and the Structural Crisis of the Capitalist World Economy, 12 October 2018, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/the-next-looming-great-recession/>

<sup>7</sup> ILO: World Employment Social Outlook, Trends 2021, Geneva 2021, p. 136

<sup>8</sup> See on this Revolutionary Communist International Tendency (RCIT): The Revolutionary Communist Manifesto, published in 2012, pp. 28-30; online on the RCIT website at [www.thecommunists.net/rcit-manifesto](http://www.thecommunists.net/rcit-manifesto)

**Table 1. Composition of the Global Working Class, 2000 and 2020 <sup>9</sup>**

	<i>Wage and salaried Employment (Share)</i>		<i>Employment (in Millions)</i>	<i>Wage Laborers (in Millions)</i>
	2000	2020	2020	2020
World	45.7	53.3	3189.0	1701.0
Low-Income Countries	15.8	20.1	253.0	50.0
Lower-Middle-Income Countries	26.2	34.0	1071.0	343.0
Upper-Middle-Income Countries	47.7	59.1	1449.0	800.0
High-Income Countries	84.4	87.6	622.0	509.0
Northern Africa	57.0	62.7	71.9	39.0
Arab States	73.2	81.8	58.2	43.0
Sub-Saharan Africa	19.6	24.3	416.0	95.0
Latin America & Caribbean	60.0	61.9	292.0	162.0
Eastern Asia	43.4	58.7	923.0	516.0
South-Eastern Asia & Pacific	36.4	51.8	350.0	175.0
Southern Asia	20.3	27.9	674.0	175.0
Central & Western Asia	51.5	68.0	75.0	46.0
Northern, Southern & Western Europe	83.3	85.2	221.0	174.0
Eastern Europe	83.9	87.5	141.5	117.0
Central & Northern America	91.6	92.8	186.0	158.0

**Table 2. Occupations by Skill, Share of Laborers, 2005 and 2020 <sup>10</sup>**

	(in percent)	
	2005	2020
Share of occupations requiring low skill	44.2	37.6
Share of occupations requiring medium skill	38.5	41.3
Share of occupations requiring high skill	17.3	21.1

<sup>9</sup> Figures for the year 2000 are taken from: ILO: World Employment Social Outlook, Trends 2019, Geneva 2019, pp. 84-115; Figures for the year 2020 are taken from: ILO: World Employment Social Outlook, Trends 2021, Geneva 2021, pp. 128-161. The ILO report from 2019 did not only include the figures for wage laborers but also for “own-account employment” and “contributing employment”. These figures are relevant to assess the number of peasants as well as the urban poor. Unfortunately, the 2021 report does no longer list these categories. Hence, while we reported the figures for these categories in our last article on the composition of the international working class, we can no longer do so here.

<sup>10</sup> ILO: World Employment Social Outlook, Trends 2021, Geneva 2021, p. 128