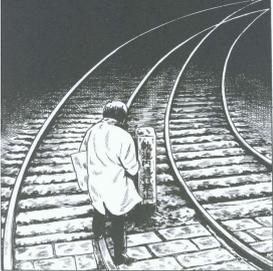


# Religion is the Sigh of the Oppressed Creature: The Twenty-Seventh Newsletter (2019).



Dear Friends,  
Greetings from the desk of the **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**.  
Sitting in a factory prison cell in Italy, Antonio Gramsci wondered about a predicament that faced communism the world over: how to win. But these chains were not merely material bonds, the chains of deprivation that prevented those who owned no property apart from their own ability to work from being fully free. These chains crept into the mind, reducing the ability of most human beings from having a clear understanding of our world. Suffocated, the workers (who were formerly adherents of socialist and communist movements) bowed towards fascism. They came to the fascist parties not because of clarity, Gramsci wrote, but because of their *autonomous* consciousness.  
On the one hand, people who spend most of their time working develop an understanding of the 'practical transformation of the world'. This framework is implicit in the workers' activity, since the worker - given the theft of their time - is often prevented from having a 'clear theoretical consciousness of this practical activity'. On the other hand, the worker has 'inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed' a suite of ideas and practices that help to shape their approach to the world. These ideas and practices come from all kinds of institutions, such as from the State's educational apparatus, from religious institutions, and from the cultural industries. Such inherited ideas do not clarify the practical experience of the workers, but they nonetheless help shape their worldview. It is this duality that Gramsci calls 'contradictory consciousness'.  
If you accept Gramsci's assessment, then the struggle over consciousness - the ideological struggle - is a material necessity. For generations of workers, the trade unions, the left political parties, and left cultural formations provided the 'schools' to advance and to connect the consciousness of the workers and provide a powerful understanding of the world, the clarity to see the chains that had to be broken. Over the course of the past forty years, for a variety of reasons that we cannot go into here **Working Document**, trade union membership has declined or has been being political parties. The 'schools' of the workers are no longer available. Contradictory consciousness is harder to dislodge, which is why there has been a drift of workers into the grip of organizations of social hierarchy (that are founded on social divisions of religion, race, caste and other such manifestations).



Yoshitaka Teramoto, *Abandoned Old in 1936*, 1936.

We are in difficult times, with the scales of history favouring the far-right - including forces that have divided our societies along their social hierarchies, such as caste and race, nationality, and religion. Globalization has fragmented social life and has created a precarious situation where people are no longer sure how to make a living and are no longer able to live enriched social lives. The terminal crisis for globalization came with the general financial crisis of 2007-2008. The signs of globalization - neo-liberalism - had taken over social democratic parties across the world and compromised them. The field now opened for an alternative to the course of globalization. For a variety of historical reasons, the Left entered this phase deeply weakened after the global financial crisis. The far-right, on the other hand, had two advantages. First, it did not have to try and create its consistency. Its base has been delivered to it by the hierarchies and divisions of history. It merely unified these divisions to its advantage, one of the lines of division being religious/religious. Second, the far-right did not need to address the actual problems of the time, such as structural unemployment and the climate catastrophe, but it could simply stigmatize the Other (migrants, religious minorities) as a way to consolidate its power.



**Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research** held a two-day seminar in Tunis (Tunisia) on religion and politics to build an assessment of the role of religion in the growth of the far-right. During the first session, researchers from our teams in Delhi (Suhin Dennis and Pradnya Ambekar), Johannesburg (Nobuhle Ndlovu), and São Paulo (Marco Fernandes) offered their presentations on the role of religion in each of their social and political contexts. Both the teams from Brazil and India spoke about the enabling growth of globalisation through the rise of Hinduism in India and the rise of Pentecostalism in Brazil. They argued, as the Marxist intellectual Nijm Masud stated, that these right-wing forces were founded 'on an extremely Gramscian principle that religious political power can arise only on the basis of a prior cultural transformation and consent, and this broad-based cultural consent to the extreme right's doctrine can only be built through a long historical process, from the bottom up'. In South Africa, the enduring authority of the African National Congress, largely although not exclusively rooted in secular modes of politics, and the failure of churches to make a decisive entry into politics has allowed the country despite from these trends.  
During the other session, scholars and activists from Turkey to Algeria, from Morocco to Sudan, presented their views on the role of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose politics are similar to those of the far-right BSS in India and the Pentecostal movement in Brazil. The presentations showed how the Muslim Brotherhood - as a mass movement - used its grip on education to shape the contradictory consciousness of the working class.



H. Hemalata, President of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, speaks during the 10th anniversary of the launch of the **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research** in New Delhi, February 2019.

In the early writings of Karl Marx, there is a sense that religion is what the workers turn to as a way to gain some solace from the harshness of capitalism. As Marx wrote in 1844, 'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the spirit of the people'. This is a powerful statement, one that seeks to understand why it is that people turn to religion. Today, however, this is not adequate. More is needed. We need to understand how these organizations prey on the psycho-social problems that have escalated among the working-class. They provide services - however limited - to face the grim aspects of our time. Such a points of therapy draws its workers, eases its community and for the social welfare delivered through these organizations. We need a more robust assessment of the role of religion in our times, which is what our research hopes to produce.



**The Only Answer is to Mobilize the Workers** - **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**, *Interview no. 18* (July 2019).

What is the most serious challenge in our times when socialist formations are struggling at high rates. This is why our researchers in Delhi went to talk to H. Hemalata, the president of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). This interview from our *Document no. 18* (6 July). **The Only Answer is to Mobilize the Workers**. We strongly recommend that you read it, study it, and circulate it. Hemalata comes to her post as the union from her leadership of the All India Federation of Agricultural Workers and Helpers (AIFAWH), New Delhi, February 2019.



Over 90% of India's workers are in the informal sector, most of them without any chance of unionisation. CITU has six million members, a considerable number but still not enough in a country with 1.3 billion people. Over the past decades, CITU has developed a series of strategies to organize informal workers, whether it be child-care workers or workers in small factories. Hemalata talks forcefully about the need for trade unions to take up issues of social hierarchy (patriarchy, caste, and fundamentalism) and to organize workers where they live, not just where they work. She talks about the need to organize not only the workers, but the communities in which they live. CITU's ideological clarity and organizational discipline have allowed it to build a strong federation, which has been in the lead in the massive general strikes that have convulsed Indian politics, with over 200 million workers on strike. Matters remain grave. The rains have started in India. This has brought some respite from the scorching heat waves that have claimed the lives of construction and agricultural workers. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has just released a report on the difficulties of working on a warming planet. But the ILO's recommendations are weak more mechanisation and more skills development. The real answer is for better policy to stem the climate catastrophe that addresses the root cause - a brutal economic system (capitalism) that seeks to reproduce capital at the expense of the planet and its inhabitants. In the short-term, the answer is to prevent the brutalization of workers by pushing for more trade unionism and other forms of working-class organization. In Kerala (India), the Left Democratic Front government recently banned work from 11am to 3pm in order to give workers respite from the heat (please see my report). More creative solutions and strategies are needed to confront a system that is at risk of destroying the planet and those who work and live on it.

Warrick, Viji,  
PK, the work, in São Paulo, our design team - Tripp Clark and Ingrid Neves - did a presentation on art and revolutionary politics. They talked about *Document no. 15* (April 2019) - **The Art of the Revolution Will Be Internationalist**. As part of their presentation, they displayed posters from the Organization of Solidarity with the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAAL) as well as posters by **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**. I wanted you to have a look at this wonderful display.



