

# *The new migrant worker: Transnationality and the making of new industrial terrains?*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The transformation of national industrial landscapes that has followed the political force of the globalisation of economies and the accompanying raft of state-engineered neo-liberal based economic and industrial relations policies have weakened the position of nation-based trade unions. This weakening of the labour movement throughout the world has also forced a rethinking of the historical aspiration to progress an internationalist working class program. One particular emphasis finds hope in building on the persistence of the globally-oriented 'new social movements'. Confidence in such movements is premised on the object of such movements to transcend the limitations of the old internationalism which is held have been founded on a cobbling together of nation-based labour movements that remained imprisoned by the nation. The new social movements, it is contended, match the forces of globalisation, and more particularly those of an unfettered capital, by transcending national borders and constructing a global terrain of struggle.

Critical to the positing of this new internationalism is the jettisoning of universal notions of class struggle that are effected through worker struggles, dominated by industrial struggles, and their supplanting by 'social movement unionism'. However, a quite different point of entry into reconsidering the nature of class struggle takes as its starting point the structural transformations that are wrought by globalisation and the economic and industrial reforms to comply with neo-liberal political agendas. Of particular interest is the way in which restructuring has engendered uneven development within economies and across the global political economy and reconstituted the international division of labour in the process.

This points to conceptual weaknesses in this new internationalism. The focus on globalisation and the 'new social movements' as multifaceted developments that together annihilate space, does not engage with the more immediate and directly material ways in which established conceptions of space are challenged by globalisation. Uneven development and the dismantling of regulatory systems have disrupted established economic life, displacing people and frustrating people's ability to meet their material needs. Globalisation and neo-liberal programs have impelled resurgence of international migration. But in the context of states making it both easier for some to migrate, sanctioning the rights of business people, professional and skilled workers to migrate and re-settle or encouraging emigration as an export income earning exercise, whilst simultaneously making it more difficult for others, by restricting or thwarting the rights especially of workers recruited for lower paid occupations or informal work, contemporary migration can be posited as being formed around struggles over the definition of the industrial, economic, social and political terrain in which the migrant worker is now placed. The new migrant worker can be regarded as being constituted as a transnational subject, asserting her/his place through a projection of identity formed around nationality and a sense of belonging that retains connections with her/his place of origin, simultaneously to forging her/his place in the spatial arena in which she/he is employed. Transnationality, it will be argued, carries the migrant work beyond the traditional industrial realm of nation-based unions as s/he seeks to establish a place in the world. This study, focusing on the industrial and political struggles of Filipino migrant workers will examine the making of the modern migrant worker as being founded on a transnationality that introduces the migrant to new geographies. This, it will be argued, is a doubled movement based on struggles around the right to work in host nations, and the associated campaigns to secure other civil and political rights normally associated with citizenship, and, insofar as this is forged around a sense of community that is defined in terms of ethnicity, investing energies in efforts to retain connections with places of origin, to promote the economic well-being of those places and to secure the right to project a political will in the reshaping of places of origin. But, contra the optimism of the new internationalism, this exploration explores the inherent tensions and contradictions in the making of the transnational subject.

