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Migration as Economic Imperialism



Dorothea Lange: Toward Los Angeles, California, 1937 – Public Domain

Numbering an estimated 169 million, [1] international migrant laborers are generally regarded in mainstream economic circles as playing a substantial role in poverty alleviation and economic development in their home countries. This is accomplished, it is asserted, through remittances sent home by migrants, reaching an estimated \$647 billion arriving in low- and moderate-income countries in 2022, a total that surpasses foreign direct investment in those nations. [2] As one World Bank policy researcher explains, remittances “have a profound impact on the living standards of people in the developing countries of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East.” [3]

In his latest book, *Migration as Economic Imperialism*, political analyst Immanuel Ness challenges and complicates that simplified narrative, situating the global migrant labor system in the broader context of the long history of resource and labor extraction between

the Global North and Global South. Ness argues that labor migration programs are “unrelated to efforts to create equality” as they transfer wealth from low- and mid-income countries to advanced capitalist nations. Concomitantly, there is a secondary process of internal rural-to-urban and South-South migration to provide labor in global production networks to serve multinational capital.

Ness points out that while migrant workers send money home to assist their families in meeting basic needs, this practice “represents an individualistic solution to a systemic crisis of inequality.” While remittances may help to pay for education, housing, or healthcare for individual families, they accomplish nothing in advancing national development and building infrastructure in society as a whole. As such, narrowly and unevenly dispersed remittances cannot be regarded as an engine of development.

Furthermore, by siphoning so many workers into an international system that serves Western capital, poor- and medium-income countries are drained of skilled and unskilled labor from domestic development. This relationship can be regarded as a form of economic imperialism.

Neoliberal economic practices propel the expansion of migrant labor, undermining and reducing full-time positions with decent pay and benefits in underdeveloped nations. The geographic shift of manufacturing to the Global South in the late twentieth century had at its base a nonunionized workforce converted into performing precarious and informal low-wage tasks in short-term positions for specific production needs.

It is not only capitalist productive forces that are served. Many migrant women provide domestic care for affluent families in host countries, living in employers’ homes. Migrant women risk deportation if they incur the wrath of their employers by failing to meet unreasonable demands. Quite frequently, migrant homecare workers are subjected to abuse, withholding of wages, and restricted freedom of movement.

Right-wing parties in host nations politicize the presence of migrants, misdirecting resentment away from the capitalist structural causes for income inequality and encouraging intolerance for migrant victims of the same economic system. There is a tension between reliance by businesses on low-wage migrant labor and appeals to nativist sentiments, which on one level are at cross-purposes. Yet, restrictive measures hurl migrants into an abyss of vulnerability that provides opportunities for businesses to violate wage and safety regulations and extract additional surplus value from this exploited workforce.

Mounting xenophobia places obstacles in the path of migrants, even as they serve capitalist interests in developed capitalist states. As the policing of borders is militarized, the cost to migrants rises. More workers fall into the undocumented category, which “allows destination states to control the number of migrant laborers via shifting enforcement.”

In the United States, the criminalization of temporary migrant labor leads to limited access to or exclusion from essential health and safety services. In Western Europe, the restrictions placed on migrants originating from outside the Schengen Area do not reduce the extent of migration; instead, a higher percentage of migrants are in an unauthorized status, facing constant threat of deportation, and often enduring harsher living circumstances. Furthermore, restrictions tend to burden migrants with the need to pay smugglers or traffickers, and those who lack resources are more likely to be exposed to debt peonage arrangements or forced labor. Restrictive measures also increase the incidence of fraud, where a migrant pays to be brought into another country, only to find that the promised job is nonexistent or other than promised. Opportunities such as these to abuse vulnerable workers multiply. Moreover, a labor system based on super-exploitation has knock-on effects throughout the rest of society in a host country. “The creation of a stratified system of migrants,” Ness remarks, “undermines the rights of all workers.”

In addition to a macroanalysis of global migrant labor, the book also zeroes in on four case studies: Nepal, Vietnam, El Salvador, and Moldova, demonstrating the impact of the migrant labor system on a micro level. In the case of Nepal, the nation remains underdeveloped, with a large majority of the population engaged in farming. The country is a major training center for prospective migrant workers able to afford the fees, recruitment, and travel. Typically, trained workers are bound for low-wage employment in East Asia or the Arab Gulf. Astonishingly, Nepal’s largest “industry” is temporary foreign migration. In essence, the nation is an appendage of foreign capitalist interests. The migrant labor system tends to suck primarily young workers out of the domestic economy, thereby creating “labor shortages in key sectors of the Nepalese economy, agriculture and essential jobs in medicine, education, construction and infrastructure.” Because Nepal’s GDP is highly dependent on remittances, its economy is inherently unstable due to fluctuations in demand for migrant labor.

There is also a personal social cost to migrant labor in that workers are forced into long-term separation from spouses, children, family, and friends. Childcare is often left to the extended family, who remain behind. By the time a migrant worker returns home, absence

may have done irreparable harm to a marriage, leading to separation. In some cases, children are left to manage on their own. According to Ness, “The separation of families is a contributing factor in the rise of crime and gang violence in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and other countries highly dependent on migration.”

Reliance on migrant labor is an inseparable component of global capitalism. The hostility to “government and political solutions to inequities triggered by the dictates of rich countries,” Ness explains, has produced “a situation which confers freedom on capital but not to labor.” It is clear that international labor in the neoliberal global economy constitutes “an extreme form of economic imperialism that ignores the security and welfare of the poor in the Global South.”

In this well-researched and informative book, Ness digs into multiple facets of the global economy of migration. In its relentless pursuit of profit, capital increasingly depends on migrant labor, producing growing precarity across many segments of society. The essential role of migrant labor in global capitalism tends to be underappreciated, and Ness performs a valuable service in exposing the widespread and destabilizing dynamics of that process.

Notes.

[1] “ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers: Results and Methodology,” International Labour Organization, June 30, 2021.

[2] Dilip Ratha, Sonia Plaza, Eung Ju Kim, Vandana Chandra, Nyasha Kurasha, and Baran Pradhan, “Migration and Development Brief 38: Remittances Remain Resilient But Are Slowing,” KNOMAD–World Bank, June 2023.

[3] Richard H. Adams, Jr. and John Page, “International Migration, Remittances, and Poverty in Developing Countries,” World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3179, December 2003.

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