



# CENTER FOR GLOBAL WORKERS' RIGHTS

SPRING / SUMMER 2018

The Spring 2018 semester was packed with events and achievements for the Center. The highlight of the semester was the Center's symposium on labor informality (see article, this page). Center members won several important recognitions, starting with Center Postdoctoral Scholar, Katherine Maich's Honorable Mention for the Labor and Employment Relations Association's Best Dissertation Award (see page 2). Center-affiliated Assistant Professor Rebecca Tarlau was awarded a Spencer Postdoctoral Fellowship for the 2018-2019 academic year (page 4). Center-affiliated Assistant Professor Elaine Hui received the Career Development Award from the Center for Global Studies (page 5). And Center Director Mark Anner was awarded the Liberal Arts Researcher Appreciation Award for his fifth grant at Penn State (page 6). Center faculty and Workers' Rights MPS students participated in a fall 2017 trip to New York City coordinated by Katherine Maich to meet with street vendors and domestic worker organizers (page 4), and a spring 2018 trip to Chicago with Elaine Hui to participate in the Labor Notes Conference (page 3). Faculty were also active publishing, including a Center Report on workers safety in Bangladesh (page 2), a book published by Elaine Hui on the state, laws, and labor relations in post-socialist China (page 3), and a journal article by Rebecca Tarlau, "State Theory, Grassroots Agency, and Global Policy Transfer" (page 6). During the summer of 2018, workers' rights MPS students and faculty were involved in exciting internships and scholarly activities (page 5).

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## 7<sup>th</sup> Annual CGWR Spring Symposium: Labor Informality in Comparative Perspective: Toward A More Just Future for Workers

The Center for Global Workers' Rights was proud to host the multidisciplinary symposium, "Labor Informality in Comparative Perspective: Toward a More Just Future for Workers," on April 19th and 20th at the Atherton Hotel in downtown State College. Our conversations and panelists featured a number of recognized sociologists, political scientists, historians, workers, practitioners, and labor scholars from across the U.S., Brazil, and India during this two-day event. Additionally, we welcomed faculty from Rural Sociology, Education, and the School of Labor and Employment Relations at the Penn State campus who shared their research and chaired panels.

Participants explored issues of labor informality for garment and homeworkers, waste pickers, domestic workers, migrant workers, and farm workers across various contexts and countries. Weaving together empirical data, historical narratives, and contemporary reflections on labor informality in comparative perspective, we together asked over the two days: How can workers build power in the informal sector? How can our work, practice, teaching and organizing increase worker protections, standards, and dignity in the informal sector? Moreover, how do we bring about a more just future for *all* workers?



7<sup>th</sup> Annual CGWR Spring Symposium Participants, April 2018

The symposium participants and other LER students also joined in for a screening of the film *Food Chains*, followed by a panel discussion with farmworkers and organizers from Vermont and Florida. The event was a dynamic experience for those involved and we look forward to collaborative projects resulting from the symposium's connections and conversations.

## Maich's Dissertation wins Honorable Mention in Best Dissertation Award, Labor and Employment Relations Association

Katherine Maich's dissertation, "Domesticated Democracy? Labor Rights at Home in Lima and New York City," completed in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, won the Honorable Mention in the Labor and Employment Relations Association's 2018 Thomas A. Kochan and Stephen R. Sleigh Best Dissertation Award. Kate's committee consisted of Raka Ray (chair), Kim Voss, Laura Enriquez, and law professor Jonathan Simon. In her dissertation she asks, given the place of the home as constitutive of the private sphere, how do we regulate it as a workplace?

To explore the implications of this guiding question, Kate focused on two recent pieces of domestic worker legislation through a global South/North comparison set between Lima, Peru, and New York City. She spent 10 months conducting ethnography in Lima and 8 months in New York City and also conducted 120 in-depth interviews with domestic workers in both cities to study these laws and their effect upon the lives and working conditions of the very domestic workers they were designed to regulate. In both cities, household workers waged decades-long political struggles to win these laws, yet they codify and complicate an employment relationship already shaped by social hierarchies of race, ethnicity, class, and gender.



Connecting with domestic workers from across Peru through *No Somos Invisibles (We Are Not Invisible)* with Sofia Mauricio.

One of the goals of Kate's dissertation was to think comparatively about workers' struggles and to bring history to bear upon our changing understanding(s) of the home as a site of work and labor rights. However, the home is far from the only site of labor in struggle to bring about labor rights and law. In light of growing informality shaping so much of how work is categorized, practiced, and understood, her dissertation calls for efforts to bring the political into all kinds of workspaces that remain hidden, devalued, and made invisible.

## Center Releases Research Report: "Binding Power: The Sourcing Squeeze, Workers' Rights, and Building Safety in Bangladesh Since Rana Plaza"

In March 2018, the Center released a research report that examines workers' rights and building safety, with a focus on the five years since the Rana Plaza building collapse that killed over 1,000 workers. The report, which was authored by the Center's director, Mark Anner, found that despite more than two decades of private voluntary approaches to address workers' rights abuses in apparel supply chains, workers in the lower production tiers continue to face poor working conditions and chronic violations of their rights. The report notes that gains in Bangladesh for workers over the past five years have been severely limited in regard to wages, overtime hours, and work intensity in part due to the sourcing practices of the

brands and retailers that sit at the top of global supply chains. A partial exception to these negative trends is in the area of associational rights, where, in the aftermath of Rana Plaza, pressure resulted in minor pro-union labor reforms. But these gains have been reversed. This report finds the one area where gains for workers have been dramatic to be building safety. This is largely the result of an unprecedented binding agreement, the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. The Accord, which imposes constraints and obligations on global firms that are absent from traditional voluntary CSR schemes, has overseen a massive program of safety renovations and upgrades. Reference to the report and interviews with the author appeared in *The New York Times*, *CNN*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.



The report can be found here:

<http://lser.la.psu.edu/gwr/documents/CGWR2017ResearchReportBindingPower.pdf>

## A Note on Labor Notes

By MPS Student Xiangzi Chen

On April 6-8, MPS students of Labor and Global Workers' Rights (LGWR) program of Penn State excitedly attended the biennial Labor Notes Conference in Chicago. Labor Notes Conferences are the biggest gatherings out there of grassroots union activists, worker center leaders, and all-around troublemakers in North America, and they are held every two years. The 2018 Conference was the largest one in the history, with nearly 3,000 unionists and labor activists registered from 25 countries, resulting from the rising labor movement in the Trump era, like the statewide teachers' strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona, and also the Supreme Court case of *Janus v. AFSCME*. More than 250 workshops, trainings, and meetings were organized in just two full days!



MPS Students Xiangzi Chen and Michelle Siuwoon, and Assistant Professor Elaine Hui participate in Labor Notes Conference.

Labor Notes was a fruitful experience as our MPS students look to build international solidarity. The conference also helped foster deeper insights into the US labor movement. For example, many workshops discussed further strategies in the rising informal sectors, like Amazon/distribution centers and gig sectors, and also provided a democratic practical training of collective bargaining for rank and file workers and unionists. In addition, we also formed connections with the international counterparts.

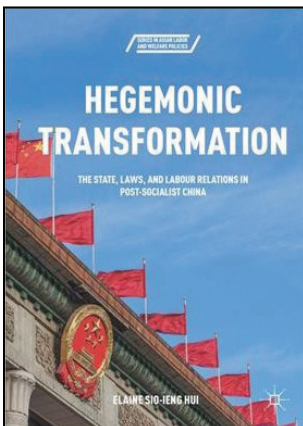
On the other hand, in order to ally with the international comrades, Michelle and Xiangzi (LGWR students) and Elaine (LGWR professor), who focus on the labor issues in China, organized a China Panel that shared the oppressed situation of labor activists and workers' collective struggles in China with the US and international labor activists. Although the situations of labor struggles in China is tough, as it is for much of the global labor movement, through sharing our experience and learning from the other comrades' struggle, we were inspired to be with so many unionists and activists from around the world and their never-give-up-the-fight attitude and the strong commitments in the conference.

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## New Book *Hegemonic Transformation: The State, Laws, and Labour Relations in Post-Socialist China*

Published by Assistant Professor Elaine Hui

Assistant Professor of Labor & Employment Relations and Asian Studies Elaine Hui published her exciting new book in January 2018 with Palgrave Macmillan, US. In the book, she notes how the Chinese party-state has been depicted in three major forms by the existing studies – the authoritarian state, developmental state, and corporatist state. These depictions, however, only offer a partial understanding of the Chinese party-state and have failed to grasp its totality. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Antonio Gramsci, this book contends that the Chinese economic reform inaugurated since 1978 has been a top-down passive revolution, and that after three decades of reform the role of the Chinese state has been changing from steering the passive revolution through coercive tactics to establishing capitalist hegemony.



The book illustrates that the labor law system is a crucial vehicle through which the Chinese party-state seeks to secure the working class's consent to the capitalist class's ethno-political leadership. The labor law system has exercised a double hegemonic effect with regards to the capital-labor relations and state-labor relations through four major mechanisms: the normalizing mechanism, countervailing mechanism, concealing mechanism, and transmuting mechanism. However, these effects have influenced Chinese migrant workers in an uneven manner. The affirmative workers have granted active consent to the ruling class leadership; the indifferent, ambiguous and critical workers have only rendered passive consent while the radical workers have refused to give any consent at all. What Professor Hui's work eloquently indicates is that hegemony is a provisional product and a terrain of continuous class struggles, and that it is possible for Chinese workers to negotiate, contest, or transgress these hegemonic boundaries.

## Reflections on MPS Students' Trip to Explore Organizing in the Informal Sector of New York City

By MPS Student Isaac Adjei

Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher once said, “for the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.” While these words rang true thousands of years ago, they still resonate with us today and are fundamental to our quest of building strong labor rights activists in today’s world of the ever-growing influence of capitalists in the global economy. Our three-day Center trip in November to New York City, consisting of informative meetings and hands-on experiential learning, helped students understand the hurdles that informal workers must overcome to survive in a global city like NYC and was based on this philosophy.

We first met the main organizer of Domestic Workers United, Christine Lewis, who outlined the many challenges domestic workers face, including low wages, physical abuses, and unreasonably long working hours. With a clenched right fist, pounding her left palm, Ms. Christine warned that there are greater challenges ahead and the fight has just begun. We also spoke with KC Wagner of Cornell University’s Worker Institute and met with Carolina Bank Munoz, a former union organizer and labor sociologist at Brooklyn College.

While all these engagements were exciting, I found the outreach with street vendors in midtown Manhattan the most intriguing. This project gave me a bird’s eye view of how street vendors struggle to make ends meet in a highly-regulated city like New York. During dialogues with some vendors, I saw fear in their eyes, heard fear in their voices, and noticed fear in their actions. Some even refused to talk to us out of fear as they were afraid of being arrested and in some cases, deported. This experience rekindled my desire to advocate for the rights of all persons, irrespective of their country of origin, religious affiliation, class, gender, or creed.



MPS Students and Assistant Professor Katherine Maich meet with Christine Lewis of Domestic Workers United, Brooklyn, NYC.

## Spencer Postdoctoral Fellowship Announcement

Rebecca Tarlau, an Assistant Professor of Education and Labor and Employment Relations affiliated with the Center, has been awarded a Spencer Postdoctoral Fellowship for the 2018-2019 academic year for her project, “Teacher Activism Across the Americas: Union Politics and Educational Change in Brazil, Mexico, and the United States.” The Fellowship Program supports 30 early career scholars working in critical areas of education research. These \$70,000 fellowships support non-residential postdoctoral proposals that make significant scholarly contributions to the field of education.

The study asks the following question: Under what conditions do unions start acting beyond their economic interest and become broader actors for social change? Rebecca will answer this question by analyzing instances of “oppositional unionism” within teachers’ unions in Brazil, Mexico, and the United States. Oppositional unionism occurs when union members come together to contest the leadership of their union and transform the union’s daily practices, priorities, and demands. By examining the diversity of internal groups and theories of social change within unions, Rebecca will contest the assumption that teachers’ unions are unitary actors simply “blocking” education reform efforts. Instead, drawing on the labor studies and social movement literature, she will argue that unions are complex organizations that reflect their political-institutional contexts, which shape their forms of political engagement. Through participant observation, interviews, and archival research, Rebecca will examine the relationship between teachers’ unions, the state, and political parties; internal union divisions; the moments when teachers organize for broader demands; and how union disputes influence education. The goal of this research is to shift understandings of teachers’ unions as simply “self-interested” or “selfless,” to a more nuanced assessment of the role teachers play in politics, the diversity of political groups within unions, and the ways that teachers’ unions in diverse contexts go beyond self-interest and become social movement actors.



Assistant Professor  
Rebecca Tarlau

## Workers' Rights Student Summer Internships and Activities

The Center for Global Workers' Rights coordinates closely with the Penn State MPS program in Labor and Global Workers' Rights that is part of the Global Labour University network. Each summer, LWGR students participate in a range of internships and learning activities. Here is what our students are doing in the summer of 2018: **George Gibson** (of Liberia) is studying about Africa with professor Kidane Mengisteab. They are examining colonialism, nationalism, the relationship between state and society, leaders, the military, political parties, and economic development, with a focus on Nigeria, Sudan, Angola and Kenya. **Isaac K. Adjei** (of Liberia) is a visiting fellow with the Harkins Institute for Public Policy & Citizen Engagement at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. Isaac is conducting research on—among other topics—barriers to employment for persons with disabilities in western Africa. **Michelle Siuwoon** (of Hong Kong) has an internship with the International Labor Rights Forum in Washington, D.C. Michelle is working with the China Program and building transnational labor solidarity with trade unions and labor groups in Asia. **Tiffany Finck-Haynes** (of the United States) has a volunteer position with Restaurant Opportunities Centers (ROC) United in Washington, D.C. where she is working with the One Fair Wage DC (OFW) campaign on Initiative 77, which will increase the minimum wage for tipped workers. The Initiative passed in June and the campaign is pressing DC Council to implement the Initiative. **Xiangzi Chen** (of China) is participating in the UC Berkeley Labor Center's 'Labor Summer' Internship Program where he is exploring work conditions and organizing possibilities of airport workers in the Bay Area in California.



MPS Student Tiffany Finck-Haynes (far left) with ROC United in Washington, DC.

## Summer Updates from CGWR-Affiliated Faculty

**Mark Anner** began his summer in Barcelona where he participated in the Latin American Studies Association Congress. He conducted research in India on the impact of sourcing practices on workers' rights and presented a paper at the International Labour and Employment Relations Association (ILERA) Congress in South Korea, where he was elected to the ILERA Executive Committee. He will finish his summer in Brazil where he will participate in the annual Global Labour University conference.

**Mary Bellman** will help to facilitate at the Mid-Atlantic Labor Leadership Initiative, an intensive year-long leadership development program, for its first session in 2018 at the Penn State from June 25-29th. She will also host the United Steelworkers District 10 for a week-long training on campus from August 6-10th.

**Elaine Hui** will be conducting research in China and Viet Nam this summer, and she will also be a research fellow at the City University of Hong Kong. She recently received the Career Development Award by the Center for Global Studies in Penn State to conduct the project "Labor NGOs, Social Justice, and the Rise of Global Authoritarianism: The Case of China". Additionally, the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation will fund Elaine's project on "China's Labor NGOs under Xi Jinping".

**Katherine Maich** will spend her summer between Buenos Aires and the Bay Area working on her developing book project and teaching the Capstone Research course for the MPS students. She will present recent work on digital platforms, domestic work, and the gig economy at the ISA World Congress of Sociology in Toronto, some of which is forthcoming in *Youth, Jobs, and the Future: Problems and Prospects*, Oxford University Press.

**Glenn Perusek** will continue his work teaching organizers for the Building Trades Academy in Baltimore for a week in June and then Las Vegas for a week in August. He is focused on articles on choke points in global supply chains and on the politics of the white working class.

**Rebecca Tarlau** will be in California doing research on teachers' unions, and she will attend the Global Labour University conference in Brazil in August.

**Paul Whitehead** attended the 107th International Labour Conference of the ILO in Geneva in May and early June, where he observed the Committee on Application of Standards as well as the first of two annual deliberations over whether the ILO will adopt a new instrument on workplace harassment and violence. Throughout the summer session of the School's HRER MPS Program, he taught a World Campus course, Employment Law.

## Center Director Recognized for Five Grants at Penn State

Center Director, Mark Anner, was recognized by the College of Liberal Arts at its annual Researcher Appreciation Reception for receiving his fifth grant at Penn State. Mark's grants cover research on price pressure in the apparel industry and its impact on worker safety Bangladesh (funded by the Dutch Embassy), an examination of the impact of a 'sourcing squeeze' on workers' rights in India (funded by the Ford Foundation), and desk research on working conditions in the Moroccan wine and olive oil supply chains (funded by the Solidarity Center). Mark's research illustrates how the consolidation of major firms that sit on the top of supply chains has created pressure on supplier factories to reduce costs and shorten production lead times. The result has been wage levels that do not cover basic living expenses, production quotas that are so intense that they are inhumane, and working hours often in excess of 70 hours per week.



### Recent Publications by Center Team Members

Anner, Mark. 2018. "CSR Participation Committees, Wildcat Strikes and the Sourcing Squeeze in Global Supply Chains." *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 56(1): 75-98.

Anner, Mark. 2018. "Binding Power: The Sourcing Squeeze, Workers' Rights, and Building Safety in Bangladesh Since Rana Plaza." Center for Global Workers' Rights.

Hui, Elaine Sio-ieng, 2018. *Hegemonic Transformation: The State, Law, and Labor Relations in China*. New York: Palgrave.

Tarlau, Rebecca. 2017. State Theory, Grassroots Agency, and Global Policy Transfer: The Life and Death of Colombia's *Escuela Nueva* in Brazil. *Comparative Education Review* 61(4): 675-700.

## Announcements

Visit our **Labour Rights Indicators** project with newly released 2016 data: <http://lser.la.psu.edu/gwr/tur-indicators>.

**Center Post-doctoral and Visiting Scholar Positions available:** For more information, write the Center Director, Mark Anner, at [msa10@psu.edu](mailto:msa10@psu.edu).

**Apply to our MPS program in Labor and Global Workers' Rights:** <http://lser.la.psu.edu/graduates/mps-in-labor-and-global-workers-rights/main>

**Sign up for our Center listserv:** <http://lser.la.psu.edu/gwr/resources-1/cgwr-listserv>

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