

# **20 Years of Struggle Against the Adverse Effects of Globalization in Hong Kong - Reminiscences on Working with Globalization Monitor**

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**October 2019 I still remember the year of 1999 when we founded Globalisation Monitor (GM).**

Ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Western ruling elites were still in a state of euphoria, while among the left and labour there was a sense of demoralisation. This was not confined to Europe. One of the founders of GM told me that on her visit to a South African labour meeting, when she raised a question about how much the democratically elected government had done for the poor there was only silence in the hall. I never miss the Berlin Wall era, for sure. But what replaced the Cold War, since early the 1990s, was the globalisation, a neo-liberal new world aiming at the destruction of everything progressive since the end of WWII, and replacing it with privatisation, de-regulation and more capital mobility.

Then came the 1994 Zapatista Uprising in Mexico. In retrospect, the reason that it captured attention across different countries was because it told an alternative story to the new world order announced by George W. Bush. This was followed by the 1999 Seattle resistance to the WTO ministerial meeting, which successfully shut down the meeting's opening. Such resistance was a boost to the morale of the social movement around the globe and this time it even arrived in Hong Kong, a commercial giant but a political dwarf situated between East and West, and hence rarely connected to radical social movements outside the city. It was at this time that we, a group of activists here in Hong Kong, began to talk about the feasibility of the GM project, in response to the call for Globalisation from Below. We started our project with a journal.

A few years back I bumped into an old artist and he recalled how the GM journal had opened his eyes to the neo-liberal new world disorder. We had some success, but we also encountered scepticism by those who questioned whether the issue of globalisation might be too remote a target. But our resistance to neo-liberal led globalisation should always begin in our home country. That is what the slogan "think globally, act locally" means. The journal was a bi-monthly, and each issue targeted one particular topic. The topics consistently linked the local and global. Such topics included privatisation, "free trade", waste and its disposal, the tourist industry, the communications revolution etc. But the journal was possible only with the active contributions of the collective of editors. After a few years, this active contribution dried up as many editors began to move on to other, usually busier, tasks. The journal ceased publication in October 2005.

In 2004 we were busily preparing the resistance to the WTO ministerial meeting, scheduled to meet in Hong Kong at the end of 2005. The whole year of preparatory work for the action week targeting the WTO meeting allowed me to hear stories told by working people about how privatisation, sub-

contracting, and de-regulation ruined their lives. This great protest of thousands, led by 1,000 Korean farmers, is much remembered today and is notable for the fact that it also somehow changed the perspective of many in relation to neo-liberalism. Before this event, one still regularly encountered progressive people welcoming the expansion of the “free market” at the expense of the “government”.

I once talked with a kind-hearted lady from a big NGO, who remarked that our concern about the down sides of privatisation can much be remedied by more “public monitoring”. The way that privatisation of public shopping arcades has created a monster called The Link REIT, ruining so many small shops by greedily and repeatedly raising rents, has proven that so called “public monitoring” is nothing but a joke. I was happy to see that after the resistance to the WTO this passion for the “free market” somehow receded a bit, at least among civil society and labour groups. I also heard that Beijing was not happy with our actions against the WTO and told the Hong Kong government never to hold any controversial international conferences again. I am not able to verify this hearsay but since then there have not been anymore big WEF, IMF, WTO conferences in Hong Kong.

At around the same time GM was put into contact with Mainland workers working for the Hong Kong TNC Gold Peak Batteries. They were being poisoned by its factories. This was also the time when GM began to develop its China labour program. This case allowed me to have a glimpse into how corporate led globalisation worked not only at the global level but also at the grassroots level, where millions of Chinese working people toiled in the semi-militarised sweat shops, and how, despite the adverse situation, joined together to fight against all the social injustice that had rained down on them. In this case, there was not much chance of winning anything at the beginning. But the GP women workers continued with their long struggle and did successfully gain handsome compensation in the end.

One of GM’s strengths, since it has some international connections, has been targeting non-Chinese, overseas TNCs, investing in China. The Maersk case is one which I found especially interesting. In January 2008, a riot broke out amongst workers at Maersk Container Industry Dongguan Ltd. They smashed the factory where they worked to protest against the brutal management there. We contacted a Danish reporter and, after they reported on the case, Annette Stube, Director of Corporate Social Responsibility for Maersk, flew to Hong Kong to meet with us, bringing Irving Hultengren, Managing Director of the Dongguan Maersk plant with her to the meeting. What amused me a lot is the episodic debate between me and Irving Hultengren. The following, though not a word for word recording, roughly gives the reader a glimpse of the debate.

*Irving Hultengren: Sometimes it is difficult to know what is going on in the plant. This worker complained about the other worker hitting him, and then the other guy told me it was the first guy who started the fight. How do we know the truth? There is no objective truth.*

Au: Surely, I do not know the case you talk about. Yet I do believe in objective truth. The truth is that it is the barricade like regime of your factory which has created such a repressive and violent working environment. It is such an environment which caused the riot in your factory.

Annette Stube: I too believe in objective truth.....

Managing director Irving Hultengren was very accommodative when he was first introduced to me. It was only when we came to the part about the riot in his factory that he came out with an opinion of his own and started a small debate about objective truth. It was even more amusing to see that his superior disagreed with him. Actually, there is one higher truth: this sweatshop regime, supported by the party state, gives rise to all the aggressive behaviours even among fellow workers. It is the

rotten system of uncontrolled freedom for corporations which makes people, managers and workers alike, turn against each other.

At the turn of the century, when the topic of globalization became fashionable, one could already identify two opposing currents on the issue. One current was internationalist and inclusive, the other was nationalist and exclusive. I personally had hoped that by linking the resistance to privatisation and sub-contracting here in Hong Kong with the global justice movement we might be able to arouse a new generation of labour and community activists to build a new movement. Such a movement might be simultaneously local as well as inclusive and open, one which would not fall into the trap of retreating to nativism or nationalism in the face of the global onslaught by the evil alliance of governments and corporations.

But things went in another direction. A localist discourse, in connection to a nativist outlook, has proven to be more powerful. And with retrospect, it is clear that this turn to nationalism or nativism is a world-wide phenomenon. Back in 2005, we were already witnessing the existence of at least two main responses to globalisation and the WTO. While the left called for “globalisation from below”, there was also a strong nationalist current opposing the same globalisation issue. If there was an ounce of relevance for this nationalist response among activists in developing countries, which were facing economic aggression from Western and Japanese TNCs and their governments, it was totally conservative in the US and elsewhere in the West and in Japan. Eventually this evolved into Trump’s ascendance and his call for “America First”.

The last ten years ended with a scenario which was hard to imagine in 1999. While China evolves into an Asian hegemony and increasingly goes global with its Belt and Road Initiative, sometimes described as Globalisation 2.0, the US empire under Trump is doing the opposite, namely de-globalisation by withdrawing from the TPP, calling for US corporations to return their investment in China to US soil, and engaging in a trade war with China. This reminds us of the United States’ escalation of tariffs in the 1930s, which triggered a tariff war and in turn made world trade shrink by more than 60%. The rest of the story is common knowledge. Although we are always sceptical of so-called free trade, replacing it with a trade war like this is even more problematic. When I hear hawks from either side talk of war between the two great countries, both as a possible scenario in the future and as an option, I feel a chill down my spine.

Hence in the last decade things in Hong Kong have also developed not entirely in the way we had hoped. Increasingly, the defence of Hong Kong autonomy has overshadowed all social and environmental injustice. What I would like to argue is that, instead of making the two issues exclusive, why not combine them and argue for a defence of Hong Kong autonomy and for social and environmental justice simultaneously? For the working people and the youth who are being robbed of their futures, this approach is both probable and desirable. And this is what is happening world-wide as well. We are witnessing leftist and progressive forces all over the world opposing austerity, nationalism and climate denial. The anti-Trump campaign in the US, the challenge to austerity in the UK, and Greta Thunberg led climate strikes going global, all of these campaigns have proven that the undercurrent of progressive discourses are still alive and kicking. Here in Hong Kong, the momentum of the young people’s quest for political justice is also impressive. There is no Great Wall which separates them from going further and tackling social and environmental justice in the future. And our participation in the real movement is one of the keys to this desirable result. Therefore, even if the current situation in Hong Kong does not look very optimistic now, its link to the world also determines that its fate is always connected to the global situation. Hence the present is precisely what it is – just the present only, always fluid rather than static, and eventually giving way to the future. The struggle is still ahead of us, not behind us.

In the last decade, my other work has meant that my participation in GM has gradually faded.

However, I am glad to hear that GM has continued its older projects and has also been able to start new projects — from the water project to the investigation on China's overseas investment — in accordance with the changing situation. I have benefited from its work a lot. If there is "a way of life" which is worth preserving for fifty years, then it is the way of life when I was with GM, a life of connecting to struggles from below. This is something which gives one hope.

**Au Loong-yu**

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