

REPORT: SYDNEY TRANSIT LABOUR LEG

Calcutta Research Group's (CRG's) visit to Sydney began on 6 July 2012 and ended on 11 July 2012. It was a productive mix of visits to sites of logistics operations, meetings with people involved hands-on in operations in the logistical industries and academic sessions studying logistics operations in various contexts. The CRG participants were Paula Banerjee, Ishita Dey and Ranabir Samaddar, Suhit K. Sen.

The highlight of 6 July's programme was a visit to a container terminal – the MCS Container Terminal, where a drive around the site gave the team an insight into how a container terminal's logistics are organized, its possible bottlenecks and the sheer size of the container freight industry. The team – including the hosts from the University of Western Sydney, Brett Neilson, Ned Rossiter, Sandro Mezzadra, Katherine Hepworth, Giulia dal Maso and Mithilesh Kumar – also had an instructive discussion with an employee of the terminal, who spoke among other things on issues relating to the labour force and work conditions. The most significant thing he said was that while accidents were rare in the terminal the regime of work required by the logistics of the terminal's operations led to a high suicide rate. Clearly, and this point will recur in the course of this report as indeed it did in the course of the team's Sydney peregrinations, there is a fundamental problem concerning the deployment of logistical processes, in the logistical industries. To put it briefly, the relentless drive to streamline logistics in ever more minimalist and sophisticated ways always seems to run into one barrier—labour and the labour process. In other words, the refinement of logistical processes seemed always to be at the rights and entitlements of labour.

A similar visit was made to Port Botany, which included, apart from a drive through the facility, a meeting with Micah Clark, an executive at Port Botany. Clark spoke about the importance of seamless logistical networks functioning 24 hours day and went on to say that if the lives of workers and others and the rhythm of urban life had to be recalibrated these would have to be achieved, whatever the cost to individuals.

On the first day after the trip to the container terminal, there was a visit to NICTA, Australia's research of excellence working on information and communications technology, to attend a seminar addressed by three experts in the field of logistics -- Glenn Geers, Director of Intelligent Transport Systems Technologies, NICTA, Simon Hemli, Manager – Transport and Logistics Industry Sectors, Department of State and Regional Development, and Michael Michael Bouari, General Manager, 1-stop, a company specializing in transport logistics. They all spoke about the necessity to fine-tune logistics to help sustained economic activity and the problems and bottlenecks this endeavour entailed.

On 9 July, there was a meeting with trade union representatives from the logistical industries. Two of them were from the warehousing sector and worked on the shop floor themselves. One was a leader of a truckers' union. The two workers from the warehousing sector were extremely confident and seemed to know exactly how powerful they were vis-à-vis their employers. The leader from the truckers' union gave an overview of the labour situation in that sector and was also pretty confident of the strength of their union.

The Transit Labour workshop was held on 10 July. Suhit K Sen was the first speaker. In the context of the making of the new town at Rajarhat he presented testimonies of people who had been dispossessed to make way for it. Giovanna Zapperi spoke about creative labour and its insertion into global circuits of labour, with special reference to Shanghai. Sandro Mezzadra, Ranabir Samaddar and Anne McNevin spoke in the second session on the subject of conceptualizing logistics and mobility. The high point of the discussion was an animated debate on what the concept of 'borders' signified and the multiple ways of conceptualizing it. The debate hinged to a large extent on the issue of territoriality. One view was that border was more in the nature of a metaphor, identifiable, in context, in various sites. The other view located border more tangibly in the reified territorial space of the nation-state.

Members of the Transit Labour platform presented papers at a session of the Knowing Asia Conference on 11 July. The first panel was entitled 'Zones: Beyond the Logic of Exception'. Brett Neilson and Ranabir Samaddar presented papers, and were followed by Mithilesh Kumar and Giulia dal Maso, who made a joint presentation. Neilson spoke about the emergence of special economic zones with special reference to their relevance for creating and reproducing new forms of capital and labour in the context of Shanghai and Kolkata. Samaddar spoke from a broader perspective about the concept of the 'zone' and its relations to 'corridors' in the context of accumulation and the politics of the masses in post-colonial capitalism. Dal Maso spoke about emerging cultures of stock market behaviours that marked them out as new zones of capital. Kumar spoke about labour unrest in Delhi and Gurgaon in the context of special zones of production and labour regulation. The discussion in this session was centred mostly on the broad issues raised by Samaddar. A substantial part of it had to do with regimes of accumulation in post-colonial times, importantly the concurrence of primitive and virtual forms of accumulation.

The second panel was entitled 'Corridors: The Politics of Movement and Migration'. Sandro Mezzadra spoke about migration and borders and how these are both shaped by and shape constantly reconfigured corridors, especially in the context of the space that is the nation-state. Paula Banerjee spoke about the corridors that are created by migrations across the Indo-Bangladeshi border. Katherine Hepworth spoke about corridors, especially in the context of the geography of Port Botany and the movement of container traffic in the area. The debate about the salience of borders was resurrected in this session in the context of the papers presented by Mezzadra and Banerjee.

The third and last panel was entitled 'Circuits: Logistics, Labour, Programmed Spaces'. Ned Rossiter spoke about the unique character of 'logistical cities', especially in the context of the new town at Rajarhat. Athula Ginige spoke about how circuits can be transfigured by the use of technology, in the context of an initiative launched to help farmers and fishermen market their produce in more efficient ways. Ishita Dey spoke about new forms of labour in the information-technology hub in Salt Lake, Sector III, and how their networks operate in a global circuit of capital.