

# Global Labour History

International Institute of Social History



# Introduction

For most of its existence since 1935, IISH expended its resources mainly close to home. It stood almost alone in its efforts to rescue the literary heritage of the European labour movement from dictatorships of every shade, prior to the outbreak of World War II. After the war, it remained for a long time the indispensable repository for numerous organizations and individuals within and outside the Netherlands.

Today, although still it remains a very important resource for international movements and organizations, the Institute is less involved with their local representatives however; the main reason being that almost all European countries now have at least one national archival institution of good standing in the field, coping very well on their own with local material. This has provided an opportunity for the Institute to concentrate on new areas where its expertise is much more needed. During the last fifteen years, for example, many archives have been rescued for posterity in various parts of Asia and North-Africa. To promote these activities, the Institute has organized an extensive international network of correspondents, and established an office in Bangkok in 2002.

This trend coincides happily with fresh developments in historical research, notably the growing public interest in world history. In recent years, IISH has pursued the initiative

of breaking out of the confines of traditional, Euro-centred labour history. Especially from the 1990s onwards, there has been an increasing collaboration with historians from other continents, Asia in particular. Initially, an important tool was a series of comparative (and often interdisciplinary) projects, in which specialists from some fifty countries have taken part. More recently, this activity combined with collective long-term research-projects, and providing support for conferences and research activities in the Global South as well as the construction of transcontinental databases.

Through infrastructural support, the construction of so-called meta-sources, web services and publications, these developments are reinforced and strengthened.



We intend to promote strongly a transition to Global Labour History, i.e. the history of the worldwide labour relations as well as grassroots protest- and organizational forms over the last centuries. Such historiography not only has an intrinsic scientific and cultural value, but can hopefully also provide some social orientation in these times of accelerating [globalization].

Housewife cooking, the Netherlands 1955.

# Collections

Our primary task is the collection of archives and other materials relevant to social and economic history.

Almost from the very beginnings of IISH in 1935, documents were not only collected in Europe, but also from other parts of the world – at first especially the Dutch colonies and Latin America, later increasingly from Asia. At present the Institute preserves almost 2,900 archives of persons and organizations, around one million printed volumes, and about as many audio-visual items.

The available collections are accessible through an online catalogue, and an online index of archives and inventories [www.iisg.nl/collections](http://www.iisg.nl/collections).

A significant amount of this material contains information useful for Global Labour History – and the quantity of this material has only grown after IISH decided to accommodate the Netherlands Economic History Archive, which contains books and other printed material from around the world since the 16th century [www.neha.nl](http://www.neha.nl). Thus, for example, the extensive archives of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) provide a frequently consulted source for the development of trade unions in the Global South since the 1950s. Other archives, often little used (such as the archive of the International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers'

Unions), contain a wealth of material; the same applies to organizations which promote human rights, such as Amnesty International, and the many literary legacies of left-wing militants in developing countries.

The Institute also actively creates documentation sources itself. For example, a project group from Islamabad in 2003 produced a large quantity of photos and audiotapes documenting the harsh working lives of those who labour in the coal-, salt-, and other mines of Pakistan. We earlier commissioned a documentary in photos of Afghan migrant workers in Iran. Currently, oral history projects are being realized relating to Myanmar and Indonesia, among others.

**Prostitute, Casablanca 1939.**



# Meta-sources

It has become evident that global labour history is in need of new databases. There are two closely interconnected tasks here. On the one hand, the collection of large quantities of quantitative and qualitative data, on such themes as the structure of the world labour force, real wages, demographic developments and workers' movements; and on the other, the development of techniques and methodologies making it possible to compare data gathered from different contexts.

We are actively engaged in constructing several global databases, while other databases are in preparation. An important project in this area regards historical wages and prices [www.iisg.nl/hpw](http://www.iisg.nl/hpw). Such data are among the most important sources of information in social- and economic-historical research, especially for the pre-statistical period. The Institute has taken the initiative of setting up a network of scholars working with this kind of data, and establishing a moderated list of data files of historical prices and wages.

Three kinds of sources are being made available to researchers: a list of data files available online; an index to other websites containing statistical data; and an overview of the value of the guilder from 1450 onwards with links to sites with the value of the us dollar (1665- ) and the British pound (1660- ).

Other databases under construction focus on strikes, guilds and labour contracts. The Historical Sample of the Netherlands [www.iisg.nl/~hsn](http://www.iisg.nl/~hsn) – a representative sample of the life-history of about 80,000 people born in the Netherlands between 1812 and 1922 – is a national database which through collaboration with other databases (among others in Taiwan) tries to make possible transcontinental comparisons.

One attempt to make comparisons of data from different contexts possible is the Historical International Standard Classification of Occupations (HISCO) project – an occupational information system that is both international and historical, and simultaneously links to existing classifications used for present-day conditions ([historyof-work.iisg.nl](http://historyof-work.iisg.nl)).



Nurses taking care of infants, Spain 1936.

Currently the HISCO standard is based on coding the thousand most frequent male and female occupational titles in datasets from eight different countries (Canada plus seven European countries), spanning the period 1670-1970, but mostly from the nineteenth century. The coding of new data is now undertaken in Columbia, New Zealand, Russia and the USA, planned for India, and nearing completion in Portugal and Spain.

# Infrastructural support

We seek to promote collaboration among labour historians from all parts of the world in a variety of ways.

Since 1996, the Institute organizes the European Social Science History Conference (ESSHC) every two years, bringing together hundreds of scholars interested in explaining historical phenomena using the methods of the social sciences [www.iisg.nl/esshc](http://www.iisg.nl/esshc).

The Institute hosts at its website the International Association of Labour History Institutions [www.ialhi.org/iabout.html](http://www.ialhi.org/iabout.html) and Labour History Net, an overview of all relevant congresses, conferences, publications, reviews, as well as a monthly e-mail alerting service [labourhistory.net](http://labourhistory.net).

Staff members moderate two electronic and discussion lists, LabNet, used primarily by European historians [www.iisg.nl/labnet](http://www.iisg.nl/labnet), and ALSNET, aimed mainly at Asian historians [www.iisg.nl/asia/alsnet.html](http://www.iisg.nl/asia/alsnet.html).

The website of the Institute provides opportunities for external researchers to open discussion forums, such as Labour Again, which focuses mainly on Latin America and publishes contributions in English and Spanish [www.iisg.nl/labouragain](http://www.iisg.nl/labouragain).

The independent South-South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development (SEPHIS), hosted by IISH, was established in 1994 and is funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Development Cooperation. It aims to encourage the formation of a South-South network directed

towards comparative historical research on long-term processes of change [www.sephis.org](http://www.sephis.org).

IISH researchers are closely involved in the International Economic History Association, which will stage its 2010 congress in Amsterdam [www.neha.nl/ieha](http://www.neha.nl/ieha), as well as the International Social History Association [www.iisg.nl/isha](http://www.iisg.nl/isha), and the growing network for global migration history.

Beyond this, we promote the professional organization of labour historians around the world. In 1995, IISH staged a conference on South Asia, which was a stimulus for the Association of Indian Labour Historians established a year later [www.indialabourarchives.org/ailh.htm](http://www.indialabourarchives.org/ailh.htm). The Institute participated in recent years in the organization of conferences in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, India, Iran, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, the Philippines, Russia, Thailand, South Korea, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In Russia, we also facilitate the publication of *Sotsialnaya Istoriya*, a yearbook of social history.

**Wild-rubber tapper punished for 'laziness', Belgian Congo, c. 1907.**



# Web Services



We maintain three Virtual Libraries.

The Virtual Library Labour History [www.iisg.nl/~w3vl](http://www.iisg.nl/~w3vl) and the Virtual Library Economic and Business History [www.neha.nl/w3vl](http://www.neha.nl/w3vl) seek to assist labour historians (and business historians), broadly defined.

**Children braiding hats and cigar cases, Indonesia, no year.**

They concentrate on research instruments and bring together scattered information from all kinds of sources.

The Virtual Library of Women's History [www.iisg.nl/w3vlwomenshistory](http://www.iisg.nl/w3vlwomenshistory) lists women's history institutions and organizations, locates archival and library collections, and provides links to internet resources on women's history.

The Institute also features a virtual information desk [www.iisg.nl/enquiries.php](http://www.iisg.nl/enquiries.php), which as far as practically possible assists scholars in tracing primary sources in labour history around the world.

# Research

Since the late 1980s, not only has the number of researchers at IISH grown, but the Institute has also systematically promoted its own distinctive approach. Four themes have developed side by side:

Initially attention focused especially on international aspects of labour movements, visible in publications such as *Internationalism in the Labour Movement, 1830-1940* (2 volumes, 1988), *The Formation of Labour Movements 1870-1914* (2 volumes, 1990), *Revolutionary Syndicalism* (1990), *Social Security Mutualism* (1996), *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions* (2000), *Urban Radicals, Rural Allies* (2002), and *Between Cross and Class* (2005).

Gradually 'the working classes as such [...] and] the economic and technical conditions that allowed labour movements to be effective, or which prevented them from being effective' (Eric J. Hobsbawm) received more attention. This stimulated projects researching the living strategies of lower-class households – the most important results being published in the anthology *Rebellious Families* (2002); projects focusing on the global comparison of occupational groups, like transport workers (*Dockers*, 2 vols, 2000) and textile workers (publication forthcoming); and an attempt to inventorize the state of affairs in international labour historiography [*Class and Other Identities*, 2002; *Global Labour History*, 2006].

Studies were done of labour relations, migration and regulation of labour markets, published in voluminous works such as



*Racism and the Labour Market* (1995), *Migration, Migration History, History* (1997, reprinted 1999 and 2005) and *The Rise and Development of Collective Labour Law* (2000), as well as other publications and a major conference on the guilds.

In recent years, the field of inquiry has been extended, and not just free but also unfree workers (slaves, indentured labourers, child labourers) are now regarded as an essential

topic in labour history. The volume *Free and Unfree Labour* (1997) marked the beginning of this approach. In coming years, our research will pursue this topic further, investigating which 'modes of labour usage' have existed in the last 500 years and how their emergence, development and – sometimes – demise can be explained.

In that framework, we currently work on global statistical 'snapshots' for 1650, 1800, 1900 and 2000.

Afghan migrant labourers in Iran, 2001.

# Publications

Since 1956, we publish the *International Review of Social History* (from 1993 in association with Cambridge University Press). This is one of the most respected scholarly journals about labour and working-class history worldwide. Like the Institute itself, the journal has focused more and more on global labour history. Not only are more and more articles, book reviews and review essays being published about Africa, Latin America and Asia, but the annual supplements appearing since 1993 also systematically explore novel areas.

Not only are more and more articles, book reviews and review essays being published about Africa, Latin America and Asia, but the annual supplements appearing since 1993 also systematically explore novel areas. Recent issues investigated, among other topics, the role of popular intellectuals in social movements of the Global South (2004) and new developments in Indian labour history (2006). Apart from our journal, we publish a number of monograph series which also apply the new research perspective.

Peter Lang Academic Publishers (Switzerland) issues since 1995 the series *International and Comparative Social History*. The topic of the first volume was *Racism in the Labour Market* and contained contributions

from all continents; the most recent volume is a comprehensive overview of achievements of *Global Labour History* until the present. Berghahn Books (Oxford and New York) publishes, since 2000, our *International Studies in Social History* series. A diversity of topics is dealt with, including for example the social history of second-hand goods, coal miners in the Ottoman Empire, and household survival strategies of the labouring poor.

The most recent development is the series *Changing Labour Relations in Asia*, published by RoutledgeCurzon (London). So far, volumes have appeared on *Labour in Southeast Asia* and on *labour contracts in early modern Japan*.



Girl working as brick carrier in a kiln, Gujarat, India, 1997

Children going to work in the fields, Gujarat, India, 1997

Boy harvesting sugar cane, India 1997.

Next double page: **Factory labourers receive their wages**, Surabaya 1927.

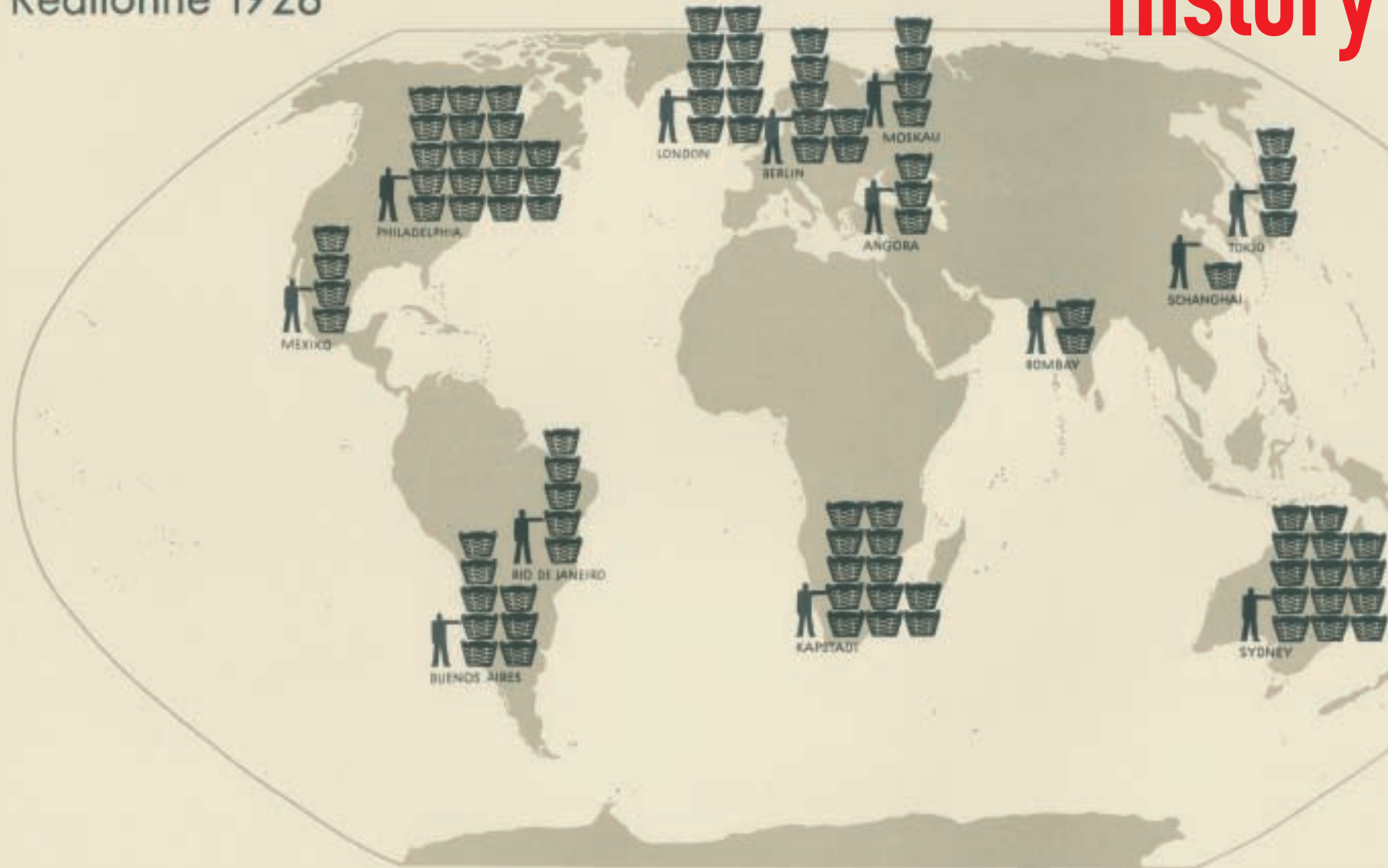




LOONUITSBETALING TE NGAGEL

# Global Labour History

Reallöhne 1928



Ein Lebensmittelkorb bedeutet soviel an Nahrung und Wohnung, als man in Berlin für 30 Mark kaufen kann  
jeder Stoss Körbe bedeutet den durchschnittlichen Monatslohn in einer Stadt

Never before in human history has such a large part of the world's working population been dependent on wages or salaries. The strong growth of the number of wage and salary earners, and their associated labour relations have major implications for our understanding of economics and society, as it is directly linked to questions of labour productivity, labour migration, labour relations, and the emergence of civil society. The historical understanding of labour and labour relations in all their diverse forms is, for that reason, crucial for understanding the modern world.

'Global Labour History' is the attempt to develop this understanding in a scholarly and objective way. We use the following provisional description:

Angefertigt für die Bibliographische Institut AG., Leipzig  
Gesellschaft und Wirtschaftsmuseum in Wien

'Real wages 1928', plate from the atlas of pictorial statistics Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft, Leipzig 1930.

## Themes

Global Labour History focuses on the transnational and transcontinental study of labour, labour relations and workers' social movements in the broadest sense of the word. By 'transnational' is meant the placing in a wider context of all historical processes, no matter how geographically 'small', by means of comparison with processes elsewhere; and the study of interaction and transfer processes, or a combination of the two ('entangled histories'). The study of labour relations encompasses work that is both free and unfree, paid and unpaid. Workers' social movements consist of both formal organizations, and informal activities. The objective study of both labour relations and social movements requires that equally serious attention be devoted to 'the other side' (employers, public authorities).

The study of labour relations concerns not only the individual worker, but also his/her family. Gender relations play an important part within the family and in labour relations involving individual family members.

## Periods

As regards the period studied, in Global Labour History there are in principle no limits in temporal perspective, though practically the emphasis is often on the study of labour relations and workers' social movements which have evolved along with the growth of the world market since the 14th century. As indicated, for instance for comparative purposes, studies going back further in time should by no means be excluded however.

## Methodology

As far as the methodological status is concerned, an 'area of concern' is recommended, rather than a theory to which everyone must adhere. It is accepted that our conceptions of research and our interpretative frameworks can differ, and evolve over time. Not only is this pluralism inevitable, it can equally well be intellectually stimulating – provided historians are always prepared to enter into a serious discussion of their disparate views. Notwithstanding different points of departure, however, an attempt should be made to work productively in the same fields of research.

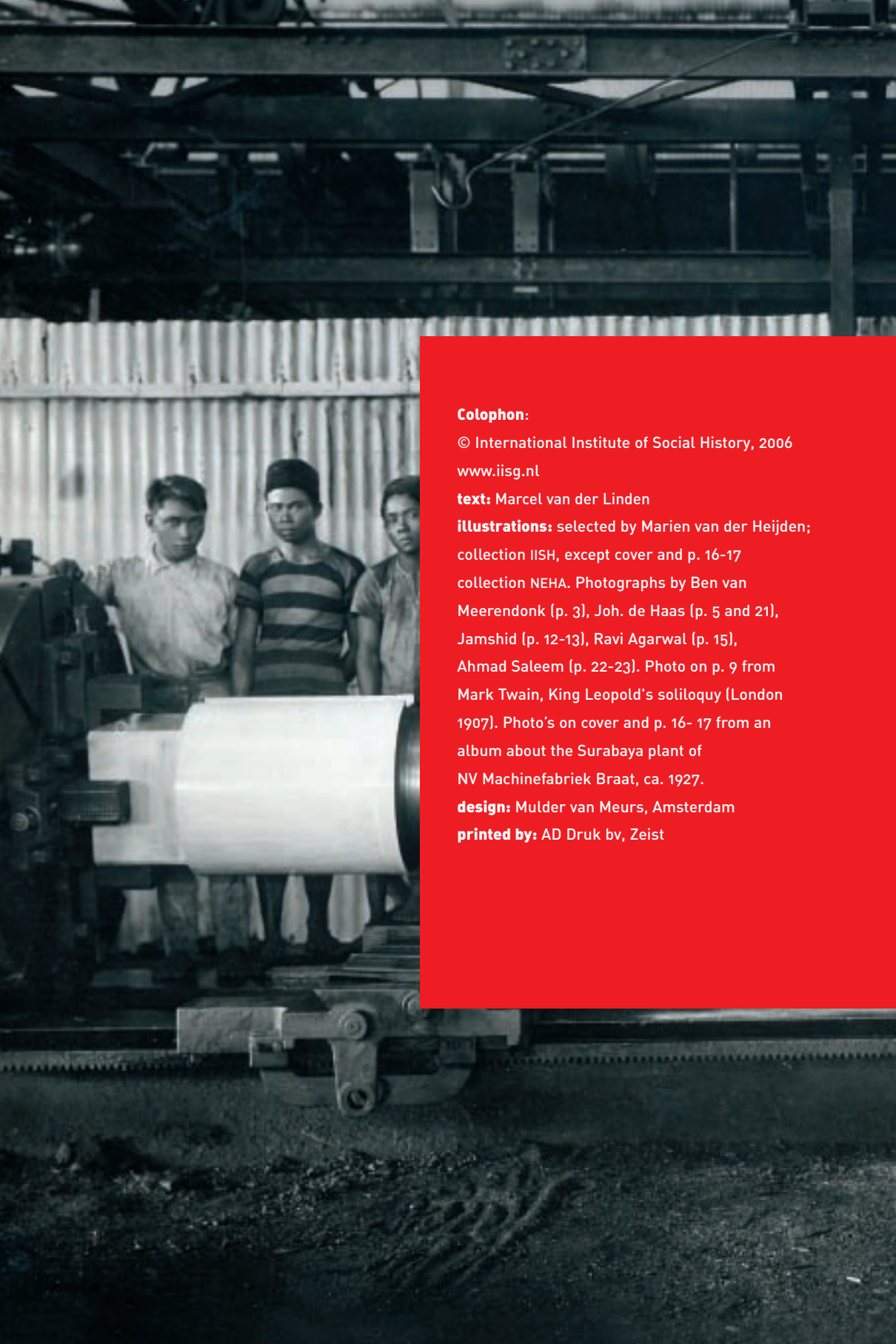
Global Labour History is interdisciplinary, combining insights from all social sciences and the humanities, technology and history.

Filling pay packets, the Netherlands 1963.

Next double page: Coal miners, Pakistan 2002.







**Colophon:**

© International Institute of Social History, 2006  
[www.iisg.nl](http://www.iisg.nl)

**text:** Marcel van der Linden

**illustrations:** selected by Marien van der Heijden;  
collection IISH, except cover and p. 16-17  
collection NEHA. Photographs by Ben van  
Meerendonk (p. 3), Joh. de Haas (p. 5 and 21),  
Jamshid (p. 12-13), Ravi Agarwal (p. 15),  
Ahmad Saleem (p. 22-23). Photo on p. 9 from  
Mark Twain, King Leopold's soliloquy (London  
1907). Photo's on cover and p. 16- 17 from an  
album about the Surabaya plant of

**design:** Mulder van Meurs, Amsterdam

**printed by:** AD Druk bv, Zeist