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Disparate but not antagonistic: Classes of labour in cotton production in Burkina Faso

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Abstract

This paper examines the variety of agrarian classes of labour and the challenges they face in organizing and pursuing their interests. By taking the cotton sector in Burkina Faso as a case study, it analyses how various ‘classes of labour’ organize and mobilize for collective action to raise their claims: poor cotton farmers and workers in the cotton factories. Poor and middle farmers recently came to the fore when they boycotted cotton production in large numbers. The study focusses on the boycott campaign, and more broadly on class struggle and collective action by farmers and workers, on interclass alliances, and on capital's attempts to play the classes of labour against one another. The boycott campaign provides an outstanding case to analyse the interests of the various classes of labour and of opportunities for rural–urban mobilization and alliances across classes of labour. I argue that poor farmers and factory workers along the chain of cotton production can be considered as various classes of labour that are not necessarily antagonistic to one another but, first and foremost, to capital. In order to achieve radical transformation in the agrarian context, what is needed are networks and organizations to establish interclass solidarity and alliances.

KEYWORDS

Africa, Burkina Faso, class analysis, class struggle, classes of labour, cotton

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1 | INTRODUCTION

History has shown that peasants are not necessarily conservative nor are they passive victims to globalized capitalism. In contrast, agrarian classes of labour, as Bernstein (2010b) has named them, including poor and middle farmers, can be agents of progressive change. This paper interrogates a core question in critical agrarian studies: How do peasants become revolutionary? (Huizer, 1975) More specifically, 'how do "working people" in the countryside [...] join other social forces in the fight against neoliberal capitalism' (Borras, 2020, 4)? It investigates which and how 'class-based alliances resisting particular forms of [...] capitalism' (Scoones et al., 2017, 7) emerge and how rural movements connect with each other and with others that are urban-based (Dietz & Engels, 2021, 666).

I explore these questions by presenting a case study on the cotton sector in Burkina Faso, a key agricultural sector that is still labour-intensive both in cultivation and processing. This makes the sector particularly interesting for the study of class structure and class dynamics, as it is characterized by a wide range of various forms of labour in both farming and industrial processing. In Burkina Faso, for approximately three million people in the rural zones, cotton production is the primary source of income (SOFITEX, 2022), accounting for 14% of the total population (21.5 million in 2021; World Bank, 2022). The cotton sector is a field of intense social mobilization and collective action. A boycott campaign by smallholder cotton producers contributed to a 29% decrease in overall production in 2018–2019 compared with the previous season, making Burkina Faso's drop down from being Africa's top cotton producer to being the fourth after Benin, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire (Coulibaly, 2019). The study focusses on the boycott campaign and more broadly on class struggle and collective action by farmers and factory workers, on interclass alliances, and on capital's attempts to play the classes of labour against one another.

The boycott campaign provides an outstanding case to analyse the interests of the various classes of labour and of opportunities for rural–urban mobilization and alliances across classes of labour. Cotton companies and the state authorities allied to them argue that the boycott significantly reduces labour in the cotton companies, and they thereby attempt to construct an antagonism of interests of cotton farmers on the one side and workers in the cotton factories on the other. As opposed to this, based on the case study analysis, I argue that the interests of farmers and factory workers are not as such antagonistic but are only based on the assumption that the overall aim of cotton production is maximizing the companies' profit. The conflict of interests between them is, on the contrary, produced by the practices of the cotton company that strives for minimizing labour cost and maximizing its profit.

The article is structured as follows. The next section introduces two theoretical concepts the analysis refers to: Henry Bernstein's concept of 'classes of labour' (Bernstein, 2010b) and Erik O. Wright's framework of class analysis (Wright, 1997; Wright, 2005). Methodology and data are presented in the section following that. Then the development of the Burkinabé cotton sector is outlined. Class structure and the fragmentation of classes of labour are analysed alongside the chain of cotton production (limited to Burkina Faso, from cultivation on the fields until the bales of cotton are transported to the harbours for export). The analysis seizes on Bernstein's core questions of political economy: 'Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? What do they do with it?' (Bernstein, 2010a, 22). Class formation and class struggle by cotton farmers on the one side, and in the factories on the other, are investigated in the following section, which asks: Who is organized how? And who does what to raise claims and enforce class interests? Based on this, and referring to the contested boycott campaign, it is discussed whether the class interests of farmers and factory workers are antagonistic or compatible. I conclude that interclass solidarity and alliances, between the classes of labour and between rural and urban classes, are key to mobilization for progressive change.

2 | ANALYSING AGRARIAN CLASSES OF LABOUR

Analysis of agrarian class formations starts from the observation that the peasantry is far from homogenous but differentiated alongside the distribution of wealth and the means of production and depending on the various forms of the use of nature (Wolf, 2001, 258). Peasants are embedded in the class structures of capitalist society but they

do not as such constitute a class. Analysis of agrarian class structures rather seeks to reveal how the ownership of, and access to, nature and the means of production are distributed unequally and what this means for class formation (O'Laughlin, 2016, 397). I do not attempt to present an overview on the rich debates in critical agrarian studies on agrarian class formation and struggle here but rather just introduce concepts that I find helpful for the case study analysis that follows: Bernstein's 'classes of labour' and Wright's framework of class analysis.

Diversification of sources of income in rural zones is rather the norm than the exception (Barrett et al., 2001, 315). This holds particularly true for small farmers who are 'too poor to farm' but quite often likewise for rich (capitalists) and middle (petty producers) farmers. Middle farmers, too, in many settings, may encounter difficulties in securing their livelihoods based solely on farming. Moreover, farming is mostly a seasonal activity, so that farmers in some periods of the year might pursue other activities to generate additional income, such as occasional and informal work in crafts or construction or petty trading. The slack season for cotton farmers without irrigated plots in Burkina Faso is relatively short (from February through May, depending on how quickly they harvest their cotton). Capitalist farmers that make a profit out of their farm tend to invest it, in agriculture and also in other economic activities. Many, probably the majority, of poor and middle farmers¹ in the South are composed of what Bernstein calls the 'classes of labour': 'neither dispossessed of *all* means of reproducing itself nor in possession of *sufficient* means to reproduce itself' (Bernstein, 2010b, 91, original emphasis). In other words, they depend on, directly or indirectly, selling their labour power while at the same time they continue farming or breeding livestock. They engage in both the formal and informal sectors, often seasonally, and depend on 'various and complex *combinations* of employment and self-employment' (Bernstein, 2010b). As a consequence, lines between the countryside and towns, between agriculture and manufacturing, and the formal and the informal are also becoming increasingly blurred. The categorizations of workers, peasants, traders, employed, self-employed, formal, informal, urban, and rural are becoming less clear. Moreover, classes of labour are fragmented, as class represents a universal, albeit not exclusive, social relation: ethnicity, race, caste, gender, and so on all interplay with class relations and increasingly blur class locations. This has theoretical implications for class analysis, and practical implications for mobilization and class struggle, as fragmentation shapes how socio-economic relations are translated into class identities and class consciousness and then may or may not lead to collective action.

2.1 | Class structure, class formation, and class struggle

Bernstein's analysis of the fragmentation of agrarian classes of labour outlines obstacles to class consciousness and collective action; in order to analyse the mobilization of agrarian classes of labour into class struggle, I combine Bernstein's reflections with Wright's concept of class analysis. Class analysis aims to identify the conditions and processes of socio-economic transformation; thus, it refers both to the micro level of the subject's perceptions and actions and to the macro level of society and how the micro and macro levels are related to each other. Wright therefore suggests six analytical categories. At the micro level, these are as follows: material *class interests* that derive from an individual's positions within class relations; *class consciousness*, which he conceptualizes as the subjective consciousness of class interests and the conditions to realize them; and *class practices*, namely, individual and collective action to enforce class interests. At the macro level, besides *class structure*, the categories are *class formations*, which are the collectives people create to realize class interests (e.g. trade unions, peasant associations, and landless worker movements), and *class struggles*, which are the manifest conflicts between individual and collective actors pursuing antagonistic class interests.

In the case study of cotton production in Burkina Faso, I combine the analysis of the fragmentation of classes of labour with Wright's framework, particularly its macro level categories, to conceive the variety of classes involved in

¹Poor, middle, and rich farmers can be distinguished based on the size of their land and on the (other) means of production and labour they have at their disposal (see in detail, the section on 'class structure and classes of labour').

cotton production, from the field to the factory. In particular, I look at how they organize and mobilize to enforce their interests and how their organizations and struggles relate to one another. At both stages—in cultivation and processing—class positions of farmers and factory workers differ considerably, and their opportunities and means of organizing and enforcing their interests vary correspondingly. A thorough analysis of class dynamics and class struggle should take this into account and can thus reveal whose interests and claims have a chance to be articulated and whose are rather silenced and can help to understand how and when fragmented classes of labour can progress to class struggle.

3 | METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The empirical material for the case study presented here was collected during nine research stays between February 2018 and March 2022. In total, I carried out around 35 semistructured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) in the towns of Bobo-Dioulasso, Dédougou, Houndé, Ouagadougou, and villages in the provinces of Mouhoun (Boucle de Mouhoun region, central-west) and Tuy (Hauts-Bassins region, southwest). Interview partners included cotton farmers (15 interviews and FGDs), workers at cotton plants (four interviews and FGDs), and representatives from labour unions (five interviews), civil society organizations (four), cotton companies (five), and the official cotton farmers association *Union Nationale des Producteurs de Coton du Burkina Faso* (UNPCB, two). Interviewees were selected in order to embrace a variety of experiences of class relations and a wide range of perspectives on organizing and mobilization in the cotton sector and thus included wealthier and poorer farmers, those who have participated in the protests and those who have not, precarious workers and workers with relatively secure contracts, and the management of the cotton companies. Interviews and FGDs were conducted in French, Mooré, and Dioula (mostly with translation to French). I conducted all interviews myself; in most cases, for interviews and FGDs with farmers and factory workers, I was accompanied by grass roots or labour union activists. I introduced myself as a researcher conducting an academic project on the cotton sector, namely, social relations of production and related conflicts. In addition, I had numerous informal conversations, paid visits to the cotton fields, and participated in the meetings and mobilization events of the social movements (e.g. the *Organisation Démocratique de la Jeunesse du Burkina Faso*, ODJ) and labour unions (the *Confédération générale des travailleurs du Burkina*, CGT-B, and the *Syndicat national des travailleurs des fibres textiles*, SYNAFITEX).

Secondary sources include reports, mainly from the Burkinabé press, and documents from international organizations (such as the World Bank and OECD), development agencies, state authorities, the cotton industry, trade unions, and NGOs.

Data were analysed through an open coding system, focusing on the various actors' perceptions of class relations, their experiences with organizing (class formation), the ways in which various interests in the sector are articulated and negotiated, and conflicts and protests, especially the recent boycott campaign (class struggle).

4 | BURKINA FASO'S COTTON SECTOR

Between 250,000 and 350,000 smallholder farms cultivate cotton in Burkina Faso, mainly on a family/household basis (Coulibaly, 2020; UNPCB, 2022). Cotton cultivation is predominantly rain-fed; only some rich farmers have the means to irrigate their fields. Smallholder cotton farmers are neither workers nor capitalists in a strict sense but rather are petty commodity producers who own the means of production and who mainly exploit their own labour and the labour of their families, especially their wives and youth. As Bernstein (2004, 129) put it: 'In short, they are capitalists who employ (hence exploit) themselves'. Rather than contract farming, farmers cultivate land they own or for which they hold tenure rights. Farmers either have ownership rights defined by traditional institutions and/or which are codified by formal land titles, or they have tenure rights through traditional institutions (for more details, see Gray, 2002).

In most cases, farmers cultivate cotton on a part of their land and other crops on other parts (cereals and beans mostly for household consumption, and groundnuts, sesame, and cashews mostly for the local market). Intercropping is practiced with other crops but seldom with cotton. Farmers decide what they will cultivate in view of the soil quality, their household consumption, market factors, and the available assets and labour.

Farmers usually do not cultivate all their land at the same time but may leave some areas fallow to recover the soil; additionally, they may not have the assets and labour at their disposal to cultivate all of their land. Class differentiation of the peasantry, as Mamdani has argued, 'develops around differentiation in any one of the elements of the labour process: land, labour or its implements' (Mamdani, 1987, 197). Systematic data on the distribution of farm land in Burkina Faso in general, and for cotton farming in particular, are missing. There is also a dearth of reliable information on landlessness among the agrarian population. This lack of information is also due to the traditional land tenure system that is widespread in Burkina Faso and other parts of West Africa, where access to farm land is not limited to landownership but included a range of socio-cultural tenure rights. Agriculture in Burkina Faso has been historically dominated by small farms of between 3 and 6 ha. A 2014/2015 survey carried out by the National Institute for Statistics and Demography (*Institut National de la Statistique et de la Démographie*) reported that land holdings operate on 4 ha on average, with 81% of farms operating on less than 5 ha and 45% on less than 2 ha (FAO, 2017, 13–15, 29–32). However, competition for land has been significantly increasing in the last two decades, due to hundreds of thousands of Burkinabé farmers returning from neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire in the late 1990s and early 2000s because of the political–military crisis and armed conflict there (Brédeloup, 2006; Loada, 2006). Further causes of competition for land result from soil degradation, from demographic changes (families splitting up farms into smaller units; Luna, 2020), and from tendencies towards a concentration of rural land holdings among urban elites (Zongo, 2006), particularly since the late 2000s, resulting from the expansion of the mining sector (Drechsel et al., 2019).

The main motivation for cotton cultivation is the specific institutional system of the cotton sector, which provides farmers with access to fertilizer, pesticides, and guaranteed purchase of production. Such input support, by contrast, does not exist for food crop cultivation. But as an incentive to grow cotton, farmers get some fertilizer for cereals if they farm a certain size (3–5 ha) of cotton. Moreover, farmers may use some of the inputs they received for cotton production to grow maize and other food crops (see Gray & Dowd-Uribe, 2013; Luna, 2020).

4.1 | Institutional setting

The Burkinabé cotton sector was, and still is today, organized according to a highly vertically integrated *filière* model, which is typical for cotton production in former French colonies in West Africa. It is characterized by a state-controlled monopolistic company, SOFITEX, that organizes cotton production (Gray, 2008).² SOFITEX was created in 1979 as a joint venture of the Burkinabé government and the French state-owned cotton company *Compagnie Française pour le Développement des Fibres Textiles* (CFDT).³ SOFITEX is in charge of the proliferation and distribution of seeds, fertilizer, and pesticides; it guarantees credits for agricultural inputs for producers; it provides agricultural extension; and it organizes the purchase, transport, ginning, and sale of the grains and fibres. The purchase price is fixed before the season begins so that farmers have some planning security, at least with regard to the price. Yet how much they will get at the end of the season of course depends on how much they can sell; and hereof there is no planning security, as harvest depends on rainfall, insect infestation, and so on.

²In 2004, the creation of two fully private cotton companies was authorised: *Société Cotonnière du Gourma* (SOCOMA) and Faso Coton. SOFITEX thus no longer holds the sole monopoly in the sector; however, the two private companies are much smaller and relatively less important, as more than 80% of production remains under the control of SOFITEX. The three cotton companies do not compete with each other; rather, the total cotton producing zone is divided between them: SOFITEX controls the west, Faso Coton the centre, and SOCOMA the east. The *filière* system functions in the same way in all zones.

³The CFDT, created in 1949, developed the cotton sector in Burkina Faso from the 1950s onwards and went on to completely cover the West African CFA franc zone to supply cotton to the French textile industry.

At the beginning of the season, SOFITEX sold inputs on credit (with interest) to the cooperatives, and after the harvest, it purchased the cotton at the fixed price. When the cotton was collected at the end of the season, producers were paid the basic price, minus the cost of the inputs they had received on credit at the beginning of the season. At the season's end, they could potentially get a premium in case the then-effective export price for cotton exceeded the basic price. If the export price was below the basic price, this deficit was topped up by a fund (*fond de lissage*) so that the farmers would still be paid the guaranteed price. The fund was topped up in years of high world market prices for cotton (Staritz et al., 2018, 13).

From the 1960s, farmers were encouraged by the state to organize themselves into village-level cooperatives (*groupements villageois*, GVs), 'which, however, seldom became genuine cooperatives although this was the state's ambition. Peasants joined forces, but rarely resources. The GVs are to a large extent a structure facilitating the work of various extension services' (Pedersen, 2001, 83). The cooperatives were in charge of administering credits to the cotton farmers. In order to have access to input supplies and be able to sell the cotton, every farmer had to be a member of a cooperative. In 1996, pushed by the World Bank's measures to liberalize the sector, the GV cooperatives were reorganized into *groupements des producteurs du coton* (GPCs). Until then, the GVs had been organized strictly at the village level; that is, all agricultural producers from one village formed one cooperative and had to share credits and inputs. The GPCs, in contrast, are established on a voluntary basis by cotton producers who trust each other. Often farmers from the same village are members of different GPCs. These members might be excluded from the GPC, or potential members might not even be accepted if they have a bad record (Kaminski et al., 2011, 1463).

The restructuring of the cooperatives also impacted class dynamics. In general, as compared with the former GV cooperatives, the GPCs have far fewer members and are less diverse (Dowd-Uribe, 2014b, 558). In many cases, more well-off farmers join together in one cooperative, while poorer farmers make up another.⁴ Gray et al. (2018) have shown that poorer farmers have relatively higher levels of debts and are more likely to be excluded from GPCs. In this view, the liberalization-driven restructuring of the cooperatives reflects and reinforces the fragmentation of the farmers, and the cooperatives become class formations, in Wright's terms. Many of the problems that the GVs faced continue to exist since the restructuring, however, particularly difficulties of debt repayment (Dowd-Uribe, 2014a, 164–165).

In 1998, the *Union Nationale des Producteurs du Coton du Burkina* (UNPCB) was created as the national organization of cotton farmers, regrouping all GPCs into a hierarchical umbrella organization. This was not a process initiated 'from below' by a broad movement of cotton farmers themselves. On the contrary, some wealthier producers, together with SOFITEX and the government, pushed the creation of the UNPCB as a 'peaceful' corporatist organization (Dowd-Uribe, 2014b, 558; Kaminski et al., 2011, 1462). Moreover, the UNPCB was created to marginalize (to 'destroy', as one interviewee put it) the *Fédération nationale des organisations paysannes* (FENOP), a more radical organization that in the mid-1990s mobilized small farmers at the village level, not only cotton producers (Bassett, 2010; Bonnassieux, 2002). The UNPCB provides technical advice to producers, represents them in negotiations with the cotton companies and the state authorities, and facilitates the credit system for agricultural inputs, that is, supporting the collection of credits and assuming liability cooperatively.

5 | CLASS STRUCTURE AND CLASSES OF LABOUR

The chain of cotton production is composed of cultivation, transport, ginning, storing, compression, packing, and transport to the harbour. Each step is based on labour and thus on class relations.

⁴Mamdani (1987, 205) has depicted very similar dynamics with respect to the restructuring of communal rural labour in Uganda.

5.1 | Farming

Most cotton farmers, as with farmers in Burkina Faso in general, own a couple of hectares (see Fok, 2008). Informants would classify as poor farmers those who have less than one (or two, in the view of some) hectare; middle farmers have 1–5 (or 2–10) ha. In Gray et al. (2018, 842), small farmers are classified as those who have less than 1.5 ha, medium farmers 1.5–4.9 ha, large farmers 5–9.9 ha, and those who have more than 10 ha as ‘very large’. Rich farmers are clearly a minority. Yet varieties with regard to land size are significant among rich farmers, too: Some may own up to 50 ha, and a very small minority of wealthy farmers own over 100 ha, some (probably no more than a handful) even over 300 ha. Rather than (solely) based on the size of the land they hold, we may distinguish poor, middle, and rich farmers based on the (other) means of production and labour they have at their disposal, since the amount of land cultivated, and how effectively they can produce, depends on ownership of the means of production (tools, oxen, tractors, atomizers for spraying, the amount of family labour, and the means to hire labour). Poor farmers mostly work with simple hoes, middle farmers with oxen, while rich farmers own tractors that they rent out to others. It can happen that farmers lose their oxen due to debt. Some middle farmers rent tractors, although most of them, and all poor farmers, cannot afford this financial outlay. Some farmers may rent oxen in exchange for their labour (Luna, 2020). Whereas poor and middle farmers predominantly use their own labour and the labour of their family members, rich farmers, in addition to their own and family labour, also employ workers. Yet it becomes increasingly difficult for farmers to mobilize family labour due to changing socio-cultural practices (decrease in reciprocal social obligations, increase in children's school attendance, and migration of young men) (Luna, 2020). This is a particular challenge to poor farmers for whom hiring (paid) labour is not an option. Rich peasants produce more cotton per hectare than poor ones, as the latter work with poorer means of production and often less labour, since they cannot afford to pay for labour when they would need it (Gray & Dowd-Urbe, 2013, 695). Moreover, the amount of family labour available to farmers is likely to vary over lifecycles.

Cotton production is actually profitable just for a minority of farmers who have sufficient land, other means of production, and labour at their disposal. Although access to credits, inputs, and sales is virtually the same for all producers, poor peasants are more likely to be continuously indebted (Gray & Dowd-Urbe, 2013). They need to spend a bigger part of what they earn to feed their families and to pay for education and health care, and the yields they produce per hectare are generally smaller. Gray et al. (2018, 841–842) demonstrate that small farmers (up to 1.5 ha) have significantly lower yields and higher levels of debts, due to lack of agriculture technology, inputs, and labour (see Gray & Dowd-Urbe, 2013, 699). The majority of poor peasants can produce, at best, one ton of cotton per hectare (often less; Gray & Dowd-Urbe, 2013); farmers stated in interviews that poor farmers who do all harvest by hand may end up with just 350–400 kg/ha. Many producers thus become constantly indebted. In this view, poor, middle, and rich farmers may be depicted as distinct classes. As E. O. Wright (2005, 22) put it: ‘what you *have* determines what you *get*. What you *have* determines what you *have to do to get what you get*’ (original emphasis).

Though cotton cultivation does come with risks and challenges, farmers keep to it because it is their only chance to access agricultural assets (input supply, credit, technical support, and access to the market) (Koenig, 2008, 188). Many farmers in the interviews stated that they would actually prefer to cultivate maize or other cereals if they got credit to do so (see Dowd-Urbe, 2014a). They claim that other agricultural sectors, namely, cereal farming, should be supported similarly to cotton production.

Labour in smallholder cotton farming is mostly unpaid family labour, namely, farmers' wives and youth (see Luna, 2019). Farmers who have some cash and who cultivate larger areas also hire labour on a daily or weekly basis. Poor farmers rely on their families to work in the fields and usually they do not count the labour of their wives and youth (the children of extended family and youth of the village) when calculating the cost of cotton production. Whereas in other settings being married to more than one woman may demonstrate a man's wealth and status, some cotton farmers have several wives because they need the labour, according to the interviews. Women are thus exploited threefold: They do unpaid labour in the fields, provide care work in the household, and in addition have to pursue other activities such as petty trading or gardening to feed their children. In the cotton cooperatives, as a rule,

only male farmers are members and thus have access to input factors on credit; women can become a member of a cooperative only in exceptional cases, for example, when their husband has passed away (see Luna, 2020). In most settings in Burkina Faso, women can have their own land but must negotiate access to land with their husbands and do regularly engage in farming food crops on a small scale to feed their families. Women's roles in land ownership and farming vary among regions and ethnic groups. If they somehow manage to produce more, they can sell it at the local markets. In contrast, in the production of the cash crop cotton, women are first and foremost involved as unpaid family workers or precarious day labourers such as harvest hands (see Kevane & Gray, 1999, 5). This role of women is not specific to the cotton sector or Burkina Faso, of course, but reveals the gendered structure of agriculture in general (see e.g. Akram-Lodhi, 2019).

Female and male day labourers, who are mostly landless, are hired for the harvest by farmers who can afford to pay for labour. For example, a harvest hand in Tuy province gets 1,000–2,000 CFA franc (about 1.50–3.00 euros) for 12-h of work, according to interviews with farmers. Luna (2020) quotes farmers, likewise from Tuy province, who would pay 25,000 CFA franc (about 38 euros) for harvesting 1 ha of cotton by hand, which means probably less than 1,000 CFA franc per worker and day.

After harvest, the cotton is transported from the producing zones to the factories by trucks owned by the cotton companies or subcontractors. However, the farmers are in charge of loading the cotton onto the trucks. Often, they hire young men from the villages to do this on a day-by-day basis and with similar fees as for harvesting. However, there are significant differences between poor, middle, and rich farmers: Whereas poor farmers in many cases have to bring the cotton themselves to a collection point to pack it on the trucks, SOFITEX would send a truck out to pick up the cotton from rich farmers.⁵

5.2 | Cotton factories

SOFITEX is the largest of the three cotton companies in Burkina Faso, and with about 5,000 employees, it is also the largest company in the country. The state holds 96.4% of the shares in SOFITEX, the association of the cotton producing cooperatives UNPCB holds 2.6%, while the banks hold 1%. Of SOFITEX's employees, only 1,500–1,700 have fixed contracts with access to social security and labour rights according to state law, including a month of paid holiday. The remaining 3,300–3,500 seasonal and occasional workers are employed on temporary contracts of less than 6 months, though some work virtually the whole year for the company, for example, in the guard service or as electricians. Seasonal workers are recruited for the entire cotton season (usually from December to April but sometimes for 6 months). They have social security, though with poorer conditions than permanent workers. Occasional workers, in contrast, are recruited on demand and are not declared to the social security benefits office (*caisse nationale de sécurité sociale*, CNSS), meaning that they do not have access to social security. Some of these occasional workers are paid on a weekly basis, others monthly, though the payment is basically the same and calculated per hour. According to informants, occasional workers are more numerous than seasonal workers. The end of an occasional contract is usually announced 1 week in advance. The differentiation of permanent, seasonal, and occasional work is the same at the three cotton companies. Unsurprisingly, contract types and qualifications are related: Most of the white-collar employees and management staff have permanent contracts. Of course, there are additional distinctions among the 1,500 permanent SOFITEX workers, between the managers, low-ranking white-collar workers, and technicians. Skilled workers are often on seasonal contracts, and unskilled workers in the factories mostly have occasional contracts. Occasional workers come from the (rural) towns; moreover, people from poor rural, that is, mostly poor peasant households, migrate permanently or temporarily to the towns to work for the cotton companies.

⁵I am grateful to one anonymous reviewer for emphasizing this.

Faso Coton has outsourced the occasional work to a subcontracting firm, *univers 3000*, a kind of temporary employment agency.⁶ At the factory of Faso Coton in Ouagadougou, in early 2020, 118 workers had permanent contracts, and 250 were seasonal workers. Both permanent and seasonal workers are declared to the CNSS and are granted labour rights, such as the right to vote for the works council. Data are missing on the numbers of occasional workers who work for *univers 3000* and are deployed to Faso Coton. Occasional workers are provided with casualty insurance and equipped with safety equipment (protective clothing and the like) but do not have access to social security benefits. They do most of the hard work such as the loading and unloading of cotton bales that may weigh up to 180 or 200 kg and delivering seeds, fertilizer, pesticides, and so on to the farmers, which also means carrying bags of 40 or 50 kg. Therefore, almost all occasional workers are relatively young men, according to interviews with workers and labour union representatives.

6 | CLASS FORMATION AND CLASS STRUGGLE

With respect to the cotton farmers, the UNPCB is the principal organization that is supposed to represent them or at least claims to do so. However, the UNPCB is not an organization of class formation but a typical corporatist institution created according to the logic of liberal corporate multistakeholder governance. It aims to rationalize production, though ultimately, it functions more to tame and control farmers rather than to represent their interests and help them raise their claims. It was established in a top-down way by the state authorities, hand-in-hand with the SOFITEX, and an elite group of relatively wealthy farmers, to weaken bottom-up mobilization and claims raised by the farmers (see Dowd-Urbe, 2014a, 557–559). Gray et al. (2018, 839) interviewed 63 cotton farmers, out of which 74% stated that the UNPCB ‘did not defend their interests’. Such an institution, created in the context of neoliberal policies and economic restructuring, fails to integrate the interests of the majority of cotton farmers (Engels, 2021). This became obvious in 2011, when a struggle for its leadership created a severe crisis at the UNPCB. Many farmers felt cheated by the UNPCB and considered its board a ‘machine’ of SOFITEX (Napon, 2011). The current president of the UNPCB, Bambou Bihoun, who came to power in 2017, is one of the wealthiest cotton farmers in the country (Dofini, 2017) and seeks collaboration with the cotton companies and the government instead of confrontation and conflict.

Class formation of poor cotton farmers proceeds instead through the creation of concurrent organizations or by cotton farmers aligning themselves with other organizations. In class struggle, they frequently draw on non-institutionalized means of collective action. ‘We have drafted an agenda of our claims’, one farmer explained (FGD with cotton farmers, Tuy province, 3 October 2019). ‘We present the agenda to the union [the UNPCB]. SOFITEX does not recognize the farmers but only the union. But at the union, our agenda goes straight to the trash bin’.

6.1 | ‘Zero cotton’: The 2018–2019 boycott campaign

In recent years, to raise their claims, mostly poor farmers from various cooperatives in the SOFITEX zone have set up a network, the *Collectif des Paysans*, and have begun to organize within an existing nationwide youth association,⁷ the *Organisation Démocratique de la Jeunesse du Burkina Faso* (Democratic Youth Organization of Burkina Faso, ODJ)—part of a broader intensification of social mobilization. On 30–31 October 2014, the long-standing President Blaise Compaoré was overthrown by a popular insurrection after 27 years of presidency. The regime change has favoured mobilization in various social and political fields in the country. The successful mass protests in the capital that led to Compaoré’s ouster also had a mobilizing effect in the rural provinces. The general mood of ‘nothing will

⁶I do not have any information on SOCOMA, the smallest of the three cotton companies that operates in the east of the country.

⁷‘Youth’ in terms of a social category, not necessarily age.

be as before' gave significant impetus to the mobilizations and has further strengthened Burkina Faso's vibrant civil society organizations.

The ODJ is one of the organizations that was intensively involved in the struggles that eventually resulted in the overthrow of Compaoré (for more details, see Engels, 2018, 2019). It was created in 2000 by André Tibiri, a key leading figure of the student movement in the 1990s, and fellow militants. The ODJ is a cross-class movement defending the democratic and social rights of and promoting solidarity among youth—where youth is understood as a social rather than an age category. 'In the context of Burkina, which is essentially characterized by imperialist domination, and by the struggles of our people for social liberation', Tibiri explained in an interview (Napon, 2013), 'every youth, whatever his or her ethnic origin, philosophical or political conviction or religious beliefs, can be a member of ODJ.' The ODJ originated from the urban context, namely, the student milieu in the capital, Ouagadougou. Today, however, it is represented all over the country, with more than 10,000 members organized in local groups at the village and urban neighbourhood level. Whereas in its first years the organization indeed focused on issues pressing for the urban youth such as education and unemployment, in 2010, its agenda became much more oriented towards the rural context, with mining, land and cotton farming being major issues. ODJ members are predominantly young (again, in terms of a social category rather than age) people struggling with all-day survival, representing the spectrum of the 'popular classes': workers, informal workers, poor farmers, artisanal miners, high school and university students and also teachers and young academics. In its national executive committee, young academics and teachers are indeed overrepresented. Yet the organization is aware of this, and its vice-president is himself a cotton farmer and one of the leaders of the recent boycott.

The 'zéro coton' campaign was an extensive boycott campaign carried out by Burkinabé cotton farmers during the 2018–2019 season. In the previous season (2017–2018), yields were poor due to unfavourable weather conditions (insufficient rainfall) and—according to interviews with farmers—also due to poor quality fertilizer. In January 2018, cotton farmers organized in the ODJ held a press conference to complain about the poor quality of the fertilizer delivered to them in the SOFITEX zone. They pointed out that the fertilizer contained stones, which according to them resulted in significantly lower yields (the cotton harvest starts in December, so that by the end of January farmers are able to assess the season's yield). Farmers who had received inferior quality fertilizer should be compensated, they claimed: 'As the benefits are shared, losses have to be shared, too', a spokesperson of ODJ in Tuy province stated. 'The cotton farmers must not be left alone to deal with the catastrophic consequence of the season. All actors of the *filière* have to bear the costs. Thus, simply cancel the total debts of the cotton season 2017–2018 due to *force majeure*' (Kinda, 2018).

They demanded, moreover, that the quality of the harvested cotton be assessed by independent experts—with neither the UNPCB nor SOFITEX being involved—and invited farmers to refuse to pay back their credit for the season until the assessment was complete. They accused the UNPCB of not representing the interests of the farmers: 'They [the persons responsible at the UNPCB] let us know that they would not put pressure on SOFITEX', the spokesperson of the protestors reported (Bassolé, 2018). Suspecting the UNPCB of corruption, the protestors announced that they would address the anticorruption state authority and the civil society network *Réseau national de lutte anticorruption* (National network for the fight against corruption, REN-LAC).

On 30 April 2018, cotton farmers who were organized in the ODJ presented their claims to the regional state authority (the *Gouverneur*) of the Haut Bassins region, complaining that the government had supported SOFITEX and its subcontractors with 14 billion CFA francs (about 21 million euros) but had not compensated the farmers. To reinforce their claims, the farmers launched a boycott of cotton cultivation (ODJ, 2019). The boycott initiative spreads rapidly, particularly within the SOFITEX zone. According to interviews, poor and middle farmers (i.e. almost exclusively male head of households) participated in the boycott, while rich ones did not. It was initiated and organized by the local groups of poor and middle farmers organized within the ODJ and the *Collectif des Paysans*. The boycott spreads rapidly also beyond the organized farmers. Even the initial organizers of the boycott campaign were surprised by this (Informal conversation, Bobo-Dioulasso, 26 September 2019). This might be explained by the fact that boycott as a means of collective action by cotton farmers has a long tradition in Burkina Faso and the neighbouring

countries. Boycotts already occurred, or were threatened, in Burkina Faso in the 1990s and early 2000s (Dowd-Uribe, 2014a, 165; Dowd-Uribe, 2014b, 559). For example, in the Cascade region in the South West of the country, farmers launched a boycott (which was not supported by the UNPCB) to protest low purchase prices (Gray et al., 2018, 836). In 2011, farmers who boycotted even destroyed 100 ha of their neighbours' cotton who refused to participate in the boycott (Bassett, 2014, 408–409). In Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, too, farmers organized boycotts, in the same period, to claim influence on the price setting (Bassett, 2010, 47; Bingen, 1994).

The boycott meant that farmers decided not to cultivate cotton at all or to significantly reduce the surface area used for cotton production and instead to grow cereals (maize, millet, sorghum), beans, or cash crops such as sesame, groundnuts, and cashew. In principle, farmers who decided not to grow cotton were supposed to not take inputs for the season on credit from the respective cotton company. However, given that for most farmers cotton cultivation is virtually the only possibility they have to access fertilizer, some farmers might have taken fertilizer from the cotton companies and then used it to grow maize or other crops instead. This could have become a problem in cases where there was no consensus within a cooperative on whether and to what extent to boycott, as debts are collectivized, and at the end of the season the members who did grow cotton would be held accountable for the credits of those who had boycotted. In most cases, however, farmers within the GPCs did discuss this issue among themselves until they came to an agreement, or if some individuals decided to reduce the surface area they would cultivate, they announced it in advance and thus ordered fewer inputs on credit.

Consent for the boycott campaign varied among farmers, not only regionally but also within villages, GPCs, and families. But regardless of whether they supported the boycott in principle, farmers widely agreed that a full boycott would be challenging in view of the absence of cash-generating alternatives in the agrarian context and since refusing cotton cultivation is particularly difficult for poor farmers who cannot afford fertilizer to farm other crops. Systematic data are lacking on who participated to what extent in the boycott, but it can be assumed that the obstacles to engaging in the boycott—namely, the difficulty of refusing to take any inputs at all on credit from the cotton company at the beginning of the season—were higher the poorer the farmers were. Cotton is the only agricultural sector in Burkina Faso that is organized and supported in a way that provides access to inputs on credit to all (including the poor) farmers. So those particularly poor farmers who hardly have access to fertilizer can cultivate some maize for household consumption but seldom for resale. So despite its decreasing yields, cotton remains the crop of choice for many, as it allows these particular farmers to have some cash for essential household spending, such as school fees and health care.

The assumption behind the boycott campaign, as one of its leaders explained in an interview (Houndé, 14 February 2019), was that 'if all farmers would produce "zero cotton", SOFITEX would have to shut down and its managers would lose their salaries'. The call to boycott was passed on from person to person, from village to village, and promoted by the *Collectif des Paysans* and local activists within ODJ. Representatives from the cotton industry confirmed that they had indeed been following the spreading calls for a boycott 'with concern' (Interview, Bobo-Dioulasso, 8 February 2019). In any case, there was a significant decrease in cotton production in the 2018–2019 season: While the Burkinabé cotton companies had set a target output of 800,000 tons, only 436,000 tons were produced, a 29% decrease compared with the previous season. This led Burkina Faso to fall from being Africa's top cotton producing country to the fourth, after Benin, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire.⁸ Although weather conditions and the unstable security situation in Burkina Faso did also negatively impact cotton production, all actors involved considered the boycott to be the major cause (Coulibaly, 2019). The boycott was clearly effective as a means to reinforce the peasants' claims and to put pressure on the cotton companies and the state authorities.

The principal claims that farmers raised in their protests included the increase of the purchase price to 500 CFA franc, lower prices for and quality control of agricultural inputs, change in the allocation mechanism for these inputs, and relief of farmers' internal and external debts for the 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 seasons. Key claims also concerned the UNPCB: the dissolution of the national and departmental boards; an independent audit of all its offices,

⁸In the 2020–2021 season, 492,613 tons were produced, and Burkina Faso ranked third among Africa's cotton producing countries after Benin and Côte d'Ivoire.

including at the national, departmental, and provincial levels; and examination of cases of possible malversation of UNPCB funds (Ouédraogo, 2019). A year after they first presented their claims, protesting farmers went to see the governor of the Haut Bassins region again. Stating that the conflict was beyond his area of competence, the governor advised the farmers to address the government at the national level. Thus, cotton farmers from the three cotton producing zones covered by the SOFITEX and the companies SOCOMA and Faso Coton joined forces and held a workshop in Ouagadougou on 16–17 March 2019. They agreed on a couple of major common claims, which they submitted on 27 May 2019 to the Ministry of Agriculture and Water (ODJ, 2019).

6.2 | Class formation in the cotton factories

Labour unions are important, yet they are of course not the only actors of class formation of wage workers. Notably, casual workers are significantly less organized in labour unions, which creates what Eddie Webster (2005) has called a ‘representational gap’ (see Atzeni, 2021; Britwum & Akorsu, 2017). In Burkina Faso, six labour union federations exist, organized along ideological lines, which predominantly organize formal workers with both permanent and temporary contracts. The biggest federation, the *Confédération générale des travailleurs du Burkina* (CGT-B), is oriented towards a Marxist-Leninist ideology and understands itself as ‘revolutionary’, whereas the other federations are oriented towards more reformist and/or social democratic ideas (see CGT-B, 2013; Kabeya Muase, 1989). In the cotton companies, three labour unions represent the workers: CGT-B, the *Organisation Nationale des Syndicats Libres* (ONSL) (which is affiliated to the International Trade Union Council), and the autonomous national labour union of textile workers (*Syndicat national des travailleurs des fibres textiles*, SYNAFITEX). SYNAFITEX is mostly considered a ‘yellow’ trade union (i.e. close to or influenced by the employer).

Occasional workers are not represented by the labour unions. The cotton companies recognize the work councils as representing the workers; however, at SOFITEX, occasional workers do not have the right to vote for the work council, and at Faso Coton occasional workers are not even employed by the cotton company itself. Although in principle occasional workers may strike, too, it is much riskier for them to do so, in view of their precarious status. However, ‘wildcat’ strikes, sabotage, and other protests by occasional workers do happen from time to time. A prominent case occurred in the SOFITEX factory in the town of Dédougou in 2013, when workers threatened to burn the cotton in the factory in protest against their precarious work status. ‘This was not a labour union struggle—it was a struggle by the workers’, one worker stated (FGD with SOFITEX workers, Dédougou, 26 February 2019).

CGT-B at Faso Coton focuses on improving the status and material conditions of the seasonal workers, for example, with regard to the absorption of costs for health care, housing, and transport. However, CGT-B also does not fight for occasional workers. In the interviews, union activists argued that if the union does not have a critical mass of members and supporters among the occasional workers, it cannot carry out any systematic action on their behalf. Organising occasional workers and other precarious and informal workers is so far not in the focus of CGT-B. This also due to specific challenges linked to organizing casual labour that unions have to deal with, for example, the instability and fluidity of labour relations, and the resources that are needed for informal workers’ representation and that have to be generated by regular workers (e.g. paid from their membership fees). As a consequence, casual and informal workers are sparsely represented in trade unions but they do find greater representation in a range of other organizations, both progressive and neoliberal (Britwum & Akorsu, 2017): workers associations, women’s associations, cooperatives, civil society organizations, advocacy organizations, and others.

6.3 | Are the class interests of peasants and workers antagonistic?

The recent boycott campaign by smallholder cotton farmers provides an excellent case to examine whether the class interests of farmers and factory workers are antagonistic or compatible and how class interests vary among the

different classes of farmers (poor, middle and rich farmers) and workers (casual workers, relatively secured workers, and management). Representatives of SOFITEX management and of the 'yellow' labour union frequently stated in the interviews that both the company and the producers would want the amount of cotton produced to be high but that the claim for high purchase prices by the farmers was unreasonable. 'We are worried about the calls for boycott', a representative of a cotton company's management stated (Interview, 8 February 2019). 'It has to be win-win: they win, we win, then life is pleasant'. This idea represents a class compromise endorsed by capital, meaning that larger players win more. According to this logic, those farmers who called for boycott would actually torpedo the common interests of all those engaged in the chain of cotton production, playing up an antagonism between factory workers and poor farmers. However, cotton production is only profitable for the rich farmers; poor farmers actually do not win much in cotton production; most of them are rather constantly indebted. Indeed, a boycott concerns occasional workers at the cotton factories, as they are the ones who will be dismissed if the factory is underutilized, and the length of the seasonal workers' contracts depends on the length of the cotton season, thus on the amount of cotton produced. In contrast, the jobs of the relatively secured workers and the management are not put at risk by a boycott. Thus, the boycott is actually not in the interest of the factory workers, particularly not the occasional and seasonal ones; yet this does not mean that the interests of the poor and middle farmers and the factory workers are antagonistic. The farmers' interest is the purchase price being high; the workers' interest is their jobs being secured. The farmers do not have an interest in the precarious status of the majority of factory workers; and the workers do not have an interest in the majority of the farmers being constantly indebted. Hence, the interests of farmers and factory workers are not antagonistic per se but only based on the assumption that the overall aim of cotton production is maximizing the cotton companies' profit.

The boycott campaign did not target the factory workers, but the cotton company and its management, as a leading activist of the boycott, explained:

If we do not produce, that concerns the company and its cadres. To the seasonal and occasional workers, it is all the same; they have nothing to lose anyhow. Moreover, many of them are themselves partly [poor] peasants: they are on the field during the rainy season and work for SOFITEX during the cotton season (Interview, Houndé, 14 February 2019).

One may certainly challenge the proposition that the seasonal and occasional workers would 'have nothing to lose anyhow', even if the jobs that they could lose are precarious. Nonetheless, the idea of farmers and factory workers being opposed to one another was put forward by the cotton company. This notion of conflict of interests arbitrarily homogenizes farmers and workers and blurs class differences, namely, between poor, middle and rich farmers, and between occasional and secured workers, and the management. E. O. Wright has outlined that the management of a company is likely to be rather on the side of capital than labour, as class relations refer to the process of production not just to the ownership of the means of production. In this view, a capitalist is not just somebody who owns the means of production but also the one who decides how the means of production are used (Wright, 2005, 10).

The actual antagonism is between capital (the companies)⁹ and labour—not between cotton farmers and workers in the cotton factories. As the above-cited boycott campaign activist put it: 'When the workers protest, they [the cotton companies] lower the purchase price for cotton to meet their claims. If we get something, they dismiss some workers and others have to work double. That's how it works' (Interview, Houndé, 14 February 2019). The point here is that the cotton company, via the capitalist practices which are oriented towards reducing the cost of labour

⁹The capital side is not limited to the cotton companies, of course, all the more in view of that the sector is highly transnationalized: seeds and fertilizer are produced by transnational agro-industrial companies; transnational companies hold shares in all cotton companies operating in Burkina Faso, and the purchase price paid to the farmers is impacted by the transnational buyers of cotton and by world market dynamics. The Burkinabé government and the cotton companies are significantly restricted by the international buyers of cotton, such as the Swiss Reinhart and the Dutch Louis Dreyfuss, both leading agro-industrial companies that are main buyers of Burkinabé cotton.

and maximizing profit, constructs a conflict of interest between the cotton farmers on the one side and the seasonal and occasional workers in the cotton factories on the other.

Poor farmers and casual workers also often come from the same households or families. In this light, the cotton companies' profit is based on a double exploitation of farmer-worker households, including the unpaid family labour.

With respect to how radical transformation in the agrarian context can be achieved, what is needed are networks and organizations to establish interclass solidarity and alliances—interclass not between capital and labour or workers and the bourgeoisie but between the various classes of labour, namely, between permanent, seasonal, and occasional workers in the cotton factories, those employed by the cotton company itself and by the subcontracting firms; and between poor workers and poor farmers, rather than assuming that all cotton farmers would belong to one and the same class. While rich farmers are capitalists who own the means of production, exploit wage labour, and benefit from cotton production, poor farmers, and at least parts of the middle farmers, rather belong to what Bernstein calls the 'classes of labour', who are 'neither dispossessed of *all* means of reproducing itself nor in possession of *sufficient* means to reproduce itself' (Bernstein, 2010b, 91, original emphasis). So the call here is for a differentiated class analysis and then for solidarity and alliances among the 'classes of labour' along the chain of cotton production. This is indeed challenging to achieve, as Luna (2019, 1430) has outlined:

'Certainly some actors are aware of broader systems of exploitation. Yet some have a myopic vision, blaming the actors directly above them rather than broader forces of oppression or global capital extraction. [...] [Yet] that there is fertile ground for broader resistance—yet this will require a synthetic effort: attention both to social divisions and to shared experiences of exploitation.'

Obviously, the UNPCB is not the organization to do create these alliances, as it rather represents the interests of the rich farmers and allies with capital. The same applies to the 'yellow' labour union that represents the interests of the management and white-collar workers with permanent contracts. So far, CGT-B also does not engage in creating broad 'classes of labour' solidarity and networks in the cotton sector, but it may have the potential to do so, in view of its long tradition of interclass alliances, namely, between public sector servants, workers, high school and university students, and unemployed urban youth (see in detail Engels, 2019). ODJ, which organizes poor farmers, casual workers, and precarious youth in rural areas, is likewise among the allies of CGT-B.

Regarding the role of ODJ in mobilization of the cotton farmers, two contingent historical processes are noteworthy: First, the breaking up of the peasant movement of the 1990s, which was a consequence of the creation of the UNPCB as a means of state authorities, SOFITEX and rich peasants to combat a radical bottom-up rural movement, left a gap that ODJ as a relatively new actor in the 2010s could fill. Second, this coincided with the mass mobilization in the cities that led to the fall of Blaise Compaoré after 27 years of presidency in 2014. ODJ was part of this broad movement, and the spirit of the times after the popular insurrection that 'nothing will be as before' boosted mobilization also in the rural context. ODJ as a movement that started in the urban milieu was then able to establish itself in the rural milieu and to significantly broaden its social base. In view of the potential to advance radical transformation in the countryside, this is promising in two respects: ODJ does not organize the farmers and other rural groups in a pro-active, top-down way but understands itself as an existing structure that poor and marginalized groups can use to organize themselves and raise their interests and claims. And it therewith brings the farmer's issues and claims to the knowledge and agenda of the urban groups and of the social movements at the national scale. Such rural/urban linkages are key for mobilization that strives for encompassing progressive change.¹⁰

¹⁰I am grateful to one anonymous reviewer for emphasizing this aspect.

7 | CONCLUSION

Henry Bernstein famously posed four central questions with regard to agrarian political economy: ‘Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? What do they do with it?’ (2010a, 22). Drawing on the recent debates on emancipatory rural politics, radical transformation in the countryside agrarian social movements encountering right-wing populism (Bernstein, 2020; Borras, 2020; Scoones et al., 2017), we may add: Who is organized in what way? Who can make use of which means to raise claims and enforce interests? What types of organizations in rural and urban contexts mobilize for progressive change? How can interclass solidarity and networks be created? In contrast to what the cotton company manager cited above tried to make us believe, there is no ‘win-win’ in capitalism: where there are winners, there are losers, too. And when he suggested that ‘they win, we win, then life is pleasant’, it must be questioned who is being referred to as ‘they’ and who as ‘we’? And who is not included in this ‘they’ and ‘we’ and is likely to lose? With regard to the labour force at the cotton companies, occasional workers are structurally deprived: at the end of the season, when they are left without an income for half of the year; in case they or their family members fall ill and cannot afford appropriate health care and do not have any medical insurance; when they get old and will no longer be recruited for the hard occasional work and do not have access to any pension fund.

Regarding farming, it is a minority of rich farmers who will win, while the bulk of poor and many middle farmers are rather unlikely to do so:

Although some larger farmers make money, the majority of farmers and their families struggle simply to get by. In contrast, actors employed higher up the cotton commodity chain benefit substantially from cotton production—including cotton company employees, state actors, agribusiness, banks, textile manufacturers, and end consumers of cotton products (Luna, 2018, 221).

Ultimately, many peasants are not even interested in cotton cultivation, in particular those who are poor; many stated clearly that they would prefer to cultivate cereals but felt unable to do so, as cotton production is their only chance to get access to inputs or credits. Be it due to the colonial legacy or to cotton being an export crop, cotton is the only sector in Burkina Faso that is organized in such a way that it provides credits, agricultural inputs, and sells to farmers, while there is no input support for cultivation of food crops. Nonetheless, many poor farmers in the cotton sector are becoming steadily more indebted, and the vast majority is, as Bernstein put it, not ‘in possession of sufficient means to reproduce itself’ (2010b, 91), which means that in one way or another, they depend on selling their labour power (i.e. exploiting themselves). Yet also among the classes of labour, considerable differences exist with respect to ownership and disposability of the means of production, as well as along the lines of gender and generation.

Smallholder cotton production, at least in Burkina Faso, is fundamentally based on the exploitation of unpaid family labour and especially on the triple exploitation of women—to the benefit of capital, which in this case means the cotton companies. Without the exploitation within farmers households along the lines of gender and generation, the prevailing system of cotton production would not work. This highlights how crucial it is in any such analysis to entangle class with other intersectional categories; if gender and generation are not taken into account, we will fail to understand the class structure of cotton production.

This holds equally true with regard to class formation. Cotton farmers are indeed organized: top-down in the UNPCB and the cooperative system and bottom-up in radical organizations such as ODJ. The UNPCB is a case in point of an organization that claims to represent farmers but, at least from the perspective of the poor farmers, fails to do so; furthermore, it is virtually exclusively male and thus based on the misperception that the male head of the household represents the household and family and will act in the interests of his younger brothers and sisters, wives, and children. The more bottom-up and radical organizations do not formally exclude the women and youth who do unpaid work on the cotton fields or day labourers, though they are only rather meagerly represented. This is similar at the scale of the factories: While labour unions are supposed to—and claim to—represent workers in general,

some (namely, the ‘yellow’ unions) predominantly represent the white-collar workers and management staff—employees who are workers in so far as they, too, sell their labour to the company, but are nevertheless more closely related to capital than to large segments of the working class. Even radical unions such as CGT-B fail—or at least have difficulties in doing so—to organize and represent occasional and informal workers, day labourers, and the like.

Class struggle is ever-present in capitalist societies; wherever surplus value is created and distributed, class struggle is taking place. This includes struggles over access to and control over natural resources (Pattenden, 2018, 1044). In view of this, the means of class struggle is of course not limited to the typical means of labour dispute (negotiations, strikes) but also includes the various means of struggle of the agrarian classes of labour, such as land occupations or, in the case study presented here, the boycott campaign by poor cotton farmers.

Poor farmers do not turn out to be conservative and reactionary; nor are they passive victims to agro-capitalism. The encouraging lesson from cotton production in Burkina Faso is that a number of poor cotton farmers do engage in radical organizations and present their class interests explicitly as being opposed to capital. However, solidarity and alliances between the classes of agrarian labour—poor farmers, precarious youth, day workers, occasional, seasonal, and permanent workers in the cotton factories—are hitherto rather weak or absent. From a class analytical perspective, however, even though cotton farmers are indeed petty commodity producers, poor farmers may be considered as distinct from, yet still not antagonistic to, the factory workers. Rather, poor farmers and the precarious and less precarious workers along the whole chain of cotton production can be considered as various classes of labour that are not necessarily antagonistic to one another but, first and foremost, to capital.

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