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Organized Labor as a Global Social Force

Workshop contribution by Dan Gallin (Global Labour Institute)

Introduction

Within the framework of the 1999 meeting of the International Studies Association in Washington D.C. an interdisciplinary workshop entitled IR² (International Relations plus Industrial Relations) was organized on February 20 by Jeffrey Harrod (RECIPE, University of Amsterdam) and Robert O'Brien (University of Sussex (UK) and McMaster University (Canada)). Its purpose was to bring together specialists from international relations and industrial relations fields to exchange ideas and approaches on how the two disciplines might relate to each other, perhaps engendering a new field: international industrial relations. Seventeen specialists from universities and from the labor movement (from Australia, Brazil, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Switzerland, Turkey, the UK and the US) participated. Dan Gallin contributed the paper given below.

Organized Labor as a Global Social Force

These are notes about a virtual reality. Although organized labor does exist, also internationally, and although it is even now a global social force, after a fashion, the gap between the existing reality and the potential is huge. This is true on both counts: organization and force. The purpose of these notes is to show what is and to try to explain what made it so, why it is not what we need and what we must do to move forward.

History

To understand the present situation a flashback is needed to the point where it originated, the end of the last war, when the organized labor movement reconstituted itself in formerly Nazi occupied Europe and in Japan.

Superficially, the conditions of its re-emergence looked promising. Organized business was politically in a weak position. It carried the guilt of having supported fascism, first in Italy, Germany and Austria, then in all of occupied Europe, with a few honorable exceptions. The political mood of the time was therefore anticapitalist. In France, there were punitive nationalizations. The German Christian-Democrats, at their first congress (Aalen) adopted what amounted to a socialist program. The USSR, at the peak of its prestige and with half of Europe under its control, may not have been socialist but it was in any event anticapitalist. In Japan, organized business had supported the military dictatorship and the war, and the occupation authorities, as in Germany, tried to bust the trusts. In the US, the dominant power of the post-war world, the government was

still New Deal Democrat and pro-labor and in the UK Attlee led a reforming Labour government.

Whatever else fascism may have been, it was certainly a gigantic union-busting exercise, and the unions, allied to the re-emerging Left, were riding the crest of the Allied victory, whereas business, at any rate in Europe and Japan, had lost the war. Therefore trade union rights, in their most extensive form, were taken for granted and incorporated in all post-war legislation.

But the labor movement that re-emerged under these conditions was not the pre-war labor movement. It had been bled of its leadership: at least two political generations (more in Spain and Portugal where fascism survived until the 1970s) had disappeared in concentration camps and in the war, or in exile, with few returning. The survivors were quickly exhausted and their successors lacked their training, experience and political vision.

In Eastern Europe where (with the exception of Czechoslovakia) the trade union movement was never strong in the first place, the social-democratic, socialist, dissident communist and other independent cadres who survived the war quickly disappeared in the jails and labor camps of the KGB. Trade unions were forcibly dissolved and replaced by repressive State institutions of labor administration by the same name.

In Japan, two types of unions emerged under American occupation: the successor organizations of the "patriotic" labor organizations of the dictatorship, in general enterprise-based and management controlled, and genuine unions (often also enterprise-based) led by socialists and communists coming out of jail.

Social reconstruction, financed in large part by the US (in Europe through the Marshall plan), therefore took place on the ideological base of social partnership, meaning roughly a trade-off between social peace and the recognition of labor rights, as well as the consent of business to participate politically and financially (through taxes) in building an egalitarian welfare State. Once the opposition (the communist unions in France and Italy and, marginally, the radical Left) had been disarmed, this was the pattern that would prevail for the next thirty years.

This social reconstruction, however, also took place in the context of the Cold War, which did enormous damage to the labor movement. I do not believe that the Cold War was the only or even the principal reason for the split in 1947 in the international trade union movement (in particular in the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) which emerged at the end of the war). The radical opposition between democratic socialist and communist social and political objectives, which became irreconcilable since the mid-1920s and the emergence of Stalinism, with the object lesson of the on-going repression against socialist trade unionists and any other independent trade unionists in the countries under the control of the USSR, would have sufficed to split the movement. Of course, as is well documented, the CIA also put its oar in where it could, but I do not subscribe to the police theory where history is shaped by conspiracies rather than the movement of social forces.

It remains, nonetheless, that for the next forty years or more the political life of the labor movement was dominated by an absurd

debate: whether capitalism (partially managed by social-democracy) or communism (in its Stalinist form) was best suited to workers' interests. In any event, the huge propaganda machinery mobilized to line up the labor movement on one side or the other of the vertical line of cleavage separating the two blocs largely succeeded in concealing the much more important horizontal line of cleavage separating classes within both blocs.

In the "West" the sectarian and paranoiac anti-Communist crusade of parts of the trade union leadership (in the US mostly former Leninists who had forgotten everything except the method) damaged the socialist and independent unions more than those under Stalinist control, which they actually managed to consolidate in some cases (the Mediterranean ports are a good example). The "Eastern" machine (propaganda, money, organization and, in isolated instances, terror) at the same time sought to establish a Stalinist monopoly on all radical opposition to capitalism.

One of the outcomes of this "debate", and we need to come back to this, has been to convince the present emerging/reconstructed labor movement in Eastern Europe and in the successor states of the USSR to embrace capitalism while ignoring any form of democratic socialism.

The end of the Cold War coincided, broadly speaking, with the end of the post-war economic boom. Mass unemployment started appearing in the industrialized countries with the first "oil shock" of 1974; the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the USSR was dissolved in 1991. In that decade, between the late 1970s and the late 1980s, the labor movement in the industrialized countries is in bad shape: we have a diluted and trivialized ideological and political heritage; priorities distorted through the Cold War; still powerful trade union organizations but with blinkered and politically ignorant leaderships (with some exceptions, as always), geared to administering gains of earlier struggles rather than to organizing and engaging in new struggles, generally unquestioning in their acceptance of the ideology of social partnership and bereft of political imagination; a rank-and-file educated to bureaucratic routine and to passivity.

In what used to be called the Third World, the situation was not much better. As a rule the unions were closely linked to anti-colonial and democratic people's movements. When these movements became government parties and generated a new political establishment no longer either popular or democratic, the trade union movement in most cases fell under the control of the government or, if it resisted, faced repression (here, too, there are exceptions). The competition between the two camps of the Cold War, each trying to buy loyalty, created wide-spread corruption and a culture of dependency.

It would have taken a miracle for the international trade union movement to rise above the weaknesses of its members. Its present state reflects the losses inflicted upon it ever since the First World War. The remarkable fact is that it exists at all. It has survived the empires of the 19th century, two world wars and totalitarian systems with a destructive capacity without precedent in modern history and is the only universal, democratically organized, world wide social movement in existence today. The reason is simple: as long as there will be workers, there will be unions and there will be a labor movement.

Inventory

In its present form, the international trade union movement comprises three types of organization that matter: the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the International Trade Secretariats (ITS), or international trade union federations by industrial sector.

The rest is marginal. The World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) continues to exist at a greatly reduced level as an alliance of Middle Eastern dictators with the remnants of the Russian kolkhoze bureaucracy. It retains two representative centers in Latin America (Bolivia and Peru) and in Asia (India), although their commitment at this point is largely symbolic. The rest of its membership is splinters and minorities. The World Confederation of Labour (WCL) (ex-Christian) is a small organization of a political tendency, with only one national organization representative in its own country (the Belgian CSC). Independent regional organizations like OATUU (Africa) and ICATU (Arab countries) are government dominated and thoroughly corrupt, therefore useless for trade union purposes.

The ICFTU has a fundamental structural problem which is also a political problem: it is a confederation of national trade union centers, which means that its governing bodies are composed of representatives of organizations accustomed to think and act within the confines of the nation-State, with a vested interest in believing (or pretending) that the problems of their members can be solved within those confines. Moreover, this generation of leaders (and their expert staff) has been largely shaped by the social partnership ideology and the Cold War. The combination of these factors makes it difficult for them to understand what is happening to them and to their members in the context of globalization (the rise of transnational corporate capital, the decline of the State as a machinery to deliver social consensus, the global labor market where repression is a competitive advantage).

This may change as the bad news gets around: the American labor movement, for example, threatened in its substance by the assaults of the militant Right, has reacted by becoming more radical, which has led it to new insights both domestically and internationally. This, however, is only a beginning, affecting principally the top leadership which has to contend with internal opposition and the inertia of organizations and, in any event, we need more than one "new AFL-CIO". The AFL-CIO is not the only national center that needs a thorough renewal.

The ICFTU today is a paradox: after the collapse of the Soviet bloc it has been joined by a great majority of the formerly non-aligned centers and of the centers which have arisen in Central and Eastern Europe and the successor states of the former USSR, also Mongolia. It now has 206 affiliated organizations with a total membership of 125m. and is by far the most representative international trade union organization that has ever existed. Formally speaking, the international trade union movement has never before in history been as united as it is now.

But, contrary to what has been often assumed, the main problem

of the international trade union movement has never been its division, but the political weakness of its mainstream. That problem not only remains unresolved but is even more starkly revealed in the cold light of globalization. Anti-communism (without a positive alternative content other than social-democratically managed capitalism) is dead as a substitute ideology. "Social partnership" is revealed as a fiction as transnational corporate power and the governments at its service have become more aggressively hostile to labor, notwithstanding the soul-searching at Davos. Social-democracy has interiorized neo-liberalism and treats unions as just another "pressure group" among several.

So the ICFTU drifts along without an ideology, without a policy and without a program. To reinvent itself, it would have to remember that it is in effect the organization of the world working class, and therefore has a mandate and a responsibility: to propose a world economy and a world society - a "new world order" - based on the needs of its constituency, which is actually much larger than its membership. There is no indication so far that this is about to happen.

Useful work is being done in the ICFTU on issues where a majority consensus within the trade union movement is achievable at a relatively low political cost, such as the defense of human and democratic rights, or equality between men and women. The blockage happens at the level of macroeconomics and political thought and action, where the main effort appears to focus on trying to convince the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO to subscribe to Keynesian economics and to social corporatism.

The ETUC has the same problem at the level of its governing bodies (contrary to the ICFTU where national centers, and not ITSSs, are members, the European Industrial Federations (EIFs) are an integral part of the ETUC, but as it is a highly centralized organization their political weight is insignificant compared to that of the national centers). In addition, it has another problem which is its dependency on the Commission of the European Union, which pays 70 percent of its budget. Thus, the EU provides the ETUC with its legitimacy and its funding, but at the same time sets its limits. The ETUC should therefore be seen as a trade union lobby within the EU and for the purpose of "social dialogue" with European employers' organizations. Although unions and other workers' organizations (such as unemployed workers' movements) have begun to act together at European level, these initiatives do not originate with the ETUC which keeps getting caught in the position of having to race to the front of the procession to appear to lead it.

At the same time, the existence of the ETUC means that the ICFTU has no European regional organization. When the ETUC was formed in 1973, it was on the basis of uniting in a single organization the European affiliates of the ICFTU (the large majority) and the European affiliates of the WCL, and this meant the dissolution of the existing European Regional Organization of the ICFTU (the WCL had none). Thus a "Europeanist" ideology, generously funded by the EU, prevailed over trade union internationalism. This conflict remains unresolved and although all sides avoid open clashes it keeps simmering and surfaces on a variety of issues, including in discussions on the status of other ICFTU regional organizations and also in the ITSSs, where the

European structures are integrated in the international structure in some cases and entirely separate and independent in others.

Clearly, an effective trade union response to globalization would be strengthened by the integration of the ETUC into the ICFTU as a regional organization for Europe, not least because it would remove the burden of divided loyalties from the European national centers and help change their agenda. But there the WCL members have been a blocking minority, so that the integration of the ETUC into the ICFTU now largely depends on the merger of the ICFTU with the WCL. This, in turn, depends on a decision of the Belgian CSC, a decision over which it has been agonizing for years.

Meanwhile, the most significant and potentially most positive development in Europe has been the adoption by the EU in 1994 of the directive (draft legislation to be implemented in each EU country) on European Works Councils (EWCs). This requires most transnational corporations operating in Europe to institute a body composed of elected representatives from each of their enterprises in the different EU countries with whom they must meet at least once a year for purposes of "information and consultation". Several hundred (out of a potential 2,000 or so) such EWCs have been instituted so far. Two issues have emerged here: the trade union issue and the geographical issue.

The trade union issue arises because the EWC directive is a much diluted version of the original draft of 1980 which would have given trade unions statutory representation rights. In its final and present form, it does not mention trade unions at all, so that unions (in particular the ITSs where they have responsibility for the European structures of their sector) have had to fight to nail down the right of union officials to be part of the EWC and to ensure that the lay members should be union members themselves. Where this has not succeeded, sometimes because the EIFs which negotiated the agreement were more concerned with the quantity of agreements signed rather than their quality, EWCs remain vulnerable to management manipulation or become outright management-dominated fakes.

The geographical issue arises because the directive formally only applies to EU countries, but leaves agreement on the actual coverage of the council to the social counterparts. Most companies seek to limit the EWCs to the EU only (thus leaving out their enterprises in Norway and Switzerland, but also in Central and Eastern Europe), whereas the union interest is of course to secure the maximum coverage, ideally of every single operation of the company regardless of country. Thus some EWCs are confined to the EU, some cover all of geographical Europe and at least three are world-wide in coverage. Unsurprisingly, it is the ITSs who have fought hardest for the maximum coverage whereas some European unions have bought into the "Europeanist" agenda and obediently restricted themselves to the letter of the directive.

The International Trade Secretariats (ITSs) are clearly the most effective international trade union organizations existing at this time, even though they also have their own limitations.

One of them is the fact that they, like every other international organizations, are made up of national members who think and act in national terms, even though there often is among these

national unions a significantly sharper perception of internationalism because they are confronted daily with the consequences of globalization and are, in many cases, directly confronted with transnational corporations.

Another problem is the weakness of the ITS central structures (typically the secretariat staff will include 15 to 50 persons, less in the case of the smaller ITSs). This is due to their financial limitations: the bulk of ITS income is from dues, a varying but generally small part from project administration. Some ITSs have tried to overcome these constraints through decentralization (autonomous regional organizations, member unions taking over some international tasks), or through merger (in recent years, between two education internationals, chemicals and mining, food and agriculture and, coming up, a four-way merger in commerce, postal and telecommunication services, media and graphical workers).

The main limitation of the ITSs in a broader sense is that they hardly ever coordinate, do not communicate much and rarely cooperate even in smaller groups of two or three. As a group, their general secretaries meet formally only twice a year for one or two days at a time, and informally maybe on one or two other occasions, for example when they attend the annual ICFTU Executive Board as observers. In the past, this lack of coordination has been partly due to the fact that the ICFTU, with the help of some of its national affiliates, has systematically prevented it whenever it began to happen because it perceived such coordination as a threat. Another reason is that all ITSs are overextended, in other words they are all too busy fighting off the crocodiles to attend to draining the swamp.

I believe that many of these problems could be solved if the ITSs joined the ICFTU - as members, not as departments, with the same rights and responsibilities as its present members, the national centers. It would put an end to ICFTU/ITS turf battles and the ICFTU would no longer be able to divide the ITSs because they would be in it; cooperating among each other and with the leading national centers would be easier because they would be acting within the same organizational framework; their priorities would redirect the agenda and the resources of the ICFTU in a more practical and effective direction. These ideas are not new. Edo Fimmen, then general secretary of the International Transport Workers' Federation, made the same proposal for much the same reasons as early as 1924. For the historical reasons described above, it did not happen. At this time, neither the ICFTU nor the ITSs are ready for it, but the issue remains open and will have to be revisited as transnational corporate power continues to represent an existential challenge to the international trade union movement.

Some observers (Kim Moody) believe that the capacity for innovation and militancy of ITSs is limited because the secretariats cannot go much beyond the policies of their largest affiliates (in the same way that the speed of the convoy is determined by its slowest ship, particularly if it is a very large ship). In actual fact, the secretariats have a stronger mandate to act in the general interest of the organization than is sometimes supposed. On industrial issues, they can almost always build a consensus around militant action; although on political issues consensus can be more difficult. All of this depends in addition on variables, such as the organizational culture of each ITS and

its sense of identity, the structure of the industry and of the unions it covers.

In any event, it is the ITSs who conducted the only effective international actions in the postwar period, such as the flag of convenience campaign of the ITF, a model of its kind, the actions of the IUF (food and allied) to defend trade union rights, and even the existence of trade unions in Peru (Nestlé) and Guatemala (Coca-Cola) or to force transnational corporations to withdraw from Burma (Heineken, Carlsberg, Pepsico). ITSs have also concluded the first international agreements with transnational corporations (IUF with Danone, Accor, Nestlé, among others, IFBWW and FIET with IKEA, ICEM with Statoil, etc.). In general, ITS activities have become markedly more professional and sophisticated.

To round out this description of the international trade union movement, it should be mentioned that the bilateral activities of a number of national centers and of some of the larger unions play a huge role in it, sometimes in support of the international structures described above, sometimes at odds and in competition with these structures. These activities are in general related to education and trade union development programs in Africa, Asia and Latin America and, since 1989, in Eastern and Central Europe. The major players are the national centers of the Nordic Countries, the Netherlands, Germany (mostly through the extensive network of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung), the United States, Britain, Australia and Canada (the latter three partly through the Commonwealth Trade Union Council), France, Italy and Spain (through specialized institutions created for that purpose). Some of the larger unions like TGWU and UNISON in Britain, SiD in Denmark, CAW, CUPE and USW in Canada have also played an important role in specific situations.

The history of these bilateral policies and activities is fascinating and complex, and it would take us too far afield to go into detail here. The danger is always that assistance programs are driven by the political needs of the donors rather than the real needs of the recipients and, depending what these political needs are, the results can be highly damaging.

The cooperation of the AFL-CIO, its international department and its "free labor" institutes with the American government throughout the Cold War period has already been mentioned and is well documented, as are parallel and related activities of the British TUC. One of the most positive results of the leadership change of the AFL-CIO in 1995 has been the restructuring and redirection of its international activities.

But the problem goes deeper: even unions with an agenda free from government influence, motivated ostensibly only by their own best intentions, can do a lot of damage through inappropriate and ill-advised programs, especially if a lot of money is involved. These dangers can be largely neutralized when assistance is given through multilateral channels (such as ITSs) because these provide a level of expertise and control that is often absent from bilateral operations. A number of the national trade union donor organizations have realized this and their support has enabled some very constructive ITS programs to go forward.

In this respect as in others, it generally remains true that

international trade union organizations carry out in the most cost-effective and appropriate fashion necessary specialized tasks which national unions could only perform in an expensive and inefficient fashion. That is the purpose for which they have been created, and nowhere is this proposition easier to verify than in the field of international trade union development assistance. To strengthen the capacity of international trade union organizations is therefore the most meaningful type of international activity any union can have today and certainly the only one that reflects an internationalist agenda.

Tasks

So much for the inventory. Let us now look at the tasks that are facing the movement and the directions in which it needs to develop to become the global social force we need.

The tasks can be summarized in three words (Elaine Bernard): organize, democratize, politicize. These are, of course, related and mutually supportive tasks. All three have to do with structures, procedures and policy; each move at any of these levels involves a political choice, and even if any one choice is right, it will not ever in itself be a magic bullet to solve the problems of the movement. In the best of cases, it is the incremental accumulation of "right" choices, i.e. mutually supportive and converging choices, at different levels and interacting with each other, that will build a new labor movement. The point is, therefore, not to look for dogmatic short-cuts which of necessity lead into blind alleys but to try to understand the complex, living reality of the movement and to move within it, at different levels perhaps, but always in the same direction.

Organizing is a good illustration of these interactions. It means in the first place creating the conditions under which the great mass of unorganized workers in the world can gain access to trade union organizations. At present, world-wide union density is about 13 percent among wage earners (163m. trade union members out of 1,300m. workers within the wage system - if the informal sector is included, the percentage would be very much less, perhaps something like 5 percent).

In the international context, three organizing targets are obvious: the transnational corporations, the informal and semi-formal sector and the dictatorship countries.

The transnational corporations (TNCs) are already being organized by the ITSS, with varying degrees of commitment and effectiveness. Although the 73m. workers directly employed by TNCs world-wide represent only a minority (a much larger minority if subcontracting is included), it is the most internationalized segment of the world working class and the best placed strategically to make a difference in the over-all power relations between labor and management. In this perspective, the internationalization of the European Works Councils becomes important, either by expanding them to cover unionized workers employed by the same TNC outside of Europe or by integrating them into an ITS organization of regional works councils.

In the past, the principal obstacle in the way of long-term coordination has been its cost: international meetings are very expensive (travel costs, interpretation and translation costs). But another labor movement organization, the International

Federation of Workers' Education Associations (IFWEA), is about to solve this problem, at least in part. Since last year, it has developed a model of international study circles through the Internet, where discussion groups (study circles) in different countries connected by e-mail are able to discuss the same issue at the same time, thus forming a single international study circle. The issue under discussion can, of course, be a TNC and the local study circles can be the local unions in the subsidiaries of this TNC. The outcome of such a study circle is therefore a permanent coordinating network linked by e-mail. The same techniques which have enabled capital to globalize also give us the means of creating global countervailing union structures, which also have the potential of directly involving the membership and therefore contributing to the democratization of the movement.

The informal sector is another target which, in contrast to TNCs, is huge, diffuse, complex and therefore perceived as daunting by many unions. Yet, it is the fastest growing sector in the former Third World and also, with the deregulation of the labor markets, in industrialized countries. The growth of the number of workers is outpacing the growth of job opportunities in the formal labor market. Every year 43 million people enter the labor force world-wide (ILO, 1995) and most of them are obliged to create their own income or to accept jobs under precarious conditions. If the labor movement fails to organize this mass of workers it will not only be unable to change world-wide power relationships to its advantage, but will continue to lose ground in its remaining bastions in the formal economy.

That this sector can be organized is demonstrated by the experience of, for example, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of India, or of the movement of landless peasants in Brazil (MST), or of the Dutch-based HomeNet network. But an international organizing strategy here requires the feminization of the trade union movement. A substantial majority of workers in the unorganized areas of precarious work are women: in the urban and rural informal sector, among immigrant workers in certain regions and occupations (Arab/Persian Gulf, domestic workers, service workers, garment workers), among home workers (of whom there are 6.9m. in Europe alone). In the industrialized countries, the casualization of labor means also its feminization. The proportion of women in the labor force has gone from 33 percent in 1960 to 42 percent in 1993 and in the most industrialized countries it now approaches 60 percent; among part-time workers between 66 and 90 percent are women.

This represents many millions of workers who are impossible to organize without a thorough-going change in the priorities, organizing methods and the staffing of the trade union movement. There is a necessity of not only better integrating the specific demands of women workers into trade union objectives, but also of adapting the way of operating of the organizations to the conditions of life and work of women workers and to promote women cadres in the unions, as well as developing cooperative and mutually supportive relationships with women's organizations that may exist at community or national level. This has also implications for the internal democracy of unions insofar as such policies require that free rein is given to the already organized women members and to accept that this not only can but should lead to changes in the top leadership.

The same applies to young workers. The Swedish Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union, after a long period of stagnation, increased its membership from 40,000 to 60,000 in five years after giving its young members the responsibility of organizing other young workers, among other places in the fast food chains, and to leave them free to do it according to their own inspiration without any intervention from the leadership other than the necessary financial support.

A third organizing target, with immediate political implications, is the dictatorship countries. There the struggle is to change or overthrow the regimes which prohibit independent and democratic unions. This fight is currently being won in Indonesia; what remains is China, Burma, Vietnam, Cuba, North Korea but also Syria, Iraq, Libya, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf monarchies, Iran, to mention only the principal countries where independent trade unionism (and, in some cases, any form of trade unionism) is prohibited and repressed.

This requires an international strategy of struggle for human and democratic rights on a world scale, without any double standards and without regard to political sentimentalism, although tactics can of course vary. Wherever this struggle is inhibited by links to national business interests or government priorities, these complicities must be exposed and denounced.

For the labor movement, human rights is not an academic issue nor a question of cultural preference. It is an issue of basic class interest, because only where human and democratic rights are guaranteed are workers free to organize to defend their interests including their political interests. For this reason, the labor movement must also reject all arguments of cultural relativism where these attack the universal validity of human rights. They must be denounced as the self-serving arguments of corrupt elites who are defending their wealth and their power by abusing their countries' cultural heritage. An alliance with the representative human rights organizations (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, International League for Human Rights) is an indispensable element of such a strategy.

When it comes to fighting dictatorships, organizing TNCs or, indeed, organizing the informal sector, the international labor movement needs to redefine its political priorities. One example: the erosion of the right to strike. In most industrialized countries the right to strike in solidarity ("secondary action"), especially in an international context, has been severely curtailed or eliminated in the last thirty years by means of increasingly restrictive legislation. The resistance of trade unions has been surprisingly weak, mostly limited to formal protests. But what we are dealing with here is a fundamental attack on the right to strike, particularly dangerous in the context of globalization where the interests of workers in different countries are increasingly interdependent, just like the process of production has become. If the right to strike is a fundamental human right, as certified in several international instruments, by what right do parliamentary majorities (of the Right or of the Left) decide on which occasion workers are entitled to use it to defend their interests as they see them?

It is a great triumph of the right-wing propaganda campaigns against "the excesses of trade union power" to have succeeded

in criminalizing solidarity strikes in most of Western Europe and in the United States. The Liverpool dockers strike would not have ended in defeat if the union involved had not been shackled by legislation and the successful international action in support of the Australian dockers strike came under threat by the same legislation. If there is an international struggle that is worth conducting, it is certainly the struggle to recover that right.

Structures

Policies have to be carried out by structures and, just like every end requires its own means, each kind of policy requires its appropriate structure. Structures are not ends in themselves but instruments. In the trade union movement, they are the means the movement gives itself to carry out its purposes and they constantly change throughout its history as the social and political context changes.

Structures become obsolete when they separate what should be united, when they inhibit communication and cooperation, when they generate unnecessary layers of hierarchy and bureaucracy with vested interests that conflict with the general interests of the movement. The present structures, in most countries and internationally, are inherited from the last century. They belong in a history museum.

In most industrialized countries the trade unions have sought to compensate through mergers the growing gap between their tasks and the means available to carry them out, with shrinking memberships and diminishing resources. In this case, the objective is the concentration of resources.

In the United States, in Japan, in Canada, In Australia, in New Zealand, in Germany, in the Netherlands, in Denmark, in Finland, in Sweden, in Norway, in Switzerland, in Spain, in Italy, union mergers have taken place for several years and, in the case of Japan and the Netherlands, at confederation (national center) level. France, where national centers multiply as the overall membership shrinks, and Belgium, where the language issue has split the labor movement as it has split the State, are the exceptions.

The tendency is towards big general unions and in some countries this may lead to a radical restructuring of the movement. In the Netherlands, the new union Bondgenoten, created by a merger of four unions at the beginning of the year, represents half the membership of the largest national center to which it is affiliated, the FNV. The declared objective of Bondgenoten is to continue the merger process and to transform the FNV into a single union by the year 2000. A similar development may take place in Denmark, with the general workers' union SiD, already representing about a quarter of total trade union membership, as the core element.

In a context where the industrial sectors are losing their importance because of the refusal of management to continue negotiating at national industrial level, and where company structure itself is changing through decentralization and sub-contracting, the rise of large general unions may compensate for the refusal of organized business to continue bargaining at national industrial level. Unions will therefore become politicized, and the power relations between themselves,

management and the State will move to the political level. In this sense, the old dream of American revolutionary syndicalism, "One Big Union", may be the pattern of the future.

Democracy

This is where the issue of union democracy arises with urgency in a new context: how does one prevent these huge new organizations from becoming bureaucratic monsters, increasingly removed from the membership and ultimately dysfunctional? It is a mistake to assume that mergers automatically add strength; they can also conceal the weakness and decline of one or both merger partners and unless the new union can rely on an active, informed and participating membership there is no reason to assume the decline of the organization, however large, will not continue.

Union democracy implies more than easy access to union services. It means the active participation of the members in the life of the organization, real membership power at all levels of the union structure where the priorities of the policies and activities of the organization are decided. This is what ultimately determines its strength.

At international level, the need for democratization, linked to new policies and new structures, is more than ever a necessity. The globalization of the world economy means that trade union policy is now mostly international policy, since most problems trade unions are confronted with in any part of the world are part of an international context or have international effects. Yet, the union mergers which we described above all take place within national borders. A simple idea such as merging unions of different countries across borders is regarded as utopian even though it lags behind what is already practiced by corporations and the real needs of the membership.

It is true that at international level ITSs are also merging, but to create an international trade union movement that deserves its name would mean not only to merge existing organizations, but to centralize as much as possible the available resources and action structures, whilst decentralizing as much as possible the processes by which policies are prepared and decided. The point is no longer to "cooperate beyond borders" but to create integrated, borderless organizations. The European Industry Federations, for example, should develop into unions with the authority to negotiate collective agreements, or to declare strikes, at European level. The ITSs at world level need the same centralization of resources and action, and the same decentralization of the political process which underpins structure and action.

The problem is that the great majority of the membership, and even most of the middle leadership, that is those who most need to know and most need to be involved, often do not even know that international trade union organizations exist or, if they do know, their perception is distorted by misunderstandings and misinformation. International trade union policy to be effective must cease to be perceived as an exclusive responsibility - or, worse, a privilege - of the trade union leadership and must involve the greatest possible number of members.

To convey a new perception of international trade unionism is

relatively simple in the case of the TNCs, where experience is the teacher. Developments in communication technology, such as the spread of e-mail, will certainly facilitate consultation and coordination among local unions and the creation of a "public opinion" within trade union organizations. The role of trade union education needs to be reconsidered in that context: it needs to systematically integrate an international dimension. In the general trade union movement, however, it will be impossible to motivate and mobilize the millions of men and women who are not directly involved with TNCs and who do not have access to modern communication techniques without offering a political perspective that is at the same time realistic and hopeful.

Before we move on to politics, however, a final word of caution: the cause of union democracy cannot be advanced, nor the problem of union bureaucracy solved, from outside the trade union movement. Some observers have held up as an example self-appointed groups, without a democratic mandate or legitimacy and financed by external sources, as if they were major actors in the struggle to democratize the unions. They are nothing of the sort. None of them have achieved their ostensible purpose because their point of leverage is wrong and none of them have had a positive impact because they understand neither the nature of unions nor the nature of democracy (it is actually bizarre to observe a group which itself functions in a manipulative and conspiratorial fashion trying to organize workers in the name of rank-and-file democracy). These are blind alleys that waste people's lives and energies.

Politics

Structures cannot by themselves create an organizational culture where the members have ownership of their union and perceive themselves as citizens of their organization. This requires a conscious policy that goes back to the roots of trade unionism, to the original purpose of the exercise, and which measures the value of an organization by its fighting capacity. The depoliticization of the trade union movement in the period 1950-1980 has had a paralyzing effect: it has created a layer of unprepared cadres and a passive membership. Therefore the movement needs to be re-politicized.

In the present situation, restoring the political dimension to the trade union movement cannot mean re-establishing allegiances and much less dependencies with respect to existing political parties, nor taking control of a political party. For reasons which cannot be elaborated here, but which have to do with the declining autonomy of the nation-State with respect to transnational capital, the traditional labor parties are backing away from the trade union movement. The relationships of the past, be they transmission belts (both ways), electoral machine politics or corporatist agreements at the top become more difficult to maintain and produce diminishing returns everywhere. This does not mean that the trade union movement does not need a political dimension: on the contrary, all trade union action is political by nature. What it means is that the politics of the trade union movement have to be reinvented, taking as a point of departure the interests of its members at the point of production.

One might say that democratic socialism has to be reinvented, from and by the trade union movement, as an alternative to the

"new world order" of transnational capital rather than as an ambulance service for its victims.

This is not an enormously complicated undertaking. The starting point should be to define the legitimate purpose of any form of social organization, whether local or world-wide, in other words, to affirm that enterprises, or an economic system, have legitimacy only to the extent that they serve human welfare in the widest sense of the term (the satisfaction of basic needs which also include justice, equality, freedom, access to culture, the rule of law). These values and basic principles, which can of course be elaborated upon, together constitute a program of radical democracy diametrically opposed to the currently hegemonic neo-liberalism, and this should become the basic program which the labor movement will defend at all levels with all appropriate means.

This is particularly important for the labor movement in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including the successor States of the USSR, where the movement has lost its ideological and political bearings (to varying degrees). The traditional values of the labor movement (as well as the vocabulary and the symbols) are discredited in the former communist countries by their association with Stalinism and large parts of the trade union movement have embraced the ideology of neo-liberal capitalism because "socialism", as they experienced it and understand it, is no longer an acceptable option. How could it be? But to accept this situation is very dangerous.

It is, in the first place, dangerous to themselves. The rupture with their pre-Stalinist history (40 years in CEE, 70 years in the ex-USSR) means a rupture of identity. The highjacking of the Romanian miners' movement by fascist politicians is an extreme case of confusion, but it is by no means the only one, and no doubt not the last one. Without a strong sense of political identity and legitimacy, in the context of a deep economic and social crisis, the labor movement risks losing its way and being pushed to the margins of society. Secondly, it is a dangerous situation for the labor movement everywhere else. In the former communist countries there are millions of workers, in large part already organized into unions, that need to be integrated into the international labor movement as matter of urgency. This is not happening except at a formal level, despite the efforts of some committed ITSS and national centers.

An essential part of the integration effort has to be political: the rehabilitation of democratic socialist politics. Despite all the difficulties, this work has to be done: recover the values, the policies, the vocabulary and the symbols, recover the political space. There is no other political identity practically imaginable that would enable the labor movement in CEE to defend its members interests, consolidate democracy in society at large and build solid bridges to the labor movement of other regions.

Let us also look at what happened in other situations where "new union movements" have emerged: in Korea (with the KCTU), in Brazil (with the CUT and the MST) and in South Africa (with COSATU). In all three cases, these are trade union movements which have taken responsibility for the problems of society in general, who have forged strong links with other elements of civil society, in particular communities, and who have political programs for social reform.

What is at issue is not only to get the international trade union movement into shape and to turn it into an effective combat organization at international level, but to organize and unify the wider the social movement through common action. We are referring to the organizations of civil society in all its complexity: human rights organizations, solidarity organizations, women's movements, movements for the defense of the environment, of minorities, informal sector organizations and also political parties to the extent that they remain supportive of our movement and loyal to its objectives.

All these social movements represent converging interests. They have a common concern and their struggle is about the same overriding issue as that of the labor movement: what kind of world we will live in tomorrow, in 10 or 20 years. The objective of the trade union movement must therefore be to reconstitute the social movement world-wide, with the means provided by globalization and by its technologies. This new social movement will be the liberation movement of humanity and its weapons will be the fax and the computer.

The trade union movement alone can play this role. We know its weaknesses. It remains nonetheless the only universal and democratically organized movement at world level, with an unequaled capacity for resistance. This is not surprising since it is the only movement through which millions of workers achieve power through organization. These workers are conducting thousands of struggles throughout the world every day because they have no alternative, no other place to go. They only have the choice of fighting or of submitting, and if they do not submit, it is because the trade union struggle is before anything else a struggle for dignity, which means a struggle where ultimately no compromise is possible since people are prepared to die for it.

The trade union movement is not a "pressure group" like any other and, contrary to what some believe, the paycheck of its members can never be its sole concern. It has no interests separate from those of civil society as a whole. This is not surprising either since the huge majority of the world's population are dependent workers and when it takes responsibility for these, it takes responsibility for all of society.

Finally, the trade union movement is a complex tissue of structures and networks which, weak and loose as they may be in places, cover the whole world and are that many potential or actual centers of resistance. This is of fundamental importance because if a new social movement is to emerge that can act effectively at world level and in the context of globalization, it needs structure, and it needs permanent organizations capable of acting consistently over the long term.

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