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Editorial overview

Deborah Eade

This special issue on Trade Unions and NGOs has formally come together as a result of a Call for Papers issued by the journal, but its roots lie deep in the lives of our guest editor, **Alan Leather**, and me. Though our professional and political trajectories have taken us in different directions, we share the experience of taking our commitment to trade unionism into our work in development NGOs; and of working in and alongside trade unions from a pro-poor and rights-based understanding of development issues. We have often been frustrated by the inability or unwillingness of development agencies to engage with organised labour, and by the similar reluctance of trade unions to recognise the positive contributions that development NGOs can make to improving the situation of those who are poor and marginalised. All too often, discussions and debates between the two sectors have been marred by antagonism and a touch of arrogance, a dialogue of the deaf rather than a mature conversation. But we have also worked alongside and been inspired by the dedication of people in both sectors, their willingness to continue to fight in the face of adversity, and their commitment to social and economic justice for all. In his Guest Editorial, Alan charts his personal experience in working towards this vision over the last four decades, moving from the UK trade union movement into the world of international development agencies, then back into trade union development education work, and eventually into the global union federation arena. An inspiration in itself, this experience affords us unique insights into each sector, and allows Alan to distil critical lessons for both in standing with the powerless in the fight against injustice.

While there is enormous scope for NGOs and trade unions to support each others' aims—and there have been exemplary cases of such collaboration—relations between the two sectors have frequently been marked by ignorance and suspicion, if not rivalry or outright hostility. This is hardly surprising. The phenomenal expansion in the number of NGOs operating around the world, and their growing international influence, have occurred in (and may indeed be a symptom of) a neo-liberal political and economic context in which trade unions have experienced overall declines in membership and political influence.[1] In addition, although they may be grappling with similar issues, and share many perspectives, unions and NGOs think and work in very different ways. Unions act on the basis of the mandate conferred by their membership, as a result of which they risk becoming over-bureaucratised and slow to react to change. By contrast, in part because they seldom have a single constituency to which they are accountable, NGOs have greater flexibility and can act quickly, but may as a result fail to consult or coordinate effectively with other civil society organisations.

Trade unions and NGOs have also had grounds for ideological disagreement. NGOs, for example, may argue that unions do not represent or address the needs of the poorest, most of whom subsist in an informal economy; that their approach to recruitment and mobilisation is

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outdated in today's globalised economy; and that they have a poor record on gender or ethnic equity or the concerns of women workers. For their part, unions have a legitimate concern about the tendency of NGOs to address poverty reduction through informal-economy mechanisms, such as micro enterprises or income-generating projects, which often fail to take labour rights fully into account. Nor are NGOs themselves above criticism on issues of gender equity in the workplace, whatever their funding criteria overseas. And very few international NGOs have a glowing record on reflecting ethnic diversity at all levels, or draw their staff from all social classes. Tensions have arisen when NGOs are seen to have undermined local unions, by entering into bilateral dialogue with employers or by monitoring codes of conduct. Many NGOs basically ignore trade unions altogether as civil society organisations, while some adopt anti-union policies internally by discouraging or even disallowing their staff to form or join unions.

As the neo-liberal agenda continues to erode the rights of workers and their families enshrined in Article 23 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights,[2] and various ILO Conventions, in particular those known as the core labour standards,[3] so it becomes imperative that civil society organisations break down the barriers among them, in order to keep the rights of poor or otherwise vulnerable people firmly on the international agenda. The gulf between rich and poor has widened enormously in the last 30 years, and employment and access to basic social services are increasingly insecure for most of the human race. There is a pressing need for a concerted voice to challenge the ethos of the market; neither trade unions nor NGOs can afford to go it alone.

Our Call for Papers therefore invited contributions that would help to elucidate some of the underlying tensions between trade unions and NGOs, in order to contribute to a greater understanding of the potential sources of conflict and disagreement often afflicting inter-organisational relations, and to enhance the scope for constructive and respectful dialogue—and occasionally partnership—between the two sectors.

The papers included in this special issue are organised around five broad, but overlapping, themes:

- alliances and tensions between trade unions and NGOs
- experiences of union-based NGOs
- workers in the informal and *maquila* economy
- workplace codes of conduct
- specific case studies

Alliances and tensions

Trade unions and development NGOs can be broadly characterised as value-driven civil society organisations that champion the rights of those who are (or who may potentially be) exploited, oppressed, excluded, or otherwise marginalised. Although NGOs and trade unions are not homogeneous sectors, a goal that many of them share is that all individuals and communities should play an active role in promoting equitable economic development and in shaping their societies and cultures.

Recent debates about globalisation, ILO core labour standards, codes of conduct, and the role of the WTO have placed civil society organisations at the heart of these issues of global governance. While it is to be expected that NGOs and trade unions should pursue diverse strategies, and adopt different means of achieving them, it is critical that they each avoid doing so at the expense of the other. There is an urgent need to engage in constructive dialogue and to work together towards a common cause.

This section includes papers that explore some of the generic tensions that affect alliances between trade unions and development NGOs and have to be overcome if collaboration is to be fruitful. **Dave Spooner**, for example, looks at the different class backgrounds of the two types of organisation, and at the corresponding differences in political and organisational cultures, and consequent lack of understanding of each other's respective roles and objectives. These tensions came to the fore in recent ILO discussions on the organisation of workers in the informal economy, with some NGOs challenging the right or ability of trade unions to represent those not in formal employment. **Mark Anner** and **Peter Evans** examine recent attempts to span the double divide between trade unions and NGOs across the North–South socio-economic cleavage. The promotion first of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and now of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA, or ALCA in its Spanish acronym), have given new impetus to inter-hemispheric organising both within specific sectors (notably the apparel export industry) and in relation to more macro issues concerning democratic governance. **Sophia Huyer** picks up a similar theme in relation to collaboration between Canadian NGOs and trade unions in the face of the challenges posed by NAFTA, illustrating both the potential strength but also the inherent weaknesses of such alliances. It is one thing to collaborate on a specific campaign event, but sustaining that collaboration over time is far harder, especially if some partners are stronger and better resourced than others. **Tim Connor** looks at the involvement of NGOs in promoting the rights of workers through the anti-sweatshop movement, arguing that although the loose networked form of organisation has enabled the movement to grow and accommodate a diverse constituency, there will be a need for greater cooperation between such NGOs and labour unions if the movement is to maintain its momentum and achieve any lasting results. **Deborah Eade** describes a period of exceptional collaboration between one international development NGO and trade unions in Honduras, during the prolonged political violence that ravaged Central America in the 1980s. She reflects on the personal and political commitment that often underpinned such relationships at that time, casting development assistance and solidarity as mutually reinforcing rather than at odds with each other. With reference to a project working with immigrant Mexican communities in California, **Paul Johnston** examines a mechanism enabling trade unions to establish a semi-autonomous non-profit 'arm' to undertake activities that would be inappropriate or impossible for them to do themselves. **Joseph Roman** argues that NGOs have tended to focus on race and gender inequalities and to downplay social class as the principal issue to be addressed by working people in general, and in relations between workers in the North and the South in particular.

Union-based NGOs

Many NGOs and foundations around the world have been set up by, or have close links with, trade unions. Some of these are involved in funding union initiatives in other countries; often, they seek to promote links or twinning arrangements between workers in similar industries or sectors, whether North–South or South–South. In Europe, for instance, Norwegian People's Aid was set up in 1939 by the Norwegian labour movement, and is now involved in over 400 projects in 30 countries. A more recent pioneering example of a trade union-based development initiative is the Steelworkers' Humanity Fund, established in 1985 by the United Steelworkers of Canada on the basis of a weekly contribution of 40 cents per member. Since then, a number of similar funds have been set up there, such as the Canadian Auto Workers' Social Justice Fund in 1991, the Canadian Union of Public Employees' Union Aid in 1993, and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation Humanity Fund in 1996 (Marshall 1997). Solidar, based in Belgium, is an alliance of NGOs, trade unions, and campaigning groups from

15 countries with links to the social democratic and socialist parties and to the trade union movement. It is active in the fields of social service provision, international cooperation, humanitarian aid, and lifelong learning. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) in Germany is perhaps one of the best known labour-related organisations working in development. Founded in 1925 (and banned under the Nazi regime), FES is committed to promoting the values of social democracy. Its development cooperation programme, which accounts for half its annual budget, focuses among other things on reinforcing free trade unions, supporting democratisation, encouraging independent media structures, and promoting peace and respect for human rights. FES also supports research and publications, as well as its own publishing programme, on trade unionism.

This issue contains papers describing the work of three such NGOs. **Jackie Simpkins** outlines The Global Workplace programme being run by the UK organisation War on Want. This is essentially an umbrella for a range of activities to encourage trade union members in the UK to establish relationships with their counterparts in the South so that both sides develop a deeper understanding of how globalisation is affecting them, encourage solidarity, and work together as an international force to defend workers' rights. **Ken Davis** gives an account of the latent tensions and trade-offs between development NGOs and Union Aid Abroad (formerly Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad), and of the sometimes conservative or ill-informed attitudes within the labour movement towards international development. While trade unions may be to the left of the political spectrum, individual members may not immediately see the links between this position and how they view 'competition' from workers in poorer countries. There is therefore a need to educate the union constituency while also defending labour rights at home. **Pravin Sinha** of FES in India describes how the informalisation of labour has encouraged some trade unions and non-union organisations of working people (and the NGOs supporting them) to unite within a National Centre for Labour. It is hoped that this will provide an opportunity for greater trust among them to develop.

Workers in the informal economy, and alternatives to unionisation

A point often made by development NGOs and by Southern advocacy organisations is that although millions of workers are unionised, these represent only a fraction of the world's workforce. Women and men who are in some form of self-employment or subsistence activity—particularly those in the agricultural sector, who represent upwards of 60 per cent of the labour force in the South—are not in a position to join a conventional workplace-based union. The same holds true for home-based workers who undertake piecework in some link in the production chain. Within the formal employment sector, many workers are prevented from unionising, or choose not to do so. The growth of the informal economy worldwide is cited as further evidence of the waning relevance of trade unions, as is the fact that some 900 million workers are underemployed while a further 150 million are said to be unemployed (Bullard 2000:32). Hence, it is argued, the formal labour movement cannot represent the interests of most workers. Additional critiques of the representational legitimacy of trade unions are that their leadership tends to be male dominated, and that women are under-represented in the industrial sectors where unions are traditionally concentrated and which are therefore likely to be better protected by labour legislation (*ibid.*) (though see World Bank 2003 and note 5 below). Leaving aside the counter-argument that any such legislation has in most cases been fought for by organised labour, and that the union movement has no interest in making gains at the expense of workers who are not unionised, some of these concerns are legitimate. Clearly, the world of work is changing rapidly, particularly in relation to the 'flexibilisation' of employment and the phenomenon of the 'virtual boss'.[4] If unions are unable to modernise their own methods of

recruiting, mobilising, and articulating their demands, then the rights of all working people are likely to be further eroded. Conversely, the presence of strong and effective unions has been found by the World Bank itself not only to enhance the conditions of unionised workers, but also to improve overall economic performance and social stability.[5]

The papers in this section focus mainly on women workers in the informal and semi-formal economy and in the *maquila* industry. **Ruth Pearson** reports on action-research to map the huge range of home-based employment, in which women predominate, and to explore the potential for establishing sustainable organisations of homeworkers both nationally and internationally. Tracing the production chain that invisibly links women in different parts of an industry is part of the key to such organising. **Marina Prieto** and **Carolina Quinteros** look at the exponential growth in the *maquila* industry in Central America with the cessation of the wars that ripped the region's economy to shreds throughout the 1980s. Focusing on Honduras and Nicaragua, they highlight the tensions between traditional industry-based trade unions and the new proletariat, comprised mainly of young women who are lone parents or maintaining a family. The old methods of organising are not only unfeasible within the *maquila* (where employers are known to stamp out any attempt to unionise), but also unresponsive to the priorities of the female workforce. Women's organisations focusing on labour rights and linking up with international anti-sweatshop movements have, by contrast, had greater success; but their relations with the local trade unions have not thrived. **Angela Hale** from Women Working Worldwide shows how trade unions and NGOs often find themselves around the same table in the wish to improve working conditions in global production and supply chains. Her argument is that, although the two types of organisation have different ways of working, they have nevertheless proved able to collaborate; and that building on this collaboration offers the potential to create what she refers to as new forms of labour internationalism. **Omar Ortez** reports on how the garment-manufacturing sector in one subregion of the Guatemalan highlands has avoided the *maquila* industry, as manufacturers have been shrewd in creating and occupying a local market niche for low-cost clothing. Paradoxically, it was the failure of unions to organise the workforce in the 1960s that brought the traditional elite closer to their employees and has allowed local producers to flourish today and stemmed the out-migration that generally characterises this part of the country. Turning again to Honduras, **Leslie Groves** describes a programme run by Save the Children Fund (UK) to promote ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. The NGO sought to encourage the Ministry of Labour to take responsibility for compliance with its obligations, and helped it develop the technical and organisational capacity to do so. While there was some involvement of employers and unions in the project, there was relatively little engagement. Clearly, employers who currently rely on child labour will not willingly cooperate with laws that will punish them for doing so, but arguably this is an area in which trade unions might have organisational experience to contribute, as well as having an obvious commitment to the goal of eliminating the worst forms of exploitative work, and ensuring the effective application of labour legislation.

Workplace codes of conduct

The promotion of workplace codes of conduct has been one of the main ways in which NGOs have engaged with labour issues in recent years, whether primarily from a rights-based perspective or as a tangible campaigning goal around which to mobilise public support. There is a strong moral and educational appeal in the argument that consumers bear some of the responsibility for poor working conditions: few would feel comfortable about wearing clothes that had been produced by slave or bonded labour, or eating out-of-season vegetables that had been grown by people who earn too little to feed their own children adequately. There is

something obscene about children being denied their own right to recreational activities because they are employed in the manufacture of sports equipment. Focusing on cases of extreme exploitation, or where there is a clear link between consumer choices and the oppression of other human beings, can offer NGOs the classic campaigning agenda: a problem with which to identify, a 'bad guy' against whom to mobilise, and a tangible solution in the form of a code of conduct.

But in reality, neither the picture nor the solutions are so simple. Criticisms of codes of conduct are plentiful, ranging from the argument that they are mainly cosmetic, designed for public display while business goes on as usual (Utting 2000), to concerns that they divert attention from the need for structural solutions, i.e. strong laws and effective enforcement of social clauses. NGOs are also accused of being short-lived in their commitment, and perhaps too concerned with profiling themselves, while unions are necessarily in for the long and unglamorous haul. Perhaps the gravest criticism is that the establishment and monitoring of codes of conduct have on occasion allowed NGOs and management to work things out bilaterally, permitting the company to avoid negotiating with employees and their representatives—a criticism that NGOs would rebut by arguing that they focus on industries in which unions are weak or simply non-existent.

Rainer Braun and **Judy Gearhart** engage with these tensions head-on. They see the underlying issue as being one of differences in the approaches of trade unions and NGOs to political power. The former aim for power and operate within a context of political bargaining and compromise, while the latter need to remain political outsiders if they are to maintain a watchdog role. It is possible to obtain short-term successes, but these will be sustained in the long term only through the self-representation of those directly concerned, in this case the workers. In other words, the litmus test is whether NGO activity facilitates or inhibits this long-term objective. **Ronnie D. Lipschutz** similarly maintains that the 'spillover effects' into the broader society of the host country are ultimately more important than the adoption of codes per se. In his view, the real goal is to improve legal, political, and social conditions for workers rather than trying to influence corporate behaviour through consumer pressure. **Lance Compa** has written widely on these and related issues, and we are pleased to reproduce a paper first published in the International Centre for Trade Union Rights (ICTUR) journal *International Union Rights*. He recognises that trade unions and NGOs share the desire to halt abusive behaviour by companies and to check corporate power in the global economy. He also acknowledges the real tensions between the two, both over tactics and over their understanding of social justice in the global economy. However, both have more in common with each other than they do with corporations, governments, or with a neo-liberal agenda that sees free trade as the way to raise labour standards. In cases where NGOs can act quickly, and given the weak presence of unions in the global assembly line, then codes may be a valuable asset. **Neil Kearney** and **Judy Gearhart** also look at how workplace codes might help workers to organise, especially in situations where unions are repressed. They focus specifically on a collaborative project between the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF) and Social Accountability International that aims to help workers to understand how to use codes to their benefit, building on their existing organisational and education strategies.

Case studies

This section brings together a series of contrasting case studies from around the world. Some illustrate collaboration while others show trade unions and NGOs running almost on parallel tracks; and all reveal the critical importance of the wider legal and social framework regulating

the activities of both sectors, and of the political context more generally. **E. Remi Aiyede** looks at the role of human rights NGOs in the democratisation of Nigeria, emphasising their alliances with trade unions (which were themselves the target of government repression) in helping to build a wider consensus for change within civil society. **Jane Lethbridge** gives two detailed examples of NGO and trade union collaboration on issues relating to the health sector: joining in opposition to privatisation of the health service in Malaysia and joining in support for policies and action-plans on HIV/AIDS in South Africa. **Jonathan Ellis** writes about a campaign in the UK to defend the rights of asylum seekers, which brought together a unique (and occasionally awkward) alliance between Oxfam GB, the Refugee Council, and the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU): the campaign was successful in terms of the immediate outcomes, and while it did not lay the ground for long-term collaboration, all parties learned much about the importance of compromise in the interests of alliance building. **Elaheh Rostami Povey** compares the role of trade unions and women's NGOs in Iran, where there has to date been very little cross-fertilisation between the two sectors. She argues that the women's NGOs would have a great deal to offer to the labour movement in terms of greater sensitivity to gender issues and to the specific needs of women workers, while the NGOs would also benefit from setting their project-based work within a framework of broader structural change. **Satendra Prasad** and **Darryn Snell** turn to the troubled situation of trade unions in three South Pacific countries: Papua New Guinea, the Fiji Islands, and Solomon Islands. The region has undergone significant political and economic turmoil in recent years, and trade unions have had to face the challenge of continuing to stand for a broad social justice agenda on the one hand while, on the other, needing to look to their members' immediate interests. **Dodina Yevgeniya** ends with an account of how the legal frameworks regulating NGOs as public interest and associative bodies rather than philanthropic organisations in Ukraine have led to real collaboration on issues such as public health campaigns to encourage sport and physical activity and to deal with the problems of disability.

There are many other angles on these issues, and this collection by no means purports to be comprehensive. Nor is it the last word. However, our hope is that these papers will contribute to greater understanding among the different sectors and types of organisation represented here—from trade unions to development NGOs, from labour and human rights organisations to networks of homeworkers, from activist-scholars to union organisers. We hope, too, that trade unions and development NGOs might also learn from seeing themselves through the eyes of others and so step 'outside the box' of their own assumptions, self-images, and perspectives and reflect on how they are perceived by outside observers. Mutual respect depends upon acknowledging and accepting difference rather than trying to impose uniformity, and real collaboration is possible only on the basis of such respect. Conversely, and as many of our contributors show, behaviour that is perceived to break rank among progressive civil society organisations will play into the hands of forces that have shown scant regard for the rights of working people and indifference to the goal of social and economic justice for all. The stakes could not be higher.

Notes

1 The World Bank's website on NGOs, for instance, estimates that there are 'between 6000 and 30,000 national NGOs in developing countries'; and that 'over 15% of total overseas development aid is channelled through NGOs' (see www.worldbank.org, accessed 12 December 2001). The list of NGOs with consultative status at ECOSOC runs to 60 pages of about 40 entries apiece—that is one NGO per day for six and a half years, or alternatively

about one NGO per minute for an entire 24-hour day. And that is obviously just the tip of the iceberg.

2 Article 23 states '(1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment. (2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work. (3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection. (4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.'

3 The core labour standards are (1) the right to organise and engage in collective bargaining, (2) the right to equality at work, (3) the abolition of child labour, and (4) the abolition of forced labour. These standards serve as 'enabling rights' in that they create conditions that allow access to other important workers' rights. Trade unions have lobbied for the core labour standards to be recognised as internationally accepted guides to a civilised, dignified, and sustainable workplace, regardless of the stage or nature of national development.

4 A major focus of consumer-based organisations such as the Clean Clothes Campaign and Labour Behind the Label is to trace company mergers and find out who really owns what. Companies often have a range of products marketed under different brand names. A consumer may choose to boycott one product, but be unaware that the rival 'clean' brand actually belongs to the same company. By the same token, transnational outsourcing means that workers may not even know for whom they are ultimately working.

5 A report issued in June 2002 (Aidt and Tzannatos 2002), based on reviews of over 1000 studies on the effects of unions and collective bargaining, found that in industrialised and developing countries alike, unionised workers earn more, work fewer hours, receive more training, and have longer job tenure on average than do their non-unionised counterparts. Furthermore, wage differentials between skilled and unskilled workers, and between women and men, are lower in unionised settings. The clear message is that joining a union is good for workers and good for the economy—something that trade unions have argued since their inception over a century ago!

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