

Preface

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Development NGOs and Labor Unions is based on a special issue of the journal *Development in Practice*,¹ whose roots lie deep in the lives of the guest editor, Alan Leather, and myself. Though our professional and political trajectories have taken us in different directions, we share the experience of taking our commitment to labor unionism into our work in development NGOs and of working in and alongside labor 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 organized labor and by the similar reluctance of labor unions to recognize the positive contributions that development NGOs can make to improving the situation of those who are poor and marginalized. 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 fight on in the face of adversity, and their commitment to social and economic justice for all. In his introductory essay Alan charts his personal experience in working toward this vision over the last four decades, moving from the UK labor union movement into the world of international development agencies, back into labor union development-education work, and eventually into the global union federation arena. An inspiration in itself, this experience permits us unique insights into each sector and allows Alan to distill critical lessons for both in standing with the powerless in the fight against injustice.

While there is enormous scope for NGOs and labor unions to support each others' aims—and there have been exemplary cases of such

collaboration—relations between the two sectors frequently have been marked by ignorance and suspicion, and sometimes by 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 neoliberal political and economic context in which labor unions have experienced overall declines in membership and political influence.² 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 overly bureaucratic 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 organizations.

Labor unions and NGOs also have 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 mobilization is outdated in today's globalized economy; and that they have a poor record on gender and ethnic equity and 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 microenterprises or income-generating projects, which often fail to take labor 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 on drawing 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 monitoring codes of conduct. Many NGOs basically ignore labor unions altogether as civil society organizations, while some adopt anti-union policies internally by discouraging or even disallowing their staff to form or join unions.

As the neoliberal agenda continues to erode the rights of workers and their families as enshrined in Article 23 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights,³ and various ILO conventions, in particular those known as the core labor standards,⁴ so it becomes imperative that civil society organizations 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 thirty 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 labor unions nor NGOs can afford to go it alone.

In compiling the special journal issue we invited contributions that would help to elucidate some of the underlying tensions between labor unions and NGOs in order to contribute to a greater understanding of the potential sources of conflict and disagreement often afflicting interorganizational relations, and to enhance the scope for constructive and respectful dialogue—and occasionally partnership—between the two sectors.

These papers are organized in this book around five broad but overlapping themes:

- alliances and tensions between labor 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

Labor unions and development NGOs can be broadly characterized as value-driven civil society organizations that champion the rights of those who are (or who may potentially be) exploited, oppressed, excluded, or otherwise marginalized. Although NGOs and labor unions are not homogeneous sectors, a goal that many of them would 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 globalization, ILO core labor standards, codes of conduct, and the role of the WTO have placed civil society organizations at the heart of these issues of global governance. While it is to be expected that NGOs and labor 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 toward a common cause.

Part 1 includes papers that explore some of the generic tensions that affect alliances between labor 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 organization, the corresponding differences in political and organizational cultures, and the consequent lack of understanding of each other's respective roles and objectives. These tensions came to the fore in recent ILO discussions on the organization of workers in the informal economy, with some NGOs challenging the right or ability of labor unions to represent those not in formal employment. Mark Anner and Peter Evans examine recent attempts to span the double divide between labor unions and NGOs across the North-South socioeconomic 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), has given new impetus to inter-hemispheric organizing 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 labor unions in the face of the challenges posed by NAFTA, illustrating 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 organization has enabled the movement to grow and accommodate a diverse constituency, there will be a need for greater cooperation between such NGOs and labor unions if the movement is to maintain its momentum and achieve any lasting results. Deborah Eade describes the exceptional collaboration between one international development NGO and labor unions in Honduras during the prolonged political violence ravaging 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 sets out a mechanism enabling labor unions to establish a semi-autonomous nonprofit "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 labor 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 labor movement and is now involved in over four hundred projects in thirty countries. A more recent pioneering example of a labor 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 forty 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, labor unions, and campaigning groups from fifteen countries with links to the social democratic and socialist parties and to the labor 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 most widely known labor-related organizations 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 program accounts for half its annual budget and focuses, among other things, on reinforcing free labor unions, supporting democratization, encouraging independent media structures, and promoting peace and respect for human rights. FES also supports research and publications, as well as its own publishing program on labor unionism.

Part 2 describes the work of two such NGOs. Jackie Simpkins outlines The Global Workplace program being run by the UK organization War on Want. This is essentially an umbrella for a range of activities to encourage labor union members in the UK to establish relationships with their counterparts in the South in order that both sides should develop a

deeper understanding of how globalization 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 tradeoffs 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 labor movement toward international development. While labor unions may be to the left of the political spectrum, individual members may not immediately see the links between this position and their how they view "competition" from workers in poorer countries. There is therefore a need to educate the union constituency while also defending labor rights at home.

WORKERS IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY AND ALTERNATIVES TO UNIONIZATION

A point often made by development NGOs and by Southern advocacy organizations such as Focus on the Global South in Thailand or Third World Network in Malaysia is that although millions of workers are unionized, they represent only a fraction of the world's work force. Women and men who are in some form of self-employment or subsistence activity—particularly those in the agricultural sector, who represent upward of 60 percent of the labor 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 unionizing or choose not to do so. The growth of the informal economy worldwide is cited as further evidence of the waning relevance of labor 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 labor movement cannot represent the interests of most workers. Additional critiques of the representational legitimacy of labor 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 labor 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 organized labor and that the union movement has no interest in making gains at the expense of workers who are not unionized, some of these concerns are legitimate.

Clearly, the world of work is changing rapidly, particularly in relation to the “flexibilization” of employment and the phenomenon of the “virtual boss.”⁵ If unions are unable to modernize their own methods of recruiting, mobilizing, and articulating their demands, then the rights of all working people are likely to be still further eroded. Conversely, the presence of strong and effective unions has been found by the World Bank not only to enhance the conditions of unionized workers but also to improve overall economic performance and social stability.⁶

The contributions in Part 3 focus mainly on women workers in the informal and semiformal economy and in the *maquila* industry. Ruth Pearson reports on an action-research approach to map the huge range of home-based employment, in which women predominate, and to explore the potential for establishing sustainable organizations 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 organizing. 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 labor unions and the new proletariat, comprised mainly of young women, many of whom are lone parents or maintaining a family. The old methods of organizing are not only infeasible within the *maquila* (where employers are known to stamp out any attempt to unionize), but they are also unresponsive to the priorities of the female work force. Women’s organizations focusing on labor rights and linking up with international anti-sweatshop movements have, by contrast, had greater success, but their relations with the local labor unions have not thrived. Angela Hale from Women Working Worldwide shows how labor 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 organization have different ways of working, they have nevertheless proved able to collaborate; building on this collaboration offers the potential to create what she refers to as new forms of labor internationalism.

WORKPLACE CODES OF CONDUCT

The promotion of workplace codes of conduct has been one of the main ways in which NGOs have engaged with labor issues in recent years,

whether primarily from a rights-based perspective or as a tangible campaigning goal around which to mobilize 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 produced by slave or bonded labor, or eating out-of-season vegetables grown by people who earn too little to feed their own children adequately. There is something obscene about children being denied the right to play and recreation 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 mobilize, 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. They range from the argument that codes of conduct 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, that is, 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, allowing 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 nonexistent.

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 labor 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 affect corporate behavior 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 journal of the International Centre for Trade Union Rights (ICTUR), *International Union Rights*. He recognizes that labor unions and NGOs share the desire to halt abusive behavior 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 neoliberal agenda that sees free trade as the way to raise labor standards. In cases where NGOs can act quickly, and given the weak presence of unions in the global assembly line, codes may be a valuable asset. Neil Kearney and Judy Gearhart also look at how workplace codes might help workers to organize, especially in situations where unions are repressed. They focus specifically on a collaborative project between the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation and Social Accountability International that aims to help workers to understand how to use codes to their benefit, building on their existing organizational and education strategies.

CASE STUDIES

Part 5 brings together a series of contrasting case studies from around the world. Some illustrate collaboration while others show labor unions and NGOs running almost on parallel tracks; 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 democratization of Nigeria, emphasizing their alliances with labor 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 labor union collaboration on issues relating to the health sector: joining in opposition to privatization 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 that brought about a unique (and occasionally awkward) alliance among Oxfam GB, the Refugee

Council, and the Transport and General Workers' Union. 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 labor unions and women's NGOs in Iran, where there has to date been very little cross-fertilization between the two sectors. She argues that the women's NGOs have a great deal to offer to the labor movement in terms of greater sensitivity to gender issues and to the specific needs of women workers, while the NGOs would 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 labor 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 labor 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.

There are many other angles on this issue, and this volume by no means purports to be comprehensive. Nor is it the last word. However, our hope is that these chapters will contribute to greater understanding among the different sectors and types of organization represented here—from labor unions to development NGOs, from labor and human rights organizations to networks of homeworkers, from activist-scholars to union organizers. We hope too that labor unions and development NGOs might also learn from seeing themselves through others' eyes and so be encouraged to step "outside the box" of their own assumptions, self-images, and perspectives and reflect on how they are perceived by one another and 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, behavior that is perceived to break rank among progressive civil society organizations will play into the hands of forces that have shown such 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 *Development in Practice* 14, nos. 1 and 2 (February 2004).

² The World Bank's website on NGOs, for instance, estimates that there are "between 6,000 and 30,000 national NGOs in developing countries" and that "over 15% of total overseas development aid is channelled through NGOs" (accessed December 12, 2001). The list of NGOs with consultative status at ECOSOC runs to sixty pages of about forty entries apiece—that is one NGO per day for six and a half years or about one NGO per minute for an entire twenty-four-hour day. And that is just the tip of the iceberg.

³ 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."

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

⁵ A major focus of consumer-based organizations 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 own a range of products, which are 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.

⁶ A report issued in February 2003, based on reviews of over one thousand studies on the effects of unions and collective bargaining, found that in industrialized and developing countries alike, unionized workers earn more, work fewer hours, receive more training, and have longer job tenure on average than do their non-unionized counterparts. Furthermore, wage differentials between skilled and unskilled workers, and between women and men, are lower in unionized settings (World Bank 2003). The clear message is that joining a union is good for workers, and good for the economy—something that labor unions have argued since their inception over a century ago.