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## Labor Union and NGO Relations in Development and Social Justice

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In this chapter I concentrate on the evolution of relationships between labor unions and NGOs that have developed in the field of development and social justice. In so doing, I explore how these relationships started, how they functioned, and what the outcomes have been. Most of the reference points are drawn from my experience working for *both* labor unions and NGOs in the UK and other parts of the world over the last forty years.

As a young labor union activist and printing apprentice in the late 1950s and early 1960s, I became very concerned about international injustices. Much of this concern was rooted in my labor union experience—the workplace discussions, labor union education programs, and the books and newspapers that were passed around the workplace. For example, the father of the chapel (shop steward) in my first workplace gave me Trevor Huddleston’s book *Naught for Your Comfort* (Huddleston 1956). The effect on my fifteen-year-old self of reading about life in Sophiatown, a South African township near Johannesburg, has never left me. “Jacob Ledwaba had been arrested for being out after curfew and without a pass. On Saturday morning he came home. He told his wife he had been kicked in the stomach in the cells and that he was in so much pain that he couldn’t go to work.” This was an everyday occurrence in Sophiatown.

My reaction to this and other instances of tyranny and inequity was to go and do something practical—but despite labor union concern with international injustice and a long tradition of international solidarity, there wasn’t much a labor union could offer a young activist in terms of

hands-on involvement. I therefore moved toward the cause of NGOs such as Oxfam,<sup>1</sup> the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), and the Anti-Apartheid movement. At Easter in the late 1950s we marched with CND from Aldermaston, the UK government's Nuclear Research Establishment, to London. We carried tins of powdered milk as a symbol of food for the hungry in a world where vast resources were being spent on the arms race.

It seemed quite natural for a wide range of progressive organizations, labor unions, political parties, peace groups, churches, and development NGOs to be marching together against a threat to global peace and against the global injustices of poverty and colonialism. Only recently in London have demonstrations against the Iraq war surpassed the CND marches of the 1960s in terms of numbers of protesters on the streets.

By the age of eighteen I had decided to apply to Voluntary Service Overseas. The projects available did not (and probably still don't) place volunteers with labor movement organizations, but there is nonetheless enormous scope for labor unions to work with international volunteer-sending agencies, and I took part in discussions in the 1970s about placing volunteers with labor movement organizations. This was not just in terms of North-South exchanges but also South-South and South-North, a different vision of volunteering that was the founding spirit behind UN Volunteers, for example, and many smaller agencies. The strengthening of labor unions has never been seen as a developmental goal, but I have recently learned that in order to promote HIV/AIDS prevention in the workplace, UN Volunteers may now be placed with labor as well as employer organizations in selected African countries.

As a volunteer I was fortunate to find myself in Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), where I became involved with refugees from apartheid South Africa, many of whom had fled from the townships so vividly described by Huddleston. This was the time when the first African National Congress (ANC) and Pan African Congress (PAC) offices were being opened in Lusaka, and despite the colonial administration's connivance with the South African authorities, there was an opportunity to do something on the ground.

When I returned to the UK in the mid-1960s I eventually took a job with Oxfam. I worked in one of the London offices in the Trade Union and Cooperatives Department. The department had two main objectives—to work with the UK cooperative movement on building a consumer cooperative movement in Botswana, and to raise money from UK labor unions to support projects in the Third World. There were also strong

links between the Cooperative Wholesale Society (CWS) and the unions, and many UK labor unionists were members of the CWS as well as being the major users of its different commercial services. I can still remember the Leather family dividend number. Oxfam's links with the cooperative movement were well developed before I joined, and part of my job was to fundraise with CWS groups in different parts of the country. The CWS had underwritten the project and, in consultation with Oxfam's Africa Field Office, had sent experts in consumer cooperative development to Botswana to train local cooperators.

The labor union work, however, was still at an early stage, and we were responsible for making contact with labor union head offices to open up fundraising possibilities by offering specific projects for sponsorship, based on the idea of twinning a union with a project in the same line of work as the union members. Oxfam helped the unions to raise the money by providing materials and speakers for union meetings. The initiative was well received as fitting into the tradition of international solidarity, though the projects—usually involving some form of training for young people—were more likely to be run by a church mission than a labor union.

Reflecting on it today, I find it interesting that, from Oxfam's perspective, the relationship was simply based on fundraising, and indeed the unions saw it this way as well. Neither side saw the other as a potential ally to fight world poverty in political or strategic terms, for example, through joint campaigning, or even to extend the educational opportunities offered by the fundraising. It was still about using the starving child to move hearts, and never mind using the head to link that child to issues of exploitation and inequality that labor unionists understand so well.

The labor unions, for their part, also saw Oxfam as a fundraising organization and supported Oxfam projects without getting involved in a broader international strategy to challenge the causes of poverty. Many of the same labor unions were members of international labor union federations—now known as global union federations (GUFs)—and even these organizations took until the 1990s to make it a priority to raise the awareness among their affiliates about the workings of the international system and to take steps to challenge it.

My stay in the Trade Union and Cooperatives Department was rather short-lived because of differences of opinion over strategy, but it gave me insights into some of the internal workings of Oxfam. Labor unions were organizations outside the experience of most of the staff at Oxfam's headquarters in Oxford, which was unsurprising given the class base of

Oxfam at the time. There was no staff union until the 1980s, and even then the initiative initially met considerable resistance from senior management. The Trade Union and Cooperatives Department lasted a few years longer than I did but was never a central activity. Without the support of then-director Leslie Kirkley it would not have existed, though there have been labor union liaison staff based in Oxfam for periods of time since then. Even today, I don't believe that an active labor union leader sits on or has ever been invited to join Oxfam's board of trustees, although there is room for the great and the good from most other walks of life.

Oxfam's labor union links in the 1960s should be seen in the context of an important difference of opinion at the time over the organization's involvement in "political" movements for change. The loudest arguments were between the fundraisers and the campaigners for social justice. The fundraisers did not want Oxfam's image to be tarnished by pictures of young Oxfam supporters taking part in CND demonstrations or associating with anti-establishment organizations such as labor unions. One irony of this debate was that Oxfam's leadership at the time was strongly linked to the Quakers, who in turn were very active in CND. Fundraising needs versus campaigning work—complicated by UK law and the role of the Charity Commission—has been an ongoing dilemma, one that has obviously influenced the relationship between Oxfam (and other similar organizations in the UK) and labor unions, and, more broadly, one that has also constrained the role of development NGOs in taking political action.<sup>2</sup>

I should also like to reflect briefly on Oxfam's involvement with social movements and political action in other parts of the world, as I experienced it when working for Oxfam in India. In 1967 I went to work on a famine-relief project in Bihar State, NE India. This was primarily a feeding program organized in cooperation with the state government and CARE. Famine had followed the failure of the monsoon rains in 1966, leaving thirty million landless laborers and small farmers without any income. The feeding program was a success in that it focused on the most vulnerable—children and nursing mothers.

I returned to India after a six-month break to work on a rural development project in the same area. The project was a joint Oxfam program with Sarva Seva Sangh, the main Gandhian organization for social and economic development. It provided irrigation and agricultural know-how to small farmers to enable them to cope with the problems of irregular rainfall. There was a strong social-reform aspect to the project in terms

of the *Gramdan* (village council) approach to village development. This was based on the idea of each village establishing a council that would take responsibility for running village affairs, including the pooling of land so that there was no social exclusion. This was the first time that Oxfam had become involved in this type of social movement. Most of the organization's previous assistance in India had been directed toward mission-run welfare and training projects, the increasing of food production through support for hybrid crop production, and refugee relief.

Working with a movement for social change such as Sarva Seva Sangh raised major questions for Oxfam, as any change process meant getting involved with politics on the local, district, and possibly state levels. Challenging the rural status quo—as the Oxfam project did by providing employment for laborers on their own land when they were wanted by the landlords for work on theirs—caused enormous problems. As many of the laborers were bonded to the landlords, their not reporting for work when called was interpreted as a strike. Local Gandhian social workers eventually sorted out the conflict, but it was clear that Oxfam could have been blamed for causing social unrest. This highlights another fundamental dilemma: one of the key ways of helping the poor and marginalized is to support the organizations they set up to improve their situation, which often involves challenging the local power structure. At the same time, such support can threaten the ability of an external NGO, in this case Oxfam, to continue functioning in the country. This helps explain Oxfam's reluctance, for many years, to form alliances with labor union organizations in the South.

On returning to the UK after this period in India I decided to use my international experience in labor union education and took a job teaching development studies at Ruskin College, Oxford, which has close links with labor unions. While working with a group of students in 1976 on the impact of the international economy on UK workers, we decided to develop an audiovisual presentation that would explore this relationship and to show it at a fringe event at the Trade Union Congress in Brighton. This led to the formation of the Trade Union International Research and Education Group (TUIREG), an NGO whose aim was to create awareness of the impact of the international economy on the UK workplace, and vice versa, through labor union education programs. In many respects the aim was to create awareness among rank-and-file activists and shop stewards about how the world works. It was clear that an increasing number of jobs in the UK were dependent on the global economy, but there was little discussion within labor unions about the policy implications. The main

area of activity during the first years of TUIREG's existence was to explore the ways in which multinational companies operated internationally.

TUIREG could be described as a service NGO for the labor union movement. However, despite its name and its base at Ruskin, labor unions took time to be convinced that TUIREG could offer useful input in labor union education. Initially, labor unions were suspicious of a message that was critical of global capitalism. This seemed too political, even for labor unions!

Over the next few years several unions recognized TUIREG's educational role, and there was a constant demand for work. Once the unions concerned had commissioned TUIREG, staff members were given a free hand to develop course materials and programs. A study that TUIREG undertook in the late 1970s with the European Trade Union Confederation showed little ongoing educational activity that strategically examined the international economy. There were, however, international solidarity activities around major causes such as Chile, South Africa, and Nicaragua, and some links between labor unions and the NGOs that were taking up these causes. It was, however, still an effort to link these issues to national or international economic policies and global trends in trade and investment.

In order to spread TUIREG's funding base, it was necessary to approach other organizations for support. In the UK these included Oxfam, Christian Aid, and various foundations. Initial approaches to Oxfam in the early 1980s received a sympathetic hearing but did not produce any tangible support. Christian Aid did respond positively and remained a TUIREG partner for many years. Later, Oxfam also provided funding. TUIREG was also obliged to undertake an increasing amount of commissioned work. This included the production of audiovisual education materials, educational programs for international labor unions and the International Labour Organization (ILO), and projects in developing countries for individual labor unions. To some extent this changed the original conception of the organization, although much of the experience gained from working in different developing countries was used in the UK-based education work.

I have concentrated on TUIREG because of firsthand experience of its activities,<sup>3</sup> but it is important to recognize that there were other NGOs in the UK and elsewhere in Europe that were working with labor unions on international issues with varying degrees of success. One example worth considering is War on Want, which had strong labor movement

links when it was started in the early 1950s; for a long time, however, it did not develop this alliance. The late 1970s witnessed a resurgence in the agency's interest in labor unions through the work of Don Thomson who, with Rodney Larson, wrote a book for War on Want entitled *Where Were You, Brother? An Account of Trade Union Imperialism* (Thomson and Larson 1978). The book was highly critical of certain aspects of national and international labor union activity. Its publication created a major furor, and War on Want came to be regarded with great suspicion by large parts of the labor union establishment. This, in turn, had implications for labor union relations with other development NGOs in the UK, and to some extent at an international level.

TUIREG entered new territory in the 1980s by starting to work for some of the GUFs. For the most part the federations had little experience working with NGOs. The organization that used TUIREG's services the most was Public Services International (PSI), representing public service workers worldwide. PSI employed TUIREG to develop information and education materials, especially video programs, and to run education and training programs, mainly in West Africa.

I joined PSI in 1987 as its education officer. Apart from using TUIREG in a service or consultancy role, PSI had few links with NGOs, but as it began to develop its policies on gender equality and public-service reforms, including privatization, the organization became aware of the increasing number of NGOs working in the same areas.

An initial reaction—not only on the part of PSI but quite commonly among labor unions—was to see these NGOs as competitors who had moved into a field of activity that should have been theirs. Issues of particular concern related to the extent to which such organizations represented the view of their “membership” in a democratic way, as NGOs tend to talk about “speaking for” or “on behalf of” the members of the groups they support but do not have an explicit mandate to do so. At the same time, the unions had to recognize that on many issues they had been slow to react.

Since the mid-1990s there has been a marked change in the relationship between PSI and NGOs. This has come about because of the recognition that in major policy campaigns where PSI is trying to influence the functioning of international bodies such as the WTO, it is impossible to be effective without forming alliances with like-minded organizations. One of the best examples is the World Is Not for Sale Campaign, an international alliance of 150 organizations. One central aspect of this alliance is the fact that there is a shared objective, though at the same

time the organizations involved have been ready to recognize the value of one another's points of view—and increasing efforts are made to reflect a range of views in joint position statements. For example, as the only labor organization in the alliance, PSI policies have on the whole been accepted by the others because there is an understanding and appreciation of the workers' perspective and the importance of including it. This mutual trust has taken a long time to build, and many links have come about because of the impact of globalization and the ensuing social injustice and exclusion.

A study made of the eleven GUFs dealing with NGOs in the late 1990s showed that a wide variety of relationships exist. Some, like PSI, have close and growing relations, while one or two remain suspicious of contacts of this sort. There are many unresolved concerns, such as the role of NGOs with relation to the ILO, where it is important that the special role of labor unions is maintained.

In conclusion, what we need to hold on to are two key realities: first, there are issues of such significance to civil society, including workers and their organizations, that the only way to tackle them is through the broadest possible coalitions; second, imbalances in the distribution of power and resources are so great that all those who wish to oppose such injustice and stand with the powerless must celebrate their differences and use their diversity in a many-stranded alliance for change.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Known at the time as OXFAM, the organization later changed its name to Oxfam UK and Ireland, and more recently to Oxfam GB.

<sup>2</sup> This tension was by no means peculiar to Oxfam. Most development NGOs in the UK are registered as charities and so come under the scrutiny of the Charity Commission, which is charged with investigating allegations of involvement in activities not permitted under this legislation. Any advocacy, campaigning, lobbying, or research activities conducted or supported had to be directly related to the organization's charitable purpose and be "non-political." Campaigning and human rights organizations such as Amnesty International UK and World Development Movement have long called for reform of the UK Charity Law, which is based on a four-hundred-year-old statute. In July 2003 the government set out a broader definition of charitable purposes to include a range of "purposes beneficial to the community" (Home Office 2003).

<sup>3</sup> For current information about TUIREG, see its website.