

## Organizing: Means and Ends

by Dan Gallin (2006)

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The fact that such a conference can take place at all, and that it has met with such an enthusiastic response, is probably indicative of the depth of the crisis we are in.

There is no question today that the labor movement is in a crisis. We are all experiencing it. What we are facing is:

- \* serious loss of membership in most countries of the world, especially in the unions' industrial heartland in Western Europe and North America;
- \* an inability to organize the huge and growing mass of unorganized workers, not least in the informal economy;
- \* the lack of political and industrial power to resist and defeat repression, either in the form of a systematic campaign of murders, as in Colombia, or of State policy, as in China and many other authoritarian States, or of anti-labor legislation backed by a hostile government, as in the United States or in Australia;
- \* lack of capacity to resist the dismantling of social protection, of social services and of public property, an agenda carried out by conservative and social-democratic governments alike (as in most of Europe, North America, Australia and Japan, and, under pressure from the IMF, in Africa, Asia and Latin America).

This crisis is generally attributed to the economic, social and, ultimately, political effects of globalization, unfolding in the 1980s and 1990s: the dramatic world-wide shift in social power relations in favor of transnational capital, to the detriment of labor and to the detriment of the national State in its role of administrator of a social compromise between labor and capital.

Why has this happened? The usual explanation is the new and unprecedented mobility of capital, at the same time as labor remains confined within the boundaries of the national State. At the same time, massive and permanent unemployment, also in industrialized countries, has caused the unions to lose control of the labor market even where they were traditionally strong and has substantially weakened their bargaining power.

These are true insights, but they are partial truths and partial insights. The crisis of the trade union movement today is in fact the outcome of a larger crisis of the broader labor movement, which began much earlier, much before the onset of globalization. The trade union movement would not be in its present predicament, fighting defensive battles in isolation, if it had not lost, by stages and over time, its anchorage in society at large.

History advances in long cycles. To understand what has happened, we need to do a flash back, about seventy years ago or more. Fascism in Europe, whatever else it may have been, was a

gigantic union busting exercise. Its consequences, and the consequences of WWII, are too often forgotten. A whole generation of labor activists, the best people, disappeared in concentration camps, in the war, or did not come back from exile.

At the end of the war, the labor movement re-emerged, superficially strong, because it was part of the Allied cause, and had won the war, whereas capital was on the defensive, having largely collaborated with fascism in the Axis countries and in occupied Europe.

In reality, the labor movement had been greatly weakened, with a decimated leadership and its capacity to act as an independent social force severely undermined. All democratic governments in post-war Europe were initially supportive of the labor agenda and consequently the trade unions, in their weakened condition, developed an over-reliance on the State. No longer was there any aspiration to represent an alternative society. Amidst the newfound peace and prosperity, the labor movement had disarmed ideologically and politically.

In the USSR and in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe under its domination, it was a different story. All traces of an independent labor movement were erased. Nearly all the cadres and activists of the socialist, syndicalist, or dissident communist movements who had survived the war perished in the labor camps and prisons of the system. A new class of bureaucrats took total control of society: in that system, so-called trade unions were in fact State agencies of labor administration.

With Eastern Europe frozen in Stalinist paralysis for fifty years, there remained the movement in Western Europe. That was a movement led by survivors, not the kind of labor movement that would be capable of meeting the challenges of an entirely new world situation.

Decades of complacency had diluted and trivialized its ideological and political heritage. Its priorities had been distorted by the Cold War. Still powerful trade union organizations were led, in most cases, by blinkered and politically ignorant leaderships, 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. The rank-and-file was educated to bureaucratic routine and to passivity.

What I am describing here of course not only applies to Europe but, for different reasons, to North America and to other parts of the world as well. I could elaborate, but I won't do it here for reasons of time and you can fill in the blanks anyway.

While the labor movement was asleep, the world changed dramatically. I already referred to the impact of new communications and transport technologies, leading to an unprecedented mobility of capital, while labor remained prisoner, mentally and institutionally, of the nation-State. The working class was also changing. Traditional bastions of the trade union movement in the mass-production industries and in the public sector were falling, while the largely unorganized service sector was expanding.

The informal economy, once thought to be a remnant of archaic forms of production destined to

disappear, has, on the contrary, grown everywhere, even in the industrialized countries. If we are talking about services and about the informal economy, we are talking about women workers. Women represent a huge, and largely invisible, part of the new working class.

In the 1980s and 1990s, workers from China, India and the former Soviet bloc entered the global labor pool. That's an estimated 1.47 billion new workers joining the global system of production and consumption, effectively doubling the size of the world's now globally connected work force.

These workers are, for practical purposes, unorganized. In China, what passes for trade unions, are in fact State agencies of labor administration and do not represent their captive membership. In India, over 90 percent of the labor force is in the informal sector, where organization is still weak, and the existing trade unions, divided into eight national centers, represent a fraction of the remaining few percent. In the former Soviet bloc, the collapse of the system in the 1990s exposed the hollowness of the so-called State trade unions and left behind a weak, divided and disoriented labor movement.

Here we have the real reason for the global shift of power relations in favor of transnational capital: organized labor no longer represents a statistically significant proportion of the global labor force. With a global labor force of approximately 2.93 billion, and organized labor representing globally 170 million at the most, we get a global union density of just below 6 percent.

How do we deal with this? Obviously by organizing the unorganized. Easier said than done. This is not happening and, on the contrary, we are losing ground, so we have to ask ourselves why it is not happening and what the premises of successful global organizing might be. We have to ask ourselves: what are we organizing for? And what is the vision we hold out to people we are asking to join the labor movement?

I want to submit to you the idea that the real crisis of the labor movement is a crisis of identity and perspective, and that this is the crisis we need to resolve in order to become capable of organizing the world's working class.

In order to do that, we have to return to our roots. The labor movement, in resisting the brutal exploitation of early capitalism, was inspired by the fundamental values of justice and freedom, based on the recognition of the equal value of all human beings.

In many countries it broadened its struggle to encompass larger social goals. The first international labor organization held that the emancipation of the working class was to be, at the same time, the emancipation of all society, which would become an "association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."

Today, a serious challenge to the domination of global transnational capital cannot be mounted unless the labor movement recovers a common identity based on an alternative vision of society: the vision of freedom, justice and equality that inspired it at its origins and made it the greatest mass movement in history.

We do have an international trade union movement, such as it is. It has no vision, and it does not inspire anyone. Its principal organization, the ICFTU, has been mired for decades in lobbying activities in international institutions controlled by transnational capital. Despite the obvious failure of such activities to make any significant impact on the ground, there is no sign of a change in perspective. What we have here is an ideology of global "social partnership".

We are among those who hold that the ideology of "social partnership", which became dominant in the labor movement in the three decades following WW2, has now become the main obstacle to the necessary renewal of the movement.

Large parts of the trade union movement are still unable to come to terms with the loss of their presumed "social partners", even while transnational capital has obviously abandoned any "partnership" perspective and is using its vastly increased power to unilaterally impose its interests on society.

There is now a real danger that the majority of the trade union movement will seek solutions to its crisis by restructuring exercises that will provide the appearance of power without its substance.

This has become an international issue through the decision of the last ICFTU congress to create a new International through a merger with the WCL (plus some former WFTU affiliates and independents).

This is not a bad idea in itself, and it might even have positive effects if it develops a dynamic of its own under the law of unintended consequences (there are signs that something like this may be happening in Latin America) but the absence of any political and ideological perspective in a major policy decision by what is, after all, the leadership of world's working class, is striking.

We hear that the significance of this merger lies in that "the ideological divisions of the past" are being overcome, but we are not told what the ideology of the "new International" is supposed to be. Nor is it clear what stopped the ICFTU in the past from doing by itself what it will supposedly be able to do within a "new International" where its affiliates will represent about ninety percent of the membership.

There appears to be an assumption that such a merger, by itself, will automatically restore the power and authority that the labor movement has lost, as if the mere addition of weaknesses could produce new strength. This is magical thinking, without any basis in reality or in reason.

There is no attempt to analyze the changing nature of capitalism, which has led to a dramatic shift in power relations to the detriment of labor, nor to analyze the changing nature of the working class, which is a prerequisite of successful organizing.

But we may be wrong if we assume that the apparatus currently in charge of the international labor movement is seeking to rebuild the strength of the movement to make it fit for a successful power struggle with transnational capital. It is disturbing to hear that the level of ambition of the

"new International" is no more than to exercise more influence in the World Bank and in the International Monetary Fund. This means that they are continuing to chase the illusion of a "global social partnership" under conditions where "social partnership" is a thing of the past even in the countries where the labor movement has been strongest.

The signing on of most of the international trade union movement to the UN Global Compact is another manifestation of this policy of seeking co-optation at international level. Maintaining an appearance of bargaining without bargaining power is a theater of make believe, not a strategy of struggle.

At international level, by renouncing a unifying ideology and of a vision of an alternative society, of a global Co-operative Commonwealth based on freedom and social justice, the labor movement has narrowed its options to purely defensive ones. It has failed to connect with the new social movements that are able to mobilize millions. By restricting its agenda to what it assumes to be its core business, it has isolated itself from society and is in danger of turning itself into a narrow "interest group", as its enemies would have it.

A movement content to represent politically no more than the lowest common denominator of its members, substituting process to politics and seeking solutions to its crisis by restructuring exercises that provide the appearance of power without its substance, cannot lead or inspire society.

Yet, it must lead and inspire society.

The time has come to remember that the labor movement is not an end in itself. It has a responsibility not only to its members but to all of society, precisely because it is not a "special interest group" and because the interests of its members are not separate from those of society at large.

The stakes are extraordinarily high. The current system of global transnational capitalism, as it stands, is environmentally unsustainable. It condemns most of the world's population to poverty and virtual slavery. It divides humanity into a small minority living in gated estates of prosperity surrounded by an ocean of misery and revolt. It spends billions on means of repression. It is leading humanity to death.

Must the labor movement save humanity? Yes, of course. Who else? If not us, who? If not here, where? If not now, when? No other force in society has the potential to achieve this goal, which is the only goal that matters today.

How do we go about saving humanity? In the first place, by saving ourselves.

The first step is to recognize that the present world order is not an eternal given and to declare clearly that we are opposing it. Contrary to what some thought, we have not reached the end of history. The ideological premises of the present world order are a fraud. The free market is a fiction, there is no correlation at all between so-called free market capitalism and democracy.

Capitalism is enormously adaptable, but only under threat.

Alternatives of course remain possible, socialism in the way it was historically conceived remains such an alternative. Personally I believe that a benevolent and sustainable capitalism is an illusion, but even for those of us who would be willing to give it a try it must be clear that in order to effect positive changes we again have to become a threat.

How do we become a threat?

In the first place, this requires a break of the international labor movement with their cozy bureaucratic complicities in the international financial institutions and other intergovernmental organizations. A policy of breaking away would send a strong signal to the transnational establishment and would in addition free resources that would become available to support more productive investments.

All policies, activities and priorities of the labor movement should be reconsidered in a different perspective, a perspective of system change: the ends and means of organizing, the allocation of resources, the conditions under which trade union development programs are carried out, the way the movement positions itself in society, its alliances and its political commitments.

This, I expect, will be the agenda of our Task Force. Here I cannot do more than mention some specific aspects

Within the realm of the traditional trade union activity, the Global Union Federations have, in some cases, made significant progress in bargaining at international level with transnational corporations. They are, for the most part, underfunded and overstretched. Building an international fund to support these activities would be a first step to help reverse the existing power relations.

A second step would be building alliances with those who share our concerns. They represent an enormous constituency. Last year it was estimated that a billion people in the world existed on less than a dollar a day. Of these, 550 million were working. Most of these have been beyond the reach of the trade union movement. They have no stake in this society.

We need to address all workers, whatever the form of their work or areas where they work, and we cannot reach them, we cannot mobilize and organize them, unless they can see and sense a commitment on our part to a common cause based on mutual solidarity - unless we give them hope.

Most of the working poor are in the informal economy, that is, in unprotected and unregulated jobs, both self-employed and working for wages. There is a growing international movement of workers in the informal economy and since women are over-represented in that sector this is largely a women's movement. These are our natural allies and, indeed, one of their largest and most dynamic organizations, the Self Employed Women's Association of India, has joined several Global Union Federations. For no good reason, the ICFTU has been keeping this movement at

arms' length, although there are now signs that this may be changing.

Women organizing are a source of tremendous energy: they are resourceful, militant and unafraid. In a number of countries they are joining unions at a faster rate than men, yet the labor movement has been slow to recognize their contribution and to include them at all levels of responsibility. They are now spearheading organization in the informal sector. Our answer to the feminization of poverty must be the feminization of the labor movement.

The working poor also include hundreds of millions rural workers: small peasants, landless peasants, day laborers and casual workers. They are also getting organized, they also want to change the world and they are also our natural allies. I was looking forward to share this platform today with José Bové, one of their outstanding leaders. The US immigration authorities decided otherwise, and I am deeply indignant that Bové was refused access to this country and to this conference. They will not stop us. Tierra y Libertad! Land and Freedom! This great watchword of the revolutionary unions in Mexico in the beginning of the last century, and in Spain in the 1930s, should be our common program.

We need to build alliances with those who are seeking to protect our natural environment. This will not be easy, because it means that trade unions, which are committed to defend their members' jobs, will have to reconsider the methods of production and, indeed, the product itself, that guarantee these jobs.

I know you can't smoke in this city and at one time I represented tobacco workers. They were a small group to begin with, and their jobs were destroyed by the companies through mechanization, far more than by anti-smoking campaigns. But what about auto workers? Can the world afford an auto industry based on present assumptions? And will the social and environmental impact of Wal-Mart become any less destructive once it recognizes a union? Who needs huge hypermarkets?

These are difficult questions but we must deal with them because we have no other option: what is ultimately at stake here is the survival of human life on this planet. That is an issue the labor movement cannot walk away from. We must deal with these issues and find solutions in the interest of society, which also includes our members.

We need to strengthen alliances with the academic world, draw on its research capacity and its capacity to organize exchanges of ideas and policy discussions. This conference is actually an illustration of such an alliance and an important step in strengthening these links.

But the labor movement also needs to invest far more in educational activities and in supporting those organizations that are engaged in workers' education in a labor movement perspective, such as the IFWEA. The movement needs this ideological and political back up. I know I am also preaching here for my own parish, but how else are we going to counter the vast array of reactionary think tanks generously funded by reactionary billionaires, in public opinion and within our own membership?

Finally, we need to take democracy seriously, both internationally and within our own movement. We must be consistent with our own principles: we define a union as an organization of workers democratically controlled by its own members, who decide on its policies and activities. I am fully aware that within our movement this definition is sometimes honored more in breach than in observance, but there is a world of difference with organizations that are structurally and by definition controlled by employers, or by the State where the State is the employer.

In situations like China, or like Cuba, or like any other authoritarian State that represses any independent expression of civil society, the organizations that purport to represent workers cannot be our allies. They are obstacles to the alliances we need to build with the workers of these countries. Organizing internationally in this context can only mean, for the time being, reaching out to and defending those incredibly courageous individuals who are facing jail, psychiatric internment or labor camps to defend the kind of unionism we believe in.

In addition, democracy has to be in the first place our own commitment in our own organizations, also at international level. Democracy is not only a goal, it is a permanent process, which cannot be separated from the goal. We do not believe that union strength can be built, or re-built, at any level, without the involvement of an aware, informed, motivated and militant membership. It certainly cannot be done under conditions where most of the members are not even aware of the existence of the organizations that purport to speak in their name.

To re-connect the membership to a perspective of international struggle requires a realistic assessment of the situation, the political will to change it, a vision of an alternative, the democratic reform of the movement and a global program of action. Education, organizing and struggle must go hand-in-hand.

We will continue to support those working for the reform of the labor movement through struggle, reconstructing its identity as a movement for democratic social transformation, with a common vision of an alternative, and better, society.

I thank you for your attention.