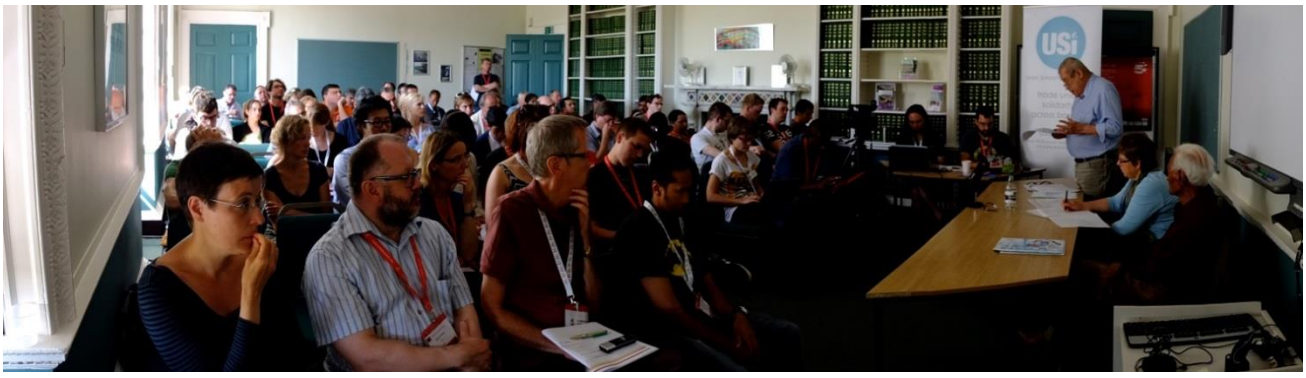
Global Labour Institute
International Summer School 2013

The Political Agenda of the International Trade Union Movement

An open space to debate and question what are, and what should be, the politics of the international trade union movement

KEY ISSUES & QUESTIONS



Host Unions and Supporting Organisations

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Programme

Session 1: *The Big Picture*	
Capitalism Today – The Financialisation Of Corporations	**PETER ROSSMAN**, International Union of Foodworkers (IUF) **SUSAN GEORGE**, Transnational Institute (respondent)
Session 2: *Global Unions – Global Politics*	
The Political Challenge For The International Trade Union Organisations	**BALA TAMPOE**, Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers Union (CMU), Sri Lanka **DAN GALLIN**, Global Labour Institute, Geneva
Group Discussion: *The European Challenge*	Led by **HANS BAUMANN**, UNIA, Switzerland (European Federation of Building and Wood Workers)
Group Discussion: *The Climate Challenge*	Led by **SEAN SWEENEY**, GLI Cornell, USA **ALANA DAVE**, International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF)
The Anti-Capitalist Challenge	**FÁTIMA AQUADO QUEIPO**, CC.OO, Spain **LEFTERIS KRETSOS**, Syriza, Greece
The Public Services Challenge	**GREG THOMSON**, Unison, UK, **MARCELA OLIVERA**, Municipal Services Project, Bolivia **DAVID HALL**, PSI Research Unit
Session 3: *The Politics of Organising*	
The Fall & Rise Of Labour? – *new trends in trade unionism. What will the international labour movement look like in 2020?*	**LIV TØRRES**, Norwegian Peoples Aid **HAN DONGFANG**, China Labour Bulletin, Hong Kong **BORIS KRAVCHENKO**, Confederation of Labour, Russia
Politics, Organisation and Education	**DAVE SPOONER**, Global Labour Institute, UK **TERESA CONROW**, labour organiser and educator, USA
Session 4: *Our Common Purpose*	
Do We Share The Same Perceptions Of The World?	**JOSUA MATA**, APL, Philippines **KIRILL BUKETOV**, IUF **ADWOA SAKYI,** IUF
Group Discussion: *What does "socialism" mean to us?*	Led by **ALEXEI GUSEV**, Praxis Center, Russia
Group Discussion: *What does "internationalism" mean to us?*	Led by **KHALID MAHMOOD**, Labour Education Foundation (LEF), Pakistan
Group Discussion: *What does "syndicalism" mean to us?*	Led by **DEREK KEENAN**, Strathclyde University **JOHN BELL**, Northern College
Prospects For The Political Agenda Of The International Trade Union Movement	**SHARAN BURROW**, International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) Panel prepared by Summer School Commission
Session 5: *Conclusions and Next Steps*	
Summer School Commission Proposals For International Trade Union Policy And Collective Action By Participants	GLI Summer School Commission

Introduction

In July 2013, GLI held its second International Summer School, where 96 trade unionists from 19 countries and five international trade union organisations gathered for five days at Northern College in northern England to debate : *The Political Agenda of the International Trade Union Movement*.

This discussion paper aims to summarise some of the key questions and issues explored during the event. It is not a detailed report of the proceedings of the Summer School, but an attempt to draw out some of the key ideas, debates and questions that emerged from the presentations and subsequent discussion.

The main purpose of the event was to provide an open space to debate and question what are, and what should be, the politics of the international trade union movement. GLI recognises that trade unionists face an unprecedented attack from financial markets, corporations and governments, in the context of economic, ecological and political crisis. But there are some causes for optimism: a new international agenda for strong industrial organisation, evidence of increasing corporate vulnerability to well-organised and targeted campaigns, and a new generation of activists emerging from unions and movements for democracy and climate justice.

Yet there is a political vacuum. Union members want an international political alternative to neo-liberalism and corporate capitalism, but little emerges beyond rhetoric. Many of the formal institutions of the international labour movement have retreated into a bland, lowest common denominator of politics, shy of even basic principles of social democracy, let alone any mention of democratic socialism. But this is precisely the time when radical political solutions - and a new sense of political direction for the international trade union movement - are needed. The GLI Summer Schools are a modest contribution towards this.

The Schools are primarily designed for trade union activists with a reasonable amount of experience (although not necessarily experience of working internationally) with a particular emphasis on younger activists. Most invitations are issued through international and national unions and federations who express interest in supporting and participating in the event. In addition, GLI invites a number of individuals with particular expertise and experience who are able to stimulate and guide discussion.

Throughout the Summer Schools, we encourage younger participants to meet regularly as a *Summer School Commission* and reflect on each day's discussions. At the 2013 School, the Commission was also asked to prepare some questions and comments for a discussion with Sharan Burrow, the General Secretary of the ITUC, towards the end of the week's programme.

The content of this discussion paper was compiled and edited by Dave Spooner. The ideas and analyses in this paper do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the GLI Network or those of the supporting trade union organisations.

The Big Picture

Capitalism today – the Financialisation of Corporations


Peter Rossman

The current industrial, political and social crises are also crises for the labour movement, apparently impotent in the face of such an onslaught.

Since the Second World War, the labour movement's trade union and political programme have relied on a model that no longer exists based on the premise that corporations invest, investment brings productivity increases, unions bargain a share of these productivity gains for their members, and the process is good for workers, both individually and collectively, and finances the provisions of the welfare state. Direct permanent employment and a high level of unionization was assumed to be the norm. It became an 'ideological anchor' for the labour movement across the world.

In reality, this model applied only in a specific historical period, in restricted geographical areas (effectively the OECD countries), and to a limited but important group of workers, largely to the exclusion of women and people of colour. Unionisation - even high degrees of it - also rested on long chains of subcontracted, precarious workers who were excluded from the benefits of collective bargaining and the private welfare systems which characterized capitalism in, for example, North America. The model never applied in much of the colonial and post-colonial world.

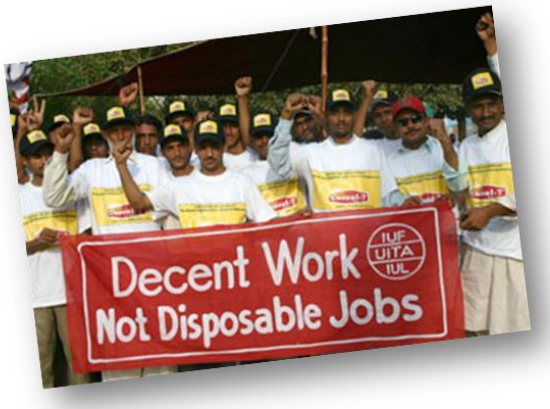
This consensus-based economic model has been almost completely replaced by neo-liberalism, characterised by a rising share of profits and a declining share of wages in national income, increasing inequality, a decoupling of wages from productivity, and the replacement of direct employment with precarious jobs (for example, agency labour, temporary contracts).

There is now huge pressure for increasing rates of return for investors. The levels of profit now demanded by investors would have appeared insane only a decade or two ago. This reaches its most extreme expression in leveraged buyouts. Listed companies also rely on high levels of leverage to boost returns, capital investment and even research and development have declined while dividend yields have increased dramatically. The stock market is a source of disinvestment as companies use their cash to boost returns through share buybacks. Employment and production are increasingly outsourced.

These are the realities of the current system, the financialisation of the economy, which transforms manufacturing and service sector firms into organizations geared to maximizing short term financial gains, treating their companies as a 'bundle of assets', rather than as a productive enterprise. Most transnationals now combine their traditional operations with those of a financial corporation.

This, of course, places a tremendous strain both on workers and on a completely unsustainable economic model. Under pressure to deliver inflated returns, companies cut back on capital expenditure and investment in the company's future, and assume only minimal responsibilities to the workforce.

This is what drives the increase in **precarious work**, shifting risks and responsibilities from employer to worker, breeding uncertainty and insecurity as permanent jobs are replaced with time-limited contracts (fixed-term, short-term, temporary, seasonal, day-labourer and casual labour). The relationship between employers and workers has become more and more complicated as enterprises are fragmented and dispersed through sub-contractors, franchise-holders, labour and temporary work agencies, and bogus self-employment.



The financial crisis is being treated exclusively as a crisis of government revenue and borrowing rather than a crisis of private corporate debt and non-financial companies have also played a role: there was a huge rise of non-financial corporate debt in the years leading up to the crisis. Meanwhile, companies are sitting on huge amounts of cash: this is in effect, a corporate investment strike. Corporations in the US, the Euro Zone, the UK and Japan currently hold $7.75 trillion in cash, or near equivalents - an unprecedented sum. So much for "social partnership." It is illusory to believe that private sector investment will finance the job creation needed to emerge from the crisis and halt or reverse rampant social disintegration.

What should be the response of the labour movement?

The response should be two-fold: industrial (what can be achieved through trade union organisation, collective bargaining and industrial action) and political (requiring policy underpinned by the power of law).

Industrially, we should ensure that precarious workers are organized in the labour movement, build effective organization within transnational companies, rebuild the wage floor and resist employers' strategies to divide and rule. We need to build truly global solidarity movements, engage with broader social justice movements and campaigns, and strengthen our own trade union democracy and education.

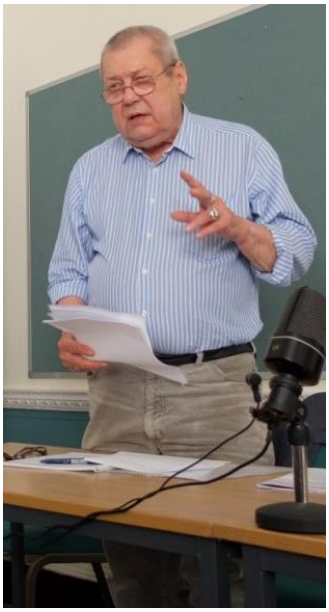
In essence, we should be doing all we can to win permanent, decent jobs for precarious and informal workers. There have been notable victories in some specific transnational companies, among some sectors and in some countries. But it is important to recognise that in countries where precarious work is hugely predominant, these victories are but a drop in the ocean. We need to coordinate our organising within a broader political movement to diminish the role of precarious employment. Union organising is not enough in an environment which is deeply hostile and union victories are piecemeal.

Politically, labour has internalised the prevailing neo-liberal ideology to such an extent that there is little or no discussion on the seemingly obvious demand, to bring financial markets under democratic control and run banks as public utilities. Instead, unions appear to be concerned with promoting "sound finance" or other equally vapid notions.

Private finance has usurped the role of the state in financing public welfare. It is necessary to cut the umbilical cord linking social security to the profitability of financial markets or the labour movement will remain trapped in neo-liberalism. This creates an opening for the revival of socialist politics.

Global Unions – Global Politics

The politics of the international trade union movement, its institutions and its organisations



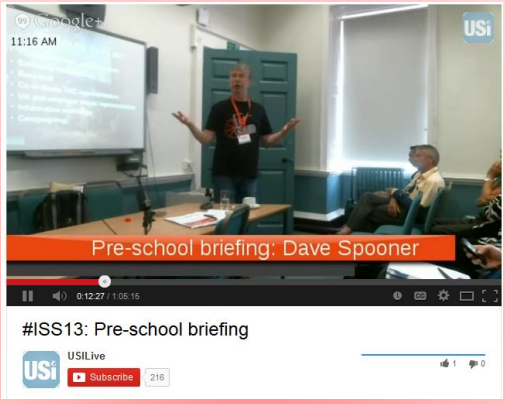
Dan Gallin

The Political Challenge for the International Trade Union Organisations

We are dealing with a highly fragmented movement.[1] There are two major international confederations of national union centres: the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU)[2] . There are eight Global Union Federations (GUFs) which are the international federations of national unions in specific industries or sectors. The GUFs are loosely associated with the ITUC but determine their own policies. Membership of the GUFs largely overlaps with that of the ITUC, but can include WFTU affiliates and independents. They differ in size and policy but most of the significant international labour struggles today are conducted within their framework.

Recent efforts to organise informal workers have created new international organisations, principally StreetNet, representing street and market vendors, and the International Domestic Workers' Network (IDWN)[3] . Home-based workers have organised at the regional level in South-East Europe and in Asia.

Finally, there are regional organisations. The ITUC, the WFTU and the GUFs each have their own, but some operate outside a global framework. They are principally the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) and two in Asia: the South Asian Regional Trade Union Council and the ASEAN Trade Union Council (ATUC). There is also a number of other sub-regional co-ordinating bodies, in all parts of the world



For an introduction to the organisations of the international trade union movement, see the presentation of *The Global Unions Starter Kit*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQJPE_s-MaU

YouTube

What all these organisations have in common is that they are workers' organisations. You would therefore expect that they would have largely common policies, reflecting a common class interest. But they do not. Why is this not the case?

Our main problem is not so much the fragmentation among different organisations as the fragmentation of our political perception; of our understanding of society, of our interpretation of what is happening in society and therefore of

[1] This is an edited version of a presentation by Dan Gallin. The full text can be found at http://www.globallabour.info/en/2013/09/the_political_challenge_for_th.html.

[2] In fact there are two other – much smaller – world federations: the World Organisation of Workers, a small conservative organisation (1.3m members) representing former affiliates of the WCL which did not join the merger with the ICFTU in 2006 which created the ITUC; and the International Workers' Association (IWA), with a secretariat in Norway, represents revolutionary syndicalist unions in 13 countries. The IWA may have about 100,000 members. Some important syndicalist organisations , like the American IWW, the Swedish SAC and the Spanish CGT, are not affiliated.

[3] Now the International Domestic Workers' Federation, following their founding congress in 2013. The IDWF is affiliated to the IUF.

what needs to be done. The organisational fragmentation is a consequence of the loss of a common understanding, not a cause.

There are two reasons for this. The first is both a paradox and a consequence of its own success. The international trade union movement is now truly world-wide and spans a far greater range of societies and cultures than at any previous time in its history.

The second reason is that, at the same time, its leading organisations, mainly in industrialised countries, have become largely de-politicised. This is the outcome of a long process starting at the end of World War II, when a weakened trade union movement in Europe became increasingly dependent on the State and, in the context of capitalist reconstruction and the Cold War, retreated to what it believed to be its core business (collective bargaining), abandoning the goal of a socialist transformation of society and leaving society to the State.

In that context, the merger between the ICFTU and the WCL in 2006 was achieved by erasing the last vestiges of social-democratic politics that had survived in the ICFTU. Nor has much remained of what were at one time progressive elements of WCL ideology , basically liberation theology. This was a merger based on the lowest political denominator, with the result that the ITUC today is adrift with no recognisable politics at all.


ITUC Founding Congress, 2006

This has deprived the workers of the world of a universal and common narrative about society: what it is, and how to change it – like, for example, the democratic socialist narrative which still existed in the pre-World War II movement, and which today survives only in some Global Union Federations, and of course in many unions at national level.

The loss of a universal and common narrative is a critical problem. It weakens international class consciousness and abandons political consciousness to widely different perceptions of society, shaped by local or regional realities.

Examples of this include the ETUC, which is politically and financially dependent on the European Union. It is deliberately and sometimes aggressively Eurocentric, and - even more so than the ITUC - subscribes to an ideology of "social partnership" which has long since been discarded by the presumed "social partners".

The Latin American unions, acutely sensitive to the dangers of American imperialism, have been far less aware or concerned about what happened to the workers for seventy years in the USSR and for forty years of Stalinism in the Eastern European countries under its domination.

Much the same applies to the South African unions, with politics shaped by the anti-apartheid struggle. Their physical, intellectual and emotional remoteness from the reality of extant Stalinism has clouded their judgment and has enabled the WFTU to gain some undeserved credibility. "Socialism", by its Stalinist definition, seems an attractive option – at a safe distance in time and place.

The unions in the former Soviet bloc, emerging from the wreckage of a society where all forms of independent labour organisation were suppressed for decades, have for the most part no ideology at all. Not

having experienced apartheid, they would be totally unable to understand how the political hegemony of the South African Communist Party (SACP) over the South African labour movement came about. Their main problem has been to repudiate the so-called "socialism" which - according to its Stalinist definition - was the ideology of its rulers, the ideology of a police State. Some parts of it have embraced the neo-liberal ideology of its natural enemies. Some of its more radical elements have been attracted to revolutionary syndicalism, because its class struggle politics are less tainted with the vocabulary of their Stalinist enemies.

Polish Solidarity - a movement of 10 million members at its peak in 1981, with a strong left-wing component - has since been hijacked by Catholic conservatives, endorsed neo-liberal policies, invited Margaret Thatcher to its Congress and is down to fewer than 1m members.

China, the largest nation on earth, has a trade union structure inherited from the Soviet model. The government has embraced capitalism, but has maintained a trade union structure designed to control the working class rather than represent it. While the ITUC and others are cosying up to it, workers throughout China are daily revolting against it, and against the system. Which side are we on?

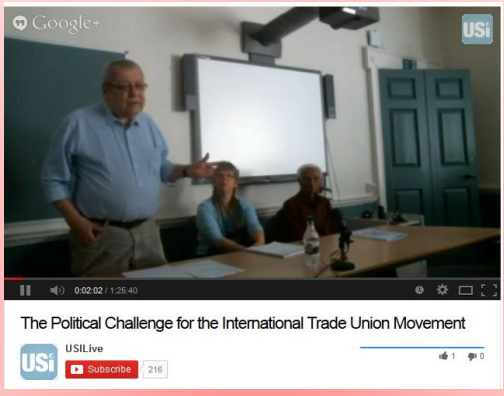
The present labour movement resembles far too much the blind men in the parable trying to find out what an elephant is like and coming up with incompatible answers. So our challenge is to reconstitute the full view of the elephant. How do we do this? The trade union movement, such as it is, is what we have, and that has to be our point of departure. Our task is to recover the politics which are naturally ours, the politics of our class, and reconstitute our identity as a movement of our class.

All of us need to rise above and reach out beyond our own experience (which is of necessity only one part of reality) and open up to the experience of others. We need to do this always critically, but always with patience and respect, rebuilding the movement from below, always remembering that we are part of one world working class. We must become internationalists.

Socialism remains our goal but, instructed by experience, we know that the meaning of socialism must be radical democracy: real power, democratically exercised, by real people, at every level, not by any substitutes, no vanguard parties, no so-called "progressive" authoritarians. We cannot delegate the fight for the emancipation of labour to anyone but ourselves.

Finally, we must always keep in mind that we are part of society, and that our goals are no different from the general interest of society. We are not a "special interest group" as our enemies would have it, we are at one with society.

Therefore we need to remain aware that there are many social movements not directly linked to labour, but sharing many of our objectives, who are or should be our allies. Many have filled the void left by the labour movement when it retreated to business unionism and the administration of post-war capitalism, also known as the "social market economy". We need them as allies to build a broad, world-wide political coalition that will eventually liberate mankind from capitalism.



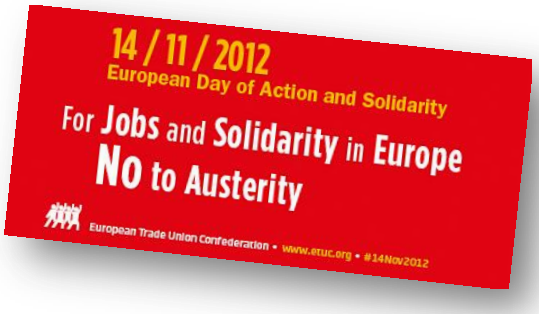
The presentations of Dan Gallin and Bala Tampoe, and subsequent 2013 discussion on The Political Challenge for the International Trade Union Movement are available at:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1muR_fnjPEw

The European Challenge

The political challenge of Europe is not simply a challenge to Europeans. It has a central significance for the worldwide trade union movement. Despite decline in most European countries in recent decades, the European trade union movement remains the strongest and most influential. The political agenda and strategies of the European regional trade union organisations remain dominant, though not unchallenged, in the global union institutions.

Europe has moved to the right and is in the grip of austerity politics. The historic political partners of the European trade union movement - the social-democratic parties - largely accept a neo-liberal economic agenda and bear significant responsibility for its proliferation across Europe. The practical consequences of this agenda are well known: declining living standards; increasingly precarious employment patterns; growing inequality; cuts in welfare and public services; historic levels of unemployment; and – particularly in Southern Europe and most acutely felt by women and the young – major social crises.

All this is, of course, familiar to those from the global South who have suffered decades of 'structural adjustment' at the hands of the international financial institutions, or to those from the East with the experience of economic shock doctrines and gangster capitalism.



But it is also a political crisis for the trade union movement itself. For decades, the dominant political model has been one of 'social partnership', in which employers and unions are recognised by governments and EU institutions as equally important bargaining counterparts in determining policies that protect rights, livelihoods and welfare – a 'Social Europe'. As Europe expanded, it was thought that European, essentially social-democratic, values would follow, and ultimately be a global progressive political force.

These were the founding ideals of the European trade union institutions, encouraged and financed by the EU itself. The economic crises and the shift to the right in European governments have, at the very least, presented a major challenge to this political model, if not killed it stone dead. "The employers left the restaurant, and left the unions to pick up the bill", as Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary, described it.

This has thrown the problems of European trade union organisation into the spotlight: the dependency on EU finance; the focus on committee representation in Brussels at the expense of any real transnational organising strategy; the engagement with European Works Councils at the expense of building genuine collective bargaining power; and the problematic – or, in some cases, non-existent – relationships with the global trade union federations.

The concept of a 'Social Europe', once proudly the leading political export to the rest of the world, has proved to be an empty shell, leaving behind a political vacuum for the whole international labour movement.

The European trade union movement will only begin to fill this vacuum when it starts to convincingly offer alternative economic policies to the people of austerity-stricken Europe , and actively engages with the broad-based grassroots mobilisations which have developed in resistance to what has become a Europe-wide neoliberal project.

The Climate Challenge

Sean Sweeney

Climate change and ecological degradation pose a threat to civilisation. Climate and environmental protection must be a core trade union principle grounded in solidarity. To extend solidarity with the eco-system is just another way of extending solidarity to other human beings, because humans are inseparable from the ecosystem.

In terms of practical trade union policies and politics, the 'green economy' framework promoted by the liberal wing of the capitalist class (which has been endorsed by many unions on the grounds that it is the best we can do given the global balance of forces) is not the answer. In fact, the green transition is not happening. The idea of 'green capitalism' is bankrupt.

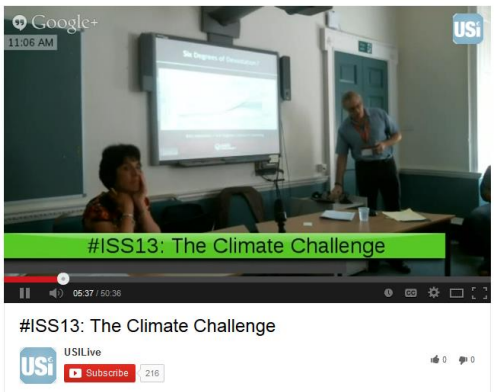
The energy sector is a key battleground for unions and the left. Energy-sector privatisation and liberalisation have failed and are unpopular all over the world. The projected increase in emissions from fossil fuels constitutes a planetary emergency, threatening a catastrophic four degrees Celsius of global warming by the end of this century according to the International Energy Agency. Renewable energy is not growing fast enough to offset the growth in the use of coal, oil and gas, and new data on fugitive methane and water contamination from strip mining for coal and also shale gas drilling (fracking) reveal that such extractive methods threaten poor and working class communities in the global South and North. And still, 1.5 billion people have no access to electricity.

Furthermore, the enormous political power of the fossil fuel companies – private and public – must be confronted. This is a hugely difficult task, of course, but we have no choice other than to speak truth to fossil-based power and not simply succumb to it.

There is mounting evidence to support the view that public ownership and democratic control of energy, particularly electrical power, are needed in order to address energy poverty, inequality, and the huge and expanding ecological footprint of fossil fuels.

Unions can help reclaim the energy system by joining with other social movements in the effort to build a renewables-based energy system that not only incorporates community choice and public control but also regards emissions reductions as a public good.

The recent launch of *Trade Unions for Energy Democracy* (TUED) illustrates how this perspective is gaining support among unions around the world. More than 30 unions are part of the project. But there are important questions that need to be addressed: for example, what models of 'energy democracy' can unions support? One of the goals of TUED is to create a space where unions, energy and non-energy unions alike, can work out a trade union programme for energy that can propose real solutions to the climate crisis.



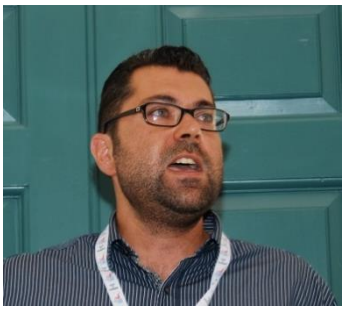
The presentations of Sean Sweeney and Alana Dave and subsequent 2013 discussion on The Climate Challenge are available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1muR_fnjPEw

The Anti-Capitalist Challenge

Fátima Aquado Queipo

In recent years, many countries have experienced waves of popular protest movements. In Spain, for example, there has been a series of protests demanding a radical change in Spanish politics, with protesters such as the “Indignados” who symbolically occupied town squares across Spain in 2011, not considering themselves to be represented by any traditional party or trade union movement. In 2013, the "citizen’s tide" brought together various protest movements, including the "white tide" (public health services) "green tide" (education), "orange tide" (social services), "yellow tide" (libraries), "purple tide" (women’s rights) and the Indignados (also known as 15M) movement itself.

In Greece, we have seen the meteoric rise of the Coalition of the Radical Left,“Syriza”, a new party built on a broad movement of green, democratic socialist and independent groups. In 2012 Syriza became the second largest party in the Greek parliament and the main opposition party, with 27% of the vote. Syriza leaders emphasise the vital importance of acting as a movement instead of as a bureaucratic party.



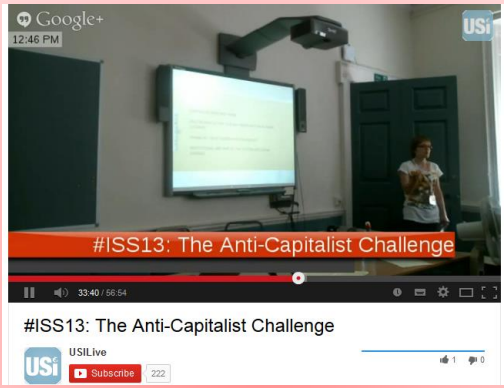
Lefteris Kretsos

In many other countries, there have been comparable popular uprisings and new movements (the Occupy movement being the most well-known), often seemingly appearing on the streets from nowhere.

These present a challenge to the trade union movement. First, there is much evidence that many of the mostly young people participating in these ‘anti-capitalist’ movements are deeply distrustful of trade unions, believing them to be bureaucratic, hierarchical, concerned with narrow self-interest, and identified with old corrupt political structures. At best, they see trade unions as irrelevant and, at worst, as an integrated part of the system they are struggling against.

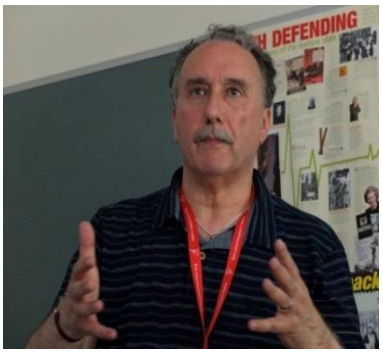
A growing number of union leaders recognise that there is much to learn from these movements: the mobilisation of young people; the innovative use of technology and mass action; the fresh unbureaucratic style. Yet there are also concerns about the need for underlying democratic organisation, accountability, and long-term resilience. Some unions, keen to engage with new social movements, find the differences in language and culture difficult to overcome, struggle to relate, and frequently find themselves arriving late at the back of the demonstration.

The second element of the challenge is more fundamental. Many in the social movements simply argue that capitalism is destroying the planet and impoverishing its people, and that radical alternatives are needed. Do unions agree? Is the trade union movement anti-capitalist? Or are the interests of the members best served by pragmatically defending what they can from corporations and the State while waiting for the political and economic upturn that may never come?



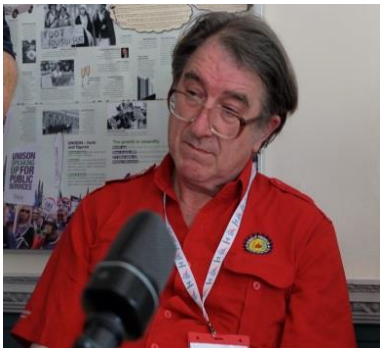
The presentations of Lefteris Kretsos and Fátima Aquado Queipo, and subsequent 2013 discussion on The Anti-Capitalist Challenge are available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEA9UdqhPmE

The Public Services Challenge



Greg Thomson

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, public services across Europe and the North America have faced a sustained attack under the banner of austerity. Government spending on schools, hospitals and countless other public services has been drastically reduced, and those services that have not been "cut" are being broken-up and farmed out to various private companies and subcontractors. As a result, public sector unions are haemorrhaging thousands of formerly active core members. In the UK alone, it is estimated that over 1.2 million people working in the public sector will lose their jobs by 2017/18. As Greg Thompson of UNISON (UK) points out, the current use of the austerity narrative to accelerate and entrench neoliberal reform seems to epitomise the cynical political dictum "never waste a good crisis."



David Hall

However, this assault on public services and its attendant march of privatisation into all corners of the State apparatus is not something new. It is simply an acceleration of the existing political project of neoliberalism which, at its core, amounts to a reconceptualization of the function of the State and the nature of society itself. Under neoliberalism, citizens become consumers, public services become commodities, and the overarching metric of progress becomes an anaemic conception of economic efficiency rather than the satisfaction of basic human needs and a broad notion of public good.

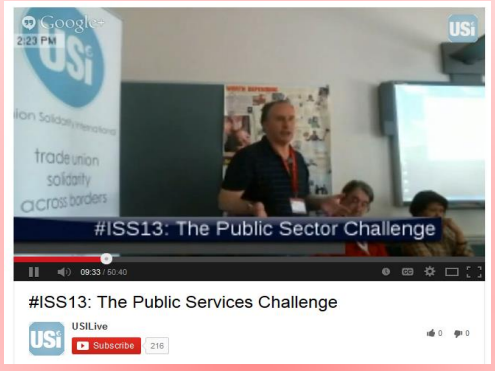
The decimation of public services is a challenge to the trade union movement on several levels. The attack on public sector jobs - traditionally a highly unionised sector serving as an exemplar to the private sector in terms of showing what decent, secure, non-discriminatory work looks like - is a threat to good employment practice for all. Therefore the trade union movement must be at the forefront in defending public services. This needs to involve organising the non-traditional (and often precariously employed) workers in the fragmented plethora of service providers inevitably produced in the wake of privatisation.

Marcela Olivera

However, on a more basic level, the neoliberal agenda constitutes a fundamental challenge to the values on which the trade union movement is based: communality, cooperation and equality. The goals of raising living standards and promoting human dignity have all but disappeared from the lexicon of contemporary politicians. Instead, we are left with the absurd austerity narrative which lays the blame for the 2008 financial crisis squarely on the shoulders of an overly indebted State and the feckless poor rather than on the financial elite and the institutions which continue to sustain them. Thus the trade union movement needs not just to oppose cuts and seek to defend the already underfunded and fragmented public services that remain. It must also actively promote an alternative and inherently political vision of public services run with public objectives, in the name of creating a more just society.

This is a difficult task. It runs against the grain of the prevailing neoliberal economic hegemony which characterises the majority of national governments in both the global North and South. However the message that a better, fairer, more just way of running public services is possible is an inescapably powerful one, and the trade union movement must draw on the experience of the numerous cases across the world where people have fought back against privatisation of public services and won.

From the "Water Wars" of Cochabamba, Bolivia in 2000, which brought privatised water back into public hands as a result of mass street protests, to the 2004 referendum in Uruguay which constitutionally enshrined water as a human right, the struggles against water privatisation in Latin America have played a key role in de-legitimising the neoliberal model of public service provision. In both these cases and others across the world, alternative systems of water provision, which emphasise the importance of civil society participation and transparency, have been put in place.



The presentations of Marcela Olivera, Greg Thomson and David Hall and subsequent discussion on The Public Services Challenge are available at:
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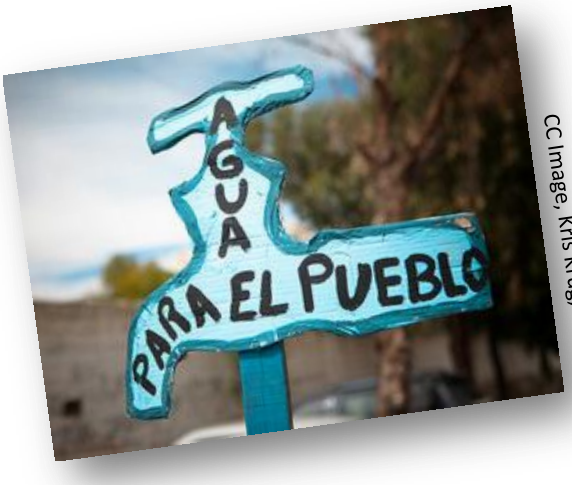


CC Image, Kris Krüg, Flickr

This is not to say that there is an exact "one-fits-all" blueprint which can tell us how to build, and crucially how to sustain, equitable alternatives to privatised public services. Multiple problems persist within publicly owned services; for example, in the form of corruption and entrenched corporate mind-sets within the institutions themselves. Also, those governments which pursue alternative economic models can find themselves liable to be sued by multinational companies which, due to being barred from public procurement contracts, utilise provisions in international trade agreements to claim compensation from national governments on the basis of projected profit losses.

There are many cases in which multinational companies have managed to extract millions of tax-payer dollars from governments whose democratically enacted laws are regarded as contravening the global neoliberal economic order. These kinds of cases will undoubtedly become more commonplace if the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between the US and the EU, which will bring about the world's biggest free trade zone, is brought into effect in coming years. However, what is clear is that this tide of neoliberalism, intensified and accelerated as it is under the banner of austerity, can be and is being resisted. It is therefore essential for the trade union movement as a whole to take stock of these instances of successful resistance and to be bold enough to reach out beyond its traditional constituents to articulate the politics and the values on which fair and democratic societies, with public services at their core, must be built.

The Politics of Organising

Building the trade union movement from below

The Fall & Rise of Labour?

Despite the onslaught on organised labour over the last few decades, there are some encouraging new trends in the ability of workers to rebuild the trade union movement from below. Key examples include the growing organisations of informal economy and precarious workers, signs of emerging independent trade union organisation in China and sustained cross-border organisation, particularly within transnational corporations.

The organisation of informal economy workers - the great majority of workers in many parts of the world - is an essential element in the regeneration of an international trade union movement capable of representing the working class in its entirety. New national and international organisations of home-based workers, domestic workers, waste-recyclers, street vendors, market vendors and others have emerged to challenge preconceptions of what unions are and can be, and how workers can become organised. These organisations are primarily built by and for women, led by women, and have enabled women workers to reshape and redefine the labour movement.

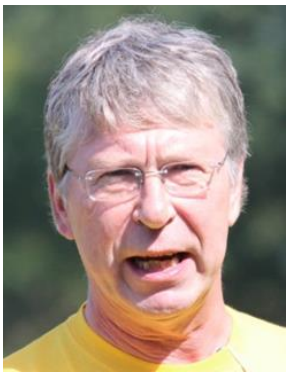
Where new models of capitalism have led to widespread attacks on workers' livelihoods, conditions and rights in the 'formal economy', unions are re-engineering organising methods to reach the rapidly expanding numbers of workers in precarious employment. The huge increase in out-sourcing, temporary and zero-hour contracts, casual labour, part-time working and other forms of precarious work has been accompanied by a decline in living standards, attacks on trade union rights and the spread of fear and insecurity, particularly for young and women workers. Unions are increasingly realising that there is no return to 'business as usual' - of social partnership and mutual gain. We have to rethink union organisation in a new industrial relations landscape and learn from community-based organising, social movements and our own histories and origins. After all, not too long ago, all workers were precarious, and it was they who built the trade union movement in the first place.

Nowhere is this more evident than in China, where workers are still deprived of basic trade union rights. But today, there are thousands, if not millions, of Chinese workers engaged in daily battles with employers and the State. Strikes are becoming more frequent as (mostly young) workers demand a better standard of living, respect for rights and unions independent of party and State.

The movement is also becoming more internationalist in outlook. Unions are now routinely attempting to organise across national borders and engage in coordinated solidarity action. Global Union Federations, although still under-resourced, are seriously engaged in building union power within transnational corporations on a scale which would have been unthinkable two decades ago.

As the axis of the world economy shifts to the global South, and in particular to Asia, old assumptions about North-South trade union relationships are being challenged. A new generation of trade union activists and leaders is emerging - politically radical, technologically sophisticated, young and inclusive of women.

Politics, Organisation and Education



Dave Spooner

Until relatively recently, when unions wanted to increase involvement from their base of workers, build new leadership and organise workers they looked to trade union education. Formal trade union education programmes were dominated by models of active learning which encouraged union activists to 'learn through doing'. This approach emphasised the process of learning itself as a democratic activity, rather than the hierarchical transmission of knowledge from teacher to learner**.**

Formal trade union education, with 'active learning' as its base, has its roots in the Nordic study circle tradition established 100 years ago, from the ideas of Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) in Brazil in the 1960s and 70s, and the trade union and workers' education movements thereafter. By the late 1980s, it had become the dominant internationally-accepted approach to education and organising, especially in the English-speaking world.

However, over the last decade or so, the active learning approach has faced a challenge from new approaches to union organising, with associated new methods of training and education. At a time when unions throughout the world were facing what seemed to be an endless cycle of falling membership and declining power, many leaders recognised that radical new thinking was needed to reverse the trend.

The new approach, which emerged as a response to this challenge, has its political roots in the ideas of Saul Alinsky, as outlined in his 1971 book "*Rules for Radicals".* Alinsky inspired new approaches to community organising in the 1970s in the USA, which emphasised the role of professional union organisers who were often separated from their own home and work communities. A whole generation of organisers followed, including a young Barrack Obama in Chicago. By the mid-1980s, the organising model was adopted and adapted by American unions such as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and spread globally, including into trade union development programmes in the global South.

Active learning manuals were replaced by strategic organising manuals. A new and useful vocabulary was introduced to trade union activists: for example, 'mapping', 'leverage', 'timelines', 'escalation plans'. However this vocabulary often came at the expense of terms such as 'class' and 'imperialism'. In many unions, resources were switched towards professional organisers rather than education materials and programmes for workers, and the direction of funds from funding agencies followed suit. The emphasis was on outcomes and tighter reporting requirements that measured union density and recruitment or campaign wins rather than on worker education and involvement.

Teresa Conrow

There is plenty of evidence that, partly as a result of this new approach, the international trade union movement is becoming more effective in building industrial power, particularly against targeted transnational corporations. Some unions and countries are even slowing or reversing the decline in union membership.

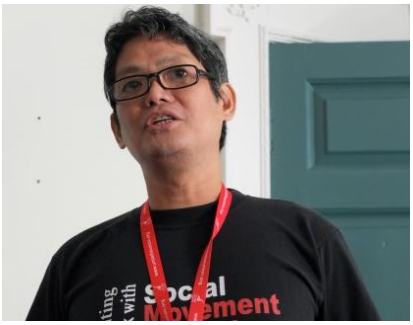
But the big question is: does this success come at the expense of trade union education? And particularly, is it at the expense of *political* education in the trade union movement –the key to building democratic unions from below, based on active learning by rank-and-file activists? We hope not. We need both.

Our Common Purpose

Do we share the same perceptions of the world?

Although the worldwide trade union movement very broadly shares common principles, we don't necessarily share the same perceptions of the world. We are politically shaped by very distinct regional, national and local histories, and there are significant disagreements within the movement regarding what a union is, what solidarity is and what the alternatives are to capitalism.

Take three contrasting examples. In the **Philippines**, the trade union movement is dominated by an American model of industrial relations and labour law, based on individual workplace union certification. There is a bewildering number of competing politically-affiliated union federations, confederations and alliances, with frequent (often violent) interventions by government and employers. Even parts of the Catholic Church are notorious for union busting. To make matters worse, there were instances where the armed left meddle in trade union and labor disputes with deadly results



Josua Mata

Most Filipino workers would not be categorised as 'regular' workers, and divisions between formal/ informal, agricultural/non-agricultural, public sector/private sector have been emphasised by much of the sectarian left. The labour movement is divided with informal transport workers identifying themselves as 'semi-proletarian', rather than 'workers', and informal settlers and squatters treated as a separate 'sector' rather than being integrated into the movement. The problem is a lack of common vision – a vision of what the future should look like and what our shared strategy is. Fortunately, after several decades, the broad labor movement has come together under the banner of NAGKAISA (United).

Adwoa Sakyi

In **Africa**, the union movement started in the 1940s and '50s, and formed a large part of the independence movements. This gave unions a significant amount of power after independence, with automatic membership granted to workers when they joined certain sectors. Yet around 10 years after independence many economies such as Ghana's began collapsing and World Bank and IMF intervention led to the slashing of the public sector where unions were strong. The continent has always been divided between the formal and the informal economy, despite many unions having embraced informal workers. While many unions have changed organising methods in an attempt to engage women, young people and those working in the informal economy, African trade unionism remains fragile. Poverty can often make trade union activism difficult as people will often focus on their immediate needs. Trade unions need to continue to step out of their comfort zones and show that they can provide real alternatives.

In **Russia**, the main issue is: "What kind of world do we want to see?" After the collapse of the communist State, there was virtually no one in Russia who had the skills or experience of organising democratic unions. There was no intergenerational knowledge. Concepts of solidarity, cooperation and collectivism were tarnished throughout the former Soviet world. It is therefore vital to overcome fragmentation and build a common vision based upon divergent experiences. A key element to this is defining socialism itself – what do we currently mean by it, and what do we want it to mean? Crucially, we need to develop a vision of democratic socialism that is clearly distinct from the horrors of the Stalinist past.

Kirill Buketov

What does ‘Socialism’ mean to us?

Alexei Gusev

How do unions relate to socialism? Marx described unions as the ‘schools for socialism,’ and unions are arguably inclined to some kind of democratic socialism by their nature as collective bodies for workers. Unions helped found the First International. In many countries, socialists played a crucial role in founding the first unions.

But to many workers in the second half of the 20th century, at least in advanced economies, capitalism appeared tamed, and union power could gain much without destroying capitalism. Therefore the idea of going beyond capitalism lost its appeal. At the same time, the failure of the USSR showed that simply abolishing private property did not automatically liberate workers. The choice was between capitalism with a human face versus socialism with an anti-human face.

In the 1980s the situation began to change. Neoliberalism emerged, while the USSR started to collapse and eventually disintegrated. For some, these events created the conditions for a revival of socialist ideas. For others, they marked their death knell. Such debate raises the question of what do we mean by “socialist ideas”? And what do we, as a movement, have in common in our understanding of socialism?

Perhaps we share a very broad definition of a ‘self-governing society without exploitation’ and some general principles – social justice, equality, solidarity, freedom – and perhaps most importantly, democracy. Radical democracy is at the heart of the socialist project, and requires political freedom. This can happen only on a global scale: there can be no return to a pre-globalisation State.

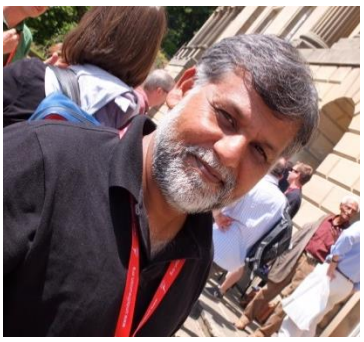
Nevertheless, a common global trade union vision of socialism is difficult to achieve. Our vision of socialism needs a radical reassessment of our relationships with nature, and ‘social ownership of the means of production’ must be redefined on the basis of ecology. Economic growth, accumulation and profit are destroying the eco-system, challenging the idea that socialism can be built on the basis of industrial growth. Yet economic growth, even under capitalism, is clearly perceived by most unions to be in the interests of their members, in the short term at least, to protect jobs and living standards.

Even on fundamental economic questions, we are far from clear or agreed. Should there be central planning of the economy? By whom? What would drive innovation? Could the world’s economy be run through cooperatives? What would an industrial democracy look like?

Democracy is at the heart of socialism, and genuine participatory democracy may almost be its definition. Yet we continue to struggle against the long shadow of Stalinist history; indeed some of our own trade union organisations are far from a model of democracy.

Despite decades of feminist struggle and much of the ‘new left’ embracing an analysis of gender as well as class oppression, ‘socialism’ is still primarily seen as future economic arrangements , rather than immediate human relationships. Social ownership would not abolish patriarchy in and of itself: it requires a transformation of people’s consciousness and understanding.

What does ‘Internationalism’ mean to us?



Khalid Mahmood

The obvious starting point for trade unionists is that ‘internationalism’ means “Workers of the world unite!” Yet we do not necessarily share the same perspective when considering what internationalism means in practice.

The question of unequal North-South-East relationships still pervades discussion of internationalism in the trade union movement. This is despite the fact that accelerating inequality between the super-rich and the desperately poor at the local and national level is a world-wide phenomenon and recession in the Global North stands in stark contrast to economic growth in parts of the Global South. Why is this?

It is partly because the international trade union movement is still perceived to be dominated by Northern, and particularly European, interests. Northern unions are believed, often with justification, to be controlling the agenda and dominating the leadership of the international trade union organisations. Many activists in the South believe that conservative Northern trade union policies are holding back the international movement. Many argue that Northern unions are concerned only to protect the gains of 40 or 50 years ago, even at the expense of workers’ livelihoods and rights in the global South.

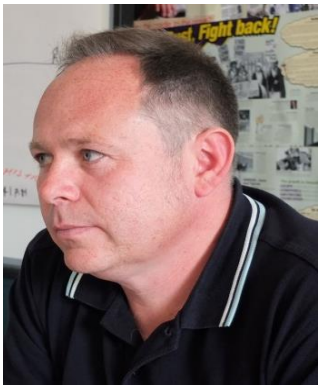
It is clear that we need to be conscious of how workers in the global South and global North think about one another. North/South relationships are often built upon client-patron relationships which reinforce rather than redress existing imbalances of power between the regions. Northern unions do take up international solidarity initiatives; however these initiatives should not operate in only one direction. Meaningful international solidarity must be based on equitable relationships, underwritten by mutual respect and understanding between all parties. Why, for example, should workers/unions in developing countries not run solidarity campaigns for austerity-stricken Spain and Greece? Why should workers in the global South not be running courses for workers in the global North on, for example, organising workers in the informal sector?

Yet there appear to be major conflicts of interests within the international trade union movement that cannot be overcome by political education and goodwill alone. For example, cheap products based upon cheap labour in the South have become increasingly important to maintain the living standards of workers in the North. These contradictions need to be discussed and thought through instead of simply papered over. International solidarity campaigns can start the discourse, but it is clear that deeper questions, ones that address the structural underpinnings of global capitalism, need to be explicitly addressed.

While there are many examples of international campaigning, most campaigns currently take the structure enforced by capitalism (for example, campaigns within companies) and campaigns themselves are about particular labour demands, not about challenging the economic structure. This kind of solidarity is important and has won victories, but we need to consider ways to actually challenge capitalism itself. This requires a radical change to our entire method of thinking as a movement.

The internationalism of the trade union movement must be one that is, at root, informed by an awareness of the complex interactions between multiple systems of oppression – those of gender, race and class. Crucially, unions need to resist the tendency to become inward-looking and nationalistic at times of crisis, as has arguably been the case in some parts of Europe.

What does ‘Syndicalism’ mean to us?



Derek Keenan

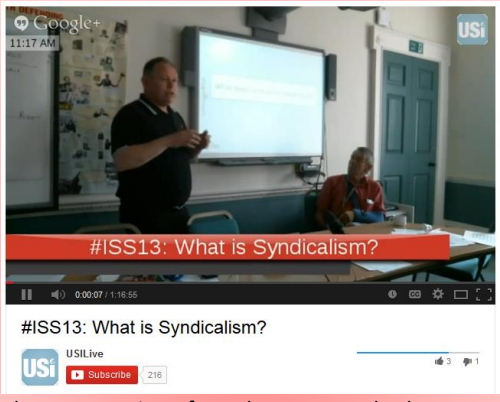
What does syndicalism, this ‘ghost’ from the beginning of the last century, hold for the international labour movement? Looking back, syndicalism has turned out to be profoundly realistic in its assessment of what challenges the global working class faces and how it might overcome them.

The era of partnership, at least where one of the partners is not openly abusive, appears to be largely over. The post-World War Two consensus, which gave rise to the hegemony of a tamed, business-oriented trade unionism, has been shattered, as capitalism will no longer tolerate even acquiescent unions. Lip-service is still often paid to partnership and social dialogue by capitalists in regions of relatively high union density and established patterns of collective bargaining. However, the reality for the majority of the world’s working population is class war, as highlighted by syndicalists as the fundamental characteristic of the capitalist system.

The ‘wild’ capitalism of the early 21st Century in many respects resembles the period when syndicalism first emerged. Today, many political parties of the democratic left have embraced neo-liberalism whilst Leninist parties, which remain tied to their ‘democratic centralist’ model of top-down politics, continue to proffer a failed ‘alternative’ of State ownership and party dictatorship to an ever-shrinking audience. National parliaments have proven to be little more than local executors of the decisions of transnational capital. The State is exposed not as a neutral arbiter between the contending classes, but as a self-perpetuating arm of capital itself. What is won from the State and capital today is generally won by the direct activity of people themselves. Direct action, it would appear, remains the best and, increasingly, only viable weapon left in the armoury of the workers. The ongoing crisis and the austerity under which ever larger numbers of working people are suffering have been met with a wholly inadequate response by large sections of the international trade union movement. This reflects the general crisis in trade unionism and the need for new thinking and new approaches. The question is whether syndicalism can provide this.

At present, syndicalism is usually represented by relatively small unions, smaller ‘union-initiatives’ and by tendencies in the wider labour movement either working inside non-syndicalist unions or working independently. A broader awareness of syndicalist models, even amongst union activists, is often minimal or non-existent. And yet, they are pushed by the circumstances of the greatest onslaught against the working class since the 1920s, to utilise syndicalist methods, to rediscover the potential of direct action. Conscious syndicalists need, therefore, to encourage (and rapidly!) awareness of the bigger syndicalist vision.

The syndicalist ethos of working class self-emancipation through direct action appears more vital than ever, and the labour movement of tomorrow must embrace that ethos if it is to renew itself on the global stage. This direct action- based unionism, which emphasises workers’ organisation and solidarity rather than the search for binding contracts, has been notably successful with Starbucks baristas in the United States and Chile - an example of successful syndicalist organising in the here and now.

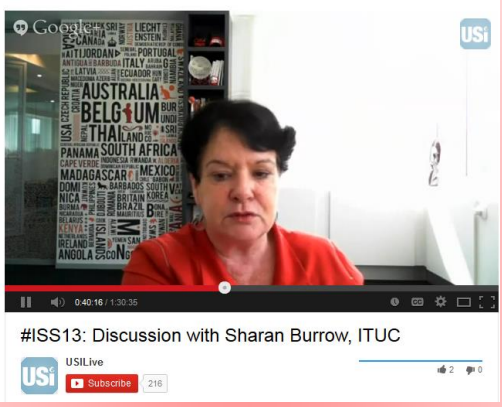


The presentation of Derek Kennan and subsequent 2013 discussion on The Anti-Capitalist Challenge are available at:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glTIIFOywcI

Prospects for the political Agenda of the international Trade Union Movement

In the final session of the Summer School, the 'Summer School Commission' of young participants held a live question and answer session with Sharan Burrow, the General Secretary of the ITUC. Below is a selection of questions raised by the participants…

- *What does the ITUC do? Does it really represent the trade union movement as a whole? If not, why not?*
- *How do we tackle the growth of agency work and zero-hour contracts?*
- *How are we going to build democratic trade union structure, and strengthen the international movement?*
- *How do we involve youth in the international trade union movement, especially when they are increasingly faced with precarious and transitory employment?*
- *What can we do to ensure that we get trade unionists out of jail, rather than issue Statements of protest and solidarity?*
- *What is the goal and what is the strategy for the next big battle to win systematic change over the next 50 or 100 years? How do we support self-organised and independent unions in China?*
- *How do we move from informal to formal work?*
- *How can we reduce the distance between ordinary members and the international trade union leadership?*
- *Is there a resurgence of the WFTU? Is this a failure of the ITUC to present alternatives to capitalism?*
- *Why do international union federations still support unions that represent bosses, e.g. in the former USSR?*



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