Chapter 4: Globalisation and Labour

Globalisation

International companies and international exploitation of workers have been around for a long time. After all, the many European empires and their wealth were built on the foundations of the African slave trade and colonial trading companies. The British, Dutch, French, Swedish, Danish, Portuguese and Austrians all had their own East Indies Companies set up between the 1600s and 1700s which ran supply lines stretching across continents. In 1848, Marx and Engels even wrote in *The Communist Manifesto* that:

"The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country . . . All old established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries… whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe."

However, after World War II, international agreements reduced taxes and tariffs on international trade, making it even easier for companies to spread globally. Waves of deregulation and free trade deals between the 1970s and 2000s led to a huge growth in transnational corporations or **TNC's**.

These companies are based in many countries, and often use subsidiary companies or third parties to produce part of the product or service that they sell. This can sometimes make it a bit confusing to work out just who is involved in working for them, and how to organise for better conditions amongst workers in the firm.

What is a TNC?

Nike's shoes and clothing are manufactured in over 525 factories across 40 different countries- none of which Nike actually owns. These factories will source raw materials from nearby independent providers. The finished goods will be transported by a logistics company, and arrive at a Nike-owned distribution centre. They will then be sold – either directly to customers through Nike stores or their website, wholesale to other companies (Footlocker, for example), or to Nike subsidiaries. So while Nike might employ around 40,000 people worldwide, there are estimated to be over 1 million people producing their shoes and clothes in different factories.

The rise of the TNC has had a huge impact on world politics. It used to be the case that pressuring national governments to change trade policies, welfare programmes, and labour laws, was a very important part of improving workers' conditions and strength. But these companies exist far beyond the reaches of the nation-state. If they decide that a new labour law in one country gives unions too much say, or a new minimum wage law is too high, they can shift operations to another company where workers are more repressed and can be paid less. This can also happen within the company's suppliers- if workers in one factory successfully win better overtime pay or maternity leave, the TNC may just end their contract and move on to a factory where workers don't have these benefits.

In response, the ITS's, particularly those representing chemicals, metal and food workers began to realise that this required a new form of international organisation and international solidarity,

In 1972, Charles Levinson, the General Secretary of the International Federation of Chemical and General Workers Unions (ICEF) wrote a book in which he argued for the creation of *World Company Councils* - global union councils of representatives from different car manufacturers, helping local unions share information about their workplaces and coordinate demands and campaigns. Several were launched by ICEF and the International Metalworkers Federation, but with limited success.

The IUF continues organising Coca-Cola workers against company injustices today.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the International Union of Food Workers (IUF) launched (and won) the first major coordinated and sustained international solidarity campaign against a transnational company – Coca Cola – over the extreme violence towards, and murders of, trade unionists in Guatemala.

In the 1980s several ITS's adopted the strategy of persuading TNC's to adopt 'Codes of Conduct'- statements of their ethical practices in relation to employment, the environment, and other issues. This was perhaps the beginning of so-called 'Corporate Social Responsibility' (CSR), where corporations set out guidelines for their ethical principles, appointed CSR managers supposedly to oversee good practice throughout the company and its supply chains. It also spawned an international industry of CSR research, monitoring programmes and conferences, often involving NGO's and academic institutions. Despite a minimal commitment to trade union rights, most of this had little to do with independent trade unionism and even when taken seriously, had little or no impact on corporate practice. Many Codes of Conduct are initiatives from companies rather than unions, as an attempt to claim that they have a social conscience and undermine union's claims. It was and remains to be a tool to attempt to prevent the emergence of genuine international collective bargaining.

In 1988, the IUF took a further step and signed the first of *International Framework Agreements* (IFAs) with a transnational corporation – Danone, the French milk product company. This was new- it contained a formal recognition of an ITS at an international level, and established international collective bargaining and procedures for the union to monitor the company. Central to the agreement were clauses guaranteeing training programmes for staff, a commitment to combat inequality between men and women workers, and an affirmation of the right of workers to organise unions and elect reps without the threat of harassment.

In the following years, numerous such agreements were signed. In some cases, such as the agreement between the IUF, Chiquita, and the Latin-American Coordination of Banana Workers' Unions, the ILO has played a role in facilitating and overseeing it.

IFAs are most common in companies based in Europe in industries which have traditionally had a strong union presence. However there have been important gains in sectors where unions have been less prominent- for example, in security. After a five-year long struggle with G4S, the security company, which involved, strikes, walkouts, legal cases, and even union pressure to shut down company operations. In some countries, Union Network International (UNI) managed to secure an IFA in 2008 which guaranteed employees the right to unionise, and saw new unions set up in Nepal, Congo, and Ghana, as well as improved severance pay in Mozambique and better overtime rates in Malawi. G4S was once a very hostile antiunion campaigner, but since 2008 has voluntarily recognised unions in collective bargaining arrangements on several occasions.

In theory, IFAs enable the ITS to report local cases where trade union rights are being denied, and the company at an international level will take immediate action to rectify the problem. This could include ending a contract with a subcontractor who violates the terms of the agreement. This is the case with the agreement struck between the French concrete and cement producer Lafarge, and the BWI.

In practice however, many such Agreements remained on paper, with the ITS or its national affiliates unable to take advantage of the opportunity to organise effectively enough. Nevertheless, this was not always true and there have been important victories as a result.

Neoliberalism

Globalisation was not just a change in the patterns of industrial production. It was the result of a political project, based on what became known as ***neoliberalism***.

Neoliberal ideas started to be formed in the 1920s and 1930s, as right-wing economists and political thinkers feared both the Soviet Union and the growth of social welfare and market regulations in countries with strong workers' movements. They said that restrictions on free enterprise were not only bad for the economy, but would lead to tyranny.

After World War II, scared by the growth of both social-democracy and the advances of Communist states, the neoliberals started to get organised. In 1947, some of the most important and well-known thinkers involved in the cause- people like Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Karl Popper- gathered in Switzerland and formed the Mont Pelerin Society. They decided the best route to power would be by slowly advance their ideas through think-tanks, universities, publications, and acting as advisors to politicians.

They would get their opportunity to act in the 1970s, as the post-war era of economic growth began to end. Capitalists wanted access to cheaper labour and new markets to get their way out of the slump.

A group of American right-wing academic economists, led by Friedman at the University of Chicago, became well-known for their arguments that the state shouldn't control industries, provide services or welfare, or reduce unemployment, and that attempts by trade unions to keep wages high and control production were stifling the economy. They said that restrictions on businesses were a restriction on freedom and tried to justify their plans to increase profits for the rich as a fight for liberty. Their ideas resonated with those who wanted to wage war on workers' conditions.

The first testing ground for their ideas would be in Latin America, and in particular, Chile. Following the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende's democratically elected socialist government, many thousands of activists, trade unionists, and politicians had been tortured killed or 'disappeared', and

nearly 200,000 people fled the country. The new regime, led by General Pinochet, enthusiastically embraced Friedman's ideas. With the left and the independent unions crushed, they privatised most industries, gave companies access to Chile's natural resources, massively reduced taxes and tariffs, and stripped back social welfare spending. Unemployment rocketed, wages were reduced, and instability became the norm.

Neoliberalism went hand-in-hand with extreme state violence. In this picture from 1988, protestors in the Netherlands demand an end for Reagan's support for the Nicaraguan Contras.

By the 1980s, other politicians had started to follow suit- most famously Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Both made defeating the unions their top priority, to prevent workers from having any control of policy. In 1981, Reagan fired 11,000 air traffic workers who were on strike for better pay and hours and banned them from ever getting any public-sector jobs again. Thatcher attacked the miners in 1984, destroying the power of one of Britain's most militant unions. A whole series of anti-union laws, which made striking and picketing more difficult and left unions vulnerable to huge fines, changed the balance of power in Britain.

Major industries were soon sold off, financial regulations were loosened, unemployment soared, and soon the rich were making far more money than had been possible since World War II. In many countries in the Global North, permanent contracts were replaced with short-term ones, while agency labour increased. Organising workers in an industry around common goals became more difficult as there were huge differences in the forms of employment and conditions. What's more, entire industries were shifted across the globe to states with weaker unions and less democratic rights.

Neoliberalism became 'common sense' for many governments, as it was promoted by well-funded think tanks, powerful politicians, and business leaders. The International Monetary Fund and World Bank made loans to debt-saddled countries on the condition that they slash spending on public services, state housing, healthcare, education, and welfare, reduce corporate taxes, and open up their industries to be bought out by foreign companies.

The type of trade unionism developed in the wake of World War II was increasingly under attack. Closed shop agreements were gone. Government subsidies for education and international development were stripped back. Unions were given less say in public bodies, or else removed from them entirely. The social-democratic parties also reduced their connections to unions, creating a gap between the two wings of the workers' movement. The rules of the game had changed.

Trade Unions in the Global South

With globalisation and the rise of the TNC's from the late 1970s to early 1990s, a new wave of trade unionism spread across the countries of the Global South.

Many of these formerly-colonised countries were undemocratic- either ruled by outright dictators or sham democracies where the winner was chosen before the vote. Often their regimes had been set up or were propped up by one or the other big Cold War power. Unions in these countries were often extremely limited in what they could do because of state pressure and violence, and in some cases were just tools of the state. Wages were low, workers were kept in line through terror, and regulations were lax- it was much cheaper to run factories and operations in these conditions than in the West.

The new wave of Global South unionism in the 1980s was focused on both fighting for democracy and fighting to improve workers' conditions- an approach demonstrated by COSATU, which was a part of this wave of new, militant unionism.

In South Korea, independent trade unionism had been crushed by a series of dictatorial governments since the end of World War II. The only legal union was the state-controlled Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) which often worked hand-in-hand with factory managers. Working and living conditions were very bad, and there were few legal ways to challenge them.

However, in 1987, an explosion of worker militancy caught the government off-guard. It began when the ruling Democratic Justice Party announced that it would choose the next President. Students took to the streets in protest, and were soon joined by huge numbers of workers. The government backed down, promising open presidential elections.

Korean workers then targeted the industrial system. New unions were set up at several Hyundai plants, launching militant and confrontational strikes. This set off a chain reaction- between June and October there were some 3,500 illegal strikes involving 1.2 million workers. For the next two years, strikes rocked the country, with 3,4000 new unions being set up.

Workers occupied and blockaded their factories. Managers and factory owners were taken hostage to make sure that the police would not block food and water from being brought in. Strikers armed themselves and prepared defences to stop the government's riot police and paramilitary thugs.

The young unions would strike first, and then decide their demands democratically during the occupations. As well as wage increases and an end to forced overtime and military-style factory discipline, strikers demanded their FKTU branch be broken up and their new union be recognised.

The FKTU was affiliated to the ICFTU and the ITS's, making the situation difficult for sympathisers to independent trade unionism in the international movement. Any official visit had to be done through visiting the hostile state-controlled unions. Christian organisations and labour NGO's played an important role by providing information to the international organisations and offering resources to the growing movement.

Gradually workers started linking their factory-based unions together, forming the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) in 1995. In 1999 the confederation was legally recognised, and has fought tirelessly to protect and extend democracy, as well as to improve workers' conditions. KCTU members still struggle for this today- as recently as 2016 the government imprisoned several of its leaders for supporting and organising anti-government protests.

In Brazil there was also a wave of 'new unionism' in the 1980s. The trade unions had been under state control since the 1930s, but in 1964 things got worse when a military coup installed a vicious, right-wing dictatorship.

TNC's took advantage, setting up highly-profitable factories, and the workforce in key industries quadrupled in size. This growth was accomplished on the back of appalling conditions. Strikes were made illegal and low wages enforced by law. The unions were purged of left-wing leaders and activists, and torture, assassinations, and imprisonment were used to keep workers compliant.

However, in the late 1970s, workers set up underground factory committees which organised by secretly passing out hand-written notes and by holding clandestine meetings in factory restrooms. In 1978, metal workers in the Saab-Scania plant in São Paulo went into work but refused to switch on the machines. They demanded higher wages and condemned the dictatorship's restrictions on organising. They were soon followed by workers at Ford, Volkswagen, and Mercedes-Benz.

In 1978 over 1 million Brazilians went on strike, led by the committees. They were supported by left-wing sections of the Catholic Church, community groups, and pro-democracy campaigners. The churches provided meeting spaces, set up 'pastoral labour groups,' and demanded the release of imprisoned workers' leaders.

As the government's response became more violent, the committees began organising in communities, not just factories. Soon they started demanding independent workers' delegates be posted in the factories. The movement kept growing, with committee militants even getting enough support to win control of several key unions. The former Brazilian president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (often known simply as Lula), first came to public attention as a committee militant, and was so well-respected that he soon won leadership of the metal workers' union.

In 1983 a new union federation- the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT)- was created. The CUT helped to build a pro-democracy coalition of different NGO's, activists, unions, factory committees, parties, community groups, and social movements. They were successful, forcing real elections and a new constitution to be drawn up in 1988. The CUT made sure that the right to strike and the right to worker representation were enshrined in Brazil's new constitution.

The strike at the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk, 1980, was the starting point for the movement which created the first independent trade union within the Soviet bloc.

Meanwhile, in Poland, an independent trade union was at the centre of a democratic movement which would end Stalinist rule. It began in August 1980 when 17,000 workers staged a strike in the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk, protesting the firing of Anna Walentinowicz, an underground union activist. Workers in over 200 local factories joined in, forming strike committees and workplace councils. They demanded reforms, including an end to censorship and the right to form independent trade unions. The strike spread nationally, with other workers' councils making similar demands.

The government eventually signed an agreement with the strike leaders, granting workers the right to organise unions. In September 1980 the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union Solidarity (or 'NSZZ Solidarność') was launched as the first independent trade union in a Soviet Bloc country which survived longer than a few months.

Over the next year, 9 million people joined – a quarter of the country's population. Strikes became a regular feature of life, and were used to free imprisoned activists, get better pay and conditions, and challenge corrupt officials.

In December 1981 the government declared martial law, outlawed Solidarność and imprisoned its leaders. The movement went underground and fractured into different local groups, each working independently. The arrested leaders were replaced, with many women organisers taking up key roles. Despite now being illegal, Solidarność's local groups carried out protests, vigils, parades, marches and strikes, produced leaflets, and even used radio, music, and films to spread their ideas.

Western labour movements offered their support to Solidarność. Both the ICFTU and the WCL called on their members to protest the Polish government's repression and to send funds and resources. The anti-communist AFL-CIO worked with the US government and created the Polish Workers Aid Fund, becoming an important foreign supporter of the new union. The Swedish Trade Union Confederation *'Landsorganisationen i Sverige'* was the young union's most important backer .

The Polish government was forced to negotiate with the union leaders in 1989. It was not able to stop the movement. After two months of discussions, an agreement was signed announcing major political reforms, and which officially recognized Solidarność once again. An agreement was reached to hold free elections a few months later- the first ever in the Communist bloc.

In Indonesia, new trade unions were formed in opposition to the state-controlled federation FBSI (*Federasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia*) in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including one named *Setiakawan*

('Solidarity') in tribute to the Polish movement. They were often founded by human rights NGO's, lawyers, and student activists.

The threat of violence, arrest, and death were never far away- President Suharto's regime had come to power on the back of a series of mass killings in 1965 of communists, ethnic Chinese people, left-wingers, and women's rights activists, which had resulted in at least 500,000 deaths (some estimate 2-3 million were killed). The dictatorship was committed to using extreme violence, and used it frequently to keep workers in line and foreign investment rolling in.

Members of the new movement had to work 'under the radar', with activists often bouncing between different safe houses, and taking indirect routes to meetings to outmanoeuvre the military's many spies.

While many of the initial unions collapsed due to government repression, the networks of workers, labour activists, lawyers, and NGO's helped launch a further series of independent unions in the 1990s, helping to bring down Suharto's military dictatorship in 1998 as part of a fraught alliance with students, intellectuals, and journalists.

In Taiwan, 1987 saw workers also fight poor conditions and the state-controlled union federation – the Chinese Federation of Labour (CFL). The CFL had colluded with the bosses to keep pay and conditions low. Unpaid overtime was widespread, with many people working 25 hours extra per week.

Taiwan is an island near China, which had been ruled by the Kuomintang party (KMT) since 1945. The KMT were originally based in mainland China, but fled to Taiwan after being beaten by the Communists during the civil war. They maintained that they were the real Chinese government and promoters of 'true' Chinese culture, discriminating against indigenous Taiwanese peoples.

They declared martial law and crushed opponents through extreme violence known as the 'white terror.' The labour movement, pro-democracy campaigners, and rival political groups were all suppressed. All strikes were banned. The KMT controlled union leadership elections, dissolved 'problematic' unions and vetoed disloyal union leaders. Many unelected CFL leaders had been in power since the KMT first set up in Taiwan.

In the 1980s, as Taiwanese exports grew, American businesses and unions became worried about cheap Taiwanese goods' impact on US industries. The American government hinted that they would tax Taiwanese imports if their prices were kept low by suppressing workers. So, in 1987 the Taiwanese government ended martial law. AFL-CIO lobbying saw strikes legalised, although there continued to be strict rules around them.

Those who had grown up under martial law seized this opportunity. From 1987, they set up new independent unions in the largely-unorganised private sector, and organised takeovers of KMT-controlled unions in the public sector. In the Spring of 1988, a wave of industrial action hit Taiwan.

One of the biggest battles was at Mialoi Transport Company, where a fare increase was not accompanied by a wage increase. Workers didn't have the legal mandate to strike. Instead, they called an 'Emergency General Meeting' which all union members had a legal right to attend – the meeting went on for 8 days! They found a way to strike without declaring a strike.

However, the KMT and the transport company wanted to make an example of these workers to end the wave of militancy. The meeting was declared illegal, and 250 workers were sacked. The police were called in to attack and arrest the pickets.

Taiwanese trade unionists protest for a higher minimum wage and better pensions. May Day, 2021.

But the workers gained support from a coalition of labour NGO's, religious groups, and independent unions. They raised funds to support the strikers, and church figures lobbied for the release of imprisoned picketers. Eventually, the strikes spread across the transport sector. The KMT and the company backed down and rehired all the sacked workers.

The new unions were able to make real improvements, and by 1989 manufacturing wages had risen by 60%. But they were still small and fragmented organisations. As they grew in number, many wanted to create a new national centre. This was very difficult - the KMT still controlled thousands of workplace unions and the legal system prevented confederation without their presence.

For some time there were several coordinating bodies including the 'Brotherhood Union', and 'Association of Union Cadres.' In 1988, the 'National Federation of Independent Trade Unions' was established, but it was soon dissolved due to cultural and political tensions. The KMT-controlled CFL continued to represent Taiwanese workers within the ICFTU and the ITS's.

It wasn't until 1998 that four major unions were able to establish an alternative national centre - the Taiwan Confederation of Trade Unions. In 2000 it was legally recognised, a year which also saw the KMT removed from the national leadership of the CFL, and replaced by the leaders who gained recognition and experience during the strikes of the late 1980s.

Internationally, this emergence of new trade unions, largely independent of the Cold War rivalries (both between Communist and non-Communist camps, as well as those within the non-Communist bloc), were a source of great hope and inspiration for many in the democratic left of the trade union movement. Many hoped that it marked a significant shift away from the historical dominance of the European and American movements and the colonial legacies of the Global South. Perhaps, it was thought, it would bring new radical perspectives into the international trade union federations with a stronger political agenda, opposition to neoliberalism, and commitment to democratic socialism.

It was also hoped that international networks and solidarity links could be built between these new unions, breaking the idea that solidarity was simply a pattern of paternalistic Western union support for poor under-developed unions in the South.

Various NGO initiatives attempted to support this idea, such as Australia-Asia Worker Links; the International Labour Research & Information Group, based in Cape Town; the Dutch-based Transnational Information Exchange; Asia Labour Monitor in Hong Kong; among others.

The democratic left within the ITS's were also encouraged by developments in the South, and many of the new more militant unions were encouraged to affiliate.

There was also an attempt to build a more formal alliance between the new unions, the Australia-based Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR), which has held conferences every few years since 1991, involving representatives of many of these new unions, along with the Australian Council of Trade Unions, and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

The early enthusiasm was later dampened as some of these new unions and federations faced major internal problems. COSATU became submerged in controversy and in-fighting over its rampant corruption and its political alliance with the ruling African National Congress (which had embraced neoliberalism), while Solidarność was captured by the Catholic right-wing and ended up supporting neoliberal policies.

Social Movement Unionism

The growth of trade unions in the Global South where members fought both in the workplace and in the community, often in alliance with other types of campaigning groups, for the benefit of the whole working class, was not necessarily new. As we have seen in chapter 1, this kind of alliance-building and non-workplace action had a long history dating back to struggles against slavery and colonialism and for a democratic society.

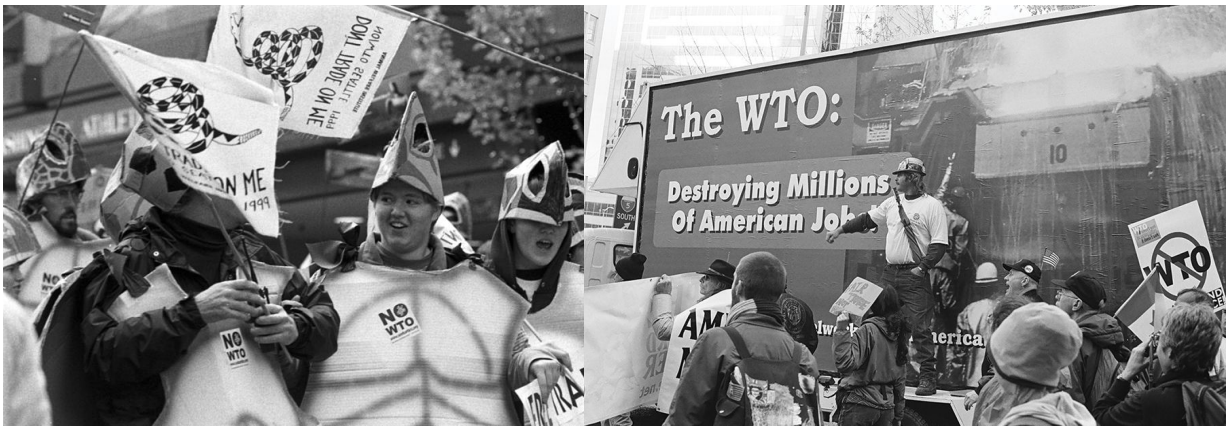
However, the new growth of this type of trade unionism between the 1970s and 1990s, particularly in Brazil, South Africa, and the Philippines, gave many hope that it could be the beginnings of a new model of democratic and militant trade unionism which would be adopted globally. Often called 'social movement unionism', it was a very important idea during the 1990s and 2000s, and still commands support today. Some hope it can help the unions of the Global North overcome declining numbers and influence by partnering with community groups and social movements, to fight for the interests of the community and the working class, not just their members.

The 'anti-globalisation' movement saw trade unions and environmentalist groups work together- for example when 'teamsters and turtles' marched together in Seattle against the presence of the World Trade Organisation in 1999. The World Social Forums, prominent in the early 2000s, and often held in Brazil, attempt to spread the model of union-social movement alliances to challenge globalisation. However, self-imposed rules on not taking action or making unified statements, as well as some activists' unease with the dominance of NGOs, has led to their decline.

The model of Social Movement Unionism works well for those unions and social movements with a healthy democratic culture, grassroots members playing an active role, and which share a radical political outlook about the need to transform society. The success of unions in defeating dictatorships in Brazil, South Africa, the Philippines, was precisely because of these factors.

However, where unions or social movement partners are focused on very limited issues, or rely on lobbying efforts or being part of formal industrial or political structures, alliances will not be able to

overcome the problems of political outlooks and strategy, or the absence of strong left-wing political tendencies.



In 1999, trade unionists and environmentalists marched together to protest the World Trade Organisation in Seattle.

The Collapse of the Soviet Union

While workers in the capitalist states were fighting the impact of neoliberalism, the workers of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc states were confronting the dictatorships. These regimes had faced and put down protests against their rule over many years, but in the 1980s a series of movements exploded on a scale not seen before. Many were directly inspired by the growth of Solidarność.

Across the Eastern Bloc, protest movements demanding democratic reforms sprung up, and independent trade unions began to be formed. Strikes, mass protests, and blockades challenged Communist rule. In the past the Red Army would have been sent in to crush this dissent, but the scale of these movements, plus a new reforming spirit amongst Communist Party leaders, prevented such a crackdown.

Within Russia, Communist Party chairman Mikhail Gorbachev started a process of democratic reforms in the late 1980s. When workers felt that these reforms were not fast enough or deep enough, they went on strike or else formed independent unions and NGO's to pressure the government. 1989 was a key year- hundreds of thousands of miners downed tools and formed a network of strike committees, lawyers formed an independent union, and even the state-operated cooperative movement was split by democratic reformers. The following years saw workers and progressive intellectuals coordinating and protesting, demanding an end to Communist Party rule and further democratic reforms.

They were successful, and soon reforms were passed which allowed for more independent journalism, the creation of new political parties, a free parliament and local governments, and an independent court system which could force politicians to follow the law. Gorbachev also wanted an economy similar to those of the Scandinavian countries, with some private businesses allowed.

Communist hardliners opposed Gorbachev, and in 1991 they sent tanks into Moscow to surround parliament. Workers came out to defend their new democracy against this violence. Famously, the newly-elected Russian president Boris Yeltsin stood on top of a tank and called for mass strikes and protests to defend the new democracy. The coup failed thanks to workers' resistance and the Soviet Union soon collapsed.

In Eastern Germany, the hated Berlin Wall was torn down by people wanting to travel and work freely. In Czechoslovakia, a general strike ended Communist rule. In Romania, street protests and riots saw the army join with workers and students to turn on the dictatorship. The Cold War was ended not by the American military or the propping up of right-wing regimes, but ordinary people organising and demanding change.

People had taken action because they wanted an end to dictatorship, not necessarily because they wanted a capitalist system. Solidarność had said explicitly that they would turn state industries in democratic workers' cooperatives, for example.

But after the fall of communism, a wave of neoliberal 'reforms' swept the region. The countries of the former Eastern Bloc needed loans and debt relief, and the International Monetary Fund and World Bank demanded the reforms in return.

State-owned industries were sold off, foreign investment was encouraged, and welfare and social spending were drastically reduced. This had a devastating effect for many- in Poland, food prices shot up by 500% after the reforms came in. In Russia, one-third of the population fell below the poverty line. Non-payment of wages and corruption became an everyday problem. Yeltsin's neoliberal reforms were so unpopular that he ordered the army to dissolve the parliament, crush street protests, and threaten political opponents. He ordered the shelling of parliament by tanks in 1993 to prevent further opposition to his right-wing reforms. The workers of the former Soviet bloc now had a new set of challenges to contend with.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states also had a huge impact on the labour movement, and by the early 1990s, WFTU had appeared to have collapsed completely, having lost the state-controlled unions that made up over 90% of its membership. A few years later the French CGT, the biggest member which wasn't state-controlled, also left. While the WFTU still exists today, it is tiny, and still dominated by state-controlled unions (like those of Iran, Cuba, and Syria).

Protestors march in Russia, 2019, commemorating those who died at the hands of the state to enforce neoliberal reform. Their banner reads 'Nothing is forgotten. No one is forgiven.'

Globalisation and the Breakdown of Post-Colonial Alliances

Alliances between nationalist and labour movements that had won independence in the colonised world began to fracture as globalisation pushed these states to adopt right-wing policies. This was particularly true in Africa, where many of the nationalist parties who had taken power formed one-party states. These party-states had often incorporated the trade unions into their structures, in a similar way to the Soviet Union. The nationalist leaders often came from university-educated students

and civil servants who had looked to Soviet history as an inspirational example of how to industrialise and develop.

In Ghana, a militant labour movement had helped get rid of British rule and put Kwame Nkrumah in power in 1957. In 1958, a new trade union law was passed, which banned the right to strike and turned the Ghana TUC into a tool of the new regime, which could pick and choose leaders, close down unions they didn't like, and so on. Many of the older trade union leaders had been trained in the Soviet Union and consciously pursued this model, all done in the name of building 'African Socialism'.

This pattern was followed by other African nations, leaving many national trade union centres as tools of the state, or constantly struggling to keep some degree of independence. In Tanzania, the trade union opposition to the government's attempts to incorporate them led to the national centre being shut down, and replaced with a new 'National Union of Tanganyika Workers' in 1964. The General-Secretary became the Minister of Labour, and the government held on to the right to fire officials as they chose. In Kenya, the Central Organization of Trade Unions was set up to replace independent unions in 1965, with the country's president holding the right to appoint its general secretary. This was also true in Francophone Africa; for example, in Senegal the head of the trade union movement sat in the Council of Ministers.

This pattern also affected the work of internationals in the region. The Ghanian unions helped to set up a regional organisation called the All-Africa Trade Union Federation (AATUF) in 1961. All unions which affiliated to it were ordered to leave both the ICFTU and the WFTU (although the WFTU only had two affiliates on the continent, and it was seen as a move against the ICFTU specifically). The party-state unions joined this organisation, and banned their national unions from joining the ICFTU. The international movement attempted to work through the ILO and bilateral campaigns to support African trade unionists who were attempting to build strength which might challenge state control. The ILO encouraged unity between the AATUF and a group of supporters of the ICFTU in 1973, forming the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU).

These relationships between the party-states, their unions, and working-class supporters began to unwind as economic crises during the 1970s and 1980s saw African nations saddled with huge amounts of debt, and many were told to accept Structural Adjustment Programmes by the IMF and World Bank. This included austerity and the end of food subsidies, leading to hunger and anger in many nations. As the unions had been incorporated into state structures, often protests against them came from outside of the union movement, such as during the Egyptian 'Bread Intifada' of 1977.

However in some states, such as Zambia, the unions were still in a position to be able to help organise and lead resistance. After a series of food riots cause by austerity and an end to subsidies in 1986, the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) followed up with a strike wave through the early months of 1987. Despite having ironically helped to first set up the ZCTU, the ruling United National Independence Party accused the unions of being disruptors and traitors. Fortunately, they weren't strong enough to beat back the wave of strikes, and announced on May Day 1987 that they were reversing their policy of austerity measures.

The ZCTU would keep pushing on, however, working with women's' groups and churches to organise a series of rallies and political strikes which brought an end to one-party rule through the course of 1990-1991. Zambia was far from the only African state to experience this kind of process- some 35 regimes were toppled between 1990 and 1994.

The split between nationalist and labour movements reached a tragic height with the Marikana massacre of August 2012. The South African Police shot dead 34 miners taking part in a wildcat strike at the Lonmin platinum mine in South Africa. Over 270 of their comrades were arrested, and initially charged with being responsible for the murders. Although the ANC and South African Communist Party remain powerful, many of their members became wealthy by continuing to manage the same kind of exploitative economy that existed under Apartheid. This has created deep divisions with grassroots workers whose organisation and struggle brought down the hated regime, and yet still suffer from poor pay and unsafe conditions today.

Today the OATUU continues to represent those unions still tied to their governments. Perhaps not surprisingly, they work with the ACFTU, the Chinese state-controlled union federation, which has sponsored a regional training centre for them.

From International Federations to 'Global Unions'

With the rise of TNC's, the attacks on unions' power in the West, a global decline in union membership, and the spread of capitalism into the former-Soviet states, the ITS's had a huge task ahead of them. In the 1950s and 60s, many of them seemed content to just restrict themselves to exchanging information about conditions in different countries, which occasionally raised the odd bit of solidarity cash for campaigns, and only had a small staff. They would need to become far more proactive in these new conditions.

There were some exceptions of course. The ITF's huge size, its border-crossing seafaring membership, and the political culture developed by early radical leaders like Tom Mann and Edo Fimmen, meant that it was both more able and willing to act internationally. Indeed, as early as 1911 it was organising coordinated strikes in different countries.

There were also the metal workers', chemical workers', and food and drink workers' ITS's, which had all been led by left-wing figures in the 1960s and 1970s. As mentioned before, they had been some of the most proactive in tackling the TNC's early on.

During the 1980s it became clear that all the international federations were facing a dramatically new circumstances which demanded a change in role. There was a new demand for international organisation on a scale never seen before. The ITS's had to be restructured, given significant new responsibilities, and be more directly in touch with unions at a workplace, as well as national level.

The process of merger between ITS's, which had started early in the 20th century now accelerated. Some ITS's were simply too small and financially stretched to survive, such as the International Federation of Plantation, Agricultural and Allied Workers, which merged into the IUF in 1994, and the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation which merged with the federations covering metal, chemical, mining and energy industries. In 2005, the ITS's were re-branded, from the rather archaic International Trade Secretariats to Global Union Federations (GUF's).

More importantly, the logical response to international restructuring of industry and the growth of TNC's that crossed sectoral boundaries was to create broad international federations that could organise and coordinate between major sectors – as well as save money. As a result, a series of mergers were agreed to create two big GUF's – IndustriALL, formed in 2012 to cover manufacturing and extractive industries, and UNI Global (originally called Union Network International), formed in 2000 to cover private sector service industries. Public sector unions were already covered by Public Services International, which had been formed in 1907, and Education International.

Smaller GUF's represent unions in food, hotels, restaurants, catering, tobacco and agriculture (the IUF), construction and the timber industry (Building & Woodworkers International - BWI). There also remain some GUF's which are still closer to their craft union origins- such as those for journalists (International Federation of Journalists - IFJ), and musicians and actors (International Arts & Entertainment Alliance). In addition, linked closely to the IUF, a new GUF was launched in 2009: the International Domestic Workers Federation – IDWF (see pages 121-122)

Most independent unions in the world are affiliated to one or more of the GUF's. In the case of large general workers' unions, they can be affiliated to several GUF's.

The restructuring of ITS's into today's GUF's also has political consequences. Like all unions, each ITS had a distinct political culture, sometimes shaped by the impact and character of the leadership, and sometimes as the direct result of the industry represented and its trade union culture. The size of the global transport sector, and the border-crossing nature of many sailors' lives, has helped create a culture of militant internationalism which often defined the ITF, for example.

In the creation of 'super-GUF's', like any union merger process, conflicting political currents have to be subsumed or managed, and there is a danger that the process leads to an overall watering down of politics, a retreat into vague generalities or general depoliticization – far from the overtly socialist ideals and principles of the ITS's when formed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

International Trade Union Unity

While the Global Union Federations were transforming in an attempt to meet the challenges of industrial restructuring, the federations representing national trade union centres were taking stock of the implications of the collapse of the WFTU, the shifts in the global political landscape, and the potential of creating a unified single over-arching confederation representing the entire trade union movement.

Although many of the ICFTU unions had connections with socialist parties, it was never a socialist organisation. It promoted 'free trade unionism', but nobody could quite agree what that meant. For the AFL-CIO it meant no connection to any political parties, but the European trade unions disagreed. For the unions in the colonial world, it meant freedom from the empires and their puppet rulers, which meant involvement in a liberation movement. For many it had meant freedom from the church, but there were affiliates such as the Italian CISL which were religious. Despite opposition to state-controlled unionism, state-controlled unions from anti-Communist regimes were members. There was no unity, except for opposition to communism.

The WCL was in a similar position. In 1968 it had had stop being explicitly Christian as it had begun to work with Muslims and Buddhists in Africa and Asia. Instead, it became open to anyone who was

religious and a worker. It had tried to sell itself as an alternative to both the Soviet-dominated WFTU and the ICFTU, which in areas like Latin America, was widely regarded as a puppet of the USA. With no WFTU, it too lost one of its key reasons to exist.

Leaders in both the ICFTU and WCL started discussing the possibility of merging the two internationals. Many of their European affiliates were already working together through the ETUC (as were several ex-WFTU unions), and leading figures from ETUC were some of the biggest players in the unity process.

There were other factors which pushed the two internationals together. Unions in many countries were shrinking in strength and numbers. International institutions were playing a greater role than ever before. A larger, unified, organisation which could claim to be the authentic voice of organised workers made sense.

What's more, there was pressure from below. Several of the WCL's national union affiliates had joined the ITS's/GUF's and had already begun working alongside ICFTU members internationally. The IUF, for example, had gained new affiliates in the 1980s from both Belgium and the Netherlands- two of the WCL's most important bases.

In 2006, after several years of discussion and negotiation, the ICFTU and WCL both dissolved their organisations and, with the addition of some previously independent or former WFTU-affiliated union federations (notably the French CGT and Italian CGIL), launched the International Trade Union Confederation – ITUC.

As with the ICFTU, the primary role that the ITUC has given itself is to represent the world's trade union movement in the major inter-governmental organisations (United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, World Bank, etc) and coordinate policy and campaigns on general cross-sectoral issues, such as the environment, women's rights, and trade union rights.

The ITUC's role in industrial issues is limited, and most GUF leaders remain keen to preserve their autonomy and independence (indeed this had been a barrier to unity as WCL leaders initially wanted the new organisation to have control over the GUF's). Yet as the influence of the trade union movement in the inter-governmental institutions has waned with the decline in membership and power, and with the decline in power of the inter-governmental institutions themselves, the ITUC has itself had to re-examine its role.

Much effort has been spent in trying to assert the ITUC as the representative voice of all workers in the world, which has been translated into all the trade unions in the world. But this presents a major difficulty. Some of the largest trade union national centres are state-controlled or allied to the state and repressive, such as the ACFTU (see below) and the Russian FNPR federation. Efforts to engage such so-called union federations are hugely controversial and many believe undermines the ITUC's credentials in defending and promoting democratic and independent trade unionism.

'Social Dialogue' and 'Decent Work'

'Social dialogue' has come to dominate the political strategy of the ITUC, reflecting the ETUC's founding principles of institutionalised negotiation between unions, employers and the state, and the ILO's tripartite structure and mission. In some unions, the language of 'social dialogue' and 'social partnership' has replaced that of collective bargaining.

Despite world-wide campaigns by trade unions and GUF's to organise McDonald's workers and fight against poverty wages, the ILO has allowed them to sponsor a 'Decent Work for Youth' Scheme

However, with the collapse of communist states, the decline in union power and the international shift to the right, governments and employers are increasingly confident to ignore the trade union movement, and attitudes against unions and international labour standards have hardened. Union representatives struggle to get a seat at the table, let alone have any real influence on the agenda.

Central to the ITUC strategy has been the promotion of '**Decent Work'**, a programme adopted by the ILO with ICFTU backing in 1998, which attempts to develop a 'fair globalisation' in which the core labour standards of freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining etc, are placed at the centre of government policy worldwide. It includes the development of ILO 'Decent Work Programmes' in target countries (almost all in the Global South and former Eastern Bloc) in an attempt to lift living standards, promote better working conditions and secure workers' rights.

Unfortunately, the ILO faces declining budgets and decreasing support from governments. ILO programmes to support the organisational capacity of unions, which were substantial in the post-war period up until the 1990s, have in effect disappeared.

The ILO is increasingly attempting to fill the funding gaps by turning to global corporations. Astonishingly, this includes a 'Decent Work for Youth' scheme sponsored by McDonalds. Ian Hodson, President of the UK's Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union (which is organising young McDonald's workers for a decent wage), condemned the hypocrisy in 2018:

"We are disappointed to read of the tie up between the ILO and McDonalds who are global exploiters… Its employment practices are not a model to be praised. McDonalds operates a fierce anti-union strategy which includes union busting tactics again in breach of what is expected of a decent employer."

The 'New' Organising Agenda

Trade union membership numbers have been in decline since the 1970s. The end of closed shops, the legal restrictions on industrial action, the shutting down of tripartite bodies, the removal of subsidies, and the refusal of increasing numbers of large employers to negotiate have all had an impact. In 1979, British unions had nearly 12 million members- by 1990 they had around 9 million. The American unions lost nearly 5 million members in the same period.

Leaders of the American service sector union, the SEIU, decided they need to change course to stop this decline. They said that the old ways of negotiating with bosses and running unions were dead in

the water. Instead of relying on good faith to get long-standing agreements with companies and the government, negotiated by paid union officials (known as the **'servicing model'**) they wanted more of a confrontational, activist approach, drawing on the writings and training methodologies of community organiser Saul Alinsky in his famous book *Rules for Radicals*.

They invested in hiring and training teams of organisers. These organisers would focus on bringing new members into the union, often through home visits and one-on-one meetings, and on winning union recognition in workplaces through media-savvy campaigns. The aim was to recruit members who could grow the union and fight for their own needs without relying on full-time officials. With this done, paid organisers could then be sent on to new sectors/industries to run campaigns there.

This 'organising model' or 'organising agenda' had some early successes- the SEIU launched the 'Justice for Janitors' campaign in the 1980s, picking up new recruits and getting their union recognised in many workplaces across the USA. In Los Angeles, union membership amongst janitors soared from 17% to over 80% within a few years, bucking national trends.

The SEIU wanted to spread this model within the American movement, and managed to get the AFL-CIO to set up the Organizing Institute to train union officials in 1989. Their attempts to change the AFL-CIO weren't as successful as they hoped, so they led a group of unions in a split in 2005, founding Change to Win as an alternative national centre.

The 'organising model' also spread internationally, with American unionists travelling across the world to preach its success. The TUC and the Australian Council of Trade Unions have both set up organising schools based on these ideas. SEIU set up partnerships with trade unions in the Netherlands, Germany, UK, Ireland, and New Zealand, to name but a few, and has helped shape the strategy of UNI, one of the largest GUF's. The 'organising model' has not, however, lived up to its own promises. Often it has slowed membership losses, but not stopped or reversed this trend. In Australia, the US, and the UK, both the overall numbers of trade unionists, and the overall percentage of trade union members in the workforce, are lower than when the organising model was first promoted by their national centres.

The organising model was, in fact, designed specifically for US industrial relations, making it difficult to neatly copy in other countries. In the USA, workers gain union recognition and the right to collective bargaining after a vote in which over 50% of workers in the balloted company or workplace vote in favour of the union. In these circumstances, organising an energetic campaign to meet all the potential workers to be balloted, winning them a seat at the negotiating table, and moving on to the next workplace makes some sense. It makes a lot less sense when this is not the model of labour relations.

The SEIU is one of the organisations most responsible for the global spread of the idea of the 'organising model' as a way of fixing the problems of the labour movement.

While going back to the 'servicing model' is not possible due to changing laws and industrial conditions, or even desirable (as it often kept members passive and uninvolved in the union), the 'organising model' comes with its own problems.

While the model promises to give power to members, often they get no say in the strategy – what industries/ workplaces are to be targeted, what conditions are being fought for, and so on. Some people have referred to this as a 'managed activism' – while grassroots unionists are more involved than in the servicing model, they are still directed by the existing union leaders.

The focus on growth in membership above all else has led to some unions accepting questionable deals with companies in return for permission to recruit in them. The SEIU famously won the right to organise within a Californian chain of retirement homes, but workers discovered that their union-negotiated contracts banned them from either striking or whistleblowing on dangerous practices.

Another danger comes from the idea that the 'organising model' is a clear, straightforward, all-inclusive way of doing things. It is maybe better to see it as a toolbox. It contains different tools suited to different tasks, which can be useful in some situations but not in others. As a bundle of different techniques, they can be combined with other techniques- organising to change laws, building alliances with community groups, providing services, and so on, which are not often presented as part of the 'model'.

Perhaps the biggest issue is that the reliance on 'organising' to overcome union weakness means that the question of what the union should be organising ***for*** gets ignored. Globalisation, the climate crisis, the rise of the far-right, the hollowing-out of democracy, and a global attack on workers' power and influence are key questions which unions need to grapple with and address to grow. Improved recruitment techniques cannot solve these issues by themselves.

International Workers' Education and Globalisation

During the era of globalisation, some unions have unfortunately responded with nationalistic ideas. In the Global North, some unions have said that to stop de-industrialisation, workers should cooperate with management and learn more technical skills to prevent jobs being moved overseas. This has seen a rise in workers' education programmes within national trade unions and trade union centres focused on 'human resources' style skills' improvement. In other cases, some unions have focused solely on teaching 'organising methods' with no attempt to develop political education or analysis.

However, some organisations are still providing an alternative, and using education to encourage a greater understanding of how globalisation affects the entire global working class, and encouraging joint action across borders. The International Federation of Workers' Educational Associations (IFWEA), set up after World War II, and the Global Labour University provide two examples of this.

Beginning in 1997, IFWEA established a series of International Studies Circles. These are small groups of around 8 to 12 people, where everyone is encouraged to take part, sharing their experiences and ideas around a particular topic. They are not action bodies, but the opportunity to share personal experiences of conditions, ideas for change, and analyses of situations, which often helps participants to work together or in their own organisations to effect change. The IFWEA scheme encouraged groups in different regions to discuss the same topic and then use the internet to share the ideas they had developed.

For example, representatives from workers' education organisations from Taiwan, Korea, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Australia all met together to design a curriculum for a course on the nature of globalisation and responses to it. They then ran the courses in their respective countries and shared the discussion notes and responses with one another. These types of courses not only encourage people to work together across borders, but to see themselves as part of a global working class, as the connections between their experiences and opportunities to unite against the same problems become clearer.

Some IFWEA affiliates have also initiated bilateral relationships and programmes. These include Denmark's *Arbejderbevaegelsens Internationale Forum* (AIF), which spends over half its budget on organising in other countries. It organises educational programmes and acts as a lobbying body for international workers' interests. When union members in the Philippines were fired by Carlsberg for organising, AIF lobbied the Danish Carlsberg workers' union to take solidarity actions, for example.

The Global Labour University was formed in 2002 to take a model of cooperation between academics and the labour movement to the international level. It aimed to tool up the labour movement with a greater understanding of globalisation and its impact on the labour market. It began as an initiative from within the ILO, and has grown into a network involving many universities, Global Union Federations, national union centres, and NGO's such as the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

It has achieved remarkable successes in setting up advanced studies programmes in Germany, Brazil, South Africa, India, and the USA. It holds annual conferences and regular summer schools, commissions research papers, and in the past few years has expanded its influence further through launching Massively Open Online Courses, which bring expert knowledge about labour and capital to an even wider audience through internet-based courses. It has acted as a space where trade unionists and researchers from across the Global South can come together and share ideas and get their voices heard internationally.

Labour Environmentalism

The effects of the climate crisis become more obvious with every year. Droughts, floods, wildfires, extreme heat, and monsoons are becoming more frequent and severe as greenhouse gas emissions raise global temperatures and destroy the environment. Heavy chemicals, fossil fuels, processed metals, plastics, and other forms of industrial waste are poisoning people, animals, and the earth.

Over the past fifty years, many labour organisations have become increasingly aware of the urgency of the climate crisis and are increasingly taking an active role to try to reduce carbon emissions and environmental pollution, while still protecting workers' livelihoods and conditions.

In the 1980s, workers in the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW) union (now part of United Steelworkers), popularised a now-common term in the movement – a 'just transition'. A New Jersey chemical plant was shut down due to its toxic impact, and the union demanded that laid-off workers should have their income protected and receive access to training. The union, led by the radical Tony Mazzocchi, called for workers not just to receive support as industries shifted to become greener, but demanded that they help shape the transition to a new, sustainable economy. The approach was strongly influenced by previous experience of the plant's destructive effect on the health of the workers and the local community.

Since then, the idea of a 'Just Transition' has become more popular within labour movement and is now the dominant framework for trade union campaigning and organising around environmental issues. In 2016, the ITUC set up the Just Transition Centre. They work to bring representatives of workers, businesses, communities, and governments together to discuss how to create more green jobs, train workers so that they have the skills for a green economy, and to protect those threatened by climate change. A decade of lobbying saw the idea adopted into the text of the 2015 Paris Agreement (a legally-binding international commitment to limit the impact of climate change).

This 'social dialogue' approach, as seen in the Just Transition Centre, emphasises that private businesses can profit from the transition to a greener society by expanding into new areas, and call for that process to be supported and for it to be done with jobs creation in mind. They call for working with businesses but also granting more power to governments to promote new industrial jobs. But this approach also reduced the space for workers to have a direct voice. One of the Just Transition Centre's key business representatives, for example, is Richard Branson, who personally intervened to prevent the Transport Workers Union organising in his Virgin America company.

The term 'Just Transition' is no longer used only to describe a process of green industrial transformation led by workers. Businesses are increasingly co-opting the term, using it to describe a 'greener' vision of capitalism in which business incentives are doled out to companies who reduce their carbon footprint or damaging industrial outputs. Their financial resources mean that they are able to dominate the conversation, for example through sponsoring UN COP meetings (where international climate policies are discussed and coordinated) and flooding them with lobbyists. Where governments don't invest in transition policies, private companies are able to take advantage through greenwashing their actions and presenting themselves as the leaders on the issue.

The 'social dialogue' approach is not used by everyone- more radical groups emphasise a 'social power' approach. Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED), for example, aims to resist fossil fuel companies rather than treat them as social partners. They seek to increase public ownership of natural resources, in particular energy, to get them out of the hands of those who deplete and use them in a way which damages the earth and our communities. TUED conducts research and works with labour movement organisations, encouraging them to adopt policies and approaches which can draw on the strength of the workers' movement to mobilise against big-business polluters and their government backers. This model emphasises building up workers' democratic ownership and control over the earth's resources.

Some unions and workers' organisations are taking action on this basis. The COP 26 Conference, held in Glasgow, Scotland, in October 2021, was met by a demonstration of over 150,000 people, mobilised by the Climate Justice Coalition. The coalition worked with others to coordinate over 800 actions and protests around the world, held widely-accessed workshops and meetings, and organised information to be distributed and ideas for organising to be exchanged. The COP 27, held in Cairo, Egypt in November 2022, will also be targeted by a coalition of trade unions, indigenous rights groups, and

environmental campaigners. A counter-summit is being organised by a coalition of informal workers' organisations, community groups, and NGOs under the slogan 'Reflect! Resist! Rise!'

The 'social power' model, while not universally accepted by international groups or national unions and federations, is closest in spirit to the early environmentalism discussed in chapter 1, where socialists and radicals demanded worker control of and access to the resources of the earth. Re-articulating this spirit today would mean emphasising doing away with a system of unequal access to, and profit-driven management of, natural resources. It means arguing for workers and their representative organisations to democratically determine what a more sustainable world would look like and how it would operate, without concern for the growth and profits of either established or emerging businesses.

Post-Communist Unions –Stagnation and Repression in Eastern Europe

Union decline is not just a Western issue. Since the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, trade unionists have faced major hurdles in Eastern Europe.

Damaging neoliberal reforms have had a major impact on workers' organisations. Trade unions lost their former roles as providers of social welfare and benefits. The new owners of the private industries are often hostile to unions' presence. Collective bargaining structures were rarely set up (with the exception of Slovenia), and where they were, management generally refused meaningful negotiations. The huge numbers of unemployed people desperate for work made it very difficult for those unions that pressed for better conditions to get their way.

What's more, there were difficulties caused by a lack of experience. The old state unions didn't have to organise their members for collective action to support their negotiations – this tradition of the workers' movement had been almost non-existent in Russia.

Both the former state-run unions and new, independent unions have struggled to make gains in this environment. In some cases because they actively supported the neoliberal reforms, in others because their power has been curbed by the reforms. Both have struggled with the fact that unions and pro-labour language are associated by many with the old regime. Many workers accepted the idea that there would be a difficult period after the transition from the old regimes, which gave bosses and politicians a chance to go on the offensive. In Poland, Solidarność lost support and members as they backed the neoliberal reforms. The leaders of the movement came to power after the introduction of democracy, but did not give unions a place in the new society. They felt that strong, militant unions would put off foreign investors and derail the country's shift to capitalism.

In Russia, the former state union, the FNPR, cozied up to first Yeltsin, and then Putin. Though it is no longer state-controlled, the old culture of keeping workers compliant so union leaders can stay close to the government hasn't gone away. Some constituent unions have been able to use this to their advantage, gaining some legal cover for organising efforts, although the FNPR still contains many 'yellow unions' as well.

The KTR-affiliated Interregional Trade Union (MPRA) organised auto-workers and was well-represented in the Ford plant of Vsevolozshk. In 2018 they were disbanded after being accused of being 'foreign agents'.

A new, independent national centre called the KTR was formed in 1995. They have struggled to grow- the government passed a labour law in 2002 which basically gave the FNPR the right to be the sole representative of workers in collective bargaining. Striking has been made much more difficult through legal changes. The KTR and the strong auto workers' union, which have received funding and support from the GUF's, have been targeted by laws which ban 'foreign actors' from being involved in Russian politics. Workers have faced extreme violence from the riot police for striking and occupying, and leading labour lawyers and activists have been arrested and some even killed by the growing far-right.

Despite these threats to the KTR, some of its member unions are still doing important work. Healthcare workers, Teachers, and Academics are all organising- not necessarily around workplace conditions, but about social issues. Academics are fighting attempts to censor their profession, teachers to reform the education system, and healthcare workers to ensure more people get better treatment. Novoprof, an affiliate of the IUF, is doing important work organising workers within the fast-food sector. Their organisers are multilingual and work closely with Central Asian unions to ensure that migrants are not exploited along with Russian workers.

The ETUC has run training and education events for Eastern European unions, often with a focus on how they can engage in 'social dialogue'. In the early 1990s these were funded by the EU's PHARE program, which aimed to get Poland and Hungary ready to join the EU. With EU encouragement, tripartite bodies have been set up in many of the former Communist countries. These bodies often have little power in reality, and unions frequently complain that joint decisions are ignored by employers and the state. Ironically, the ETUC was telling Eastern European workers to trust in a model which was increasingly not working in Western Europe either!

The GUF's have also made efforts to support the unions in the region, with several setting up regional offices in Russia in the early 1990s. The ICEM (the chemical workers, now a part of IndustriALL) and the IUF were very proactive, setting up educational programmes through which they built networks of independent trade unionist allies.

However, since the late 1990s, parts of Eastern Europe have seen a return to undemocratic and authoritarian rule. The GUF's and ITUC all left Russia after threatening visits from the police. In Ukraine, pro-Russian separatists regularly attempt to intimidate trade unionists in areas they control.

In Kazakhstan, protesting oil workers in Zhanaozen were shot and killed by the police in December 2011. However, the Kazakhstani movement has not been easily crushed by either the regime of Nazarbayev or his successor, Tokayev. In 2014, the state made independent unions illegal, and the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Kazakhstan was shut down in 2017. Despite this,

organisation continues. In 2021 there were 60 large strikes in the oil end energy sector, and in 2022 a strike in Zhanaozen against the rising cost of energy set off a huge protest movement which occupied public squares, blocked roads, and marched on government buildings. The government first called a state of emergency, asked Putin to support their crackdowns, and then agreed to a cap on energy prices, hoping to calm the situation.

While there are some successes in the region, the association of unions with Stalinism, the impact of neoliberalism on unions' ability to organise and negotiate, the collaboration of some with right-wing governments, the lack of traditions of collective organising during the Soviet era, and growing authoritarianism create many barriers to growth.

'Constructive Engagement' in China

While international labour is struggling to overcome the damage done by state-controlled unionism in Eastern Europe, in China it is very much a live issue.

Since the 1970s, China has opened up its economy to foreign investment. Many transnational companies now have factories and plants in the country, connecting Chinese workers into global supply chains. The Chinese government help to keep these companies' workers in line so that the country is seen as an attractive place to invest. Some people have called this system 'market Stalinism' as it combines neoliberalism with strict political control by the Communist party-state.

The All-Chinese Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) is the only official 'union' body in the country- attempts to establish independent unions have often been stamped out violently. For example, the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation was formed during the infamous Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, launching a city-wide strike which terrified the authorities. After a bloody crackdown on the striking workers and protestors, the leaders of the new union were arrested, and many have since fled or been forced out of the country.

While the ACFTU does sometimes lobby for better labour laws and conditions, its main goal is to serve the party-state by making sure that productivity stays high and that workers do not protest or slack off. It also provides some welfare and benefits to workers.

Its leaders are usually trained in the ranks of the Communist Party, rather than having worked their way up through the unions. Many local leaders are ex-army and use military training techniques to keep workers in line. In some cases, local branch leaders and factory managers are friends or family members.

Despite being a trade union in name only, the ACFTU is becoming more involved in the international labour movement. More and more trade unions (including national unions, national centres, and GUF's) are establishing regular contact with the ACFTU. According to the *People's Daily*, a Chinese state-run newspaper, between 1994 and 1998 Chinese trade unions established 'cooperative relations' with 419 trade unions from 131 countries. Pictures of foreign delegations meeting ACFTU leaders are regularly splashed across the pages of the Chinese press, granting the body prestige.

The ACFTU is increasingly active in the ILO, and runs events, programmes, and workshops alongside the ILO's bureau for workers' activities (ACTRAV). This is despite China not honouring many of the ILO's Conventions and Recommendations. Although not a member of the ITUC, the ACFTU developed

connections with many of the GUF's, with only the IUF refusing to engage with the state-controlled union.

At an ITUC congress in Berlin in 2013, representatives of ACFTU and the (still independent) Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) both attended. The HKCTU was barred from speaking about the situation in China, as the ITUC had guaranteed the ACFTU that they would not be criticised during the event.

Those who engage the ACFTU often say that they have to, as transnational companies which they are organising against have workplaces out there. As the ACFTU is the only legal union, they have little choice in who they can worth with. They claim that their engagements can help lead to change in the organisation's culture. They point to the ACFTU's attempts to organise in Wal-Mart in China, which the company originally objected to, as evidence that they can function as a real trade union.

However, after working out a deal with Wal-Mart, union branches in many stores were set up and run by Human Resources managers, who kept a low-wage regime in place. International engagement from other unions has not reformed the ACFTU, which is still led by unelected party loyalists and army officers.

Contact with the ACFTU legitimises a fake union which can now claim its international connections show its credentials. It also helps an organisation which allows the exploitation of its own members to shape the policies of labour groups around the world. Perhaps even worse, it prevents connections from being formed with independent trade unionists in China.

Organising in the Informal Economy

The ILO estimated in 2018 that over 60% of the world's workers- some 2 billion people- are part of the informal economy. So what is the informal economy? The ILO defines it as: *"All economic activities that are- in law or in practice – not covered or sufficiently covered by formal arrangements"*

Domestic Workers face some of the most difficult conditions to organise under. Many are isolated from fellow-workers and live in situations where they face legal and physical threats for organising. Through creative campaigning and strategies, and with support from others in the international labour movement, they have formed their own GUF.

Informal workers often have no formal contract, no job security, poor or non-existent social protection (pensions, maternity provision, health insurance, etc), and are denied fundamental rights. They may work for themselves or as part of a family, or work for an unregistered or unregulated company, or hold an informal role in a formal company. Some work out in public, like street vendors or unregulated taxi drivers, and are vulnerable to police harassment. Some are less visible, like home-based workers making clothes or traditional handicrafts, or domestic workers, who are more-easily exploited because of their isolation. Women and migrants form a large part of the informal workforce, and informal work is much more common in the Global South.

In the past many thought that the informal economy would disappear as the world became more industrialised, but it has kept growing since the 1960s. The changes of neoliberalism- with big companies farming out production to a network of harder-to-trace smaller firms- has helped spur this growth.

Neoliberal policies saw unemployment rocket in Latin America in the 1980s, and in Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia throughout the 1990s and 2000s. This led to more people turning to informal work. The informal economy is also growing in the 'developed' world, with more people now working in the 'gig economy'. Many former workers are now 'independent contractors', working similar roles in worse conditions. Although not all precarious work is informal, all informal work is precarious.

In some countries there are even 'Special Economic Zones' where the usual laws, taxes, and regulations do not apply. Workers in these places have few legal routes to challenge the exploitation they face. They are often used by TNC's to produce goods to sell around the world.

This type of unprotected work has been very common throughout history. The London dockers of the 1889 strike mentioned in chapter 1 had no formal contract. The rural workers whose underground unions started as mutual aid funds had no rights at work or access to welfare. Jewish migrants in New York's tailoring industry in the late 1800s and early 1900s worked long days in unregulated sweatshops.

With the growth of unions and workers' power came labour rights, proper contracts, and government protection, making this type of employment less common in the 20th century in Europe and North America. Collective bargaining and government legislation helped to turn many into formal workers. However, because women and migrants for so long were excluded from unions and the workforce, many still worked in informal roles.

To organise, some workers have formed unions, while others have launched different types of organisations. Co-ops, clubs, meeting halls, voluntary associations, support groups, creches, and friendly societies are all used by informal workers. Often, informal workers' organisations play many different roles at once, and may not be registered as a union- these are sometimes called 'hybrid' organisations.

The Self Employed Women's' Association (SEWA), based in India, is perhaps the most famous example. It was officially established in 1972 by women workers in Gujarat, led by Ela Bhatt. Bhatt had been an organiser for the women's section of a textile union which had often helped women get vocational training and access to welfare. In the 1960s Bhatt started recruiting women informally working around the textile factories- rag-pickers, cart-pullers, and the like.

In 1971 these workers decided to set up SEWA, which brought together women from all parts of the informal economy, including street-vendors and handicraft producers. They were often poor and illiterate, harassed when working in public, and ripped off by middle-men and suppliers.

The next year they registered as an official union, despite government objections that they didn't have a common employer. They grew throughout the next decade, and in 1981 were kicked out of the male-dominated textile union. They re-established themselves as an organisation run entirely by, and for, women.

"Although insulted at the way we had been thrown out, really, we felt most powerfully, an incredible sense of freedom"

Kalima Rose, 'Where women are leaders'

SEWA is not your traditional union. To cater to its members' needs it had to play many different roles. As well as taking part in collective bargaining and organising, it runs a democratic bank which offers members small loans, so self-employed women can gain access to more materials and better training, increasing their income. It helps set up cooperatives, creating more job opportunities and ensuring that these women can buy and sell at better prices. They have organised health and childcare cooperatives, literacy and technology training programmes, and lobbied local and national governments to reduce the burdens on their members' lives (such as tackling corrupt police who demand bribes).

SEWA's first international affiliation was with the IUF in 1983, following a visit of Ela Bhatt to Geneva and a meeting with IUF General Secretary Dan Gallin. At that time SEWA was not considered to be a union by other Indian unions, which opposed the affiliation. Among other things, SEWA was accused of gender discrimination because it did not accept men into membership. The IUF ignored these objections and supported SEWA's fight for recognition on the international stage. At the 1988 congress of the ICFTU in Melbourne, Australia, the IUF was represented by Gallin and Renana Jabhwala of SEWA, and the IUF gave its 5 minutes allocated speaking time allocated to Renana.

In 1996, SEWA played a big role in getting the Home Work Convention passed through the ILO. This Convention said that home workers should have the same legal rights as all other workers- for example sick pay, minimum wages, pensions, health and safety standards, or the right to join a union. The next year they also helped to launch **Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing** (WIEGO), an international network which links up member-based organisations like unions and co-ops.

Domestic workers are a particularly vulnerable group in the informal economy. These are people who work in and for a household, and often do a range of jobs such as cooking, cleaning, nannying, driving, and so on. They often work by themselves in someone else's house for long hours each day. They are frequently working far from their own home, with many millions crossing borders to get work- the ILO reckons that there are around 11.5 million migrant domestic workers globally, with around 8.5 million of these being women.

In some cases, employers confiscate their workers' passports, lock them in their house, and/or physically abuse them. Domestic workers' isolation, lack of legal protections, and inability to get social welfare puts them at particular risk. In Singapore, hundreds of migrant domestic workers have committed suicide rather than face continued abuse by their employers in high-rise flats.

However domestic workers are not weak or passive. They are organising, as all workers do. In 2009, a group called the International Domestic Workers' Network was launched in Geneva, with the support of the IUF, WIEGO, the GLI, and members of the ILO. They aimed to connect domestic workers' organisations from around the world, and bring them together to get the laws and conditions covering domestic work changed. They have had some remarkable successes. In 2011, they managed to get the Domestic Workers Convention passed by the ILO.

In 2013, they re-founded their network as the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF), becoming the newest GUF. As of today, it represents over 500,000 members from 56 countries, who are organised in unions, networks, associations, and co-ops.

Informal workers were once seen by the mainstream of the labour movement as impossible to organise; unseemly; not real workers as they had no boss; even as potential strike-breakers. But the success of groups like WIEGO, SEWA, and the IDWF has caused many to rethink their attitude. All three of these organisations were supported on the international stage by the IUF, and later the Global Labour Institute (GLI), helping them gain recognition and prestige within the wider movement. Gallin, the former IUF General Secretary, even took a leading role in WIEGO after his retirement from the food workers' international.

The BWI has helped many of those who are employed informally or casually within the construction industry. The ITF launched an Informal Transport Workers Project in 2013, with the support of the GLI, which has brought over 100,000 informal workers into affiliated unions. It helped unions with experience of organising informal workers expand their reach and support unions in nearby countries.

ATGWU and the Power of Informal Workers

The ITF worked with the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union (ATGWU) in Uganda, helping them build their capacity to organise and to provide mentorship to unions in Kenya and Tanzania. ATGWU had previously had difficulty as the large bus companies had collapsed, giving way to new informal forms of public transport – motorcycle taxis known as 'boda bodas' and informal minibuses.

Before 2006, the leadership of the union hadn't paid much attention to informal workers, and between 2006-2012 were reluctant to spend money organising the sector. But in 2012, Aziz Kiryaa was elected as General Secretary, and pushed for more focus on the issue.

ATGWU realised that they could not rely on just recruiting workers from the informal economy one-by-one. They saw that many were already organised in credit unions, community groups, and associations. Instead, they began education and research work with these groups, learning more about their members' lives, how they organised, and what they needed. ITF-supported workshops helped draw many of these associations to ATGWU, and they affiliated their groups.

The ITF project has also been important in supporting ATGWU to help develop women as leaders within the trade union movement locally. All newly-affiliated associations were encouraged to set up women's committees, and recruitment of women working around the transport sector in informal roles has increased. There are now more women in union leadership positions, playing an active role in the union, and working in traditionally 'male' occupations than ever before.

However, because many unions were slow to organise informal workers or not sure how to go about it, NGO's often stepped in. In Britain, the Ethical Trading Initiative was launched in 1998 as a coalition of NGO's, companies, and unions to make sure that ILO standards were being kept to throughout TNC's supply chains.

ATGWU in Uganda demonstrated the importance of organising informal workers for trade union revitalisation. With support from the ITF, they have grown through collaboration with, and recruitment of, existing networks of workers.

In the USA, 'Workers' Centres' have emerged since the 1990s, and support (mainly) migrant day labourers- they often provide services (like healthcare and English lessons), training (for example, understanding your legal rights), and advocacy (targeting bad bosses and recruitment agencies). In the Philippines, the Labor Education and Research Network (LEARN) was founded in 1986 after the fall of the Marcos dictatorship, and helped provide education and training for a new generation of union activists often organising in the informal sector, helping to build alliances between unions and the unorganised.

In the textile trade, for a long time it was very hard to reach informal workers. Many were housed in barracks in Special Economic Zones in countries with repressive governments. The International Textile, Garment, and Leather Workers' Federation (now part of IndustriALL) worked with and within NGO's, such as the Clean Clothing Campaign, to draw attention to companies taking advantage of these groups of workers and hold them to account. Similarly, the ITF and the charity War on Want have worked together to support workers on cruise ships, where employees from the 'developing world' often face brutal conditions in precarious situations.

Informal workers have shown that they can organise, get results, and build lasting institutions. Their numbers are growing daily, while the formal economy shrinks. Making sure that the global labour movement supports their efforts will be key to rebuilding our strength, and ensuring that all workers are represented.

Digital Unions

Along with the rise of informal work, technological changes present new challenges and opportunities for the international labour movement. There are new and growing industries to organise, major changes in the way people work, and new possibilities for workers to connect across borders.

Large companies have been able to use tech to keep their workforce more divided and easier to control. In newer companies like Uber and Deliveroo, workers are technically self-employed, and are directed where to go by apps rather than managers. Amazon's deliveries work in a similar way. You could drive for any of them and technically never have to meet another driver or a supervisor.

Employees' journey times and breaks are monitored through an app, and this information feeds into an algorithm which decides which driver will be given what delivery. Failure to live up to company standards has gotten some people kicked off the apps for reasons that were never explained to them.

Workers don't get to meet, are closely-monitored, and are more easily-disposed of with this system. This makes traditional organising much more difficult.

But new communications technology also gives workers the chance to organise more effectively than before. Although it is unevenly spread, around 4.5 billion people in the world have internet access, while 3.5 billion have smartphones. Companies can use this tech to isolate workers, but workers can also use it to connect with each other.

Deliveroo couriers have used messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram to set up group chats. They don't have a shop floor, so this kind of technology helps to connect them, giving them the chance to discuss working conditions and what they want to do. This has helped them to get people involved in campaigns, protests, and even strikes. Some workers have even organised cooperatives, such as the US-based 'The Drivers Cooperative', to provide alternatives to the gig economy model.

New tech can even be used to challenge some of the problems in the international labour movement. In the past it was very difficult to contact workers in the same firm who were based in another country. The metal workers' ITS , for example, had a rule that all contacts between countries had to go through their Geneva office. A union rep in Dagenham might have to go to a regional officer, who'd go to a national one, who'd contact the ITS/GUF, who'd contact a national organiser in a different country, to get a phone number for another regional officer, who could get the number of the rep in the other local plant. This process could take months.

As computers became more affordable, and the fibre and cable networks which connected them grew both in size and power, it became easier for workers to directly communicate. In the early days of the internet, it was often labour NGO's which set up new systems, using funds from the EU, left-wing church groups, and Labour-controlled local governments. The North West Transnationals Project, based in Manchester, used email to create direct connections between trade unions in the Global South and Global North. They also made workers' education resources with activists from many different countries chipping in by email. The Transnationals Information Exchange, set up in 1978, connected workers in different countries who shared an employer.

Worknet, set up in 1986, connected labour activists from a range of unions (including COSATU), parties, and support groups within South Africa. It also was connected to other digital networks, meaning they could make direct international appeals for solidarity. In Russia there was Glasnet, in Germany, Geonet, and in North America, Solinet. The connections between different digital networks kept growing.

The larger unions and older international structures lagged behind in getting to grips with this tech. Some people were keen to keep international connections in their own hands. Sometimes there was a distrust of computers or lack of knowledge about making use of them.

However, the ICEF was one of the earliest of the international unions to make use of the new technology. It established databases of companies' and workplaces' health and safety records which were shared with affiliates for collective bargaining purposes. News of disputes were posted on online message boards. Emails were used to exchange information rather than face-to-face meetings. This way of working has spread to the other GUF's since.

Since these early efforts, communications technology has advanced hugely. Workers regularly make use of pre-existing services to organise. Uber drivers set up WhatsApp groups to plan petitions,

protests, and strikes like the Deliveroo couriers did. Wal-Mart workers used Facebook groups to share info and ideas to prevent the company from spying on them while they were at work.

There are also dedicated tools for the labour movement. The website coworker.org allows even un-unionised workers to create a petition which can then become the start of a campaign. Workers using the website have helped Uber drivers get tips and improved parental leave policies at Netflix. It is even creating a social media network for trade unions and their members.

There are plenty of innovators out there; *Notes from Below*, a collective which publishes a socialist journal, even organised with Game Workers Unite UK (a section of the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain) to make a series of video games about labour organising.

The larger unions are starting to follow suit. Unite has launched Work, Voice, Pay, a website which contains information on companies, a database of collective agreements, campaigning resources and templates, and a pay claim generator.

While these kinds of tools aren't the be-all and end-all, they make direct communications between workers easier, and can allow us to share the information and research which can be crucial for a successful campaign.