

Labour Still has to Catch Up with the WSF

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Late-2007 the International Trade Union Confederation issued a statement publicly endorsing the World Social Forum's Global Day of Action (GDA), January 26, 2008. This is something of a step forward for a 20th - even 19th - century movement. In 1995 the forerunner of the ITUC had expressed outrage at being kept off the governmental platform at the UN's Social Summit. This meant that it was being cast down amongst NGOs it considered self-appointed, non-representative and unanswerable to any membership. Today it seems to embrace the notion of being considered part of global civil society and the global justice and solidarity movement. And, in its appeal, it encourages unions to formulate their own ideas for their local GDAs.

Although the ITUC and its forerunners (which merged late-2006) have been increasingly present at events of the WSF, at both global and lower levels, attendance has not, I think, previously been marked by such an appeal. So far the union internationals have attended the WSF but tended to hold their own mini-events beforehand, or to keep to their own tents or areas within the more general Forum. This has not, however, prevented them, and some of their affiliates, from joining the International Council of the WSF, nor its sub-committees. Here, however, they seem to play a low-key, if supportive, role, rather than representing some kind of union or labour front.

The ITUC, its related international unions and (burgeoning) NGOs have not been notable for mixing or matching with others present at WSFs. In Nairobi, early-2007, they promoted 'Decent Work' as if this was the Single Answer to world labour's multiple problems. Indeed, ITUC's Kenyan affiliate even tried to make WSF adoption of the slogan a condition of union attendance! This may have been an exception to the modest and supportive role mentioned earlier.

Labour alternatives still marginal

A search on the Global Day of Action's official website, 15 days before January 26, showed union initiatives and labour issues to be marginal. The relevant keywords turn up here and there. But the only specified labour project I could find was from tiny Vermont in the USA. This is called, appropriately, 'Building a Movement for Labour Justice', <http://www.wsf2008.net/eng/node/2081>. And whilst endorsed by numerous unions, and to be addressed by a national union leader, it is being sponsored by one of those 'worker centres' that have been responsible for much labour activism in the USA recently.

The event is described as "a major gathering for workers, students, educators and health care providers to build a movement for workers' rights, livable wages, economic justice, quality healthcare for all and global solidarity."

One can speculate that other such workshops, or independent labour events, will take place elsewhere on January 26. And hope that the traditional national and international unions will respond to the ITUC appeal. If they do so, one can also hope that they will surpass the ambiguity of the Decent Work campaign.

Old 'social partnerships' or real new ones?

The problem here is that Decent Work is not actually a union initiative. It comes from the United

Nations' labour body, the International Labour Organisation. Indeed, it is generally considered the brainchild of ILO Director, Juan Somavia, the man responsible for the fatal - or crucial - UN Conference in 1995! What Decent Work seems to be seeking is a return to a failed utopia - the West European capitalist welfare state of the second half of the 20th century. Given globalisation, of course, this now implies something of a global 'social partnership' (actually one between Labour, Capital and the State or Interstate Organisation). In both form and content Decent Work reveals international unionism's continuing dependence on benign powers above. Such dependency is in some tension with the spirit of a WSF formally oriented toward building up autonomous power from below.

The presence/absence of unions or the wider labour movement at the GDA should certainly be monitored, analysed and consequently strategised round. Unionism is currently in its worst historical crisis but simultaneously in a condition of more innovation and variety than it has been for many decades - possibly even a century. Thus, within the Americas (which evidently include Vermont!), a process of international union unification has been accompanied by considerable discussion and at least one new initiative.

This is the Labour Platform for the Americas (<http://www.gpn.org/research/orit2005/index.html>).

This, whilst still in the incremental/gradualist tradition, seems to go further than Decent Work, calling for

Strengthening democracy and achieving full respect for human rights; Broadening the channels for citizen participation in national and international decision-making; Achieving social justice; Integrating a gender perspective into all policies; Eliminating all forms of discrimination on the basis of class, race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation; Establishing full employment as the basis for sustainable development; Ensuring no man, woman or child is excluded from our societies; and Rebuilding the capacity of governments to take pro-active measures.

In a recent paper on 'new-wave labour organising strategies', moreover, Anthony Ince identifies the following variety:

- New Union Organising (e.g. Organising Unionism, Partnership and Bargaining to Organise);
- Network Unionism (e.g. Social and Community Organising Unionism, Radical Organising Unionism);
- New Worker Organising (e.g. Worker Centres, Solidarity Networks and 'Cyber-Unionism' (<http://uin.org.uk/content/blogsection/10/125/>)).

Even without these being spelled out, this may suggest the variety of contemporary unionism.

Whether or not this variety will be represented on the GDA, or whether unionism might be a matter of discussion there, remains dubious.

And, whilst there is increasing movement in the labour movement of the Global South, as indicated in the Latin American case, and whilst 'labour-friendly' regimes may have been brought to power there, there is no clear indication of a distinct and radical Southern union voice either in international union bodies or in the WSF itself.

New labour voices - on line

The voice of labour's non-unionised majority is slowly finding voice within the WSF. This is not only through such traditional WSF supporters as the rural labour network, Via Campesina. Nor the union-linked network of women street-traders, StreetNet. It is coming from union-friendly but autonomous labour initiatives, some inspired by the practices of the World Social Forum and the broader global justice movement.

Whilst the union bodies are obviously organisations, these new forces tend to be networks and to

operate largely on or through the worldwide web. They were to be heard - at least marginally and tentatively - at the 2006 WSF in Nairobi. They may be heard again on January 26. But evidence suggests they are more likely to appear at the European Social Forum (ESF), Malmo, Sweden, September 2008 (for which see <http://www.esf2008.org/en/proposal/>)...or maybe at the next WSF, Belem, Brazil, 2009. Or on such new sites and lists, as Labour and Globalisation <http://openesf.net/projects/labour-and-globalisation/lists>, Global Labour Strategies http://laborstrategies.blogs.com/global_labor_strategies/about_us/index.html, and the already-mentioned Union Ideas Network http://uin.org.uk/component/option,com_frontpage/Itemid,1/.

Towards an emancipatory labour charter and a space within the WSF

My feeling is that whilst new union strategies, new labour movements (often movements of new kinds of labour), and even new spaces for a new kind of international labour struggle and dialogue are developing, labour does not yet have the impact on, or profile within, the WSF that is necessary - for both labour and the WSF.

The point of comparison here is, surely, the position of women and feminism within the WSF and the wider movement. Labour could well learn from just two feminist initiatives here, the Feminist Dialogues (<http://feministdialogues.isiswomen.org/>) and the Global Women's Charter for Humanity http://www.worldmarchofwomen.org/qui_nous_sommes/charte/ en). The first represents a dialogue about ideas and strategies, the second a public campaign. Both have been inspired by and are critically engaged with the WSF. I do not know whether, where or how they, or other women's movements, will be present within the Global Day of Action. But one can be fairly confident that they women will be more evident than labour!

It is time for labour movements, whether defensive or emancipatory, to catch up.

P.S.

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