

Trade Unions and NGOs:

A Necessary Partnership for Social Development

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Acronyms

AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
AIP	Apparel Industry Partnership (United States)
CCC	Clean Clothes Campaign
CEO	Chief Executive Officer (of a company)
CNT	Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (Spain)
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CSD	Commission on Sustainable Development (United Nations)
EI	Education International
EPZ	Export Processing Zone
EU	European Union
FLA	Fair Labor Association (United States)
FNV	Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (Netherlands)
FTF	Salaried Employees and Civil Servants Confederation (Denmark)
HKCIC	Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee
HKCTU	Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions
HRIC	Human Rights in China
ICCR	Interfaith Council on Corporate Responsibility (United States)
ICEM	International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
IFBWW	International Federation of Building and Wood Workers
IFN	International Friends of Nature
IFWEA	International Federation of Workers' Education Associations
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRENE	International Restructuring Education Network Europe
ISC	International Study Circle
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
ITF	International Transport Workers' Federation
ITGLWF	International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation
ITS	International Trade Secretariat
IUF	International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World (United States)
KOR	Komitet Obrony Robotników (Workers' Defense Committee) (Poland)
LARIC	Labour Rights in China (Hong Kong)
LO Denmark	Danish Confederation of Trade Unions
LO Norway	Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions
LO Sweden	Swedish Trade Union Confederation
NGO	non-governmental organization
NOVIB	Nederlandse Organisatie voor Internationale Ontwikkelings-samenwerking (Netherlands)
OI	Oxfam International
OPIC	Olof Palme International Center
Oxfam	formerly the telegraphic address of the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (United Kingdom); now the name of the organization
SA8000	Social Accountability 8000
SEWA	Self Employed Women's Association (India)

SEWU	Self Employed Women's Union (South Africa)
SiD	Danish General Workers' Union
SKP	Sara Lee Knit Products
SOLIDAR	SOLIDAR is not an acronym: it is the name of the international federation of welfare and solidarity organizations of the socialist labour movement (formerly International Workers' Aid)
TCO	Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees
TNC	transnational corporation
UNITE	Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (United States/Canada)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WFTU	World Federation of Trade Unions
WTO	World Trade Organization
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature

Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

What distinguishes trade unions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from other actors in civil society (for example mainstream churches, religious sects, educational institutions, professional associations)? This paper argues they are different because they have specific agendas for the improvement of society.

Unions have always held that a consistent defence of their members' interests over the long term requires them to work for people's overall well-being. Their vision of society includes elements such as political, social and industrial democracy, civil and democratic rights for all, the elimination of poverty, equality and the rule of law. In this respect, they can legitimately claim to be serving the interests of society generally, as can NGOs acting on a desire to advance and improve the human condition. Consequently, co-operation between unions and NGOs is possible and necessary in a shared perspective of building a society in which the satisfaction of basic human needs is the overriding priority.

This paper examines the conditions that unions and NGOs must meet to strengthen their alliance. It reviews the historical background, the existing record, the difficulties and the potential for co-operation.

Unions re-emerged after the Second World War in a favourable political context worldwide, which helped conceal the crippling losses inflicted by several decades of repression by totalitarian states and by the war itself. NGOs had already been created by the mostly social-democratic labour movement before and after the First World War to address the special needs of its membership (in the areas of welfare, housing, health, education, culture) and to advance its political agenda. These were not merely service organizations; they represented an attempt to create an alternative society or counter-culture.

During postwar reconstruction, labour NGOs disappeared—or survived with an abbreviated agenda. Trade unions largely withdrew into their "core business" (wages and conditions of employment). Several factors account for these developments: the loss of trained and experienced political leadership; the postwar social compromise based on the ideology of social partnership; reliance on the state to support the trade union agenda; and distortion of labour movement priorities through the Cold War.

The effect of globalization has been to break the balance of power between organized labour and organized business on which the postwar social consensus was based. The rise of transnational corporate power has been accompanied by a massive attack on all fronts (social, political, ideological, cultural) of the labour movement and on its values. It has also aggravated inequalities within and among countries and changed the role of the state to serve its purposes. The trade union movement was largely unprepared for these developments and was unable to offer an adequate political response.

Meanwhile, civil society had generated a large variety of voluntary organizations seeking to advance public interest issues, in part as a response to social problems created or aggravated by globalization. Many such organizations filled the vacuum left by the labour movement when it retreated from the broader social and political concerns it had sought to address in prewar decades.

Since the 1970s, co-operation between unions and NGOs has developed over a wide range of issues. It has been most established and successful so far in the defence of human rights, including workers' rights. In the field of development and education, unions have been active largely through labour movement NGOs (although sometimes with non-labour NGOs) and, in education, with academic institutions.

On women's rights and equality issues co-operation has been more problematic, because it implies a challenge to the traditional (male-dominated) culture of the labour movement. However, it is potentially the most important area of co-operation for organizing the growing sectors of the labour force worldwide (services, free trade zones, informal sector) and for regenerating the trade union movement itself.

More recently, union/NGO co-operation has developed on environmental issues, particularly in agriculture (pesticides and herbicides, chemical fertilizers, genetic engineering, seed patenting), forestry (sustainable exploitation of timber) and on issues of chemical pollution in industry and mining.

Corporate accountability has been another area of expanding union/NGO co-operation, especially when workers' rights are at issue; but in some instances unions have had to resist what they saw as an overly accommodating approach by NGOs toward company codes of conduct. While some NGOs have been prepared to accept such codes, including a monitoring role for themselves, unions stress that codes are no substitute for union organization and that monitoring is done most effectively by union organizations in the workplace. Unions therefore remain distrustful of unilaterally proclaimed codes of conduct and aim instead for international agreements.

Co-operation between unions and NGOs depends, in the first place, on shared objectives and, equally importantly, on the way the organizations involved operate (issues of legitimacy, transparency, accountability, management). Tensions between globalization—based on the neoliberal agenda (endorsed by most leading governments)—and the prospects for a just, egalitarian and democratic society (advocated by unions and most NGOs) have strengthened the case for co-operation.

In a globalizing economy and society, trade unions face three main tasks: organizing in transnational corporations; organizing the informal sector; and connecting with other civil society actors to advance a broader social and political agenda. In each of these areas they have formed partnerships with NGOs, and this trend will continue because it produces positive results. In the process, both unions and NGOs are changing. Important segments of the labour movement are returning to their roots in the form of "social movement unionism". On the NGO

side, the resilience of the trade union movement under conditions of adversity and its capacity for self-renewal have not gone unnoticed. NGOs wishing to act in the public interest are finding in trade unions the social anchor and reality check that neither their own constituency nor their relations with other social actors can provide.

Because the way society develops depends in large part on the global power relations resulting from the struggle between labour and organized business, the responsibility of building a broadly based peoples' movement for social progress and determining the direction it will take rests largely with the trade union movement and its allies.

Dan Gallin is the Chair of the Global Labour Institute, a foundation established in 1997 with its secretariat in Geneva, Switzerland.

Résumé

En quoi les syndicats et les organisations non gouvernementales (ONG) se distinguent-ils d'autres acteurs de la société civile (par exemple des Eglises traditionnelles, des sectes, des établissements d'enseignement, des associations professionnelles)? Selon cette étude, ils sont différents parce qu'ils ont un programme spécifique pour améliorer la société.

Les syndicats ont toujours soutenu qu'une défense cohérente de leurs adhérents les obligeait à long terme à travailler pour le bien-être de la population en général. La démocratie en politique, dans la société et dans l'industrie; des droits civils et démocratiques pour tous; l'élimination de la pauvreté; l'égalité et la primauté du droit font partie de leur vision de la société. A cet égard, ils peuvent légitimement prétendre servir les intérêts de la société dans son ensemble, tout comme les ONG mues par le désir de faire progresser et d'améliorer la condition humaine. En conséquence, la coopération entre syndicats et ONG est possible et nécessaire dès lors que le but commun est de construire une société où la satisfaction des besoins essentiels des êtres humains a la priorité absolue.

L'auteur examine les conditions que syndicats et ONG doivent remplir pour renforcer leur alliance. Il porte son regard sur les origines historiques, les résultats déjà obtenus, les difficultés

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