

Place, space and the new labour internationalisms

What's new in the new labour internationalisms?

Faced by increasing pressure to compete on a global market without the traditional protection provided by high tariff barriers, national trade union movements are increasingly threatened by cheap imports and employers who think unions have no place in the new 'information economy'.

This useful collection of 13 essays takes a different approach; it sees the new global economy as an opportunity for labour to realise its historic goal of working class unity worldwide. They argue that the new information technology provides workers worldwide with the opportunity to communicate quickly and cheaply through a form of network organisation. However to achieve this goal, the authors and contributors to the book argue, labour will need to think of itself again as a social movement rather than as a mutual benevolent society.

In the first part of the collection, six authors outline some of the developments that are taking place as trade unions seek to respond to the challenges of globalisation. One documents the emergence of a form of network organisation of trade unionists in the South – the Southern Initiative in Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (Sigtur) described in this edition of the

Eddie Webster reviews the book Place, Space and the New Labour Internationalisms (2001), edited by Peter Waterman and Jane Wills, Blackwell Publishers: Oxford.

Bulletin (see p 78). Keld Jakobsen, a Brazilian trade unionist, describes an unsuccessful attempt to transform the Latin American arm of the International Confederation of Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the need to consider alliances with the growing anti-globalisation social movements.

Franco Barchiesi analyses the attempt by the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) to internationalise the struggle against privatisation but concludes that its 'struggle has given way to a conventional union internationalism ... that lacks effective strategies for sustained networking and action.

Andrew Herod analyses two case studies of workers fighting transnationally organised companies in the United States and shows convincingly why local organisation is still important in the global economy. Workers may on some occasions, he concludes, best achieve their goals through engaging in practices of

transnational solidarity aimed at matching the global organisation of their employer ('organising globally'), whereas on other occasions they may be able to do so through highly focused local actions ('organising locally').

Contemporary labour internationalism

In the second part, contributors consider different aspects of contemporary labour internationalism beginning with a valuable account of the debate around attempts to link trade with workers' rights. This is followed by case studies in North America and Europe of cross-border mobilisation, including an account of 'the promise of ethical trading' in the garment industry.

Arguably the most challenging essay in the book is by union veteran Dan Gallin on the growing informalisation of labour worldwide. His argument is quite simple but central to any discussion of a new labour internationalism: 'It is impossible to conceive at the present time of organising a majority of workers at world scale without serious organising in the informal sector. The vast majority of the world's workers - including the poorest, who most need self defence through organisation - are in the informal sector'.

This is the answer to what is *new* in the new labour internationalisms: neoliberal globalisation, Gallin argues, 'has cut down on the hard core of permanent full-time workers, by decentralising and subcontracting all but the indispensable core activities, and by relying wherever possible on unstable forms of labour (casual, part-time, seasonal and so on), management deregulates the labour market, not only to reduce labour costs but to shift responsibility for income, benefits and conditions onto the individual'.

Gallin provides a brave attempt at suggesting ways of organising the 'informal sector' but I was left with a feeling at the end of this important collection, that the constraints facing the proponents of a *new* labour internationalism are not all that different from the old - unsuccessful - attempts at labour internationalism. While labour speaks the language of international solidarity, its union officials, as Gay Seidman has recently reminded us 'face xenophobic pressures from members who see immigrants from the rest of Africa as competitors in an already-flooded labor market' (*Critical Sociology*, 1 (1), Summer 2001).

Union organisers and its intellectuals face a complex challenge in the era of globalisation, one not that different from that which faced an earlier generation when the nature of work under capitalism changed from craft-based production to the fordist assembly line: the need for a new form of worker organisation. But the challenge is a contradictory one as it is pushing labour in two conflicting directions: on the one hand workers need to respond to the challenge of competitiveness by developing new skills and more cooperative relationships with employers; on the other hand, they need to widen their constituency to incorporate the growing number of casual and informal sector workers.

The challenge points towards two forms of quite different organisation; the one in partnership with the employer, the other in opposition. The future of labour internationalism depends on whether and how these two contradictory pressures are reconciled.

Eddie Webster is the director of the Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP) at the University of the Witwatersrand.