

Discussion papers

**Network on
Organized Labour
in the 21st Century:**

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**Report of a meeting
to review the activities
of the Network**

Labour
and
Society
Programme

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The *International Institute for Labour Studies* was established in 1960 as an autonomous facility of the International Labour Organization (ILO). Its mandate is to promote policy research and public discussion on emerging issues of concern to the ILO and its constituents – labour, business and government.

The *Labour and Society Programme* examines the outlook for labour at the beginning of the new millennium in the light of changes at the workplace and in society at large. Focusing initially on organized labour, the programme seeks to identify approaches and strategies to enhance the profile of labour as a major actor in civil society, and as a contributor to dynamic and equitable growth. Specifically, the programme will review the changing environment of labour and unions; document trade union responses to these changes; highlight promising approaches for trade unions in civil society and the global economy in future; and outline the type of policy and institutional environment required for the growth of free and effective trade unions. This work is undertaken in close collaboration with international and national trade union organizations and international trade secretariats, and will be implemented through networks consisting of trade union practitioners, academics, research institutes and other policy-makers. These networks, both international and regional, will also be a means of disseminating research outcomes to a wider audience.

The *Discussion Paper Series* presents the preliminary results of research undertaken by the ILS. The documents are intended for limited dissemination with a view to eliciting reactions and comments before they are published in their final form in the *Research Series* or as special publications.

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Network on Organized Labour in the 21st Century:

Report of a meeting to review the activities of the network

The International Institute for Labour Studies held a meeting in Geneva from 1-2 December 1998 which was attended by over 30 participants, including academic researchers from different disciplines, trade union leaders and ILO Officials. The objectives of the meeting were to: review the progress of activities in the "Network on Organized Labour"; discuss measures for enhancing the scope and coverage of the network; and discuss themes for research and dissemination within the network.

The meeting commenced with a review of the background, objectives and activities of the network.

It was recalled that the Institute programme on organized labour was launched early in 1998 in order to investigate the challenges facing trade unions; to present an overview of their varying responses; and to identify the policies and approaches which have proved particularly successful in different regions of the world. Activities under the programme have been organized in two tracks.

Track 1 is an electronic network, linking trade union practitioners with the academic community. The network serves for information gathering and analysis of the situation and activities of organized labour, for the exchange of such information, and it also provides a forum for interaction between the Institute, union practitioners and the academic community. A document entitled "Network on Organized Labour in the 21st Century: An Invitation to Participate" has been posted on the Institute website. The document identifies and categorizes the main problems facing unions today, and raises a number of questions on the way in which unions have responded to the challenges. Copies of the document, along with a request to respond to the queries raised, were sent to more than 600 members of the network, either by e-mail or by post. As a result of over three months' written and electronic communication the Institute had received approximately 125 responses from network members by late 1998.

Track 2 organizes research into the successes and failures of unions in different countries. A total of 16 case studies dealing with trade union responses to globalization are being undertaken in the following countries: Brazil, Canada, Chile, Ghana, India, Israel, Japan, Korea, Lithuania, Niger, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Tunisia, USA, and Zimbabwe. The aim of these studies is to survey how far the unions in each country have adapted to a changing environment by organizing new constituents; adjusting their structures and finances; addressing new concerns; forming new alliances; and formulating a new agenda for collective action. The case studies are due for completion in mid-1999, and they will be brought out as Institute discussion papers or monographs.

The present report summarizes the discussion at the December meeting, which focused on the Track 1 exercise. The first part of the report presents the methodology of the network and the second part presents the themes for research and dissemination within the network.

1. Methodology of the network

The debate on methodology followed a review of network activities in the second half of 1998. Three sets of issues came up for discussion: (i) the network and its limitations; (ii) means of strengthening the network; and (iii) regional activities under the network.

1.1 The network and its limitations

The following question was raised at the beginning of the meeting: Has the network met its original objectives? The network was established with the objectives of stimulating an international debate on the future of trade unions, and of building a dialogue on the subject involving academics and union practitioners. It was designed as a forum for interaction and was expected to encourage more people to contribute ideas as well as to take part in the debate. The Institute is ideally placed to coordinate the exchange. The main challenge is to create interest in e-mail-based communication and to sustain that interest, thus ensuring a long-term commitment from members of the network.

The network did not reach out to the trade unions as expected. Few unions responded to the queries raised compared with the number of academic institutions which sent a contribution. The geographical coverage of the network exercise was uneven and responses have a strong Anglo-Saxon bias. In addition, there were serious difficulties in receiving information and analysis from the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Language barriers and regional differences when accessing the Internet limited the scope of the exercise. The Internet is not an efficient or optimal means of communication in many developing countries. Finally, the network has not yet developed into a fully interactive exercise. Only when responses are circulated among members of the network will they lead to a debate on the issues identified in the document.

The meeting, while discussing the problems obstructing the smooth functioning of the network, also highlighted its value and significance for the trade unions. Some commentators believe that the network could be a major asset since it uses new technology in support of trade unions. The fact that it is coordinated by the Institute, gives it the potential to achieve ambitious goals. The network should be used to capture the dynamics of change in the workplace, and it should focus on the experience of unions in the emerging global situation. Participation in the network will help unions become aware of developments all over the world and assist them in formulating their own policies. At present there is too little communication between trade unions in different parts of the world, and this new project is a way of bringing them together.

The structure and mechanisms of the network provide scope for more interaction between unions and the academic community. Members should therefore benefit from the vast accumulation of information and take advantage of new methods of communication worldwide. A strong proactive approach is needed to building contacts; members of the network can highlight what could be of value to the programme and develop a framework within which key or even controversial questions can be raised. Preparing a prescriptive agenda for the future is a vigorous exercise which requires the contribution of present and potential members of the network.

1.2 Means of strengthening the network

A number of practical suggestions were made for strengthening the network and enhancing its geographical coverage. These suggestions are summarized under the following headings: making a user-friendly network; the role of network moderators; using a list server; creating sub-groups of members; organizing the web-site; and expanding into the regions.

1.2.1 Making a user-friendly network

Having created a forum for communication, the task now is to keep it going and make it more effective. Launching an Internet-based discussion requires serious inputs, and the flow of an enormous amount of information. Two areas to concentrate on are making the information available to a wider public, and involving more people in the ongoing exercise. Much of the literature on the future of trade unions concentrates on Europe and the Anglo-Saxon countries. The regional bias should be counterbalanced by broadening the network. Trade unions should be encouraged to take part in enjoyable discussions in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, which will extend their range of interests.

1.2.2 The role of network moderators

Network moderators should assist in the debate, make practical suggestions, provide innovative ideas and new topics, channel feedback and ensure that unions remain involved. The moderators should identify the main points in the debate and highlight them for further discussion. The contributions received could be summarized and transmitted to network members, which would reduce the time needed to sift through voluminous information. Moderating the network is time-consuming; it requires good communication skills and an excellent knowledge of the issues involved.

1.2.3 Using a list server

A list server is an essential element of the network, as it ensures that messages go to all members concerned. It puts information into everyone's mail box and thus provokes lively discussion. Technically, a list server does not require a moderator; but in practice a network moderator is needed. All e-mail addresses on the network should be placed on a list server. Once network members choose to subscribe, the list server can take their responses and automatically circulate them amongst other members.

1.2.4 Creating sub-groups of members

The options are to keep a long list of network members or to form smaller groups dealing with specific themes. Not all participants in the network will be interested in all the questions posed. Creating sub-groups would be a means of involving members more closely in the exercise. To make this idea operational, the network would need to find union leaders in each region who could identify the issues facing unions. The network could then determine the sort of data required to link the information sources. The sub-groups of participants could discuss the main issues of concern in specific regions. Key issues at sectoral and regional level could be presented with a view to fruitful discussion.

As a first step, the network should try to establish interaction on specific questions. Union leaders could participate in selecting these topics depending on their area of interest. The list server could facilitate the flow of information among the sub-groups dealing with specific themes. The objective should be to establish strong groups where participants comment on each other's views and freely inform the public of these views.

1.2.5 *Organizing the web-site*

The web-site should become a special service for network members. Emphasis should be on placing new and original material on the web-pages and making them accessible to all users, including other constituents of the ILO. Unlike the list server, the web-site is not a discussion forum, and a deliberate effort must be made to access it. Papers can be posted there and it can thus serve as a useful reference tool. A number of trade union organizations have their own web-sites where they talk about the future of the unions and also post a variety of information. For instance, unions in Australia, Korea, Mexico and the USA have been informing the public of their problems and their approaches to these problems through the web-site. Information from these sites could be extracted or linked through hot-links and placed on the network web-site.

Key documents from trade union organizations working on issues of concern could appear on the web-site. In addition, people with a special interest in a particular question could be invited to contribute to the web-site. Such contributions, focussing on the future of organized labour, could be invited from selected persons. A list of other web-sites dealing with trade union concerns should be compiled and referred to on the network. The network could also try to identify leaders at specific levels of a union and design web-based documents to address their concerns.

One problem lies in identifying the subjects for discussion. Network members are unlikely to engage in subjects that are unfamiliar to them or which lie outside their area of interest. The ICFTU has some contextual information which was obtained through surveys on core labour standards carried out in 42 countries. Keeping those surveys on the web-site can provide detailed background information for discussion.

1.2.6 *Expansion into the regions*

The network should be open to new members who wish to join. It is important to ensure that the network is not confined to industrialized countries. Ideally the entire exercise should move in the direction of the regions. Learning from the experience of other countries should be a major goal for the entire programme.

A practical question at this stage is how to correct the geographical imbalance in the network coverage. Special attention should be paid to local users and their contributions should be tapped. Overcoming the language barriers of the project requires an effort. As a first step, the network documents should be made available in the three major languages of the UN (English, French, and Spanish). A multilingual network will facilitate more region-specific discussions on the priorities and strategies of trade unions. It should be borne in mind that the Internet is not a fully developed medium of communication in many countries and that the Institute should therefore make use of the regular mail option so that more potential members could be reached.

1.3 *Regional activities under the network*

A number of participants observed that the network has not been effective so far in generating either a significant flow of information or a reflection on the future of trade unions in the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. It was therefore suggested that regional level consultations and seminars should be held under the auspices of the network. The meeting also discussed other follow-up activities to strengthen the network. A summary of the discussion is given below.

1.3.1 Regional seminars

Consultations should be held at regional level so that information can be obtained directly from the unions concerned. The meetings could be organized with the support and collaboration of the regional structures of international trade union organizations. Information gathering should precede each meeting, and a report on the findings should be discussed at the seminar.

The topics studied should correspond to regional concerns. For instance, in Latin America the impact of change on the international economy requires special attention. The differing experiences of individual countries within a region should also be explored with special attention to contextual factors which condition national developments. A document discussing the experience of trade unions in each region could be prepared in the light of feedback. Seminars should be organized according to the pattern of the present meeting. Discussion papers should describe experience in the regions, and these could serve as a basis for discussing strategies. The country studies being prepared in each region should also be presented to the participants.

Along with the three regional seminars proposed for Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Institute should explore the possibility of holding a fourth meeting for Central and Eastern Europe. The possibility of holding mini-conferences at country level might also be considered, as it is impossible to generalize about the trade union situation for an entire region such as Africa. For instance, South Africa and Chad represent two extremes which cannot be equated with mainstream Africa. The challenges facing unions in Africa should be addressed in relation to the relevant sub-region.

1.3.2 Other follow-up activities

The papers prepared for this meeting by Richard Hyman, Robert Taylor, and Henk Thomas should be placed on the web-site. Other papers of a similar nature could be posted on the same site. A report of the present meeting should also appear on the network web-site.

The authors of the country studies should be listed for the information of meeting participants. They should be invited to join the network, and their attention should be drawn to the issues discussed at the present meeting. They should be encouraged to collaborate closely with trade unions in the respective countries to ensure that their studies reflect the interactive exercise.

2. Themes for research and dissemination within the network

Three papers were specially prepared for the meeting: (i) "An emerging agenda for trade unions?" by Richard Hyman; (ii) "Trade unions as development partners" by Henk Thomas; and (iii) "Trade unions and transnational industrial relations" by Robert Taylor. The paragraphs below summarize the discussion on these papers.

2.1 An emerging agenda for trade unions?

Richard Hyman mapped out an emerging agenda for trade unions around the themes of: flexibility, security, opportunity, democracy and community. Research along these lines would help mobilize ideas and build a firm ideological basis for the unions. Without an ideology unions will find it difficult to recapture their organizational strength. The union agenda has to relate to new workers, taking into account potentially organizable groups, such as women workers. The participants made a number of observations in response to the points made by Hyman.

Unions need to pay special attention to mobilization and solidarity. They will remain strong and influential if they mobilize and maintain the unity of all workers. Organization is an essential element of trade union activities. In developing countries, unions try to target workers with poorer working conditions, such as those in the export processing zones. Too often the governments of these countries oppose the organization of such workers. Unions are also making a conscious effort to organize workers in the informal sector.

Unions have to look for ways of gaining public support for organization, and alliances with NGOs are a strategic option to be pursued. Union relations with NGOs and strategies to collaborate with them need to be thought through, as the constituencies of organized labour are different from those of community organizations. Unions should aim for short- or long-term alliances with other associations sharing their social objectives. Alliances and coalitions with NGOs already exist in a number of countries and in a variety of fields, especially for the defence of human rights. Unions should, however, make sure that alliances are forged only with genuine NGOs which are accountable to their constituents.

Unions have always been guided by a concern for equity. Mobilization and ideology are very important to them; solidarity has always been an important element in their organizing efforts. The craft unions of the 19th century were based on solidarity. These associations gave dignity to labour and to the working classes and their values were duly incorporated into the mass production regimes of the 20th century. However, solidarity faces difficulties in a world where labour is likely to become polarized. Therefore, unions should emphasize this theme in their agenda, stressing care of the unemployed and the creation of social security schemes. In order to recapture the ideological initiative of solidarity, unions should make freedom and justice the central themes of their campaigns. They also need to build support and consensus around these objectives in society as a whole.

Trade unions should promote the flexibility which enhances workers' capabilities and combine this with an assertive defence of workers' interests. Everywhere there are problems associated with flexibility and informality in the labour markets. In Africa, flexibility is viewed with suspicion by the unions since the term is associated with productivity and competitiveness. Competitiveness has to be balanced with social cohesion. The new agenda for trade unions should therefore include a "social dimension" ensuring a minimum level of security with regard to employment and working conditions. Basic protection against dismissal should be provided. The union agenda should also pay attention to the right to a minimum wage. These rights tend to be ignored in the name of flexibility.

Fundamental workers' rights are essential elements which the labour movement cannot afford to ignore. Core labour standards provide a solid foundation for the unions to stand on even in times marked by anti-unionism. Nobody today could claim to be in favour of child labour, discrimination or slavery.

"Leading the future rather than defending the past" should figure on the agenda for discussion by unions. They should consider themes which are likely to contribute to a broad vision of society, such as technological progress and the development of global markets which are bringing about far-reaching change. Trade unions have always argued for regulated labour markets. Over the past few years, they have been building a solid basis for a positive agenda in this field, so that they are now in a position to influence the social policies of individual countries through global organizations. The investment treaties being adopted in many countries are usually silent on the subject of labour rights. It is time for the unions to enter the multilateral framework and discuss the responsibilities of capital and the rights of labour. In this context, it would be worth attempting to map out social approaches and strategies in the different regions. It would be most useful to have a comparative picture of union presence, labour law and social policy in most countries of the world - as reflected in the adoption of social security schemes and fair labour practices.

The dominant neo-liberal doctrine poses a new challenge to the unions, which believe that it has created increasing disparities in an unstable economic, social and political environment. The Asian crisis is a good example of this. A renewed approach to regulation has to be adopted, taking account of the new technologies. More thought should be given to the question of regulation at global level. The trade unions have a long list of claims for protection of the life, health and well-being of workers as well as solid arguments in support of these claims.

Another issue is local development strategy based on the provision of union services. The early stages of industrialization were a very painful experience for workers in Europe and their suffering was ultimately mitigated through local initiatives which were instrumental in reducing mortality rates and improving living standards. Services such as health and education were provided through collective action and not through government programmes. One lesson is that democracy and political action at local level can energize people to make collective efforts and thus to obtain improved living standards. The micro level policies of local institutions, when supported by trade unions, can become powerful tools for stimulating domestic demand. The unions are not unwelcome obtrusions but entities which can make a significant contribution to society.

2.2 Trade unions as development partners

Henk Thomas pointed out that union participation in development should become an area for further research, which could help correct the misconception held by the development community that trade unions are part of the problem rather than the solution. This research could establish a strong case for the participation of unions in development programmes, in collaboration with donor agencies and global financial institutions. He emphasized that unions are key partners in civil society. There are useful lessons to be learned from union collaboration with development institutions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The observations made in response to the paper are summarized below.

It was considered important to trace the regional perspectives on trade union strategies for development. Fundamental changes are taking place in many regions, especially in Asia. Many Asian countries have invested in education and an urban middle class is beginning to emerge; institutions sponsored by the state are required to address the new types of social problems. Unions are looking for a social role, taking into account the characteristics of the region. Unions in Africa, Europe and Latin America are also trying to define a new role for themselves in relation to social policies. In Africa, restructuring is an ongoing problem, and in many Latin American countries the state's role is diminishing and the unions are having to deal with individual companies.

Trade unions would do well to coordinate their strategies with the support of global financial institutions and work towards a universal acceptance of the codes of conduct governing labour standards. The World Bank is gradually accepting the union concept that freedom of association and collective bargaining are conditions which, when recognized, can open new doors to development. However, the Bank insists on making enterprises competitive and argues for more decentralized collective bargaining. It is important to develop an institutional framework at the central level which is supple, and which would ensure the necessary coordination. With the support of financial institutions there is a need to develop codes of conduct aimed at guaranteeing social as well as financial stability.

Trade unions should not try to become surrogates for donor agencies. They are not meant to play a surrogate role, especially since aid has been a major distorting factor in many developing countries. Unions should be cautious about an uncritical acceptance of the logic of privatization and property rights. They should make sure that they are in the forefront, defending growth and equity. At international level, their role should be to scrutinize the implications of development cooperation and play a positive role in institution building.

With regard to the role of unions as development partners, the following issues deserve special consideration: first, the primary mission of unions is to defend workers' rights, and that requires sustained pressure on governments. Social dialogue is successful when unions build up their ability to exert pressure. Union muscle is equally important in achieving better results from consultation and co-determination. Second, unions should involve themselves in providing services at local level and they should integrate those services into their agenda. Finally, unions should strengthen partnerships among themselves, pooling their resources, and creating unitary structures.

The development role of unions may be linked to three specific aspects: society, enterprises and human rights. In society, unions should be able to influence macro economic policies, especially when these are dictated by external institutions. As for enterprises, a distinction has to be drawn between large and small enterprises, which require different approaches. In small enterprises the union priority should be to mobilize workers. On issues related to human rights, the unions should try to be creative and build institutions which can promote social justice.

2.3 Trade unions and transnational industrial relations

Robert Taylor highlighted the following aspects of his paper on the above theme.

Unions defy pessimism. Their attitudes are changing at international level. The aim of international trade secretariats is to seek practical solutions and to accommodate the forces of the global market. They realize that cooperating with transnational corporations is important for the promotion of labour standards at global level. Global financial institutions, in particular the World Bank and the IMF, are responding to the situation in a positive way. The supply chains built by transnational corporations have made the MNC aware of the need to secure the support of workers and their unions to ensure the smooth running of their operations. International cooperation and networking among the unions have led to a situation where global corporations are beginning to accept the unions as partners. Union coalitions inside the transnational corporations can crucially influence the corporations' attitude towards their employees in developing countries.

There are clear signs of emerging regionalization in the trade union agenda in Europe, but its effectiveness will depend on how it resonates at the workplace. Whether the social accords and mutual gains in specific companies will extend to the global level remains to be seen. Here again there are some hopeful signs. The crucial question is how the unions can find a global role and institutionalize ways of giving workers a voice thereby ensuring long-term social stability.

The discussion on of the paper covered the following points.

Optimism about the positive approach of international financial institutions is somewhat misplaced. In many cases, they remain hostile and tend to regard the unions as cartels which block the working of the market. One theme which runs through their discourse is that economic growth and labour standards are not necessarily compatible. The argument that global corporations are increasingly accepting the unions is not entirely true either. Many corporations are forced to treat their workers decently in some, but not all, countries. More often than not, national labour standards are changed in response to the business strategies of global corporations. In spite of these disadvantages, trade unions are destined to play an important role, since they are uniquely endowed to influence social stability in the long run. Stability has become a dominant theme, especially since the East Asian crisis when capital failed to meet its social responsibilities in the regions concerned.

In developing countries, there are instances of global corporations preventing the growth of trade unions. Too often the labour-management committees fostered by the corporations are compelled to work in a union-free environment. The rights of labour tend to be ignored or set aside in non-union firms. In Central America, for example, there are serious problems in organizing workers on account of the anti-union practices of corporations, so much so that a global strategy

is needed to combat the situation. Trade unions in some Asian countries have tried to meet this challenge by coordinating their activities under a regional Trade Union Council. In the ASEAN region, unions, under the auspices of a Council, have been meeting to discuss issues of common concern. The Council has also had a visible presence in discussions on the ASEAN Free Trade Association (AFTA). Such cooperation has led to the unions being granted an observer status in the AFTA. A similar outcome has also been reported from the Maghreb region of Africa where the unions have collaborated and adopted a social charter on minimum labour standards.

Governance of enterprises at global level has led the unions to adopt different strategies which may be listed as follows: (i) *Solidarity action*. When a dispute arises in a particular enterprise or a group of enterprises in one country, trade union assistance could be offered from other countries as part of a well organized campaign. Unions often work with International Trade Secretariats and mobilize solidarity action. (ii) *International collective bargaining*. More and more companies are willing to work in an atmosphere of consultation and information sharing. Japanese and US companies working in Europe are obliged to consult European workers. They may adopt the same policy in their own country. (iii) *Codes of conduct*. The model code of the ICFTU is followed by more companies incorporated in the supply chain of global production. However, the monitoring of codes is still a problem. (iv) *Work in export processing zones*. Unions work towards organizing workers and gaining their support. (v) *Work with pension funds*. Because the funds come mainly from workers contributions and savings, the unions try to influence investment strategies which would favour countries having respect for workers' rights. (vi) *Dialogue* with employers, international and regional organizations, and other bodies. One example at international level is the World Economic Forum in Davos, now being used by unions to expound their views and position. In all these fora the union message is that they can ensure social stability, which is an essential part of good governance.

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