



International
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Executive Summary

Trade unions and the global crisis Labour's visions, strategies and responses

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Within three years of the outbreak of the latest global financial crisis, the economic mood appears to have gone back to business as usual. Little has been done to address the root causes of the crisis; indeed, after a short revival of corporatist social dialogue in some countries, more workers are being pushed into precarious employment, and austerity packages are making working people, their families and pensioners pay for the crisis.

This collection of essays looks at how labour can respond to the existing highly unequal, crisis-prone and unsustainable world economic order. Bringing the views of activists and researchers from the trade union movement together with those of academics, the varied contributions range from short-term strategies and actions to medium and long-term policies, and to alternative visions and discourses that challenge the current development paradigm. The authors also take an unflinching look at the labour movement itself, discussing its successes and failures during the crisis and proposing strategies for change.

There are three main threads of argument in this volume, reflected in the three parts into which it is divided. The first takes a broad perspective, challenging the mainstream analysis of the impact of the crisis on labour and proposing possible alternatives, either specifically to address the crisis or to embark on a more transformational project beyond the logic of the prevailing capitalist orthodoxy. The five chapters here provide alternative narratives and challenge mainstream discourses on the nature of the crisis and its impact on labour by pointing out the basic structural deficits of the dominant economic order and exploring

fundamental options. For the authors, such options are built on equality and solidarity, workplace democracy and socio-ecological sustainability as well as on the mobilization of movements, alliances and coalitions for emancipatory transformation. The first chapter identifies a new labour paradigm emerging in the global South which treats decent work not as obstacle but as an alternative path to economic development. Using the concept of a decent work deficit, the author looks at how in South Africa labour and the Government have sought to overcome this deficit. A second essay examines connections between social experiments and various theoretical models in an effort to define alternatives to capitalism. Three further essays challenge mainstream assumptions in various ways. One raises the questions of whether a solution can be found for the “polycrisis” capitalism now faces, and if a greener, more sustainable economy poses fundamental challenges to the premium placed on continuous economic growth. Another analyses the “corporate view of society” and advocates more democratic approaches to economic and industrial management that are more centred on positive and equal worker participation in decision-making and the abolition of hierarchical employment relationships. The final chapter in this group argues that labour needs to focus more on the political causes of its weakness, for example the assaults it experienced under the Governments of Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Reagan in the United States, and the impositions it is currently suffering in the course of labour market “reforms”.

The second set of essays addresses labour’s responses to the financial crisis and to the current model of globalization, particularly the deregulation of labour and financial markets. The case studies in this segment highlight some of the pertinent transnational approaches being developed. They focus on the labour rights strategies adopted by the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), a Global Union federation that represents workers in a wide range of transport industries, on how Global Unions have cooperated in mobilizing efforts to re-regulate private equity funds at various levels, on the role of international framework agreements in promoting labour rights in the absence of a regulatory context at the global level and with weak enforcement at the national level in Europe, and on the politics of corporate control and corporate governance in the European Union and the role of labour in influencing EU policies.

The volume's third part focuses on labour responses within a variety of national settings, namely Canada, China, Nepal, New Zealand, Turkey and the United States. The chapters here examine how labour at the national level is responding to the crisis in particular and to the prevailing political economy in general. In doing so, they highlight the various factors and forces that influence the variety of responses undertaken by labour. These chapters highlight that there is no single set of strategies used by labour in taking on the challenges posed by the crisis and the prevailing politico-economic model. Each national setting of institutions, actors and historical developments requires specific responses. Nevertheless, each of them shows that unions can learn from each other and in many cases may even be able to – and need to – cooperate in developing and initiating their responses. As the authors show, whether in Canada, China or Turkey, the outcomes will have long-term ramifications for unions in other countries as well.

The richly diverse essays presented in this volume explore a broad range of topics within the overall theme of trade union responses to the global crisis. Together, they enable the reader to consider the relevance of a number of fundamental issues in conjunction with more specific strategic and policy questions facing labour. Indeed, many of the contributors address the need for re-conceptualizing “trade unionism” in order to counter the attacks on working people. Building solidarity locally both to protect and improve existing working conditions and to define new, cooperative and self-determined approaches is crucial to effective response. It is just as important to link the local to the national and the global dimension in the context of political, economic and environmental strategies.

As a collection of ideas, analyses and information, this volume does not represent a single manifesto for a global union response to the economic and fiscal crisis or even in a more general way to the recurring crises of capitalism. It does, however, offer a possible point of orientation and a strong stimulus for debate, both within the labour movement and beyond.

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