CALL FOR PAPERS AND WORKSHOP

Trade Unions and Cooperatives: Challenges and Perspectives

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The current financial crisis has laid bare some glaring deficiencies of the dominant system of governance of enterprise. Financial institutions have failed in their role as providers of capital for the real economy while multinationals have proven ultimately disloyal to their stakeholders. The crisis is thus creating a new context to reconsider the dominant governance and organizational system of both financial and productive enterprises.

In search for more sustainable forms of enterprises, there is a renewed interest in cooperatives. Indeed, worker cooperatives have not only proven resilient to the crisis, but financial cooperatives have generally fared much better than traditional banks. Tellingly, in recent years, trade unions and their members, both North and South, have turned to the cooperative model in attempts to save their jobs.

The trade union and cooperative movements share a parallel history having emerged at the beginning of the industrial era, and having provided, in their own ways, responses to the insecurities brought about by the development of capitalist social relations. Yet the relationship while often complementary has not been without its challenges.

This call for papers is interested in contributions that would document the developments that have arisen in recent years:

- Despite their demonstrated resilience, viability, and potential, worker cooperatives generally remain marginal economic players, what are the obstacles that stand in the way of establishing and strengthening them? And how can trade unions help with it?

- Worker cooperatives have been set up as a response to plant closures and/or delocalisations across different times. What has been the role of trade unions in facilitating the creation of such cooperatives, what were the obstacles (organizational, financial, legal, and cultural) that needed to be overcome?

- The emergence of “social economy” enterprises that provide needed social services and in so doing creating a new model of social embeddedness for both workers and their clients. Such developments are often perceived by trade unions as a setback from the provision of such services by the public sector and a threat for job quality, yet with fiscal pressures and the growing needs, these initiatives have multiplied in recent years. What assessment can be made of social economy from a trade union point of view? Can the social economy provide a viable partner in the provision of social services and decent work?

- Cooperatives of self-employed workers in the informal economy, who cannot be organized in the traditional way, have provided them with voice. Trade unions have often lent support
to those workers through the creation of service cooperatives (saving and credit, housing, consumer cooperatives) to improve both their bargaining power and their livelihoods. Have these initiatives been successful and sustainable? What are their conditions of success? In what way do they change the relationship between trade unions and workers in the informal sector? How do they improve the working conditions of the self-employed?

- What are successful models of cohabitation between trade unions and worker cooperatives and what can they teach us? In the same vein, it is often asserted that worker cooperatives provide better working conditions and more meaningful work, but what is the evidence? What are the conditions that lead or inhibit the achievement of decent work in worker cooperatives?

The papers would ideally show how trade unions have been using the cooperative model and working with the cooperative movement to achieve economic, social and political objectives. This call for papers is thus particularly interested in case-studies that can provide lessons for trade union practitioners and co-operators internationally.

Papers should be no more than 7,000 words, excluding tables and references. Proposals will be received until February 2, 2013. Authors of the papers selected will be invited to present them at a workshop to be held in Geneva in May 2013 for eventual publication in the fall of 2013.

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