

Organizing a Global Labor Movement from Top and Bottom

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While the prospects for a global labor movement are ripe, working people and their supporters may fail to take full advantage of this historical opening. A potential barrier is the existence of a strategic myopia when it comes to the role of preexisting labor organizations at the national and international levels. Specifically, these higher-tier institutions are often viewed by labor activists and the rank-and-file as inherently autocratic and imperialistic, and are thus deemed to have little value for efforts at fostering global labor solidarity. A consequence is that many in the labor movement concentrate their energies solely at a local or community level, with the idea that it is only here that true progressive change can result. In terms of broader solidarity and resistance, it is felt that cross-regional and cross-national linkages will eventually develop to expand the struggle to a truly global level. In effect, it is presumed by many that a global labor movement will, and in fact must, be built strictly from the "bottom-up" (e.g. Brecher and Costello, 1994).

I by no means wish to undermine the value of bottom-up strategies for furthering the development of a global labor movement. Indeed, in recent years grass-roots initiatives and struggles have undeniably been enormously more successful in resisting capitalist exploitation, furthering local interests, and establishing equitable linkages between working peoples around the world than their counterparts at the national and international levels. However, such bottom-up strategies do need to be complemented by "top-down" initiatives as well, including such actions as the implementation of global labor standards, accelerated cross-border organizing by national and international unions, and transnational coordination and cooperation between various peak-level labor confederations. Further, global level initiatives like these can in part be accomplished by transforming existing institutions, rather than by the lengthy creation of entirely new international worker organizations from the bottom-up.

The trepidation and hesitation with which working people approach existing national and international labor institutions is certainly warranted. Taking the AFL-CIO as one example, it is certainly understandable why rank-and-file workers even in the United States, let alone in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, would resent and mistrust collaborating with this organization. At home, the AFL-CIO leadership spent decades stifling domestic labor militancy and channeling it into an acquiescent "business unionism" that supported, rather than challenged, U.S. capitalism. This support was even more salient abroad, as the AFL-CIO used its Department of International Affairs to implement the anti-Communist foreign policy of the U.S. government and to ensure the continued global hegemony of American capital (e.g., Bina and Davis, 1993: 158-160; Borgers, 1996: 78-79; Howard, 1995: 371).

If anything, then, as an established labor organization operating at the transnational level, the AFL-CIO has long hindered, rather than facilitated, the prospects for a global labor movement. Despite this inglorious history, the AFL-CIO has in recent years moved,

however slightly, toward a more progressive position. Armbruster (1995: 78), for example, cites the importance of the AFL-CIO's membership in the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM), as well as the utilization of its "vast organizational resources", in the success of corporate campaigns in Mexico. Frundt (1996: 396-397) also lauds the AFL-CIO's involvement with the CJM, and additionally notes the federation's involvement with progressive labor groups in countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile.

This shift in AFL-CIO strategy is attributable both to external and internal pressures. Externally, as put by Bina and Davis (1993: 160), "[t]he global integration of capitalist production has undermined the material conditions that have supported [the] AFL-CIO's traditionally nationalist, class-collaborationist posture". In effect, the need for a global response to global capital has become an unavoidable reality. Internally, progressive change has emanated both from the bottom and from the top of organizations. Beginning in the mid-1980s, rank-and-file activists and several member unions successfully challenged the AFL-CIO leadership on its stance toward Central America, notably its support of the Reagan Administration's Nicaraguan policy (Howard, 1995: 376). In the mid 1990s, the AFL-CIO leadership itself changed, with a coalition coming to power that, at least on paper, appeared more attuned to the needs of rank-and-file workers both within and, importantly, outside the United States (Borgers, 1996: 71-72).

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The case of the AFL-CIO points to a fact that proponents of a strictly bottom-up organizing strategy frequently lose sight of: organizations and their structures are human creations and are therefore malleable. The "Michelsian paradigm" that has long dominated thinking about formal organizations, and about labor organizations in particular, needs to be fully discarded (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, 1996). Large-scale bureaucratic organizations do not all inevitably slide into oligarchy, and those that do need not remain that way. The democratization of existing institutions for the representation of worker interests, albeit extremely difficult, is always a possibility. Overall, given the pace with which the globalization of production proceeds, workers of the world may not have the luxury of waiting for a new global labor movement to be built anew from the bottom-up. It might be better to also consider working with what we already have at the "top," and thus conduct the struggle on two fronts.

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