

Forum: Problems and Prospects for a Global Labor Movement

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ABSTRACT:

What are the roles for local, national, and international labor and worker organizations in struggles against intensified global integration? How do we achieve these possibilities? Inside this issue are five PEWS members' answers.

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The Problems and the Prospects

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Rapidly globalizing capital obviously calls forth the need for a global labor movement. If capital can shift production from one country to the next in an effort to find the lowest living standards and most politically oppressed workers, then the efforts of workers to improve their conditions anywhere will be undone. Workers worldwide need to join together in an effort to set standards and protect the political rights of all, so that capital cannot pit one group against another in a race to the bottom.

The necessity is so obvious that it barely needs stating, yet the pitfalls in achieving this objective are legion. I mention only a few:

1. Poor countries need industrial development. Joining globalizing capitalism is the only option available to achieve this goal, or at least so it seems. No other viable models exist today (even if we might want to experiment with alternatives). What poor countries have to offer capital is their workforce at bargain prices. Both workers and governments can see that, if demands for improved conditions come too quickly, all will be lost. Capital and industry will flee. (It matters not that the "need" for industrial development arises from the erosion of alternative economies brought on by multinational corporations. The current reality is what it is, and insistently demands solutions now.)
2. Efforts by workers and unions in the richer countries to reach out to workers in poorer countries smell of protectionism. Workers in the richer countries want to protect their jobs against flight, which translates to mean that they don't want those jobs to move to the poorer countries. To workers in the poorer countries, this seems like selfishly holding on to an advantage and not being willing to share it. Why should an impoverished worker who cannot feed her family fight to stop a factory from moving to her country where she might get a job?
3. The odor of protectionism is not diminished by the history of the AFL-CIO in Latin America and other areas of the world (to use a U.S. example). The U.S. working class, at least as represented by some of its political alliances, has given the appearance of aligning itself with imperialist domination. Why should workers in poor countries support the fights of such "allies" now that they are suddenly waking up to the fact that global capitalism hurts them too? Where was the AFL-CIO when the marines were invading their country and destroying its democratic movements?
4. What is our model for international labor organizing? Do we mean that union organizers from the richer countries send their representatives south to "help their little brown brothers and sisters"? Too often, unfortunately, that is the way it looks. From the perspective of workers in poor countries, the response is likely to be: "Who the hell are you to help us? You are part of the problem, not part of the solution. Get out of here and let us figure out our own problems." (Needless to say, both the parallels to racism within

a country, and the reality of racism in relation to workers in poorer countries, are evident.)

These things said, is there any hope for the development of a global labor movement? Here are a few signs of hope or possibility:

1. To the extent that the U.S. (again limiting ourselves to U.S. examples) workforce and labor movement comes to consist and be led by people of color, immigrants and women, the chances of forming alliances across borders improve.
2. International organizing efforts need to be sensitive to the dangers of capital flight from poor countries to even poorer countries. Thus support efforts need to include in their demands the idea that flight is not acceptable.
3. Consumer movements are showing a new potential for putting pressure on companies to improve their work standards even as workers themselves are not put in jeopardy. Similarly, corporate campaign-style strategies recently developed by unions can be used to put pressure on global companies just as they can be used for domestic campaigns.
4. Unions from the richer countries need to be engaged in a continual struggle to negate their own imperialistic tendencies. They need to respect indigenous leadership, and give up on trying to control what happens, even if they have given money in support of the movement. Simply giving money to local labor movements, without strings attached, may be the best thing the AFL-CIO could do.
5. We all need to recognize that the solutions to global capitalism are not to be found in the labor movement alone, because it operates within the constraints of capitalism. We need to develop transnational political movements that attempt to posit alternatives about the way both the world's production system, and the world's product, can be more equitably distributed within and between nations.

Of course I recognize that as we try to settle the differences among ourselves, the international capitalist class keeps getting fatter and more powerful. The need to find a solution to the conundrum of working together to fight effectively against them is intense. We should keep on evolving new tactics for better communication, understanding, cooperation and support. And we in the U.S. need to be especially sensitive to what workers in poor countries need and want.