

An Evaluation of the Global Role of Trade Unions in the 21st Century

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I. Introduction:

The Law Dictionary has adopted the definition of Trade Unions as has been provided under the provisions of the Trade Unions Act of 1871, an Act passed by the Parliament of the United Kingdom. Accordingly, trade unions mean a combination or association of men employed in the same trade, (usually a manual or mechanical trade,) united for the purpose of regulating the customs and standards of their trade, fixing prices or hours of labor, influencing the relations of employer and employed, enlarging or maintaining their rights and privileges, and other similar objects.²

Further, the Oxford Dictionary defines Trade unions as an organized association of workers in a trade, group of trades, or profession, formed to protect and further their rights and interests.

The origins of unions' existence can be traced back to the 18th century, when the rapid expansion of industrial society attracted women, children and immigrants to the work force in large numbers. Trade unions were also endorsed by the Catholic Church towards the end of the 19th Century. The existence of a strong and recognized trade union is a prerequisite to industrial peace. Decisions taken through the process of collective bargaining and negotiations between employer and unions are more influential. Trade unions play an important role and are helpful in effective communication between the workers and the management. They provide the advice and support to ensure that the differences of opinion do not turn into major conflicts. The central function of a trade union is to represent people at work. But they also have a wider role in protecting their interests. They also play an important educational role, organizing courses for their members on a wide range of matters. Seeking a healthy and safe working environment is also prominent feature of union activity.

II. Emergence of Trade Unions:

The trade unions sprang up during the early stage of capitalism as an organization aimed at improving the economic conditions of the workers within the framework of the existing capitalist system. At first they considered it as their task to fight only the individual capitalists in defense of the immediate professional workers' interests, without affecting the

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² Available at: <http://thelawdictionary.org/trade-union/>

foundations of capitalist exploitation and without going beyond the pale of the capitalist industrial social organization. The abolition of competition among workers of a given trade, the restricted access of new workers to it and the resorting in extreme cases to strikes - those were the usual methods used by the old trade unions in order to obtain higher wages, shorter working hours and better working conditions.

With the trade methods of struggle, the unions in the different countries did, indeed, achieve quite a few results. The despotic arbitrariness of the boss towards the workers at the enterprises was restricted. The workers won the right to intervene, through their trade unions, in the settlement of relations between labour and capital. A rise in the average wage level was also obtained as compared with the worker's former exceedingly miserable conditions, as well as shorter working hours, which in the past the capitalists could freely prolong to the physically utmost possible limits.

Moreover, the sums spent by the trade unions during periods of unemployment not only alleviate the heavy lot of the unemployed, but also help to avoid intense competition between unemployed and employed, thus preventing a lowering of wages and the former unrestricted deterioration of general working conditions.³

III. The Need for Unions, the Right to Strike and Collective Bargaining:

Modern industrial relations requires that workers be afforded the basic right to form unions and those unions should be granted the right to bargain collectively with employers and to strike if a negotiated settlement is not reached. The social advantages gained from the provision of those rights are revealed in the experiences of industrialized countries. The advantages include the fact that workers are entitled to a say in the determination of their employment and working conditions. Not only is such input justified on rights grounds, but in addition, contemporary experience shows that to compete in world markets requires the active participation and commitment of the work force in order to meet quality and product performance standards.

Experience in the industrialized countries also shows that unions, the right to strike, and collective bargaining are more likely to produce outcomes that are acceptable to workers and employers as compared to solutions that are imposed by governments or other third parties. Not only are employers and workers more likely to develop solutions that meet their own needs, these parties are also more likely to feel a commitment to making such solutions

³ Georgi Dimitrov, 'The Tasks of the Trade Unions', *Communist Trade Union Library* No. 3, February, 1920.

Available at:

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1920/tasks.htm>

work. Imposed employment terms in contrast are often resented and resisted in part because the parties who must live with these terms had little say in their development. Thus, the process through which employment terms are set is often as important as the actual terms themselves. Collective bargaining has the advantage of being a process that is "owned" by the parties involved.

Since collective bargaining is a healthy process, it should be applied widely. This suggests that the right to strike should be granted in nearly all cases. There may arise some instances where an alternative to the right to strike is necessary, yet experience demonstrates that the use of strike alternatives should be limited. It makes sense, for example, to exempt certain public services, such as police, fire-fighter, or emergency medical care, from the right to strike.⁴

IV. Global Relevance of Trade Unions:

As long as there are workers whose rights are being infringed, or who work under substandard conditions, there will be a need for the trade union movement, or something very much like it.

Basic workers' rights are protected under national laws in many countries. They are also clearly stated in important international instruments, notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights agreed by the United Nations in 1948. Article 23 of the Declaration says:

"Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests".

These laws and international instruments were fought for by generations of workers and their trade unions, working together locally, nationally and internationally. Some would say that it was really the trade union movement, working through the International Labour Organisation (ILO), that invented the modern human rights system.

This crisis facing workers can sometimes result in a retreat into protectionism and even racism. But a doctrine of 'us first' cannot succeed. In a global economy where workers across the world are pitted against each other, there are always other workers in an even worse situation - particularly where they cannot freely organise their own trade unions. They can be exploited by transnational enterprises in what has been called a 'race to the bottom'.

⁴ Harry C. Katz, Sarosh Kuruvilla and Lowell Turner, 'Trade Unions and Collective Bargaining', Education and Social Policy Department, The World Bank, February 1993, WPS 1099. Available at: http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/1999/04/30/000009265_3961004060600/Rendered/PDF/multi_page.pdf

A more effective way of sustaining livelihoods is for workers to strengthen their international solidarity. Workers' rights and conditions in one place can be better protected if they are not undermined elsewhere.

Workers are increasingly linked together across borders by virtue of being employed by the same multinational employer or by working in the same global production or distribution chain. The trade union movement is one of the most dynamic movements that organises internationally to tackle the problems of free market globalisation.

The role of trade unions has changed significantly over the past 30 years. Global competition, a growing trend in outsourcing, legal constraints, and employer sponsored forms of employee participation have combined in precipitating a significant fall in union membership and the coverage of collective bargaining. The coming decade promises to be equally challenging for the trade union movement. How they respond to the challenges and opportunities over the next few years will be crucial in determining their level of influence at work and beyond in the future.⁵

Now, at the dawn of the 21st century some important overthrows have taken place in the International balance of forces. These overthrows have given serious supremacy to the forces of capital at the expense of the working class. The temporary sovereignty of capital intensifies capitalist exploitation against people and states, the wealth that the working class produces is gathered in the hands of a few strong people around the world.

The progress of science and technology in all fields, the rapid use of new technologies in the productive process is developed for the increase of profits of the transnational corporations.

While in a society without exploitation of man-by-man new technologies should, as a human achievement, be of service to man, in order for him to work less, to earn more, to enjoy better occupational hygiene and safety conditions, to have more free time, better opportunities in entertainment, culture, education and healthcare. That is to live better and longer. Nowadays, this not only does not happen, but exploitation is intensified while such great wealth is being concentrated in the pockets of few. 115 million children remain illiterate. A child dies each 3,6 seconds. In New Orleans, USA, 1.577 poor people died. In the countries of European Union the unemployed exceed 30 million. According to UNESCO more than 921 million people live in dens. This is the true image in most capitalist

⁵ Chris F. Wright, "What Role for Trade Unions in Future Workplace Relations?", ACAS Future of Workplace Relations Discussion Paper Series, September 2011.

Available at:

http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/g/m/What_role_for_trade_unions_in_future_workplace_relations.pdf

countries, independent of whether neo-liberal, conservative, or social democratic powers are governing.

In the beginning of the 21st century, we see that neo-colonialism is emerging again strengthened, with new characteristics and elements. In Africa, many countries experience intense pressure from the USA. The same is true for Latin America. The USA is worried by the intense development of People's Republic of China. In the former socialist countries of Europe, the working class works in feudal conditions. Racism, neo-fascism, xenophobia are gradually reappearing. The revolt of immigrants in France and in the USA proves that.

So against this overall picture the following issues arise for the international trade union movement:

- What type of trade union do the workers need today?
- What strategies and tactics have to be employed?
- What should be jettisoned and what maintained?
- How new are the economic theories of today against those defined 150 years ago at the commencement of the international trade union struggle?
- Should a trade union be judged by its words or by its actions and inactions?

The new World Federation of Trade Unions(WFTU) leadership started on a new path based on the decisions of the 15th World Trade union Congress held in Cuba in December, 2005 and encapsulated in the final declaration entitled the **Havana Consensus**.

In the course of 2006 these principles were developed in substantial dialogue on contemporary issues between affiliates, friendly organizations and individuals from the world trade union movement in a series of meetings organized by the WFTU leadership.

Emerging from these discussions and the Havana Consensus paper is a list of ten priorities the WFTU has nominated for itself in these challenging times. They are as follows:

1. In order, for the Labour and Trade Union Movement to be capable of expressing the contemporary demands of the Working Class it has to be **guided by the principles of class struggle and militant orientation**. The study of labour movement's history the last 200 years proves that what the International Working Class has achieved had been achieved by struggle. Nowhere in the world, no employer and no capitalist government has ever resolved working class problems by its own initiative. Our movement does not accept the theories of rejecting class oriented struggles.

2. WFTU believes in the **Independence of Trade Union organisations from monopolies and transnational corporations**. We live in a society divided into classes, therefore trade unions represent Working Class with its contemporary characteristics, aiming at a wide coalition with broad popular strata. Trade Union movement must be organisationally independent from political parties. To fight back against the policies of governments that are harmful to popular strata. To be financially independent so as not to depend on secret sources.
3. Today, there is a serious drawback in the **issues of Democratic and Trade Union Liberties** due to employer terrorism and state violence. The latest examples against the strikers of South Korea, the governmental violence against the striking teachers in Mexico, the barbarity of the Colombian regime against struggling trade unionists and the modern surveillance systems in Europe, the threats against the construction workers in Australia, and thousands of other cases are undeniable facts. The WFTU is ringing the bell of danger for progressive people about human rights that are been attacked under the pretext of the struggle against terrorism, by the governments of the USA, the UK and their allies. The struggle for democracy and free trade union action is constant but also concrete.
4. In a period of imperialist madness, the **struggle for Peace** is for the class oriented trade union movement a principal task. The first victims of USA's and NATO's aggressiveness are workers and popular strata. They are killed in battlefields, in their homes and workplaces; they are burdened with the task of recovering from wars' consequences. **International Peace** will help all peoples in all developing countries. Therefore, WFTU is present in the development of a wide, mass antiwar movement and underlines that **Internationalism and Workers' Solidarity** are key points for the struggling movement with a new and rich content. WFTU is in favour of the abolition and destruction of all nuclear weapons from all countries without exception.
5. The whole of humanity realises that in the last 15 years the negative correlation of forces which dominates in International Organisations such as the UN, legalise the illegal and aggressive acts of US governments. This is a very negative development. **The Labour and Trade Union movement, developing a wide, mass movement, demands for a UN just and independent from the powerful of the earth**. Our era needs such International Organisations.

6. WFTU's new leadership assesses that trade unions need to obtain a **constant front against bureaucracy and elitism**, so as to regain authority, trust and acceptance. History teaches us that **the principles of collectiveness, criticism and democratic functioning** help the movement. Trade union leaders should be simple, be with simple people, love the Working Class and not become themselves wealthy allies of capital. True trade union leaders ought to educate the younger on the principles and values of labour movement. They ought to respect the base. To respect ordinary workers.
7. We live in the century of knowledge and information. Trans-national corporations try to keep knowledge and **specialisation for their cadres and managers**. **The necessity for workers to have access to and the right to knowledge, culture and Education** is more imperative than ever before. Within this framework, **Trade Union Education** provided through seminars, schools, groups, and institutes is useful to all workers. Research and science are necessary tools. They give further advantages to the trade union movement for it to address **youth, women, intellectuals, economic immigrants** whose entering trade unions will revive the labour movement. It is essential that new trade union members have a higher educational, cultural and intellectual level.
8. WFTU fights for the improvement of workers' lives, for the solution of their economic, social security and labour demands. Demands, which are being formed according to the era and its needs. According to the time and the place. They work for the participation of all workers in Trade Unions. For the establishing and the free functioning of Trade Union organisations in every country. At the same time, it is stated in the statute of the WFTU that the organisation will struggle for **the abolition of exploitation of man-by-man**. This qualitative element gives impetus to the Working Class's struggle and makes it the moving force of history in the construction of a society without social injustice, without wars, with democracy and freedom. With a right to knowledge and democratic media.
9. WFTU struggles against **cultural imperialism**, which aims at the distortion of History, which does not respect traditions, culture and the particularities of each nation, which tries through a multisided propaganda to impose the American way of life everywhere. Each nation, each country, each trade union movement has its own

history, its own characteristics. WFTU respects and values this. And calls upon the youth to study the culture and history of their nations.

10. WFTU states in the new page it has turned after its 15th Congress that it is ready to **cooperate and act along with other international trade union organisations, with national, regional and branch trade unions, independent from existing ideological and political differences, for the promotion of the international workers' interests.** The only criteria for every WFTU cooperation is equality, mutual respect, the acceptance of each other's differences and each time, a mutual designation of aims. The WFTU of today does not view trade unions as enemies. It sees enemies in capital and the Imperialists. A fundamental principal of WFTU was and is the **promotion of UNITY of all workers** independent of ideology, religion, colour, language and sex. This UNITY should promote the fighting characteristics of all trade unions and rally wide forces so that the struggle against capital is more massive and effective. In this fighting unity, poor peasants, the landless, self-employed, groups of people, who are concerned and worried about the world we are living in and its future, have a place.⁶

V. Conclusion:

Trade Unions have long been part of our nation's history, fighting for better pay, safer working conditions, health care and retirement benefits, education and civic participation. Unions have brought diverse voices together, and their struggles have elevated the working conditions, the standard of living and the recognition of not just their members, but of all who labor.

We live in the era of globalisation, whose dominant element is neo-liberalism and the accumulation of excess power in the hands of the few. Globalisation has put national labour movements under severe pressure due to the increasing transnationalisation of production and informalisation of the economy. The increased international integration of production and supply chains prompted some unions to use international regulatory instruments as a way of maintaining and improving employment conditions in recent years.

There is a growing perception that the private sector is using human resource management strategies to hinder the development of the trade union. One of the fastest growing areas of education for professionals is that of local and international access to training in Business Administration at the certificate, diploma and bachelor's and master's level. A large number of graduates are

⁶ Available at: http://www.wftucentral.org/?page_id=40&language=en

forming human resource management associations in different countries, and there is a regional grouping of human resource management practitioners. Human resource management tends to adopt strategies which tend to challenge the trade union and which tend to de-emphasize industrial relations. Trade unions are being forced to evaluate their practices in relation to this development.

There is also a growing tendency among young entrants to the labour market to challenge the values and practices of the labour movement. Some of these young entrants are individuals who can gain significant personal benefits by leaving the trade union. Employers have also introduced a level of individualism into the workplace through emphasizing the personal contract as against the collective agreement, stressing personal compensation, and using other strategies to destabilize the collectivism which is the basis of trade unionism.

While political unionism is not practised to the extent of earlier decades, there is still some concern about the role which trade unions play in local partisan politics. In some instances, trade union bargaining and other activities are seriously affected by perceptions of the political role of the trade union.

The challenges facing the trade union as an institution demand a new focus on the trade union's role, and how it manages its business. Like other institutions, trade unions need to reflect, evaluate and adjust to a continuing process of keeping relevant. The growth of non-governmental organizations, and their acceptance at the international, regional and national level as co-spokespersons for the constituency of the trade union should be a wakeup call for trade unionists.