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Beacons of transnational solidarity

Trade unions are under pressure worldwide. Yet they find creative ways to make the world more just and inclusive

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The democratic space for working people is closing off across the world. The International Trade Union Confederation's Global Rights Index paints a bleak picture: workers are coming under a dual pressure.

On the one hand, an excessively raging financial capitalism demands ever higher returns, which leads to a downright milking dry of companies at the expense of employees. That results in precarious working conditions, an enlarged informal sector, pressure on wages and poorer security in the workplace. On the other hand, as requested by chambers of industry and commerce, collective agreement systems are being ground down, the right to strike limited, setting up trade unions is made more difficult while their sources of finance are drying up.

This suits the agenda of autocratic and nationalist forces, who want to erode freedom of opinion and association to get rid of the pesky trade unions. The toolbox of intimidation tactics against trade unions is further enriched by the looming danger of massive job losses through automation and digitalisation. There is a reason that the World Bank, in its vision of the future of work, makes the case for further flexibility in the workplace combined with lower minimum wages. The richest 1 per cent and all those who desire a flexible, atomised workforce like the idea of the digital day labourer.

In a world whose economic system increasingly produces exclusion, inequality and destroys the very livelihood of humankind, the workers' movement is possibly the last force for maintaining social cohesion, even more so across national borders. That's a lot to ask from a movement whose membership is declining in many places, whose political influence is dwindling and which is itself not free from short-term transactionalism and paternalism. And yet trade unions do manage to mobilise power resources and create inclusive solidarity. We see this on at least three levels.

New strategies, new successes

First, the trade union movement has overcome the old saying that only someone employed in the formal sector, and who is able to pay a set share of his wages for membership fees, can be a trade unionist. Not only have informally employed people long been in the majority, but, contrary to popular opinion, they are indeed organised – just in other forms of organisations.

It's fascinating how trade unions in India, Uganda, Nigeria and South Korea have bridged the gap between formally and informally employed people. They created new types of interest representation, obtained collective arrangements and have therefore, in some cases, increased their membership numbers dramatically.

Humane work in a digital, post-fossil fuel capitalism, and a successful socio-ecological transformation are both only possible by including the workers.

Yet, many places in the Global North are also overcoming this divide and give new and inclusive answers to the question of who is a worker. This way, domestic workers, courier drivers and temporary workers, for example, benefit both in a material sense as well as from a newly acquired dignity, acceptance and belonging.

Second, transnational solidarity has long been more than just a left-wing dream. It's the lived reality of the trade union movement. Long-term networking in multi-national companies (often strategically accompanied by the Global Union Federations) has enabled spectacular successes in openly anti-union firms such as Walmart, Amazon, Pepsi and recently Ryanair. Just a short while ago it would have been inconceivable that these companies would recognise trade unions and negotiate collective agreements.

The recipe for success in the cross-border development of trade unions lies consists of several important ingredients: articulating and accepting respective interests, acting patiently, transcending cultural differences and using strategic gateways by means of organising and campaigns. Workers who experience this solidarity no longer define 'we' as simply relating to a company or country.

'Together we are strong'

Third, trade unions expand opportunities for active participation. They are increasingly recognising that they only stand a chance if they become more democratic and participatory. This involves an active equality

policy, gender quotas or parity, supporting young and precariously employed workers, mentor programmes and LGBTIQ inclusion. Opening up to all working people expands the trade unions' agenda. The representation of interests beyond the workplace, an active connection to the community and alliances with the women's movement or the environmental movement give new meaning to the phrase 'together we are strong'.

If, on top of that, decisions are no longer made in backrooms and exclusive committees but instead with the help of member surveys and digital communication tools, then involvement and identification with one's own organisation will increase. On such a basis with active members, campaigns can be planned, disputes with the employer can be conducted and strikes kept up. This means that trade unions become places of collective action and develop their organisational power. Striking teachers and metal workers know the strength hidden in working together in solidarity and in industrial disputes.

Collective action and solidarity are possible in almost all (conflict) situations, and trade unions are getting better at mobilising their organisational power. But they also need institutional support and rules facilitating their actions. Therefore, trade unions will still have to defend the right of association and the right to strike, expand participation rights and create new regulations on multinational companies' duty of care.

This is all the more relevant since both digital economy's competition law and its investment and trade regime are currently negotiated. To represent the interests of working people, trade unions cannot avoid mobilising their social power: concepts of justice for the new economy have to be formulated and new alliances have to be built. Humane work in a digital, post-fossil fuel capitalism, and a successful socio-ecological transformation are both only possible by including the workers.



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