A New Social Unionism, Internationalism, Communication/Culture and Solidarity - in a Nutshell (2007)

[Source: Waterman, Peter. 2003. Appendix to 'Adventures of Emancipatory Labour Strategy as the New Global Movement Challenges International Unionism'. Journal of World-Systems Research, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2004, 217–53. http://jwsr.ucr.edu/archive/vol10/number1/pdf/jwsrv10n1-waterman.pdf.]

This is an attempt to combine, in the most compact form, ideas about a new kind of unionism appropriate for our present world (dis)order. These are about the four closely inter-related aspects of labour protest I have been working on for the last decade or so. I do not here go into the now familiar scenario of capitalist globalisation and union crisis, except to say that the Chinese ideograph for 'crisis' combines those for 'danger' and 'opportunity': What I do want to remind people about is that the labour movement has dramatically changed form with successive transformations of capitalism: from the local Guild to the national Craft Union, from the national Craft to the international Industrial Union.
We seem to urgently need a new form of labour self-articulation – articulation meaning both joining and expression – appropriate for both effective defence and counter-assertion against a radically new kind of capitalism of a highly-aggressive and literally destructive nature. It goes without saying, finally, that this whole argument is open to criticism, rejection, adaptation and surpassing – particularly by union activists and workers themselves.

A new social unionism

By a new social unionism is meant a labour movement surpassing existing models of 'economic', 'political' or 'political-economic' unionism, by addressing itself to all forms of work, by taking on sociocultural forms, and addressing itself to civil society. Such a union model would be one which, amongst other characteristics, would be:

- Struggling within and around waged work, not simply for better wages and conditions but for increased worker and union control over the labour process, investments, new technology, relocation, subcontracting, training and education policies. Such strategies and struggles should be carried out in dialogue and common action with affected communities and interests so as to avoid conflicts (e.g. with environmentalists, with women) and to positively increase the appeal of the demands;
- Struggling against hierarchical, authoritarian and technocratic working methods and relations, for socially-useful and environmentally- friendly products, for a reduction in the hours of work, for the distribution of that which is available and necessary, for the sharing of domestic work, and for an increase in free time for cultural self-development and self-realisation;
- Intimately related with the movements of other non-unionised or non-unionisable working classes or categories (the precariat, petty-commodity sector, homeworkers, peasants, housewives, technicians and professionals);
- Intimately articulated with other non- or multi-class democratic movements (base movements of churches, women's, residents', ecological, human-rights and peace movements, etc) in the effort to create a powerful and diverse civil society;
- Intimately articulated with other (potential) allies as an autonomous, equal and democratic partner, neither claiming to be, nor subordinating itself to, a 'vanguard' or 'primary' organization or power;
- Taking up the new social issues within society at large, as they arise for workers specifically and as they express themselves within the union itself (struggle against authoritarianism, majoritarianism, bureaucracy, sexism, racism, etc);
- Favouring shopfloor democracy and encouraging direct horizontal relations both between workers and between the workers and other popular/democratic social forces;
- Active on the terrain of education, culture and communication, stimulating worker and popular culture, supporting initiatives for democracy and pluralism both inside and outside the dominant institutions or media, locally, nationally, globally;
- Open to networking both within and between organisations, understanding the value of informal, horizontal, flexible coalitions, alliances and interest groups to stimulate organizational democracy, pluralism and innovation.

In so far as a new labour internationalism addresses itself to the problems of a globalised networked capitalism (of which interstate relations are but one part), this would have to see itself as part of a general global solidarity movement, from which it must learn and to which it must contribute. A new kind of labour internationalism implies, amongst other things:

- Moving from the international relations of union or other officials towards face-to-face relations of concerned laboring people at the shopfloor, community or grassroots level;
- Surpassing dependence on the centralised, bureaucratic and rigid model of the pyramidal international organisation by stimulating the self-empowering, decentralised, horizontal, democratic and flexible model of the international information network;
- Moving from an 'aid model' (one-way flows of money and material from the 'rich, powerful, free' unions, workers or others), to a 'solidarity model' (two-way or multi-directional flows of political support, information and ideas);
- Moving from verbal declarations, appeals and conferences to political activity, creative work, visits, or direct financial contributions (which will continue to be necessary) by the working people concerned;
- Basing international solidarity on the expressed daily needs, values and capacities of ordinary working people, not simply on those of their representatives;
- Recognising that whilst labour is not the privileged bearer of internationalism, it is essential to it, and therefore articulating itself with other democratic internationalisms, so as to reinforce wage-labour struggles and surpass a workerist internationalism;
- Overcoming ideological, political and financial dependency in international solidarity work by financing internationalist activities from worker or publicly-collected funds, and stimulating autonomous (independent of capital/state) research activities and policy formulation;
- Replacing the political/financial coercion, the private collusion and public silences of the traditional internationalisms, with a frank, friendly, constructive and public discourse of equals, made accessible to interested workers.
- Recognising that there is no single site or level of international struggle and that, whilst the shopfloor, grassroots and community may be the base, the traditional formal terrains can be used and can also be influenced;
- Recognising that the development of a new internationalism requires contributions from and discussion with labour movements in West, East and South, as well as within and between other socio-geographic regions.

Elements of such an understanding can be found within both international union pronouncements and practice. It is, I think, becoming the common sense amongst left labour internationalists, although some still seem to consider labour (or even union) internationalism as the one that leads, or ought to lead, the new wave of struggles against neo-liberal globalisation. Yet others are beginning to go beyond ideal types to spell out global labour/popular and democratic alternatives to 'globalisation-from-above' in both programmatic and relational terms.

Internationalism , labour internationalism , union internationalism

We need to distinguish between the concepts of 'internationalism', 'labour internationalism and 'union internationalism'. Within social movement discourse, *internationalism* is customarily associated with 19th century labour, with socialism and Marxism. It *may* be projected backwards so as to include the ancient religious universalisms, or the liberal cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment. And it *should* be extended, in both the 19th and 20th century, so as to include women's/feminist, pacifist, anti-imperial and human rights forms. In so far as it is limited to these two centuries, and to a 'world of nation states', we need a new term for the era of globalisation. Some talk of 'global solidarity', in so far as it is addressed to globalisation, its discontents and alternatives. As for *labour internationalism* this refers to a wide range of past and present labour-related ideas, strategies and practices, including those of co-operatives, labour and socialist parties, socialist intellectuals, culture, the media and even sport. As for *union internationalism* this is restricted to the primary form of worker self-articulation during the national-industrial-colonial era. Trade union internationalism has so displaced or dominated labour internationalism during the later 20th century as to be commonly conflated with the latter. Yet it is precisely *union* internationalism that is most profoundly in crisis, and in question, under our globalised networked capitalism.

Networking, communications, culture

We really need an additional, even an alternative, principle of worker self-articulation (meaning both joining and expression) appropriate to our era. In other words, we need one that would continually and effectively undermine the reproduction of bureaucracy, hierarchy, and dogma that occurs also within 'radical' and 'revolutionary' unions. This principle is the *network*, and the practice is *networking*.* There is no need to fetishise the network or to demonise the organisation. 'Networking' is also a way of understanding human interrelations, and we can therefore see an organisation in network terms, just as we can look at a network in organisational ones. Nonetheless, it remains true that the movement from an inter/national-industrial to a

globalised-networked political-economy is also one from an organised to a networked capitalism. It is from the international labour networks and networking that the new initiatives, speed, creativity, and flexibility tend to come. An international unionism concerned with being radical-democratic and internationalist will learn this, or it will stagnate. International union networking itself will stagnate if it does not recognise itself as a part of a radical-democratic internationalist project that goes far beyond the unions, far beyond labour problems. 'Networking' relates to communication rather than institutions. International labour networking must be informed by and produce a radical-democratic style of communication and sense of culture - 'global solidarity culture'. Labour has a long and rich cultural history and has in the past innovated and even led popular, democratic, and even avant-garde cultural movements. Once again, international trade unionism has to either surpass its reductionist self-definition or remain invisible in the international media arena, which is increasingly challenging and even replacing the institutional terrain as the central site of democratic contestation and deliberation.

Solidarity

There is still no Marxist or socialist theorisation of solidarity, despite its centrality to both, as also to unionism and worker struggle. A distinction may be made between 'economic' and 'political' solidarity, but that's about as far as it goes. Which is clearly inadequate, especially in the diverse struggles against a complex, globalised, networked capitalist disorder. It is essential to distinguish between *aspects* of internationalism, such as Identity, Substitution, Complementarity, Reciprocity, Affinity and Restitution. Each of these carries part of the meaning. Each, separate from the others, can have a counter-productive result. Thus Substitution – standing in for the other – can, as with 'development cooperation' imply a patron-client relation. Complementarity – I give you A and you give me B – could turn into a calculative exercise.

We also need to consider *dimensions* of solidarity – reach, depth, length of time and impact. And both *axis and direction* – West-East-South? South *to* North? And both *topic* (rights? conditions? identity?) and *address* (workers of the world? global sisterhood?). Finally, I think, the most difficult matter, *understanding*, amongst those involved. There is also the problematic role of international/ist *icons*,

whether persons (Marx, Che, Marcos…Mother Teresa (!?), or artefacts (the Red Flag, Hammer and Sickle, Mayday, Mao caps and badges, slogans such as 'Another World is Possible!'). Equally problematic is the role of internationalists – the active agents of internationalism. And their possible differentiation diachronically or synchronically. Thus one can distinguish between the internationalist as Agitator, Agent or Communicator along both these axes. Around 20 years ago an Indian scholar suggested that solidarity was the forgotten term in the secular Western trinity (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity). Quite. Especially given that Fraternity excludes women and is confined to a band of national or racial brothers. Agreed that it is being recovered more recently. But such a recovery requires both recognition and specification if it is to carry the necessary weight.

References:

Waterman, Peter. 1998/2001. *Globalisation, Social Movements and the New Internationalisms*. London: Cassel/Continuum.

Waterman, Peter. 2004. 'Adventures of Emancipatory Labour Strategy as the New Global Movement Challenges International Unionism', *Journal of World-Systems Research*, Vol. 10, No. 1. http://jwsr.ucr.edu/archive/vol10/number1/index.php?art9=&.