

New International Labour Studies Confront Traditional International Unions*

This is a brief report of the conference on "Third World Trade Unionism: Equity and Democratisation in the Changing International Division of Labour" held by the Institute for International Development and Cooperation, Ottawa, 25-27 October 1984.

The conference covered a broad range of topics to which one cannot do justice in a brief review. The keynote address by Charles Levinson (Secretary General Emeritus of the International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers Union) shocked many participants present by its evident lack of preparation and its candid admission that the international trade unions mirror the practices of the multi-national corporations. The following day, scholars from Holland, Denmark, Israel and the USA offered various models of "systems of labour control", and "types of accumulation" in the so-called Third World. However worthy, these constructions were somewhat too global and formal to provoke the hoped-for synthesis between academics and trade unionists.

The next session stirred more passions after a defence of nationalism as a trade union perspective was followed by two front-runners of the "new international labour studies". Here we were beginning to come to grips with the problems raised by Levinson's provocative opening remarks. Could improved communications, especially at a grassroots level, overcome these? At the end of the day would/should not the trade unions in a particular nation-state turn to national strategies to defeat the threat of the multi-nationals.

The undoubted highlight of this conference was a set of interrelated papers by a group of intellectuals/

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activists associated with the South African Labour Bulletin, together with one by conference organiser Roger Southall. We were introduced to the rise of political unionism in South Africa in the 1950s, the emergence and struggles of Black trade unions in the 1970s, the role of the International Metalworkers' Federation in South Africa, the emergent unions in the multi-national-controlled motor industry and the struggles amongst migrant workers on the East Rand. This provoked the theoretical discussions informed by political practice which many of us had come for.

The papers on Nigeria were, unfortunately, more of a mixed bag. Papers ranged from Althusserian exercises on the nature of the "social formation" to passionate defences of the market economy against "greedy and selfish" trade unions. One speaker accused the trade unions of aggravating, if not causing, the differentials between urban and rural incomes in Nigeria. There was however some constructive discussion of the prospects for Nigerian labour in the 1980s under conditions of recession, retrenchment and military rule. There were in other sessions extremely useful surveys of the changing role of the trade unions under "radical-populist" African regimes and in French-speaking Africa, and an overdue call for reassessing the role of women in trade union struggles in Zambia (an issue obviously of much wider importance).

Another exciting set of papers centred on India and Sri Lanka. The discussion was set in context by two wide-ranging surveys of the impact of the new international division of labour on labour organisations, and the limitations of conventional trade union strategies. A study of the union movement in India's railways was followed by an account of the 1982 Bombay textile strike. A survey of the union movement in Sri Lanka concluded that women workers in the modern "transnationalised" garment industry (in Export Processing Zones) should be seen not only as workers but also as women if they were to be unionised.

A final set of papers tackled topics so diverse it would

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be hard to categorise them: the role of the International Labour Organisation regarding trade union rights, the role of the trade unions in promoting human rights in Africa, workers' participation in the Malta Drydocks and Francophone Africa, the workers councils (shoras) in Iran and surveys of the trade union movement in Argentina, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Fiji. Nevertheless, many important general issues were raised in discussion.

The round table which closed the conference once again pitted the new international labour studies against the established bastions of the international trade union movement, represented this time by Luis Anderson, secretary general of ORIT (Inter-American Regional Organisation of Workers of the Brussels-based ICFTU). He rapidly brushed aside criticisms regarding the dubious sources of financing which have given rise to the accusations of "trade union imperialism".

I was left wondering at the width of the gap between traditional international trade unions and the new community of labour-oriented scholars. A serious dialogue would have required the presence of representatives of such new "social-movement unions" as those of Brazil, Chile, South Africa and the Philippines.

Further details: Plans exist for a special issue of Labour Capital and Society (McGill University, Montreal) that should draw on work from conference participants, as well as an eventual book. Two or three of the conference papers have appeared (at least in draft form) in P Waterman, For a new labour internationalism, (NILS 1984

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