

«Modes of organising global labour solidarities”: mutual, militant, mass based»

A world-wide meeting of labour unions discussed experiences and developed new perspectives for global labour solidarity.

Labour on the defensive: The Background of the workshop

Which modes of (international) organising are needed to push through the interests of the manifold fragmented working class and thus to challenge the globally organised power of capital? To discuss this question partners of RLS and other befriended unionists met at the eve of the World Social Forum in March 2015 in Tunis at the workshop “Modes of Organising Global Labour Solidarities: Exchanging Experiences, Developing new Perspectives”. Amongst the participants were unionists from Argentina, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Costa Rica, Croatia, Germany, Guinea, India, Mexico, Tunisia and Turkey.

In the beginning Dr. Florian Wilde of the research institute of RLS in Berlin provided a short overview on the challenges of trade unions and labour solidarity in the 21st century: Whereas internationalism and international organizing have played an important role for the workers movement from its beginning, the labour movement had to face many defeats since the 1970s. Reasons for this are (at least) threefold: 1) the globalization of production, which is putting workers of different countries into direct competition, 2) the changes of capitalist production towards the postfordist model of accumulation which promotes atomisation and fragmentation of the working class and 3) the ideological defensive of the left since the collapse of “real socialism”. Thus in the 21st century the need of an effective international and transnational organizing has become very urgent – not only with regards to cross border organizing inside multinational companies, but along the global value chains as well. Finally Wilde pointed out, that RLS has organized this workshop to open a space for the debate about appropriate models of workers transnational organizing in 21st century.

Guiding questions for the following exchange were:

- 1) What concrete experiences does your union have with cross border (regional, international) organising and networking?
- 2) How do you try to organise workers along the global value chains?
- 3) How is the utility of the present global union federations (at industry and inter-industry level) evaluated by your organisation?
- 4) Which forms of international organisation (in the field of labour) do you see as appropriate in the future and how do we might get there?

Back to the (grass) roots: the (re)orientation of unions

While revisiting recent experiences of Global Union Federations, Gautam Mody sharply criticised the character of the former International Textile Workers Federation: “This was not a real union organisation but rather a NGO.” This criticism was shared by the representative of the Turkish union confederation DISK, Kivanc Eliacik. He pointed out, that global unions tend to become or already are

NGOs (e.g. by depending on resources of international development agencies) instead of being militant working class organisations as it would be necessary. Another problem (which is somehow related to the NGOisation!) is the eurocentrism or centrism on the global north (USA, EU, Japan).

Given the criticism towards the current orientation of Global Union Federations, characteristics of a future organisation presented were: unity (one organisation on each level from local to global and one organisation for all segments of the working class, e.g. also precarious, migrant and women workers in one organisation), democracy, autonomy, based on class struggle, able to organise at the level of multi-national companies and along production / value chains and able to build cross-border thematic campaigns (e.g. on and with precarious and informalised workers).

To fulfil this goal the following steps were discussed: building unified unions from below (bottom up from local to global level), and organisational mechanism for a social alliance between unions, social movements and political parties, exchange of global working class (especially of young unionists), transnational networks of left-wing unions / unionists, a think-tank for progressive trade union policies, a multi-lingual website, critically revisiting the existing experiences, more resources for global unions, educating the membership in regard to international issues, going beyond company unionism to address class questions, democratising the internal structure of (global) unions and developing more political interventions of unions.

Finally, going back to the roots of unionism would not only mean to go back to internationalism, but to grass roots activism as well. Against the background of precarisation of labour relations, this means to focus on precarious work and informalised labour relations.

Rebalancing south-north union relations

Hector de la Cueva of the Mexican RLS partner CILAS (Information Centre for workers and trade unions) argued: "Solidarity is not aid. The south can be in solidarity with the north as well." Further on actions of solidarity in the north mean to organise in the north itself (esp. when labour becomes more and more precarious). It would be enriching, to have a closer look on concrete possibilities of solidarity of unions from the south to the north. Maybe, such actions of solidarity can also contribute to an alternative and more militant and mutual perception of international solidarity by unions from the north. Today, the relations are still very much unequal. For instance, the German IG Metall like other unions from industrialised countries can afford to pay the highest membership fees per person and register all its members within IndustriALL and is still spending more money for international activities outside IndustriALL than for IndustriALL, as it was criticised during the workshop. The expectation was that strong unions from industrialised countries like the IG Metall should spend more money for an organisation like IndustriALL and be less dominant within it.

Outcome of the workshop in terms of envisaged future cooperation

The workshop contributed to a closer cooperation between unions. E.g. DISK representative Kivanc Eliacik showed interest to cooperate in future with CGT-B (Burkina Faso) and NTUI again wants to strengthen its relations with DISK. And the Tunisian CGTT wants to cooperate with IndustriALL (due to a split within the Tunisian unions the industrial affiliates of CGTT are not yet member of IndustriALL). Furthermore, Kaba Nabé of the Guinean national umbrella organisation CNTG wants to intensify relations with IndustriALL. The networks seem to get more solid and wider, though capacities are much smaller than aspirations of cooperation. Further on the participation of women should be increased.

Open questions for the continuation of the discussion

To continue the conceptual discussion which started during the workshop, the following questions / aspects (in bold) could be fruitful:

- 1) It was observed in the workshop that “the power [within the Global Union Federations] lies in the Daimler, GM and Toyotas” (as Gautam Mody of India’s NTUI put it) and that the left is relatively weak. So the following question needs to be answered: **What measures are needed to strengthen the left within the Global Union Federations?**
- 2) **How should Global Union Federations be structured internally?** (Fernando Lopes mentioned discussions within IndustriALL to link member fees to GDP and thus secure a more realistic representation of unions from countries from the south)
- 3) This workshop brought together small and very large unions – in terms of membership but also in terms of resources. Against this background the following question would be interesting to explore: **How can in particular smaller unions with small resources be involved into different modes of global organising?**
- 4) A participant of the workshop analysed: “Many of us meet at different points but are unable to take their cooperation further”. **Under which circumstances would it be worth to invest rare resources into taking the cooperation further? What should be the outcome of such a deepened cooperation? How should it look like in terms of organizational structures?**
- 5) Also those spaces which were intentionally build as spaces not dominated by the Global Union Federations and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) need to be evaluated in regard to the perspectives of a left internationalist unionism: **Which role is SIGTUR (Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights) playing in this regard? And which role is the cooperation between BRICS-unions playing? How strong is it actually?**
- 6) Given a) that labour relations are getting more and more precarious (again) and b) that the union strength on the ground (an organised, militant and educated membership) is the precondition for any successful struggle one could ask: **Which concrete activities on the international level can contribute to build up union strength on the ground?** Answering this question would also substantially contribute to a positive joint working definition of international solidarity (in contrast to charity) which still seems to be a desideratum.

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