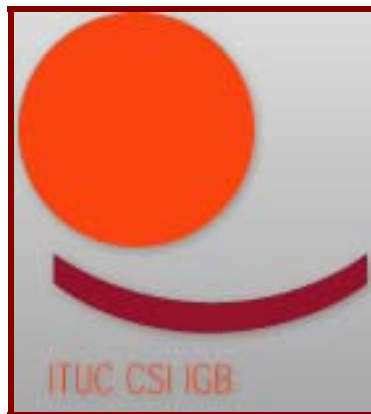


5 - The International Union Merger of November 2006: Top-Down, Eurocentric and... *Virtually Invisible*¹ (2008)

[Revised and extended from a contribution to *International Union Rights*, www.ictur.org, Autumn 2006]



Guaranteed not to inspire or offend? A 'floating signifier'? This is the meaningless logo of the the new International Trade Union Confederation. See <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?rubrique1&lang=en>

¹ Dan Gallin read and commented on two drafts of this paper. He cannot, of course, be held responsible for the use I have made of his comments.

At a conference in Vienna, early November, 2006, there took place the unification of most of the major international - and of certain national - trade unions in a new organisation. Unlike previous such launchings, however, this occurred without any general global upsurge of union protest or expressions of labour self-confidence, and without public knowledge. Although the parties involved talked about the creation of a new union international, the word 'merger' seems rather more appropriate. This for two reasons.

Firstly, what was taking place here represented a largely administrative unification between two Western European-based international trade union centres of the social-reformist tradition. These are the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions/Global Unions (ICFTU/GU) and the World Confederation of Labour (WCL).

Given the serious effects on them of neo-liberalism and globalisation – in both membership and financial terms – this makes managerial sense. The ICFTU (1949), inheritor of the international Social-Democratic tradition, is here the major partner, claiming some 150 million members. The WCL (1968) descends from the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions (1920), is of Social-Catholic inspiration, and claims some 26 million – largely in Latin America. (The WCL wildly exaggerates its own membership figures. It has one or two major West European affiliates, but in the South is to a large extent a development project of West-European Christian Democracy, without whose funding it would collapse).

Other international organisations involved, such as the European Trade Union Confederation (1974) and the Trade Union Advisory Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (TUAC 1948). are similarly social-reformist and based in Western Europe. The unification also involved the trade-specific internationals (e.g. public service or agriculture) of the ICFTU and WCL. Some of these have already merged. However, these further complicate the merger. The Global Union Federations associated with the ICFTU in the Global Unions network, are much older than, and autonomous from, the ICFTU. Those of the WCL are merely departments. The WCL, moreover, seemed reluctant to have the global or regional merger reaching down to national level. The role of the ETUC in the whole process needs emphasis for two reasons. Firstly, it provides an explicit or implicit model of a unified union body, being formally autonomous from the existing international centres and having long included national unions of both the Communist and Catholic tradition (Moreno 2005). Secondly, however, it is itself self-subordinated to the European Union and thus to an elite social accord of problematic value. This has been extensively argued by veteran left labour specialist, Richard Hyman:

With the advent of labour diplomacy, a distinctive model of international trade union bureaucratisation became the line of least resistance. We may note, in this context, that the double-edged certification of labour as a 'social partner' within the institutions of the European Union has had analogous effects: providing recognition and material resources, but incorporating the ETUC within an elite policy community largely detached from those it claims to represent. (Hyman 2002)

And:

All too often, official trade union practice seems implicitly to accept that internationalism is an elite concern, that it is safer if the membership does not learn too much of policies which they might perhaps oppose. In some unions, certainly, international issues are given reasonable prominence in internal communications and education; I fear that this is

far from typical, though openness may be increasing as unions struggle to find a response to 'globalization'. In any event, since effective international solidarity is impossible without a 'willingness to act' on the part of grassroots trade unionists, it is unattainable without an active strategy by union leaders and activists to enhance knowledge, understanding and identification of common interests cross-nationally. This means engaging in what might be termed an 'internal social dialogue'. (Hyman 2005)

Given that there was no international, or even Southern, union criticism of the ETUC model, it seems likely that the new organisation will reproduce this model. There was, further, a rumour that the new international would move to Geneva, the city that also hosts the International Labour Organisation. Although this has not occurred, there is plentiful evidence of the increasing dependency of the international unions on this global-level 'partner'. The ILO is, however, an inter-state body in which the unions have only a 25 percent vote but are treated as representing also that majority of the world's labour force that is un-unionised or un-unionisable.

The word 'merger' seems appropriate, *secondly*, in analogy with the contemporary corporate world, in which it is the boards of directors who are involved, whilst those lower down the hierarchy are either uninformed, passively observe or – where more actively concerned and involved – may at best express some opinions or hope that 'unity means strength'. In this union case the merger has been virtually invisible to the 176 million or so of union members claimed, to world public opinion in general, and even to that progressive part of such in the new 'global justice and solidarity movement' (GJ&SM). Information-denial here went to the point at which a relevant article by the ICFTU's Joint General Secretary was published not on the ICFTU website, but in Medellin, Colombia (Oliveira 2006).

This virtual invisibility has also been true of 'virtual reality'. Bearing in mind the increasing number and professional quality of international union or labour websites, and the ease of publication on them, this invisibility is puzzling, at the very least. Neither on the site of the ICFTU, the Global Unions or the WCL was it possible to find more than a few meagre messages on something supposedly of significance to tens of millions! (This invisibility extends even to the otherwise innovative and autonomous site, LabourStart). Indeed, an inquiry about this lack, addressed to the Press Office of the ICFTU, produced only a reference back *two years* to a resolution of its 2004 Congress! One can only speculate about this virtual silence. Perhaps the leaderships are themselves ambiguous about the project, or worried about its success, or simply aware that it represents a new form without a new content.

I would have considered taking the two-hour train journey from The Hague to try to solve this puzzle. But I was apparently fortunate in being thousands of air miles from Brussels, base of both major centres involved, whilst writing this piece. For it is in Latin America that there has been most interest in the merger – at least at regional level. This may be because of a recent rise in labour and other social protest in Latin America. Or because it is here that the WCL has a certain presence. It is in the sub-continent, in any case, that there has been expressed most concern about the political content of the merger, the autonomy it will allow at regional level and its implications at the national one. This I found in a slim collection produced by a regional consultative labour council (Consejo Consultivo Laboral Andino 2005) and published by the Peruvian labour NGO, PLADES. It consists of 13 short contributions, from union leaders and specialists, national, regional and international, and from a wide range of tendencies, including the Communist. It is available in both print and digital form, and

provides a model which regrettably does not exist at the international level or in languages other than Spanish.

The most obvious challenge in Latin America has been the competition between the regional organisations of the ICFTU and the WCL. The regional body of the ICFTU, the ORIT (Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores, 1951), is actually a *hemispheric* organisation, including the major national union centres of the USA and Canada. That of the WCL, the CLAT (Confederación Latinamericana de Trabajadores), is restricted to Latin America. In the past the ORIT was widely associated with what was then called the 'AFL-CIO-CIA', in other words, with the use of the US unions as a channel for US corporate or state manipulation of Latin American unions (Agee 1975). In the past, the CLAT has struck radical notes, in favour of worker self-management, or the organisation of the self-employed. But neither the one thing nor the other means that today the CLAT is more radical than the ORIT. Its credentials have in the past been also seriously challenged (Stichting Imperialisme en Onderontwikkeling 1984). The ORIT has recently itself been so much more assertive than its mother organisation in Brussels that its mother organisation, the ICFTU, has ignored its *Labour Platform for the Americas* (2006) (despite its hardly revolutionary orientation). The relative radicalism of ICFTU affiliates in the region is suggested in concerns about the composition of the new international and its relationship with the broader social movements:

[T]here has to be a more balanced relationship between numerical and occupational representation in the new leadership, as also with gender and ethnicity. A union centre cannot be truly global if it is controlled solely by white men from industrialised countries. [...] One of the great victories we have achieved in the continent was the non-implementation of the [Free Trade Area of the Americas]. This agreement, nefarious for all workers, particularly those of Latin America and the Caribbean, was only possible thanks to the united struggle of union centres of all the countries, from Canada to Argentina, through the mediation of the ORIT and the Continental Social Alliance (CSA). This alliance, in addition to being of the North with the South – even if for different motives – also incorporated a series of social movements and NGOs, and was a great victory we cannot lose. (Jakobsen 2005:66-7)

One should not, finally, discount the influence in Latin America of the World Social Forum and its regional spin-offs, most of which have taken place in the sub-continent. The WSF has provided not only a site at which some of the (closed-door) union negotiations have taken place, but have also suggested more holistic alternatives to globalisation than have been traditionally offered by the major union internationals. Involvement in general social protest may have itself stimulated Latin American union concern about the *content* or *ideology* of a unification that is likely to continue a model forged in Western Europe during the years of both the Welfare State and the Cold War - both of which have pretty much disappeared.

The Cold War requires mention because this unification excludes the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), an organisation that became increasingly Communist during the Cold War and then reproduced the misfortunes of its sponsoring bloc. A shell of its former self, it still has some following. This is largely sentimental insofar as WFTU is not demonstrably to the left of the ICFTU/WCL. For evidence of this consider the Beijing Consensus (2004), in which the WFTU was involved. In so far as WFTU still has affiliates that are extensions of the state in Communist (and certain Middle Eastern?) countries, it can hardly complain at its non-invitation to the party.

Within Latin America, the WFTU is largely dependent on the Cuban state and its unions. There may even still exist its regional affiliate from the 1960s-80s, the *Congreso Permanente de Unidad de los Sindicatos de America Latina* (CPUSTAL), but this has only a skeletal web existence in Wikipedia. However, the WFTU has national affiliates elsewhere in the region, and these are predictably critical of a unification which excludes their tradition (Pacho 2005). Such concerns have emerged from Communist-oriented unions elsewhere (Majumdar 2000). But these complaints are either iterations of traditional Communist ideology, or simply objections without any new ideological elements or strategic proposals. Neither the presence nor the absence of the (ex-) Communist unions seems likely to make much difference to the new organisation.

Questioned about the coming merger, a North American international labour-rights specialist, based in Vienna itself, told me he knew nothing about it though he was interested in attending the event.

And when I asked a Latin American with 10-15 years experience in international unionism, for a sentence or two on whether the event would be significant for the labour movement internationally, he replied with one word, 'No'.

A veteran South-Asian labour organiser, currently engaged in labour and social movement solidarity internationally, certainly revealed awareness of the coming merger. But he suggested it would have no positive effect at either regional or national level. He considered it a Western and top-down initiative, with any unifying prospects locally being obstructed by self-interested national leadership concerns 'to keep hold of their assets, such as buildings, and their foreign project funding'. Moreover, he argued that exclusion of the WFTU meant the exclusion of major national union centres in the region.

And a highly-experienced and qualified European observer commented:

[W]hat is the politics of the new International supposed to be? No one knows...but I fear it might be a divorce from any sort of explicit ideology, although I guess they won't be able to escape from the subliminal, immanent ideology of the trade union movement which is obliged to wage the class struggle whether it wants it or not, or even knows it or not. It will probably be couched in human rights terms.

It is significant – if hardly promising – that the only extensive analysis I was able to find of the unification was on the website of a self-isolated Trotskyist international labour initiative. It was written by a former leader of the French Force Ouvrière. He concluded:

This proposed merger has turned its back on the great founding principles of proletarian internationalism, based on the understanding that society is divided into social classes with opposed and contradictory interests - that is, on the one hand, the exploiters of wage labour and, on the other hand, the exploited who are forced to sell their labour to survive [] All the sectors involved in this trade union unification project would be well[] advised to reflect before heading down a road that could lead to a dead-end with totalitarian implications. (Sandri 2005)

The French CGT (ex-WFTU), however, did play an active part in the unification process (Confédération Générale du Travail 2006, Schwartz 2006).

Given the extent to which the international unions have been themselves infected or affected by the global justice movement, a totalitarian outcome seems the least imaginable of scenarios. A human-rights orientation seems more likely – though without the information and debate demonstrated by the newest social movements. The founding event should have told us more. A number of independent observers were present but failed to produce the expected commentary. Further stagnation, disorientation and ambiguity seems likely until and unless an open global dialogue about the merger takes place.

But such a dialogue would have to go beyond the diplomatic mode, in which the different parties who have spoken are operating under a gentlemen's agreement not to mention painful truths, for example about the problematically democratic credentials of many of their own national affiliates, about financial shenanigans, and about past subordination to states and blocs at every level.

A serious dialogue could be stimulated by the translation and distribution, even after the unification, of the Latin American compilation I have both referred to and made use of. Without this kind of institutional initiative, we will have to look elsewhere for sources of a meaningful renewal and unification (definitely in this order) of the international labour movement. But it seems to me that this is likely to come, if at all, from new sectors of the working class, out of their increasingly common militancy, and to be inspired less by the new union organisation than by the global justice and solidarity movement (Waterman and Timms 2004-5, Waterman 2006). It is likely to also take the form less of new union institutions, more of effective global networks.

Resources

- Agee, Philip. 1975. *CIA Diary: Inside the Company*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Beijing Consensus. 2004. 'Beijing Consensus: International Forum on Economic Globalization and Trade Unions', October 11, 2004.
<http://www.acftu.org.cn/Consensus.htm>
- Consejo Consultivo Laboral Andino. 2005. *Reflexiones sobre la unidad internacional sindical* (Reflections on International Trade Union Unity). Lima: Consejo Consultivo Laboral Andino/Programa Laboral de Desarrollo.
- Confédération Générale du Travail. 2006. 'Introduction de Bernard Thibault au CCN du 17 septembre 2006 sur l'adhésion à la Confédération Syndicale Internationale' (Introduction by Bernard Thibault to the CCN of September 17, 2006, on Joining the International Trade Union Confederation). September 29.
<http://www.cgt.fr/internet/>
- Gallin, Dan. 2004. 'Not With a Bang But With a Whimper'. http://www.global-labour.org/big_bang.htm
- Gumbrell-McCormick, Rebecca. 2006. 'From the Old Trade Union Internationals to the New: Commentary on ICFTU/ITUC Congresses, Vienna, 31.10 – 3.11.06'.
<http://www.labourstart.org/docs/en/000382.html>
- Hyman, Richard. 2002. 'The International Labour Movement on the Threshold of Two Centuries: Agitation, Organisation, Bureaucracy, Diplomacy',
http://www.arbarkiv.nu/pdf_wrd/Hyman_int.pdf.
- Hyman, R. (2005b) 'Trade Unions and the Politics of European Integration', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*. Vol. 26, No. 1: pp. 9-40.
- Hyman, Richard. 2005. 'Trade Unions and the Politics of the European Social Model', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 9-40
- Jakobsen, Kjeld. 2005. 'La nueva central mundial: Pan y rosas? (The New World Centre: Bread and Roses?)', in Consejo Consultivo Laboral Andino..

- Reflexiones sobre la unidad internacional sindical* (Reflections on International Trade Union Unity). Lima: Consejo Consultivo Laboral Andino/Programa Laboral de Desarrollo. Pp. 64-9.
http://www.ccla.org.pe/publicaciones/cuadernos_integracion.php
- Labour's Platform for the Americas. 2006.
<http://www.gpn.org/research/orit2005/index.html>
- Majumdar, Chittabrata. 2006. 'Problems of International TU Unity', *Working Class* (New Delhi), June. http://citu.org.in/wclass_june06_a3.htm
- Moreno, Juan. 2005. 'Unidad sindical: un paso adelante', in Consejo Consultivo Laboral Andino.. *Reflexiones sobre la unidad internacional sindical* (Reflections on International Trade Union Unity). Lima: Consejo Consultivo Laboral Andino/Programa Laboral de Desarrollo. Pp.30-33.
http://www.ccla.org.pe/publicaciones/cuadernos_integracion.php
- Moberg, David. 2007. 'Solidarity Without Borders: Confronted with multinationals and business-friendly trade agreements, unions have begun to act globally', *In These Times*. www.inthesetimes.com/main/print/3021/.
- Noblecourt, Michel. 2004. 'Le big bang du syndicalisme international' (The Big Bang of International Unionism), *Le Monde*, July 26.
- Oliveira, José Olivio M. 2006. 'Nueva Central Sindical Mundial y los desafíos para el movimiento sindical de las Américas' (New World Trade Union Centre and the Challenges for the Union Movement in the Americas), *Cultura & Trabajo* (Medellín), No. 68, pp. 15-17.
- Pacho, Valentín. 2005. 'La utopia de la unidad sindical', in Consejo Consultivo Laboral Andino.. *Reflexiones sobre la unidad internacional sindical* (Reflections on International Trade Union Unity). Lima: Consejo Consultivo Laboral Andino/Programa Laboral de Desarrollo. Pp.20-29.
http://www.ccla.org.pe/publicaciones/cuadernos_integracion.php
- PLADES, Programa Laboral de Desarrollo. www.plades.org.pe.
- Sandri, Roger. 2005. 'Some News on the Future "Global" Union Organisation', *ILC International Newsletter* N°. 163, pp. 3-6. <http://www.eit-ilc.org/us/articles.php?lng=en&pg=560>.
- Schwartz, Peter. 2006. 'France: CGT Union Federation Moves Further to the Right', http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/may2006/cgt-m02_prn.shtml
- Stichting Imperialisme en Onderontwikkeling. 1984. *Latijns Amerikaanse Vakbeweging en Solidariteit: Kritische Analyse van CLAT in Latijns Amerika en Nederland* (Latin American Union Movement and Solidarity: A Critical Analysis of the CLAT in Latin America and the Netherlands). Nijmegen: Stichting Imperialisme en Onderontwikkeling.
- Waterman, Peter and Jill Timms. 2004. 'Trade Union Internationalism and a Global Civil Society in the Making', in Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius and Mary Kaldor (eds.). *Global Civil Society 2004/5*. London: Sage. Pp. 178-202
- Waterman, Peter. 2006. 'Toward a Global Labour Charter for the 21st Century'.
http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/4278.html
<http://www.nu.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28,11,2492>