

fund of knowledge. At best, it expands horizons and inspires ambition at a time when the labour movement worldwide is in transition, lacking the artificial anchor of the old fundamentalist certainties and with little patience for adventurist rhetoric. ☆

Editor responds

We thank Mike Allen for his useful contribution to the debate on trade union internationalism. In the light of his comments perhaps some issues should be clarified. The *Labour Bulletin* focus did not intend to suggest that WFTU is a progressive federation compared to ICFTU. WFTU did not attract more comment in our focus, because it has not been an important factor in SA unionism in the 1970s and 80s, and because it is - as we pointed out - a dwindling force. Secondly, the feature may have been overpoliticised, but then trade union internationalism has been highly political in SA. The history of relations with centres in Europe and the US has contained a fair degree of conflict and tension, as Jay Naidoo indicates. Thirdly, *Labour Bulletin* does not support a new internationalism of purist sects. For us ACTWU-SACTWU solidarity, two way solidarity, "normalising" relations with ICFTU and affiliates, and building relations with African and militant Third World centres are all part of a "new internationalism" with political, economic and democratic dimensions. Our focus attempted to reflect some of the diversity of this thinking. ♦

A new labour internationalism: what content and what form?



Peter Waterman outlines a new labour internationalism. He argues that COSATU should both affiliate to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) as well as build a network of international alliances.

The issue of the April 1991 *South African Labour Bulletin* devoted to 'a new internationalism' represents something of a breakthrough. I do not recall such an extensive critical treatment of the subject from a union-oriented publication, either in the Third World or anywhere else.

For many years, discussion and documentation of international labour solidarity has taken place largely within 'alternative' or 'marginal' publications and academic

journals in Western Europe and the USA. Here it could be largely ignored or condemned by the powerful traditional Northern-based unions, national or international.

The *Labour Bulletin* enjoys considerable international prestige due to its significant role in the growth of one of the most dynamic labour movements in the world. This means that the new ideas previously circulating in small-circulation bulletins have

now become 'international trade-union politics'. It thus seems possible that the old union internationals or their supporters will now for the first time feel the need to respond publicly and even discuss with their critics.

Criteria for a new labour internationalism

The new labour internationalism comes out of analysis of the new economic and political situation of labour in a period of world economic crisis, and the fundamental restructuring of the labour force nationally and internationally. It also comes out of a critique of the responses of the state and inter-state organs to these crises, and from a critique of the serious inadequacy of the dominant traditional union, labour and socialist organisations and ideologies in confronting this situation.

It comes, more positively from reflection on the successes of the internationalism of the 'new social movements' such as those on peace, human rights, women and the environment.

Rejecting much of the form, content and procedures of the traditional labour internationals, a new labour internationalism implies two major principles:

The first is that a new Third World labour internationalism should be **practical rather than ideological in nature**. It should be drawn from worker



practice, rather than traditional socialist, nationalist or any other theory. We have surely had enough of the ideological internationalisms, which ended as the internationalisms of ideologues. An internationalism based on workers' interests, capacities and aspirations will have more meaning and be longer lasting. Being non-ideological in origin does not mean that it will be without values - particularly those of democracy, equality and solidarity. Nor does it mean that it will not result in a new *programme* - ie in a set of proposals to guide social action. 'Being practical rather than ideological' also means proposing activities that can be achieved - rather than calling for an apocalyptic transformation ('Workers of the World Unite to Smash Capitalism and Imperialism and Build a World Socialist Commonwealth') that cannot be achieved in this lifetime, and that some (such as Catholic, Muslim or anti-socialist workers) will in any case reject.

The second principle is that the new Third World internationalism be **simultaneously addressed to the Third, First and Second Worlds**.

This means that a new Third-World labour internationalism needs to understand the increasing interpenetration of social processes and the increasing similarity of worker struggles. This does not mean ignoring or repressing Third World worker interests and aspirations, but expressing these in a way that maximises their relevance to workers elsewhere.

Issues for action and discussion

Following from the above, and drawing freely and extensively from earlier Third World documents, I would suggest the following list of *possible* issues for action and discussion.

Trade union autonomy and worker democracy.

The traditional national and international union organisations of the West and East come out of labour movements that long ago accepted a subordinate (if oppositional) status both within the nation state and with reference to the dominant international agencies and ideologies. The new unions have generally had to overcome such subordination and have done so by appealing to the collective self-activity of the workers. A stress on autonomy and democracy nationally, regionally and internationally, will not only appeal to progressive forces within unions internationally but may also help guarantee the new unions against

'bureaucratic degeneration'.

An internationalism of the shopfloor and of networks. The new unions have usually come to international recognition by creating direct linkages at worker, enterprise or city level, and by using the networking principle rather than the institutional one. Shopfloor internationalism guarantees that international linkages express the interests of workers rather than officials. Networking implies direct, informal, horizontal and flexible relations, based on matters of current common interest. Whereas the traditional international labour organisation tends to reproduce the characteristics of the inter-state organisation, the international network relates to the dynamic, informal, egalitarian and autonomous relations that the new social movements develop with each other. Whilst some radical Third World unions may decide to join the ICFTU or the associated International Trade Secretariats, they may also consider that international networking at shopfloor, grassroots or community level provide the only guarantee of dynamism in the formal international bodies.

Alternative forms of communication. This is more a matter of creating alternative labour and popular forms of communication, nationally and internationally, than of rhetorically and ritualistically denouncing cultural



imperialism. Third World labour movements are the most advanced in developing their own forms of cultural expression. The new movements have also often innovated in forms of international communication (the Philippines KMU's International Solidarity Affair, the educational materials of South Africa's International Labour Research and Information Group(ILRIG) the use of computer communications by the new *Korean Labour News*).

A code of relations for richer partners. Here we come to the most material face of aid, yet the one which is usually the last to be confronted. Some radical Third World unions may be satisfied if the flow is shifted from the 'yellow' unions to the 'genuine' ones. South African experience and the case of Poland's Solidarnosc (during its period of repression) show both the dangers and the possibilities of relations between donor and recipient organisations internationally. Rather than 'playing the market' in petty-capitalist style, it should be possible to draw up a Code of Conduct for relations between donors and recipients. In so far as the donors wish to move from an

aid to a solidarity model in their international relations, they should be responsive to such codes - which do exist for some non-governmental donor-recipient relations on the North-South axis.

Including non-unionisable labour. The greater part of Third World labourers, even in urban areas, is non-unionisable despite being involved in petty- or semi-capitalist relations. This is also true of a considerable - and growing - part of the working population in the industrialised capitalist countries. They are, however, often organised or organisable in residents' associations, urban and rural co-operatives, peasants' associations, women's organisations, etc. These are, or have been, or could be, internationally organised. The point is to consider ways that they could be organised, nationally and internationally, not under the unions but in fruitful association with them.

Learning from women's movements. This is not only in recognition of the centrality of women's labour (waged, semi-waged, unwaged) to the accumulation of capital nationally and internationally. It is also in recognition of the way in which the self-emancipation of women can undermine relations of super- and subordination both within society in general and the labour movement in particular. Out of women's movements, moreover, there come experiences, ideas and forms of organisation and



American workers building North-South solidarity

Photo: American Labor

struggle of general value for human emancipation.

Starting internationalism at home. Whilst it may be that the new internationalism in the Third World began on the West-South axis, it is essential for a Third World internationalism to prioritise solidarity with those workers closest to hand. This is in order to make internationalism both comprehensible and accessible. A relationship with workers in neighbouring countries (who may also be immigrants in one's own) can be built on commonalities of culture and language. Out of such relations will come understandings and demands that can be fed into other international dialogues and relationships, thus avoiding creation of an abstract internationalism of interest only to bureaucrats or ideologues.

Broader social and economic democracy. This is based on recognition of the

limitations of the liberal, Communist and populist concepts of democracy. Given the increased threat of concentrated capitalist or state power in contemporary world conditions, it is necessary to build an expanded and powerful civil society if workers are to surpass their proletarian condition. This demand has particular pertinency under authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule in the Third World, but should have great appeal also to mass movements in the East, and to democratic forces in the West. The question of democracy evidently extends to the struggle against capitalist and managerial authoritarianism at work, or



workers' control.

Struggle against, and alternatives to multinationalisation. This expresses recognition of transnational corporations (TNCs) as the most dynamic force for exploitation, repression and alienation in the world today. The alternatives proposed need to be primarily addressed to positive self-activity by the workers and popular movements, not to the state or local capitalists. Opposition to transnationalisation does not necessarily imply favouring local capitalists or state bureaucrats, nor a blanket opposition to the operation of TNCs. There are contradictions within and between TNCs, as well as between TNCs and workers, TNCs and communities, TNCs and citizens. On the basis of felt grievances and specific capacities and desires, unions can take common

international action to 'civilise' TNCs, demand the generalisation of 'best practice', and develop democratic controls over and alternatives to them.

Struggles against and **alternatives to indebtedness**. This issue not only unites workers with other popular forces in the Third World but can appeal to workers in indebted Eastern countries and to un- and underemployed workers in the West. The 'alternatives', however, need to be addressed also to specific activities that can be carried out by the labour and popular movements themselves, not simply by the states - or even the unions - 'on behalf of' the workers or the poor.

Alternatives to ecological catastrophe. The relationship between ecology, land rights, labour struggles and internationalism in the Third World has been symbolised in the figure of the Brazilian labour, human-rights and ecological martyr, Chico Mendes. Both in the West and the East the advanced part of the labour and democratic movements increasingly recognises that production and development must be understood in an ecological manner if they are not to be self-defeating, or even life-threatening.

Alternatives to militarism. Third World masses are particularly subject to military repression, both external and internal. With the decline of nuclear confrontation



between East and West, the issue of militaristic domination of, by and in Third World societies must gain more priority. But the democratic movements in the East also have a major interest in demilitarisation, if they are to escape years of internecine warfare. 'Por la Vida' (For Life) movements in Latin America have expressed the popular opposition to militaristic coercion of the masses and their organisations by the fundamentalist left (Sendero Luminoso in Peru), as well as by the right. Opposition to militarism, it should be said, does not mean opposition to all and any armed movement. But it does when - as in the Peruvian case - the movement is militaristic and is experienced by the unions and the masses as terroristic.

Socialist alternatives to capitalism. The value of a discussion on this issue resides not only in its relevance to Third World unions, in a part of the world where the word may still resonate positively amongst workers. It lies also in the possibility of demonstrating internationally that trade unions can have a positive, attractive, holistic, alternative vision of society and the world. Whilst this might have little immediate

appeal to the mass of workers in the North, it could certainly appeal to socialists in the labour movements of West and East and contribute to the rethinking of socialism that will inevitably be taking place internationally.

Two controversial issues in the Special Focus

Readers of the *Labour Bulletin* Special Focus on internationalism, as well as writers in it, will recognise much coincidence between what appeared there and what I have said here. But let me try to apply these principles to two controversial issues arising out of that special focus of the *Labour Bulletin*.

These are :

- The possible incorporation of COSATU into the patron-client relations traditional on the North-South axis. The fact that the Western unions have increasingly been obliged to abandon their relations with racist unions and eventually recognise COSATU is due to the determined struggle of South African unions (making effective use of information supplied by friends in the West!). As is well known, however, the concession of 'recognition' always brings with it the threat of incorporation, as the rich and powerful patron dangles cash, equipment, conference trips and scholarships over the heads of the only-too-needy clients. Friends of COSATU in Asia and Latin America

are themselves still subject to denial of recognition, condemnation or undermining by organisations that are courting COSATU today. The fear therefore arises that COSATU will slide into a client status, rather than fighting for the establishment of new principles which would be to the benefit not only of COSATU unions but also of others in the Third World.

- the idea of setting up some kind of new 'international democratic trade union alliance', apparently as a successor or alternative to the existing ones. It may be that this proposal is intended to *guarantee against* incorporation, or to demonstrate COSATU independence from Western domination. I suppose that the model the writer may have in mind would be that of the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU).

Whether this is or is not the case, it would seem to me that the suggestion of such a successor or alternative fails to reflect on the history of such projects. It also fails to deal with the contradiction between seeking Western recognition and support and rejecting the International Confederation of Trade Unions that represents an increasing number of the world's unions. Such an approach implicitly puts the social-reformist ICFTU (which is thriving) in the same category as the Communist



World Federation of Trade Unions (politically bankrupt and ailing). Finally, it fails to consider to what extent 'a new worker-controlled internationalism' *can* be expressed or furthered within one "single, unified, democratic and accountable world federation" that the writer in the Special Focus proposes.

Conclusion: internationalist principles and international organisation

I would argue for two apparently contradictory positions, but which are, in fact, based on the principles outlined above. My arguments are as follows:

- Joining the ICFTU would shift the centre of gravity in this organisation away from the most conservative, secretive and state-dependent forces (North, East or South) towards the most progressive, open and independent ones. If COSATU practised within ICFTU what is being preached within the South African Labour Bulletin, this would transform that organisation! But we can no more rely on such a 'Trade Union United Nations' to express and further internationalism than we can on

the United Nations to express and further the popular global desire for liberty, equality and solidarity. The ICFTU would, at best, be an international union of national union leaders. The latter is at present probably also the best one could say of OATUU which, when I was active in Africa, was unknown to ordinary workers there.

I argue for joining the ICFTU, incidentally, not because I have abandoned my critical attitude toward it but because

1) the WFTU has virtually disappeared,

2) I do not believe the ICFTU can simply 'absorb' the COSATU and its new East European affiliates, and

3) the ICFTU has already shown it is not impervious to the new radical union movements in the Third World.

- Furthering international and democratic alliances. COSATU should also further international labour and democratic alliances, including forces that may reject the ICFTU (or the US AFL-CIO) or be rejected by them. But it seems to me that this alliance should not be thought of in terms of a 'non-aligned' or even 'democratic' ICFTU. It should be a matter of a multiplicity of levels and forms of alliance - such as those COSATU has benefited from up to now, and which could be en-

riched and multiplied in the future. Recent history suggests that relevant new ideas, strategies and even technical means (international labour communication by computer) have been pioneered by tiny networks and marginal publications. Some of them are not even unions, some of them have no relations with workers (I am one, so was my newsletter).

Maybe one needs to recognise that, in international labour affairs as in others, power exists at the centre and the top but empowerment is developed at the base and the periphery.

In a study done in Peru in 1986 I quoted the Peruvian communist Mariategui [see box]. At that time I could only dream that what he said about international communication and labour internationalism might one day come true. I ended my study with the following words:

The industrialised capitalist countries may be (because of their level of industrialisation, de-industrialisation, post-industrialisation) sources of new social thinking and even new labour strategies, but these tend to develop outside or on the fringes of the organised labour movement. The latter - victim of its own past successes - is in a largely defensive posture. Whilst it is engaged in many activities of interest to other labour movements, it does not in general show a capacity to



either understand or effectively fight back against the aggressive new capitalist order. Countries on the periphery of capitalism (and we must here include Poland and South Africa alongside Peru) have thrown up organised labour movements of a 'social-movement' kind - inspired by a vision of social

transformation, open to or intimately linked with other classes and social interests. These movements become - but in very diverse ways, at different moments and for different periods - open to a new kind of labour internationalism. If the ideas above have been launched into space from the capitalist core, it may be at the periphery that they are brought down to earth and converted into a force that will return to grip the mind of labour internationally. ☆

A note on internationalism

Internationalism exists as an ideal because it is the new reality, the nascent reality. It is not the absurd ideal of a few dreamers or utopians... Socialism, trade unions, did not thus spring from some work of genius. They sprang from the new social reality, the new economic reality. And the same is true of internationalism... When the European workers fought for the conquest of the eight-hour day, they fought not only for the European proletariat but for the world proletariat. For you, workers of Peru, it was easier to obtain the eight-hour law because the eight-hour law was already in existence in Europe. Peruvian capitalism ceded your demand because it knew that European capitalism had also ceded this... The incapacity of individualist and capitalist society to transform itself in accordance with international economic necessities does not prevent the appearance within it of the first signs of an international organisation of humanity. Within the nationalist and chauvinist bourgeois system which separates and opposes peoples, there is woven a dense network of international solidarity that is preparing the future of humanity... Communications are the nervous system of this internationalism and human solidarity. One of the characteristics of our epoch is the rapidity, the velocity, with which ideas spread, with which currents of thought and culture are transmitted. A new idea that blossoms in Britain is not a British idea except for the time that it takes for it to be printed. Once launched into space by the press, this idea, if it expresses some universal truth, can also be instantaneously transformed into an internationalist idea.

Jose Carlos Mariategui, Peruvian Communist, Editor of the labour newspaper, *Labor*, in 'Internationalism and Nationalism' (1923)