



In *Labour Bulletin* Vol 15 No 7, we ran a special focus on worker internationalism. We publish two responses below. MIKE ALLEN, former co-editor of *International Labour Reports*, argues that the 'new labour internationalism' is ineffectual. PETER WATERMAN, specialist at the Institute of Social Studies in Netherlands, suggests that the 'new labour internationalism' has the potential to transform our world. Both argue for affiliation to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

New internationalism ... or old rhetoric?

MIKE ALLEN argues that the picture presented in the *Labour Bulletin* focus of the ICFTU, international trade unionism, and unions of "the North" in particular, is highly misleading. The unions of the north and the ICFTU have been and will remain central to international labour solidarity.

There are few opportunities to discuss the challenges confronting the international labour movement, so the *Labour Bulletin's* recent special focus on trade union internationalism provides a welcome chance to address some critical issues. More informed coverage of internationalism is urgently needed, especially in the face of the growing penetration and mobility of the

transnational corporations and the ominous increase in their anti-union strategies.

However, most of the *Labour Bulletin's* special focus misses the chance for a serious consideration of the issues in a way which would inform rather than mislead active trade unionists. Large chunks of the text are devoted to a curious and unsubstantiated attack on the International Confederation of

Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). The picture which the editor and contributors to the focus have painted of the ICFTU, international trade unionism in general and unions of "the North" in particular, is so partial and ill-informed that it demands a response.

Conspiracies of the ICFTU?

The first problem concerns the frame of reference within which the feature was evidently conceived. The editors appear obsessed with uncovering some Western (ie, ICFTU) plot, to control the 'emerging' unions of the South? It is never made clear. But this fixation with political conspiracies distorts the feature from the outset.

As a working journalist, I have seen few such unprofessional and blatantly leading questions as those which spoil the potentially informative interviews with COSATU's Jay Naidoo and NACTU's Cunningham Ngcukana. For example: "The ICFTU has tended to

see itself as improving conditions within a capitalist framework. Many federations would say that the struggle for socialism continues and therefore have a particular perspective on the ICFTU. What is your view?"

Apart from the misleading description of the ICFTU's ultimate political objectives, suggesting that it espouses some form of business unionism, there is the mischievous implication that ICFTU affiliates are no longer committed to socialist politics. This may be true of some but certainly not all ICFTU affiliates. In any case, the ICFTU is not an ideologically driven organisation. Prospective affiliates are not shoved through some filter of political rectitude. They need only be largely independent and relatively democratic to qualify for affiliation.

Furthermore, all genuine trade unions work to improve conditions under capitalism - that's their daily function. Presumably, they will do the same under socialism.

In a further question to Ngcukana, the interviewers refer to Third World union criticisms of "northern" unions' unwelcome interference, asking if NACTU had experienced such meddling "from the ICFTU or any of its major affiliates". Apart from being an equally unprofessional leading question, it also excludes the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) and its affiliates



from the ranks of interfering "trade union centres of the north".

What is most significant is that neither Jay Naidoo nor Cunningham Ngcukana can be prompted to cite any examples of such unwelcome intervention from the ICFTU or its affiliates despite the weighted questions, insinuations and vague references to "external agendas".

In fact, Naidoo specifically states, "I don't think we have suffered in any way from [this] kind of intervention". Ngcukana talks only of the ICFTU and its International Trade Secretariats (ITs) providing "material support", "education programmes and legal assistance in cases of repression" and "solidarity for struggles by workers against multinationals".

Why the screen around discussion of WFTU interference? I'm sure the interviewers are not naive enough to suggest WFTU and its affiliates do not interfere in other unions' activities, so why not give this at least equal weight with hypotheses about ICFTU operations?

And why this nonchalance verging on carelessness when discussing international labour issues from writers who, we hope, would think twice and

double-check facts and sources when describing domestic union affairs.

The entire section on internationalism contains neither a single reference to WFTU interference nor, more significantly perhaps, a single example of practical solidarity from any WFTU-associated union. This latter fact comes as little surprise. I have yet to see any evidence of practical inter-union solidarity from WFTU or its affiliates which even approaches the levels of solidarity, material support or direct assistance provided by the ICFTU, its affiliates and the ITs.

Crudified views of ICFTU politics

We might at least have expected the interviews with Naidoo and Ngcukana to place an equal emphasis on, say, transnational corporate strategies, the global exchange of new management methods or prospects for cross-border collective bargaining.

The obsession with the politics of the ICFTU betrays a level of either indifference to, or ignorance of, the real nature of international trade union activity. We can only agree with Jay Naidoo's view that the ICFTU's role in South Africa has been "crudified by people who really didn't understand the situation".

The politics attributed to the ICFTU and ITs are, to use Naidoo's useful phrase, equally crudified. It is inaccurate and misleading to

characterise ICFTU politics as crudely anti-communist, although this may certainly be true of certain affiliates. The ICFTU, its national affiliates and the ITSs are largely pluralist organisations, containing diverse political currents.

For example, many communist-led unions which have demonstrated a commitment to democratic pluralism are affiliates of the ITSs. The communist-led Italian confederation, CGIL, disaffiliated from WFTU as long ago as 1978 and it is



especially some communist-led unions. But it is not sectarian to be selective. ITSs, for instance, do work closely with communist-led unions which, like the Italian CGIL and the Spanish CCOO, demonstrate a genuine commitment to pluralism and democracy. After all, the ICFTU and many

COSATU welcome UWUSA? Would the British TUC welcome back the maverick electricians if they continued to poach other unions' members and reject TUC authority?

The same confused thinking is applied to the discussion of international funding of trade union work. Celia Mather refers to "unwarranted siding in internal disputes" as a "negative trend.....to be combatted". Does she really believe that, when making international links, unions should not discriminate between, say, corrupt unions and genuinely independent progressive organisations?

International confederations will inevitably be selective about which organisations they support or accept as affiliates. The ICFTU, ITSs and the vast majority of its affiliates which operate bilateral programmes don't have money to burn, nor do they wish to sustain unions which are not genuinely democratic or largely independent.



International labour solidarity – American workers march in support of South African unions

Photo: Impact Visuals

likely to affiliate to the ICFTU in the near future. This issue is complex and sensitive, deserving much more serious and sophisticated consideration than the *Labour Bulletin* allows.

It is suggested that the ICFTU, its affiliates and ITSs are in some way maliciously sectarian or divisive in refusing to work with certain organisations,

of its affiliates continue to support COSATU and those affiliates which include many communists within their leadership. But no genuine trade union organisation would willingly accept into membership unions which are not reasonably independent and democratic or which are in hostile competition with existing affiliates. Would

Cold war confusion

The tired old cliché of "Cold War" politics is too often employed to deflect criticism from WFTU, its affiliates and other "progressive" unions. The Cold War incantation is also invoked to suggest that the complex political mosaic of international labour relations can be reduced to simple anti-communism. In countries like Belgium, for instance,

inter-union divisions are largely religious. In Italy, the three major union confederations have been divided on ideological and religious grounds between communists, christian democrats and socialists, but nevertheless still collaborate closely.

Claims of Cold War divisiveness are consistently used to disguise the real roots of differences within the international labour movement: incompatible forms of trade unionism which reflect divergent views of society, political strategies and basic values. Broadly speaking, most western unions (ie, those in the advanced capitalist economies) have, after many years of struggle, established largely democratic and reformist trade unions, whose primary but not exclusive purpose is to improve the working and living conditions of members and their families. They do so through a combination of workplace organisation, collective bargaining and political pressure, with many openly committed to some form of socialism.

While often closely linked to socialist and social democratic political parties, western unions are not subject to external political control. In fact, unions and Left-led governments frequently clash over a whole range of issues, from wages policy to foreign affairs. While most western unions are committed to the socialist



transformation of society, they pursue this aim through a 'gradualist' strategy of non-violent reformism.

An alternative view of trade unionism - which is shared by orthodox communists and many national liberation movements - is to exploit trade unions as schools for the political education of militant workers, to expose the limits to reformism under capitalism, and to reduce unions to the function of transmission belts, subordinate to the control of a vanguard party, for conveying propaganda and mobilising workers in the party's interests.

The French CGT provides an example. One of the many complex reasons why the French labour movement is among the weakest in the advanced capitalist economies (union density is lower than in the United States) is workers' practical experience and frustration at union activities being determined by the demands of the French Communist Party rather than in the interest of union members.

International labour affairs have always been fraught with political tensions, only some of which reflect Cold War divisions. With the WFTU reduced to a rump of state-managed union fronts,

the way forward to genuine labour internationalism can only be through broad-based, democratic and pluralist organisations like the ICFTU and the ITSs. The maverick activities of certain ICFTU affiliates is all the more reason to strengthen progressive and democratic elements within the confederation.

Distorted unionism: North and South

Reducing inter-union political differences to purely "European ideological struggles" is another gross simplification and also reflects the underlying attempt to replace East-West tensions with North-South divisions.

And why be so dismissive of "ideological struggles"? Are there really any other kinds? It is a barren and unproductive trade union practice which is not informed by some ideology. What else motivates workers and activists? Some kind of "pure" material self-interest?

The suggestion that western unions are condescending, patronising or interfering towards unions in the South is a theme running throughout the *Labour Bulletin* focus. Celia Mather's introduction refers to "Northern-basedpatronage" and suggests that unions of the South "have yet to find how to break the North out of its paternalism". The anonymous author of 'Towards worker-controlled

internationalism!' believes solidarity is "seen as a generous 'gift' from more 'advanced' organisations to the needy." They seem to want it both ways. It is simply mischievous and itself condescending to imply that international solidarity is based on a patronising client relationship between unions North and South. The anonymous correspondent prefers "solidarity without strings".

In anyone's vocabulary, that amounts to little more than charity - surely the worst form of paternalism. It contrasts with most unions' insistence on a relationship between moral equals, recognising that, for reasons too complex to list here, northern unions enjoy the resources, advantages and an internationalist commitment which allows them to demonstrate solidarity with fellow trade unionists elsewhere.

There are also glaring disparities of resources between northern unions: for example, German and Scandinavian unions are much better-resourced and funded than their British, Irish, Spanish and Portuguese comrades. Yet it is not condescending interference, but fraternal support, if the German Ebert Foundation funds a transnational conference on the British TUC's territory.

Yet another 'third road'?
Celia Mather describes as "radical" and "provocative" the anonymous correspondent's proposal for a



"single unified, democratic and accountable world federation". A 'third road' international, or tricontinental, is hardly a new idea. The Maoists of the Philippines Communist Party are again floating the idea under the auspices of elements within the Filipino KMU.

The sad tale of the International Miners' Organisation (IMO), provides a clear example of the intended effect of this same tactic - setting up a new organisation in the name of 'unity' in a conscious attempt to split the movement. Former Soviet miners' leaders have since admitted that the IMO was set up in order to split the Miners' International Federation. Ironically, with Eastern Europe's newly independent miners' unions now joining the MIF in droves, IMO apparatchiks are going back to the MIF with their tails between their legs seeking 'collaboration'.

What would be the political criteria underpinning this new international? If they do not include a commitment to genuinely independent and democratic trade unionism, only a rump of state-run unions and front organisations will join - in

other words, the drop-outs from the WFTU. But if there is a commitment to democracy and autonomy, with a pluralist tolerance of political diversity, there is no practical reason to establish an alternative to the ICFTU.

The confused thinking which underlies the call for a new international includes a basic contradiction: if you have an international which is "single [and] unified" you have to include unions which are undemocratic and unaccountable. How then can you claim your international is "democratic and accountable"?

If the new international is genuinely committed to independent and democratic trade unionism, it would have to exclude many unions of the South. It is doubtful that OATUU or the KMU, for example, which the correspondent holds up as examples of the "new internationalism", would qualify for membership.

How open, accessible and accountable are OATUU and most of its affiliates? Would OATUU have to purge itself of the many state-run puppet unions in its ranks, shed off the political control and constraints imposed by the Organisation of African Unity? Would the KMU have to shed the political control of the Philippines Communist Party? How many OATUU or KMU union leaderships are democratically-elected and accountable to members?

This is precisely why

organisations like the ICFTU do not make throwaway policies on issues around which there is no clear consensus. While many of its largest affiliates are committed to the socialist project, others are not (for various reasons, ranging from repression to genuine ideological differences). Consequently, representative internationals like the ICFTU perform most effectively when catering to the lowest common denominator, representing affiliates on shared interests and articulating common policies, from the unequivocal defence of human and trade union rights to promoting fairer distribution of power and wealth.

In any case, the relative secrecy and established hierarchies of international labour affairs are already being undermined and bypassed by the growing use of electronic mail and other forms of 'horizontal' communications between unions through international labour networking for the exchange of information. In most cases, this is supported and financed by the ICFTU and ITSS!

Concrete basis?

The material basis and practical use of this new international is extremely vague. Its advocate suggests its axis will be primarily along South-South lines. But Jay Naidoo reminds us that, "needing solidarity for industrial action against [western] multinationals, our



first contacts obviously developed with western unions." How many Filipino or Brazilian multinationals, say, operate in South Africa?

Which leads us to ask whether the North-South metaphor has any real use in describing international labour politics? Has SACTWU got more in common with ACTWU or textile workers' unions in, say, Burkina Faso, Papua New Guinea or Belize?

If a Malaysian trade union wants up-to-date information on how to handle a hazardous substance, forms of protective clothing to be worn, danger premiums to be paid... does the union think South-South or does it contact the most advanced sources and guidelines through US or European union contacts?

This Third Worldist approach of romanticising South-South links ignores the fact that unions of the North are strategically better-placed to advance the interests of organised labour globally. They are historically strongest, with the largest memberships, the longest and potentially most instructive experience, greater material resources, and, in some cases, still exercise political leverage. Based in the transnationals'

home countries, they are invariably best placed to exercise whatever leverage exists - from labour rights trade provisions to shareholder action - in order to influence corporate behaviour.

Northern unions don't provide infallible models or transferrable lessons - history holds no short cuts - but they can bring to bear a collective experience and resources which the vast majority of unions in the South simply cannot match.

None of this is to deny the need for South-South collaboration and contacts or to deny that Northern unions have a lot to learn from counterparts in the South. However, given the power of the transnationals, the imposition of austerity and structural adjustment programmes, and the many other problems facing organised labour, unions in the South will inevitably ask which unions are best-placed to guarantee effective solidarity. Which unions can, to be blunt, deliver the goods of international solidarity through organised boycotts, industrial action, political pressure, or new forms of union leverage, like mobilising pension fund investments?

The *Labour Bulletin's* anonymous correspondent says a new international will "challenge the domination of Northern centres/federations over trade union activity." But would any union in, say, SA or Brazil, which is serious

about dealing with Volkswagen or Shell, really benefit from alienating unions within those corporations? Such an adventure would jeopardise, the extensive and deeply-rooted North-South "organic solidarity" so instructively illustrated by *Labour Bulletin's* case study of SACTWU- ACTWU relations.

Of course there is a need for South-South links. There are also obvious instances where the objective needs and interests of trade unionists North and South will be confused or actually conflict - for example, the Multi-Fibre Agreement, or on questions of multinationals' investment and industrial location.

Yet most existing South-South links and many of the activities of independent research centres would not be possible without material assistance from trade unions of the North. There is also scope for autonomous regional initiatives. But the last thing trade unionists need is another divisive international confederation.

Many progressive trade unionists rightly campaign for greater accountability and internal democracy within the labour movement. But faced with the option of establishing pure but tiny organisations in a political ghetto or reforming the mainstream from within, most serious activists would opt for reinforcing the



progressive and democratic forces within the most representative organisations.

'New labour internationalism'?

In attempting to cut out or bypass established and representative organisations, the anonymous author suggests that unions in the South would be able to rely on the "strengths" of "extensive networks of worker activists in the established unions of Europe and North America". Presumably this refers to those organisations committed to the evasive 'new labour internationalism'.

But these amount to only a few small highly-dedicated organisations, including journals, labour research centres and single-issue campaigns which are themselves politically diverse and far from uniformly Third Worldist. Few of these groups would ever suggest that there is even the beginnings of an "extensive network" and certainly not one which presents the slightest hint of an alternative to working with established and representative trade union organisations.

Moreover, despite the valuable work they have done, these groups remain largely unrepresentative and

unaccountable, pursuing their own agendas which may or may not coincide with the needs of the movement.

So what is new about this new internationalism? Since the late 1970s, there has been a great deal of talk and comment concerning the 'new labour internationalism'. Crudely speaking, they argued that trade union internationalism had to be made more transparent, more relevant and accountable to rank-and-file workers.

Unfortunately, this was tied to a crude notion of trade union imperialism - the idea that western trade unions were accomplices of multinational capital in exploiting the Third World.

This had the effect of blinding the new labour internationalists to the abuses of trade unionism under the auspices of the WFTU and, equally naively, looking to the newly emergent unions of the South - principally in South Africa, Brazil and the Philippines - for an inspiring model of uncorrupted militant unionism.

Yet the 'new internationalism' has achieved little of lasting value. The few, practical and successful instances of international labour solidarity cited by the self-proclaimed new labour internationalists invariably turn out to be the work of the official union structures associated with the ICFTU, especially the ITSs.

Likewise, the genuinely new labour internationalism, the most dynamic, innovative and effective international initiatives, are taking place not between self-styled rank-and-file groups but through official union channels, as demonstrated by the "organic solidarity" between SACTWU and the AFL-CIO-affiliated ACTWU.

Irresponsible purism

Karl von Holdt correctly refers to the "potential for militant, democratic trade union movements...to reinvigorate and give new meaning to international solidarity." But they will not do so by confining themselves to the political margins. If union members are critical of a leadership, unhappy with policy, or believe the union hierarchy to be unaccountable or unrepresentative, the response is rarely to form another union.

If the *Labour Bulletin's* anonymous correspondent is genuinely concerned to promote democratic and accountable trade unionism, independent of state control, and excluding those transmission belt 'fronts' for vanguard parties, there is only one game in town.

The only meaningful forum for this process and for confronting the growing power of multinational capital is those organisations - the ICFTU, its affiliates, and associated ITSs - which represent by far the vast majority of the world's workers organised in



democratic and largely independent trade unions.

There is clearly a case for international union bodies to be more accountable and their activities more transparent to union members. But the new international proposed by the anonymous correspondent is, at worst, a recipe for splitting the progressive mainstream of the international labour movement. At best, it is a guaranteed passage to a political ghetto.

A more constructive agenda

A more constructive and progressive agenda would deal with the serious, pressing issues facing organised labour on the international plane, by:

- addressing the internationalisation of production, markets and recruitment, and trade unionists' growing interest in, and need to know about, comparative employment practices, pay, conditions and union rights;
- monitoring transnational corporate activity, including industrial relations practices, investment trends, and workers' rights violations; the implications of cross-border mergers, acquisitions and international

joint ventures, etc;

- stimulating the exchange of 'best practice' information on union strategies, experiences and practical lessons, from industrial action and corporate campaigns to 'socially responsible' pension fund investment and other emerging forms of union leverage;
- providing accessible information, in a format suitable for labour educators, on the characteristics of national industrial relations systems, trade union practices, and political developments.

Internationalism needs to go beyond the kind of superficial discussion of the *Labour Bulletin's* focus. An internationalist awareness should seep through the whole trade union agenda. This would allow organised labour to exploit its greatest resources - the collective strength based on our membership, accumulated experience and political weight worldwide.

It should become second nature for workers to look for instruction or inspiration to fellow trade unionists elsewhere - to learn from political strategy in Brazil, minimum wage provisions in Europe, co-ordinated corporate campaigns in the United States, and women workers' organisation in India.

Of course there are limits to the transferability of union experiences. But, at worst, the exchange of information, research and analysis increases unions' common

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