

A Global Labour Charter Movement?

As labour comes increasingly under attack across the globe, global unity is becoming an essential. **Peter Waterman** proffers the bold and powerful idea of a Global Labour Charter.

The idea of a Global Labour Charter Movement comes out of both desperation and hope. The desperation is seeing the labour movement in North, South, East or West floundering under the multiple attacks by contemporary capitalism, and by labour's lack of socially unifying and mobilising vision which inspired it in the past. The hope comes from seeing energy and vision within the so-called global justice and solidarity movement (GJ&SM).

The idea of a Global Labour Charter (GLC) is to develop a charter, declaration or manifesto on labour, relevant to all working people, labouring under the conditions of a radically transformed and highly aggressive capitalism, neo-liberalised and globalised.

The idea of such a charter was provoked by recent international labour declarations – Bamako Appeal 2006, Labour Platform for the Americas 2006. A common limitation of these otherwise very different documents is that each was issued for endorsement by union leaderships or intellectual elites, without discussion by union



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members, shopfloor or community activists themselves. The GLC notion is, however, also inspired by a recent women's one, the Women's Global Charter for Humanity (2004), produced after worldwide discussion by a new mobilising social movement.

This project addresses itself to the emancipation from work in the sense of labour for capital and state, empire and patriarchy. It seeks to articulate both through joining and expressing labour struggles with those of other

oppressed and exploited social categories, people and peoples particularly the majority of workers, women. The existence of a growing GJ&SM, best known through the World Social Forum (WSF) process, makes such articulation increasingly possible.

Its title could be the 'Global Labour Charter Movement' (GLCM21). 'Charter' reminds us of one of the earliest radical-democratic labour-popular movements of industrial capitalism, the British Chartists.

'Movement' reminds us that the development of such a declaration requires a process and the self-mobilisation of workers.

Such a process needs to reveal its origins and debts. These are to the new forms of labour self-organisation (within and beyond unions), to the shopfloor, urban and rural labour networks (local, national, international), to the labour NGOs (labour service organisations), and to a growing wave of labour education, communication and research responding to the crisis of the labour movement.

The novel principle of such a charter should be its conception as a 'virtuous spiral'. That it be conceived not as a single, correct, final declaration, which workers, and other people simply endorse, but for its process and dialogue orientation and developing nature. This notion would allow for it to be begun, paused and joined at any point. Such a process would require at least the following elements: information/communication, education, dialogue, formulation, action, evaluation, information.

It is the existence of cyberspace (the internet, the web, computerised audio-visuals) that makes such a GLC for the first time conceivable. We have not simply a new communications technology but the possibility for developing non-hierarchical, discursive, equal relations worldwide. The process will be computer-based because of the web's built-in characteristics of feedback, its worldwide reach, its low and decreasing cost. An increasing number of workers and activists are in computerised work,

are familiar with information and communication technology and have web skills. Given, however, uneven worker computer access, such a process must also be intensely local, imply and empower outreach, using the communication methods appropriate to particular kinds of labour and each specific situation.

Networking must ensure that any initiators or co-ordinators do not become permanent leaders or controllers. There is a growing international body of full-time organisers and volunteer activists, both within and beyond the traditional inter/national unions, experienced in the GJ&SM, who could provide the initial nodes in such a network.

Networking also, however, allows for there to be various charters, in dialogue with each other. Such dialogue should be considered a normal and even necessary part of the process and avoid the authority, dependency or passivity associated with traditional manifestos.

If this proposal assumes the crisis of the traditional trade unions, it should be clear that it simultaneously represents an opportunity for them. This is for a reinvention of the form of labour organisation and expression as has occurred more than once in the history of capitalism - from guilds to craft unions, from craft to inter/national industrial unions.

By abandoning what is an increasingly imaginary power, centrality or privilege, unions could reinvent themselves and become a necessary and significant part of a movement for social emancipation worldwide. The

forms of such a reinvention will emerge out of a continuing dialogue, the dialectic between organisational and networking activities.

Starting with the first edition of any GLC, there could be a list of globally-agreed demands and campaigns, with these having emancipatory (demonstrably socially-transformatory, empowering) implications for those involved. Rather than increasing their dependence on capital, state, patriarchy, empire, any GLC must increase solidarity with other popular and radically-democratic sectors/movements.

Any such campaigns must, however, be seen as not carved in stone but as collective experiments, to be collectively evaluated. They should therefore be dependent on collective self-activity, implying global solidarity, as with the 200-year-old (but never completed) campaign for the eight-hour day. There is a wide range of issues of which the following are examples, in no necessary order of priority:

- A Six Hour Day, A Five Day Week, A 48 Week Year, thus distributing available work more widely, reducing overwork.
- Global Labour Rights, including the right to strike and inter/national solidarity action, but first consulting workers including migrants, precarious workers, unpaid carers ('housewives'), and the unemployed on their priorities; and secondly by prioritising collective struggles and creative activity over leadership lobbying.
- A Global Basic Income Grant, in the interests of women, of the unemployed, etc.

- A Centennial Reinvention of the ILO in 1919, raising labour representation from 25 to 50%, and simultaneously sharing the raised percentage with non-unionised workers.
- A Global Campaign for Useful Work, reaching beyond conditions of, or at work ('Decent Work') to deal with useful production, socially-responsible consumption, environmental sustainability.
- All in Common, a campaign for the defence and extension of forms of common ownership and control (thus challenging both the privatisation process and capitalist ownership in general).
- A reinvention of May Day as a Global Labour and Social Movements Solidarity Day (as being done by precarious workers in Europe and by immigrant labour in the US).
- Support to the principle of Solidarity Economics and the practice of the Solidarity Economy, i.e. production, distribution, exchange that surpasses the competitive, divisory, hierarchical, growth-fixated, wasteful, polluting, destructive principles of capitalism.
- A Global Labour Forum, as part of, or complementing, the World Social Forum, an assembly organised autonomously from the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and the Global Unions, whilst open to all).

This proposal is clearly marked by its origin, in terms of its author, place and language. It is, however, issued under the principle of



CopyLeft. It can therefore be adapted, replaced, challenged, rejected and, obviously, ignored. Its only requirement or hope is that it be discussed.

If you support the idea discuss it in your organisations and send responses to the author Peter Waterman who will circulate it to other interested people and organisations globally
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Resources

Bamako Appeal. 2006.
<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/bamako.html>
Labour's Platform for the Americas. 2006.
<http://www.gpn.org/research/orit2>

[005/index.html](http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/005/index.html).

Waterman, Peter. 2006. *Toward a Global Labour Charter for the 21st Century.*

http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/4278.html

Women's Global Charter for Humanity. 2004.

http://www.worldmarchofwomen.org/qui_nous_sommes/charte/en

Peter Waterman began his working life with international Communist organisations in Prague (1955-8, 1966-9). In the 1980s he published the Newsletter of International Labour Studies. He originated the international debate on 'Social Movement Unionism' in the 1980s.