

NEEDED: A GLOBAL LABOUR CHARTER MOVEMENT

A Work in Progress

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[T]he material basis for international working-class solidarity is greater than at any point since the development of capitalism. Nevertheless, the existence of a material basis does not ensure success. Movement from the general recognition that international solidarity is a good to its realisation will require changes in ideological orientations as well as practical programmatic steps.[...]To bring social justice unionism into existence, we must change not only the leadership of existing organised labour but also the relationship between the existing trade union movement and other progressive social forces.

(Bill Fletcher Jr and Fernando Gapasin 2008)

Like any movement under attack, labour generally resists as disloyal critical thinking that challenges established tenets and practices. But today that won't do. Now more than ever we need a free and open debate about the future of labour, a debate that respects a full range of opinions and perspectives. Launching such a debate would be a good first step in labour's revival.

(Global Labour Strategies 2008)

The disappearance of utopia brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes no more than a thing. We would then be faced with the greatest paradox imaginable...After a long, torturous, but heroic development, just at the highest stage of awareness, when history is ceasing to be blind fate, and is becoming more and more man's own creation, with the relinquishment of utopia, man would lose his will to shape history and therewith his ability to understand it.²

(Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 1929-31)

Preamble

The idea of a Global Labour Charter Movement comes out of both desperation and hope. The desperation is due to seeing the labour movement, in North, South, East or West, *still* on the defensive due to (despite?) the severe, multiple and continuing attacks delivered by contemporary capitalism. Not only has the union movement largely forgotten its early emancipatory inspiration and utopian hopes. Even the old adage that ‘the best means of defence is attack’ seems unfamiliar to labour’s international leadership.

The desperation is due – more specifically - to the international unions’ continued attempt to *get back* to a mythologised utopia of social harmony (the reality of which is surely responsible for labour’s current predicament). This *backward-looking* utopianism is represented in the current ‘Decent Work’ campaign <http://www.decentwork.org/>. DW promotes the archaic West-European paradise of ‘social partnership’ between Labour, Capital and State. It has simply hoisted this to the global level. DW is no sense a *union* or *labour movement* project: it has been adopted, lock, stock and two smoking barrels, from the Geneva-based International Labour Organisation. And this is an *inter-state* body (castigated by a former insider (Standing 2008) for *its* multiple incapacities in the face of globalisation!). DW, finally, reproduces a traditional imperial relationship, since it is being promoted by the West to the Rest. Its sponsors and funders are West European social-reformist unions and NGOs...plus the *neo-liberal* European Union!

Hope comes from seeing new energy and vision within the global justice and solidarity movement (GJ&SM), for example in the international rural labour movement, Via Campesina. Despite all the imaginable difficulties confronting the self-organisation of rural labour, this body has developed a holistic vision of its social position, of its enemies, of an alternative future. It has demonstrated assertive global strategies and sophisticated relational practices (internal and external) that have made it a leading actor in the GJ&SM and led to widespread public recognition and support (Desmarais 2007, Waterman 2008a). Hope also comes from signs of assertion and innovation closer to the traditional labour movement, and from new thinking within and about such (Fletcher Jr and Gapasin 2008, Gallin 2003, Huws 2008, Ince 2007, Waterman 2007, Research Committee 44 2008, Bieler, Lindberg and Pillay 2008). As well as from efforts to specify a necessary and desirable post-capitalist utopia – and how it might be reached. (Networked Politics 2008, Adamovsky 2005, 2007, Dwyer-Witthford 2007, Sousa Santos 2006-7, Spannos 2008).

Propositions

1. The **idea** of a GLCM is to develop a charter, declaration or manifesto on labour, relevant to *all* working people, under the conditions of a radically transformed and highly aggressive capitalism, neo-liberalised, networked and globalised.
2. The proposing of such a charter has, however, been **provoked** by a couple of other

international labour declarations (Bamako Appeal 2006, Labour Platform for the Americas 2006). A common limitation of these otherwise very different documents is that they were initially produced and issued for acceptance or endorsement, by union leaderships or intellectual elites, without previous discussion by union members, shopfloor or community activists themselves. The GLC project is, however, also inspired by a women's one, the Women's Global Charter for Humanity (2004), produced after worldwide discussion by one of the newest mobilising social movements. (Verdière 2006, Conway 2007).

3. In so far as the GLC project is addressed to **the emancipation of life from work** (work here meaning labour for capital and state, empire and patriarchy), it implies *articulating* (both joining and expressing) labour struggles with those of other oppressed and exploited social categories, people and peoples – particularly those previously unrecognised workers, women and peasants/farmers. The existence of the GJ&SM, best known through the World Social Forum (WSF) process, makes such articulation increasingly possible.
4. Its title could be the '**Global Labour Charter Movement**' (or GLCM21). 'Charter' reminds us of one of the earliest radical-democratic labour-popular movements of industrial capitalism, the British Chartists (Thompson 1984) 'Movement' reminds us that the development of such a declaration is a process and requires the self-mobilisation of workers.
5. Such a process needs to reveal its **origins and debts**. These are not only to early labour history. They are also to the new forms of labour self-organisation (by, within and beyond unions), to the shopfloor, urban and rural labour networks (local, national, international), to the pro-labour NGOs (labour service organisations), and to a growing wave of labour education, to (electronic) communication and to research responding to the global crisis of the labour movement (Waterman 2007).
6. The novel principle of such a charter should be its conception as a '**virtuous spiral**' - that it be thought of not as a single, correct, final declaration, which workers, peoples and other people simply *endorse* (though endorsement could be part of the process), as for its processal, dialogical 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, (re-) formulation, action, evaluation, information.
7. It is the existence of **cyberspace** (the internet, the web, online audio-visuals) that makes such a Global Labour Charter for the first time conceivable. We have here not simply a new communications technology but the possibility for developing non-hierarchical, dialogical, 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 locale. (See: Networked Politics).

8. **Networking** can and must ensure that any initiators or coordinators do not become permanent leaders or controllers. There is a growing international body of fulltime 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 such labour 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. (See, again, Networked Politics).
9. 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 self-articulation, 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 simultaneously reinvent themselves and become a necessary and significant part of a movement for social emancipation worldwide. The form or forms of such a reinvention will emerge precisely out of a continuing dialogue, the dialectic between organisational and networking activities.
10. Starting with the first edition(s) of any GLC, there could develop globally-agreed demands and campaigns, with these having **emancipatory** (arguably subversive, empowering, socially transformatory) **implications** for those involved. Rather than increasing their dependence on capital, state, patriarchy, empire, any GLC must increase their solidarity with other popular and radically-democratic sectors/movements.
11. 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 international 19th century campaign (never universally implemented) for the eight-hour day http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eight-hour_day. There is a wide range of **imaginable issues** (of which the following are hypothetical 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 (see <http://www.swt.org/>).
 - Global Labour Rights, including the right to strike and inter/national solidarity action, but first *consulting* workers - including migrants, precarious workers, unpaid carers ('housewives'), the self-employed, the unemployed - on their priorities; and secondly by prioritising collective struggles and creative activity over leadership lobbying. http://laborrightsblog.typepad.com/international_labor_right/2006/11/about_this_blog.html.

- A Global Basic Income Grant, independent of any obligation to work, and asserting the right to life over the obligation to work <http://www.basicincome.org/bien/aboutbasicincome.html>.
- A Centennial Reinvention of the ILO in 2019, raising labour representation from 25 to 50 percent, and simultaneously sharing the raised percentage with non-unionised workers (Standing 2008);
- 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/restoration (Morris 2008, <http://libcom.org/history/1976-the-fight-for-useful-work-at-lucas-aerospace>).
- 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), Waterman 2004, <http://turbulence.org.uk/turbulence-1/commonism/> ;
- A reinvention of Mayday as a Global Labour and Social Movements Solidarity Day (consider the innovations introduced by precarious workers in Europe and by immigrant labour in the USA) <http://www.euromayday.org/about.php>, <http://www.mayday2007.org/>;
- 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. (Miller 2006, Mance 2007)
- A Global Emancipation of Labour Forum, as part of, or complementing, the World Social Forum, an assembly open to all working people, organizations, intellectuals/artists and movements, organised autonomously from the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and the Global Unions. If not in a geographical place then in cyberspace. (Reese and Chase-Dunn 2008, Waterman 2001, 2008).
- A website/portal coordinating information and ideas oriented toward the emancipation of labour, covering research, education, audio-visuals, and other resources; to have such a title as 'The Global Labour Charter', 'The Global Emancipation of Labour', 'Moving Labour Globally'; to be open to sponsorship but autonomous of all organisations and ideologies; open on equal footing to all; to have a preferential option for globally marginalised workers and regions; to have a transformatory purpose and be open in governance and operation. (Compare here: Choike, Global Labour Strategies, New Unionism, Union Ideas Network, E-Library for Social Transformation, Union Renewal, Rebelión, etc).
- [Fill at will]

12. This proposal is clearly marked by its origin, in terms of its author's 'subject position', place of birth/residence, age, language, etc. 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.

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² Too bad about the patriarchal formulation, but readers can re-imagine the idea in non-sexist terms.