

TOWARD A GLOBAL LABOUR CHARTER MOVEMENT FOR THE 21ST CENTURY (GLCM21)

(Mayday 2006 Update)

Peter Waterman

p.waterman@inter.nl.net

1. Here are some initial ideas about developing a charter, declaration or manifesto on labour, relevant to *all* working people, under the conditions of a 21st century, globalised, networked, informatised capitalism. The reflections start from two points, the Labour Chapter of the Bamako Appeal (2006) and a critique of the Appeal that focuses on the same Chapter (Waterman 2006).
2. The Labour Chapter (**Appendix 1**) in the Bamako Appeal (BA) may represent the most radical public statement on the contemporary global labour question to be found so far. Considering the present nature of work and workers worldwide, it recognises the limitations of the trade unions - traditionally considered to be either the sole or the central form of worker self-organisation. But the BA nonetheless suggests a significant role for labour within the new global justice and solidarity movement (GJ&SM), thus re-articulating labour with the general social movement of our epoch.
3. The Labour Chapter of the BA calls for a new form of worker organisation globally that would equally represent all workers, and ends:

Only such a renewed movement of workers, worldwide, inclusive and acting together with other social movements will be able to transform the present world and to create a world order founded on solidarity rather than on competition.
4. The Chapter also, uniquely, puts the labour question within a general context of contemporary global social problems and movements (as represented by the BA).
5. The Chapter and Appeal may be the *latest* word on their respective topics but neither can be considered the *last* word: they rather represent a provocation to the formulation of some more substantial 'charter for the emancipation of labour globally' and/or a 'global emancipatory manifesto' (a GEM?).
6. The Labour Chapter provides a stimulus to a global dialogue, both socially deep and globally wide, involving the whole labour and other social movements, without prioritising one form of organisation, class (or fraction thereof), party, network, ideology or socio-geographical region,

thus potentially reaching out to every kind of labourer, as well as to labour-oriented NGOs, communicators, teachers, researchers and artists.

7. The broad inspiration and motivation for such a dialogue could be such notions as 'the emancipation of labour' (Plekhanov 1883), 'the liberation of life from work', (Gorz 1999), recognition of the generalisation of proletarianisation, the radically new conditions of labour, types of labourer, and the potential agency of 'those who refuse the rule of capital' (Hardt and Negri 2004). Its title could be the 'Global Labour Charter Movement' (GLCM21). 'Charter' is suggestive of one of the earliest radical-democratic labour-popular movements of industrial capitalism. (British Chartists 2006). 'Movement' suggests both mobilisation and process
8. In so far as this project is addressed to emancipation from work (i.e. labour for capital and state, empire and patriarchy), it implies articulating (both joining and expressing) labour struggles with those of all other alienated social categories, people and peoples.
9. Such a process needs to reveal its origins and debts. These are to: the changing nature of labour under a globalised, networked, financial and services capitalism; to the new kinds of workers and worklessness created by such, to the new forms of labour self-articulation (within and beyond unions), to the shopfloor union networks (national, international), to the labour NGOs (labour service organisations), and to the growing wave of labour education, communication and research responding to this.
10. The novel principle of such a charter should be its *iterative* nature - that it be conceived not as a correct and final declaration, which workers, peoples and other people simply *endorse* (though endorsement could be allowed for), as for its processal, dialogical and developing nature.
11. This process should be a virtuous spiral, which can be begun, paused and joined (or left) at any point, but anyway involving: information/communication, education, dialogue, (re-) formulation, action, evaluation...
12. Because of its revolutionary socio-technical characteristics, its worldwide reach, its low cost, this process will be computer-based, occurring in cyberspace (Aguiton and Cardon 2005-6). Given uneven worker computer access, of course, it must also imply and empower outreach, using locally-appropriate communication methods.
13. Such an initiative could have been started by anyone anywhere. That it is here being initiated by an ageing, white, European, male, etc, labour specialist, has to do with particular privileges and interests. But networking can and must ensure that any such initiator/coordinator does not become a permanent leader, nor suggest a model for such 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 possible nodes in such a network.
14. If this proposal begins with 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 the movement (from guilds to craft unions, from craft unions to inter/national industrial ones). By abandoning what is an increasingly notional power or privilege, unions could simultaneously strengthen themselves and become a significant part of a movement for social emancipation worldwide

(compare Gallin 2006).

15. Starting with the first edition of any GLC, there could be a list of globally-agreed demands and campaigns, with these having emancipatory (socially-transformatory, empowering) implications for those involved. These must increase the autonomy of those benefited. They must intensify their solidarity with other popular and radically-democratic sectors/movements (rather than increasing their dependence on Capital, State, Patriarchy, Empire). Any such campaigns must, however, be seen not as marching orders but as collective experiments, to be later 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 (Eight Hour Day 2006). 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;
- **Global Labour Rights** (first by consulting all workers, including migrants, the precariat, carers, unemployed; secondly primarily by struggle, not by lobbying);
- **A Global Basic Income Grant** (in the interests of women, of the unemployed, etc);
- **A Global Labour Forum** (as part of, or complementing, the World Social Forum, an assembly independent of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and the Global Unions, whilst open to all);
- **A Centennial Reinvention of the ILO** in 1919, raising labour representation from 25 to 50 percent, and simultaneously sharing the raised percentage with non-unionised workers;
- **A Global Campaign for Useful Work** (reaching beyond conditions of, or at work to deal with useful production, socially-responsible consumption);
- **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 Mayday as a **Global Labour and Social Movements Solidarity Day** (as being done by precarious workers in Europe and by immigrant labour in the USA);
- **[All of the above?]**
- **[None of the above?]**
- **[Additional to the above?]**
- **[Alternative to the above?]**

The Author

Peter Waterman (London 1936), began working with international Communist organisations in Prague (1955-8, 1966-9). He taught university in Northern Nigeria (1970-72). He spent 26 years at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague (1972-98). In the 1980s he published the *Newsletter of International Labour Studies*. Since 1984 he has specialised on the new labour and other internationalisms, and on (electronic) communications in relation to such. He published *Globalisation, Social Movements and the New Internationalisms* (1998/2001). He has written, and co-edited, on (international) labour and on the World Social Forum. Pending are collections of his papers in Spanish, and another in English. He is currently writing his own international/ist memoirs.

Resources

- Christophe Aguiton et Dominique Cardon. 2005-6. 'Militants et TIC' (Activists and ICT). Email attachment received April 2006.
- Bamako Appeal. 2006. <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/bamako.html>
- British Chartists. 2006. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chartism#External_links
- Eight Hour Day. 2006. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eight_hour_day
- Gallin, Dan. 2006. 'Organising: Means and Ends', Global Unions, Global Justice Conference, Cornell University/Global Labor Institute, New York, February 9, 2006. http://www.global-labour.org/means_and_ends.htm.
- Hardt and Negri. 2004. 'The Becoming Common of Labour', in *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin. Pp. 103-15.
- Gorz, Andre. 1999. 'A New Task for the Unions: The Liberation of Time from Work', in Ronaldo Munck and Peter Waterman (eds), *Labour Worldwide in the Era of Globalisation: Alternative Union Models in the New World Order*. Houndmills: Macmillan. Pp. 41-63
- Plekhanov, Georgi. 1883. 'Programme of the Social-Democratic Emancipation of Labour Group' <http://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1883/xx/sdelg1.htm>
- Waterman, Peter. 2006. 'The Bamako Appeal: A Post-Modern Janus?', http://www.choike.org/documentos/bamako_appeal_janus.pdf

To Build a Workers' United Front (Chapter 6 of the Bamako Appeal, 2006)

Two of the principal weapons in the hands of workers are the right to vote and the right to form trade unions. Up to now democracy and trade unions were built mainly within the national states. Now, however, neo-liberal globalisation has challenged the workers the world over, and globalised capitalism cannot be confronted at the national level alone. Today, the task is twofold: to strengthen organising on a national level and simultaneously globalise democracy and reorganise a worldwide working class.

Mass unemployment and the increasing proportion of informal work arrangements are other imperative reasons to reconsider the existing organisations of the laboring classes. A world strategy for labor must consider not only the situation of workers who work under stable contracts. Employment out of the formal sectors now involves an increasing portion of workers, even in the industrialised countries. In the majority of the countries of the South, the workers of the informal sector – temporary labor, informal labor, the self-employed, the unemployed, street salespeople, those who sell their own services — together form the majority of the laboring classes. These groups of informal workers are growing in the majority of the countries of the South because of high unemployment and a two-sided process: on the one hand, the decreasing availability of guaranteed employment and increased informal employment, and on the other hand, the continuous migration from the rural areas to the towns. The most important task will be for workers outside the formal sector to organise themselves and for the traditional trade unions to open up in order to carry out common actions.

The traditional trade unions have had problems responding to this challenge. Not all the organisations of the workers - except in the formal sectors - will necessarily be trade unions or similar organisations and the traditional trade unions will also have to change. New perspectives for organising together, based on horizontal bonds and mutual respect, must develop between the traditional trade unions and the new social movements. For this purpose, the following proposals are submitted for consideration:

1. An opening of the trade unions towards collaboration with the other social movements without trying to subordinate them to the traditional trade-union structure or a specific political party.
2. The constitution of effectively transnational trade-union structures in order to confront transnational employers. These trade-union structures should have a capacity to negotiate and at the same time have a mandate to organise common actions beyond national borders. For this purpose, an important step would be to organise strong trade-union structures within transnational corporations. These corporations have a complex network of production and are often very sensitive to any rupture in the chains of production and distribution, that is, they are vulnerable. Some successes in the struggles against the transnational corporations could have a real impact on the world balance of power between capital and labor.
3. Technological development and structural change are necessary to improve living conditions and eradicate poverty, but the relocations of production are not carried out today in the interest of the workers; instead, they are exclusively profit-driven. It is necessary to promote a gradual improvement of the wages and working conditions, to expand local production along with local demand and a system

of negotiation to carry out relocation in other ways than simply following the logic of profit and free trade. These relocations could fit under transnational negotiation in order to prevent workers of the various countries from being forced to enter in competition with each other in a relentless battle.

4. To consider the rights of migrant worker as a basic concern for the trade unions by ensuring that solidarity among workers is not dependent on their national origin. Indeed, segregation and discrimination on ethnic or other bases are threats to working-class solidarity.

5. To take care so that the future transnational organisation of the laboring class is not conceived as a unique, hierarchical and pyramidal structure, but as a variety of various types of organisations, with a network-like structure with many horizontal bonds.

6. To promote a labor front in reorganised structures that also include workers outside the formal sector throughout the world, capable of taking effective coordinated actions to confront globalised capitalism.

Only such a renewed movement of workers, worldwide, inclusive and acting together with other social movements will be able to transform the present world and to create a world order founded on solidarity rather than on competition.