REVITALIZING TRADE UNIONS :
GLOBAL SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM

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Introduction

T he union movement in Sri Lanka is going through a period of crisis as well as experimentation. The dominant perception of unions is that they are captured by political parties, powerless to organize new workers, and mostly operating as "industrial wings" of political parties. While this party subordination is a significant feature, there are new tendencies emerging within labour movements across the new global economy. This tendency is described as community unionism or social movement unionism. The main orientation of this new tendency is to regain union identities as a social movement engaged in struggles for social justice. Particularly in a context of neo-liberal globalization, revitalizing unions is intricately linked with issues of transnational worker solidarity or labour internationalism. In extending social movement unionism to the global realm, some local unions are increasingly becoming aware of a global social movement unionism, depicted by the Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR) network.

Union strategies

I n terms of union responses to neo-liberal globalization, the two main tendencies can be described as business unionism and movement unionism (figure. 1). Business unionism is what is promoted by business and the World Bank, think tanks and a range of NGOs. In this view, unions are seen purely in economic terms as labour market actors whose interests are to improve wages and conditions for their members. Accordingly, the unions should co-operate with the management to improve "productivity", "efficiency", and "international competitiveness". The two main manifestations of business unionism are described as authoritarian and strategic unionism (Lambert, 2002).

Authoritarian unionism is where unions are controlled by the authority in power (theocracy, military dictatorship, fascist party, etc.), with limited access to a system of industrial relations. In contrast, strategic unionism focuses on the realm of representative politics and systems of industrial relations. This economistic approach to unions, focuses on providing

"services" for members, while avoiding alliances, agitation and mobilization. Generally, these unions are the preferred choice of employers as well as the state, where unions act as 'managers of discontent', socialising workers to become hard working, self-responsible and docile.

In contrast, movement unionism locates unions as key actors within the labour movement as class and civil society actors. In acknowledging the specificity of capitalist class relations shaping wage work, union interests extend beyond the workplace and labour markets into addressing issues of community and citizenship. Within movement unionism there are also two tendencies. Political unionism, like strategic unionism is based on representative politics. In Sri Lanka, the CP, LSSP and JVP unions practice varying degrees of political unionism. Meanwhile, the UNP union *Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya* (JSS), the SLFP union *Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya*, and the CWC (Ceylon Workers Congress – the dominant plantation union) practice a version of political unionism that is mainly promoting business unionism.

The changes in party-union relationship are central for understanding new possibilities for unions. The party-union relationship entered a new set of relations with the decline of classic Socialist or Communist labour parties, and the disconnection of socialist alternatives from the labour movement and social revolution (Hobsbawm, 1989). In addition, the rise of new social movements (women, peace, ecology, sexual identities, etc.) revealed the inability of centralised parties to address a range of issues. Even working-class parties such as the CP, LSSP and JVP are hollowed out, lacking alternatives to market-driven politics.

Figure 1. Union responses
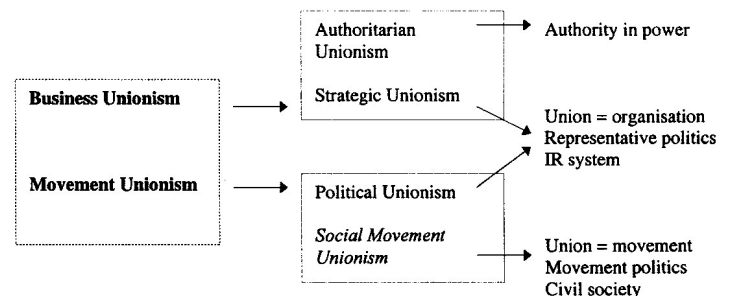
An emerging new tendency within movement unionism focuses on union strategies independent of political parties, and geared towards long term alliances with other civil society movements and on collective action. This tendency is described as community unionism (Wills, 2001, Fine 2005) or social movement unionism (Waterman, 1993; Moody, 1997; Seidman, 1994; Lambert, 2002). In this strategic orientation, even party allied unions are manoeuvring to gain some autonomy, which is often contested and negotiated.

Social movement unionism (SMU) is about gaining union independence to activate autonomous, creative initiative and collective agency of workers while building alliances with external actors. These external relations include other unions, and community groups, and NGOs. These actors are located in different territorial scales (local, national, regional, and global), strategic terrains (lobbying, awareness raising, activism, etc) and issues (worker rights, womens' rights, ecology, peace, etc.). In resisting political party attempts to negotiate, institutionalize, and change demands won by trade unions, the SMU approach suggests party "strategies that serve rather than lead and dominate" trade unions and the labour movement (Waterman, 1993).

Unions and the labour force

T he capacity for unions to mobilize relates to their specific context in the labour force. The level of unionisation in Sri Lanka in 2000 was around 18% of the employed labour force, or nearly one million workers, of the 5.6 million employed labour force (Labour Department, 2001). Between 1977 and 2000, the numbers of unionized workers have fluctuated between 1.4 to 1 million workers. In 2000, there were 1,636 unions encompassing around 1.4 million members (Labour Department, 2001).

The plantation workers are the largest segment of unionized manual workers, with close to 450,000 unionized workers in privatized tea plantations. The urban labour movement is dominated by services sector workers, mostly in the public sector. While representing a relatively small nucleus of organised workers, the public sector workers are a core segment of the labour movement, with a militant history. Most militant unions are dispersed in the ports, bus, railways, government administrative services,postal, telecommunication, banks, schools, and hospitals.

However, the fragmented character of the union movement is a main constraint on union mobilization. According to

Labour Ministry categories, the concentration of registered trade unions in 2000 included: 140 in Education, 123 in the health sector, 90 in railways, 61 in the plantations, 36 in Mahaweli-related (agriculture) activity, 26 in Bank-related areas, and 19 in the ports (Labour Department, 2000). While there are numerous unions, in each sector and within each occupation, often only a handful of unions are active.

Authoritarian labour markets

I n Sri Lanka, as in most South Asian countries, the liberalization policies (or market-driven politics) are re-configuring dominant political unionism strategies towards business unionism. This is based on reinforcing authoritarian labour markets or coercive labour regimes aimed at making a productive and docile labour force. Authoritarian labour markets are essentially those that restrict collective bargaining rights and freedom of association, while legitimizing coercive managerial authority.

A key moment in this shift towards authoritarian labour markets is the repression of the union movement during the 1980 July strike. The mobilisation of the UNP union, the JSS, then known as *Thugs Inc*, characterised how unions were manipulated for narrow party interests. The authoritarian labour markets were also reinforced by the state engaged in an ethnic conflict since 1983 and counter-state violence of the 1989-90 'terror period'. Moreover, the regular enforcement of Essential Services Act, and the extension of "free trade zone" status to the whole country, continues to undermine unions while empowering employers.

Unions are restricted not only by the decisions and non-decisions of the state, but also by the conditions of unemployment, declining real wages and sustained levels of poverty. While the official unemployment rate has declined from around 14% in 1990 to around 8.3% of the labour force (7.7 million) in 2003, issues of underemployment and unemployment in rural areas, of educated youth and women are serious enduring issues.

The growing casualised (migrant workers, home workers, etc) and feminised labour force also reveals the inadequacies of dominant union strategies. For unions spatially fixed on formal workplaces, the casualised informal sector workers who are difficult to organise is a key challenge. Meanwhile women wage-workers continue to be neglected by enduring male-biased unions. Even in unions where women are a majority of members, such as tea plantation workers, nurses,

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and teachers, the union leaders and officials are mostly men. This masculine culture of trade unions also evades substantive alliances with the women's movement. However, the male bias in unions is maintained by similar tendencies in other interconnected institutions such as the private sector, state (labour department, courts, labour tribunals, police, hospital, schools, etc), and community (religious worker welfare institutions, NGOs, etc.). Given these internal and external constraints, how can unions develop SMU strategies?

Social Movement Unionism in action

T he SMU theorising relates to the rise of militant labour movements with similar strategies, yet in different contexts of the global capitalist economy. This labour militancy emerged in "semi-peripheral" or "late industrialising" economies of South Africa and Brazil in the 1970s, and Philippines and South Korea in the 1980s (Webster, 1988; Moody, 1997: 200; Seidman, 1994). However, the development of SMU strategies is not confined to semi-industrialised authoritarian countries. In the North, the Canadian Auto Workers Union, in the late 1980s (Moody, 1997:200), Justice for Janitors (Johnston, 1999) and Solidarity and Workplace Project (Fine, 2005) in the U.S. have adopted similar strategies (Waterman, 1993). The 'social movement' character of these unions relates to their "inclusiveness" that connected the workplace with demands around collective consumption (public goods and services).

The union strategies in South Africa and Brazil in the 1980s characterized an SMU orientation for their "unusually inclusive character" that strengthened "the discourse of class within popular organisations" (Seidman, 1994: 40). Despite differences in histories and ethnic politics, the two labour movements depicted similar patterns, scales, forms, and discourses of mobilization. These similarities involved three main strategic and organizational elements. First, there is an eruption of strike activity mobilized by workers with a strong shop-floor organization. Second, a rapid escalation of demands from workplace to broader community and national issues that linked shop-floor organizations with national federations. This escalation of demands also positioned the labour movement, directly challenging the state. Finally, strong structured alliances between labour movements and the community groups, mutually reinforced each other. In emphasizing the movement dimension of unions, the labour-community alliances elaborated new relations between the "working class, the state and dominant classes" (ibid.).

The emergence of union-community relations, in both South Africa and Brazil, were conditioned by a specific context of "peripheralisation" of worker communities (Seidman, 1994). The steady outward push of the poor and working class residents, to the geographic and social edges of the city, meant a daily commute to work with minimal state social provision. This provoked struggles around public services (collective consumption) such as public transport, housing, and municipal governance issues, which reinforced union-community alliances in both South Africa and Brazil (Ibid. :227-252). These struggles around public goods and services, or anti-privatization struggles, are emerging as a new terrain of struggle capable of building alliances across a range of actors.

These union-community relations have also emerged within Sri Lankan labour movement. For example, the nurers' (Public Services United Nurses Union) struggles in 1985 drew on a range of actors, including women's NGOs. The FTZ workers have mostly linked with NGOs in their struggles. The unions most likely to forge these alliances are generally party-independent trade unions, with relatively progressive leaders such as the CMU (private sector clerical workers), the CBEU (banks), the UPTO (post and telecom) and FTZWU (free trade zone workers). However, these union-community alliances are mostly instrumental, contingent and transient. Deepening these alliances into structured, long term alliances is a key aim of SMU. In addition, extending these alliances into the trans-national realm, of labour internationalism, described as Global Social Movement Unionism.

Labour Internationalism

L abour internationalism entered a new phase in the early 1990s under a new global economy. The new global economy is characterized by: the increased scale and power of global financial markets; the extended role of Transnational Corporations (TNCs) in the production and marketing of goods and services; and new transnational regulatory structures (e.g. WTO and numerous bi/multi lateral trade agreements) (Leys, 2001: 13-14). In other words, the unions are now dealing with globally mobile capital and an internationalised state. This draws attention to the limitations of a purely nation-state oriented union strategies, that have also nurtured existing forms international union alliances of labour internationalism.

Labour internationalism was founded in the second half of the twentieth century and coincided with the invention of

nation-state traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). In the context of a growing North-South divide and competitive regional alignments, an effective union revitalisation relates to the possibility of, and necessity for, a Global Social Movement Unionism (GSMU) strategy (Moody, 1997:275). Accordingly, a GSMU orientation is grounded in recognising the interdependence of labour internationalism with other internationalisms, such as feminist, environmental, and human rights. This emphasis on many internationalisms, leads to recognising the limits of 'old' labour internationalism.

The 'old' labour internationalism is maintained by the ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions), the WFTU (World Federation of Trade Unions) and the GUFs (Global Union Federations which are industry based international unions such as the ITF – International Transport Federation). Among these the ICFTU and GUFs are the main international unions and they primarily focused on systems of industrial relations, engaged in promoting union rights. However, their (eurocentric) discourse of 'social partnerships' and 'social contract' end up reinforcing authoritarian state strategies in the South.

In contrast, the emerging "new" labour internationalism coincides with new social movements and Third Worldism. These perspectives are critical of eurocentric, bureaucratic, and male-biased tendencies of 'old' internationalism (Munck, 1988). Unlike the 'old' internationalism that was based on 'unity in diversity' the 'new' internationalism emphasises 'diversity in unity'. This allows for recognizing 'many' internationalisms that are interdependent with labour.

In turn, the new labour internationalism expresses a complex solidarity. This complexity relates to negotiating a range of hierarchical relations of power that extend across multiple sites, relationships, orientations, strategies, and alliances (Waterman, 1998:72-73). As a result, the new labour internationalism is initiated by workers in the global South, involving African, Asian and Latino workers (Lambert and Webster, 2003). In turn, these new initiatives reveal the inadequacies of 'old' labour internationalism in the South socialised by independence struggles, and based on party subordinated, nation-state strategies. So are there concrete initiatives that characterize GSMU strategies?

The SIGTUR

T he SIGTUR (Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights) is an international union network resembling a new labour internationalism (GSMU). The

"South" is articulated as a counter-hegemonic value orientation. It emphasise the subordinated (marginalized) status of the South in the global economic power hierarchy; the history and experience of colonialism; coercive labour regimes; disillusionment with post-colonial development states; and differences in national histories and organizational cultures (Lambert and Webster, 2003).

The SIGTUR emerged from the struggles of the South African union COSATU (Confederation of South African Trade Unions). COSATU's struggles in the 1980's against the authoritarian apartheid state encouraged new strategies of building worker solidarity. With the aim of developing a new trade union internationalism, COSATU committed itself to an initiative bringing together independent unions from Asia, Australia and Southern Africa. SIGTUR's orientation is based on encouraging open, democratic internal structures, engaging in contentious action outside of the establish system and building alliances with other struggles, movements and NGOs. Focused on mobilization and campaign orientation, these strategies express new ways of organizing.

New modes of organizing and mobilization

T he SIGTUR is aimed at transforming bureaucratic, hierarchical, centralized, modes of organization that restrict debate, dialogue and participation. Led by a generation of committed activists, SIGTUR promotes democratic and network organizations that encourage decentralized open debate. The aim is to promote new forms of worker solidarity within unions and among unions and other social movements, networks and organizations. There is also a focus on "structured linkages" between strong and weak unions. These linkages relate to coordinating orgnisational strategies through collective decision making and community-building events.

The SIGTUR's focus on independent democratic unions is formally articulated in the 1999 "Principles for Participation" statement. This is built around the ILO conventions 87 (Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention) and 98 (Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention). In broadening the scope of unionism, these core principles are for developing clear organising strategies to move into the new areas.

Since its origin in 1992, SIGTUR has held six international conferences between 1992 and 2005. These conferences include a range of unions, labour non-governmental organizations (NGOs), global union federations (GUFs),

labour academics and activists. The SIGTUR conferences are often linked with events of local activism. At the 2005 SIGTUR conference in Thailand, the activism included two protests: one in front of the Australian embassy against new labour reforms and the other at a chicken processing factory where locked-out women workers were agitating.

At the third conference in Calcutta in 1997, hosted by the CITU, there were 260 delegates. More than 20,000 workers participated in the Calcutta opening events. At the fifth SIGTUR conference (2001), in Seoul, South Korea, there were 150 delegates from 15 countries including South Africa, South Korea, Brazil, Australia, India, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Zimbabwe and Hong Kong. At this conference, SIGTUR delegates participated in an anti-war rally condemning the war on Afghanistan and the Joen Tae II labour activists commemoration rally (somewhat similar to a May Day rally). The conference also initiated solidarity action to release jailed union leaders and activists in Korea and Malaysia.

The 2005 SIGTUR conference was attended by three unionists from Sri Lanka. They were Anton Marcus (FTZWU - Free Trade Zone Workers Union); O.A. Ramiah (tea plantations workers) and Saman Rathnapriya (nurses' union). As an activist within the SIGTUR from its inception, Anton Marcus has leveraged the SIGTUR network to engage in a range of campaigns. For example, at the 2001 SIGTUR conference in Korea, Anton actively campaigned around the coercive labour practices of Korean companies in the Sri Lankan FTZs. In effect, the Free Trade Zone Workers Union remains the only union experimenting with SMU strategies. Emerging from worker struggles in the FTZs in the early 1980's, this new union began as a partnership between a women's NGO (the Women's Centre) and a union. By participating in the SIGTUR network, the FTZWU has gained resources, opportunities and incentives to internationalise the struggles of FTZ workers.

As an emerging new labour internationalism, the SIGTUR has opened the space for revitalizing unions. The emphasis on the South is of particular importance in contesting Eurocentric tendencies of dominant labour internationalism strategies that neglect the movement dimension of unions. However, this also highlights transforming a range of power relations (such as class, caste, gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality and disability) within unions in the South. The revitalization of unions, along SMU involves a deep democratic orientation that can promote non-hierarchical internal relations, as well as encourage worker-community alliances. In building GSMU orientation, the aim is to go beyond the nation-state diplomatic positioning to organizing campaigns to mobilize workers and their unions. By emphasizing the movement dimension of unions, SMU and its' global version GSMU, suggest new possibilities for unions to revitalise their struggles for social justice.

Conclusion

The revitalisation of unions is central to contesting the neo-liberal globalization that is undermining unions. The dominant business unionism response is often state-centred, male-biased, top-down view of unions that maintains hierarchical internal relations and limited union alliances. In contrast, emerging tendencies of social movement unionism emphasise the movement dimension or contentious collective action as the new platform for building solidarity, within and among unions, and between organised and unorganised workers.

The social movement unionism (SMU) strategy is geared towards the (self)transformation of unions, particularly related to their internal and external relations. In terms of internal relations, SMU suggests non-hierarchical, democratic, open relations that can encourage active participation and creative initiative of union members. As for external relations, the aim is to extend workplace struggles into the local and global community. In scaling-up workplace struggles into the international realm, SMU strategies articulate a global social movement unionism (GSMU), or a new labour internationalism grounded in initiating global solidarity action. As a concrete example of a GSMU, the SIGTUR union network illustrates new possibilities for revitalising unions and building working solidarity.

While most unions in Sri Lanka are party subordinated unions, there are unions within the labour movement experimenting with SMU strategies. While these union strategies might not be articulated in terms of an SMU orientation, the revitalisation of unions demand an open dialogue around issues of non-hierarchical internal relations, community and transnational alliances, and contentious movement politics.

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