

Organizing in the Informal Economy: A Challenge for Trade Unions

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Introduction

Over the past two decades or so trade unions have become increasingly aware of, and challenged by, the growth, persistence, and reach of informal employment across the globe. The idea that informal work is a transitory phenomenon and will decline and even disappear over time through formalization has largely been dispelled (Chen et al. 2005: 88). Informal or precarious employment is extensive and growing in many developing countries, and is on the rise in various guises in industrialized countries.¹ At the same time, union membership has declined in many countries as the number of formal, permanent, full-time jobs has shrunk.

Pressure from unions in developing countries already organizing informal workers, and interventions by the ILO – particularly the *Resolution Concerning Decent Work and the Informal Economy* adopted at the International Labour Conference in 2002² – has increased awareness of the

1. Informal or precarious employment comprises between one-half and three-quarters of non-agricultural employment in developing countries: specifically 48 percent in northern Africa, 51 percent in Latin America, 65 percent in Asia, and 72 percent in sub-Saharan Africa (78 percent if South Africa is excluded). 60 percent or more of women workers in the developing world are in informal employment, rising to 84 percent in sub-Saharan Africa (non-agricultural) (ILO 2002a: 7). We do not have comparable figures for developed countries but we do know that three categories of non-standard or atypical work – self-employment, part-time work, and temporary work – comprise 30 percent of overall employment in 15 European countries and 25 percent of total employment in the United States. Not all such categories of workers are employed informally, but the majority receive few if any employment-based benefits or protection. In the US, for instance, less than 20 percent of regular part-time workers have employer-sponsored health insurance or pensions (WIEGO 2010).
2. The 2002 discussion and *Resolution on Decent Work and the Informal Economy* at the International Labour Conference recognized that informal workers – employed and self-employed – have the same rights as formal workers to decent work, and promotes the organization of informal workers (ILO 2002b).

need to organize informal workers and spurred policy changes in the international trade union movement.

However, this has not been fully translated into support and action by national centers and unions. Despite progress, especially in developing countries where the issue is most pressing, some remain skeptical about the feasibility or desirability of organizing informal workers into trade unions.

As has been cogently argued by many,³ there are compelling practical and political reasons for trade unions to take the lead in such organizing if they are to retain or rebuild their influence with employers and governments, and their legitimacy as the voice and true representatives of the broad working class. With more than half the world's workers informally employed, and union density in the formal economy in decline in most countries – for example, in the United Kingdom (Achur 2009: 3) – the challenge for the union movement is urgent and serious.

Organizing Challenges for Trade Unions

Unions and other workers' organizations undoubtedly face many real challenges in organizing the informal workforce, irrespective of sector or country. Challenges are political/conceptual and practical, external and internal, with many trade unions lacking the experience, openness, skills, resources or political will to seriously take on the challenge of organizing informal workers. Particular challenges result from the gender composition and segmentation of the informal workforce, where women form the bulk of those employed in sectors with the least income, security and status (ILO 2002a).

Political/Conceptual Challenges

Whilst the ILC 2002 Resolution goes a long way towards clarifying what is meant by informal employment, and gives status and legitimacy to informal workers, the concepts contained in the Resolution are not universally understood or accepted. This is not surprising, given the diversity of informal work, the varying degrees of informality and – often – the lack of a clear dividing line between employer and employee.

3. See, for example, Gallin 2001; Horn 2008.

Some unionists remain unconvinced that self-employed or »own account« workers are in fact workers, believing that they fall outside the trade union ambit. This is often supported by labor laws that include only workers in an employment relationship. There are informal workers, too, that do not perceive themselves as workers and their organizations do not perceive themselves to be part of the organized labor movement or allied to the labor movement. In other cases their organizations may look, behave, and organize themselves like trade unions, but for a variety of reasons do not identify themselves as such. For example, they may not wish to be associated with the political allegiances of the »formal« trade union movement in their country or sector or the members may have had bad experiences of trade unions. This lack of a worker identity is particularly true of many women, such as home-based workers who may see their work as an extension of domestic or family duties (Bonner and Spooner 2010: 4).

Practical Challenges

Legal and Regulatory Framework

Most informal workers fall outside the legal framework for formal workers, with rights and protections around which to organize and make gains, and there are no traditional collective bargaining forums. As collective bargaining is a defining feature of trade union work, this creates a particular challenge for traditional unions. In the case of own-account workers such as street vendors or waste pickers,⁴ there is also no employment relationship, or the employment relationship is unclear or disguised, such as for many homeworkers. Some trade unionists hold to this more narrow view that such workers are outside the scope of trade union organization.

Where an employment relationship exists, such as for domestic workers or many garment workers, the workplaces are often so small – or in individual households – that workers lack power to confront employers

4. Many different terms are used to describe workers who extract and sell recyclable material from waste (waste pickers, rag-pickers, reclaimers, recyclers, waste-collectors, »recicladores«, and so on), part of an ongoing debate among the workers themselves. See »The Politics of Naming« in Samson 2009: 2.

and obtain gains. Their employers are often harsh and ignore the law, so they are easily dismissed with little or no recourse to legal remedies.

Where regulation does exist, such as urban space or transport regulations, it usually creates obstacles or results in the harassment of informal workers by police and authorities, rather than helping to improve their situation. While harassment or harsh employers can provide the impetus for organizing and collective action, they can also create a fear of organizing: fear of losing jobs or livelihoods.

Workplaces and Workers

Unlike a standard workplace around which organization can coalesce, many informal workers are situated in scattered, individualized workplaces (domestic workers, home-based workers) or are mobile (street hawkers, street waste pickers, taxi drivers). Their workplaces may be far flung (farm workers, forest gatherers, waste pickers on landfill sites). Many have multiple jobs and multiple workplaces. These all make recruiting members and building democratic structures more difficult, necessitating new approaches to defining a workplace, new organizing strategies, structures, communication tools, and dues collection methods.

Many informal workers are poor and focused primarily on survival. They often work long hours and time spent on organizing can be income lost for them. The latter is especially true for own account workers, although many informal waged workers also supplement their wages with work such as selling, recycling or repairing, and have little time for organizational work. Solidarity and collective action is not always a natural tendency among own-account workers as they may be in competition with each other. Take the case of street vendors selling the same products in the same street and informal taxi drivers in the same area competing for customers or the waste pickers on a landfill site competing for recyclable materials. Therefore, while they may come together for specific reasons – especially to face the authorities in crisis situations – this unity of purpose and collective action may be short-lived unless an ongoing common interest and purpose is identified.

There are many issues faced in common by formal and informal workers (wages or income, health and safety, social protection, and so on), but many are different or of differing priority. Safety and security of person – especially for women – and goods is vital. Own-account workers must focus on securing their right to livelihoods through access

to urban space (vendors), transport routes (informal taxis), recyclable materials from discarded garbage (waste pickers), and electricity (home-based workers). They must prioritize livelihood improvement through better business opportunities, financial services, and job skills. Because they have no employment-related social security and have limited or no access to government schemes, organizations for them may have to provide services or the means of accessing existing ones. Many traditional trade unions lack the experience or resources to provide for such needs and shy away from them. Migrant workers form another large group of informal workers. Often undocumented and wanting to operate »under the radar,« they are particularly insecure and vulnerable to exploitation and harassment and do not fit easily within a traditional union culture.

Leadership

Not all challenges are a consequence of external or livelihood conditions. Within some sectors and in some countries informal workers have long organized themselves into local associations. This is commonly the case with street and market vendors, informal transport workers, rural workers, fishermen, and so on. However, these associations often do not have a tradition of democratic functioning: there may be no agreed rules (constitution) or, where they exist, low levels of compliance; leaders may be unelected or may not be subject to recall (Roever in Chen et al. 2007: 261); they may also be »controlled« by politicians or even criminals. Despite their numerical dominance women are routinely kept out of, or lack the confidence to take up, leadership positions.

This can make it difficult to form larger organizations or to join forces with trade unions, as long-standing leaders want to retain the power and privileges that come with leadership and trade unions may be insensitive to or dismissive of the historical and contextual issues that have influenced organizational forms and practices and thus unable to provide the leadership necessary to affect change.

Resources

The vast majority of informal economy workers, particularly women, have precarious livelihoods and many face extreme poverty. Their ability to pay regular membership dues is severely restricted and may be erratic and vulnerable to external shocks (economic crises, natural disasters, and

so on). Even where organizations have some income stability, it is rarely sufficient to cover the costs of paid staff, meeting expenses, adequate premises, and so on. The same is true for many unions of workers in the formal economy, so that even where informal and formal workers are organized within the same union, they are rarely financially self-reliant. Organizing informal workers is therefore seen as a drain on union resources with inadequate financial return in the form of union dues.

Organizing Informal Workers⁵

Today, informal workers are organized in a variety of ways despite the difficulties they face, and their organizations are growing. These include trade unions, workers' associations outside the formal trade union movement, cooperatives and other less traditional forms of democratic worker organization or member based organization (MBO).⁶ These MBOs are also diverse in geographical coverage, ranging from small (often fragile) local organizations, to national organizations, federations and alliances, regional networks and associations, and a variety of international organizational forms – both inside and outside the formally constituted institutions of the international trade union movement.

There are two main strategic issues for informal worker organizations: labor rights and representation (employed and own-account), and economic/business development (more likely to be own-account workers). These are combined in many informal economy organizations. For example, a trade union of informal workers may also set up cooperatives, and cooperatives may act like a trade union when negotiating with the authorities.

5. Much of this section is summarized from Bonner and Spooner (2010).

6. Members of the WIEGO network, along with allies and partners, use the term »Membership-Based Organisations« (MBO) to describe the range of organizations in the informal economy. Irrespective of their formal or legal status, these are organizations representative of members, as distinct from those that advocate or campaign for workers on their behalf (NGOs and so on). An MBO is »of the workers, by the workers, for the workers, and run, managed and owned by the workers« (SEWA 2009).

Trade Unions and Associations

Within the trade union movement, one can find local and national unions formed by workers in the formal economy that have recruited informal workers into their membership, and newly-formed unions of informal workers (see section 4). However, outside the formal trade union movement there are self-organized unions and myriads of small local workers' associations dealing with welfare issues, local taxes, space allocation, permits, organization of work, and so on. Some associations are trade unions by any other name, but are unable to legally register as such, where labor laws exclude workers from trade union structures unless they are able to demonstrate a clear employment or collective bargaining relationship. Associations often start to combine at city or national levels to face authorities with more strength, for example, the National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI), National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) in USA, and the *Federacion Departamental de Vendedores Ambulantes de Lima* (Federation of Street Vendors of Lima – FEDEVAL). In Pune, India, unions of informal workers (street vendors, waste pickers, domestic workers, head-loaders, auto-rickshaw and tempo⁷ drivers, and construction workers) form a city-wide Manual Labourers' Association – in effect, a trade union federation of informal economy workers – that is *de facto* recognized by the municipal authorities as the bargaining counterpart for issues related to the informal economy.

Cooperatives

Commonly, informal workers form cooperatives, especially in sectors such as agriculture and waste/recycling. These are found in various forms: producers' cooperatives, consumer cooperatives, service or marketing cooperatives, and so on. Some are formally registered, while others are less formal. In some instances (for example India), it can be a very expensive and time-consuming process to register as a cooperative, and may be subject to considerable state regulation and interference; in other instances, it may be that the members do not see any advantage to being formally constituted, or have no knowledge of or contact with formalized cooperative structures and procedures.

7. Motor-tricycle goods vehicles.

Trade unions and cooperatives share common principles and values, while focusing on different aspects of economic empowerment. With the growth of the informal economy, unions/organizations are increasingly experiencing the need to straddle the realms of both union and cooperative. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India has over one million informal women members and uses a twin strategy of struggle and development. It is a trade union (struggle for rights), yet has over 100 cooperatives run by its members combined in a federation of cooperatives (livelihood development). Similarly, कककक (Trade Union of Waste Pickers, Pune, India), with 6,000 mainly women members, formed a savings and credit cooperative, scrap shop cooperatives to sell recyclable materials at a better price, and a solid waste doorstep collection cooperative to integrate waste pickers into the local solid waste management system (Samson 2009: 27, 57).

NGOs and Community-Based Organizations

NGOs are often important agents and catalysts in the development of MBOS. Many NGOs have been established to support informal workers. There are local and national NGOs that concentrate on community or livelihood development, housing or human rights for which informal economy workers become the focus of attention. In areas where trade unions or other MBOS have little influence, profile or organizational strength, NGOs may attempt to fill the vacuum – either by advocating or campaigning on the workers' behalf, providing support and advice, and/or establishing some sort of workers' association.

There are other forms of membership-based organization that combine the features and strategies of both MBOS and NGOs in different mixes. Found among informal workers and those with little or no protection, they attempt to represent workers left outside mainstream trade union organizing. These varied organizations range from advocacy-oriented organizations to quasi-unions⁸ or associations beginning to act as unions where they focus on workplace and employment issues, or where they

8. Quasi-unions, »the broad range of organizations that have emerged to represent the interests of otherwise unrepresented people in their work lives and in their relationships with their employer, seeking to address matters of worker rights and to improve working conditions.« »The most frequent organizational form is highly staff-driven, with a small and dedicated staff and a very loose and shifting membership« (Heckscher and Carré 2006).

may be responding to a range of issues wider than employment. Migrant domestic workers often come together to seek assistance around their problems as migrant workers, or for language, social and solidarity reasons; others form interest groups on the basis of their religious affiliation or around their identity and problems as women. Often organizing with or through NGOs, community-based organizations (CBOS) or religious institutions, they develop a form of organization which may be membership-based, but without a formal membership mechanism and dues collection system. These nascent MBOS often provide a transitional route to independent informal worker associations and trade unions.

International and National Networks

New hybrid forms of organization also exist at the national and international levels. In recent years, international networks have been established between organizations supporting or representing informal workers in specific sectors. These have differing linkages with the formal trade union movement.

HomeNet South Asia and HomeNet Southeast Asia are regional networks of national »HomeNets«,⁹ each of which are alliances of national groups representing or supporting home-based workers. The national HomeNets vary significantly, with some having a membership almost entirely of NGOs, and others having strong MBOS (both associations and unions) at the core. Although the HomeNets have some national trade union members, relationships with trade unions, particularly national centers, remain weak. Nevertheless, there is a growing consensus that national and regional HomeNets should be answerable to workers' MBOS, including unions. A recent regional meeting of HomeNet South Asia agreed that »MBOS should constitute the majority in the governing bodies of all Country HomeNets, and of HomeNet South Asia itself [...] (and) form no less than 75 percent in the composition of their respective governing bodies by December 2012« (HNSA 2010: 18).

In Europe, some unions have homeworkers as members (for example, IG Metall in Germany) or home-based workers' organizations have built an alliance with the trade unions (for example, the Association of

9. HomeNet South Asia is the regional network of »HomeNets« in India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. HomeNet Southeast Asia covers HomeNets in Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia and Laos. See <http://www.homenetsouthasia.org/index.php> and <http://www.homenetseasia.org/new.html>

Home-based Workers in Bulgaria is an associate member of the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria (CITUB).

The StreetNet International alliance of street vendors was launched in 2002. Its membership is restricted to MBOs directly organizing street vendors, market vendors, and/or hawkers among their members. It actively encourages the formation and then affiliation of national alliances of MBOs. It has a clear common agreement on the definition of a democratic MBO, active democratic governance structures and a quota to ensure women in leadership positions. As such, it is somewhat akin to an international union federation of street vendors, yet StreetNet International is not structurally integrated into the international trade union movement, although it retains strong relationships with UNI, PSI, other Global Union Federations, and structures of the ITUC. It has 35 member organizations, with its greatest numerical strength in Africa, but has growing numbers of affiliates in Asia, Latin America, and Europe. It also has the technical capacity to design, manage, and deliver its own projects and programs.

In 2004, waste picker associations (primarily cooperatives and federations of cooperatives) came together to form the Latin America Waste Picker Network. The network now has representation from 15 countries, including from the Caribbean. There is wide variety in the composition of national organizations within the network, although all are MBOs, with NGOs playing strictly a technical support role. Globally, an interim international steering committee has been formed to facilitate global networking, and coordinate global activities, such as participation in the United Nations Climate Change negotiations. As yet, the networks have had little contact with the trade union movement. The Latin American networks have a strong commitment to independence and grassroots leadership and the trade union movement tends to be viewed as bureaucratic, interested only in workers with formal jobs and having political affiliation. There is, however, a growing interest in working with the organized labor movement, as expressed in a recent exploratory meeting with ILO-ACTRAV, and unions with waste pickers as members, such as SEWA, might provide links in the future.

More recently, a number of unions and associations formed the International Domestic Workers' Network (IDWN¹⁰). In November 2006 an international conference on »Respect and Rights: Protection for

10. See <http://www.domesticworkerrights.org/>

Domestic Workers!» was held in the Netherlands. Some 60 participants came from domestic workers' organizations, networks, trade unions and support organizations, as well as researchers from all continents. The conference determined the need for a permanent international network (IRENE and IUF, 2008: 25).

At a follow-up meeting in September 2008 a provisional Steering Committee was formed. The group decided to use the then forthcoming ILO discussions around an international convention on domestic work as an organizing tool. Representatives from domestic workers' trade unions and organizations attended the 2009 and 2010 International Labour Conference (ILC) to prepare for and negotiate a new ILO Convention for domestic workers. Importantly, IDWN is supported by, and works closely with, the IUF, which provides an organizational base for the network, with the status of a self-funded project reporting to the Executive Committee. Unusually, the IUF agreed to a non-traditional structure becoming part and parcel of the organization, without insisting that all of the unions involved should become IUF affiliates.

Informal worker organizations are thus finding creative ways to deal with the challenges through a variety of organizational forms and different strategies which are driven by circumstances: context, sector, organizational and political history, and so on. Through their organizations they are becoming more visible and are increasingly making their voices heard on national and international platforms, as well as improving the situation of their members.

In this organizational mix the support or otherwise of trade unions organizing and/or supporting informal workers is an important – sometimes critical – factor that can determine the extent, effectiveness, and sustainability of an informal worker organization or network.

Unions Rising to the Challenge

Increasing numbers of national and international union organizations are prepared to support organizing initiatives by informal economy workers. This is driven both by pressure for support from affiliated unions – particularly those in the global South, facing huge rises in numbers of informal workers and shrinking (in some cases virtually disappearing) membership outside the public sector – and a political commitment to an inclusive working class movement.

Shifting Opinion in the International Movement

The Constitution of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), adopted at its founding Congress in 2006, includes a commitment to »initiate and support action to increase the representativeness of trade unions through the recruitment of women and men working in the informal as well as the formal economy, through extension of full rights and protection to those performing precarious and unprotected work, and through lending assistance to organizing strategies and campaigns« (ITUC 2006: 7). This was followed by some regional programs and workshops and far greater prominence was given to affiliates' informal economy organizing initiatives in ITUC media.

There was an attempt at the 2010 ITUC Congress to secure a commitment to a more specific program and platform for organizing informal workers, through a resolution proposed by SEWA, the Ghana Trades Union Congress and the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CROC) in Mexico – all ITUC affiliates that organize, or have members organizing informal workers.

The motion never reached the Congress floor, but instead a very much more general clause was included in the composite resolution on organizing, which deplored the growth of informal and precarious work, and called upon trade unions »to meet the challenge of organizing all workers within their respective jurisdictions without distinction as to employment status ... including highly educated workers performing new jobs that are rarely unionized, just as much as those performing work in the informal economy and who are unregistered, unrecognized and excluded, or who are in disguised employment relationships and may be wrongly defined as self-employed« (ITUC 2010).

Whilst this did not provide the strong support to affiliates that SEWA, Ghana TUC, and CROC had hoped, it suggests that the issue is growing in importance for ITUC delegates and may provide the impetus and opening for affiliates and regions of ITUC to implement or continue with more active programs, especially in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Central and Eastern Europe.

The Global Union Federations are increasingly paying attention to the issue. The IUF has supported the inclusion of informal workers' unions for many years, and was the first international union body to encourage their affiliation (notably of SEWA in 1983), actively support the struggle of informal agricultural workers and homeworkers for rights and

recognition and, more recently, support the international organization of domestic workers.

The ITF 2010 Congress declared:

There is a need to recognize and work with other forms of worker organization which precarious workers have developed among themselves, and to link them to the trade union movement. The ITF will develop a 2011–14 strategic plan which will develop networks of organizations, which could include both unions and associations, which act on behalf of workers whose livelihoods come from precarious or informal work in the transport sector (ITF 2010: 4).

There are practical initiatives, too, by other global union federations. UNI supports unions of street vendors (including partnership with StreetNet International), informal telecommunications workers (street sellers of mobile phone cards, and so on), and informal hairdressers/beauticians. PSI is concerned with informal public service workers, such as home care workers, and has a particular interest in building cooperation between market traders' associations and municipal workers' unions when facing the privatization (or mutualization) of markets.

BWI supports organizing projects among informal forest products workers and construction workers. In India, for example, the BWI's Global Wood and Forestry Programme supports a project organizing among Kendu and Sal leaf-pickers,¹¹ led by state-wide affiliated unions of informal leaf workers (BWI: 2011).

These shifts in policy and activity by international union organizations are important in setting the »mood« and influencing the activities of their respective affiliates. It provides the rationale, legitimacy, and mandate for affiliates or regions to move into action without awaiting agreement or a comprehensive strategy across the movement. Where the practical and political reasons are strongest, the unions will take up the challenge. It also opens the possibility of global unions increasing the priority given to informal economy organizing when determining priorities for the deployment of (decreasing) funds from international development agencies.

11. Kendu leaves are used to wrap bidis (cigarettes); Sal tree leaves are used to make a variety of products, including bowls and plates. It is a major source of income for forest-dwellers, particularly in Orissa and Gujerat.

Translating Policy into Practice: National and Local Organizing Strategies

There is a growing number of informal workers' unions of varying origins. Some were created »spontaneously« by informal workers themselves (sometimes by former trade unionists forced into informal employment through redundancies, and so on); some by unions traditionally organizing in the formal economy, but reaching out to organize informal workers; and some conceived and supported by external actors (women's organizations, migrant workers' organizations, NGOs, and so on).

In an increasing number of countries, national trade union centers play an important direct or indirect role in organizing and representing informal economy workers. Examples include establishing new unions or associations to organize in the informal economy, supporting and encouraging affiliated unions to organize informal workers, and building alliances with non-union associations of informal workers.

In some cases, informal economy associations not formally constituted or registered as trade unions have been encouraged to join national trade union centers as »associate« members or have signed a Memorandum of Agreement. This entitles them to have representatives at union meetings, and to participate in discussions, but with limited constitutional democratic rights, having no vote.

This close cooperation between national union centers and informal workers' organizations significantly enhances informal workers' effectiveness in representation, defense of workers' rights, and international visibility and support, including:

- ▶ recognition by local government authorities (for example, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) and in some cases also national government;
- ▶ voice and representation, even if ad hoc;
- ▶ means for informal workers to exercise their rights in respect of ILO Convention No. 87 (Freedom of Association) and Convention No. 98 (the right to organize and bargain collectively);
- ▶ means for informal workers to affiliate internationally and enjoy international solidarity;
- ▶ means for informal workers to be represented in international forums (for example, ILO Conferences, international trade union meetings) (Horn 2008: 38).

With the support of national and international trade union organizations informal workers have been able to influence negotiations on international

standards at the ILO, such as the current negotiations for a convention on domestic work. Where national and international unions join hands with informal workers' organizations in campaigns and solidarity activities their effectiveness is enhanced. Current examples include the campaign for domestic workers' rights and StreetNet International's »World Class Cities for All« campaign.

Through the different organizational models and creative strategies, unions and national centers are tackling some of the challenges identified. The Ghana Trades Union Congress, for example, has adopted a multi-faceted approach. It encouraged its affiliates in many sectors to change their constitutions so that existing associations could affiliate, thus making recruitment and dues collection simpler. It also encouraged the principle of »the stronger helping the weaker« through formal workers cross-subsidizing informal workers (FNV 2003: 32). In negotiations on the new Labour Act 2003 the Ghana TUC successfully proposed that the Act should cover all workers rather than »employees« and protections for casual and temporary workers, thus opening the way for extension to informal workers (Chen et al. 2005: 99) and in 2003 they were successful in negotiating a Health Insurance Scheme that provided for both formal and informal workers (Alfers 2009: 16).

The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) has been proactive in helping build domestic workers' unions. But because there are many migrant domestic workers from different countries, and NGOs supporting the different groups, workers organized into nationality based unions. On November 21, 2010, following a two-year process facilitated by the HKCTU, local and migrant domestic workers' unions came together to inaugurate the Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Unions (FADWU) (personal communication, Ip Pui Yu).

The support for BWI affiliates in India¹² has enabled them to organize more effectively (OKKS claims to have organized more than 50 percent of the estimated 1.8 million kendu leaf workers in Orissa state), leading to recognition of their status as workers, adoption of identity cards, wage increases, and health and safety improvements. It has also led to the establishment of basic social protection (welfare fund, health provisions, and so on) (BWI: 2011).

12. Orissa Kendupatra Karamchari Sangha (OKKS), Orissa Forest and Minor Forest Produce Workers' Union (OFMFPWU), and Gujarat Forest Products Gatherers and Forest Workers' Union (GFPGFU).

To overcome the particular challenges associated with organizing informal women workers some unions of and for women informal workers have been formed, the most notable being SEWA in India which has succeeded in developing a deep layer of confident and effective women leaders and in making real improvements to the lives of members through helping to increase income (cooperatives, skills development), provide social protection (health insurance, child care), financial services (SEWA Bank), and so on.¹³ In other instances, women have been supported in taking up leadership positions through constitutional quotas (for example, StreetNet) or through active development programs and political work with men. The role that the international trade union movement and networks of informal workers can play in promoting gender equality and women leadership is significant.

Conclusion

In the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), 2009, Summit on Organizing in the Informal Economy, the General Secretary of the Nigeria Automobile Technicians Association (NATA), David Ajetonmobi noted: »Informal workers need the organizational experience of the trade unions while unions also need the vast number of informal workers to build more power to leverage more concessions on larger macroeconomic issues« (Komolafe and Emeribe 2009).

This neatly sums up the mutual needs and benefits that can or should result from combining the organizing efforts of formal and informal workers. And as the NLC summit illustrates, more and more trade unions – especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America and to some extent in Central and Eastern Europe (Glovackas 2007) – are recognizing these mutual needs and benefits and taking organizing in the informal economy seriously.

Overcoming the very real challenges and organizing effectively will require a varied and flexible approach incorporating a range of differing relationships between unions, informal worker associations and cooperatives, networks and alliances. Most importantly, it requires political will on the part of union leadership to prioritize organizing workers

13. See Jhabvala, Desai and Dave (2010). Research shows that SEWA has made a difference to the lives of their members.

in the informal economy and to make available the human and financial resources to do so. It requires new conceptual thinking and new mind sets on the part of the (mainly male) union leadership – in particular, a change in patriarchal attitudes – together with concerted awareness-raising and education among members. It requires an openness and flexibility with regard to different organizational models, strategies and activities, the ability to seize new openings and opportunities, and the building of alliances with informal workers' organizations and their supporters within and outside the union movement. Finally, it will require respecting, learning, and taking leadership from informal workers and unionists who have already organized informal workers – including women – and creating the opportunities and resources to allow for learning from each other.

The informal economy is here to stay for the foreseeable future. Formalization of the informal is a long-term goal of trade unions, but it is not a short-term solution. It cannot be used as a way of avoiding responsibility to organize and/or support organizations of informal workers, who make up the majority of today's workers. This is not only a practical necessity but a political choice if the trade unions are to remain true to their aims and principles, such as the commitment to »securing comprehensive and equitable economic and social development for workers everywhere, particularly where poverty and exploitation are greatest« (ITUC 2006: 5).

Informal workers have demonstrated that the immense challenges to successful organization can be overcome, and that their unions, cooperatives, and other forms of workers' association can be just as effective in asserting and defending their rights and livelihoods as their counterpart unions in the formal economy.

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