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NGO-Labor Union Tensions on the Ground

Abstract
[Excerpt] There are serious tensions between NGOs and trade unions, two major advocates of workers' rights, that underlie any discussion of workplace codes of conduct. The tensions stem from questions of legitimacy that bedevil both communities. Trade unionists see themselves as representing stable organizations with dues-paying members. They have a ready answer to the question "Whom do you represent?" The situation for NGOs is far more complex. No single organization speaks authoritatively for the NGO community. Unlike union leaders, NGO activists are not elected. Some NGOs are membership organizations funded by contributions from individuals. Payments are often sporadic and crisis-driven, in contrast to regular union dues. Other NGOs depend on government grants, wealthy individuals, foundations, and even corporate donations. Dependence on such sources tends to limit NGO activities to those that do not exceed the risks that the funders are willing to take, whereas unions are constrained only by the democratically determined wishes of their members.

Keywords
unions, trade unions, NGOs, labor movement, funding, labor rights

Comments
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NGO-Labor Union Tensions on the Ground

Lance Compa

October 6, 2000

There are serious tensions between NGOs and trade unions, two major advocates of workers' rights, that underlie any discussion of workplace codes of conduct. The tensions stem from questions of legitimacy that bedevil both communities. Trade unionists see themselves as representing stable organizations with dues-paying members. They have a ready answer to the question "Whom do you represent?" The situation for NGOs is far more complex. No single organization speaks authoritatively for the NGO community. Unlike union leaders, NGO activists are not elected. Some NGOs are membership organizations funded by contributions from individuals. Payments are often sporadic and crisis-driven, in contrast to regular union dues. Other NGOs depend on government grants, wealthy individuals, foundations, and even corporate donations. Dependence on such sources tends to limit NGO activities to those that do not exceed the risks that the funders are willing to take, whereas unions are constrained only by the democratically determined wishes of their members.

When NGOs purport to speak for workers, therefore, trade unionists often question their accountability. Many unionists also harbor suspicion, even resentment, of NGO activists who assume a high profile on workers' rights issues without ever having passed through the crucible of an organizing campaign, hard-nosed collective bargaining, or a strike. How can they know what workers are really up against? Trade union advocates believe that, as workers' organizations, unions should have the primary role in the fight for workers' rights in the global economy.

Many trade unionists fear that the real goal of corporate backers of codes of conduct is the destruction of strong, class-based workers' organizations that can organize, bargain, and back up their demands with the power to strike. In their place would be scattered, small, resource-starved NGO monitors whose only clout lies in ad hoc public relations campaigns that will soon tire consumers. Some unionists suspect that NGOs making codes of conduct a priority are really engaged in entrepreneurial grant-seeking, since companies, foundations, and governments are more comfortable with notions of corporate social responsibility and private sector initiatives rather than tougher national and international regulation. While not dismissing the value of codes of conduct, most unions still see strong laws effectively enforced by government authorities, along with self-organization and collective bargaining, as the best ways to advance workers' interests. To them, corporate codes of conduct should be seen as a supplement to labor law enforcement and collective bargaining, not as an alternative.

For their part, some NGO activists question labor's claim to leadership and see a new emphasis on "civil society" in international discourse that gives NGOs greater status than trade unions. Many NGOs are composed mainly of middle- and upper-class intellectuals and professionals who perceive labor unions as special-interest groups devoted to protecting their own members' jobs and wages at the expense of the larger society. Other NGOs question labor's claim to broad representation. In most countries trade union movements have only a minority of workers in their ranks, and unions tend to represent a higher-paid stratum of male workers in the formal sector. Union formation is notably lacking among informal sector workers, women workers, and workers in export-oriented factories where the effects of globalization are most pernicious and NGOs are most active.

Many NGOs see their primary role in code initiatives as monitors who are adamantly critical of the work of international accounting firms or other corporate-oriented social auditors. Some advocates of workers' rights even oppose monitoring by Northern-based NGOs or unions and insist that monitoring be performed by indigenous actors. But some of the early experience with local monitoring has only reinforced tensions between unions and NGOs, who have learned that the same problems of inexperience, instability, incapacity, hidden agendas, and sectarianism marking many NGOs in Northern countries afflict NGOs in developing countries too.

One well-known case involves monitoring at the Mandarin apparel factory in El Salvador under a plan negotiated in 1997 between NGO activists and the Gap, which contracted with Mandarin for clothing production. Monitor activity by an independent group aligned with local NGOs prompted worries among trade union leaders in the factory that monitors were supplanting the unions' role as representatives of workers, and the monitoring group found itself caught between competing union factions among the workers. These problems have complicated efforts to expand the monitoring effort beyond this single facility.

The tensions and differences laid out here complicate but do not prevent unions and NGOs from collaborating in the pursuit of social justice in the global economy. In Guatemala, for example, the NGO monitoring group COVERCO has established strict rules limiting its work to monitoring and reporting, and avoiding any advocacy role. When workers approach monitors with grievances, COVERCO representatives provide names of trade unionists, NGO advocacy organizations, and labor lawyers to help them.

Trade unions and NGOs still have more in common with each other than either has with corporations, governments, or international organizations that see free trade and free-flowing capital as the solution to low labor standards. Mutual recognition of overriding common interests is critical to achieving NGO and union goals as these organizations confront powerful actors in the global economy with demands for social justice. At the same time, awareness of tensions and differences in their own ranks will allow unions and NGOs to navigate the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.