

Article

Eddie Webster, the Durban moment and new labour internationalism

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An alternative to neo-liberal globalisation

The struggle for an alternative to self-regulating global capitalism, commonly described as neo-liberal globalisation, needs to be contested both at the level of ideas (theory/ideology) and strategy (movement/politics). Firstly, a vision of an alternative model of economy, politics and society, grounded in democratic social regulation has to be forged. Harvey refers to this as ‘thought experiments’ – painting fantastic pictures of a future society (Harvey 2000:49). Secondly, realising such a vision depends upon imagining and struggling for a new kind of global social movement, which creates active, globally coordinated civil societies, driven by the desire for a more humane, just way of working and living. Defining the role of unions within such a movement is contested, with some arguing that unions have become an obstacle to the realisation of such a movement (Waterman 2009).

The obstacle at the centre of this dual challenge is the disempowerment of civil society, in varying degrees, across the globe.¹ Consequently, citizens mostly sense alternatives to corporate dominance is not feasible, given their power consolidation through the mutually reinforcing policies of national states and global institutions such as the World Trade Organization, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Domination is solidified through the hegemony of neo-liberal ideology where markets are viewed not as social and ideological constructs, but rather as deriving from natural laws of individualism and competition, which are perilous to ignore (Huberman 1968:204). Such an ideology legitimates radical change in three spheres: the way corporations function, the organisation of work, and privatisation of public assets. This discourse is grounded in a particular

market conception of restructuring manifested in Darwinian mergers and acquisitions, often producing factory closures and relocations to cheap labour havens. Lean production work restructuring via downsizing, work intensification and casualisation complement these organisational and spatial shifts. Privatisations (corporate acquisitions) mark the public sector resulting in a similar reorganisation of work.

There is a shadow side to the share market driven ‘efficiency dividends’ of restructuring: the scenarios reveal the destruction of persons, families, communities. Market ‘necessity’ strikes fear into the mind and being of workers as they confront either job loss or adverse changes in conditions such as work intensification, longer hours, changing working time arrangements and casualisation (Lambert and Webster 2004a, Lambert and Gillan 2007). As a consequence, insecurity pervades their daily existence, corroding personal identity and purpose (Webster et al 2008). Stressed and sometimes irretrievably fractured family relations and degrees of withdrawal from society reflect this psychological decline (AMWU 2006:7).² None of these impacts is considered by an ideology quite without pity or human compassion.

Surely movement building and resistance is fanciful in such circumstances? How can psychologically scarred, disempowered, fatalised victims, who have, in varying degrees, withdrawn into private inner selves, act to transform their predicament? This reality, which characterises much of contemporary global society, defined apartheid South Africa in the early 1970s, when Edward Webster returned from studies in the United Kingdom. This article considers the consequences of his relationship with Richard Turner and student activists in Durban, which 20 years later influenced the evolution of a New Labour Internationalism (NLI) in the Global South. Webster’s intellectual life has always been shaped by restless ‘thought experiments’; indeed, this defines his being. Questions which thus arise become research issues. This article traces how Durban in the 1970s shaped his intellectual engagement with the NLI, an initiative which reflects an intense struggle for a new kind of global movement under the wintry conditions of neo-liberalism.

The Durban moment

In its essence, political conditions in early 1970s South Africa did not differ markedly from the limitations now imposed by contemporary neo-liberal globalisation. Social movements were repressed and civil society

disempowered during the 1960s and, as a consequence, movement capacity to impose change appeared fanciful. Yet thinking what then appeared impossible spawned a new movement power within a decade, forcing the apartheid regime to the bargaining table despite its repressive security apparatus.³

This utopian discourse became influential in student and worker politics when Richard Turner arrived in Durban in the early 1970s, fresh from the experience of Paris in 1968 and the renaissance of Marxist theory in Europe. At this time student politics was largely framed by racially exclusive parliamentary elections, the outcomes of which demoralised the politically committed. The racist Prime Minister B J Vorster's threats pervaded political life. The 1970 election results proved to be a turning point when the failure of the non-racial Progressive Party left a void in student politics. Pessimism prevailed, making the depth of the cultural change which followed quite remarkable. Turner redefined politics, arguing choice and commitment could never be erased, no matter how deadly repressive a regime. Sartre's theory of agency informed Turner's life choices. His book *The Eye of the Needle* expressed utopian thinking, defined as 'exploring the absolute limits of possibility by sketching an ideally just society' (1972:3). This analysis was grounded in an integration of Marxist theory and Christian ethics. Turner demonstrates how the vision of the historical Jesus centred on a notion of the intrinsic value of persons (Nolan 1995 [1976]), complementing Marx's analysis of the structural logic of capital accumulation, which values things (money, possessions) over persons and society. Marx's theory of exploitation captures capitalist logic's negation of human need, reducing human beings to the status of a commodity. This theoretical position prioritised working class organisation. The analysis enlivened a spirit of resistance through linking personal liberation to a movement commitment. This 'search for freedom' challenged evasion, subterfuge, compromise, escape, recognising 'a person is free so as to commit himself/herself, but they are not free unless they commit themselves' (Meszaros 1979:10 and 14).

The depth of the critical cultural transition was due in no small measure to Turner's charisma. He was a quietly spoken person, reflective, probing, always ready to talk about books, the world and social justice. His lectures were memorable. The theatres were filled to capacity as were public forums at the University and in the city. Students became inspired by a new working class politics founded on a vision of a democratic and participatory socialism.

This cultural change intersected with a new independent organisation of

workers, which gained further momentum from this ferment. I had secured an assistant secretary position in a registered union where Indian workers predominated and soon began organising African workers into a funeral benefit fund later known as the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund (GFWBF). I moved between union office and university attending Turner's lectures, reading Marx and meeting students who were organising Wages Commissions at universities across the country to inform African workers of their rights. Key players David Hemson, Halton Cheadle, Gerry Maré and David Davies became involved in the union organising effort at Bolton Hall helping to prepare meetings, issue membership cards and collect dues. Hemson was also engaged in exceptional work on the Durban docks dissolving racial, cultural and language barriers through his knowledge of unionism and scope for organising despite the narrow limits of racial industrial law.

Life was lived intensely, moving seamlessly between the world of ideas and the craft of organising workers who were now coming in their hundreds to Bolton Hall to join the GFWBF. Within six months, 9,000 workers had been recruited expanding to 27,000 inside a year, figures which give an indication of black workers' mood. In February 1973 mass strikes erupted impacting across the city as workers abandoned factories, marching *impi*-like down the streets of the industrial areas, singing and chanting. Turner wasted no time in coming down to Bolton Hall to organise a survey, which provided the data for the book, *The Durban Strikes 1973* (Institute for Industrial Education [IIE] 1974). Gerry Maré had a role in producing this creative research because in 1974 the state intervened to quell what they perceived as a 'dangerous' turn of events. Turner was banned. Shortly after this setback, Josephine Cheadle, who worked at Bolton Hall, came in one morning and said, 'Rick has been replaced. Eddie Webster has arrived. He is another Turner'.

Webster accepted a lecturing position in sociology at the University of Natal where he was asked to build the industrial sociology programme. Initially he was interested in researching the 1949 African/Indian race riots from a social class perspective but this was soon overtaken by research on attitudes of African workers. A partnership with Turner was formed and Webster became part of a team which created the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE) as a springboard to establishing a Workers College. The team included Phil Bonner and Luli Calinicos who made key contributions in historicising trade union struggle in South Africa, contributing to a more sophisticated understanding of agency. A small group of academics, which

secretly involved the now banned Turner, produced lecture notes pertinent to movement strategy. These included a critique of the history of non-racial trade unions in South Africa; the need for a democratic trade unionism; the role of shop stewards and changes in industrial law, particularly the Labour Relations Amendment Act of 1974, which introduced Liaison Committees to pre-empt unionism. These notes resulted in the production of books, planned as a resource for a Diploma in Industrial Relations at the proposed College.⁴

The Workers' Organization (IIE 1975) was a vital intervention relevant to our contemporary predicament for it captures the critical relationship between empowerment and internal union democracy. The relevance of this dynamic resides in its potential to transform the process of commodification, which diminishes persons by reducing them to a valueless, thing-like being (Fromm 1947:77, Marx 1976:168-9, Polanyi 2001:76).

Commodity relations under capitalist development builds upon the experience of race during the colonial period captured poignantly by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* when Marlow reflecting on the company's chief accountant who, in the midst of the suffering of blacks brought from 'all the recesses of the coast', worked 'bent over his books, making correct entries of perfectly correct transactions; and fifty feet below the doorstep I could see the still tree tops of the grove of death'.

Returning to the contemporary era, research uncovers the social and psychological impacts of the transformation of persons into commodities: fear and anxiety producing insecurity, negative self worth, loss of meaning and identity, feelings of depression, relationship and family breakdowns (Lambert and Webster 2004b, Lambert and Gillan 2007, Webster et al 2008, AMWU 2006:7). These daily encounters come together to create an overall experience of powerlessness, – a belief that nothing can be changed and therefore there is a sense of being trapped as a *permanent condition*. Fromm (1947:67-82) reveals how commodity relations are reinforced when workers are rendered voiceless in corporations and in the political processes. Such a negation attacks the essence of what it means to be a person for human beings are defined by their capacity to think and reflect. The situation is compounded if workers join bureaucratically structured unions, which also deny voice. Hence a participatory model is central to the reconstitution of personhood. If workers find they have a genuine voice and control over their own organisation this counter experience has the potential to transform commodity status, prior to this change being attained in the workplace. A

central proposition in the book, *The Workers' Organization*, is the concept of worker control, which locates decision making at the level of the shop floor worker, thereby pre-empting the possibility of elected leaders acting without engaging the base.

This is why 'Trade union democracy' features so prominently. The problem is framed thus:

There will always be some workers who understand better than others the need for a trade union. There will always be some workers who are more willing to work to bring about worker unity. These workers will become leaders among other workers. It is these workers who are chosen by the other workers as their representatives. So there will be both the *leaders who go ahead of the workers, and representatives who must follow the wishes of the workers*. The problem of union democracy is to keep a balance between these two things. The union must be organized in such a way that the representatives are responsible to the workers, and the workers can participate as much as possible in the organizational structure of the union. A union must be a combination of representation and participation. The task therefore is to create innovative organizational structures to maximize participation from the shop floor as well as ensuring leadership is accountable to the membership through a system of mandates and report backs. (IIE No.2:87/88)

Participatory democracy is not simply a question of structures. The orientation also depends upon leadership style, which promotes a *culture* of participation. Thus in electing leaders there is a need to search for committed persons, who recognise the role of a leader is 'to participate in the workers' struggle...it is not a career or a way of getting rich...they must expect to live at the same standard of living as their fellow workers' (IIE No.2:110). Hence autocratic and bureaucratic orientations are to be avoided. An autocrat is defined as 'somebody who is always telling other people what to do, and will never listen to criticism from other people...an autocratic leader will always think that he/she knows best, and can learn nothing from the workers or anybody else' (IIE, No.2:31). A bureaucratic approach is spawned when 'the union moves out of the factory and into an office'. As a consequence full time officials believe that they run the union, not the workers. Everything is left to the officials who end up 'spending more time having tea with management than talking to the workers' (IIE No.2:26). These value choices shaped the structure and culture of the new unions, maximising participation and thereby rebuilding a sense of being a person capable of contributing ideas and taking action thus transforming commodity status.

Producing books articulating new organising concepts does not in itself result in the growth of a new style of unionism. Transmitting these ideas was crucial. Webster, Turner and others in IIE were committed public intellectuals who sought to ensure that ideas were not dormant in libraries. Because of his banning, Turner remained in the background and Webster, Erwin and others were involved in a series of seminars at Red Acres farm, a Catholic Church property near Howick where these ideas were presented and debated with factory workers. The group also became involved in the establishment of the *South African Labour Bulletin* as a vehicle to advance these leadership ideas. The *Bulletin* became a forum research on the democratic labour movement.

By 1975, momentum built on all these fronts: workers were being organised into new unions through the GFWBF and these emergent organisations were being shaped by these new ideas transmitted through seminars. The state was not a passive onlooker and as Webster observed, ‘Things got tight!’⁵ In the midst of this revival of organised labour from the nadir of the repression of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) in the early 1960s the African National Congress (ANC) and South African Communist Party (SACP) stepped up their underground activities. Reflecting on the tensions and contradictions of above ground organising work and an underground armed struggle campaign, Webster assessed the situation thus:

I think we were on very different projects and I think we still are. Raymond Suttner was involved in the underground and was in contact with people in London who were producing pamphlets, whereas our approach was that opportunities had opened up for working within the law. We had decided to try and take advantage of this space by creating democratically styled trade unions.

We were preoccupied with problems and opportunities surrounding this project, whereas they had an insurrectionist strategy. Perhaps this captures the essential difference between the old and the new left. Our emphasis was on building an independent power base through participation at the shop floor level, through workers discovering the possibilities of controlling the situation in the workplace.

Despite these differences, the Security Police were convinced that this was one and the same project. They took the simple view that there were links in the chain between the exiled movement of the ANC and SACP and the new activities which had emerged in Durban. That is why they put me on file and why I was eventually found not guilty because those links didn’t exist. They believed that the Communist Party had sent me

to Oxford and I had come back to South Africa to ferment a revolution. They seriously believed that! The reality is that they missed out on the change that was actually taking place in the country, driven by people who were very critical of the Communist Party.

The 'Durban moment' reflects a profound political change generated by the renaissance of Marxist theory. This included a critique of structuralist Marxism. Marxism had to be reinterpreted to create space for human agency. The world could be changed through action and research and history writing in particular should consolidate this theoretical emphasis. These theoretical developments were connected to a social and political engagement with the working class. This was central to Rick's political philosophy. Ideas needed to be connected to action. This was inspired by utopian thinking. It created such a feeling of personal liberation.

There was a profound feeling of personal liberation being able to explore all these ideas and connect with them in a very action oriented way, and I think this is what was so central to Rick's philosophical position. The necessity of utopian thinking applied to all aspects of life. You could actually think about how the world could be different – not just the world, but how personal relationships could be different; how bringing up children could be different; how schools could be different. This utopian thinking was radical at a level of ideas and practice, but not in the way that the Security Police thought of it.⁶

Another defining characteristic of the 'Durban Moment' was the commitment to a Gandhian inspired non-violent resistance. Webster recalls:

On the question of violence, Rick was strongly opposed to the ANC/SACP armed struggle campaign. The alternative he argued for was a conception of people coming together in the exercise of power through strategically withdrawing their labour power. There was a Gandhian punch to this. Building on Gandhi's notion of passive resistance, workers simply stopped work, folded their arms and stood unmoved at the machines. This was a very powerful idea – refusing to work. It was something that I was always intrigued with – the idea that you could actually radically change a society by this means.⁷

This Gandhian slant on the South African struggle was deepened and reinforced during the course of Webster and Bonner supervising my Doctoral thesis on SACTU. The interviews uncovered a debate within the SACP in 1960 in which the armed struggle decision was criticised from the perspective that the new mode of struggle would lead to the rapid decline of SACTU at the very moment when a highly politicised social movement orientation was becoming effective in mass mobilisations of Gandhi styled

non-violent radical action such as the pass burning campaign. How ironic that Turner, who inspired my interest in the non-violent strategies of the 1950s and who was strongly opposed to violence as a form of struggle should die by a state assassin's bullet. This tragedy cast an enduring shadow over the lives of all who knew him. His life was like a shooting star and we were forever left in the knowledge of what was lost, of what he would have contributed to social theory and human liberation had he lived out his life.⁸

These ideas of internal democracy, participation, power and methods of resistance transformed South African trade unionism during the 1980s leading to the formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985 and the application of intense pressure on the apartheid state in the years that followed, culminating in a democratic transition. In the second section of this paper, the focus is not on this remarkable achievement, which surely confirms the salience of the ideas emanating from the 'Durban Moment'. Instead the analysis shifts to the impact of these ideas on the making of a NLI in the Global South over the past two decades.

Creating a new labour internationalism

The Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR) is a network of democratic unions in the Global South established at a small meeting of 20 unionists from South Africa, Australia, Malaysia, Indonesia and Pakistan in May 1991. The initiative arose out of discussions between COSATU and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) on the need for a proactive, coordinated global response to neo-liberal restructuring. Over the past 18 years the network has expanded and now embraces 13 countries spanning four continents. Lambert and Webster provide an account of SIGTUR's development (2001, 2003, 2004, 2006).

Through these articles and the book, Webster has made a significant intellectual contribution to the strategic evolution of SIGTUR. His interventions again highlight the power of Turner's emphasis on the committed public intellectual. In his prison note books Gramsci (1971:12) speaks of *organicita* as the *quality* of an intellectual's connection with fundamental social groups, arguing this can be measured. In this instance *organicita* is assessed through the application of new ideas to practical organising. Like Turner, for Webster such an engagement was a life choice. He has lived this public role throughout his academic career in an era where most now believe that such a commitment is demanded only for a limited

duration. Those who abandon public engagement with the powerless claim to have made their contribution to society as they become submerged in business projects, the stock market and the world of things. Consequently a rich vein of experience is continuously drained from the movement project. Not so Webster. He will keep his boots on well beyond retirement, still preoccupied with working class liberation from insecure work, poverty and an absence of voice.

SIGTUR arose out of the recognition that self-regulating global capitalism consolidated the political and economic dominance of global corporations, thereby disempowering civil society.⁹ This is the outcome of the removal of investment and trade barriers on a world scale, which has intensified mergers and acquisitions, reflecting a process of ceaseless competitive war between private companies (Marx 1981:254). Historically, this concentration and centralisation of production is capitalist development's intrinsic logic as 'one capitalist always strikes down many others' (Marx 1976:929). This is described as a world of 'circling predators', a Darwinian survival of the strongest, a process which simultaneously destroys and creates (*The Australian*, November 3, 2000).

This destructiveness is exacerbated by the way corporations exploit the uneven geographical evaluation of labour, relocating production to nations where labour rights are negated. Such a spatial dynamic defines the nature of competition (Harvey 2000:57). Nation states facilitate this accumulation logic regardless of social consequences because of the political leverage of these corporations (Leys 2001:15). The global financial crisis and the looming catastrophe of global warming highlight this imbalance, for in both scenarios state intervention withers before corporate assertiveness, demonstrating an unwillingness to socially regulate capital markets, nor are they willing to prioritise the earth and pay the price of a genuine carbon reduction programme.

This is the logic which defines labour internationalism for the spatial dynamic of corporations demands a new strategy. Despite some notable exceptions, Existing Labour Internationalism (ELI) appears largely incapable of taking up this daunting challenge.¹⁰ This Northern dominated orientation embedded in the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and in many but not all the Global Union Federations commonly referred to as GUFs.¹¹

Social partnership assumes power is conceded to the international trade union movement.¹² Corporations are unambiguous: restructuring is off the

agenda. ELI has generally accepted this assertion, limiting its activities to lobbying rather than exploring new forms of direct action. Social partnership has in many instances integrated worker leaders into corporate power structures (Board of Directors). These leaders see themselves as having a stake in the financial success of the organisation hence resistance to restructuring is unimaginable. Furthermore, for historical reasons, ELI has a thin presence in the Global South. After the war, the US intervened in East and South East Asia to contain communism. The key facet of this strategy was the repression of democratic unionism in the region and the promotion of a bureaucratic company unionism, and/or unions established and controlled by authoritarian states.

Prior to founding SIGTUR in 1991, I visited Asian countries to contact *democratic* unions marginalised by US interventions. This strategic choice was a product of IIE insights. After eight years of organising work I formed an intellectual partnership with Webster, which was to prove pivotal to the further advancement of a NLI.

Our first task was to define NLI (Lambert and Webster 2006). The definition maybe summarised thus:

ELI	NLI
Hierarchy	Network
Centralisation	Decentralisation
Command	Participation
Control	Empowerment
Careerist leadership	Politically committed activists
Restricted debate	Open debate
Slow decision making	Quick decision making
Bureaucracy	Delayed
Formal	Flexible
Diplomatic orientation/social partnership politics	Mobilisation orientation/resistance politics
Priority focus on workplace and trade unions	Focus on workplace <i>and</i> coalition building with new social movements and NGOs
Predominantly north	Predominantly south

In this set of binary oppositions (ideal types) we highlight a chasm in organisational styles and action between labour internationalisms. The choice to work only with democratic unions meant SIGTUR evolved the characteristics of the NLI. This is reflected in its leadership culture, organising style and modes of action.

The bi-annual SIGTUR Congresses (nine over the past 18 years) are week long, live-in events, structured around a strategic position paper followed by workshops and plenary sessions to maximise participation and debate. A primary aim is the creation of a culture of solidarity between movements within SIGTUR, producing thick organic connections over time. Relations of solidarity are produced by conscious value choices based on commitment to the predicament of the other, to justice at work and in society. Paddy Crumlin, National Secretary of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), Vice President of the International Transport Federation (ITF) and an advocate of SIGTUR captured the essence of these relations in a keynote address to the Mining and Maritime Global Network in April 2008:

We are dealing with people who think they own us. Of course they don't. We own each other; we own the love, the affection and the humanity; the ability to construct and integrate; the ability to have empathy and sympathy; and the most wonderful thing is our ability to share. We say in the knock around world, good people share.

If we are able to work together and unleash the tremendous human creativity and potential inherent in our own humanity, we are a political and economic and industrial force in which almost anything is possible.

This culture permeates SIGTUR and is the principal reason why this initiative endures despite an absence of financial resources, making the claim that it is a poor people's movement a reality. Such an orientation contrasts markedly with market individualism. Bauman observes:

These are ruthless times, times of competition and one-upmanship, when people around seem to keep their cards to their chests and few people seem to be in a hurry to help us, when in reply to our cries for help we hear admonitions to help ourselves. (Bauman 2001:3)

For Sennet (1998:30) market culture leads to the 'acid erosion of those qualities of character, like loyalty, commitment, purpose, and resolution, which are long term in nature'. Individualism has produced 'chameleon values', jettisoned as swiftly as a change of clothing as long-term social commitment dissolves before short-term private opportunity. This 'corrosion of character' is the antithesis of social commitment and vision so critical to

the NLI project. Given his theoretical formation Turner viewed the experience of everyday living as an opportunity to choose commitment over the acquisition of things. Thus the NLI has its roots in the culture advanced during the early phase of the rebirth of struggle in South Africa.

SIGTUR's formation led to a search for activists with these values, not time-serving union bureaucrats and careerists from company and state-sponsored unions. This choice led to the discovery of a generation of labour leaders who had fought to win democratic union rights in the South, often at a high personal cost. Many in the SIGTUR leadership have endured prison terms, torture and other methods of victimisation.¹³ These persons had formed identities centred on justice and working class liberation. Interviews reveal how these identities are grounded in value choices – service to the community rather than individual careerism and personal material reward; solidarity in place of upward mobility; freedom, democracy and participation over hierarchy and control; equality contra elitism; and social control over market logic. This southern movement has thrived because of these value choices. For example, Dita Sari, a leader of democratic unions in Indonesia, chose not to accept the Reebok human rights award and an accompanying cheque of US\$50,000 in March 2002. Robert Redford, Desmond Tutu and other international celebrities were present at a glittering ceremony planned to coincide with the Winter Olympics at Salt Lake City. In a letter to the Reebok CEO, she stated:

We know how you treat your workers in the Third World. I know because I helped organize them and carried out actions with them. We know you paid your workers less than a dollar a day when your sneakers were selling for a hundred and that you rented the police to destroy us. Understanding this, we feel that it isn't appropriate for you to put the lid on the wrongs you've committed toward workers by giving this kind of award. (Dwyer 2002)

Such values generate the organisational characteristics captured in the table. Malaysian union leader Arokia Dass' personal identity is inseparable from the colonial past and its impact on his father as an indentured labourer. This sense of personal history shaped his commitment. This long-term commitment of the leadership group is critical to movement stability over the shifting sands of time.

Dass describes a transformative moment in his life:

One day I was walking along the road and there was this person staggering and walking in front of me. Suddenly, he dropped dead.

Someone told me he died of hunger. I turned around and saw that there was so much food. Why should this person die of hunger? Then I realized that religion had no answer to this question. I wanted the eradication of poverty. I started reading Marx. I became a socialist. (Dass, interview, 2001)

As was the case in South Africa, SIGTUR leaders are committed to union democracy and accountable leadership. A struggle against bureaucratic and corrupt leadership of the established unions has been central to union struggles in Asia in the post-war period.

When we took over leadership we posed the question, what is the difference between us and those we kicked out of the union? We did participatory action research. Three to four thousand workers were interviewed. They all said that decision making must be left to the members; the union must be democratic and independent; it should not be affiliated to political parties. (Dass, interview, 2001)

Giving workers a voice in organisational decision-making builds a positive sense of self and psychologically transforms feelings of worthlessness. Our interviews revealed that the *process* of building democratic unions de-commodified labour, prior to any change in work or society. This solidarity culture powers movement resistance.

Repertoires of resistance and network evolution

A new unionism was created in South Africa in the 1970s because the bureaucratic organisation of the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) eschewed economic and political action. Neo-liberal globalisation produced a similar need with regard to labour internationalism in the Global South, consequently democratic unions have forged rich repertoires of resistance. The task was to create an internationalism which could widen the geographic scope of these actions through their demonstration effects. The southern repertoire includes strikes, general strikes, mass protest demonstrations and, in the case of Korea, martyrdom to intensify resistance.

At the time of writing in November 2009 there were intense conflicts in Mexico, India and Korea, which provide an insight into southern struggles. In Mexico, when the Mexican Electrical Workers Union resisted the privatisation of electricity utilities the entire workforce was locked out. Workers are protesting through a Gandhi-style hunger strike. In Korea, public sector workers are also resisting privatisation advocated by the conservative Bak government as necessary 'business rationalisation'. The

Korean Council of Trade Unions (KCTU) organised a series of mass protest rallies and strike action in response to severe repression which included leadership arrests, mass dismissals and the withdrawal of collective bargaining agreements. In Karnataka, India, The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) spent two years organising a mass protest action of poor casualised women workers on day work arrangements. Action took the form of multiple mass marches across the state to deliver a million strong signature campaign. Seventy per cent of the protesters were women and the demands were for a minimum wage and work security. They were baton charged by the police.

These instances are emblematic of a pattern of sustained resistance to restructuring in the Global South and are reflective of a movement culture of mobilisation distinguishable from northern responses. The role of a NLI is to embrace and reflect this culture, supporting, interpreting and communicating and where appropriate linking this resistance through the global network. Webster has contributed to deepening the discourse on these events through *Grounding Globalisation* and the way the book theorised the logic of self regulating global capitalism. The essential thrust of the argument about markets and society structured the keynote address at SIGTUR's 8th Congress in Kochi, India in April 2008.

In the context of national resistance against restructuring SIGTUR's primary role is connecting national movements to further empower local action through working space (SIGTUR 2009). There is a dual interrelated meaning of the concept *working space* (Lambert and Gillan 2007). Firstly, the notion may be defined as the spatial structuring of work and employment relations (Herod et al 2007). Secondly, the concept may be developed to theorise resistance – how unions and other civil society movements attempt to *work space*, that is, produce (actively structure) space to re-empower labour. Recognising the potential of new spatial relations as a source of power is central to a NLI. However, the strategic proposition begs the question: *how* might this be achieved? The answer resides in an understanding of what it means to *work space*.

There are two interrelated dimensions to working space: organising networks and embracing new communications technologies. Networking in this context is not a spontaneous, random, surfing the net linkage. Building global movement power requires a disciplined construction of networks in complementary spheres of economy and society. These include networking:

- between democratic national union federations;
- within global corporations and associated global production networks

(GPNs);

- within the public sector;
- between women workers;
- between union educators.

SIGTUR has created an enduring 18 year long network between national federations in the Global South, grounded in annual leaders meetings through the Regional Coordinating Committee (RCC). The regularity of these meetings has sustained the network and given strategic direction to SIGTUR. Internal networks are currently in different stages of evolution.

At SIGTUR's 8th Congress in Kochi, India in April 2008, delegates prioritised networking within global corporations, selecting Hyundai's factory in Tamil Nadu as an experimental test case. This region's export processing zones have attracted the world's major car makers and 150 components companies from Japan and Korea. Anti-unionism is pervasive in these zones where unions have no legal status and where 25 per cent of workers endure precarious employment contracts.

Over the past decade attempts to unionise workers has been met with victimisation. Like South Africa in the 1970s, the law allows companies to form Works Committees to bypass unions. In the Hyundai case these denials of rights were exacerbated through the racism of military styled Korean management who beat workers and smashed the Hindu icons they kept at their work stations leading workers to claim 'We are a people without dignity'. Despite these conditions, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) unionised workers and marginalised the Works Committee in Hyundai. They then fought for recognition and sought registration under the Trade Union Act of 1926. The response was a new wave of victimisation, which has led to a two year struggle, climaxing in a protest which took the form of a human chain surrounding the factory. The government backed the company, warning that no unions would be allowed in the zones.

In response to these repressive conditions SIGTUR constructed new spatial relations, which drew the Korean Metal Workers Trade Union (KMTU) leadership into solidarity relations with the Hyundai workers in Chennai. These leaders visited India and participated in the human chain protest. KCTU widely publicised the working conditions and worker resistance in India, issuing a statement of serious concern. The Hyundai leadership in Tamil Nadu then visited Korea where they participated in meetings, including one sponsored by the International Metal Workers

Federation (IMF), which mobilised leaders from Hyundai plants in other parts of the world. Finally, KMTU organised a solidarity fund for Hyundai workers in Chennai. They also organised a mass rally at the Hyundai Headquarters in Seoul where they delivered demands for union recognition.

There then followed a strike of 1,300 workers in the Chennai plant who continued to press for recognition. Predictable victimisation led to a Gandhi-style hunger strike at the Labour Office in the city – ‘We will not take food until our demands are met. We are on an indefinite fast’! As a consequence of this symbolic act, solidarity actions were launched throughout the state and the government was forced to ask the company to conciliate. However, the dispute drags on and is yet to be resolved. CITU was warned, ‘Don’t live in a dream. The union is not coming here’. The union is currently organising precarious workers (4,500 workers out of 8,000 at Hyundai) demanding ‘equal pay for equal work’. This conflict was high on the agenda of the SIGTUR RCC meeting in Korea in May 2009 and decisions were made to extend the action against Hyundai to include spatially coordinated initiatives focused on logistics.

This process of working space to globalise resistance has achieved the realisable initial goals which SIGTUR set, namely, federation to federation solidarity. This is a foundation to extend the links to include transportation unions and their potential for applying logistical power. These disputes are titanic in that the new labour zones reflect the essential geography of the global economy, which negates rights to attract global corporations. Challenge this logic and one confronts the power of a global corporation and the full might of the state, fearful that union action will undermine their

Conclusion: challenges and legacy

The concluding section shifts from this summary account of the struggle to establish a NLI to a critique of this project and the challenges which loom large on the agenda of any global counter movement to corporate dominance. Potentially catastrophic global warming, the financial meltdown and work insecurity will surely shape such a movement. A fundamental question has yet to be adequately answered: what kind of global movement will develop a capacity to force change in these critical areas?

Waterman (2009:6) asserts SIGTUR is built on a foundation which negates any prospect of contributing to resolving these crises.

SIGTUR is in fact trapped in an undiscussed and undiscussable contradiction: of trying to build a new *networked* labor movement

internationalism on the basis of leadership relations between trade union *organizations* that themselves reproduce the state-national base for the Old Labor Internationalism.

He argues:

If trade unionism is the center of a NLI you are lost. The argument is simple: in most countries eighty per cent of the workforce is not unionized and so trade unions should not be confused with the labor *movement*. The labor movement should not be reduced to trade unionism. There is a need to look at constructing a broader social movement which engages workers outside of formal full time employment.¹⁴

The observation that trade unions have generally failed to respond creatively to the changing nature of work under globalisation is pertinent. However, there are national movements within SIGTUR such as the KCTU which are struggling to evolve new forms of organisation which engage casualised workers. They have set aside 30 per cent of the national union budget for the new irregular workers union. As indicated in the above analysis, CITU is deeply involved in initiating campaigns of day labourers. Is it a wise strategic decision to write off the largest organised global force in civil society, notwithstanding the multiple serious flaws which exist? Rather than writing off unions an intense struggle needs to be waged within unions at all levels (local/national/global) to create a new kind of movement with the capacity to defend society against the triple crises.¹⁵

In this sense, Waterman is right: a new kind of movement needs to evolve. Such a movement should organise the casualised *in a highly strategic manner* by grounding such organisation within a carefully researched understanding of global production networks (GPNs). Coe et al (2008:274) define GPN as 'a nexus of interconnected functions, operations and transactions through which a specific product or service is produced, distributed and consumed'. GPNs are social and cultural phenomena existing in transnational space. Their pertinence for building a new kind of movement resides in the fact that they are potentially contested organisational fields reflecting asymmetrical power relations. The fundamental movement task is to organise strategically within GPNs to challenge this power inequality. In this GPNs are a rich field for the exercise of logistical power (Webster et al 2008:13, Coe et al 2008:276).¹⁶ The vastly increased complexity and geographic extensiveness of production networks requiring sophisticated coordination and integration renders the logistics problem absolutely central to corporations maximising profit and shareholder value. Here the shrinkage of

time and space is cardinal hence the importance of logistical strategies such as just in time management and lean logistics.

A consciousness of these issues and the possibilities of identifying points of vulnerability in the GPN as a focus of movement action is the key source of re-empowering society against the share market logic of corporations. Public intellectuals could play a critical role in this process through researching GPNs so as to clearly identify points of vulnerability in the production chain. This approach then redirects organising priorities towards these strategic links calling forth ever widening repertoires of collective action in the form of consumer boycotts and transportation interventions.

SIGTUR is yet to attain this sophistication in its research, organising strategy, and forms of action, notwithstanding the movement's accumulated experience through organising shipping boycotts between Australia and South Africa in the late 1990s when the Australian unions were under intense attack from the Conservative Government's anti-union agenda. Public intellectuals will need to become involved in this process if quality research is to inform activists.

In this regard Webster provides a role model to future generations of labour academics through the quality and relevance of his research and its connectedness to movements. It is not by chance that his current research centres on Johannesburg and Mumbai sweatshops, for one of the key features of GPNs is the way these 'value chains' incorporate the extremes of nineteenth century styled exploitation into contemporary commodity production. His enduring legacy will be the values he so readily embraced some 40 years ago in Durban: a lifelong commitment to justice for working people. He has lived the interior ethical stance he shared with Turner during those intense years – persons can never be destroyed to achieve an end, not for a stock market, corporation or nation. These values are critical if global civil society is to confront the challenge of the destructive forces of climate change, finance capital and global corporations.

Notes

1. Notable exceptions are Korea, where the Korean Council of Trade Unions (KCTU) continues to mobilise mass action against neo-liberal restructuring; the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, (CITU), which has sustained mass protest actions against restructuring and the Congress of South African Trade Unions is also committed to resisting these impositions. Elsewhere, resistance is relatively fragmented and localised.

2. This report refers to the research of the Hunter Valley Taskforce, November 2001, in which their case studies found ‘the consequences of the closure include relationship breakdown, domestic violence, alcoholism, depression and suicide’. See p29.
3. Turner begins his book, *The Eye of the Needle*, with an introductory chapter on ‘The necessity of utopian thinking’, where he argued in the first paragraph, ‘There are two kinds of impossibility: the absolute impossibility, and the “other things being equal” impossibility. It is absolutely impossible to teach a lion to become a vegetarian. “Other things being equal” it is impossible for a black person to become Prime Minister of South Africa’.
4. These books were *The Workers’ Organization*, *The Worker in the Factory*, *The Workers’ Negotiation Handbook* and *The Worker in Society*.
5. Interview, Edward Webster, March 2009.
6. Interview, Edward Webster, March 2009.
7. Interview, Edward Webster, March 2009.
8. Richard Turner was diligent on issues of personal health and safety, monitoring his diet and refusing to travel in my old Volkswagen because the seat belts did not work. He was determined to live a long life to have the opportunity to make a significant intellectual contribution.
9. Every sector of the global economy is now dominated by a small number of global corporations, generally around ten. Of these two to three dominate the others.
10. There are of course some notable exceptions. These include Unions Network International (UNI) and its campaign against the Canadian corporation Quebecor and the work of the United Union of Foodworkers (IUF).
11. The notable exceptions are Unions Network International (UNI), the International Union of Foodworkers (IUF) and the International Transport Federation (ITF). However, all are not monolithic entities and many have histories where there have been periods of contestation between the existing and new tendencies.
12. The historical evolution of social partnership in Europe has a complex, many faceted history, the exposition of which is beyond the scope of this article. See Hyman 2001, Chapter 4 for an excellent summary.
13. Malaysian union leader Arokia Dass, who has played a key role in the development of SIGTUR, was detained under Malaysia’s Internal Security Act between 1987 and 1989. He was psychologically tortured, blindfolded and moved to different prisons up to three times a week. Dita Sari, a leader of the independent unions in Indonesia, was imprisoned for three years under Suharto. She campaigned against prison conditions, organising other prisoners, and, not surprisingly, found herself placed in isolation. Korean unionists regularly face prison terms.

14. Skype interview, May 2009.
15. Cumbers et al argue for intense struggle within unions to better position resistance against neo-liberal globalisation.
16. In *Grounding Globalisation* we introduced the concept logistical power but did not apply it to GPNs as do Coe et al (2008).

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