

Labour at the 2009 Belém World Social Forum: between an ambiguous past and an uncertain future¹

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The time, the place and the focus

The time: this was the first World Social Forum (WSF) since the profound financial/industrial crisis of capitalism, late-2008, the consequent labour layoffs, and the desperate and extreme state measures to restore capitalism – largely by throwing obscene amounts of money at the financial institutions that were the immediate cause of the crisis. *The place:* Belém is a tropical city of some two million, at one mouth of the Amazon river, and therefore a potent reminder of the Amazon basin and forest - 'the lungs of the world' - whose nature and peoples are under threat of extinction by capitalist globalisation (plus local capital and the Brazilian state). *The focus:* for the first time the WSF declared a single focus – on this Amazonian environment and its peoples and movements.

Point Two of the WSF's objectives reads (in somewhat iffy official translation):

For the release of the world domain [ie liberation from the world domination – PW] of capital, multinationals corporations, imperialist, patriarchal, colonial and neocolonial domination and unequal systems of commerce, by cancelling the impoverish[ed] countries of debt. (World Social Forum Programming 2009:7).

This may be a long-standing formulation² but it nonetheless did me good to see it confirmed on the front page of the Forum supplement of the regional daily, *Diário de Para* (February 1). Here it was stated (in English!) that

¹ Although this may be the fourth report I have written on labour at World Social Forums or related events since 2002, I am unable to claim this one will be broader or deeper than previously. This may be a function of the growing extent of labour participation, of the number and spatial spread of labour events in Belém, or simply of my increasing age and uncertain health. This year, as a result of just one or two other Belém commitments, I was unable to attend all the three or four successive events on the timetable of the small, if growing, Labour and Globalisation network (L&G). What I will nonetheless here attempt is to reflect on and around this small left network. And to do so in the light of the emancipation of labour globally. This means: 1) in the face of the globalisation of capitalism, its current worldwide crisis, its increasingly pernicious effects on labour, on human life, on the natural environment); 2) going beyond either incrementalism (previously: reform or social democracy) or insurrectionism (previously: revolution or communist-stateism). Positively it implies the collective self-empowerment of all alienated by capitalism, the creation of a radically-democratic global civil society. I hope others will be provoked to either challenge my account and/or orientation or go beyond them.

² My compañera, Gina Vargas, who is on the WSF International Council (IC), assured me in Belém that it was a long-standing formulation which I *had not seen* because I don't read official

Criticism against capitalism was the focus of the World Social Forum. But, after all, what are the actual alternatives to build a better world?

A fair-enough question, given that so many anti-globalisers think a re-assertion of state and inter-state power would do the trick. Also because, as we will see, the nature of the WSF is quite ambiguous, giving rise to somewhat differing left analyses (e.g. Toussaint 2009, Pleyers 2009, Costello and Smith 2009).

Another innovation, taking shape over the years, was the devotion of the Forum to 'self-managed activities', these dominating the first days of the Forum. And this move in the direction of...what?...*indirectionality*? was accompanied by 'thematic tents', and extended by 'Belém Expanded' (locally and globally, in place and cyberspace) and completed by a 'Day of Sectoral Alliances', which included a final 'Assembly of Assemblies' in which it was intended the WSF would sum up or concentrate, or anyway express, its orientations and coming activities. I am myself not sure whether all this makes the WSF more *participatory*, even if it makes it more diverse. My feeling is that it rather exemplifies the notorious 'tyranny of structurelessness' (Freeman 1972) under which those with the desire, the means and the experience to dominate do so wearing a cloak of at least semi-invisibility.

A final - actually the initial - innovation was the mentioned focus on the Amazon and the indigenous peoples of the world. The indigenous peoples, in particular of the Amazon, were highly visible and integrated into much of the programming. But there were complaints from some of the Amazonians that they were still being treated as folklore. And there were – predictably – differences expressed between the comparatively long-organised Andeans and the recently-organised Amazonians. This specific problem/movement focus raised in my mind the question of when we can expect such on labour or on gender/sexuality/women – both clearly multi-voiced parties and neither particularly folkloric.

That maybe 90 percent of the participants were from Brazil (some 60-70 percent from the state of Para alone!) might have given an exaggerated impression of labour participation since the sites were full of people wearing the red teeshirts of the major Brazilian union federation, the *Central Única dos Trabalhadores* (CUT). It was nonetheless my impression that the presence of national and international union organisations and of labour activists was greater than previously. Survey evidence may later confirm whether this was so.

For the rest, it must be said that – despite the customary complaints concerning its suburban siting, the distance between sites, timetable changes, room

WSF documents seriously. (A touch, a touch, I do confess!). But the WSF has been rather better known for its opposition to *neo-liberalism* than to *capitalism*. And the phrase 'domination by capital' is open to a Keynesian corollary in which this 'domination' can be offset by the state, or another in which it can be countervailed by an increased role (not qualified) of civil society (customarily undefined). Both such tendencies, separately or combined, could be found in presentations of Susan George and Walden Bello (both fellows of the Transnational Institute, Amsterdam), when I returned to the Netherlands, March 2009 (<http://www.tni.org/acts/debatingeuropebello.pdf>).

cancellations and the often rough accommodation – most of the experienced participants I spoke to after the event considered the Forum a success. This may have been in part due to the relatively small size of the city, and to the challenge implied by the high temperature, high humidity and frequent tropical downpours. I, in any case, found the city easy to move around, friendly...and most of my events in their scheduled places. Not every participant, of course, had a cellphone and a hotel room (with air-conditioned mosquitoes) or even an umbrella. But even the kids in the tent city on one university site seemed to be comparatively satisfied with the conditions. And the organisation of such a gigantic and complex event by a relatively small team of organisers remains something of a miracle: we saw the future and it worked (if unevenly).

Belém treated the Forum as other cities might do the Olympics.³ And I do have to say that that bilingual supplement in the major daily paper of the State of Para, the *Diario de Para*, was not only WSF-friendly but professional, compensating for the absence of the daily edition of *Terra Viva* from the Inter Press Service, to which we have become accustomed.⁴ Indeed, I rather depended on the *Diario* for reports on what I was missing (90 % of Forum activity?), having early decided that I was NOT going to search through the 142-page, three-column, half-kilo, three-language *Programming* – to find *anything*.

It was, thus, only later, at the farmhouse of Brazilian Forum founder, Candido Grzybowski (some hours North of Rio, surrounded by mountain greenery and in the company also of other congenial Latinos/as) that I finally confronted the Frankenstein's Monster of the WSF, the Programme, in search of the word 'labour', 'union' or related terms (in one or more of three or four languages). I have to say that this further convinced me that the Forum is an agora as much in the sense of a marketplace as of a meeting-place. On the *assumption* that each of the 143 Programme pages listed just 45 events, then dividing by three (for languages), and then dropping a few pages of introduction and a back page list of sponsors, we still have 2,000 3-hour events, which, divided by four (thus excluding the Opening and Closing Days) still leaves us with some 500 events per day!

Let us consider the Labour Question for one such day. Whilst inviting anyone with a minimal command of mathematics to do better than myself here, I challenge anyone to reduce the number of competing 'labour related' events, of Theme 6, listed on page 26 for Shift One (of three), for January 29. I make it

³ This comes close to a problematic truth. The city is involved in 'improvement' for a World Football Cup bid as well as for our more-modest WSF. By 'improvement' I wish to suggest there is a negative side to this – the clearing of settlements of the poor to the advantage of the already excessively 'improved classes' in Belém. There is surely a problem in the WSF being complicit with evictions, just as it was complicit in the exclusion of the Nairobi poor from the WSF there in 2007. For the Belém case, see http://eng.habitants.org/zero_evictions_campaign/observatory_belem/background_news_about_the_observatory_on_belem/the_chart_of_belem.

⁴ For this special edition, see http://ipsterraviva.net/uploads/TV/wsfbrazil2009Pt/photos/TERRA_VIVA%20FSM%202009_WEB_30-01-09.pdf

around 45. These then taking place on one of two campuses, separated by a bus-ride of some 15 minutes (excluding waiting time), and then distributed (in one case) at maybe 30-40 minutes walk from the campus bus stop.

I begin at this point to feel nostalgic for the World Youth and Student Festivals of the 1950s, at which the programme was pre-determined by a Soviet-funded *apparat* that decided everything for us, shipped us to the site and then bussed us around, with its loyal national (Communist) committees further decreeing that, for example, we individualistic Brits should wear white shirts and grey trousers or skirts (which, having just recovered from the uniformity of World War Two, we signally failed to do).⁵

The 'division of labour' at the Forum

Perhaps one should talk of a field or spectrum rather than a division of labour. This would better suggest the extent to which labour events overlapped in concerns, that organisations and individuals were present at different labour events, and that individual international friendships existed or were created across or despite differences in identities, ideologies or affiliations. These characteristics are not to be lightly dismissed.

We can, however, at least distinguish between the presence and programmes of the traditional national/international union organisations and that of the 'alternative' Labour and Globalisation network. The former were present, with a whole range of closely allied NGOs (non-governmental organisations), and concentrated in or around the CUT's large 'World of Work' tent. The CUT was a founder organisation of the WSF, is represented on its International Council. It is allied with the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) and therefore with the government of President Luiz Inácio da Silva (better known as Lula, himself a former worker and union leader).⁶ With its Brazilian allies (Força

⁵ In case anyone should take my nostalgia literally, I should make clear that this I am speaking tongue in cheek. This distinguishes my attitude to the Communist-controlled Festivals (in four of which I took part) from that of my friend Tord Björk (2009), who disparages Belém, comparing attendance there to that of what were state-sponsored, state-controlled Youth Festivals. Tord also seems to think that these Communist-front events contributed significantly to anti-imperialist struggles. Maybe to Soviet-inspired anti-imperialist *rhetoric*, but it does now seem to me that the World Youth and Student Festivals combined Machiavellianism with naivety, endless cries of 'Peace and Friendship' – from 1949 till 1989 - applying only to those endorsing or tolerating the Soviet worldview and accepting Communist control of the events. For evidence I refer to a video I picked up in...*Belém* (World Federation of Democratic Youth 200?)! This predictable, repetitive, propaganda exercise is done, in 1950s Cold War style, both politically and aesthetically. It airbrushes out nearly all the Communist leaders who played such a role – on banners or in person – at the Festivals. I caught the word 'Communist' just once on a pedestrian video heavily dependent on half-tone photos from the WFDY magazine. And it actually buries the drama, contradictions and pleasures experienced by myself and most Festival participants.

⁶ Lula, along with other 'left' presidents in Latin America, was present at the Forum, whilst not formally invited by the WSF. Such presidential appearances have become customary at the Latin American Forums, just as customarily taking place outside the programme and outside at least



Inside the substantial World of Work tent of the Brazilian *Central Única dos Trabalhadores* at the Belém World Social Forum.

Sindical and UGT), its International (the Brussels-based International Trade Union Confederation) and its various European and Latin American links, the CUT offered a series of events which expressed the globally hegemonic union orientation, concerns and activities. These included:

1. The holding of an international trade-union forum - to which a representative of Lula was also invited;
2. A seminar on climate change and sustainable development, with invitees from South Africa and the sphere of the United Nations (this was François Houtart, customarily identified with the socialism and third-worldism of Egyptian political-economist Samir Amin);
3. A session on migration and development;
4. Others on labour rights and on the current campaign of the International Trade Union Confederation (adopted, lock, stock and barrel, from the International Labour Organisation), on 'Decent

the main forum sites. The rights and wrongs of such presidential presences has been much disputed over the years. I do not think the Forum should be in the business of even allowing a platform to Presidents, states or regimes. Any more than it should to – say – allow space to 'socially-responsible' national corporations or multinationals. I find it a weakness of the WSF that these statesmen have a place at (if not in) the WSF whilst the EZLN (Zapatistas) of Mexico has never had such – presumably because of a very brief initial resort to arms.

Work'. This session also invited, however, the increasingly anti-capitalist Filipino academic-activist, Walden Bello (2009).

All in all, this suggests the Global Neo-Keynesian approach of the traditional trade union hegemony, seeking 'social partnership' with reasonable capitalists and reformist states - despite these being thin on the global ground, or limited in political performance - for a more-civilised capitalism (for more on this see Wahl 2008).

Such an orientation was reinforced by various West European-based, union-oriented NGOs as the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES).⁷ This had its own extensive and evidently well-funded series of events elsewhere in the grounds of the Forum. Advertised on a well-designed web-site, running over three days, armed with printed or xeroxed documents, supported by well-equipped professional interpreters, the panels of this programme were filled with (presumably FES-funded) delegates and experts from various countries worldwide. I heard one such, from a Global Union Federation, utter a few words of formal greeting and accord, only to later inform me that he had come to the WSF for this two-hour event alone and then only because he had never been to Brazil! He declined my invitation to join an immediately following Labour and Globalisation event along the corridor. The FES programme covered such topics as 'union networks within multinationals' (with a background paper from the Brazilian researcher, Drummond 2008), Core Labour Standards and Union Strategies in the State of Parra, International Framework Agreements, Decent Work again, even Women and Political Reform. (See http://www.fes-globalization.org/events/download/FES_Programme_World_Social_Forum_2009.pdf).

Whilst none of this might be totally irrelevant to the condition of at least *waged* labour I did not note in many of these activities the word 'capitalism' - far less opposition to such.⁸ More, I would suggest, did this activity have to do with

⁷ See the classical critique of Evers (1982): 'In conclusion', said Evers of the relationship between the FES and its Latin-American partners,

it is a game of 'who uses whom', which both sides are consciously playing. Perhaps the basic rule of the game can be summed up as follows: Give me opportunities to think I am using you and I will give you opportunities to think that you are using me.

The FES and its partners may have changed over the years, but recognition of 'instrumental internationalism' is still required in relation to such highly unequal 'partnerships' internationally.

⁸ Here the Drummond (2008) paper is revealing in so far as it reproduces a 19-20th century European social-democratic notion that the *expansion of union organisation* and of *increased bargaining possibilities* will make it hypothetically possible for multinational workers (the most advanced sector of the class, he argues) to pass from class compromise to revolution. It seems somewhat counter-intuitive and counter-factual (in the historical sense). No evidence is provided for this hypothesis, nor does Drummond really make use of the network theory of Manuel Castells, to whom he does refer. Castells' argument would rather suggest a *generalisation* of radical-democratic networking amongst workers in all sectors of employment and then beyond the unions, and even wage-earners more generally.

routine, late-20th century union defensive strategy, or activity, for the *restoration* of a capitalism in which ‘social partnership’ practices could be (again) routinely carried out. This contrasts quite dramatically with the declaration of an Assembly of Social Movements (2009), under the slogan:

We won't pay for the crisis. The rich have to pay for it !

**Anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, feminist,
environmentalist and socialist alternatives
are necessary**

The declaration continues in ringing yet detailed condemnation of capitalism and with the proposal of an alternative society reflecting the long-standing traditions and 21st century demands of the ecological, socialist, feminist and indigenous movements. It is worthwhile reading in full (<http://links.org.au/node/897>).⁹

How 'alternative' is the Labour and Globalisation network?

But whilst the 'alternative' Labour and Globalisation Network differentiated itself from the traditional labour inter/nationals, was it as radical as the Assembly's declaration? Pat Horn, a leading figure in the network, had earlier said that the purpose of its Belém event was:

1. To jointly discuss in more depth how globalisation is shaping labour relations, including a joint analysis on key policy fields that are of particular relevance;
2. To offer a space for sharing experiences of struggles for labour rights in different regions;
3. To offer a space for trade unions and social movements and other social actors to build new relationships;
4. To develop relationships of North-South solidarity based on functional equality rather than financial dependence;
5. To identify a platform of issues around which such international solidarity can be developed through international campaigns;
6. To discuss the development of the network itself (what working program, what tools to work together etc.). (Email received 050109).

⁹ Costello and Smith (2009) consider this document to consist in part of ‘the usual anti-capitalist boilerplate’. Actually, amongst declarations from the WSF, this one is quite unusual. Particularly in its definition of an alternative in terms of a synthesis of the listed ideologies and movements.

If this specification suggests some kind of independent labour 'forum within the forum', its final declaration (Appendix 1) issued at the event by L&G was a little more specific. Referring back to the Nairobi WSF, 2007, it suggested that an L&G network could give more visibility to labour within the Forum, develop an ongoing dialogue and exchange of ideas and experiences, discuss a new and broader understanding of labour (covering also reproductive labour and the informal sector), strengthen ties between unions, movements, intellectuals and citizens, go beyond defence toward a new global capacity for action, find common objectives, consider the full meaning of production, and map all possible labour actors.

Given that L&G has miniscule resources compared with the FES or the traditional inter/national unions (compare simply the size of the FES' programme with that of L&G in Appendix 2), this boiled down to three three-hour sessions, largely in English. They dealt, in turn, with the following:

1. Labour: New Struggles, New Alliances: Towards a Charter of Labour?
2. Labour in the Global Crisis.
3. Assembly of the Labour and Globalisation Network.

Since I have a long-standing interest in a Global Labour Charter Project (appended to Waterman 2008c), I was encouraged by the numbers of unions/unionists attending this session, but discouraged by the limited time given to the idea of a charter. There was, nonetheless, a generally positive response to the idea of developing such. One must further note the following:

1. That the number of *non*-union participants in the L&G event seems to have remained stagnant;
2. That the Southern unionists who prioritised North-South union conflicts here were nearly all prominent members of national unions affiliated to the West European-based and West European-dominated ITUC - *of which these unions have never made public criticism*;
3. That whilst the less-geographically-fixated South Korean speaker stressed that capital was changing faster than labour was responding, further discussion on a charter (which could specify an anti-capitalist social-movement orientation for L&G) was postponed to some indefinite future.

My conclusion from Session One, from informal exchanges with core L&G activist, Marco Berlinguer, and the final L&G declaration (Appendix 1), is that whilst L&G does provide an independent agora in which unions and other labour-oriented movements (like Pat Horn's StreetNet) or research, support and service groups (like the US-based Global Labour Strategies network) can meet and dialogue, it does not (yet?) amount to anything like the World March of Women (with its Charter, http://www.worldmarchofwomen.org/qui_nous_sommes/charte/en), and will therefore *not* impact on either the WSF itself nor all the left tendencies and labour constituencies that lie beyond union reach (presently some 80 percent of the world's labour force; more if one

includes 'housewives' amongst 'workers'). Such feelings were only strengthened by the disappearance of any reference to a global labour charter in the final L&G declaration mentioned above (Appendix 2)! I can only presume that this is due to L&G's self-definition, in this same appendix, as 'an instrument and not an organic actor'. As far as I am concerned, however, an 'instrument' is a tool with particular characteristics, wielded by certain actors, with certain interests, ideas and purposes in mind. But if, in denying a role as an 'organic actor', L&G means to suggest that it does not have a particular position, or set of such, concerning the trade unions, the labour movement or the working class(es), this is surely undermined by the other clauses in the same appendix.

The final labour (and whoever?) assembly

My scepticism had already been reinforced by the final Labour Assembly.¹⁰ This was not only shifted a half hour away from the advertised site and one hour late in starting. It also turned out to be the Labour, Solidarity Economy, World Financial Crisis (?), and maybe even Falun Gong, Assembly. True, the Solidarity Economy contributions related to a more radical socio-political field than the labour one. True the Falun Gong contribution existed only in my over-fertile imagination (although Falun Something was present elsewhere at the Forum). True, even, that I seemed to recall that Labour had been somehow grouped with these others by some earlier International Council decision. But the result, of course, was that there was *no way* there could even begin to be any *dialogue* between the L&G presentation (which was split in two) and those of the inter/national unions or pro-union NGOs.

I tried, but failed, to imagine the women's movements and feminists agreeing to be 'grouped' with the UN Reform, Participatory Budgeting and Fair Trade – even with the indigenous movements. They would, of course, have said 'We would rather meet together under a mango tree' (given the numbers involved, possibly in a mango plantation). There could for me be no more striking demonstration of labour's lack of identity and self-confidence, and of the WSF's continued marginalisation of labour. The Amazon and its indigenous peoples rightly have their place and day. Labour has its tents and seminars. But neither the WSF IC nor the unions, nor other labour movements and NGOs seem bothered at labour being another letter in one of the Forum's alphabet soups.

To add to my unease at the labour non-assembly, the event was more or less dominated by a declaration on the world financial crisis, presented by my 1980s compañero from 'shopfloor labour internationalism', the Brazilian World Council of Churches activist, Marcos Arruda. When he urged on us a document entitled something like 'Putting Finance in its Place',¹¹ I began to wonder

¹⁰ I am in some confusion about any finality here. The final action of L&G appears to have actually been the document referred to above and reproduced in Appendix 2. A detailed descriptive and chronological account of the L&G events would be welcome.

¹¹ This same document, or possibly a revised version, was later published, with an impressive list of institutional and individual signatures, <http://www.choike.org/campaigns/camp.php?5>.

whether I had not stumbled by mistake into an unannounced World Neo-Keynesian Forum. Like the ITUC, this declaration - for which our approval was sought - seemed to assume that there is an evil, if virtual, economy (finance, manned by vicious bankers) and a good 'real economy' (manned by virtuous industrialists, loving unions, embracing the women's movement and worshipping the colour green). 'I will not vote for the restoration of a capitalism which is destroying our world and which is itself broken', I said, to some mild and scattered applause. Bearing in mind that I was hereby endorsing the official anti-capitalism of the WSF, I had expected just a little more enthusiasm...

Lost in forum 'space' – other labour activities

Apart from such ambiguities as may have existed within the two labour projects I have here chosen to contrast, there were numerous others sponsored by unions and labour-focused NGOs, which took place alongside – even simultaneously with - those of the traditional inter/national union hegemon on the one hand and L&G on the other.

- Thus the Global Network (another Brussels-based and social-reformist offspring of either the ITUC or Solidar (or both) mounted an event on 'The Impact of China on Decent Work in Africa and China'. I await some outcome that might suggest whether this was imbued with a sense of solidarity with those suffering Indecent Work(lessness) in China or yet another invocation of the late-19th century Yellow Peril.
- An event on the privatisation of education was mounted by an acronym I am unfamiliar with, GEW, involving also the leftwing SUR in France and various other European left labour or socialist bodies. Why no one outside Europe?
- The International Labour Organisation (Brazil Office) used the Decent Work label for a session on child labour and sex-traffic, and 'other forms of the precarisation of labour', together with two Brazilian ministries and various local union organisations. This may have been the sole presence at the WSF of an inter-state organisation, buttressed by a national one, even if many in the world think the ILO (75% dominated by states and employers) is part of the labour movement.
- One such marginal event even featured the presence of the World Federation of Trade Unions which, as far as I am concerned, condemned itself to irrelevance by condoning the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, August 1968 (this was at a Council meeting, four months later). Clearly, however, the soullessness of the WFTU goes marching on, followed by

Reading it now, I think I would qualify it as *Left* Neo-Keynesian. It does seem to me that it is insufficient, right now, to talk of 'a new paradigm', including 'decent work', rather than a post-capitalist order. But as a German friend emailed me just before Belém: 'The Right is reading Marx; the Left is preaching Keynes'.

the state-approved Cuban unions and a handful of others nostalgic for Cold War simplicities.

- The Amsterdam-based Transnationals Information Exchange (TIE), which I remember from the glory days of 'shopfloor internationalism' 25 years ago, mounted an event on labour struggles against precarisation. I look forward to any outcome of this, too, but wonder why TIE is not associated with L&G.
- India's New Trade Union Initiative is, of course, present within L&G but held a series of events, one of which was entitled 'The trade union and class politics in the era of imperialist globalisation'.
- Two US networks held separate events, one on strategies to achieve migrant labour rights, one on social movements in the post-Bush era. The Karnataka Sex Workers Union held two or three events, with the support of a US-based labour law NGO (the International Commission for Labour Rights). Given my long-standing interest in 'the internationalism of labour's others' (Waterman 2007b), I regretted not being able to take up an invitation to attend.
- Other events either overlapped with or might have challenged L&G. The COBAS, an Italian confederation of radical unions independent of the major 'social partnership' confederations, actually had an event entitled 'Contents and Shapes of an Anti-Capitalist Trade Unions International Network'!

So alongside my complaints of domination by the traditional union inter/nationals I am inclined to place one on fragmentation of labour concerns and the dispersion of labour activities! Both things can, of course, be simultaneously true – just as they are of contemporary capitalism more generally. What this would seem to argue for is not a re-centralisation of WSF activities in the hands of its self-appointed International Council but of serious labour dialogue and coordination over one or two years before each WSF to see if we cannot agree a common programme – even a couple of such – whilst still permitting minorities to mount their own marginal events should they so wish. Such an effort would surely increase the impact of labour within the WSF and in the media.

Why the L&G network has not (yet) taken shape and taken off

My last contribution to discussion on the L&G List, just before Belém, was entitled 'Will an Alternative Global Labour Network Take Off - and Take Shape - at the World Social Forum, Belém, 2009?' (Waterman 2009). Well, despite a possible growth and spread of unionists or other labour activists attending, I don't think it has done either of these things.

The *main reason* for this is that L&G sees its primary constituency and its fundamental point of reference to be the *trade unions* – left, right or centre, old

or new, self-subordinated to the UN's ILO or independent of such, tied to national political parties or autonomous of such. I think L&G should be oriented to *human labour in general*, regardless of whether this is organised or organisable in the form typical of the national-industrial-colonial capitalist era (the trade union) or not. After all, we are talking of some 80 percent of the world's labour force! In India, as one sober union representative informed us, 90 percent are in the 'informal sector'. Such workers – migrants, sex-workers, slave workers, homeworkers, domestic workers and unpaid carers ('housewives') are increasingly organised inter/nationally in the network form. So are certain higher levels of the 'precariat', particularly in the increasingly-computerised and highly-globalised information technology and information services sectors.

A *second* limiting factor on the L&G network is its prioritising of dialogue over programme. This echoes the increasingly empty WSF exchange between those favouring 'space' and those favouring 'movement', 'organisation' or 'politics'. Given that there is no *power-free* space and that all organisation occupies a *particular* place or space, the real issue is: what *kind* of space and what *kind* of organisation? With what *kind* of worldview and values – explicit or implicit. With what *kind* of relationships both internally and externally. Fortunately, at the Belém WSF, one or two longstanding WSF friends and commentators, Walden Bello (2009) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2009), seem to be in accord that the WSF has – in the face of the global capitalist crisis (financial, industrial, ecological, climatic) – to have more explicit anti-capitalist orientations. Both think it needs to trade in its self-appointed leadership structure for something more representative and publicly responsive. Santos stresses the necessity for improving the WSF's notoriously problematic communication activities. I make these points because the problems are reproduced in the L&G network.

A *third* limiting factor seems to me to follow from the prioritisation of the traditional trade unions: there is an evident lack of L&G interest in what I call the 'emancipatory' tendency within the international labour movement. I myself identify with this new tradition. But those connected with the 'solidarity economy', with precarious labour (its theorisation and experiences) are absent in large numbers from L&G. These may be discomfiting allies for union traditionalists, because they may be critical of trade unionism, but they are often on the cutting edge of innovation, and their absence is a self-crippling loss for L&G. For an example of the critical insight, consider the observations of L&G Session 1 by Chris Carlsson

(<http://www.processedworld.com/carlsson/nowtopian/2009/01/30/trade-unionism-long-past-the-peak/>).¹² And, before dismissing them, consider that

¹² The note clearly invites correction, a more detailed account, and a response from those criticised. Apart from my doubt that the South African referred to was more than, possibly, a member of the SACP, I would like to say two things about the 'guy from India': firstly this was Gautam Mody, a leader of the New Trade Union Initiative; secondly, Gautam hit a quite different note in a feminist-organised Cross-Movement Dialogue at the Forum, in which he explained, in sometimes self-critical detail, the efforts the NTUI had been making, even in the

Chris was associated with the San Francisco-based magazine, *Processed World*, that discovered the precariat some 20 years before it got this name.

A *fourth* limitation on L&G is, for me, actually, the lack of any substantial statements from several of its leading figures about what *their* positions are or what they think about renewing the labour movement globally today. Whilst Pat Horn expresses herself both vocally and in print, and whilst the position of StreetNet can be found on its website, I really do not know what, for example, Marco Berlinguer and Alessandra Mecozzi, or a half-dozen other activists, actually think about the world of work and the global emancipation of labour. From Marco I mostly hear his reactions to what I do or say. This is, however, hardly the same thing as knowing positively what one's comrades believe or desire. This problem may be related to the previous one, of prioritising the creation of a space of dialogue over the development of a position or an identity. However, one of the requirements of the newest radical-democratic movements is also the frank and free exchange of sometimes conflicting visions. Or for that matter of often *complementary* ones!

Ambiguous past? Uncertain future?

Both Marxists and union professionals tend to simplification and certainty about both the past and future of the labour movement. The past is painted in terms of its heroic moments and its undoubted achievements, be these differently seen by the two parties mentioned. For the Marxists and other revolutionary socialists, the matter is one of the centrality of the working class for global social emancipation – seen as both (potentially) the most revolutionary and (potentially) the most internationalist. For the professionals of the labour organisations, whether unionists, party members or the increasing number of NGOs produced by these, trade unions 'are the largest and longest-lived democratic organisations in the world' (I paraphrase one of several old friends who identify with this belief).¹³

Yet the Marxist tradition recognises the ambiguity of trade unionism, as simultaneously expressing/organising labour protest *and/or* integrating labour

face of male union leader resistance, to organise or ally with young women wage-workers and with sex-workers.

¹³ Another old friend, Rob Lambert, a founder of the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR), comes to terms with the new social movements and civil society by proposing that they are or will be led by the trade unions: 'The [Counter Movement] is a *movement of movements* mobilising society against the free market, against finance capital and corporate restructuring in their present neo-liberal form. What do we mean, 'Movement of movements'? In our view, such a movement will be initiated by the trade union movement, because we are the largest and most organised civil society movement in the world. That is to say the trade union movement, locally, nationally and internationally, will take the initiative to link and coordinate all other progressive civil society movements into a new alliance of movements at each of these levels in a singularly focused global campaign to end free market rule' (Bailey and Lambert 2009).

into capitalism. This is why Marxism has customarily depended on the Revolutionary Vanguard (ex-machina, and today, possibly ex-machista) to provide the working class with the consciousness it really, *really*, ought to have. Labour's professionals and activists are increasingly obliged to come to at least pragmatic terms with the transformations of capitalism, its globalisation, its informatisation, its shifting of precarisation from the periphery (of both the capitalist core and of labour-control strategy) to the centre. Whilst there has been considerable such pragmatic adjustment by unions – taking increasing interest in women, in the 'informal sector', in the migrants and marginalised, even in climate change – this has been so far done without abandonment of at least *the hope* that 'good' capitalism (umm...Sweden 1975?) can be restored - but, now, on a regional or global scale! Since no evidence or argument is produced for this, it remains a utopia. But, then, this is a utopia of the past since it only ever applied to particular national, occupational or industrial sectors, often to ethnic/racial/gender categories amongst such. At a time when even *these* workers are threatened with unemployment, homelessness, the reduction or disappearance of health or welfare guarantees, this seems a limited foundation on which to base the notion that 'another world of labour is possible'.

I was fortunate enough to carry with me to Belém a couple of books that suggest additional or alternative bases for a labour movement of the future. And then to have the time, *after* the Forum, to read them whilst still in Brazil. Whilst one is an international compilation, focussed on women workers (Colgan and Ledwith 2002), and the other is on marginal/ised workers in the USA alone (Tait 2005), I consider them to belong to a new and growing tradition of what should be called 'emancipatory labour theory and practice'. The women authors/editors are all labour-linked, feminist, cognisant of the transformations of labour under globalisation and of the necessity to positively accept gender, ethnic and racial difference amongst workers. Both books throw doubt on 'the rise and rise of labour' or its 'inevitable resurgence', suggesting how 'success', 'progress', 'achievement', has been often won at the cost of exclusion of 'other' workers, or by self-subordination to 'social partnership', or 'industrial peace', or 'national competitiveness', or of some right to discriminate against those workers and organisations that are not likewise 'male, pale or stale'. Both books I think, recognise that capitalism is complex, multi-faceted, and that its power rests not only on class divisions but also on those of gender, community, ethnicity, nationality, etc.

The customary inconclusions

Here I just want to make two points that can be illustrated from labour activities in Belém, but that have an application to the WSF more generally.

Overcoming money/power inequalities between participants. If we turn again to a mere measurement of the difference in *size* between the L&G activities and those of the FES (Appendices 4-5 again), we see a difference of – let us say – 1:3.

This is to ignore the extended layout of L&G in the appendix, the compressed one of the FES. It is also to leave out of consideration the difference in facilities at the events, the amount of money spent on each, and the *source* of the funding (the German capitalist state in the case of FES, unknown (to me) in the case of L&G).

I can think of no argument based on the principles of the WSF, or those of global justice and solidarity more generally, that justifies such a disproportion. The principle here expressed is simply a capitalist/statist one: those who have more get more. Applied to this particular case, the principles of justice and solidarity would suggest redistribution to create equality. (I understand that at the 2009 meeting of the Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encounter, in Mexico DF, all funding went to the organising committee, which was then able to re-distribute it to interested women's movements and NGOs. The matter deserves further investigation). At the very least there could be a principle that participant organisations/movements declare how much money is behind their WSF attendance and presence (the principle of transparency).

This argument applies to the WSF more generally (which *does* publish financial reports, of which the most extensive is Lopez, van Koolwijk and Shah (2006)). Yet, despite the WSF being full of (and surrounded by) political-economists, none has, to my knowledge, yet produced a critique of the political-economy of the WSF. In its simplest formulation, political-economy refers to the power-wealth complex within a particular society, place or space. We are surrounded – since Belém more than ever – with political, ideological and cultural reflection and critique of the WSF. It is clearly time to study the WSF in terms of money, power and - to move toward Marxist political-economy - class and hegemony within it. (Whereas I customarily complain about the political-economic determinism of the left, the fact is that without considering this fundament of the WSF we are condemned to *indeterminism*). For that matter, we could do with an ecological impact study of the WSF. But perhaps I have said enough – for many of my comrades and friends, maybe too much! But if we do not 'live the change we want to see', we are self-condemned to reproduce the social relations that, outside the WSF, we condemn.¹⁴

The left is dead, long live emancipation! I have said this before elsewhere but find it necessary to repeat in the light of the Belém L&G and the WSF more generally. The origin of the word 'left' lies in the seating of the most democratic and egalitarian elements in the national assembly created by the French Revolution (also known as the *Montagne* because it sat top left). This ties the term to that particular revolution, and its outcome, a bourgeois liberal national industrial capitalist society. 'Left' is also a relative term (relative, obviously, to 'centre' and 'right'). It is surely the term most deserving of qualification as 'a

¹⁴ Discussion on 'the future of the Forum' has been occurring since 2002. It can be found all over the left side of the Web. It is also to be found in the compilation of Sen, Anand, Escobar and Waterman (2004) and subsequent publications of Cacim, <http://www.cacim.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=Publications>. A recent selection of analyses and opinions can be found on the site of the Maghreb Social Forum, <http://www.e-joussour.net/en/node/927>.

floating signifier'. Were the Communist states more 'left' than Social-Democratic ones. Are Trotskyists (which?) more 'left' than Anarcho-Syndicalists (which)? In contemporary times the concept has become problematic, even apparently amongst Marxist lexicographers (<http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/l/e.htm>)! In so far as we are not only 200 years from the French Revolution but, more significantly, living under a globalised, informatised, capitalist (dis)order, and insofar as we wish to distinguish ourselves from what has passed for 'left', then, surely, 'another concept is possible'. I propose 'emancipation'/'emancipatory' as appropriate to the radical-democratic transformation of contemporary capitalism. It has, of course, a history, relating to slaves, women, serfs, peasants, the working class (the first Russian Marxist body was called the 'Emancipation of Labour') and other oppressed groups.

'Emancipation' and 'emancipatory' can and will be as much disputed as 'left', but at least they provoke a serious contemporary discussion that might surpass the arid and partisan claims amongst those still attached to the state, the party, the state-defined nation, the trade-union form traditional to the Eurocentric national industrial capitalist era. I have suggested above that the contemporary trade union left – national and international - is a prisoner of such traditional trade union forms (and ignores the pre-history of this particular form as well as the 'virtual trade union of the future' (Hyman 1999)). As for a preliminary understanding of 'emancipatory' under contemporary globalised conditions, one could start with this:

Social emancipation must...be understood as a form of counter-hegemonic globalization relying on local-global linkages and alliances among social groups around the world which go on resisting social exclusion, exploitation and oppression caused by hegemonic neoliberal globalization. Such struggles result in the development of alternatives to the exclusionary and monolithic logic of global capitalism, that is to say, spaces of democratic participation, non-capitalistic production of goods and services, creation of emancipatory knowledges, post-colonial cultural exchanges, new international solidarities.
(<http://www.ces.uc.pt/emancipa/en/index.html>).

This introduction to an extensive project of Boaventura de Sousa Santos today needs possible qualification, in terms of struggles beyond *capitalism* (as well as old and new fundamentalisms and pre-capitalist oppressions/exploitations), or the self-determined struggle of all such categories against alienation (the loss of past rights or powers, the denial of future possible alternatives), and the expansion of a radically-democratic civil society.

Such an understanding may seem to be embodied in the WSF (and the L&G network), but whilst I would grant it to the creation and early years of the WSF, it seems to me that *no* emancipatory project is guaranteed eternal life, that *every* such project is subject to what in the labour movement has traditionally been called *incorporation*. In other words, *every* would-be emancipatory project has to be subject to self-criticism and re-invention and such repeated critique and re-invention must be part of the meaning of emancipation.

Appendix 1

Developing the Labor and Globalization Network Statement from Belém, Brazil World Social Forum, 2009

Preamble

"Neoliberal globalization is the most vicious attack against labor in living memory": so began the appeal we issued in Nairobi, at the first assembly of the Labor and Globalization Network. The current crisis will only underline that appeal.

Labor is weak and has been in retreat almost everywhere for more than 20 years. The once powerful labor organizations and institutions that were created in the 20th century face challenges as never before. The current global economic crisis means that labor movements that have so far managed to escape the worst ravages of neoliberalism will be swept up in the current downward spiral engulfing global economy. It is no secret that there is no clear way out.

Fragmentation and precarity are increasingly the condition of labor throughout the world. And worker movements have not yet figured out how to cross borders and create a new global perspective and new global strategies. Old notions of organization have already been exploded as women and anti-colonial, anti-racist and anti-discrimination organizations and movements have demanded that their voices be heard and their interests addressed. This has increased the diversity inside the world's labor movements. Margins have become centers (and vice versa); new forms of labor have emerged in the information economy; and the informal sector has grown rapidly even in the rich and OECD countries of the West and Asia.

Globalization links and recombines literally thousands of forms of labor, both new and old. But, while they are linked *de facto* in the global economy, they scarcely meet or even communicate each the other.

In these conditions, is there a common language and discourse that global labor can speak? Is there another politics of labor? And what can a labor strategy be, in a world, where the planet is threatened by environmental crises; where an enormous part of the population is in extreme poverty; and where corporate led globalization is driving us to a global disaster?

Against this backdrop, the Labor and Globalization Network initiative emerged from the Nairobi World Social Forum in 2007. At the Belém World Social Forum in 2009 the initiative was refined and developed. The guiding idea is to create an inclusive space for worker organizations and their allies from around the world to confront critical issues of common concern. The L&G Network is specifically committed to reach out to organizations and individuals

representing all of the many forms of labor in the world in both the formal and informal economy.

The Labor and Globalization Network was also created with the aim of strengthening the voice of labor inside the World Social Forum process. As well as it is our goal to reinforce the use by labor of the WSF and other forms of organization that have emerged in the global movement and to contribute to the debate about the development of the WSF itself and of the global movement from a labor perspective.

Functions

Prior to the Belém WSF, a working group of the Labor and Globalization Network was formed to shape a discussion on ways to provide more structure to the network to make it more useful for network participants. The working group proposed six basic functions to those assembled at Belém and these were accepted by consensus:

- To maintain a flow of useful information on common issues to network participants.
- To help create and shape a global discourse on critical issues of mutual concern.
- To link and reinforce the cooperation between worker organizations and their allies across the divides of geography, language, structure, program, and constituency.
- To renew and enlarge the political conception of labor, including not only productive but also reproductive work; not only formal, but also informal work; not only dependent but also autonomous work.
- To demand that labor rights be respected everywhere and that violations be exposed and addressed through global solidarity by labor and its allies.
- To confront the question of the meaning of production: what to produce, how, for whom.

Principles

The following principles were also agreed to:

- The L&G Network is an instrument and not an organic actor;
- The L&G Network will actively reach out to organizations and individuals representing all forms of labor, throughout the world;
- The L&G Network will forge links with other social movements fighting for economic justice and for an alternative model of development;
- The L&G Network will serve as a nexus for the communication and

exchange of information and cooperation directly among members;

- The L&G Network will become an open and plural space where different analysis and opinions are treated equally and respectfully.

Next Steps

The following steps were taken by the members of the Labor and Globalization Network present in Belém.

- A temporary facilitation group was formed [members are listed below] at Belém to move the work of the Network forward. Two representatives will represent each area, but the group is open to others that would like to participate. The facilitation group will create a more distributed responsibility and will seek ways to maintain a dynamism in the network between the Forums, to increase internal communication, debate and initiative, access resources, organize conferences, stimulate face to face contact, and develop new ideas. It will report regularly to the Network.
- The creation of a committee was proposed to recommend ways to create an interactive user friendly communication infrastructure utilizing available technologies. Membership is open to those who would like to join.
- The L&G Network will address—but will not be limited to—the following immediate themes:
 - The current economic crisis, the climate crisis, their convergence, and ways to share strategies and tactics to confront these crises which are of immediate concern to worker movements everywhere. Particular benchmarks for addressing these crises are the upcoming G-20 economic talks in London in March, and the global climate talks taking place in Copenhagen in December, 2009.
- The L&G Network is committed to developing ways to build global labor solidarity through frank discussion of mutual interests, particularly between labor movements in the North and labor movements in the emerging economies of the world. The L&G Network is also particularly committed to building solidarity with workers and their organizations in all forms of work in the formal and informal economy.

The temporary facilitation group is formed by: Gautam Mody (NTUI – India) and Lee Changgeun (KCTU – Korea); Africa: Pat Horn (StreetNet – South Africa)*; Kjeld Jakobsen (CUT/Observatorio Social – Brazil)*; Marco Berlinguer (Lavoro in movimento – CGIL / Transform – Italy)*; Tim Costello (Global Labor Strategies – USA) and Carlos Jimenez/Sarita Gupta (Jobs with Justice – USA). Bruno Ciccaglione (SDL Intercategoriale – Italy) and Alessandra Mecozzi (FIOM-CGIL – Italy) are going to facilitate the connection between L&G and the cross-networks spaces on crisis created at Belém and in Europe.

* N.B. Pat Horn and Kjeld Jakobsen can propose a second facilitator for Africa and Latin America; for Europe, the participation is going to be better defined at the next meeting of the network L&G in Europe.

Appendix 2

Labor and globalization network

Activities at the WSF 2009

| DAY | TIME SLOT | PLACE | TITLE OF THE ACTIVITY | Title as it appears on the program | ORGANIZATION | Inscribed by |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|---|---|---|--|---|
| 29th of January | 2 | UFRA Prédio Central - Bloco B B 001 | Labor: New Struggles, New Alliances. Towards a Charter of Labor? | crisis global; crisis de la globalizacion | Labor and Globalization Network | FIOM-CGIL |
| 30th of January | 3 | UFPA Profissional Fp Fp 08 | Labor in the Global Crisis: Threats, Challenges, Strategies | Effects of the financial crisis on the jobs and work conditions | Labor and Globalization Network | Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro |
| 31st of January | 1 | UFPA Basico Eb E 1 | Assembly of the Labor and Globalization Network | Meeting of the labour and globalization network | Labor and Globalization Network | Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro |

Labor and Globalization Network is also co-promoter of the:

- **Cross-networks meeting on crisis** (date and place yet to be confirmed)
- **Final assembly on labor** (to be held on the **1st of January morning**, place yet to be confirmed)

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