

## **Response to Alternative International Labour Communication Survey**

**Eric Lee**

**How would you describe or characterise your own international labour media project, including a) how it differs from or adds to traditional trade-union media, b) how it relates not only to such but also to other alternative international media projects.**

LabourStart, the news and campaigning website of the international trade union movement, was founded back in 1998. At the time, it was one of very few union websites – other than the online brochures some unions were slowly putting up. It was a unique effort to create a global site, multilingual, open to both union officials and rank and file members. That is, of course, no longer the case. There are hundreds of great union websites today.

What distinguishes LabourStart is its global reach – now appearing in 24 languages, publishing links to some 90,000 news stories every year.

LabourStart differs from traditional trade union media in the way that all such Internet-based efforts do – it is more immediate, more global, and more dynamic than union media have normally been.

If by other “alternative international media projects” you mean things like IndyMedia, LabourStart has no particular relationship with them except to use them as sources of news.

**How would you characterize your activity? Do you consider yourself an ‘international labour media activist’? If not, what? How do you relate to others like yourself? And to trade unionists and/or other kinds of labour activists?**

I would not characterize myself as a “media activist” of any kind. LabourStart is not merely a medium like a television station. It is a campaigning project. What we do is what good trade unionists have always done – educate, agitate and organize. If I was looking for a term to describe what I do, it would be one or all of those – educator, agitator or organizer.

“Others like myself” would mean other trade unionists, and I relate to them as comrades. In other words, LabourStart is a joint effort involving tens of thousands of trade union members around the world. Over 750 of them are volunteer correspondents; tens of thousands regularly sign up to our online campaigns; more than 60,000 subscribe to our email newsletters in more than a dozen languages.

We are part of a very large movement – not something outside of that

movement.

**What are the challenges, problems and issues that alternative labour media have raised for the trade unions and/or other forms of labour and/or social movement activism.**

I think the challenges have been raised by the new media in general and not specifically by "alternative labour media" (whatever that is).

For example, by giving everyone access to everything, as the web did, certain union structures that were previously several stages removed from rank and file workers were overnight connected directly to those workers – through websites and email.

I'm thinking primarily of the global union federations, which used to deal only with affiliate unions, never with members of those unions. All that changed in the 1990s when union members began to visit GUF websites and send them emails.

The new technology has also speeded things up beyond recognition. The days when the arrest of a union leader would lead to the publication of a print bulletin, sent out by post – that now seems leisurely and quaint. We now respond within hours, sometimes minutes, to major violations of union rights as we learn about them. This is campaigning at the speed of light, and is something utterly new to the trade union movement.

It requires a certain agility, a flexibility, that we are learning.

**Do you consider 'alternative international labour media' (or however you wish to characterize your field of activity) gender neutral? Or does it reproduce the discourse and practices of traditional patriarchal media?**

I can't say I understand the question.

**Do you consider that technical criteria and the logic of the media production in which you are involved influence or actually limit your efforts to treat your medium (or media) as the voice of working people (also beyond the unions) or, to put it another way, of international labour protest in general?**

The only limits I can think of are (a) we cannot reach everyone online because not everyone is online and (b) when you start dealing with rank-and-file workers, and not just with the people tasked with international relations in unions, you run slam up against the problem of languages.

**In so far as you consider your activity as 'internationalist', how does**

**this a) relate to traditional internationalist labour communication/culture, and b) relate to a novel kind of labour or social-movement communicational/cultural internationalism?**

The work we do at LabourStart is a continuation of, you might say, a 21<sup>st</sup> century adaption of, traditional labour solidarity.

Of course our movement adapts and changes over time, and the way we do things now differs with how we once worked, but certain core principles still apply.

The values of solidarity, accountability and democracy are still central to what we do, which is one of the reasons why LabourStart works so closely with the existing, democratically-elected leaderships of unions everywhere – as well as with rank-and-file members.

I know that in the 1990s there were some who argued that the new media would create something utterly new, something different from and even opposed to the existing trade union movement. That has not turned out to be the case, at least not from what I can see.

Some of those who argued for some kind of new global solidarity movement based on the web as an alternative to unions have long-since disappeared from the scene, moving on to other things.

Meanwhile, the same cumbersome, slow-moving, unfashionable unions that were to have been eclipsed by the new technology are still there, doing their job.

**How do you support yourself financially and how are your projects funded? To what extent, if any, are such sources of income a constraint on what you would like to do?**

LabourStart is financed primarily by donations from trade unions and individual trade unionists. In addition, we do web design work on consulting for unions at local, national and global level.