

**RÉSUMÉ**

**Existe-t-il un nouveau syndicalisme international? La Confédération internationale des syndicats libres: Une réponse à la mondialisation, 1996-2002**

Stuart Hodkinson

*Depuis la fin de la guerre froide, et la consolidation de la mondialisation néolibérale, les syndicats ont été obligés de repenser leur raison d'être et d'agir en dehors du cadre strict des États-nations dans lesquels ils étaient confinés. Des littératures récentes montrent qu'en réponse à ce réajustement des syndicats un 'nouveau mouvement ouvrier internationaliste' (NLI) semble émerger à travers cette économie mondiale.*

*M'appuyant sur l'étude de cas de la campagne de la Confédération internationale des syndicats libres (CISL) pour une introduction de la clause sociale dans le traité de l'Organisation mondiale du Commerce (OMC), cet article tente de montrer que les notions de nouveau mouvement ouvrier internationaliste à l'intérieur des structures officielles du syndicalisme international sont prématurées. L'on constate que le CISL s'est inscrit dans un long et difficile processus politique, financier, d'organisation, de réorganisation et de modernisation, et a partiellement soumis ses structures de prise de décision à un large et rigoureux examen interne surtout dans le sens de faciliter une plus large participation démocratique. En filigrane, on peut cependant noter que la nouvelle orientation symbolique du CISL pour construire une alliance et susciter des adhésions, est une manœuvre stratégique d'envergure qui vise à pallier à sa fragile position tant à l'intérieur des arcanes des instances décisionnaires internationales que dans celui du 'mouvement de justice mondial'. Tout compte fait, le CISL reste encore idéologiquement et méthodologiquement marqué par l'esprit du mouvement ouvrier international d'antan. Is There a New Trade Union Internationalism? The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions' Response to Globalization, 1996-2002*

## **Is There a New Trade Union Internationalism? The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions' Response to Globalization, 1996-2002**

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### *Abstract*

*Since the end of the Cold War and the consolidation of neoliberal globalization, trade unions have been forced to think and act outside the confines of the nation-state. Recent literature argues that in response, a 'new labour internationalism' (NLI) is emerging across the global economy. Drawing on a case study of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions' (ICFTU) campaign for a social clause in the World Trade Organization (WTO), this article argues that notions of a NLI within the official structures of international trade unionism are premature. It finds that the ICFTU has undergone a difficult process of political, financial, and organizational retrenchment, reorganization and modernization, and has partially opened up its decision-making structures to greater internal scrutiny and democratic participation. Beneath the surface, however, the ICFTU's new symbolic orientation to alliance building and membership mobilization is a largely strategic manoeuvre to cope with its weakened status within both the international corridors of power and the radical contours of the 'global justice movement'. Overall, the ICFTU remains embedded in the core ideology and methodology of the 'old labour internationalism' (OLI).*

### **Introduction**

One of the defining features of today's global capitalism is the weakness of national trade unionism, a dramatic turnaround from the height of organized labour power during the so-called 'Golden Age' of capitalism in the post-1945 era. Since the 1980s, neoliberal globalization has re-drawn the industrial relations landscape of the world economy, undermining the power of working class movements everywhere. In order to challenge global capital and protect wages and workers' rights, trade unions and labour

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movements are being forced to think and organize beyond the confines of the nation-state. The last decade has witnessed a pronounced escalation in labour internationalism with Transnational Corporations (TNCs) becoming targets for international union campaigns and strategic strike action, and regional and global trade agreements ‘pulling’ organized labour into cooperation as part of opposition movements to market liberalization (For excellent overviews, see: Harrod and O’Brien, 2002; Moody, 1997; Munck, 2002; Waterman and Wills, 2001).

But what is the *political* character of contemporary labour internationalism? The question is posed for two main reasons. Firstly, because the historical reality of labour internationalism has been dominated by the institutionalized activities of national and international trade union ‘elites’ aligned to the competing geo-political interests of their respective nation-states and imperial blocs. Secondly, recent literature argues that a ‘*new* labour internationalism’ (NLI) is now emerging at the grassroots, epitomized by the ‘social movement unionism’ of the 1999 Seattle anti-World Trade Organization (WTO) protests when an alliance of local unions, anti-capitalist activists, environmentalists and NGOs engaged in direct action to shut down the trade talks. Significantly, writers studying the ‘official’ international trade union bodies synonymous with the Cold War era, like the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and Global Union Federations (GUFs) (formerly known as International Trade Secretariats), suggest that they too are in a process of progressive transformation “in the direction of a broadly based social unionism which is compatible with a series of new internationalisms on a variety of issues” (O’Brien, 2000a: 548).

The purpose of this article is to explore how far we can really talk about a *new* trade union internationalism at the official level by critically examining the ICFTU’s response to globalization since the mid-1990s. The focus is justified because as the official ‘head’ of the international trade union movement, the ICFTU “continues to play an active role in international politics and is often the only representative of labour in the global arena” (Greenfield, 1998: 188). Moreover, the ICFTU formally represents 145 million workers across 154 countries and territories, numbers that “would represent a formidable political power if they were effectively organized and coordinated” (Jakobsen: 368). The prospect of a more radical, democratic and effective

ICFTU, as several writers suggest, would therefore have positive implications for the ability of the international trade union movement to challenge neoliberal globalization. However, claims that it is changing are contested by other writers who see the ICFTU as firmly entrenched in the ideologies, structures and relations of the ‘old labour internationalism’ (OLI) (Gallin, 2002; Jakobsen, 2001; Waterman, 2001). Therefore, the controversial nature of the ICFTU’s post-Cold War evolution requires a fresh and empirically-grounded examination of the organization’s recent activities.

The case study specifically focuses on how the ICFTU constructed and pursued its main campaign between 1996 and 2002 for the inclusion of core labour standards in the WTO, known more commonly as the “social clause”. It draws on internal archives, leaked documents and fifty semi-structured face-to-face interviews with serving and retired senior international and national trade union officials<sup>2</sup> NGO workers, labour movement experts and social movement activists. These interviews were conducted between 2002 and 2004 in several European countries. Interviewees, where quoted, are done so anonymously as many were unwilling to speak on the record due to the sensitive political nature of the subject matter and the potentially adverse implications for both their organizations and personal careers.

The analysis unfolds in three sections. We begin by briefly looking back at the history of international trade unionism, focusing on the role and character of the ICFTU in the post-war era. The second part of the article situates the competing perspectives on the ICFTU’s post-Cold War direction within debates on the NLI. The third section then critically evaluates these perspectives through a case study of the ICFTU’s social clause campaign. The article concludes that although the ICFTU’s attempts to modernize its structures and tactics owe much to the NLI paradigm, the organization itself remains ideologically and methodologically stuck in the OLI model of the past.

### **The ‘Old Labour Internationalism’**

Since the demise of the International Working Men’s As-

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<sup>2</sup>These included former General Secretaries of the ICFTU and several GUFs, past and present ICFTU Departmental Heads, senior GUF officials and international officers of national trade unions. Abbreviated organizational affiliations are listed in full in the appendix.

sociation (a.k.a. the 'First International') in 1876, labour internationalism has been historically dominated by the official activities and bodies of international trade unionism, which have in turn been characterized by the following general features: the subordination of working class internationalism to ideological and geopolitical rivalries between the labour-state alliances of imperial blocs; a highly centralized, bureaucratic, pyramidal organizational form, run by professional elites "several removes – and gatekeepers – away from any flesh-and-blood workers" (Waterman: 315); and one-way, paternalistic, self-interested and often destructive flows of solidarity from powerful Northern unions to workers in developing countries designed to "promote their own political positions within the trade unions to which they provided assistance" (Ashwin: 103; see also Thomson and Larson, 1978). This 'old labour internationalism' (OLI) was embodied in the international trade union Cold War.

### **Labour's Cold War**

The end of World War II was met with a strong clamour for international labour unity between the so-called 'democratic socialist' labour movements of Western Europe and the Communist unions directed by Moscow (See Carew, 2000; Weiler, 1988). Consequently, in 1945, the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) was born, bringing together the vast majority of union centres both East and West in "the most ambitious international yet attempted" (Carew: 168). It quickly proved to be the most *unworkable* international ever attempted and split acrimoniously in January 1949 when irreconcilable differences over the role of the International Trade Secretariats (ITSs) (the industrial-level international union federations), the persecution and suppression of independent trade unionism in Soviet-occupied countries and Communist opposition to the 1947 Marshall Plan came to a head (See MacShane, 1992; Weiler, 1988). The main non-Communist Western trade unions joined forces to found a new rival international body – the Brussels-based ICFTU – and for the next forty years, international trade unionism was divided by the conflict between East and West.

Labour's Cold War was fought most fiercely in the 1950s and 1960s between the secretariats and trade unions of the ICFTU and WFTU (and to a lesser extent the Christian-oriented World

Confederation of Labour (WCL))<sup>3</sup> for influence in the United Nations (UN) and the tripartite International Labour Organization (ILO), and the non-aligned labour movements of developing countries. Cold War competition also took place between the ITSs, which were considered part of the 'ICFTU family', and the WFTU-controlled Trade Union Internationals (TUIs). The issue of how and whether to work with Communist unions created constant tensions both within and between the ICFTU and ITSs (See Gumbrell-McCormick, 2000).

The ICFTU's role in developing countries during the height of the Cold War has been particularly criticized by historians and labour activists as "imperialist" (See Reinalda 2001; Thomson & Larson, 1978). But recent historiography shows that its secretariat continually sought to reign in affiliates over their own destructive and divisive bilateral activities in the Global South (See Carew et al., 2000). By far the worst were carried out by the leadership of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) in conjunction with the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to undermine all forms of anti-capitalist, leftist or Communist trade unions, political movements and even governments, such as the ill-fated socialist regime of Salvador Allende in Chile (See Sims, 1992). In contrast, the ICFTU's European affiliates took a different approach, founding in 1973 the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), which while part of the ICFTU family, was an independent body seeking a broad membership of Communist and non-Communist unions in the struggle to shape the emerging European integrationist project (See Gumbrell-McCormick, 2001). The AFL-CIO's diminishing ability to push the ICFTU in an anti-communist direction led to its self-imposed exile from the Confederation between 1969 and 1982.

### **Challenging the Rise of the Transnationals**

In the 1970s and 80s, the most important aspect of international union activity was the response to the growing internationalization of capital. The ITSs' main strategy, grounded in Levinson's (1972) 'countervailing power' approach to global capital, was to create and coordinate World Company Councils

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<sup>3</sup>The WCL was the 1968 successor body to the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions (IFCTU), which had been founded in 1921.

(WCCs) – bodies of national trade union representatives spanning a TNC’s operations – that sought to strengthen the bargaining power of unions and ‘harmonize’ working conditions across a company or industry (Bendiner: 90). The ICFTU, meanwhile, lobbied the UN and industrial country governments of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for legally binding international codes of conduct on TNCs, and pressured the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) Rounds at Tokyo (1973-79) and Uruguay (1986-94) for a ‘social clause’ in the international trade system that would enforce fair labour standards in trade (See Gumbrell-McCormick, 2000). The success of these strategies was very limited. WCCs rarely went beyond talking shops and were hampered by Cold War politics or charges of protectionism (See Haworth and Ramsay, 1988); ‘voluntary’ codes of conduct were introduced in the UN, OECD and ILO but had no legal enforcement; and efforts for a social clause proved fruitless.

By 1989, major changes in the international system had brought the Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union, and their respective trade union movements, to an official close. WFTU’s effective demise merely confirmed its long-standing marginalization and left the ICFTU and ITSs as the undisputed peaks of official international trade unionism. Previously non-aligned national labour movements along with new trade union confederations and former Communist centres in Central and Eastern Europe now queued up to join the ICFTU and ITSs, paradoxically reopening old Cold War divisions within the ‘ICFTU family’ over Western trade unionism’s appropriate policy response (See Ashwin, 2000; Herod, 2001).

The supremacy of the ‘ICFTU family’<sup>4</sup> in comprising the main international labour actors in the post-war era ensured that a particular model trade union internationalism was hegemonic within the world order. As Waterman (2001: 313) argues, this was characterized by support for the “ideology, institutions and procedures of ‘social partnership’”. Deprived of normal trade un-

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<sup>4</sup>The ‘ICFTU family’ is commonly-used among international union officials to describe those international and regional bodies sharing a common history and ideological platform linked to ‘free trade unionism’. It encompasses the ICFTU and its regional bodies, the ITSs, the Paris-based Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC) to the OECD and the Brussels-based European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC).

ion methods like collective bargaining and strike action, the 'ICFTU family' championed elite-level diplomatic lobbying to promote its own status and influence within the inter-governmental arena. Such a stance was perhaps the inevitable 'lowest-common-denominator' outcome of organizations bringing together trade unions from multiple national settings and traditions, but it was also the preferred choice of the ICFTU's most powerful affiliates in North America and Western Europe whose financial and political weight exerted a disproportionate influence over policy.

Relations between the various international bodies of the 'ICFTU family' were often beset by political tensions and turf warfare. The ITSs generally resented the ICFTU secretariat's interference in their 'territory' and what they regarded as the waste of limited resources by getting "embroiled in the international bureaucracy of governmental institutions" (ICFTU 1972: 471). ICFTU officials, meanwhile, would become frustrated by ITS "individualism" (Interviews with past and present ICFTU and ITS officials, Summer 2002). Similar tensions characterized ICFTU and ITS cooperation with the ETUC whose growth in power and importance over the 1970s and 80s directly threatened the jurisdiction, relevance and role of the international bodies. As for alliances with other actors in civil society, the ICFTU and ITSs occasionally worked with labour and human rights NGOs like Amnesty International but viewed with deep suspicion any NGO historically and institutionally unconnected with the trade union movement, mostly due to Cold War fears that "they might harbour communist sympathizers or favour policies avowed by organizations supported by the Soviet Union" (Ashwin: 114).

### **After the Cold War: Globalization and the 'New Labour Internationalism'**

Since the official end of the Cold War in 1989, the pace of global economic restructuring and market liberalization under neoliberal globalization has intensified with devastating consequences for national trade union and labour movements. At the same time, although globalization undermines the power of *nationally* organized labour, it also creates new opportunities and imperatives for labour internationalism to flourish (See Moody, 1997; Hodgkinson 2004). This helps to understand the pronounced escalation in labour internationalism since the late 1980s. Impor-



tantly, several commentators argue that bound up within this re-awakening is a *qualitatively* ‘new’ labour internationalism (NLI) (Lambert and Webster, 2001; Munck, 2002; Waterman, 2001).

The NLI encompasses novel and radical forms of solidarity that eschew ‘social partnership’ in favour of confronting globalization and capitalist exploitation, and break down the traditional binary oppositions between workplace and community, consumption and production, trade unions and social movements of the OLI. The NLI is also about new *processes* of organising solidarity with a move away from large bureaucracies, slow decision-making, hierarchy, restricted debate and centralization towards greater horizontality, flexibility and openness of decision-making structures. This is combined with a new-found emphasis on mobilization and campaigning, and a willingness of unions to join and build international coalitions and networks with other social forces and actors. In the NLI thesis, the predominantly struggling Southern worker that was traditionally marginalized by the official international union movement’s attachment to the established Northern male white worker, today constitutes the typical proletarian under global capitalism and principal actor within the NLI.

The literature offers several examples of the NLI in practice. Moody (1997: 262) highlights the Transnationals Information Exchange (TIE), which he describes as a “democracy of activists” facilitating international exchanges between workers with the general aim of matching the global networks of capitalism and countering worker protectionism. Lambert and Webster (2001: 349) point to the Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR), a networked-organization linking unions from Latin America, Southern Africa, Asia and Australasia with the aim of building “a strong Southern unionism focused on global action campaigns” and in alliance with other social movements. Most celebrated of all is the so-called “Battle in Seattle” of late 1999 when 40,000 protesters shut down the Third WTO Ministerial. The famous Seattle street slogan ‘Teamsters and Turtles Together at Last’ has become the ubiquitous symbol of the NLI in its unity of traditionally incompatible interests – industrial employment and environmental protection – and mutually hostile actors – an historically reactionary, chauvinistic US trade union and largely middle-class animal rights activists dressed in turtle outfits (See Mazur, 2000).

Perhaps the most significant debate within the NLI literature concerns the 'official' international level. Several writers argue that the end of the Cold War has removed the "major ideological cleavage" that previously obstructed a united, effective and more radical international union movement (O'Brien, 2000a: 536; see also Ashwin, 2000; Munck, 2002). No longer constrained by geo-politics but under attack from globalization, O'Brien (2000a: 553) asserts that "the role of the international union movement is transforming from a supporter of US capitalism, to a brake on neoliberal industrial relations, to potentially advocating a different form of political economy in alliance with other groups". Munck agrees, arguing that this broadening out is particularly significant in relation to gender and the informal economy:

*the ICFTU has become aware that the Western, urban, male, full-time, permanent worker is no longer the only, or even the core, member of the trade unions. The ICFTU now proclaims a new orientation towards women workers and young workers. It addresses the issue of the informal sector, both in developing countries and the advanced individual societies (Munck: 14).*

In addition to opening up its decision-making structures by working "intensively with its affiliates in the South to achieve much greater internal consensus" (ibid.: 165), the ICFTU's traditional 'dialogue and lobbying' approach at the inter-governmental level has now been complemented by a broad alliance strategy with the NGO community and the recognition that "it must work with far less traditional NGOs...and campaigning groups" (ibid.: 14). Relations between the ICFTU and ITSs have also improved markedly since the end of the Cold War: the 1997 international trade union campaign on the non-payment of wages in Russia involved "genuine co-ordination between the ICFTU and ITSs" (Ashwin: 115). In short, the ICFTU's post-Cold War transition signals a "detectable broadening of the ICFTU agenda and a realisation that it must champion issues wider than those of concern to its most powerful members if it is to build the alliances crucial for political success" (O'Brien, 2000a: 550).

### **Sceptical Voices**

Other commentators, however, paint a far less rosy picture of today's official trade union internationalism. Gerard Greenfield (1998: 181) argues that instead of seeking to confront global capital, the ICFTU is actually using the "inevitability" of globalization to "justify the abandonment of collective action locally, and even nationally, as ineffective or irrelevant". Strategies like the 'social clause' are seen as a continuation of international union bureaucracies traditional strategy for a "seat at the table" in the inter-state arena with international capital and government elites, which are criticized on two levels. First, because trade unions end up endorsing and agreeing to administer the policies decided by capital and state with little by way of reciprocal influence (Panitch: 377); and second, because trade unions "place far too much emphasis on representing labour than organizing labour" and in the process become further detached from their members and the working class as a whole (Greenfield, 1999, cf. Panitch: 378).

Such conservative policies are blamed on a basic lack of democracy and connection with working class communities on the ground. According to Kjeld Jakobsen (2001: 369), Brazilian trade unionist and former official of the *Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores* (ORIT) (the ICFTU's regional body for the Americas), despite a membership roughly equal in terms of North and South workers, the ICFTU's leadership remains dominated by "representatives from a minority of labour organizations in the industrialized countries, and more particularly, the G-7 countries". Strategies continue to be mainly devised by a European-based central bureaucracy, which is unable to consider "the real situation of all – or at least the majority – of the membership" and eschews "in-depth discussion of the issues involved" (ibid.: 371).

These conflicting perspectives on the ICFTU's recent activities lead to the following question: to what extent do the policies, strategies and structures of official union internationalism represent continuity with the past or a significant shift towards a NLI? The remainder of this article aims to provide some tentative answers to this question by critically assessing the ICFTU's post-Cold War evolution through the lens of its main campaign of recent years for a social clause in the WTO.

### **Official Union Internationalism at the Millennium: the ICFTU's Social Clause Campaign**

The ICFTU's main response to globalization during the second half of the 1990s and 2002 was launched at its 16<sup>th</sup> World Congress in June 1996, Brussels. The 'social clause' campaign (or workers' rights clause as it was also known) demanded that the WTO's constitution be changed to legally obligate member states to respect the ILO's 'core labour standards' (freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, minimum age of employment, non-discrimination in employment and prohibition of forced or slave labour) whilst engaging in trade or eventually face some form of multilateral action from a joint WTO-ILO Advisory Body (Van Roozendaal: 183). At successive WTO Ministerial Meetings in Singapore (1996), Geneva (1998), Seattle (1999) and Doha (2001), the ICFTU led an international trade union delegation<sup>5</sup> to lobby trade ministers on the issue. Each time, a coalition of neoliberal industrialised countries and the majority of developing countries blocked their demands, arguing that labour standards could be used for protectionist purposes and that only the ILO should ensure international respect for core labour standards (Wilkinson & Hughes: 261).

The campaign was not completely without impact. At Singapore, US government pressure eventually forced member states to make clear their support for core labour standards and endorse some form of collaboration between the WTO and ILO secretariats in the final Ministerial Declaration (WTO: par. 4). In their desperation to stop any further progress in the WTO, the anti-social clause coalition of employers and governments agreed to give the ILO greater powers to supervise and pressure member states to respect core labour standards in the 1998 ILO 'Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up' (see O'Brien, 2000b). But following widespread realization by unions that the Fundamental Declaration had possibly *weakened* the ILO by implicitly creating a new hierarchy of rights in which non-fundamental standards were downgraded, and a particularly unsuccessful Doha 2001 Ministerial, affiliates and other international unions urged the ICFTU to rethink its strategy

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<sup>5</sup>Each delegation typically included national centres, the ETUC, TUAC, specific GUFs like Public Services International (PSI), Education International (EI), the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF), and towards the end, Union Network International (UNI).

publicly, arguing that “little has been achieved at the WTO. The union position has gone backwards...opposition has hardened” (Kearney, 2002). Shortly afterwards, the social clause campaign was dropped as the ICFTU’s main priority, and it instead shifted focus to other areas such as supporting the ILO’s ‘Decent Work’ programme, and improving relations with the IMF and World Bank, notably through getting ICFTU interns into the institutions and becoming a member of the latter’s “core group” of NGOs through which it holds dialogue with civil society (see ICFTU, 2004).

This closure allows us to look back at the social clause campaign in a more historical and analytical way. As the ICFTU’s highest-profile campaign and priority activity between 1996 and 2002 it offers a useful vehicle through which to critically examine the ICFTU’s post-Cold War evolution within the framework of the NLI debate. The remainder of this article examines the ICFTU’s campaign in relation to three main themes: the political and economic thinking behind the ICFTU’s response to globalization; internal democracy, cooperation and participation; and alliance-building with global civil society.

### **Embracing Globalization: the ICFTU’s Turn to ‘Global Business Unionism’**

Throughout the Cold War era, the ICFTU’s policies towards the world economy were firmly rooted in what Ruggie (1982) has termed “embedded liberalism”: a corporatist compromise between capital, labour and state in which national Fordist systems governed by Keynesian technical management of the economy, free collective bargaining and social welfare commitments were complemented at the international level by fixed exchange rates, restricted capital mobility and gradual trade liberalization under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). During the world economic crisis of the 1970s and 80s when Western governments (backed by their trade unions) turned to new forms of protectionism, the ICFTU stuck faithfully to free trade, blaming instead the behaviour of TNCs in escaping domestic controls and corporatist pacts, and the inadequate regulatory systems and institutions governing the global economy. This regulatory deficit was embodied in the ILO’s lack of supranational powers (which had been vetoed by the US government in 1919) to enforce universal fair and humane labour conditions and

GATT's lack of legal powers to enforce trade rules, stop First World protectionism and ensure that liberalization benefited the developing countries. The ICFTU called for an international neo-Keynesian regulatory framework to re-empower the nation-state, and by consequence, national trade unions. Alongside its specific macroeconomic policy prescriptions was the demand for a social clause in GATT to provide employment and income guarantees, enforce fair labour standards in trade, and ensure public control of social and economic adaptation and timely adjustment measures that would be managed by a tripartite commission on trade and employment (ICFTU, 1974).

By effectively re-articulating its previous demands for a social clause in international trade agreements as its main response to neoliberal globalization in the mid-1990s, the ICFTU's policy thinking remained firmly embedded in its traditional institutional pluralist ideology. This can be seen clearly in the ICFTU's 1996 Congress Report, *The Global Market – Trade Unionism's Greatest Challenge*, which reaffirmed the ICFTU's commitment to free trade and enthusiastically welcomed the 1995 creation of the WTO, stating that its unprecedented powers to oversee, manage and enforce multilateral trade rules in domestic law would finally enable a minimum level of labour rights to be enforced across the world economy (ICFTU, 1996). Moreover, in support of the ICFTU's neo-Marxist critics, by advocating a form of regulation that gave a central role to the ILO and core labour standards, the ICFTU secretariat was also seeking to carve out a "seat at the table" for itself within a new tripartite system of global governance (Panitch, 2000).

But in contrast to the ICFTU's post-war economic policy framework, its social clause campaign of the 1990s also represented a dramatically *narrowed down* and *hollowed out* approach. The WTO did not just represent a powerful international trade body but also a new neoliberal trade regime mandated to carry out a vast, unprecedented and rapid liberalization of every aspect of global economic activity – services, intellectual property rights, investment, competition policy and so on (See Wilkinson, 2000). The ICFTU's response to this clear break with "embedded liberalism" was to abandon its post-war Keynesian programme, in which the social clause was one of many regulatory approaches to multinational capital and international trade, and instead now make the social clause effectively *the* policy. Most significant of

all, the social clause had been stripped down to just five 'core labour standards' and the tripartite vision of 'social partnership' underpinning the social clause transformed from national neo-corporatism to what Greenfield (1996) has called "global business unionism". The ICFTU (1996: 3) now openly referred to trade unions as "responsible partners" to help firms and states "handle the change needed to meet the pressure of competition that global trade and investment is bringing" by convincing workers to accept the painful but necessary reforms in their working practices and wages. In short, the ICFTU's solutions towards trade union decline in the global economy had themselves been *neoliberalized*.

Throughout the duration of the social clause campaign between 1996 and 2002, the ICFTU's approach to neoliberal globalization and the WTO came under heavy and consistent criticism from the broad 'anti-globalization' or 'global justice' movement, led by Southern development NGOs and social movements who had coalesced under the international 'Our World is Not for Sale' network. They argued that the priority of trade unions and social movements was not to support trade liberalization in the vague hope of a deal on workers' rights, but instead to roll back the "power and authority of the WTO" (Our World is Not For Sale, 2000), change unfair trade rules and oppose its anti-worker neoliberal agenda of "privatisation, liberalization and deregulation, and the ideology of the 'free' market, which drive down wages and deprive people of dignified work" (Bullard: 5-6). Grassroots workers' organizations and labour NGOs working with women workers in the informal economy also raised serious questions about the ICFTU's understanding of the relationship between gender and globalization, highlighting that the WTO had no jurisdiction to enforce core labour standards in the informal, unregulated, female-dominated sector of developing countries where neither work nor worker officially exist (Women Working Worldwide: 3).

In support of both O'Brien (2000a) and Munck's (2002) analyses, the ICFTU did ostensibly respond to the criticisms by gradually promoting a broader, greener, more gender-aware and less uncritical agenda at the WTO (ICFTU 1999, 2001a). Along with more appreciation of the plight of developing countries within the negotiating process, the ICFTU called for a series of measures to protect public services, food security, indigenous

knowledge, and at the 2001 Doha Ministerial worked as part of a major NGO and developing country coalition that won the right for all countries to export and import cheap generic medicines for protecting public health, principally for the treatment of HIV/AIDS (ICTSD 2001).

The extent of this transformation, however, must not be over-stated. While the *discourse* of ICFTU priorities broadened to new issues, once inside the lobbying caucus ICFTU officials were only really interested in getting progress on core labour standards. The policies themselves, moreover, were certainly far removed from “challenging the existing principles of global order”, as O’Brien (2000a: 534) suggests. For instance, the ICFTU publicly called on the WTO to make “gender-impact assessments” of trade agreements but continued to advocate a package of core labour standards and a mechanism of enforcement that were irrelevant to the specific needs of women workers on the end of subcontracting chains in developing country informal economies – a huge percentage of the international workforce (See Gallin, 2001). ICFTU officials justified this approach by claiming that over the long-term “workers in the informal economy would become aware of their rights” (Interview with ICFTU official, Summer 2002). This tells us that ICFTU policy-makers had failed to embrace the specificity of the female and informal worker and remained wedded to a traditional belief that the formal sector would gradually extend and envelop the informal economy, and that trade unions were the only appropriate form of labour organization, a fact disputed by informal workers themselves. This supports Waterman and Timms (2004: 185) argument that the ICFTU continues to “reduce the complex reality of working people worldwide to a Western model of the unionized (or unionizable) male worker in lifetime employment in a large-scale capitalist or state enterprise”.

### **Internal Democracy, Participation and Cooperation**

At face-value, the ICFTU’s turn towards ‘global business unionism’ and its continued attachment to policies premised on a Western context of capitalist development inapplicable to large parts of the Global South appears to support the view of critics like Jakobsen (2001) and Gallin (2002) that the ICFTU’s decision-making processes continue to be geared towards its most powerful Northern union leaderships. Behind the scenes, how-



ever, the factors shaping ICFTU policy and its internal democratic process are more complex as the background to the adoption of the social clause campaign demonstrates.

Despite ‘winning the Cold War’, by 1994 the ICFTU found itself in a potentially terminal political and financial crisis. Under assault from neoliberal globalization, leading Western affiliates began to seriously question the relevance of a body whose historical *raison d’être* had finally been removed by the collapse of Communism. Convinced that the European Union (EU) represented the best hope for social protection and trade union rights, the ICFTU’s European affiliates began to increasingly re-direct their international activities and funding towards the ETUC (Gallin, 2002). The British TUC and American AFL-CIO in particular saw the ICFTU as “a form of trade union charity to workers in the developing world that they were no longer prepared to fund” (Interview with a former ICFTU General Secretary, Summer 2002).

This crisis sparked the sudden resignation in 1994 of the ICFTU’s General Secretary, Italian Enzo Friso, and began the search for a new leader who would effectively be mandated to save the ICFTU from extinction. The clear favourite was Luis Anderson, the Panamanian leader of ORIT, the ICFTU’s inter-American regional body. Supported by a majority of affiliates, Anderson’s election would have seen the first ever black, non-European ICFTU General Secretary, and his candidature came with an intended reform programme to push the ICFTU into alliances with progressive, independent NGOs and social movements, oppose neoliberalism and adopt a more representative leadership structure of the ICFTU’s developing country membership (Interview with a former IUF General Secretary, Summer 2002).

But to the leaders of the ICFTU’s ‘Big Four’ affiliates – the AFL-CIO, the German DGB, the British TUC and the Japanese JTUC-Rengo – an Anderson-led ICFTU implied an unacceptable loss of control to the left-wing Nordic-Latin American axis within the Confederation. They wanted an outsider sympathetic to their worldview to shake up the organization and make the ICFTU’s policies, strategies and campaigns “relevant for *industrialized* country trade unions while at the same time saving them money” (Interview with a former ICFTU General Secretary, Summer 2002). After obtaining a delay in the leadership contest,

the Big Four used their financial weight to effectively impose the renowned right-wing British ‘business union’ leader, Bill Jordan, as the ICFTU’s new General Secretary (Gallin, 1994: 2). Jordan’s experience of overseeing trade union mergers and restructuring, and his central role in helping to steer British trade unionism towards non-conflictual social partnership with employers, matched their criteria. In this context, the ICFTU’s core labour standards strategy was not simply emblematic of the ‘new realism’ sweeping Western industrial relations, but also a perfect tool of *organizational restructuring* – focusing on one simple policy enabled the ICFTU secretariat to more easily downsize and simplify the ICFTU’s structure (Interview with a former ICFTU General Secretary, Summer 2002).

In terms of democracy, Mark Anner’s 2001 internal evaluation report on the social clause campaign, commissioned by LO-Norway on behalf of the Norwegian Foreign Ministry who effectively bankrolled the campaign, finds that there was “very little discussion with affiliates, particularly southern affiliates, regarding the core labour standards campaign” (Anner: 10). Consequently, while the majority of developing country affiliates were either reticent or agnostic about the proposed social clause focus, Indian unions spoke for a number of Asian affiliates in voicing their outright opposition to what they saw as “Western protectionism” (Van Roozendaal: 23). Worried that the Indian unions’ public opposition to the social clause was creating the perception that the ICFTU was split down the middle on the issue, the ICFTU secretariat told the Indian unions to “shut up – it was as brutal as that” (Interview with former ICFTU General Secretary, Summer 2002). The ICFTU’s relations with a number of GUFs were also difficult during the early days of the campaign after the ICFTU allegedly attempted to marginalize their participation in the trade union delegation for the 1996 Singapore WTO Ministerial (Interview with PSI official, Summer 2002). In short, the initial narrow social clause policy that emerged in 1996 was the outcome of a highly centralized, bureaucratic and Northern-dominated decision-making process consistent with the ICFTU’s traditional model.

Following Singapore, however, the ICFTU secretariat did take steps to achieve greater internal consensus with its traditionally marginalized Southern affiliates as Munck (2002) has suggested. In 1997, the *Task Force on Trade, Investment and Labor*

*Standards* (TILS) was set up to “facilitate communication, share information, and jointly develop future activities” with interested affiliates, the ETUC, TUAC, GUFs, and select NGOs (Anner: 10). Largely funded by the Norwegian Foreign Ministry with the express purpose of “ensuring the more active involvement of Southern unionists in the core labour standards campaign”, TILS soon moved ‘on-line’ with an electronic discussion list connecting over 100 international and national trade union officials, and an Internet-based database tracking government and NGO positions on labour standards (ibid.: 10). Throughout 1999, the ICFTU organized some dozen seminars in different sub-regions of the developing world to “enable affiliates facing similar national circumstances to debate the problems they face in convincing their governments and turning public opinion in their favour” on labour standards (ICFTU, 1998: 14).

These fora combined to create a greater democratic space in which many Southern affiliates, led by the Brazilian CUT and South African COSATU, criticized the ICFTU’s approach for not “adequately [reflecting] the needs and aspirations of those workers who are the most adversely affected by economic globalization” (Anner: 5). They argued instead for a strategy that “broadened out to go beyond just workers’ rights and into the whole development agenda because this equally affected workers’ welfare” (Interview with ICFTU official, Summer 2002). They also complained that the ICFTU’s elite lobbying and events-focused approach did not reflect the everyday reality of trade unionists in developing countries who generally had very little influence over their governments and instead relied on membership mobilization and alliance-building with other sectors of civil society.

These deputations were clearly instrumental in the ICFTU’s increased focus on developing country issues at the WTO outlined earlier, its replacement of traditionally small, discreet lobbies of Brussels-based bureaucrats with much larger, high-profile international trade union teams of anywhere up to 100 officials from national affiliates and unions, and its decision to coordinate a ‘Global Day of Action’ to coincide with the opening of the Fourth Ministerial in Doha, 2001. Although not a major success, the Day of Action was the first ever ICFTU activity for rank-and-file workers and “not just something for general secretaries” (Interview with ITF official, Spring 2001). Significantly, it

was also the first major initiative of the newly-formed 'Global Unions' network, which brought together the ICFTU and TUAC with the ten GUFs and was a major sign of the improved relations within the ICFTU family. The Global Unions website contained the latest news and campaigns from each member body (see [www.global-unions.org](http://www.global-unions.org)).

While these developments represent a *tentative* opening out and levelling down of the ICFTU's policy-making structures to both an increasing number of affiliates, as well as other actors in the 'ICFTU family', the extent of this shift remained limited. Not only was the ICFTU's development agenda a largely 'public relations' exercise to satisfy developing country governments and affiliates, neither TILS nor the regional seminars significantly expanded the ability of national centres themselves to directly formulate ICFTU policy. TILS was a forum for discussion and information-sharing, not for decision-making, which remained the fiercely guarded preserve of the ICFTU secretariat in Brussels. This centre-periphery relationship between the Brussels-based bureaucracy and affiliates inevitably reproduced a classic North-down-to-South relationship within the ICFTU in the form of the 1999 regional seminars in developing countries. These seminars were, in reality, an ICFTU 'roadshow' designed "to give high-ranking officials in Southern affiliates the opportunity to ask questions about the campaign and receive training sessions in how to lobby trade ministers on the core labour standards issue" (Interview with former ICFTU official, Summer 2002) As LO-Norway's internal evaluation report itself argues, increased Southern participation in the "implementation phases of the campaign" was not matched by Southern involvement in "strategy development" (Anner: 3).

This North-South divide should not be exaggerated or seen as a Northern conspiracy. The prevalence of weak trade unions in large parts of the developing world mitigated against a strong Southern bottom-up pressure in the ICFTU. The TILS email and database system also operated "95 per cent of the time in English" (Interview with ICFTU official, Summer 2002). At the same time, these familiar resource constraints on international trade unionism were exacerbated by the ICFTU's top-down method for involving its Southern affiliates.

### **The ICFTU and the ‘Global Justice Movement’: an Awkward Partner**

The ICFTU, like any other nominally democratic trade union body, has always found it difficult cooperating and even relating to other progressive actors of global civil society. Trade unions have generally come to resent and distrust the middle-class backgrounds of most NGO and autonomous social movement activists, their ability to “gain a high media profile for their campaigns” in comparison to unions, and their growing shift into advocacy and campaigning work on labour issues without a democratic mandate from workers and unions (Spooner: 11). Unions also refute their representation as “conservative, bureaucratic institutions unable, or even unwilling to advance their members’ and society’s true interests” by critical NGOs and autonomous social movements (ibid.: 6). The radically changed global political and economic environment since the end of the Cold War has only exacerbated the situation with trade unions forced to compete for representation and legitimacy both within the institutional arena with tens of thousands of internationally-recognised NGOs, and ‘on the streets’ with the emergence of the ‘anti-globalization’ or ‘global justice movement’ (Gallin, 2000: 7; Notes from Nowhere Collective, 2003; Solidar 2002). The ICFTU has found its policy demands and claims to represent workers’ interests increasingly undermined by media-savvy NGOs, civil society coalitions and grassroots networks often sending a very different and more radical political message, a fact that has in turn led to often “very nasty” relations between the international unions and NGOs (Interview with Solidar official, Summer 2002).

As O’Brien (2000a: 548) has documented at length, this enmity was evident from the very beginning of the social clause campaign when, during the First WTO Ministerial Meeting in Singapore 1996, the ICFTU publicly fell out with Third World Network (TWN), a coalition of Southern research institutes and NGOs, over the latter’s role in “steering a coalition of NGOs to oppose the extension of the WTO’s mandate to new issues, including core labour standards”. Although the row was ostensibly based on a fundamental disagreement of analysis and approach towards the WTO, O’Brien (2000a: 549) argues that underpinning the dispute was “a contest over legitimacy and representativeness”:

From the perspective of some members of the TWN, the ICFTU was a naïve northern-dominated institution acting on the behalf of northern workers to the detriment of southern workers...From the perspective of the ICFTU and ITSs, ... [TWN] was a collection of a intellectuals with dubious links to the people they claimed to speak for. They had no mass membership base and no mechanisms of accountability (O'Brien, 2000a: 549).

One of the key assertions of the NLI literature is that the ICFTU's previously hostile attitude to working with NGOs is mellowing to the extent that it is not only actively seeking better relations and joint-campaigns with them but is also incorporating new tactics and repertoires associated with 'social movement unionism'. An oft-cited example is the ICFTU's close links with Solidar, a European-wide NGO that lobbies the European Union (EU) on behalf of national NGOs in EU member-states on social development issues. This relationship is seen as going beyond the ICFTU's traditional 'cooperation at distance' approach to NGOs: the ICFTU is an observer member of Solidar and during the social clause campaign the two bodies put on joint-seminars and conferences and participated in each other's internal discussions on the social clause. Munck (2002: 158) goes as far as to posit the ICFTU's relationship with Solidar as evidence of it working for the first time with "far less traditional NGOs".

On the surface, this assertion is supported by evidence from the social clause campaign of the ICFTU trying to work more closely with more radical Southern NGOs like TWN and Focus on the Global South (FGS). For example, in March 2001, the ICFTU initiated an unprecedented informal meeting between international and national trade union officials and leading anti-social clause actors identified with the 'global justice movement'. The aim of the 'Bangkok Roundtable' was to enable both sides to clear the air and develop "an agenda and strategies for future collaboration, research, meetings or actions" (Focus on the Global South & Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung: 2, 3). Following it, relations between the ICFTU and NGOs improved sufficiently for them to jointly organize a 'direct action-style' protest at the opening ceremony of the 2001 Doha Ministerial Conference against the abuses of democracy during the pre-summit negotiations: civil society delegations taped up their mouths and held up placards reading 'No Voice at the WTO' (ICFTU, 2001b).

The 'private face' of ICFTU-NGO relations, however,

reveals a somewhat less rosy picture. For instance, the ICFTU-Solidar link-up was certainly no rupture with its past: the ICFTU was simply continuing its Cold War relationship with Solidar's predecessor, International Workers' Aid, a trade union-linked NGO that had worked closely with the ICFTU as part of its anti-Communist Cold War activities. Seeing the advantages of having a strong public connection to a high-profile NGO, the ICFTU actually played an integral role in International Workers' Aid's metamorphosis into Solidar; and in turn, Solidar aligned itself as a "publicly uncritical" supporter of the 'ICFTU family' and the social clause campaign (Interview with Solidar official, Summer 2002). Contrary to Munck, therefore, Solidar was hardly a "less traditional NGO", a fact reinforced by the organization's deeply compromised relationship with the EU, which in 2002 was providing nearly 90 per cent of Solidar's funding.

While the ICFTU considered the kind of civil society organization Solidar represented as a natural ally, it privately continued to regard much of the rest of the NGO community with contempt and believed, despite evidence to the contrary, that most Southern NGOs like TWN were "state-sponsored mouthpieces of developing country governments" (Interview with ICFTU official, Summer 2002). This attitude was apparently evident during the Bangkok Roundtable:

*There is no doubt that the ICFTU approached the Roundtable with great wariness – even hostility. They caucused, and basically 'prepared for battle' with the NGOs...*

*Interview with FGS official, Summer 2002*<sup>6</sup>

While it is understandable that organizations funded by and formally accountable to workers like trade unions resent other bodies that lack such legitimacy but speak on behalf of workers and workers' interests, the ICFTU's continued hostility to other civil society actors was less clear-cut. never publicly questioned the right of to speak on behalf of workers' rights. In the first instance, anti-social clause NGOs like TWN and FGS never claimed to be democratic worker-led organizations. Nei-

<sup>6</sup>The official from Focus on the Global South made it clear that this was a personal opinion and in no way implicated Focus on the Global South as an organization

ther, for that matter, did pro-social clause NGOs like Solidar, Oxfam or Amnesty International, but while the ICFTU publicly rebuked the right of the former to speak on issues that affected workers, they never criticized the latter. Therefore, the ICFTU's antipathy to certain NGOs during the social clause campaign was less about organizational typology and more about political strategy – only those NGOs that did not agree with its position were attacked by raising the issue of “representative legitimacy” (Interview with FGS official, Summer 2004).<sup>7</sup> In reality, the ICFTU was more interested in *appearing* to build alliances with other members of civil society than actually doing so. The ICFTU-Solidar link-up was part of this strategy, helping to give the ICFTU a more outwardly credible alliance with civil society but without making any real commitment to ‘social movement unionism’.

### **Conclusion**

Although this article has been unable to properly consider the substantial and significant revival in the international activities of trade unions and labour movements since the end of the Cold War, the evidence from the ICFTU's social clause campaign gives little support to O'Brien's (2000a: 534) optimistic assessment that official international trade unionism is engaged “in a process that may result in its own radicalization”. On the contrary, the ‘social clause’ campaign was an example *par excellence* of an organization entrenched in its classic institutional pluralist approach to the world economy. If anything, by prioritizing just five ‘core’ labour standards and promoting the neoliberal language of ‘flexibility’ and ‘partnership’, the ICFTU actually abandoned its social democratic model in favour of ‘global business unionism’. The ICFTU also retained its classic high-level ‘dialogue and agreement’ diplomatic lobbying approach throughout the campaign.

That is not to deny that its methods and strategies underwent some changes. Its organizational structures and lobbying techniques were modernized in recognition of the increasingly competitive and pressurized new global institutional arena. More significantly, the ICFTU demonstrated a new willingness both to enter into strategic alliances with NGOs like Solidar, and combine traditional elite-level lobbying approach with less traditional forms of pressure politics witnessed in the joint action with



NGOs at Doha. The most significant evidence of change was in relation to the ICFTU's democratic processes. While the ICFTU's secretariat and major Northern affiliates exerted their traditional control over the organizations between 1994 and 1998, after this point, a more horizontal, participatory campaign network emerged with the help of email and the Internet, exemplified in the general ability of affiliates to have more input into ICFTU policy and decision-making. The ICFTU made real efforts to increase the number of developing country affiliates involved in the campaign. The tentative opening up of democratic participation to affiliates was mirrored by the relaxing of traditionally territorial relations between the different actors of the 'ICFTU family'. Although tensions did not completely disappear, international trade union officials worked constructively across the formal vertical structures of their respective organizations.

These changes in internal democracy did not, however, significantly enlarge the number of national confederations actually making policy. Instead, the ICFTU allowed a small, informal network of officials from within the national and international trade union bureaucracies a greater role. The ICFTU's orientation towards the campaigning and mobilization model of the NLI was also largely superficial. By understanding the ICFTU as an organization in constant political and financial crisis, it is possible to see its flirtation with NGO alliances and street-style mobilizations as a strategic manoeuvre to 'capture' the emerging political dynamic of global civil society. Beneath the surface, the ICFTU's attitude towards the majority of NGOs remained deeply hostile and suspicious and it continued to choose its alliances very carefully, typified by its alliance with Solidar, which was in reality a conservative and longstanding NGO ally of the ICFTU from the Cold War era.

### **Postscript**

Since the end of the social clause campaign in early 2002, the ICFTU's post-Cold War evolution has continued. It has participated in public dialogues with NGOs and social movements at the annual World Social Forum (WSF) in both Porto Alegre and Mumbai. During 2003 and 2004, the ICFTU worked with other Global Unions partners and NGOs like Oxfam International and the Clean Clothes Campaign to campaign for improved workers' rights in the global sportswear industry around the 2004 Olympic

games. Most spectacular of all has been the ICFTU's unprecedented 18-month 'Millennium Review' of the international trade union movement's priorities, strategies and structures, launched at its Seventeenth World Congress in Durban, 2000. The main outcome of this novel self-reflection has been the historic decision to merge the ICFTU with one of its historical rivals, the Christian-linked WCL, by May Day 2006 (Tudor and Gurney 2005). It is therefore undeniable that the ICFTU is engaged in a process of transformation, but only time will tell whether this transition remains embedded in the OLI or takes the new road to international labour solidarity relevant to the era of global capitalism.

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## Abbreviations

AFL	American Federation of Labor
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor/Congress of Industrial Organisations
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations (US)
COSATU	Confederation of South African Trade Unions
CUT (Brazil)	Central Única dos Trabalhadores (Brazilian Trade Union Centre)
DGB	<i>Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund</i> (German Trade Union Centre)
EI	Education International
ETUC	European Trade Union Confederation
FES	<i>Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung</i>
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GFA	Global Framework Agreement
GUFs	Global Union Federations
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
IFCTU	International Federation of Christian Trade Unions
ITF	International Transport Workers' Federation
ITGLWF	International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation
ITS	International Trade Secretariat
IUF	International Union of Food and Allied Workers' Associations
JTUC-RENGO	Japanese Trade Union Congress/Rengo
LO	<i>Landsorganisationen</i> (Norway)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
ORIT	<i>Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores</i> (ICFTU)
PSI	Public Services International
SIGTUR	Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights
TIE	Transnationals Information Exchange
TILS	Taskforce on Trade, Investment
TUAC	Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD
TUC	Trades Union Congress (UK)
TUI	Trade Union International
TWN	Third World Network
UNI	Union Network International
WCC	World Company Council
WCL	World Confederation of Labour
WFTU	World Federation of Trade Unions