

Syndicalisation au sein de l'économie parallèle : Ela Bhatt et la SEWA en Inde

Edward Webster

Résumé

Je m'inspire dans cet article de la vie et de la contribution d'Ela Bhatt pour comprendre les origines et le développement de la SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) en Inde. Ela a concouru à transformer notre façon d'envisager deux concepts essentiels de la modernité, soit la main d'œuvre et le foyer. Grâce à la SEWA, l'idée de qui représente la main d'œuvre s'est élargie et les marginalisées trouvent une voix. Au lieu de négocier collectivement avec un employeur, la SEWA place le pouvoir économique aux mains des femmes au sein de l'économie parallèle en regroupant celles qui travaillent à leur compte. Pour répondre aux besoins de ce nouveau type de travailleuse, la SEWA a développé un nouveau type de syndicalisme qui associe au travail collectif, principe de base des coopératives de travailleurs, la notion de solidarité des ouvrières. La SEWA a amplifié la portée des syndicats pour satisfaire aux besoins des membres ouvrières dans leur globalité, et non simplement en tant que productrices de biens et services. Leur pouvoir tient à leur puissance collective, générée par la syndicalisation de travailleuses ordinaires au niveau local. L'article conclut en se demandant si la SEWA pourrait s'intégrer à une alliance plus large regroupant la main d'œuvre salariée et la masse des ouvriers d'un marché du travail informel et précaire.

Organizing in the Informal Economy: Ela Bhatt and the Self-Employed Women's Association of India

Edward Webster¹

Abstract

In this paper I draw on the life and contribution of Ela Bhatt to understand the origins and development of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of India. Bhatt's organizing and advocacy work has contributed to transforming the way we look at two central concepts of modernity – labour and the household. Through SEWA, the notion of who represents labour has been broadened to include the marginalized, self-employed women workers in the informal sector. Instead of bargaining collectively with an employer, SEWA economically empowers these women by building collective power through struggle and organizes them into cooperatives to strengthen their bargaining power. In this way, SEWA has developed a new type of trade unionism which combines the notion of collective worker solidarity with the central idea behind worker cooperatives – that of collective work; and has broadened the union's reach to meet the needs of worker-members as a totality, not simply as producers of goods and services. The article concludes by discussing whether SEWA could become part of a broader alliance that brings together wage labour and the great swaths of informal and precarious labour.

Introduction

The growing informalization of work under neoliberal globalization has eroded the regulatory framework and undermined the standard employment relationship that defined the role of trade unionism in the developed world in the second half of the twentieth century. Non-standard or atypical work – self-employment, part-time and temporary work – now comprises 30 per cent of overall employment in 15 European countries and 25 per cent of total employment in the United States (WIEGO, 2010). Unions in developed countries have lost the key foundational categories of

their power – structural and associational/organizational power – and their institutional power is superficially robust but precarious (Hyman, 2010). Informal employment comprises between half and three-quarters of non-agricultural employment in developing countries (WIEGO, 2010). Indeed Guy Standing (2009: 110), in his recent book, speaks of the end of labourism and the rise of a precariat, “flitting between jobs, unsure of their occupational title, with little labour security, few enterprise benefits and tenuous access to state benefits”. If the labour movement is to have a future, new forms of organization and new sources of power will need to be constructed.

How has labour responded to this growing representational gap (Webster and Bischoff, 2011)? Despite a growing willingness on the part of trade unions to organize informal workers, especially in developing countries where the issue is most pressing, some remain sceptical about the feasibility and desirability of organizing informal workers into trade unions. Five main challenges in organizing the informal workforce have been identified: there are those who remain unconvinced that informal workers are in fact workers; most informal workers fall outside the legal framework for formal workers; many informal workers are situated in scattered, individualized workplaces (domestic workers, home-based workers) or are mobile (street hawkers, street waste pickers, taxi drivers); the local associations into which informal workers have organized themselves often do not have a tradition of democratic functioning; and their precarious livelihoods make it difficult for them to become financially self-reliant by, for instance, paying regular membership dues (Bonner and Spooner, 2011: 88–91).

In their article in this Special Issue, Bonner and Spooner mention the increasing numbers of national and international union organizations that are supporting organizing initiatives by informal workers. They discuss an increased interest by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and by the Global Union Federations (GUFs) to organizing informal workers, and the growing number of informal workers’ unions of varying origins. Some of these have been created by informal workers themselves; some by unions traditionally organizing in the formal economy, but reaching out to organize informal workers; and some have been conceived and sponsored by external actors (women’s organizations, migrant workers’ organizations, non-governmental organizations [NGOs],

and so on) (Bonner and Spooner, 2011: 98–102). In their discussion of SEWA as an example of an informal workers union, Bonner and Spooner, argue that SEWA has “succeeded in developing a deep layer of confident and effective women leaders and in making real improvements to the lives of members through helping to increase income (cooperatives, skills development), provide social protection (health insurance, child care), financial services (SEWA Bank) and so on” (Bonner and Spooner, 2011:90).

Despite these examples of the successful organization of informal workers, their organizations are often dismissed as irrelevant or, in some cases, as being incapable of collective mobilization (Lindell, 2010). As late as the 1990s, trade unions affiliated to the Indian national trade union federations did “not appear to be interested in unionizing workers in the informal sector” (Bhowmik, 2002: 142). He cites studies that showed that “workers in the informal sector constituted less than 1 per cent of the total membership of the seven national federations, despite the fact that employment in the informal sector had been growing, while declining in the formal sector due to the strategies [the putting out or outsourcing system] adopted by large firm” (Bhowmik, 2002: 142).

However, this was to change over the following decade and “established trade union federations are now prioritising the organisation, mobilisation, and representation of informal workers more than perhaps at any time in the past” (Gillan, 2010: 22). Indeed, the left Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) reported at its 2010 conference a 27.8 per cent increase in its membership from 2007 and “that unorganized sector workers now comprise some 60% of its total membership” (Gillan, 2010: 12). In 2007 CITU organized its own national strike action in support of its demands for comprehensive social security, improved working conditions and employment protection for unorganized sector workers. This strike action was also the centrepiece of an ongoing mobilization drive among informal workers that “featured rallies, pickets at government offices and road closures in hundreds of cities and district town centres in these states (Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and Punjab) with the subsequent arrests of thousands of union activists” (Gillan, 2010: 11).

Importantly, during this period, we have also seen the emergence of new trade union federations, in particular the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI), committed to use their base in the

organized sector to “organise the unorganised” with a consciously progressive/left social and political agenda (Gillan, 2010: 25). At the same time, Gillan writes, “the NTUI seeks to project a non-party affiliated commitment to redistributive politics and alternatives to neo-liberalism and willingness to cooperate with established trade unions to build strong issue based campaigns” (Gillan, 2010: 12).

This growing interest in organizing informal workers in India has led to two different organizational strategies. On the one hand, there are the attempts by established left unions to extend traditional forms of representation and ways of recruiting informal workers through class politics and political trade unionism. On the other hand, there is the pioneering role played by SEWA in recognizing that informal workers are different and require a different form of representation and mobilization. At one level this involves broadening the role of the union to include a range of new functions such as access to micro-credit and training in entrepreneurship. Established trade unions remain sceptical of this attempt to reconfigure trade unionism and see it as “depoliticizing”. In particular they are critical of this approach as they feel it is compatible with “the neo-liberal prescription that the State should hand over many (welfare) functions to NGOs and civil society” (Gillan, 2010: 14).

Agency is central to building movements. Leadership vision, commitment and imagination are cardinal to such projects. A gap in much of the literature is an explanation of how and why a person might become a movement activist (Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout, 2008; 8-9). In her biography of Oliver Tambo, President of the African National Congress (ANC) during its 30 years of exile from 1960 to 1990, Luli Callinicos uses the biographical method to explain how and why Tambo committed his life to building this movement. “A biography”, writes Callinicos, “is a genre that is not quite history nor quite a novel. Like history, it requires empathy and imagination to try to understand the social and political landscape of that ‘other country’, the past, and a particular life within it. As in a novel, the reader requires the character (in this case Oliver Tambo) to come alive, to develop; the reader wants to get to know what moved him, how he coped with the struggles of his own life as well as the movement’s, what sort of a person he was” (Callinicos, 2004:17).

While this article is not a biography of Ela Bhatt, it is an attempt to understand the origins of SEWA and the innovations

Bhatt introduced into trade unionism, through a brief biography of her life and times. I use the life of Ela Bhatt as a prism through which to view the social context within which these innovations were conceived and implemented. Of course, she did not build this successful movement alone, any more than Oliver Tambo successfully held, on his own, the ANC together for 30 long years in exile. Both SEWA and the ANC are examples of mass-based social movements that were built through a collective process of decision making and organizing. What the biographical method allows, is to understand agency, to understand why and how leaders chose to act in the way they did. Biography, Callinicos suggests, bestows agency. “When we focus on one individual, we are given the opportunity to examine the particular circumstances, the life choices and values chosen in a particular life” (Callinicos, 2004: 15).

But, while leaders make choices, they do so in a particular social context. The social context of India, until the end of the nineteenth century, was that of a caste society, a classic example of a closed system where caste played a central part in almost every sphere of Indian life (Beteille, 1996: 7). There are four main castes: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The so-called Dalits (the “Untouchables”) are placed outside the caste system as they are considered “impure” (Bayly, 1999: 9). Today many spheres of life have become relatively independent of caste, and the focus of research is on the dynamic interconnection of class, caste and gender in the Indian political process (Mohanty, 2004). Nevertheless, caste-based networks continue to influence social relationships and the bulk of informal sector workers are drawn from the Dalit community.

This article begins with a short biography of Bhatt, showing how her family background, deeply rooted in Gandhism and the struggle for Indian independence, shaped her values and how this led to her forging a different trajectory from that of the established trade union movement. To understand these influences I visited Ahmedabad, the home of SEWA, in December 2010 to observe its activities and interview key figures in the organization. In the second part of the paper the new conceptual thinking and organizational innovations introduced by SEWA are described. I conclude by drawing attention to the similarities and differences from existing trade union models. I argue that although SEWA organizes a different kind of worker in ways that are different from conventional trade unionism, at the core of its approach is the enduring idea of

collective worker solidarity. This raises a fundamental question: are SEWA-type strategies confined to debates on livelihoods and poverty alleviation, or could their innovative response begin a process of labour revitalization? Are we seeing the beginnings of an alliance that brings together wage labour and the great swaths of informal and precarious labour in a broadened and more representative workers movement?

Bhatt and the Foundation of SEWA.

Ela Bhatt was born in 1933 in Ahmedabad in the state of Gujarat, the home of Mahatma Gandhi after he returned from South Africa in 1915. Her parents were from the professional Brahmin elite. “My father”, she describes in her autobiography, “was a successful lawyer with a thriving practice and a prominent position in society. My mother was more progressive. Her maternal grandfather was a freedom fighter who had gone with Mahatma Gandhi on the Salt March”² (Bhatt, 2006: 5). “He was a medical doctor strongly influenced by Gandhi. This led to him changing his lifestyle and sleeping the rest of his life on a mat. He was jailed three times for his anti-British activities” (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010). All her father’s brothers were lawyers. She described her father as a “very modern man who appreciated British education and thinking” (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010).

She was brought up in the neighbouring city of Surat at a time of high idealism. “While I was at school my country was fighting for freedom. Our teachers taught us the importance of decentralizing the economy, at the village, local and district level” (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010). She went on to study for a BA degree in English Literature at the University of Gujarat, where she met her future husband, Ramesh Bhatt. “Ramesh opened my eyes to the world. It was 1949, and I was a shy and studious university student, who admired Ramesh at a distance. He was a fearless, handsome, student leader and an active member of the Youth Congress. He was collecting primary data on slum families for independent India’s first census of 1951. When he invited me to accompany him on his rounds, I timidly agreed. I knew my parents would disapprove of their daughter ‘wandering in dirty neighbourhoods with a young man whose family one knew nothing about’” (Bhatt, 2006: 5).

The young Ela Bhatt became a determined woman with no doubts as to what to do with her life. In 1952 she completed her

BA degree and in 1954 her LLB. India was a newly independent country at the time. Mahatma Gandhi's spirit encouraged the youth to live and work with the poor, to build "village republics" as basic units of a foundation on which Indian democracy could "prosper". "We saw our task as rebuilding the nation, and Gandhism taught us to look at things from the perspective of the masses" (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010). "Politics", she wrote, "was idealistic. It had the power to inspire and stimulate action. Ramesh gave me the writings of Gandhi and J.C. Kumaarappa on the economics of self-reliance and we read and discussed them avidly" (Bhatt, 2010: 6). It was these Gandhian ideas on the simplicity and dignity, or even sanctity, of labour that were the decisive influence on the early? Ela Bhatt. It was logical, therefore, in 1955 for her to join the legal department of the Textile Labour Association (TLA), a union founded by Gandhi in the 1920s.

Ahmedabad had become a powerful centre of the textile industry by the middle of the twentieth century. It was, the local inhabitants proudly announced, the "Manchester of India". By 1959 there were 60 mills employing 141,884 textile workers (Bremen, 2004: 82). The TLA was hegemonic in the industry. It had been deeply influenced by Gandhi's corporatist notions of industrial relations, where class struggle was rejected in favour of "trusteeship". As Khandubhai Desai, the first Secretary-General of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) said to the International Confederation of Free Trade unions (ICFTU) in Berlin in 1962:

The employers and the management, in these days of democracy and freedom, are only an appendage of the economic apparatus. As Mahatma Gandhi, who was also a great trade unionist, used to tell and preach to us, there is no employee or employer. The principles that we must place before ourselves are that both are co-trustees of society and the community as a whole. In order to create that psychology he used to tell us that workers should have the sensation and psychology of working as co-owners in industry, while the management or employer should orient their minds to think that they are co-workers in the field (quoted in Bremen, 2004: 82).

The young Bhatt soon made her mark as a diligent and

innovative union lawyer. She helped devise the gratuity scheme, which gave members the right to a bonus payment for every year they had worked in the mill (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010). But by the mid-1950s most of the women workers in the textile industry had been, in the view of the TLA, “expelled from the mills in their own interests” (Bremman, 2004: 110). From the perspective of the male-dominated TLA and their Gandhian mission of elevating the lives of workers to a higher plane, these women “should devote themselves to looking after their husbands and children. Their exemption from paid work allowed them to perform all kinds of tasks in the household that they had until then not had time to do” (Bremman, 2004: 110-111). As Bremen (2004: 111) observes, what at first sight appears to be a sympathetic goal of improving the living standards of workers was actually grounded in a dogmatic and patriarchal view of the social role of women.

In the course of her legal work Bhatt soon began to realize that the work being done by the wives of the textile workers was not only unpaid domestic work; these women were also performing crucial economic activities. These activities, such as street vending, embroidering from home, recycling and various labour services, were not only crucial sources of household income, they were also a major contribution to India’s GDP. This became clearer when the TLA asked her to set up a women’s department inside the TLA (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010). She discovered that the women did not need counselling on how to run their households; instead, they needed help in defending their interests as paid workers as they were not protected by any of the labour laws.

In 1969 she was sent by the TLA to live in a kibbutz in Israel and to do a course on Labour and Cooperatives (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010). This exposure to cooperatives for the first time proved to be a decisive event. When she returned to India she persuaded the TLA president that the wives of the mill workers needed a separate women’s union inside the TLA.³ “I wanted”, Bhatt wrote, “to organise the women workers in a union so that they could enjoy the same benefits that organised labour received. I came to a simple realisation – a union is about coming together. Women do not need to come together against anyone; they just need to come together for themselves. By forming a union – a bond – they affirmed their status as workers, and as a result of coming together, they had a voice” (Bhatt, 2010: 9). In April 1972,

the Self-Employed Women's Association was launched. ⁴

Initially SEWA's claim to be a union was rejected, as their members were not seen as workers because they were self-employed.

When I am asked what the most difficult part of SEWA's journey has been, I can answer without hesitation: removing conceptual blocks. Some of our biggest battles have been over contesting pre-set ideas and attitudes of officials, bureaucrats, experts, and academics. Definitions are part of that battle. The Registrar of Trade Unions would not consider us 'workers'; hence, we could not register as a 'trade union'. The hard-working *chindi* workers, embroiderers, cart-pullers, rag pickers, and forest produce gatherers can contribute to the nation's gross domestic product, but heaven forbid that they be acknowledged as workers. Without an employer, you cannot be classified as a worker, and since you are not a worker, you cannot form a trade union. Our struggle to be recognised as a national trade union continued until we succeeded in 2007 (Bhatt, 2010: 88).

From the beginning Bhatt challenged this narrow view of work and argued that the self-employed were also workers. Ironically, she said, the self-employed were the backbone of the Indian economy in which formal jobs constitute just 7 per cent of the total workforce (Bhatt, 2010: 42). She argued that the "self-employed are engaged in innumerable trades They perform manual labour as agricultural workers, construction workers, movers, loaders, and cart pullers. They provide services as domestic workers engaged in cooking, and cleaning. They are home-based workers who have skills like garment stitching, *bidi* rolling, junk-smithing, or basket making, and they are vendors and hawkers who sell fresh produce, recycled garments, or articles of everyday use" (Bhatt, 2010: 42).

Bhatt argued persuasively that "The self-employed share certain characteristics. They are all economically active. They rarely own any capital or their own tools of production or trade. They have no access to credit. They are exploited by middlemen, who are an integral part of their work life. They are the unacknowledged, low-tech, labour-intensive, raw material-processing arm of industry.

Even though they exist in such large numbers, they are scattered, isolated, and unaware of their position in the economy. They have very little bargaining power” (Bhatt, 2010: 42).

SEWA grew rapidly in the 1970s and was, later, to grow bigger than the TLA. In part this was because the membership of the TLA was shrinking as mills began to close down from 1980 onwards in the face of technological change and a loss of competitiveness (Breman, 2010: 144). It is estimated that approximately 85,000 regular workers were retrenched in Ahmedabad from the 1970s to the 1990s (Breman, 2004: 254).⁵ This process of informalization was sanctioned and encouraged by the growing liberalization of the economy, with its emphasis on flexibility in the labour market. The mill workers had won, in the course of the twentieth century, permanent jobs with the accompanying benefits that characterize “decent work” in the formal economy. Now they were being squeezed by two processes. On the one hand, work was being pushed out of the factories and formal work situations into small workshops and homes through subcontracting. On the other hand, those who remained in the factories found themselves working harder, with fewer benefits and growing insecurity (Breman, 2004: 232-293). The result was a rapidly expanding informal economy, with growing poverty and tensions over competition for jobs. In 1981 these tensions erupted in communal rioting.

The communal riots of 1981 were the trigger that led to SEWA being “booted out” of the TLA (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010). In a mass meeting during the riots Bhatt had come out in support of the continuation of the reservation policy, a package of measures intended to protect and promote the upward mobility of workers belonging to the “Scheduled and Backward” castes. Ostensibly she had breached the TLA policy of not taking sides in these communal conflicts. Her forceful opinions, writes Breman (2004: 283), were not shared by many of the TLA leaders and in 1981, after she expressed support for the continuation of this public policy in the mass meeting, she fell into disfavour.⁶ While a hero in the marginal communities, Bhatt had become a villain in the eyes of her neighbours and relatives, who “boycotted” her (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010). In fact, neighbours started throwing stones at the Bhatt home, and they had to live in her father’s home for three months.

SEWA's split with the TLA was a turning point in the history of Indian labour. But was it inevitable?⁷ Bhatt is sceptical whether a broader programme was possible at that time as the TLA "did not understand that these [the informal workers] were workers. They were invisible to the policy makers, the census writers and the trade union leaders" (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010). However, as Breman argues, an alternative broader-based programme was possible, but the trade union movement had neither the imagination nor the political will to take this risk:

The sustained policy of the Indian trade union movement not to mobilize informal sector workers should be judged as a historic blunder. Timely acknowledgement of the organic links between the formal and the informal sectors of the economy would have made it possible to co-opt the labouring poor in the struggle to promote the right of all segments of the working class in a balanced manner. A broader-based programme than the one which continued to focus only on a small and shrinking segment of the total workforce could have prevented the agents of organised labour from becoming helpless bystanders to the on-going onslaught of informalisation which has eroded whatever political strength they might have had in the past (Breman, 2004: 285).

While there is evidence, 30 years later, that the Indian trade union movement is beginning to broaden the base of its organizing strategy by organizing workers in the informal economy, SEWA has already proved convincingly that it is possible to organize workers in the informal economy. At the end of 2010, SEWA had 1.3 million members among the marginalized workers of the informal economy in nine Indian states (Jhabvala, 2010). However, its success lies in its ability to innovate and to adapt traditional modes of trade union organization to a different type of work and a different type of worker. It is to SEWA's innovative organizing strategy that I now turn.

Innovative Organisational Strategies

SEWA is not a traditional trade union that aims, through collective bargaining with an employer, to improve its members' wages and working conditions as sellers of their labour power. Instead

it aims to empower women economically in the informal economy by bringing them into the mainstream economy as owners of their labour (Pratibha Pandya, Interview, Ahmedabad, 6 December 2010). Like any other trade union movement, SEWA does this by mobilizing and organizing women to come together collectively around their work issues. “The union”, says Bhatt, “is for collective solidarity. Poor workers individually are too weak. They need to come together on a basis of work. Women then see themselves as workers. I would not have thought of trade unionism if I had not had a background in the TLA” (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010).

SEWA differs from traditional trade unionism in that, once recruited, the women form trade cooperatives in an effort to become owners of their labour. As a result, Bhatt (2010, 87) suggests, SEWA “straddles the realms of both union and cooperative”. SEWA has nearly a hundred different cooperatives – rural and urban – some built around products, others around services. “There are vendors’ cooperatives as well as midwives’ cooperatives, rag pickers’ cooperatives as well as weavers’ cooperatives. There are as many trades as there are facets to a country’s economy, and self-employed women can be found in every one of them” (Bhatt, 2010: 87).

A second crucial difference from traditional trade unionism is that SEWA’s members do not engage in only one economic activity; they engage in several income-generating activities. “Since the income of poor women from any one type of work is usually not enough to make ends meet, they must have several income-earning occupations. In fact, 80% of SEWA members are engaged in multiple types of work” (Bhatt, 2010: 88).

It follows from their multiple economic activities, that SEWA members do not have one employer. In fact, Bhatt argues, there may not be a specific employer/employee relationship (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010). “Our members perform many different forms of work. They may have been sub-contracted to do some work and may not know who the principal employer is. They may own a small farm of half an acre but also work during the harvesting season as a labourer on a neighbouring farm. You cannot categorize them as belonging to a single occupation and neither can you conceptualize the employer. The idea of a single employer has come from the conception of work in industrialized countries” (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010).

To achieve the goal of economic empowerment, SEWA has set itself two central goals – full employment through greater work security, income security and access to social security (health care, child care, insurance and shelter); and self-reliance through asset creation, leadership development, self-sustainability, and individual and collective decision making.

SEWA adopts an integrated approach to its members. By stressing the importance of creating employment opportunities through entrepreneurial activities, SEWA overcomes the notion of these workers as simply victims. Importantly, the activities of SEWA deal with workers as a totality, not simply as producers, by creating child-care facilities, credit facilities (including the SEWA Bank) and a range of social security benefits (Mirai Chatterjei, Interview, Ahmedabad , 7 December 2010). The key role of social security for the members emerged in an interview with Mirai Chatterjei, head of social security in SEWA. “The need for social security emerged organically. First was childcare, then health care, followed by water, sanitation and housing, then social insurance and finally pensions. Work and social security are two sides of the same coin” (Chatterjei, Interview, Ahmedabad, 7 December 2010).

How then does SEWA identify, recruit and maintain its members? The first step in the recruitment process involves a survey, run through the SEWA Academy, of approximately 500 households, usually those involved in a particular trade (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010) Essentially the survey is designed to identify household income and the problems the household faces. A meeting is then called, both as a consciousness-raising activity as well as a collective discussion on what action can be taken. Members then form a group of 15 to 20 members, local leaders are identified, the most pressing issues are identified, and action is taken.

How are leaders identified? Leaders, Bhatt argues, are easily identifiable as they exhibit “a certain restlessness, a sense of dissatisfaction and some spirit to change” (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010). If possible they should be literate; honesty with money is essential.⁸ Honesty is best established by asking the group whom they trust and who has the time to devote to being a leader.

To observe this process I accompanied the organizer to the offices of a Community Learning Centre in the Surendranagar District of rural Gujarat. The district covers 25 villages and the 30,000

SEWA members are mostly small farmers (14,000), producing some cash crops such as cotton, castor oil, cumin seed and crops for their own use such as wheat, millet and gram (chick pea flour) (Heena Dave, SEWA, District Coordinator, Interview, Surendranagar, 6 December, 2010). They also keep some livestock, such as buffalo and cattle. Some also obtain additional income from working on the nearby salt pan.

I was struck by the strategic way in which SEWA is intervening in the supply chain, in a way that adds value to the products sold by their members. This emerged very clearly in the case of the Rural Urban Distribution Initiative (RUDI), where the branding and packaging of the products is not only benefitting the consumer but also the producer – that is, the worker – by cutting out the “middle man” (Heena Dave, Interview, 6 December Surendranagar 2010). As the district coordinator remarked, “Through RUDI, farmers get a fair price for their product, and consumers get good quality product at their doorstep” (Heena Dave, Interview, 6 December, Surendranagar 2010).

Their intervention in the supply chain is quite simple but effective. SEWA established RUDI as a trading company held by a trust of which majority owners are members of SEWA. This provides SEWA members direct access to the market by distributing and marketing their products. At the beginning of the year RUDI approaches potential buyers and says it will only cultivate the product if they receive, for example, 180 rupees per ton. They then sell only to those buyers who are willing to pay the 180 rupees. This enables the producers to influence the price of their product at both ends of the supply chain by removing the middle man.

A similar strategic approach of intervening in the market took place with the salt workers, who have been able to add value to their product by shifting from edible salt to commercial salt production on the advice of SEWA. This not only upgrades the supply chain economically but also socially by improving the price of their product. As the district coordinator explained,

Salt farming was dominated by big merchant traders. But we could not fight them directly so we did a survey of their economic activities. They used to cultivate edible salt but the price was lower than commercial salt. SEWA provided them with training to cultivate commercial salt.

We persuaded the government to establish a research laboratory to improve the quality of the salt – the Salt Marine Chemical Research Institute – in which we also participated. Initially we chose five members, those who were willing to work hard and were disciplined, on a pilot basis to train to produce industrial salt. At first the traders were annoyed but eventually they accepted our product and our members expanded into industrial salt. It was necessary to invest in diesel pumps to drain the water. SEWA helped 100 of our members with credit, which they had to pay back at 2 per cent interest (Heena Dave, Interview, SEWA district coordinator, 6 December, Surendranagar 2010).

These anecdotes demonstrate the innovative approach of SEWA to trade union development. The union dimension of SEWA builds collective power through struggle; the cooperative dimension translates bargaining power into the economic and social development of its members and their communities. Members who had been receiving 80–90 rupees per ton for edible salt now get 250 rupees for industrial salt. With their superior product and upgraded skill, they were able to intervene directly in the supply chain, cut out the middle man, and increase their demands on the traders.

The organizers explained how they used their new bargaining power. “When the traders were not willing to pay the increased amount, 30 to 40 women went to his premises to protest. They surrounded him and demanded their money and said, ‘We will not leave until we have our money.’ They proceeded to sit down. The trader became frightened and called the police. When the police arrived and heard the women’s story, they told the trader to pay up immediately, threatening him with prison if he did not” (Pratibha Pandya, Interview SEWA senior manager, Ahmedabad, 6 December 2010).

As the organizers emphasized, “We do not have many skills, neither are we working in large factories. We do not have much strength. Our only power is to be honest and to stick together” (Meeting with rural organizers, Surendranagar, 6 December, 2010). Unlike the trade union, which targets the employer and demands better wages and working conditions, informal workers target the purchasers of their goods and demand a fair price. They also, as

Agarwala (2006) argues, target the state and demand job cards and the right to payment on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA). Above all, it is a demand for what Bhatt calls “the old Gandhian idea of community”. Bhatt continues:

The community that I am talking about is beyond the identity of caste, village or ethnicity. My sense of community centres around work, but work defined not as an occupation, a job, a career, but as a livelihood. A livelihood is a chain of being. It connects work to ecology, to a sense of community with nature. Livelihood has implicit in it two forms of access: access to nature as a commons and also to the means of production, consumption, distribution and renewal. Renewability involves all three processes: production, consumption and distribution. In recycling livelihoods, you recycle both nature and community. Thus we sustain both over time (Bhatt, 2010: 91).

Rethinking Modernity: Who Represents Labour?

Bhatt’s approach to the self-employed was a direct challenge to the concept of tripartism upon which the International Labour Organizations (ILO) was established . This notion of tripartism was also under direct attack from within the organization in the early seventies for excluding household work from the definition of labour. It also excluded small farmers, own-account workers and the unemployed (Cox, 1971). This lack of representation of the marginalized workers of the developing world became more visible in the ILO when large numbers of developing-country delegates arrived in the 1960s for the annual ILO Congress in Geneva. In most of these countries only a small percentage of the labour force was in formal employment. As a result, their unions were weak and employer organizations hardly existed.

The ILO came to refer to the lack of adequate representation of these marginalized workers as a representational gap. As Harrod (2007: 9) argues, “The labour force of these [developing] countries bore no resemblance to the foundational concepts of the ILO which was based on workers in industry and employed in agriculture”. Furthermore, and contrary to the expectations of modernization

theory, there had been little transition to formal work in the city. Instead the cities of the developing world were generating a range of livelihood strategies, in what was to be identified in the early 1970s as the informal sector (ILO, 1972; Hart, 1973).

In 1971, Robert Cox was directing an ILO project on the future of industrial relations, focusing on the neglect of the marginalized workers of the developing world. He argued that tripartite industrial relations were only one among many forms of regulating production.⁹ He identified eleven other forms of production, which included the self-employed as one form of production (Cox, 1971; Cox & Harrod, 1972). As Standing (2008: 382) argues in his hard-hitting critique of the ILO, “The organisation is a testament to the past century of labourism trying to protect employees in standard employment relationships. Like it or not, in the early twenty-first century, labour is a commodity. And the ILO cannot do much about it”.

However, while the ILO was debating the limits of tripartism, Ela Bhatt was taking tentative steps to empower these marginalized workers by forming SEWA in 1972. It was to become what we called earlier a “classification struggle” over how and who is to define what a worker is. Bhatt eventually won this battle when first the Indian trade union movement in 2007 and then the international trade union movement, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), accepted SEWA as a legitimate voice of labour.

A crucial insight of Bhatt’s was that the household was not simply a site of reproduction; it was increasingly becoming a place of production, of income generation. “Over the past three decades”, she wrote, “we found an increasing trend toward garment production in women’s homes. During the *chindi* workers’ struggles, we witnessed that the traders maintained their competitiveness in the market by lowering their labour costs, especially in labour-intensive industries like garment making. The employers push for home-based production so they can exploit the women’s preference for working from home to their advantage” (Bhatt, 2006: 70).

Her focus on the household encouraged the successful fight for an international convention on homework. Bhatt argued at the ILO Meeting of Experts in 1990 that homeworkers were “not demanding charity but their rightful place in the labour movement”. The definition of a worker should include, she said, “whoever contributes to the economy of the country or the household”. The Fordist category of “worker”, styled as a dependent employee

labouring under the supervision of an employer, she continued, “could not encompass the needs of SEWA members: their desire for flexibility, their preference for working at home, and their need to integrate productive and reproductive activities” (cited in Prügl, 1999: 206-207).

Reflecting on Bhatt’s contribution to the feminist struggle through her challenge of the gendered rules of homework, Elizabeth Prügl (1998: 143) wrote, “In attacking rules, feminist activists change institutions. Households in which men no longer are the undisputed breadwinners can no longer uphold men’s authority on the presumption that they ensure household survival”.

Bhatt’s challenge to the notion of the standard employment relationship as the only definition of the worker and representative of labour has implications for how we understand the welfare state. The welfare state emerged in Western Europe in the context of Keynesian full employment and the standard employment relationship (Esping-Anderson, 1990). It was based on the equal contribution of three pillars: the state, the market and the nuclear family (Hermann & Mahnkopf, 2010). While full employment has been eroded in the developed world and the state is being “hollowed out”, in the developing world welfare has always been predominantly based on the household, the community and the village.

We have seen a different type of welfare regime emerge in countries such as India and South Africa. Ian Gough and Geoff Wood (2010) describe this different type as an Informal Security Welfare Regime. In this regime, they suggest, the household, community and village are the central sources of welfare. Income is derived from multiple livelihood strategies, not from standard employment. For Ela Bhatt the caste system continues as a source of security and solidarity in times of insecurity and individualization for much of the poor of India. She does not see the Indian state being able to develop a formal welfare regime for its people anytime in the near future and insists therefore on the caste system as being an important source of security for many Indians (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010).

While caste-based associations are a crucial part of the community, Bhatt seems to overstate the significance of caste-based social protection. Caste-based networks are fragile and involve a limited transfer of resources (Meuer, 2011). The dominant coping

strategies among the poor are labour market adjustments (working longer hours, more household members – women and children – entering the labour market) or financial adjustments (mainly borrowing or a reduction in consumption), although “households use their networking ability to gain entry into safety net programmes”

(Dev, 2007: 143). This also includes using caste-based networks – a form of caste solidarity.

This raises the question of the effectiveness of SEWA in challenging historic inequalities such as the relationship between caste and work. Bhatt speaks of the connection between work, social protection, household and caste, but seems to accept it as a fact of Indian life rather than as a source of inequality and discrimination that has to be systematically challenged.

Conclusion

I have used the biography of Ela Bhatt as a prism through which to understand the origins and development of SEWA. I have shown how her values were shaped by her background and how this led her to a different trajectory to that of the established trade union movement. I have argued that through her organizing and advocacy work, Ela Bhatt has contributed to a transformation in the way we look at two central concepts of modernity – labour and the household. She has done this by redefining the concept of work. I have argued further that rethinking these concepts has implications for how we understand work, who we define as workers, and how workers are to be represented.

Ela Bhatt extended the traditional notion of worker solidarity to a new type of work and worker – the self-employed in the informal economy. Instead of bargaining collectively with an employer to improve the wages and working conditions of those who sell their labour, SEWA empowers women economically in the informal economy by bringing together collectively those who own their labour power. To meet the needs of this new kind of worker, SEWA developed a new type of trade unionism. This combines the trade union notion of collective worker solidarity (“An injury to one is an injury to all”) with the central idea behind worker cooperatives – that of collective work. To achieve this goal, SEWA has broadened the reach of the union to meet the needs of worker-members as a totality, not simply as producers of goods and services. Their power

lies in their collective strength built through organizing ordinary working women at the grassroots level.

This is not to portray solidarity among the poor in romantic terms as warm, supportive and uncomplicated, as is often done by the World Bank, the United Nations, some NGOs, as well as some of the research on development (Bahre, 2007). As we have shown, communal conflict in the state of Ahmedabad has been very violent and destructive. “Solidarity”, argues Bahre (2007: 52), who has studied social relations among the poor in a rural slum in South Africa, “is not opposed to conflict, nor does conflict necessarily take place outside the realm of solidarity. Instead, rivalry, conflict, jealousy, and aggression can be at the heart of solidarity networks”. The point is that without visionary leadership, commitment and imaginative organizational strategies, the ambivalence that is inherent in the households and communities of the poor, quickly erodes social cohesion (Jensen, 2010).

This shift to a new form of unionism is captured by Agarwala (2006: 432) when she writes that “the new movement aims to protect workers within their informal employment status, rather than in trying to transform them into formal sector workers.... It identifies and recruits members by going through slums rather than worksites. To make these changes, informal workers have organised a unique class-for-itself shifting its target and demands”. Instead of making demands only on employers, demands are made on the state for benefits. “Rather than demanding workplace benefits alone, the new movement also demands welfare benefits at home for the entire family. Appeals to the state for these welfare benefits have been operationalized in the form of industry-specific Welfare Boards” (Agarwala, 2006: 433).

Although the state plays a less central role in the informal security welfare regime than the traditional European welfare state, innovative responses to welfare are emerging in what are now called the IBSA countries (India, Brazil and South Africa). South Africa recently introduced a Community Work Programme (CWP) that it intends to extend to all its municipalities by 2014. This will guarantee two days of work to anyone wishing to work (Philip, 2009). In 2006 India introduced the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee, which guarantees 100 days of work a year for every rural household (Pankaj, 2010). Brazil has introduced the *Bolsa Familie*, that gives grants to families whose children attend school (Machado,

Fontes and Antigo, 2010). The aim of a global social floor is, many now believe, an attainable goal.

The lesson I draw from Bhatt is the need for an alternative developmental path grounded in the distinctive work and livelihood strategies of the developing world. She illustrates this using the example of the recycling process:

The rag picker picks recyclables from the garbage, sorts them into broad categories, and sells them to the dealer.... This material is sold to manufacturing units, which are part of the formal sector. They in turn produce new products for the market from the recycled stuff. By recognizing every worker at every stage of the production process as integral to the industry and the economy, we can begin to build equitable, democratic and participatory systems that are the key to eliminating poverty (Bhatt, 2006: 58).

Bhatt's long-time colleague, Renana Jhabvala, describes this alternative as a "people's economy". "We need", she suggests, "to think of alternative institutions of the economy, not only of large-scale corporations such as Unilever and Monsanto. A people's economy is not driven by pure profit. This is not its driving force. We need to think in terms of co-operatives, of what the Brazilians call the 'solidarity economy'" (Jhabvala, 2010:10).

I concluded my interview with Ela Bhatt with a question. "How", I asked, "does SEWA deal with the power of corporate capital in the age of globalization?" "It's a losing battle", she replied pragmatically, in the spirit that defines her life and that of SEWA. "We are poor", she said, "but we are not destined to be poor. You cannot rob us of our collective strength" (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5 December 2010).

While these comments locate SEWA clearly in the tradition of the labour movement, they do raise the question of how SEWA's approach connects with the issue of alliances with organized labour and other social groups. How does SEWA relate to political action and the politics of representation?

We have suggested that the established trade union federations are now prioritizing the organization, mobilization and representation of informal workers. Importantly, they are showing a greater willingness to engage in tactics of confrontation and resistance

(pickets, road closures, arrests) to accentuate their political demands (Gillan, 2010: 22). In the process they are discovering new sources of power and new forms of support for, and with, self-employed workers. This includes the mobilization of major union federations around the introduction of national social security legislation, in particular the Unorganised Sector Workers Social Security Bill passed into law in December 2008 (Harriss-White, 2010).

Criticism of these state initiatives has been widespread within the left. It has been argued that there is a lack of awareness of the social security schemes and severe limitations in their coverage (Dev, 2008: 328-333); that welfare schemes for unorganized sector workers have been introduced without making any financial commitment or setting out any timeframe (Harriss-White, 2010: 120); that it is not compulsory to register, making the regulation of employment impossible (Hensman, 2010: 120). But, in spite of these criticisms, Harris (2010: 8) argues, “the sheer fact of so much official policy interest in the unorganised sector is remarkable, and seems to show how far the Indian state has been pushed away from the neo-liberal model”. India, he concludes, is experiencing a counter movement from above, a series of state interventions designed to protect society (Harriss, 2010: 9-10).

The growing willingness of trade unions to organize informal workers in India identified in this article suggests that we may be seeing the beginnings of a counter movement from below in response to the state’s ambitious social security programme for unorganized workers. Whether it is possible for the different organizing traditions identified in this paper to come together in a broad alliance of wage labour and informal workers remains to be seen. As Gillan (2010: 25) notes, there is scope for alliances and common ground, but the “relations between various unions are just as likely to be characterised by suspicion and caution, as all seek to play a leading role in organising the unorganised and representing the voice of these workers to the state and in politics”.

What is clear is that the social security legislation introduced by the Indian government since 2004 has opened up new possibilities for organizing in the informal economy. Standing (2009) may well be right when he speaks of the end of labourism, but he may have underestimated the ability of labour to reinvent itself as a social movement in the twenty-first century. The transformation of work under capitalism is a contradictory process that opens up new

opportunities at the same time as it closes down options. Whether the new sources of power and new forms of organization that are emerging to represent workers in the informal economy lead to the revitalisation of labour is a question to be researched and not simply dismissed because the old sources of power are being eroded.

Endnotes

1. Edward Webster, Professor Emeritus. Society, Work and Development Institute. University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. E-mail: Edward.Webster@wits.ac.za. This article began as a farewell lecture in June 2010 while I was the Ela Bhatt Visiting Professor at the International Centre of Development and Decent Work (ICDD) in Kassel, Germany. It was published by the ICDD as their first Working Paper in February 2011.
2. Gandhi famously led his followers in the non-cooperation movement that protested the British-imposed salt tax with the 400 km (240 miles) Dandi Salt March in 1930.
3. Forming a union inside the TLA was relatively simple as the TLA is a federation of different trades.
4. I have drawn the idea of a classification struggle from Jennifer Chun's use of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, the power of naming. In her study of Korean golf caddies and Californian home care workers, she uses the idea of a classification struggle to discuss debates over how to define an employer and how to define a worker (Chun, 2009).
5. Bhowmik estimated an even greater number – 170,000 – were dismissed from the textile mills of Mumbai during a similar period (cited in Breman, 2004: 254-255).
6. In January 2010 I visited the Ambedkar Institute for Labour Studies in Mumbai, where I was introduced to the aging union leadership who described Ela Bhatt as “a social worker, not a trade unionist”.
7. Three months after the public spat with the TLA leadership, Bhatt quietly left the TLA and set up SEWA as an independent trade union. The first of many awards came soon after the split when Ela Bhatt was given the Ramon Magsaysay Award, the equivalent of the Nobel Prize for Asia. Fortunately the Dutch trade union federation, the FNV, came to SEWA's aid with financial help.
8. Out of the eighteen rural organisers I met at the Community

Learning Centre only four were literate. However, they were all able to sign their names.

9. Cox was forced to resign from his post in the ILO's International Institute of Labour Studies over his critique of what he saw as the ILO's corporatist approach to industrial relations and the dominant position played by the United States in the policies of the ILO. "This structure of power", he wrote, "has prevented the ILO from confronting effectively the real social issues of employment – creation, land reform, marginality and poverty in general. Initiatives that have been taken to deal with such issues have all ultimately been diverted into programs consistent with the hegemonic ideology and power relations" (Cox, 1977: 385).

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