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Working Paper Number 19

Social Movement Unionism:
Beyond Economic and Political Unionism

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May 1991
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Presentation

There has for some years been an unpub-
lished debate taking place around the concept of “social movement unionism”. One of the latest contributions to this, by the South Afri-
can labour activist and researcher Rob Lam-
bert, provided Peter Waterman with the stimu-
lus for going public and presenting his own
analysis. Lambert’s position, developed in re-
ference to South African unions, past and
present, is criticised for its narrow under-
standing of the relationship between unions
and other social movements. Social movement
theory is presented as surpassing the econom-
ic/political opposition, as suggesting new re-
lations between class, popular and democratic
interests and demands, and as providing a
base for a new relationship with parties and a
new kind of internationalism. An eight-point
definition of social movement unionism is of-
fered which stresses the intimate articulation
of unionised workers and other workers, of la-
bour and other social forces, and of shopfloor
democracy and shopfloor internationalism.
The test case offered to illustrate the argu-
ment is that of the relationship between femi-
nist strategy for working women and recent
South African trade union practice. The con-
clusion drawn by Peter Waterman is that so-
cial movement unionism offers an emancipa-
tory strategy surpassing current capitalist,
nationalist and socialist ones.

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now reproducing in this issue of our own WP-
IIRE, which was originally published in the

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Social Movement Unionism: Beyond Economic and Political Unionism

1. Introduction

There has for some years now been an informal and unpublished debate taking place around the concept 'social movement unionism'. I believe that I was the first to use the term in an interview (Lucas and Vledder 1985) later published in Dutch, but without the part using the concept itself. I did not define the concept but used it to characterise union movements then arising in Brazil, South Africa, India (locally) and Poland. I saw these movements as arising out of the problems created - particularly at the capitalist periphery - by the world economic crisis, the international restructuring of capital, and by the inability of collective-bargaining or state-oriented unionism to deal with this. I saw these new unions as involved in political and social issues as well as the industrial or economic ones, and as looking for an alternative social model to that of either liberal capitalism or statist socialism. I mentioned their refusal to subordinate themselves in traditional ways to a party or nationalist movement, their pouring of new content into the old union form, their creation of international relationships disregarding the traditional internationalisms, their creation of direct alliances with other social movements. I also suggested that we might, as a result, see the rebirth of labour movements (instead of mere union organisations) in the industrialised capitalist world, with these being increasingly allied with environmental, peace and other such movements.

Either despite or because of its somewhat utopian character, the concept was picked up and used by a number of people interested in developing the 'new international labour studies' (for which see Cohen 1980, Munck 1988, Newsletter of International Labour Studies passim). Those who have employed the term include Eddie Webster (1987), Ronaldo Munck himself (1988:117), Rob Lambert (1988:35), and Lambert and Webster (1988:39). Being dissatisfied with these uses, I wrote a brief note on the matter (Waterman 1988) that was quite widely circulated but has also remained unpublished. This note provoked a more substantial reply from Lambert (1989), likewise unpublished. It is to this note of Rob Lambert that I wish to now address myself, drawing where necessary from my earlier unpublished one. Neither I nor my friends and interlocutors are interested in polemic. It seems, rather, that we are commonly concerned with reflecting on the concept and seeing whether it can be turned into a useful theoretical/political tool. That is the purpose of the rest of this paper.

One last point. I myself proposed the concept as a general, universal - or at least universalisable - one. Munck saw it as relevant to the periphery. Lambert and Webster have been applying it to South Africa. My intention is to defend it as a general concept and as a desirable future strategy for the labour and socialist movement internationally. But my argument will end on Rob Lambert's terrain. This is in part because I disagree with the way that he has applied the notion to South Africa, past and present. It is also because South Africa seems to offer particularly rich possibilities for innovative social movement strategies at this moment. I believe that the understanding of the movement may allow for a broader comprehension of the union movement there, and thus for its future possible development. In order to argue this point, I will make reference to Lambert's earlier, and so far unpublished, study of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) (Lambert 1988). Whilst I cannot here do justice to this work, I think that reference to it will help me formulate my own case.

In what follows I will discuss Lambert's contributions to the debate (Part 2), put the new term in the context of new social movement theory (Part 3), offer an initial definition of the concept (Part 4), argue for its value (Part 5), and present a case to demonstrate this (Part 6).

2. Lambert's position

2.1. Three elements

I identify three major elements in Lambert's argument (1989). These are the distinction between 'political' and 'social movement' unionism, the definition of the latter, and the methodology for defining, researching or furthering the same.

1. the distinction from political unionism. Lambert identifies the concept of political unionism with 1960s American liberal theorising about unions in developing societies, making particular reference to Bruce Millen (1963). These theorists, he suggests, saw US-type economic or business unionism as the 'developed' norm, and political unionism as the recourse of 'underdeveloped' unions without sufficient industrial clout. Lambert seems to also consider that this conceptualisation in some way reflected African union realities. Explaining an earlier position, he says SACTU's political unionism during the 1950s, and COSATU's [Congress of South African Trade Unions] in the 1980s, differed substantially from the political unionism of the African independence struggle, in that new forms of workplace organisations evolved, based on new ideological inputs, which went far beyond the following possible options: the mere establishment of a workers' party; the union movement informally taking on the characteristics of a political party; unions entering an alliance with a political party, or establishing united fronts with women's organisations, student groups or coteries of intellectuals. I tried to show that the es-
sentential distinguishing feature of the new organisational form was realising the major objective of organisationally transcending the traditional political, economic divide, so central to the maintenance of bourgeois social relations. (Lambert 1989:3-4. Original stress)

The new union orientation, he argues, consisted of three essential elements:

Firstly, a cautious, planned, and above all, critical engagement in the legal industrial relations system, based on a consciousness that all industrial relations systems seek to restrict trade unionism to the production sphere only...The second element...was the attempt to form structured alliances with social movements in civil society and the third was engagement in national campaigns of mass-based resistance against the state. (4)

2. An understanding of social movement unionism. It seems to be on the basis of these new characteristics that Lambert develops his understanding of social movement unionism. Although not expressed in the form of a definition, and spread over several pages of his paper, this understanding includes the following elements (which I have re-ordered): 1) genuine democratic trade unions; 2) economic defence against capitalist exploitation; 3) new forms of workplace organising that transcend the political/economic divide; 4) a new kind of production politics through some form of participation or worker control; 4) structured relations, meaning formally organised and constitutionally established alliances with 5) urban social movements organising around collective consumption issues within civil society; 6) direct engagement of both in national-level political struggle with the state; 7) a non-subordinate relationship with nationally based political movements or parties; 8) the coalescence of such elements to the point at which a bourgeois hegemony based on compartmentalisation is eroded.

3. Research principles and methods. Whilst, again, this matter is not set out specifically in one place, Lambert does present a series of inter-related positions here. In the first place, he argues the necessity of analysing the relationship between the different social spheres and the ways in which capitalist social relations are thus maintained:

That is, we need to clarify the ways in which the economy, civil society and the state interact, and the role of ideology in maintaining dominant social relations. Clarification of theoretical debates on the character of the social formation should then open the way for a more precise locating of social movement within the dynamics of the relationship between these spheres, as well as indicating its potential in challenging relations of economic exploitation and social and political oppression. (5)

He also enunciates other necessary principles: that research be historically based so as to avoid theoretical formalism (a finger possibly wagged in my direction); that it requires comparative research in different historical and national settings; that it is only on such a basis that we can build theory. There are, finally, precepts on the researcher/movement relation: that researchers need to be close to the movement so as to understand the choices it faces; that this requires that unions recognise the researcher as someone in support of the movement; that a critically engaged posture is necessary if the researcher is to be able to clarify policy options to the leaders.

2.2. An initial reaction

I appreciate the spirit of Lambert's exercise, particularly its rooting in the history of South African unionism, its intimate relationship with current struggles there, and its address to the nature and role of research and researchers wishing to develop the concept and practice of social movement unionism. I feel, further, that his general line of argument is necessary to the development of such a concept and practice. But I do not feel that it is at all sufficient. This is for a number of reasons. I will set them out critically here, reserving the positive alternative for later parts of the paper. I will address myself to the three areas already identified.

1. The relevant distinction is from Leninism. It is curious that Rob Lambert sets up his social movement unionism in opposition to US political science and African practice in the 1960s, rather than Leninist theory of the 1900s and Communist practice since 1917. Lambert's historical reference, to the SACTU in the 1950s-60s, is to an organisation under the direct influence of the South African Communist Party (Lambert 1988:Ch.2). Neither that union nor that party would have been aware of or interested in American bourgeois liberal theory. My guess is that the same would have been true for African trade union practice! The SAPC and SACTU would have been - and evidently were - both aware of and influenced by Leninist union doctrine and Communist union practice.

Within a SACTU education course summarised at length by Lambert (1988:App.C) we can find the classical Leninist economic/political opposition. This is expressed in two ways, firstly in the opposition between 'reactionary' and 'progressive' unionism (1988:498), secondly in the evolution from factory level struggle to that against the capitalist state (501). There are also specifically Communist elements. One is to be found in the account given of the world labour movement, which identifies itself with the state-socialist World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), to which the SACTU was (and still is) affiliated. Another is in the political strategy indicated for SACTU, and which Lambert himself says was 'shaped by the SAPC debates' (504). This was for a two-stage strategy, itself evidently drawn from Lenin (e.g. Lenin 1976:119). In the SACTU case, the struggle was first against 'the imperialists' (as the rulers of South Africa were currently conceived) for a democratic state, secondly against the capitalists for a socialist one.

I do not mention this to deny Lambert's argument that SACTU was radically different from contemporary unions in colonial or independent Africa, that it led a social movement, innovated, etc. I am largely convinced by his Ph.D. here. I mention it because Lenin-
ism evidently was, and still today is, the crucial point of reference. This is not only true for contemporary South Africa, but also for such other authoritarian industrialising societies as South Korea and the Philippines. As far as the left is concerned, the problem is one of coming to terms with Lenin, not Millen.

Let us briefly consider both the traditional Leninist doctrine and contemporary Leninist practice. The classical and quasi-universal Leninist distinction is between the 'economic' and 'political' struggle of the working class (Lenin 1970:68-142), the first associated with trade unionism, the second with a marxist vanguard party. The first form or level taken to be essential but inevitably subordinate to capitalism, the second to be anti-capitalist and revolutionary. There may well be more to Lenin than I have suggested here (Hyman 1971:11-14) but this is what is reproduced by popularised marxism to this day. Thus, whilst we can hardly hold Lenin responsible for the distinction 'Yellow Unionism/Genuine Unionism' made by the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) in the Philippines (EILER 1988:40-41), the source of the inspiration is clear. We can similarly identify the Leninist origins of the two-stage strategy offered by the KMU to its members: first the national-democratic then the socialist phase (KMU Correspondence, May-June 1988:4).

Given the widespread stagnation, crisis, collapse - and working class rejection - of Leninist-inspired unions, East or West, North or South, it seems to me that we need to come to quite explicit terms with that still influential model. Moreover, I do not believe we can construct a new socialist understanding of unionism without doing so.

2. Social movement unionism relates to social movement theory. Rob Lambert develops his understanding of social movement unionism by a process of induction based on one historical case (SACTU), or one national process (the South African). To these he seems to eclectically add such elements as self-management and an egalitarian relationship with national political movements or parties. This is an 'understanding' rather than a 'conceptualisation'. And, it seems to me, that in the absence of a critique of Leninism, what it amounts to is an improvement on 'political unionism' rather than an alternative to it. The only point at which he makes more than simple reference to theory on new social movements is when he stresses the necessity for his 'social movement unionism' to have a structured relationship with urban social movements involved in collective consumption issues.

I find this procedure inadequate. In the first place Lambert is ignoring a whole body of theory that has developed around the dramatic growth of such new social movements as those of ethnic minorities, on the environment, peace, consumption, human rights and women. He hangs his new model on one hinge only, articulating it with just one type of social movement - the urban - understood in just one way. He here actually opts for the earlier work of Manuel Castells (1977, 1978) over Castells' radically different later one (1983). The preference is justified in a footnote (1989:10-11, fn.11), in which he argues for the linkage of struggles around primary and secondary contradictions in capitalism, rather than a shift away from the primary, capital-labour contradiction.

If Lambert is anxious to preserve the primacy of the capital-labour conflict whilst abandoning Leninist vanguardism, then he could just as well adopt the Latin American slogan 'cläsista y autonomista' (class and autonomous). It is, however, only in this footnote that he uses the language of primary and secondary contradictions, and the relationship of this conceptualisation to that of 'civil society' is obscure. Civil society cannot, surely, consist only of urban struggles around collective consumption.

Let us here simply note the significance of Castells' later and richer definition of urban social movements. He identifies three types or aspects of urban social movements (1983:320, Table 32.1). These are: 1) collective consumption, 2) community and 3) citizen movements. Each of these has distinct goals: 1) the city as a use value, 2) identity, cultural autonomy and communication, 3) territorial self-management. And each has a distinct adversary: 1) the bourgeoisie, 2) technocracy, 3) the state. There are many implications of this for contemporary non-proletarian social movements. But all I here wish to do is to indicate the enrichment of the single-issue understanding preferred by Rob Lambert. The enrichment is in two senses. In the first place it gives urban social movements themselves a far greater significance. In the second place it suggests a far wider terrain for unions working with urban movements. They could now be conceived as allying with not only another type of anti-capitalist struggle but also with those against technocracy and state, for cultural autonomy and residential self-management. Recognition of the multiple possible meanings of urban movements also raises the question of whether unions are - or should be - understood as solely workplace or even class actors. As I will argue below, they cannot and should not be - at least if we really want to overcome the capitalistic division of the economic, political, social, etc.

3. Research principles and methods. On this area I can only register agreement - with perhaps one reservation. Those of us who are not privileged, as is Rob Lambert, to be able to work in intimate dialogue with a major labour movement during its heroic moment, may be able, and therefore required, to make another type of contribution. Our privilege, at least in the relative sociopolitical space of the bourgeois parliamentary democracies, is a great - and increasing - access to information and resources. We also have time not usually available to those deeply involved with movements. What we ought to be doing is facilitating the processes Rob Lambert identifies, and working harder on those aspects of the research that the activist/researchers do not have time or facilities for. If this means more theoretical and comparative work, then so be it. But, then, only in the kind of relationship with the activist-researchers that Lambert says the latter must have with the unions. I suppose that the rest of this paper is my attempt to do this.
3. The development of 'movementist' theory

3.1. Origins of the new orientation

The notion of 'social movement unionism' evidently requires reference to social movements. From the later 1970s there began to develop a new 'movementist' theory, stressing social movements as the focal point of social transformation and therefore for social analysis. Reference was to 'new social contradictions', 'new social subjects' and, of course, 'new social movements' (women's, peace, ethnic, ecological, consumer, etc.). Those coming from the Marxist tradition were also drawing, implicitly or explicitly, from Marx, where he says:

*Communism is not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.* (cited Arthur 1970:56-7. Original stress)

More specifically, they were drawing from Gramsci and breaking with the notion of revolution as primarily the seizure of power plus nationalisation of the means of production:

*If the articulations of the social whole are political articulations, there is no level of society where power and forms of resistance are not exercised...The achievement of socialism...does not arise from an absolute moment represented by a radical break consisting of the seizure of power. It must instead be the result of a series of partial ruptures through which the ensemble of relations of forces existing in society will be transformed...What [this] refers to is a novel conception of the radicalisation and politicisation of social struggles, one which enlarges the field of confrontation and struggle to the whole of civil society.* (Laclau and Mouffe 1981:20)

Within such a conceptualisation, worker struggles are neither condemned as 'economic/reformist', nor glorified as 'political/revolutionary', but recognised as representing one front or site of political struggle that must be articulated intimately with others if the 'present state of things' is to be abolished. In summary, and in distinction from traditional Marxism-Leninism: social structure is seen as determined by political struggle; classes as shaped and re-shaped through struggle; all worker struggles are understood as political struggles; the enemy is seen simultaneously - as the interlocked structures of capital, state, patriarchy, imperialism and racism; the end is not the grasping of state power and the nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy, but the overcoming of exploitation and domination throughout society; this project is seen as realisable only by the articulation of the autonomous demands of different types of workers, of the working class and other 'working classes', of class and popular demands (see Waterman 1983:340)

3.2. Characteristics of new social movements

In order to develop the above line of thought we will need to have at least a minimal understanding of the new social movements. In discussing the newness of the new social movements in Latin America, David Slater (1985:2-7) identifies the following crucial characteristics: 1) new forms of struggle in relation to new forms of subordination and oppression (i.e., the generalisation of commodification, bureaucratisation and massification); 2) the fact that these new forms of subordination and oppression are not necessarily connected with or concentrated within the proletariat: they take autonomous form and expression, they are not necessarily anti-capitalist, and a new revolutionary subjectivity has to be created (rather than being assumed to inhere in the proletariat); 3) the high value given to empowerment at the base of society, to democracy within movements, to respect for differences and to a high standard of inter-personal relations.

In another specification, differentiating the new social movements from the traditional labour movement, an interview with Alberto Melucci (1989:205-6) identifies four new structural characteristics. These are 1) the centrality of information, 2) new forms of organisation, 3) the integration of the latent and visible, the personal and the political, and 4) a 'planetary' consciousness.

3.3. The relationship of the class, the popular and the democratic

Such arguments go way beyond the rhetoric of proletarian messianism and populist nationalism - not to speak of the practice of vanguardist manipulation. It seems to me that they offer something much richer, more complex, and more relevant to experience and struggles in the contemporary world. But, even if Slater is reflecting on Latin America, Melucci is clearly reflecting on Europe. And the question might arise of whether such theorising is relevant to - for example - Asia or Africa. Well, speaking of Africa, Michaela von Freyhold (1987:28-31) says the following:

*If one looks at working class struggles in Africa without the blinkers imposed by an arbitrary scheme of working class evolution and sees them as they were, embedded in popular movements right from the beginning, one becomes aware of a different type of working class history which revolves around some of the issues that were also at stake in [19th century] Europe [...] Since independence masses in Africa have been forced or persuaded to sacrifice their demands for democracy of whatever kind to the fetish of 'development'. Developmentalism, left or right, socialist or capitalist in rhetoric, has always consisted of the promise by the state to take care of development if only the masses kept quiet and did not resist the cooptation or suppression of whatever autonomous or semi-autonomous organisations they had [...] The central state...has proved incapable of producing the type of development that is compatible with the survival of the people and their cultures and so ecology groups, feminist groups and minority groups are*
beginning to combine their efforts to curb the power of the central states [...] There are similar concerns in the new social movements in Europe. This is no accident. Despite all the specific differences between underdeveloped and developed economies, capitalism is creating a global predicament which provokes similar answers. This would, of course, also be a good reason for new types of (international) solidarity movements...

Von Freyhold thus reminds us of the connections of recent labour movements in Africa with those which took place historically in Europe, and raises as a prospect the possibility for a new social movement internationalism. Both elements are crucial to a new understanding of unionism.

3.4. The historical origins of the new movements

There was, of course, a time when the old social movement (labour) or old social movements (labour and nationality) were the new social movements. In the interview with Melucci to which I have already referred, Keane and Mier point out that all four of the features he considers novel were present in the 19th century labour movement! They suggest that contemporary movements may, in fact, be understood as reviving and extending forms of action to be found in earlier social movements (Melucci 1989:214). Melucci agrees, and himself talks not of the disappearance or irrelevance of trade unionism but the manner in which it is being today articulated with the new social movements.

The above is of very considerable import, and for several reasons. Firstly, of course, it establishes or re-establishes a connection with the labour movement that some new social movement theorists might like to forget or deny. Secondly, it suggests that an additional crucial aspect of the new social movements is the new understanding of social movements. The new understanding enables us to look at the old labour movement in new ways. Leninism, it may now appear, is not so much out-dated as originally one-dimensional. The one-dimensionality comes out of Lenin's political - not to say instrumental - view of unions. They were means to higher ends, a foundation for a structure built to and from the Party, 'schools of Communism'. The new approach would enable us to view trade unions as social: i.e. either prior to, or beyond, or more than, but in any case distinct from, the political. (We will later see that they can also be seen as cultural phenomena). Thirdly, however, we need to recognise that even if the classical labour movement - and its contemporary expressions - do have the four 'new' characteristics, they were not usually aware of this. Whilst, for example, the 19th and early 20th century labour movement was intensely involved in highly original and specific forms of what I would call 'alternative international communication', this was not something it ever reflected on. Such communication would have been seen primarily as a practical instrument for other ends.

3.5. The internationalist connection

The old labour, socialist and thirdworldist internationalisms are today so many empty shells - a series of ideologically-defined, institutionally and competing internationalisms of politicians and bureaucrats having little contact with workers or peoples (Waterman 1990).

The new social movements are increasingly seen as popular and democratic because they are opposed to militarism, bureaucracy and technocracy - to the concentration of power and information in the hands of ever smaller numbers of managers, specialists and officials. In so far as such an increasing concentration of ever-greater powers is recognised to be a universal phenomenon, the new social movements tend to be internationalist. They have, indeed, been largely called into being by the increasing 'statification' and 'inter-statification' (IMF, EEC, UN, ILO) of society.

We can also identify the outlines of a new kind of labour internationalism. This is of the grassroots, shopfloor, community kind revealed by the British miners' strike (Saunders 1989). The new labour internationalism is, significantly, frequently interwoven with the internationalism of the new social movements. If labour was most internationalist when, in the past, it was most closely articulated with popular-democratic struggles, it is becoming once again internationalist where and in so far as it re-articulates itself with these.

Internationalist thinking is being increasingly called for by the 'democratic revolution' taking place throughout the Third and Communist World: these are transformative socio-political movements in which labour customarily plays a significant role. Out of such movements in the Third World come both reflections on and projects for a new Third World labour internationalism (Waterman 1990). And advanced union thinking on the future of the (ex-) Communist World is increasingly seeing it as part of one world of democratic labour struggle (MacShane 1990, White 1990).

3.6. New social movements and political parties

We need to have an understanding of how new social movements relate to political parties - particularly those nationalist or Communist parties that claim a vanguard role over other social forces or have the state power to impose such. We can first ask how the relationship between social movements and political parties is now perceived. Manuel Castells (1983:289) challenges the primacy traditionally accorded the political party, suggesting that the crucial phenomena today are 'self-conscious, self-organised social movements'. Castells allows the necessity for political parties, suggesting that social movements are there precisely to move people, and parties precisely to negotiate and institutionalise the changes demanded or won. There is here no disparagement of the party form, simply a denial of its primacy and its monopolisation of political space. If we accept this more modest role for the political party, then what of its traditional leading role (social democratic, communist, populist)? What kind of party is needed by the new social movements? Tilman Evers...
(1985:66) suggests these would need to rather be 'rear-guard' parties - i.e., parties that would serve and support rather than leading and dominating the social movements.

In our increasingly diverse, complex but interdependent economies, politics and cultures, it would seem, it is not unity but diversity that is strength. It is, in other words, not so much a matter of trying to reduce all the increasing variety to one 'primary', 'fundamental' contradiction (class, nationality or - for that matter - gender). It is rather one of recognising within the many movements (which thus include the labour one) the common democratic thread. And then finding a solidaristic and egalitarian way of weaving these into each other.

3.7. The primacy of democracy

It should not need new social movement theory to convince us that democracy must precede and underlie socialism. It was the original understanding of Marx and Lenin also. (It is, I believe, what actually inspired the two-stage theories, now largely discredited because the language subordinated democracy to class, treated bourgeois democracy as mystification and manipulation, and then created a socialism in which democracy was not so much mystified and manipulated as hollowed out). The point is made by Stanley Aronowitz (1989:57), who refers not only to the experience of the Third World but also to that of the industrialised capitalist and state socialist ones.

Prioritising democracy has, in Aronowitz' argument, interesting implications for the relationship between intellectuals and workers. It is no longer a matter of the intellectuals bringing the necessary consciousness to the workers. Workers today are educated enough to determine their own interests. The intellectuals (today a vast and varied category) can now relate to workers' and peasants' movements in two ways, 1) as 'technical intellectuals', assisting and advising movements, 2) as participants in middle-class organisations with which the unions can ally (59). If the above suggests a more egalitarian relationship between intellectuals and workers, Aronowitz also suggests a transformation in the role of the trade unions themselves:

(T)he new social movements are self-produced, not only with regard to their appearance on the historical stage...but also with respect to their ideology, which is not merely 'trade unionist' in content but clearly radical democratic. Here the term radical entails a conception of democracy that goes beyond the parliamentary forms, even as it embraces the notion of representative government. More to the point, the social movements are (unevenly) internationalist and communitarian. They speak for their own local aspirations, against the power of the multinational that control their labour power, and also against the national state that increasingly speaks for itself, as well as a segment of local capital. (59)

There is one more element in Aronowitz' argument, which reinforces my earlier criticism of the traditional instrumentalisation of the unions:

Only the most myopic observer can regard Solidarity or the South African Union of Mineworkers [sic] as traditional trade unions. Like the Sao Paulo metalworkers, they are characterised by a whole network of cultural affinities. The union is not primarily an instrumental organisation; it is the name given to their communities...In the new movements, the union is the repository of the broad social vision; it is linked to the neighbourhoods, as well as to the workplace. In short, it is a cultural as well as an economic form. (61)

In this conceptualisation, therefore, the surpassing of the capitalist division of social spheres (economic, political, cultural, etc) is not merely a matter of external alliances but of internal self-transformation.

It is irrelevant if Aronowitz has overstated his case, or presented a potentiality as a reality. What is important is the recognition of such a potentiality. This can then be formulated and shown to workers to see if it responds to their experience or aspirations. And, since we are talking of radical democracy, it is evident that such an offering is not presented to the workers as their 'real consciousness' but, precisely, as an offer.

4. An initial definition of social movement unionism

The above may suggest the distinction between the traditional Leninist concept of political unionism and the new one of social movement unionism. Let me now try to translate some of the suggestions or implications into a series of propositions with direct reference to unions. By 'social movement unionism' I mean that which is:

1. Intimately articulated with the movements of other non-unionised or non-unionisable working classes or categories (petty-commodity sector, homeworkers, peasants, housewives, technicians and professionals);

2. Intimately articulated with other non- or multi-class democratic movements (base movements of churches, women's, residents', ecological, human-rights and peace movements, etc);

3. Working for the continuing transformation of all social relationships and structures ('economic', 'political', 'social', 'residential', 'domestic', 'sexual') in a democratic and cooperative direction;

4. Intimately articulated with political forces (parties, fronts and states) with similar orientations (i.e. which recognise the value of a plurality of autonomous social forces in a transformatory project);

5. Intimately articulated with other (potential) allies as an autonomous, equal and democratic partner, neither claiming to be, nor subordinating itself
to, a 'vanguard' or 'sovereign' organisation or power;

6. Taking up the new social issues within society at large, as they arise for workers specifically and as they express themselves within the union itself (struggle against authoritarianism, bureaucracy, sexism, racism, etc.);

7. Favouring shopfloor democracy and encouraging direct horizontal relations both between workers and between the workers and other popular/democratic social forces;

8. Favouring direct shopfloor, grassroots and community contacts and solidarity internationally, both with workers and other popular/democratic forces, regardless of social system, ideology or political identity.

This specification has its own limitations. It may suggest that any union or worker movement has to fulfill the Eight Conditions before it can join this Post-Communist International. It does not spell out the meaning of 'intimately articulated'. Those who - like myself - find it thought-provoking but inadequate should consider themselves invited to develop it further!

5. Value of the concept

The new concept - such as it is - has itself been drawn from new social movements and new trade union experiences, both of which have taken shape over the last 10 or 15 years. Such movements, it is true, have taken most dramatic form in the context of semi-industrialised authoritarian countries - with Poland and South Africa as leading examples. But not all dramatic worker movements under such conditions necessarily give rise to social movement unionism. Vanguardist or reformist political parties (locally based or foreign sponsored) may dominate the political scene and shape the new worker movements in traditional ways. In Spain, social democracy has largely defused the radical potential of the Workers' Commissions created against Franco. In the Philippines, the radical unions have religiously to the Leninist model. Nor is any new experience guaranteed of permanence. In the case of Poland, Jadwiga Staniszewska talks of 'the obsolescence of Solidarity' (Staniszewska 1989).

Whatever the case here, we need to further note that the development of social movement unionism is not necessarily confined to the semi-industrialised authoritarian countries. It can also - apparently and significantly - be a product of the struggle against de-industrialisation and anti-democratic developments under highly-industrialised liberal-democratic conditions! The authors of a promised collection on the topic in the USA identify the revival of the US labour movement in terms of labour-community alliances that escape the bounds of collective bargaining activity and the hierarchical national union structures (Breccher and Costello, 1988a:75). A prime case would be the campaign to prevent the shutdown of the Van Nus (California) plant of General Motors. As Eric Mann (1987;Ch.14) shows, this not only involved a labour-community alliance but alliance with ethnic minorities, struggles to democratised the union concerned, a democratic (rather than liberal or social-reformist) attitude towards US industrial development, and a movement open to progressive political/ideological tendencies across a wide range.

It is gratifying to note that the process identified in the USA has been accompanied by a quite dramatic development of grassroots labour internationalism (Brecht and Costello 1988b, Karmel 1990, Witt 1990). In other cases we can see the combination of broad social union thinking with new kinds of international contact. Thus, at a workshop set up by the West German Greens, technical specialists from a major German union consulted with Soviet peace organisation officials on problems of conversion from arms production (Johnstone 1989). The Germans were here making explicit use of the notion of 'socially-useful' production. This concept - which goes way beyond the traditional parameters of either social-democratic or Leninist unionism - came out of worker struggles against closedown threats at Lucas Aerospace in Britain in the 1970s (Wright and Elliott 1982).

If we can thus find seeds of a new kind of unionism in the West and East as well as the South, and if we can also perceive seeds of a new kind of labour internationalism in relationship to this, further work on the conceptualisation of both might assist development in a new and exciting direction. We should not try to force all contemporary trade union reality into our new model. But we should at least see whether it does not have some reality. And if we (and ordinary workers and union members) find it an attractive one, we could then try, experimentally, to advance it further.

6. A test case: feminist strategy and union practice

Let us briefly consider the relevance of the new concept by taking a particular case. This should be done by using the eight criteria above and applying them to a movement, such as Solidarnosc in Poland or the KMU in the Philippines. But this would involve time and space which I do not have at my disposal. I propose instead to consider the relationship between feminism and unionism in contemporary South Africa. This can be done by using both a limited conceptualisation of a feminist labour strategy and a limited case study. The conceptualisation will be borrowed from a group of Indian researchers/activists, reflecting on a survey of working women in Bombay and Kanpur (Rohini, Gotherskar and Chaturvedi 1982). The case study is that of developments within the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) over the last couple of years.

6.1. A feminist strategy for working women

South Africa, of course, is hardly a typical Third World country (if such a thing can be imagined to exist). If, however, the Indian strategy 'travels', it might at least suggest that contemporary feminism has some
general significance to workers and unions worldwide. I will draw from the summary conclusion to the Indian study, expanding where necessary. The authors propose four types of organisation or movement for working women, as follows.

1. Autonomous women’s organisations and movements. Although called ‘women’s’ organisations, these would seem to actually be feminist ones, or at least to be inspired by feminism. They are intended to take up issues of body politics (rape, wife-beating, abortion, etc.), to develop a non-sexist culture and to provide a place where women can meet and talk (Rohini, Gothsasnor and Chaturvedi 1982:146). Elsewhere the authors criticise certain shortcomings of existing women’s groups, dominated as they usually are by middle-class women. They consider that the presence in these of working-class women might not only broaden their social significance but also help them overcome two limiting organisational patterns - either extreme centralism or extreme structurelessness (134).

2. Women’s trade union organisations. This is a matter of either women’s committees or separate women’s unions. They are necessary because of the domination, exploitation and humiliation of women not only within the workplace but also within the union itself (131-4). These bodies would serve to discuss and struggle for women’s demands in the workplace, as well as for changes in union structures and functioning that would enable women to take a full part in their activities (146).

3. Women’s production collectives. This proposal refers to the organisation of women on a residential community basis and is in recognition of the fact that most working class women are non-wage workers, largely confined to the home and its surrounding area. The idea is to carry out the collective organisation of housework and childcare, to set up cooperatives, to increase the economic power of the communities, and to struggle against the sexual division of labour in the household (146-7).

4. Women’s organisations within general social struggles. The purpose here, of course, is the same as that of women’s groups in unions - to ensure that the women can participate and that their particular point of view or grievances are not ignored or buried. Although the report does not specify what is meant by ‘general social struggles’ it apparently means struggles for political rights, against price rises, etc.

6.2. The South African case

My source for South Africa is a special section on ‘Women Workers in the Unions’, which was also highlighted on the front page of the South African Labour Bulletin (Klugman 1989). This section contains reports on union activities and achievements in 1988-9, resolutions of a COSATU Women’s Conference in 1988 and of its Third National Congress in 1989. It interviews women workers and leaders, and it makes some reference to community-based organisation. (For another relevant interview, see Obery 1989; for a more general analysis of feminism in South Africa see Beall, Hassim and Todes 1989). Klugman makes only passing reference to non-workplace organisations. This might make it seem inadequate for investigating the relevance of the feminist strategy above. I think, however, we will find the case and the coverage rich enough. (And, if the model is even richer than the case, this may provide a stimulus to further research - or action - in South Africa and elsewhere!).

1. Issues and achievements at work. Over the past few years there have been a number of struggles and achievements concerning women workers in South Africa, some of a rather advanced kind - particularly for the world’s last officially racist state. Thus, in one enterprise, if both husband and wife are employed, either can take parental leave for a newborn child (28-9). In other cases parents have won the right to use their own sick leave to look after a sick child. There have been struggles around equal pay for work of equal value, on promotion possibilities for women, for creche facilities and pay raises (a test for cancer of the cervix). Sexual harassment at work is still a big issue and Klugman is able to report only one case in which the union acted effectively against this.

2. Forms of women’s organisation in unions. Whilst some male-dominated unions have taken women’s issues up forcefully, South African women activists generally seem to feel the necessity for separate women’s organisation at national and/or local levels (18-19). This is because of: 1) women’s lack of confidence when confronted by men; 2) in order to take women’s issues to the union and union issues to women - inside and outside the unions; 3) because men don’t sufficiently press women’s issues, and also 4) for discussion of sensitive issues such as sexual harassment (32). The 1988 Women’s Conference proposed there should be women’s committees in the affiliated unions, and a number have since set these up at different levels (16-17). The 1989 National Congress passed a resolution on building up women leaders at all union levels, resolving to attempt to break down all practical barriers to the full participation of women leadership in our structures, by providing child care facilities at meetings where it is needed, by assisting to transport women comrades home when meetings end late and where it is dangerous for them to take public transport and by spreading the idea that housework should be shared between men and women. (20)

3. Against sexual harassment in unions. Whilst the above issues could be possibly interpreted as traditional women’s issues (or the women’s concerns of traditional unions) I think the next one can only be understood in the context of contemporary feminism. It is a matter of a resolution on sexual conduct, stating in part that male comrades in our organisation often get involved in relationships with newly recruited women members of our affiliates, and that these relationships are often characterised by an imbalance of power because of the greater political experience and organisational seniority of the male comrade [and] when these unequal re-
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5. Feminist attitudes and issues. Whilst the evidence does not bear on specific feminist organisations, it is clear that feminist issues are being raised around the above matters. This is how one of the few prominent women union leaders responded to Klugman's question about whether her life would be harder if she were married:

If I had a husband my life would be more difficult. But my boyfriend understands. I feel I must have freedom of association at home, not strings tying me all the time. But still my union activities are a problem. Sometimes as a woman you must choose between your lover or the struggle unless you educate and conscientise your man. It is tough to find someone who is also involved in the struggle, so that the power relations between you are equal. (14)

Other new issues and attitudes are expressed in the interviews. Women say of the pap smears demand that, whilst management clinics offered them contraceptives they had not asked for, they were now demanding something they themselves wanted. Another woman pointed out that the problem of sexual relations within the unions was not specific to COSATU but a universal one.

6. The persistence of tradition. It is important to record the resistance to new thinking in the unions - by some of the women as well as the men. First we must note that much of the discussion on union versus community organising was couched in terms of traditional South African workerism/populism discourse. This debate, which sets up an opposition between workers and socialism on the one hand, anti-apartheid and nationalism on the other, is hardly one appropriate to discussion on gender discrimination. And, apparently, this 'theoretical' issue died away as the unions began to tackle the real problems. Secondly, it seems that whilst union women took the debate on sexual conduct seriously, most men found it cause for amusement. Thirdly, there was a suspicion that the new advanced agreements on parental rights and responsibilities would be used by men to their own advantage rather than for the purpose intended (30). Finally, there were women who blamed other women for the sexual misconduct of men, and a woman leader who resisted separate women workers' organisations - in traditional socialist terms:

The aim of the women's committees is not to make women into a different social group. Women are part and parcel of the working class. Our Women's Forum Committee is different from bourgeois women's liberation. We don't view men as social enemies as bourgeois women do. They fight against men - they are resentful about historical experiences they have had and they blame men. But in our case we can't blame our male comrades because they don't possess anything as such. (22)

Whilst this did not seem to have been a majority opinion among women activists, it is well to record it. It will serve to remind us, once again, that 'social movement unionism' is primarily a new understanding and that its achievement is a matter of struggle.

7. By way of conclusion

The case above can be - given its limited scope - no more than suggestive. However, the extent of coincidence between the proposed strategy in India and the political experience of South Africa is striking. So is the relevance of my criteria 3 and 6 above. The first of these, it may be recalled, talks about the transformation of all social relations, including those of gender. And the second talks of the necessity of taking up the new issues as they arise for the workers themselves and within their unions. The possible enrichment of unionism, the possibilities for alliances with other democratic forces and on other popular issues, seem considerable. It is also inspiring to see this occurring in South Africa where, according to the old socialist ideology, worker organisations are supposed to be confined to either getting crumbs from the capitalist table or capturing state power. And where, according to recent South African socialist discourse they are faced with but two competing priorities, either socialism or nationalism. As the labour movement is increasingly learning, neither socialism nor nationalism (nor, for that matter, capitalism) has proven capable of emancipating workers, people and peoples. Perhaps social movement unionism offers an alternative, worldwide, and continuously renewable, project.
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