



Propositions on Trade Unions and Informal Employment in Times of Globalisation

Dan Gallin

Global Labour Institute, Geneva, Switzerland; e-mail: gli@iprolink.ch

The purpose of this contribution is to identify some of the issues which need to be addressed in order to advance the organisation of workers, and in particular women workers, in informal employment. The organisation of these workers, collectively described as the “informal sector”, represents an existential challenge to the trade union movement: unless and until it puts itself in a position to effectively address this challenge, it cannot halt its decline, but in order to do so it has to undergo fundamental changes in its culture, its self-awareness and the way it relates to society. The issue of organising the informal sector is at the heart of the necessary transformations the trade union movement must undergo to recover its potential as a global social force.

Introduction: Why Organise the Informal Sector?¹

Even now, the importance of organising informal sector workers is not recognised equally by all sections of the trade union movement. Part of the reason for this contribution is the confused and contradictory perception of the informal sector by trade unions. It is still a widely accepted assumption that the informal sector is a transitory phenomenon, and that it will be absorbed by the formal sector in time without the need for action by trade unions or the state. The experience of the last two decades, however, shows that this assumption of gradual formalization is unrealistic and only fosters dangerous complacency.

Unions, particularly those in the service sector, also face significant problems in trying to organize in the formal part of the economy and do not feel that they are in a position to use scarce resources for the informal sector. Admittedly, the heterogeneous nature of employment relations, the difficulties of locating and contacting workers in informal employment and—in some instances—obstacles created by legislation make organising difficult. However, unions also often underestimate the capacity of informal sector workers to organise

themselves. Organising in the informal sector is not missionary work amongst an amorphous and passive mass of individuals. On the contrary, it depends on the ability to reach out to groups of workers who are survival experts and therefore, in many cases, extraordinarily dynamic and resourceful.

Organising workers in informal employment needs to be a priority of the trade union movement at both national and international levels, because: (1) it is here to stay; (2) it is growing, whilst the formal sector is declining in terms of organisational potential; (3) these two trends are linked and are irreversible in the short and medium term; and (4) consequently, the stabilisation of the formal sector organisations and building trade union strength internationally depend on the organisation of the informal sector. Organising the informal sector serves the interests of the majority of workers worldwide. Without wishing to belabour points which have been made elsewhere, we need to remind ourselves of some basic facts underlying the above statements.

It is impossible to conceive at the present time of organising a majority of workers at world scale without serious organising in the informal sector. The vast majority of the world's workers—including the poorest, who most need self-defence through organisation—are in the informal sector. In India, for example, the proportion of the active population in the informal sector (including agriculture) increased from 89% in 1978 to 92% in 1998. In Africa, Asia and Latin America the informal sector accounts for a share of employment ranging from significant to prevalent (ILO/TUIS 1999:3, 5, Tables 1 and 2; see also Table 1 in this paper).² For Central and Eastern Europe data are generally not available, but anecdotal evidence indicates that the informal sector is rapidly growing as state enterprises close down or are privatised and unemployment increases (the same applies to China). Such statistical data as are available for OECD countries (the industrialised world) indicate that the informal sector also represents a significant part of the labour force: about 11% in Ireland and New Zealand, 19% in Germany and 20% in Italy (excluding agriculture).

It is no longer accurate today to describe the informal sector as “atypical”. In most so-called developing countries, it is the formal sector—regular direct employment with a formal sector company—that is “atypical” in the literal sense. In many of the older industrialised countries, the informal sector, although it does not occupy a majority of the labour force, is becoming increasingly significant, particularly for women (ILO/TUIS 1999:Table 1). Equally, it is not appropriate to identify the formal sector as the “modern” sector, as opposed to the informal sector, which is supposed to be “nonmodern”. What is

Table 1: Size of the Informal Sector

Informal Sector Share of	Latin America, Caribbean	Africa	Asia
Total employment excluding agriculture	15%	18%	15–30%
Total employment including agriculture	45%	75%	75–85%
Nonagricultural employment	57%	78%	45–85%
Urban employment	40%	61%	40–60%
Poor employment	50%	NA	NA
New jobs	84%	93%	NA

	Low-Income Countries	Middle-Income Countries	High-Income Countries
Total employment outside formal sector	80%	40%	15%

Table created by Jacques Charmes (Université de Versailles, Centre d'Economie et d'Ethique pour l'Environnement et le Développement).

“modernity”? Is factory work more “modern” than teleworking? As deplorable as it may be, it is a fact that sweatshops producing garments or components for the automobile industry or assembling printed circuit boards, in back alleys in Paris, New York or Macau, are more “modern” phenomena than a steelworks in Indonesia, Romania or South Chicago.

The growth of the informal sector since the 1980s has two main causes: the global economic crisis, and the way production is being organised by transnational capital. The world economic crisis is the result of political decisions. It is these that have led to the debt crisis in the developing countries, driven by the structural adjustment programmes of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (dismantling of the public sector, deregulation of the labour market) and led to the global crisis which started in Asia in 1997, continued in Russia in 1998 and hit Brazil in 1999. According to an ILO estimate (ILO 1998), this crisis has destroyed 24 million jobs in East Asia alone, mostly in the what the report terms the “modern industrial” sector.

To take Indonesia as an example, according to official figures, unemployment rose from 20 million in 1998 (when it represented 22% of the labour force) to 36 million at the beginning of 1999. The

population living below the official poverty line (meaning a daily income of US\$0.55 in urban areas and of US\$0.40 in rural areas—about half internationally comparable rates) went from 37% of the total population in the middle of 1998 to 48% of it at the end of that year. Comparable trends have been reported in Korea and Thailand. In Russia and the other successor states of the USSR, in addition to the millions of unemployed, there are more millions of workers still in formal employment who do not get paid for several months at a time. For all of these, in the absence of serious social safety nets, the informal sector provides the only possibility of survival.

These are neither short-term trends nor trends that are reversible in the short term. Even if they are the results of policy decisions which are by their nature reversible, a reversal involving the adoption of different macroeconomic policies at a global scale depends on a fundamental shift in global power relations between labour and capital. Whether such a shift can be brought about depends in turn, at least partially, on the very question of whether the informal sector can be organised by unions. Even assuming that a shift of global economic policy can occur in the short term, its effects will be felt at the earliest in about a decade or two. Meanwhile, the labour movement cannot afford several decades of continuing decline.

The other factor that has contributed to the growth of the informal sector in the last 20 years or so has been the changing structure of transnational enterprise. The modern enterprise is essentially an organiser of production carried out on its behalf by others. Its core includes the management and employees at corporate headquarters and possibly a core labour force of highly skilled technicians. This core directs production and sales, controls subcontracting and decides at short notice what will be produced where, when, how and by whom and from where certain markets will be supplied. It may also perform key manufacturing processes. However, the company's real product is the label, design and marketing and its skills in organising production and distribution and quality control. Most of the production of the goods it sells and all labour-intensive operations will be subcontracted, also internationally. This type of company will coordinate cascading subcontracting operations which will not be part of its structure but will nevertheless be wholly dependent on it, with wages and conditions deteriorating as one moves from the centre of operations to its periphery.

For example, the footwear company Nike does not regard itself as a manufacturer, but as a “research, development and marketing company”. In 1991, Toyota had 36,000 subcontractors. A significant

part of the production of companies such as General Motors, General Electric, Kodak, Caterpillar, Bull, Olivetti and Siemens is carried out by others. United Brands has turned a large part of its banana plantation workforce into “independent farmers” who continue to produce for it and are wholly dependent on the company buying their product. Companies in the brewing, dairy and other sectors have turned their delivery drivers into “independent contractors”.

By cutting down on the hard core of permanent full-time workers, by decentralising and subcontracting all but the indispensable core activities, and by relying wherever possible on unstable forms of labour (casual, part-time, seasonal, on call and so on), management deregulates the labour market, not only to reduce labour costs but to shift responsibility for income, benefits and conditions onto the individual worker. The outer circle of this system is the informal sector: the virtually invisible world of microenterprises and home-based workers. The informal sector is an integral part of global production and marketing chains. What is particular to the informal sector is the absence of rights and social protection of the workers involved in it. In every other respect, particularly from the economic point of view, the formal and informal sectors form an integral whole.

The deregulation of the labour market is also a strategy for eliminating the trade union movement. Subcontracting is a well-travelled road to evading legal responsibilities and obligations. The fragmentation and dispersion of the labour force, its constant destabilisation by the introduction of new components (women, youth and migrants of different origins) in sectors without trade union tradition (computerisation, services), the pressure for maximum profits (productivity) together with management intimidation—all these are obstacles to trade union organisation.

The decline of trade union density in most industrialised countries in the 1980s and 1990s is less due to transfers of production and relocations to the South and to the East than has been often assumed, although such transfers have of course played a significant part. More important has been the deconstruction of the formal sector and the deregulation of the labour market in the heartland of industrial trade unionism. For example, Japan and the US have lost half their trade union members over a period of 40 years; New Zealand and Portugal have lost half their trade union members in only 10 years; and Israel has lost three quarters of its trade union membership in the same 10 years. In Japan, union density declined from a high of 56% in 1950 to 28% in 1990, essentially due to subcontracting, and it continues to decline (eg by 16.7% between 1985 and 1995). In the

United States, union density peaked at 35.5% in 1945 and now stands at 13%. Some other examples of the decline of union density in the years between 1985 and 1995 include: in Argentina, union density declined by 42.6%, in Mexico by 28.2%, in the United States by 21.1%, in Venezuela by 42.6%, in Australia by 29.6%, in New Zealand by 55.1%, in Austria by 19.2%, in the Czech Republic by 44.3%, in France by 37.2%, in Germany by 17.6%, in Greece by 33.8%, in Hungary by 25.3%, in Israel by 77.0%, in Poland by 42.5%, in Portugal by 50.2%, and in the United Kingdom by 27.7%. The unions which have resisted this trend are in countries where most social regulation has been maintained (eg between 1985 and 1995 union density increased by 2% in Denmark, by 16.1% in Finland, by 3.6% in Norway, by 8.7% in Sweden and by 35.8% in Malta) or where unions have benefited from a favourable political situation (in the same decade, union density increased by 130.8% in South Africa, by 84.9% in the Philippines and by 62.1% in Spain). These are exceptional situations.

The deconstruction of the formal sector through outsourcing and subcontracting is a long-term trend that cannot be reversed unless we can change the cost/benefit calculations of companies when it comes to their employment policies. Together with the impact of the economic crises, this deconstruction has led to a decline of trade union organisation in most countries in all parts of the world, in leading industrialised countries as well as in developing countries and transition countries. This means that the stabilisation of what remains of the trade union movement in the formal sector now depends on the organisation of the informal sector. Only by organising the informal sector can the trade union movement maintain the critical mass in terms of membership and representativity it needs to be a credible social and political force. In practice, this means organising the global labour market to the extent that companies—and governments at their service—no longer have either the power or the incentive to create and maintain inequalities on the same scale.

It should be stressed again that any strategy based on the gradual absorption of the informal sector into the formal sector, let alone on the “elimination” of the informal sector (by decree? by extermination?) is programmed to fail (ILO/TUIS 1999:19, 30). In the current global economic and political context, no state or regional grouping of states has the ability or the political will to set in motion the macroeconomic changes that would create universal full employment under regulated conditions. On the contrary, for the foreseeable future we can expect more deregulation and a further growth of the informal sector. The

issue is therefore not formalising the informal but protecting the unprotected.

What Is the Informal Sector?

The informal sector covers a multiplicity of activities and different types of relationship to work and to employment (ILO/TUIS 1999:chapter 1.3, 5–7). The working definition of the informal sector used by Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)³ includes: self-employed (in own account activities and family businesses), paid workers in informal enterprises, unpaid workers in family businesses, casual workers without fixed employer, subcontract workers linked to informal enterprises and subcontract workers linked to formal enterprises. However, it is possible to define the informal sector in several ways, and general statements that apply under one definition will cease to be valid under another.

In WIEGO's view, its definition and the general propositions that follow should be functional in terms of the intended purpose, which is organisation. The point of departure of this definition should be the situation of the worker as the worker perceives it. It should include not only self-employed workers but also all those who are not directly employed by a formal sector firm (even if the end product of their work is connected, three or four times removed at the end of a subcontracting chain, to a formal sector firm). Informal sector work takes place in a rural as well as in an urban context, and is as important in agriculture as it is in certain industries (ILO/TUIS 1999:28). At the end of the day, everyone who works in a dependent situation is a worker; street vendors, home-based workers, tenant farmers, artisans, fishermen (or fisherwomen) and collectors of forest produce are workers. The traditional concept of a worker, reflected in the legislation of many countries, is based on a direct employee/employer relationship. As this relationship is being replaced by a variety of more diffuse and indirect but nonetheless dependent relationships in the process of production, trade union organising can no longer focus primarily on the employment relationship. Instead, it should focus on the worker and on his/her needs for protection and representation.

The most important general statement that can be made about informal sector workers, which is valid under any definition and crucial in terms of organising, is that the majority of them are women. Indeed, a majority of workers expelled from the formal sector by the global economic crisis are women. As the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions has reported, women are the principal victims

of the casualization of labour and the pauperisation created by the crisis and have therefore massively entered the informal sector in the last two years (ICFTU 1999). Even before the crisis women constituted most of the informal labour force (child labour is also strongly represented). The great majority of home-based workers are women, and home-based work represents as much as 40% to 50% of labour in certain key export sectors, such as garments and footwear, in Latin America and Asia. Women also comprise the great majority of street vendors in informal markets, who in certain African countries represent up to 30% of the urban labour force.

Although workers in export processing zones (EPZs), or free trade zones, are not in general regarded as part of the “informal sector”, inasmuch as they are wage workers in more or less regular employment, it is worth noting here that 90% of EPZ labourers are women and that, in the majority of cases, workers’ rights and social protection are also nonexistent in EPZs. Like informal sector workers, EPZ workers comprise mostly unprotected, largely unorganised female labour. In Central America, organising women workers in the EPZs has come about mainly as a result of work by women’s nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), which have always supported unionisation of women workers (see also ILO/TUIS 1999:50, Box 10).

How to Organise the Informal Sector

The obvious points of departure in seeking to organise informal sector workers are successful existing examples of this kind of organisation. What is true of workers in general is true of informal sector workers: they will organize whenever they have a chance to do so, and they are best organised by their own.

Two general paths of organisation exist. The first occurs when a traditional union extends its field of activity to include informal sector workers. For example, the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA) is organising home-based workers in its sector. UNITE in Canada also organises home-based workers in the garment industry. Other examples include the Timber and Woodworkers’ Union and the General Agricultural Workers’ Union, both in Ghana. A national trade union centre might create an organisation for informal sector workers, as the UDTs did in Senegal (ILO/TUIS 1999:46). In Hong Kong, the HKCTU assisted in the establishment of the Asian Domestic Workers’ Union, comprised mostly of Filipino and Thai women. Although this union did not survive internal disputes, domestic workers have organized elsewhere, for example in Britain, where their

union Kalayaan works closely with the Transport and General Workers' Union. Unions in Benin, Brazil (Força Sindical), Colombia, Germany (IG Metall), Italy (FILTEA-CGIL) and the Netherlands (FNV Vrouwenbond), among others, also organise and/or bargain for home-based workers. SIBTTA, the embroiderer's union in Madeira, has been organising home-based workers for 25 years and currently has about 8000 members; it may be the union with the longest history of organising home-based workers.

The second case is that of new trade unions created specifically to organise informal sector workers. An early case, and an example to many, is the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India, which started twenty-five years ago with a few hundred members and now numbers over 210,000 members in four Indian federal states. SEWA organises home-based workers, street vendors, paper pickers and refuse collectors and so on. It has created an infrastructure of flanking services: a bank providing microcredit, a vocational and trade union training programme at different levels, producers' cooperatives (artisans, agricultural producers) and service cooperatives (health, housing). SEWA is affiliated to three ITSs (ICEM, ITGLWF, IUF) and has joined with other unions to establish a national trade union centre in India concentrating on informal sector workers.

In addition to its ITS affiliations, SEWA is active in two international networks of informal sector workers. One is the International Alliance of Street Vendors, or StreetNet, which includes organisations or support groups in eleven countries. It was founded in 1995 and in the same year adopted the "Declaration of Bellagio" on the rights of street vendors. The second one is HomeNet, a network of unions, such as SEWA, SEWU, TCFUA and SIBTTA, which represent home-based workers, as well as other associations of home-based workers (in Bangladesh, the Philippines and Thailand). Together with SEWA, certain other unions and support groups at universities and in international organisations, HomeNet and StreetNet have formed WIEGO, another network. WIEGO seeks to work at different levels: research, policy proposals and coalition building.

In South Africa, the Self Employed Women's Union (SEWU) has been organised along the same lines. Recently, moves have been made to set up a similar organisation in Turkey. Women workers' organizations, including both formal and informal sector workers, have also formed in Hong Kong, Korea, Nepal, Pakistan and the Philippines.

Partnerships between unions and NGOs have helped organise informal sector workers. At the European Union level, the European Homeworking Group has brought together a coalition of those involved

with home-based workers (unions, NGOs, church organisations, researchers and so on). The work of this group was one factor in influencing the majority of European governments to support the ILO Home Workers' Convention at the International Labour Conference in 1995 and to ensure its adoption in 1996.

In the UK, there are many local projects (NGOs or local authority schemes) and a national campaigning organisation, the National Group on Homeworking. This group has led the campaign for home-based workers to be included in the national minimum wage and has been a major influence on government policy, public awareness and trade union policy on home-based work. Other examples exist. At one stage in Greece, street committees were organised to represent home-based workers. In Portugal (mainland) work is being done through local rural organisations as well as trade unions. In the UK, a home-based workers' association was set up in one area.

In rural areas, and for obvious reasons in predominantly agricultural countries, there are a number of informal sector unions. SEWA organises rural informal sector workers such as gum collectors. Another example in India is the HKMP (ILO/TUIS 1999:59, Box 16). One example in Latin America is the landless workers movement of Brazil (Movimento Sem Terra—MST), which is currently facing repression in its struggles to occupy unused land belonging to large landowners. In the Brazilian federal state of Parana, the MST has established 82 encampments on unused land, with 7000 families involved, and has resisted police efforts to dislodge these encampments. Since 1980, over one thousand people have been killed in Brazil by hired assassins and police in the struggle over land, including many organisers of the MST and of other unions. Very few of these murders have been solved. On 19 August, a court in Rio de Janeiro acquitted three commanding officers of a military police commando which killed 19 MST members on 17 April 1996 at Carajas. The MST is a member of an international network of landless peasants and small holders called Via Campesina.

In summary: informal sector workers are already organising, partly within existing union structures originating in the formal sector, partly into new unions created by themselves, partly into associations which are sometimes described as NGOs but which are often in fact proto-unions. International networks of informal sector workers already exist. The experience, activities and organisational structures created in this way are valuable resources and points of leverage for the entire trade union movement, at the national and international levels. Such organisations are either already a part of the trade union movement

or its closest partners and allies. Any discussion and planning on organising the informal sector should include as a matter of course those who are already doing the job.

Notes on a Programme for the Informal Sector

A programme of organising the informal sector and at the same time defending the informal sector workers' interests has to have two aspects: *external* and *internal*. The external programme consists of the demands directed to workers' social counterparts: employers, public authorities, international organisations and so on. The internal programme focuses on what the labour movement itself has to do to improve its capacity to organise and represent informal sector workers.

External Programme

WIEGO proposes that the following points be included in a labour movement agenda of demands for the informal sector:

International labour standards. Several international labour standards relevant to the informal sector exist (ILO/TUIS 1999:15–18, 31). They should be used as organising and campaigning tools. For example: in 1996, the International Labour Conference adopted the Home Work Convention (No 177) and Recommendation No 184 thanks to vigorous and coordinated lobbying by three ITSs (ICEM, ITGLWF and IUF), the ICFTU Equality Department, the FNV, SEWA and HomeNet. WIEGO regrets that this coalition, which proved effective and powerful, did not remain in place as an action group after the adoption of the two international instruments, which have so far only been ratified by two countries (Finland and Ireland)—enough to take effect, but not nearly enough to get the attention of a majority of governments and international organisations. The ratification of Convention No 177 and Recommendation No 184 should be a continuing campaign theme for the international trade union movement and its allies.

The ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities points out that “the absence of a similar degree of coordination and cooperation was a factor in the failure to adopt an ILO instrument on contract labour in 1998” (ILO/TUIS 1999:32). It suggests that “the experience with Convention No 177 should be examined with a view to mobilising international support to bring contract labour rapidly back onto the agenda of the International Labour Conference and working towards the adoption of a strong Convention on this issue” (ILO/TUIS 1999:32).

Although ILO Conventions are not mandatory, they are influential in shaping national labour legislation and are a useful reference for union campaigns. In this sense, they offer opportunities that should be recognised and seized.

Social protection and services. The guiding principle of social protection should be that *all* workers need social protection (health, life and property insurance, old age security and safety nets) as well as social services (health, education and child care), regardless of their position in the process of production. This also applies to home-based workers who are own-account (self-employed) workers, ie they do not have an easily identifiable single employer, even though they may be a part of chains of production leading to big companies.

Microenterprise development has been seen by some as a first step to launch own-account home-based workers on a career as capitalist entrepreneurs. We regard these views as inspired by neoliberal doctrine without any relationship to what happens in the real world. As the BWA has pointed out, “for the vast majority of dependent and own-account workers the informal sector is not a stepping stone to improvement but a strategy for survival” (ILO/TUIS 1999:iii). Home-Net has stated that its experience has shown that collective organisation is essential not only for piece-rate home-based workers, who may have a more direct relation to an employer, but for the majority of own-account workers as well: “In today’s international trading environment, a growing number of workers are outside legal regulations as ‘workers’ or ‘employees’ and collective organisation is becoming increasingly important”. It follows that in the case of own-account workers, too, social protection schemes need to be discussed and negotiated with organisations.

SEWA’s work shows that, in some instances, workers themselves can provide better social security systems than the state. The ILO’s Strategies and Tools against Social Exclusion and Poverty (STEP) antipoverty programme is “based on the assumption that the extension of social protection to the informal sector is not feasible through national systems of social security” (ILO/TUIS 1999:36–37). Whether this is generally true, and to what extent, remains to be proven. In any event, however, the state remains responsible for the social protection of workers in informal employment.

The question, then, is this: how can the state strengthen and help develop alternative systems that may be developed by informal sector organisations, through funds, political and technical support, and make the employers accountable for them? Political support includes providing the legal space and framework for trade unions and informal

sector organisations to provide social support services for all workers. In such cases, the state would remain responsible but would play an enabling rather than an implementing role.

At the same time, it remains “vital to ensure that formal sector employers do not see [voluntary grass roots schemes] as a cheap substitute for social security and thus as an encouragement to informalise more of their activities” (ILO/TUIS 1999:37). Extension of the state systems already in place must remain on the agenda of all workers’ organisations. The ILO could serve as a forum for a discussion amongst trade union organisations, including informal sector workers’ organisations, on the evolution of social protection systems to ensure social protection for all workers.

Internal Programme

Organising strategies. The ILO could also be the most appropriate facilitator for meetings involving all those involved in the issue—unions already organising informal sector workers (see above), other informal workers’ associations, supportive NGOs, international trade union organisations and international networks of informal sector workers—for the purpose of developing coordinated organising strategies and practical cooperation in organising as well as building coalitions and alliances and developing a programme of common demands. There is a need for international meetings of this kind as well as regional meetings.

Coordination. International trade union organisations should have a contact person for the informal sector to whom all others involved in an issue can refer. Almost every ITS could have activities and membership in the informal sector. In the ICFTU, the Equality Department has already functioned in practice as a contact point. Such contact points are necessary to provide permanence and continuity to cooperation in organising and in pushing common demands.

Cooperatives. The creation of cooperatives can be an important flanking support measure for informal sector workers organisations, as it is already for unions in many countries (see also ILO/TUIS 1999:52). This role of cooperatives and their relevance to informal sector organisation could be discussed with information and advice from the International Cooperative Alliance and the ILO Cooperative Branch, among others. For example, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Germany has a cooperatives department.

Education. Study circles have proved a successful didactic method in organising women workers in the informal sector (ILO/TUIS

1999:52–3). In this context, it should be noted that, beginning in 1997, the International Federation of Workers' Education Associations (IFWEA) has been developing an international study circle programme. These are local study circles, linked through the Internet, discussing the same issue simultaneously in different countries (IFWEA 1999). One of the current circles deals with "Women and the Global Food Industry". Others, conducted in partnership with ITSSs, deal with transnational corporations. The IFWEA will work with any labour movement organisation and prolabour NGOs interested in organising informal sector workers and therefore—of necessity—conducting workers' education. It may be objected that informal sector workers are unlikely to own a computer or be able to access the Internet unless they are teleworkers, but this argument only strengthens the case for organisation: they can be members of local organisations that do have access to such technologies. In that respect, their situation is no different from that of formal sector workers in low-paid and low-skilled jobs. IFWEA's experience has shown that such obstacles can be overcome.

At the national level, a number of workers' education institutions and organisations have worked with informal sector workers in their own countries. For example, this year the Workers' Education Association in Zambia has been instrumental in organising the Lusaka Street Traders' Association, which then affiliated to the Zambian Congress of Trade Unions.

On another educational front, HomeNet/StreetNet/WIEGO could produce an educational package to be used by ITSSs, the IFWEA, national trade union centers or national unions in organising campaigns. Popular materials about existing organisations could be developed, people from these organisations could be identified who could talk about their experiences and—resources permitting—exchange programmes and visits could be organised.

Representation. As we have seen, informal sector workers spontaneously organise, sometimes with the help of unions or supportive NGOs. After the initial stages, they then face the difficulty of sustaining and developing their organisations. One of the main problems is that these organisations usually remain unrecognised by those with whom they need to bargain (public authorities, contractors, etc). For example, street vendors' organisations should be recognised by the police and municipal authorities and home-based workers' organisations by the labour department, the contractors and the employers. Their international networks should be recognised by the appropriate international institutions. This is generally not the case today.

A related issue is that policies that affect informal sector workers are made without consultation with their organisations and therefore work against their interests. For example, urban planners never consult street vendors, and hence never plan for them. In some cases, collectors of forest produce have to sell to forest departments at prices determined by committees where the collectors have no representation and no role. Except for as yet rare instances where they have achieved genuine bargaining power and legal protection, home-based workers and domestic workers remain unprotected from employers who offer work on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. This lack of visibility and recognition has been an obstacle to the growth of informal sector organisations and in some cases a threat to their survival. A successful organising strategy therefore requires securing recognition and representation at the different levels required, first for organisations that already exist. The trade union movement is in the best position to help informal sector workers secure such recognition and representation.

The first step would be to make a start in the movement itself and in the institutions where it is represented. At the present time, informal sector workers are generally not represented in the institutions and organisations of the labour movement. Even though individual trade unions do organise informal sector workers in an number of cases (see above), national trade union federations make no provision for their representation within their structures. The same is true for the international trade union federations. Within the ILO structures, informal sector workers are not represented.

National trade union centers, the ITSs, the ICFTU and the ETUC should examine ways in which appropriate forms of representation of informal sector workers can be introduced in their structures, as well as ways in which formal cooperation with existing informal sector organisations can be established. The contact points suggested above could be a starting point. A working party could also be formed for that purpose, with a clear mandate to bring the organisations into the national and international trade union movement, not to keep them out.

Finally, the ILO should establish a special section to service informal sector workers, preferably within the Bureau for Workers Activities.

Conclusion

Organising in the informal sector takes place where the traditional labour movement intersects with the broader civil society. It is therefore intimately linked with the issue of engaging with civil society

Table 2: Acronyms Used in This Paper

ACTRAV	Commonly used French acronym of Bureau for Workers' Affairs (ILO): Bureau des activités pour les travailleurs
BWA	Bureau for Workers Affairs (of the ILO)
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
EPZ	Export Processing Zones
ETUC	European Trade Union Confederation
FILTEA-CGIL	Federazione Italiana Lavoratori Tessili e Abbigliamento—Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro
FNV	Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (Federation of Netherlands Trade Unions)
FNV Vrouwenbond	FNV Women's Union
GLI	Global Labour Institute
HKCTU	Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions
HKMP	Hind Khet Mazdoor Panchayat (India)
ICEM	International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
IFWEA	International Federation of Workers' Education Associations
ILO	International Labour Organisation/International Labour Office
IMF	International Metalworkers' Federation
ISC	International Study Circles (of IFWEA)
ITGLWF	International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation
ITS	International Trade Secretariat
IUF	International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations
MST	Movimento Sim Terra/Landless Workers' Movement (Brazil)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SEWA	Self-Employed Women's Association (India)
SEWU	Self-Employed Women's Union (South Africa)
SIBTTA	Sindicato dos Trabalhadores da Indústria Bordados, Tapeçarias, Texteis e Artesanato da Região Autónoma de Madeira (Portugal)
STEP	Strategies and Tools against Social Exclusion and Poverty (ILO Programme)
TCFUA	Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia
UDTS	Union Démocratique des Travailleurs Senegalais
UNITE	Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees
WCL	World Confederation of Labour
WIEGO	Women in Informal Employment Globalising and Organising

and of forming broad alliances to advance a common agenda. A basic overarching principle in this common agenda is human rights: labour organizing is essentially a human rights issue. Workers, wherever they may be, organise to defend their rights as human beings. Ultimately, all union organisation is based on the defence of human dignity; everything else—wages, working conditions, benefits—follows from this basic issue. Every wage increase, every reduction in working time, every improvement in working conditions, every guarantee for job security opens up an additional space of freedom for the worker as an individual, a space of individual freedom and self-expression that can only be achieved by solidarity and by collective action. As important as any of these is the sense of being able to stand up to the boss.

If the rights of workers as workers are a human rights issue, workers' rights are a union rights issue because workers have no other way to express their collective interest, or to effectively defend their individual interest, except through independent and democratic trade unions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of workers in informal employment. These are the most exploited and most unprotected of all workers, whose dignity is constantly challenged by their conditions of survival. Here is where labour must join forces with the women's movement and human rights movements. Campaigning for the human rights of informal sector workers, and helping them organise into unions, is a crucial contribution to the social movement of tomorrow.

Endnotes

¹ An International Symposium on Trade Unions and the Informal Sector, organised by the Bureau for Workers' Activity of the ILO, was held in Geneva from 18 to 22 October 1999. The meeting was attended by 31 trade unionists from as many countries in Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe, Latin America, and North America, 16 observers from five ITSS, the ICFTU, and the WCL, moderators from the ILO, speakers from the ILO, ITSS, ICFTU, and WCL, and ILO officials. The following propositions have been edited from a contribution to this discussion by WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment Globalising and Organising). The previous version of this paper was prepared by Dan Gallin (Global Labour Institute), with contributions from Martha Chen (Harvard University), Renana Jhabvala (Self Employed Women's Association, India) and Jane Tate (HomeNet, UK), as the WIEGO position paper for the October 1999 ILO meeting. Table 2 presents a list of the acronyms used in this paper.

² This reference, which will recur frequently, is to the background paper of the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities. For details, see References section.

³ WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing), established in early 1997, is an international network of individuals from unions, academic institutions, and international development agencies concerned with improving the conditions and advancing the interests of women in the informal economy through better

statistics, research, programmes, and policies. It includes already existing women workers' organisations, some of which are themselves international networks (such as HomeNet [homeworkers] and StreetNet [street vendors]) or national unions (such as the Self-Employed Women's Association [India] and the Self-Employed Women's Union [South Africa]). Some of the unions participating in WIEGO are members of national trade union centers in their home countries, and some are affiliated to one or several ITs and to the IFWEA. WIEGO organisations—particularly SEWA and HomeNet—have worked closely with the international trade union movement in securing the adoption of the ILO Home Work Convention, 1966 (No 177). One of the WIEGO programmes supports organising of women workers in informal employment at both the national and international levels.

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- HomeNet. Website. HTML file: <URL: <http://www.homenetww.org.uk>>
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- International Labour Organisation/Bureau for Workers' Activities. Route des Morillons 4, CH-1211 Geneva 22. Fax: +41 22-799 67 50. E-mail: actrav@ilo.org. HTML file: <URL: <http://www.ilo.org/actrav>>
- WIEGO. HTML file: <URL: <http://www.wiego.org/>>

Dan Gallin is Chair of the Global Labour Institute (GLI), a foundation established in 1997 with a secretariat in Geneva. The GLI investigates the consequences of the globalisation of the world economy for workers and trade unions and develops international strategies for the labour movement. It works with WIEGO on the organisation of the informal sector. Gallin is coordinator of the WIEGO Organization and Representation Programme. From 1960 until 1997, Gallin worked for the IUF (the International Federation of Unions in Food, Agriculture and Catering), as General Secretary

beginning in 1968. Since 1992, Gallin has also been the president of the International Federation of Workers' Education Associations (IFWEA), an organisation of labour educational institutions and labour service organisations.