Alternative Ways of Organising: Asian Labour's Response to the 'New' Globalisation

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Globalisation – when defined as the 'linking of distinct localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring miles away and vice versa' (Giddens 1990: 64) – is nothing new. However, the most recent wave of globalisation has distinctive features. Rather than being linked to the activity of identifiably imperialist powers such as Britain or France, post-1960s globalisation is driven by often faceless investment interests using vehicles other than the nation-state. These include transnational corporations who have no clearly identifiable home country base, and global structures such as the WTO (World Trade Organization), which have erected a 'boundaryless world' that prioritises capitals' interests over those of the nation-state or labour. This 'new globalisation' is modelled on an American style of neo-liberalism under which the conduct of individuals, groups and nations is clearly dominated by economic imperatives. American neo-liberalism promotes a minimalist approach to social obligations while maximizing economic interests; it differs from the Ordo neo-liberalism practised in Europe, which combines free market ideas with the need for social welfare provisions (Emy 1993). However, both forms of neo-liberalism have had significant effects on society. Not only does neo-liberal ideology seek to eliminate restrictions and regulations such as tariffs, quotas

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and other tariff and non tariff barriers, it also seeks to actively construct an enterprise culture (Peters 1996), or enterprise mentality, that prioritises market or economic interests above social needs. Individualism not collectivism, user pays not social justice, become the dominant values guiding the conduct of individuals, groups and nations operating within this framework of governance as each person, group, or community of persons, aims to carve out their own 'best deal'.

These principles drive the export-oriented model of industrial development (EOI) that now dominates the economies of Asia. EOI advocates argue that a reassertion of the primacy of economic growth and market interests reduces poverty and generates prosperity in newly industrialising environments (NIEs) (see Balassa 1981; Krueger 1985). The International Monetary Fund's promotion of EOI, along with the rapid growth achieved by Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong, encouraged other Asian countries to adopt EOI policies. As a result, EOI has become the industrial development model of choice in the region, even in previously closed or centrally managed economies such as India, Vietnam and now of course China. This pathway has been pursued with relative ease because most Asian NIE economies were governed by authoritarian or single party democratic regimes, which erected legislative and regulatory frameworks to proactively promote EOI even when social costs were incurred.

Asian governments' commitment to export-driven economic growth has had serious implications for labour. Exchange controls, guarantees concerning repatriation of investment, taxation and general industry assistance schemes to attract investment were complemented by an industrial relations model characterized by restrictions on freedom of association, collective bargaining and the right to strike. These governments tightly controlled remuneration and workplace conditions to match the needs of international capital, as opposed to broader community needs. In summary, the Asian labour-management model has heightened the vulnerability of Asian workers in comparison to those working in more industrialised environments.

Collective resistance is not only difficult to co-ordinate within this paradigm; it is also difficult to stimulate. However, the papers in this symposium suggest that the harsh regimes of labour control characteristic of Asia's EOI economies have not been able to eliminate labour collectivity altogether. Rather, they have encouraged novel forms of labour activism both within the tradition of unionism and beyond it. As in developed countries, both in the past and even now (for example, the Fair Wear Campaign by the Australian Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union involving collaboration with church and other community groups), these

novel forms include the use of drama, music and the arts by unions and other organisations involved with labour. There has also been a greater recognition that non-union organisations are able to mobilise workers; and of the formation of alliances between unions and non union organisations to pursue labour-related campaigns. Worker activists in Asian countries have also enthusiastically joined the global surge in non-traditional forms of international labour activism of recent decades, when transnational labour bodies, such as the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU); national union bodies, such as the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (Rengo); and trade union solidarity organisations, such as the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS), were joined by international NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and the anti-sweatshop movement, which has promoted codes of conduct and other means to improve the rights of workers in developing countries (Ford 2003).

The seven papers that follow provide illustrations of these and labour's other responses to pressures from government and employers in Asian EOI states. The papers' geographical focus on Asia does not imply that similar developments are not taking place elsewhere; rather, that the Asian region offers a wide variety of examples in which the implications of late twentieth century global capitalism for the future of labour organising can be examined. They address three related themes: unions' responses to diminishing opportunities to organise in multinational corporations and privatised state enterprises; their failure to adequately respond to the feminisation of the workforce in EOI economies and women's responses to that failure; and unions' responses to the growth in non-traditional forms of labour organising, specifically under the auspices of non-governmental organisations. Individually, the papers focus on the experiences of international workers' organisations and efforts to organise workers locally and nationally in South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia and Indonesia. Collectively, they suggest that while labour's responses to the pressures for convergence associated with the 'new' globalisation remain diverse and sensitive to local conditions, there is a general trend towards modes of action not generally associated with traditional trade unionism both within trade unions themselves and outside them.

The first two papers deal with the effects of the 'new' globalisation on opportunities for effective unionism. Lansbury, Purcell, Suh and Kwon examine the implications of transnational corporations' industrial relations policies for the right to organise in Asian settings. Lansbury *et al* describe the transfer of human resource management practices from Hyundai's Korean core to India. They argue that Hyundai's experience

of labour militancy in Korea led management to seek sites in India where unions were not well established, and to establish a Works Committee in the plant in an attempt to exclude unions from labour-management negotiations. Hyundai's attempts to avoid unionisation of its plant were aided by the fragmented nature of union organising in India and recent changes in India's economic and legislative framework, which encourage employers to promote Employee Participation at company and shop floor levels over unionism. Lansbury *et al* argue that the low-cost, labour-intensive production strategies adopted at Hyundai's Indian plant, and the non-union policies that have accompanied them, are unsustainable if Hyundai wishes to develop higher value-added products.

Chen-Yen Ku's paper, which describes labour's experiences in a privatised state telecommunications company in Taiwan, offers a more optimistic interpretation of the implications of Employee Participation for unions in a climate of neo-liberal globalisation. He argues that the trend towards democratisation that accompanied Taiwan's entry into the global marketplace has served to weaken the authoritarian government's hold over unions and industrial relations practices. Although privatisation is often seen to diminish union strength, Ku claims that in the case of Chunghwa Telecom Company unions have responded by using the company-sponsored Labour Management Committee to strengthen their position.

The second group of papers describes Asian women's responses to unions' traditional failure to acknowledge the needs of women workers. Broadbent's paper examines women-only unions in Japan and South Korea. She argues that while women have a long history of labour activism in Japan and Korea it was only through the establishment of women-only unions that they were seen as active creators of unionism rather than passive recipients of union strategies because of restrictive cultural assumptions about women and male dominance of the organisational hierarchies of mixed-sex unions. Women-only unions provide channels through which to focus on female-dominated sectors of the economy that lie outside traditional union constituencies and to deal with women-related issues generally ignored by established unions. Broadbent concludes that the activities of Korean and Japanese women-only unions help to broaden the scope of unionism in those countries in a way that may ultimately benefit the mainstream union movement.

Caspersz makes similar observations about the weaknesses of traditional unions in a paper on the responses of Asian members of the Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR) women's forum to EOI production regimes. Having highlighted the

shortcomings of unions' responses to women's issues, Caspersz describes an alternative in Sri Lanka, where women workers' responses to the conditions imposed on them within the EOI production regime initially sparked responses through non-traditional modes of organising, such as community centres, rather than through unions. These informal initiatives were later channelled into a formal union after government regulations about unionisation in Free Trade Zones were changed in 1994. She argues that unions must re-evaluate their own patriarchal structures and learn from the successes of non-union initiatives if they wish to face the challenges of neo-liberal globalisation.

The next two papers examine union responses to non-union forms of labour organisation. Biyanwila, writing about unions on Sri Lanka's female-dominated tea plantations, proposes that unions have to rediscover their social movement dimension if they are to successfully face the challenges of privatisation and the deregulation of the Sri Lankan labour market. He suggests that unions on Sri Lankan tea plantations are antagonistic towards NGOs, which they see as depoliticised service providers focused on alternative income generation rather than the promotion of labour militancy. He argues that unions should instead adopt a social movement approach to unionism, based on the building of alliances with NGOs and other organisations associated with non-labour counter-hegemonic movements, in order to deal more effectively with the challenges of EOI.

Crinis also focuses on a female-dominated industry in her discussion of union-NGO relations, namely Malaysia's garment industry. Her paper explores the context in which NGOs became involved in labour organising and advocacy work, and unions' responses to that involvement – noting that government policy, the pressures of globalisation, and unions' failure to accommodate the interests of women workers meant that for much of the 1990s feminist NGOs were the only organisations that acted on female garment workers' behalf. She argues that NGO activities in garment worker communities and very public advocacy of the rights of migrant workers have forced unions to re-examine their approaches to women workers in general, and female migrant workers in particular. Crinis concludes that whilst there is no real cooperation between trade unions and feminist labour NGOs to date, unions' reactions may signal a broadening of their focus to encompass women working in sectors traditionally considered to be difficult to unionise.

The final paper in the collection uses an Indonesian case study to argue that labour NGOs should not just be considered as catalysts to union reform, but as legitimate labour movement organisations. In the first part of her paper, Ford reviews the literature on NGO-union relations, con-

cluding that its three main streams recognise the importance of NGOs' involvement in labour at both the domestic level in developing countries and internationally, but ignore the theoretical implications of the role they have played in countries such as Indonesia. In the latter parts of the paper, she provides a brief overview of labour NGOs' activities in Indonesia, with an emphasis on scholars' inability to adequately incorporate labour NGOs in their analyses of Indonesian labour relations. She concludes that in order to fully understand the contribution of labour NGOs, studies must advance beyond union-NGO cooperation, union adoption of NGO techniques, and NGO promotion of unionism to examine the role non-union organisations have played within the labour movement in their own right.

The papers in this symposium highlight an interesting conundrum: while traditional collective forms such as unions may be appropriate for some actions and at some stages in various campaigns by workers, this is not always the case. They suggest that although unions are not always effective in responding to the challenges of organising in low-cost, export-oriented production environments that characterise the manufacturing sectors of most Asian economies, Asian workers continue to find collective modes of resistance to the excesses of the 'new' globalisation. The case studies presented in this collection confirm that the basis for worker collectivity now extend beyond material or class based interests, and encompass realms traditionally considered beyond the scope of union activism, particularly in relation to questions of gender. These alternative pathways raise questions for unions in terms of both their organisational form and *raison d'etre*. Will unions have to re-think their structures and organisational practices to remain viable, and/or shift from a preoccupation with union-only issues into a broader spectrum in order to remain active actors in influencing worker status outcomes? The experiences of Asian labour activists, and the analyses of the academics who research them, provide us with the opportunity to glean answers to both these questions. This symposium is one step in this direction.

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