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Are the unions prepared to face the future of work? By Kjeld Jakobsen

Abstract

Trade Unions became the workers' organizations to defend their rights and interests in front of capitalist exploitation insofar as it started to be systematic through the industrial production of goods. The form how unions were historically organized depended on the production model time to time. Thus, the dawn of the trade union movement was the first industrial revolution very much composed by craft workers.

Nevertheless, the model of industrial unions as we still know it today arrives from the second industrial revolution, particularly, from its "Fordist" period when the employers inside vertical structures controlled the entire production since the management of raw materials, the make of the spare parts, the final assembling of the goods and in some cases issuing the retail business too.

The performance of most of these operations didn't require special skills and the majority of the workers were not craft laborers anymore but mostly migrants coming from the agriculture. In the USA, for instance, many of them were foreign migrants that even didn't speak English because no special language skill was needed to tighten screws on an assembly line. Nevertheless, this production model generated plants with tens of thousands of workers, numbers that by themselves originated very powerful unions in the industrialized part of the world. From that moment on, the industrial union organizational model became a pattern for any other branch of workers like those in the private and public service as well of those in the agriculture.

However, since the second half of the twentieth century the industrial production model changed with the introduction of "just in time" schemes, new technology, plant mobility, outsourcing and the creation of global production chains, but the trade union organizational model didn't change at all despite the deep changes of the working class' profile. One of the new characteristics of it was a relevant inclusion of informal and precarious labor in the production chains as well as the increase of female workers but most of the unions kept the representation just of the formally contracted workers allocated at the top of the production chains. Thus, the representation and power of the unions as we know it since the 1930'ies has been tremendously undermined and is even more threatened by the technological changes to come in the short run.

So, if the existing trade unions pretend to become powerful again, they need to deal with the organizational challenge introduced by the global production chain model.

The corporatist feeling of workers belonging to certain labor branches like metal, energy and similar together with thousands of comrades is insufficient to mobilize at the present. A new and broader concept of labor solidarity based on a working class perception needs to be developed through national and international trade union networks.

Methodology: this paper will be developed with data from secondary sources, personal experiences and consultations with present trade union officials.