GLOBALISATION
A TRADE UNION PERSPECTIVE

Threat to survival or opportunity for growth?
THOBILE YANTA presents the results of a survey on trade union views on globalisation.

DOES ECONOMIC GLOBALISATION
offer any positive opportunities to trade unions? Pessimists within the unions point to the decline in labour standards, erosion of worker rights, job insecurity, threat to collective bargaining and the changing nature of work. Optimists argue that prospects for international worker solidarity have become brighter.

To gauge the views and feelings of trade unionists on this issue, surveys were conducted among the international trade union leaders who attended three important union events in South Africa in late 1999 and early 2000. The first event was the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR) conference which brought together leadership from union movements in the countries of the Indian Ocean Rim. The second was the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Union (ICEM) Congress. The third event was the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) congress which recently took place in Durban. The ICFTU is the largest international labour body in the world. In-depth interviews were also conducted with delegates to these events in order to get a more textured sense of how trade unionists view economic globalisation.

UNION VIEWS
The majority of international respondents (57%) associated economic globalisation with the 'international consolidation of capitalism'. Twenty one percent said the concept implied the decline of national sovereignty, while others were more concerned about the relationship between globalisation and job losses. Only 1% of the representatives interpreted economic globalisation as meaning the creation of more jobs for workers.

A unionist from Canada captured general sentiment by describing economic globalisation as:

"a process that is mainly driven by economic factors and the expansion of capital, but also involves a shrinkage of time and geography, so that places of work far apart seem to become closer. It's a change in social relations between people. There are also new centres of authority."

The majority of South African delegates (58%) also subscribed to the idea that globalisation implied the international consolidation of capitalism and neo-liberalisation.

The growing distress which economic globalisation is causing among the working people of the world has resulted in trade unions taking the issue more seriously. A prime concern is the lack of job security, which stems from the changing nature of work. The overwhelming majority of trade unionists said economic globalisation was being debated in their unions. In order to survive, trade unions are being forced to re-invent themselves by developing new tactics and strategies.

PRIORITY ISSUES
For 45% of the respondents, the number one priority is for unions to build their internal
Understanding of Economic Globalisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>South African views</th>
<th>International views</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International consolidation of capitalism</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decline of national sovereignty</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privatisation &amp; job losses</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Priority Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Most important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Less important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Build internal union capacity to deal with change</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organise ‘atypical’ workers</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reform international financial institutions</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhance the participation of women in unions</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efforts towards international collective bargaining</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### ‘Vulnerable’ Workers

Fiftytwo percent of the respondents felt that existing unions will have to be restructured if they are to be effective in organising ‘vulnerable’ workers. This is consistent with the view that unions should build their internal capacity to deal with change. Forty-four percent suggested the incorporation of vulnerable sector issues into the overall union agenda as another important way of bringing the sector within the union fold.

### Most Effective Way to Organise ‘Vulnerable’ Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Most effective</th>
<th>Quite effective</th>
<th>Somewhat effective</th>
<th>Least effective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restructure existing unions to organise vulnerable workers</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporate the issues which vulnerable workers face into overall union agenda</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop strategic alliances with existing unions organising vulnerable workers</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase the union’s organising budget</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set-up or support specific unions for vulnerable workers</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Capacity to deal with change. Internal ‘reforms’ will help worker organisations grapple with the complex dynamics and processes of globalisation. Other respondents suggested that unions pay more attention to organising ‘vulnerable’ workers (such as casuals, part-time, temporary, and informal sector workers). Maintaining strong domestic organisation is key to engaging with international debates and processes. As one delegate put it, “international struggle begins at home”.

While most respondents viewed the building of internal union capacity and organising ‘atypical’ workers as important, 57% felt that enhancing the participation of women in unions was either of average or less importance. This is a major contradiction. Women make up the bulk of ‘atypical’ workers, especially in the developing economies. For example, the South African informal sector is dominated by women. In India, almost all women workers (96%) are employed in the informal sector. Thirty seven percent of the respondents did not see reform of the international financial institutions as a priority. This is probably a reflection of the powerlessness which unions feel to confront this issue.

### Impact

More than two thirds of the respondents (70%) felt that economic globalisation is impacting on trade union activities. This applied to representatives from both the developed and developing countries.

Asked for details, the majority mentioned the erosion of worker rights, threats to collective bargaining and a decline in union membership. Only 13% felt that globalisation presents the unions with new opportunities to organise.

Almost all the South African delegates (99%) said that economic globalisation is impacting on trade union activity. Most (41%) said that it poses a major threat to collective bargaining. Forty percent pinpointed a decline in labour standards and worker rights. Nineteen percent said it provides new opportunities for trade unions to organise.
The following additional factors were identified as negative features:

- lower wages;
- lack of job security;
- reduced benefits;
- longer working hours;
- increased unemployment;
- increased difficulty in organising workers; and
- decline in union membership.

Job loss is the main concern for both international and South African unionists.

Indepth interviews provided a more detailed response. A delegate from Australia representing the Community and Public Sector Union said that:

"the biggest challenge is to maintain membership in a unified way and to continue recruiting members. Australian trade unions are facing a decline in membership which is due to a number of factors, including changes in work organisation and casualisation."

Another unionist spoke about "uncertainty in policy...what sort of policies (should be) pursued by trade unions in the light of economic globalisation?"

**STRATEGIES**

The union representatives were divided on the issue of whether or not economic globalisation offered any opportunities. Thirty four percent said it provides space for international working class solidarity, while 31% contended that there are no gains at all. Interestingly, a small percentage of representatives (5%) said that women benefit from the system (because, in their view, women can now compete for jobs previously reserved for men).

Although 48% of South African delegates saw globalisation as more of a threat than an opportunity to the working class movement, 52% said that it provides unions with the opportunity to change their strategies and practice international solidarity. In their opinion, trade unions should move away from fearing globalisation to making the adaptations in order to remain relevant. For example, the technological revolution triggered by globalisation – including e-mail, web sites, databases and other computer applications – can be used to find,
responding to globalisation

• south african view
  - develop solidarities
  - mobilise other sectors
  - organise the unorganised
  - challenge globalisation
  - other

• international view
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sort, store, analyse and transmit information to union officers and members.

A representative of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union from Australia summarised some of the opportunities:

Globalisation is not all negative... (it) presents us with many challenges, but also with many opportunities... I may not have been in South Africa talking to South African workers and workers from other countries if it was not for the subject of globalisation... I think globalisation is going to make unions mobilise internationally... this is essentially making unions part of the global community.

Respondents were also asked whether any plans and strategies have been developed in response to economic globalisation. More than two-thirds (70%) said that their unions have developed organising strategies in response to the issue. Twenty-nine percent said the strategy was informed by the need to develop working class struggles and solidarity, 27% mentioned the mobilisation of other sectors of society and 20% cited campaigns to "organise the unorganised". The majority of South African delegates (30%) said that they have developed organising strategies to respond to globalisation. Most of these revolve around mobilising other sectors of society, such as civil society formations.

During the ICEM congress, the ICEM executive Committee proposed:

the creation of permanent networks between organised workers in key multinational companies, within ICEM branches of industry, to exchange micro-economic information, data on pay and conditions for use in collective bargaining and to establish regular links of solidarity.

International solidarity has been on the trade union agenda for a long time. However, it remains a complex and difficult issue. There are substantial differences of interpretation between unions from the developed and developing countries. Survey respondents made different suggestions to take this process forward. These include building union capacity to develop information, education, and exchange plans and strategies.
programmes on international worker struggles and applying pressure on governments to adopt progressive policies and processes.

Other suggestions included:
- strengthening the structure of trade unions;
- fighting for respect for core labour standards; and
- establishing company networks.

Sixty three percent of the respondents said that the most important requirement for international solidarity is wider acceptance of this principle and the development of good policies on international solidarity by unions.

The co-operative agreement signed between the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the Australian trade unions during the South/South conference could be a model for other union federations. The agreement emphasises the need for Cosatu and Australian unions to work jointly on international campaigns, especially those targeting multinational corporations. It is part of Cosatu’s plan to fight job losses triggered by globalisation.

Most trade unionists are convinced of the need to build international strategic partnerships (99%) and build the strength of trade unions nationally (99%).

Eighty five percent of delegates felt strongly about the need to build strong relations with civil society and seventy two percent felt trade unions must consider developing co-operative agreements with capital.

With globalisation the name of the world ‘game’ today, the way unions respond could determine their survival or demise. The respondents in our survey came up with a number of ways of turning threats to survival into opportunities for growth. Time will tell whether their organisations are able to rise to this challenge.

Thobile Yanta is a researcher in the Union Organisation Programme at the National Labour and Economic Development Institute (Naledi).

E-mail: thobile@naledi.org.za