

Out of the headlock!

Ten theses about the role of trade unions in the global economy

1. Structural crisis of the trade unions

The fact that trade unions for almost 20 years now are in a defensive position – with special consequences in terms of working hours and of work distribution – is not the result of lacking will power or programme deficiency. The trade unions did not find any answers (they haven't even tried to) to the structural challenges of economic globalisation, which founded a new supremacy of capital and disadvantaged trade unions structurally.

2. How trade unions function

... the principle for their functioning consists of establishing a monopoly to offer labour force to specialised labour markets. The threat of the collective hold back of labour force (strike) becomes possible and brings them into the position to pit themselves against the structurally dominant capital (private property of means of production) and enables workers to get the materially well-deserved survival in capitalism, and – the other side of the wage agreement policy, or the "wage agreement free exercises" – the reduction of working hours and, along with it, the compensation and collectivisation of production progresses through redistribution of work (avoidance / limitation / reduction of unemployment).

3. Globalisation of the labour markets

The revolution of the productive forces as a result of digitalisation and internet has speeded up the economic processes and brought their boundaries to fall. The national limits of labour markets were dissolved through new forms of migration. The operative capacity of the capital to transfer production and services, at always lower risks and expenditures, to any place in the world where labour force is cheaper, makes the worldwide price of wages directly comparable and creates an increasing global world market segmented according to different branches, which is deregulated (for the time being) and functions according to the conditions of demand (of the capital).

Trade unions react to the economic globalisation and to the formation of new global labour markets arguing in two, both helpless, ways: part of them declare the new situation as bluff of the opposing side and therefore ignore it, others understand it as a law of nature, to which one has to submit in the end, but skilfully, i.e., with a socially endurable location securing policy.

4. Neoliberalism as „adequate“ ideology

The everyday practical experience of workers, to save their employments by adapting to the market dominance of the capital (i.e., through wage decrease or unpaid extension of working hours) is the material root of neo-liberal ideology, Trade unions, on the other side, appear contradictory and untrustworthy, because in the end they are forced to practice something which stands in clear contradiction to their own right macro-economic understanding, that wage reduction does not guarantee employment, but as a total and in the end leads to more unemployment. In the battle between ideologies, neo-liberalism cannot be defeated, it can only be disbanded by the contradiction of which it is fed itself.

5. Global Unions and trade-unionist need to catch up

Trade unions will only function again in globalised labour markets, if they improve their development or restructure themselves in direction to global trade unions, in order to recover the monopoly of the labour force offer in the new extension of the labour market.

The fact that this request is blamed today for being utopian is, first of all, the result of their ignorance for many years. Instead of keeping pace with capital, trade unions have spent a decade reacting to the structural problems in the manner of apolitical business management, namely by merging to national multibranch trade unions.

6. Globally equal wages are only a far away objective

Global Unions don't of course mean (at least not for the first steps) equal wages and working conditions worldwide, but it means neutralisation of the competition of wage costs, so that the employers don't get influenced when deciding on investments or transfers. Other criteria of competition as the vicinity to the market, productivity, currency facilities, political stability, infra-structure, etc. get important for decisions on competition. In this sense stopping wage competition also means to stop dumping competition downwards (where all employees are losers), whereby at first the gap between the wage and the social level will stay constant. Even if there would be a turning of the trend, i.e., when improvements would become feasible, it would not at first affect all levels, before the gap can be reduced.

7. Bridgeheads and first steps

There have always existed international trade union confederations, there are trade unionist cooperations in border regions, and there are European workers commissions and common efforts on the wage agreement policy in Europe. Even if every way presents special limitations and contradictions, these steps are out of the national constraints, both political and cultural, with which both trade unions and workers move to the international boards, on which the forces of the capital are moving for a long time already with great routine. With the ITF – Section Maritim there is a first, not yet realised by many people, global union for sea folk – having wage agreement achievements and an increase of memberships.

8. Europe – no way out of the trade unionist dilemma

In Europe as it is constituted for the time being, with the Lisbon-Strategy and an outlined neo-liberally defined constitution, trade unions will be in the defensive position from the very beginning: instead of the German location, there will be the European location, with extension of working hours, reduction of wages, of taxes and of the social system in order to resist to the pressures from the Southeastasian and Northamerican areas of competition. The trade unions in Europe must face their defensive role without illusions, be ready for conflicts against reduction struggles and consider the global level, which is where the question of power in Europe is decided.

9. attac & trade unions – a potential alliance

Altermondialism is gradually reaching its limits with its forms of mobilisation. In order to impose itself with its ideals, it would need a means of pressure in the centre of economy, which theoretically, not practically, is at the disposal of the trade unions. An alliance in which trade unions only strengthen the mobilisation forms of altermondialism in quantity, but don't put in their real pressure potential, is platonic and doesn't help anything. Attac and others have an own vital interest in the re-shaping of the trade unions in the global context and have many possibilities within their networks to support this process, as well as to claim for it.

10. „Wer sich selbst versteht, wie soll der aufzuhalten sein“ (Bert Brecht) „How shall he be stopped, who understands himself“ (Bert Brecht)

The perspective of Global Unions doesn't mean to give up national struggles of distribution or the everyday trade-unionist work under defensive conditions – on the contrary! Only a wage agreement and trade-unionist policy that is ready for conflicts has the conditions to use the free spaces of distribution as well as the learning processes in the sense to initiate a globalisation of trade unions. Trade unions that take the decision for such an ideal, will have to count with defeats and compromises for a certain time, but they would understand them, would find ways out of them and would get a more convincing and more solidary perspective, which within a short time would make the long-expected „turnaround“ possible.