Faire appel à la syndicalisation pour combler le fossé entre les secteurs formels et informels

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Résumé

Ce numéro spécial traite des nouvelles formes d'organisation collective chez les travailleurs occasionnels et informels, et des nouveaux types de relations qui émergent des efforts pour regrouper ces travailleurs en syndicats et en organisations non gouvernementales. Les articles présentent une évaluation critique de ces relations, étudiant de plus près les risques inhérents aux tentatives de rassemblement des collectivités de travailleurs formels et informels et les occasions qu'elles rendent possibles. Les auteurs réfléchissent aux possibilités et aux implications politiques générées par la tendance croissante à la précarisation et à l'informalisation du travail. Les cas et les situations traités sont tirés de différents contextes géographiques dans diverses régions de l'hémisphère Sud. Un large éventail de secteurs économiques et de situations de travail y passe : secteurs du détail et des services, confection et textile, industries automobile et agroalimentaire, travailleurs domestiques et ramasseurs ou récupérateurs de déchets. Les diverses contributions présentent au final des perspectives diversifiées et contrastantes plutôt qu'un consensus sur des questions majeures.

Introduction to the Special Issue:
Organizing across the formal-informal worker constituencies

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Introduction

This special issue addresses novel forms of collective organization among casual and informal workers and the new kinds of relationships that emerge out of initiatives to organize these workers by trade unions and non-governmental organisations. The articles critically assess these relationships by taking a deeper look at the opportunities and the risks involved in initiatives that seek to bring together formal and informal worker constituencies and reflecting on the political possibilities and implications of this growing casualization and informalization of work. The papers present cases from varied geographical contexts in several regions of the Global South and from a wide variety of economic sectors and work situations, including workers in retail and service, tailoring, textile, automobile, agribusiness, domestic workers, and waste pickers/recyclers, among others. The contributions offer diverse and contrasting perspectives on central issues, rather than a consensus.

Processes of informalization and casualization of work and livelihoods are becoming more intense in many parts of the globe in the context of global economic change and the deregulation of labour markets. While on the rise in post-industrial societies, these trends are particularly marked in the Global South, where large parts of the population earn a living through activities beyond the purview of state regulation and without the protection of state legislation. Many capitalist firms rely increasingly on casual labour and subcontracted work to reduce costs, thereby contributing to the spread of precarious forms of work. Self-employment in a great variety of small-scale activities has also become widespread, chiefly, but not exclusively, among the poor. No less exposed to the whims of global markets than other workers, some groups of the self-employed are also vulnerable to volatile governments that in many cases do not see them as rights-bearing citizens. The general picture is of a vast and

growing number of vulnerable workers located across a wide range of economic sectors, work situations and employment relations.

Mike Davis (2004:24) describes this "informal proletariat" as "the fastest growing […] social class on earth" and others have interpreted these developments as the end of labourism (Standing, 2010). The political implications of these trends are often described in discouraging terms. Much has been written about the debilitating effects of these processes on worker solidarity and on trade union power bases, which have been premised on wage work in capitalist economies. At the same time, the growing "informal proletariat", is described in some influential analyses as more or less devoid of historical agency and as, at best, a kind of "pre-industrial mob" prone to explosive but short-lived outbursts (see Davis, 2004). Others emphasize the *individual* agency of these workers, their preference for silent action and their avoidance of overt activism (Bayat, 2004). There is indeed a long tradition of seeing informal and casual workers as lacking the capacity for collective organization and for activism of wider import. This capacity has long been viewed as the prerogative of the traditional working class. Now that this class is being undermined by neoliberal globalization, the possibilities for effective resistance may indeed seem dismal.

However, the informalization and casualization of work does not necessarily spell the end of possibilities for emancipatory struggles. These processes are also giving rise to new forms of collective mobilization and new organizing initiatives in a variety of contexts.

Emerging Organizing Initiatives and Relationships

This collection of articles joins a growing literature on how vulnerable groups and workers in the Global South create their own organizations and articulate their concerns (see for example Lindell, 2010a, 2010b; Chen et al., 2007; and Fernández-Kelly, 2006). The collective organization of informal and casual workers takes a wide range of forms and orientations. Chris Bonner and Dave Spooner describe in their article the emergence of highly diverse forms, ranging from membership-based associations, cooperatives and trade unions to faith-based groups. Organizational forms vary greatly from one context to another and between sectors – as Bonner and Spooner show in their comparison of the domestic work and waste sectors – indicating the inadequacy of a universal form or

strategy for organizing these workers.

Several of the articles highlight how casual and informal workers in different contexts devise innovative self-organizing strategies that differ considerably from conventional trade unionism – see in particular the articles by Bonner and Spooner for an overview and by Eddie Webster for an in-depth look at one organization, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India. The organizing strategies of vulnerable workers are flexible and aligned with their needs and realities. Their collectives often combine features of different organizational forms and often evolve from one form to another. They seek to address the multiple needs of members, including those beyond the realm of "work", such as household needs and community concerns (see also the article by Bridget Kenny). They shift their targets according to members' needs and circumstances. They use flexible recruitment strategies to reach workers in such diverse and dispersed locations as the waste dump site, the city street and the "slum". These features lead Webster to describe SEWA as "a new type of trade unionism".

However, many organizations of informal and casual workers face a range of serious constraints. Many are small and lack material resources, influence and recognition from the authorities. Consequently, as Bonner and Spooner argue in their article, one strategy has been to build supportive relationships with other organizations in order to offset some of these weaknesses. The authors go on to describe a variety of emerging collaborative relationships among informal workers' organizations and other actors, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and trade unions. While such relationships are important if informal workers' organizations are to grow and increase their influence, the authors stress the importance of the organizations' autonomy, of the possibility of setting their own agendas and of self-representation.

The articles probe more deeply into emerging relationships between trade unions and informal and casual workers and their organizations. Facing the bitter reality of declining membership among their traditional ranks, many trade unions are looking further afield to new constituencies in an effort to retain their standing and influence in society. The idea that trade unions should expand their mandates and play an active role in organizing casual and informal workers has been advocated by, among others, the International Labour Organization (ILO) as part of its "decent work" agenda (ILO,

2002) and is the subject of increased academic debate. As conditions have worsened for workers across spheres and segments of the labour market, proponents argue that trade unions should be concerned with *all* workers, irrespective of the "location" and nature of their work. Failure to do so will turn trade unions into a "labour aristocracy" concerned only with protecting the privileges of a minority. Trade unions are thus urged to reach out to the self-employed and to casual labourers. This is part of a vision whereby trade unions link up with social movements and community struggles to give effect to a broad-based social movement unionism (Waterman, 2001; Moody, 2005).

Advocates of this position see a range of potential benefits for both trade unions and informal workers and their organizations, including, for the latter, increased opportunities for social dialogue. But there is also considerable scepticism and concern about potential risks. The contributions in this collection reflect this diversity of positions, and reveal rather contrasting findings and views, as they examine a number of critical issues arising from the encounter and interface between the two constituencies.

Building Relationships: On Whose Terms?

One important issue emerging from the analyses is this: on whose terms are relationships between trade unions and informal and casual workers built, and what are the power relations involved? Can trade union engagement build coalitions that are horizontal and respectful of pluralism, as envisaged by Peter Waterman (2006)? In her study of two automobile industries in South Korea, Aelim Yun shows how unions created by subcontracted workers became dependent on regular employee unions to bargain on their behalf and how their members fell into passivity. In a context where both types of workers worked on the same assembly line, the power of shop stewards over both was reinforced. In one of the two studied cases, the regular workers' union sought to control and restrain strikes organized by the union representing the subcontracted workers. The integration of the casual workers' union into the regular workers' union, she states, also led to loss of membership by the former, thus weakening it. In her view, the traditional trade unions were reluctant to accept the casual workers' unions and to share workplace power. Despite sporadic collaboration, conflicts ensued, ultimately to the advantage of the corporations, which were drawing on the labour of both regular and subcontracted workers.

Bridget Kenny's findings from her analysis of trade union efforts to reach casual women workers in the retail sector in South Africa through the creation of Mall Committees are also sombre. In her view, casual workers became dependent on shop stewards, whose authority was reinforced by virtue of their privileged access to resources and networks. She argues that "casual workers remain at the margins of inclusion; the state, employer, the union, the source of all power to be lobbied". Ultimately, she states, the Mall Committees served to "disciplin[e] precarious workers as political actors", reproducing a division whereby agency is ascribed to the union and casual workers are reduced to subjects.

There is an important gender dimension to these processes, one that surfaces in several of the articles. Feminist scholarship has shown how the effects of neoliberal globalization are gendered, including how women in many contexts have been turned into the desirable and docile "flexible workers" (Standing, 1989). The fact that women are often particularly numerous in the lower income levels of the informal economy is also well documented (ILO, 2002a). This deepening feminization of casual and informal work has been an additional challenge for trade unions, whose history of gender relations is a convoluted one of male privilege and unequal gender participation, resulting in the neglect of the concerns of women workers for a long time (see the article by Olaiya et al for a review). Olaiya, Brahic, Jacobs and English argue in their article that "organizing female casual workers is a critical issue in ensuring the relevance of trade unions, which […] must engage with the changing face of the labour force". They document initiatives by trade unions to organize casual women workers in export-oriented horticultural estates in East Africa. In contrast to Kenny's findings, they conclude that trade unions, despite earlier male biases and gender blindness, can improve the conditions of women through innovative strategies and attentiveness to the needs of casual female workers. Through the Women Workers Committees that were brought into existence, female leadership was also fostered. Noteworthy in this case is the impetus provided by Women Working Worldwide, an international NGO with a strong feminist agenda, for local partner organizations to adopt gender-oriented approaches.

The contrasting findings above suggest that the outcomes of trade union engagement with vulnerable workers cannot be predicted or generalized. While such outcomes sometimes appear to be mainly

to the benefit of these workers, the contributions above also suggest the need to be attentive to eventual unequal relations and to instances of marginal or nominal inclusion in trade union structures. Fear of such unbalanced relations might be one reason informal and casual labourers and their organizations are sometimes reluctant to join or collaborate with trade unions. Andrae and Beckman, in their study of Nigerian trade union initiatives to bring individual small-scale tailors into their ranks, show that the tailors' responses varied: while some tailors joined the trade unions as individual members, others wanted instead to invest in their own association. The latter were keen to preserve the autonomy of the association and insisted on equal standing with the union. Another example is SEWA, which, as described by Webster, after an initial period of existence under the auspices of the trade union, broke away as a result of unresolved tensions over gender issues and conceptions of "worker".

The contributions consider the importance of recognizing informal workers as *actors* rather than as subjects or mere recipients of trade union (or other) organizing efforts. This perspective is notably different from seeing all agency as located in the trade unions, with informal and casual workers reduced to a subordinate and passive position. The latter view may flow from paternalistic attitudes that see the extended mission of trade unions as "organizing the unorganized" – those who supposedly lack organizing capacity, literacy etc. (see, for example, Moody, 2005). They may also stem from one-sided agendas exclusively concerned with "trade union renewal", in terms of which trade unions may be eager to increase their membership but be less willing to transform themselves. Several of the contributors argue that if trade unions are to include informal and casual workers on fair terms, they must be willing to undergo substantive change (see particularly the articles by Yun and by Bonner and Spooner). This would include changing their internal structures and the profile of the leadership; taking the priorities of informal workers seriously and developing services tailored to their needs; and promoting gender equality within the union so as to reflect the feminization of casual and informal labour. To help effect such transformation, trade unions may draw inspiration and learn from the innovative forms of unionism emerging within the informal economy.

Constructions of Difference and Sameness

Despite the above hazards and difficulties, can a larger movement of working people be built and formal and informal worker constituencies be brought together into a stronger front, as envisaged by some (for example, the ILO, 2002:84)? At the heart of this question lies the contested notion of "work"/"worker" and issues pertaining to collective identity-building and worker subjectivity.

As Webster notes in his article, "work" is a key concept of modernity. The notions of "work" and "worker" on which most trade unions have relied have their origins in former Fordist production relations in Western societies, and are associated with conditions of a single occupation, permanent employment in large-scale workplaces and a single employer to bargain with. Besides being informed by narrow understandings of "class" (on which I have commented elsewhere in connection with relations in the informal economy, see Lindell, 2010c), such definitions classify as "non-workers" all those making a living through own income-creation, multiple and precarious income sources, varied and shifting employment relations, etc., and thus exclude the vast worlds of casual and informal work. They amount to a construction of difference that has a range of significant potential consequences. They may render difficult collaboration between the two worker constituencies, as they are construed as intrinsically different. They may also legitimize the unequal integration of vulnerable workers into trade unions, based on the argument that they are not "real workers" and thus should not enjoy equal rights of representation in the decision-making bodies of the union. At a wider societal level, such constructions of difference may hamper recognition of these workers' organizations as *worker* organizations (if they so choose to profile themselves). In addition, and as Bonner and Spooner remark, they may deprive these workers of access to legal benefits often reserved by law for the traditional working class.

Some organizations in the informal economy are contesting and redefining such narrow notions of "work" and "worker", as Webster illustrates in his analysis of SEWA. By doing so, they are also challenging the power of conventional trade unions to classify and define, thus engaging in a symbolic politics over who has the legitimacy to represent the large numbers making a living through informal and casual work (Lindell, 2010c). Instead, they advance more flexible and embracing notions of "work" and "worker" to

include the realities of these workers.

Efforts to bridge the different worker constituencies, however, require overcoming difference and constructing shared meanings. As Yun states in her article, for more than nominal integration to occur collective identity needs to be built. Indeed, in analyses of actual bridging efforts, we need to give greater attention to processes of collective identity-building and of construction of sameness (which I have discussed at length in Lindell 2010c). One example of constructed sameness is the argument that people working formally and informally "are all workers", thereby identifying some basic commonality on the basis of which joint mobilization can occur (see ILO, 2002). Building collective identity and shared meanings often involves the negotiated selection of one fundamental contradiction or injustice to be prioritized – what is often referred to as framing processes (Jenkins and Form, 2005). This comes at a cost, as it may suppress difference and other types of experienced injustices. This realization prompts some important reflections.

First, informal and casual workers are not simply *workers*: rather their subjectivities are far more complex (Lindell, 2010a, 2010c). They may organize as workers, but also on the basis of religious and other forms of belonging, which do not necessarily exclude one another. As several of the articles point out, vulnerable workers often mobilize around concerns beyond the sphere of work. Their multiple and malleable identities are accentuated by their transient and multiple livelihoods, by the diverse and shifting relations of production in which they work and by the way that many of them straddle formal and informal spheres of the economy. So a framing that focuses excessively on one particular identity or contradiction does not reflect the diverse and multilayered experiences of these workers.

Second, constructions of sameness may also render invisible the great differentiation that can be found in today's informal economies (Lindell, 2010c). People of varying economic standing in the informal economy are often treated as if they were an undifferentiated and homogenous group. Yet differences in economic capacity, gender, age and ethnic identification interact to produce place-specific patterns of advantage and disadvantage in the informal economy. If collective organizing in the informal economy rests on constructions of sameness that erase these differences, sources of exploitation and injustices emerging from within the informal

economy will remain unaddressed. In addition, where trade unions venture into organizing in the informal economy, who exactly are they organizing? There are cases where trade unions mainly bring into their ranks small-scale employers in the informal economy and are reluctant to acknowledge labour relations within it (see Vainio, 2011). Such selective inclusions have potential implications for the possibility of representation and empowerment of the most marginalised informal and casual workers.

Wider Political Potential?

Given the dim prospects for agency that Mike Davis and other influential pessimists ascribe to people in informal and casual work, it is worth considering what the political potential is of their collective organizing. It is known that certain groups tend to be excluded from most forms of organizing. This is the case for child workers and international (illegal) migrants, who face obstacles to becoming members of associations. In addition, the poorest often lack the time to participate in associational activities. The organizations of poor people are often vulnerable to political cooption or dependent on political patronage (Meagher, 2010). They may also have skewed internal power relations and fail to comply with Western-style democratic procedures. But while the problems and shortcomings are many, some informal worker organizations are able to protect and secure benefits for their members (see Lindell, 2010a; see Webster's article).

Some of the contributions discuss the wider political potential of organizing across formal-informal constituencies. The positions, however, differ considerably. Bonner and Spooner hold that such bridging will lead to increased leverage with and influence on the state. Andrae and Beckman argue that alliances between formal and informal workers are critical for reorienting national economic policy, for democratizing politics and for establishing "a popular democratic alternative to the neoliberal order". In their view, while an organized informal work force is essential, trade unions have a leading role to play in this political project. Although trade unions may be weak, they add, alliances with informal worker organizations will give them wider popular backing and improve their power in leading joint democratic initiatives.

Kenny's article reaches quite different conclusions. In her view, the Mall Committees created by trade unions ultimately

reproduce "the role of the state as protector and as resource holder, accessed through the political leverage of trade unions [which] is part of the hegemonic framing of South Africa's ruling party". Naturally, political context matters – as the contributors in this volume make evident – and the political outcomes of alliances and initiatives bridging formal-informal worker constituencies cannot be generalized. However, Kenny's findings seem to resonate with a more general scepticism about a vanguard role for trade unions in leading broader contemporary worker struggles (see, for example, Barchiesi, 2010).

A loss of autonomy by informal worker organizations following their integration into trade unions may eventually narrow down the range of political strategies to those sanctioned by the trade union. As already mentioned, such organizations often have multiple targets and change strategies to fit circumstances. They learn how to navigate complex and difficult political landscapes and how to play the political field, sometimes through less orthodox strategies, including exploring contradictions within the state to their own advantage (Lindell, 2010a). Sometimes, they may prefer to withdraw into invisibility, which may be necessary in conditions of heightened legal or political uncertainty (Lindell, 2010b). Their politics thus tend to be more flexible and fluid than those usually adopted by trade unions.

While organizing and alliances may in some cases improve the influence of vulnerable workers on the state and national policies, can they challenge the neoliberal order beyond the territorial frame of the nation state? Casual workers are often part of global production networks and many local informal activities are inserted into global commodity chains. Thus, what can organizing these workers achieve in relation to powerful global actors? While the answer to this question lies in the future, we can begin to reflect on the political potential of organizing initiatives emerging at the international level.

Promise and Perils of International Organizing

Some of the contributions indicate the importance of scaling-up collective organizing and of international connections. What new political possibilities might be opened up through international organizing over the concerns of informal and casual workers? First, possibilities for influencing global actors and

international governance institutions involved in the setting of international regulatory regimes may be created. Opportunities for coordinated international action may also emerge among a range of geographically dispersed worker organizations. Second, international organizing creates opportunities for sharing experiences and mutual learning across different contexts. Third, it sometimes provides strength and resources (symbolic or material) for informal workers' struggles at the local level (Lindell, 2009). Multi-scalar strategies can thus enable informal and casual workers to exert influence on a range of relevant actors (such as governments, firms, supranational regulatory bodies) located at various scales.

Given the significant potential gains, current developments at the international level warrant attention and reflection. One novel trend is that informal and casual workers' organizations are increasingly establishing international networks or supranational structures (Lindell, 2010a). Bonner and Spooner describe the varying progress made by domestic and waste sector workers in this respect, as well as the benefits that can be derived. Another significant and parallel trend Bonner and Spooner discuss is the growing interest global labour organizations show in the conditions of vulnerable workers and the policies they are devising regarding them. Is this the beginning of an international social movement unionism that takes account of the vast numbers of casual and informal workers and that could more effectively confront powerful global actors in this age of global capitalism?

The above developments, in spite of their considerable potential, are not without risks or obstacles. First, the level of commitment and openness among global labour organizations varies considerably. Bonner and Spooner describe how implementation of supportive policies by these organizations lags. They describe how informal workers' organizations have sought to influence international trade union organizations to adopt a more active and supportive role, and also how they have struggled for recognition by the international labour movement. Second, as with other the formation of other transnational movement, there is always the risk of North-South power inequalities, as powerful NGOs and labour organizations in the North may set conditionalities for their support of organizations of vulnerable workers in the South. In a global civil society well populated by organizations that claim to speak for the poor, there is a new generation of transnational "grassroots movements" that

are led from the South. These derive their agendas from the bottom up on the basis of the concerns of their grassroots constituencies, thus potentially "enjoy[ing] high levels of legitimacy and right to representation" (Batliwala, 2002:404). StreetNet International is an example of such a movement that draws its leadership from member organizations in the South. However, the difficult realities facing grassroots organizations and their members in the South usually impede direct participation in international activities (Cumbers et al., 2008:189). There are considerable constraints on the international mobility of poor people in the South as well as limited material resources, levels of literacy, access to internet technologies, etc. Under such conditions, participation by the majority becomes highly uneven, as well as indirect and dependent on a limited number of individuals. Mechanisms to check their powers of mediation and representation are thus important in realizing the potential benefits of international organizing for poorer members.

Despite the above risks and obstacles, transnational solidarity is emerging among organizations of casual and informal workers located in many countries. These developments indicate that rather than simply being the victims of global forces, these workers have an agency that reaches beyond local or national scales. This is a scenario that Mike Davis and other extreme pessimists were unable to envisage. It remains to be seen whether multi-scalar organizing and emerging international solidarity and collaboration will be able to disrupt or reverse the global tide of informalization and casualization of work.

Endnotes

1. This project emerged from a session on "Organizing across the Formal-Informal Divide" at the XVII World Congress of the International Sociological Association (ISA), 11-17 July 2010, in Gothenburg, Sweden. The session was part of a series of sessions arranged by the Research Committee No 44 of the ISA. It was convened by Ilda Lindell, guest editor of this issue, then a researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute and now at the Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University.
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