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Review: The labour movement and the internet

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Pipedreams? Perhaps, however email is already used in this way (though without quite such speed and co-ordination). The net was central to highlighting the case of the EZLN who otherwise might have been wiped out quite early on in their history.

The Verdict

A book combining the Labour Movement and the internet could be a potentially boring one! This certainly isn't the case with Eric Lee's book, it is well written and non-technical. The slant though is reformist throughout, and he always makes great play on the role of leaders and executives.¹¹

Overall, though, a good and important read. If you haven't the £15.00 handy why not get your union branch or local library to order it for you and have a look at the Web site (www.geocities.com)

¹¹ For example, on page 103 he tells us that (in the USA) "more important, at the end of 1995, a new leadership was elected in the national trade union centre, the AFL-CIO, which promises to organise millions of workers into trade unions and restore Labour's power and prestige"....Don't hold your breath Eric!

For business, international solidarity is not a far off dream but an integral part of its day to day existence. In capitalism there is, of course, competition, but it is in all their interests to promote low wages, high unemployment, ease of movement of currency and so forth. These days production is located where it is cheapest and products are sold where they will make the most. They have access to communication and information exchange beyond the dreams of most people and they can move millions of pounds at the touch of a button. They make good use of their international banking 'solidarity' to maintain an impressively stable climate where the rich get more powerful and the vast majority become more disempowered. They are numerically much smaller than us but extremely well organised, well informed and – most importantly – aware of their own interests as a class.

Ordinary folk on the other hand remain trapped. We are trapped by our lack of access and control, lack of access to media, means of communication and the ears of government. We are also divided by multiple practical, ideological and cultural differences. It is possible, occasionally, to get really impressive solidarity, for example the Liverpool docks' strike¹ but to make this permanent and on-going is much more difficult.

¹ An even more impressive example was the International Gathering in Chiapas in the Mexican Jungle last Summer. This was facilitated by ordinary poor peasants in Chiapas who, despite living in appalling conditions themselves, took the time to feed, accommodate and organise all facilities for 3000 people from all over the world to talk about capitalism and how to beat it!

The Internet

The internet opens new vistas for cheap communication, conferencing and publishing. Eric Lee poses the question: can this be used to reinvigorate the world “labour movement.”?²

He first goes through the various tools available; E-mail, on-line databases, discussion groups, usenet news groups, on line chat and publishing, including the World Wide Web. As this article is not an explanation of the internet, I certainly won’t intimidate you by going into any of these in any more detail. Suffice to say that his introduction is precise and easy to grasp, better written than many textbooks on the net are.

Pioneers

The book then deals with the history of how “telematics”³ have been used by the labour movement. This was new and fascinating territory for this reviewer. Our bosses love to give the impression that workers react to new technology with mistrust and suspicion. What would they say about a character like Chip Levinson?

Levinson was the general secretary of the International Chemical Workers’ Federation in the 1970s.⁴ He spent much time wrestling with the problem of the growing power of transnational corporations (TNCs). In 1972 the internet was a top secret military project known as ARPNET (The Advanced Research Projects Agency Network) linking a few military

² His term!

³ “The interaction of all types of data-processing, electronic information and communication” is how he defines this term in the glossary at the back.

⁴ This is one of the secretariats which are the global organisations of national trade unions. The ICF no longer exists having since been incorporated into the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers’ Unions (www.icem.org).

It is, of course, only fair to point out two drawbacks to the net. Firstly, transmission is insecure and most messages are easily traceable.¹⁰ Secondly, and probably more importantly, the internet is very much a plaything of the well off and middle class, with the USA being hugely over-represented and many parts of the world hardly getting a look in. Even in those countries where there is good connectivity it is still very much a plaything of college kids.

The Future

The author has some grand visions for the years to come. One is the idea of an on-line daily labour paper with archiving and a live discussion forum. He also dreams of an accredited Labour University offering courses from negotiating a contract to labour law and history.

As union rights are under attack all over the world, unions have to respond promptly to violations and in a co-ordinated way, like Amnesty International’s “Urgent Action Network”.

He gives an example of how this might work. A trade union activist employed by a leading TNC disappears, presumed kidnapped, in Brazil. His union send all his details and a photo to HQ in Rio. The photograph is scanned, and the information entered into a standard form, and the lot is emailed to the International Secretariat in Europe. The information is sent to two mailing lists. One is for all Portuguese speaking unions world wide, the second for workers in the TNC concerned. Letters are sent and articles are written, phone calls are made, Company HQ is picketed. Within hours a phone call is made to someone in Brazil and the activist appears bruised and battered but alive.

¹⁰ There is free software available such as PGP (Pretty Good Privacy) but it’s not that user-friendly and most people wouldn’t be bothered. Encryption is a big issue on the net as governments, like the US government, demand the keys to the encryption codes.

dockers by Greg Coyne, the moderator of the Union-d⁸ list in Britain. Initially he says in the book, it was:

“more of a stunt than an organising tool.”

However the site has been a success bringing in not just solidarity mentions but action by the likes of the Japanese dockers’ union and the San Francisco Longshoresmen’s union local.

Problems and Possibilities

There is little doubt that the internet offers massive advantages for transnational organisation. The bosses have not been slow to grasp this. These advantages are mainly to do with cheapness and potentially high circulation.

On-line publishing simply involves getting space on an internet connected server and then adding some “tags” to your text graphic and sound files. Gone are the cost of paper, printing and circulation.⁹

A second area which is rapidly becoming a reality is cheap on-line conferencing, where international meetings can be held without the time and expense of travel. It is already possible to have live discussions using Inter Relay Chat (IRC) software. With cheap digital cameras, faster connection speeds and cheap software, face to face video conferencing won’t just be the property of big business.

⁸ There are many such discussion groups on the internet. Some are open Usenet groups, available to anyone with the right software. Better discussion is to be had on closed groups of which Union-d is one. On these lists the groups are moderated and you have to subscribe. The discussion is E-mailed to participants and is usually much more in-depth than on the open news groups which tend to have a lot of noise but little discussion. For details on anarchist discussion groups see the WSM site.

⁹ The key to high circulation is to do a good “advertising” job for your new site.

and science research institutes in the U.S. Knowing nothing of its existence didn’t stop Levinson speculating on the idea of internationally linking unions using computers. In his book *International Trade Unionism* he wrote that;

“Only a computerised information bank could possibly keep bargainers and union strategists tuned into the strengths and weaknesses of companies and provide them with the current data on financial facts and figures, productions, inventories, wages, hours of work, vacations, pensions and all the other factors involved.”

Though the technology still hadn’t come on stream (he hoped to use telex machines⁵), like a true pioneer he was already formulating concepts that could only become reality in the future.

The first practical, working “Labournet” was set up in 1981 by Larry Kuehn. He was the president of the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, a union representing 40,000 secondary and primary teachers across a sprawling province in Canada. Kuehn and Arnie Mayers, the union’s communication officer, bought 11 “dumb” terminals for the 11 members of the union’s executive. These were just keyboards and thermal printers (no screens even) connected by 300 bytes per second modems (about 1% of the speed of a typical 1990’s modem). After 2 years all the union’s locals⁶ were hooked up and the system stayed in operation until 1990.

It got plenty of use. The union launched a province wide strike in 1983. Strike news rushed up and down the lines, got printed and photocopied and handed to picketers. The teachers quickly found themselves to be much better informed than

⁵ “Through a compatible programme these data banks could be linked by telex to ICF headquarters and information rapidly transmitted to affiliates on request.”: Charles Levinson “*International Trade Unionism*”(1972)

⁶ Union branches in USA and Canada

their bosses, discussions and conferences could be held over the lines and a news service (which could be given on disk to local papers) and contract database were launched province wide. The system proved so effective that the bosses paid it the ultimate inverse tribute, quickly rushing out to get one of their own!

The Present; onto the infobahn

Many such networks and bulletin boards were set up in the 1980s and plenty are still going strong. Initially all these networks were closed and served by central computer(s) or servers which had information and space for conferences and news groups. Bulletin boards like this are dialled through a modem and telephone line, generally for the price of a local call. Many, like Fidonet in America, now also have links to the internet.

Since about 1988/89 more and more people are dialling into the internet itself through “service providers.” You dial directly to these organisations and they, for a charge over and above your phone call, hook you into the net.

OK, a very brief technical explanation. The Internet is not thousands of computers linked by modems and phone line. The net itself has a massive thick fiber optic backbone capable of conveying millions of messages including sound and video images at extremely high speeds. Your phone call connects you to your “service provider” who then has a direct line onto the internet. Most modern use of electronic communication focuses on the internet itself, though thousands of local networks exist independently of it and some can hook into, it though they may not get all the available services.

The author discusses some of the current internet use by unions and union federations and also how it has been used by strikers to explain their case and has often led to real solidarity actions in other countries. Eric Lee himself set up “New

International Review” in 1977, but his politics would appear to be, at best, social democratic to judge from his occasional disparaging use of the term “hard left”. So there is no information here on revolutionary or syndicalist union federations. Unfortunately, he focuses entirely on the large reformist federations. None the less there are some startling examples of how much can be done with the new technology.

One such is the International Transport Workers’ Federation. This London based Federation is made up of 400 unions in 100 countries, representing about 5 million workers. It was one of the first to adopt E-mail and use on-line databases in the mid 1980s. They have gone to the time and expense of leasing their own internet connection and could set up as service providers in their own right. ITF inspectors can now telenet into their on-line database from any net connected machine and get information on ships covered by ITF agreements. They were also the first international secretariat with their own web page (www.itf.org.uk). Their monthly publication is now available to download in 5 languages. They also use the page to publicise major disputes involving other unions as they happen.

The Federation is now in negotiations with the International Marine Satellite Organisation to lease satellite time allowing internet access to seamen in virtually every cargo ship in the world!⁷

Web strikes

There are now several examples of use of the internet, especially the Web, in disputes. The Liverpool dockers web site is perhaps the best known example. This was set up for the

⁷ This use of satellites is also a possibility for unions in developing countries — it’s expensive but cheaper than building a telephone network from scratch.