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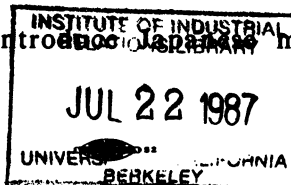
## WORLD-WIDE ASSESSMENT OF LABOR'S TACTICS AND STRATEGIES

by Paul Chown

The International Metalworkers Federation was founded in 1893 and now groups 14 million members in 165 unions in 70 nations world wide. It is perhaps the largest coordinating body of any international union. Located in Geneva, it brings trade union representatives together to discuss international policy on such subjects as collective bargaining, political action, reduced working time, new technology, industrial democracy and workplace health and safety. It also engages in research work, collects data on contract provisions, and makes surveys of comparative purchasing power, among other activities.

At a meeting held November 25th and 26th, 1986, in Geneva, the organization took a hard and serious look at developments in the trade union movement and in collective bargaining on a world-wide basis. The results of their discussions, which can only be briefly summarized in this article, are significant for trade unionists in any country and in any work jurisdiction. Spokespersons coming from 27 countries reported the following developments:

1. Employers now commonly enter negotiations with demands for concessions on a world-wide basis. With a few exceptions, unions are on the defensive in every country.
2. A major demand of employers is for "flexibility". Their approach can range from a direct attack on work rules to demands for sharply reduced numbers of classifications and a change in work hours. European unions have generally been successful in resisting nightshift work, scheduling of shifts at off hours, excessive overtime work and other infringements on historic customs. Union practices vary from country to country, but the employers' demand for flexibility crops up everywhere. As Herman Rebhan, General Secretary of the IMF put it, "flexibility is a word used by employers...to stand for whatever they most need from us."
3. A demand for decentralization of contracts and negotiations has been raised by employers on a world-wide basis. Just as the steel industry has broken up industry wide bargaining in the United States, and employers like General Electric and Westinghouse are demanding the break up of decades-old national agreements, so too in Europe and elsewhere employers are seeking to negotiate on a local scale and break up industry wide conditions. Union are required to think through their present structures and ways of doing things to combat such employer demands for local plant bargaining. One response is to strengthen the organizations of shop stewards, in Germany called the "Vertrauensleute," or "men of confidence."
4. The introduction of new technology is frequently accompanied by renewed employer resistance to collective bargaining and has led in some countries to intense anti-union activities by governments, and to election victories for conservative parties.
5. Increased use of part-time and temporary workers, and along with this the development of a new class of workers who do not come out of a trade union background and tradition, has become a major employer challenge on a world-wide basis.
6. Widespread efforts to introduce Japanese management styles are taking place in various countries.

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7. Persistently high levels of unemployment in many countries have weakened the power of labor unions on a world-wide basis.

8. The formation of ever larger "cartels" or multinational companies has intensified monopolist competition among the powerful world-wide economic units which tend to be the pace setters. Computerized banking has given rise to international credit markets with a major shift in power from national governments to banks, especially central banks.

9. Strikes are becoming ever more difficult to win, everywhere in the world.

Recognizing these difficult trends, unions affiliated with the IMF are setting new goals and plans, not just to survive but to grow and to make a greater contribution to the overall aims of the IMF: "Peace, Justice and Jobs". Some of the key goals and resolves contained in reports from the November 1986 meeting in Geneva are:

a) A determination to confront new technologies by insisting that workers must be involved in every aspect of planning, installation, operation and, particularly, in the control of work processes. West Germany is the leader in establishing procedures for control of new technology by workers at the point of operation, with the goal of "humanizing" its application.

b) A determination to develop a new approach to politics and to labor's relationships with political parties. The goal is to forge new alliances with the poor and the disinherited to win gains for the unorganized and non union sectors of a country and its economy. It is clearly perceived that unions must develop new approaches to win allies in other segments of the economy.

c) A determination to increase labor's communication efforts significantly--both internally with members, and externally with the public at large.

d) A reaffirmation of democratic procedures and membership participation in decision making i high on the list of new directions which were recognized as essential.

e) Shorter hours of work is another key proposal and demand. German metal workers won a shorter work week after a strike; the most recent group to do so are 200,000 Danish metal workers who negotiated a 37 hour work week. The report contains specific information about many countries in which hours are steadily being reduced below the 40 hour work week which is still customary in the United States.

Readers of LCR are urged to take a few moments to write for two free reports which provide details for the above summary. The reports are (1) *Guide to Changing Patterns of Collective Bargaining* (a 180 page summary of international trends, which includes accounts of approaches in different countries); and (2) *Current Problems Facing Metalworker Unions, World Wide* (a thoughtful report on new approaches to the changing situation).

Both reports are available free to those who request them from International Metalworkers Federation, 54 bis, Route des Acacias, CH 1227, Geneva, Switzerland.

-- Paul Chown

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