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Organising in the global workplace

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About this manual

The global economy is now a reality for all trade unionists. Whichever sector we work in, and wherever we live, our lives are affected by worldwide changes in society, economy and ecology.

Nothing showed this more than the global financial crisis of 2008 which has had such an impact on workers here in the UK and across the world. No-one can now imagine that our own future is separate from theirs. We have to organise internationally. Only then can we help create a more sustainable economy, with decent jobs for all that combat poverty as well as address the ecological threat facing humankind from climate change.

More and more members of Unite work directly for global corporations, in the global supply chains that produce or handle the goods and services, or in industries dominated by global markets. The nature of jobs is changing, as more employers demand ‘flexibility’ – taking away permanent jobs and replacing them with different kinds of unprotected and vulnerable labour: casual short-term contracts, migrant labour, ‘informal’ work arrangements, and so on. These are all worldwide trends, not just something happening in the UK.

In the relatively near future, climate change will inevitably lead to major restructuring of industrial production and transport. It will have a dramatic impact on our members, but it also presents a major organising opportunity for the trade union movement.

Such global changes make the international organising strategies of our trade union movement more important than ever. We cannot restrict our thinking and actions to Britain and Ireland alone. We need to build new forms of practical solidarity and new global organising initiatives, and also integrate global perspectives into our local organising activities wherever this makes them stronger. I’m pleased to say that more and more of our union members are keen to know how we can do this.

All around the world, other unions are similarly looking at the changing world, and debating what the best responses are. Unions are sometimes accused of self-interest. To an extent, this is true of course – unions have to listen first and foremost to our own members. But the trade union movement has also always maintained a tradition of fighting for broader social justice, and a sustainable world for future generations. The fight for the environment and against poverty go hand-in-hand – and they actually provide us with new opportunities for organising and building strong unions.

And we must not forget or allow employers to ride roughshod over the outstanding achievement of the international labour movement - the fact that all workers everywhere have fundamental rights, no matter who we are. This is something fought for, and won, by trade unionists working together at a global level.

In this manual we look at the strengths we already have – the international structures and alliances that we are part of, and the activities we undertake there. And we discuss how they can be developed and strengthened so as to help us better meet the challenges of today’s world.

Jack Dromey
Unite Deputy General Secretary
Who this manual is for, and how you can use it

The aim of this manual is to stimulate discussion within Unite about our international organising strategy.

• How can we all – wherever we are in the union – play a greater role in building an international union movement capable of meeting the challenges of today and exerting real power?

• What should our international organising strategies be? Which are our main priorities?

• How can we best use the relationships we have with others around the world to achieve our goals?

The manual is primarily for those taking part in Unite education programmes, whether tutors or lay representatives, whether on courses specific to ‘Organising in the Global Workplace’ or on any other ones. As globalisation deepens, there is barely an aspect of union education that does not have an international dimension to it.

But it is also for much wider use within the union. Unite officers, staff members, and lay representatives at all levels are encouraged to read and make use of the manual. It is for anyone and everyone in Unite who is interested in, and wants to take action on, international issues.

There is plenty of practical information about the structures and activities of the international union movement of which we are part. There are ideas for action that might strengthen our ability to organise effectively around the world. There are websites and publications where you can find more information.

Section 1 looks at some of the key issues of today’s world, and how we are already responding.

Section 2 goes into more depth about the international union structures and other relationships that we are already involved in, and the types of activities that we are involved in.

Finally there are tips about how we can use new technology better in our international communications, and a ‘To Do’ checklist for lay representatives.

The opinions stated in this manual are not necessarily union policy, and the purpose is certainly not to prescribe policy. It doesn’t attempt to provide all the answers. Its aim instead is to encourage debate within Unite that then leads to stronger action.

We all want a future for everyone without poverty or injustice.
We want a world that is sustainable for generations to come.
So how can we in Unite best go about helping to get this?
Where to go next

If you are interested in getting more involved in Unite international activities, there are plenty of places to start:

- **The ‘Action List’** at the end of this manual (see page 76)

- **Education courses** run by Unite for our members:

  For up-to-date information on all courses available, get a copy of the latest Unite Education Prospectus:

  Email: education@unitetheunion.com  
  Tel: 020 8462 7755  
  Website: www.unitetheunion.org/member_services/education.aspx

- **International activities** of Unite.

  Sign up to get involved at:

  Website: www.unitetheunion.org/resources/international.aspx

- **The websites of the Global Unions and the many other organisations with whom we work on international solidarity, listed throughout this manual.**
1. GLOBAL CHALLENGES = NEW OPPORTUNITIES

The first Section of this manual looks at the key directions in which the global economy is moving, and what this means for our union’s international organising activities:

- The world’s financial system crashed in 2008, causing job losses and increased poverty for millions; how can we trade unionists work together across borders to get a global economic system that works for the world’s people, rather than just using us?

- Who are the global corporations that employ so many of us today? What are the best forms of global union solidarity to stand up to them?

- What is going to be the impact of economic development elsewhere in the world – particularly in the rising economies of East/Central Europe, China and India?

- Employment is getting more precarious – for us in the UK and for workers around the world; how can we best fight together to retain the standards we have won, and improve on them?

- How will climate change affect industry and employment in the UK and around the world; how can we seize these opportunities to organise for jobs that are both green and fair?

- What is the impact of these developments for workers and unions elsewhere, particularly those in the ‘global South’ fighting such deep poverty? How can we best build solidarity with them, in their interests and ours?

- What are the implications for our own union membership and our strategy for growth?

What do we mean by the ‘global South’/‘global North’?

These terms are sometimes used in this manual. The ‘global North’ is a short-hand term way of talking about the comparatively wealthy countries of the world, including the UK, which are mostly in the northern hemisphere (the ‘North’), while also including others such as Japan, Australia and New Zealand in the south of the globe.

Meanwhile, much of the southern hemisphere – Africa, Latin America, and Asia – is populated by poor countries. Plus, there are also countries in the northern hemisphere struggling to develop, including in Central/Eastern Europe. So the loose term for them is the ‘global South’.

First World/Third World, high/middle/low income countries, or developed/developing/underdeveloped are other terms you may come across elsewhere. None are totally accurate, and in any case are becoming out of date with the rise of the new economies and the impact of climate change which are shifting the balance of economic and political power.
1.1 No more ‘Business as Usual’

In late 2008, the world’s financial system crashed, bringing on a global recession said to be the greatest man-made economic catastrophe in human history. It was a crisis created not by the working class, but the financial elite. Yet ordinary working people have been made to bear the brunt.

Millions across the world have been losing their jobs - something like another 240 million people just by the end of 2009. For the already poor, it means greater poverty. And women workers suffer disproportionately, even though they are crucial to the well-being of the young, elderly and sick.

But this crisis is also a moment to seize, to organise more effectively in our global trade union movement for a world that is much more humane and environmentally sustainable than the ‘free market capitalism’ of the past three decades. We don’t just have to accept a pared-down version of the old model.

“It is time for a new model of globalisation.
One that puts people first.
One that shifts the focus from capital to labour.
One with decent work, social justice and quality public services for all at its heart.”

Peter Waldorff, General Secretary, Public Services International (PSI)
speaking at the International Labour Conference, 18 June 2009, financialcrisisblog.world-psi.org

‘Free market capitalism’, also called ‘neo-liberalism’, said that ‘the markets’ know best. Governments should back off from legislation, which was simply ‘market distortion’. The ‘public sector’ should be kept to a bare minimum, and ‘private sector’ bosses brought in to show the rest how to run things - never mind the waste of tax-payers’ money on ridiculously expensive consultancies, or their inability in reality to run things on schedule or safely, as we saw after the privatisation of British Rail.

It was like a fundamentalist religion. Anyone questioning it was dismissed as ‘old-fashioned’. Somewhere along the line, the idea of public ownership, of working for the greater good of society, became out-moded – unless, that is, you were one of those strange socially-minded people who became a nurse, or a teacher, or a local government worker, and so on.

Meanwhile, the ‘neo-liberal’ experiment deepened inequalities and widened social divides. The rich got much, much richer; the poor got much poorer. It was a dangerously simplistic ideology.

Now, thank goodness, since the crash it is seen as the sane thing to question what kind of system we want. More people are open to new ideas. There are better ways of running the world, and it is up to us to help achieve them.

“Basically, neoliberalism is over: as an ideology, as an economic model. Get used to it and move on. The task of working out what comes after is urgent. Those who want to impose social justice and sustainability on globalised capitalism have a once-in-a-century chance.”

Paul Mason, BBC TV Newsnight journalist,
See also Paul Mason’s blog ‘Idle Scrawl’ at www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/paulmason
So what did happen?

The financial sector had increasingly become divorced from the real economy. Far higher profits could be made out of gambling on the financial markets than by producing actual goods and services. It was ‘casino capitalism’. They betted on whether or not other investments would turn rotten (‘credit default swaps’), or on a drop in share prices without needing to invest in the shares themselves (‘short-selling’), and so on. The money to be made in such ways was vast, and fast.

Such financial transactions were so far removed from reality that few seemed to understand them, and while the good times rolled no-one listened to the odd doubter. Those directly involved were full of their own greed and adrenalin. The regulators, meanwhile, had adopted a ‘light-touch’ approach; investment banks, for example, were not even required to have sufficient capital to underwrite their debts, a core principle of traditional banking.

Then it all collapsed. The trigger was the crazy lending to people in the US to buy houses they could never afford: the ‘sub-prime’ mortgage system. But if not that, it would have been something else. Once the defaults started, they spread like wild-fire, and the global banking system seized up.

Some of the biggest banks in the world went out of business. Others stopped lending to each other or to other businesses or individuals – removing the money flow which lubricates the economy. So, governments stepped in with take-overs, injections of capital, buying up ‘toxic assets’, etc. – a massive bail-out. The private racketeers conveniently forgot their own principles and, with seemingly little remorse, lapped up this ‘state intervention’. Some left with their pay-offs; some stayed in post, supposedly best placed to steer us out of the mess they created.

Then came the knock-on effect to businesses involved in actual production. Even giant global corporations such as General Motors collapsed.

Now our governments have debts they hardly know how to clear, leaving us with a future of reduced public services and recession.

“The emergency action to support financial institutions that are too big to be allowed to go bankrupt is necessary. However, it is unacceptable that governments nationalise the losses of financial capital and privatise the profits.”

Statement by the Secretariat, Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC) to the OECD, 19 September 2008

Financial Crisis Facts

- British banks rescued by £75 billion worth of UK Government funds in August 2007 - October 2008 were Northern Rock, HBOS, Bradford Bingley, RBS, and Lloyds; this is an on-going debt of about £3000 per household in the UK.

- Leaders of failed businesses walked off with huge pay-offs: Stan O’Neil, who led the US financial services company Merrill Lynch to disaster, kept more than US$160 million; his counterpart in the UK, Sir Fred Goodwin of the Royal Bank of Scotland (which made a pre-tax loss of £24.1 billion in one year under his leadership), walked away with a pension pot worth £11.9 million, even after he ‘volunteered’ a cut.
How to get out of the mess?

Some still seem to cling to the belief that this crisis is a ‘temporary blip’ and the markets will correct themselves. Even now, they still want a small state and deregulated markets. Many in governments and regulatory bodies, as well as the private sector, can’t seem to adjust. If only the banks will lend and we all start buying more again, the economy will pick up, they say.

But neo-liberalism has ended in abject failure. More consumer spending is not the right way out of the mess. Nor can we just argue for the same jobs back, though on better terms and conditions. It is not a simple question of growth, but of what kind of growth.

Certainly, when the economy picks up again, it must no longer be on the back of insecure contracts and low wages, with employers doing their best to avoid negotiating with the workforce and governments helping them by bad-mouthing unions or, worse, brutal repression. Organised labour is not part of the problem, but key to the solution.

We have proved right in our campaigns against privatisation and for the public good. In fact, mutual and cooperative financial institutions, under attack for years, have been relatively successful in weathering the financial storm, and they demonstrate that another model – social rather than individual/private - is possible. We have proved right that more legislation is needed to curb the excesses of the selfish, anti-social ‘free marketeers’.

In reality, too, millions who are losing their jobs cannot go back to the same ones. This is because at the same time as dealing with an economic crisis we have an ecological one caused by climate change. There is huge potential, though, in new ‘green jobs’ that develop new industrial processes and transport to replace fossil-fuel driven ones, convert our homes to be energy-efficient, and so on (see Section 1.5). Any growth must be socially and environmentally sustainable.

The international union movement within the Global Unions (see Section 2.1) are monitoring and analysing the situation, and taking every opportunity to put proposals forward to governmental meetings on the crisis, such as the meetings of the G20 powerful governments, and the IPCC meetings on climate change.

This is a moment of real opportunity to think big, and organise globally for a better future for the people and planet.

“Accelerating climate change, financial disorder, and food & oil price instability share the same origins: a lack of commitment to regulation, a push towards ‘small government’ and free market economics, and an international system that has underperformed in terms of its governance of globalisation. All these crises always end up affecting the most vulnerable among us, those who did little to cause these problems... We now have, through sustainable production and consumption patterns, a unique and historic opportunity to transform our societies for the better.”

Guy Ryder, General Secretary, International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)
www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article2568

Global Financial Crisis Unions’ Watch: www.ituc-csi.org/financialcrisis


Blog and policy proposals on the financial crisis by UNI, the global union federation that includes banking/finance workers: www.uniglobalunion.org
1.2 Global corporations integrating the world

More and more of our members either work for transnational corporations (TNCs) or in industries dominated by them. Whether in food/drink processing, chemicals/oil/rubber, power/engineering, banking/insurance, retailing, or even the public sector, our employers today are seldom local or even national. They are more likely to be multinational, or transnational. Their world is a global one. So ours must be too.

The UK is home to some of the world’s largest transnational corporations. Companies based here, as well as North America, Europe and Japan, benefited from globalisation from the early 1980s onwards. International debt and privatisation were used as levers to open other countries up to them, particularly those in the ‘global South’. UK-based retailers too now have stores in many countries, and they wield huge economic power through the way they source their goods across the world. These developments have brought us into a direct relationship with many more workers in distant places sharing the same employers as us.

Meanwhile, foreign investors have been arriving in the UK. In the 1980s, Japanese car manufacturers set up plants in the UK. Then, with the privatisation of public utilities like water, power and railways, we saw the arrival of French companies, for example. In recent years, the UK has been attracting more foreign investment than ever. In the latest phase, they include corporations from the rising economies of India and China. As employers, they all come from countries with very different patterns of industrial relations for us to deal with.

- Nanjing Automobile of China now runs the former MG Rover plant at Longbridge, Birmingham.
- Corus, Europe’s second largest steel producer based in the UK and the Netherlands, is now owned by Tata Steel from India. In March 2008, Tata also bought Ford’s Jaguar and Land Rover divisions.

Alongside this, there is another important development: the rise of private equity firms. Blackstone, Carlyle, Goldman Sachs, Lion Capital, Texas Pacific and Permira are hardly household names. But they now employ nearly one-fifth of the UK’s private sector workforce.

The business of private equity companies is delivering very high rates of return to their investors (typically 20-25%, sometimes 40%) in a short time. Such astronomical returns can only be achieved by extracting cash out of the companies they acquire. They buy up, restructure, and sell off, and unsurprisingly jobs and employment standards are ruthlessly cut. If anything, these faceless groups have even less sense of responsibility, let alone accountability, than large corporations. Sometimes it is not even clear if they are technically our employer or just ‘a shareholder’. Meanwhile, individual private equity bosses make billions off these deals, though exactly how much they like to keep secret.

- In 2005, Texas Pacific bought the global airline catering company Gate Gourmet from Swissair and, with a planned assault on unions, especially at London Heathrow, reduced the global workforce from 25,000 to 20,000. By March 2007, they had quietly sold it again to Merrill Lynch.

“I’d like to see that if an employer moves his or her work from Britain to a country where they can make more profit, it is the same unions meet them over there, wherever they move.”

Iggy Vaid in ‘Hear Our Story’,
a DVD by Unite-T&G Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority Members
Many of us, meanwhile, do still work for a local or national employer. Even so, we are most likely working in a global production or distribution chain. Our workplace may well be one link in an inter-dependent system of production and transport that stretches across the globe. Raw materials and components come from afar; or what we are processing may well have been semi-processed first, say in China; or our own production may be heading off for finishing elsewhere.

- In 2006, the UK imported almost 84,000 tonnes of meat from Thailand (two-thirds of all EU meat imports from that country); much of it is semi-processed poultry for UK workers to ‘finish’.

The global economy does not only feature large corporate producers. Goods are often produced in complicated supply chains of outsourced contractors – even involving small sweatshops and home-based workers. Today, there are certain global corporations that dominate such supply chains. They include the giant retailers such as Tesco and WalMart (that now owns Asda). They wield enormous power, through their purchasing policies, over the manufacturers, large and small, around the world who produce the goods they sell. It is these global producers and retailers who encouraged a massive shift to women’s employment in sourcing countries, for example, because the labour cost of women is invariably lower.

Then, components and products are transported across the globe by what is now called the logistics industry. Certain global logistics companies have come to dominate these distribution chains - DHL, FedEx, TNT, and UPS are well-known names. They are also known as the ‘integrators’ because it is they who ‘integrate’ and control the myriads of sub-contracted transport companies involved in passing the goods on, one to the next.

Many transport workers are involved – long-distance truckers, local van drivers, seafarers on container ships, dockers to load and off-load, air cargo handlers, plus the office-based data-handlers, keeping track of the goods as they move across the world. Unite is part of a 50-strong Integrators Network organised by the ITF transport workers’ global union federation, see Section 2.1. As with the big TNC manufacturers, a key area for union activity is to put pressure on them to accept their responsibility for the employment terms and conditions throughout their supply chains.

It is not the same as where we share the very same employer, but we are nevertheless related to fellow workers in these global chains, and we do have collective industrial strength with them. The chains are highly reliant on just-in-time production and ever-faster cycles of design, production and distribution. So they are very vulnerable to any disruption or delay somewhere in the chain.

- As US dock workers showed when they shut down ports along the west coast for ten days in 2002, a strategically-placed picket line in the transport system can bring large parts of the world economy to a grinding halt within a matter of days: www.ilwu.org

So, what do these global developments mean for our organising strategies, at home and with others internationally?
**Corporate facts**

- Of the world’s biggest 100 economies, more are private corporations than countries; just 200 companies control over a quarter of the global economy.

- The top 100 global corporations directly employ about 15 million people, and they influence the working conditions of many millions more.

- In 2006, private equity funds spent over US$725 billion buying out companies – an amount equivalent to buying up the national economy of the Netherlands, or the economies of Argentina, Poland and South Africa together – and with billions of dollars to spare. By late 2007, one private equity company Blackstone alone claimed to control over US$100 billion worth of assets. Workers in companies taken over by private equity funds are more likely to experience job losses than if taken over by other types of companies.

- TESCO has stores in 12 countries outside the UK with over 100,000 employees – over 500 stores in Thailand alone. In the UK, the “Big Four” (Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury’s and Safeway) now control three-quarters of all groceries retailing. This concentration has occurred very quickly; in 1990, the “Big Four” did not even control half of the market.

‘Private Equity Explained’, T&G Record, September-October 2007


Buy-Out Watch: www.buyoutwatch.info

Corporate Watch UK: www.corporatewatch.org
No global regulations yet, only ‘guidelines’

Transnational corporations are subject to laws in each country where they operate, on issues such as employment, standards of business practice (anti-corruption), etc., even if most governments have believed in operating with a ‘light touch’ to give the private sector maximum room to manoeuvre.

But these laws governing corporate behaviour are only at a national level. There is no body of law at an international level to regulate the global activities of corporations, despite their huge economic power.

This has meant that corporations can and do duck and weave between countries to gain advantage out of the different legislative environments. Often, for example, they don’t actually produce but only source goods or services from particular countries deliberately so as to side-step legal responsibilities there. So, trying to get global corporations better regulated through enforcing national laws is not enough on its own.

The financial crash of 2008 did cause governments some rethinking, at least for the financial sector. The leaders of the G20 countries meeting in London in April 2009 agreed to “take action to build a stronger, more globally consistent, supervisory and regulatory framework”. This was quite a departure from the past.

However, global corporations outside the financial sector are still free from global regulation. All we have so far are some ‘international guidelines’ agreed by governments which set out how corporations ought to behave. They have some value as statements, and can be used to bring extra pressure on companies, provided it is part of a more concerted campaign (see below and page 16).

Plus there are various international negotiating procedures developed by the global trade union movement over the past few decades, as discussed later in this Section.

ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is important to trade unionists because we have official representation there, alongside governments and employers, and it has set out fundamental rights for all workers everywhere, including to free trade unions (see opposite).

Some thirty years ago, the ILO also agreed a set of ‘principles’ that corporations should respect, and they include these fundamental rights of workers. However, these principles are, in the words of the ILO, “promotional”. They are voluntary: companies should follow them, but whether they do or don’t is up to them.

It has been known for a complaint to be made to the ILO about a particular company, but the process is not clear. There is certainly no police force to halt actual abuses by a company. The ILO operates through diplomatic pressure – and overall it is aimed much more at bringing governments into line rather than corporations.

International Labour Organisation

www.ilo.org

The ILO is a body of the United Nations, with its headquarters in Geneva. In the ILO sit the representatives of governments, employers and trade unions. It is the UN’s only such tripartite body. Here, these ‘social partners’ discuss and eventually agree on international labour standards. Above all, the ILO has established the principle that:

All workers, no matter who or where we are, and whatever our employment status, have fundamental rights which no governments or employers are entitled to violate.

These fundamental rights of all workers, known as the ILO’s Core Labour Standards, are:

- Freedom of Association
- Right to Collective Bargaining
- Elimination of forced labour
- Effective abolition of child labour
- Freedom from discrimination

The core standards are part of a wider set of Conventions and Recommendations that governments are supposed to bring into national law (known as ‘ratification’). The first one – on hours of work – was agreed in 1919. These are the world’s closest thing to a body of international labour law. However, there is no enforcement mechanism, only pressure, and on governments rather than employers. Complaints are heard by Committees of Experts. Their opinions, though not binding, nevertheless can support actions by unions on the ground.

One useful activity for British unions is to lobby the British Government to ratify Conventions, not only to help us here but also to put pressure on other governments. Those still waiting to be signed by the UK include:

- Private Employment Agencies Convention No.181 of 1997
- Maternity Protection Convention No.183 of 2000
- Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention No.184 of 2001.

The ILO promotes what it calls ‘fair globalisation’: that only job creation, ‘decent work’, and better social protection can reduce poverty in the world. ‘Decent work’ is the ILO short-hand term for: good jobs at good wages, respect for core labour standards, good public services, social protection, and social dialogue between governments, employers and unions.

ILO policy decisions, such as the adoption of new Conventions, are made at the Annual International Labour Conference (ILC), held each year in June. British unions are represented through the Global Unions (see Section 2.1), as we are too on the ILO Governing Body, where one of the members to 2011 is a British TUC International Officer.

ILO Bureau for Workers’ Activities ACTRAV:

The ILO carries out research, education and training, produces a wide range of publications, and has useful on-line databases, especially ILOLEX on International Labour Conventions: www.ilo.org/ilolex/english/index.htm
OECD Guidelines on Multinational Enterprises

This is another set of guidelines for corporations agreed thirty years ago, this one by governments of the industrialised countries in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), including the UK. Revised in 2000, they set out the human rights, labour relations, information disclosure, anti-corruption measures, taxation, environment standards, and consumer protection that companies should be respecting.

With the OECD guidelines, there is a clear complaints mechanism. Each country involved has a National Contact Point (NCP) to whom anyone can make a complaint about a company operating in that country. However, most NCPs are pretty toothless, and few people know they exist. A Global Union analysis of 50 cases worldwide showed many left to drag on, directed elsewhere, or other excuses found.

The UK’s NCP is made up of government officials from the Department for Business, Enterprise & Regulatory Reform (BERR), the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DFID). Lord (Bill) Jordan sits on the NCP Steering Board for the TUC. In recent years, complaints have been brought to the UK NCP against, for example, M&S, Premier Oil, BAT, Group 4/Securicor, and National Grid/Transco, mostly about their operations abroad.

In the UK, Unite complained to the UK NCP when PSA Peugeot-Citroen closed down the Ryton plant without proper consultation in 2006. Our complaint was upheld, and it did add to the pressure on the company. In the same year, when Nestle in York threatened British unions with relocation, the IUF foodworkers’ global union federation (see page 61) took it up with the NCPs in the UK and in Switzerland (where Nestle has its headquarters); this helped to get collective bargaining back on track. But these steps succeeded only because we had union strength on the ground.

“The OECD Guidelines procedure can be a useful tool - when it supplements an on-going campaign.”
Peter Rossman, food workers’ global union federation IUF

OECD: www.oecd.org
UK NCP including decisions on individual cases: www.csr.gov.uk/oecd1.htm
Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD including a ‘Users’ Guide for Trade Unionists’ and analysis of complaints brought to NCPs: www.tuac.org
OECD Watch: www.oecdwatch.org
Global corporations do not have to abide by any global regulations, and duck and weave around the national laws operating in each country. But many do depend on their image to make their profits. Soft drinks producers, retailers, banks, and so on need public confidence in their ‘brand’ to sell their goods or services. Companies, like Nike and Gap, that produce sportswear and other clothing have actually been hard hit by consumer and student campaigns outraged by the bad conditions for workers making the goods they sell.

The response of many companies has been to adopt a ‘Code of Conduct’ and/or join a ‘Corporate Social Responsibility’ (CSR) body. Their aim is to show what a good ‘corporate citizen’ they are. Neil Kearney, former General Secretary of the garment workers’ global union federation (ITGLWF) (see page 65) estimated 10,000 such codes exist. However, to him, most were “meaningless, nothing more than fig leaves for exploitation”.

As well as individual company codes there are many other CSR initiatives: codes drawn up for a specific industry such as toys or sporting goods; international standards such as SA8000 and the Global Reporting Initiative; discussion forums such as the United Nations Global Compact, and more. Plus there are activities in individual countries. Here in the UK, the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) was set up in the late 1990s, and supported by the new Labour Government, to encourage dialogue between corporations, trade unions and NGOs. All this has spawned a vast profession of ‘social auditors’, one after another visiting supplier factories in the developing countries to check how well the different codes and standards are being applied.

Unions are wary of CSR because it is voluntary – companies choose whether to take part or not; it is not legally-binding. “CSR must not become a substitute for the proper functions of government”, says the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC, see Section 2.1). Nor must it be used to side-step union rights to collective bargaining. It is legislation and negotiated agreements that make employers accountable under law.

This is not to say that we can or should ignore CSR. Codes have sometimes provided a lever to help win trade unions, for example in garment factories in Asia. Unite found the ETI useful in getting the Gangmasters Licensing Act passed after the tragic deaths of Chinese cockle-pickers in Morecambe Bay in 2004. CSR has changed the terrain so that some previously hostile companies such as Nike now do acknowledge trade union rights, at least in theory.

The growth of CSR does give us an opportunity to promote greater recognition of the fundamental rights of workers. We can use it to put pressure on corporations to respect international treaties and conventions on human rights, the environment, anti-corruption, and so on. However, again, our success will depend on how well organised we are.


Corporate Responsibility (CORE) Coalition: Unite is a member, along with 130 other organisations in the UK: www.corporate-responsibility.org


See also, “CER”? (Corporate Environmental Responsibility)’ on page 48.
Union responses to corporations

Depending on governments to regulate corporate behaviour is clearly not going to work. Nor, obviously, is letting corporations regulate themselves. Strong trade unionism is key to keeping corporate power in check. But how to do this to be most effective is the key question.

All the time that global corporations have been gathering strength, trade unionists have been grappling with how best to organise in them. Dealing with a TNC at just a local or national level is not going to be very effective. It too easily allows management to play trade unionists in one location off others elsewhere. Coordinated international union responses are needed. But what form should they take? Which structures are best for building union strength, at home and abroad, while also being flexible to respond to new developments - like the private equity takeovers and contracted supply chains that we see today?

Over thirty years ago, the International Metalworkers’ Federation (IMF) (see page 64) set up structures to bring together trade unions that represent workers sharing the same corporate employer. They called them World Company Councils (WCCs). Today, there are WCCs for trade unions in, for example, ten major car manufacturers (including Ford, Nissan, and General Motors) and others such as Electrolux, Siemens and Caterpillar. Another global union federation UNI has similar structures for particular companies which it calls ‘global unions’.

Their strength lies in coherent, coordinated initiatives that feed through into union policy development. However, they tend to involve union officials rather than shopfloor representatives, and so there can be difficulties in relating what they do to the workforces in distant locations. The solidarity they generate tends to have relatively little impact on union organising on the ground. The structure also doesn’t easily fit for dealing with corporations which operate in various sectors. Plus, given the dozens of TNCs existing in each sector, there has to be a limit to the number of such structures that senior union officials can handle.

A different response in the late 1970s was to set up International Shop Steward Combines. These brought together shopfloor union representatives to share information and collaborate on strategy towards their TNC employer. Union activists set them up for Ford and General Motors global workforces, for example.

These networks had the advantage of involving union members who directly work for the same employer. They were a bottom-up approach; workplace reps could be part of developing an international strategy that directly reflects members’ day-to-day concerns. They demonstrated to workers - and employers - the collective power of the global workforce, helping to generate confidence and union organisation.

The disadvantages lay in building effective and on-going coordination. It is very expensive to bring large numbers of plant-level representatives together from across the world. Combines also didn’t work in corporations which have hundreds of product lines and production facilities, such as the food giant Unilever. And it was not easy to build the achievements of different combines into a coherent global union policy.

The scale and complexity of transnational corporations today is such that it is impossible for global union federations to organise all the union responses that are possible or desirable. So some GUFs are actively encouraging networks between workplace reps in different countries, in a way that is reminiscent of the early combines. By using new communications technology they can be both structured and flexible – and they cost much less. There is, for example, a Unilever Union Network (see Section 2.3).
International/Global Framework Agreements

“When companies were local, unions had local agreements; when companies were national, unions had national agreements. Now in the global economy we need global agreements.” UNI global union federation

From the late 1990s, the global union federations have been developing another approach too. They have been reaching agreements at a global level with senior managers of particular corporations, called ‘International’ or ‘Global Framework Agreements’.

IFAs set out minimum labour standards that the corporation agrees to respect in all its operations around the world. Typically these are trade union rights, collective bargaining rights, information and consultation, equal opportunities, safety and health, minimum wage standards, and the banning of child labour and forced labour. Regular monitoring meetings are usually built in. With the growth in outsourcing and supply chains, some GUFs have been arguing for a clause where the corporation accepts responsibility for employment conditions in its contractors too. Today there are about 60 IFAs, including:

- **International Metalworkers’ Federation (IMF):** 19 including Indesit and Bosch home appliance manufacturers, and DaimlerChrysler and Renault car manufacturers.

- **UNI:** 15 including Securitas security firm, H&M clothing stores, and Nampak (see below).

- **International Federation of Chemical Energy Mine and General Workers (ICEM):** 13 including the Lafarge cement company.

- **Building and Woodworkers’ International (BWI):** 12 including IKEA furniture.

- **International Federation of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers Association (IUF):** 5 including Danone foods, Accor hotels.

- **International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers’ Federation (ITGLWF) European regional body:** 2 with European regional employers’ associations.

These agreements are, as the name says, ‘frameworks’ containing bottom-line standards. They are only as strong as the unions on the ground, and it is up to the unions in each country to use them, make sure they are implemented and not just used as PR by the company, and to negotiate higher standards than the minimum they contain.

There is also a need to involve unions worldwide in IFA negotiations. Often unions from the headquarters country of the corporation are signatory to the agreement. But there have been some complaints from unions elsewhere that they have been left on the sidelines.

It seems that no IFAs reached so far are with corporations headquartered in the UK, but many of them do operate here. So we too can use these agreements – and our using them strengthens their use elsewhere too.

In May 2006, an IFA was signed between UNI and Nampak, the South African packaging corporation. It incorporates core labour standards and recognises union access to members and the information distribution, as well as regular dialogue between the company, UNI, and unions on the ground. In the UK, Nampak has carton and plastic food container plants in several locations, organised by Unite.

Find out if your employer has agreed to an IFA at: www.global-unions.org/spip.php?rubrique70

More on IFAs:
IMF: www.imfmetal.org/main/index.cfm?n=47&l=2&c=7787
UNI: www.uniglobalunion.org/UNIsite/ln_Depth/Multinationals/GFAs.html
European Works Councils

European Works Councils (EWC) were established in the mid-1990s as part of ‘social Europe’, that is to say as a mechanism for management and workers’ representatives to sit down together and discuss issues relating to their particular company. Under European Directives, any company with at least 1000 employees in EU member states, and 150 in each of at least two of those countries, must set up an EWC.

EWCs currently operate in 828 major companies across the EU, covering some 14.5 million employees. 110 of them are companies with headquarters in the UK. There are, however, still many companies without the EWC they could have.

On the plus side, EWCs bring together workers’ representatives from across Europe who share the same employer, and they have rights to information and consultation by management on the company’s plans and performance. This can be useful for improving working terms and conditions.

Women in the Nestle EWC used their rights to information to take an in-depth look at Nestle pay structures across Europe. At first the company denied there was a problem, and some of the union men were not interested, according to Monserrat Sagarra Fitó of the Spanish union CC.OO. But after a lot of work, the women found wage differentials that “could not be rationally explained”, and they eventually got Nestle to agree to end this discrimination. Without an EWC, the women probably would never have got sufficient information to make their case.

There are weaknesses with EWCs, however. The workers’ representatives in them do not have to be union representatives, and there is so far no legal obligation on them to report back to the workforce. Without care, they can also become a clique between union officials and management. As the European Trade Union Confederation (see page 23) says, “An active, representative trade union organisation is the first guarantee of a well-functioning EWC”.

Also, as companies get rid of directly employing people by shedding them to outsourced suppliers, those workers become excluded from the benefits of EWCs unless, that is, unions take action to keep them in.

On top of that, EWCs are limited to Europeans, even though many of the companies concerned operate well beyond the EU. Unions elsewhere sometimes feel kept ‘out of the loop’. Where union representation in an EWC is strong, this could be used to strengthen global union organising, but there seem few cases of this yet.

Unite is very active in EWCs. Unite-Amicus played a key role in setting up new EWCs in companies like Barclays, Flowserve, and Textron, and has representatives in over 200 EWCs.

Workers fighting the closure of Cadbury’s plant in Keynsham near Bristol got solidarity from unionists in Poland after the Polish workers heard, through the Cadbury’s EWC, about the company’s plans to shift the work there from the UK. It would be Cadbury’s fourth plant there (even though transporting their products back to the UK adds on unnecessary emissions).

Find out if your employer has a European Works Council at: www.unitetheunion.com/resources/international/regions/europe/european_works_councils.aspx


For more information on EWCs: www.etuc.org/r/57 and www.etuc.org/a/125

Corporate Europe Observatory: www.corporateeurope.org
1.3 The rising new economies

Trading across the globe is centuries old. But the past three decades have seen something new – a massive relocation of production itself. In particular, many Northern-based industries, now dominated by transnational corporations (see Section 1.2), have moved production to the global South, taking advantage of the low labour costs of workers there, and the relative cheapening of transport and communication costs.

Labour-intensive production processes - notably in garments and the new electronics industries – were the first to move, to countries where mass poverty drives people to accept jobs with poor employment terms and conditions, and unions have had to fight hard to establish themselves. Such countries include Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Philippines in Asia, and Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala in Central America. And the manufacturers have found they can move relatively easily between them when unions do get organised and raise employment terms and conditions.

Some capital intensive industries also moved. For example, in the 1980s some steel manufacturing in the UK and was transferred to countries described as ‘middle-income’ such as Korea, India and Brazil. Labour costs there were cheaper than in the North but there was a good enough economic infrastructure for these longer-term investments.

Workers in the North called them ‘runaway’ industries. Sometimes it led to protectionist responses such as ‘cheap workers are taking our jobs’.

But others realised that the best response is solidarity not hostility. Our interests are best served by helping to build strong unions in those countries as well as in our own, to raise the standards for all.

What is more, their solidarity can get returned to us; organised workers in the South can and do help workers in the North strengthen our strategies and campaigns. Unite benefited from this in early 2008, during our campaign against M&S using agency labour (see page 37).

Today, capital movements are no longer so ‘North-to-South’. Industries are being relocated to new areas such as the countries of East and Central Europe that have recently joined the European Union.

What is more, we are now seeing corporations that originate in the rapidly growing economies of countries such as China and India investing and outsourcing across the world, including here in the UK.

In this Section, we focus on three key areas of economic growth that are important to workplace developments in the UK: Europe, China, and India. We look at what kinds of international relationships we can build with workers in these regions that might help us meet these latest challenges of the global economy.

“We have to find ways of uniting with our sister unions in India, China and Eastern Europe.”
Tony Woodley, UNITE Joint General Secretary
Europe expands

27 countries in Western, Eastern and Central Europe are now part of the European Union (EU). It is a political and economic community – a ‘single market’ – and its laws apply in all member states. These laws guarantee the freedom of movement of people, goods, services and capital across national borders within the EU. The exceptions are the UK and Ireland, which opted out of the Schengen Agreement on the free movement of people.

The EU works on a social democratic model of consultation between the ‘social partners’ of government, employers and unions. Its Social Charter enshrines the fundamental rights to form and join unions, to information and consultation, and to collectively bargain with employers. EU Directives (adopted by the European Council) cover social and employment issues, and they have been very important in helping to raise working conditions in the UK and elsewhere. Recent important Directives give rights to workers in part-time work, or on temporary contracts, for example. Directives are binding on each member state to bring into its own national legislation. Recently, Unite has been putting pressure on the UK Government to reverse its ‘opt out’ from the Working Time Directive (so far without success), and to implement the Temporary and Agency Workers’ Directive.

The expansion of the EU is bringing a new dynamic to the whole continent. Ten countries from East and Central Europe have joined in recent years (often called the ‘new accession countries’). Many of them have right-wing governments which are now helping to undermine the original concept of a ‘social Europe’ with its ‘social partners’. Offering cheaper labour than in Western Europe, they have also become attractive to investors. Plus they give access to Western European and Scandinavian markets at relatively low transport costs and with quick turnaround production times that suit fast-changing consumer markets. The region may even become even more competitive with Asia as fuel costs rise and the environmental impact of long-distance goods transport becomes a factor for investors to consider. UK companies are getting on the bandwagon.

After being taken over by a private equity company Electra, the tampon manufacturer Lil-lets was closed down in the UK and moved to Poland and Taiwan. A short Unite movie ‘Period Drama’ to encourage a consumer boycott of Lil-lets is at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_o3B-RZ72Q

So far, not many UK companies have made this move to Eastern/Central Europe yet, but we are likely to see more do so. Or, it may simply be used as a threat to our workforces.

Meanwhile, all Western European countries are now receiving many migrant workers from these countries. This is creating new challenges for the European trade unions, not only in recruiting and organising these new workers within our borders, but in creating new forms of cooperation across borders within Europe, to ensure that the migrants are not exploited to their own cost as well as that of the host population.

So, our own social and employment conditions are becoming ever more directly bound up with social and employment conditions in East and Central Europe.

Europe facts

- The ten new EU ‘accession’ countries of East and Central Europe are: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

- Japanese and Korean electronics producers have recently set up in the Czech Republic to be closer to the European market.
Organising across Europe

What happens in Europe - West, East or Central – has a direct impact on our working terms and conditions in the UK. So it is in our best interests to collaborate closely with our fellow European unionists. We need to maintain and strengthen the standards we have achieved in Western Europe, and make sure they are extended to East and Central European countries.

There are several structures at a European level involving Unite, either directly or via the TUC. Each has its own role in coordinating union efforts to engage in ‘social dialogue’ with European policy-makers so as to influence industry/sector developments, and to negotiate with individual employers. In October 2008, Unite opened its own office in Brussels too.

European ‘social dialogue’ among ‘social partners’

Policy-making in the European Union does not just involve Members of the European Parliament and officials of the European Commission. The ‘social partners’ – representatives of management (employers’ organisations) and labour (trade unions) – also have rights to be consulted and this constantly happens. It is what in the EU is called ‘social dialogue’.

European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)

www.etuc.org

The ETUC is the European regional body of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) (see page 58). The two are independent, but work closely together. The ETUC comprises 82 national trade union confederations from 36 European countries, including the British TUC, as well as the European industry federations (see below). So, 60 million union members (about 35% of the total European workforce) are represented by the ETUC.

The strength of the ETUC lies in its right to be involved in European policy-making on social and employment issues, particularly in the development of Directives (see page opposite). Sometimes the ETUC runs Europe-wide campaigns, such as one in early 2008 against the downward spiral on wages in Europe. It also has a research body, the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI).

A new body was launched by the ITUC in March 2007, the Pan-European Regional Council (PERC). This represents all the ITUC’s affiliates in Europe plus unions in non-EU countries of East/Central Europe and Central Asia. PERC and the ETUC work closely together, sharing the same General Secretary, John Monks.

EU Directives: ec.europa.eu/employment_social/labour_law/directives_en.htm
European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound): research, information and advice on employment, working conditions, work-life balance, and industrial relations in Europe: www.eurofound.europa.eu
European Trade Union Institute for Research, Education and Health and Safety (ETUI-REHS): www.etui-rehs.org
Trade Union European Information Project: www.tueip.dircon.co.uk
European Industrial Federations

These are regional bodies which bring together unions in Europe on an industry or sector basis:

- **European Transport Workers’ Federation (ETF):** www.itfglobal.org/etf
- **European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions (EFFAT):** www.effat.org
- **Union Network International – Europa (UNI-Europa):** www.uni-europa.org
- **European Mine, Chemical and Energy Workers’ Federation (EMCEF):** www.emcef.org
- **European Metalworkers’ Federation (EMF):** www.emf-fem.org
- **European Trade Union Federation - Textiles Clothing and Leather (ETUF-TCL):** www.etuf-tcl.org
- **European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EFBWW):** www.efbww.org
- **European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU):** www.epsu.org

To a large extent, EIFs can be seen as the European regional bodies of the global union federations (GUFs) (see Section 2.1). However, some like to operate more autonomously.

One of the main roles of EIFs is to interact in ‘social dialogue’ with structures of the European Union, promoting the interests of unions in the development of policy relating to their sector. For example, they lobby the European Commission and Parliament for union-friendly Directives. Sometimes they launch Europe-wide campaigns to back up their efforts.

EIFs also do a substantial amount to support European Works Councils (see Section 1.2) with, for example, research and training programmes for EWC representatives.

More on EIFs:
www.unitetheunion.com/resources/international/international_resources/international_trade_unions/european_industry_federations.aspx

In the ports sector in Europe, there was no official ‘social dialogue’ with unions and the European Commission tried several times to bring in a new Directive that would open up ports throughout the continent to the ‘market’ and make many port workers redundant. The European Transport Workers’ Federation (ETF) and its global counterpart ITF brought port unions and workers together in a Europe-wide campaign, and successfully fended these attempts off. Now there is a more sophisticated ‘plan’ for the sector, and unions are starting to be recognised in more countries and by the European institutions as having a constructive role to play in how the industry develops.

“It is because of the solidarity of unions in Europe that we have better legislation than we might otherwise have on driving hours, the tachograph, design of vehicles, and so on.”

Martin Mayer, member of the Unite Executive Council and the ETF Road Transport Steering Committee

Organising migrant workers across Europe

With the sudden expansion of migration within the enlarged Europe, trade unions across the continent are developing new activities and structures. Like Unite, many are reaching out to migrants to bring them into the unions in the country where they have gone to work. There are also initiatives to organise across borders. These are discussed more in Section 1.4.
China: Where the ‘race to the bottom’ stops?

China is set to become the world’s largest economy. It has been absorbing investment and raw materials from around the world, and producing vast quantities of goods for the consumer markets of the North. Once unions gained strength in countries like Indonesia and Bangladesh where capital relocated in the 1980s-90s, companies wanted somewhere else where labour demands could be held down. In China they found a combination to their liking: authoritarian state politics and ‘free market’ economics.

The Chinese Communist Party in power developed a taste for global capitalism. To attract foreign investors, they set up Special Economic Zones (SEZs) where companies could benefit from low taxes and other financial incentives, no free trade union rights for workers, and yet high productivity. Per unit of production, labour costs are very low.

Combining this with the unrealistically cheap fuel costs for transporting raw materials in and finished goods out, China became the location for mass production of consumer goods against which economies like ours cannot compete. This has had a huge impact on jobs, and employment terms and conditions in the UK, as elsewhere.

Meanwhile, Chinese capitalists have been gaining strength and expanding their interests overseas. Chinese companies are especially active in Africa, mining the raw materials they need and also producing consumer goods for export. Chinese investors have set up plants in Jordan in the Middle East too, employing workers from China, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh to produce clothing closer to the markets of Western Europe. Chinese companies are more and more active Europe too. In Europe, the UK is second only to Germany in attracting Chinese investment.

With the financial crash of 2008, the Chinese export market suffered a sudden and massive drop. But the Chinese Government stepped in with £390 billion to shore up its industries and also decided to pump money into expanding China’s own consumer market. One difficulty they face is that, perhaps unsurprisingly, the rich have been getting richer, and the poor getting poorer. Millions of farming families have been losing income because they can’t compete against agricultural imports. Workers in the new factories do not earn much. All the same, while the US and the UK economies contracted, the Chinese was predicted to keep growing.

China facts

- 1.3 billion, one in five of the world’s people, live in China; the gap between rich and poor is one of the biggest in the world; there is a vast labour supply of people migrating to the cities to escape poverty in the countryside.

- With an annual growth rate of at least 10% for many years (compared to the UK’s 3%), China now consumes more steel, coal, meat and grain than any other nation.

- China is the world’s fifth largest exporter, largely to the EU, Japan, and the US. In 2006, 80% of the world’s consumer electronics were made there, as were 80% of the world’s duvets, ballpoint pens and buttons. It is now many years since the last plastic bag was made in the UK.

- By July 2007, over 350 companies from China had invested in the UK – in finance/insurance, automobiles, transport, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, oil, food processing/catering, etc.
Trade unionism in China

What are the best forms of solidarity to build with Chinese workers to help stop the ‘race to the bottom’ there that is driving down the standards for workers everywhere, including us?

The only trade union organisation allowed in China is the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), and it is a state-controlled body, not an independent workers’ organisation. It works on the basis of cooperation rather than conflict with management. Of course there are good individuals within the ACFTU, but their hands are pretty much tied. All too often union officials are passive bystanders as workers’ rights are violated.

“In some matters, the union is … in fact … helpless… truly helpless.”
An ACFTU leader at county level, interviewed by China Labour Bulletin

Independent workers’ social welfare groups are allowed and they often try to express grievances. However, they have no rights to negotiate and, if they become too critical, they are swiftly closed down. Any attempt to establish an independent trade union is met with brutality, and is forced underground.

Workers’ unrest is growing, particularly as state enterprises are privatised at the expense of workers’ conditions. According to the ITUC Global Union, official Chinese statistics in 2007 reported 317,000 labour disputes with a further 130,000 resolved cases prior to arbitration, a rise of 42% from 2005. The ITUC says, “Workers’ strikes and protests were increasingly responded to by violence, both from management and from government side”.

In April 2007, a dispute over the privatization of the Yueyang Steelworks in Shaanxi escalated into a major strike. Up to 3,000 workers blocked an inter-province highway for four days before they were forcibly dispersed by police. The workers used their own representatives to negotiate with management, bypassing the ACFTU altogether.

A new Labour Contract Law came into effect on 1 January 2008, in an attempt to deflect the high levels of unrest. On paper, it gives individual workers greater rights and, significantly, gives the ACFTU opportunities to negotiate collective labour agreements. The question is whether the ACFTU can use this opportunity to reform itself into a genuine trade union.

“The challenge for the ACFTU now is either to join China’s growing workers’ movement or to remain on the sidelines – an increasing irrelevance to the real issues.”
China Labour Bulletin

Meanwhile, in Hong Kong (transferred from the British colonial authorities to China in 1997) there is an independent union movement. The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) is a federation of 61 unions representing 160,000 workers. The HKCTU has representatives in the HK Legislative Council, and fights hard to retain democracy in their ‘special administrative territory’. The HKCTU also supports the pro-democracy movement in mainland China, including the struggle for independent unions there.

All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU): www.acf tu.org
Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU): www.hkct u.org.hk
Can ‘constructive engagement’ work?

Most trade unionists would agree that the only viable and sustainable solution to the ‘race-to-the-bottom’ impact of Chinese capitalism is the development of independent and democratic Chinese trade unionism. Yet any attempt to establish independent trade unions within China is met with repression.

So, how to build solidarity with Chinese workers has become an issue of great debate in the international labour movement. Which would better help the development of free and democratic trade unions – ‘constructive engagement’ with senior officials of the state-controlled ACFTU, or links with workplace reps and/or unofficial workers’ initiatives? Or a combination? And, if so, how would we do that?

In 1997, the Global Unions and the HKCTU set up the International Hongkong Liaison Office (IHLO) to support the Hong Kong unions, monitor trends across the border and help foster the kinds of solidarity most likely to support the development of independent trade unions in China. The IHLO’s emphasis has been on links with independent groups and workers’ representatives at a workplace level. Lee Cheuk-yan, HKCTU General Secretary, strongly believes that ‘constructive engagement’ with senior ACFTU officials is a waste of time:

“...ever, many in the international trade union movement are now taking a different view. Following several union delegations to China by some of the Global Unions, as well as the British and the US unions, and others, a number of senior union leaders are now distancing themselves from the HKCTU’s advice.

The ITUC global union confederation has recently decided to enter into dialogue with the ACFTU. The ITF transport workers’ global union federation also believes that “Not engaging with China, and with Chinese unions, simply doesn’t seem to be an option”. The British TUC is also following the strategy of “critical engagement” with the ACFTU. A delegation to China in November 2007 met with ACFTU leaders as well as grassroots representatives. Contact with all levels of the ACFTU was planned on topics of mutual concern: “Olympics, trade, vulnerable employment, solidarity with trade union movements elsewhere in the world, prisoners and so on”. The TUC will also “continue to press for the Chinese Government to ratify the rest of the core ILO conventions and to discuss this, and violations of workers’ rights, with the ACFTU when the opportunity presents itself”. At the same time, the TUC intends to maintain relations with the HKCTU.

Meanwhile, others are still very cautious.
Unite recognises the dilemma facing us. We cannot just sit on our hands and watch. We believe there is enough space opening up in the ACFTU for us to build relationships, while yet being wise about the limitations.

The increasing levels of investment between our two countries – British employers departing for China and Chinese investors becoming our employers – provide new reasons for linking up with Chinese trade unionists. The Chinese Government may regard some of this as very subversive. For example, there are reports that it refuses to allow international trade unionists to discuss the OECD Guidelines on Multinational Enterprises (see page 16) on Chinese soil. So, exchanging information and strategies on shared employers could be a vital way of helping independent unions to grow there, as well as providing us with useful knowledge about our new Chinese bosses.

International Hongkong Liaison Office (IHLO): www.ihlo.org


‘Workers’ Rights in China’, resources from the IMF at: www.imfmetal.org/main/china

‘Two Systems, One Challenge’, report of a TUC delegation to China, February 2008: www.tuc.org.uk/international/tuc-14330-f0.cfm

Fundamental rights in China – only some allowed

China has ratified ILO Conventions 100 and 111 against discrimination, and Conventions 138 and 182 against child labour. But it has not yet ratified Conventions 87 and 98 promoting freedom of association and free collective bargaining, nor Conventions 29 and 105 against forced labour, (see page 15 on ILO Conventions).

“Trade unionists need to understand that when they talk to the ACFTU they are talking to a representative of state power and not to an organisation representing the workers of China.”

Ron Oswald, IUF General Secretary
India: Another fast-growing economy

India now promotes itself as the “world’s fastest growing free market democracy”. It has an official annual economic growth rate of just over 9% (only a little less than China) though this may be an underestimate. And it has huge potential for even more.

The country is attracting large amounts of foreign investment, not only in such industries as IT and call centres but also in mining as well as textiles, pharmaceuticals, automobile manufacturing, energy, and transport. Until a few years ago, India had an economy that was dominated by state enterprises and relatively protected from foreign capital. Recently, however, the Indian Government has followed global trends and opened up to foreign investors. It is privatising state industries and setting up several hundred Special Economic Zones (SEZs) – just like in China and many other Asian countries – to attract investors with ‘business-friendly’ tax exemptions and the right to send home 100% of profits.

Rising environmental costs of the long distance to transport goods to the markets of Europe, North America, and Japan may become a competitive disadvantage. However, the country itself is becoming one of the world’s largest consumer markets. Its middle class is about quarter of the total population of 1.136 billion, or some 284 million, almost equal in size to that of the US. Six million new telecoms customers are being added every month, for example.

Also crucial to global business is the fact that Indian workers are relatively well-educated, skilled, English-speaking and low cost. And there is a big labour market of those seeking jobs. About one third of India’s rural population survive on less than 12 rupees (15 pence) per day. Farming is in crisis as the country’s agricultural policy focuses on production and markets rather than on land reform, small-scale credit, or access to food. So, as in China, the chance of a job pulls many of the rural poor to the cities.

As India’s own corporations grow, they are increasingly investing overseas. Among those that have now become UK employers are Tata in the metals industry (see page 11), Piramal, Ranbaxy, and Wockhardt in pharmaceuticals, the IT companies HCL, Infosys, and Wipro, ICICI Bank, Bharat Forge based at Ayr in Scotland, and Dabur personal care products.

India facts

- More than 500 Indian companies now have a presence in the UK; the UK is India’s No.1 location for investment in Europe.
- The UK is the third biggest investor in India: UK investors in India include Group 4/Securicor, Logica IT systems/business process outsourcing, British Gas, Unilever, GlaxoSmithKline pharmaceuticals, HSBC, and Vodafone.
- Indian call centres and Business Process Outsourcing (BPOs) now handle many UK information/IT functions; they include thetrainline.com, National Rail Enquiries, and British Airways; these industries are now attracting thousands of young Europeans and Asians with non-English language skills to work there – a new migrant population into India.
Trade unionism in India

The map of trade unionism in India is complicated. Indian workers have long had, and used, the freedom to establish independent trade unions. However, they have never combined into a unified trade union movement.

Instead there are many trade union centres at a national level, and often at a regional/state level too. Some unions are associated with or directly linked to a political party; others are organised on ethnic or religious lines; there are also hundreds of unions for individual workplaces.

The largest trade union centres in India are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Union Name</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Members (Million)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS)</td>
<td>BJP Hindu Nationalist</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC)</td>
<td>Congress Party</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC)</td>
<td>Communist Party of India</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS)</td>
<td>Socialist</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)</td>
<td>Communist Party of India (Marxist)</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indian unions developed largely in the public sector, in the years after Independence from British rule when employment in the state industries was relatively well regulated and there was little foreign investment in India. Then, in the 1990s, all that changed as the Indian economy was opened up to the world. Transnational corporations arrived, and Indian companies started to build their empires abroad.

Unsurprisingly, this has brought new organising challenges to the Indian unions, particularly because they are so fragmented. Some activists, wanting to overcome the sectarian divisions of the past, set up the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI) in 2006. ntui.org.in

Other initiatives concern new workforces not covered by the traditional unions. India is of course now well-known as a country to which a lot of office-based work is outsourced. Call centres and ‘back office processing’ companies have been set up in cities like Delhi and Bangalore to service the international finance and insurance industries, transport and travel companies, and many others. It is a huge new workforce of well-educated young Indians – and also absorbing young migrants from many other countries, including Europe. Unite has been working with the global union federation for white-collar workers UNI (see page 62) to help these workers to organise. It is not easy, as many see themselves as ‘professionals’, and unions as ‘only for blue-collar workers’. But a new UNI-sponsored union Unites-Pro is making progress, even starting to reach collective bargaining agreements. www.unites-pro.org

India has also seen the remarkable development of the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA). For nearly three decades, SEWA has been organising women who are workers and yet do not have a formal employer. Now operating in seven States of India, it has grown to a membership of about 1.1 million women. And it most determinedly calls itself a trade union. (For more on SEWA, see page 35).
What kind of solidarity is best?

As India emerges as a major player in the world economy, the complicated map of trade unions there can make it difficult for trade unionists elsewhere to know how to build solidarity with them. However, industrial concerns and employers are increasingly shared. British companies operate in India and now Indian companies operate in the UK. So how can we best strengthen our relationships with Indian unions?

The HMS, INTUC and SEWA are the three Indian union centres that are affiliated to the same global union confederation, the ITUC, as we are through the British TUC (see page 58). So, it is their member unions and regional organisations in India with whom we most often liaise through the Global Unions. For example, the HMS has transport and dock workers’ unions that we meet in the ITF global union federation (see page 60), and steel and engineering unions via the IMF (see page 64).

Increasing numbers of unionists outside India also believe that the divisions inside the country are a major obstacle to international organising related to India in the global economy. The transport workers’ global union federation ITF, for example, has been actively encouraging unity among transport unions in the country.

“When staff in HSBC in the UK were offered a 0% pay rise in 2005, Amicus members took successful strike action to ensure a fair pay deal. This action started a campaign across the UK finance sector… Amicus members in the UK were grateful for the solidarity received from our sisters and brothers in Indian trade unions.”

@ work with Amicus’ leaflet
Unite supports Indian ship-breakers

What happens to ships when they are no longer sea-worthy? 90% are broken up and recycled on the beaches of China, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, by workers in appalling conditions. The industry moved there to take advantage of lower environmental/safety standards and labour costs.

In India, thousands are employed in ship-breaking. Most are migrants from elsewhere in the country, and employed on a casual basis through contractors. Earning less than a dollar a day, they face hazards such as fires, falls from great heights, and exposure to heavy metals and PVCs. An average ship contains 100-600 tonnes of the killer asbestos and workers remove it with no or little protective clothing. Many are barefoot. Living conditions are atrocious and, being largely men without families, HIV-Aids and alcoholism are rife. Each year hundreds die, but there's no compensation for the dead or injured.

Supported by the international metalworkers’ IMF and transport workers’ ITF, Indian unions took up the challenge of organising these workers. Despite intimidation from local ‘mafia’, the Mumbai Port Trust Dock Workers Union helped win the shipbreakers in Mumbai access to drinking water – in a working day of up to 12 hours. The union has also given the workers identity cards with their blood group on, and arranged for St.John’s Ambulance support when there is an accident.

The union and shipbreakers’ representatives visited the UK in October 2007. Assisted by the ITF, they took their case to the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) which has its headquarters in London. Unite helped get them a meeting with the British Secretary of State for International Development, which led to good media coverage and meetings with employers when they got home. By 2009, governments in the IMO had signed a new international convention on the recycling of ships. Environmentalists say it does not go far enough, and Indian shipbreaking companies still want to prevent it going into Indian law.

1.4 The changing nature of work

“A union is a human rights organisation that does not refuse someone in trouble. We say, ‘Where you are, we were. Where we are, you will be’.”

Mwanda Chiwambala, Malawi Union for the Informal Sector (MUFIS)
Speaking at a seminar on ‘Organising Workers in the Informal Economy’, Eastbourne, March 2008, attended by many Unite-T&G representatives. Only 12% of the workforce in the African country of Malawi is in the formal economy.

Employers are on the offensive, pushing downwards on the quality of jobs on offer. Ever fewer of them are willing to provide decent employment to a permanent, unionised workforce.

Stiff global competition is the driving force, pushing many companies to restructure and outsource to suppliers rather than produce for their own needs. Along with this come demands on the labour force for ‘flexibility’, for more short-term or part-time job contracts, more contracting out to agency-hired labour and to ‘self-employed’ freelancers, more use of homeworkers and migrant labour, more discriminatory use of women workers, and so on. Companies like the budget flexibility that this gives them.

So, more work is being pushed out of the regulated ‘formal’ economy, into the de-regulated ‘informal’ economy. This is a global phenomenon, not something happening only in the UK.

In fact, very few of the world’s workers are employed by a known employer, in a defined workplace, under a clearly laid out employment contract, with rights under employment and social protection laws. Those that are, are termed ‘formal’ workers. The rest – the vast majority – are ‘informal’ workers. Sometimes this is also called the ‘unorganised’ sector, though in truth these workers are often organising themselves. In Unite, we often refer to them as ‘vulnerable’ workers.

The point is that workers with an unclear employment status do not enjoy the protection of employment legislation where it exists; they have little or no access to social security benefits such as pensions, paid holidays, sick leave or maternity leave, and so on.

But the situation is not always clear-cut. Many individuals move from one category to another and back again. Sometimes, even within the same day, a person has ‘a job’ and then is, say, a small trader to earn enough for the family.

In many countries of the ‘global South’, 90% of the workforce is in the ‘informal’ economy. In India it applies to over 94% of women workers, for example. They include day-labourers and other forms of casualised workers, small traders, self-employed artisans, and so on.

So in countries like India, Malawi and Zambia in Southern Africa, and Ghana in West Africa, the trade union movement has had to recognise its limitations if it represents only the ‘formal’ workforce. With or without the unions, ‘informal workers’ are organising themselves anyway, and so the question becomes: what is their relationship to the formal trade unions?

“It turns out that the informal economy and the formal economy are more strongly interrelated than perhaps we have recognised... The big task ahead is not to approach informal workers as if they are a new and different group, but to include them so that we encompass all working citizens in our union activities.”

Jean Lapeyre, Deputy General Secretary, European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)
Here too in Europe, where the union movement has fought for and won many legally recognised rights for workers and duties for employers, the trend towards ‘informalisation’ is growing. Employers are narrowing the definition of who are their ‘employees’ so as to sidestep their legal duties.

There are now many workers who seem to be ‘self-employed’ but in reality are tied to one client who is ducking his/her responsibilities as an employer. In the UK, we have many taxi and truck drivers in this situation. In this world of ‘flexible’ labour, it is often simply hard to tell what the employment relationship is.

Then there are the ‘homeworkers’. Many are part of an industrial process; it is just that the work is outsourced to them at home. There may be as many as one million homeworkers in the UK. The vast majority are women.

There is a strong gender aspect to this. Women have less access than men to ‘formal’ jobs in the first place, and are also often the first to be casualised when employers restructure and seek ways of avoiding the costs of social security rights such as maternity leave. All too often, employers choose women workers because they can give them lower working terms and conditions than men workers. It is by design, not accident, benefiting from gender discrimination in wider society. So it is very important that unionists make sure that women are included in organising efforts.

“Its also true that organisations in developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America have been at the forefront of building new forms of organisation for informal workers, and we have much to learn from them. The Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) of India has been an inspiration to many across the world (see opposite).

‘Precarious Work Affects Us All!’ International Metalworkers Federation (IMF), campaign materials and details on what union action around the world: www.global-unions.org/spip.php?rubrique69
WIEGO (Women in the Informal Economy: Globalising and Organising): www.wiego.org
National Group on Homeworking: www.ngh.org.uk Sadly, the NGH has closed for lack of funding.
Homeworkers Worldwide: www.homeworkersww.org.uk
HomeNets: South Asia: www.homenetsouthasia.org and South-East Asia: www.homenetseasia.org

“We don’t keep up our strength by keeping others out. The rights we have gained only apply to the few - a relatively declining part of the labour force. This is now recognised by the trade unions at a global level, by the ITUC Global Union. But unions from some countries are still stopping us all working together. We in Unite need to play our part in addressing this.”

Diana Holland, Unite Assistant General Secretary

“We cannot bargain for some and leave some out. The future of trade unions has to be totally inclusive, very, very global and international. We cannot make the mistakes of the old, when we concentrated on the strong industrial… everybody has to be organised. The system will use the so-called Third World to give the impression that they are so backward we will have nothing to do with them. But it is our duty to make sure that that solidarity, that link, is always there, so that workers all over the world know they are part of an international movement.”

Martha Osamor in ‘Hear Our Story’, a DVD by Unite-T&G Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority Members
The Self-Employed Women’s Association of India

Something like 92% of the workforce in India is outside the formal economy, and millions of them are women workers. For decades they were left unprotected by the trade union movement.

In 1972, the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) was founded and it has become a huge success. In fact, at one point in the 1990s, they were recruiting so many new members they had to stop for a while just to consolidate. SEWA now has over a million members.

SEWA's members include street-traders, and agricultural workers said to be ‘self-employed’. There are also homeworkers, litter-pickers, and many more, covering nearly all trades and sectors. Yet it believes it is a trade union, and it is affiliated to both the IUF global union federation and the ITUC confederation.

Madhuri Sinha, a brick tile-maker and roofer, told a seminar at the T&G Education Centre in Eastbourne in March 2008, “SEWA has always been a union because we work with workers. It is the same issues of income, social security, and the rights to negotiate”.

SEWA's organising strategy is based on providing services for women workers who are not formally recognised as ‘workers’ and so do not benefit from official social welfare schemes and employment rights. SEWA has set up organisations to provide that missing social security, and a SEWA Bank promotes credit schemes and housing finance. In a situation where many are virtually illiterate, they encourage women to form small savings groups to cut out exploitative money-lenders, and they support job creation and better incomes through women's cooperatives. “The banks resisted at first, saying ‘These women can't read or write; how can you open a bank account with a thumb-print?’ But eventually we won recognition for the contribution that we women make to the economy, and as workers.”

Building women's collective decision-making and self-reliance is SEWA's main focus. They make sure their members know what rights do exist, and try to get women's representatives on, for example, workers' welfare boards. Those that SEWA negotiates with tend to be contractors and local/regional government, and SEWA does a lot of work to generate awareness among policy-makers.

Madhuri continued, “When organising the poorest workers, membership fees have to be low: as little as 5 rupees a year (about 6p). Our activities are aimed at generating activism, and that doesn’t require a lot of funds. We also have income-generating activities that plough resources back into the organisation. Plus there is some external funding”.

“Trade unions tend to think that the ‘informal’ will become the ‘formal’. But we think the ‘informal’ is growing”, Madhuri adds.

www.sewa.org

“If British trade unionists are not aware of the actual nature of the economy in developing countries, then your solidarity runs the risk of not actually being ‘solidarity’; it doesn’t match what is happening on the ground. There is organisation of informal workers, and they can even help by bringing their ideas to the UK – in a two-way flow that is based on ideas of equality and commonality, rather than one-way charity.”

Sahra Ryklief, General Secretary, International Federation of Workers’ Education Associations (IFWEA)

“What the informal workers told us in Zambia was, ‘Don’t do anything for us; do it with us’.”

Kenny Barron, Unite national union learning organiser, after a visit to Zambia hosted by the Alliance of Zambian Informal Economy Associations (AZIEA), 2007
Unions meeting the challenge

It is not easy for unions to reach out and help organise individuals who are scattered rather than being in one workplace, and/or those who are on temporary rather than permanent contracts. And yet it can be done. It often means ‘thinking outside the box’, and learning lessons from elsewhere.

Unite is actively organising parts of the UK workforce that had previously been thought of as ‘marginal’ and perhaps simply too difficult to organise. They include temporary/agency workers and migrant workers.

We have to do this for two reasons: one, because they are very vulnerable, at risk of great exploitation, and often desperately in need of union support. But also, they are used to undermine the standards for us all; we ignore them at our peril.

After the tragic deaths of the Morecambe Bay cockle-pickers in 2004 (see page 17), we achieved a victory in persuading the government to pass the ‘Gangmasters Act’. We are now seeking to extend it to cover construction workers, for example. Meanwhile, in the City of London, we have a vibrant and high-profile campaign ‘Justice for Cleaners’.

Such activities do challenge the union movement. It means:

- Finding out more about where different types of workers are; for example, ‘mapping’ workers in one locality by their employment status.

- Reaching out to new types of worker, many of whom might not speak our own language well, or who know little about employment laws and union rights in our country; finding out what they need.

- Developing new kinds of organising activities and services, even new forms of organisation.

- Collaborating with other groups to whom these workers have turned.

- Perhaps taking a fresh look at our membership rules.

- Even challenging our own concept of who is a ‘worker’ and what is a ‘workplace’.

These problems are being faced by unions the world over. So there must surely be lessons we can learn from elsewhere. In 2003, trade unions from across Europe came together to share experiences of taking on this difficult yet essential work, and to find more ways of working together internationally to combat these trends that are hitting us all hard.

‘From Marginal Work to Core Business: European trade unions organising in the informal economy’, report of an international conference, with many concrete examples of organising initiatives, FNV, Netherlands, May 2003.


In 2000 in Austria, the GPA (Union of Salaried Private Sector Employees) changed how they offer union services so as to help vulnerable workers and draw them to the union. They now have seven special sections, including work@flex for the ‘self-employed’ (including those who are not really ‘self-employed’) and work@migration. If someone needs legal services, the GPA offers the first one for free, after which they can choose: pay a fee or join the union. In these ways, they have reached out to 15,000 workers, and 8,000 of them have joined the union. The GPA has also been successful in getting social security legislation changed to cover a wider range of workers. However, the union does still have to subsidise these activities.
Contract/agency workers

Seasonal workers in agriculture and ‘temps’ have always been hired on short-term contracts, often through an agency or gangmaster. More recently, however, contract/agency hiring has moved on also to jobs such as security guards, cleaners and canteen workers, and then to many different types of job on-site. So these days huge numbers of workers are not directly employed by the main company where they work. By these means, the big companies create a two-tier workforce, where many workers do not have the job security, benefits, and working conditions that the permanent employees have.

Unite’s Temporary and Agency Workers Rights Campaign challenges these unclear and unfair employment relationships. We have won court cases confirming that agency-hired migrant workers are not ‘self-employed’ but employees of the agency. We have lobbied hard on the British Government which, gripped by the need for a ‘flexible labour market’, first blocked and then weakened the European Temporary and Agency Workers Directive; passed in November 2008, this gives such workers equal rights on basic working and employment conditions, but only after a 12-week qualifying period insisted on by our Government. We are also highlighting how retailers such as M&S and Tesco use and abuse migrant labour in their supply chains, and we have received support from unions literally across the world. This is an issue that workers all over the world recognise.

Global support for Unite’s agency labour campaign

When Unite found rampant exploitation of migrant agency workers in meat companies producing for M&S, we turned to the food workers’ global union federation IUF (see page 61) for solidarity. To our delight, trade unionists in twelve cities as far apart as Manila and Moscow, Cebu and Seoul, Hong Kong, Istanbul and Zagreb responded. They leafleted outside M&S stores and sent messages of protest to M&S corporate headquarters.

M&S managers complained bitterly at the international campaign. They questioned why they were targeted when they have made a public commitment: “By being a fair partner, we’ll help to improve the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in our worldwide supply chain and local communities”.

Unite Deputy General Secretary Jack Dromey replied: “Prove it. Sign an agreement to ensure that there is no discrimination against agency workers or a divisive two-tier workforce in your supply chains. It is wrong to exploit newly-arrived migrant agency workers and wrong to undercut the workers who have been here for generations”.

The workers outside M&S stores in Thailand, Croatia, Hungary and elsewhere were not just demonstrating in solidarity with meat workers in the UK. They were showing that they are also members of the same global union structures, building organising capacity across the world.

See also: ‘Tesco: Every Worker Counts’:
www.unitetheunion.com/campaigns/tesco_-_every_worker_counts.aspx

Unions in the ICEM global union federation (see page 63) represent workers in the high-risk chemical, energy and mining industries. They believe that some of the world’s worst industrial accidents may well have been caused by poorly-trained, poorly-employed agency labour on-site. The ICEM’s focus is on making the principal companies responsible for the conditions of all workers working for them, not just their direct employees. It has found that risks to health and safety standards, as well as to production/service standards, are strong arguments to use with management and governments to combat agency labour.

Migrant workers

“The failure of globalisation to create productive employment and decent work where people live is the prime factor in increasing migration pressures…”
Juan Somavia, Director-General, International Labour Organisation

Migration facts

- Today, one in every 35 people in the world is an international migrant; if they all lived in the same place, it would be the world’s fifth-largest country.
- By far the majority of the world’s migrants are refugees fleeing persecution in the Middle East and North-East Africa.
- Western industrialised countries absorb fewer than half of the world’s migrants; some African and Asian nations host larger numbers of refugees.
- In Europe, migrants form a higher proportion of the population in Switzerland, Germany and France than in the UK.
- Migrants make up about 8% of the British population (6% of the labour force) and contribute some 10% of our Gross Domestic Product (GDP); (Germany 10% of the labour force; France 8%).
- The money sent home by migrant workers is the second-largest source (after private capital investment) of foreign exchange for developing countries.
- The world is seeing unprecedented numbers of women migrating to work as domestic/care workers, with as yet unknown impact on family and community life in home countries.

It is inevitable that people in poor conditions will move to find a living elsewhere. The only solution is to help raise conditions and combat poverty everywhere, particularly by raising working terms and conditions through union organising.

Here in the UK, we are certainly seeing unprecedented numbers of migrant workers arriving and the death of 23 Chinese cockle-pickers in Morecambe Bay in February 2004 raised public awareness of how badly some are being exploited. The Institute for Public Policy Research estimates that about one million migrant workers have come to the UK from European accession countries since 2004 (see Section 1.4), but that about half of them have already left the UK again. Today’s transport systems mean that migration is often more temporary than it used to be.

Not ‘Illegal’

The problem with official figures is that they can count only those migrants who are registered. In all countries, there are many migrants who are unregistered, or who become unregistered through no fault of their own – for example, when they run away from an abusive employer who has kept their passport or work permit. No-one knows how many such ‘undocumented’ workers there are in the UK. Some think as many as 800,000.

When migrants are working without the right documents, they are often called ‘illegal’. However, the work they are doing is usually legitimate, not criminal, and valuable to their host country. So, it is better to call them ‘undocumented’, or ‘irregular’ (the term used by the ILO).
Organising migrants – across borders too

Migrants are often the most vulnerable of workers, in need of immediate protection and services like legal advice. Some, especially the ‘undocumented’ ones, are at extreme risk of abuse – at the receiving end of violence or unpaid for months. Current Unite rules say that you should be a member for three months before receiving a service. Many migrant workers are unlikely to be union members for that length of time before they need help; many are not in stable jobs but moving between them; many work abroad for a few years and then return home. So migrant workers often do not easily fit in to unionisation patterns of the past.

Mass migration is causing unions in many countries to rethink their policies and activities, including us in Unite. We have been recruiting and encouraging organisers from the migrant communities in the UK, people who share the same languages and cultures, on the basis that ‘Like Organises Like’. We are also working with churches, community-based groups, and agencies like Oxfam who are concerned with combating poverty in the UK.

But there is still more we need to do to cope, for example, with the fact that many individual migrants are only here temporarily – to be replaced by yet others. If we don’t include them, employers will continue to use them to dodge their legal employment duties and undercut the situation for all. This means developing new ways of informing migrants about their rights, and new forms of cross-border union collaboration. What lessons might we learn from elsewhere?

- **Pre-departure information**: Unions from origin and host countries are increasingly cooperating to help inform migrant workers before they depart about what to expect in the country/workplace to which they are going, how the unions are organised there and how to find them, and so on. The European Federation of Building and Wood Workers (EFBWW) (see page 24) has a multi-lingual website to inform migrant construction workers in Europe.

- **Cross-border recognition of union membership**: Unions in the Ukraine and Denmark have a joint agreement to protect Ukrainian students working as trainees in Danish agriculture and forestry. Students who join the Agro-Industrial Workers’ Union of Ukraine automatically become members of the 3F union in Denmark, and then get the same collective insurance cover as Danish students.

- **An International Union Card**: The International Union of Food and Allied Workers (IUF) (see page 61) has developed an international union card, particularly to help the large flows of migrant agricultural workers. IUF affiliated unions are encouraged to give the card out to their members before they depart, and direct them to the appropriate trade union in the host country. Card-holders can then make themselves known to the host country union, join in and take part with the same rights and benefits as all that union’s members. By using the card, says the IUF, affiliated unions can keep their members within the global union movement, and so help to defend their rights.


**European Construction Migrant Information Net (ECMIN)**: multilingual website for migrant construction workers in Europe, with information on minimum working terms and conditions in each host country including the UK, launched by the EFBWW in June 2009: ecmim.efbww.org

Domestic/household workers

As our population ages, the UK requires an expanding workforce of domestic workers. Among them are thousands of migrant workers working in our care homes and private households.

The story is repeated across the world. Literally millions of women are moving in search of a living. The Middle East is absorbing huge numbers from Asian countries. Women are leaving their own homes, children and elders to be cared for by other relatives, to work in the homes of others, often in distant countries. They are often invisible and very vulnerable, also to sexual abuse. It is a new global phenomenon – whose social impact has yet to be reckoned.

Counting migrants and non-migrants together, it is thought there are 100 million (mostly women) working in other people's homes around the world. Many have only a verbal agreement to work there. Many others are hired through agencies, with unclear employment terms and conditions. In many countries, they are not even recognised as 'workers' under employment law. It is often just seen as 'what women do'. Yet domestic/household workers are workers, and they are demanding respect and the same rights as other workers.

Organising domestic/household workers varies a lot around the world. In countries like South Africa, Bolivia and Hong Kong, there are domestic workers' trade unions. Here in Europe, the unions handle domestic workers' rights in many different ways, as was revealed in a conference in 2005, attended by Unite. Then in late 2006 there was the first ever international conference of domestic/household workers' unions and associations from all continents. Despite domestic workers' own efforts and the union support they get in many places, however, they often still remain off the radar screen as 'workers'.

So, an international network of domestic workers' organisations has been developing, under the umbrella of the IUF global union federation (see page 61). And they have achieved a significant breakthrough: a new international Convention (see page 61) for domestic/household workers' rights is on the agenda of the International Labour Conference in 2010.

Here in the UK, Unite first built good relationships with Kalayaan in London, an association of migrant domestic workers set up with help from the churches. Campaigning together, we got their legal status restored in 1998, and we produced a model employment contract. Several hundred joined the union. Unite Assistant General Secretary Diana Holland says that the migrant domestic workers brought energy and inspiration to the union.

Now, as well as renewed organising among domestic workers here in the UK, we are actively supporting the campaign for the ILO Convention which will give domestic and household workers international recognition as workers for the first time.

Respect and Rights for Domestic Workers: including the campaign leaflet ‘Mobilise for an ILO Convention’ and ‘Respect and Rights: Protection for Domestic Workers’, the report of the international domestic/household workers’ conference, Amsterdam, 8-10 November 2006, with case studies from around the world, IRENE/IUF, 2008: www.domesticworkerrights.org

‘Out of the Shadows: Organising and protecting domestic workers in Europe: The role of trade unions’, conference report, ETUC, 2005. Full of examples from European/Scandinavian countries, and including a model employment contract between a private individual and a domestic worker: www.etuc.org/a/2809
1.5 Responding to climate change

“While workers and their families are among the first victims, they also hold the key to the solutions the world is seeking, because they are at the centre of industrial activity that is contributing to climate change.”

It is now clear that we must all play our part in combating climate change. If we do not, the sea will continue to rise, swamping low-level communities, and severe droughts elsewhere will lead to widespread famine. Some estimate that by 2050, 200 million people could become environmental refugees. This means unprecedented social and economic disruption - within the lifetime of most of us now, and certainly of our children and grandchildren.

What is also clear is that the international trade union movement is now actively part of finding solutions to the climate crisis, and we in the UK can and should play a full role in this.

The Stern Review for the British Government said that a 2°C temperature rise is likely by 2035. This has been identified by scientists as the threshold for dangerous climate change, and now research shows we have to cut carbon emissions by a staggering 85% by 2050. Effectively, this means a ‘de-carbonisation’ of the global economy. On top of that, we also have to end our dependence on evermore scarce fossil fuels.

So we are about to go through a new industrial revolution, a ‘green’ one as radical as the one over the past two centuries that has been driven by carbon. This will have a direct impact on all of our lives - as workers, as trade unionists, as consumers and as citizens.

To do nothing - ‘business-as-usual’ – is not an option. The costs of that would eventually far outweigh the costs of taking action now. The issue instead is how we are to do it.

At the local and national level, we can and must organise for ‘green jobs’ and ‘green workplaces’, putting carbon-neutral, healthier work onto the agenda for collective bargaining, as the TUC is encouraging us to do.

We must also be active internationally. We will need to produce more food and consumer goods locally, so as to displace the damaging environmental impact of long-distance freight. In fact, as the price of oil rises ever more sharply, this relocation is already starting to happen. There will be changes in the modes of transport used by passengers and freight.

There will also be ‘job churn’, as some jobs are phased out to be replaced by others. This means unions lobbying governments to become more proactive. As the international trade union movement is pointing out, we need social security support for those worst affected by loss of income and retraining for new jobs in new ‘green’ industries. Unions must be fully involved - and that means we have to step up to the plate too.

Shifting to environmentally-sustainable production and distribution has to be integrated with the fight for good jobs and strong unions around the world, a ‘Just Transition’ as the international trade union movement calls it (see page 47). If not, it won’t succeed. So, as much as climate change is a threat, it is also an opportunity, and we can seize this to build even stronger union organisation internationally.
Why is the climate changing?

Climate change is caused by the increase in gases such as carbon dioxide (CO2) and methane in the atmosphere, which trap in the sun’s heat. These greenhouse gas emissions come mainly from burning fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas. Analysis of ice cores shows that the concentration of CO2 in the atmosphere is higher than at any point in the last million years at least, and the vast majority of scientists believe this is due to human activity.

Climate Change Facts

- Global emissions that cause climate change are still growing at an average of 3% per year (2009).
- Per person per year, the UK produces 9.6 tonnes of CO2, compared with 3.6 tonnes in China, 1 tonne in India, 0.3 tonnes in Bangladesh, and 0.2 tonnes in Zambia.
- Under the Kyoto Protocol agreed in 1997, governments – including the UK signed up to reducing CO2 emissions by 12.5% (below 1990 levels) by 2012; more recent science suggests we need an 85% cut by 2050 to prevent catastrophic climate change, a target that is backed by the Global Unions.
- The UK Climate Change Act passed in late 2008 has targets of 34% reduction in emissions by 2020 (below 1990 levels), and 80% by 2050; however, it is still unclear how our part of international aviation and shipping emissions is to be included.
- The UK’s current contribution to climate change comes from:
  - Heating for domestic and commercial buildings, and industrial processes: 35%
  - Electricity generation: 29%
  - Land transport: 20%
  - Aviation: 13%
  - Shipping: 3%
- Aviation is the fastest growing contributor to climate change in the UK; yet the British Government is still planning for a doubling of air passenger transport by 2020.
- Altogether, around 2.3 million people worldwide are currently employed in renewable energy.
- Converting buildings to be energy-efficient could create 10 million new jobs around the world, 4 million of them in Europe and the USA.

Campaign Against Climate Change (UK): www.campaigncc.org
World Development Movement (WDM) has an excellent series of briefings on the UK and climate change: www.wdm.org.uk/resources/briefings/climate
Friends of the Earth: www.foe.co.uk
Stern Review: www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/F/8/Chapter_27_Conclusions.pdf
UK Government policies/action: www.defra.gov.uk/environment/climatechange
“Sectors linked to fossil fuel energy and other energy-intensive sectors will be profoundly modified by emissions reduction policies. The latter include industries such as steel, iron, aluminium but also energy-intensive services, such as road transport… While trade unions need to accept that changes in some sectors are necessary, they need to propose measures that prevent workers from bearing the burden of these transitions.”

UNEP and Sustainability, 2008

“Even where jobs might be threatened, recent studies by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) show that proper transition planning can lead to the creation of large numbers of green jobs.”

Philip Pearson, TUC Senior Policy Officer on climate change and energy; also Chair of the Global Union’s Climate Working Group

“All jobs have to become ‘green’. Only those which are long-term sustainable can carry on.”

Tony Juniper, Friends of the Earth, speaking at the TUC climate change conference, June 2008

“There are no jobs on a dead planet.”

Brian Kohler, Health and Safety Officer, ICEM global union federation

**Going for green**

In the UK, about 400,000 are already employed in ‘green’ industries and the number is growing. The Stern Review for the British Government urged the creation of 100,000 new jobs through investment in green technology, and in July 2009 the UK Government launched a Low Carbon Industrial Strategy; this included setting up a ‘Just Transition Forum’ involving government, employers and unions, and recognition that workers need retraining for the skills needed in new low carbon industries.

It is also in all of our interests to help adapt all workplaces and work practices, bringing in more energy efficient processes, and so on. Those who lead the ‘carbon revolution’ will be the ones to prosper.

“There is no conflict between economic success and a low-carbon world. Indeed the only prosperous future for the UK is to use our know-how to ensure that we become world-leaders in low carbon industries.”

Brendan Barber, General Secretary, TUC, 15 July 2009

**UNITE** education materials/programmes on climate change / greening the workplace

TUC: many useful materials at: www.tuc.org.uk/theme/index.cfm?theme=sustainableworkplace including:


‘Green Workplaces’, news monthly.

‘One Million Climate Jobs NOW!’ , Campaign against Climate Change trade union group, November 2009: www.campaigncc.org/unions and cacctu.wordpress.com

Turning Transport ‘Green’

Transport workers and those involved in the production of vehicles obviously have a strong interest in helping to shape the future of transport for the planet. They in particular are going to experience a lot of changes.

Transport takes a quarter of the world’s energy, and puts out a quarter of all CO2 emissions. About 80% of this can be attributed to road transport. But air travel emissions are growing the fastest, by 87% between 1990 and 2001. In the industrialised countries, emissions from transport have risen by over 30% in the past twenty years.

So we need to make sure that transport industries are adapted, and this means pressure on governments and employers for the right kinds of investment and retraining. In fact, studies for the European TUC and others show that the transport sector could be an important source of new green employment. The more people use public transport – especially the railways - rather than private vehicles, the more jobs will be created. And the more it is publicly owned, the more likely this is to happen.

Our union’s involvement in the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF) is clearly the key place to develop our international union responses to the world’s transport policies. In April 2008, the ITF Executive Board decided to encourage all affiliates (and that includes us in Unite) to find solutions “which reduce the consumption of transport fuel by providing companies and communities with transport services in a sustainable way”. The ITF is now developing comprehensive policy proposals to put to its 42nd Congress in 2010. Unite representatives will be there, debating and deciding on this important policy for the future.

In the meantime, the ITF is encouraging its affiliates to:

- Consider rejecting technologies “that neither reduce emissions nor contribute towards a sustainable model of development”; biofuels is an example of this (see page 46).

- Continue to call for the expansion of public transport under public control.

- Back a shift to rail transport for both freight and passengers.

Transport International, the bi-monthly magazine of the ITF, has frequent articles on climate change in relation to the transport sectors: www.itf.org.uk/transport-international
Carbon-trading or carbon tax?

Carbon-trading is a system that allows industrialised countries to earn credits by investing in emission reduction projects in other countries, including developing countries. It has been promoted by governments through international treaties like the Kyoto Protocol and by the EU. However, it has been criticised for letting companies off the hook, allowing them to outsource their emissions, rather than having other responsibilities such as employment and pollution. Such vital matters, critics say, cannot be left like this to the ‘market’ to determine.

Another proposal is for a global carbon tax - which should give companies a direct incentive to reduce their own fuel consumption. Some countries/states, including the UK, have introduced versions, but progress on developing it internationally is slow. The Global Unions are asking affiliates worldwide to push this idea more.

Carbon Trade Watch: www.carbontradewatch.org

“The Stern Report for the UK Government concluded that ‘climate change represents the biggest market failure in history’. The on-going financial crisis represents another huge market failure in history. We cannot reply on those same failed market mechanisms to solve these crises.”

Fuel or food?

“The grain required to fill the tank of a sports utility vehicle with ethanol…could feed one person for a year.”

World Bank

Many were putting their hopes in biofuels - fuels from crops such as corn, sugarcane and rapeseed. The European Union has mandatory targets for their use in transport. However, even as companies like the Virgin Group and the US Government continue to push for more biofuel production, it is now widely recognised that biofuels cause more harm than good. The British Government did have targets for their use, but is now drawing back.

For one thing, biofuels (also known as ‘agrofuels’) increase hunger in the world.

Turning land from food to biofuel plantations is one reason why the price of food has been soaring. People in countries like Brazil and Indonesia are being pushed by biofuel corporations off the land that feeds them. For this reason Jean Ziegler, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, has called biofuels a “crime against humanity”.

What is more, biofuels could actually accelerate climate change. The crops are grown using fertilizers which give off high levels of emissions. Then, a lot of energy is used to process them. Vast areas of rain forest are cut down and forest peoples are displaced even though they are the experts in managing these forests that are vital for absorbing CO2.

Some are placing their hopes in ‘second generation’ biofuels, made from materials that do not compete with food production, such as leaves, tree bark, straw, woodchips, or algae grown in water. In the UK we have small amounts of fuel produced from used cooking oil. As large-scale fuel alternatives, however, they are still in the very early stages of development and their production will still need to have a negative CO2 balance.

The destructive impact of biofuels on land rights, employment and food prices is now firmly on the agenda of the global union federation for agricultural and plantation workers, the IUF (see page 61). IUF affiliates in Latin America and Asia-Pacific are very active, and are all looking for more solidarity from trade unionists in the main biofuel consuming regions such as us in Europe.

Biofuel Watch UK: www.biofuelwatch.org.uk
‘Fuelling Hunger’, IUF, 28 April 2008: www.iuf.org/cgi-bin/editorials/db.cgi?db=default&www=1&uid=default&ID=579&view_records=1&en=1
A ‘Just Transition’

At a world level, urgent action to tackle climate change has become “a priority for new trade union internationalism”.

The General Council of the ITUC global union confederation (see Section 2.1) has put its weight behind ‘green jobs’ as the best way to get a rapid shift to a low carbon economy. These ‘green jobs’, says the ITUC, must be ‘decent jobs’ with workers and unions playing a full role in making them happen. There must be social protection measures for those who lose their jobs and income, and retraining and education for new jobs. This is what the Global Unions are calling a ‘Just Transition’ – only then will it be sustainable. The ITUC adopted a special action programme and set up a task force on this in December 2007, with the British TUC fully involved.

The Global Unions say governments must show stronger leadership. Until the financial crash of 2008, many governments were tending to leave it to ‘market-based’ policies such as carbon-trading. But it has been the dominance of the free market that led us to this crisis, and more governments are now persuaded of this. Governments have to step in more, help phase out jobs in damaging industries and make sure they are replaced with sustainable ones. They should be promoting jobs in sectors such as construction to convert energy-inefficient buildings, build flood defences, and so on.

The Global Unions are determined to get this concept of a ‘just transition’ embedded in the new international treaty to replace Kyoto, to be agreed in 2012. They lobbied hard at meetings of the UNFCCC, the main United Nations body dealing with global responses to climate change, and achieved official status there. Then they managed to get the term ‘just transition’ included in the official text preparing for the climate summit in Copenhagen in December 2009. Now the emphasis is on mobilising unions in each country to make sure governments sign up to it, internationally and at home.

The Global Unions are working with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (see page 15) on supporting trade unionists around the world to get more involved. In 2004, they set up SustainLabour, which has produced very useful training materials.

In the different sectors, the Global Union Federations are also active:

- For transport workers, the ITF is busy with new ideas and activities on sustainable transport (see page 60).
- For autoworkers, the IMF sees the development of innovative clean vehicle and fuel technologies as integral to the industry’s evolution (see page 64).
- For agricultural/food workers, the IUF is very active on the problems of biofuels and food sustainability (see page 61).
- For forestry workers, the BWI has several sustainable forestry management initiatives, particularly in Africa (see page 66).

“For trade unionists, a viable solution to climate change will not be found unless we also combat social injustice.”

‘Trade unions and climate change: Equity, justice and solidarity in the fight against climate change’, Global Unions statement to the UNFCCC meeting in Poznan, December 2008: www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/No_45_-_TradeUnions_ClimateChange_COP14.pdf
‘CER’? (Corporate Environmental Responsibility)

We need to get these vital issues into our negotiations with global corporations, not just governments. Global companies – for example the giant retailers at the head of global supply chains – may be willing to green their own workplaces in countries such as the UK, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. Unions are starting to realise the energy use that is embedded in the supply chains of the global market. We should certainly be putting more pressure on corporations about their responsibilities towards global warming and sustainable energy policies as a whole.

European Works Councils with their rights to company information (see page 20) could be very useful places for this, as could the International Framework Agreements between global union federations and certain companies (see page 19). Just as we have been concerned with getting principal companies to take responsibility for employment standards in their suppliers, can we also get them to insert a ‘green’ clause into those contracts?

Trade unions are also very well placed to help monitor global companies for ‘greenwash’. There is great need – and potential - for workforces on the ground to exchange information about how companies are operating in different locations, to prevent the spread of inaccurate propaganda about how well companies are doing environmentally.

More even than this is how labour is to have a role in shaping the new post-carbon industrial revolution that is ahead of us, how we get it into our industrial, collective bargaining agenda at all levels.

“Climate change is the biggest and deadliest failure of the market that the world has ever known… Transition to a low carbon economy must be done with the people, not to them.”
Frances O’Grady, Deputy General Secretary, TUC,
speaking at ‘A Just Transition’, TUC climate change conference, 16 June 2008

ITUC on climate change: climate.ituc-csi.org

Global Unions officer Anabella Rosemberg talks about climate change and workers at: youtube.com/watch?v=PzC1JQKVsoE

‘SustainLabour’: International Labour Foundation for Sustainable Development:
www.sustainlabour.org


Country-by-country profiles on the progress made by governments on sustainable development, including climate change and energy: www.tradeunionsdunit.org/profiles/profiles.php

www.monbiot.com

“Climate change is the biggest and deadliest failure of the market that the world has ever known… Transition to a low carbon economy must be done with the people, not to them.”
Frances O’Grady, Deputy General Secretary, TUC,
speaking at ‘A Just Transition’, TUC climate change conference, 16 June 2008
Using our US ties

Our special relationships with US unions (see page 68) give us an important opportunity to work together for an international ‘New Green Deal’, especially as it is our governments and employers who are so significant in global terms. It is clear that many organised workers in the USA are taking the issue seriously.

“We are an environmental union. We understand that it’s not a case of jobs versus the environment. The science is clear: it’s either both, or neither.”

Leo Gerard, International President, United Steelworkers, USA and Canada

See also, ‘Securing Our Children’s World, Our Union and the Environment’, USW, 2006

www.uswa.ca/program/content/3573.php

Blue-Green Alliance

Both US unions to which Unite has a close relationship, the United Steelworkers and the SEIU, are members of the Blue-Green Alliance in the USA dedicated to expanding the number and quality of jobs created in a new, green US economy. In fact, the USW helped found it in 2006. Also involved are unions for teachers, utility and construction workers, and environmental organisations like the influential Sierra Club, altogether over six million people. The Alliance has a full programme of education and training, policy development, and so on. Its conference ‘Good Jobs, Green Jobs’ in February 2009 attracted over 2,000 workers and environmental activists wanting to develop a "New Green Deal”. Vice-President Biden was there, along with members of President Obama’s Cabinet.

www.bluegreenalliance.org

“For the past century, our craft has been involved in constructing infrastructure we now know has contributed substantially to the greenhouse gas emissions that are causing climate change. For the next century, our craft will be essential to deploying the new technology now available to reduce the carbon emissions associated with energy generation and industrial processes.”

Abraham Breehey of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, USA, in a blog from the United Nations conference on climate change, held in Bali, December 2007

“We see the struggle against global warming as an opportunity to put a stop to unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, and to create new and well paying ‘green’ jobs in renewable energy, the construction trades, public transportation, sustainable farming, and much-needed manufacturing…

… the fate of workers, communities, and the biosphere are inseparable from each other. We reject the notion that we must choose between jobs and environmental protection. We commit ourselves to work wholeheartedly for both…”

Excerpts from the Statement by the North American Labor Assembly on Climate Crisis, New York City, 7-8 May 2007. 350 unionists and environmentalists from around the world attended the conference, including Unite.

www.iir.cornell.edu/globallaborinstitute/events/climateChangeConference/index.html
**Part of a wider movement**

All over the world, collaboration on climate change is happening between unions and a wide range of other groups. At the UNFCCC meeting in Bali in December 2007, for example, the ITUC held joint briefings with the Climate Action Network. CAN represents over 430 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) around the world. www.climatenetwork.org

We in the global North must play our full part, and to be seen to be doing so. If not, how are we to persuade our friends in the rising economies of Asia and elsewhere of the need for them also to pull back on carbon-driven growth? At present, they are mostly following our model of economic development that got the world into this crisis, and now risk increasing emissions to the point of no-return. We have to work together to show that low carbon development is the only sustainable one for all, and is possible.

> “While responsibility for emissions lies with rich and powerful nations, it is the poorest countries which are the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change through impacts on agriculture, food security, water supplies, weather (droughts, flooding, etc.), health and ecosystems. It is in this context that the trade union statement submitted to the UNFCCC conference in Bali in December 2007 calls for developed countries to show solidarity with developing countries by cutting their own emissions.”
> *IF*, April 2008

**Sustainable Development = Ecological Justice**

It seems we are at a stage in human history when we must build into all economic developments the principal of ‘first do no damage to the climate’. However, solutions to the environmental crisis cannot come from technological fixes alone. The poor of the world are going to suffer the most. So we must bring together the environment and the social, making sure that justice, equity and democracy are built into our responses to climate change.

We must each play our part in developing positive political responses. We may see the rise of ‘green protectionism’, a negative defensiveness against those who are actually victims elsewhere (as we saw during the movement of jobs to the ‘global South’ in the 1980s, see page 21). Instead, we must build solidarity across the world to argue for ‘decent jobs’ and a new post-carbon industrial revolution. Trade unions are crucial to finding solutions to the climate crisis.

This is not only for us today but Justice for Generations.

> “Climate change is a global problem that requires global responses and solidarity.”
> United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and SustainLabour, 2008
1.6 Still trying to ‘Make Poverty History’

Globalisation facts

- 57% of world wealth is owned by just 1% of the population.
- 20% of the population - 1.2 billion people - live on less than 1US$ a day.
- 70% of those 1.2 billion people are women and children.
- 800 million people are living in hunger, the vast majority in rural areas; at the time of writing, there are food crises in 37 countries; food prices around the world rose 57% in 2007 – 130% in the case of rice, the staple diet of millions.

In September 2000, all governments in the United Nations agreed to reduce extreme poverty in the world, and they set out for themselves a number of goals to achieve by 2015, called the ‘Millennium Development Goals’. For example, so as to end “extreme poverty and hunger”, they agreed it would be necessary to:

“Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people.”

Millennium Development Goal No.2

Five years later, as many Unite members will recall, there was a big campaign called ‘Make Poverty History’ to keep up the pressure on the major governments (the ‘G8’), as they met in the UK.

The United Nations confirms our analysis, saying governments have been too slow in fulfilling their promises on trade and aid to the developing countries. On top of that, the poor have been badly hit by high fuel and food prices; many children remain malnourished as a result.

Governments signed up to these goals but they failed to tackle the fundamentals of the global economic system. They allowed us all to be in the grip of unfettered capitalism – exploiting working people, and perpetuating rather than reducing inequalities and poverty. And then the global recession at the end of the decade hit the poor even further.

There can be no ‘international development’ without poverty reduction – and that means enabling the poorest people of the world to have a sustainable income, freedom from discrimination, oppression and exploitation, respect for human rights, and so on.

In fact, this is where our trade unions were born - at the forefront of combating poverty by trying to build a society based on fairness and democracy for ordinary working people and our communities. One of our greatest achievements has been winning international recognition for these fundamental human and labour rights for all, through the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (see page 15).

Today as much as ever, we must be part of international efforts to develop a future that is sustainable for the whole globe, for the people and our planet. A strong and healthy democratic trade union movement remains an essential part of this.

Millennium Development Goals: www.un.org/millenniumgoals
**Government support for solidarity**

In some other countries of the ‘global North’, for example the Netherlands and the Nordic countries, governments have long recognised trade unions as partners in supporting international development. They give very substantial state funding to unions there to help support projects with unions in the ‘global South’.

Unions in the UK never benefited from this – until, that is, the election of the Labour Government in 1997. Very soon the old Overseas Development Administration was transformed into the Department for International Development (DFID), and the list of those recognised as partners in international development was widened. As well as the development/aid agencies such as Oxfam, Save the Children, etc., now faith groups, youth organisations, community groups, and trade unions were encouraged to get involved, with funding.

DFID’s ‘Development Awareness Fund’ is for education in the UK to raise awareness and understanding of development issues. The ‘Civil Society Challenge Fund’ supports partnerships between UK-based civil society organisations (including unions) and similar organisations in developing countries.

DFID recognised that unions need support to develop our own capacity in this field. So they signed a partnership agreement with the TUC that includes a small grants scheme for unions. There are quarterly meetings between the TUC, union representatives, and DFID. Compared to some other countries, the money available is relatively small; some of the procedures and conditions are difficult for unions to meet. But it is an important step forward for British unions to be acknowledged by government as having a legitimate role in international development activity. This manual is part of an international organising education project for UNITE members supported by DFID funding.

**Department for International Development (DFID), British Government:**

www.dfid.gov.uk

**TUC International Department:** Many resources on international issues including an 8-week on-line course on international development, and a monthly newsletter ‘International Development Matters’:

www.tuc.org.uk/international/index.cfm
Working with ‘NGOs’

There are of course many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also actively trying to combat poverty around the world. Many have similar aims as ourselves. Some were set up with the involvement of trade unions and remain very close; in the UK they include War on Want and One World Action. Others such as Oxfam are interested in partnerships with unions, particularly as workers’ rights and ethical trade in the globalised economy move up their own agenda. Oxfam GB is now working with Unite and others to help organise and defend migrant workers in the UK, for example.

The relationship between unions and NGOs is not necessarily straightforward. Some in NGOs know little about trade unions; some know but are not interested. It is also true that some government officials and advisors, though said to be specialist academics in this field, know or care little about unions. They reflect a general prejudice in British society, with its roots in the Thatcher years when unions were demonised.

All too often, unions are portrayed as only defending a privileged few – those workers who have the power and resources to protect their interests, normally the ones with relatively good jobs and incomes. We stand accused of ignoring the needs of the poorest workers, those on subsistence wages or surviving in the ‘informal economy’ (see Section 1.4). We are also accused of being dominated by men, ignoring the needs of women workers and doing little to promote women’s leadership in our structures.

It is a fact that, despite our roots, ideals, and many good actions, the fight against poverty is not necessarily the first priority for trade unions. Our highest priorities, by definition, are set by the needs and demands of our members – who, also by definition, enjoy the right to join a union and have some form of recognised employment. There is an underlying tension throughout the world’s trade union movement between representing our members and representing all workers – the majority of whom are not union members.

It is in our hands to answer our critics with words and deeds, and to build useful alliances with the right kind of partners if we want to do more in the global fight against poverty. There are building blocks for this.

Importantly, UNITE is the main union representing the UK staff of British-based international development/aid agencies. We have members in Oxfam, Amnesty International, Christian Aid, and many others. Is there more we could do to help them organise more effectively, both when working in the UK - and when they are overseas? Perhaps we could also support them to build trade union membership among the ‘local’ staff in the countries where the agency operates. Generating stronger organisation in this way might well also help get a trade union perspective into the projects and programmes of these agencies.

Section 2.2 looks in more depth at relationships with non-union organisations.

War on Want: www.waronwant.org
Oxfam: www.oxfam.org.uk

‘NGO’

This stands for Non-Governmental Organisation. It is the term used internationally for organisations set up by citizens – i.e. not by governments, nor by private companies. NGOs can be big global organisations, like Oxfam, or small groups. In the UK, the term ‘the voluntary sector’ is often used instead.
What kind of economic growth?

“It is vital that governments and the global institutions do more than just fiddle at the edges of a system which simply isn’t delivering for the world’s people... The factors behind soaring food and agricultural commodity prices are part of the same set of global policies which have resulted in massive global financial instability and intensifying climate change, and these three current global crises must be tackled through root and branch reform and effective regulation that can deliver decent work... Large parts of the global agricultural system are built upon poverty wages and violation of workers’ fundamental rights. No durable solution to the crisis can be found unless the appalling worker rights record in global agriculture is addressed.”

**Guy Ryder, General Secretary, ITUC, May 2008**


The dominant economic model for ‘development’, accepted by virtually all governments including our own, is that economic growth is the way to end poverty; and that international trade is the main route to that growth. But such massive worldwide inequalities and hunger, compounded by the threat of climate change, lead us to ask: “Growth yes, but what kind of growth?”

Through the Global Unions, we are part of international action on these vital questions of sustainable development for all – whether relating to climate change (see Section 1.5), or the food crisis through the IUF global union federation for food and agricultural workers (see page 61), or many other aspects.

“Absolutely key is local economic development in the Third World; and this means changing our relationships to those communities – our need for the minerals they mine, the out-of-season flowers/food they grow, the goods they produce at such distance from us. The question is: how to replace their current exports with sustainable production. Fundamental to this is union development in the Third World. We should be supporting the emergence of unions which want their economies to succeed sustainably, not based on the export of migrants or green beans.”

**Jack Dromey, Unite Deputy General Secretary, speaking at the TUC conference on climate change, June 2008**

Meanwhile, Unite’s Assistant General Secretary Diana Holland – who is also Chair of the Women’s Committee of the ITUC global union confederation (see page 58) – reminds us that the fight against poverty is at the same time a fight for women’s equality.

“There are 1.2 billion women in work around the world, but we earn less than our male co-workers, at best about 12%, in some places even 60% less. Nor do we get the same level of social protection. This means more poverty, not only for women but also for our families. So, fighting discrimination in the workplace is the same thing as fighting poverty, and it helps to create a better society for all.”

**Diana Holland, Unite Assistant General Secretary, and Chair of the Women’s Committee of the ITUC global union confederation, as well as the Women’s Committee of the transport workers’ ITF.**
2. HOW GLOBAL LABOUR SOLIDARITY HELPS

In Section 1, we looked at some of the key global issues facing us as trade unionists, and how our union is and might be more active about these issues at an international level. We looked at some of the ways in which our union is already involved.

In this Section 2, we go into more depth about the kinds of international activities, organisations and alliances of which Unite is a part. Our aim is to examine more:

• what should be our priorities in today’s world?
• which structures and activities best fit each of our priorities?
• how can we be more effective in these structures, to help build union organisation everywhere, at home and abroad?

Different types of solidarity

One way of looking at international solidarity is to examine its purpose, and then think about the best way of achieving it. What kinds of solidarity do we want to emphasise to meet the challenges of today’s world? The map of our international activities is really quite intricate, each carried out with particular aims in mind:

• Charitable

British trade unionists have a long history of ‘digging into our pockets’, at branch, region and national level, to support a wide range of charities at home and abroad. They include concerns such as wildlife, or medical aid, as well as support for workers and communities facing deep poverty (see Section 1.6). Support for fellow trade unionists in urgent need of resources is vital and much appreciated. But sometimes such charity carries assumptions about the ‘deserving poor’; nothing more is expected than ‘we give something to help them’. Missing here, however, is the recognition that solidarity can be two-way, that they may well have ideas and strategies to help us.

• Human and Labour Rights

Trade unions have a long tradition of international solidarity for those whose fundamental human and labour rights are most under attack. Each year, the ITUC (see page 58) publishes an annual survey, highlighting the countries where anti-union violence is at its worst. Two currently under the spotlight are:

- Colombia: “the deadliest country in the world for trade unionists”
  www.justiceforcolombia.org
- Iran: where there is ongoing denial of rights and arrests of trade unionists
  www.justiceforiranianworkers.org

‘Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights’, ITUC: www.ituc-csi.org
• Political

British trade unionists have often expressed strong solidarity with liberation movements: South Africa, Chile and Nicaragua are examples from recent history. Today, our focus is largely on:

- **Cuba Solidarity Campaign**: www.cuba-solidarity.org.uk
- **Palestine Solidarity Campaign**: www.palestinecampaign.org
- **Zimbabwe**: for example, via **Action on Southern Africa (ACTSA)**: www.actsa.org

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**Five men, five families
10 YEARS SEPARATION
JUSTICE FOR THE MIAMI FIVE**

*Imprisoned for defending their country, Cuba*

Sunday 21 September

Unite Marquee (secure zone, conference centre)
17.30 - 19.00 (food and Cuban drinks provided)

**Invited guests include:**
Tony Woodley, Derek Simpson, Unite Joint GS;
Dave Prentis, Unison GS; Billy Hayes, CWU GS;
Amnesty International, family members of the Miami Five, and others

Join us to build support for visitation rights www.unitetheunion.com

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• Policy

By being part of the global trade union movement, we get to influence international policy developments: at the European level through the British TUC to the European TUC, and through our membership of sector/industry-based European industrial federations (see Section 1.3); and at a global level, through the Global Unions to the International Labour Organisation (see page 15) and other United Nations and intergovernmental bodies.

• Industrial

Today, more than ever, we share interests with workers the world over by being in the same sector or industry as them, often working for the same employer or in the same supply chain. Our main vehicles for developing common strategies are outlined in Section 1.2 and through the sector/industry-based global union federations (see pages 59-67).
2.1 Global Unions

‘Global Unions’ is the umbrella name for the main structures of the international trade union movement:

- The Global Union Federations (GUFs) which bring together unions from around the world on an industry/sector basis.

- The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) to which national trade union centres belong.

- The Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC) to the intergovernmental Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). www.tuac.org

The origins of several GUFs can be traced back to the 19th century. They are independent of each other, but there is constant co-operation between them and with the ITUC, at the highest level through the Council of Global Unions. They collaborate, for example, in their involvement in the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (see page 15), as well as on such issues as climate change, transnational corporations, and so on.

Added to this, there are regional bodies for the ITUC and each GUF. In Europe, they are the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the European Industrial Committees, and the Pan-European Regional Council (see also Section 1.3).

Unite and the international trade union bodies
ITUC

www.ituc-csi.org

International Trade Union Confederation
Headquarters in Brussels; offices in Amman, Geneva, Moscow, New York, Sarajevo, Vilnius and Washington DC.
Regional bodies include the European TUC (ETUC)
311 national union centres representing 168 million workers in 155 countries
UK Affiliate: TUC; also Irish Congress of Trade Unions (active in Northern Ireland)

The ITUC is the international confederation of national trade union centres from around the world, including the British Trades Union Congress (TUC). Unite therefore largely relates to the ITUC through the TUC. However, senior Unite officials are also elected onto top ITUC bodies: Joint General Secretary Tony Woodley is a member of the ITUC General Council, and Assistant General Secretary Diana Holland is chair of the ITUC Women’s Committee and sits on the ITUC Executive Bureau, for example.

The ITUC was formed in 2006 through the merger of two world federations, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the World Confederation of Labour (WCL).

It is primarily concerned with the representation of trade union interests at intergovernmental organisations. These include the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the OECD (see page 16), and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), as well as United Nations agencies - principally the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the trade and development body UNCTAD and the education/science/culture body UNESCO.

The ITUC has a particularly important function within the ILO, see page 15. The Workers’ Group on the ILO’s Governing Body is in effect representative of the ITUC. Its significance in pushing for and achieving respect for international labour Conventions – the closest thing we have to international labour law – cannot be understated.

As part of its efforts to get respect for ‘core ILO labour standards’, the ITUC is focusing on getting a ‘social clause’ into the world trade agreements of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The ITUC wants to stop world trade being organised on the basis that countries which do not respect basic workers’ and trade union rights benefit.

The ITUC’s main areas of activity at present include:

• Trade union and human rights
• International solidarity campaigns, for example against child labour, ‘Fair Play at the Olympics’, ‘Global Call to Action Against Poverty’, HIV-Aids action
• Economic and social policy at a global level
• Equality and non-discrimination: organising more women and young people
• Organising in the informal economy and among migrant workers
• Climate change

TUC International Department: www.tuc.org.uk/international
Global Union Federations (GUFs)

These are federations of trade unions around the world with members in particular industries or sectors. There are currently ten GUFs.

- **ITF** - International Transport Workers’ Federation
- **IUF** - International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations
- **UNI** - Union Network International
- **ICEM** - International Chemical, Energy and Mine Workers’ Federation
- **IMF** - International Metalworkers Federation
- **ITGLWF** - International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers’ Federation
- **PSI** - Public Services International
- **BWI** - Building and Woodworkers’ International
- **EI** - Education International
- **IFJ** - International Federation of Journalists

Unite is affiliated to the first eight, each of which is outlined in the following pages.

The GUFs are the closest international structures to the day-to-day union work of negotiating with employers and representing the employment interests of workers. Their activities include:

- Providing support for trade union development (e.g. education programmes) within their sectors or industries
- Co-ordinating international solidarity actions in defence of trade unions under attack or in dispute
- Monitoring and researching global/regional industrial restructuring
- Co-ordinating representation with transnational corporations
- Representing trade union interests at international meetings and organisations concerned with particular sectors or industries (e.g. UN agencies, international employers’ organisations etc.)
- Promoting the exchange of experience, information, etc. between affiliated unions, through publications, seminars, conferences etc.
- Campaigning on key issues facing the sector or industry.

GUFs follow the principles of democratic representation. They are governed by their affiliated unions through global Congresses every four or five years, which decide on key policy issues and elect an Executive Council to oversee policy in between. The work of their various industrial sections, equalities, and so on, is also governed by committees made up of elected representatives from affiliated unions. Unite representatives sit on many of these councils and committees, helping to decide on union activities at the global level and bringing them back to the UK.
Global unions

• ITF

www.itfglobal.org

International Transport Workers’ Federation

Headquarters in London; regional offices in East and West Africa, East Asia, South Asia, South America, the Caribbean, East and West Europe.

654 unions in 148 countries representing 4.5 million transport workers

UK affiliates: Unite, ASLEF, GMB, Nautilus, PCSU, Prospect, RMT, TSSA, UNISON, USDAW

Sectors: railways, road transport, civil aviation (cabin crew and ground staff), dockers, seafarers and fishing workers, tourism.

The ITF was founded in 1896 in London by European seafarers’ and dockers’ union leaders who realised even then the need to organise internationally against strike-breakers. Not surprisingly, Unite remains a key ITF affiliate. Our elected representatives and senior officials sit on many ITF policy bodies, including its Executive Board, Women’s Committee, and the Road Transport, Dockers and Civil Aviation sections. So our links in and out of this global union federation are very strong.

The ITF is famous for its defence of the world’s seafarers. Its 60 year-old ‘Flags of Convenience’ campaign chases disreputable shipowners who flag their vessels in countries like Liberia and Panama where the authorities turn a blind eye and there are no strong maritime unions, an early form of ‘outsourcing’. The ITF has over 125 ships inspectors in ports around the world with rights to board unsafe vessels and assist seafarers. It also has consultative status in the bodies that govern international waters and airspace – the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO).

Dockers remain important to the ITF, not only for standing up for their own rights but also for defending seafarers by refusing to load or off-load vessels at key moments. Aircraft cabin crews and airport ground staff are also well supported. The ITF helped our fight for the jobs of Gate Gourmet airline catering workers in 2005 (see page 11), and generated international solidarity for our BA cabin crew members in a dispute in January 2007.

In road transport, the drivers of trucks, buses, and taxis around the world face great pressure to work long hours, even though this puts them and other road-users at extreme risk. For several years, the ITF has been holding a Global Day of Action on the theme ‘Fatigue Kills. Cut Working Hours’ involving unionists in about 65 countries.

With the growth of the logistics industry, the ITF and UNI (see page 62) run a joint ‘Global Delivery Network’. This focuses on the firms that dominate parcel distribution worldwide: DHL, FedEx, TNT, UPS and CEVA, known as the ‘Integrators’. The network has a members-only extranet to exchange information, and runs global campaigns such as a Day of Action on 5 December 2007. In early 2008, the ITF publicised the case won by Unite against TNT for sacking an elected Unite rep Dave Reeves in Bristol.

“First Buses was expanding in the USA, and was very hostile to unions there. So we did a lot to support the Teamsters, facilitated by the ITF. There are now 10,000 union members with recognised agreements there. Through that campaign we stemmed the import of those ideas over here. It was a case of ‘solidarity; yes – and with self-interest’.”

Martin Mayer, Unite Executive Council Member, and Chair of the ITF Road Transport Section Committee
• IUF

www.iuf.org

International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations

Headquarters in Geneva; autonomous regional organisations in Africa, Asia/Pacific, the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America and North America.

336 trade unions in 120 countries representing over 12 million workers

UK affiliates: Unite, BFAWU, GMB, USDAW

Sectors: Agriculture and plantations, food and beverage production, hotels/restaurants/catering services, tobacco processing, and domestic/household work.

IUF priorities are:

• building solidarity at every stage of the food chain
• international organizing within transnational companies (TNCs)
• global action to defend human, democratic, and trade union rights
• promoting women’s equality at the workplace, in society and in the trade union movement

Farm workers are one of the world’s most vulnerable workforces in one of the world’s most dangerous industries. Agriculture is also one of the two areas, along with domestic/household labour (see page 40), where there is most child and migrant labour, as well as slavery. Rural families are prone to poverty and hunger, and are now even more at risk from climate change and biofuels production (see Section 1.5). These are all concerns the IUF takes up vigorously at international level, as well as supporting its affiliates through education and campaigning.

Food, catering and hotel workers are other important sectors, where the IUF helps to confront major food corporations like Nestle and Unilever, and big hotel chains, as well as small workplaces like restaurants. Agency-hiring to undercut working terms and conditions is big in this sector, and the IUF has supported our own campaigns targeting M&S and Tesco to demand equal treatment for agency workers - publicising our activities and encouraging unions in many countries to go out on solidarity demonstrations (see page 37).

“With the IUF, it is not just about turning up at meetings. It is a campaigning organisation, taking up the needs of workers on an international scale. When it comes to agricultural workers, the IUF and Unite-T&G have a long history of working together – often leading the way, such as on organising migrant workers. The IUF was also ahead of the game on understanding the role of private equity capital in the global economy.”

Teresa Mackay, Unite Regional Women’s Officer for Women Race and Equalities (RWO/WRE) for the London and Eastern Region, who has been on the IUF Agricultural & Allied Workers’ Trade Group Board since 1998, and its Vice-President since 2002.

‘All for One = One for All: A gender equality guide for trade unionists in the agriculture, food, hotel and catering sectors’, IUF, 2007: www.iufdocuments.org/women/2008/All for One.pdf


• UNI

www.uniglobalunion.org

Union Network International
Headquarters in Switzerland; regional offices in Belgium, Russia, Zambia, Tunisia, Ivory Coast, Panama, Argentina, Singapore, Japan
900 affiliated unions in over 140 countries representing 20 million members
UK affiliates: Unite, Connect, CWU, GPA, USDAW
Sectors: White-collar and service industries: commerce, banking and finance, IT, graphical, media, entertainment and arts, hair and beauty, postal services, property services, social insurance, private health care, telecommunications, tourism.

“Our aim is to make union members, global players.”

UNI priorities include:

• Global financial reform, including an end to executive greed, the abolition of tax havens, the financial industry to contribute to the public purse (for example, through a tax on international financial transactions), and reform of the international banking institutions – the World Bank and International Monetary Fund – so that they are no longer driven by neo-liberal ideology; as the global union federation representing bank and finance workers, UNI can play an especially constructive role in this

• Global alliances and ‘virtual committees’ to improve union organisation in key multinationals; global agreements with multinationals such as Nampak (see page 19).

• Organising initiatives to get more young workers (increasingly women) into unions, to create democratic unions where there were none, and to help organise workers in countries receiving outsourced work.

The ‘offshoring’ of financial services work by companies such as Norwich Union/Aviva is one area where Unite is active with UNI. We have, for example, been supporting UNI’s efforts to help establish new unions among India’s young workforce in the call centre / back office processing industries (see page 30).

Another emphasis for UNI is the employment conditions of cleaners and security guards working for the global corporations that have grown massively with privatisation and outsourcing. Group 4/Securicor (G4S) is one example, a company that is expanding its operations in Africa, Asia and Latin America, while selling off in Western Europe. In Africa, “G4S is the largest private employer with nearly 100,000 workers in around 20 countries”, says UNI, adding how this shows that G4S prefers to do business “where it can capitalise on the mistreatment of workers”. UNI is currently running an ‘Alliance for Justice at G4S’ campaign. As well as tracking these corporations, UNI tries to get those companies and governments who place contracts with them to have a ‘Responsible Contractor Policy’ that respects workers’ fundamental rights.

“When we campaign against job losses or for decent labour standards around the world, we know that we are campaigning together with more than one and a half million finance sector trade unionists.”

David Fleming, Unite National Officer for the Finance Sector
**ICEM**

www.icem.org

**International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers’ Unions**  
Headquarters in Switzerland (moved in 2008 from Belgium); regional offices in all world regions  
467 trade unions in 132 countries, representing over 20 million workers  
UK affiliates: Unite, GMB, NACODS, USDAW  
Sectors: Energy, oil and gas, chemical and pharmaceuticals, mining and quarrying, pulp and paper, rubber, glass, ceramics and cement, gems and jewellery production, environmental services.

ICEM priorities include:

- Global Framework Agreements with individual TNCs: currently 13 signed including, for example, the French cement company LaFarge, and the chemical companies Bayer and BASF  
- Networks of trade unions sharing the same TNC employer, including the oil/gas giant Exxon/Mobil and the chemicals corporation DuPont, and the South African pulp, paper and packaging corporation Sappi  
- Combating contract and agency labour (see also page 37)  
- HIV/AIDS  
- Gender issues  
- Sustainable development / health and safety  
- Union responses to the financial crisis

Unite has a long history of strong involvement in the ICEM, by both the T&G and Amicus wings. For example, Unite-T&G’s former National Secretary for the chemicals, oil and rubber sector Fred Higgs became the ICEM General Secretary, serving from 1999 to 2006. His successor in Unite, Phil McNulty, is one of the ICEM Vice-Presidents, and Unite Assistant General Secretary Tony Burke is on the ICEM Executive. Meanwhile, the United Steel Workers (USW) of the US, with whom we have forged ‘Workers Uniting’ (see page 69) is also an active ICEM affiliate. So we are well represented in the structures and deeply involved, both in what we give to the ICEM and what we receive in return.

“**In 2004, a request came to us via the ICEM. Unions in Thailand were asking for help after two of their shop stewards were sacked. The company in question, BOC/Linde, has its headquarters in the UK. So we and the ICEM stepped in. Not only did we get them reinstated, but we also won a guarantee that union organisation would not be interfered with at their plant. A year later they and their fellow workers had organised 11 of the 12 plants run by this company in their country.”**

Phil McNulty, Unite National Officer and ICEM Vice-President

In 2007, the Leicester Paper Company (LPC), which produces paper products for retailers such as Morrisons and Tesco, bought up a towel and tissue plant in Belgium. Unionised workers there contacted the ICEM for information about their new employer. It was news of their activities that spurred Unite into fresh organising efforts at LPC, and in July 2008 we won union recognition rights there.
• IMF

www.imfmetal.org

International Metalworkers’ Federation
Headquarters in Switzerland; regional offices for East/Southern Africa, South Asia, South-East Asia, Latin America and Caribbean, and a project office in Russia. Over 200 affiliates in 100 countries representing 25 million members. UK affiliates: Unite, Community, GMB; with a British co-ordinating body ‘IMF British Section’

Sectors: Aerospace, automotive, electrical and electronics, iron, steel and non-ferrous metals, mechanical engineering, shipbuilding.

The IMF’s current priorities are:

• Building a global metalworkers’ movement
  - organising the unorganised
  - giving international solidarity more impetus

• Dealing with transnational corporations
  - negotiating international framework agreements: the IMF has negotiated some 18, including with BMW car manufacturers and Indesit domestic appliance producers
  - the IMF also has ‘world company councils’ and networks for unions in a number of global corporations (see page 18) including Ford
  - creating new information strategies

• Implementing countervailing union power
  - developing an alternative economic programme
  - securing workers’ rights
  - ensuring that economic development is sustainable.

The IMF is another of the global union federations very concerned about the growth of ‘precarious’ work – where workers are employed in anything but a secure job with known terms and conditions and employment rights (see Section 1.4). It is encouraging affiliates to join in a global campaign ‘Precarious Work Affects Us All!’ with information, posters, etc.

Unite’s activities and concerns are regularly publicised on the IMF website. Recent examples include job insecurity in the UK, and the Jaguar Land Rover takeover dispute in 2007.

The Global Crisis and Restructuring in Automotive and Metalworking Industries,
The ITGLWF’s current priorities include:

- Eliminating child labour
- Multinational companies: how framework agreements and company ‘codes of conduct’ can be used to strengthen union organisation on the ground; getting garment/sportswear brands to disclose the list of their supplier factories worldwide
- Strengthening the organisation of garment/sportswear workers
- The rights of homeworkers
- Wages and working hours – including a ‘Living Wage’ campaign
- Health and safety at work

Clothing and sportswear is a sector dominated by big brands such as Nike, Gap, and adidas, and by big retailers such as M&S and Primark. These companies mostly outsource production to countries where trade union rights are not properly recognised, if at all. The industry also relies on a lot of subcontracting to sweatshops and homeworkers. Once these workers get organised, the companies often move on to the next location. So garment and sportswear workers need a lot of support in a situation where unions are relatively weak, despite all the efforts of garment and sportswear workers.

“\textit{The clothing and footwear sectors are not so big in the UK these days – because they were outsourced to where the labour supply is cheaper in Asia and Africa. But it is still important for Unite to maintain our involvement in the ITGLWF. We get a better understanding of the problems unionists elsewhere face, often in situations where their unions are not strong, and we offer our backing and experience where we can. And we do get respect for the input we give.}”

Brendon Gold, Unite National Secretary and member of the ITGLWF Presidium

Meanwhile, groups of concerned activists have got organised in the main markets of Europe, Scandinavia and North America. Their campaigns have put a lot of pressure on the brands and retailers to accept responsibility for the working conditions in their supply chains. The ITGLWF works with such groups, for example the Clean Clothes Campaign, recognising the added value that their pressure brings. These alliances have forced many of the big brands and retailers to adopt so-called ‘ethical codes of conduct’. There is now a cat-and-mouse game to ensure these statements mean something in terms of real union organising on the ground (see page 17). The London Olympics in 2012 will provide plenty of opportunities for British unionists to join in these campaigns, see page 70.

ITGLWF education materials, including videos on bargaining for a living wage and ‘Organising in a Global Economy’: www.itglwf.org/education
Global unions

• BWI

www.bwint.org

Building and Woodworkers International
Headquarters in Switzerland; regional and project offices in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Malaysia, Panama, Peru, Russia, South Africa, and South Korea
319 affiliates in 130 countries representing 12 million members
UK affiliates: Unite, GMB, UCATT
Sectors: Construction, wood and forestry.

BWI current priorities include:

• Multinational corporations: the BWI has signed International Framework Agreements with ten TNCs including the Swedish furniture company IKEA and French cement company Lafarge

• Informal work and contract labour – a big problem on construction sites

• Defending migrant workers: the BWI European regional federation (EFBWW) has a European Migrant Workers Network, with a website dedicated to migrant construction workers’ support (see page 39); meanwhile, a Migrant Workers Rights ‘Passport’ is being tested out in Asia – especially to help defend the thousands of Asian workers in the booming construction sector of the Arabian Gulf

• Sustainable development, especially for the world’s forests – not only economic viability, but also environmental protection and social responsibility

• Health and safety at work, for example combating exposure to cancer-inducing particles such as asbestos

• Gender equity and young workers

“In construction, at least 108,000 workers are killed on site every year... That is one person dying every five minutes because of bad, and illegal, working conditions.”

‘Strong Unions for Safe Jobs’, a BWI global health and safety programme, involving over 100 trade unions in 65 countries

The BWI is also keen to highlight the possibilities of getting local and national government to adopt labour standards in their ‘public procurement’ contracts. There is an ILO Convention (see page 15), signed in 1949: No.94 on Labour Clauses (Public Contracts) on this very subject. It was ratified by the UK in 1950 but ‘denounced’ by the Tory Government in 1982. The BWI wants affiliated unions to “infuse new life” into this Convention, and use it to win better standards for those working on government contracts such as building sites.

Unite’s construction sector is affiliated to the BWI and supports its activities, but tends to work more intensively within its European wing, the EFBWW (see page 24). There is currently no Unite representation on BWI global structures.
**Global unions**

• **PSI**

www.world-psi.org

**Public Services International**

Headquarters in France; regional bodies in Barbados, Belgium, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, India, Japan, Lebanon, Malaysia, New Zealand, Romania, Russia, South Africa, Togo, Ukraine, and USA

Over 650 unions in 160 countries representing 20 million members

UK affiliates: Unite, FBU, FDA, GMB, PCS, Prospect, Unison

Sectors: Public service workers.

Current PSI priorities include:

• Improving the quality of public services for all
• Union rights for all public service workers
• Gender equality and employment equity for all
• Public alternatives to the privatisation of services
• A strong and united trade union movement
• Social justice in the workplace
• Poverty reduction and debt relief
• Climate change

Since it was founded in 1907, the PSI has been coordinating public sector workers’ struggles for labour rights, social and economic justice, as well as efficient and accessible public services. Unsurprisingly, it has been at the forefront of combating the global trend of privatisation, tracking the companies that benefit and the negative impact on services. It does its best to intervene with the international bodies that still push privatisation, like the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation. The PSI has many activities in Central and Eastern Europe, too, to help unions there to build decent public services.

With privatisation and outsourcing, the public sector in the rich countries is absorbing more and more migrant workers. This is especially true in healthcare, where most migrants are women. They may be critical to the well-being of the people they are caring for, but many migrant women are badly treated, with low pay, poor conditions, high workloads, and even gender/racial discrimination.

12 August is United Nations International Youth Day. In 2008, the PSI used this day to launch a campaign to raise more awareness among young people about trade unions.

Global Unions also use other international days each year to support affiliates’ organising campaigns: International Women’s Day on 8 March, International Human Rights Day on 10 December, and International Migrants’ Day on 18 December.

**PSI blog on the current financial crisis:** financialcrisisblog.world-psi.org

‘Beat the Heat’, PSI statement for the UN Conference on climate change, December 2007: www.world.psi.org/TemplateEn.cfm?Section=Climate_Change1&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentFileID=18433
A new international organising agenda?

As well as working through the Global Unions and at a European level, Unite also collaborates with trade unions in other countries through many bi-lateral relations and alliances. Some are short-term, on specific issues or campaigns. For example, Unite and the CC.OO union in Spain worked together to make sure that a proposed merger between British Airways and the Spanish airline Iberia would not be used as an opportunity to undercut working terms and conditions in either country. We also have partnerships with a much wider set of aims.

• Global Organising Alliance

With falling membership, Unite-T&G recognised we have to do much more than manage a decline. So we joined this alliance which focuses, as the name suggests, on organising techniques that re-build grassroots union membership and activism. The Global Organising Alliance, which is now active in many countries and includes several global union federations, is led by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) from the USA. Despite being in one of the toughest environments for trade unionism in the world, the SEIU has increased its membership dramatically over the past decade, including workers some had thought ‘unorganisable’ such as low-paid, often isolated cleaners, caretakers (janitors) and care-home workers. The SEIU’s ‘Justice for Janitors’ campaign in Los Angeles inspired Ken Loach’s film ‘Bread and Roses’.

www.seiu.org/about/global_partnerships

“The organising techniques developed in the US are proving a huge success for us too.”
Jack Dromey, Unite Deputy General Secretary
• Workers Uniting

In mid-2008 it was agreed to merge Unite with the **United Steelworkers (USW)** of the USA/Canada. This new ‘global union’ **Workers Uniting** represents some 3 million working people in Britain, Ireland, the USA, Canada and the Caribbean in many industrial sectors - the metal trades, motor tyres, pharmaceuticals, oil, paper, and many more. The aim is to synchronise collective bargaining in companies that operate on both sides of the Atlantic, do joint political campaigning, and encourage trans-Atlantic involvement by union activists in each other’s education programmes, events, and rapid response activities. Workers Uniting provides a “formidable alliance at a global level”, says Unite National Officer Phil McNulty, who is also Vice-President of the ICEM global union federation (see page 63).

www.workersuniting.org

“The political and economic power of multi national companies is formidable. They are able to play one nation’s workers off against another to maximise profits. They do the same with governments hence the growing gap between the rich and the rest of us. With this agreement we can finally begin the process of closing that gap.”

*Derek Simpson, Unite Joint General Secretary*

At the other end of the spectrum, there are also many ‘non-official’ international union activities, which are growing every day through the use of the Internet (see Section 2.3).
2.2 Alliances with solidarity campaigns and NGOs

There is yet more, too, to the map of our union’s relationships on global issues.

In Section 1.6, we looked at the partnerships we have with organisations such as Oxfam and War on Want in the fight against global poverty. Alongside that, we have relationships with political solidarity campaigns and more general human rights organisations. Unite is affiliated to or has recently donated to a number of such bodies based in the UK:

- ACTSA – Action for Southern Africa: www.actsa.org
- Amnesty International: www.amnesty.org
- Anti-Slavery International: www.antislavery.org
- Banana Link: www.bananalink.org.uk
- Burma Solidarity Campaign: www.burmacampaign.org.uk
- Cuba Solidarity Campaign: www.cuba-solidarity.org.uk
- Justice for Colombia: www.justiceforcolumbia.org
- Medical Aid for Palestine: www.map-uk.org
- Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign: www.nicaraguasc.org.uk
- Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.palestinecampaign.org
- Venezuela Information Centre: www.vicuk.org
- War on Want: www.waronwant.org
- Western Sahara Campaign: wsc.members.gn.apc.org

As we can see, a number of these are related to supporting union and political developments in individual countries or world regions. For example, Unite collaborates with ACTSA through the ‘Africa Matters’ campaign to support trade union rights in Zimbabwe, as well as charitable acts to support women there. Meanwhile, Banana Link supports the rights specifically of workers who produce bananas, often in dreadful labour conditions.

Our link with Anti-Slavery International is largely about ridding the world of forced child labour. Amnesty International is of course a famous human rights organisation, with a special department supporting trade union rights.

Unite has also been supporting the ‘Balls to Poverty’ campaign by college students. In the run-up to the World Cup football championship in South Africa in 2010, they have been distributing thousands of footballs in townships. For Unite, this is part of unions’ reaching out to people through a wide range of activities and interests.

Of course, there are yet more groups which individual Unite branches support, and many more too which we potentially could. British trade unionists are not just workers but citizens, consumers, environmentalists, and so on. We have always been part of broader ‘civil society’, fighting for a better quality of life for all, not just in the workplace.

Since the financial crash of 2008 and the global recession it has caused, there is even more energy in society at large to curb the over-reaching and unregulated power of global capitalism. And environmental concerns are rightly at the forefront of our minds (see Section 1.5). So, there is plenty of potential for building more alliances on the big issues of the day, with consumer campaigns, investor campaigns, environmentalists and so on.

So how can we be working better – in our communities, nationally and internationally – to build a more sustainable future for the world?
Play Fair at the Olympics – London here we come!

This campaign started with the Athens Olympics in 2004, continued to Beijing in 2008, and London will be next, in 2012. It asks where the Olympics ideal of ‘fair play’ is for the workers who make the clothes and shoes that the athletes wear.

At a global level, it brings together the ITUC, the ITGLWF sportswear workers’ global union federation, and the Clean Clothes Campaign, an alliance of consumer/activist campaigns in Europe and Scandinavia. In the UK, those involved have been the TUC, Oxfam, and CCC member group Labour Behind the Label.

In the run-up to the London Olympics in 2012, there will be even more reason for more British unions to get involved.

“For the past eight years trade unions and NGOs have engaged in dialogue with the sporting goods industry. This jaw/jaw approach has produced limited results. The time has come for unions to sharpen their teeth and insist that the industry is fully cleaned up by the London Olympics in 2012.”

Neil Kearney, former General Secretary, ITGLWF

“I am exhausted to death now…. None of us have time to go to toilet or drink water… we are working without rest and are always afraid of not working fast enough to supply soles to the next production line. The supervisors are pressuring and nagging us all the time.”

Worker making New Balance shoes, Dongguan, China

from ‘Clearing the Hurdles: Steps to Improving Wages and Working Conditions in the Global Sportswear Industry’, PlayFair, 2008:

www.clearingthehurdles.org

www.playfair2008.org,
www.cleanclothes.org
and www.labourbehindthelabel.org

HOW GLOBAL LABOUR SOLIDARITY HELPS 71
2.3 New technology tools for solidarity

“The new communications technologies mean we can take on global skinflints wherever they come from and whatever they do. Trade unionists are learning to log on and fight back.”

Owen Tudor, Head of International Relations, TUC

The Internet means that unions are now more able than ever to exchange information and develop international strategy in a coordinated and yet flexible way.

**Coordinated**

- **Password-protected websites**

Organised, for example, through a global union federation, a password-protected website can give people at all levels of the union movement a place to exchange information and help develop strategy. On particular global corporations (see Section 1.2), local/national unions can post the text of their collective bargaining agreements for each to read. The GUF can put up the International Framework Agreement if one exists, or its analysis of the global corporate strategy, or news of any complaint to the OECD. More information can come in from a European Works Council to share with non-European workforces. If there is a coordinated global day of action, reports and photographs can be posted of mass mobilisations in the various countries.

One example is the ‘Global Delivery’ campaign on the global logistics ‘integrators’ run by the ITF and UNI global union federations: www.itfglobal.org/global-delivery Another is the Unilever Union Network, see below. Not only does this potentially involve many layers of unionists, it also has economic and environmental benefits. Flying people across the world for meetings is very expensive, and damaging to the environment. So using the Internet has become even more valuable.

**Unilever Union Network**

It’s hard to find the name Unilever on supermarket shelves but consumers everywhere recognize Hellmann’s mayonnaise, Flora and Blue Band margarine, Carte D’or and Magnum ice creams, Knorr soups, Lipton and Brooke Bond teas, and other names like Cif, Comfort, Dove, Lifebuoy, Lux, Omo, Persil, Ponds, Signal, Sunsilk and Vaseline. These are just some of Unilever’s 400 brands. This Anglo-Dutch company is the global market leader in detergents, and No.3 in food production and soap/personal care products. Its profits steadily rise.

Yet the company has in recent years closed or sold off over 125 factories around the world and halved its global workforce to 179,000. More of its workers are hired on short-term contracts and through agencies, often to block unionisation. Meanwhile managers have been paying themselves bonuses and buying back shares with cash freed up through the job cuts and outsourcing.

The global union federation for foodworkers IUF (see Section 2.1) coordinates a Unilever Union Network for its affiliated unions like Unite. Through a password-protected section of the IUF website, affiliates discuss Unilever’s corporate strategy, exchange the text of collective agreements, and so on. There is news of the IUF’s challenge to the company through the OECD ‘Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises’ (see page 16), and reports/photos of a global mobilisation on 4 December 2007, including a rally outside Unilever’s headquarters in the Netherlands and others in India and South Africa.
Yet flexible

“The power of the internet gives unions the potential to go beyond its membership and reach out directly to millions of people and influence consumers.”
Tony Woodley, Unite Joint General Secretary

Check out Unite’s Solidarity E-Actions posted at: www.unitetheunion.com/resources/international/solidarity_e-action.aspx

• New Unionism
  www.newunionism.net and www.younionize.org

A web-based community of individuals and unions wanting to strengthen the global exchange of labour information; its global union directory has over 4,000 unions listed, with their email addresses, websites, on-line join-up forms, membership statistics, and background information supplied by ‘surfers’ (wikis); also free web pages for unions in the poorest 50 countries.

• Solicomm
  www.solicomm.net

A new Internet search engine and communication system from the ILO; it includes free email for trade unionists and web-page hosting for labour organisations in developing countries.

• Labourstart
  www.labourstart.org

A regularly updated, multi-lingual source of international labour news and campaigning, Labourstart specialises in appeals for urgent action about cases of extreme intimidation against trade unionists, but also carries plenty of other information.

• Social networking

Unite now has its own Facebook group “to enable the union to communicate with people working all over the planet”: www.unitetheunion.com/campaigns/unite_on_facebook.aspx

In early 2009, LabourStart launched UnionBook especially for union networking. Here, trade unionists can create their own profile and blog, or gather in groups, and it is free from commercial advertising: www.unionbook.org

For those interested in the pros and cons of Facebook for unions, see:
‘In defence of Facebook (sort of)’, by John Wood: www.johninnit.co.uk/2008/01/23/in-defence-of-facebook-sort-of/
• ‘Union Island’ in Second Life

www.slunions.org

This is another area of virtual ‘social-networking’ on the Internet. In Second Life, anyone can create their own graphical image of themselves and join in, and now there is a ‘Union Island’ where you can meet other unionists and undertake collective, if virtual, action. It is a joint initiative by the TUC, Prospect and Unison in the UK, the global union federation UNI (see page 62), ver.di in Germany, and the New Unionism Network (see previous page).

Second Life union action started off in September 2007 when 1850 real people behind their computers in over 30 countries joined in a virtual picket of IBM, organised by the global union federation UNI. They were protesting at the company’s attempts to slash workers’ bonuses by up to 1,000 Euros. During the virtual demonstration, the strikers crashed the IBM business centre and even forced their way into an IBM virtual meeting. It gained a lot of media coverage worldwide.

• Union TV

Unite activities are now broadcast on television. Union TV can be seen every week on Red TV, channel 186 on Sky Digital, and is also available as a Podcast from our website. This is another way to air global debates among union members and the wider public, at home and abroad.

• YouTube and other video tools

In early 2008, Unite put a short film on YouTube to highlight the plight of workers who lost their jobs when the tampon company Lil-lets shut its factory in the UK and transferred the work abroad: www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_o3B-RZ72Q

A 15-minute video on ‘globalisation’ and Unite responses is at: www.unitetheunion.com/resources/international.aspx

United Steelworkers, our partner union in the US, is also encouraging videos via its website: www.usw.org/multimedia or on YouTube: www.youtube.com/steelworkers
• Campaigning ads on Google

For the ‘Look Behind the Label’ campaign targeting M&S (see page 37), Unite took out ads on Google one day in February 2008, and received more than 12,000 hits in only six hours – more than 30 a minute. Anyone typing ‘M&S’ or ‘Marks & Spencer’ into Google immediately saw a direct link to the campaign alongside other search results. And it only cost a few hundred pounds. The ‘Times’ newspaper commented, “The union is effectively hijacking searches for M&S on Google”.

• On-line telephone calls and video-conferencing

Unionists with access to broadband – and who share a language – are making increasing use of ultra-cheap international telephone calls using Skype and similar systems. Some are exploring the potential too for low-cost video-conferencing too.

• Text/SMS

Union activists in the ‘global South’ often have more ready access to mobile phones than computers, and so they often prefer to communicate internationally using text/sms.

• On-line translations

Communicating around the world is difficult because of the hundreds of languages involved. New on-line translation sites can be useful - for everyday language. However, a word of caution: trade unionism uses specialist terminology: for example, a ‘shop-steward’ is not a ‘security guard at a supermarket’! Plus, trade unions are organised differently across the world, and so the names for structures and activities do differ: a ‘shop-steward’ in the UK is not exactly the same as a ‘délégué’ (workplace rep) in France.

Google free on-line translation service in about 23 languages: translate.google.com
Babelfish free on-line translation service by Yahoo: babelfish.yahoo.com

‘Communications Toolkit for Organisers’, Unite, January 2008
2.4 A ‘to do’ checklist

Get involved in your Global Union Federation

• Find out which is the appropriate GUF for your industry/sector.
• Check out the GUF website.
• Join GUF mailing lists.
• Find out who is the Unite national officer who liaises with your GUF.
• Talk to your reps on your national trade group.
• Circulate news through your workplace or Branch.
• Encourage participation in international education courses.

Get Organised!

• Find out more about your employer – is it a global corporation or part of a global supply chain?
• Draw a plan of where you are in the production / distribution chain.
• If your employer operates in several European countries, find out if it has or should have a European Works Council. If there is one, find out who in Unite represents you on it.
• Find out whether there is GUF activity concerning your employer or supply chain.
• If not, search out counterpart unions in other countries, and how to contact them.
• Take a look at the new international organising tools on the Internet, and see if you want to take part.
• Discuss in your workplace or Branch how to create or join international union networks.

Demonstrate solidarity

• Respond to urgent action requests.
• Support solidarity organisations.