

PART FOUR: Social Movement Unionism

1. What is unionism?

Unionism is the bonding together of workers for the collective protection and promotion of their needs and interests as workers.

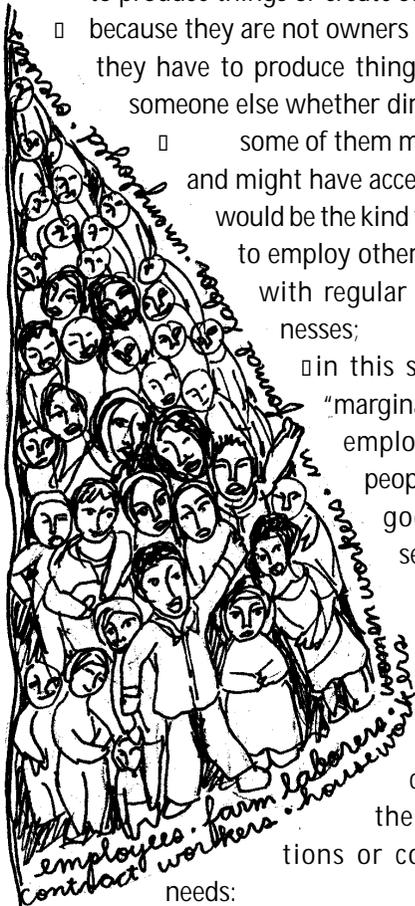
Workers' interests may span several aspects:

- economic security - workers form unions to ensure that they acquire jobs, receive income that is due them and that they are not removed from work unjustly; unions also allow workers to make sure that they do not work under unhealthy or unsafe work conditions.
- participation in decision-making on things that affect them - unions allow workers to voice out their concerns and assert their demands. In cases where wages are satisfactory, for example, workers may still form unions so that they do not get mistreated in any way or on any aspect. It is important to workers that they are not just dictated upon, either by their employers or by society at large
- Self-esteem and recognition - workers form unions to help each other gain the respect that is not usually given to workers. Societies usually regard workers as second class citizens so workers need to bond together to assert that they should be treated equally and fairly

2. When we say workers, who are we referring to?

“Workers” used to refer to those working in factories or companies where it was clear who the supervisors, the managers and the owners were. New classifications of workers, however, have emerged over the years because of unclear employee-employer relations. “The working people” have at least four (4) characteristics in common:

- they do not own any capital or equipment to be able to produce things or create services on their own
- because they are not owners of capital or equipment, they have to produce things or create services for someone else whether directly or indirectly
 - some of them might be “self-employed” and might have access to some capital but it would be the kind that does not allow them to employ others or to compete equally with regular and established businesses;
 - in this sense, all workers are “marginalized” in comparison to employers -business-owning people or other producers of goods and providers of services.



The following are the types of workers that exist in Philippine society. They are classified according to their common work locations or common situation and

needs:

a) wage earners or formal labor

These workers fall within the ambit of labor-capital or wage relations. In such relations, the employee-employer relationship is clear and formal. Workers in this classification can be further classified into:

- Private sector employees who work for privately-owned industrial or manufacturing firms and service companies
- Public sector employees who work for national and local government agencies or government-owned corporations
- Farm laborers in small-scale agricultural businesses and the plantation agricultural workers
- Middle rank executives of service institutions

b) non-wage earners or informal labor

Informal labor includes the self-employed or own-account workers in a great variety of small and often unstable trades and occupations. They are marginalized in the sense that they often create products or provide services that are priced lower than those in the “market” because they were created in an informal way, i.e. not in the manner that regular companies do business. Although these workers are not within the ambit of wage relations, they usually become victims to highly irregular shifts in the capitalist market.

c) women workers

Women now account for 37% of those employed in the formal sector. As wage earners, these women are continually exposed to discriminatory and harsh working conditions.

Most of the women workers are also found in the informal sector. Because most of them find it difficult to get formal work, these women usually resort to income generating activities such as sari-sari stores that allow them to work in or near their homes.

Women workers are also usually “houseworkers” whose job is to maintain the homes of other people. They are usually not bound by the labor relations framework and thereby are not protected by labor laws.

d) Flexible and temporary labor

These are people who are willing to do temporary work and accept lower (i.e. lower than the minimum wage) wages. Flexible labor includes the contractual workers, casual workers, and the swelling ranks of the unemployed, particularly those from peasant families who have been uprooted from rural farm production.

e) Overseas Contract Workers (OCWs)

OCWs are Filipino workers who opt to work and earn wages in other countries. Some of them are “documented workers”, that is, they are legally registered as contract workers. Others, however, are undocumented workers who are not legally registered, that is, they do not have the papers necessary to legalize their status as OCWs. Seven (7) million Filipinos are now OCWs.

3. What are the different types of unions?

All organizations formed by workers to protect and promote their interests are considered unions:

a) trade unions

These are unions that are formed by wage earners. They are formed to represent workers in collective bargaining negotiations with employers for increased workers' benefits and better working conditions.

Trade unions at the enterprise level are called "local unions". They can either be "independent unions", i.e. they do not belong to any federation or center, or they can be "affiliated" to a larger trade union grouping.

A trade union federation is an aggregation of a number of local unions. Under Philippine laws, a group is recognized as a federation if it is able to organize at least (10) local unions. Such recognition allows the federation to represent and join its affiliate-local unions in collective bargaining. A federation also assists local unions in other areas such as trade union education. Federations may be organized along industry-line and thus are called "National Unions" or "Industry federations". Others may accept or organize members that cut across several industries and these are called "general federations". On the territorial level, federations may be organized into "regional federations" or "national federations". Unions of companies owned by a single person or corporation are called "Owner-wide federations".

Groups who bond together but do not necessarily seek legal recognition are called "trade union alliances". They perform basically all the functions of a federation except the task of legally representing unions in collective bargaining.

National labor centers are organizations that bring federations or alliances together for the purpose of expanding workers' representation in society.

In the international level, unions from different countries and territories operating in a particular industries are called International Trade Secretariats or ITSs. In response to the challenges of today's global realities, different ITSs are slowly merging with each other. Now they are better known as Global Unions.

Furthermore, National Trade Union Centers from different countries bond together to form International Labor Centers.

b) workers' self-help associations

These are unions that do not necessarily go into collective bargaining but promote workers' interests through mutual aid. Concretely, in these associations, workers help each other out gain insurance, health benefits and other social security measures.

c) workers' cooperatives

Cooperatives are usually considered the "economic arm" of unionism. In cooperatives, workers pool in resources to create products or services that they themselves can avail of at lower prices.

d) workers' community organizations

These are the territorial-based organizations usually found among the informal labor sector. As community organizations, they not only concern themselves with "work matters" such as employment and wages but "community" or "living" matters such as livelihood, housing, child care and education, and health.

e) women workers' organizations

Women workers usually organize as a group to promote their interests as women. They can be found within or outside unions. Within trade unions, for instance, women workers usually form committees to ensure that women's concerns are integrated in collective bargaining. Women workers are also organized within community organizations. Other groups cut across companies and communities and do lobbying or advocacy work to promote women workers' issues at all possible levels.

f) workers' education associations

These associations are focused on building the capability of workers particularly in the area of consciousness raising and skills training. Workers' education associations may be formed within and across unions.

g) migrant workers' organizations

These organizations are formed primarily to promote the interest of migrant workers. They can be found in the country of origin (i.e. to protect and help migrants before they leave to work abroad) or in host countries (i.e. to protect and help migrants once they arrive in the countries where they work). Most of these organizations, therefore, are cross-national in nature.

4. What is social movement unionism?

Social movement unionism is a strategy directed at recognizing, organizing and mobilizing all types of workers and unions for engagements in different arenas of struggle. This strategy is not limited to "trade union" organizing and has been developed precisely to respond to new work arrange-

ments where employee-employer relationships do not exist or are not clear.

Social movement unionism, then, seeks to protect the rights of all workers, not just the wage-earners. It is “social” because it does not deal only with economic rights and political rights that trade unions usually deal with. Rather, social



movement unionism seeks to address even the “social costs” of oppressive economic and political systems. It recognizes the broadness of workers’ interests and the diversity and complexity of work arrangements. As such, it is geared toward the struggle for workers’ rights in all aspects — economic, political and socio-cultural — and at all levels — local, national, global. In short, the strategic objective of social movement unionism is nothing less than social transformation.

5. What are the different arenas of the workers’ struggle?

The workers’ struggle for social transformation can be waged in different arenas and should not be limited to engagements with employers at the enterprise or industry level:

a) Mass movement arena

This arena essentially involves “pressure politics”. In this arena, “mass” numbers are needed and actually used to engage employers, governments and even the agents of neo-liberal globalization to gain for the working people the rights due them.

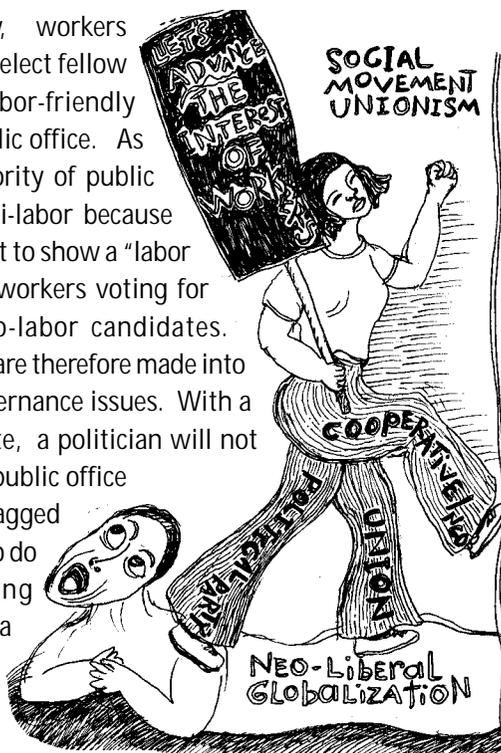
In the mass movement arena, workers are better-placed to struggle for their rights on their own terms – on the basis of their strength and positioning. In this arena, the working people, through assertion and negotiation, can greatly influence, if not actually participate in, decision-making processes where rules have been previously set. Unions, in all its varied forms, are the perfect instruments for the working people’s intervention in this arena of struggle. For the unions to remain effective, it must therefore constantly accumulate forces not only in terms of quantity (recruit more members) but more so in quality (develop effective mass leaders).

b) Electoral/parliamentary arena

In this arena, there are certain pre-set rules and laws and is thus usually called the “legal” arena. It is an arena where the objective is to elect or recall/impeach people in government positions and to make sure that they truly represent worker’s interests.

Historically, this arena has been a most exclusive playground of the elites. It is through their electoral victories that they perpetuate their control of economic and political power. Thus to gain power for itself as a class, the working people must challenge the elites in this arena. The task of unions, therefore, is to engage this arena to change the rules in favor of workers’ interests.

Concretely, workers have to work to elect fellow workers and labor-friendly people into public office. As of today, majority of public officials are anti-labor because workers have yet to show a “labor vote”, that is, workers voting for workers or pro-labor candidates. Workers’ issues are therefore made into electoral or governance issues. With a strong labor vote, a politician will not be elected into public office if he/she were tagged as anti-labor. To do so, the working people needs a different instrument. It needs to build its own political party.



The success of unions in the electoral/ parliamentary arena means better labor laws and more workers’ participation in formal societal decision-making processes.

c) Development arena

This arena usually involves the spaces where unions can enhance workers’ conditions in the “material” sense. Hence, the development arena usually entails the formation of cooperatives or other such groups and strategies that help the workers economically. This also extends to the delivery of social services such as health and education that should be provided by government. In this arena, workers learn to provide these services and develop their capacities. This is

where labor-related non-governmental organizations (NGOs) come in. These NGOs are important union partners in capacity-building. Their assistance usually takes the form of education-formation programs, information dissemination, research and advocacy, and, even organizing assistance.

d) Ideological and Cultural arena

Unions have to win the minds and hearts of workers and the public at large. As mentioned in the first part of this primer, neo-liberal globalization is now the dominant ideology. To combat it, therefore, requires for people to understand why this set-up must be changed and how they can help unions change it.

In this arena, unions work for cultural transformation, for changing people's consciousness. Such new consciousness in turn leads to actions that actually change the lives of workers for the better. Transformation, after all, becomes possible only when they come from real understanding and commitment.