

Workers rights, internationalism and the Internet

Panel on Organising and representing workers in the digital economy

*Presentation to ETUI-ETUC Conference on Shaping the new world of work:
The impacts of digitisation and robotisation*

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I want to speak today about how digitisation – the Internet – has transformed campaigning for workers' rights. I will speak based on the experience of LabourStart, which I founded back in 1998.

LabourStart started a time when few trade unions fully grasped the importance of the internet. When I wrote my book on unions and the Internet in 1996, I was able to list all the trade union websites in the world on *a single page*.

It took a long time to persuade many unions that tools like email and the web could be used to help unions grow stronger. Many were skeptical at first. Many remain skeptical today.

These days, I think that pretty much everyone understands that the Internet has changed completely how we organize, how we campaign, how we fight.

But this was not just about the technology.

It was about internationalism. About global solidarity. About a world where the differences between social classes are more important than the differences between nations.

In a globalized economy, we are making the case for a globalized labour movement.

The new technology made borders disappear and made it possible for *ordinary trade unionists* to be engaged in international solidarity work for the first time.

This is an important point.

Since the founding of the International Workingmen's Association – the First International – by Karl Marx in 1864, trade unionists have never stopped doing international solidarity. But *the way they have done it* has changed over the years.

A century ago, there was a relatively high level of international awareness among ordinary workers. For example, you could persuade workers in one

country to give up a day's pay to support workers in another. There were many examples of rank-and-file actions supporting workers in other countries.

But over time, that changed. Increasingly, international solidarity was something done by union officials, in union headquarters. Ordinary union members were not involved.

If, for example, a union leader was arrested in one country, word would go out from global trade union organisations in Brussels or Geneva, and letters or faxes would be sent from union headquarters in Washington or London or Berlin.

All that has now changed; today if a union leader is arrested somewhere, word goes out via the net, through platforms like LabourStart, and instead of an employer or government receiving ten faxes from union officials speaking on behalf of their members, they receive *ten thousand* email messages directly from those members.

Let me speak specifically about LabourStart's experience.

When it comes to campaigning in defence of workers rights we bring two things to the table: a platform and a network.

The platform is the web-based ActNOW system, which makes it easy for trade unionists working in any language to support our campaigns.

And the network, which at its core is a mailing list of just under 137,000 names and addresses of trade unionists who are prepared to support our campaigns. 88,000 of them are on our English list and the other 49,000 on dozens of other lists in all the major and several minor languages.

So how does it work?

Unions come to us with problems and we offer solutions.

For a number of reasons we work mostly with the global union federations and the International Trade Union Confederation. But we also work with national trade union centres, national unions, and in some cases, even local unions and pro-union NGOs. We work with both the ETUC and European trade union federations.

Those organisations come to us with issues like an employer who has sacked union officials for doing their jobs, or a government which has jailed union leaders, or — in the worst case scenario — cases where trade unionists have lost their lives and the demand is simple justice.

Working together with our union partners, we figure out what the message of the campaign needs to be, who the target of our messages will be, and how we

can achieve our goal.

Once this is all agreed upon, we put the campaign online and begin translating it. Typically, a campaign will appear in 15 – 20 languages, all the translations done by volunteers.

Anyone visiting LabourStart's website will learn about the campaign, and it will appear on many other union websites automatically. We make sure it gets known on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and other social networks.

And if that's all we do, the campaign will be a failure and very few people will know about it.

We have learned over the years that the only effective way to get the word out about these campaigns is email.

Email, that old, low-tech, boring communications tool turns out to be the killer app of online campaigning.

When we launch a campaign targeting a company or government, within minutes of our email message going out, the first few hundred messages of protest will have been delivered.

Within a day, we could be looking at 5,000 or more messages.

Never before in the long history of the international trade union movement have we had a tool like this.

That's great, you may be thinking, but does it work? Do sacked trade unionists get their jobs back? Do jailed union leaders get released? Is anyone listening to our protests?

The answer is yes, sometimes. Not all the time. There is no guarantee that a campaign will work. But our campaigns succeed often enough that we actually published a short book a couple of years ago called *Campaigning Online and Winning* where we talked about dozens of successful LabourStart campaigns.

And I should say a word about what we mean by winning.

We don't mean "sending a lot of protest messages". I don't care if we send 1,000 messages or 20,000 messages — what matters is only this: did we get the result we were looking for?

There are campaigns we have won with very few messages sent. And campaigns we've lost despite having mobilized very large numbers of people.

That doesn't mean numbers don't matter. They do. It certainly helps to have more people involved in a campaign.

But other factors play a role as well.

The central one is the role played by people on the ground. We win campaigns when the workers on the ground, the ones we are fighting for and with, show determination and grit.

The courage of so many of the workers we campaign with is truly inspiring. Our role is clearly secondary — it is their heroic struggle that wins the day.

Let me give a couple of examples.

Several years ago, the management of the Hilton Hotel in Sydney, Australia wanted to close the hotel down for 18 months for renovations. They sacked all the workers, offered no compensation, and refused to talk to the union. At the request of the union, we launched a LabourStart campaign. We flooded the inbox of the hotel's manager with protest emails. We helped attract world-wide attention to the workers' struggle. And the manager eventually caved in, agreeing to all the union demands.

One of my favourite LabourStart campaigns focussed on a young woman in Dublin, Ireland. Elected a union shop steward, she came to work one day wearing her union pin. She was ordered to remove it, refused to do so and was sacked. Our campaign came after the union had run out of ideas to pressure her employer, Dunnes Stores. It quickly grew into one of our largest campaigns, and helped trigger debates in parliaments in three countries as well as street actions across Ireland. I watched the television interview with this young woman on the day she learned that she'd gotten her job back, a result of an unprecedented global campaign.

Five years ago, at the height of the Arab Spring, the people of Bahrain rose up to demand their freedom. The teachers union called a national strike, and the government cracked down, jailing union leaders. We launched a campaign demanding that those trade unionists be released from jail. We managed to help get one of them, Jalila al-Salman, released after a few months, but union president Mahdi abu Dheeb, remained in jail for five full years.

I met Jalila in London shortly after her release, and Mahdi earlier this month in Oslo. I have to say that meeting people like Jalila and Mahdi, people who risk everything in the fight to defend workers' rights, is a great privilege.

The new technologies have allowed us to realize a slogan first published back in 1848 by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It was just five words long. And yet it remains valid and relevant today, in the age of digitisation and globalisation. *Workers of the world, unite!*