Raising the voice of labour

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Paper presented at: ‘The Politics of Everyday Life in Global Politics’, 48th Annual International Studies Association Convention, 28 February – 3 March 2007,

Chicago, US

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| **Abstract**In 2006, for the first time at the International Studies Association Convention, there were three sessions on labour issues. The lack of a voice for labour in international studies is striking. Even in studies of social movements, there is a muted acknowledgement of the role of trade unions. The socio-economic security of labour makes a major contribution to overall security concerns, yet it is not widely recognised. However, there are signs that multi-lateral agencies are beginning to recognise the importance of labour standards. The International Finance Corporation recently introduced core labour standards for companies receiving its loans. An analysis of some World Bank and other multilateral agency documents shows that there are two major approaches to labour issues emerging in international policy: labour standards and workers involvement in public services. This paper analyses and reflects on a research project, which was a partnership between the International Labour Office and an international trade union, Public Services International. This set out to examine the impact of policies of liberalisation and privatisation on public sector workers. The paper looks at the process of gathering and analysing data, the involvement of trade unions in this process and the responsibilities and issues that have emerged. The results contribute to a growing body of evidence on how international policies impact on workers. |

**Raising the Voice of Labour in international policy**

In 2006, for the first time at the International Studies Association Convention, there were three sessions on labour issues. The lack of a voice for labour in international studies is striking. Even in studies of social movements, there is a muted acknowledgement of the role of trade unions.

Considering labour issues within international studies immediately focuses attention on how structural inequalities in the world system are dealt with. Cox (1989) criticised other more traditional accounts of international relations for failure to resolve issues of structural inequality in the international system. Gills (2006) has called for a much more active promotion and pursuit of the concept of global justice, particularly exploring the relationships between global capitalism, global poverty and global justice. Labour issues are central to these debates about inequalities. There is a limited literature about labour and international political economy, with O’Brien (2000) being one of the leading researchers of labour issues in the global economy.

Labour issues could also be addressed through a security framework, just as health security, in relation to HIV/AIDS in Africa, is being seen as an important type of “soft” security. However, as the following analysis of World Bank and other multi-lateral agencies shows, there is limited acknowledgement of the wider impact of socio-economic workers’ insecurities in international policy.

This paper will start by analysing some recent publications of several multi-lateral agencies, which show that attitudes to labour are becoming more diverse. There appear to be two approaches. The World Bank, International Finance Corporation and International Labour Organization have been working on establishing codes of conduct and setting labour standards. The International Labour Organisation has also campaigned on *Decent Work*, which uses a wider social justice approach than labour standards alone. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the World Health Organization (WHO) and Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) are beginning to identify the need for public sector workers to play a more active role in the reforms of public services and other institutional reforms. These changing attitudes have implications for trade unions and other civil society organisations campaigning for global justice.

**Setting labour standards**

Wade (2001, 2002) sees two main agendas operating in the World Bank: the “*finance ministry*” agenda, which promotes privatisation, liberalisation and foreign direct investment; and the “*civil society*” agenda, which emphasises poverty reduction and empowerment of poor people. The tensions between these two agendas can be seen in an analysis of how labour issues have been treated in several World Bank publications.

The 1995 World Development Report Workers in a Changing World provides an introduction to current World Bank approaches to labour issues. It shows that there have always been some conflicting views about labour within economic growth strategies. Market based growth strategies are considered important for the economic well-being of workers. It maintains that whether “*increased international trade and investment and less state intervention will hurt employment are mainly without basis*” (World Bank, 1995:2). However, it also recognised that inequalities had to be addressed and that international integration can lead to increased vulnerability. International migration, in 1995, was perceived as less of a force for change than trade and investment.

Labour policies are presented as only addressing the needs of the formal labour force in low and middle income countries. It recognises that

 “*formal public action is sometimes needed to improve market outcomes, enhance equity and protect vulnerable workers*” (World Bank,1995:5).

It also recognised that “*collective bargaining between firms and independent unions is an effective way to determine wages and working conditions*” (World Bank,1995:5). It comments specifically on the role of government in public employment, maintaining that the quality of public services has suffered because of overstaffing, inadequate pay and weak governance. Solutions lie in restoring levels of pay and reducing the number of public employees, accompanied by increased pay, promotion and accountability of civil servants, teachers, nurses and policymakers. This presents a positive case for government intervention in the public sector, but there was no support for linking core labour standards to multi-lateral trade agreements.

In the World Development Report 2007, Development and the Next generation, some of the contractions, within the World Bank, become apparent in the discussion of the barriers that young people face in entering the workforce. It argues that the minimum wages, barriers to dismissals, and unemployment benefits all form barriers to young people entering the labour market. Employment protection laws “*also raise hiring costs, putting young people at a disadvantage*” (World Bank, 2006:105). High costs of redundancy reduce the number of redundancies, as well as limiting job creation. A reduced turnover of labour leads to an increase in the length of unemployment (World Bank, 2006:105). WDR 2007 also considers that young people are affected by changes in the minimum wage, often negatively. It questions the strategies of young people who wait to get a job in the public sector, because of the higher wages and benefits paid by the public sector.

An expansion in the private sector and more foreign direct investment are seen as the way to increase the number of jobs. Interestingly, WDR 2007 points out that:

“*steps are needed to mitigate the effect of market and policy failures that disproportionately affect youth*” (World Bank, 2006:106).

Although reform of labour market institutions is seen as a solution in middle income countries, expanding alternatives to the rural sector, promoting sectoral and regional labour, and reducing child labour are possible solutions in less developed countries (World Bank, 2006:106).

There is no apparent recognition that some of the World Bank’s own policies, such as the conditions of its loans, which dictate public sector budget cuts, liberalisation and privatisation, have created growing inequalities and reduced employment opportunities for young people. Although the World Bank does acknowledge the need for education, training and skills development, it ignores strategies for wider job creation (ICFTU, 2006 16 September Press release).

One of the areas where the finance ministry agenda seems to be dominant in the World Bank is in the recent publication of the new version of “*Doing Business: How to Reform*”. This presents an analysis of how easy or difficult it is to “*do business*” in 175 countries. It emphasises the need to promote competition through a variety of measures. Liberalisation and market reforms are central to this process.

Countries are ranked according to how easy or difficult it is to undertake ten different dimensions of doing business. One of these dimensions covers ‘*employing workers*’. The ‘*employing workers*’ index covers difficulties of hiring, rigidity of working hours, difficulties of firing workers and the costs of firing, as seen in redundancy payments. There is no exploration, in *Doing Business*, of whether labour rights actually contribute to business success. There are assumptions that the right to redundancy payments, a notice period for redundancy, and rigid working hours are a hindrance to doing business. However, an examination of some countries, suggests that this is not necessarily a barrier and might even benefit business. Denmark and Australia have long established labour legislation and labour rights. Other countries, rated as high in the overall “doing business” index, often have the weakest trade union and labour rights.

The International Finance Corporation (IFC) is part of the World Bank Group, responsible for supporting the growth of the private sector in developing countries and countries in transition. It plays a key role in the World Bank Private Sector Development Strategy and this strategy was part of a process of organisational change that brought the IFC more firmly into the work of the World Bank (Peter Woike personal interview April 2006). In the last two years, IFC has introduced core labour standards as part of the conditions for its private equity loans.

It is useful to examine how standards have been viewed within the IFC. Social and environmental standards have been promoted, according to Peter Woike, former Vice-President of the World Bank, more as part of a “*competitive advantage*” for IFC, although it later found that where companies adhered to standards then their long term profitability enhanced (Woike Personal interview 2006).

In relation to labour standards, Woike argued for the use of an Ombudsman, from within the World Bank, which provided an overall view, rather than an inspection panel, which only “*pinpointed mishaps*” (Woike, 2006 personal interview). This was after 1998, when the United States wanted to impose certain safeguards on the IFC. Woike considers that the imposition of labour standards is a long process and only child labour and forced labour were recognised, initially. The labour standards introduced, since 2004, are more wide reaching (Woike, 2006 personal interview).

Unions and other international agencies, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), have pursued core labour standards as a way of recognising labour rights in trade and other agreements. Wilkinson (1999) argued that although the attempts to include “*regulatory protection for labour in the legal framework of the WTO*” had failed up to then, there were still opportunities for a further labour-trade standards debate in WTO. There is a long history of attempts to include labour standards in trade organisations, but these have been linked to protectionism by Europe and North America (Wilkinson, 1999). Wilkinson concludes that a collaborative relationship between WTO and ILO would be the most effective way of ensuring that core labour standards are recognised in trade negotiations, even though he concluded that core labour rights would inevitably conflict with trade regulation and economic liberalism (Wilkinson,1999:187). In 2007, this view might be considered over-optimistic, following the GATS negotiations, which did not feature labour rights and standards.

The role of the International Labour Organization is considered to have changed over the past decade, in the light of the adoption by ILO in 1998 of the ILO *Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work*. Alston (2005) sees the ILO as playing a central role in influencing labour rights in trade agreements such as NAFTA and other bi-lateral negotiations. Although ILO has played a key role in defining the labour standards agenda and in the supervision of these standards for several decades, it has not been able to adapt to recent changes in the global economy (Alston,2005:472). ILO provides advice but this is not enough to protect labour standards when government commitment to labour rights is weak (Alston, 2005:474). Also, the tripartism of the ILO is not considered to be a guarantee of future effectiveness, with declining trade union membership. Both labour and employers were considered lukewarm in their enthusiasm for the 1998 ILO *Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work*.

Sussex (2006) has analysed the comments made by both labour and trade ministers about making links between trade and core labour standards. Trade ministers at the WTO meetings at Doha, Cancun and Hong Kong were unsympathetic to links being made between trade and core labour standards. In contrast, at the International Labour Conference (ILC), labour ministers were more positive about making these links, although there were three, from Malaysia, Egypt and India, who were opposed to a link between labour standards and trade (Sussex, 2006).

There are still extensive debates about the effectiveness of a core labour standards approach. Recent research on the effectiveness of labour codes, through the Ethical Trading Initiative, shows that codes of labour practice have a positive effective on the more “*visible*” code principles: health and safety; child labour; minimum wages; and documented employment benefits. They had little impact on the “*less visible*” principles: freedom of association; discrimination; and regular employment. Permanent and regular workers benefited most but migrant or casual workers were not affected by the codes. Third party labour contractors were also beyond the reach of the codes (Barrientos, 2006).

As a sign of a more civil society agenda, ILO has also promoted the “*Decent Work (Securing decent work for everyone)*” agenda as a response to the changing global economic liberalisation and as a follow-up to the *Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work*. The four strategic objectives of ILO support this strategy: fundamental principles and rights at work; greater employment and income opportunities for women and men; social protection; social dialogue and tripartism.

As a way of trying to address a wider social justice agenda, the ILO set up the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization in February 2002, to examine all aspects of globalisation “*as it affects people, their lives, families and societies*”. It aimed to look at the implications of all aspects of globalisation for social and economic progress. In 2004, it reported its findings in *A Fair Globalization – opportunities for all* and made recommendations for how to achieve a consensus on future economic, social and environmental priorities. One of the main recommendations was to make “*decent work a global goal*”. This represented ILO’s attempt to influence the global agenda. This can be seen as an expansion of the scope of labour standards work, to wider advocacy for social justice as well as growth, investment and employment. One of the conclusions of the report, for ILO, was that “*We need to step into the economic policy arena*” (ILO, 2004:7).

Labour standards and codes have emerged as the main vehicles for addressing labour rights. World Bank World Development Reports show that there are some tensions between acknowledging the need for some government intervention in labour markets and other benefits but no admitting that policies of liberalisation and privatisation have been a cause of growing inequalities affecting workers. In parts of the World Bank, labour rights are seen as a disadvantage for successful businesses.

ILO has led the promotion of labour standards, but it has also started to pursue a wider agenda of “*decent work”* and social justice. Its tripartite structure, with worker, employer and government interests, perhaps hinders a more public promotion of the value that labour rights play in economic and social development.

**Workers playing a role in institutional reform**

The Millennium Development Goals, provided a vision for the future, and have played an important role in focusing attention on what is needed to achieve these basic goals by 2015. Set in 2000, these goals cover education, health, environmental sustainability, and gender equality and women’s empowerment (UN, 2006). The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs publishes annual monitoring reports. The MDG targets have become an important focus for campaigning, for trade unions as well as other civil society organisations. It has become clear in several areas that achieving many of the MDG targets depends on effective public services. Deteriorating working conditions and the resulting depletion of the workforce are reducing the capacity of countries to reach the Millennium Development Goals.

The United Nations, through its Division for Public Administration and Development Management has passed a series of Resolutions to promote the need for public administration and development. This process started in 1994/6, with General Assembly resolution 50/225 on public administration and development (UN Public Administration Programme, 2007).

The UN, Department of Social and Economic Affairs (UNDESA) published the first bi-annual World Public Services Report in 2001. In 2005, the theme was *Unlocking the human potential of public sector performance*. The UN has also set up annual UN Public Service Day and the UN Public Service Awards ceremony, which in 2006 focused on accountability and transparency of government services. These highlight the importance of both public services and the role of public sector workers.

The UN World Public Sector Report (2005) observed that:

*“There has been a rediscovery in recent years of the critical role played by human resources in improving and sustaining institutional effectiveness and development performance.”* UN World Public Sector Report 2005:Foreword)

The recognition of the need to involve public sector workers in public services, has been reflected in publications and research from OECD and WHO. This suggests that another perspective to labour issues is beginning to emerge. Several factors have contributed to this perspective but they hinge around a more positive perception of the public sector, recognition of the importance of public sector workers and a critique of privatisation and liberalisation.

Almost five years ago, the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) started by commissioning a series of papers from leading human resource specialists on what was still needed, in public sector reform. Two contributors, to this process, started to raise awareness about the need to focus more attention on human resources, in the public sector. One contributor was an academic, Bram Steijn and the second contributor, Alex Matheson, worked for the OECD.

Steijn starts by observing that human resources issues were largely absent from public administration and modernisation projects of the public sector. He refers to the concept of the ‘*High Performance Work Organisation’*, which acknowledges that as the external environment changes, so must internal structures and ways of working. Workers need to be given more responsibility and more job autonomy (Steijn, 2002:3). This will make them more motivated and willing to learn new things.

Public employees have often been seen as a problem, rather than an asset, on which the delivery of public services depends on. Steijn asks if the introduction of market mechanisms and performance related pay is affecting the “*public sector spirit*”. He outlines the essential components of human resource management, which is significantly different from personnel management. Human resource management should encompass: a long term focus and strategic direction; orientation towards employee commitment; employees taking control; trust; an organic organisational structure; looking for optimal use of employee capabilities (Guest, 1987). There have been changes in the level of satisfaction with public services and the declining levels of job satisfaction among public sector workers in some countries. Steijn (2002) concluded that HRH strategies need to be a “*primary objective for public organisations”* (Steijn,2002: )*.*

Matheson reflects some of Steijn’s concerns. He thinks that human resource management has been ignored in public management reforms and that, as a result,

*“the constitutional, legal, cultural and leadership factors, which together create what is important and distinctive about public services, are not reflected on, or are dismissed as the bureaucratic problem which must be 'reformed*'(Matheson, 2002: 10).

He concluded that “*organisational culture is the most important management asset of any organisation*” (Matheson,2002:10).

The World Health Organization (WHO) has also started to focus more explicitly on the need for human resources for health. There have been human resources for health programmes working, within WHO, for many years, but the 2006 World Health Report took Human Resources for Health as its theme. This is also the beginning of a “human resources” decade, when WHO will focus on this theme until 2016.

However, part of the process for the development of the 2006 World Health Report, starts to show a rather one-dimension view of human resources for health, which does not include a strong labour rights and trade union perspective. Although WHO consulted some international trade unions in the development of the World Health Report, the participation of labour representatives was minimal at the launch of the report.

This can also be seen through the World Bank’s World Development Report (2004) *Making Services Work for Poor People*, which although acknowledging some positive aspects of public sector workers, is also infused by a view of the poor quality of the public sector workforce, in many countries, which is often hostile to changes in ways of delivering public services.

However, the prospect of worker participation in institutional reforms presents an interesting development in the field of labour and international policy. In private sector human resource development, there is some recognition that involvement of labour in organisational developments can influence effectiveness and innovation. Tendler (1997), in a rare study of how public sector workers introduced innovative ways of delivering public services, refers to the importance of the industrial workforce and workplace transformation literature, which highlights the role of workers in improving performance (Tendler,1997:4). Grindle (2001) examines how groups, such as unions, play different roles in relation to reforms, with some opposing and others supporting reform. Dilulio (1994) notes the importance of “*principled agents*” in public sector organisations. Public servants can also be motivated by managerial and incentive schemes, to lead and support change.

**International labour solidarity**

International unions and international solidarity strategies have been changing partly as a response to changes in the global economy. Carr (1999) wrote that there have been changes in the practices of worker and union internationalism. The international trade secretariats have played an important role in expanding communication and developing alliances with other social movements. An example of this, has been the role that Public Services International (PSI) has played in campaigning for Millennium Development Goals, acting with NGOs and other civil society organisations, as part of its Quality Public Services campaign (PSI, 2007).

Carr (1999) is critical about what new internationalist trade unionism can achieve

but concludes that the NAFTA agreement has generated some a “*labour internationalist form of globalization from below*” but economic integration may both stimulate and repress transnational workers and union cooperation (Carr, 1999:57).

Munck (2004) examines the prospects for the labour movement. He believes that workers are not just the victims of globalisation but there are opportunities for international solidarity. Labour needs to become part of wider movements for social justice. There are signs that more trade unions are developing alliances with NGOs and other civil society organisations, at local, national and international levels.

One of the issues facing trade unions wanting to be effective at an international level is to what extent, the national concerns can inform and even be transcended by international perspectives. ICFTU has campaigned for rules and regulations in international trade bodies but has often experienced hostility from non-European and North American unions because it is seen as northern protectionism (Munch, 2004). Harrod’s proposal for studying the global labor force "horizontally", that is, according to different categories and forms of work rather than on a nation-by-nation basis, demonstrates a recognition of the global- national dimensions (Harrod and O’Brien 2002:49).

Waterman (2005) observes that workers are becoming more diverse globally and often less unionised, although there has been a growth of international solidarity networks, which creates a new form of union internationalism. Waterman is interested in what this means for international labour studies, arguing for a more systematic dialogue between academics, union leaders, union members, pro-labour NGOs and other social movements. He suggests that there is little understanding of how workers actually experience “international solidarity”.

Waterman (2006) also questions the strategies that international trade unions need to pursue, in the light of recent experience. He argues that they need to abandon the engagement with global governance issues and pursue wider issues of global justice with other social movements and civil society coalitions. This would presumable reject the recent engagement of international trade unions with the World Bank and the IMF (Bakvis, 2006). However, the experience of trade unions developing partnerships, with civil society organisations, might provide opportunities to help bring social justice and civil society agendas into public sector reforms.

**ILO-PSI Project**

This section is a more personal account of my involvement in a joint research project between the International Labour Organization and Public Services International (PSI), from 2004-2006, which examined the impact of public sector reforms on public sector workers.

A series of working papers on the changes in different public services as experienced by both public sector workers and users of services were commissioned, as the first phase of the project ‘*Liberalisation of Public Services – Impact on Workers’ Socio-economic security*’. These papers were published eventually as a book “*Winners and Losers? Liberalizing Public Services*” in 2006. These papers were designed to place the survey in context and provide an analysis of the processes of liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation and new forms of public sector management.

There were three partners: the Socio-Economic Security (SES) programme, part of the International Labour Office and Public Services International (PSI), an international trade union, and Education International, an international union linking teaching unions.

The strategy of the Socio-Economic Security (SES) programme focused on the promotion of seven forms of security for Decent Work. These covered: labour market security; employment security; work security; job security; skill reproduction security; income security; and representation security.

As mentioned earlier, the International Labour Office has a tripartite structure, reflecting the three groups involved in social dialogue: workers, employers and government. There were continual internal tensions between the SES programme and the employers division, about the nature of their work and control of the budget, especially in relation to this project.

The second partner was the Public Services International, an international trade union that links national public sector trade unions together. PSI campaigns at an international level for wider trade union recognition as well as on issues facing public sector workers. PSI officials involved in this project, had to justify their involvement in this project, in terms of how the results would benefit its affiliates. They argued that the research data could be used in campaigns and collective bargaining. This illustrates some of the tensions within international trade unions about the value of research and the extent to which resources should be used for commissioning research.

The third partner was Education International, an international trade union representing teaching unions. Although providing some input into the questionnaire, there was no regular member of Education International on the steering committee.

The ILO-SES programme and PSI had worked together, previously, on a project examining the effect of health sector reforms on health care workers in Russia and Central and Eastern Europe. This research project has used both a semi-structured interview survey of health care workers in four countries as well as a structured questionnaire postal survey of trade unions in all countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Some of the research had been contracted out to a team of academics, which has also caused some tensions between the partners. This project has resulted in a book entitled “Corrosive Reform” (Afford, 2003), which has provided useful evidence of how health sector reforms in Russia and the countries of Eastern and Central Europe have affected health care workers.

The project team were united in a common goal to research and identify the effects of public sector reforms on public sector workers. However, ILO provided almost all the funding. This meant that the financial responsibilities were not shared between the two partners and inevitably affected the balance of power within the project team.

The ILO-SES programme had commissioned questionnaire surveys of changes in the socio-economic security of workers in different countries for several years. These had generated a body of data about changes in economic security in different societies. The research into public sector workers was conceptualised in a similar way by some members of ILO-SES.

There were immediately differences in views about whether a long structured questionnaire survey was the most appropriate way of collecting data from trade union affiliates. SES- ILO felt that this was the most effective and rigorous way of collecting data because it would generate a useful data set. The PSI view, and one member of the SES-ILO team, was more sympathetic to using a qualitative approach, perhaps interviewing PSI affiliates or running focus groups at PSI regional meetings. This debate took place over several months, and was still echoing even when the final questionnaires had been sent out.

Even after there had been a broad agreement on the use of a structured questionnaire, the debates that followed, about what questions to ask, were extensive and took place over several months. The first stage of the project, which had commissioned working papers, generated a multitude of research questions, which informed the early drafts of the questionnaire. The SES seven forms of socio-economic security were used as a framework for the questionnaire. By the end of 18 months, there had been 18 drafts of a questionnaire, over twenty pages long.

One of the issues that emerged in the process of developing and agreeing the questionnaire, was whether trade unions had the expertise, time, resources and information to complete the questionnaire fully. This raises questions about the importance of having an understanding of research subjects and their capacity to complete the research instrument. This showed some of the tensions between a political commitment to researching the impact of public sector reforms on public sector workers and an awareness of the context within which public sector trade unions exist. This was not easy to resolve. Researching trade unions shows that researchers need to be sensitive to the time involved in the research process. This has also emerged in research into other disadvantaged groups or groups with little “voice”.

These debates, together with the results of a pilot survey, did lead to a revision of the research project. Initially the questionnaire was going to be sent to all PSI affiliates but the project was revised, so that only a sample of PSI affiliates received the questionnaire. These were chosen on the basis of general country experience of public sector reform; reforms that started pre-1999; reforms started post-1999; population size; geographical distribution within PSI regions; and adequate affiliate resources. The decision to limit the survey to a sample of PSI affiliate did make it a more manageable survey. The overall response rate was 27%, which was considered successful. It involved extensive chasing up by members of the project team, especially PSI staff.

Developing a global analysis of how policies of liberalisation and privatisation have affected public sector workers, provides a series of challenges in analysing the impact of policies, which, whilst broadly described as liberalisation and privatisation, often take different forms, depending on the existing political, economic and institutional context. Larbi (1999) writes that “*the importance of political and institutional context in which reforms have to be implemented has been undervalued*”. Some of the issues about analysing the data show some of the difficulties in assessing the impact of public sector reforms by country, region and sector. There are both similarities and differences in sectors and countries.

One of the main conclusions was quite surprising. Many public sector workers have received increases in real wages during the past decade, even though in countries where wages are paid in arrears, they do not always receive these increases. This is also reflected in ILO research, which shows that skilled workers have experienced rises in real income over the past decade, whereas wages for unskilled labour have fallen in value.

Secondly, there has been an increase in ‘casualisation’ as a result of changes in the numbers of permanent and short-term contracts in public, private and not-for-profit (NFP) sectors. This has implications for public sector unions, which will have to consider whether they develop strategies to organise workers in all sectors. There are implications of widening participation for public sector unions, in that once private and nor for profit sector workers become members, the commitment of the union to the public sector is often reduced.

A third conclusion was that public sector unions are finding it more difficult to obtain information from governments, which is an indication of reduced transparency in government-trade union relations.

The process of public sector reform will continue. Although there are signs that public sector reforms may lead to increases in real wages, there is also evidence to show that types of contracts are perhaps a more significant indicator of the socio-economic security of public sector workers, with some increases in short-term contracts and ‘*casualisation*’. The deterioration of relationships between public sector unions and governments has long-term implications for the way in which the public sector is being shaped. This contrasts with a greater recognition of the value of human resources in public service delivery at international level. How public sector workers can play a more active role in shaping future reforms needs to become a central issue in the debates about the future of public services, by public sector workers and civil society organisations.

Personal reflections

I became the researcher to the project after the first researcher left, after six months of work. I had participated in some of the discussions, in the first stage of the project, and I had written two working papers on health and social care workers. This is my main area of research but I am also increasing interested in changes in other public services.

I joined the project, when the 8th version of the questionnaire was being circulated. Naively, I thought that there would only be a couple more versions before moving into the pilot stage. Part of my role was as a mediator between the partners, although I had a strong tie to PSI, because I work for a research unit partly funded by PSI. I also had previous experience of working with one of the PSI project team. When the questionnaires were returned, I have felt a strong sense of responsibility to use the results, which have created by trade unionists spending many hours completing the questionnaire.

This has been one of the most difficult projects that I have been involved in. It has made me acutely aware of some of the problems of researching issues, where other researchers have a strong commitment, in this case to the socio-economic security of public sector workers. This can lead to conflicts over research methodologies, project control and funding. However, the overall goal of gathering data has been very powerful in keeping me going through some difficult processes. It precipitated some creative problem-solving for some of the issues that emerged through the course of the project. It still remains a strong motivating force for continuing with the analysis even though the SES programme no longer exists, following a major reorganisation of ILO.

Conclusions

International policy and labour still remain a peripheral activity in international studies. One of the under-stated issues is whether the focus of further research should be on workers or trade unions. There is a growing body of work on global union solidarity as well as research into the experience of workers and “*precarious employment*” (Vosko, 2004). The challenge for trade unions is to what extent to pursue goals of global governance or global justice. Some may consider these to be mutually exclusive goals.

One of the most interesting scenarios emerging from this analysis is whether greater public sector worker involvement in public services will take place. This could lead to increased cooperation between trade unions and NGOs on improving public services, which is already beginning. It will also mean that international agencies need to understand and support campaigns for social justice.

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24 February 2007

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