

How the Internet is Changing Unions

By Eric Lee
Working USA

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1. The Internet internationalizes unions and is leading to a rebirth of classical trade union internationalism.
2. The Internet democratizes unions, decentralizes them, makes them more transparent and open, weakens entrenched bureaucracies and provides new tools for rank and file activists.
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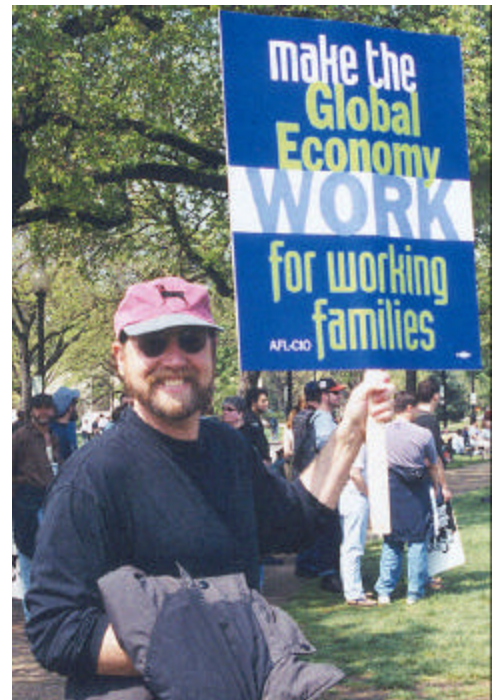
There is little debate any more about how much the Internet has changed the world -- it is now widely understood that the emergence of a global computer communications network is an event comparable to the invention of the printing press. (Though I do think comparing the net to the discovery of fire are stretching things a bit.)

It has changed much in the world we live in, including how we buy and sell things (from books to shares on the stock market), how we learn and teach, how we are entertained and informed. Everyone who uses the net understands this. It is a transformative experience.

And it is changing trade unions too, even if they don't realize it yet.

It's a little hard, at first, to accept the idea that new communications technologies change institutions like trade unions. And yet a glance backward at the 19th century reveals that the telegraph too had a profound effect on the world's economy and culture and even -- albeit somewhat less obviously -- on the emerging trade unions.

In Tom Standage's delightful book, *The Victorian Internet*, a history of the telegraph, he recounts a story of the first trade union meeting conducted "online" -- hundreds of employees of the American Telegraph Company working the lines between Boston and Maine met for an hour, conducted their discussions and even passed resolutions, all in Morse code.



Obviously the idea of "online" trade unionism (using Morse code) didn't catch on in the 19th century. But no less an authority on the early labour movement than Karl Marx was convinced of the transformative power of new communications technologies. In *The Communist Manifesto*, he wrote that it was not the occasional victories of workers that was the "real fruit" of their struggles, but the "ever expanding union" of workers.

"This union," he wrote, "is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry, and that place the workers of different localities in contact with each other."

New communications technologies create new possibilities for trade unions. In the nineteenth century, they made unions possible -- or at least unions that went beyond a single location. National trade unions, which were common by the end of that century, would have been unthinkable without the national economies, which were in turn dependent upon the telegraph.

The global trade unions emerging today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, are being made possible because of the Internet.

But none of this happened overnight. There is a history going back more than twenty years of trade unions using computer networks. The global networked trade unions now being born have their roots in the early 1980s.

Back in 1981, personal computers were hobbyists' playthings. They existed. Some people bought them. Some hobbyists even built modems, which allowed them to exchange files through telephone lines. In the late 1970s, electronic bulletin boards had been created. But you really had to like this sort of thing to buy and use a computer at home.

Trade unions, of course, had nothing to do with any of this. They continued to work in the old tried-and-tested ways (without using computers) for years to come, lagging far behind businesses, which adopted personal computers widely in the 1980s and got online by the mid-1990s.

But in 1981, there was a first, tentative step made. Larry Kuehn and Arnie Myers of the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) saw a demonstration of how a modem worked and were impressed. They introduced portable computers (not very portable by today's standards) with modems and printers to union leaders and quickly created the first labour network. Soon the whole Executive of the BCTF was traipsing around the province sending off messages to each other on the clumsy machines.

There was no rush of imitators even though the project was fairly successful. (The union survived a brutal assault by the right-wing provincial government in part because its internal communications allowed swift and effective responses.)

By mid-decade, a fellow Canadian -- Marc Belanger of the Canadian Union of Public Employees -- managed to put together Canada's first nationwide packet-switching network. It was not only the first such network created for a union -- it was the first such network created in Canada, period. It was called Solinet, short for Solidarity Network.

Within a short time, hundreds of CUPE members were using Solinet's unique conferencing system which was also the first in the world to work in two languages, English and French.

Meanwhile, the need for cheap communications was driving European-based International Trade Secretariats to seek out alternatives to phone calls and even the new fax machines. (International Trade Secretariats are global organizations of trade unions in particular sectors of the economy, such as teachers, metal workers, transport workers and so on.)

Eventually, they came upon a German-based network called Geonet and began using this to exchange emails and even set up online bulletin boards. The ITS for the chemical sector -- now known as the ICEM -- and the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) were pioneering global labour computer communications years before most of us were even using personal computers, let alone the Internet.

A little more than a decade after Kuehn and Myers got hooked on the idea of modems, enough was happening to justify an international conference to discuss where things were going. This was held in Manchester in 1992, hosted by one of Britain's largest unions, the GMB.

That Manchester conference and a successor one in 1993 included among the invitees all those who had been involved -- including Kuehn, Belanger, and the Europeans, such as Jim Catterson of the ICEM and Richard Flint of the ITF. Poptel, a workers cooperative had been launched in the UK to help coordinate this work, and a rival grouping in the US -- IGC Labornet -- set about to bring American unions online. For several years the two systems -- Geonet's and IGC's -- existed side by side, unable to communicate with one another, offering rival conferencing systems for those few trade unionists who were already online.

I got interested in all this sometime in 1993. The International Federation of Workers Education Associations (IFWEA), which employed me to produce its new quarterly "Workers Education", took a great interest in these new developments. It became the first international labour body to have its own website, early in 1995. I began contacting all the early pioneers who had been making slow progress for more than a decade, learning about this remarkable hidden history of an emerging labour network, when suddenly all hell broke loose.

Thanks to the creation of the Mosaic browser in 1994, the Internet became, overnight, a mass medium. (The Mosaic browser is the forerunner of Netscape Navigator.)

In my book, *The Labour Movement and the Internet: The New Internationalism* (Pluto Press, 1996), I pointed out that the most optimistic estimates showed then about 50 million people online. The day was coming, I wrote, when there would be double that number. As I write these words, early in 2000, there are over 200 million people online. Many millions of these are trade union members and thousands of unions have established websites and begun using the Internet as a basic tool of communication.

Coincidentally, many of the countries with the highest rate of Internet penetration, such as Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway, are countries with the highest rates of trade union organization. Thus the percentage of Internet users who are trade unionists is actually probably quite high, and it is not unreasonable to suggest that there are currently tens of millions of trade unionists online.

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But I think this misses the main point, which is the role played by the Internet in reviving and strengthening the labour movement. There are three major effects which I intend to address in this article:

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The most important of these, by far, is the first -- the re-internationalization of the labour movement.

One has to start by remembering how bad things have gotten. A hundred years ago, there existed a kind of labour internationalism that is hard to imagine today. Working people often dug deep into their pockets to support far away strikes and unions were often built by highly mobile workers who moved from country to country. The ties between unions in different countries were much stronger in 1890 than they were in 1990. In 1890, unions were able to organize centrally co-ordinated worldwide protests including general strikes in support of a single, global demand -- the 8-hour day. And they were able to co-ordinate their actions so that it all happened on a single day: May 1, 1890. That was the first real May Day. It would have been unthinkable a hundred years later to organize a similar global campaign, even though communications technologies were much improved.

American unions have been particularly affected by the de-internationalization of the labour movement and for many years, the heavy hand of the AFL-CIO's International Affairs Department held back any kind of genuine solidarity campaigning, particularly at rank-and-file level. And this was not only true of the USA, but of most trade union movements in most countries. International departments of unions talked to one another; ordinary workers did not.

The Internet has already had a huge impact and one can now say without fear of exaggeration that it has contributed to a remarkable re-internationalization of trade unions which has in turn empowered those unions, allowing them to survive and grow in the most difficult of times.

A remarkable example took place in early 1998 when tension between Australian dock workers (known as "wharfies") and their employers, backed by a viciously anti-union government, peaked -- launching what came to be known as the "war on the waterfront".

News was breaking every hour as unions, employers and government fought it out in the country's courts -- and in ports around Australia. The Maritime Union of Australia, representing the wharfies and the target of vitriolic hatred from the right, had just launched its own, slick website. But it wasn't being updated. Like so many trade union sites, it was just an online brochure.

A team of web activists from other unions, including the teachers, worked together with the Australian Council of Trade Unions to get up a regularly updated site on the net, but even this proved to be a sporadic effort. The most successful attempt to maintain daily coverage on the web was done by a local activist in Melbourne, an anarchist who went by the online name of Takver. His "Takver's Soapbox" website, together with the Leftlink mailing list run out of a leftist bookshop, became the

best sources of up-to-date, online information about the dispute -- which increasingly took on an international character.

The International Transport Workers Federation, based in London, was charged with co-ordinating international support for the wharfies and mobilized its website toward this end, but it was immediately slapped with a court injunction barring it from interfering. For several days the ITF was immobilized and it fell to the independent LabourStart website, recently launched by this writer, then living on a kibbutz in Israel, to spread the news and build international support for the wharfies.

Within days, the threat of a boycott of Australian shipping emerged with the longshoremen on the west coast of the US and Canada taking the lead. News about the dispute had spread rapidly around the globe, largely thanks to the web and email. Faced with massive public support in Australia for the wharfies and the danger of a shipping boycott, the government retreated and the wharfies won.

The victory of the wharfies stands in sharp contrast to the defeat of the Liverpool dockers a few weeks earlier. The Liverpool dockers struggle was also widely publicized on the net, thanks particularly to the Labournet website run by Chris Bailey in the UK, and was widely promoted as the most successful example of the building of online, international trade union solidarity we had seen so far.

But unlike the Australian wharfies, the Liverpool dockers' struggle was "unrecognized" and they could not enjoy the full support of their union (the Transport and General Workers Union) nor that of the ITF. Without such support from their own union, the best website in the world couldn't help.

In another example, in late 1999 broadcasting technicians working for the American Broadcasting Company walked off their jobs in a one day strike -- which prompted the company to lock them out and begin a bitter dispute which lasted several months.

What would have been a purely national dispute between a US union (NABET) and its employer inevitably took on an international character and within weeks it became clear that ABC was using its London studios to broadcast World News Tonight, their flagship program, thus avoiding the picket lines in New York.

Thanks to the NABET websites news of the struggle with ABC had already reached British shores. Eventually a NABET delegation arrived in London and using all the tools of modern communications technology -- websites, email, faxes, mobile phones -- within hours they were able to pull together leaders of some of Britain's largest unions, including the Communication Workers Union, in a dramatic international picket line at the ABC studio. Among the participants in that picket was the president of Media and Entertainment International (MEI), the international trade secretariat responsible for this sector.

The picket was widely reported in the British media, and digital photos appeared hours later on the strikers' website in the US. Unions on both sides of the Atlantic touted the event as heralding a new era of co-operation and everyone pointed to the key role-played by the Internet in organizing it.

Unfortunately, the London picket disappeared as soon as the American strikers went home, ABC continued to broadcast its nightly news from the safety of the capital of New Labour's Britain, and the union was eventually routed, accepting all the company's terms.

It was not enough to have a first-rate website or even to drum up some international solidarity. When playing hardball with the likes of a multinational corporation like Disney (which owns ABC), much more is necessary.

A final example -- and one with a happier ending -- of how the net is helping to strengthen trade union internationalism occurred in recent weeks.

The militant South Korean trade unions -- long experienced in using the Internet to build international support for their struggles -- were engaged in a non-violent sit-in in Seoul. The government sent in riot police who proceeded not only to arrest 17 of them (including many prominent figures, heads of national unions) but to brutally beat them as well.

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) sent out an urgent appeal by email to all its contacts in the international labour movement. The appeal began by publishing the email address of the Korean President, Kim Dae Jung, suggesting that protest messages be sent directly to him. It was instantly published on the LabourStart website and a special urgent appeal sent out to the more than 1,400 subscribers to LabourStart's mailing list. Within 48 hours -- on December 10th 1999, Human Rights Day -- the KCTU announced the release of all the jailed trade unionists. In a remarkable statement, they wrote:

"The news of the raid of the KCTU sit-in site by the riot police aroused immediate reaction from the trade union movement community of the world, which helped in bringing about the quick release of the detained activists."

"The news of the riot police raid," the statement continued, "was featured as the top news at the most widely accessed labour movement news website, LabourStart. The LabourStart relayed the news via its listserv to several thousand trade union movement activists in the world."

As a result, statements of protest poured in -- most of them by email. It is no coincidence that the very organisations the KCTU thanked in their message -- the International Metalworkers Federation (another international trade secretariat), the South African Municipal Workers Union, the Canadian Labour Congress -- are among the most "wired" unions on earth.

At the end of their statement the Korean unionists remarked that they were made to realize "once more the power of international solidarity and the new communication weapon of the labour [movement]", meaning the Internet.

This was not just a thank you note -- it was a wakeup call to unions everywhere. The Korean trade unionists have long been proponents of greater use of the new communications technologies and as early as December 1996 were publishing daily news reports about their general strike on the web. Three years later, they were able to confirm what many of us have long suspected: the Internet allows international labour to mobilize with a speed and effectiveness we have never experienced before. And it can produce concrete results, like freeing 17 imprisoned trade unionists.

Another important change the Internet is bringing to unions is that it is democratizing them. Some of them.

This is a painfully slow process and is nowhere near as advanced as the re-internationalization of the labour movement. But there is already good evidence that it is happening.

Already back in the early 1980s, the British Columbia Teachers Federation, the n pioneering use of modems, discovered whole strata of the union hierarchy that proved to be unnecessary once communications were improved and made more direct.

In the summer of 1999, flight attendants working for NorthWest Airlines rejected the company's contract offer in a surprise vote. The union leadership had urged members to vote for the contract. This is not the first time that the rank and file have rebelled, but what made the NorthWest case interesting was that the campaign against the new contract was conducted entirely online.

It was organized initially by a single angry flight attendant based in San Francisco who sent out repeated emailings to fellow union members explaining what was wrong with the contract. Because of the nature of their profession, always travelling from place to place, unable to attend conventional union meetings, email turned out to be an especially potent weapon.

It even turned out that the NorthWest insurgents were not such pioneers; they had heard that a similar rebellion at American Airlines, also using email, had won a better contract some time earlier.

At just about the same time in Britain, the Communication Workers Union, which represents both postal and telecom workers, had concluded a long and difficult series of negotiations with Royal Mail to produce a joint long-term vision of employer-employee relations for the years to come. Historically, postal workers have been a militant lot and the future of Britain's postal service in the Internet age is uncertain. One can imagine how much work must have been put into reaching an agreement that satisfied both the union and management.

Rank and file postal workers were not, admittedly, organized by email into an effective opposition to the agreement. They did, however, vote to defeat the proposal in a democratic ballot, forcing the union to re-think its strategy regarding Royal Mail. But there was also an Internet angle to the story.

Some months earlier, the union had launched a series of web forums on its site. Though over a thousand members of the union (out of 250,000) had password access to the forums, they were largely unused. In one particularly embarrassing case, a female member of the CWU launched a forum on women in the union and began with a message asking if anyone was out there. She received no response.

As the forums were fairly inactive, and the top union leadership not yet connected from their desktops to the Internet, no one noticed when insurgent postal workers began using the tool to exchange views -- and trash the union leadership for the deal it had made with Royal Mail. After a while, the attacks became bolder and personal, bordering on the libelous. Someone noticed. The reaction of the union was to immediately shut down all the web forums for 48 hours and rethink the situation.

In the end, a set of guidelines for behavior in the forums was proposed and they were reopened, but it came as quite a shock to the CWU leadership to see the new technology being used for such purposes.

One should not exaggerate the democratizing potential of the Internet for trade unions. If the net were truly the great leveller, making everything transparent, giving out all the facts so propaganda and lies would become ineffective, and so on, then in countries like the US where Internet penetration is very high, you'd see a rapid decline of old, corrupt leaderships and their replacement by democratic reformers.

And yet the single biggest change to happen to US union leaderships in the age of mass Internet access was not the triumph of a reforming slate somewhere, but Jimmy Hoffa's election in the Teamsters.

When I pointed this out at a conference in New York City a year ago, an angry Teamster, herself a strong Hoffa supporter, pointed out that the Hoffa campaign had run an excellent website and used email intensively. Which is, I guess, the whole point.

The new technology by itself can be used by insurgents and by entrenched bureaucracies -- there is nothing about it that guarantees the success of democracy. What made the NorthWest and Royal Mail cases different was that the union leaderships were caught off guard. In the future, those leaderships will be better prepared.

In addition to internationalizing and democratizing unions, the Internet has the potential to greatly strengthen them -- not only as a recruitment tool, but as a way of binding members ever-closer to their unions, using the new technology.

In late 1998, John Dixon was sent on a global fact-finding mission by his union, the New South Wales Teachers Federation, in Australia. While visiting the UK, he met with officials of the National Union of Teachers who told him that the web had proved to be an incredibly effective organizing tool. Some 5,000 new members had been recruited online, he was told.

I have my doubts about this story. Because as one looks around at the hundreds of trade union websites that seem to offer the possibility of joining up online, in reality what they all seem to really offer is the chance to fill out an online form and receive a packet of information by snail mail.

This was confirmed by the fact that headlines were recently made in the US by the second largest union at Boeing (the SPEEA) which allows potential members to download the union's authorization card in Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF), meaning that they can print out the cards themselves, sign them, and hand them in to union representatives. This seems to be about as far as it has gone. Not even the SPEEA actually allows you to join online.

True online organizing means allowing people to join unions in the same way that they bank online, or buy insurance, or shop for books or CDs. You should be able to fill in a secure online form and sign it using an encrypted digital signature. There should be no need for paper at all.

Obviously such a technical development would not eliminate the need for human organizers actually talking to potential recruits. The labour movement is not going to grow because people read good things about unions on websites and promptly fill in the online forms.

But there is no reason why technological barriers should still exist to actual online recruitment. And I'm convinced that it's only a matter of time before unions actually do recruit this way. Already in Britain, the government's proposed ecommerce legislation with its support for digital signatures has convinced some that true online recruitment is now possible.

Organizing means more than just recruiting members -- it also means keeping members in unions and bringing them closer to their unions. This is where the Internet can play a big role in strengthening unions.

Unions which until now were limited by budgets to quarterly magazines, which were sent to members, can now communicate with their entire memberships on a daily basis, using email and the web. Because of the enormous cost involved in old-fashioned print and mail, unions have become increasingly distant from many of their members. When I asked at Britain's giant MSF union (with some 400,000 members) about the possibility of doing a mailing to the membership, I was told that the union simply didn't have the financial ability to do such mailings. It relied upon a bimonthly or quarterly magazine to keep up contact with the rank and file. It had no means to mobilize its membership in time of need.

Today, MSF's website is updated on a daily basis, allowing the union to talk to its members in real time -- something it has never been able to do before. The potential for mobilizing is now there. There are other ways unions can bring members closer to the organization. In the past, unions used things like t-shirts or pins and badges. Today, email addresses can play a similar role. MSF negotiated a deal with a provider of web-based email to provide an MSF email address to every member of the union. This would be their permanent address, regardless of where they worked or who their Internet service provider was. The idea was that members would tell people their email address and that would be a way identifying themselves as union members.

Other unions have made determined efforts to create portal websites which would be the home pages of members on the Internet. Such sites would bind members closer to their unions.

The most ambitious attempts to do so have been those recently launched by the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the AFL-CIO, both of which are offering package deals of computers, Internet access, and the portal website. If hundreds of thousands of union members begin using these services, as the two national centers hope will happen, they will not only be exposed to union news and views on a daily basis, but will probably begin to identify themselves more and more as trade union members, even if they have never attended a union meeting in their lives.

The new online tools also allow unions to reach out beyond their own memberships as never before. This is particularly true during times of need, such as strikes, when the support of the community is especially important. In recent years, unions have made extraordinary efforts to use the web to tell their side of the story. This proved particularly effective in the case of the Teamsters, a union which suffers from generally awful public relations, when it led a strike at UPS which proved to be quite popular with the American public. As I write these words, the Teamsters are again involved in a long and bitter nationwide strike, this time at Overnite, and have set up a special website to tell their side of the story.

In 1999, Quebec's nurses found themselves embroiled in an extremely difficult strike against a union-hating provincial government. The union's website was caught unawares as the strike began -- it was a simple online brochure with a picture of the union's president and some basic information and everything was in French.

But as the strike intensified, with threats of arrests of union leaders and multi-million dollar fines (nurses' strikes are illegal in Canada), the union found itself transforming the website, turning it into a tool to mobilize public support. Daily news was added. An English language page was added. Another page showed a long and growing list of organizations, which expressed solidarity with the nurses, from all over Canada and around the world.

After only a few days, the Quebec nurses were using the Internet actively to build support, spread the news, raise morale. With widespread community support and an unwavering rank and file, they eventually won. The net certainly played a part in their victory.

Unions are often perceived, at least in the advanced industrial countries, as dinosaurs. It would surprise no one to hear that most top leaders of most unions are Internet illiterates.

But a campaigning union website sends out the opposite message. It says that unions are part of the new, networked economy, that they intend to stay around for a while and are not about to become extinct. Using the new communications technologies itself is a way of sending a strong message about unions' commitment to the future.

Until now, I've talked about the past and present of unions and the net. It would be appropriate to conclude with a few words about the future.

Naturally, no one knows what will happen. With the incredible pace of technological change, predicting has become an impossible job.

But we can take a page from Samuel Gompers, who when asked what trade unions want said, "More!" What will happen to unions and the net in the years to come? More -- more websites, more online campaigns, more online recruitment, more online communities (web forums and chat rooms), more mailing lists, more news, updated more frequently, more interactivity, more online rank and file activism, more international solidarity.

Thanks in part to the Internet, we are moving inevitably toward a networked global economy. Just as the emergence of national markets in the 19th century spawned national trade unions, so the 21st century is giving birth to the next stage of the labour movement: networked global unions.

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*About the author: Author of *The Labour Movement and the Internet: The New Internationalism* (Pluto Press, 1996), editor of the LabourStart website (<http://www.labourstart.org>), and ICT Co-ordinator for Labour and Society International. Also the author of *Saigon to Jerusalem: Conversations with Israel's Vietnam Veterans* (McFarland, 1992) and the unpublished *Mole: Stalin and the Okhrana*. Founding editor of *The New International Review* (1977-1989) and *Workers Education* (1993-1997). Member of Kibbutz Ein Dor, Israel. Editor of the online newsletter *BibiWATCH* (1996-98). Currently based in London.*