

New Economy, New Workers: The Evolution of Collective Organization in the ICT Economy by: Kun Wardana Abyoto

Generally recognized so far is the fact that the Information Society may have an impact on the way we do work. In fact, already large numbers of people have already experienced dramatic changes in their own working lives. The impact is already becoming in the way work is organized.

The IT revolution is having a major impact on work organization and job content. It is very important to research the changes in job content and skill requirements and how this can be introduced into collective bargaining and social dialogue.

The common view of ICT sector is of highly technical work, insecure jobs, high workload, pressures and stress, long hours and a highly competitive environment. Most of ICT staffs are young and often independent workers. Other characteristic of these workers may have in common include lack of security, lack of fixed workplace, strong sense of freedom of expression, a blurring of dividing line between work and private life, strong sense of individualism, weak organizational involvement, hence rarely so far organized into labor organizations.

The ICT sector has to evolve improved retention policies to enable a better work / life balance. These circumstances result in even more acute divergence from social protections, insecurity, social isolation, and so forth. To solve many of these problems, indeed to sustain their individualism and self-reliance, such workers are already beginning to feel the need for networking among themselves and, perhaps, seeking collective voices.

Early initiatives to serve these ICT workers in most cases are still far from resulting in something equivalent to traditional trade unions. Characteristics of successful organizations will probably include greater decentralization, easier opting in or out for specific services desired, access to personal legal, fiscal and career planning assistance, close personal contact between members and union staff, particular attention to professional and training issues, and among others, perhaps in reaction to social isolation, a return to bygone trade union traditions which made the labor organization a centre of social life.

Individualization will require different types of trade union services. This will expect unions to act as professional advisers in the field of terms and conditions of employment, working conditions and industrial relations. They will expect unions to place a high premium on training, retraining and life-long learning. They will also expect unions to invest in the latest technology to enable access to union information services anyplace, anytime and anywhere.

One thing is certain; specialization will be what brings people together, not vague slogans or social philosophy. Collective bargaining should not disappear. But it will probably evolve on several levels, one of them broadbased, perhaps regional and international, others very specific and profession based. The diversity in collective bargaining may not be only at different levels but may extend to the individual. Certainly, collective bargaining by a single set of negotiators covering all aspect of working life for entire sectors or multisectors will not be enough.

The trade union should be the ideal instrument for helping new workers to organize and defend their new rights, some of which are yet to be identified and established.