



Cornell University
ILR School

Labor Research Review

Volume 1 | Number 13
*Solidarity Across Borders: U.S. Labor in a Global
Economy*

Article 6

1989

Working Women & the Food Secretariat

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Working Women & the Food Secretariat

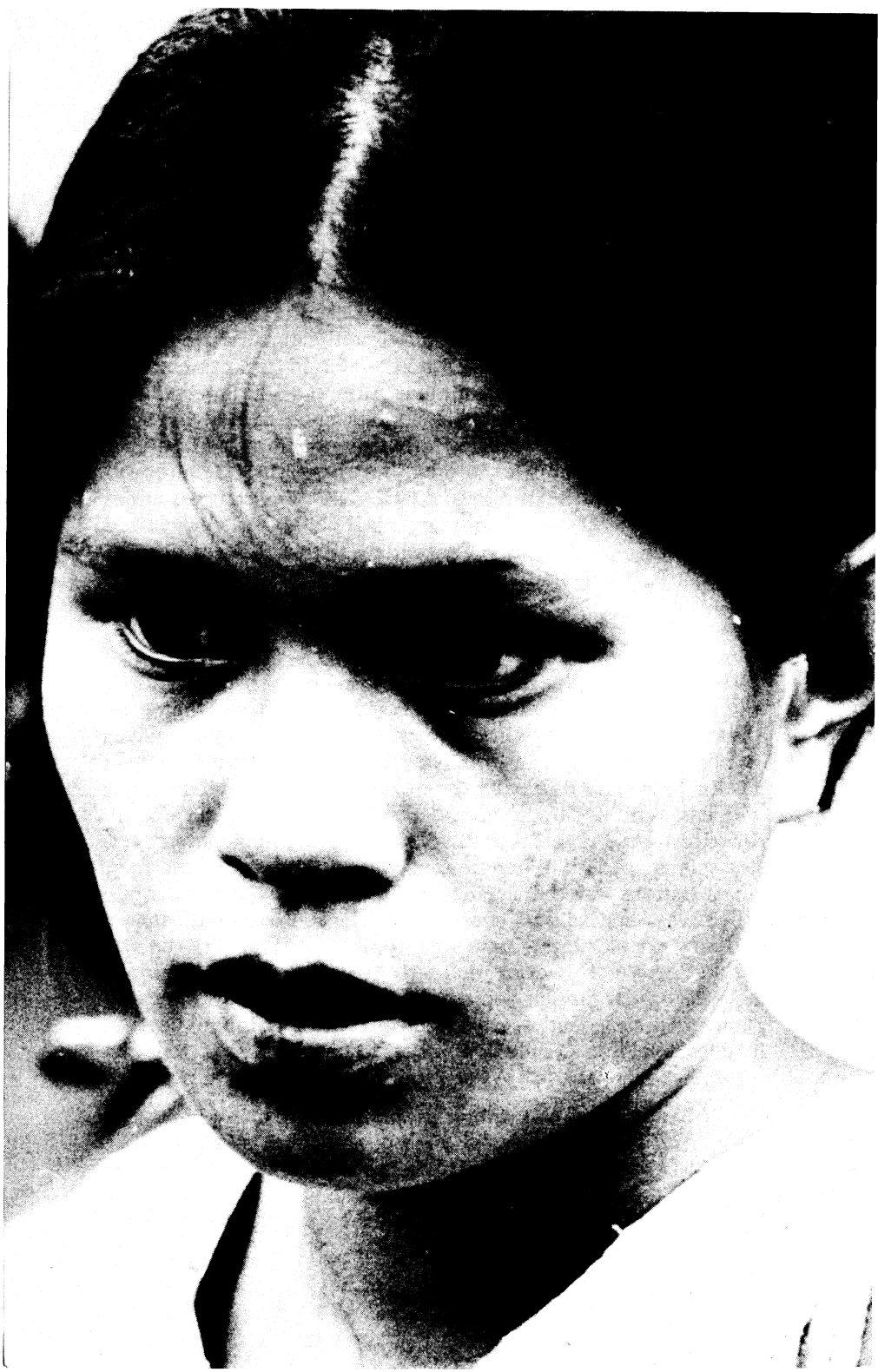
Abstract

[Excerpt] Today, huge companies spanning the face of the earth are mounting a global challenge to the living standards and dignity of working people. While it may be expensive and difficult to build a genuine international labor movement, particularly one that is democratic and accords women full participation, this era requires exactly that. The international trade secretariats (ITSs) are excellent vehicles for the labor movement to do this work.

It is important that more unionists and activists know about the ITSs, and that international action be better integrated strategically into domestic organizing and bargaining. This will help ITSs realize even more of their potential for linking unions around the world in common struggles, and this also helps national unions achieve their immediate goals. This article describes one of the most active ITSs in North America – the International Union of Food and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) – paying particular attention to the IUF's emphasis on the problems of women workers.

Keywords

international trade secretariat, ITS, International Union of Foodworkers, gender, women's rights



Working Women & the Food Secretariat

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There are 15 international trade secretariats organized by industry, craft or occupation. All of the ITSs are based in Europe, and most are almost 100 years old. Their activities include organizing international councils of unions by company or industry; research on transnational corporations; international

solidarity actions; educational programs, including a variety of publications; occupational safety and health projects; and programs on working women's issues.

The IUF is an international union of unions in the food and beverage processing, hotel, restaurant, catering and tobacco industries. Headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, the IUF has more than 2 million members from 215 affiliated unions in 69 countries. Dan Gallin is General Secretary. International labor solidarity is the principle which guides IUF's promotion of trade union, human and civil rights.

The IUF has five autonomous regions—Africa, Asia/Pacific, Europe, Latin America, and North America. In North America, IUF has nine affiliated unions in Canada and the U.S., with almost 500,000 members.

Based in Washington, D.C., the North American Regional Organization (NARO) was formed by affiliates five years ago to better coordinate their activities and represent their interests within IUF. René Rondou of the Bakery Workers is president of NARO, and Lenore Miller of RWDSU is vice-president.

North American unions, facing advanced capital mobility and union busting, are strengthening their direct participation in the international labor movement through the ITSs. This is a way of building economic international trade unionism to deal with transnational corporations. North American unions' involvement with the IUF has been marked by a desire to extend and accept solidarity with other IUF regions, an openness about the corporate challenges faced in Canada and the U.S., and a leadership role on working women's issues.

In North America, IUF coordinates the Nestle Labor Council in which rank-and-file members, officers and staff from Nestle unions meet to plan joint strategy. NARO and its affiliates regularly organize or participate in solidarity actions such as supporting:

- Coca Cola workers in South Africa, Canada and Guatemala;
- the real union at Continental Grain's subsidiary in Paraguay;
- locked out Unilever workers in Bombay, India;
- organizing efforts at McDonald's in Denmark;
- and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees in their organizing drive at the Nikko Hotel in Chicago.

The IUF also provides corporate and labor reports, such as a recent report for the North American Quaker Oats Council.

Canadian and U.S. affiliates of the IUF recently initiated plans for an international labor conference on "International Labor

Actions: Fighting Union Busting in a Changing Global Economy.' Sponsored by the IUF and other ITSS, the conference is scheduled for July 7-9 in Washington, D.C.

Working Women's Issues

It is estimated that 50% of the global food and allied workforce consists of women and young girls, and approximately 40% of IUF's membership is female. For these reasons, many of the IUF's regular activities involve women and, when successful, these activities have a positive effect on women's socioeconomic status.

Each of the IUF's five regions now has a women workers' issues committee, and each has held meetings or conferences to deal with issues like discrimination in the workforce, safety and health, home responsibilities, trade union skills, representation in IUF, and other societal problems that are unique to a country or region.

In Asia and the Pacific, the women's committee was formed in 1985 in Hong Kong, and met in Bangkok in 1986 and in Seoul in 1987. In 1988 the women's committee was successful in having the Asia/Pacific Regional Committee adopt a policy on sexual harassment. A two-week leadership training course was held last year in the Philippines for 25 women from 19 unions in 11 countries. A seminar in New Caledonia and a conference in Seoul are scheduled for the first half of this year.

The African Region's first women workers' conference was held in Lusaka, Zambia, in 1986 and a women's committee was formed. A second meeting was held in Port Louis, Mauritius, in 1987, and last year a seminar in Swaziland attracted 14 women unionists from nine countries. A women's leadership training seminar is scheduled for this year in Zimbabwe.

The first European women workers conference took place last year in Luxemburg. The 55 delegates from 12 countries addressed the issues of night and part-time work, job training, and sexual harassment, and focused on identifying present policies of the IUF affiliate unions and setting priorities for the European IUF Region.

In Latin America the first IUF women's meeting was held in 1987, followed by a conference last November attended by 30 women from ten Latin American countries. The delegates developed an action program and elected a representative to the Latin American Regional Committee.

In North America, a women workers liaison committee has been formed. Last year, NARO developed a special issue on "How to Stop Sexual Harassment" for the IUF's regular publication *Women at Work*; highlighting the activities of North American unions, it

was translated into four other languages and distributed worldwide. This year, NARO is producing an issue of *Women at Work* on what Canadian and U.S. unions have done to eliminate wage and job discrimination against women workers.

The General Secretariat of IUF has produced fact sheets and resource lists, translated and distributed to all affiliates, on occupational safety and health for women workers and prepared a special issue of *Women at Work* on women and nightwork. A *Memorandum on Equality* was adopted by the IUF Executive Committee in 1987, and in September of this year an international women's conference will be held in conjunction with the 1989 IUF World Congress. Finally, the IUF Executive Committee is recommending to the World Congress that IUF Rules be amended to provide for the addition of seats reserved for women to governing bodies in order to guarantee women's representation.

In addition to these systematic international efforts, the IUF's regular day-to-day activities are often of direct benefit to women. For example, the RWDSU recently requested the assistance of the IUF in getting a first contract at Cargill Poultry Products in Buena Vista, Georgia, where the workforce is predominantly black and female. An IUF Committee travelled to Georgia to hear worker testimony and assess for the General Secretariat what type of international actions would be appropriate. This visit contributed to the company's making an offer that the workers were able to accept 11 days later.

Conclusion

The trade secretariats are uniquely positioned to help unions in both developed and developing countries build international labor solidarity. They allow unions to cooperate across national borders to increase their collective power—particularly in relation to transnational corporations, but in other ways as well.

By systematically increasing the role of women trade unionists, ITSS like the IUF have greater potential for vitality, democracy and international grassroots action. Now is an important and exciting time for women and women's issues in the international trade union movement. Women certainly need and deserve labor unions—on local, national and international levels—and labor needs the experience, judgment and sensitivity that women bring.

Paradoxically, the global divide-and-conquer strategy of transnational corporations is cultivating the opportunity for working men and women to build their power as an international force. ■