

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

Focus on freedom of expression and association online



Workers' rights and the internet

Steve Zeltzer
LaborNet
www.labornet.org

Communication, solidarity and the internet: How the internet, information technology and new media are shaping the world working class

From textile factory workers at the Egyptian Mahalla textile plants, to Chinese workers in Honda factories, to Wisconsin public workers: social networks, the internet and new communications technologies are playing a critical role in linking up workers locally, nationally and internationally.

In each of these struggles the use of mobile texting, Twitter, YouTube and video streams is playing a vital role in helping to get the word out, defending against repression and linking up with workers throughout the world.

The global economy and the drive for greater profitability is the key driving force in the development of communications technology. International production lines are linked up through the internet, and the export and transfer of labour through the use of the internet is endemic.

Central to the power and information network of working people globally has been the rollout of mobile phone coverage. In 2010 there were 4.6 billion mobile phones in service and this is set to go to five billion by 2011. Even in parts of Africa where only 5% of the population has electricity, workers globally, and particularly migrant workers, are now linked up through their mobile phones.

One of the first uses of the internet and the web for education and solidarity was the Liverpool dockworkers strike in 1995. The 500 dockers who were members and local leaders of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) refused to cross a picket line. This solidarity action was labelled as illegal under the Thatcher anti-labour laws, and the dockers not only faced a fight with the government laws, but also the acceptance of these laws by their national union. The workers, in order to fight back, had to break the information blockade. LaborNet, in collaboration with the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) in the United States (US), working with APC member GreenNet in the United Kingdom (UK) and labour supporters Chris Bailey

and Greg Dropkin, developed the first international web page to support a struggle globally.¹

The web page allowed the Liverpool dockworkers to bring their struggle to Australian dockers as well as longshore workers throughout the world. It included messages of solidarity and helped solidify an international defence campaign that even included workers' action by dockers in the US, Canada and Japan against the ship the Neptune Jade.²

One of the lessons of this struggle for the working class was that the anti-labour laws and restrictions on solidarity, and the corporate effort to prevent knowledge of workers' struggles and solidarity efforts, could be overcome using the internet. In fact, during the West Coast boycott of the Neptune loaded by the union-busting company, video footage was provided to CNN for broadcast in the UK for the first time showing that the struggle had international support.

This multimedia use of computer networks, video and the media has been replicated many times worldwide, and the growth of social media and live streaming now make this a 24-hour-a-day occurrence.

Temporary workers and communication

Capitalists have also sought to use technology to control temporary workers. A document called The Beeper Revolution from Korea tells how workers were contracted by being beeped on their mobile phones, and had no contact with other workers. This also prevented workers from linking up with each other and beginning to organise. The atomisation of workers, who do not work together in the old way through a union hall, but only when beeped or called, is a major obstacle to organising workers.

This is especially the case with the use of temporary workers on a global level, such as in Spain and other parts of Europe, as well as in Korea, where 30% or more of the work force are temporary workers. In Japan where these mostly young workers are called *Freeta* workers, their marginalisation through their isolation is a conscious policy of the corporations and their governments. They have done this through deregulation and anti-labour laws, which inhibit unionisation and collective action.

1 eastbound.eu/site_media/pdf/060111bailey.pdf
2 www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3Wva4XbMV5

In one document called *Workers Under Surveillance and Control: Background*, presented by Korean professor Kang Soo-dol of Korea University at the Third Annual Seoul International Labor Media conference in 2001, it was pointed out that this means of controlling and using labour was critically connected to the use of digital and communication technologies.³

The great fear of capital is that through their collective power, labour will refuse management control and threaten their power to govern. This fear was confirmed in the 1997 general strike in South Korea, when the young Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) led a general strike in part through the use of computer networks. At the 1999 Second Seoul International Labor Media conference, reports were presented about the Seoul Subway Workers Union's use of a computer users group (CUG) to help organise the general strike. Trade unionists reported that they had to go underground to conduct the strike, and did this through the use of computer networks to keep their communication open in the successful strike. This was also the first general strike in which workers used video to document the strike throughout the country with the development of a labour video network.

The growth of LaborFests⁴ and international working class film and video festivals have also become a tool for the expansion of communication and knowledge about labour and the democratic struggles of workers throughout the world. The first LaborFest in San Francisco in 1994 has now expanded internationally with film festivals in Turkey, Korea, Japan, Argentina, South Africa and other countries around the world. These can also be streamed live, and the development of an international labour video channel on the internet and cable would be a powerful vehicle for building solidarity and increasing education.

The use of a variety of communication technologies in labour struggles is a vital lesson of the new age of telecommunications. This was also the case with the Egyptian Mahalla workers who used their mobile phones to organise workers' actions and overcome the government control of information. As suggested, the use of mobile phones has become a historic vehicle for workers' and peoples' struggles throughout the world. Today, the Mahalla workers not only use their mobile phones for mobilisation, but also use social media sites like YouTube to get their action plans out.⁵

3 lmedia.nodong.net/maybbs/view.php?db=nodong&code=lmedia_pds&n=165&page=14

4 www.laborfest.net

5 www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6UC9Lme7PE

Another report, by Hossam El-Homalawy, a journalist and labour activist, shows how the role of the mobile phone and computer networking was critical in the building of the workers movement in Egypt – and in fact led to the foundation of the mass movement that removed Mubarak.⁶

Mobile phones also have the potential to be used to spy on workers and to prevent their struggle to unionise for labour rights. The most shocking case is again in Korea, where the Korea Samsung workers were seeking to organise. They visited their labour lawyer to find out what their rights were and when they returned to the factory, their boss repeated word for word what they had questioned their lawyer about. Their phones had been used to track their locations and record their private meeting with their lawyer by the virulently anti-labour Samsung Corporation.

Again, the independent labour media movement was able to develop a video about how mobile phones are being used against the workers. Seoul-based Labor News Production made a documentary called *Big Brother is Watching: The Other Side of Samsung* (2006), which was also screened to workers around the world, including in Turkey, Argentina and the US.

Tracking workers on the internet

Another dangerous use of ICTs is the use of the internet in the tracking of union activists and organisers, as well as sick and injured workers, to allow employers to gather information that will help them terminate their contracts. Today, everything that is done on the internet stays in the internet world. Actions including labour rallies, strikes and other activities are now being recorded both by the mainstream media and independent journalists, and this material, once posted, is traceable on a global level.

Artificial intelligence developed by Google and other corporations is now being put to use to collect and examine, effectively amounting to spying on people to determine what they are interested in for future sale of products. This includes book publishers such as Amazon and other online consumer businesses. The information about the books you buy and look at are now being held by private corporations that have private interests. And some of this information is made public. To find out if a worker is looking up books about labour history, for example, you could do a search under US laws and most laws around the world.

6 blip.tv/file/4699784 and blip.tv/file/4700355

Digitalisation of the health industry threatens privacy rights

In a world with private control of health care, this is especially the case with the digitalisation of medical records by private health care companies and capitalists, who seek to limit their liabilities.

A powerful example of this is the recent case of Adventist Health System. IT worker Patricia Moleski was ordered by the company to delete the electronic records of injured workers to negate workers compensation due to them. She was also ordered to delete records of deaths and other malpractices that had become corrupted due to a computer glitch. The failure to have backup records in an electronic medical system and the lack of any serious regulation potentially allow the massive manipulation of information, threatening basic human rights for workers and the public.⁷

The development of communications technology and the digitalisation of our society have generally left organised labour behind, despite the work that has been done. Most unions in the world do not do media training and do not educate their members in the use of technology and the dangers of it to their unions and the public. Issues of net neutrality and calls for a strong independent media that would support workers' causes are usually not addressed.

Tech workers organising on a global level grows

The potential for organising technology workers globally is growing. IBM workers, who are pro-union, have organised and some important struggles have developed over freedom of information.⁸

Ken Hamidi, an employee of Intel who installed systems, was injured on the job while driving. He continued working until he could not do the work and complained about growing health problems. Intel refused to take care of his injury and as a result Hamidi formed an organisation called FACE Intel (Former and Current Employees of Intel). He then was provided with the email addresses of over 30,000 workers by a supporter, and sent out messages to Intel workers throughout the world. For this action, Intel went to court and got an injunction that charged that Hamidi had entered the "chattel" of Intel by sending the messages. With support from the US trade union federation AFL-CIO and the Electronic Frontiers Foundation, as well as LaborNet, Hamidi was successful in defeating this

effort to repress his free speech. The effort to prevent workers and unions from sending email to their fellow workers and getting information out through email was thwarted.⁹

The fight to defend the workers who make technology is critical. The brutal conditions faced by Foxconn workers in China, leading to many suicides, show the real story behind iPhones and the other new communications tools. Workers and human rights supporters have mobilised nationally and internationally to demand justice for these workers.¹⁰

Foxconn even sought to force the workers to sign documents pledging that they would not commit suicide, working through the government trade union federation ACFTU in 2006. But this meant very little when it came to conditions on the factory floor for workers, as their slave-like conditions continued under the new "union agreement".¹¹

This is not to say the conditions of workers even at technology companies like Google are proper. At Google workers are separated by coloured badges and lower-level workers are discriminated against in the company on the grounds of the colour of the badge they wear. A former Google videographer declared:

Speaking for myself, what worries me is that there is apparently a class of workers (yellows) who are denied privileges that are given to other workers of an equivalently non-skilled or impermanent nature (reds)... The only differences between these two classes of workers are the exact nature of their work (data entry versus, for example, janitors), and their overall racial mix. Neither of these reasons is a legitimate reason to withhold a privilege like free transportation from one group while granting it to the other, in my opinion. You, of course, may not agree.¹²

Labour using social media to organise: A double-edged sword

There is no question that social media have become vital tools in protecting democratic and labour rights. These tools have helped link up trade unionists and human rights organisers throughout the world. At the same time, however, workers are now being fired by their boss for putting material about their job on their Facebook page in their own time.

⁹ www.faceintel.com/hamidismessage.htm

¹⁰ www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3YFGixp9Jw

¹¹ www.boingboing.net/2011/05/05/foxconn-workers-forc.html and www.workerscapital.org/connected/news/in-focus-students-and-labour-activists-protest-foxconn-working-conditions/#1n%20Focus

¹² Andrew Norman Wilson recorded the segregation of Google workers in this video: vimeo.com/15852288

⁷ www.youtube.com/watch?v=F91hN9nR1KA

⁸ www.endicottalliance.org

In a recent US Federal Labor Relations Board case, the board ruled that the actions of five workers who had been fired for using Facebook to publicise bad working conditions were not cause for firing.¹³

This effort by employers and corporations to silence their workers who use Facebook and the internet is growing. In a recent case in the UK, Uncut reported that UK Facebook had illegally removed material and sought to change workers' pages.¹⁴

Additionally, governments have sought to shut down labour and civil rights organisations' websites in many countries throughout the world, including the shutdown of the internet in Egypt during the recent uprising. This will likely take place again as mass movements seek to break the information blockade. The likelihood of this in most industrialised countries however is quite small, since the shutdown of the internet would result in the complete shutdown of the entire economy. In the US and Europe, the closure of the internet would virtually close the world economy from the airlines to all financial transactions. This would obviously be a doomsday scenario for those governments that have contemplated these tactics to silence critics using the internet.

This includes attacks on independent media, and, again in Korea, the suppression of independent media groups such as MediAct has brought international solidarity and protests.¹⁵ APC took up an international campaign to defend this community media centre.¹⁶

The worldwide growth of independent labour media platforms has led to significant and powerful examples of using streaming media to defend workers struggles. Sendika.org, a project of LaborNet Turkey, supported the hunger strike by fired Tekna Tobacco workers in Istanbul by live streaming their strike and interviewing the workers about why they were taking the action.¹⁷ The live video streaming reached an international audience and solidarity was expressed through SMS text messaging.

This was a concrete international expression of solidarity for their hunger strike and showed how workers can link up directly. Videos about these struggles were also streamed worldwide, including one called *The Wind Blows From The Workers*.¹⁸

Pizzas from Egypt in the Wisconsin struggle: Will the revolution be televised?

The most recent example of social media in the labour struggle was a major battle in Wisconsin to defend public workers against the attacks by Governor Scott Walker. While workers and students were occupying the capitol building, labour and community supporters were using tweets to organise food and other supplies. Tens of thousands of workers were mobilised to support a workers' picket line minute by minute also through the use of Twitter and other social media including live streaming on smartphones.¹⁹ There was also an explosion of labour music videos, giving an important cultural expression to this struggle, including *Cheddar Revolution* and *Union Town*.²⁰

When someone in Egypt helped buy a pizza for the workers occupying the capitol building, workers knew that their struggles were crossing all borders in a way that was impossible in the past.

The digitalisation of the world and the growing awareness of the world working class on how these communications and media tools can be used to build their unions and support their democratic workers' rights will only grow in the future. The development of a powerful world working class mass movement offers the potential to change the fundamental dynamics of who controls and runs the world, and these tools are critical to these developments. ■

13 www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/n/a/2011/05/18/national/w151508D64.DT

14 www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2011/apr/29/facebook-accused-removing-activists-pages and www.guardian.co.uk/uk/video/2011/feb/10/uk-uncut-protest-movement

15 labornetjp.blogspot.com/2010/02/movement-to-support-independent-media.html and www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=273091817582&ref=nf

16 www.apc.org/en/news/south-korean-govt-threatens-public-media-centre-me

17 Background about this struggle can be found at: www.sendika.org/english/yazi.php?yazi_no=29021

18 iscinet.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&catid=45%3Avideolar&id=168%3Atekel-direnii&Itemid=92

19 The use of the smartphone to stream labour struggles directly onto websites is already taking place through www.ustream.com and other servers.

20 www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5ZT71DxLuM&feature=player_embedded; www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCNaBe2Sl10; www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nGeWyV4Vec; www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTHo5CBelRk; a report of this was made by J. Eric Cobb, executive director of the Building Trades of South Central Wisconsin, in a recent speech in San Francisco: www.youtube.com/watch?v=04zzzFckj

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

Everyone is familiar with the stories of Egypt and Tunisia. **GISWATCH** authors tell these and other lesser-known stories from more than 60 countries. Stories about:

PRISON CONDITIONS IN ARGENTINA Prisoners are using the internet to protest living conditions and demand respect for their rights.

TORTURE IN INDONESIA The torture of two West Papuan farmers was recorded on a mobile phone and leaked to the internet. The video spread to well-known human rights sites sparking public outrage and a formal investigation by the authorities.

THE TSUNAMI IN JAPAN Citizens used social media to share actionable information during the devastating tsunami, and in the aftermath online discussions contradicted misleading reports coming from state authorities.

GISWATCH also includes thematic reports and an introduction from Frank La Rue, UN special rapporteur.

GISWATCH 2011 is the fifth in a series of yearly reports that critically cover the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GISWATCH is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

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2011 Report

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