

Migrant Workers Against Institutions

By Francisco Arqueros

Fieldwork

- County Monaghan, August 2005-September 2007
- Phase 1 (August-December 2005): Commodity Chain Analysis and Anthropology of Work; Structural transformation in the Industry (1980s; 2000s). Focus on changing capital-labour relation and extraction of surplus value
- Phase 2 (2006-2007): MRCI and SIPTU start organising campaigns. Focus on union organising; obstacles on the way towards a militant and democratic unionism. My enquires shifted to the relationship between workers and their representatives.

Findings 2nd phase (MWMSG)

- Reluctance to join SIPTU
- Dissatisfaction with the work of MRCI

The Role of the Anthropologist

- David Mosse (2006)
- A draft of his book about a development project in Western India triggered a long controversy with his informants.
- He argues that the success of a development project is based on its ability to continue recruiting support (institutional survival)
- Also: Development interventions are driven by the demands of organisations.
- Francisco Arqueros (2009)
- Paper at the Labour Process Conference, Dublin 2008

Academic 'Independent' criticism

Sol Tax (1951) on action anthropology:

- “[We want] to help a group of people to solve a problem, and [we want] to learn something in the process.”
- The action anthropologist can have no master (i.e. governments)
- “Community research is thus justifiable only to the degree that the results are imminently useful to the community and easily outweighs the disturbance to it.”
- So it was not social work because the researcher is in a position of undue influence, **which can lead to empirically wrong studies...**
- Point: people must be allowed to make their own decisions from their own point of view (i.e. popular power?).

A view from the field

- The view from a technical advisor working for TEAGASC.

Main Contradiction in this presentation

- 1) Union officials/NGO staff and workers
(Hyman 1975: institutional efficiency/survival and popular power. Sheila Cohen 2006: 'unions-as-institutions' and 'unions-as-movement')
- Capital and Labour (both political economies)
- Institutions and workers

An ethnographic case: The MWSG (2006-2008)

- MRCI set up the MWSG in January 2006:
- Goal: to pursue the self-empowerment of immigrant workers in the Irish Mushroom Industry by means of a migrant-led group and fill a vacuum left by 'partnership unionism'.
- Context
- My role in the MWSG

The Final Evaluation Report (FER) Sept, 2007 (for the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland 2000-2006)

- Between August 2006 and August 2007 two MWSG staff got in touch with 441 workers in 49 house meetings and conducted 419 interviews with individuals
- ‘MRCI’ helped around 40 workers to recover over €200,000 in back wages.
- Most important claim: “The MWSG ... used a community development approach to ensure migrants determine the direction and focus of the work, indicating true ownership.”

Taking decisions

- In the first two meetings (August-Sept 2006) the organisers asked to members what were the three more important issues to deal with on mushroom farms.
- 1) Pay
- 2) Health and Safety
- 3) Long hours

The group was going to work on that, but MRCI staff did the work on casework bases.

Collective actions. Example 1: The national campaign

Meeting 1

- The lead organiser had decided that like in the US workers should target supermarkets (out of €2, final price per pound, the farmer got €0.80 and the worker €0.15) to ensure compliance.
- Workers preferred to put pressure on the government to guaranteed their entitlements.
- The lead organiser suggests meeting with the director of TESCO in Ireland and asks what they should do if he doesn't want to meet with the group. The members say that they would organise a picket line outside his office.
- The lead organiser proposed to talk to him and come back with the answer at the next meeting.

Meeting 2

- The lead organiser says that he's been in touch with Ethical Trade Initiative (ETI) and that they will meet with them in London, and asks for a volunteer.

Meeting 3

- He informs about the meeting with SIPTU, ETI, the supermarkets and mushroom growers. There was no follow up.

Example 2: organising a party

Meeting 1

- The lead organiser comes up with the idea of organising a party for group members, relatives and open to guests. Everyone want to do it in a house or a community centre, bring their own food and drinks.

Meeting 2

- The lead organiser informs that he has arranged the official launching of the group plus a report at a Hotel in Monaghan town
- This launching was meant to turn the MWSG in to a MCRCI 'hig profile' project.

(example 3 the newsletter)

Members' voice

- Some had stopped going to the meetings because same issues were discussed all the time and not action was taken (i.e. creating AgWa, the whole process too slow).
- Not following through decisions taken in meetings
- No members take responsibilities (just attend meetings to listen to the lead organiser.)
Members wanted to get more involved.
- No control over resources

Lead organiser's view

- They had helped so many because there was a group (to go to the media, employers, government, unions, etc)
- I am only a facilitator.
- It takes time a group owned by the members
- I always ask people to get involved (to attend meetings)
- The “invisible work” that no one acknowledges

Some conclusions

- Can we attribute this particular style of leadership to individual traits?
 - 1) The initiative to constitute a support group came from MRCI; it didn't emerge organically
 - 2) MRCI was mainly dedicated to casework (the “invisible and the quickest path to success in order to show results). It was easy to subordinate “popular power” (end) to “institutional efficiency” (means).
 - 3) MRCI was ruled by a non-elected (by members) board of directors.
 - 4) MWSG two organisers were accountable to MRCI
 - 5) MRCI controlled the budget of the MWSG (around €90,000)
 - 6) There was no pressure from below (workers' struggles)
 - 7) Members were scattered and isolated in the country.
 - 8) All this issues put workers against institutions. The result was a conflict with both MRCI and SIPTU (apart from the employers and government)

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