



The Liverpool dockworkers' strike 1995-98 and the Internet

Chris Bailey - *Internet Rights Bulgaria*

This paper/presentation examines how 500 Liverpool dockworkers, sacked for refusing to cross a picket line, used the Internet very effectively to organise widespread international action in their support. They did not just act as isolated "labor militants". They used official union structures where and when these gave them support, but bypassed them "as damage" when they did not, and instead used a host of unofficial channels and structures to build an extremely powerful network bringing about worldwide action in their support. These actions brought them into growing conflict with the existing official union structures over their use of the Internet to build an international support network outside their control. Many union officials saw this Internet-based networking as a threat to their dominant position, based, as it is, largely on their control of channels of information and command.

The Internet has been used extensively by new social movements to create strong international networks that can be seen as contributing towards the growth of a globalized form of civil society. In contrast to this, a traditional social movement, organised labour, has made little use of the Internet as an international organising tool. This is despite the profound detrimental effect globalisation has had on labour's ability to defend itself, and despite the fact that organised labour has always made claims to support a conception of "international solidarity".

Castells raised questions concerning the ability of the labour movement to adapt itself to the Information Age:

The labor movement does not seem fit to generate by itself and from itself a project identity able to reconstruct social control and to rebuild social institutions in the Information Age. Labor militants will undoubtedly be a part of new, transformative social dynamics. I am less sure that labor unions will. (1997: 360)

This paper/presentation seeks to contribute to a consideration of the question Castells raises by examining how 500 Liverpool dockworkers, sacked for refusing to cross a picket line, used the Internet very effectively to organise widespread international action in their support. They did not just act as isolated "labor militants". They used official union structures where and when these gave them support, but bypassed them "as damage" when they did not, and instead used a

host of unofficial channels and structures to build an extremely powerful network bringing about worldwide action in their support.

These actions brought them into growing conflict with the existing official union structures over their use of the Internet to build an international support network outside their control. Many union officials saw this Internet-based networking as a threat to their dominant position, based, as it is, largely on their control of channels of information and command.

It was these internal conflicts within the union structures that ultimately defeated the Liverpool men. Enormous pressure was ultimately exerted on the shop stewards by the leadership of their union, the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), forcing them to end the dispute.

The author of this paper is in a unique position, through having been the coordinator of the Liverpool dockworkers' Internet work, to produce an analysis of this work and to consider what it showed concerning the potential for the international labour movement to adapt to a globalized Information Age.

By its nature, this paper cannot take the form of a dispassionate and neutral academic exercise, though I do think a serious independent theoretical analysis of the lessons of the events it describes are necessary. They seem to have been ignored by Castells and others considering the nature of social movement networks. Analysis of the Liverpool dockers' international network and the issues it raised ought surely to be an important aspect of considering the question posed by Castells above, and yet, despite the fact that in terms of what it was able to achieve it must surely rate as one of the most powerful social movement networks so far, it has been singularly missing from academic social analysis. My contribution here must take the form of supplying some new original source material, largely in the form of personal narrative, hopefully contributing towards such an eventual analysis.

My story is a unique story, much of it not written down before. It is in many ways an incredible story. But the fact remains that for over two years the Internet work that played a backbone role in the creation of an extremely powerful international network, inflicting hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of damage on port and shipping employers around the world, was the work of two people, myself and Greg Dropkin. In this partnership, despite his later work concerning use of the Internet for the labour movement, Dropkin made clear that his job was to be that of a journalist and reporter. Although I often consulted widely, ultimately all decisions concerning the handling of the Internet communications network in support of the Liverpool dockers were mine. Neither I nor Dropkin wanted it that way. We tried continuously to involve the Liverpool dockers themselves in the use of the Internet. It did not happen. Although, as a result of the success of the Liverpool dockers' website, several dockers' organisations in various parts of the world did themselves set up websites, generally through Internet-knowledgeable sympathisers (Santos in Brasil, Amsterdam, Montreal, Los Angeles, Sweden,

Australia); most of these websites eventually disappeared after the defeat of Liverpool.

Origins: A message in a bottle!

Shortly before the Liverpool dockers' dispute began, Greg Coyne from the Merseyside Trade Union Centre, with the help of Jagdish Parikh, who had been involved in developing the Institute for Global Communications (IGC) in San Francisco, started a UK-based union email list called union-d.

When the Liverpool dockers' dispute began, we agreed on union-d to start propagating information about the dispute as widely as possible on any email lists that might reach support. One of the aspects of the Liverpool strike that made it so suitable for using the Internet to gain support was the tradition of internationalism that already existed amongst the Liverpool dockers. They had built up some international contacts with other dockworkers in the 1980s. They quickly set out to renew these and were enthusiastic to establish new ones. Before the Internet work began they were already in contact with dockworkers in Sweden and Spain, who both gave solid support throughout the strike. Communication with these was outside the Internet and took place through phone and fax directly from the Merseyside Portworkers Shop Stewards Committee (MPSSC).

After we started distributing news about the strike on the email lists, the Liverpool dockers told the local press that they were now "using the Internet" to gain support for their strike. This produced an immediate response as to "Where was their website?". At this time, I had been in discussions with GreenNet, a mainly environmental movement Internet Service Provider, concerning the possibility of starting a "LabourNet" website devoted to supplying a "computer communications and news" service for the labour movement. It was now agreed that I should launch LabourNet as website support for the Liverpool dockers.

This centralised the Internet work for the Liverpool dockers. From now on, information about the Liverpool dispute for dissemination on the email lists was sent via me, with me adding the information onto the website and referencing the website in messages distributed through email.

We now tried to set up direct communication between me and the dockers for them to supply the updates. They had only a very vague idea of what the Internet was. They started to *fax* me a mass of documents mostly totally unsuitable for inclusion.

It was at this point that Greg Dropkin phoned me. He was working with the dockers trying to get reports into various media channels, without much success. There was a virtual blackout by press and TV. He had heard about my efforts from the Labor Beat TV programme in Chicago. We immediately formed a partnership that lasted for the rest of the dockers' dispute. He met with dockers'

representatives virtually every day, discussed the latest developments and news and then wrote them up for me to put on the website and distribute via email. Soon we were running a daily Internet news service for the dockers.

But was anyone reading it? Dropkin characterised this period as "sending a strike message in a bottle". Would our news service begin to reach other dockworkers around the world? The first clear sign that it had come when I received an email message from Akinobu Itoh, General Secretary of the All Japan Dockworkers' Union, informing me that his union was sending a 1 Million Yen donation to the Liverpool strike fund.

Shortly afterwards the Maritime Union of Australia contacted the MPSSC directly and invited them to send a delegation to discuss the strike. They also had heard about it through the Internet. The Liverpool men who went to Australia reported that by the time they got there everyone they met seemed well informed about the dispute and were already producing leaflets they had printed from the Internet.

The next key development came in the form of an email message I received from Robert Irminger, a young member of the Inland Boatmen's Union who worked on the run from San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf to Alcatraz. He had been following the dispute on the Internet and would be passing through the UK on a holiday shortly. He wanted to discuss how to give support and we arranged to meet. We met in a pub in Cambridge and I gave him a pile of literature about the dispute to take back to San Francisco.

After Irminger got back to San Francisco he contacted Jack Heyman, an International Longshore Workers' Union (ILWU) Local 10 Executive Committee member who was also at that time a ships inspector for the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF). The ITF is the international trade union body for dockworkers, with most dockworkers unions affiliated. Irminger showed Heyman how to use the Internet to read news about the Liverpool dispute. He started at an opportune time. The ITF in the form of its Communications Officer, Richard Flint, had written to me complaining about what he insisted were false allegations on LabourNet concerning the ITF's lack of support for Liverpool. I had published his communication for public debate. Heyman immediately wrote to me privately. As an insider to the ITF who had been present at internal meetings Flint had referred to, he insisted the original allegation was correct. The public discussion continued with Heyman guiding me from behind the scenes. Finally he became so angry about some of the excuses Flint was making concerning the ITF's role that he resigned his post as ITF inspector and joined the debate publicly in a scathing attack on the ITF's lack of support for Liverpool. Shortly afterwards he was delegated from the ILWU to come to the UK and establish direct connections with the MPSSC.

This feature of private insider communications was to become a permanent aspect of the Internet network. Quite a lot of people emailed me wanting me to keep

their identity hidden, but saying they wanted to help support the strike. They were often a source of invaluable inside information from trade unions, port employers, shipping companies, etc. Eventually, Flint from the ITF himself opened up a private discussion with me in which he indicated that he wanted to work for LabourNet after the dispute was over.

After these first slow beginnings the Internet network really began to take off. Dockworkers organisations from around the world began to make contact expressing their support for the Liverpool men and in the case of Santos in Brazil and Amsterdam brought their own particular battles concerning similar issues to Liverpool into the arena. The underlying factor in these disputes and the strong feeling of solidarity being generated with Liverpool was clearly the worldwide decasualisation of port labour taking place through globalisation. Through LabourNet, dockers around the world were learning the similarities between the problems they were facing and were developing a strong sense of international identity. The network was resembling a classic case of what Castell's calls a "reactive" network against globalisation. At the same time, besides portworkers, we were also attracting wider layers around the dispute. Support networks and groups were being set up in many parts of the world and were writing to me asking to be kept in the loop. Other already existing organisations were also contacting to express their support. Many of these were from the traditional labour movement, but support was also coming in from sections of the new social movements.

Days of Action

But the big question now was could this support be translated into international action in support of Liverpool?

An international day of action was called for January 20th 1997. I put out the appeal for action via LabourNet. It was addressed to "dockers of the world" in five languages calling on them to "blockade Liverpool on January 20th". Once again, it was Itoh of the All Japan Dockworkers' Union that made the first response. He wrote to me promising to close every port in Japan, more than 50 he said, with "stop work meetings" of Japanese port workers. I immediately sent this through to Heyman. A couple of days later he emailed me back saying the Japanese decision "was going down really big here". But he asked me a question I just couldn't understand. How many hours were the Japanese stopping for - "8, 16 or 24"? This did not make sense to me. How could a meeting last more than about an hour?

What I did not understand was that, because of the US contract system, US portworkers were bound by a no-strike clause, making it illegal for them to strike. They got around this periodically by having "stop work meetings" about a grievance. After the meeting they went home without working, so this amounted

in practice to being an 8, 16 or 24 hour strike, depending on how many different shifts of workers were included.

By now, through ILWU control of the hiring halls, printed versions of LabourNet news were being posted regularly at the point where men signed on for work all down the US West Coast. They were interpreting the Japanese decision as being for at least an 8 hour strike!

There now followed a sharp discussion within the ILWU about what action they should take in support of Liverpool. At first, the top leadership tried to propose taking only token action, saying it was sad, but very little support was coming in internationally. But they were shouted down by portworkers armed with the Japanese decision. Various opposition factions to the leadership within the ILWU began to jump on the bandwagon demanding real action for Liverpool. The first clear decision, and it was for a 24 hour stoppage, came from the Seattle longshoremen. Stoppages were then eventually agreed in all US West Coast ports.

After the ILWU decisions, I began to be flooded with messages from portworkers, support groups, etc pledging various actions. The ITF had decided to support the action from the beginning. But it immediately had a problem. The press started approaching it asking for details of the latest news on what actions were going to be taken. The ITF could not tell them. They wanted to give the appearance of being in charge of events, but the information channels were bypassing them completely. Flint now wrote to me what amounted to a begging letter, asking to be kept informed of developments. I contacted the MPSSC concerning this and received the humorous reply "Tell him we'll show him ours, if he will show us his!". They were referring to the fact that the ITF appeared to have done nothing itself towards the actions. I wrote back to Flint asking for him to outline what actions the ITF were bringing about. He claimed they were going to stop the US East Coast, where there was a different union from the ILWU. I duly reported this on LabourNet in a summary of promised actions issued just before the day of action. I later received disappointed emails from support groups who had gone to take part in the supposed actions at the East Coast ports only to find them working normally!

Everyone knew the ILWU action was the big one. Because of the time difference, the Liverpool men were waiting eagerly on the afternoon of the day of action to hear whether they had actually succeeded in shutting down the entire US West Coast. I was in contact with them by mobile phone with instructions to check my email every five minutes. But most of the people who would inform me were busy ensuring the stoppage took place. We got well past the time it should have started and the Liverpool men were getting impatient. At this point, I decided to start watching CNN on my TV via satellite to see if any news came in that way. I was watching this whilst checking my email regularly when suddenly I did get the news from CNN, but via email! I received a message from their San Francisco newsdesk. San Francisco port had stopped work - could I explain to them what was

happening? They only had video footage of Tilbury docks in London - was this relevant? Could I get them relevant material within 45 minutes for their next news broadcast? I contacted the San Francisco Labor Video Project, who rushed video footage they had of the Liverpool men to the CNN studio, where it was just in time for the news broadcast.

This was one of the very few news items from the mainstream media concerning the day of action. Actions took place in 27 countries at more than 100 ports and cities, resulting in what one international union official, Jim Catterson from the International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers' Unions, described to myself and Heyman as being "the biggest international working class action for 100 years". Yet there was an almost total news blackout from mainstream media. The effect of this was to further build readership of LabourNet as a daily source of information not available elsewhere. Other alternative media sources also tried to fill the gap by producing videos, etc about the action.

The success of this first day of action caused major tensions within the ITF. Although the ITF had nominally supported this first international day of action, it was obvious that it was not at all in control of it. In the period following the day of action, David Cockcroft, the General Secretary of the ITF, acknowledged that the Liverpool dockers had shown "the tremendous power of the Internet", but stressed the need to "harness" this power. At the same time, the leadership of the Liverpool men's own union, the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), were increasingly dismayed at the widespread international support they were gaining, as the union was trying to impose a settlement of the dispute that would mean the men being paid a cash sum to accept the loss of their jobs.

Things came to a head in the preparations for a second day of action. Cockcroft wanted the ITF to support this second day, whilst wishing to find some formula whereby the ITF could take the credit for it. The TGWU vetoed this and insisted that the ITF should not support the action. It made little difference - if anything it was bigger than the first - and this time it closed down all the American West Coast ports from Alaska, through Canada, down to Los Angeles. A sign of the flexibility the dockers' network had now acquired was the fact that the actual date of this second day of action was kept quiet until the last moment except to those who needed to know. As with the first day of action, it included a mix of dockers actions and a range of activities by various supporting groups around the world.

All this was further proof that the official union structures had lost control of the dispute. They were being bypassed by an international network, with the Internet as its backbone, that was directly under the control of the Liverpool shop stewards committee. In the period leading up to this second day of action a number of union officials at various levels within the ITF opened up private contact with me expressing their disgust at the failure of the ITF to support the action and declaring their own personal support.

The Neptune Jade actions

The US West Coast support for Liverpool in the days of action had been solid. The MPSSC now discussed with sections of the ILWU how that support might be used in further actions. The big problem was that no ships from Liverpool actually sailed to the US West Coast. A plan was made that widened the target. Ships did sail from Thamesport in London to the US West Coast. The Port Authority for Thamesport was Medway Ports Limited, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, which the Liverpool dockers were in dispute with. On the strength of this it was decided to target a ship from Thamesport, the Neptune Jade, for boycott action.

As pointed out earlier, the ILWU is bound by contract not to take strike action and, of course, this applies to boycott actions, too. In the early 80s, however, this problem was circumvented quite cleverly in a boycott action against a South African cargo in a protest against apartheid. The person who came up with the idea then for a legal way to carry out a boycott was a longshoreman called Howard Keylor. A picket was set up, made up of anti-apartheid students at Berkeley University. The longshoremen then refused to cross the picket line on the grounds that it was "a threat to their health and safety" to do so. For a while this worked, though Keylor was ultimately threatened by the employers with a lawsuit for a massive sum of money, which forced an end to the action.

Keylor was now retired and living in Hamburg, but he had made contact with me very early on in the Liverpool dispute, offering whatever support he could give. It was now decided to re-employ his method of bringing about a boycott, using it against the Neptune Jade.

For three days at the end of September 1997, supporters of the Liverpool dockers in the San Francisco community maintained a picket against the Neptune Jade, docked at Oakland. Longshoremen refused to cross the picket on grounds of health and safety. An independent arbiter was called in, who ruled that their grounds were legitimate. After the Pacific Maritime Association failed to obtain a temporary restraining order against the picket, the Neptune Jade left Oakland without unloading.

Crew members had indicated that it was bound for Japan. Upon being informed of this, Itoh immediately assured me that it would not be unloaded there. However, there was a suspicion that it might still try to unload its cargo somewhere along the American coast. Alerts were put out appealing to supporters along the US West Coast, Canada and Mexico to watch out for it. On October 4th, it turned up in Vancouver. A new community picket was quickly organised and Vancouver longshoremen, also members of the ILWU, refused to cross it.

The ship eventually did proceed on to Japan without unloading its cargo. It arrived in Yokohama on October 15th, where dockworkers refused to unload its

Thamesport cargo. It then proceeded on to Kobe where again it was unable to unload the Thamesport containers.

This action terrified the shipping companies even more than the days of action had. The losses to a shipping company through carrying containers around the world without being able to unload them can be horrific. It is believed the Neptune Jade was ultimately sold off somewhere in East Asia, together with its Thamesport cargo, rather than making the return trip to the UK.

After the Neptune Jade boycott, meetings of lawyers and shipping company representatives took place in the US where attention was drawn to the role of the LabourNet website. I received an email message from a representative of Thamesport claiming I had spread false information which caused them serious damage, but no further action followed.

But if I was in the clear, Irminger and Heyman were not. The Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) launched a lawsuit against both of them for damages, potentially for millions of dollars. In addition, they sought a jail sentence for Irminger after he refused to name others involved in the Neptune Jade actions. The MPSSC called on dockworkers throughout the world "to join in Irminger's defense just as they have acted in support of Liverpool". Eventually the lawsuits were dropped after the ILWU indicated to the PMA that it would not conclude another contract with the PMA until they were.

Yet the most powerful network the labour movement has created in the age of the networked information society was to be destroyed from within its own ranks. Suddenly, out of the blue, on 26th January 1998, the MPSSC announced the dispute was over, because of "very important and significant developments which made it more or less impossible to continue". These developments were never publicly spelled out, but they are believed to have involved virtual blackmail from the TGWU that might have involved older dockworkers with a lifetime on the docks losing both redundancy payments and pension rights.

There was enormous shock throughout the support network following this announcement. Although dockworkers websites had begun to sprout up elsewhere, most of these soon disappeared. The dockers' network had relied on a central authority, the MPSSC, for its existence. LabourNet still had a very big readership internationally amongst dockworkers, but it had lost its central focus.

The potential for a new focus arose shortly afterwards, in April 1998, when Patrick Stevedores in Australia sacked its entire union workforce of 1400 dockworkers. There followed a major confrontation with Australian dockworkers which the dockworkers eventually won with much of the Liverpool support network playing an important international support role. However, coinciding with the beginning of the Australian dispute, LabourNet, with the largest readership of dockworkers around the world, was put out of action and disappeared for a couple of weeks when its Internet Service Provider GreenNet was hacked. Within days of it coming

back on line, GreenNet was then threatened with court action over an article on the LabourNet website. I could not help feeling that someone out there did not like us!

Some ethical questions

The MPSSC was part of a long tradition of democratic rank-and-file control of union structures that had been a central feature of the historical growth of trade unions in Britain. Throughout the 70s and 80s, this strong democratic tradition came under increasing attack. The full-time paid union officials sought to "modernise" union structures by tearing up the old union rulebooks and imposing much less democratic structures that were firmly under their own control.

Some of the tensions that existed between the MPSSC and the TGWU leadership undoubtedly reflected this wider context. My own background when I started the Internet work for the dockers was as a trade union activist within the lay structures. I had served twice on the National Committee of my own union, where I had been actively involved in resisting attempts from full-time officials to encroach on the longstanding democratic traditions of the union.

Initially, I saw my Internet work for the dockers within this context. I was convinced at the time of the universally democratising effect the Internet would have, and saw it as a strong weapon for reasserting democratic rank-and-file control of union structures, not only in the UK, but internationally.

There can be little doubt that the Liverpool dockers' fight did become a rallying point within the international labour movement for those seeking to defend union control by rank-and-file members against what appears to be a universal international trend towards curbing this. However, in other ways, things did not come out the way I expected. As time went on, I began increasingly to doubt whether the Internet has an intrinsic democratising effect *per se*.

Much of this doubt concerned my own role. Initially I had seen this role as simply being one of providing a medium through which the dockers could get their message around the world. However, I became more and more aware as time went on that what I did or did not do was having a powerful effect on events. The building and development of a network does not just happen of its own accord. I found myself at the centre of a giant web of interactions that required steering in certain directions if it was to survive and continue to grow. It was not just a question of putting everything I received onto the Internet. Where I sent what, what I chose to emphasise, what I chose to hold back - all these were critical to the life and expansion of the network.

Bringing about the closure of all ports on the West Coast of the USA on the first international day of action, for instance, involved me in intricate day-to-day email discussions with rival factions of the ILWU. They were all communicating directly with me, because each felt they might otherwise miss some vital piece of

information that the other factions could then use against them. Deciding who to feed what information was a delicate question, and I strongly believe the decisions I made played a key role in bringing about the eventual stoppage at the West Coast ports.

But where did this put me in terms of using the Internet to develop union democracy? I was not even a member of the ILWU, let alone in any elected position, yet I appeared to be playing a not inconsiderable role in determining its actions and interfering in its internal politics.

Another issue that arose in this first US West Coast stoppage in support of Liverpool further emphasised the fact that building the power of the network required careful manipulation. The first decision for a stoppage came from Seattle port. It was for 24 hours. Since San Francisco portworkers were regarded as being much more militant than Seattle, it was assumed that it would be relatively easy to get a similar decision there. It proved not to be so simple, however. The majority of San Francisco longshoremen are black. Some of them began to ask the question, "Where are the black Liverpool dockworkers?". The truth was that there was not a single black Liverpool docker, despite the fact that Liverpool has a large black population. The dockers had always operated a highly restrictive practice that insisted on keeping dock jobs in the family, passing them on from father to son.

The failure to produce a black dockworker from Liverpool made getting a stoppage in San Francisco much harder, and eventually the decision there was for 8 hours rather than 24 - a decision that then spread to Los Angeles as well. However, salvation arrived before the second international day of action, after dockworkers in Durban, South Africa, communicated to me that they had participated in the first day of action by stopping work. The MPSSC contacted them and obtained a statement from them that they were pleased to support the Liverpool men now in return for the support Liverpool had given them in the fight against apartheid, a claim that was certainly at least partially true. This statement was used to considerable effect in San Francisco in preparations for the second day of action, and helped secure the decision for a 24 hour stoppage at all American West Coast ports, including Canada and Alaska.

Another important point where extremely careful manipulation was necessary for the survival of the network came when the MPSSC announced they were considering a deal whereby the sacked dockworkers would be helped to set up their own company to compete for jobs with the scabs, who were employed by a company called Drakes. It seems that talks between the TGWU and the MPSSC on such a settlement had been taking place in the background for some time - now they surfaced. The MPSSC issued a statement trying to compare such a settlement with the agreement the ILWU has for the control of the hiring halls. I knew the comparison was absolutely absurd. The fight to control the port hiring halls on the US West Coast had been a major historic battle of US labour. Workers had been

shot dead in this battle. The deal cooked up by the TGWU was something else entirely. I knew that if I simply distributed the MPSSC statement it would be seen as a sell-out of the strike, particularly by the West Coast longshoremen, and was likely to collapse the international support network. I emailed Heyman and Keylor and explained the situation to them. I then rifled through the books on my bookcase to find more on the history of the ILWU battle to control the hiring halls. I found a detailed account in the book, *Strike!*, by Jeremy Brecher. I accompanied the MPSSC statement with an excerpt from this account, and announced that LabourNet was initiating a debate on whether any comparison could be made between the TGWU deal the MPSSC was considering and the ILWU hiring halls agreement. Keylor was already preparing a lengthy contribution to such a discussion.

Meanwhile Heyman had contacted leading members of the MPSSC directly, warning them that the TGWU deal would be seen by the international support network as a complete betrayal of the strike. He eventually convinced them of this. Further public statements on the deal were avoided by the MPSSC, and the original statement was left as a debating point on LabourNet, accompanied by Keylor's reply.

This episode, however, revealed clearly that there was a considerable contrast between the MPSSC as it was in reality and the portrayal of it that was necessary to maintain and build the international network. The MPSSC knew that its unprecedented international support was the strongest card it had in its negotiations with both the TGWU and the employers, but, as any trade union organisation would, it was using it to try to negotiate the best deal it could get. That deal might prove to be one that would appear as totally unacceptable to the international support network.

When I started LabourNet I had a rather vague underlying idea of the Internet as being something like the conception of the public sphere propagated by Habermas and Arendt. I thought its potential for free debate and discussion would lead towards closer approximations to "the truth". From the above developments I was now becoming more and more conscious that I was heavily involved in manufacturing a myth - an idealised version of the MPSSC for international consumption. Without this myth, the network would collapse.

This situation was troubling me greatly. In effect, I felt that the network was controlling me. It was achieving some incredible results - beyond my wildest dreams. But it had rules of its own that I had to conform to and I was not sure that it was ethical to do so. Certainly I wanted the dockers to win, but was this to be done at the expense of dropping my original ideals of using the Internet to extend democracy and propagate truth? Later I was to find that very similar issues surrounded the *Zapatista* network, particularly through reading the account of its development in Ronfeldt and Arquilla's "The Zapatista "Social Netwar" in Mexico" (1998). There too, tensions clearly arose between the actuality of the *Zapatistas*

and the mythology that was necessary to build an international network. I suspect the manufacturing of the image came more from those who needed to keep the network alive than from the *Zapatistas* themselves. But they quickly realised that they needed the international network to survive and to be able to negotiate with the Mexican government. They therefore acceded to and cooperated with the myth producers responsible for building their international support network.

How ethical is this myth-building by those responsible for creating and developing a support network? I was uneasy about it, but convinced myself that the intended aim justified the means. No doubt those who worked on building the *Zapatista* network thought similarly. But is there a difference in principle between using mythology to build and sustain the dockers' network or the *Zapatista* network and using it to build and sustain an *Al-Qaeda*?

The Internet first impressed me as a democratising force through the role it played in the development of the women's movement and the environmental movement. Since my work with the dockers, I have also seen, and to a certain extent been involved in, other powerful uses of the Internet in the fight for democracy. I am thinking particularly of the extensive use of the Internet by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, and the young activists that worked with it, in the fight for democracy in South Korea. I later saw similar uses of the Internet by Radio B92 and Belgrade students in the overthrow of Milošević in Serbia. Both of these reaffirmed for me the democratising potential of the Internet.

What is different about the types of network required by the dockers, the *Zapatistas*, or for that matter *Al-Qaeda*, when compared with many other clearly democratising networks? Why must they base themselves on the creation of a mythology rather than approximating towards a public sphere?

I have looked at the difference between these types of network and those of the new social movements elsewhere (Bailey: 1999). I think the decisive issue is that they require a form of command structure. By the nature of the tasks these networks set themselves, they cannot allow individuals to simply make up their own minds about what actions they will take as a result of the information they receive from the network. I believe this contrasts sharply with the form the new social movement networks take, where activities are far more spontaneous and decentralised.

In describing the way the anti-globalisation movement developed around use of the Internet, Castells says:

By using the Internet, the movement did not need a centralized, command structure invested with authority and decision-making power. (154)

He sees this as the form of future globalized social movements:

It is a new political culture: networking means no center, thus no central authority. (156)

He then goes on to claim that the *Zapatistas* were the first to develop this form later generalised by the anti-globalisation movement:


If the *Zapatistas* were the first informational guerrillas, in the terms defined above, the anti-globalization movement generalized this strategy to a whole array of convergent struggles against the capitalist global order. (156-157)

I find this statement quite astonishing. Surely, the network the *Zapatistas* developed *did* have a central authority, quite unlike the form that later developed for the anti-globalisation movement in general. Certainly the actions taken in support of the *Zapatistas* were taken at local level and left to local initiative, but there *was* a central authority, ultimately concentrated around building Subcomandante Marcos into a legendary figure. The dockers network also left the deciding of actions to local level. At first the MPSSC was calling for traditional labour movement strikes and boycotts in its support. But it soon realised that calling for "Days of Action" was more effective. Besides the traditional labour movement strikes, these actions ultimately included such things as demonstrations at British Embassies, occupation of a shipping company office in Switzerland, a giant "Worker's Picnic" in New Zealand, and the blockading of Victoria Station in London by Reclaim the Streets. All of these local initiatives took place in response to a call from a central authority. This authority was the MPSSC.

It is simply not true that "networking means no center, thus no central authority", as Castells argues. Networks clearly can have a central authority. International capitalist corporations themselves are examples of giant networks that leave many decisions to local level, but nonetheless certainly do have a central authority. And for some networks opposing them and/or the effects of globalisation it is also essential to have a central authority for the network to function. This was the case with both the dockers' network and that of the *Zapatistas*, and it is certainly true of *Al-Qaeda* too.

I have argued elsewhere (Bailey: 1999) that a central authority is essential for a labour movement network. But is it possible to build an alternative, democratically-based command structure for a network rather than basing its authority on mythology? I think it is this question more than any other that will ultimately decide the fate of labour in a globalized, networked world. Historically, the power of organised labour has involved the masses in a way no other movement in history has. At the heart of this involvement has been the issue of democracy. The masses joined the movement of organised labour because, often for the first time in their lives, they were given the right to make their voices heard in deciding policies and direction. The authority that unions possessed to call these masses out in powerful actions ultimately derived from this fact.

Globalisation has undermined these democratic structures which established social rights at the level of nation-states. In an attempt to survive and hang on to their relevance as bargaining instruments with employers and governments, unions



around the world have become more bureaucratized. They have viewed much of their old democratic structures as being an expensive and outdated luxury that has had to be dispensed with. Yet it is very clear that this is not solving their problems. They are losing their mass base, and their bureaucratized and rigidly hierarchical structures pose an insurmountable obstacle to them being able to adapt to a globalized and networked Information Age. If unions are to re-establish their relevance, they need to find a way to regain their former mass democratic nature, but at an international rather than nation-state level, and in forms that embrace the globalized and networked world we now live in.

References

Bailey, Chris (1999). *The labour movement and the Internet*.
<http://lmedia.nodong.net/1999/archive/e39.htm>

Castells, Manuel (1997). *The Power of Identity*, Vol. II of *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Ronfeldt and Arquilla (1998). *The Zapatista "Social Netwar" in Mexico*.
<http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR994/>

Downloaded from EastBound / Journal / 2006 / 1
<http://www.eastbound.info/journal/2006-1/>