



## Post-Socialist Trade Unions, Low Pay and Decent Work: Russia, China and Vietnam

- The transition from a command economy to a capitalist market economy is transforming the trade unions from being simply an extension of the Party-state apparatus into bodies that represent their members in negotiation with employers and lobby within the political system to secure legal standards for decent pay and working conditions.
- In Russia the process of trade union reform has been directed by the trade unions themselves, as they seek to find themselves a place in the transformed polity and society. In China and Vietnam the process of reform has been undertaken under the direction of the Party.
- The principal stimulus to trade union reform has not been initiatives imposed from above, which tend to degenerate into bureaucratic formalism, but the pressure of worker activism from below, which requires workplace and local trade unions to develop their capacity to represent the needs and aspirations of workers.
- The most effective international trade union collaboration has been in support for the development of industrial relations institutions, where the ILO has been most active, and in the training of trade union officers, particularly in methods of collective bargaining. Because the driving force for change has been located at the local and workplace levels international trade union collaboration is most effective when it is targeted at the exchange of experience at these levels, rather than the exchange of high-level delegations.



### Aims

The aim of the project was to identify the possibilities and limits of trade union practice to improve the pay and working conditions of employees in three post-socialist countries, Russia, China and Vietnam. These countries provided very favourable conditions for trade union activity to the extent that they have inherited large and wealthy trade union organisations from the state socialist past. On the other hand, they remain encumbered by their past history as an arm of the Party-state, which has set limits to the degree to which they are willing or able to organise employees in opposition to employers.

As representatives of the interests and aspirations of employees, trade unions have the potential to play a very positive role in the construction of civil society in the post-socialist countries. The transition from a command economy to a capitalist market economy transforms the trade unions from being simply an extension of the Party-state apparatus into bodies that represent their members in negotiation with employers and lobby within the political system to secure legal standards for decent pay and working conditions. The reform of the trade unions therefore plays a central role in the democratisation process.

At first sight the trade unions in Russia are radically different from those in China and Vietnam. The Russian unions have been independent of all political organisations for two decades, while the trade unions in China and Vietnam are still legally and constitutionally

‘under the leadership of the Communist Party’. Russian trade unions function in a formally democratic political system and a liberalised market economy, whereas the Chinese and Vietnamese trade unions still function in an authoritarian one-Party state and in economies that continue to be subject to pervasive state control. The Russian trade unions enjoy freedom of association and the right to strike, while the Chinese and Vietnamese trade unions operate with a legally enforced monopoly of representation of employees. The right to strike is not protected in China and is severely

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### NGPA Programme

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Non-Governmental Public Action research programme is a unique opportunity to further understand the impact of non-governmental public action in reducing poverty and exclusion, and in social transformation, from an international comparative and multi-disciplinary perspective.

Public action by and for disadvantaged people, undertaken by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other actors, is increasingly significant at local and international levels. The focus of the programme is not just on NGOs, but on a broader range of formal and informal non-governmental actors concerned with poverty reduction and social transformation. These might include advocacy networks, campaigns and coalitions, trades unions, peace groups, social forums, rights-based groups, social movements and business in the community initiatives.

Building systematically on research to date, this programme will develop theory, generate new empirical theory, and foster beneficial linkages between researchers and users.

# Non Government Public Action RESEARCH BRIEFING

circumscribed in Vietnam. While the Russian trade unions were admitted to the international trade union community through their affiliation to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (now the International Trade Union Confederation) in 2002, the Vietnamese unions retain their affiliation to the Communist-era World Federation of Trade Unions and the Chinese reject all formal international affiliations, having until recently been ostracised by the bulk of the international trade union community.

Despite these important differences, the trade unions in all three countries have faced the common problem of adapting to capitalist market conditions. Under the state socialist command economy, they were integrated into the Party-state apparatus as executors of state functions and Party policy. In a market economy dominated by capitalist employment relations, the trade unions have to take on the new role of representing employees in their relations with their employers who have distinct and often opposing interests. In Russia the process of trade union reform has been directed by the trade unions themselves, as they seek to find themselves a place in the transformed polity and society. In China and Vietnam the process of reform has been undertaken under the direction of the Party.

Yet the principal barriers to reform encountered in all three countries are the same – the conservatism of the trade union apparatus and the lack of confidence of workers in their trade unions. As a result, the tendency is to reproduce traditional patterns of bureaucratic working and collaboration with the employer as part of the management apparatus. The pattern of reform

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has been similar in all three countries, with an emphasis on strengthening and democratisation of workplace organisations and the extension of trade union organisation, with technical and organisational support from higher trade union bodies. The principal stimulus to reform has not been initiatives imposed from above, which tend to degenerate into bureaucratic formalism, but the pressure of worker activism from below, which requires workplace and local trade unions to develop their capacity to represent the needs and aspirations of workers. Reform is by no means a spontaneous response to worker activism but depends, crucially, on the initiative, imagination and courage of individual trade union officers who are committed to representing their members effectively.

International collaboration has made an important contribution to trade union reform, most particularly in Russia, where the three principal trade union federations have been affiliated to the ICFTU (now ITUC) since 2002. Although the Vietnamese trade union confederation, VGCL, continues to be affiliated to the Communist-era WFTU, it has developed an extensive programme of collaboration with



ITUC-affiliated national trade union centres and with Global Union Federations. The ITUC only began to explore the possibility of collaboration with the Chinese ACFTU in December 2007 and connections remain at the exploratory level to date. The ILO has been active in supporting trade union development in all three countries.

The most effective international trade union collaboration has been in support for the development of industrial relations institutions, where the ILO has been most active, and in the training of trade union officers, particularly in methods of collective bargaining. Because the driving force for change has been located at the local and workplace levels international trade union collaboration is most effective when it is targeted at the exchange of experience at these levels, rather than the exchange of high-level delegations.

