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The North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation (NAALC), a side agreement to NAFTA, provides an instructive example of an attempt to link global trade to labor standards. While this side agreement was created in order to bolster the internationalization of trade, it has brought Labor, human rights groups and governments together to scrutinize and challenge the ways that each NAFTA member country ensures the provision of basic health, safety, and human rights on the job. Effective enforcement of the Agreement will come only with political pressure from a wide variety of groups interested in improving quality of life for workers and their families. However, despite growing recognition of the importance of international social welfare efforts, social work groups have yet to become involved in monitoring the effect of trade on worker quality of life. This lack of involvement is reflective of social work's general estrangement from organized labor, despite many common goals. Increased cooperation between unions and social welfare groups would benefit their respective, and frequently shared, clientele.

Introduction

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect in January 1994, despite severe opposition from labor groups. Although negotiations for NAFTA began under the former Bush presidency, the Democratic administration of Bill Clinton saw it through, alienating much of the traditional Labor constituency of the Democratic Party (Rothstein, 1993). But Clinton promised that free trade could be good for the workers of all of North America, that government and labor could cooperate to ensure workers' rights and quality of life. Thus a side agreement was
added to NAFTA called the North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation (NAALC), which was touted as the body that would oversee basic labor standards in Canada, the United States and Mexico. At the time of enactment the efficacy and power of this body was doubted widely (Rothstein, 1994), and it frequently has functioned as a Trojan horse which diverts attempts at reform into a bureaucratic process of complaint, review and bland report. While the NAALC has provided a high-level forum for the internationalization of the discussion of labor standards, it has been unable to improve conditions for many workers who have sought its protection (Cleeland, 1999, Human Rights Watch, 1998).

Under the NAALC, each NAFTA member country has the opportunity to scrutinize the labor regulations of other members, and question, possibly even penalize, lack of enforcement. Thus the sovereignty of individual nations (to say nothing of states and municipalities) is challenged not only by international corporations in their efforts to pay as little in wages and taxes as possible, but also by the body created to facilitate trade. Despite being a legal and administrative document which includes the possibility of official sanctions, this agreement is designed to promote cooperative resolution, using publicity and transparency to pressure each country to enforce its own laws (Garvey, 1999).

The NAALC may have only been created to diminish NAFTA opposition and prevent the kind of labor atrocities that would give opponents of expanding free trade broader recognition and support. However, when it was enacted both pro-labor and pro-business commentaries recognized the side agreement as the “premier attempt to date to provide a modality in international trade law for reconciling trade values with social... values” (Garvey, 1995). The NAALC serves as both a model and a cautionary tale in the fight by labor and other groups for increased public control over international trade, and the linkage of trade to enforceable regulations to protect workers and the environment. The demonstrations in Seattle against the World Trade Organization in November 1999, and against the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in Washington D.C. in April of 2000, publicized the objections of organized labor, environmentalists, consumers advocates, and a diverse array of other people to unfettered global trade. They also began to shed light
on the socially conscious, egalitarian global development that
the protesters were proposing. Jay Mazur, President of the Union
of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE),
explained:

The future is a contested terrain of very public choices that will
shape the world economy of the 21st century. The forces behind
global economic change—which exalt deregulation, cater to corpo-
rations, undermine social structures and ignore popular concerns—
cannot be sustained. Globalization is leaving perilous instability
in its wake . . . As President Clinton himself has said, if the global
market is to survive, it must work for working families. A first step
toward that goal is building labor rights, environmental protection,
and social standards into trade accords and the protocols of interna-
tional trade institutions—and enforcing them with the same vigor
now reserved for property rights. (2000, p. 79)

In order to make such demands coherent and realistic, those
interested in safeguarding worker rights and quality of life—
including social welfare groups—should learn from both the posi-
tive and negative aspects of the NAALC.

Background

Despite a recent gain in momentum, the labor movement
in the United States continues to struggle to define itself and
to re-establish a foothold in American civic and economic life
that was once unquestioned. As opposed to high levels of union
membership at mid-century (Reich, 1991), presently only 13.9%
of the American workforce is unionized (Greenhouse, 1999). This
has been accompanied by lowering real wages (Economist, 1998b),
the loss of many blue-collar jobs, and a continuously widening
gap between rich and poor (Reich, 1991). Much of this trend has
continued in the United States, even during the economic boom of
the mid- to late 90’s (Economist, 1998b, Bernstein & Michel, 1997).

The globalization of trade was in full swing well before
NAFTA lent itself to a process of de-industrialization of the U.S.
economy, from which blue-collar and low-skilled workers are still
struggling to recover (Rothstein, 1994).

Millions of manufacturing jobs have disappeared in the United
States in the last two decades. Despite much rhetoric from political
and business spokespeople about job creation, most new jobs in the last two decades have been in the service sector. In contrast to the relatively high pay and benefits of the manufacturing jobs that made up the core of the pre-1970’s economy, these new jobs—in hotels and motels, bars and restaurants, convenience stores and other shops, hair salons and health clubs—provide low wages, low or no fringe benefits, and generally lack union representation. (Wagner, 1991b, p. 16)

During the recession-ridden years of 1979–83, 5.1 million workers were displaced from their jobs, with 50% of job losses taking place in the manufacturing sector. These workers had only a 60% re-employment rate, and many changed to lower-paying service-sector jobs, or could work only part-time (Herz, 1991). Black and Hispanic men were over-represented among the displaced, and had higher rates of prolonged unemployment. Although overall displacement slowed during the late 1980’s, the U.S. manufacturing hemorrhage abated only slightly (Herz, 1991). Many displaced workers, even when able to find other employment, experienced resulting problems such as depression, poverty, social isolation and family breakup (Wagner, 1991a; Donovan, Jaffe & Pirie, 1987).

Into this charged atmosphere NAFTA was born. “A new era of economic integration in the Americas” (Wrobel, 1998, p. 552) began in 1989, with the Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement. President Carlos Salinas of Mexico proposed a free trade agreement with the United States in 1990, which initiated the formation (with Canada) of NAFTA in 1992. After extensive debate, the NAFTA was passed by Congress in 1993 (Wrobel, 1998).

From the point of view of government and business, NAFTA has been an unequivocal success. In 1998, Mexico replaced Japan as America’s second-largest trading partner, and NAFTA is credited with cushioning the blow dealt by the Asian economic crisis (Barshefsky, 1999). The U.S.–Mexico Chamber of Commerce (1998) reported that trade between the two countries doubled between 1993 and 1997, shooting from $80 to $160 billion/year. The U.S. Trade Representative (1999) claimed that 350,000 jobs were created in the United States due to NAFTA, and that these jobs paid 13 to 16% more than the somewhat smaller quantity of jobs that were lost due to increased trade with Mexico.
But the global economy has not bestowed its favors equally on all sectors of society. Earnings inequality has risen consistently in the United States since 1979 (Bernstein & Mishel, 1997). The Economist reported in 1998 that “the richest fifth of American households still account for half of aggregate income, and the poorest fifth for less than four percent” (a, p. 25). Between 1995–97, 4.5 million people were displaced from jobs that they had held three years or more. Although not as high as experienced in the 1980’s, manufacturing jobs were still lost at a rate “much higher than manufacturing’s share of total employment” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1998). One-fourth of these workers, when re-employed, suffered earnings reductions of 20% or more (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1998). Some estimate that hundreds of thousands of jobs have been lost to Mexico (Rothstein, 1993).

NAFTA also has the potential to cause fundamental changes in Mexican society and culture, by displacing farmers and agricultural workers, whose livelihood will lose the protection previously provided to it by the government (Cornelius & Martin, 1993). Under the agreement, Mexico lowered its average applied tariffs on U.S. imports by 7.1%, “compared with a reduction of 1.4 percentage points in the U.S.” (U.S. Trade Representative, 1999)

Whatever its long-term effects may be, America’s high-profile embrace of free-market policies was signed by a Democratic president. The Clinton Administration adopted a ‘we’ll bring everyone along’ stance on economic growth and free trade, that denied that labor interests and a free market are inherently antagonistic. Charlene Barshefsky, U.S. Trade Representative, told the House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Trade in February 1999: “The President, in his State of the Union address, called for a new consensus on trade. He said we must find the common ground on which business, workers, farmers, environmentalists and government must stand together.” Such ‘common ground’ was central to a Clinton foreign policy in which “trade helps increase world prosperity, advances the rule of law, and helps to strengthen international peace.” The administration thus advocated protections for workers’ rights, “while clearly separating advocacy of labor rights from protectionist trade policies.” Because it addresses all but the most severe infringements on workers’ rights with discussion, the NAALC is
emblematic of the labor-business compromise that Clinton sought to establish.

**NAALC**

The NAALC took effect on January 1, 1994, with the stated mission of improving “working conditions and living standards in the United States, Mexico and Canada as . . . NAFTA promotes more trade and closer economic ties among the three countries” (U.S. National Administrative Office, 1998, p. 1). In joining the NAALC, each NAFTA member country agreed to “ensure that its labor laws and regulations provide for high labor standards” (p. 3). The Agreement calls for effective enforcement of the following eleven labor principles:

1) Freedom of association and protection of the right to organize;
2) The right to bargain collectively;
3) The right to strike;
4) Prohibition of forced labor;
5) Child labor protections for children and young persons;
6) Minimum labor standards, such as minimum wages and overtime pay, covering wage earners, including those not covered by collective agreements;
7) Elimination of employment discrimination on the basis of race, religion, age, sex, or other grounds as determined by each country’s domestic laws;
8) Equal pay for men and women;
9) Prevention of occupational injuries and illnesses;
10) Compensation in cases of occupational injuries and illnesses; and

Governments agreed to provide a due process system in which to resolve complaints of violations of domestic labor law, and to ensure publicity of and public access to information regarding worker’s rights. If a member country fails to enforce these principles within its own system, a complaint can be filed with the National Administrative Office (NAO) of another country.
The cases are filed with the NAO of one country (frequently the U.S.), alleging that another country (usually Mexico), has failed to enforce its own laws, to uphold labor standards cited in the agreement.

The Agreement has three levels of enforcement. The majority of standards are protected only by low levels of enforcement, which do not involve any penalization for non-compliance. “The preferred approach of the Agreement . . . is through cooperation—exchanges of information, technical assistance, consultations” (U.S. National Administrative Office, 1998, p. 1). The system of complaint review starts with Cooperation/Consultation, when an NAO office accepts a complaint submission. The office that receives the complaint puts together a report, consults with the NAOS of the other two countries, and may recommend that the labor ministers from the two countries consult. These consultations are frequently followed by seminars, public conferences, and more reports (U.S. National Administrative Office, 2000). The first three principles, which have to do with the most basic labor rights of organizing, collective bargaining and work stoppage, are limited to the Cooperation/Consultation level of enforcement. As of early-2000, this was the only mechanism that had been utilized in response to the twenty-two complaints filed under the NAALC (U.S. National Administrative Office, 2000).

The intermediate level of enforcement is labeled Evaluation Committee of Experts (ECE). This involves convening a panel of non-governmental experts to make a recommendation. Although such a committee has never been convened, hypothetically an equal number of experts would be chosen by the NAOs of each of the three countries. Five labor principles, including prohibition of forced labor, non-discrimination in employment, equal pay for equal work, worker’s compensation, and migrant worker protection, are restricted to finding relief in the ECE.

The only NAALC remedy with hypothetical enforcement teeth is Dispute Resolution. The Agreement calls for a panel of “outside experts” to be put together representing each member country. These experts would once again be chosen by the NAOS, and they have the authority to put together an action plan, to levy fines and even invoke a loss of tariff preferences if the plan is not heeded. Only minimum wage, child labor laws and occupational
health and safety are covered under Dispute Resolution. It is important to note that the minimum wage standard does not imply a common minimum wage between countries, but only requires that the minimum wage of each country be enforced.

Anyone can file a complaint with an NAO, which is required to "provide for receipt and review of submissions on labor law matters in the other two countries" (U.S. National Administrative Office, 1998, p. 4). The submission must demonstrate violation of one of the eleven principles discussed above, must show that the country in question is not taking the steps necessary to enforce its own laws regarding the situation, and that the infringement is causing harm to those effected. If the NAO to which the submission is made does not feel that these standards have been met, it can decline review of a submission. There is no real process to appeal such a decision, and thus ultimately the cases that have access to the NAALC process are decided by the NAOs themselves, which are affiliates of the Department of Labor of each country.

Cases under NAALC

As of early-2000, twenty-two cases had been filed with the NAALC since its inception in 1994, ten of which were filed in 1998. The majority of cases involved infringements on the right to organize, and most were lodged against Mexico. They involved the Mexican plants of international companies such as Honeywell, General Electric, Sony and Han Young, a car-parts manufacturer for Hayundai Corp. (U.S. National Administrative Office, 2000).

Like many of the complaints, the one regarding Echlin Inc., a car parts manufacturer owned by Dana Corp., included allegations of threats and intimidation during union elections at a Mexican plant. The United Steelworkers filed complaints against Echlin in both the U.S. and Canada, which were joined by a total of forty organizations. Canadian Steelworkers National Director Lawrence McBrearty claimed that:

workers were held captive, beaten and threatened with rape as they were forced to vote for the government controlled union . . . Thugs crowded the polling station as workers were forced to vote by saying the name of the union. (United Steelworkers, 1998)
The alleged intimidation took part in a joint effort by the Mexican government and Echlin, Inc. to shut out a non-government union. Mexico is heavily unionized, but traditionally the unions have been closely tied to the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the party that governed Mexico for over seventy years, and only recently lost its hold over the Presidency. Many of the allegations of infringements on the right to organize and hold union elections have involved attempts by alternative unions to enter plants, and replace the state-approved unions, which are seen as simply rubber-stamping government policies. PRI policies tended to be passive in the face of trade-related social issues, in part due to the government's fear that foreign companies that are pressured to comply with labor or environmental standards that they find unfavorable, might choose to relocate to another developing country (Human Rights Watch, 1998).

These cases have brought about studies, public conferences and ministerial meetings. One case involved a complaint against a Sony plant in Mexico where allegedly "workers were intimidated, pressured and eventually dismissed by the company when they attempted to organize a union," and "police used violence to break up a peaceful demonstration by workers" (Commission for Labor Cooperation, 1996). After holding public hearings and conducting a study of Mexican labor-arbitration processes and the police use of force at the demonstration, the U.S. NAO recommended a meeting between the Minister of Labor of Mexico, and the U.S. Secretary of Labor. The Commission for Labor Cooperation reports that:

The ministerial consultations resulted in an agreement to conduct a series of three public seminars on union registration and certification, an internal study on union registration by the Mexican authorities, and a series of meetings between Mexican authorities and the parties involved. (Commission for Labor Cooperation, 1996)

This process exemplifies the gentle pressure for change that the NAALC espouses.

A case filed against the United States in May, 1998, involved the most comprehensive allegations of labor abuses brought under NAALC up to that point. The submission brought up issues of
freedom of association, safety and health, employment discrimination, minimum employment standards, protection of migrant workers, and worker's compensation (U.S. National Administrative Office, 2000). It was filed by Mexican unions, alleging:

failure of U.S. labor law to protect worker's rights in the Washington State apple industry. The complaint cites the lack of legal protection for farmworker union organizing and bargaining rights, discrimination against migrant workers, widespread health and safety violations, budget cuts in U.S. enforcement agencies like the NLRB and OSHA, and employers' use of threats and intimidation in recent union representation elections at two major apple picking and shipping plants. (International Labor Rights Fund 1998)

Hearings were held in December, 1998, and in August of 1999 the Mexican NAO issued a report recommending ministerial consultations (U.S. National Administrative Office, 2000).

Labor unions are not the only groups to have filed NAALC complaints. Human Rights Watch filed a claim in May, 1997, after finding that many international companies in Mexico, such as General Motors, Zenith Corporation, and Tyco International, were discriminating against women by making them take pregnancy tests before hiring them. Some companies even made women provide proof that they were menstruating. When an employee became pregnant, she was frequently denied her wages while on maternity leave (Human Rights Watch, 1998). The problem lay not in Mexico's sex-discrimination laws, but in the government's lack of enforcement.

Rather than condemn such practices, the government has taken every opportunity to interpret and apply labor law in a way that most favors the discriminatory practices of the corporations and affords women the least amount of protection. In fact, the government has gone so far as to excuse publicly this discrimination. (Human Rights Watch, 1998, p. 3)

This complaint wound its way through the process of public hearings, report and ministerial consultations. However, Human Rights Watch (1998) claimed that the report and consultations addressed only post-hire pregnancy discrimination, and thus did not address access to employment. Despite the publicity, some companies continued and even defended these practices as legal.
The NAALC process produced a conference in March 1999 entitled “Protecting Women in the Workplace” (Embassy of Mexico in the United States, 1999), and “as a follow-up to this conference, on August 17–18, 1999, the United States and Mexico held individual outreach sessions in McAllen, Texas and Reynosa, Tamaulipas to educate women workers about their rights in the workplace” (U.S. National Administrative Office, 2000).

Human Rights Watch was joined in the gender discrimination case by the International Labor Rights Fund and the National Association of Democratic Lawyers, a Mexican group. Combinations of these groups have filed other complaints, regarding freedom of association and the right to organize. The American Friends Service Committee also joined the 1994 complaint against Sony (Commission for Labor Cooperation, 1998). Petitions were filed with both the Canadian and Mexican NAOS in late 1998/early 1999 alleging lack of enforcement of minimum wage and overtime pay regulations for immigrant workers in the U.S. The Yale Law School Worker’s Rights Project filed the two complaints, together with a number of non-labor advocacy groups. These included the American Civil Liberties Union Foundation’s Immigrant’s Rights Project, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AADEF), and the Center for Immigrants Rights. No recognizable social work group was included in the lists of submitters for any of the complaints (Commission for Labor Cooperation, 1999; U.S. National Administrative Office, 2000).

The NAALC is an essentially political document. Although it relies on the willingness of each country to accommodate basic labor rights in order to advance the ultimate goal of expanded free trade, the effect of the Agreement depends entirely on the way that it is utilized and enforced by the departments of labor in each country. If the administration of a country where a complaint has been filed fails to exert pressure for reform upon the political powers of the country against which the complaint was lodged, the NAALC’s linkage of global free trade and labor rights is undermined. NAFTA’s contradictory side agreement is ridden with conflict of interest, as it leaves enforcement to the very governments so hungry for free trade—trade that they understand translates into low wages, minimal social benefits, little
taxation, and in general the best interest of large corporations. The NAALC (and any future trade side-agreements) will not be effective without pressure and attention from the public. Such attention must come not only from labor groups, but also from other groups with a degree of public trust and the willingness to publicize poor working conditions in North America and around the world.

Improving worker quality of life on an international level: where do social welfare groups fit in?

In the last decade, as markets have become more internationalized, social work has followed suit. The 1990's produced a body of social work literature that both recognized this trend and sought to encourage and expand it. Much of this literature centers on new roles for social work, in areas such as refugee assistance (Mupedziswa, 1997); conflict resolution (Mehta, 1997); and response to the global AIDS crisis (Mancoske, 1997). Midgley (1995) advocated comparative research regarding need and systems of social welfare in different countries. Many authors charged social workers with the responsibility for promotion of culturally-sensitive social and community development to assist marginalized groups (Estes, 1994; Lusk & Stoesz, 1994; Midgley 1996; Johannesen, 1997). Social work as a profession is catching up with changes in society and the focus on international development as a way of eradicating poverty, and some commentators are responding with general calls for increased education of social workers on international issues (Healy, 1992; Estes, 1994; Garber, 1997).

The integration of this new societal dynamic into the profession seems to evoke high expectations for what social workers stand for and can achieve in the world, and a call for a change of focus away from clinical work with individuals. Lusk and Stoesz (1994, p. 102) asked social workers to "discard the myopia of a predominantly clinical world view," because in the context of extreme world poverty "social change strategies which stress the pathological aspects of clients in their microenvironments will fall short of contributing to the general social welfare." Younghusband (1964) based her faith in the success of international social work on the profession's values, pointing out that it is "in the
dignity and worth of man, that the philosophy of social work rests” (p. 106). She called for her colleagues to “strive for economic and social policies which will progressively remedy that which is remediable in the current state of knowledge” (p. 107). Johannessen (1997) stated that “social integration is a key goal for social work, which should be moving from an emphasis on adjustment of the individual to society to an emphasis on changing society to meet individual needs, including the goals of eradicating poverty and eliminating unemployment” (p. 151). Wagner (1997), also called the troops to action, by claiming that:

In a global economy, professional social work in general and local empowerment in particular cannot be reduced to designing welfare programs and delivering services at the local level. It is crucial for the future of the profession to become more attentive to the structural-and therefore political-issues involved at the national level and now also at the global level” (p. 52).

International social work literature offers many models of social development, and some authors advocate increased social work involvement in the United Nations (Hokenstad & Midgley, 1997; Johansson, 1997). However, this movement remains quiet on the issue of unions. Unions have been left out of general planning for social work’s attack on international poverty, social inequality, exclusion from government, and other social problems, despite common goals and professional literature that supports the connection between union involvement and improved quality of life (Scanlon, 1999).

Notwithstanding social work’s present emphasis on work with the individual (Spect & Courtney, 1994), precedent exists within the profession for efforts to improve worker quality of life. Such advocacy has included support of and cooperation with organized labor. In the late 19th Century, the settlement house movement began to recognize societal causes for the problems of the poor, and engage in grass-roots organization to spark change. These reformers often supported labor unions, and lobbied with city governments for improvements of infrastructure and services to the poor. They also worked to increase public awareness of social issues (Addams, 1910; Costin 1983). The Great Depression of the 1930’s also helped to bring social workers to action. The
Rank and File Movement improved the standing of the social work profession by uniting professional social work unions, and adding a voice of support for New Deal reforms and organized labor (Leighninger & Knickermeyer, 1976; Reynolds, 1963, 1951).

The modern social work literature also shows some recognition of Labor's role in both protecting workers and public promotion of an effective social safety net. Wagner (1991a) found in a study of a social work—union partnership in assisting dislocated Maine factory workers, that the alliance was successful in addressing the worker's varying needs.

Social workers and labor union leaders and members should be natural allies. Working people make up the majority of social work's clientele, and despite the numerical decline of union membership, trade unions remain the only vehicle of representation that exists among working people. (p. 477)

In a study of female unskilled workers employed by a university in the deindustrializing Midwest, Morrissey (1995) noted that all of the subjects recognized the advantages that union membership brought in wages and benefits. The study also supported Labor's role in job protection. Korpi (1989) found a relationship between strong union influence in national politics and the extensiveness of the social service system. In a discussion of employee assistance programs, Balgopal (1989) assumes union-social work cooperation in assuring acceptable work conditions and job security for clients.

There are many ways for social welfare professionals to become more involved in improving worker quality of life, both in the U.S. and abroad. Scanlon (1999) recommends that social work academics conduct more research "to examine the relationships among working conditions, union membership, and family well-being" (p. 591), and that social work students be placed in internships at labor sites. Students should also be educated about the growth of international social work, and the way that changing market forces and workers' issues effect clients in any locality.

Pressure from social work groups to make trade side agreements such as the NAALC meaningful vehicles to combat exploitation of workers, would benefit both the causes that social work
seeks to espouse and the advocacy-based heart of the profession itself. Such support should also extend to grass-roots attempts to organize and empower workers. Social workers' collective experience in helping individual clients or communities with specific needs, provides an ideal perspective from which to build advocacy momentum with the goal of educating the public, and influencing government and the private sector.

Conclusion

The main function of the NAALC was to protect NAFTA from its critics and push for gradual reform that might prevent only the harshest and most provocative infringements on labor rights and quality of life. The "labor-friendly" Clinton Administration envisioned the front-page photograph of a skinny ten-year-old girl sewing labels into designer clothes, and immediately recognized NAFTA's true Achilles heel. Thus the NAALC not only provides some incentive for member countries to prevent the most flagrant mistreatment of workers, but it also provides a review process that can help divert the public's anger at such mistreatment away from the NAFTA accord itself.

Labor groups in NAFTA countries are left with an enforcement mechanism that is insufficient to meet their needs, but appears to be more than what was available in the rapidly globalizing market that preceded NAFTA. While global production frustrates labor’s attempts to win concessions from corporations and improve worker quality of life on a national level, the advent of the NAALC allows workers to call both international corporations and governments to answer to a third authority (the agreement itself), for infringement of labor rights. Thus some key U.S. unions have made the integration of basic labor standards into trade accords and development efforts a centerpiece of their public message and political activism (Lindsey, 2000).

The struggle to improve worker quality of life is not for organized labor alone. All groups interested in this issue should exert pressure on government to link trade to substantive, enforceable labor standards. While corporations relocate in order to exploit inequalities between countries and localities, such agreements provide a small first step towards the creation of a more even labor
arena. Social work should become involved in the struggle for labor rights, in which other progressive groups are already active. It would be entirely appropriate for social welfare groups such as the National Association of Social Workers, or the International Federation of Social Workers, to add their voices of social concern to the public discourse over trade issues by organizing advocacy among members, and putting out strong policy statements. These groups could also initiate or join a submission to the NAALC or any future trade side-agreement, as well as monitor and publicize both the causes that the agreement covers, and the progress of worthwhile complaints.

It may be precisely the chaos of politics and international trade that keeps social work at the sidelines of international social development and worker's rights issues, tending to the 'less fortunate'. However, any genuine commitment to influencing the system that creates social problems mandates that we insert ourselves, and our unique world view, into the process. The goals and values that social welfare groups and labor share, call for increased cooperation in the variety of efforts that each group makes to create a more humane and egalitarian world community.

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Social Work and Labor


