Report of 2008 Meeting

“Communication is the single biggest challenge facing the trade union movement today.”
— Aidan White, General Secretary, IFJ

The EI ComNet meeting for 2008 took place from 18-20 February at International Trade Union House in Brussels. Including staff and guests, the meeting involved 27 participants from 16 countries. (See participants list below.)

The purpose of the meeting was to strengthen our network, to share technical expertise and communications experience from our respective countries, and to engage in strategic planning for the new initiative launched at Congress: Video for Union Educators (VUE).

The VUE project proposes to bring together the skills and resources of teacher trade unions to give voice to educators and to vividly illustrate their experience in the classroom and the global community. By creating short documentary videos that would be shared over the internet and on DVD, we hope to raise awareness, build solidarity and help further the Millennium Development Goals, especially the EFA agenda.

The ComNet meeting opened on Monday 18 February with a technical session led by EI Web Coordinator Harold Tor and Timo Linseenmaier. The session was aimed primarily at those working on their union web sites, but other participants also benefited. (See report on web session below.)

On Tuesday 19 February, Charlie Lennon, Chief Administrative Coordinator, welcomed participants on behalf of EI. He spoke of the importance of effective communications to EI’s work in a world of rapidly changing technologies and increasing inequities on the global education scene.

On 19 and 20 February, participants heard keynote presentations from two veteran labour communicators who offered insights on a wide range of practical and philosophical points.

Aidan White, General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, offered a powerful keynote address in which he called on unions to bring communications into the heart of everything they do.

Tim Noonan, Director of Communications for the International Trade Union Confederation, urged unions to engage with the mass media to expand their reach and the impact of their messages. (See sidebar stories below.)

**Video for Union Educators — VUE project**

Nancy Knickerbocker, EI Senior Communications Coordinator, introduced the VUE project, its proposed structure, timeline, messages, target audiences and potential story themes.

Luc Allaire, from CSQ/Canada and Steve Snider from NEA/USA shared their experiences working on videos about EI’s post-tsunami school reconstruction projects in Indonesia and Sri Lanka. The three-way partnership between the 2 affiliates and EI provided a successful model to build on.

Contact: editor@ei-ie.org | Coordinator: Nancy Knickerbocker
Leona Hiraoka from NEA/USA also shared examples of stories done as full multi-media packages, with articles in the magazine supported by web-based slide shows with audio and video production.

Over the next day and a half, participants worked through a series of discussions and brainstorming exercises to further define the VUE Project. Tasks completed during the three working sessions included:

- Define target audience(s)
- Identify budgetary resources, real and in-kind
- Establish the editorial board
- Brainstorm story ideas or theme proposals
- Agree upon 2 story assignments
- Define working protocol, communications within the network
- Set time frame and deadlines
- Create production and distribution plan
- Clarify measures of success

To date the VUE project has received funding from EI (15,000 Euros) and the NEA Foundation ($15,000 US.) It is committed to completing two pilot project videos before the end of 2008.

The project will be coordinated by EI head office in Brussels in consultation with chief coordinators in EI’s regional offices, and with support and guidance from members of the editorial board. They are: Luc Allaire, CSQ/Canada; Leona Hiraoka, NEA/USA; Steve Snider, NEA/USA; Nancy Knickerbocker, EI; and Charlie Lennon, EI.

In terms of additional resources, the ComNet members identified an inventory of skills, equipment and technology that they could offer to the project. For example, the NEA generously volunteered to provide editorial and web articles, production and post-production services through its in-house studio. EI will provide similar editorial and web support, as well as graphic design, journalistic skills and overall coordination. The other unions represented said they could provide information and contacts, highlight the projects on their web sites and in union publications.

Target audiences include: member organisations, the broader labour movement, GUFs, students, parents, concerned citizens, NGOs, civil society, policy makers, education ministers, other government leaders and the mass media. We agreed that target audiences depended on the topic at issue.

After much discussion of many story ideas, the ComNet members agreed on two story themes to pursue this year: child labour and immigrant/displaced students. Both of these topics affect millions of people and have wide application across all regions. In addition, both offer dramatic illustrations of the urgent need to continue to press for achievement of the Education For All agenda.

Education is the theme for this year’s World Day Against Child Labour. Because the day falls on 12 June, we decided to tackle child labour as the first topic in 2008. As it is important to shine the spotlight on places where teachers and their unions are making a difference for child labourers, we will look to India, Albania and Morocco for stories. EI communications staff will work in collaboration with the new coordinator for Child Rights, ILO/IPEC and members of affiliates working on the issue. A rather tight timeline was set in order to complete a short video in time for release on 12 June.

The question of how to meet the needs of immigrant and displaced students is one that affects teachers in both industrialised and developing countries. Further discussion is needed to develop this story from
idea to reality. ComNet members agreed to maintain contact via email throughout the year, and to keep sharing ideas and information.

The meeting concluded with a screening of *Un Poquito de Tanta Verdad* (A Little of So Much Truth), a powerful new full-length documentary by Jill Freidberg. It explores the key role of media in the teachers’ strike that spawned the 2006 popular uprising in the state of Oaxaca, in southern Mexico.

Participants also enjoyed a social evening, with an excellent dinner of typical Belgian cuisine hosted at an Art Nouveau-style restaurant near the Brussels Botanical Garden.

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Aidan White: Unions care, but don't share their inspiring stories

"Communication is the single biggest challenge facing the trade union movement today," according to Aidan White, general secretary of the International Federation of Journalists. "Are we bold enough to address our challenges?"

The aims and aspirations of the international trade union movement cannot be realised without effective communications, White warned. He pointed to several common weaknesses in union communications, including the inability to respond in a timely fashion to breaking news and an unsustainable tendency to centralise all communications.

Of paramount concern, however, is the fact that most unions do not effectively communicate their impressive body of work on issues such as child labour, the rights of women, the environment, sustainable development and social justice worldwide.

"Unions care. It’s a very simple message," White said. "But the shocking reality is that unions are not telling the world — nor even one another — about the great work they are doing. We’ve got so used to doing the right thing that we don’t even think it’s newsworthy any more."

Everybody in the trade union movement needs to be engaged in communications, White said. "No matter the program, we should build our communications strategy into it."

He urged unions to ensure their communications focus on organising and on defending labour rights, as well as development and solidarity work. Labour communicators must work harder to connect not only with union members, but with civil society. We must reach out to young workers, and those in emerging forms of employment.

"Communications has to be brought into the heart of our work. If not," White predicted, "we will see intensified attacks [on the labour movement] in the next 10 to 15 years."

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Tim Noonan: Voice of labour movement should be heard in global dialogue

The actions, policies and viewpoints of EI, the ITUC and other leading players in the international trade union movement should become as well known as those of the big NGOs, environmental groups and human rights organisations, says Tim Noonan.

As Director of Campaigns and Communications for the ITUC, Noonan believes “it’s important to get to the stage where we are automatically a voice of authority for the record.”

To get there, we should not make the mistake of focusing only on internal audiences, Noonan said. “The use of mass media to communicate our messages is fast and the reach can be enormous. It is extremely important we have a presence in the mainstream media.”

For example, leading up to the Beijing Olympics the ITUC invested 40,000 Euros to commission a report on labour rights in the supply chains of products bearing the Olympic logo. Research into working conditions in Chinese factories uncovered violations much more severe than the ITUC had expected.

After the report was completed, the ITUC approached the BBC with the story. The overture was made well in advance of the report’s public launch so the broadcaster could independently verify the facts in the report.

“Within 48 hours of the launch and the BBC coverage, we had reached an audience of 700 million viewers for an investment of 40,000 Euros,” Noonan said. In addition, they had succeeded in putting intense pressure on the International Olympic Committee to ensure respect for labour rights of workers producing Olympic-branded goods.

He suggested that social networking sites also have huge potential to reach younger workers and potential union leaders of tomorrow. For example, last autumn in response to the Burmese government’s violent crackdown on peaceful demonstrators, ITUC utilized an already-existing group on Facebook to spread its message. With 400,000 members in Facebook’s Burma group, the ITUC reached a significant number of activists through one site.

With the aim of pushing for economic sanctions against the military regime in Burma, the ITUC is presently working on a video news release (VNR) about Burmese refugees on the Thai border. It will be accompanied by an information package with translations of all the interviews, and a report on various countries’ economic relations with Burma. The ITUC normally spends 30-40,000 Euros on this type of video for broadcast.

Child labour is an issue that always attracts media attention, Noonan said. ITUC has tackled the issue in various countries. In Pakistan, for example, they hired freelance video crews to document how child labourers were being abused in factories making footballs.

“Most multi-nationals have cleaned up their supply chains. They know if they don’t talk to us about child labour they will be stung,” he said, and that has brought about positive change. Nike, for example, has gone from being one of the worst to one of the best in terms of corporate social responsibility.

Noonan encouraged unions to cover important stories both in print and video, with each medium reinforcing and supporting the other. “It’s expensive, but it’s a good investment,” he said.
Report on ComNet Web Session

18 February 2008, 13:00-18:00

Aim and Description of the Session

The half-day web session aims to build up a support network of web developers and editors within the EI membership when it comes to developing union websites. The session is neither a seminar nor a workshop but more of a practical, hands-on discussion session for web developers and editors to exchange know-how and ideas.

These exchanges can then be continued via email using the ei-WIRED mailing list. A sense of mutual help and support when it comes to the technical development of union websites can then be fostered within this group.

It is hoped that when Communications Heads attend the Communications Network, they can bring along their web developers and editors to attend this meeting.

Attendance rate

A total of 17 participants attended the session, including Latin America staff member Gustavo Gordinez.

General Report

a) Introduction

After a general round of self introduction, EI web personnel presented four examples of recent use of web technologies for the purpose of organizing:

- Second Life: Union Network International helped stage the first ever virtual life in history on Second Life (http://www.union-network.org/secondlife)
- Facebook:
  - Girl lobbies minister on Facebook (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/staffordshire/7133190.stm)
  - Colombians in huge FARC protest (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7225824.stm)
- Online Games:
  - UN World Food Programme (www.food-force.com)
  - Darfur is Dying (www.darfurisdying.com)

b) Getting to know you – Website Musical Chair

Participants took part in the activity which aimed to encourage them to present to one another their websites and explain what the principal features are.

c) Presentation on “Doing up a teacher union website” by Charlotte Love

Charlotte Love, web developer at the Lärarförbundet (Sweden) did a magnificent presentation on the development of their website.
She highlighted the process through which the development was done, and how, to suit the membership, they tailor-made the entire web portal to be user-centric. Below are the crucial points of her presentation:

- User-centric web design, organisation and structure
- W3C guidelines
- Division into sub-sectors/groups and regions

A copy of Charlotte’s presentation is available on the event’s webpage:


d) Groupwork, with the advice of Alex Gomes (ITUC Web Coordinator)

The participants were split into two teams. Each team was given a topic for discussion and they each chose a rapporteur to present the team’s findings.

**Group A (How to increase your union website’s visibility?):**

- Corbin Hinds (CUT)
- Gemma Tuffy (ASTI)
- Peter Mullan (INTO)
- Alf Lindberg (Lararforbundet)
- Leona Hiraoka (NEA)
- Dave BERVER (AFT)
- Gaspar Antuna (FETE UGT)
- Javier Sanz (FETE UGT)

**Group B (What are the web technologies that can be harnessed for union work?):**

- Luc Allaire (CSQ)
- John DUNNION (IFUT)
- Stian Skaar (Utdanningsforbundet)
- Charlotte Love (Lärarförbundet)
- Steve Snider (NEA)
- Gustavo Godinez (EILA)
- Tom O’Sullivan (INTO)

e) Presentation by Group A – Rapporteur: Gemma Tuffy (ASTI)

**Gemma from ASTI** Ireland presented the findings of her group on the topic: “How to increase your union website’s visibility?”. The main points of her presentation are below:

- **Online promotion**
  - Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)
  - Google Word Buys
  - Banner ads
  - Viral Marketing, through blogs and social networking sites
- Use of mini websites to drive traffic to main site (www.readacrossamerica.com by the NEA)
  - Offline promotion
    - Texting / SMS
    - Print Media
    - Emails
    - Staff: “always refer to the site – more info on the site”
  - Barriers
    - Generation gap
    - Human and Financial Resources needed to manage web marketing
    - Training: for both leaders and staff in web marketing

f) Presentation by Group B – Rapporteur: Luc Allaire (CSQ)

Luc from CSQ Canada presented the findings of his group on the topic: “What are the web technologies that can be harnessed for union work?”. The main points of his presentation are below:

- **Texting / SMS**: SMS can offer a flexible and comparatively cheap means to quickly communicate with members and officers. Examples from different unions included the possibility to contact union officers for meeting reminders, or offering members the possibility to send messages to a central screen during congress;
- **Web applications**: Representatives offered various examples of how to harness web technology to offer value added to members: One union offers a members-only section of their website to help calculate teacher pay, pension payments and insurance rates.
- **Podcasting** was discussed as a hands-on possibility to produce “radio shows” for members – especially younger ones – to add yet another possibility to keep members up-to-date on developments in the union.
- **Email lists as well as discussion boards/forums** were briefly discussed as tools for members and networks to stay in touch and share knowledge
- **Overall**, the participants agreed that the web can be used as platform for interactive engagement with and among members. However, representatives from developing countries had the group consider that in their situation, internet access, though improving in many countries, for most of their members internet access is still expensive and slow. Often, hardware and software developments as well as specific know-how take long to “arrive” and to be deployed. Notwithstanding these limitations, representatives felt that, given the time, the role of the internet would increase in communication efforts in developing countries.

g) Presentation by Timo Linsenmaier (EI)

Timo from EI did a presentation on RSS feeds. The presentation, entitled “RSS feeds – What they are and what they do”, aimed at giving an overview of technical background, usage examples and possibilities to harness RSS technology in union work. Special emphasis was given to the fact that all technology shown during the presentation was either
Open Source of Freeware, thus enabling unions to benefit from the technology at little to no cost. Web developers from EI member organisations were strongly encouraged to use RSS feeds as a web tool to reach out to their members. EI has created a page on the main EI website to display the feeds of member organisations: http://www.ei-ie.org/en/rss/

A copy of Timo’s presentation is available on the event’s webpage: http://www.ei-ie.org/en/calendar/show.php?id=110

**Feedback and Conclusions of the Web Session**

Out of 17 participants, 9 handed in the feedback form prepared by the Web Communications Unit. The following paragraphs analyse and summarize these forms. Suggestions and propositions are quoted verbatim.

**Question 1: Are you directly in charge of your website?**
*Yes: 6 of 9*
*No: 3 of 9*

**Question 2: Do you think you have benefited from this session?**
*Yes: 9 of 9*
*No: 0 of 9*

**Question 3: Should this be a formal annual meeting?**
*Yes: 8 of 9*
*No: 1 of 9*

**Question 4: What would be topics for future sessions?**
- Blogs & discussion boards
- How to drive more users to a site
- Presentation of other unions’ websites
- How to add and expand membership value, how to stimulate membership interaction/discussion
- Use of pictures, re-designing projects, examples of new web possibilities
- Developments of web server technology

**Question 5: What could be improved?**
- More technical information
- More time to look at other people’s websites
- More time to discuss, more time for specific tasks
- Ask people beforehand on topics, survey the group for topics
- Full day session, more opportunity to go into details
- More time to look at solutions other organisations apply
- A full day session would be good

**Question 6: Any other suggestions on further activities?**
- „How to…“ group workshops, e.g. writing for the web
- Training on the successive planning of setting up union websites
Web Session Feedback – Summary
- Although only 2/3 of the participants of the survey were directly involved with their organisation’s website, all felt to have benefited from the session, and an overwhelming majority stated the necessity to have an annual meeting
- A recurring observation was the fact that ½ a day was felt to be too short for the session, about 1/3 of the participants of the survey suggested a full day session
- A recurrent requirement was to tailor the sessions better to individual needs, e.g. by surveying necessary topics beforehand, but also by having separate workshops, e.g. one focusing more on communicative aspects, while another could work on technical aspects of web work.