

# Digital Solidarity or Complacent Clicktivism?

Nearly 7000 people supported the Turkish TÜMTIS union campaign. The company caved in to the union's demands. But the workers on the picket line have to be given full credit for their victory

**ERIC LEE** is the founding editor of LabourStart, the news and campaigning platform of the international trade union movement



Trade unions have been using information technology to promote global solidarity for more than three decades. When I began researching and writing about this in the early 1990s, I found an already existing community of activists who had been using email and other online tools for years. In fact, by the early 1990s, they had already held a couple of international conferences to discuss what had been done and where to go next.

So we've learned a lot, and we have decades of experience behind us. We've learned about some tools that work very well, and others that don't. LabourStart has been a laboratory of sorts, where we've tried out many of the new technologies.

## What works, and what doesn't

Let me start by giving a couple of examples of things that did not work out very well.

One was called 'Second Life' – an immersive, 3-D online environment which was all the rage a few years back. Some unions decided that this 'virtual world' was the next big thing and didn't want to be left behind. Something called 'Union Island' was created to much fanfare. I tried to be supportive, and signed up to use 'Second Life' only to discover that I couldn't figure out how to equip my online avatar with clothing. As a result, my unclothed character stood neck-deep in the sea surrounding 'Union Island' cheering on those few who had managed to get ashore with their clothes on. 'Union Island' quickly disappeared under the virtual waves and has not been heard of since.

When Facebook took off, many of us realised some of its limitations – more on this in a moment – and thought it would be better to build a social network owned and controlled by unions. Thus UnionBook was born. Using a platform that replicated much of Facebook's functionality, it struggled to get even 5000 trade unionists to sign up. The problem was a chicken-and-egg one: without vast numbers of trade unionists there, the network was useless. It limped along for several years until it was finally shut down.

So, what does work? It turns out that two of the older technologies, which have been in use for a quarter century or more, remain potent tools for trade unions.

One is email. As we have repeatedly learned, there is nothing more effective than a mass mailing in order to promote an online campaign. We see this all the time whenever we launch a new campaign on LabourStart. If we share it with our tens of thousands of followers on social networks (Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn) we'll get a small trickle of responses.

But when we send out a message to our 130,000 email subscribers, we get a flood.

This simple point is still not widely understood in unions. Often when we ask a union to give publicity to a campaign – even to a campaign which they requested – what we get is a posting on Facebook and Twitter which has little demonstrable effect on the campaign.

Why is this the case? I think it's because we treat our email inboxes differently from how we treat our Facebook news feeds or Twitter feeds. If a message comes into my inbox, it's something I need to read, or act on, or delete. This is absolutely not the case with Twitter or Facebook; I can happily not visit social networks for days and no one necessarily expects me to be responding to their posts.

The other tool that still works very well is the website. Though we live in an age of smartphones and apps, the reality is that websites remain incredibly powerful tools. Just ask Amazon.

So we have found that the most potent combination for global solidarity campaigns is to use a website combined with large email lists – and backed up by social networks. And this often works. Let me give a very recent example.

## Credit where credit's due

After a successful organising drive at DHL Express, the Turkish Motor Vehicle and Transport Workers' Union (TÜMTIS) filed for trade union recognition. Despite TÜMTIS organising the required number of workers under the Turkish labour laws, DHL refused to talk to the union. TÜMTIS members were on the picket line for a full year, from 17 July 2017. Eleven months into their struggle, they approached LabourStart through their global union federation, the London-based International Transport Workers Federation (ITF).

Their campaign was launched on LabourStart on 8 June 2018. It was translated by volunteers into 14 different languages. 6,769 people sent off messages supporting the workers. By 23 July, just 45 days after the campaign went live, the company had caved in to the union demands. As the company and union put it in a joint press release with the ITF, 'DHL Turkey and Tümtis have agreed to start negotiations on a collective labour agreement ... both parties have met for first, informal talks over the last weeks. In these talks, which were also attended by the ITF, Tümtis and DHL both expressed their willingness to enter into a trustful and sustainable relationship'.

Some campaigning organisations would have promptly announced that it was their effort which

made the difference, and used this as an excuse to send out a fundraising appeal. LabourStart, which works as part of the trade union movement, has to behave according to a different standard. In a message which we sent out announcing the victory, we wrote: 'The main reason for this [victory] is, of course, the determination and courage of those union members in Turkey. The support given by the ITF and its affiliate unions around the world was also hugely significant'. We also thanked those who supported the online campaign, but we put things in perspective. Their support 'certainly played a role in the last few weeks as we aimed to convince the company to finally come to the negotiating table'. But the workers in Turkey, on the picket line, had to be given full credit for their victory.

### Online overkill?

Possibly the biggest mistake we're seeing today in how trade unions use the net for global solidarity work is the over-reliance on social networks and Facebook in particular. Let's be clear about the difference between Facebook and tools like the web and email. The web and email are standards. Anyone with a web browser like Firefox or Chrome on their computers or phones can access a web page. Any email client, like Outlook, can send and receive email. The web is a public space, not a private, walled garden. Facebook on the other hand is like the old, 1990s version of online communities before the Internet arrived on the site. It's like Compuserve or America Online. It's not an open standard, but a privately-owned, profit-making business.

And Facebook will not be around forever. Its growth among young people has ground to a halt as other, more popular social networks take its place. Facebook itself grew out of the collapse of another hugely popular network, MySpace, which has now effectively disappeared.

But even before Facebook enters its decline (which may already have begun) it can behave as it wants and no one has a right to challenge it. We've seen cases of unions creating platforms on Facebook to criticise companies, and then these being taken down by Facebook at the request of the company. Today, with tremendous pressure being put on Facebook to deal with the problem of 'fake news' and attempts to influence elections, we may see much more of this kind of thing.

And of course on Facebook, unlike the web or email, where are our archives? How easy is it for a union to look up what it did in a campaign, what worked and what didn't? As we outsource our collective memory to this private company, we give up an invaluable asset.

But it's not only Facebook which is the problem. Even the tools that work – email and the web – are facing challenges. Ten or twenty years ago, an online campaign was relatively rare and would excite activists. Today, our inboxes are full of appeals from a very wide range of organisations and campaigns. It's hard to support them all, and one grows tired of the repetitive messages. Much as I care about the

declining number of bumblebees in England, I'm not sure I need to be reminded of that fact every day. Or that a progressive candidate running in a primary election in New York needs a donation from me, and apparently needs that donation every single day.

### No substitute for mobilisation


We need to remember that putting those online tools aside, our strength as a labour movement is in our numbers. Our campaigns succeed or fail based on whether we can mobilise our own members.

In a recent campaign we were given by a union, it seemed as if the union was simply outsourcing the campaign to LabourStart. We managed to get over 6,700 people from around the world to support the union's campaign. But when analysed those results, it became clear that only one in six supporters came from the country concerned. And only 16 – out of 6,700 – were members of the union which had asked for the campaign. And that's a union which claims over 100,000 members.

It's a campaign that is unlikely to achieve its goal for that very reason. What works is not this or that technology, though some (like email) are better than others (Facebook). What really matters is whether unions are prepared to reach out to their own members and encourage them to take the few seconds needed to sign up to support a campaign.

Our members are our greatest strength. We win campaigns when we mobilise them.

What works is not this or that technology. Unions win campaigns when they mobilise their members



# Stands for Solidarity

[www.uniglobalunion.org](http://www.uniglobalunion.org)

Over 60 million jobs have been lost since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008. With the addition of new labour market entrants over the next five years, 280 million more jobs need to be created by 2019. Half the world's workforce are employed in precarious work and one and three jobs pay less than \$1.25 per day. To just maintain the status quo 1.8 billion jobs must be created by 2030.

We are seeing levels of inequality in income distribution back to the scale of the 1920s. We are living through a boom period but only for the one percent.

There is a word missing in the world of tomorrow debate – 'solidarity'. UNI Global Union and its 20 million members stands for solidarity in action.

Join with us: [www.uniglobalunion.org](http://www.uniglobalunion.org)  
 UNI global union, 8-10 Av. Reverdil,  
 1260 NYON, Switzerland