



Workers of the World Unite (At Last)

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Rising developments challenge the conventional wisdom that neoliberal globalisation has been an unprecedented disaster for workers, trade unions, and the labour movement. The obstacles to labour organising do, of course, pose serious challenges. Increased mobility of capital has led to a sharp increase in relocation, outsourcing, and offshoring. Multinational corporations can threaten plant closures when workers request better wages or when states try to raise taxes. Executives at multinational corporations can pit their own plants against each other, going back and forth between them to get local managers and workers to underbid each other. At the same time, increased mobility of labour has increased migration, which can be seen as a threat to wages and working conditions if migrant workers are introduced into a settled labour force. Corporations can then stoke divisions across racial, ethnic, and linguistic lines to undermine the foundation of solidarity.

Beyond pessimism

However, fixating on obstacles creates a facile pessimism. Globalisation may have opened as many doors as it closed. With email, social media, and other online platforms, workers enjoy better tools for organising across countries—imagine trying to organise a transnational strike a century ago. Globalised communication fosters solidarity as workers are able to see, hear, and share each other's stories (Evans, 2010). Improvements in translation software could help bridge the language divide, opening new paths to transcultural dialogue. Globalised capitalism may have created the basis for a global working class in consciousness as well as material conditions.

Transnational unionism can operate among union executives or on a grassroots level. Organising can be workplace oriented, or collaborate with NGOs on issue campaigns. Successful transnational unionism has to navigate complexity and operate on multiple levels. Transnationally oriented unions have used globalisation to their benefit by organising transnational actions, forming new structures, and fostering solidarity with migrant workers at home.

When a transnational corporation spreads production nodes across countries, thus distributing the workforce, the geographic expansion also increases the possible leverage points for organising. Ryanair workers understand this well. Since the Irish budget airline's foundation in 1984, CEO Michael O'Leary had been a vocal opponent of unions, but workers chose not to listen. In mid-2018, they went on strike — starting in Ireland before spreading across the continent — for pay increases, direct employment, and collective labour agreements that comply with national labour laws. Management, which had used its transnational status to play workers against each other, was

confronted by a united cross-national labour force (Lafaut Hernandez et al, 2018). This truly remarkable mobilisation generated power by social media networking, finding allies in national and international union structures, astute work with the public and securing official EU support for the rule of 'normal' industrial relations.

Labour has also found strength by partnering with allies at different points along the globally dispersed production chain. Direct action by students in the US supported workers organising in apparel sweatshops in Honduras. Garment workers in global production chains are usually considered weak compared to hypermobile, high-profit companies like Nike (Greenhouse, 2010). But such corporations are vulnerable to boycotts and consequent reputational damage. Transnational union resources focused on a particular industry or country can also have considerable power to deny market share and thereby bolster demands at the point of production. These new mobilisations have also involved much wider layers, including student and pressure groups, and lobbying in the political system 'back home'. We now know some of the pressure points that can bring concessions from multinationals.

The case for transnational unionism

Besides enabling specific actions, the new economic landscape has given rise to new organising structures, as unions realise that old methods no longer suffice. In the 1960s, the International Trade Secretariats (today known as Global Union Federations, GUFs) responded to multinationals' expansion by forming World Company Councils. First established by the United Auto Workers and the International Metalworkers' Foundation, the councils coordinated activities of various national trade unions across a multinational corporation's operations. However, they proved unable to create the stability and continuity needed to achieve transnational collective bargaining power (Bourque, 2009). There are many reasons for this: the Cold War proved very divisive, multinationals saw no good reason to engage (corporate social responsibility was a long way off), and the major unions of the North Atlantic which promoted the councils were using a collective bargaining style whose time was nearly up. Still, as globalisation took shape from the 1980s onwards, this historical memory was to prove important: workers could organise transnationally.

By the 1990s, the international union strategy had shifted from promoting voluntary 'codes of conduct' with multinationals and introducing social clauses (including labour rights) into trade agreements, to more ambitious and comprehensive Global Framework Agreements (GFAs). An expression of transnational labour solidarity, GFAs bind a company's global operations to the labour standards of the headquarters, usually based in Europe. Thus gains won where labour is stronger can spread to

where it is weaker. By 2015, 156 GFAs had been signed around the world, focused mainly on core workplace conditions and the right to collective bargaining (See, for example, Ford and Gillan, 2015).

Such developments grew from the realisation that labour needed new strategies, tactics, and organisational modalities. With 'business as usual' organising modes no longer adequate, many trade union leaders began calling for global solidarity. They called into question labour's 'special status' alongside the state and employers—the famous tripartite modality of the International Labour Organisation. If capital now organised itself predominantly as a transnational player, so, too, would trade unions need to go global.

A significant manifestation of this shift is the emergence of global unions. In 2008, the United Steelworkers in the US merged with Unite the Union, the largest labour organisation in Britain and Ireland. At its founding, the new union, Workers Uniting, represented almost 3 million workers in the steel, paper, oil, health care, and transport industries. Now the workers of oil conglomerate BP and steel behemoth ArcelorMittal are transnational too, refusing to be pitted against each other in negotiations. Maritime workers, who have a built-in internationalism, have taken similar steps. In 2006, the National Union of Marine, Aviation and Shipping Transport Officers in the UK developed a formal partnership with the Dutch maritime workers' union, Federatie van Werknemers in de Zeevaart, renaming themselves Nautilus UK and Nautilus NL respectively. Two years later, workers voted to create a single transnational union, Nautilus International. In 2015, the United Auto Workers in the US and IG Metall in Germany joined forces to create the Transatlantic Labor Institute, focusing on auto worker representation issues at the US plants of German auto manufacturers. In a decade, transnationalism has entered mainstream trade unionism as leadership catches up with the objective possibilities opened up by globalisation.

Notably, the smartest unions are treating migrant workers not as a threat but as an opportunity. Trade unions have deepened their democratic role by integrating migrant workers into unions and combatting divisive and racist political forces. In Singapore and Hong Kong, state-sponsored unions have recruited migrant workers, to mutual benefit. In Malaysia, Building and Woodworkers' International, a GUF, recruits temporary migrant workers alongside 'regular' members. Such positive, proactive outreach can counter the divide-and-conquer strategy on which anti-union management thrives.

Despite such bright spots, many contradictions and pitfalls may impede transnational labour organising. The mismatch between the unlimited scale and complexity of the challenge and the limited resources available remains a chronic problem. Also, successfully organising new layers of workers may reduce unions' capacity to take action owing to the difficulties of mobilising an informal or precarious global labour force. These

problems are not insurmountable for a nimble and strategic labour movement, but they must be addressed head on.

In the labour movement's formative stages, unions engaged actively with the broader political issues of the day, in particular the call for universal suffrage. There is no reason why such larger concerns cannot again become central to labour's agenda, and a very good reason they should form its backbone - the interpenetration of a host of economic, social, and environmental factors. In contrast to the later tradition of craft unionism, early labour organisers did not recognise divisions based on skill or race. This tradition of labour organising, known variously as community unionism, deep organising, or social movement unionism, has been making a comeback. Its spread could open a new chapter in labour's ongoing struggle against capitalism.

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