

## **The Global Labour University: A new laboratory of learning for international labor solidarity?**

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Abstract:

For 10 years now, an interdisciplinary network of faculties, the Global Labour University (GLU), has been offering master level courses for trade unionists from around the world. The main purpose of these Masters programs is to develop the capacity among trade unionists to develop policy expertise for the challenges of globalization. The joint activities go beyond the Masters programs and include short-term training courses, alumni applied research schools and conferences. With its five campuses, two in the global north and three in the global south, the GLU provides a “one world” research and learning environment for labor to investigate, analyze, and identify effective policy measures to meet the labor challenges of today. Our paper reviews and assesses the activities of the GLU. To what extent does the GLU achieve its objective of building capacity for a critical engagement with policy issues arising from globalization? The other important question we address is to what extent do the international composition of the Masters programs and the ensuing alumni work actually strengthen communication (and solidarity) among trade unionists across national borders. The assessment will rest on participatory observations, interviews with a wide range of stakeholders and outside evaluation reports.

Labor is facing enormous and increasingly complex problems in the global economy. In much of the world, labor unions have been in decline as market-oriented domestic reforms, trade liberalization, and corporate controlled global production networks seek to keep wages low and unions down. At the September 2013 Convention of the AFL-CIO, US union leaders declared that the labor movement was in crisis and that new strategies and alliances were needed to revitalize the movement. Significant attention was placed on alliances with worker centers and other community-based organizing initiatives. What was not discussed at the Convention, but is nevertheless recognized as being a key element of a revitalized labor strategy, is organized labor's alliances with progressive, labor-oriented academics and academic programs. In this vein, the AFL-CIO, along with several major US trade unions, has recently backed the efforts of the Global Labour University (GLU)<sup>1</sup> to extend its network of Master's Programs to the US.

The GLU initiative took an important step forward in February 2013, when at the invitation of the newly founded Center for Global Workers Rights at Penn State University, officials of several major US trade unions and the AFL-CIO joined representatives from the GLU and the International Labour Organization (ILO) to lay the foundation for bringing the GLU to North America. Initiated some ten years ago as an interdisciplinary network of university faculties, national and international trade union organizations and the ILO, the GLU offers master level courses for trade unionists from around the world. The main purpose of these Masters programs is to build capacity among trade unionists to develop policy expertise for the challenges of globalization. The GLU Masters program at Penn State, scheduled to start in the Fall of 2014<sup>2</sup>, will be the fifth campus in the GLU network, joining those already operating in Brazil, Germany, India and South Africa. As such, this was a needed and overdue step towards extending the global academic reach of the GLU and anchoring its presence together with labor movements in key regions of the world.

In this article, co-authored by active participants in this singular experiment, we will cover the development and thrust of the GLU, the reasoning behind its existence, its governance structures and course offerings, its students and alumni, and its links and activities beyond the individual Masters' programs. And we will endeavor to pose the necessary questions and provide answers regarding the actual impact of the GLU and the extent to which it has been and will be able in the future to fulfill its mission to the US and the global labor movement. The assessment will rest on participatory observations, interviews with a wide range of stakeholders and outside evaluation reports.

### **Why have a GLU?**

Strategies such as the liberalization of financial markets, deregulation, outsourcing and offshoring, as well as privatization impact directly or indirectly workers around the world. The outbreak of the subprime mortgage crisis in the US brought this point home very brutally as millions of workers around the world have lost their jobs (ILO 2009). While workers have to bear the brunt of the crisis, they have hardly a voice in the crisis management. This silence cannot be solely blamed on neoliberal media. It is also rooted in insufficient policy coordination, debate and expertise within the trade union movement

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.global-labour-university.org>.

<sup>2</sup> More information on this program can be obtained by writing to [lgwr@psu.edu](mailto:lgwr@psu.edu).

along with differences and a lack of inter-action within the broader spectrum of progressive social movements about basic policy alternatives. Evidence of this can be seen for example, in the fact that during the first year of the crisis one could not find a proposal of how to regulate finance capital on the websites of the US trade union federations, or of most other federations in the world.

Traditional trade union educational programs are not sufficient to surmount the hegemony of neoliberal ideas. First, knowledge needs to be created about the ever-changing capitalist relations from the local to the global level for discussing policy options and strategic approaches that prioritize the interests of working people. This knowledge cannot be bought through hiring experts since it does not exist in the textbooks and curricular of most universities. Furthermore knowledge itself is a process of constant deliberation that cannot be bought and stored, but needs to be appropriated by the social actors in order to become relevant for policy debates. Therefore, it is necessary to create space for the generation of such knowledge. In light of the marginalized position of critical scholars in academia, the isolated scholars can gain strength through networking, and global labor movements can acquire the knowledge, analysis and skills they need to more effectively respond to the challenges of global capitalism. Given the global character of the challenges to labor, the networks should span the continents.

Second, traditional forms of research will not produce the required knowledge. Only in the exchange of experiences among workers and their representatives will new insights into the workings of capitalist relations be gained. Teaching trade unionists, or even better, collaborating with trade unionists on research projects and even involving them in the teaching process, provides the necessary stimulus for conducting research with workers' interests on the mind. The result of such research will flow back into the classrooms and through publications and the participating trade unionists into the movement.

Third, the critical knowledge about the world economy will only become relevant in practice, if the labor movement strengthens its capacity to collaborate across borders. Political action limited to the nation state will not suffice for influencing rule setting at the global level. In contrast to management, trade unionists outside the Anglo-Saxon world are not familiar with today's *lingua franca* and do not have the chance for bonding at elite universities. The familiarity and trust necessary for collective action across national and language borders is surely enhanced by the classroom presence the GLU provides. Long-distance learning or short-term training courses can be a complement but not a substitute for the intensity of a year-long face-to-face exchange.

These three points call for a form of trade union education that (a) transmits knowledge about capitalist relations, (b) generates policy proposals on various levels in the interests of working people, and (c) supports the establishment and consolidation of trans-border networks.

The GLU is built on an alliance between the ILO, formal institutions of higher education, and the labor movement. This was a strategic choice to bring the potential and the complementary strengths of such a variety of actors together. The ILO has led the discussion on social justice in the UN System, and its international labor standards are, despite their well-known deficiencies, the most advanced instruments to protect workers' rights internationally. Universities can be the laboratories of new thinking and can provide the distant, critical view on policies that those actually involved in the daily struggles seldom have, assuming of course, that the necessary space for this kind of scholarship exists. Finally, the power

of argument is often limited without the argument of power. Trade unions know better, and experience more than anyone, the constraints, resistance and threats against those who try to put ideas and visions into practice.

As transnational companies, complex global trade and capital markets, and over-arching macroeconomic, fiscal and monetary policies increasingly determine labor market conditions, so the need increases for technical and theoretical skills to internationalize trade union policies at local, national and global level. In their daily work, most trade unionists are constantly caught up with fire-fighting, confronted with having to find instant responses to burning issues. Trade unions often need people now, and training – in their view – must be brief, targeted, and with immediate benefits for strengthening the organization and representing members. This short-termism is understandable, but it is impossible to close the skills' gap without investing beyond short-term needs. Today, lacking internal capacity, trade unions often feel they must buy external expertise. However, while studies and research can always be commissioned, it is of long-term, strategic importance that trade unionists themselves supplement their “on the ground” expertise with advanced, theoretical and analytical capacities. There is an unfortunate discrepancy between knowledge on the shelf and its application in practice: much as an outside academic consultant would never be able to understand the realities of labor organizing without ever having been a unionist, it is equally unlikely for a trade unionist to confront the global challenges of today without acquiring an adequate level of theoretical and analytical skills. A trade union with both types of expertise, however, will be best equipped to apply the knowledge to the realities of today and the challenges of tomorrow.

This is the reason that trade unions have increasingly recruited academically trained staff, and this is the reason why the Global Labour University developed a global, university-based qualification program for trade unionists. Effective responses to the challenge of globalization cannot be found in an isolated national context. A national strategy tends to push trade unions into a national competitiveness pact in order to outcompete and gain export markets. Never has there been a greater need to build international institutions and demand rules that will limit the global market power of the few to the benefit and the social well-being of the many.

Understanding the driving forces of global capitalism, appreciating cultural diversity, and recognizing the different legitimate priorities and interests of workers in different countries are necessary preconditions for policy alternatives based on unity, cross border solidarity, and cooperation. To this end, the GLU offers postgraduate programs and research opportunities for trade unionists and labor activists, combining academic studies with practical work through close cooperation with trade unions and field-based internships. With its five campuses, two in the global north and three in the global south, the GLU provides a “one world” research and learning environment for labor to investigate, analyze, and identify effective policy measures to meet the labor challenges of today. As such, it is not only a unique global network, but has a strong focus on the global south, replacing the traditional north-south knowledge transfer with transversal global cooperation. At each campus, trade unionists from different parts of the world study together, and the faculty exchange program between the universities ensures a diversity of progressive academic views.

## What does the GLU offer?

The curriculum of each of the Global Labour University (GLU) programs reflects the academic environment of each of the participating universities. While being developed at each site in accordance with the academic traditions and goals prevalent at that particular university, the GLU has drawn on the expertise of trade unions, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, and the ILO to create programs with a common understanding and suitable to addressing the global challenges facing labor. All programs are designed to offer a labor perspective of key global labor issues such as trade, global governance, macroeconomics, wage policies, the informal economy, development economics, international labor standards, and international trade union policies. The GLU network offers Masters Programs (which are all taught in English) in

- M.A.'Labour Policies and Globalisation' (University of Kassel & Berlin School of Economics and Law / Germany)
- M.A.'Labour and Development, Economic Policy, Globalisation and Labour'(University of the Witwatersrand / South Africa)
- M.A.'Social Economy and Labour' (University of Campinas / Brazil)
- M.A.'Globalisation and Labour' (Tata Institute of Social Sciences / India).

In the Fall of 2014 a new Master's program "Labor and Global Workers' Rights" is scheduled to commence at Penn State University. The program is situated in the Department of Labor Studies and Employment Relations and is being developed at the Center for Global Workers' Rights.

The GLU program at each of the participating universities in the network is offered with a particular disciplinary focus depending on its location within a certain faculty or department, or on the disciplinary orientation of the school. These unique global programs have been jointly discussed by the faculty at the participating universities with workers organizations from around the world. Each program is regularly reviewed and evaluated in cooperation with representatives from the major unions and their federations in that country. Each campus has a steering committee consisting of representatives from the teaching staff and university administration as well as members from the national trade union federations. Funding comes from many sources, mainly from the universities involved, the ILO, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the German Ministry for Development Cooperation. Both national and international trade unions contribute to the GLU by providing scholarships and internships as part of the regular curricula.

For the GLU network, there is a common understanding that a labor perspective on "globalization and labor" in the broadest sense represents the overarching thematic link across the diverse offerings. At the core of each of the curricula offered at each campus are courses on sustainable development, social justice, international labor standards, multinational companies and trade unions, economic policies and global institutions. A good example may be seen in the course "*Strategies of Multinational Corporations and Labour*" taught in the German program. This seminar focuses on theoretical and analytical approaches rooted in political science (global governance, new constitutionalism), sociology (changes in the labour process, social relations) and political economy to understanding the foundations of power of

both multinational corporations and labour in an international setting. The first half of the seminar is based on selected academic texts and consists of a general thematic overview of the key issues around which strategies of conflict and cooperation are developing and which impact power relationships between capital and labor have, especially in regard to global production networks. In the second half of the seminar, the students are divided into several small research groups. Using case material and empirical data from a variety of corporations, industries and sectors, each group prepares a case study of a campaign or a transnational union network for presentation. The presentations take place at a two-day workshop with representatives from various national and international unions, who provide their own input and are asked to comment on the work of the students. Grading is based on oral participation in class, the group case study research and presentation, and a final written analysis of the case study. The program at Penn State University seeks to follow in this tradition, making its course and scholarship on strategic corporation research and campaigns a cornerstone of its GLU program.

#### THE ENGAGE PROGRAM

In 2011, the GLU introduced the ENGAGE Program to supplement the MA program in Germany. During the previous years it had become evident, that there was a need for a shorter program that could offer certificate courses to trade unionists unable to enroll in an MA program, whether for lack of time or because they lacked the required academic credentials (a Bachelor's degree). ENGAGE was devised as a three and a half month academic trainee course followed by a month-long internship at one of the participating unions. The course work in the five modules "Global Finance", "Global Wage Policies", "Multinational Corporations", "Global Trade" and "Participating in Global Governance" has been designed to address and supplement each participant's transfer project. These projects are intended to focus on a particular issue or problem facing the participant's union or at his or her workplace. The research design and initial phases of the research are to be completed during the program, while the project's finalization and the implementation of its findings are to be carried out after the participant returns home.

After three increasingly successful years in Germany, the program has been relocated to the GLU program in South Africa, where its first intake was in 2013. In this new setting, the curriculum has been broadened to include topics such as labor and development. In addition, the students must complete a two-month research project. A large majority of the students who have participated in the German Engage program and those in the first intake in South Africa are from the Global South and for many of them it is their first opportunity to interact with fellow unionists and labor activists from other countries and enhance their skills to cope with the impacts of globalization.

#### INTERNSHIPS

Internships are an integral part of each of the MA programs (except for South Africa) and the ENGAGE program. Internships vary in length from six weeks (German program) to six months (India program). Most commonly, students do their internship in a union office, at the ILO, or at a labor-related research institute. This experience is found to have a directly positive influence on the re-integration of the

students at their place of work after graduation. It is both an opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge acquired during the first semesters to practical problems and to provide suggestions and ideas for concrete thesis topics and other academic papers. As a recent survey (see below) shows, a significant percentage of GLU alumni regard the internships to be highly relevant for their future career. And the reception by the organizations offering internships has been quite good as well, providing opportunities for strengthening ties between the unions involved.

### **Who are the students, where do they come from?**

The participating trade unionists come from around the world. As of 2013, students from nearly 60 different countries had attended GLU courses. According to our alumni statistics, the GLU has had one graduate from 22 different countries, 2-4 graduates from 17 different countries, 5-9 graduates from 12 countries, and more than 10 graduates from the five countries Germany (22), Brazil (20), India (18), Ghana and South Africa (12 each). A multi-cultural, multi-regional and multidisciplinary environment brings together students and lecturers from developing, transition and industrialized countries. Applicants range in age from the early twenties to the mid-forties, although there are exceptions. Women are strongly encouraged to participate, and indeed, as the graduate statistics show, the GLU has been quite successful in attracting women from the unions.

Because so many of the students come from countries in the global south or work for unions with very limited resources, the GLU endeavors to provide those qualified applicants without the financial means with scholarships. Although scholarship funds available to the GLU through its supporting institutions are definitely limited, students requiring support will have their living expenses either partially or fully covered during the program, as the four participating academic institutions in Germany, Brazil, India and South Africa are tuition-free<sup>3</sup>. Most scholarship awards are conditional on the endorsement by a trade union. Furthermore, these scholarships require the commitment of a supplementary contribution of 1500 Euro from other sources such as the supporting trade union or another donor.

### **What do the students do after graduation?**

Ten years after starting the GLU program, it is a good time to ask to what extent it has met all our expectations. Finding GLU alumni working for the labour movement around the world is especially crucial to the fulfillment of the goals of this program. According to a recent study commissioned by the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation in Germany (Wannöffel 2013), the program has achieved a significant level of success in this regard. By the end of 2012, some 300 trade unionists had graduated from the GLU. Among the survey participants, two-thirds of them reported that they are active in the labor movement or in labor research. GLU alumni today work for Global Union Federations or political foundations, are general secretaries of trade unions, work as full-time officials on economics, education, gender or international affairs in their trade union, as advisors to works councils, or freelance as labor consultants and journalists, or have continued their studies in labor-oriented PhD programs. Interestingly, less than 10% of the jobs they hold actually require an MA. But even if an MA degree usually did not lead to a

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<sup>3</sup> The issue of tuition fees at US universities has been a major hurdle to establishing a program in the US. However Penn State is endeavoring to make financial arrangements that will make the GLU program a reality in 2014.

position where it was required, 94 percent of respondents (men and women alike) agreed that they can apply all the acquired skills and knowledge successfully to their current position.

Women, who make up a slight majority (52%) among the graduates, replied to questions regarding career development very similarly as men. Although some traditional discriminatory practices in regard to pay were reported, the survey results showed no significant gender-based difference in career development (Wannöffel 2013: 37). Indeed, the majority of all alumni believe that their future professional development will benefit from the competencies they have acquired in the course of their studies at GLU. GLU alumni have at their disposal a combination of knowledge, competencies and social networks that are regarded as helpful for organizational development.

Beyond the educational value of participating in such a globally oriented program, an active and – to an extent – self-supporting alumni network has been established, through which alumni not only stay in contact, but also cooperate in comparative research projects. In the same survey referred to above, over 54 percent of responding alumni said that they are in contact with the official GLU network. Those same respondents noted that their contacts to the GLU after graduation had come mainly through the yearly conferences sponsored by the GLU or through attending the GLU's own summer schools. Beyond the mere fact of attendance, the alumni emphasized that their academic contacts to other GLU alumni and to the teaching staff were enhanced by their participation in small research groups, working on projects that are of mutual interest and go beyond the content of the study program. Interestingly, the whole range of post-study contacts is much broader than the above interaction would suggest. Results from the survey indicate that 86 percent of alumni continue to have informal and personal contacts with former fellow students long after graduation (Wannöffel 2013: 42)

One of the most important objectives of the Global Labour University is the establishment of global networks of trade union experts. A number of measures contribute to the fulfillment of this objective. First, the dispersion of applicants from a relatively large number of countries (nearly 60) has laid a broadly based foundation for making and exchanging learning experiences. Supported by multicultural workshops trade unionists not only from various countries but also from different types of trade unions (the spectrum includes institutionalized social partnership trade unionism, informal sector organizations, state controlled unions trying to change, militant left wing movements as well as ranging from multi-sectoral and industrial to craft and professional unions) get to know each other and learn about the specific political and economic contexts of other trade unions. Encouraged to do group work in the seminars, the Masters' students are challenged to improve their ability to work together with persons with different backgrounds. This usually leads to the kind of strong bonding that is the hallmark of other university degree programs with small student numbers, and we find that it is particularly strong among students coming from and returning to common worker organizing experiences. Second, supported by the German Academic Exchange Service the instructors and some of the students participate in the exchange among the GLU campuses. The faculty exchanges introduce components into the respective programs that have not yet been taught at the host campus. It also frequently leads to research collaborations. Third, during their Master's program the students are able to intern at trade unions, trade union federations, international organizations or research units close to the labor movement. In addition, trade unionists are invited as speakers to seminars or the students participate in



demonstrations or other trade union events in the host country. In some places, Berlin is a good example of this kind of inter-action. Local trade unionists volunteer to form a tandem with one of the students, helping them to learn more about the daily activities of the local unions through participation.

Fourth, at annual so-called "summer schools" organized by the GLU with funding from academic sources up to 30 graduates from the various GLU campuses exchange their trade union experiences, listen to lectures on current developments and, most importantly, develop the research design for case studies they conduct during the rest of the year. The topics of such research projects range from minimum wage policies (Herr/Kazandziska 2011) to current lived alternatives to capitalist production relations (Serrano/Xhafa 2012). Fifth, the GLU holds yearly conferences at which labor related research is presented and discussions with trade unionists are held. The GLU campuses alternate in hosting the annual conference. Many of the conference papers have also been published (Serrano, Xhafa and Fichter 2011; Mosoetsa/Williams 2012; Bhowmik 2013). The next conference will be held in May 2014 in Berlin prior to the World Congress of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). The GLU conference will be dedicated primarily to the presentation of research that has been conducted at all the campuses on how to combat economic inequality. It is intended to present the results of the research then to the ITUC at its congress.

A weekly online publication of the GLU, the Global Labour Column (GLC)<sup>4</sup> has created a forum for debate on global labor issues. Since 2009 it has been edited and managed at the Center for Corporate Strategy and Industrial Development, a leading research institute within WITS University in Johannesburg, South Africa. Over the years, several hundred authors – academics, trade unionists, journalists, politicians, social activists and policy administrators – have provided thoughtful and critical assessments of issues impacting labor locally, nationally and globally. The GLC has seen its mailing list grow exponentially, and since 2013 it has become available not only in English, but also in Russian, French and Spanish.

The GLU is also a partner of the International Center for Development and Decent Work (ICDD) at the University of Kassel, Germany. The aim of the ICDD is to do research and promote education that will contribute to achieving the United Nations Millennium Goal of "*full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people*" (ICDD 2013). The ICDD is an interdisciplinary unit funded primarily by German government funds. It maintains a strong network of universities doing similar research in Brazil, Ghana, India, Kenya, Mexico, Pakistan and South Africa.

### **Challenges facing the GLU**

To what extent does the GLU achieve its objective of building capacity for a critical engagement with policy issues arising from globalization? And to what extent do the international composition of the Masters programs and the ensuing alumni work actually strengthen communication (and solidarity) among trade unionists across national borders?

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.global-labour-university.org/index.php?id=221>

The administration of the GLU's international master programs comes with challenges for all participants: the coordinators, the instructors and the students. Selection criteria such as trade union experience as well as the regional and gender balance lead to a great diversity in the student body concerning academic qualifications and cultural backgrounds. The programs address these challenges quite successfully through multicultural workshops, special training in academic writing and individual support for weaker students. Nevertheless, there have been incidents in which students have violated academic standards (i.e. plagiarism); in a very few serious cases this led to expulsion from the program. Another challenge facing the GLU is the fact that many students are very much preoccupied with the problems of their countries of origin. For one, this inhibits their ability to learn from other trade unionists and from their experiences. Moreover, it reduces their ability to think more abstractly. These limitations are somewhat overcome through the so-called One World seminars in which the students present specific trade union challenges in their home countries. This satisfies their interest in reporting about their own experiences, but stimulates also comparisons with other trade union experiences. It thereby builds a bridge toward developing more theoretical understandings.

The main academic challenge remains in encouraging students to take up policy issues that affect labor but are not inherently considered to be a part of labor relations. Particularly in regard to their master's thesis, the GLU endeavors to support students in addressing broader issues such as economic and trade policies, transnational union campaigns, alliances with social movements, or global framework agreements. When it comes to the master's thesis topic, quite understandably many students prefer to stay in their comfort zone and write about labor relation issues. However, once this challenge has been mastered, many students have worked together with their fellow alumni on such broader issues in various alumni research projects.

Apart from the academic challenges, the different cultural backgrounds of the students lead also to organizational problems that need to be addressed openly and in the context of labor movement values of solidarity and self-organization. Since most of the GLU students have been working before, it is not very easy for them to return to life as a student with limited financial means. The programs try to deal with these expectations by handing out very detailed welcome brochures, by the already mentioned multicultural workshops and by appealing to responsibility and solidarity.

While students surely benefit from their new academic skills, the intercultural learning experience and the exposure to other trade union practices they sometimes feel that their newly acquired knowledge cannot be used directly for their practical daily work back home. This is always a recurring topic of discussions between the academic staff of each program and the students, as well as among the students themselves. Within the South African Engage program the GLU has developed the idea of practical research project conducted in conjunction with trade unions to have a collaborative practice with the unions and develop practical experience to translate their newly acquired skills in trade union work.

At the end of the day the performance of the GLU will be assessed in terms of the contribution of its graduates to strengthen the capacity of the trade union movement to influence global rule setting and to organize transnational solidarity. In this regard we stay optimistic.

## Conclusions

Labor is facing enormous challenges in the global economy, and the Global Labour University provides one important approach for addressing these challenges. By helping to prepare labor unions of the future with the theoretical understandings and analytical and research skills they need, the GLU seeks to contribute to the global labor movement a new generation of labor activists. As the AFL-CIO Convention in September 2013 highlighted, labor needs new alliances if it is to successfully move forward and respond to the needs of working people. These alliances include a broad spectrum of organizations geared to addressing worker issues from a range of employment relationships, from auto workers and secretaries to street vendors and nurses. Working with academics and academic institutions is an essential part of that broader strategy. Committed academics have a contribution to make by working with labor to develop policies and discussing strategies to achieve those policies. In the end, just as academics may help labor to achieve the research and training it needs to confront global capital, so too will the relationship between labor and academia keep the work of academics relevant to real world problems.

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