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Back to the Front line? Trade Unions in a Global Age

Daphné Josselin

While the rise or revival of transnational social movements and international non-governmental organizations has of late begun to generate a significant literature (see Chapter 1, this volume), international unionism continues to attract little interest outside labour activist circles (Moody 1997; Waterman 1998; Munck and Waterman 1999; see O’Brien et al. 2000 for an exception). Why? Three reasons stand out. Firstly, international trade unions are ‘old’ non-state actors, long predating the recent rise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs): the First International Association of the Working Man was created in London in 1864. In an age when class protest is being superseded by issue-based advocacy, their very structure seems to make them cruelly unfashionable. Secondly, their transnational dimension has to be qualified: the growing embeddedness of national trade unions in domestic structures of economic management after the Second World War corresponded to an obvious lack of autonomy in matters of foreign policy. Transnational labour activity did take place: on a bilateral basis, through umbrella organizations gathering national federations, and through International Trade Secretariats (ITSs) representing workers from specific industries. But national federations and international organizations often acted as fronts for one super-power against the other. Whether the end of the Cold War was enough to ‘denationalize’ the foreign activities of labour representatives is certainly debatable; one observer assimilates Western internationals to ‘state-funded development agencies’ (Waterman 1998: 113). Thirdly, the shift in employment to non-unionized sectors and workers has contributed to a plummeting in trade union membership world-wide.2 So has, arguably, the ideological ‘hollowing out’ brought about by the collapse of the former Soviet bloc. If trade unions have come to be regarded as dinosaurs, it is no wonder that they are deemed little worthy of investigation outside the fields of industrial relations and comparative political economy.

However, such perceptions overlook important developments in the nature of international politics as a result of globalization, and in the positioning of
international federations of trade unions within. These have contributed to propelling labour representatives back to the front lines of debates on international economic governance. Like many other non-state actors, trade unions have increasingly taken advantage of the structure of opportunity created by cheaper and faster communications, new centres of decision and the emergence of ‘global consciousness’. They have used the internet to coordinate industrial action on a cross-border basis. They have also collaborated more closely with other non-state actors in transnational issue networks. With terms like ‘class’ and ‘worker’ rapidly losing their mass appeal, many labour activists have worked to shift the debate in the direction of children, women and a broadened conception of solidarity. Efforts are now directed at the promotion of ‘core’, i.e. ‘human rights’ labour standards, while many are calling for a ‘new social unionism’ that does not only ally with the new social movements but also ‘incorporates their demands and responds to their practices’ (Waterman 1998: 217). This is manifest both at the level of international umbrella organizations, increasingly involved in ‘grand’ campaigning alongside other NGOs, and at that of the rank and file, with the emergence of ‘transnational workers’ networks’ bypassing the traditional structures of labour internationalism.³

Whether the new approach is likely to provide labour internationalism with a new lease of legitimacy is unclear. For one, I claim that the problems affecting international trade union federations cannot be solved through the adoption of new forms of communication or of a modified agenda centred on the defence of ‘universal’ values. From the outset, contradictions were embedded in the labour movement between the political aspirations of unionist leaders and their appeal to the rank and file. The rhetoric of international solidarity does not fit easily with the promotion of members’ interests, which often implies protection against other workers, either at home or abroad. Moreover, alliances with representatives of the so-called ‘new social movements’ are fraught with difficulty, and far from rejuvenating labour’s image might well lead to a further marginalization. As for efforts to acquire greater influence in international rule-making through indirect lobbying and wide-ranging campaigns, they can only provide labour groups with piecemeal agreements and a (limited) veto power. Change there may be, but the idea of a ‘new labour movement’, operating at the core of a global civil society, is at best premature.

The next section provides the background for our discussion, tracing the evolution of labour internationalism in the post-Second World War period: from umbrella organizations as instruments of statecraft on behalf of Cold War antagonists and colonial powers in the 1950s and 1960s, to active opponents of multinational corporations (MNCs) in the 1970s and 1980s, and on to ‘transnational activists’ in the 1990s, bent on shaping agendas and pressuring national and international bodies in accordance with ‘universal’ principles. I then discuss the results obtained by trade union federations in their fight against