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INTERNATIONAL LABOR SOLIDARITY: *The New Frontier*

ONCE EMPLOYERS WERE MOSTLY LOCAL; SO WERE UNIONS. WHEN LOCAL COMPANIES BECAME NATIONAL CORPORATIONS, unions too had to go national. Now capital has gone global. Unions have made intermittent efforts at international cooperation, but the obstacles are considerable. To overcome them, bridge building and information sharing across borders need to start long before individual campaigns begin, cementing relationships, fostering solidarity, and developing enough strategic knowledge for unions to provide mutual aid in the global arena. For labor to meet the challenge of globalization, the haphazard international labor cooperation of the past must be buttressed by proactive horizontal linkages between unions and workers at all levels.

WHY GO GLOBAL?

UNIONS ALL OVER THE WORLD ARE REELING before the historic changes summed up in the word “globalization.” At the core of most national trade union strategies is

the elimination of labor costs as a factor in competition. But globalization has undermined that strategy. As Morgan Stanley chief economist Stephen Roach put it, “Wage rates in China and India range from 10 percent to 25 percent of those for comparable-quality workers in the U.S. and elsewhere in the developed world. Consequently, offshore outsourcing that extracts products from relatively low-wage workers in the developing world has become an increasingly urgent tactic for competitive survival by companies in the developed world.”¹

Roach compares the movement of jobs to

the cheapest labor market to the financial practice of “arbitrage,” in which speculators move from one market to another to take advantage of a cheaper price. He calls the result “global labor arbitrage.” But the labor movement has long had another name for it: “the race to the bottom.”

Global labor arbitrage creates competition not just between first and third world countries and workers, but also among those in the third world. Mexico has lost up to 500,000 jobs and hundreds of firms to China, for example.² Wages on jobs outsourced from the United States to India are held down by competition from workers in Vietnam and the Philippines.

Some have argued that the labor movement can regenerate itself based on sectors that are immune to globalization. But today, a high proportion of both high- and low-skilled service jobs, whether in the private or the public sector, are as vulnerable to foreign outsourcing as manufacturing jobs. And the job market as a whole is affected by competitive liberalization and the global assault on public services and public pension and welfare programs; transnational ownership of service corporations and the loss of bargaining leverage; the increasing ability to outsource service sector and high-skilled jobs; and the spread of new remote technologies. (McDonald’s now has drive-through service windows where the order is taken by someone far from the restaurant—potentially on the other side of the world.) The result is stagnant or falling wages, cuts in benefits, and increased economic insecurity.³

Capital has, in effect, outflanked labor. No matter how strong a national labor movement, no matter how high its union density, it can be rendered powerless if employers can simply move production abroad. That is why unions

around the world are looking for new approaches to international labor cooperation.

International labor cooperation can work, and when it does, the payoff for workers can be substantial. Consider, for example, the 735 workers at a nonunion printing plant in Versailles, Kentucky. Their plant is owned by Quebecor World, a global commercial printing company with 35,000 employees in 160 facilities in 17 countries in North and South America, Europe, and Asia. Versailles workers tried to organize in 2001 but lost an NLRB election after Quebecor waged an aggressive anti-union campaign.⁴

Fortunately, workers in unionized Quebecor printing plants around the world recognized that their own wages, working conditions, and union security would be threatened if the corporation could simply block unionization and then shift its work to nonunion plants. Working with Union Network International (UNI, the international trade secretariat for service sector workers), they organized a campaign for an agreement guaranteeing all Quebecor printing workers worldwide the right to join a union and bargain collectively. Organized printing workers pressured the company through global days of action. Labor allies pitched in: the National Writers Union, for example, gathered letters of support from prominent writers, many of whose books are printed at Quebecor plants.

After a two-and-a-half-year campaign, Quebecor signed an agreement pledging not to oppose or interfere with its employees’ right to union representation, and establishing a quicker and fairer alternative to NLRB elections.⁵ At the end of August 2005, Versailles Quebecor workers voted three-to-one to join the Teamsters’ Graphics Communications Conference.⁶

OBSTACLES TO GLOBALIZING THE LABOR MOVEMENT

COOPERATION CAN BE TOUGH EVEN AMONG unions in the same country. Our discussions with labor activists identified some further obstacles that arise when unions try to cooperate across international borders. For example:

Beggar-Your-Neighbor

Unions are constantly tempted to pursue an aggressive economic nationalism, demanding that their own countries close their markets to foreign goods and services or that other countries open theirs. But in the era of globalization the global economy is less a collection of nations trading with each other than a single market in which corporations compete to exploit labor anywhere. This often renders economic nationalism counterproductive. Bush's pre-election tariff on steel imports promoted by steel companies and unions, for example, created few

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jobs for union steelworkers, but led to widespread job losses for American auto workers dependent on cheap imported steel. Recent

European restrictions on textile imports from China led not to jobs in Europe but rather to jobs in Bangladesh and Vietnam.

However ineffective in protecting jobs, such approaches have a devastating effect on international labor cooperation. They replace solidarity against employers with a struggle among workers over which countries can keep or lure corporate investment. Employers don't have to worry about workers in different countries ganging up on them if those workers are ready to cut each others' throats to beat each other out for jobs. When one of us recently identified ourselves to a Bangladeshi activist as someone involved with the American labor movement, their immediate response was, "Oh, you're the people who are trying to keep workers in my country from getting textile jobs."

Differences in Global Unions

Why not simply extend unions from one country into "global unions" representing workers in other countries? This indeed has happened in the United States and Canada, where law, politics, business structures, and labor traditions are similar. But in most cases, differences in the labor movement, industrial relations institutions, and labor law deter such an approach.⁷

In Scandinavia, for example, bargaining tends to be much more centralized than in the United States. Unions negotiate broad sectoral agreements with employer associations. As is the case in much of the world, health care, vacations, and aspects of the grievance procedure—subjects for collective bargaining in the United States—are addressed by national leg-

isolation. In Japan, in contrast, there are more than 30,000 unions, each representing white- and blue-collar employees of one employer. Joint bargaining is rare. Any group of workers in a company has the right to organize, demand recognition, and bargain with their employer, leading to forms of minority unionism unknown in the United States. Strategies that are crucial in one country may be worse than useless in another.

Accumulated Distrust

Mutual solidarity is grounded in trust. When American unions approach unions abroad, they face important—and in many cases well-grounded—reasons for distrust.

For many decades, U.S. unions worked hand-in-glove with the CIA and other agencies of the U.S. government to overthrow foreign governments, bribe politicians, break strikes, and favor unions that cooperated with U.S. corporations. Even in the Bush era, most of the money for AFL-CIO international operations continues to come from the U.S. government. How could foreign unionists not be suspicious of U.S. labor activities abroad? (The recent action by the AFL-CIO to demand the withdrawal of troops from Iraq as soon as possible may help open the door to greater trust by foreign unionists.)

More surprisingly, we have learned in conversations with ranking trade union officials in the United States, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, in the service, manufacturing, and telecommunication sectors, that global corporate campaigns can themselves sometimes be a source of distrust. In such campaigns, which have been used during strikes and organizing drives for more than a decade, embattled unions

often ask unions in other countries for help pressuring an employer. Sometimes, those they ask have good relations with the employer, or are at a sensitive stage in a collective bargaining process, or are reluctant to pressure the employer for other reasons. This can lead to hard feelings rather than long-term alliances.⁸

Campaigns initiated and controlled by unions in one country can generate distrust concerning their long-term commitments and agendas. For example, European trade unionists and allied NGOs questioned us sharply about whether U.S. unions would go the distance in a global Wal-Mart campaign. Their big worry was that U.S. unions are so focused on recruiting new members that as soon as they have organized a few U.S. stores, they'll call Wal-Mart a model employer and call off the campaign—leaving workers in the supplier firms in China and the developing world high and dry.

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Similar problems can arise even in campaigns initiated by a global organization. For example, at an August, 2005, meeting in Chicago, UNI launched a campaign to organize Wal-Mart worldwide. Management people from the French-based Carrefour—the world's second largest retailer after Wal-Mart—addressed the meeting and were presented as socially responsible employers. Some activists we talked to questioned whether the labor practices of the suppliers to these companies were

any different from Wal-Mart's. Long-term trust building requires taking the interests of allies into account.

These obstacles and many others must be taken seriously—but they are not insurmountable. Here are a few examples of promising strategies for effective international union cooperation.

Horizontal Cooperation

Traditionally, unions have relied on Global Labor Federations (GLFs, formerly called International Trade Secretariats) to link unions in broad industrial categories like transportation workers and service workers around the globe. While these organizations have often played an important role in promoting international labor cooperation, they have two problems. First, they are small, severely understaffed organizations that are equipped to stimulate but hardly to conduct the vast work of international labor cooperation. Second, they are largely bound by rules of protocol that require communication between workers in different countries to pass from an affiliated national union or federation in one country through the international organization to the affiliated national union or federation in another country. This cumbersome procedure can impede as well as promote contact and cooperation among those who work for the same company or in the same industry or occupation in different countries.

More horizontal links are possible. In 2002, French union representatives on the board of France Telecom noticed that a declaration of insolvency for its recently acquired German subsidiary, MobilCom, was on the agenda for the upcoming meeting. The union representatives interpreted this as part of a “rectification plan” to make employees pay for the huge debts

incurred by the company's global acquisition binge during the high-tech bubble. The French unionists immediately tried to contact German workers at MobilCom through UNI, but found that its German affiliate had no members at MobilCom. But some French union activists remembered meeting people from the German metalworkers union IG Metall at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre. A few emails later they were directly in touch with some IG Metall members at MobilCom.

Soon, German and French workers developed an aggressive plan to expose France Telecom's plans. The energy of the French response helped activate the German workers, who had limited experience with unions. Rallies were held with both German and French workers participating. Pressure was put on the German government to help the German company, saving it from imminent closure. An agreement for more orderly cutbacks and a good severance plan were negotiated.

The MobilCom story indicates how horizontal channels of communication can make possible direct cooperation among workers in different countries. Alain Baron, a union representative for the French union SUD-PTT on the France Telecom Board, observes: “The cross border unity established in the France Telecom group is indicative of a new social climate. The attacks of the multi-nationals on jobs, their ability to relocate, do not often meet with an adequate response from the unions. Enclosed in their local routine interests, bogged down in inter-apparatus negotiations, the traditional unions often find it hard to establish contacts which can mobilize employees in several countries against the same employer. The international structures of trade unions, when they exist, are in general too distant from the union

activist on the ground.” He adds that new venues like the World Social Forum are important to establish worker to worker links. “The easiest way to cross the Rhine was through crossing the ocean.”⁹

Strategic Alliances

Often, international labor cooperation is marked by campaigns that are short on time and fail to sustain the international linkages that they forge, once the campaign is won or abandoned. Unions also need to consider strategic alliances—commitments between unions with strong common interests to work together on common projects on an ongoing basis.

The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) has been at the forefront of building bridges with their Mexican counterparts. In the early 1990s, faced with the passage of NAFTA, the UE entered into what it called a “Strategic Organizing Alliance” with the Mexican Frente del Trabajo (FAT). Together, the two unions instituted regular worker-to-worker exchanges, published a monthly electronic periodical, built worker centers and joint organizing teams, and regularly informed their members about what they were doing and why it mattered to them.

The UE/FAT alliance worked to ensure that workers on both sides of the border benefited from coordinated activities. FAT members, for example, traveled to Milwaukee to provide support for the UE organizing campaign at a local foundry, where they allayed Mexican immigrant workers’ concerns that the UE might be similar to “company” unions they knew all too well in Mexico. On behalf of FAT members, the UE filed the first complaint under the

Mexico-U.S. labor rights “side agreement” that accompanied NAFTA—charging General Electric and Honeywell with labor rights violations. It has also built an alliance between unions in the United States, Canada, and Mexico to enforce the organizing rights of Mexican workers at the Echlin auto parts company.

Framework Agreements

About two dozen global firms with more than two million workers have signed “framework agreements” that resemble the Quebecor agreement described earlier in this article. These agreements differ from corporate codes of conduct in that they are negotiated with unions and provide for some kind of union participation in implementation and monitoring. The Declaration of Social Rights and Industrial Relations signed by Volkswagen, the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF), and the Eu-

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ropean Works Council, for example, requires the company to provide its workers worldwide the right to form unions, protection against discrimination, a safe working environment,

and minimum wage standards consistent with local conditions. Volkswagen was pressured to accept the agreement by Western European workers who already have those rights; as Robert Steiert of the IMF puts it, the agreement is most important for “workers at plants to be built or taken over by Volkswagen, especially in lesser developed countries.”¹⁰

Such agreements are no panacea. So far, they cover only those workers directly employed by the companies, not the growing number of workers employed by suppliers contracted by the firms. In the VW agreement, the company pledges to “encourage” its suppliers to abide by the agreement, but it does not stop Volkswagen from contracting with labor rights violators. The auto unions see the need to tighten this language as an important next step. Indeed, if they do not find a way to extend decent wages and standards throughout the supplier chain, they will find that they represent fewer and fewer workers.

Framework agreements are made between big international bureaucracies on both sides of the labor-management divide. The communication that they foster is more likely to be among high union officials and top company officials than among workers, shop stewards, and local union leaders in different countries. This can limit both the effectiveness of the agreements and their capacity to build a movement. Implementation and monitoring of framework agreements can be difficult where no union exists in a workplace.

But, in part because of the limited staff and resources of the federations that sign them, some of the framework agreements have led to the development of global networks of participating unions to directly monitor them. These networks, and the general flow of information

which often results from these agreements, help workers identify common interests and problems, and discrepancies in company policies.¹¹

Some U.S. trade unionists dismiss framework agreements because they usually have not led to new members—the primary focus of U.S. trade union strategy. In contrast, many trade union officials and activists we talked with in Europe who have experience with framework agreements see them as a first step in global union coordination at the firm or industry level.

Here are some concrete steps unions can take to make international labor cooperation less haphazard and more proactive:

Create Efficient Communication Channels at All Levels

- *Increase exponentially the amount of information flowing among workers and their organizations at all levels.* This will require significant resources for everything from research to translation services. Regular information exchanges with unions in other countries can be facilitated by internet-based knowledge networks; a Global Labor Solidarity E-Newsletter presenting experiences and analyzing lessons of cooperative efforts; and periodic conferences. Communication—swapping stories and reflecting on issues, strategies, and tactics—should involve local unions, staff at all levels, and membership.
- *Institute regular worker-to-worker exchanges.* Traditional labor connections are funneled through national and international federations. But, to build support for the radical shift toward a global labor movement, workers need to be continually “rubbing shoulders” with workers

from other countries who work in the same companies, industries, and occupations. Such exchanges will not only build trust and solidarity, but also position workers to assist and encourage their own unions to go global.

- *Build trust overseas by offering concrete services to workers and unions in other countries.* One way to overcome suspicions and cement relationships is to begin offering services to unions and their allies abroad. At a recent conference on outsourcing, for example, Indian unionists asked

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U.S. unionists to provide on-demand information about U.S. companies. Latin American labor networks have similarly requested regular updates on American trade policy and political developments. Initiating networking overseas by offering such services will begin opening doors and building the trust needed for ongoing coordinated action.

Create Global Networks and Alliances Before the Battles Begin

- *Start reaching out to potential allies.* Unions need to connect with national and local

unions to build relationships far in advance of asking workers in other countries to commit risky acts of solidarity. Such prebattle networking should also include foreign civil society organizations and allied government officials.

- *Develop “intelligence” about countries, unions, and industries around the globe to spot new trends and construct new strategies.* As any global corporation knows, going global requires staying abreast of an increasingly complex set of variables, such as national labor laws, political developments, and economic conditions. Seeking regular “intelligence” about specific countries and global industries can ensure unions that they are not “flying blind” in the global arena.

- *Utilize immigrant members.* Fifteen percent of the U.S. workforce are immigrants. They are playing a critical role in the growth of unions in low-wage service industries. They also form a vital resource for forming links to established and nascent labor movements around the world. Unions should provide resources to help them utilize their ties with their home countries to promote ongoing international connections.

Connect the Local and the Global

- *Build a global strategy at the local level.* Today, even local unions must confront global corporations either at the collective bargaining table or in organizing campaigns as multinational corporations extend their reach in the economy. Unions should develop a set of practices and pro-

protocols at all levels to build global perspectives and global action into local campaigns. This should include creating task forces of workers specializing in bringing international pressure to bear in local campaigns through direct contact with unions and workers in other countries. The Quebecor and France-Telecom campaigns described above are examples of how global actions can help local campaigns.

- *Establish educational programs about globalization so that workers can participate in an informed way in building a global labor movement.* Unions need to begin telling workers the facts demonstrating what they already know viscerally: globalization is affecting their lives and is here to stay. Such education is politically essential for dialogues about shifting resources into global networking and campaigns.

Take the Offensive on Global Public Policy Issues

- *Promote alternatives to neoliberal policies at local, state, and national levels.* Globalization has baffled both Democratic and Republican lawmakers. This is an opportunity for unions to take the lead in defining solutions to outsourcing, contingent work, privatization, and other public policy issues. By framing public debates, developing expertise, and pro-

posing alternative solutions, unions have an opportunity to be perceived as innovative and aggressive in solving workers' problems.

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- *Utilize immigrant members to educate the public, media, and politicians.* Immigrant workers are a rich source of knowledge and experience about the global economy. They can help labor spearhead a progressive global agenda on migration in the global economy; develop alternatives to destructive trade deals that harm workers in both the North and the South; and launch a new discussion about human, labor, and citizenship rights in the age of globalization.

Unions have tried, with varying success, to utilize international solidarity in particular struggles. Building a global labor movement next requires something further: proactive approaches designed to make international communication and cooperation part of the daily practice of the labor movement at local, national, and international levels. ■

Notes

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3. For further discussion of white-collar and service sector outsourcing, see "Outsource This? American Workers, the Jobs Deficit and the Fair Globalization Solution," North American Alliance for Fair Employment, April 2004. www.fairjobs.org.

4. For examples of Quebecor anti-union activities, see "Quebecor is cited as unfair and unsafe," Graphic Communications Conference of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, <http://www.gciu.org/archives/04j-a/quebecor04ja.shtml>.

5. The new election process provides for a neutral arbitrator to supervise a secret ballot election within 21 days of a request by the union when at least 30 percent of employees in a bargaining unit demonstrate their support for union representation. "Quebecor vows to play fair during organizing campaigns," Graphics Communications Conference, International Brotherhood of Teamsters. <http://www.gciu.org/whatsnew/05m-j/queb05mj.shtml>.

6. "Workers bring union to Quebecor in Versailles," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, September 2, 1005.

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9. *International Viewpoint*, December 2002, and interview.

10. Andrew Bibby, "Multinationals Adopt Framework Agreements." <http://www.andrewbibby.com/socialpartners/multinationals.html>

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