



Review Symposium on Jamie McCallum's *Global Unions, Local Power: The New Spirit of Transnational Labor Organizing*

Reflecting on Global Unions, Local Power

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I began the research for my book in 2009 with a great deal of skepticism as to the possibilities for authentic labor transnationalism. National or even local union victories seemed so hard to come by; how could unions win across national boundaries that were complicated by geography, language, identity, etc? Over the course of writing this book, I was convinced that the G4S campaign, and a few others, represented a decisive answer—not only was it possible, it was already happening. Sometimes it seemed unions couldn't win locally precisely because they were not campaigning globally. In certain industries, and especially in property services, the global arena provided an avenue for unions to effect change across a wide geographic span, and at different scales.

The intervening years since the book was published have altered my view again. Below I would like to reflect on some of those changes, provide some updates on the book, and offer some thoughts about the future of this field. The book featured the experiences of labor movements in the global South—South Africa and India in particular—but also those in mainland Europe, the UK, and Eastern Europe. Of those places, South Africa offered the most promise as a strong ally



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in a global campaign. With the help of UNI and SEIU, the union there, the South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union (SATAWU), went through a robust rehabilitation of its internal organizing commitments in order to transform itself into a union that can bring in new workers. As a result, throughout the highly collaborative campaign, union membership among security guards spiked from 8,000 to 36,000. Moreover, the ideological orientation of the South African labor movement, and its close affiliations with the Communist party, meant that it was easily predisposed toward international cooperation. Nevertheless, amid the divorce of the unions and the African National Congress, SATAWU splintered and UNI says it no longer has a role in the larger campaign.

In India, where challenges were stronger, UNI and its local affiliates still made gains. Union membership among Indian security guards grew from 1,500 to 17,000 in Bangalore, and from 12,000 to 20,000 in Kolkata, for example. This activity translated in 30% to 100% wage increases over the past nine years in addition to benefits increases and a panoply of worker rights victories. As in South Africa, however, most of the unions that worked alongside UNI have withdrawn from the campaign. UNI still works with the Bangalore-based unions highlighted in the book and a 2016 UNI document lists an active property services campaign in Ahmedabad.

Perhaps one weakness of the book was to underestimate how precarious such global alliances and relationships can be. It is of course possible that unions are making use of the global agreement where it is in force, without working collaboratively with UNI or other unions. In Malawi, and some other places mentioned in the book, unionists seemed on occasion to spontaneously take ownership of the framework agreement and use its neutrality clause to apply local pressure, without the assistance of UNI or others. But these cases were rare and always bubbled to the surface or echoed back to Geneva, where UNI was invariably asked to intervene in some way. Today, UNI has four active campaigns in Latin America and one in India.

Despite completing interviews around the globe, my primary interest was always the fate of the American case. Did sending resources around the world ever boomerang back to help U.S. workers, whose dues were funding at least some part of the campaign via SEIU's seed money to UNI property services? The impression I received was that many staff leaders within SEIU in the U.S. thought the answer was "no," yet I felt it was "yes." This discrepancy came from the trust I placed in my interview partners in Europe and around the globe who felt the G4S agreement would significantly aid SEIU in organizing all security guards, not just those in G4S. At the time I wrote the book, SEIU was able to use the G4S agreement to help organize 10,000 security guards. Years later, this assessment still seems accurate, with 50,000 new security guards potentially joining the union because they work within the orbit of an agreement that covers their company.

UNI also gained important lessons from the G4S campaign that happened after the book came out. Since the signing of the framework agreement with G4S, the property services division

of UNI, which organizes security guards, has grown by 100,000 members. According to Christy Hoffman, director of the property services division of UNI and the primary leader of the G4S campaign, some of the strategies used in the G4S campaign have been deployed with success against other large companies.

But the challenges of cross-border work are even more complicated than usual, given the renewed attack on U.S. unions. The largest single contributor to the UNI Property Services war chest is SEIU, which has recently announced plans to reduce significantly its staff in reaction to the attack on unions already underway by the Trump administration and other Republicans. Will it continue to fund global labor activism when there is a dire threat to workers in the U.S. and its resources are even more strained? My best guess is that it will. Though SEIU has reduced its global department staff, its largest active campaign to raise the minimum wage floor to fifteen dollars per hour has had an important global dimension. With copycat campaigns in Japan, the Philippines and New Zealand, it represents a third wave of global struggles that have rippled out from worker movements in the U.S.—first Justice for Janitors, then Stand for Security, and now Fight for \$15. One organizer in my book referred to this process, where a campaign strategy and its corresponding “brand” go viral, as “open source organizing.” It is unlikely that a global campaign will soon receive the kind of resources that the G4S campaign had at its disposal, yet that was true before the U.S. elections as well.

Aside from the empirical insights to be gleaned from wide-ranging interviews and ethnographic content, I hoped that my book would inaugurate a larger conversation about a labor union strategy I called governance struggles, in order to flesh it out. This didn’t happen to a great degree and as a result the concept remains undertheorized.

I argued that a governance struggle can be thought of as one of many strategies to “subordinate the rules-based logic of private companies to democratic oversight by workers and their unions” (3). While the term “governance,” probably more widely used in Political Science, typically implies an authority vested in non-state actors, I redefined the term to apply to worker struggles that sought to enforce new “rules of engagement” with large companies. A great exemplar of this strategy are the codes of conduct won by anti-sweatshop activists that create a new arena of labor standards. Another are the neutrality clauses that unions are sometimes able to win that force an employer to surrender its right to fight the union organizing drive. Ultimately, I concluded that the G4S agreement “helped workers build power not because it won them new rights but because it made new rules” (145). The distinction between rules and rights seems important, though my book inadequately addresses the differences. Over the years through subsequent conversations with scholars, labor activists, and lawyers, this concept has become

clearer to me.¹

Central to Nelson Lichtenstein's *State of the Union*, is the contention that the rights consciousness of the 1960s and 1970s served to undermine the solidarity of American unions by deflecting worker struggles from the workplace to the courts. Since that time, he argues, 'If a new set of work rights was to be won, the decisive battle would take place, not in the union hall or across the bargaining table, but in the courts and the legislative chambers' (Lichtenstein 2013: 192). My experience tells me that unions often lose in that arena. And where workers do win state-sanctioned rights, they are unable to make use of them without a robust organizing program anyway. Moreover, Frances Fox Piven (2008) argues that movements show their power when they break rules, not when they exercise rights. Can rulemaking be as powerful as rulebreaking?

However, it is possible that rights, broadly conceived, are fundamentally better ways to mobilize workers and communities. Rights are principled statements of entitlement and social access that allow people to make viable and legitimate claims on governments, companies, and other entities. As labor lawyer Cesar Rodriguez put it to me during a 2014 exchange, "rights are enabling." Rules, by contrast, come "from outside" and are very often there to limit rather than expand collective action.

But what if labor makes the rules? Certain forms governance can also be seen as empowering because workers can be said to have a genuine impact within their own workplaces. Take, for example, the German model of codetermination, where unions help establish production schedules and output quotas, and other rules governing the work process and employment relationship—wages, hours, benefits, vacation, pension investments, and so on. Another example is the framework agreement signed between UNI and ISS, another large property-services firm. The agreement includes an 'organizing fund' seeded by the company.

The risk of these types of arrangements is that unions become merely junior-level managers of their work lives. But that is a risk that can be avoided, if taken seriously. The G4S agreement, for example, represents what Müller-Jentsch (2004) calls a 'conflict partnership'. The union inserted itself into the boardroom by force and has demanded the company accept a series of its demands. While this has granted them less voice in the quotidian workplace than a more friendly partnership, the risks associated with bureaucratization are decreased.

How might the field of global labor studies change, or be shaped by current events?

First, the Trump administration will be as potentially destructive for global union collaboration as it will be for domestic union rights. An anecdote might help explain why.

Several years ago, I was lucky to be included in an American Sociological Association

¹ In particular, I credit the labor lawyer Cesar Rodriguez and my collaborator Marissa Brookes (who is currently writing a book on labor transnationalism) with helping me sharpen my analytical approach to the concept.

delegation to Beijing led by Katie Quan and Chris Tilly to meet Chinese labor activists and speak at a conference. During my presentation, one attendee from the pro-democracy movements in Taiwan objected to what he felt was a large bias for U.S.-style unionism, which he interpreted as corrupt, imperialistic, and undemocratic. I believe that characterization of the U.S. labor movement is incorrect today, however accurate it might have been at one point. There are simply better critiques to level at U.S. unions. So I stand behind my contention in the book that American unions have much to offer their counterparts in other places, especially Europe. However, this incident forced me to realize the significance of the popular impression that U.S. unions face around the globe, or the self-image they may even inadvertently propagate.

Today, for example, the surprisingly cozy relationship between with the AFL-CIO and the Trump administration could have ripple effects around the world. If American labor is unnecessarily timid in the face of a racist, xenophobic, business tycoon—as it is today—it will adversely impact the ability of any U.S. unions, no matter their political compass, to find willing global collaborators.

Perhaps some current activist work will yield new scholarly contributions. My book defends a relatively top-down strategy brought about by union leadership, an unpopular position. In the end, I felt that global unionism at the scope of the G4S campaign required the kind of omniscient bird's eye vision that could only come from a well-oiled bureaucracy. I was in no way downplaying the significance of the ground campaigns of workers. But I had grown weary of the scholarly tracts that seem to conflate the form of politics with its content. In this case, I had genuine faith in the fairness and political acumen of leaders at multiple levels. In some ways, this conclusion led me toward a position that over-emphasized the impossibility of authentic bottom-up labor transnationalism.

Since then, however, I began working with ReAct, a France-based labor activist group that has managed to coordinate serious campaigns between French unions and disparate places like Cambodia, the Ivory Coast, Morocco, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. Using community organizing tactics borrowed from U.S.-based organizations, it has waged successful campaigns with activists at rubber plantations in Cameroon and for workers in Moroccan call centers, the latter of which also had assistance from UNI. After building global networks of union leaders, it held simultaneous international solidarity actions against the French company ST Micro in France, Italy, and Africa. In 2015, I served as an adviser to several ReAct organizers who worked on campaigns and research via a generous grant from the geography journal, *Antipode*, which has published excellent scholarly work on global labor issues.

ReAct is a young organization, still very much a work in progress, but it is a gentle reminder that a grassroots movement can wage legitimate cross-border campaigns. Although not a substitute for large labor institutions with resources and experience, groups such as this have

much to contribute to the future of a global labor movement.

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