

TRADE UNION RENEWAL AND LABOR TRANSNATIONALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE CASE OF SATAWU

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This article links labor transnationalism with local union revitalization. Through an in-depth case study, it describes the renewal of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union as a result of its participation in a global union campaign. This effort first expanded formal rights for workers through the establishment of an International Framework Agreement, which then promoted deeper mobilization from below. I conclude that global unionism can inspire local renewal processes, and that strategies which guarantee the formal rights of workers are effective when used in tandem with local mobilization-based strategies.

In response to a general “crisis of unionism” in the advanced capitalist countries, trade unions began experimenting with new modes of struggle in the late 1980s in order to face the challenges presented by globalization.¹ Rarely, however, has transnational collaboration been considered a viable strategy for local union renewal. In fact, some scholars have found that global advocacy networks and cross-border campaigns offer false promises (Burawoy 2010), or, worse, undermine the efficacy of local action (Seidman 2008). By contrast, this article argues that global collaboration can empower local unions. To do this, I undertake a case study of the revitalization of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) as a result of its involvement in a transnational campaign in the private security industry.

The campaign is led by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and UNI Global Union (UNI), and is an effort to organize all security guards employed by G4S, the world’s largest private security firm and the largest employer on the African continent. The campaign occurred in two phases. In the first phase, SATAWU participated in the global effort to win an international framework agreement which established new rights for private security guards around the world. These included basic labor standards and rights to minimum wages, nondiscrimination, and overtime pay. Most importantly, it included the right to organize a union without management interference.

In phase two, SATAWU used this formal agreement as a platform for organizing the unorganized and deeper mobilization within the rank and file,

resulting in dramatic membership gains. This article draws two primary conclusions. The first is that labor transnationalism can instigate local union renewal processes. The second is that global strategies that secure formal rights for workers within multinational companies are most effective when complemented by local mobilization-based strategies to implement and defend such rights. Though there is a debate among legal scholars and social movements theorists as to the importance of rights, this case shows that formal rights are useful primarily in the context of a mobilization-based campaign.

Union Revitalization, Labor Transnationalism, and Worker Rights in South Africa

The growing literature on union revitalization offers the most comprehensive approach to understanding the impact of new union strategies. A theme that runs through almost all the literature is that the current conjuncture encourages experimentation with innovative forms of social movement unionism, and that these strategies can overcome the failures of tepid business unionism. South African unions are younger than their Northern counterparts, and less intimately familiar with the “oligarchic tendencies” that inspired debates on union revitalization in the North (Webster and Buhlungu 2004). Nevertheless, strategic experiments documented within the revitalization literature in the U.S. and Europe do have important echoes in South Africa.

For example, as almost everywhere, new organizing is a central concern, especially as membership within the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has roughly stabilized at 1.7 million since the late 1980s, though it enjoys less density today. Increased political activity has been another fundamental aspect of renewal efforts, though it operates counterfactually in South Africa. In SATAWU, an overreliance on the state has encouraged a tendency to depend on political solutions to union problems, solutions which are becoming increasingly difficult to achieve. COSATU’s zigzagging “road to the right” (Lehulere 2003) toward neoliberal corporatism (Catchpole and Cooper 2003) since the late 1980s has made the federation much less receptive to worker interests. Whereas in the North, unions have suffered from increasing marginality, South African unions have languished inside a paternalist state that has selectively promoted their interests, though not their autonomy.

Tait (2008) and Brecher and Costello (1990) tell us that revitalization in the U.S. was ushered in by an influx of activists from community organizations and the international solidarity movements, including the anti-apartheid struggle, thus demonstrating the effects of coalition building with new social movements. The literature often points to interfaith movements and so-called red-green coalitions, especially the Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment, which brought radical ecologists and mainstream unionists into the collective fray against NAFTA, Fast Track, and the Seattle WTO Ministerial (Hurd, Milkman, and Turner 2003). While some theorists are quick to point out the unlikely coalition of “identity movements” and labor, many new social

movements in South Africa share a political agenda strikingly similar to labor's priorities of the 1970s and 1980s, with an emphasis on economic redistribution, community control, antiprivatization, and social revolution.

This case study describes an example where global unionism actually has significant local impacts. Through works councils, international mergers, ad hoc coalitions, sympathetic industrial action, transnational advocacy networks, and information sharing, unions have recently attempted to act across borders, with occasional success (Bronfenbrenner 2007). Recently, it seems global union federations (GUFs) have played a larger role, coordinating transnational collective bargaining (Lillie 2010) and dynamic global campaigns (Wills 2002).

The primary strategy of the global unions has been to negotiate international framework agreements (IFAs) with multinational corporations. IFAs are a kind of social partnership, contracts between GUFs and multinational corporations that attempt to secure labor standards throughout a company's direct operations, and, occasionally, its supply chain. Worker rights are thereby made viral, diffused by human resource management practices through transnational production and service delivery networks. Corporations see them as a path to labor peace, especially in the global South, thus creating a stable workforce that can promote market growth. As a result of a renewed mission for GUFs (Fairbrother and Hammer 2005), there has been an explosion of IFAs signed in the last decade: from 5 in 2000 to 83 as of March 2011.

However, like other forms of social partnership, global agreements have rarely been considered vehicles that promote revitalization. Justifiably, scholars have portrayed the IFA implementation process as a bureaucratic formality between partners that does not advance worker interests. In most cases the "new relationship" under the IFA rubric constitutes a regulatory environment in which basic power asymmetries have been largely, if not wholly, preserved. The simultaneous popularity and apparent impotence of the strategy to benefit workers is perhaps best illustrated by Lerner (2007), who has expressed disdain for IFAs in writing even as the union for which he is a chief strategist (SEIU) has made them a basic goal:

The time for these types of global framework agreements has come and gone. These general statements of principle are too weak and it is proven that they cannot be enforced. They should be abandoned . . .

Other unionists share his skepticism. An article by four staffers of the International Union of Foodworkers (IUF), which pioneered the use of global agreements by signing the first one with the French company, Danone, in 1989, has since announced a moratorium on IFAs due to their perceived weakness and lack of effective implementation (Buketov et al. 2007).

Scholars have largely analyzed IFAs as a stand-alone strategy from one of two perspectives: As a "new frontier" in international industrial relations and human resource management (Muller, Platzer, and Rüb 2008; Riisgaard 2005; Royle and Ortiz 2006); or, in the absence of a legal apparatus that can safeguard workers in multinational companies, an emerging instrument of global

governance (Croucher and Cotton 2009; Schömann et al. 2008; Stevis and Boswell 2007). However, both perspectives often reach similar conclusions: IFAs often offer empty promises, delivering proclamations of rights without any obvious mechanism to implement or enforce them.

The case of SATAWU demonstrates that the negative assessment of global agreements may be premature. This study illustrates that the formal rights secured in the IFA promoted the ability of SATAWU to organize more workers by restraining the company from campaigning against the union. This legitimated the union's function, inspired an increased role for rank-and-file activists, and prompted a turn toward renewal. Though the campaign documented here represents a touchstone of sorts in global unionism, it is not an isolated example. Other unions have been inspired to replicate its strategy with positive outcomes in Latin America and elsewhere in Africa. I conclude therefore that IFAs can be viewed as opportunity structures that can galvanize transnational collaboration and worker activism.

Heeding Turner's (2005) call for a multilevel approach, and the methodological value Burawoy (2009) ascribes to the "global turn" in labor sociology, this case study attempts to locate union revitalization processes within two interacting scales—global and local. The findings here are based on approximately fifty interviews with union leaders and staff in Johannesburg, Geneva, and the U.S. Additionally, I was able to observe meetings of unions in South Africa and had considerable access to union documents, reports, and white papers. I also conducted interviews with corporate leaders and mid-level managers in London and Pretoria. As a component of an investigation into renewal, my fieldwork also examines how unions navigate transnational relationships along the North–South divide. It therefore offers a more "micro" approach than is often taken to labor transnationalism, illuminating problems that recent scholarship has not addressed, such as the contradictory impact of global unionism on local priorities.

South African Unionism Postapartheid

While the unions of the OECD countries experienced deep crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, the South African trade union movement emerged as a model of democratic, militant unionism, dedicated to the dual mission of fighting political apartheid while simultaneously improving working conditions amidst the "double transition" to economic liberalization (Webster and Adler 1999). The concurrent struggle for community/class-wide liberation as well as workplace bargaining, what has been called "social movement unionism" (Von Holdt 2003), became an inspiration for labor movements around the world.

After 1994, however, the agreement the African National Congress (ANC) struck with the World Bank required that South Africa phase out tariffs in twelve years. Instead, it voluntarily accomplished it in eight (Desai 2002), reducing import taxes by almost two-thirds between 1994 and 1998 alone (ILO 1999). The state attained competitiveness in automobile manufacturing

and steel production, the heavily unionized Fordist sectors, through a transition to a leaner production model (Wood and Psoulis 2001). After one year of the ANC's neoliberal growth program, the news media reported the unofficial conclusion of the "Honeymoon with the West" as the Rand fell 25 percent against most other foreign currencies (Koelble 1999). The increasing inability of labor to organize the swelling ranks of precarious workers since 1994 contributed to declines in membership, density, and union vitality within the workplace, a crisis that deepened in 2008 alongside the global economic slowdown.

Some remained cautiously optimistic that although the bases for social movement unionism had faded, COSATU unions nonetheless remained committed to it (Hirschsohn 1998). Others showed that the hallmarks of social unionism have eroded in two pivotal ways. First, by encouraging the redirection of class war from the workplace and community to party and state, trade unions have come to rely on the ANC to deliver changes, rather than agitating and organizing. Second, the autonomy of the trade unions, precisely the source of dynamism and promise in the 1980s, has been definitively reduced by dint of their close affiliation to the ANC (Bramble 2003). One former SATAWU staffer explained:

I was in the anti-apartheid movements as a student when I was young. Then I got in the union movement. I remember social movement unionism before it had its name. But now it exists in name only.

South African unions, and especially COSATU affiliates, have responded to these structural changes with an ad hoc series of strategic re-orientations. The federation's September Commission Report (1997) urged a return to social unionism, and an internal reorganization that included the formation of "mega-unions" in each sector. However, as COSATU affiliates operate with considerable autonomy, the federation does not have the power to enact such reforms that, for example, the Sweeny administration was able to accomplish in the U.S. around the same time. Bezuidenhout (2000) suggests a renewal strategy aimed at building "global social movement unionism" could learn from South Africa's past, though at present it is unlikely to inspire. Webster and Buhlungu (2004) note a series of strategic responses to changing conditions by unions, arguing correctly that these responses do not constitute a coherent revitalization program, a view similar to how Behrens, Fichter, and Frege (2003) assess renewal in Germany. The authors position renewal efforts as fundamentally aligned against specific changes in exogenous factors of political economy and social structure. In this case, however, SATAWU is foremost concerned with redressing its own internal deficiencies. During the course of the global campaign, UNI and SEIU sought to redirect the conversation about union weakness away from the structural conditions of capitalism and toward the subjective choices, decisions, and organization of SATAWU itself. In other words, they believed that strategy *matters*.

The Case of SATAWU

SATAWU was formed in 1998 in a tumultuous merger between unions of different federations. It now represents workers in maritime shipping, aviation, cleaning, and private security, where it is the majority union in the industry with 8 percent density.

Private security is the fastest-growing industry in South Africa. Hiring freezes followed by massive retrenchments and voluntary resignations of public police officers after 1994 created a vacuum that had to be filled, given extraordinary levels of violent crime and a heavily armed civilian population. Many former police officers then started private security ventures, and by the end of 2007, such forces outnumbered public police 2:1. Labor costs account for 70 percent of the average security company, far outweighing other factors of production. Employers therefore have a deep interest in keeping wages low, which is conveniently facilitated by an impressive reserve army on which to rely—between 2005 and 2006, security guard job applications increased by 400 percent (Makgetla 2007).

SATAWU inherited a militant tradition of social movement unionism in the public sector. One of its parent unions, South African Railway and Harbour Workers Union, led a surge of public sector wildcats against National Party privatization schemes toward the end of 1989 that was “unmatched in South African history” (CRIC 1990). Similarly, the Transport and General Workers Union, also a SATAWU forerunner, struck against the 1991 proposed restructuring of the state-run transportation company. Internationally, both unions participated in coordinated solidarity protests and boycotts during apartheid. At times, SATAWU has itself displayed impressive bouts of militancy, most notably in its 2008 and 2009 boycotts of weapons shipments to Zimbabwe and Israel, the most far-reaching dockworker actions since apartheid (ITF 2008). However, overall, it has failed to stem the tide of retrenchments and face the challenges of new organizing in the private security industry. In many ways, it epitomizes the transformation common to so many South African trade unions—from social movement unionism to servicing unionism, a shift that sees workers not as *participants* in a movement, but *recipients* of a service.

Between 2000 and 2006, its total membership fell by one third, including a loss of 28,913 members alone in 2002, more than any other COSATU affiliate that year (COSATU 2003). The union attributes this falloff to the usual assortment of labor market variables, but also its “failure of providing an effective service” (COSATU 2003). Declining membership and fewer dues meant self-imposed “belt-tightening” measures, including hiring freezes, and an economic situation in which it barely paid its primary expenses. In its resolutions to COSATU, SATAWU affirmed: “. . . We have a good team of committed officials in the union but there is tons of room for improvement to service workers . . . Affiliates and COSATU must allocate more resources toward servicing membership” (COSATU 2003). Faced with new challenges, SATAWU made a break with its forerunners’ propensity for social movement unionism.

Changing roles of paid union staff, a greatly enlarged role of the trade union bureaucracy, and an increased dependence on the legalese of industrial relations belie a shift to business unionism. Many in SATAWU claim that transformations in the roles of their officers mirror those in other unions as well. A series of interviews with organizers and representatives of other unions confirm this. For many unions in South Africa, this is where the story has recently ended. However, the campaign to win and implement a global agreement with G4S has provided a framework for SATAWU to transform itself in multiple ways.

A global campaign initiated by SEIU against G4S, the world's largest private security firm, began to take shape in 2003, when its domestic battle against the company's US-based subsidiary, Wackenhut, was failing. For close to five years, SEIU fought alongside security guard unions around the world in a campaign coordinated by UNI Global Union (UNI) (Hoffman 2008). Over the course of the campaign, G4S security guards struck in Indonesia, Malawi, and South Africa. UNI organized international days of action involving dozens of countries, built new security guard unions in Nepal and India, negotiated wage increases in several African countries, and won a determination with the OECD that had the effect of shaming G4S with its clients and investors, ultimately leading some to divest out of moral outrage (Bahadur and Koen 2009). In December 2008, G4S and UNI agreed to an IFA that covers its 600,000 workers in all 112 countries where it operates, including the 20,000 in South Africa. The campaign for the global agreement and its subsequent implementation set the stage for transnational collaboration between SEIU, UNI, and SATAWU.

Phase I: Campaigning for Formal Rights through an IFA

SEIU and SATAWU began collaborating in 2005 at a time when both unions needed help. SATAWU was searching for a way out of its morass and UNI needed partners for its global campaign against G4S. SATAWU had achieved some important victories in its security campaigns through mass demonstrations and protests. By 2005, it had won improvements in training regulations, a national provident fund, and a governmental determination of wage increases for security guards (UNI 2006). Membership nevertheless declined steadily, and the union was pushed toward financial insolvency.

SEIU leaders traveled to South Africa in early 2005 to meet with SATAWU, a trip that served the dual purpose of seeking alliance partners and a dirt-digging mission on G4S to produce fodder for the global campaign. At this stage, SEIU was focused primarily on winning recognition with Wackenhut in the U.S. In June 2005, SATAWU joined a delegation of other G4S workers in London at the company's annual general meeting of shareholders. The meeting served as a coming-out party for the global grassroots attack on G4S. Workers distributed Alternative Annual Reports highlighting worker abuses, racial discrimination, and other violations. The union returned from London energized. However, after its next bargaining session collapsed amid intraunion rivalry, it found itself mired in a brutal strike.

Historical disunity among the fifteen unions in the private security industry made bargaining difficult. Dissatisfied with industry's offers, and having been undercut by fellow unions, SATAWU called an open-ended general strike in March 2006. The strike was the flashpoint of a crisis for SATAWU, one that clarified some of its failures and provided a pivotal point for renewal. About 100,000 security guards—one-third of the entire industry—took to the streets across the country, waging battles with rival unions and police. As many as sixty people are reported to have died in strike-related violence, making it the bloodiest battle since 1994 (Makgetla 2007). Most were alleged scabs, thrown from trains by strikers as they were caught commuting to work from the townships. Others were stabbed, shot, or beaten to death by angry mobs. Many observers therefore worried that the security strike foreshadowed a crisis in the new-and-improved mechanisms of labor adjudication, a view later reinforced by the violent janitors' strike in late 2006 and the Metrobus strike in 2007. Overall, the strike appeared incongruent with the promise of a peaceful democratic multi-racial capitalism.

The strike ended in July 2006, though its effects lingered on. Later that summer, in his opening remarks during a European Works Council meeting that took place on a yacht, G4S's CEO claimed that UNI had indirectly murdered a security guard as a result of its funding of SATAWU (personal interview with UNI staff member, November 2009). The company also insinuated that UNI had assisted with lengthening the strike, which it considered a justification for temporarily suspending dialogue about a global agreement (G4S Interview).

UNI felt the sensationalism of the strike was a liability when constructing a transnational campaign with a high international profile, and that it was crucial that SATAWU regain composure and clean up its public image. To do this, UNI helped SATAWU to redirect its anger and hostility to the company in a new way, via the global campaign. After deliberation, SATAWU's daily strategy then became more closely embedded with UNI's focus against G4S. However, deep rifts soon developed about the domination of global priorities over local ones. SATAWU, for example, was steadfast in its opposition to focusing on only one company in only three "strategic" cities: Johannesburg, Durban, and Capetown. A SATAWU staffer explains that the work with UNI was slow to warm, and that some rank and file activists were skeptical of the idea:

It's sometimes hard to get people [members] excited about those kinds of actions [international]. Especially in the beginning. Some are easy. But some people think, "That's over there. Why do I have to worry about over there when we got our own problems right here?"

Still, SATAWU began to aggressively target the private security industry. UNI donated almost \$100,000 for one year of assistance to SATAWU with the expectation that an additional two years would be necessary to fully develop its capacity to go it alone (UNI Interview). The money funded industry research and other component resources that laid the basis of an organizing plan, and the skills development to accomplish it. UNI-sponsored workshops on organizing,

member mobilization, international solidarity, and strategic research have helped build internal organization among existing members, and SATAWU has established security guard worker committees in nine new sites. This has activated a base of members who had become largely staff dependent. Through these sessions, members have engaged in protests and meetings with G4S workers in other countries, and have occasionally assisted SATAWU organizers recruit new members.

Nonetheless, new organizing largely failed, and UNI briefly considered abandoning South Africa as a site of struggle within the global campaign. SATAWU staff cite fear of management reprisals and poor access to worksites as the primary explanations for organizing difficulties. SATAWU again traveled to G4S's shareholder meeting in London, this time joined by workers from Mozambique and Malawi. As UNI had deepened its ties to developing world unions over the previous year, the action had a different character this time. The new Alternative Annual Report focused decidedly more on human rights in the global South, especially abuses in South Africa. UNI used this document to tarnish the company's public profile within the country and try to dissuade the FIFA Congress from awarding G4S the lucrative contract to provide security at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. An SEIU researcher explained rather bluntly, "We found out that investors [in G4S] don't really care about poor workers in America. They care about poor workers in the Third World. So we went that route."

In 2008, after five years of battling unionization, the company capitulated, claiming it was "a matter of time." By contrast, UNI is certain its corporate campaign had the intended effect, especially as the withdrawal of a G4S investor took place just months before the IFA was signed. The agreement required the company to respect four core conventions of the International Labor Organization. These are provisions against child labor, forced labor, discrimination in employment, and respect for the freedom of association. Most crucially, it also included access rights for SATAWU staff to G4S worksites and restrained the company from antiunion campaigning when workers attempted to unionize.

Phase II: Implementing the IFA and Increased Mobilization

Most IFAs are never implemented by unions, and therefore rarely have decisive impacts on workers. And although SATAWU had fought to win it, and was determined to use it, the early stages of the implementation process were rocky. After the agreement was signed and UNI prepared for a more amicable relationship with the company, SATAWU was suddenly confronted with the prospect of collaboration, in a sense, with its historical adversary. One SATAWU organizer explained:

Those people [G4S] called us kaffirs. Fucking guys, man. Who made us work in the rain, standing, no chairs, who we did anything for them. They're still white. It's a dangerous job and they never understand it. Then all of a sudden [after the

IFA was signed] we are friends. I can tell you that people were upset. Many people were confused how this is going to work. It's not like that, I told them, but some people do not want to hear that.

G4S did redress some of SATAWU's grievances (back wages, increased contribution to the provident fund), as stipulated in the agreement. However, while UNI complied with the agreement, and removed its company-bashing website, G4S continued its longstanding antiunion bias in its corporate periphery, a posture that is out of sync with the supposedly cooperative environment of the IFA. A G4S spokesperson in Pretoria, for example, said the IFA would not benefit the company or the workers and she had no idea why it was signed in the first place. Implementation of the agreement in South Africa often required recourse to London, where G4S's home office was called upon by UNI to discipline its South African staff. Because UNI encouraged the dispute/resolution mechanism to happen outside the local context, it was, on occasion, charged with backroom dealing by SATAWU. During a conference on union internationalism, one SATAWU delegate, who had participated in UNI's global demonstrations in support of security guards, spoke to resentment against UNI:

There's a disconnect. They [UNI/SEIU] have their priorities and we have ours. But to work together, we have to combine them . . . but we answer their demands but they almost never answer ours. Because they drive the campaign. We do *their* actions. I think this is why there is the resentment sometimes.

Even after years of collaboration, UNI and SATAWU were not on the same page, and the global agreement risked becoming a paper exercise, as so many are. "They [SATAWU] wanted a magic bullet," explained one UNI staffer. "But the agreements don't work like that. You have to put them into practice."

Then a breakthrough happened. After approximately six months, through high-level talks among corporate and union leaders, UNI successfully convinced G4S to pressure its local management in Pretoria to abandon some of its antiunionism, and to respect the agreement it signed. SATAWU was then granted access to G4S security guard worksites and a handful of member activists won small amounts of paid leave for dedicated union work. As it became clear that the IFA offered access and neutrality—and thus new means to organize workers—some of SATAWU's initial skepticism of the global campaign faded. It agreed to reorient its strategy toward building density within the three largest private security companies, and G4S in particular. This required an even greater commitment on the part of UNI to help construct an organizing program around the global agreement.

UNI staffers began more regular phone communication with SATAWU organizers, some of whom were hired specifically to work on the G4S campaign. Additionally, it held a series of trainings for leadership, staff, and member activists in South Africa. This communication opened a critical dialogue about the means to transform SATAWU from a servicing union into an organizing

union. SATAWU began to target workers in the major cities rather than the entire country, and encouraged one-on-one meetings with workers, in contrast to mass meetings, as a recruitment strategy. Industrial mapping research—a strategy to identify the largest most densely populated worksites in a particular geographic area—complements of UNI and SEIU, helped SATAWU to target the largest concentrations of guards and build up its density more quickly. Said one SATAWU staffer, “It was like a science. UNI thinks of organizing like a science. I didn’t see it that way, but it is. This helped greatly.” Fifteen months after the agreement was signed, campaigns in Johannesburg and Durban brought an estimated 3000 security guards into the union, the majority in G4S. Given the extraordinary size of the private security industry, these gains are modest. But it represents approximately a 40% increase in the total number of security guards that SATAWU had organized previously, and thus demonstrable growth.

Access to the premises has not only allowed easier conversations with workers. It gives the union an air of legitimacy, a “right” to be there. This has gone a long way to convincing would-be members to set aside their fear of management retaliation for union activity. After a meeting with G4S representatives, a SATAWU organizer, proudly displaying the copy of the global agreement he’d brandished at the meeting, said:

This is my copy of the global agreement. It’s like a bible, man. When management tells me to get out, I show them this. When workers are afraid to join, I show them this. When people tell me we don’t have the right, I point to this. This this this. This is the key. But only if we use it right.

Conclusion

This in-depth case study shows that complex global and local processes contributed to the revitalization of SATAWU. At the global level, a campaign was able to secure fundamental rights for G4S security guards around the world. In South Africa, SATAWU combined this victory with increased mobilization at the grassroots. New organizing victories were won through a combination of increasing the formal rights of workers and rank-and-file mobilization. This essay then has two related findings. The first is that labor transnationalism can inspire local union renewal. The second is that the consolidation of formal rights—through the global agreement—is a necessary yet insufficient component of a renewal strategy. A local campaign is equally crucial.

Typically, management determines how and when to implement an IFA, often choosing not to do so at all, and GUFs’ limited resources and poor access to workers generally guarantee that management’s protocols prevail. As a result, even the IFAs with the strongest language rarely inspire any union activity at all. Of the 90 IFAs currently in force between GUFs and corporations, few have been accompanied by campaigns to build unions and organize new workers.

Nevertheless, I argue that scholars should resist the urge to study IFAs as mere policy instruments. Instead, viewed as opportunity structures, we see the potential of global agreements as worthy activist tools when accompanied by mobilization-based campaigns. In other words, global strategies that expand the formal rights of workers can be effective at winning gains when used in tandem with local strategies.

The dilemmas posed by efforts to build labor transnationalism and the weak implementation of global agreements demonstrate that labor activism cannot be easily reproduced at other scales, challenging the assumptions of scholars and activists who have insisted unions should simply match capital and “go global.” A 2009 COSATU document on global union federations in South Africa suggests disagreements abound over issues of political ideology, the inclusion of no-strike clauses in IFAs, and a lukewarm approach to unionism that privileges activism (letter-writing, lobbying) over organizing (union growth) (COSATU 2009). The document refers to global unions as “individualist” and too narrowly focused on a sectoral approach. It concludes:

Although many unions are quiet in terms of the problems in the Global Unions, when reading between the lines it is clear that there is a general problem of different orientations amongst most South African unions and their respective Global Unions. (COSATU 2009, 24)

The “problem of different orientations” is not merely ideological. Global unions may prioritize actions that do not have an immediately recognizable national character or impact, making for a “hard sell” to local staff and members. In emphasizing both the tensions and positive impacts that the global campaign raised in South Africa, this essay affirms the continuing significance of the local within the global.

Union revitalization is a complex and open-ended process. A common dilemma in the literature has to do with the source and directionality of change: from above or below? While some have argued in favor of a top-down approach, others, often in the social movement camp, have insisted on the necessity of change from below (Fairbrother 1996). This article sides with the middle-ground approach of Voss and Sherman (2000) and Hurd, Milkman, and Turner (2003) that understands revitalization as an interplay between leadership and the rank and file. This conclusion has particular relevance in South Africa, where the historically democratic and proletarian character of unionism was driven skillfully by ordinary workers with few paid staff, lending credence to a belief in the lower echelons as having a “historic mission” to reinvigorate social movement unionism.

Nevertheless, the account forwarded here identifies the wellspring of union change as originating *above*, and being effected by a cohort of unionists in the *middle*, that is, the staff between union leaders and the rank and file. This activity, however, has ignited a renewed participation in union affairs within the workplace. In other words, SATAWU’s transformation into a union with more

member activity, more internal democracy, more shop-floor organization, and more capacity to organize workers has been driven unmistakably by paid union staff, not rank and file workers.

In SATAWU, the middle strata of the union bureaucracy—the organizers, researchers, education specialists, representatives—has taken a decisive role in the revitalization process. Their campaigns have led to growth in union membership in some major cities and an increased role for rank and filers on the shop floor. They have influential access to both the membership and the leadership, and are often the route by which new ideas flow into the union, an observation consistent with Voss and Sherman's (2000) research on revitalization in the U.S. One organizer highlighted the positionality of middle-range staff within the union bureaucracy:

We run this place. SATAWU places a lot of emphasis on us. A lot of trust. If you have a question about SATAWU, you will get your answer from an organizer . . . The leadership asks us what's going on, they make decisions according to what we tell them often . . . If this place is gonna change it will start with us.

But this change is also coming not only from *above*, but from *outside*. The existing literature and research for this project shows that SEIU has played a significant role in union revitalization throughout the world, especially the Anglo-Saxon countries, Rhineland social democracies, and Australia (Gall 2009a, 2009b), though its role in the global South is new. In the rich countries, SEIU has encountered resistance to what unions consider to be unnecessary levels of confrontation with management (SEIU interview 2009). In Johannesburg, it has met nearly the opposite, accused of "spreading business unionism" (SACP interview 2009) and developing client unions that can do its bidding around the world, a biting appraisal that draws strength from the legacy of U.S. labor imperialism in Africa (Southall 1995). Critics claim that if the project in South Africa is successful, SATAWU will bare the unmistakable imprimatur of an SEIU local. The rich experience South Africans have with international labor cooperation both prepared and admonished them from partnering with unions in the global North. After five years of collaboration, however, it appears UNI and SATAWU have forged an interdependent international relationship that is in fact more symbiotic than previous examples during apartheid, many of which were one-way streets.

An open question in this case is the sustainability of the reforms and the continued potential of organizing. The roles of organizers, representatives, and leadership changed throughout this campaign. Organizers have played a larger role in driving strategy than before, and leadership has redirected resources toward new organizing. Part of the rationale for better internal organization has been to train shop stewards to continue some of the necessary servicing functions. In other words, an effort has been made to accommodate a new *modus operandi* at the institutional/organizational level. But how do we know if these changes are cosmetic or sustainable? Behrens, Hurd, and Waddington (2004) develop a framework to assess union restructuring. They find that lasting

examples of revitalization involve internal change that is motivated by environmental factors and a perceived new mission, both of which inform SATAWU's transformation. However, many credit then-president Randal Howard for implementing such radical changes, who has recently departed to take a political appointment within the ANC, causing some concern within UNI about the effect of the power transfer.

Also, a growing literature has made much ado about a "new labor transnationalism," a supposed shift from a hierarchical and bureaucratic past in favor of alliances with new social movements and a radical critique of capitalism (Munck 2002; Waterman and Wills 2002). This case, however, is an example of a vigorous social movement union campaign that is also driven by a US-led bureaucracy. The new, in other words, still looks a lot like the old. The important role played by UNI suggests an expanded role for GUFs in the international arena, not only as brokers of contracts, but as union activist leaders. Fairbrother and Hammer (2005) show that structural changes in the global political economy, combined with the decision to create a more discreet role for the global unions in relation to the ICFTU (now ITUC), has led to a renewed purpose for them in the last decade. This case shows that GUFs can play a more meaningful role in transnational labor activism than before.

Lastly, a Southern perspective on revitalization has yet to develop, though it will likely contribute a new theoretical perspective to these debates. Webster and Buhlungu (2004) suggest that distinctive experiences of colonialism and imperialism, as well as recent transformations in the South associated with neoliberalism, will animate different forms of revitalization that differ from those in the North.

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