

## PROGRAM NOTES

### NO BORDERS, NO BOUNDARIES: LABOR FACES THE CHALLENGES OF GLOBALISM

For decades, scholars and labor activists have assessed the relationship between trade unions and the globalization of the world political economy. By far, the dominant conclusion has been that as capital grows ever more global in scope, labor is increasingly locked in place, cut off from the ability to exercise power beyond the disappearing sphere of the local. This edition of *Working USA* challenges this conception with a series of articles about the increasing tendency of labor to reach across national borders and become transnational actors in their own right, or to become actively engaged in struggles over global issues.

A veritable cottage industry emerged to bid farewell to the working class and its primary organizations, a critique based on its passivity and purported decline in the face of the transformation of the world political economy. During a time when workers' movements seemed anachronistic, and even the alter-globalization movement—so full of promise during the millennial craze of the late 1990s—dissolved into innumerable single-issue causes, one might not have bet on a new labor transnationalism to emerge when it did.

Nonetheless, the globalization thesis—that workers and unions are necessarily undermined by globalization—has been dragged into critical light by scholars questioning the supposed fixity of labor within the national context. Slightly more than a decade ago, a renaissance of global labor studies was energized when unions joined forces with new social movements and student groups against neoliberal politics. These writers sought to “put labor back in” to the steady stream of accounts of anticorporate protests which continually neglected to mention the contributions of unions. They were also responding to the fatalism of the globalization thesis. Though still analytically and theoretically underdeveloped, we can nonetheless see the emergence of a counter-thesis to compete with the commonsense understanding of the globalization/labor relationship. This counter-thesis suggests, broadly speaking, that workers and unions actually enjoy new opportunities based upon the contradictions of globalization and the nature of worker organization. Thus it is often said that

workers, especially those in mass production industries, have new forms of structural power.

Today, labor is fashionable again. Recently global unionism has been featured in the popular media and cultural forums, such as *American Prospect*, *The Nation*, *Mother Jones*, *Alternet*, and *TED Talks*. But the scholarly examination of labor and union movements is also taking up more space in the social sciences, largely dedicated to an assessment, in one form or another, of prospects for renewal. There is even a new journal dedicated to global labor studies, and a handful of international research institutes dedicated to an interdisciplinary study of world labor politics, drawing a significant number of direct participants from the movements themselves.

The analytic thrust of global labor studies is to assess the conjuncture for labor and help propose a course forward. The movements and scholarly communities are both sufficiently small that the potential for collaboration is higher than in the entrenched national movements and other academic subfields. Key figures in both worlds have personal histories of being in the other, which also makes a common understanding more likely. Likewise, this special issue of *WUSA* includes scholarly contributions by authors with a history in the labor and social movements.

Michael Fichter's piece unravels the complicated—and often conflicting—relationship between the reality and the stated intent of what multinational companies do to safeguard worker rights and labor standards around the world. In particular, he demonstrates how this differs markedly even within the global North, by comparing the practices of German companies operating in the U.S. Dimitris Stevis documents an emerging transnational–ecological consciousness on the part of a handful of global union federations. Though still a nascent movement, he shows convincingly that some within the global labor movement have begun to add an environmental agenda to their other concerns that transcend what he calls the “fictitious dilemma” between jobs and the environment. Among other things, his essay suggests that labor's brief interest in social environmentalism that coalesced around the 1999 WTO protest in Seattle has not been completely abandoned.

I focus on the relationship of unions in North America and the global South. Through a case study of an aggressive global union campaign in the private security industry, I show that transnational union alliances were able to empower local unions in South Africa to constrain management behavior, organize new members, and mobilize their existing rank-and-file. This happened through campaigning and effective use of strategies for global labor governance.

Vishwas Satgar's essay also focuses on the transition from apartheid to neoliberalism (with African characteristics). He undertakes a close study of the globalization of food insecurity, including its local manifestation, and the development of a solidarity economy to challenge the process. Though not directly related to labor unions per se, his work raises critical issues that unions in South Africa have historically taken up, though which have recently been more forcefully raised by new radical social movements.

Two essays deal with responses to the organization and defense of immigrant laborers. Jane Holgate's piece argues that temporary, or circular, migrants can utilize innovative discursive strategies to leverage gains from employers, even though such workers enjoy comparably less power than their traditional industrial working class counterparts. Informed by the growing literature within labor geography, she takes campaigns by janitors in the UK and workers represented by the German union IG-BAU as exemplary cases. These cases suggest cause for cautious optimism, though admittedly, she says her study "does not allow for an analysis of the innovative voluntary work being done at a grass roots level to support the needs of migrant workers in local communities around the world."

This is where the essay by Tom Juravich and Corinn Williams comes in. It focuses on the response of a community campaign to a 2007 raid on immigrant workers in Massachusetts. They show that the short-term success of the campaign is, in a sense, a model for others looking to offer support in the immediate aftermath of such an event, though its long-term impact is more difficult to assess. As the political climate of Arizona has recently sharpened the attack on immigrant workers, the article offers invaluable knowledge to share with organizers, community groups, unions, and immigrant workers in general.

To this point, this issue of *Working USA* is concerned with the machinations of labor movements' relative global and/or transnational conditions. But as closing essays and commentary, we examine the growing attack on unions and their consequences in the advanced industrial world, focusing on the U.S.

In the first of two contributions on U.S. unions, a research note by Roland Zullo, provides evidence on the correlation between union density and fatality rates. Examining data from 2001 to 2009 on the relationship between union density in the construction industry and right-to-work-laws shows a correlation between higher levels of unionization equate with lower fatality rates. The research suggests that unions are less effective at protecting member safety in right-to-work states, and support the hypothesis that antiunion right-to-work laws result in the underfunding of union safety training or accident prevention programs.

Finally, in our commentary, Mike Fabricant offers some proposals for labor to meet the challenges of the U.S. and immediate problems—the attacks on public sector workers in Wisconsin. However, one can view the Wisconsin situation as part of a global assault on the public sector everywhere, especially as a supposed palliative to the economic crisis. Although the eruption of militancy by workers, students, and community leaders was as inspiring a movement as one could reasonably hope for, unions ultimately accepted concessions that emboldened not only Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's response, but that of conservative forces in other states. Fabricant proposes an agenda for labor to fight back based upon decades of experience within the public sector labor movement.

Together, these wide-ranging contributions represent different perspectives advanced in the broad literature on trade unions and globalization. Of course, they do not cover the field entirely, and are not representative of the varied

positions. For example, most of the essays here offer a cautious optimism that unions and other worker organizations can begin to tackle issues from a global perspective. We might read this, in a sense, as a response to the fatalism about transnationalism that scholars have expressed recently. At the same time, these essays also offer labor a particular kind of agency that is all too often absent from the globalization literature. Seen from this perspective, unions and workers represent more than factors of production. Rather, they are actively engaged in the construction and regulation of the global political economy through ways as varied as campaigning for transnational labor governance, struggles for the commons, and the geographic flows of labor power, to name only a few. And if the recent past is any insight into the future, an engaged public labor studies field will inform that process as it unfolds.

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