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Citation: Stirling, John (2010) Global unions: chasing the dream or building the reality? *Capital & Class*, 34 (1). pp. 107-114. ISSN 0309-8168

Published by: SAGE

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0309816809353495>
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0309816809353495>>

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Global unions: Chasing the dream or building the reality?

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Abstract

This article takes as its theme the global restructuring of capital and its impact on worker organization. It argues for a reassertion of class in any analysis of global solidarity, and assesses the opportunities and barriers to effective global unionization. Rooted in the UK experience, the article analyzes the impact of the European social dimension on trade unions, before taking the discussion into a global dimension. It concludes by suggesting that there are reasons for cautious optimism in terms of solidarity building, despite difficult historical legacies and the common replacement of action with rhetoric.

Keywords

Trade unions, community unionism, globalisation, European Works councils, international solidarity

The rhetoric of global trade union solidarity is rooted in a Marxist analysis in which class transcends national boundaries and workers of the world unite. But the reality is more often one of global unions divided by ideologies and national identities, and rarely acting together across national boundaries. While it is possible to rightly celebrate historical examples of successful solidarity (see, for example, Mason, 2007; or Waterman, 1998), division and failure are more common occurrences. Today, an often hidden international class identity is sharpened by globalization and challenged by multinational capital and the dominance of neoliberalism. Equally, trade unions themselves look beyond national boundaries for strategies of renewal, and the political hegemony of the unions of the northern economies is finally being challenged by the ideas of social movements and community action that unions in the global South have always espoused. As a consequence, academic discussion of industrial relations and trade union renewal has also been sharpened and refocused to encompass debates on place and space (see Castree et al., 2004, for an excellent starting point to a wide-ranging body of literature).

The argument that follows sits firmly within a class-based perspective, which is critical for understanding change as well as for the practical tasks involved in building cross-border solidarity.

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The analysis is also restricted in that it deliberately seeks to explore the development of 'global unionism' within a UK context.

Have UK unions broken the barriers of global solidarity, or does the concept remain an add-on to essentially national-based action—defending jobs at home, and dispensing international charity? The key elements for answering this question are developed in two directions: the external factors influencing UK trade unions, and the opportunities the unions have to engage in global action. This in turn raises the issue of whether global phenomena (such as worker migration) are responded to through positive global action, or by a more defensive nationalism. The analysis here is fourfold, focusing first on the direct impact of global restructuring on UK unions; second on the relationship between UK unions and 'Europe' as a global stepping stone; third, on the relationship between UK unions and unions beyond Europe; and finally, on the adoption of union strategies from other countries into the UK.

Global restructuring

In such a short article as this, there is little need to repeat the well-known arguments about global economic restructuring; but it is important to reflect briefly on their impact on UK unions. First, there is the direct economic impact of labour market restructuring as jobs shift from a manufacturing base in some regional economies, as in the emblematic example of the North East of England, with its loss of coal, steel, chemicals and shipbuilding and their 'replacement' with call centres and culture. The impact on trade unions is threefold: the obvious membership loss; the reduction of economic and political power that goes with it; and the seeming irrelevance of trade unionism as it fails to capture new members in the new economy. Furthermore, the locus and nature of decision-making is changed in ways that reduce union influence. Local management decisions are overruled by international strategies in the private sector, and local government policy-making is restricted by supra-national authorities such as the European Union. Thus, to use the North East as an example once more, a powerful local trade union movement had limited influence when European policy-making as well as global capital effectively closed down shipbuilding as an industry. 'Partnership'—the strategic policy at the end of the 20th century—was a signal failure in saving jobs or maintaining influence. In this important sense, economic globalization has direct impacts locally. Global restructuring is not simply an economic phenomenon that shuts shipyards, but also an onslaught on embedded national and local union strengths and strategies. A key partnership agreement signed on Tyneside by the then prime minister was a major achievement for the unions, but was nevertheless a failed strategy (McBride and Stirling, 2002).

As well as the economic consequences of restructuring, the political implications of the ideological dominance of neoliberalism have had major impacts for trade unions. While unions have had different relationships to the market economy (see, for example, Hyman's 2001 European typology of 'market', 'class' and 'society'), neoliberalism challenges underlying notions of welfare reformism and social democracy. Moreover, ideologies have institutional structures and places of engagement. Trade unions are either excluded from these, or included with severely prescribed powers, and engaged in decision-making where they are not disposed to support the initial premise of the argument. Characteristic examples might be a comparison of the influence and power of an institution such as the International Labour Organization with that of the World Trade Organization; or the limited impact of trade union voice in the North American Free Trade Agreement (but see Compa, 2001, for some examples of solidarity action). A concomitant development has been the emergence of civil society organizations that replicate or replace trade union activity, and assume a

representational function that has greater influence within global governmental organizations (see Eade and Leather, 2005, for a collection that discusses this relationship).

Finally, the restructuring of capital has led to an equal restructuring of labour not only in terms of employment in economic sectors, but also in terms of migration. The more open borders of an enlarged European Union have led to the migration of workers from east to west, creating highly vulnerable workforces in countries such as the UK. As well as simply underlining Britain's global relationship in a very visible way, migrant workers have been a major focus of organizing that has also taken unions into working more closely with local communities.

What emerges, then, for trade unionism is a restructured global economic and political system that challenges the essentially local and national basis of their power, particularly in the economies of the northern hemisphere; exclusion from the new *loci* of decision-making; the emergence of alternative channels of representation; and an urgent need to apply new strategies within old structures.

UK unions in Europe

For UK unions, 'Europe' was a key feature of globalization and, during the period of Thatcherite restructuring, it appeared to offer a transnational social democracy with a level of trade union influence that was unavailable in the UK. The emergence of the European Trade Union Confederation in 1973, with its institutional access to the decision-making process in the European Union, gave the UK TUC a significant new voice. However, as I suggested at the time (Stirling, 1991), the corridors of power in Europe were not a substitute for workplace organization, although there was a possibility of supportive legislation. The Labour government's abandonment of support for workers' rights at the European level is highlighted by its continued resistance to the full implementation of the minimal protections of the European Working Time Directive and its status as the only country opposing the revised European Works Councils (EWC) Directive. In spite of this opposition, over 700 EWCs have given trade unions an opportunity for cross-border alliances. These institutions have generated considerable interest and debate (see Fitzgerald and Stirling, 2004, for a review and a range of arguments), but there can be little doubt that they offered an opportunity for cross-border collaboration and the potential for the development of new strategies.¹ They also offered the first institutional possibility of trans-European collaboration, although not necessarily connected to the activism embedded in past experiments through, for example, the Transnational Information Exchange (TIE), or rank-and-file networks developing via the internet. The UK union response has been muted and we, again, find ourselves exploring the contradictions of place and space. As multinational capital seeks to exploit regime competition and encourage plant-by-plant competition in self-exploitation that emphasizes locality and undercuts cross-border solidarity, so opportunities emerge for new connections to be built. These forms of solidarity do not require the institutional frameworks established by European works councils (and the few world councils), nor do institutions create strategies; but they do offer opportunities. In particular, as the multinational companies in which they operate relocate into Eastern Europe and beyond, trade unionists can utilize EWCs to develop more global strategies with roots in the workplace, thanks to the workplace representatives that attend EWC meetings. This, though, brings with it the danger of EWCs' making agreements with companies that are strong 'on paper', but have little engagement with rank-and-file trade unionists unaware of their existence.

In sum, the 'Europe' project provides an opportunity for trade unionists to become engaged, often for the first time, with issues of international solidarity. This is a positive gain but the drawbacks are, firstly, that much of the activity remains confined to trade union leaderships

acting within institutional structures that are often powerless to affect serious change, or which do it so slowly that effective engagement seems a pointless activity to trade unionists with other priorities. Second, these activities, even when they involve workplace union representatives, are often cut off from any form of local activity or outcomes. Finally, there are alternatives that are embedded in the more activist approach implied in 'social movement' trade unionism.

Beyond Europe

The institutional structures available in Europe reside in the formal structures of the Global Union Federations (GUFs) and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). The Byzantine nature of these formal structures and their representativeness are real barriers to effective action. The GUFs have their origins in the International Trade Secretariats representing, in no systematic way, different economic sectors. At the European level, this can coincide with equivalent employer's organizations and institutional structures that support a largely powerless and ineffective 'social dialogue'. Beyond Europe, there are global employer organizations at sector level, but they are rarely effective negotiators on behalf of their constituent partners.

One strategy that GUFs have adopted to try to shape industrial relations in multinational companies is through International Framework Agreements (IFAs) (see Papadakis, 2008, for a collection that provides a comprehensive overview). The limited extent of the agreements (there were 62 by the end of 2007) belies their growth over the last 20 years (Gallin, 2008); but the problems in negotiating them are graphically described by Miller (2008) in his discussion of the textile sector. However, some have argued that IFAs, like EWCs, can facilitate organizing while not being a substitute for collective bargaining (see for example Wills, 2004). The IFA effectively becomes an agreement with the company on basic trade union rights that local unions can use as a bargaining lever where recognition is resisted.

Within the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, there is a Trade Union Advisory Committee that has some influence through the OECD Code of Practice on multinational companies, but it is essentially bureaucratic and confined to a small number of countries. The recently created ITUC is now the major global confederation, with an affiliated membership of 168 million trade unionists from 311 affiliates in 155 countries. Its emergence reflects the decline of the Cold War politics that had divided global labour institutions, but it remains strictly limited by its resources and by the power of capital to resist the global regulation of labour relations.

Institutionally, then, UK unions are affiliated to organizations that have limited resources and impact, and which are distant from the workplace activity that is the daily life of trade union activists. The ability of international union organizations to impact directly on global capital, whether through controlling the activities of multinational companies or by influencing the decisions of supra-state institutions, is severely circumscribed. In this context, the UK trade union response to globalization is clearly restricted by its being one player among many in a global trade union 'movement' that may not directly share the same short-term interests.

Learning organizations?

Alongside these global institutional links through affiliated structures, the TUC and affiliated trade unions have developed bilateral relations with other unions and, more recently, have sought to 'import' organising strategies in the face of the membership downturn.

Historically, bilateral relations have developed from a position of domestic trade union strength with the ability to provide resources, but also an often paternalistic belief in the applicability of British industrial relations systems elsewhere in the world. Invariably, this was associated with British imperialism in Africa and elsewhere. More recently, education and training programmes have been a key factor in UK unions' support of unions elsewhere, but they continue to focus on skills development and collective bargaining strategies that neglect the politics of globalization (Stirling, 2007). In addition, the process often remains 'one way', with an implicit sense that there is little for UK unions to learn from unions in the developing world, despite their often dynamic activities.

The same is not true in terms of relationships with unions in, for example, the USA and Australia, where UK unions seem to have had a lot to learn and to import from organizing strategies and community unionism. Faced with similar or even greater problems of decline, the well-documented 'switch to organizing' in the USA appeared to offer a model for enthusiastic embracement by the British TUC and to underpin the transformation of AMICUS and the TGWU into UNITE. The merits of this are not central to the discussion here, although the issue of the importation of strategies out of their specific contexts is worth pointing out, since there has been a hostile response from some union officials and representatives that has all too often been dismissed as being merely 'old-fashioned', rather than considered criticism.

A return to class

This abbreviated summary attempts to explore the key ways in which globalization has impacted upon UK unions, as well as the institutional opportunities for a response. The most obvious point, but one that is frequently neglected in the discussion of renewal is, quite simply, just how far UK unions have moved from the nationally focused 'exporters' of ideas in the last 20 or so years. Equally, industrial relations/trade union literature has been forced from its moribund institutionalism by the challenges of social geographers interested in space and place.

This shift is significant, but it also raises important questions, not least in terms of the (re)introduction of class into discussion of union renewal, and the urgency of developing a political voice in those debates. As Linkon and Russo (2001) have observed in the US context, there is 'an opportunity to reassess our understanding of class and gain fresh insight into its potential as an organising principle, especially for labour solidarity in a multicultural, global economy. In the US, this process is proving controversial and has sparked debate and divisions from the shop floor to the lecture hall'. For readers of *Capital & Class*, the debate should be less controversial, but no less urgent.

The classic formulation of a Marxist approach to trade unionism is summed up in Hyman's early work (1971, 1975), and by the phrase 'antagonistic cooperation'. The antagonism is with capital, but it also encompasses the national 'antagonisms' that undermine trade union and class solidarities. Is there now the 'potential', as Linkon and Russo suggest, to develop class solidarities globally where there were once severe divisions? The answer to that question lies well beyond the institutional structures of global labour.

Another way?

Successful and effective global solidarity action is dependent on the realization of class identity and the interdependence of local and international organizing. But first, how might we best define global solidarity to avoid the messy shorthand terms 'globalization' or 'social movement

unionism? There are two key dimensions and a range of actions that might help develop effective solidarity. First, there is cross-national support for other trade unionists; and second, joint action in relation to a common problem.

In the first case, the rootedness of trade unions in national industrial relations systems and within the ideological parameters set by the Cold War has meant historical competition between 'systems' and the export of 'best' practice. This is clearly divisive, and the remnants of such divisions remain influential in some trade union movements—for example, in the abandonment of trade unionism by many workers in the former Soviet bloc and the establishment of rival confederations. In Africa, the legacy of former colonial powers and the competitive foreign policies of rival super-powers also led to hostility and division between trade union centres. In blunt terms, this was reflected in problems around funding sources, as impoverished trade union centres sought support from competing powers, so that the cash nexus was as important as the political connections.

The relevance of this persists for UK unions, as they seek to develop cross-border solidarity but are faced with competing trade union confederations with significantly different histories to those found in the UK. They are also faced with the secondary issue of resources, so that solidarity action can focus on funding support with the potential consequences of dependency under mining rather than supporting potential trade union development. This is not an argument for the abandonment of a form of solidarity that can be crucial to survival, but rather to note that it rests on active engagement built around the development of an infrastructure of workplace connections if it is to avoid a descent into a one-way form of 'charity'. This may be more than ironic in cases in which the recipient organization represents a growing trade union presence in its own country, as compared with decline in the UK, and in which the real lessons to be learned are from South to North.

A further issue remains for cross-border solidarity in terms of relationships with NGOs. Trade unions have had longstanding disagreements with NGOs where the latter have been perceived as undemocratic, competitive organizations whose tactics (for example, indiscriminate boycotts) might undermine trade union organization (Eade and Leather, 2005). However, the dividing line between NGO activity and trade union action may be increasingly difficult to discern and, in some cases, NGO action on issues such as gender or work in the informal economy may be more progressive than local union strategies. UK trade unions building cross-border solidarity will need to be clear about their relationship with other civil society organizations.

The second area of activity is, initially at least, more clear-cut, as unions seek to develop joint campaigns around common problems that UK trade unionists share with their international counterparts. In this case, the institutional frameworks available to UK unions and contacts with GUFs and their European counterparts can be productive; but key to successful campaigns is active engagement at the level of the workplace (see Herod, 2001 for the significance of this and a comparison of different strategies in two US examples). A range of strategies exists for unions in organizing global campaigns, and which is appropriate will depend on the particularities of the issue involved (see Russo and Banks, 1999, for an example that contains significant lessons).

Solidarity action is dependent on both process and action. Process has been facilitated by the internet, and it is notable that Lee's prescient discussion in his (1997) book should be subtitled 'the new internationalism'. As the internet opens up opportunities for capital, so it does for labour, which can also occupy space as well as place. The internet can provide a campaign base in itself through websites and blogs that open up issues to a broader public well beyond the trade unionists actively involved in a campaign. Workers and their representatives have direct access

to the public, and a direct way of telling their own stories without third-party intervention. The existing sites of sympathetic organizations can also be used to widen campaigns, and some NGOs, for example Bananalink, have a specific focus on working with trade unions. Short-term networks can be established to serve a particular purpose; or longer-term information exchanges can be developed that help unions establish trust before taking more radical action. Finally, email provides immediate and personal contact, and is essential in building successful action. Caveats to internet euphoria remain, in terms of the available expertise for the delivery and updating of sites, language problems, and the global unevenness in electronic networking, which can disadvantage trade unions in countries where access is expensive and limited.

Trade union education programmes are also an important and neglected part of process that I have discussed elsewhere (Stirling, 2007) and there are interesting examples of outcomes from the TRACE project operating at the European level.²

Process is itself an action-orientated activity, but there are a range of opportunities for UK unions to work in cross-border solidarity. Clearly, these will depend on the organization concerned, the challenges the union faces and the opportunities that UK unions have. The more imaginative campaigning tactics deriving from the influential Justice for Janitors campaigns in the USA (Waldinger et al., 1998) focus on identifying and targeting customers and suppliers as well as employers, using local and national political channels, working with other civil society organizations, developing community activities, and using the media. Pressure on multinational head offices can have surprisingly positive results in some circumstances—for example, working through EWCs or directly with national trade unions that are able to pressurize companies in relation to a dispute or to union recognition. The IFAs discussed earlier can be helpful in dealing with problems for workers in complex supply chains by at least demonstrating the minimum standards that a global corporation is committed to in an agreement with trade unions.

Most significantly but most rarely, cross-national industrial action is a possibility. This need not be defined in terms of a 'big bang' coordinated strike action, but can consist of strategic withdrawals of labour that hit integrated supply chains or interconnected financial arrangements, at low cost to workers. These require significant time and resource investments in terms of communication and coordination, as well as raising the question of the relationships between full-time union officials and workplace representatives. Both can make or break a successful campaign.

Conclusions

In this short review, I am arguing for the importance of embedding a global dimension into discussions of union renewal in the UK. In some respects, this is simply self evident as unions such as UNITE explicitly adopt US-style organising strategies, or the TUC establishes its Organising Academy, inspired by the US model. Equally, global restructuring and the development of supra-state organizational structures inevitably demand a global focus from trade unions. Worker migration brings issues of employee vulnerability and the informal economy directly to bear on UK labour markets, and requires new union strategies as a response. The internet opens up the possibility of worker-to-worker communication and campaigning actions.

While in these developments we can identify changes in form and process, we are left to return to our starting point. The endless conflict of capital and labour may be played out on a wider stage, but the exploitative class relations remain, and are often brought into sharper focus. The national antagonisms equally remain in place as multinational capital shifts relentlessly around the globe and workers compete for jobs through their own exploitation. The response to this, equally,

returns us to the necessity of embedding a clear politics into union campaigns. Global solidarity is not just a new tactic but a political necessity, and one that needs to join trade unions with other social movements if it is to have any chance of developing successful campaigns.

Endnotes

- 1 *Transfer* 13/2 (2007) contains a series of articles and features that review trade union responses to restructuring in Europe.
- 2 Details of the outcomes of 19 separate projects are available online at www.traceproject.org, and are discussed in Walker et al. and in Bridgford and Stirling, both 2007.

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