

Introduction: Interventions on Labour Transnationalism as Practice Reflections from Trade Union Activists and Staff

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While the emergence of neoliberal globalization and the rise of multinational corporations since the 1970s have prompted calls for unions to also 'go global', attempts to do this have been limited and faced with numerous obstacles. Many of these obstacles have been sources of serious debate amongst socialists and trade unionists since the founding of the First International in 1864. For instance, there is the risk international solidarity actions have or could pose to the immediate material needs of workers. This is exemplified in the case of the solidarity shown by British textile workers in their support for the cotton blockade in the US Civil War. Despite the impacts it would have on their immediate material needs these workers engaged in solidarity action (Marx, 1872; Featherstone, 2012).

This case exemplifies the tremendous challenges to building genuine solidarity in the face of the structural disadvantage of workers vis-à-vis employers within capitalism. If we add to this the stark differences in material conditions between workers globally today as well as social hierarchies and ideological challenges like nationalism, the task of coordinating efforts between workers globally appears dimmer still. As Lenin noted about workers movements in the first world war, nationalism led to a breakdown of coordination efforts between movements across borders within Europe. Trade unions today remain on the whole not only organized on national lines but some are actively engaged in championing or fostering nationalist affinities. This is evident in everything from histories of labour imperialism (Scipes, 2010; Sims, 1992; Gupta, 1975; Bass III,

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2012; Nastovski, 2016b) to the development of explicitly nationalist union campaigns (Frank, 2010; Gindin, 2016; Johns, 1998).

Nevertheless, textile workers engaged in solidarity action and unions have and continue to initiate a range of strategies from genuine grassroots international solidarity actions (Nastovski, 2016a; Southall, 1994; Waterman 1987, 2012; Zweig, 2005; Fox-Hodess, 2017) and efforts to build transnational movements and unions (Boris Fish, 2014). What is necessary to build international labour solidarity? If we are to put up effective resistance to the free reign of global capital and its seemingly infinite strategies to deepen competition between workers, then this must be a critical question for organizers today.

It is in this context that the “New Global Labour Studies” (Webster, 2010; Waterman, 2012; Lambert 2014; Taylor and Rioux, 2017; McCallum and Brookes, 2017) has emerged to produce scholarship and promote dialogue between organizers and academics on this question. How do we make sense of the various historical forms of international labour solidarity? What are the particular openings produced by the reorganization of work globally? How can we assess the potential for interactions between the different scales of action?

In an effort to advance this scholarship and particularly to help facilitate practical discussion of international labour solidarity today, the following articles provide rich empirical data and analysis of contemporary practices of international labour solidarity.

These are concrete reflections from key organizers on different sectoral initiatives within public sector unions (Hoogers, Casselman and Cameron), private sector unions (Marshall) and efforts within global union federations (Gibb). The articles that follow provide a glimpse inside the everyday practices of building specific international labour solidarity actions and efforts at labour coordination. Each article speaks to particular sectoral and structural challenges and contradictions. However, common themes run through the three articles.

One of these themes is the critical role of local unions and union members in building long-lasting cross-border ties between workers. While often seen as the purview of expert leaders and staff, these authors show the impossibility of sustainable and effective international solidarity and coordination without rank and file involvement. Further they speak to the role of specific union cultures and capacities and how this shapes the outcomes of the different initiatives. Another theme is the ongoing impact of labour imperialism which contributes to asymmetrical dynamics between workers in the Global North and Global South. Each of these contributions provide concrete examples of how

union activists have been successful in creating spaces where support, knowledge-sharing and solidarity can go both ways.

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