

THE NEED FOR A GLOBAL OUTLOOK

Transformation will occur when the labor movement thinks and acts both globally and locally. All of the data available indicate that unionization provides the most consistent means for workers to improve their economic welfare.¹ But what about the rest of the workers, the majority of working people (now 88 percent) who do not have unions? The union movement succeeded in the past because unions were able to manifest the aspirations and hopes of most working people and consequently earned the mass support of working-class communities. Unions were “schools of democracy” in which working people could learn how to build their power where they work and often learned to fight for the equal rights of all workers, regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, immigration status, and nationality. This class-based perspective of unionism informed unionized workers about the importance of building power for working people in their communities.²

The union movement needs to make some critical changes to ensure its own future. From a leftist perspective, the future of the union movement lies in a combination of renewed internationalism and the ability of local union movements to transform themselves. Today 70 percent of the union movement’s resources are tied up in local unions, which is the level at which workers and their communities interact with the union movement every day. People have long recognized that the only structure in the union movement that can blend the various interests and cultures of unions with the culture and interests of local communities is the central

labor council. We join with other scholars and activists in believing that the shift from business unionism to social justice unionism requires a dramatic cultural, ideological, and structural transformation in and of the U.S. union movement, and that change will have to come from local bases of activism informed by global realities.³ Thinking and acting globally and locally will change unions and communities simultaneously.

When a progressive movement culture in the unions captured the hopes and aspirations of working people, union and labor “movements” were built, such as the Knights of Labor in the late nineteenth century and the CIO in the 1930s and 1940s. Industrial organizing, driven at its height by a center-Left alliance in the CIO, inspired hope for workplace democracy, broad-based democratic reforms, a social safety net, gender and racial equality, and an end to grinding poverty. Similarly today, a union movement that reflects how global forces affect workers in their communities and effectively combats neoliberal globalization at the local level (and unites with others to resist it globally) will improve workers’ lives and enable unions to reclaim their place as the basic institution of working-class people.

TRADE UNIONISM STAGE SOUTH

Despite the fact that several unions have abandoned use of the term *solidarity*, apparently because of feedback they received from focus groups, we find the term not only politically valuable but analytically useful, because it describes a particular practice that organizations, social movements, and other groups undertake to establish common cause in their efforts. An interesting and problematic view of international working-class solidarity began to emerge in the U.S. union movement several years ago. This view, which was apparently shared by the future members of Change to Win and the Sweeney leadership in the AFL-CIO, identifies three forms of solidarity: Cold War solidarity, pragmatic solidarity, and a third form we call “altruistic solidarity” (helping weaker movements with educational programs and in some cases resources).⁴ None of these approaches assumes that U.S. unions have much to learn from or to emulate in the union movements of the Global South. None acknowledges that support for other movements—whether they are union movements or other forms of justice movements—is essential to achieve solidarity within the U.S. union movement.⁵

The U.S. union movement has emerged from a tradition of Cold War trade unionism. This tradition has characteristically viewed other nations’

trade unions with arrogance and condescension, even when U.S. unions have been able to do good work with these non-U.S. organizations. The tradition has also involved destructive interference in other countries and their labor movements. And Cold War unionism has clouded the ability of the U.S. union movement to understand responses in the Global South to emerging neoliberal globalization.

The Global South is, of course, not a monolithic bloc. Within it are countries that have pursued economic and political policies often at odds with global capitalism (for example, China before 1976 and Cuba), countries that have undertaken a form of national capitalism (such as South Korea, India, and China after 1978), and more classic neocolonies (such as the Philippines, Kenya, and most of Central America). Clearly, some countries fall between these categories or reside at the nexus of them.

For reasons rooted in Cold War geopolitics, the United States has supported the economic development of certain countries more than others. It has done so in Japan, for example, by relieving the country of the burden of developing a large-scale military and creating favorable trade agreements, and in this way, it has been able to position the country to place needed resources into industrialization and large-scale economic development. In countries with more distorted development, such as Indonesia and Nigeria, foreign investment has helped expand the size of the working classes. These classes, however, have often been unbalanced, with significant investments in particular sectors, such as the petrochemical industry, being unmatched in other sectors. This unevenness can lead to polarization within the working class. Nevertheless, one can reasonably say that the world has witnessed a process of proletarianization over the last forty-plus years. This process has taken place in the shadow of the expansion of capitalism in the farming sector (and in many cases the displacement of farmers, which has encouraged migration into urban slums or to other countries).⁶ In turn, particularly during the past decade, we have seen the expansion of the informal sector, the sector of the workforce not tied into the official economy (such as unregistered businesses or workers paid "under the table").

The response to neoliberal globalization in the Global South has been mixed, with class often determining people's responses. Neocolonial elites have embraced neoliberal globalization, as one would expect. In some cases—for example, contemporary South Africa—ruling groups formerly associated with national liberation movements have also embraced neoliberal globalization but have had to navigate compli-

cated relationships with the United States to avoid total subordination. As Greg Albo has noted, relations between the major capitalist states today hover between competition and cooperation.⁷ This statement also describes the relations between the G-8 countries and many of the lesser capitalist countries such as South Africa and Brazil. Discussions, for instance, about South-South relations and an alignment between China, Brazil, India, and South Africa often reflect the desire of the national ruling groups of the Global South to strengthen their position in relation to the United States, but they do not fundamentally challenge neoliberal globalization.⁸

At the grassroots, however, significant challenges have emerged. Time and space do not permit an exhaustive examination of these efforts, but several general observations apply. First, the collapse of national populist projects beginning in the late 1970s has created a space in which new transformative movements are attempting to grow.⁹ The struggles for national independence and national liberation from the 1940s through the 1970s created formal or informal national united fronts in which various social forces subordinated themselves. The inability of the national populist projects to evolve into fully transformative projects (in large part because of their acceptance of the parameters of existing capitalism), combined with the end of the Cold War, threw these movements into chaos. The leading elements of most of these countries rejected, formally and informally, noncapitalist directions and embraced neoliberalism. This change in fundamental direction alienated parts of the movements that had hitherto worked directly with the leading organization or party of the national populist project.¹⁰

Despite accepting some form of neoliberal globalization, ruling elites in the Global South have, by and large, been able to maintain links, however illusory, between their projects and those of their nations. This posture has created significant challenges for social movements, which want to warn their fellow citizens that these elites are in fact betraying the national project.¹¹

Second, class, gender, ethnicity, and the environment have become critical issues in the Global South and thus are providing the bases for significant social movements. The struggle against outside control originally subordinated and marginalized many questions of social justice. Now, however, the crisis of national populist projects in the Global South has opened the door for these issues to emerge. The global reorganization of capitalism and the production process is also having a major impact. Increased participation of women in both the formal and the informal

workforce, albeit often in gender-segregated conditions, is part of this transformation.¹² In some cases, these issues have been skewed or co-opted by the right wing. Cases in point include the ethnic conflict that led to the Rwanda genocide and the rise of right-wing Christian and Muslim fundamentalist movements that have challenged the status of women.¹³

By the same token, positive developments have taken place, including the mobilization of the Venezuelan poor by Hugo Chavez and his movement (which spoke to the crisis of the political party system in Venezuela), the vibrant trade union movement and poor people's movements in South Africa, and a burgeoning underground women's movement in Afghanistan.

Third, vibrant trade union movements have emerged in the Global South that have had significant social impacts. In Nigeria, South Africa, Brazil, South Korea, and India (the list is not exclusive), large-scale trade union movements have galvanized other social movements. Labor theorist Peter Waterman generally describes these labor movements as forms of "social movement unionism"—that is, activist movements that mobilize members to challenge the status quo of labor-capital relations.¹⁴ Each of these movements has a visible Left presence that is sometimes very well organized and other times much looser.

Fourth, even in countries with vibrant labor movements, the absence of a broader social movement allows organized labor to backslide toward standard labor-capital relations. Under neoliberal globalization, workers are under nearly constant attack by capitalist forces. Though these attacks are national in nature, the subtext is always international. In the face of vibrant labor movements, the protectors of capital tend toward a combination of repression (sometimes violent) and co-optation (specifically, insistence on respectable labor-capital relations and conformity to established standards).

South Africa provides an illustration of this point. The country has three main labor federations, two of which—the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU, the largest of the federations) and the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU, the smallest of the federations)—emerged directly from the antiapartheid struggle under explicitly left-wing leadership. These two federations have different ideological roots but retain much in common. They have participated in activities ranging from strikes to mass marches while leading, coalescing with, and depending on other social movements.

With the democratic victory and end of apartheid in South Africa, these labor federations faced an entirely new situation. With the African

National Congress's (ANC's) assumption of power in the 1994, 1999, and 2004 elections, the strategies and tactics employed against the apartheid regime no longer applied. Nevertheless, the conditions facing the South African working class have remained difficult, particularly in light of the application of neoliberalism to South Africa. The ANC-led government has promoted the European-inspired "social partnership" model, in which labor, capital, and the state are independent partners that must collaborate in the interests of economic development. The government has set up institutions, such as the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), to coordinate and organize this relationship.¹⁵

This scenario has several problems, not the least of which is the fact that this model is collapsing in Europe. Second, the model does not mesh with the neoliberal approach to economics because it essentially obstructs the objectives of capital. For this reason, such corporatist notions have no place in a neoliberal environment. Third, this corporatist strategy raises questions about the role of other social forces, including nonunion working-class-based organizations. This last point has been a hot-button issue in South Africa. Though the unions are a significant force in South Africa (representing approximately 50 percent of the workforce), unemployment in the country ranges from 30 to 50 percent, and working people face issues in their communities that are just as important as those in the workplace, such as the need for electrification and drinkable water. Thus, a need exists to define the relationship of the trade union movement—particularly COSATU—to the social forces that have emerged to address these issues and to determine how the union movement will respond to these issues in and of themselves. Finally, the model assumes that the capitalist state is a neutral institution through which labor and capital compete. This assumption can lead to deadly consequences.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, the South African federations coming out of the revolutionary national democratic revolution—COSATU and NACTU—are under considerable pressure to be "legitimate" and "respectable" institutions. During the antiapartheid struggle, these movements defined their respectability and legitimacy in terms of their mass bases and the struggle against the white minority regime. Now that the country has Black majority rule, however, the situation is more complicated. COSATU, which has active alliances with both the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party, finds itself at odds with the prevailing economic approach of the government. Yet it and

other social movements must decide whether to press the ANC government for social transformation or to define their role in more traditional trade unionist terms.

As with the National Postal Mail Handlers Union (though on a much greater scale), which we discussed in chapter 6, various echelons in the South African union movement are under pressure to accommodate to standard patterns of labor-management relations. Along with this pressure come certain enticements and comforts for union leaders that can create distance between them and the rank and file. This matter has generated great controversy in South Africa.

Yet unionism in South Africa remains highly political, a fact that some U.S. trade unionists find both confusing and unsettling. The political discussions within COSATU and NACTU are more extensive and more sophisticated than any discussions taking place within the U.S. union movement. Grappling with some of the same questions that face U.S. unions, both South African federations, to different extents, are attempting to define the challenges facing the movement in their country during this era of neoliberal globalization. Whether they will be able ultimately to resist the sirens of neoliberalism and bureaucratism is not yet clear.

EMPIRE

No doubt one is a wretched plebeian harassed by debts and military service, but, to make up for it, one is a Roman citizen, one has one's share in the task of ruling other nations and dictating their laws.

Sigmund Freud, *The Future of Illusion*, 1927

Missing from the lexicon of U.S. trade unionism is a six-letter word: *empire*. This word, in association with U.S. foreign policy, is so explosive that it is normally avoided in polite company within the union movement. When it comes up in official U.S. trade union circles, a silence falls, as if the listeners had stumbled across a blank spot in a recording.

The notion of *empire* carries implications that the bulk of the U.S. trade union movement would rather avoid. The most important one is that movement actions do not take place in a vacuum. Every action, or failure to act, has consequences, as does every issue the union movement chooses to emphasize or ignore. U.S. organized labor's silence on questions of empire has made the movement largely complicit in the actions of the U.S. government on the international stage. This collu-

sion has come at great cost, both domestically and internationally. Yet the bulk of organized labor would rather see matters of U.S. foreign policy as irrelevant to the union movement. Absent is a willingness to ask fundamental questions, such as (1) What do we think about U.S. foreign policy? (2) Why is the United States hated overseas? (3) Should the United States support governments that crush workers and farmers? (4) What would a democratic foreign policy look like? (5) What is international working-class solidarity?

Although union leaders frequently cloak their acceptance of U.S. foreign policy in patriotism, something far deeper and more troubling is at work: *acceptance of empire*. The U.S. trade union movement has come to accept the legitimacy of the U.S. de facto international empire and has decided that such an empire is not inconsistent with democracy. As such, it is caught in a fundamental contradiction between the notion of international working-class solidarity and silence about or support for empire. The failure to question empire has many roots, not the least of which is the high standard of living in the United States, as well as the employment relationship that many workers have with the U.S. military and corporations doing business overseas. In the realm of military production, a disconnect often exists between workers' production and the policy implications of what they produce. Workers making missiles, military aircraft, and other weaponry often focus on the job at hand and do not inquire about how these products will be used. Military production that serves to strengthen the role of U.S. capitalism internationally not only results in the deaths of thousands but also redirects capital, technology, and labor away from socially useful investment. Nevertheless, workers who play a direct or indirect role in military production are encouraged or trained not to think through the implications of the products of their labor.

The point is not to make people feel bad about their jobs but to encourage people to consider the consequences of their actions or failures to act. To the extent that the trade union movement is silent about military production or silent about the social costs of multinational corporate activity in other countries, the union movement and its members become complicit in empire, regardless of their intentions. Such complicity can often cause inaction or prompt unions and their memberships to defend unconscionable activities, all in the name of saving jobs.

As we have said, the U.S. trade union movement's attempts to understand globalization have resulted in a one-sided analysis that recognizes only the activities of multinational corporations. The tendency has been

to look at globalization in terms of the ability of corporations to move around the world, outsourcing jobs and downsizing workers. Though this element is certainly an important aspect of neoliberal globalization, the phenomenon is much broader than this analysis suggests.

The best response to the reorganization of global capitalism is for the international working class to forge solidarity across borders. Moreover, it requires the unity of workers with others—not just workers—who are falling victim to neoliberal globalization. Insofar as the trade union movement (and the labor movement more broadly) does not advance a constructive alternative to neoliberal globalization, it opens the doors to right-wing nationalist movements that pose as anti-imperialist but are essentially fascist, including, on the extreme wing, the militia movement in the United States (and, internationally, groups like al-Qaeda).

The trade union movement treats neoliberal globalization as simply a matter of corporations and economics. When, however, the United States intervenes elsewhere in the world—as it has in Iraq and did in Central America in the 1980s—the union movement is often paralyzed and cannot respond because its leaders view governmental foreign policy as separate from the aims and objectives of trade unionism (unless the policy is blatantly procorporate, and even then, unions often tolerate the U.S. position). The union movement generally considers foreign policy on the narrowest of terms—for example, by focusing on the North American Free Trade Agreement—rather than considering its impact on democracy, self-determination, and human rights. Thus, U.S. unions view foreign-policy issues in light of their effect on an identifiable group of U.S. workers or, in more enlightened moments, their impact on U.S. workers in general.

Because of this narrow view, the global justice movement in the United States has grown up largely separate from the trade union movement. Though the Seattle demonstrations against the World Trade Organization in 1999 showed that unity is possible, this unity was short-lived, and the movement was unable to integrate its lessons in theory or practice. As such, the Seattle effort was an example of tactical unity rather than strategic convergence. This fact is not surprising given the serious disagreements within the AFL-CIO about the nature of the World Trade Organization.

Neither the AFL-CIO nor the CTW Federation has consistent views on the international situation. As we have noted, CTW has so far taken no position on the Iraq war. Under the leadership of SEIU, its approach to international affairs seems to combine case-by-case analysis with the

viewpoint of a trade association. This view does not differ qualitatively from that of the AFL-CIO. Traditionally, the AFL-CIO has been reluctant to take any position on international affairs that might challenge U.S. foreign policy, unless the policy has affected workers represented by one of its member unions.

Given this history, a critical need exists for a new unionism that embraces a new (for the United States) type of international solidarity. For the sake of argument, we call this new unionism *social justice solidarity*. Another form of solidarity, pragmatic solidarity, has gained popularity in the United States, particularly under the leadership of SEIU (though the union certainly did not invent it). As we have pointed out, however, this form of solidarity has a “corporate” outlook in the literal sense of the word (rather than in the sense of a “corporation”) in that it looks for shared interests to maximize the respective power of each union or union movement in an interaction. As such, each side cooperates on the basis of its immediate material interests. No larger view informs this type of solidarity; it forms around the needs of the moment. Both sides treat each agreement akin to a business decision, rather than see their activities as part of a larger struggle for power and against a common opponent.

Social justice solidarity begins with an important assumption: that unions are workers’ organizations engaged in class struggle (whether they like it or not) rather than corporations (regardless of the legalese). Thus, *solidarity*—a term we continue to insist upon—grows out of common interests at both the tactical *and* the strategic levels (which presumes that workers across borders have common strategic interests). Though we cannot assume that a union will necessarily have an ideological commitment beyond its commitment to the common struggle of workers, social justice solidarity looks at solidarity as a relationship rather than as a specific action. This relationship will inevitably change over time, but the commitment to common struggle and mutual respect will not.

Some of the best U.S. examples of social justice solidarity were in the mid- to late 1980s, when U.S. unions stood together against the apartheid regime in South Africa and in opposition to U.S. intervention in Central America. Today social justice solidarity is evident (albeit inconsistently) in the slowly developing fight against Wal-Mart’s antiworker activity. Yet social justice solidarity is at best a minority tendency within U.S. trade unionism. Clearly, a view we might call “empire consciousness” continues to dominate the outlook of much of the U.S. trade union movement, and empire consciousness is antithetical to social justice solidarity.

The meaning of social justice solidarity is clear in the words of a noted Colombian trade unionist, who stated, "The most important thing that North American activists seeking to support trade unions in Colombia can do is to work to change U.S. policy towards Colombia, especially its emphasis on military and police aid."¹⁷ Colombian workers are asking that their fellow workers in the United States look beyond common economic concerns in uniting with them. Instead, workers around the world are asking U.S. trade unionists to make a leap to social justice solidarity by addressing a wide range of issues, including:

- immigration and the rights of immigrant workers who cross borders seeking a livelihood (often because their nations' economies are in disarray because of interference by countries of the Global North)
- economic decisions by corporations of the Global North that render the economies of entire regions—for example, the Caribbean—unstable
- political repression and abuse of human rights, such as the actions faced by workers in countries like Swaziland and Burma/Myanmar, who may not have a common employer
- support for regional trade alliances in the Global South that strengthen workers' position and improve their nations' abilities to achieve genuine self-determination
- opposition to illegal wars of aggression, such as the current one in Iraq, as well as opposition to threatening behavior by the U.S. government toward countries that will not accept U.S. direction
- unity against neoliberal globalization and its impact in the United States and abroad
- unity against common employers and against the policies of governments that undermine democracy and workers' rights

This level of solidarity goes beyond one-shot agreements between partners; it requires principle-driven strategic pacts. What principles should drive social justice solidarity? At the head of the list are nonaggression among nations, national self-determination, workers' rights, human rights, and recognition of the need for a common global agenda—demonstrating at least a minimum level of unity—for the dispossessed.¹⁸

CHAPTER 19

REALIZING SOCIAL JUSTICE UNIONISM

Strategies for Transformation

PUTTING THE LEFT FOOT FORWARD

The irony of the current situation is that the U.S. union movement must become part of a new labor movement. To do so, unions must move left; they have no alternative.

The Gompers compromise unfolded as national capitalism, and later imperialism, took hold in the United States. The bulk of the U.S. movement (excluding the Industrial Workers of the World and other forces that followed them on the left) did not see a close connection between the imperial adventures of the United States and the development of U.S. capitalism. Production largely took place in the United States, though businesses had foreign investments. At least through the end of World War II, however, overseas investment focused largely on obtaining raw materials and new markets rather than on relocating U.S.-bound production. Rubber to make tires, for instance, came from Brazil and later from Asia, but the tires were produced in Akron, Ohio, and other production centers in the Global North.

This situation has fundamentally changed, which is why we argue that the material basis for international working-class solidarity is greater than at any point since the development of capitalism. Nevertheless, the existence of a material basis does not ensure success. Moving from the general recognition that international solidarity is a good