Globalisation and trade unions: towards a multi-level strategy?

Ronaldo Munck

Ronaldo Munck is Theme Leader for Internationalisation, Interculturalism and Social Development at Dublin City University in Ireland.

ABSTRACT

International trade unionism is facing a serious challenge from what is commonly called globalisation. Trade unions feel the need to ‘scale up’ their activities beyond their, once paramount, national terrain and to challenge capital’s untrammelled forward march internationalising and commodifying everything in its path. This article examines the new forms of labour internationalism and the way in which trade unions have been creating incipient counter-hegemonic strategies. The only certainty in this globalised and complex situation is that a continuation of national era trade union strategies is not a viable path. A possible ‘transformationalist’ alternative is posed in this paper, arguing that labour needs a multi-layered and flexible response to the new global capitalist order.

Introduction

‘Thoughtful trade unionists have come to recognise that playing safe is the most risky strategy. The present is either the end of the beginning or the beginning of the end’ (Hyman, 2004:23). That is, put simply, the dilemma now facing labour activists and critical thinkers. Globalisation has generated a multi-layered and multi-faceted process of social contestation. While the first wave of capitalist globalisation (1875 – 1914) saw the labour movement as the incipient driver of that contestation, the current wave of globalisation (1989 - ?) coincides with what most observers see as the terminal decline of the labour movement, and other social actors are seen as the main agents of contestation. But what if the labour movement is now entering a new cycle of activism and militancy, precisely through the contestation of neo-liberal globalisation? Is it inconceivable that a global contest between labour and capital might now emerge as Marx predicted? Be that as it may, we should certainly now move beyond the verdict of Manuel Castells who argued a decade ago, when globalisation seemed to sweep away all obstacles in its path, that ‘the labour movement seems to be historically superseded’ (Castells, 1997:360).

This article advances in three distinct moments, in the Gramscian (Gramsci 1971:124 ) sense, to seek answers to these questions and to advance what I would call a transformationalist labour perspective on globalisation. In the first section, I examine current debates and practical developments around the emergence of global unions. Does global capitalism lead inexorably to global unions or should it? The second section takes up the so-called new internationalism and how labour is joining the new
social movements in contesting globalisation. Are we moving towards a global working class taking on global capitalism? Finally, we turn to what a transformationalist or radical reform strategy for labour might mean in the era of globalisation. There are no simple answers, but we have to at least start asking the right questions.

**Global capital — global unions?**

The year 2007 began auspiciously from an internationalist labour perspective with the announcement by a group of influential US, British and German trade unions that they would join forces to confront the power of transnational corporations (Morgan 2006). The organisations involved were the UK’s largest private sector union, Amicus (in the process of amalgamating with the Transport and General Workers Union to form Unite), the influential German engineering union IG Metal and the American United Steel Workers and International Association of Machinists, representing between them nearly six and a half million workers. For traditional, or at least mainstream, trade union leaders to recognise that the days of the national trade union were numbered seemed like a major step forward. While the transnationals were seen to be pitting countries and workforces against one another, trade unionists were now committing to the creation of a transnational union to challenge the power of global capital. Would the 1970s vision of trade unions acting as a ‘countervailing power’ against the multinational corporations then surging forward across the globe, now belatedly come to fruition?

It is now widely believed amongst labour specialists that the international trade union movement in general, together with its now unified peak organisation, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) which has brought together the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the Global Unions (the previous International Trade Secretariats) and the World Confederation of Labour (WCL), is at a crossroads in terms of how to meet the challenge of globalisation. We can but agree with Marcel van der Linden for whom ‘it remains very likely that the coming of transnational internationalism will be a difficult process interspersed with failed experiments and moments of deep crisis’ (van der Linden 2003). We can probably agree with that statement whether we hold an optimistic or pessimistic view of the likelihood of a new era of labour transnationalism. What is at stake though, in this context, is not our estimation of the capabilities of this or that organisation, but the question of what the main dilemmas facing the global labour movement are. Of course, we cannot discuss this in a few pages but we can try to lay out in a simple way the main scales of activity that labour operates on in the current period, before going on to discuss actual strategies in the next section.

At an international level, the new International Trade Union Confederation (ICFTU/GU/WCL) seeks to articulate labour interests at the level of the international financial institutions and of the TNCs (transnational corporations). Compared to the period of the post-war boom, the era of neo-liberal globalisation has seen very little space for durable class compromises to be negotiated with either of these interlocutors. The main dilemma for international labour organisations is whether they continue to operate as if that class compromise was possible, through the likes of a social partnership and generally ‘responsible’ modes of engagement and activity. The alternative, I would
argue, is a more wholehearted engagement with the global justice movement and activist practices more akin to those of the civil society organisations. What is in question then is whether the existing trade union structures and procedures can adapt to the demands of the new global order.

In terms of the overarching spatial and social divide between workers in the affluent North and those in the dominated South, a major dilemma has been the issue of international labour standards. Should the international labour movement argue, on the basis of fairness and legitimacy, that core labour standards should be incorporated into the remit of the World Trade Organisation? Or are these labour standards a covert form of Northern protectionism vis-à-vis developing countries? As Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick puts it ‘The ICFTU believes that there is a danger of a ‘global race to the bottom’ and that it must be prevented by binding rules to establish minimum standards for workers in the global economy’ (Gumbrell-McCormick 2004:526). The problem is that for workers in the majority world the ‘social dialogue’ approach and social economy model this is premised on is not available to them. For a global labour movement this is a serious dilemma and not one amenable to cosmetic resolution.

Increasingly, we find the regional moment of labour activity coming to the fore. Whether it is at the level of the EU, North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA), Mercosur (Common Market of the Southern Cone) or the Asian Pacific Economic Co-Operation (APEC), trade unions need to respond to the new regional modalities of capitalist development. As Haworth and Hughes have argued, ‘There is a positive aspect to regional labour activity today. A combination of three factors – internationalisation of capital, the Social Clause / Labour Standards debate and regional integration – has provided labour with a need, a platform and a context for action’ (Haworth and Hughes 2002:163). While certainly the regional transnationalism of the South does not share the same dynamic as the EU, for example, this domain will clearly gain in importance. The dilemmas it poses for labour are whether it displaces the national terrain and whether it in some way lessens the importance of global labour solidarity.

The regional moment is certainly critical at the European level, not least because of the overwhelming weight of European trade unionists in terms of numbers and even more in terms of resources at a global scale. The ETUC (European Trade Union Congress) currently accounts for more than half of the world’s trade unionists (China excluded) and this region’s dominance in terms of the International Trade Secretariats (now dubbed Global Unions) is also very clear. However it is less clear whether the European trade unions will be able to achieve the type of renewal necessary to deal with the rigours of neo-liberal globalisation (see Dølvik, 2001). In many ways the performance of the ETUC as a countervailing power within the EU has been disappointing, for all the talk about the European social model. By contrast, regional associations in the South, from the fairly mainstream regional trade union structures within the MERCOSUR (see Munck, 2002 b) to the more radical, but at the same time less influential, SIGTUR (Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights, for which see Lambert, 2002), have been forced to take up the regional level, or moment, of activity as a counter to the regionalizing dynamic of global capitalism.
As to the once dominant, or even exclusive, national level of labour activity, there is now a gradual realisation that the nation state is far from irrelevant as a parameter for much of labour’s activity. As Bill Dunn concludes in a recent study of globalisation, labour and the state, ‘there appear to be many respects in which it remains both possible and necessary for workers to fight at the national level’ (Dunn, 2006:47). Even if labour is mounting a transnational campaign, say on core labour standards, nation states remain key targets insofar as they are the constituent members of the international financial institutions. Upscaling labour struggles because the national terrain is hostile is not always possible or desirable. Because of such dilemmas, however, it is not clear that a national trade union is an adequate vehicle even to defend the national working class from the deleterious effects of neo-liberal globalisation, never mind make substantial gains for the working class.

There is now a growing tendency across social movements to accept that we might ‘think globally’ but that we also need to ‘act locally’. Andrew Herod has argued persuasively that ‘workers may think that if they cannot organise globally, there is no point in attempting to organise at other scales’ (Herod, 2001:118). This is not only politically paralysing, but ignores the extent to which TNCs can be effectively challenged locally. This is not presented as a ‘small is beautiful’ or ‘local trumps all’ argument, but simply recognises that workers need not (indeed often cannot) respond to capital's movement at the same scale. While it is clear that local pressure points may be effective in challenging a TNC, a dilemma is still posed for workers worldwide who might accept that ‘another world is possible’ in principle but do not see a global vision that is achievable coming from the traditional labour organisations.

Clearly these different scales of labour activity are not like rungs on a ladder, and in practice they overlap, as one would expect, given the uneven and combined development of capitalism itself. Just taking one particular dispute that has received sustained scholarly attention, the Liverpool lock-out of 1995-1998, we can see in practice how complex labour contestation is (see Castree, 2000 for a review of this case). There were sustained arguments that the dockers had to ‘go global’ more consistently and that only international labour solidarity could overcome the negative forces prevailing on the national terrain. One could also argue, however, on the evidence, and persuasively, that the dense social networks of the local labour and community movements in Liverpool were the only reliable basis for sustaining such a long struggle. Likewise, one could argue that a decisive yet less confrontational approach through the official national trade union channels of the transport sector might have produced some more positive results. The point here is not to rake over these debates, but simply to reinforce the point that labour’s contestation of capitalism and its effects will more often than not be multiscalar.

At the start of the twenty first century, international trade unionism is confronted by a paradox: there are more wage-earners than ever before (around three billion according to Freeman, 2006) as globalisation has unleashed a new wave of proletarianisation, but the labour movement has been seriously weakened by global neo-liberal policies. There has been a dramatic increase in the effective global labour force over the last two decades with a recent International Monetary Fund study
(IMF, 2007) suggesting it has risen fourfold. A United Nations projection suggests that effective global labour supply could more than double again by 2050 (IMF, 2007:180). While the overwhelming majority of this labour force will remain unskilled it is the increase in the proportion of skilled workers which is its most noticeable feature. The integration of the workers from the ‘emerging markets’ (ie former state socialist) and ‘developing’ (ie former Third World) countries has created the conditions for the emergence of a global working class as the ongoing integration of workers into the global marketplace proceeds apace. However the trade union and socialist movements have been emerging from a period when they were seriously weakened, if not decimated, by capitalism’s twenty year long neo-liberal offensive.

The new International Trade Union Confederation claims to represent 166 million workers through its 309 affiliated trade union organisations in 156 countries and territories. The ICFTU had already brought the Global Unions under its wing through the Global Unions Council, when the collapsing former state socialist unions were incorporated. The once Christian-oriented WCL was then taken over and eight previously unaffiliated national trade union confederations were brought into its ranks. It was clearly a strategic response to globalisation: ‘The international trade union movement is adapting in order to remain a key player in an economic climate that is creating more losers than winners’ (ICFTU, 2006). But was this new-found spirit of political collaboration and practical action on the ground too late? Neo-liberal globalisation implied the simultaneous weakening of traditional unionism’s century-old national-industrial base, the shift of that base to countries of the South (particularly China), the undermining of traditional job security and union rights, and the decline or disappearance of support from social-democratic parties and reformist governments. Moreover, the traditional Northern unions were being confronted with a fact that they had not had to face previously in the era of national/industrial relations/corporatist type labour relations, namely that in this globalising world of labour, maybe only one worker in 18 was unionised. Finally, with the disappearance of their competitors in communist or national-populist unions, the ICFTU/GU found itself not only in an alien and hostile world but ideologically disoriented now that the old Cold War politics had been superseded.

New internationalisms

Historical parallels with the late 19th century and the emergence of the modern trade union movement teach us is that the necessary shift to a new labour internationalism is unlikely to be a smooth and organic process. It is more likely that alternative social forces (the ‘informal sector’ for example) and new geographical locations (the South generally and China in particular) will challenge and subvert the current structures and strategies. There are signs that trade unions are looking towards the new social movements in more positive ways than in the past. Even in the USA, as Dan Clawson shows, ‘Labour’s links with other [social movement] groups are denser and stronger than they have been for half a century’ (Clawson, 2003:205) and this interaction has led to new, more progressive policies, for example in relation to undocumented immigrants. Frances O’Grady, deputy general secretary of the British Trade Union...
Congress has recognised that ‘growing globalisation has demonstrated ever more vividly that going it alone [for the unions] is not an option’ (Barber, 2004), and that not only do trade unions need to engage seriously with the global justice movement, but if they wish to change the world they will need to start by changing themselves. Has this begun to happen?

A decade ago, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) declared that globalisation posed ‘the greatest challenge for unions in the 21st Century’ (ICFTU 1997). Since then, there has been a growing mood that labour needs to ‘go global’ to confront the new, more internationalised capitalist order we live under. An indication of the sea change in official international trade union attitudes can be gauged by considering that while in 1995 the ICFTU was seriously offended when it was offered ‘civil society’ rather than ‘favoured social partner’ status at the UN’s Social Summit held in Copenhagen, by 2008 it was publicly endorsing the radical counter-movement World Social Forum (WSF) of Porto Alegre and actually called on its members to follow the day of Action called by the WSF (see Waterman, 2008).

If the creation of a global economy is producing a global workforce, then global unions seem a logical development. Global economic power might be seen to inexorably produce a global social counter-power. Or, in Polanyian terms (see Munck, 2002a for a reading of labour and globalisation inspired by Karl Polanyi) the expansion of the market that lies at the heart of what we call globalisation generates a social counter-movement by which society (or social forces therein) protects itself from the ravages of the free or unregulated market. The ‘great transformation’ of market-led globalisation also creates a broad social movement (with radical and conservative strands) resisting its corrosive effect on social relations. These social relations, however, cannot be conceived without understanding how they are grounded in particular places. Thus the spatial dimensions of transnational labour relations and transnational labour solidarity are crucial to their understanding. Furthermore, contending political projects inevitably contain a particular spatial vision. The forces of capital have their range of spatial fixes, to maintain accumulation and healthy profit rates. Labour also has, or needs to have, its own spatial vision and politics of place. Globalisation has imposed on us a particular vision of space: the ‘shrinking globe’; hypermobile investment; and the communications revolution. Its contestation will also generate a new understanding of space: more networked, more interdependent and maybe more sustainable.

If we were to construct a basic social-spatial matrix to set the context for labour’s varied and multidimensional responses to globalisation, it would look something like the diagram in Figure 1.

The various points of the diamond might be seen as poles of attraction, setting up force fields affecting the activity of labour in complex and intermingled ways. Thus, workers and unions operate within the parameters of the market (on the left), but they are also always already embedded within social relations (on the right). Trade union strategies might thus be categorised in terms of whether they lean towards market discipline, or the social order. However, they are also pulled in different directions spatially, from the global (at the top) to the local (at the bottom), reflecting the different
scales of human activity. Neither the (horizontal) Polanyian tension nor the (vertical) politics of scale can be seen as self-sufficient; rather they act in a manner that is always combined if uneven. The elements detailed in the diamond are illustrative of the type of complex locations of, for example, the European Works Councils as regional and market oriented organisations that we can contrast with the local and social orientation of social movement unionism.

**Figure 1. Social and spatial dimensions of labour’s responses to globalisation**

The recent, and overdue, spatial turn in international labour studies should not, however, be seen as a panacea because it can, in turn, lead to a neglect of more traditional social, political and, above all, historical forms of analysis and prognosis. There seems to be a tendency, perhaps inevitable, to prioritise or place in a hierarchy the ‘scales’ of human activity as orthodox Marxists once did with the various ‘levels’ of capitalist society. Often this leads to binary oppositions and/or hierarchies being established such as ‘local is best’ or labour ‘must go global’. Furthermore, to just add ‘space’ to the old trinity of race, gender and class as determinants of human activity as Herod (2001:269) does, does not really subvert that well established, but limited, paradigm. However, overall, an intense focus on the interpenetration of the scales of human activity does contribute considerably to our understanding of the complexity of labour’s position and strategies in the era of globalisation, making it possible to open up labour analysis and strategising in ways that acknowledge the complexity and fluidity of the world we live in.
In practice, the new trade union internationalism – as exemplified by the new UK, US and German global super-union referred to above – is largely set within the parameters of traditional industrial relations. The Global Unions had already moved from the voluntary regulation sought by the Codes of Conduct and legal regulation, through the ‘social clause’ campaign that would have the WTO enforcing labour standards, towards setting up ‘International Framework Agreements (IFAs)’ with some transnational companies, the main purpose of which was defined as ‘establish[ing] a formal ongoing relationship…which can solve problems and work in the interests of both parties’ (ICFTU, 2004). These international unions rightly see the TNCs as the major powers in the new global economy. They have thus moved back to ‘free collective bargaining’ type strategies rather than relying on tripartite relations, including the state, to defend their interests. This is understandable as a syndicalist reaction and it does seem to also lead to a greater emphasis on traditional trade union activities such as recruitment, union building and the defence of basic labour rights. As a transformative strategy, it probably will not work, however, insofar as it moves away from the broader counter-globalisation movements currently organising outside the workplace. But in this context we should be aware of the much more positive reading of Fairbrother and Hammer, for whom ‘the pursuit of IFAs represents a singular accomplishment by trade unions at all levels of organization and representation’ (Fairbrother and Hammer 2005:421).

Labour internationalism has always taken different forms and these have rarely followed the mythical injunction: ‘workers of all countries unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains’. In fact, from the period of the First International until 1968 it was, according to Marcel van der Linden, a ‘national internationalism’ (van der Linden 2003a) that prevailed. That is to say the prevailing strategy was based on a narrow and Eurocentric conception of the ‘international working class’ and represented a form of solidarity between national trade unions movements rather than a genuine transnationalism. In the period since 1968 we have seen the rise of new social movements, the collapse of communism and the emergence of globalisation as a dominant societal paradigm. What this means in terms of internationalism is that we have probably entered a transitional phase akin to that associated with the formation of the First International, with new political and organisational forms emerging.

Traditional models of internationalism ignore the complex contingencies at play and the very real contradictions underlying its practice. For example, we might have to recognize that there are often narrow sectional interests lying behind ‘internationalism’, as when US trade unions promote unionism in the South to dampen competition over wage levels with their own members. Also, we might find that the best way to combat globalization is through a form of national alternativist trade union strategy. Thus one of the new global unions, the ICEM (International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers Union), in a document arguing for ‘global unionism’ concludes that ‘priority must be given to supporting organising at a local union level’ (ICEM 1999:25) in order to build union strength on
the ground. There is, in reality, no ‘one right way’ to practice internationalism and we need to recognise that it is a complex, shifting and transitional phase we are currently experiencing.

That task is tackled more productively, I would argue, by those engaged in bridging the gap between the organised labour movement and the ‘new’ social movements around environmental, place and gender issues (Clawson, 2004; Waterman, 2005). This is not a politics of nostalgia for an era when the ‘class struggle’ pitted clearly pre-defined antagonists in battle. It is a call for a politics of articulation between different sectors of the counter-globalisation movement, on the basis of identifying democratic equivalents. Whether it is race/class, blue/green divides or the ever-present gender divisions, unity will not occur through some mystical submerging into a ‘multitude’. Taking a broader view, we could say that the move from the hitherto dominant simple, neo-liberal, free market Washington Consensus to a putative post Washington Consensus (see Broad 2004) takes politics out of the equation so that we can all unite around ‘globalisation with a human face’. Workers are resisting this on a daily basis and their organisations are beginning to articulate a new labour politics for the era of globalisation.

Transformationism

Without repeating the Gramscian cliché that what is needed is pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will (Gramsci 1971:175), we do need to reflect on the good news and the bad news emerging from the above analysis of the contemporary state of transnational labour organising. One recent account of globalisation and labour and its impact on the democratising of global governance manages to make both cases in the same book (Stevis & Boswell, 2008). On the one hand the authors argue that ‘we are optimistic that many unions have recognised the necessity of global union collaboration’ (Stevis & Boswell, 2008:76) and that ‘International Framework Agreements are an accomplishment for global unions’ (Stevis & Boswell, 2008:150). But on the other hand they also argue that ‘there is no evidence that the authority of the ITUC will grow’ (Stevis & Boswell, 2008:72) and that ‘so long as national unions persist with business as usual, global union organizations will remain organizations of the protected labor force’ (Stevis & Boswell, 2008:74).

I would argue that this dual view of the prospects for and limitations of global unionism realistically mirrors the complexity of the present situation. Thus, for example, the International Chemical, Energy and Mining Workers Federation (ICEM) has been in the vanguard of the new labour internationalism since the mid 1990s, yet its president, John Maitland, resigned in 2006 citing as the cause his disillusionment with the conservative institutional nature of the organisation and the way it had undermined the new local/global organisational forms which had emerged to challenge global corporate power (Webster, Lambert & Bezuindenhout, 2008). While this mixed mode of advance and retreat is normal in any period of transition from one labour organisational form to another, it is understandable why pessimism sets in when transformative change seems to be always set back by conservative inertia. While this pessimistic interpretation dominates in academic analysis (see Myconos, 2005) we can also point to a real process of union renewal based on complex local/regional/global
levels of activity and repertoires of action. This complex set of activities is beginning to address and challenge the dominant international political economy and, as Fairbrother and Hammer put it after a close analysis of the trends, ‘as part of this process, a genuine international and renewed trade unionism becomes a possibility’ (Fairbrother & Hammer, 2005:405).

As to what the future may hold, it is now increasingly common to refer to the ‘collapse of globalism’ (Saul, 2005) insofar as global peace has clearly not broken out and the nation state (and nationalism) is very much alive and well. Indeed, for many authors, globalisation was always a necessary myth created by the architects of the post-Cold War neo-liberal revolution, at least insofar as this applies to labour (Hirst and Thompson, 2000; Wood, 1997). In terms of economic internationalisation and financial openness, the classic Gold Standard period (1875 – 1914) was seen to more correctly merit the label ‘globalisation’. Today, this sceptical case seems more plausible than that of the few remaining true believer globalists. However, it might be more cautious to consider the middle road of David Held’s ‘transformationalist’ perspective which sees globalisation driving rapid economic, political, social and cultural transformations across the globe, but the result of those changes is a contingent historical process replete with contradictions (Held et al, 1999:7). In political terms, transformation politics may take on different hues, from the very western social democratic cosmopolitanism of Held et al to the more radical strands emerging from social movement theorising in the global South. Thus Brazilian political philosopher, Roberto Mangabeira Unger, suggests that we should not wait for optimum conditions to emerge or tilt at windmills but, instead, to promote radical reforms where possible, along a transformative path (Unger 1998:18). Society is being transformed by globalisation and politics is changing apace. We need to rediscover our transformative vocations not by fighting yesterday’s battles, nor through succumbing to a simple humanising of the existing order. We no longer need to accept neo-liberal globalisation as la pensée unique but nor can we, or should we, seek to turn the clock back on the last 20 years, so that we must accept the transformations wrought by globalisation and promote a transformative labour politics on this new social and spatial terrain.

Recently Saskia Sassen (2006) has sought to develop a more mid-range social theory of globalisation that takes us beyond macro-level accounts that tend to simplify the complex social processes underway. In particular, this meso-level narrative would help add ‘social thickness’ to our analysis of globalisation. By reducing globalisation to the hypermobility of finance capital and the famous time-space compression, dominant accounts strip the global of its social determinants and conditioning factors. This approach also allows us to move beyond impoverished notions of the local and the global in both the pro- and anti-globalisation literatures, that manage to equate the global with placelessness. Sassen’s approach also leads us to focus on what she calls the ‘countergeographies of globalisation’ (Sassen 2006:370) whereby alternative networks develop a multiscalar politics that need not become cosmopolitan in the classical sense, to act as powerful countering tendencies to globalisation.

We can argue that there is today a tendency towards the formation of a global working class. For some twenty years now, there has been a tendential process towards
the formation of a global labour market. Management consultant William Johnston declared at the start of the 1990s that ‘the globalisation of labour is inevitable’ (Johnston 1991:126). Of course, in practice no more than one fifth of the world’s workers are directly linked to the global political economy in terms of labour relations. Yet the possibility of global unions is not diminished by this fact, when we take into account the much greater impact of what we call globalisation on labour relations worldwide. This leads even cautious labour scholars like Jeffrey Harrod and Robert O’Brien to conclude that ‘a global labour force can be discerned, if it is defined as those workers connected to the global economy’ (Harrod & O’Brien, 2002:14).

The power of the local to affect the new global capitalism is clear. The local still matters even while globalisation tends to obliterate space. But we need to go beyond the ‘local-global paradox’ if we are to construct a new internationalism for the era of globalisation. The paradox refers to the fact that ‘while economic relationships have become ever more global in scope and nature, political responses to economic globalization are becoming more localized’ (Jonas 1999:325). While this might be the case, it is not, I would argue, incompatible with the emergence of a new labour internationalism. Workers are clearly divided by national, regional, gender, ethnic and other fault-lines. The growing internationalisation of capitalist rule may increase competition along national, regional and even city lines. But globalisation is also creating a more numerous global working class and, arguably, a common focus for workers worldwide. Some workers and their organisations have responded with a ‘new realism’ that simply accepts an irreversible change in the balance of forces against workers. In other cases, national and regional alternatives have developed along traditional political mobilisation lines. Maybe we can develop a ‘local transnationalism’ based on the notion that workers’ internationalism need not mirror the international structures of capitalism of either the multinational corporations or the WTO (World Trade Organisation).

In his final ‘search for international union theory’ Harvie Ramsay concluded that ‘in the end, the success of international unionism remains a contradictory and contingent matter’ (Ramsay, 1999:215). There are many contradictions within the global working class, but not least there are the divisions based on social position and geographical location. There is a tension between the transnational labour activity ‘from above’ and the local contestation of globalisation that may well take particularist and protectionist forms. Then there is a large element of contingency in how labour responds to capitalist strategies and structures that are always changing and show a huge variety of forms across space. We must also, I believe, consider very carefully the Gramscian definition of transitional periods when ‘the old is dying but the new has not yet been fully born’ (Gramsci 1971:106) and seek to apply it to transnational labour relations. Our conclusion might thus lead us to mirror Harvie Ramsay’s, namely, that ‘this is not a message of hopelessness, but one which emphasises the complexity and difficulty of the international union project’ (Ramsay, 1999:215).

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