



Daphné Josselin

Back to the frontline? Trade unions in a global age

Originally published as:

Josselin, Daphné and Wallace, William (Eds), *Non-state actors in world politics*. Basingstoke, UK : Palgrave Macmillan 2001, pp. 169-186 © 2001 Palgrave www.palgrave.com

You may cite this version as:

Josselin, Daphné (2001). *Back to the frontline? Trade unions in a global age* [online]. London: LSE Research Online.

Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/archive/00000796>

Available online: May 2006

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>

Contact LSE Research Online at: Library.Researchonline@lse.ac.uk

NON-STATE ACTORS IN WORLD POLITICS, D.JOSSELIN AND W. WALLACE EDS (2001)

CHAPTER 10. BACK TO THE FRONTLINE? TRADE UNIONS IN A GLOBAL AGE

Daphne Josselin¹

[Non-State Actors in World Politics, D. Josselin and W. Wallace eds., Palgrave, 2001]

While the rise or revival of transnational social movements and international non-governmental organizations has of late begun to generate a significant literature (see chapter 1, this volume), international unionism continues to attract little interest outside labour activist circles (Moody 1997; Waterman 1998; Munck and Waterman 1999; O'Brien et al. 2000 is an exception). Why? Three reasons stand out. Firstly, international trade unions are 'old' non-state actors, long predating the recent rise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs): the First International Association of the Working Man was created in London in 1864. In an age when class protest is being superseded by issue-based advocacy, their very structure seems to make them cruelly unfashionable. Secondly, their transnational dimension has to be qualified: to the growing embeddedness of national trade unions in domestic structures of economic management after the Second World War corresponded an obvious lack of autonomy in matters of foreign policy. Transnational labour activity did take place: on a bilateral basis, through umbrella organizations gathering national federations, and through International Trade Secretariats (ITSs) representing workers from specific industries. But national federations and international organizations often acted as fronts for one super-power against the other. Whether the end of the Cold War was enough to 'denationalize' the foreign activities of labour representatives is certainly debatable, one observer assimilating Western internationals to 'state-funded development agencies' (Waterman 1998, 113). Thirdly, the shift

in employment to non-unionized sectors and workers has contributed to a plummeting in trade union membership worldwide.² So has, arguably, the ideological ‘hollowing out’ brought about by the collapse of the former Soviet bloc. If trade unions have come to be regarded as dinosaurs, it is no wonder that they are deemed little worthy of investigation outside the fields of industrial relations and comparative political economy.

However, such perceptions overlook important developments in the nature of international politics as a result of globalization, and in the positioning of international federations of trade unions within. These have contributed to propelling labour representatives back to the front lines of debates on international economic governance. Like many other non-state actors, trade unions have increasingly taken advantage of the structure of opportunity created by cheaper and faster communications, new centres of decision and the emergence of ‘global consciousness’. They have used the Internet to coordinate industrial action on a cross-border basis. They have also collaborated more closely with other non-state actors in transnational issue networks. With terms like ‘class’ and ‘worker’ rapidly losing their mass appeal, many labour activists have worked to shift the debate in the direction of children, women and a broadened conception of solidarity. Efforts are now directed at the promotion of ‘core’, i.e. ‘human rights’ labour standards, while many are calling for a ‘new social unionism’ that does not only ally with the new social movements but also ‘incorporates their demands and responds to their practices’ (Waterman 1998, 217). This is manifest both at the level of international umbrella organizations, increasingly involved in ‘grand’ campaigning alongside other NGOs, and at that of the rank and file, with the emergence of ‘transnational workers’ networks’ bypassing the traditional structures of labour internationalism.³

Whether the new approach is likely to provide labour internationalism with a new lease of legitimacy is unclear. For one, I claim that the problems affecting international trade union federations cannot be solved through the adoption of new forms of communication or of a modified agenda centred on the defence of 'universal' values. From the outset, contradictions were embedded in the labour movement between the political aspirations of unionist leaders and their appeal to the rank and file. The rhetoric of international solidarity does not fit easily with the promotion of members' interests, which often implies protection against other workers, either at home or abroad. Moreover, alliances with representatives of the so-called 'new social movements' are fraught with difficulty, and far from rejuvenating labour's image might well lead to a further marginalization. As for efforts to acquire greater influence in international rule-making through indirect lobbying and wide-ranging campaigns, they can only provide labour groups with piecemeal agreements and a (limited) veto power. Change there may be, but the idea of a 'new labour movement', operating at the core of a global civil society, is at best premature.

The next section provides the background for our discussion, tracing the evolution of labour internationalism in the post-WWII period: from umbrella organizations as instruments of statecraft on behalf of Cold War antagonists and colonial powers in the 1950s and 1960s, to active opponents of multinational corporations (MNCs) in the 1970s and 1980s, and on to 'transnational activists' in the 1990s, bent on shaping agendas and pressuring national and international bodies in accordance with 'universal' principles. I then discuss the results obtained by trade union federations in their fight against MNCs, both in defining a common playing field and in co-ordinating transnational industrial action. The fourth section turns to the broadening of the 'labour front' via alliances with other social movements, and defines the

limits of the new approach. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the prospects open to the 'new' labour international.

THE THREE FACES OF LABOUR INTERNATIONALISM

Trade unions have often been omitted from studies of international relations. To some extent this omission seems justified: for most of the post WWII period, workers' representatives could be seen as 'silent lobbyists to their government, which remained the chief arbiters of foreign policy' (Breitenfellner 1997, 531). After years of political struggle, labour groups (at least in the West) had finally got not only members and funding but also prestige and political influence. The creation in 1919 of the International Labour Organization (ILO), whose mandate to promote 'lasting peace through social justice' was to be fulfilled in close cooperation with both business and labour representatives, had raised hopes in that area, soon followed by disappointment as economic depression, protectionism and unemployment set in. After 1945 however, Western trade unions became 'social partners', legitimate actors in domestic decision-making, and their participation was further entrenched within the then emerging international organizations: the Treaty setting up the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 had more on the Economic and Social Committee than on the parliamentary 'Assembly'; the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) gave them consultative status, later transmuted into the Trade Unions Advisory Committee (TUAC) of the OECD.

In exchange, trade unions engaging in transnational activities often did so to further the interests of their home government, as participants in the 'new statecraft'. Throughout the Cold War, the world's political divide largely shaped the international activities of labour

organizations, most notably through the fight for adherents, influence and prestige between the Soviet-led World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) and the anti-communist International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) (Windmuller 1980; MacShane 1992). Time and again the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) supported the foreign policy goals of the US government, building an anti-communist front within the European Program Trade Union Advisory Committee created to help administer the Marshall Plan in the 1940s, working to undermine Chilean left-wing trade unions in the 1960s, endorsing the Vietnam War in 1967, supporting CIA efforts to sustain Poland's Solidarnosc in the 1980s (Lens 1975; Cox 1977; Sims 1992). The Cold War was also fought at the regional level, most strikingly in Latin America where the AFL set up the Confederacion Interamericana de Trabajadores (CIT) in 1948 before backing the ICFTU-related Interamerican Regional Organization of Workers (ORIT).

The late 1960s proved a watershed, however. In the context of detente, internal dissent surfaced within the main umbrella organizations: weakened in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Prague in 1968, incapable of reforming itself, the Communist federation lost its Italian affiliate CGIL in 1975; acrimonious debates between European and American affiliates regarding the attitude to adopt vis-a-vis Eastern European trade unions led to the retreat of the AFL-CIO from the ICFTU in 1969 (it rejoined in 1982). More generally, 'new statecraft' began to lose in importance.⁴ Instead, what could be labelled 'MNC containment' rose in response to growing levels of foreign direct investment (Cox 1971). This time, the main objective of unionists was to coordinate action against MNCs in the various countries in which they operated, so as to increase their bargaining power. By concluding private agreements with multinational companies, international trade unions hoped to play an active role in the definition of the rules governing cross-border economic interactions.

Of the three umbrella organizations - ICFTU, WFTU and International Confederation of Christian Unions (ICCU) - the ICFTU was the most successful in achieving this partial reconversion, formulating its own 'Charter on Multinationals' in 1975. Also at the vanguard of the efforts at MNC containment were International Trade Secretariats (ITSs) gathering workers from the same industries. Created at the turn of the century, more directly focused on collective bargaining than the international federations, these enjoyed a greater commonality of interests among their members and a lesser politicization.⁵ Both independently and through the ICFTU-ITSs Working Party on Multinational Companies, they pressed ahead with the new agenda, the most active being the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF), the International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers' Unions (ICEF) and the International Union of Food and Allied Workers' Association (IUF). Action was taken against individual firms, world councils created in the automotive and electrical industries, and work conducted on regulating the activities of MNCs through the TUAC of the OECD and the workers' delegations in the ILO, leading to the adoption of two 'groundbreaking' agreements: the 1976 OECD Declaration on International Investment and Multinational Enterprises, and the 1977 Tripartite Declaration of Principles on Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy of the ILO (Levinson 1972; Bendiner 1987).

At the same time, support for trade unions in poorer and/or undemocratic countries continued to be a major focus for action both for international federations and for ITSs. In that respect, the South African case set an important precedent: without the (largely state-provided) funding of the ICFTU and associated ITSs, it is doubtful whether the democratic trade union movement would have found the resources to mobilize and mount a serious challenge to the apartheid regime (Southall 1995).⁶ Building on this achievement and in an effort to influence

the public debate on globalization and its impact on social justice, international federations of trade unions have increasingly turned into transnational advocacy campaigners, joining in the orchestration of broad issue-related networks.

Here the norms to be defined and implemented internationally are of a general nature, constraining the activities of both state and non-state actors. The tactics employed also differ, with a strong emphasis on collaboration beyond the confines of the labour movement. With 125 million adherents, the ICFTU can justly pose as the most significant of international workers' federations; it has been particularly active in that area, as will be further shown below. But neither the smaller World Confederation of Labour (WCL, formerly ICCU), with 26 million adherents, nor the ITSs, whose eleven organizations total around 200 million adherents worldwide, have been immune to this evolution.⁷

Three dimensions or faces of labour's transnational activism can thus be distinguished, each placing the emphasis on a different set of goals, targets and approaches (Table 10.1).⁸ Of course, there are no firm boundaries between these three dimensions, the last two in particular. Constraints have been imposed on MNC investment to try and gain political leverage over state actors. In addition to official recognition and financial support for South African labour representatives, international unions have also put pressure directly on MNCs: the ICFTU Code of Conduct for investment in South Africa, together with the US Sullivan Code, played a significant role in bolstering the struggle of South African workers (Southall 1995; Murray 1996). Conversely, broad-based campaigns promoting core principles or values such as democracy, human rights or social justice have been used to extract concessions from multinational corporations or influence the behaviour of individual states in line with the

(publicized) preferences of home governments. One could thus argue that the difference is one of tactics more than goals.

[Table 10.1 The three dimensions of transnational labour activism]

Importantly however, contradictions exist between the three roles, inasmuch as they imply the promotion of different sets of interests: national-political in the case of the new statecraft; transnational-economic in that of MNC containment; transnational-social in that of broad-based activism. To a large extent these contradictions relate to old debates on the nature of the labour movement. That nationalism is a force to be reckoned with in spite of internationalist rhetoric has been obvious since the principal socialist and labour movements decided to support their governments at the outbreak of World War I. Competition between business and social unionism, between a conception of unions as managers of the conflict between capital and labour and one in which they would act as 'vehicles for broad social mobilizations against entrenched privilege and inequality of income and life opportunities', has been a shaping force behind the evolution of the national movements, in the US in particular (DeMartino 1999, 85).

Yet these tensions sit rather uneasily with the current optimism of many labour activists (Breitenfellner 1997; Waterman 1998; Munck and Waterman 1999; Mazur 2000). While acknowledging the reality of the problems experienced by international unionism since the 1970s (decline in numbers, rise of a neoliberal orthodoxy favouring deregulation and industrial restructuring), they argue that some of the trends generally subsumed under the label 'globalization' are having a positive impact on the ability of trade unions to mobilize their members, coordinate their action transnationally and through new alliances with other

NGOs exert pressure over policy-makers, thus paving the way for a rejuvenation of labour internationalism. This optimism has been further bolstered by the failure of the Seattle ministerial meeting to launch a new round of trade liberalization in December 1999, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney referring to 'a stunning breakthrough in the public debate over globalization'.⁹

How does the political input of umbrella organizations measure up to this flurry of internationalist speeches and initiatives? Leaving aside 'new statecraft', arguably of lesser relevance in a post Cold War world, this chapter takes stock of recent developments in the areas of MNC containment and social activism.

THE LIMITS OF MNC CONTAINMENT

In 1971, Robert Cox noted the way in which major companies in automobile, electrical goods, chemicals or air transport had been the targets of transnationally-coordinated action. For him, this raised the prospect of 'new transnational industrial structures through which labor could press for increased control not only over wages but also over all other corporate decisions affecting employment in the different countries in which the firm operates' (Cox 1971, 206). Nearly three decades later, the transnational industrial structures foreseen by Cox have failed to materialize. Of course, the economic difficulties of the 1970s must be taken into account in explaining this outcome: the collapse of the fixed exchange system and the first oil shock in the early 1970s ushered in a period of fundamental change, marked by increasing capital mobility and a weakening of the social pact in most Western economies.

But so must the diversity (in size, economic context or ideology) and strong national roots of labour representatives. Like many non-state actors, trade unions rose with the modern nation-state (Tilly 1978; Tarrow 1998). Their ability to mobilize members, structure collective bargaining and influence the legislative process became closely dependent on the national and legal system in which they operated. This embeddedness persists to this day, and divisions based on ideology and national/regional separatism have often made the action of international umbrella organizations particularly difficult. Even within the arguably more congenial European setting, co-ordinating the action of national federations within the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) has proved difficult, making the notion of Euro-wide tripartite governance a remote prospect at best (Majone 1993; Rhodes and Mény 1998).¹⁰

In their struggle to 'contain' transnational capital, world federations of trade unions are thus in a 'catch 22' situation: in the absence of an international framework for collective bargaining, they only possess a limited leverage over their affiliates; but with the threat of a 'global strike' lacking credibility, their bargaining power at the international level is severely restricted. Ever since the growth of foreign direct investment became a major concern in the 1970s, the response of international trade union federations has therefore been two-pronged: on the one hand, they have worked towards the establishment of common rules regarding workers' rights and representation, both at the level of international institutions and in partnership with the MNCs themselves; on the other, they have strove to increase their mobilization potential, strengthening transnational ties and forging common identities so as to make the threat of a global strike more credible. Yet on both fronts the results have been mixed.

MNCs: from archenemies to partners in global regulation?

Pursuing a trend already identified in the 1970s and 1980s, some among the ITSs have acquired considerable influence over the working conditions of their adherents in affiliated national unions. This is the case of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF): even vessels under a flag of convenience must pay the stipulated wage together with a donation to the federation's welfare fund; 100 ITF inspectors around the world deliver union seals of approval without which ship-owners risk strikes, boycott and the perishing of cargo. The IUF has also acquired significant clout through its worldwide framework agreements with Danone and Accor.¹¹ If economic internationalization means that societal interests are being redefined along sectoral, as opposed to class, lines (Frieden 1991; Keohane and Milner 1996) transnational bargaining of that kind could yet achieve greater significance. Yet so far the establishment of world company councils has remained largely piecemeal, leading many activists to favour other, more decentralized forms of action.

Increasing calls for business to be responsive to social concerns - emanating in part from the unions themselves - have thus given voluntary codes of practice a new impetus.¹² These codes are usually a set of rules established by the head office of a large corporation, and aimed at eliminating various forms of labour exploitation throughout the multitude of small firms that are subcontracted to supply inputs to the parent company. They are generally pre-emptive, i.e. designed to ward off mounting criticism that could harm the image, and thus the sales, of individual companies (or groups of companies in the case of industry codes).

However they can have significant repercussions, not least because they can be extended to cover entire industries or transformed into national standards, a point well taken by unionist leaders who pressed for the adoption of 'global codes of conduct' when invited at the World Economic Forum in Davos for the first time in 1997.

But many such codes are highly selective (e.g. deal only with child labour), most are drawn without consulting workers in the poorer countries, and few are based on the international standards of the ILO. An analysis by the ILO of 215 codes of conduct found that three quarters of them contained provisions on occupational safety and health; two-thirds dealt with discrimination in employment; slightly less than a half with child labour; and only about a quarter prohibited forced labour (ILO 1998). Moreover, in many less developed countries the codes are weakly implemented and monitored, often with the implicit blessing of states resenting this form of foreign interference. Finally, it is not unusual for international codes of conduct to be drafted with the sole participation of a few national trade unions, without the appropriate ITSs being associated even though the code is to be applied globally.¹³

As for the two international institutions regularly debating labour-related issues within a tripartite structure, the ILO and the OECD, neither has proved particularly effective from the point of view of international trade unions. The ILO never achieved the same status as its younger Bretton Woods sisters. By the late 1990s, it had adopted around 180 conventions, all very unequally ratified and implemented. Developing countries, notably Mexico, Egypt and Pakistan, have fought fiercely and successfully to prevent the development of any follow-up mechanism, even ruling out the naming of countries which breached basic workers' rights. The OECD Declaration on International Investment and Multinational Enterprises of 1976 defines a set of Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, some dealing with Employment and Industrial Relations. However the Committee on International Investment and Multinational Enterprises (CIME) has been extremely cautious in 'clarifying' the (non-binding) guidelines whenever matters have been raised by the TUAC, arguably under the influence of its business counterpart, the Business and Industry Advisory Committee (BIAC) (Murray 1996, 12).¹⁴

State representatives have also been reluctant to involve non-state actors in sensitive discussions, as illustrated for instance by the OECD negotiations on a Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), which took place at US insistence outside the normal committee structure.

The international reborn?

In the absence of encompassing structures for collective bargaining, and given the limitations of existing systems of political representation, international federations must rely on their mobilizational capacity to force industrial relations onto the agenda. In that area, recent trends towards globalization seem to have opened new windows of opportunity. Cheaper and faster communications have lowered the cost of collective action, making it possible for groups geographically far apart to co-ordinate their action and launch wide-ranging campaigns. The Internet in particular appears to be playing a growing role within the trade union movement, enabling rapid communication and providing relevant information, even training in information technologies.¹⁵ It is being increasingly used by unionists as a tool of mobilization, propelling campaigns via strike pages, boycott lists and corporate watch. In some cases, 'spamming' – the practice of sending unsolicited mail - has been employed as a weapon of industrial action. The International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM) thus helped the United Steelworkers of America to launch a 'cyberstrike' by providing on its web site a list of addresses to facilitate the unauthorized occupation of the sites and electronic mail boxes of the company's management and main shareholders (Peter 1997).¹⁶ Future steps might include the creation of early warning networks on trade union rights, even online company councils at the level of ITSs (Lee 1999). No wonder that the phraseology of unionist leaders has been affected: an enthusiastic General

Secretary of the ICFTU Bill Jordan has pointed out that 'If our campaigns are to succeed, the ICFTU must become the communications hub of the international trade union network'.

A further result of improved communications and transportation has been 'to create chains of economic and social impact between different parts of the globe' (Tarrow 1998, 180). Thus, Western trade unions have been swift to act on the much-debated Asian crisis, claiming solidarity with their Asian counterparts even though they had hitherto denounced unfair competition and the 'delocalization' of corporate activity to the Far East. And while talking of 'world strikes' would be at best premature, recent examples of transnational industrial action include the successful campaign of the Postal, Telegraph and Telephone International against the US long-distance phone company Sprint in 1994;¹⁷ the way in which the replacement of strikers at the US Firestone subsidiaries of Japanese tyre-maker Bridgestone triggered strikes and pickets in Turkey, Belgium and Japan; not to mention the 'Euro-strike' and protests generated by the closure of its Belgian plant of Vilvoorde by French car-maker Renault in 1997.

But does all this really amount to a rebirth of labour internationalism? We would agree with Sidney Tarrow that recent examples of transnational collective action are best characterized as examples of transnational political exchange, i.e. 'temporary forms of cooperation among essentially national actors that identify a common interest or set of values in a particular political configuration' (Tarrow 1998, 187). Such initiatives, not uncommon in the past (Bendiner 1987, 70-1), might well proliferate as these common interests or values become easier to define. But creating a transnational labour community is another matter. There are obvious limits to the sort of solidarity the Internet can generate, not least the fact that it remains essentially a Northern phenomenon.

As for the main international organizations, they continue to attract accusations of Westocentrism. Some newly independent unions in the developing world still resent the cosy Cold War relationship that the ICFTU entertained with government-sponsored labour groups. More generally, international umbrella organizations tend to be dominated by the largest and richest of their member federations. In the case of the ICFTU and the ITSs, these include the AFL-CIO, Germany's DGB, Japan's Rengo and Britain's Trades Union Congress. Moreover, with affiliation fees totalling a mere £7 million in the 1990s – compared with £12 million for Amnesty International and £110 million for Greenpeace (Waterman 1998, 113) – the ICFTU has long been heavily dependent on Western state funding for its 'development' activities. Several observers therefore contrast the bureaucratic, non-adversarial approach of the major world federations and the anti-capitalist strategies of the grassroots workers' movements emerging in the South, following the examples of South Africa and Brazil (Moody 1997; Waterman 1998).

Nor can new means of communication address the intractable tension that exists between the internationalist ambitions of some leaders on the one hand, and the protectionist demands expressed by the rank and file on the other. Largely as a result of rapid technological change, unskilled workers and those employed in traditional manufacturing industries have experienced falling real wages, unemployment and a deterioration of their working conditions. This trend is especially pronounced in the United States, and together with the growth of imports from the newly industrialized countries, goes a long way in explaining the protectionist stance taken by the AFL-CIO from the 1970s onwards, in sharp contrast with its earlier support for trade liberalization (Hecker 1993). In the past ten years US unions have systematically opposed trade liberalization initiatives, from the Uruguay Round and NAFTA

to the entry of China into the World Trade Organization (WTO). They have also lobbied hard for protection from imports of steel and other products from developing countries hit by emergency markets turmoil. The contradiction between the rhetoric of worker solidarity supported by international umbrella organizations and the defence of sectional interests by national affiliates has often made the position of the ICFTU uncomfortable. Many of its affiliates in the South – including groups independent from governmental influence - have condemned its efforts to promote higher labour standards through the main trade and investment organizations as little more than disguised protectionism on behalf of Western constituencies (O'Brien 2000, 85-6).

At the same time, unionist leaders in the US and elsewhere are well aware that their movement's political leverage also depends to a significant extent on its ability to mobilize constituencies across borders, both to counter more effectively an increasingly multinational foe, the corporation, and to acquire a genuine input at the level of international organizations, of growing importance in economic governance. How does one square the circle and unify a labour movement rife with divisions, turning it into a transnational actor to be reckoned with? This can only be achieved through the adoption of a parallel, more consensual agenda.

THE RISE OF GLOBAL SOCIAL UNIONISM

While it would be wrong to dismiss the long-lasting involvement of the international trade union movement in the defence of workers' rights worldwide, the emphasis placed on the promotion of universal rights in the 1990s is best understood in the light of the difficulties experienced by international labour. As economic interest organizations, trade unions are judged on their ability to 'deliver the goods': more jobs, higher wages, better working

conditions. However, the combination of rapid technological change and greater economic interdependence has severely reduced the ability of unionists to limit the extent of competition over wages and employment conditions (notably Rodrik 1997; for a more sceptical view, see Garrett 1998). At the same time, the success of the new social movements (NSMs) suggests there is a strong demand for issue-based representation. Progressive union activists, in the US and elsewhere, therefore argue in favour of a shift to social unionism, in which trade unions would act as 'vehicles for broad social mobilizations against entrenched privilege and inequality of income and life opportunities' (DeMartino 1999, 85; see also Waterman 1998).

We would argue that the temptation to ride on the back of the NSMs is even stronger for international trade union federations, for whom the social movement model provides a unique opportunity to reconcile diverse affiliates around a common agenda. In that respect, the widespread support enjoyed by the campaign for the respect of core labour standards, and the abolition of hazardous forms of child labour in particular, is illuminating: with the relative exception of Indian unionists, workers' representatives from both North and South joined in the effort. But the benefits expected from transnational social activism go beyond internal considerations, since alliances with other non-state actors, NGOs in particular, are seen as generating significant political counterweight in an era of widespread neoliberalism.

Activists of the world, unite

Alliances have thus been struck with like-minded NGOs in an effort to extend the reach of labour activists. In that respect, the wide-ranging campaign against the creation of a North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) was a defining moment, 'a lesson in how to build

cooperation among progressive social movements and NGOs, and what such cooperation could achieve in terms of redefining the economic agenda and shaping public opinion' (Robinson 1994, 680). Unionist leaders in Canada and the US were quick to seize this political opportunity, liaising again with environmental groups such as the World Wildlife Fund and the Sierra Club in their fight against the adoption of a Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) in 1995. Four years later, labour groups led by the AFL-CIO, in close collaboration with the ICFTU, formed the backbone and largest financier to the opposition to the launch of a new trade round at the World Trade Organization (WTO). Links have also been established with human rights organizations such as Anti-Slavery International and Amnesty International, as well as groups active in the realm of development as demonstrated notably by the participation of trade unions in the Jubilee 2000 Coalition.

However the road towards global activism is fraught with difficulty. The 'old' labour movement has long located its political struggle within the dominant system, essentially trying to seize power on behalf of workers through political mobilization. By contrast, the NSMs tend to operate within civil society, seeking changes in values or life-style through more innovative tactics (Scott 1991). Hence sometimes significant differences in goals, approach and organization, clearly illustrated in 1996 by the opposition of the Third World Network to the extension of the WTO mandate to core labour standards (O'Brien 2000, 87-8). In addition to being older and more hierarchical, labour representatives long claimed 'superior' status (Cox 1999; Munck 1999).¹⁸ Young activists also question the representativity of trade unions despite the latter's efforts to better include the poorest workers or those of the informal sector.¹⁹ Moreover, although international federations have started to modify their tactics, operating more and more through cooperative ventures and seeking to frame the broader debates surrounding social issues, some of their affiliates may prove more

resistant to change than the 'alternative' labour service centres (Waterman 1998, 215). With a few exceptions born of a long history of international involvement (AFL-CIO, British Trades Union Congress), the majority of their affiliates are still engaged in traditional protest and tripartite bargaining at the domestic level.

The transformation of the tactics of the NSMs themselves might carry even greater risks: as their representatives strive for recognition, including formal access to international decision-making, they are bound to compete with their labour allies. NGOs are now actively involved in all the agencies of the United Nations (Weiss and Gordenker 1996), but the ILO has so far remained a tripartite body. This a number of NGOs want to change, against strong opposition from trade unions keen to retain their specific representation.²⁰ Closer to the ground, the Sialkot agreement banning the use of child labour in Pakistan's soccer ball industry was adopted without expressly requiring trade union involvement, after negotiations conducted mostly between companies and NGOs.²¹ Indeed, in several high-profile initiatives (social labelling programmes in particular) workers' organizations have been significantly outweighed by their enterprise and NGO counterparts (Diller 1999, 110).

A new role in global governance?

To be fair, the new tactics have yielded some positive results, both as regards the adoption of voluntary codes of conduct (see above) and with respect to the shaping of international trade and investment regimes. While the vehement opposition of US and Canadian activists to the North American Free Trade Agreement could not prevent the agreement altogether, it had a significant impact on the debate, leading notably to the adoption of a side-agreement on labour standards; and even though the eventual collapse of the MAI discussions must be

assigned to a number of factors, observers reckon that the proactive alliance of labour and environmental groups at least rendered more difficult and controversial the adoption of a 'business-friendly' agreement (see Walter in this volume). The same conclusions were drawn regarding the collapse of the Seattle trade talks in December 1999. Whenever the prospect of domestic ratification politicizes international negotiations, labour groups can thus exert some measure of veto power (Milner 1997).

But the emergence of positive regulations on labour standards is more problematic. The first UN World Summit for Social Development that took place in Copenhagen in March 1995 was hailed as a significant event, in the preparation of which international and national trade unions actively participated. The Copenhagen Declaration committed participating governments to safeguarding the basic rights and interests of workers, and to formulating their policies through tripartite consultation. The ILO was to be given a special mandate to promote these objectives, and IMF Managing Director Michel Camdessus expressed his wish to see the United Nations build up a 'social pillar' to match the IMF, the World Bank and WTO. Yet follow-up by the UN system on the commitments made at Copenhagen has been slow and devoid of real impact, stemming in part from divisions among the United Nations specialist agencies themselves, in part from the lack of enforcement mechanisms.

Efforts to have a social clause inserted into the GATT/WTO system came to a halt in the mid-1990s, after being condemned by the so-called 'Bangkok Group' of developing countries as a cover for the introduction of protectionist measures to impede their own exports. Regardless of US support, new proposals in that sense met with similar outrage from governments of developing countries (and a similar fate) during the Seattle ministerial meeting of December 1999. In other areas of international economic policy, despite a few symbolic gestures in the

aftermath of the Asian crises (for instance the first-ever reference made to the role of trade unions in the Birmingham Summit communiqué of May 1998, or the first meeting between the ICFTU and Executive Directors of the World Bank in January 1999), the record is no more encouraging. Calls for fundamental reforms to the international financial system, including the introduction of a global tax on short term flows of capital and tax transfers to tax havens at a penalty rate, have so far received little attention from Western governments and international financial institutions.²² The idea of having precise employment targets included in the conditions attached to structural adjustment loans made by the Bretton Woods institutions has raised some interest, but with little practical implications.²³

Of late, a number of achievements have been noted. First and foremost, labour rights now seem to be firmly entrenched on the multilateral agenda. The debate on core labour standards that raged in the mid 1990s (largely focused on the WTO) gave the ILO an opportunity to reassert itself, with the adoption of a new Declaration on core labour standards at its 1998 conference. The 'Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work' binds all members (whether or not they have ratified the relevant conventions) with respect to seven core labour standards. The follow-up mechanism provides for the compilation of a global report, which will cover one of four categories of rights (freedom of association and collective bargaining, forced labour, child labour, discrimination in employment) each year.²⁴ In addition, the promotion of corporate social responsibility has been further enshrined in multilateral initiatives. In June 2000, the OECD approved a revised code of conduct for multinational companies hailed by John Evans, Secretary General of the TUAC, as an important advance towards 'socially acceptable' economic regulation²⁵; and in July 2000, after 18 months of negotiation, the UN's Global Compact initiative was finally launched, bringing together multinational companies, labour organizations and environmental groups to

promote free trade unions, core labour standards and environmental protection. Even if they continue to rely rather heavily on the goodwill of international business, both the UN initiative and the OECD agreement can be regarded as further evidence that the scope of transnational governance is being enlarged to include new actors and issues (see also Kunugi and Schweitz 1999).

By contrast, inserting labour issues in the agenda of the WTO – for instance by publishing ICFTU country reports to coincide with trade policy review mechanism hearings, in the hope that member states will seize the opportunity to raise labour concerns – remains highly problematic. The ICFTU enjoys considerable informal access to the multilateral organization and engages with key Secretariat members; it is also regarded as more legitimate than many of the lobbying NGOs, and seems to receive better unofficial treatment (O'Brien et al. 2000, 84). Support further exists at the level of individual governments such as those of France and, most critically, the US, where presidential candidate Al Gore has committed himself to press harder for labour standards in trade agreements if he is elected.²⁶

Yet labour groups are still struggling to make their voice heard in official trade policy circles and the 'social pillar' of the UN system remains weak. Several reasons have been suggested why this may be so. One centres on the dominance of neoliberal ideas in international economic policy-making, and on the inability of labour representatives to make their voice heard in 'the variety of networks that evolve policy guidelines and propagate the ideology of globalization' (Cox 1999, 12). However I would argue that assigning trade unions' lack of political input in or through international institutions to the hegemony of capital overlooks the diversity of capital and the success of other NGOs. It also ignores the continued primacy of the state as actor in international politics.

By contrast, Wolfgang Streeck focuses on the limitations of labour-oriented policy-making at the international level:

Unlike the class-political interests of capital, those of labour require positive political decisions and central regulations capable of suspending social system competition. These, in turn, demand strong supranational institutions capable of central regulation of the integrated market as a whole, and overriding national regulations. Their development, however, is stunted by the very constellation of national sovereignty and transnational interdependence that is described by the notion of 'fragmented sovereignty'. (Streeck 1996, 91)

In other words, the new means at their disposal might have given labour groups a certain veto power over international policy-making, at least when they coordinate their action with that of other NGOs. But the emergence of positive regulations on labour standards will continue to be thwarted by the lack of support, if not downright opposition, of sovereign state actors keen to promote their own agenda, whether based on economic considerations, cultural sensitivities or political misgivings. Global labour standards are 'enabling' standards, giving workers the ability to organize independently. As such they are bound to be resisted by authoritarian governments. Broader foreign policy imperatives may also deprive labour groups of the support of their home state, as exemplified by US willingness to normalize trade relations with China despite a strong opposition from the AFL-CIO and others on human rights grounds. In the end, decisions remain the preserve of governments, and most of the debates continue to take place behind closed doors, between state representatives. All this raises

questions regarding the effectiveness of grand campaigning and action at the level of multilateral institutions.

CONCLUSION

The authority of the trade union movement will continue to rest on its membership, a point well taken by AFL-CIO President John Sweeney who used the methods of civil rights activists to boost declining numbers, sending teams of young people across the US with significant success.²⁷ International federations have also begun reaching out to young workers ('Youth Campaign 2000' of the ICFTU), women and informal workers. Overcoming organizational fragmentation is another priority. The idea of a merger between the ICFTU and the WCL has been floated several times since the early 1990s. But the major problem lies in the duplication of efforts and incipient rivalry between the ICFTU, the eleven ITSs and regional organizations. The ICFTU's conference held in April 2000 in Durban officially endorsed the creation of an ad hoc group responsible for drafting reform proposals by the end of 2001, with a view to 'establish a more united, more homogeneous and more efficient international trade union movement with real power to negotiate with multinationals and international institutions' (ICFTU 2000).

Collaboration with NGOs, many drawn from the new social movements, is set to continue. Indeed, it was another of the priorities reaffirmed at Durban. Trade unions have much to gain through such collaboration: they can draw on the resources (in money, issue-related expertise, experience of activist tactics) of their NGO partners; they can also borrow some of their much valued moral authority. But altering their organizational approaches and broadening their goals might also carry significant risks, triggering disputes between old and new guards, and

generally turning labour groups from somewhat privileged social partners (e.g. within the ILO and the OECD) into few among many competing for political influence on the international scene.

Finally, I have argued here that a fragmented state system presented significant obstacles for the adoption and implementation of global labour standards, as exemplified most strikingly in the North-South debates on the social clause. This and the fact that trade unions largely continue to rely on national legal and social norms mean that action at the level of home governments and communities is essential to the promotion of their goals. Recent trends suggest that efforts directed at 'MNC containment' through direct protest and collective bargaining are worth pursuing, not least because large companies have proven more amenable to moral suasion than sovereign states. More generally, by putting pressure on firms and states, by combining traditional forms of protest and lobbying with more innovative tools of campaigning and framing, by networking across borders and functional barriers, labour groups have managed to increase their political input. But whether 'grand' campaigning and the lobbying of international institutions by umbrella organizations is the best road to an effective promotion of labour rights, or whether grassroots networks of labour activists, especially at the regional level, are best suited to the task, is a question that will continue to divide the labour movement.

¹ The author wishes to thank William Wallace and Andrew Walter for their useful comments.

² In most industrialized nations, less than a third of the workforce now belong to a trade union, less than ten per cent in developing countries. However this average masks significant

national variations, while union density appears to have decreased only marginally in many cases (Blanchflower 1996; Garrett 1998).

³ On the emergence of rank-and-file internationalism, see Kidder and McGinn (1995) and Moody (1997).

⁴ It did not disappear altogether: throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the support provided to trade unions in developing and transition economies remained a significant element in the foreign policy of the US. By providing budding unions with funds and assistance, the US government not only ensured these would promote the principles of democracy and capitalism at home; they also acquired some much-valued political goodwill on the part of rising elites, a sound basis on which to base future diplomatic relations. For instance, it has been argued that the long-term backing provided by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) to Solidarnosc in Poland - through the Free Trade Union Institute (FTUI) - gave the US access to top government officials in the Solidarity governments under Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Lech Walesa (Sims 1992, 46).

⁵ During the Cold War, they had followed the line of the ICFTU, but often with some reluctance, while the WFTU established its own international federations of unions, which it finally absorbed in the early 1960s.

⁶ Other examples include the 1977 IUF campaign in support of Coca-Cola workers in Guatemala; or the way in which the IUF helped persuade Pepsico, Heineken and Carlsberg not to invest in Myanmar in 1996.

⁷ By contrast, the WFTU pursued its decline, the collapse of the Soviet bloc taking a heavy toll (even the French CGT, a long-standing supporter, finally left in 1994).

⁸ Parallels can be drawn with MacShane's three 'aspects' of international trade-unionism: diplomatic-national, regulatory-functional and universal-inspirational (MacShane 1992, 10-1).

⁹ Financial Times, 7 December 1999.

¹⁰ There is however evidence of Euro-wide convergence on important macro-issues (Josselin 2001).

¹¹ Other examples include the agreement between the International Federation of Building and Wood Workers (IFBWW) and Ikea, and that between the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Union (ICEM) and Statoil. In another setting, the 1994 EU Directive on European Works Council establishes rights of information and consultation for workers of multinational companies.

¹² The same applies to social labelling programmes, in which the granting of a physical label guarantees the standard of social conditions surrounding the production of a good or the working of a company.

¹³ Interview Trades Union Congress, London, 29 October 1999.

¹⁴ According to Rubin and Hufbauer (1984), trade unions originally called for the OECD code on international investment to be legally binding, after which the USA, Switzerland and Germany made a counter-claim for a legally binding investment protection code. The current code emerged after both these claims were dropped. By contrast, both the Code of Liberalisation of Capital Movements and the Code of Liberalisation of Current Invisibles are legally binding.

¹⁵ See for instance <http://www.igc.org/labornet/index.html>.

¹⁶ See also New York Times, 'Corporations Try to Bar Use of E-Mail by Unions', 23 August 1999.

¹⁷ The federation launched an offensive campaign against Sprint after it dismissed Hispanic workers at its San Francisco plant, allegedly for wanting to join a union. When the company later closed the plant, unions in Germany, France and Nicaragua put pressure on their national telecom operators to force Sprint to adopt a code on labour standards as a condition for

entering international alliances. Brazilian unions also launched large protests, while the Mexican telecoms union, STRM and the Communications Workers of America filed a complaint against Sprint under NAFTA labour 'side agreements'.

¹⁸ During the 1995 UN Social Summit, the ICFTU initially demanded that representatives of trade unions and employers be seated in the official conference alongside governments, and not relegated to the NGO forum. It is only after it played a more modest role in the Forum that it began to describe itself in its own periodicals as an NGO (Waterman 1998, 114).

¹⁹ Interview TUC, 29 October 1999. Of course, trade unionists retort by pointing out that NGOs have no members at all.

²⁰ During its 17th Congress in April 2000, the ICFTU denounced this evolution in a statement on 'Trade Unions, NGOs and Tripartism'; see <http://www.icftu.org>.

²¹ Interview TUC, 29 October 1999.

²² With the exception of the Canadian government.

²³ Some have noted a greater receptivity on the side of the IMF, whereas the World Bank would see trade unions' increased contribution to policy-making as a potential threat to its network of relationships on the ground.

²⁴ Also judged significant by many (though not all) labour representatives was the adoption in June 1999 of a Convention and Recommendation requiring governments to prohibit and eliminate immediately the worst forms of child labour, including hazardous work, debt bondage, forced labour and slave-like conditions, and the exploitation of children in prostitution, pornography and drug trafficking.

²⁵ Financial Times, 'OECD Agrees Global Company Code', 28 June 2000.

²⁶ 'Unions Fall Out with Gore Over China', *Financial Times*, 18 February 2000.

²⁷ A \$20 million fund was also created to 'rebuild the American labour movement', a move paralleled in Australia and Holland.

