Globalisation and International Trade Unions : "The Working Men Have No Country"

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Crime, capitalism and unionism: A new troika?

In 1927, noted German historian Kurt Tucholsky remarked that the "only things organized between states in Europe are crime and capitalism"[1]. Labour is a noted exception. For most of the last century, labour simply has not featured as a front line player in international relations. Whereas firms have expanded the scope of their operations since the end of World War II to become international, "multi-national" or even "global", the same pattern is far less evident among trade unionism. Despite moves towards transnational alliances and collective agreement covering workplaces in more than one country, unions have by and large conducted their activities and exerted their influence within the boundaries of the single-nation state[2]. They have been sheltered by international arrangements like the Bretton Woods system or the Marshall Plan, and by national consensus based on Fordism, Keynesianism and protectionism[3].

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[1]   H. Martin and H. Schumann (1997), *The Global Trap: Globalization & the Assault on democracy & Prosperity*, Pluto Press, Sydney, p.196.

[2]   C.S. Jensen, et al. (1995), "A role for a pan-European trade union movement?—possibilities in European IR-regulation", *Industrial Relations Journal*, **26(1)**: 4.

[3]   A. Breitenfellner (1997), "Global Unionism: A potential player", *International Labour Review*, **136(4)**: 531.

This paper will explore the importance of the role played by international union organisations in the increasingly global economic, political and social environment as compared to the roles of multinational corporations (MNCs), the state and labour institutions at national, industry and workplace levels. Drawing on evidence from Australasian, European and North American countries, the ideological, political, institutional and cultural barriers to international solidarity will be discussed, reviewing the historical and current attempts at the transnational coordination of labour. The paper will conclude by positing suggestions for a cooperative concert of action based in industry and national grassroots, supported and guided by international forums.

The globalising economy

Over the last 25 years the world economy has undergone a dramatic transformation, through the phenomenon often referred to as "globalisation"[4]. The concept of globalisation describes the increasing integration of physical, financial and services market across the globe. This has lead to the growing economic interdependence of countries, which manifests itself most obviously in the internationalisation and liberalisation of trade and production through the increasing volume and variety of cross-border transactions in goods and services, the more rapid and widespread diffusion of technology, in investment and the consequent growing importance of capital flows, and in international competition in the world economy[5].

In most OECD[6] countries, globalisation has been associated with the freeing up of trade and economic strictures through the lowering of tariff and non-tariff trade barriers to international trade, the encouragement of foreign investment, and the deregulation of financial markets[7]. Concurrently, the rapid development of technology has magnified the effects of economic liberalisation by reducing the costs of transportation and

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[4]   C. Hamilton (1997), "Workers in the Globalised World", *Australian Quarterly*, **69(2)**: 25.

[5]   P. Gollan, et al. (1996), *Future of Work: Likely Long Term Development in the Restructuring of Australian Industrial Relations*, Working Paper 43, ACIRRT, University of Sydney, pp.10-11; ILO (1996) in p.1 in I. Campbell and J. Burgess (1997), *National Patterns of Temporary Employment: The Distinctive Case of Casual Employment in Australia*, Working Paper no.53, National Key Centre in Industrial Relations, Monash University, pp.40-41; IMF (1997), p.45 in A. Breitenfellner (1997), op.cit., p.533; R. Hall and B. Harley (1995), "The Australian Response to Globalisation: Domestic Labour Market Policy and the Case of Enterprise Bargaining", in P. Gollan (ed.), *Globalisation and its Impact on the World of Work*, ACIRRT Working Paper no.38, University of Sydney, November.

[6]   Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

[7]   C. Allan and N. Timo (1998), *Globalisation and Labour Utilisation: Case Studies of Three Services Industries*, Paper presented to the 6th International Employment Relations Association Conference., p.1; Lee, 1996: 485.

communications, hence expanding the scope of goods and services that are internationally tradeable, accordingly making MNCs more powerful[8]. The exposure of the previously insular and once well protected economies of the world to this internationally competitive environment has had a profound impact.

Globalisation has been underpinned by a radical shift towards neo-classical economic policies which suggest that national governments should disassemble protective regulation and emancipate individual enterprises to respond to the new competitive pressures[9]. For instance, in Australia, this push has been met by government attempts to promote improved efficiency, trade and greater competition through deregulation of capital, product and labour markets[10].

The decline of labour

Rising management prerogative

This climate of globalisation, coupled with declining economic conditions, labour market change and relatively high unemployment has accordingly provided employers with pressure to continue with and then raise profitability, enabling them to strengthen their position relative to labour. Employers have been given the incentive and the opportunity to reduce unit labour costs, restructure their organisations, and shape industrial relations[11]. A variety of demands for changes in wages and conditions has been reasoned as necessary responses to the imperatives of the globalised economy[12]. The international dimensions of MNCs has allowed them to threaten to relocate beyond the reach of national unions and governments and to cross-subsidise losses in resisting industrial action. Through their abilities to divide and rule, to draw on sophisticated techniques to control labour, to lobby to considerable effect at all levels of political action, to act in ways opaque from local purview, and for numerous other reasons, MNCs could be argued to pose a particularly severe challenge to balanced regulation[13]. In turn, the proliferation of methods whereby

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[8]   E. Lee (1996), "Globalization and employment: Is the anxiety justified?", *International Labour Review*, **135**(5): 485; A. Breitenfellner (1997), op.cit., p.531.

[9]   A. Breitenfellner (1997), op.cit., p.533; I. Campbell and J. Burgess (1997) op.cit., pp.40-41.

[10]   C. Allan and N. Timo (1998), op.cit., p.1.

[11]   S.J. Frenkel (1990), "Industrial Relations in Eight Advanced Societies: A Comparative Overview", *Bulletin of Comparative Labour Relations*, Bulletin **20**: 214.

[12]   I. Campbell and J. Burgess (1997) op.cit., pp.40-41.

[13]   H.Ramsay (1997), "Solidarity at Last? International Trade Unionism Approaching the Millennium", *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, **18**(4): 505.

firms may remove themselves from domestic jurisdiction has pushed governments gradually to eliminate capital controls in order to remain competitive, thus surrendering even more of their sovereignty to short-term capital flows[14].

Responding to the environment, MNCs have placed a greater emphasis upon improving labour flexibility as a means of increasing productivity and have been politically more active in directly lobbying governments and in directly agitating for labour market deregulation through neo-liberal policies[15]. Such policies have been used as a platform for employers to degrade the wages and conditions of the standard jobs offered, whilst the comparative efficacy of regulatory bodies such as trade unions have been enfeebled. Correspondingly, the focus of employment relations has shifted to the enterprise, where the increased freedom and capacity of employers to alter and restructure employment is pursued, which helps to direct the pressure for economic adjustment towards labour adjustment[16]. Where successful, this degradation has meant increased precariousness for employees in fundamental dimensions such as low pay, benefits insecurity, employment insecurity and working-time insecurity. Continued pursuance of such a policy can also mean a downward spiral of wage competition that threatens to extend this precariousness through broad sections of the workforce[17]. According to this conceptualisation, employers have engaged in a deliberate attempt to create a core workforce, enjoying stable employment, and a periphery, populated by employees in non-standard forms of employment[18].

Ebbing trade union strength

Comparatively, economic and structural factors have reduced the power of unions over the past decade. Locke's assertion is encompassing and valid: "Everywhere unions are in decline and management is resurgent"[19]. As a consequence of these changes, trade unions

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[14]   A. Breitenfellner (1997), op.cit., p.539.

[15]   C. Wright (1995), *The Management of Labour: A History of Australian Employers*, Oxford University Press, Auckland, p.201; B. Harley (1995), *Labour Flexibility and Workplace Industrial Relations: The Australian Evidence*, ACIRRT Monograph No.12, University of Sydney.

[16]   C. Allan and N. Timo (1998), op.cit., p.4; I. Campbell and M. Webber (1996), op.cit., p.95.

[17]   J. Burgess and I. Campbell (1998), "The Nature and Dimensions of Precarious Employment in Australia", *Labour & Industry*, **8(3)**: 16.

[18]   T. Bramble and C. Littler (1996), "Labour-use Strategies in the Context of Recession: Provisional evidence from 1990-93", in R. Fells and T. Todd (eds), *Current Research in Industrial Relations*, Proceedings of the 10th AIRAANZ Conference, February, p.62.

[19]   R.M. Locke (1995), "The Transformation of Industrial Relations? A Cross-National Review", in K.S. Wever and L. Turner (eds), *The Comparative Political Economy of Industrial Relations*, IRRA, Madison, p.15.

in the industrialised world have approached the contemporary internationalised environment on the basis of declining union densities, myriad pressing domestic challenges, changing workforce demographics, innovating management and unresponsive governments. In this environment, a picture of unions substantially ill-prepared to respond to the internationalisation of capital and certainly unable to create an international strategic response, has emerged[20].

Economic forces have come to dominate industrial relations by structuring the terms of political exchange between unions and the state. The individual and the market were hailed, with free competition and market orientation becoming the panacea. This caused difficulties to the union movement whose ideology is based on collective action and solidarity. Union membership declined in many countries, as did their political influence[21]. In the immediate post-war decades, the trade union movement had played a vital role in improving the economic and social conditions of a large proportion of employees[22]. Whilst, it may be argued that some nations have been able to "swim against the tide", the decline of union density is recognised as a common phenomenon in many developed economies[23]. Since the mid 1970s trade union density in many OECD countries has fallen substantially, with membership plummeting by one-quarter in the past two decades, from 36 to 27 percent of the total workforce in the OECD area, failing to keep pace with the growth of the labour force[24]. The falling membership can be partially explained by a range of economic, social and political factors which have reduced both the demand for unionism and its level of availability[25].

With the promotion of neo-liberal policies, the state has largely removed its underwriting of union survival. Further, governments have promoted the common ideology shared with

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20   N. Haworth, and S. Hughes (1997), "Global Regulations and Labour Strategy: The Case of International Labour Standards", in T. Bramble et al. (eds), *Current Research in Industrial Relations*, Proceeding of the 11th AIRAANZ Conference, p.459; M. Ozaki (1996), "Labour relations and work organization in industrialized countries", *International Labour Review*, **135(1)**: 43.

21   O. Hammarström (1994) "Local and Global: Trade Unions in the Future", in J.R. Niland, et al. (eds), *The Future of Industrial Relations: Global Change and Challenges*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, p.153.

22   C. Hamilton (1997), op.cit., p.30.

23   K. Sugeno (1994), "Unions as social institutions in democratic market economies", International Labour Review, **133(4)**: 520.

24   A. Breitenfellner (1997), op.cit., p.540; A. Morehead, et al. (1997), *Changes at Work: The 1995 Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey*, Addison Wesley Longman Australia Pty Limited, South Melbourne, p.141; O. Clarke, et al. (1998), op.cit., p.298.

25   S. Deery (1995), "Trade unions, technological change and redundancy protection in Australia", in R.D. Landsbury and E.M. Davis (eds), *Technology, work and industrial relations*, Longman Cheshire, p.541.

many employers which neither envisages a significant role for trade unions in macro-economic management, nor in workplace governance[26]. Those unions who affiliated themselves with governments, were subjected to similarly pestiferous outcomes, as national policies were rendered impotent and consequently their influenced waned[27].

Persistent conditions of excess labour supply and the consequent diminished prospects of finding attractive employment have forced many employees to seek forms of employment outside full-time waged employment as a refuge from unemployment or, hopefully, as a stop-gap measure until the labour market improves rather than face the choice of withdrawing from the labour force[28]. The rise of such contingent workforms, predominantly in the difficult to organise service sector, evidenced across the advanced capitalist economies a decline in levels of unionisation partly attributable to this development[29].

Concurrently, the shift toward the production of more technology-intensive goods and services and away from the union strong-holds of the old manufacturing and extractive industries had harmful consequences for unions by boosting employment of non-manual employees, a group in which rates of unionisation tend to be lower[30]. The ability to recruit new members or to retain existing members when they move across these job structures, organisations, or in and out of employed status then becomes crucial for unions[31].

Implications of the power balance

Managerial ideology and the degree of legitimacy unions enjoy in the broader society have also influenced the unions ability to adapt to the changes under way[32]. Employers have increasingly adopted more proactive and aggressive "company-centred" models of organisation which emphasise commitment to managerial goals and which discourage or

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[26]   P. Boxall, and P. Haynes (1997), "Strategy and Trade Union Effectiveness in a Neo-Liberal Environment", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 35(4): 568.

[27]   Greider (1996), p.336 in A. Breitenfellner (1997), op.cit., p.540.

[28]   J. Burgess (1994), op.cit., p.119; J. Burgess and I. Campbell (1998), op.cit., p.17.

[29]   K.S. Wever and L. Turner (eds) (1995), *The Comparative Political Economy of Industrial Relations*, IRRA, Madison, pp.450-1.

[30]   S.M. Jacoby (1995), "Social Dimension of Global Economic Integration", in S.M. Jacoby (ed.), *The Workers of Nations: Industrial Relations in a Global Economy*, Oxford University Press, New York, p.8.

[31]   R. Locke, et al. (1995), op.cit., p.144.

[32]   ibid.

exclude union affiliation among employees[33]. The adoption of human resource management practices (HRM), and assertive attempts at organisational change in MNCs, construct the company as the locus of worker loyalty through a range of techniques which either directly or indirectly undermine the traditional understandings of worker representation[34]. This has forced trade unionists to accept a greater allegiance to the enterprises at the expense of broader solidaristic considerations[35].

It seems ironic that during a period in which trade unions in many countries around the world have been declining in influence and membership, the need for a strong employee voice in corporate decision-making, industry-level interactions and national policy-making is growing[36]. However, as Freeman notes, it is the behaviour of employers, employees, unions and government, and not any mechanistic shift in economic structure, that explains the precipitous fall in trade union density and collective bargaining coverage, through helping create an inhospitable "climate" for collective activity[37].

A need for international solidarity?

Given this bleak depiction of the labour movement, this has lead to some trade unionists to propound that the "workers' movement must be as *international* as its transnational capitalist counterpart"[38] to enable it to combat the deleterious trends of "increasing economic competition in the era of globalization [which] will lead to downwards pressures on labour standards"[39]. This view has been bolstered by many MNCs having swapped

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[33]   M. Martinez Lucio and S. Weston (1995), "Trade Unions and Networking in the Context of Change: Evaluating the Outcomes of decentralization in Industrial Relations", *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, **16(2)**: 236-7.

[34]   M. Martinez Lucio, and S. Weston (1994), "New management practices in a multinational corporation: the restructuring of worker representation rights?", *Industrial Relations Journal*, **25(2)**: 110.

[35]   M. Martinez Lucio and S. Weston (1995), op.cit., p.237.

[36]   R. Locke, et al. (1995), op.cit., p.144.

[37]   R.B. Freeman (1995), "The Future for Unions in Decentralized Collective Bargaining systems: US and UK Unionism in an Era of Crisis", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, **33(4)**: 523.

[38]   P. Garver (1991), "Prospects for International Labour Solidarity", in Evatt Foundation, *Labour Movement: strategies for the 21st century*, Southwood Press, Annandale, p.172.

[39]   E. Lee (1997), "Globalization and labour standards: A review of issues", *International Labour Review*, **136(2)**: 181.

their "local-for-local" policies into a concept of globalisation[40]. The problems of "each union bargaining with one tentacle of the multi-national octopus",[41] and being played off one another have thus slowly become clarified for international unionism advocates.

Advocates such as Levinson (1972, 1974) believed that localised labour responses allowed for no more than parochial actions at the margins of corporate decision-making, and ones which dealt only with the consequences of decisions rather than their formulation or underlying rationale[42]. He asserted that internationalism was the only viable response to international capital, that unions and their members would perceive and accept this, and that obstacles to international solidarity would be overcome. Collective bargaining would then provide the framework for a mutually beneficial economic solidarity which would gather its own irreversible momentum, enhancing the institutional role of international federations and trade secretariats[43]. Forms of such international regulation for unions relations with the multinationals have been proposed in this respect within the ILO, the OECD, the UN and the EEC Commission which have met considerable resistance not only from the companies themselves but also from the various governments in which their corporate influence is potent[44]. Historically, Levinson's solution has collapsed on all except the entertainment-communications and transport front[45].

Is global unionism possible or necessary?

Thus current views of international trade unionism are characterised by the optimistic assertion that the rise of MNCs will automatically lead to trade-union internationalisation, and that the new organisational forms which have arisen in connection with MNCs will provide the foundation for a new phase of trade-union internationalisation[46]. This assertion

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[40]   S. Weston and M. Martinez Lucio (1997), "Trade unions, management and European works councils: Opening Pandora's box?", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, **8(6)**: 766.

[41]   I.A. Litvak and C.J. Maule (1972), "The Union Response to International Corporations", *Industrial Relations*, **11(1)**: 62.

[42]   H. Ramsay (1997), op.cit., p.506.

[43]   ibid.

[44]   B. Bendiner (1987), *International Labour Affairs: The World Trade unions and the Multinational Companies*, Clarendon Press - Oxford, New York, p.20.

[45]   H.B. Northrup et al. (1988), "Multinational union-management consultation if Europe: resurgence in the 1980s?", *International Labour Review*, **135(1)**: 526.

[46]   W. Olle and W. Schoeller (1977), "World Market Competition and Restrictions Upon International Trade-Union Policies", *Capital & Class*, **2**(Summer): 63.

is naive in that the history and focus of unionism erects barriers to international solidarity between workers, and does not emerge logically and necessarily from the responses to the internationalisation of capital[47].

The concept of international unionism presumes that MNCs have a managerial interest in developing a common approach to labour relations management across borders. But this does not of itself mean that MNCs will chose to inform, consult or negotiate with employee and trade union representatives on an international level[48]. The increasing emphasis on managerial control and decentralisation in many MNCs augurs badly for their willingness to accept outside interference from international unions. Corporate management usually refuses to deal with unions on an international basis and delegates industrial relations issues to the national level[49]. Since they retain an undoubted capacity to sabotage or render ritualistic any form of consultation or bargaining not reinforced by an effective threat of labour sanctions, the outcome remains uncertain[50].

A number of other factors have made it difficult for unions, particularly in industrialised nations, to organise internationally as their corporate counterparts have. The main barriers to international unionism are the conflicting goals, ideologies and industrial relations system which have appeared insurmountable. Trade unions interact with their members and their negotiating parties mainly within national boundaries, typically staking out a clearly-defined area of protection[51]. Given this insular and protectionist foundation, attempts at international coordination of issues will be hampered by the fact that what may "be of advantage to one national group of workers could be disadvantageous to another"[52]. In the new industrial division of labour, workers are inclined to see their main enemy as being employees in other countries, rather than uniting to challenge the common source of oppression. Attempts at international unionism are therefore likely to occur through temporary alliances of interest, thinly concealing narrow sectionalism, nationalism and protectionism which, historically, have resurfaced at frequent intervals to disrupt solidarity[53]. Trade unions need to keep these restrictions in mind or risk unconsciously reproducing the conditions of international competition between capitals, thus perpetuating the national divisions. As Olle and Schoeller argue, the "contemporary

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[47]   N. Haworth and S. Hughes (1997), op.cit., p.457.

[48]   P. Marginson (1992), "European Integration and Trans-national management-Union Relations in the Enterprise", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, **30(4)**: 539, 536.

[49]   O. Hammarström (1994), op.cit., p.156.

[50]   H. Ramsay (1997), op.cit., p.524.

[51]   A. Breitenfellner (1997), op.cit., p.542.

[52]   B. Bendiner (1987), op.cit., p.23.

[53]   H. Ramsay (1997), op.cit, p.509.

euphoria as to the possibility of trade-union internationalisation could then change to resignation and national pragmatism, so that every move towards trade-union internationalisation would appear as 'self-deception'"[54].

However, to enlarge such differences would misrepresent the international labour movement, since views do not effectively diverge on the overwhelming majority of issues. Moreover, a measure of diversification may even strengthen their effectiveness by challenging views and policy choices, thus making it accessible from different angles and offering greater flexibility in its responses to new challenges[55].

A concern, however, does exist that workers will lack identity with an international union. Unions rely for their effectiveness on many characteristics, including a sense of identity, shared experience, common interests, often experienced within spatially-narrow confines such as workplaces or communities. These characteristics are dissipated as organisation moves away from these confines, and the further away one moves from these traditional bases of experience and organisation, the more difficult it becomes to sustain the rationale for workers' organisations[56]. The compositions of international unions makes them appear remote from the rank and file, as they have remained relatively insignificant in disputes at the plants of MNCs[57]. Even at the national level, action tends to be remote from most employees and attracts little interest. It is posited that a willingness to support or act with workers in other countries would thus appear even more remote[58].

Organisational power in trade unions is therefore concentrated at the level at which collective bargaining, or industrial action is conducted[59]. The growth of enterprise-level industrial relations is a recent trend in developed economies[60]. The individual enterprise has emerged as an increasingly important locus for strategy and decision-making on human resources and industrial relations thus making this the organisational power base of unions[61]. Therefore, there would appear to be no necessary trend towards the internationalisation of labour. Indeed, any attempt to build such organisation would find it necessary to run hard to stand still, since the natural solidarity of labour is localised and

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54   W. Olle and W. Schoeller (1977), op.cit., p.58.

55   A. Breitenfellner (1997), op.cit., p.550.

56   N. Haworth and S. Hughes (1997), op.cit., p.458.

57   W. Olle and W. Schoeller (1977), op.cit., p.68.

58   H. Ramsay (1997), op.cit., p.524.

59   C.S. Jensen et al. (1995), op.cit., p.5.

60   K. Sugeno (1994), op.cit., pp.512-3.

61   R. Locke et al. (1995), op.cit., p.144.

fixed in concrete labour[62]. It is doubtful whether international unionism could stand as an efficient and viable alternative to systematic and coordinated national and sub-national organisation. Each potential national participant must be able to regard such activity as serving its own immediate or ultimate self-interest, and to that end, some form of "continuous association," as the Webbs put it, is necessary[63]. Thus these subordinate level trade union movements are the foundation of the labour movement, with structures having been shaped to fit a nation-state framework. In functional terms too the scope of union activities and their orientation have been national in character, while the other central actors in the organisation and collective agreement systems, namely employer associations and the state, have also been organised along "national" lines[64].

Whilst, it is argued that as MNCs act according to global logic, and bring to bear their financial and other economies of scale in attacking local worker interests, the need for cross border solidarity becomes apparent. However, the classic situation calling for shared resistance in global restructuring and rationalisations, is precisely the circumstance that provokes a retreat to local survival first[65]. International unionism must therefore fight instinct. This locally based protectionism, is also erected on divisive political ideologies which further hamper international labour solidarity efforts[66]. In Europe, particularly, the labour movement is characterised by the existence of pluralism and by organisations which compete ideologically and hold preferences and constraints as to political, social and economic concerns[67]. These political schisms engender a reluctance of national unions and confederations to surrender decision-making authority to international organisations, and the hostility of official trade union structures to the development for direct contacts between union representatives within enterprises[68].

Therefore, the lack of authority of international or regional-level trade unions, vis-à-vis their national counterparts provides yet another barrier. For collective agreements of the type which would have a telling impact on industrial relations at the member state level, the labour organisations at this level must have the authority to enter into arrangements on behalf of national affiliates and even perhaps have the capacity to bind national members

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[62]   H. Ramsay (1997), op.cit., p.510.

[63]   L. Ulman (1975), "Multinational Unionism: Incentives, barriers and Alternatives", *Industrial Relations*, **14(1)**: 9.

[64]   C.S. Jensen, et al. (1995), op.cit., p.9.

[65]   H. Ramsay (1997) op.cit. p.522.

[66]   P. Garver (1991), op.cit., p.172.

[67]   J.W. Budd (1998) "The Effect of International Unions on Wage determination in Canada", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, **36(1)**, pp.1-2; C.S. Jensen, et al. (1995), op. cit., p.9.

[68]   P. Marginson (1992) op.cit., p.539.

to such agreements[69]. A further problem in ceding competence to such bodies arises from the fact that many member organisations may have little real competence at national level[70].

International unionism is made all the more difficult as responses are mediated through different societal and institutional forms. In spite of MNCs, different national conditions of production at the level of the firm persist, creating structurally conditioned weakness in international unions[71]. Therefore, attempts at bringing about economic integration may lead not to a creation of an integrated system of industrial relations, but to internal conflicts in which different systems may exist, possibly producing greater diversity[72].

Finally, the general inability to effectively coordinate and handle the emerging forms of contingent labour, and the demographic changes this brings with it does not augur well for the labour movements continuing ability to be a player at even the national level. The concentration in small workplaces, the varied, unsocial and few hours of work, and the instability of the employment make contingent employees hard to recruit and retain as members. Further, their needs and interest often diverge from those of full-time permanent employees, and they frequently display ambivalence towards unions, perhaps partly because of the unions failure to adapt their organisation and services to their peculiar needs[73].

Thus global solidarity efforts are hampered by traditional national union structures, taboos against interference by outside agents in national trade union affairs and the legitimate suspicions aroused were such interference has occurred historically. Further the short-termism, economism, nationalism and suffocating centralisation have been seen as characteristics of most international union activities, consequently engendering a feeling in the less developed nations that these fora are conspiracies for developed-country protectionism rather than exercises in altruistic solidarity[74]. This has lead to a lack of enthusiasm in national unions, jealous of their autonomy; religious and ideological divisions; incompatible interests of different labour movements, especially as between the

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[69]   P. Teague (1993), "Between convergence and divergence: Possibilities for a European Community system of labour market regulation", *International Labour Review*, **132(3)**: 396.

[70]   C.S. Jensen, et al. (1995), op.cit., p.11.

[71]   W. Olle and W. Schoeller (1977), op.cit., p.68.

[72]   Baldry (1994), p.99 in S. Weston and M. Martinez Lucio (1997), op.cit., p.765.

[73]   I. Campbell (1996), "Casual Employment, Labour Regulations and Australian Trade Unions", *Journal of Industrial Relations*, **38(4)**: 587.

[74]   H. Ramsay (1997) op.cit., p.511.

developed and less developed countries; the lack of constant legal frameworks and collective bargaining practice between countries, making coordination extremely difficult; and an absence of more than token membership interest in international solidarity[75].

Attempts at international unionism

Despite these barriers, an international union cooperation does exists on a number of levels. At the peak international level the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), with its 127 million members, is now by far the most important worldwide labour organisation[76]. The ICFTU in its representational activities, calls attention to injustices committed by governments or employers. It supports the development of a comprehensive social dimension in a number of regional blocs, the creation of a work program to address the problem of unemployment, clearer and stronger protocols on investment (in line with the OECD's Multilateral Agreement on Investment), and arrangements for regular consultation with trade unions[77]. Its focus is largely directed to developing economies where unionism is weak, and over the last two decades has become stronger in Africa and also established largely self-sufficient regional organisations for Asia and for North and South America[78].

On the next level there are international trade secretariats (ITSs), most of which are affiliated with one of the international confederations. The trade secretariats affiliate with the national unions in the same industry or sector of the labour market, with 15 trade secretariats being affiliated with the ICFTU[79]. The more pragmatic ITSs have developed a successful response to MNCs by organising worldwide works councils, coordinating research on health and safety hazards and technological change, all aimed at maintaining international union solidarity[80]. One of the shortcomings of the ITSs, however, is that they are limited to the unions that are affiliated to them[81].

Regional bloc union confederations, such as the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) act in a similar role, coordinating union activity relative to the European Union (EU) and meeting with its employer counterpart, the Union of Industrial and Employers'

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[75]   ibid.

[76]   A. Breitenfellner (1997) op.cit., p.544.

[77]   N. Haworth, and S. Hughes (1997) op.cit., p.464.

[78]   O. Clarke, et al. (1998) op.cit., p.314.

[79]   O. Hammarström (1994) op.cit., p.160.

[80]   O. Clarke, et al. (1998) op.cit., p.315; A. Breitenfellner (1997) op.cit., p.544.

[81]   O. Hammarström (1994) op.cit., p.161.

Confederations of Europe (UNICE)[82]. Similarly, specially established advisory groups, like the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC), ensures that the OECD is provided a union perspective. TUAC has been instrumental in formulating views on the desirable form of international economic and social policies, which have then been submitted to OECD summits[83].

These organisations each employ a number of policy methods at the international level to ensure that the "rapid changes occurring in the nature of work and the labour market are achieved without compromising the goals of full employment and social justice"[84]. They include the development, and lobbying for ratification, of international labour standards, the introduction of social clauses in multilateral economic agreements, the coordination of international industrial action, the pursuance of multinational collective bargaining (MNCB) and information networking.

International labour standards such as those promoted through the International Labour Organisation (ILO) aim at setting a worldwide floor on labour conditions. The ICFTU supports an international Social Clause based on seven core ILO standards[85] patrolled by a World Trade Organisation (WTO)/ILO disciplinary process, which it asserts would encourage international growth on the basis of "a more balanced expansion of world trade and a smoother process of adjustment to changes in the global division of labour"[86] and would transcend cultural particularities[87]. The proposal of social clauses arises out of the fear that Western governments may be driven to force down labour standards to those prevailing in Asian countries characterised by unions with low and declining membership coverage, limited power, little autonomy and highly stunted organisational capacity[88].

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[82]   O. Clarke, et al. (1998) op.cit, p.315.

[83]   ibid.

[84]   ICTFU (1998), *The global market - trade unionism's greatest challenge*, Sixteenth World Congress of the ICTFU, http://www.ictfu.org/english/sclause/econthem.html, [Site visited: 30.7.98].

[85]   These standards include the abolition of forced labour, freedom of association and collective bargaining, prevention of discrimination in employment and equal pay for work of equal value, and the minimum age for employment

[86]   CFTU (1998).

[87]   N. Haworth, and S. Hughes (1997) op.cit., p.463.

[88]   T. Bramble (1996), "Globalisation, Unions and the Demise of the Labourist Project", *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, **38** (December): 42.

Though, whilst labour standards are important in their own right, the extent to which the adoption of these standards affects production costs and thus the international competitiveness of export producers in low cost countries is open to discussion[89].

The major problem for unionists with the strategy of social clauses, however, is the unlikelihood that capitalists or their trading partners would unite sufficiently to agree to them. The more internationally-oriented Western blocs of capital are steadfastly opposed to any attempt to put significant pressure on offending repressive or "low-wage" governments for fear of endangering trade access[90]. Even where social clauses have been adopted, such as in Europe, intervention by the dominant western countries has ensured that these clauses are impotent, and not backed by genuine enforcement of such rights. It appears that it is only when unions are strong enough on the ground to turn formal legal rights into effective industrial rights that they become real. Beyond Europe, unions are further hampered by the absence of any supra-national state institutions capable of enforcing minimum labour standards[91].

Despite the apparent failing of introducing strong social clauses, international union cooperation on other levels takes place in relation to international organisations such as the ILO, the OECD, and the European Union[92], with the role of political lobbying activity having grown spectacularly on the European scene[93]. The ICFTU has stated that it is committed to developing a network of contacts, and mechanisms with the ILO and the United Nations so that its influence embraces and influence the ideas and actions of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the WTO. Its aim is ensure that trade union views are inserted at an early stage of the preparation of key policy initiatives[94]. Most recently, trade unions appear to have strengthened their position in regional free trade areas, notably under the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), in which trade is already linked to basic workers' rights, and in the European Union[95]. But, critics of such international fora, claim that these economic summits resemble not supra-national decision making in the interest of globalised capital, but horse-trading sessions involving

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[89] G. van Leimt (1992), "Economic globalization: Labour options and business strategies in high labour cost countries", *International Labour Review*, **131(4-5)**: 463; E. Lee (1997), op.cit.

[90] T. Bramble (1996), op.cit., pp.46-7.

[91] ibid., p.48.

[92] O. Hammarström (1994) op.cit., p.160.

[93] H. Ramsay (1997) op.cit., p.520.

[94] ICFTU (1998).

[95] A. Breitenfellner (1997) op.cit., p.545.

rival governments each pushing the interest of the dominant capitals located inside their borders" where attempts at international union advocacy would suffer the imposition of harsh and regressive demands by the most powerful capitalist states[96].

The third arm of the international union approach, is multinational collective bargaining (MNCB), widely regarded as the grail for the international labour movement[97]. Despite international collective agreement found in the transport and entertainment-communications sector, MNCB has largely been nonexistent. These industries are seen as exceptional, because of the international nature of service delivery in these sectors[98]. With the exception of Europe, no procedures for consultation have been established, let alone any for bargaining. Evidence suggest that recent initiatives have taken the form of joint consultation at a transnational level rather than MNCB[99]. MNCs have successfully maintained a "taboo front" against MNCB, which requires a high level of refinement and coordination from unions, as well as considerable financial and human resources to match those of employers. Moreover, the different national unions do not necessarily have parallel interests[100]. The fact remains, especially in the case of Europe, that the right to negotiate does not inevitably translate into the will to negotiate[101]. Where MNCs see no benefit in meeting unions on an international basis, unions might be expected to shadow management at this level in order to enhance their national and local bargaining strategies[102].

Fourthly, international industrial disputation has also been predominantly ineffectual. At first glance, strategies of global coordination and integration would appear to enhance the bargaining position of trade unions, since an industrial dispute at one subsidiary could have a major adverse impact on the whole integrated system[103]. However, with the exception of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), who have recently shown their strength locally, efforts to coordinate dispute activity in MNCs have been sustained largely through enterprise combines or by ITSs, but there has been no systematic

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[96]   T. Bramble (1996), op.cit., p.46.

[97]   H. Ramsay (1997), op.cit., p.520.

[98]   P. Marginson (1992), op.cit., p.532.

[99]   ibid., p.529.

[100]   G. van Leimt (1992), op.cit., p.463.

[101]   P. Teague (1993), op.cit., p.402.

[102]   P. Marginson (1992), op.cit., p.531.

[103]   J. Hamill (1993), "Employment effects of the changing strategies of multinational enterprises", in P. Bailey, A. Parsitto and G. Renshaw (eds), *Multinationals and employment: The Global Economy of the 1990s*, International Labour Office, Geneva, p.75.

progress on this score. Gestures of international solidarity or nominal expressions of support and token financial contributions are more common[104]. The success of the ITF is difficult to emulate, as seamen are physically concentrated and are consequently much easier to organise than other workers[105]. Moreover, many MNCs operating with globally integrated strategies refuse to recognise or negotiate with unions, thus not placing themselves in such a volatile situation[106].

Perhaps the only avenue, by which recent international union coordination has been successful is through information networking. Networking, and information gathering and provision have been the traditional core of international union links in practice, at all levels of union organization. Nevertheless, they have at no time been easily maintained on a widespread basis, and the construction of an adequate international information network has not been achieved[107]. However, there is some recent evidence indicating that the adoption of new technological processes and new arrangements in MNCs has generated a very intense dialogue among groups of employees across national boundaries[108]. These "spontaneous" networks, are not formally established or legitimised by the higher union organisation and arise out of an immediate interest at the level of the workplace[109]. The managerial strategy of referring to non-existent or merely partial uncertainty within particular plants, that would supposedly benefit from new investment, unintentionally have heightened uncertainty and generated a demand for relevant company information as potential means to find ways to curb the reassertion of the management prerogative[110].

New and inexpensive technologies have swept away communications barriers and opened the way for joint efforts in research and bargaining. The opportunities for elaborating these information networks and for the transmission of collected information has grown enormously with technological advances in recent years, especially in computing and networking. Cross-border interaction between workplaces is now possible[111]. In this sense, the Internet is not only a medium but it can also play a part in democratising unions and empowering members. Success in this will require far more flexible attitudes in union central offices, however, allowing open networking and access to union gathered and

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[104]   H. Ramsay (1997), op.cit., p.520.

[105]   A. Breitenfellner (1997), op.cit., p.545.

[106]   J. Hamill (1993), op.cit., p.75.

[107]   H. Ramsay (1997), op.cit., p.520.

[108]   S. Weston and M. Martinez Lucio (1997), op.cit., p.767.

[109]   M. Martinez Lucio and S. Weston (1995), op.cit., p.242.

[110]   ibid, p.244.

[111]   A. Breitenfellner (1997), op.cit., p.547.

processed information rather than seeking to regulate local use[112]. Perhaps the hidden hitch, is that local worker representatives, in their eagerness to understand the reality of other workplaces within their company can drive energy into such relations on a competitive, rather than cooperative basis. Higher tiers of trade union movement generally do not have the organisational resources and authority to control such unsolidaristic behaviour which is usually couched in nationalistic terms[113].

"Think global, act local"?

Having illustrated the largely unsuccessful attempts to internationalise unions, and the evidently portentous obstacles which are cast in the path of these efforts, there is a need to temper this rather pessimistic discourse. Some commentators have pronounced the conjectured havoc of globalisation to be "largely mythical",[114] and the woes the phenomenon have wrought as exaggerated. Critics claim that it is clear that there are relatively few *multi*national corporations, with recent analysis showing that MNCs are still primarily "home centred"[115] concentrating their investments in a handful of advanced and newly industrialising countries, taking advantage of access to major markets and the presence of large numbers of skilled workers, which compensate for higher wage costs[116].

Whilst, it would appear difficult to unreservedly support this diametrically extreme view, complacency is also unwarranted. A fully globalised economy may not have developed, but there has been a qualitative change in the global economic environment affecting workers across the world and this has had some impact[117]. An international economy appears to have emerged, with flows of production and finance having increased over the past three decades[118]. However, in spite of these developments and supported by the deregulation going apace in many economies, the nation-state has not been made redundant[119]. Indeed, labour markets retain a predominantly domestic focus and national policies are therefore still paramount in determining levels of employment and labour

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[112]   H. Ramsay (1997), op.cit., p.525.

[113]   M. Martinez Lucio and S. Weston (1995), op.cit., p.246.

[114]   Wolf (1997), in A. Breitenfellner (1997), op.cit., p.537.

[115]   E. Lee (1996), op.cit., p.493.

[116]   T. Bramble (1996), op.cit., p.39.

[117]   E. Lee (1996), op.cit., p.493.

[118]   T. Bramble (1996), op.cit., p.40.

[119]   E. Lee (1996), op.cit., p.495.

standards[120]. Crucially then, the nation-states are not yet at a stage of ungovernability, but the key implication is that there is now a greater need to supplement national employment and labour policy responses to this new economy with cooperative action at the international level to safeguard basic labour standards[121].

This arrangement clearly has considerable implications for the labour movement. In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* Karl Marx and Frederich Engels asseverated: "The working men have no country"[122]. However, it is precisely at the national, and sub-national, level that the labour movements of the world are chiefly forged and where most efforts begin[123]. Effective action does not have to start out with an explicitly internationalist agenda[124], and it is somewhat unrealistic to expect a globally coordinated trade union movement to emerge which is capable of matching the recent changes in the organisation of production[125]. The most decisive trade union activity will be at the local or national levels, an arena in which they are most equipped to respond to these developments using their traditional methods of regulatory channels for attaining their objectives[126].

This is not to deny that international unionism has a significant role in the emerging environment. At the same time as strengthening their position at the local level, unions also need to be attentive to global developments, which is likely to inject a new relevance into the old slogan, "Workers of the world unite!"[127]. In this task, one of the most important tasks confronting them will be the achievement of a more effective integration of the international context and subordinate levels at which policies are implemented[128]. As the ICFTU assert:

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[120]   N. Haworth, and S. Hughes (1997), op.cit., p.461; A. Breitenfellner (1997), op.cit, p.537.

[121]   P. Hirst and G. Thompson (1992), "The problem of 'globalization': international economic relations, national economic management and the formation of trading blocs", *Economy and Society*, **21(4)**: 394.

[122]   Marx and Engels (1848), p.142 in A. Breitenfellner (1997), op.cit, p.543.

[123]   T. Bramble (1996), op.cit., p.59.

[124]   ibid.

[125]   D. Campbell (1993), "The globalizing firm and labour institutions", in P. Bailey, A. Parsitto and G. Renshaw (eds), *Multinationals and employment: The Global Economy of the 1990s*, International Labour Office, Geneva, p.286.

[126]   W. Lecher and R. Naumann (1994), "The Future: structural change, internationalism and the trade union response", in W. Lecher (ed.), *Trade Unions in the European Union: A Handbook*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, pp.87-8.

[127]   G. Griffin and S. Svensen (1996), "The decline of Australian Union Density – A Survey of the Literature", *Journal of Industrial Relations*, **38(4)**: 534.

[128]   W. Lecher and R. Naumann (1994), op.cit., p.89.

> There is a direct link between the strength of unions at the work place and nationally, and the influence that the ICFTU can bring to bear at the international level. How unions develop and adapt to the new bargaining environment globalization has created, and the ability of their international organization - the ICFTU - to shape the framework of policies and roles that govern the functioning of the global market, are closely interconnected[129].

Without, such an integration it would be likely that the workplace, national and international dimensions would rail against each other, through promoting one level of unionism at the cost of stifling unity or autonomy at disparate levels[130]. As the balance between economic and socio-political forces becomes skewed, states and unions need to be complemented by some type of transnational element. International unionism provides a forum for not merely information exchange and policy coordination of these subordinate fora. It provides service centres, assistance pools and rallying points for solidarity to develop strategies and perhaps even clasp the grail of bargaining on an international level. Thus global action could be based on local experience, with communication technologies facilitating stronger bonds amongst all levels of the labour movement. "Trade unions should perceive themselves as being part of a global civil society"[131] with the main objective, and obstacle, being to provide protection without protectionism.

It is difficult to contemplate any organisational form of global labour market wherein "the world has become a huge bazaar with nations peddling their workforces in competition against one another"[132] which would make the nation-state redundant. Thus, international unionism provides for national policy and union operation, not obsolescence. For surely, without international worker solidarity firmly founded in local and national grassroots, "no international order acceptable to the majority of the world's people can be imagined"[133]. The working men have no country, but their own, and their brothers'.

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[129]   ICFTU (1998).

[130]   H. Ramsay (1997), op.cit., p.30.

[131]   A. Breitenfellner (1997), ,op.cit., p.552.

[132]   Donahue (1994), p.47 in E. Lee (1996), op.cit., p.491.

[133]   P. Garver (1991), op.cit., p.172.

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