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Transnational Cooperation among Labor Unions

Gordon and Turner set out to provide compelling evidence that unions can survive and grow if labour is willing to co-operate across national borders. Adopting a case-study approach, with contributions from both academics and participants in union campaigns, they submit “best practice” examples of union strength through transnational coalition-building and collaboration. Their purpose is twofold: to draw lessons from these campaigns that can help trade unions achieve their goal of improving employment conditions for workers around the world, and also elicit a better understanding of transnational collaboration among trade unions.

The book is organized into three parts. Part one explores the prevailing industrial relations situation in the world, as forged by the end of the Cold War, the dominance of global capital and the national basis of labour legislation. Chapter one provides an account of organized labour’s decline from the 1970s through the 1990s, under the doctrines of deregulation and privatization. Gordon and Turner illustrate that labour’s response ranged from defensive measures (labour-management “cooperation schemes,” attempts to restrict regional free trade agreements) to coalition- and alliance-building in national and international arenas, and increased organizing efforts at home (U.S.A., U.K.). The chapter also includes a brief history of transnational union collaboration and an account of AFL-CIO’s internationalism along anti-left and Cold War lines. Gordon and Turner describe how, since the days of Gompers, the cornerstone of U.S. trade union foreign policy was to fence off any socialist, communist or other influence that did not aspire to pure and simple business unionism.

In chapter 2, the late Harvey Ramsay tries to break down the “black box” approach towards multinational corporations, upheld by many in the labour movement. He exposes corporate strategy, reveals vulnerabilities in management thinking and discusses how commodity chains reshape corporate structures, communications and power. Servais, in chapter 3, draws our attention to the limits of national labour law with respect to transnational actions, as well as to the serious consequences deriving from legal environments in some countries that inhibit the growth and very existence of trade unions. In consequence, Gordon’s description of export processing zones in chapter 4 provides an appropriate example of areas that are an integral part of commodity chains, where violations of human and worker rights prevail, and where host governments and employers often collude to prevent the formation of unions.

Part two focuses on the structures that promote transnational co-operation. Prominent among them is the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. Gordon describes its formation, structure and some of its campaigning activities in chapter 5. Windmüller introduces the role and activities of international trade secretariats in chapter 6. Martin and Ross, in chapter 7, map out the position of the European Trade Union Congress amidst a profound “europeanization” of industrial relations in the European Union.

Part three shows how transnational co-operation can be put into practice. Wilson, in chapter 8, describes a remarkable transformation in the media sector and the development of convergence structures for unions in journalism, broadcasting and entertainment business. Jessup and Gordon, in chapter 9, look again at export processing zones, this time to show how a co-ordinated collaborative effort in the Dominican
Republic resulted in the signing of the first collective bargaining agreement in an EPZ. Cohen and Early of the Communications Workers of America show next, in chapter 10, how a transatlantic alliance with the U.K.’s Communications Workers Union can use trade related international labour regulation—in this instance that of the labour side agreement of NAFTA—to open new roads for collaborative action, albeit with modest outcomes, in the rapidly changing global telecommunications industry. Chapter 11 contains an example of a successful international corporate campaign. Zinn describes the United Mine Workers of America campaign against Peabody and the Anglo-American conglomerate Hanson PLC. Moving to the Caribbean Basin, Anner, in chapter 12, employs social movement theory and the cases of Phillips-Van Heusen and Daimi Atlantica in Guatemala and Walt Disney in Haiti, to demonstrate the importance of both local organizing and transnational activism in successful campaigns, as well as the need for a industry-wide strategy by all those involved in the anti-sweat shop movement.

Finally, in chapter 13, Turner and Gordon put forward eight principles for the potential success of transnational co-operation among unions. These include the perception of interdependence, the need for an ideology that promotes labour internationalism, the key character of knowledge and systematic intelligence in corporate campaigns, the necessity for workers to be willing and able to mobilize and take risks, the requirement for altered existing relationships between employers and various external stakeholder groups, new levels of sophistication in union strategy, the importance of unions in the nation where the offending multinational is headquartered, and placing of a human face on the conflict!

Gordon and Turner have provided a valuable tool for understanding better transnational labour co-operation. Each chapter is well founded and can generate many challenging questions for future research. For example, what position will the U.S. labour movement occupy within the post-Kyoto and post 9/11 unilateralist U.S. foreign policy? Have all its interventionist and “patriotic” expertise—perfected for decades—really disappeared? What are the implications of a network-based corporation (which, as Ramsay suggested, is increasingly the case) for organized labour and its own bureaucratic structures? Should a looser network of activists replace altogether the multi-layered structures of trade unionism (local-national-international-transnational), perhaps in a “cell” type structure? What are the implications of the introduction of the Euro for co-ordinated collective bargaining and trade union co-operation in the Euro-zone? And how significant can trade-related labour standards laws really be for promoting collaborative trade union internationalism?

I have found this book thought-provoking. It equips its reader with a firm knowledge of transnational trade union co-operation and with an advantageous insight into the forces and issues that can shape this field in the future.

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Trade Union Activists, East and West: Comparisons in Multinational Companies

In the words of Meardi, this book concerns the transformation of class consciousness. It tries to show how trade union experiences and differences are