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The Local is Now Global Building a Union Coalition in the International Transport and Logistics Sector

Du local au mondial : bâtir une coalition syndicale dans le secteur du transport et de la logistique

Lo local es ahora globalizado: Construyendo una coalición sindical en el transporte internacional y en el sector de logística

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Article abstract

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The Local is Now Global: Building a Union Coalition in the International Transport and Logistics Sector

Ruth Barton and Peter Fairbrother

Trade unions face a range of challenges in a global world. As trade, production and consumption relations change, unions have begun to consider how they organize and operate. The argument is that for trade unions to effectively challenge key aspects of these global relations, they must take steps to rebuild the way they organize and operate at local levels. The conditions for this step are a reflective and experienced leadership, opportunities for leaders to meet each other, and for activists to develop practices of solidarity, information exchange and union cooperation with each other. To explore these themes we study a proto-typical case of inter-union coalition building. Over the last four years, three remote and local transport unions, in Victoria, Australia have developed the Victorian Group of the International Transport Federation. In doing this, these unions are building on existing forms of organization and in the process, they are reforging their relations with each other so as to have the potential to challenge international employers.

KEYWORDS: global unionism, coalition, trade unions, international employers, globalization

The prevailing forms of analysis on global unionism seek to map and explain the policies that global unions are pursuing in the changing context of work and employment (e.g., Harrod and O'Brien, 2002). The focus is on the way that unions are adapting to changed circumstances (Wills, 2002) or the increasing activity taking place at an international union level, via, for example the Global Union Federations (GUFs) (e.g., Stevis and Boswell, 2007; see also Bronfenbrenner, 2007). However, missing from these accounts is an examination of the ways in which locally-based unions may be attempting to work together to re-focus their local organization and activity so as to counter threats from increasingly internationalized work and employment relations. This latter theme draws attention to analyses of the origin, articulation and implementation of proposals to reposition unions in global sets of relationships.

The global context in which unions now operate is characterized by deterritorialization. The production, movement and consumption of goods and

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services are no longer contained within the nation state. Increasingly, governments, supra-national organizations (e.g., World Bank) are both shaping and adapting to the emergent sets of economic relations at an international level (Held *et al.*, 1999; Wolf, 2004). These developments have prompted debate about how unions should respond. Firstly, attention has been drawn to the international trade union movement, the GUFs and the international trade union confederations, noting the increased prominence of these organizations, over the last two decades (e.g., Fairbrother and Hammer, 2005). Secondly, there is a diverse set of evidence that individual unions are beginning to develop cross-border alliances, and in a few cases, establish cross border unions (Tattersall, 2007: 170). A third focus has been on the ways in which locally-based unions are attempting to meet the global developments. One recent study addresses the implications of state policies that seek to facilitate the activity of global companies (Turnbull, 2007 on the European waterfront); another addresses recruitment drives by unions in the face of restructuring and the internationalization of such areas of employment as care work (Lopez, 2004). There is also some evidence of union memberships reaching out to community bodies and associated organizations (e.g., Waterman, 2001; see also Webster, 1988).

Nonetheless, unions remain bound by conceptions of unionism as nation-state based, even when cross-border alliances are established (Myconos, 2005; Tattersall, 2007). There are few examples of unions attempting to transform the way they organize and operate, specifically in relation to the linkage between the local and the global, and by working together. This absence is brought out in two recent publications on the position and prospects of unions in the global world. First, in an analysis of union resistance and renewal, Cohen (2006) focuses almost exclusively on the workplace/locality. She develops an argument that it is at this level of organization that the wellspring of activity, organizationally, as well as in relation to community based forms of resistance, will emerge. Second, in another study (Bronfenbrenner, 2007), debate is opened up about the origins, form and implications of cross border union activity and alliances in relation to global developments around work and employment. However, there is only a brief examination of the way unions may be able to transform themselves and work together to address such developments.

One possibility is that unions may take steps at a local level to build coalitions to address the challenges arising from global changes. In relation to the process of building cross-union relationships, the options range from *ad hoc* cooperation between unions on specific events to more long-term coalition-building between unions. In relation to links between unions and community organizations, Tattersall (2007) identifies five features: common concern, structure, organizational commitment, organizational culture and scale (pp. 156–158). While this framework enables her to open up an analysis of global union alliances, the focus here is different. Rather than global union alliances, we examine inter-union coalition building at a local level. The relevant features are: history (focusing on the traditions and experiences that leaders and other activists draw upon); scale (the level at

which the coalition operates); and the process of creating a collective presence via coalitions. Such processes of renewal have the potential to move from informal *ad hoc* coalitions to more structured mutual interest coalitions.

The focus, thus is on developing this analytic framework, via a close study of a union initiative taking place in Melbourne, Victoria, focused on the transport and logistics industry. This sector increasingly has an international focus, particularly in relation to the shipping of goods. It also is an industry that in part comes from a provincial state-based and focused past, where public transport was usually publicly owned, regulated and focused. Over the last few years, three sets of union leaders from the logistics and transport sector in Victoria have taken decisive steps to transform key aspects of their trade unionism, and thus address the challenges that arise from economic globalization. Our claim is that these developments constitute an example of successful coalition-building between three unions with very limited connections before this development. The study thereby enables us to revisit the theories about unions, showing how local union relationships can complement and strengthen global union alliance work.

The data for the paper come from a variety of sources. First, the core database comprises a series of key informant interviews from 2004 to 2008 with 17 different respondents, involving 28 interviews altogether. The focus of the interviewees began with an exploration of the events that took place and initial views of them. Informants were selected according to position within each union. Of course, this results in a partial data source. To counter this dilemma we cross-checked with other interviewees, documentary sources, and limited observation of union activity. A number of these informants have been interviewed several times, as we built an account of what happened and why. As the interview programme proceeded, the focus was on elaboration and expansion of details that were unclear, as well as clarifying the perspectives that interviewees had of the developments that took place. In addition, five interviews were conducted with ITF head office staff in London. While this material constitutes the core of the research data, it is complemented by documentary materials, including fortnightly publications from unions. These union journals provided a rich source of data, often including personal views and statements from officials and members. To a limited extent, we also conducted observational data collection, at union offices, in public houses, and on the street. This material has been written up in the form of fieldnotes. In addition, we conducted internet searches of company and union material.

The analysis is structured as follows. In the first section, we set the scene with a brief account of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) Working Group in Victoria, Australia, dating from 2004. Second, we locate some of the key developments that have taken place in the transport industry, particularly as they impacted on Australia. Third, we provide an account of the origins, focus and achievements of the Working Group, demonstrating the role of the local leaders in this process. In the fourth section, we provide an assessment of these developments, which in turn is followed by a brief conclusion.

The ITF Working Group, Victoria, Australia

The ITF is a major global union federation covering workers in independent trade unions in the transport sector (ITF, 2007; Koch-Baumgarten, 1998). It has been active in coordinating and developing global union networks (Bonacich, 2006) and has embraced a version of the organising approach advocated for national-based unions (Bronfenbrenner *et al.*, 1998). Recently, the federation has promoted a variety of practices to encourage “more union members to become aware of the capacity and potential for international union action” (Howard, 2006). It has also taken steps to promote campaigning and mobilizing strategies by affiliates, building on the existing organizational framework of the confederation, and particularly the National Coordinating Committees (NCC) in each affiliate’s country. These committees bring together unions and serve to provide the basis for joint and supportive action (Rule 2.2 (e) – ITF, 2002).

In 2004, in a distinctive move, three Victorian unions, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), Transport Workers Union (TWU) and the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), established an ITF Working Group. The coverage of these unions was broadly complementary. First, the MUA covers shipping, stevedoring, port services (tugs), hydrocarbons (oil and gas rigs) and diving. In 2006, it had 2,260 members in Victoria and 10,760 nationally. Second, the TWU covers aviation, oil, waste management, gas, road transport, passenger vehicles and freight logistics. In 2006, it had 88,215 members across Australia with 21,955 in Victoria. Third, the RTBU is an amalgamated union, comprising three divisions: rail; locomotive; and tram and bus. Only the Rail Division, which covers staff such as signallers, station staff, customer service staff, workshops, shunters and administrative staff, became involved in the ITF Working Group. In 2006, it had 3,336 of the 6,515 Victorian Branch members, and 32,429 national members (AIRC, 2006).

In the latter part of 2004, each union proposed and agreed the following motion:

That this meeting congratulates the MUA, RTBU (Rail Division) and TWU initiative of forming the ITF Victorian Transport Union Working Group.

The Integration of Logistics Transport through the establishment of multi modal transport companies is happening and the VTUWG is a logical step for our three unions to take. Noting that this is not an amalgamation in any way shape or form, but a way for our unions to cooperate for the benefit of our members.

We fully support the principal of this working group “...to establish a cooperative working relationship for the benefit of maritime, rail, and road and air transport union members.” Further, it seeks to uphold the charter of the ITF and identify and support the ideals, principles and campaigns of the ITF. (Maritime Union of Australia, 2004)

This motion was agreed unanimously at an MUA members’ meeting on 26 October 2004. In contrast, the RTBU Rail Division agreed the proposal at a delegates meeting; it saw the Working Group as enabling “union members to work together to maximize their strategic power against employers who are moving to cover the entire freight logistics chain” (Dobbyn, 2004). The TWU also ratified the proposal at a delegates meeting.

However, at first the Working Group was not welcomed by the national leadership of two of these unions, the RTBU and the TWU. As stated:

Initially there was a lot of uneasiness about it. Our national officers, none of them liked it ... and were quite unhappy about it but since then they have relaxed and seen that it is no threat to them and it works quite well (RTBU, August 2007).

But, with the tangible impact of cooperation between the three union groups, this unease was largely put to one side, although there remained on-going tensions about union coverage at the national level, between the TWU and the RTBU Rail Division.

Even so, the local union leaders and their supporters sought to develop a strategic approach to the new opportunities and threats posed by the globalization of transport and logistics (on strategy, see Hyman, 2007). The aim was to lay the foundation for cooperation, despite a history of operating in isolation from each other, competing over membership jurisdictions and arguing over political views and affiliations.

The Context of Transport and Logistics

The key reference for the ITF Working Group is the world transport and logistics industry, as expressed in the port facilities in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. This industry employs people in different countries and therefore is a critical conduit of economic globalization. As such, it has long displayed aspects of an international industry, although intensified in recent times. A number of factors have contributed to these developments, such as the deregulation of the transport market, privatization of transport chains and technological improvements in transport and communication. Transport firms have become networked and more centralized through mergers, strategic alliances, joint ventures, acquisitions and partnerships (Lemoine and Dagnæs, 2003: 213). Within this context, the ITF sees logistics and related workers as occupying a pivotal place in global capitalism (ITF, 2007).

In Australia in the mid-1990s, some elements of Australia's railway operations were privatized. In practice, this meant that corporations came to own different facets of a single integrated system. It also meant that other employers in the transport sector had to deal with a greater number of railway owners and operators. These complexities were played out in the potentially lucrative rail freight sector. In 2002, the conservative federal government sold the National Rail Corporation and NSW FreightCorp to a joint venture involving the road transport company, Toll Holdings, and the stevedoring company, Patrick Corporation. Out of this sale the main private operator, Pacific National, was formed and, after purchasing former state owned assets in Victoria and Tasmania, it controlled 75 percent of Australia's rail market and more than 80 percent of the traffic on the east - west rail link through Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth (Stevens, 2005: 1).

One of Pacific National's owners, Patrick Corporation, achieved notoriety when in 1998 with government assistance, it locked out and dismissed its 1,700 strong unionized (MUA) workforce and attempted to replace them with a non-unionized workforce. After extensive legal action, assisted by "peaceful community assemblies"

outside the wharf gates and an international boycott by the ITF of ships loaded by scab labour, the MUA workforce returned to their jobs. In this process over half were made redundant or downgraded to casual status (Svensen, 1998; Wiseman, 1998). Patrick's Chief Executive Officer, Chris Corrigan, subsequently described the dispute as "extremely good value," in part because he viewed it as weakening trade unions. He announced he was preparing for more industrial disputes, this time at National Rail/Pacific National (Workers Online, 2002). Subsequently, Pacific National took an aggressive stance towards the RTBU in enterprise agreement bargaining negotiations (RTBU, December 2004). However, following a period of corporate disputation, between the owners of Pacific National, Toll took over the company. It ended up with around 26,000 people in its employ, representing six per cent of all employees in transport and storage. This acquisition made Toll one of Australia's largest employers; it became a serious competitor in the international transport market and the largest of the global mid-sized transport companies (Martin and Rice, 2007).

Alongside these ownership moves, a Port Precinct for the Port of Melbourne was in the process of being built up as the main trading port for Victoria and south eastern Australia, handling \$75 billion worth of trade each year. It is anticipated that over the next 30 years the number of containers passing through the port will increase from 1.4 million to 7 million. There is a planned \$A 2 billion investment in the area to upgrade port capacity, change land use and enhance rail and road infrastructure. The then Transport Minister claimed it was crucial that:

... we make the best use of the port's existing stevedoring, rail terminal and other infrastructure
... The terminal would be connected by rail to outer suburban intermodal hubs and would form the basis of a world class intermodal freight hub at the Port of Melbourne (Minister for Public Transport, 2006).

The government, and by implication the Port management, recognize the centrality of the interlinkages between the different aspects of transport and logistics in relation to the Port.

These interlinkages were also recognized by the ITF. When Toll took over Pacific National, the three unions had an estimated 7,000 members associated with the company (Workers Online, 2006a). Toll thus became a target for the ITF as it addressed the reconfigurations of the logistics industry worldwide (ITF, 2007). ITF full-time officials (in London and the regions) actively promoted links between Australian affiliates, and between them and other affiliate unions internationally, in this case particularly within the Asia Pacific region (e.g., ITF Dockers' Section, 2007).

Unions at Work Globally

The changing context of transport and logistics created the opportunity for the three unions to develop a distinctive approach to union co-operation, focused on the Port Precinct. The three sets of union leaderships formulated and promoted a view of how the unions could begin working together. In this process, they initiated a transformation of the relation between the global and the local (Burawoy, 2000: 34).

Origins

The ITF Working Group has its origins in the 1997/98 waterfront dispute, centred on the MUA. This dispute provided the initial opportunity for leaders from the three unions to formulate long term plans for an inter-union coalition, link up with each other and begin to define a pro-active approach to the types of corporate (and government) policies that led to the dispute (Hyman, 2007: 198–199).

The first steps were taken by the MUA and the ITF. Working closely with and under the auspices of the ITF, the MUA sought to internationalize the campaign, highlighting the way a seemingly narrowly focused dispute about the de-unionization of cargo handling operations on the Australian coast (promoted by the National Farmer's Federation and supported by the conservative federal government) was in fact a dispute with international ramifications. In the ensuing events, there was supportive action from the International Longshore and Warehouse Union on the West Coast of the United States, protests by Japanese dockers and demonstrations in support of the MUA outside Australian embassies in Japan, Korea, India, the Philippines and Russia (Svensen, 1998). These actions were organized by the ITF and their affiliates, often involving links and exchanges between local leaderships elsewhere and the MUA.

The MUA leadership defined the dispute as “global,” in its form and its implications (Coombs, 1998). While the corporation sought to secure a compliant non-union workforce, the union presented the dispute in class terms, focusing on the systematic attempt by the corporation to reconstitute the stevedoring workforce (Svensen, 1998). Additionally, the conservative federal government was an ardent supporter of waterfront “reform” and was both an active covert and overt participant in the dispute (McConville, 2000; O'Neill, 1998). A leaked brief to the then Prime Minister stated:

The stevedores would use this opportunity to sack their existing workforce and restart their operations with a new (non union) workforce, perhaps with some former employees who might be selectively re-employed (MUA, 2001).

The union in its response built on its long history of international trade unionism and involvement and engagement with the ITF (MUA, 2007).

The MUA sought support from other unions. Picket lines, for example, drew unions and union leaders together and gave rise to new mutual understandings and industrial strategies (McConville, 2000: 399). TWU organizers went down to the docks to dissuade truck drivers from breaking the picket line. As one of the leaders stated:

We actually took ... organizers off their normal work. ...Now we brought them all in at 5.30 each morning and we would explain to them what things were, and so at 6.00 each morning they would be off in to a waterfront yard, straight on and have meetings with the drivers ...[to persuade them not to drive in]... (TWU, July 2007).

This activity had two consequences. First, it built up trust between two unions who had not had an easy relationship in the past, over recognition and coverage, as well as in relation to politics, with the MUA a left-led union and the TWU a right-led

one. Second, the leaders of the two unions came to know each other, and began to discuss what could come after the dispute.

The third union, the RTBU, had long represented members in the public sector. Following privatization of these services in Victoria, it refocused its organization and activity (for details, see Barton and Fairbrother, 2007). It was also a left-led union and, in the context of the Patrick's dispute, the leadership had a frequent presence on the wharves. Nonetheless, the rail sections had a physical presence on the wharves and there was always a possibility of demarcation and union coverage disputes with the TWU (Bray and Rimmer, 1987: 260). Hence, the industrial action also enabled these leaders to meet and come to know each other.

These seemingly small incidents enabled the three sets of union leaders to begin thinking about how they might continue working with each other. One leader noted:

I guess that was the beginning and we built up a bit of a relationship and it crossed my mind that ... it should continue...So I was speaking to [one of the other union leaders] and said what we need to do is ... you know build on the relationship and the interaction that we had between the three of us [MUA, TWU, RTBU] and virtually introduce the members down at the waterfront to one another and in the process try to build a ... trade union Precinct (TWU, July 2007).

Each leader expressed the view that this dispute laid the foundation for trust between them. They each came to realize that developments on the wharves provided a unifying focus for joint action.

Place and Space

The Port Precinct became the focal point for activity by the Working Group. It provided the union leaderships (and the ITF internationally) with the opportunity to redefine the Port as a "trade union Precinct." This idea is well captured by one union leader:

The three secretaries of the three unions [RTBU, MUA, TWU] decided we would set up a[n] ... ITF local working group and we would do things on international days of action together. We would also recruit down at the waterfront Precinct, where we all have a concentration of members and we [would] designate that as a sort of union zone and concentrate on that area ... (RTBU, August 2007)

The Precinct thus became a place where solidaristic relations between the three unions were given substance, where the unions took proactive stances in relation to the logistics industry, the trucking companies, the railway freight companies and the shipping industry. The three unions began to recruit, combine with each other, and address the seemingly intangible impacts of a globalised industry. In the process, they began to lay the foundations for trade union collectivism between unions (McBride, 2006: 589–590).

The Port Precinct constituted a delimited social sphere that enabled the vision of unity and proactive aspirations of the three senior leaders and other union representatives to be realized (Ellem, 2003 and 2005). As stated:

We pick out the trucking companies down there [at the Precinct] and go and have a breakfast [at the gates] in the morning...we [all] take our delegates down [to the Precinct]...and officials. We all intermingle. We usually have a few speeches...we talk, we invite the blokes from the company to come in [and talk with us] ... the stewards always come out. The managers usually come out and tell us to fuck off (RTBU, August 2007).

The aim is:

So you know it's about sending messages to the employers down there that we have an alliance that can hold, notwithstanding we are all in different sections (RTBU, August 2007).

This is a site where class relations, between employers and workers become *real*. Such relations took the form of rallies, meetings, and recruitment activity. These events provided leaders, activists and on occasion, non-member's opportunities to meet with each other and build a collective presence at the Precinct.

Creating a Collective Presence

The Precinct, as a place, thus becomes a wellspring for inter-union coalition building, via a developing "trade union collectivism" (Stephenson and Stewart, 2001: 8). As stated by one leader:

... what we tried to do was to build something a bit more concrete on the ground [compared to existing ITF arrangements]

And:

We've been to their functions [delegate meetings in the other unions] and they have had training on occupational health and safety and we've all taken our people to that and we've had their delegates to our things. We've had international meetings and we've invited the unions there. There is a lot of intermingling at delegate level, which is where it really counts (RTBU, August 2007).

Prior to the Working Group, the three unions operated separately from each other at the Precinct. With the establishment of the Working Group, they began to work together. At the outset, on 22 October 2004, the TWU and RTBU Rail Division leaders held a week of action, under the auspices of the ITF. Subsequently, RTBU Rail Division activists attended TWU events and the TWU leaders were invited along to the RTBU Rail Division activists' committee. More specifically, the three union leaders promoted cross reference to each union in newsletters and related communications, as well as encouraging breakfast meetings of leaders and activists and BBQ days at road, port and rail sites. The other side of these meetings and related events is that the three leaders also met frequently to map out courses of action and to deal with problems that may threaten the embryonic unity that was in process.

The Working Group took deliberate steps to support each union's core activities. Nonetheless, the activity of the Working Group principally focused on selected trucking companies:

The biggest area of stress for the three of us is the trucking operations down at the waterfront. It's scarcely regulated. There's lots of little scabby operators being set up all the time ... They're largely non-union. So we concentrate on that area because it's our biggest area of vulnerability ... (RTBU, August 2007).

For the three unions this is part of the preparation for expected strife down at the waterfront. Of the three unions, the TWU is the most at risk because of the fluid contracting relations between the trucking companies and the stevedoring companies, where there is frequent change of contract, which affects the sustainability of union representation and presence in these companies.

The view is that unless the three unions stand together, the Working Group will crumble and each union will be threatened. As stated:

We [officials and delegates] have been down at the waterfront and helped them [MUA] do ship inspections and that's never happened before ... we are also helping the TWU. Sometimes we will picket a terminal and help them do a ticket check on the terminal ... We have combined shop steward committees with the MUA down at the waterfront. In the past that would have been impossible (RTBU, August 2007).

Specifically, at a 24-hour stoppage at Pacific National over stalled negotiations, the RTBU picket in Melbourne received strong support and visits from delegations from the TWU and MUA (Harvey, 2005). When a ship crewed by MUA members had their jobs threatened with replacement by non-union overseas labour, the RTBU Rail Division attended the MUA rally and spoke in support of the crew (McPherson, 2006). Complementing this type of support, the RTBU Rail Division and the TWU attended the same educational programmes dealing with health and safety at work, led by a TWU trainer (TWU July 2007 and RTBU, August 2007). When difficulties arose, the leaders would "pick up the phone" to each other; they met down at a Precinct cafe and had breakfast with each other; they organized meetings with each other if there had been no contact for a few weeks; and so on. These practices held the alliance together.

Further, the broader trade union movement recognized, supported and in the case of the ITF facilitated this inter-union activity. First, the union confederation, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) was actively involved in the organization and support for the 1997/98 maritime disputes. In part, these developments were acknowledged with the award of the ACTU "Organizer of the Year," 2005, to Greg Harvey of the RTBU. Harvey played a critical role in the organization of 2,200 workers across five Australian States to resist Pacific National's use of the "Work Choices" legislation (Workers Online, 2006b). Second, the ITF also became a player in this process of inter-union coalition building. It encouraged attendance by Working Group members at international schools and it facilitated international links (e.g., with New Zealand counterparts). On occasion, the GUF provided a research base for the Working Group. More mundanely, the three union groups participated in ITF Days of Action supporting campaigns for international trade union solidarity (RTBU, 2006, 2007). Thus, the Working Group was located within both national and international cross union activity.

Assessment

The history of the Working Group is an example of the slow gritty and uncertain work of building inter-union coalitions. These union leaders and their activist support learnt from the past, focused on one place and looked to the future. They drew on their past experiences, as political activists, but also they embraced the changes that

had taken place under the auspices of globalization, identifying points of leverage. These clusters of experience and outlooks enabled local struggles to acquire a global relevance. The crucial point here is that unions sought to identify and turn outwards to develop “transnational connections,” involving “flows of people, information, and ideas, and the stretching of organizations” (Burawoy, 2000: 34).

The starting point for coalition building was the history of relations between the union leaders, dating back to the 1998 maritime strike. By focusing on the Port Precinct, these leaders developed a local scale set of activities, with global implications. In the process, they worked with activists and other members to build a collective presence at the port. In this process, they were able to forge a structured mutual interest coalition from an initial more informal and *ad hoc* coalition of interest.

History

Building on the experience and the emergent awareness associated with the 1998 maritime dispute, these leaders set about transforming our understanding of trade unionism. Rather than build a new type of unionism (community based or social movement unionism) these leaders began to build a working inter-union coalition, although they retained the traditional institutional arrangements of representation. They thereby developed a strategic approach to union coalition building. They encouraged links within unions and between unions, and in outlook, reforging “trade union collectivism.” So, a participative form of unionism was promoted, in the context of the unions working together. Central to this was a leadership prepared to engage in public displays of unity, underwritten by informal and covert planning, preparation and engagement (Hyman, 2007: 198–199).

The study traces out the ways in which locally based leaderships can reforge their unionism to develop a distinctive form of solidaristic unionism in hostile conditions. The proposition is that leaders, particularly at a local level, may be critical in promoting “trade union collectivism” (Stephenson and Stewart, 2001 and McBride, 2006), particularly in the form of a working inter-union coalition. In this instance, these union leaders were able to promote a distinctive form of unionism in the context of globalization, and thus move beyond the fragmentation of the past. Although they knew of each other before the 1998 maritime dispute, they belonged to different political factions and they had little contact with each other. Nonetheless, they took steps to reposition their union memberships to address the Port Precinct developments, bringing together biography, history, place and institutional innovation.

Much analysis of union organization focuses on leadership and activism. One aim was to explain core features of local representative behaviour and the foundations for union democracy and its interplay with union leadership (Tannenbaum, 1956). A further purpose has been to identify the role and place of stewards, or delegates in the process of representation and union mobilization (e.g., Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel, 1977; Gall, 2003). Yet another is to show how a leadership-led relationship is an essential condition for “mobilizing” members around social justice and related

issues (Kelly, 1998). While of value, it is also necessary to move beyond leadership *per se* and consider the enabling conditions for leadership effectiveness and activism and the varied strategies that leaders may pursue.

Scale

The Port Precinct, constituted an organizational focal point for the Working Group, although it acquired this relevance from the past and the present. On the one hand, the maritime dispute was a decisive point of reference for subsequent union activity, while on the other, the presence of major employers and the potential intermingling between the differently represented sections of the workforce provided the union leaderships with a focus for coalition-building. These leaders were able to draw on history, point to the present, and look to the future. The Precinct became a place where the union activists gathered and where union leaders met and where “trade union collectivism” was constructed (on scale, see Tufts, 1998; see also Herod, 2002).

The Precinct is delimited, the hub of an intersection between rail, road and sea, and accessible. It was both defined by the developments associated with logistics and transport, and it in turn defined them, specifically with reference to the internationalization of shipping, and the concurrent impact on production, trade and consumption (Sadler and Fagan, 2004; see also Herod, 2002). These union leaders and their supporting activists saw the Precinct as part of a broad set of relations, and thus located their concerns beyond the Port itself, beyond the city and indeed the Australian state (Sadler and Fagan, 2004: 27). Although these union members as workers were tied to the Precinct and the city (on this feature, see Ellem, 2003 and 2005), they were relatively successful in operating at multiple levels, locally, within the Victorian State, Australia and internationally, particularly in the Asian Pacific region (Tattersall, 2007: 171–173).

One success of the leadership, reflecting a strategic view of multinational activity and economic globalization, was to define the work and employment relation in class terms (Hyman, 2007). The unions came together in terms of their work activity, from rail, from privately owned trucks and as wharfies. Equally corporate management is based in the Precinct and they could see what was happening. Port management worried about these developments; they did not want to see a united trade union movement developing, focused on the Port Precinct, the centre of transport logistics in Melbourne. The Working Group thus became an experiment that goes beyond the immediate and lays the foundation for a broader political engagement within a globalised sector than has hitherto been realized. The unions not only spoke on behalf of workers *qua* workers, they built an alliance which has the capacity to be both transformative and solidaristic (Unger, 1998: 10–16; see also Cohen and Rogers, 1995; Cohen, 1997; Fearon, 1998).

Building a Collective Presence

The critical dimension in this process of coalition building is the question of organization. A small number of leaders took the initiative to open up a new form of unionism, a “logical development.” However, while it may be “logical,” it required effort, planning and commitment to a different way of doing things, thereby

challenging prevailing power relations and laying the foundations for resistance (Carter *et al.*, 2003). These union members focused recruitment drives on the Precinct, delegates worked together and exchanged experiences across unions and with each other. They attended rallies and participated in other forms of support in relation to other Australian trade unionists and international ones. The leaders met with each other formally and informally, expressed support for each other, and planned ways of approaching and dealing with sections of their unions who did not favour these developments.

The union leaderships sought to develop a distinct way of organizing and operating as trade unionists. They took what seemed to be a “logical” development of both the solidaristic moment symbolized by the 1998 maritime dispute and the fragmented and parochial form of union organization that had long characterized the logistics industry; they saw beyond the immediate and the mundane, through the prevailing forms of domination (Lukes, 2005: 144–151). In turn, the ITF provided a legitimating rubric for the intersection between these two aspects of unionism. While historically there may be examples of like organization, where unions come together and in *ad hoc* but on-going ways attempt to create solidaristic ways of organizing, this particular initiative is new for these trade union members at this time, in this place.

The unions built a collective presence at the Precinct. They developed a structured mutual interest coalition, where the membership participated in activity together, irrespective of the particular union to which they belonged. The activist cadre worked together and exchanged views and experiences with each other; they learnt from each other. Thus this was not just the activity of particular individuals in one place at a moment in time; it was a process of building a form of trade union collectivity that went beyond the prevailing *limited* patterns of representation.

Moreover, there was an awareness of the tenuousness of the experiment. It would appear that the union leadership, supported by key activists in each union, is holding the experiment together. They have the view, particularly the leading union advocates, that if they have a major dispute and come out of it in solidaristic ways, then the Working Group will become a stable element of the union scene. However, one of the difficulties they face is the seeming intractability of globalization and the associated neo-liberal project. To address the perceived pressures of the future, they have taken two steps. First, they have gone beyond the traditional boundary relations that in the past fragmented them. Second, these union activists have also begun to question the apparent intractability of globalization, and the ideas that underpin the neo-liberal form of globalization (Mykonos, 2005).

Conclusion

Three transport unions in a rather remote part of the world have set up a distinctive union formation. This step is part of local unions repositioning themselves as a global one, prepared and able to engage with a complex global world. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that the unions lose their local base, their local connection and indeed their local outlook. What it does mean is that they begin to define trade

unionism in different terms and that they develop an international outlook and practice. In the first instance, this rests on local co-operation, a sharing of facilities and experiences, and the beginnings of reaching out to address the implications of recent global developments in the logistics industry.

Thus, this is a study of institutional adaptation, via inter-union coalition building. Such developments are the building blocks of global unionism in two decisive respects. First, institutionally the Working Group is a constituent element of the Global Union Federation. Second, in its vision and focus, the Working Group promoted union practices that went beyond the state. The outcome is that global unions have become more than a prospect; they are part of the present and the future.

This study suggests the possibility of union reformation in a global context. Unions have been bound by a historical focus on the nation state. Within these limits, their historical focus was on employers, usually within the one jurisdiction. However, with the restructuring and reorganization of trade, production and consumption relations, unions face new challenges and possibilities. Indeed, this set of transport unions in Australia took steps to increase their chances of exploiting the opportunities generated by restructuring, the complexities of global chains, the variations in state policy and practice, and the varied ways these are expressed and formulated. Thus, trade unionism has the possibility of becoming more global in focus and orientation, with an increasingly sophisticated account of both globalization and the neo-liberal political project. This is the promise of global unionism.

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RÉSUMÉ

Du local au mondial : bâtir une coalition syndicale dans le secteur du transport et de la logistique

Les syndicats font face à un éventail de défis à cause de la mondialisation. Le contexte dans lequel ils œuvrent est caractérisé par la délocalisation où la production, le transport et la consommation des biens et des services ne se font plus à l'intérieur de l'État nation et où les États s'adaptent et se reforment dans le contexte d'un ensemble émergent de relations économiques internationales. Pour les syndicats, le défi est énorme. Après une période de déclin et d'incertitude, ils commencent à se regrouper et à gérer ces changements.

Un certain nombre de débats font l'objet de cette étude. Premièrement, on s'intéresse aux changements institutionnels qui prennent place, plus précisément en lien avec le mouvement syndical international, les Fédérations syndicales internationales (Global Union Federations) et les confédérations de syndicats internationaux. Deuxièmement, il existe aussi une preuve variée à l'effet que des syndicats particuliers commencent à créer des alliances transfrontalières et, dans quelques cas, ils mettent sur pied des syndicats également transfrontaliers. Un troisième débat concerne la manière dont les syndicats opérant sur une base locale cherchent à affronter les défis venant de la finance mondiale. Il en ressort que les syndicats cherchent à apprendre les uns des autres, probablement d'une façon plus positive que dans le passé. Néanmoins, on observe quelques cas de syndicats qui tentent de modifier la manière de s'organiser et d'œuvrer tant au plan local que mondial.

Pour aborder ces thèmes, nous avons porté notre regard sur le rôle du leadership syndical dans sa tentative de façonner de nouvelles manières de travailler dans un contexte de mondialisation. Nous avons centré notre attention sur trois aspects. Premièrement, alors que les syndicats ont souvent cherché à travailler ensemble pour affronter les défis de la restructuration de l'emploi et des politiques publiques, il s'est avéré souvent difficile d'établir des rapports intersyndicaux. Dans le contexte de la mondialisation, le lieu où les syndicats opèrent est critique pour le développement et l'édification de telles coalitions. Deuxièmement, les syndicats, par le biais des coalitions intersyndicales, ne peuvent arriver à défier la prédominance des relations de pouvoir ancrées sur le capital. Troisièmement, il est aussi important de considérer la question organisationnelle, notamment la manière dont les travailleurs et les syndicats reconstituent des formes d'organisation, offrant un droit de parole à leurs membres comme conditions préalables à la lutte collective. Ce dernier aspect connaîtra un traitement subséquent au moment de référer aux compétences et aux capacités des syndicats.

Pour en savoir plus à ce sujet, nous étudions un cas exemplaire, celui de trois syndicats du secteur du transport à Victoria en Australie. Au cours des dernières années, ils ont mis sur pied le Groupe de Victoria de la Fédération internationale des transports. Ces syndicats sont présents dans l'industrie du transport et de la logistique dans le secteur du port de Melbourne, et plus précisément dans la livraison de marchandises. Alors que deux des syndicats ont toujours été présents dans le port et qu'ils ont transigé avec un spectre assez vaste d'employeurs privés, le troisième était issu du secteur public du transport qui était, jusqu'à la moitié des années 90, propriété publique et qui a dû recentrer ses activités suite à une privatisation. Au cours des dernières années, ces trois ensembles de dirigeants syndicaux ont posé des gestes de façon à transformer des aspects clés du syndicalisme et à établir une coalition intersyndicale centrée sur les activités du secteur portuaire de Melbourne.

On prétend que des formes distinctives de syndicalisme, capables d'affronter les aspects importants des relations inhérentes à la mondialisation (par exemple celles qui impliquent des employeurs multinationaux ou bien le secteur de la logistique transfrontalière) sont en voie d'émerger au niveau local. Les conditions pour ce faire dépendent d'un leadership expérimenté et consciencieux, des occasions pour les leaders de se rencontrer et pour les activistes de développer des pratiques de solidarité, d'échanges d'information et d'établissement d'une coalition intersyndicale. Dans ce contexte, les dirigeants syndicaux et leurs membres construisent sur des formes existantes d'organisation syndicale et, en ce faisant, ils inventent des façons de travailler pour faire face aux entreprises internationales. Alors, quelques syndicats s'adaptent ainsi à la mondialisation, là où le commerce, la production des biens et services et les rapports de consommation prennent une allure internationale.

Il s'agit donc ici d'une étude de transformation des institutions. Elle met en relief la façon dont un ensemble local de membres syndicaux et leurs dirigeants en viennent à mettre sur pied des pratiques qui permettent un repositionnement des syndicats sur la scène internationale. Ces développements se présentent comme la pierre angulaire d'un syndicalisme à l'échelle mondiale qui prend deux formes distinctives et décisives. Premièrement, au plan institutionnel, le Groupe de Victoria devient un élément constitutif des Fédérations syndicales internationales. Deuxièmement, dans sa vision et son intérêt principal, ce groupe met de l'avant des pratiques syndicales qui vont bien au-

delà des frontières des États et des nations. Le résultat de ce processus fait en sorte que des syndicats internationaux deviennent plus qu'une éventualité; ils font maintenant partie de ce qui caractérise la situation présente et future.

Les conclusions de cette étude nous incitent à croire que les syndicats ne sont pas prisonniers de leur regard historique sur l'État-nation. De fait, en développant ce genre de syndicalisme, l'organisation syndicale accroît ses possibilités de saisir des occasions créées par la restructuration, par la complexité des grandes chaînes multinationales, par des changements des politiques publiques et des pratiques et par les façons nombreuses par lesquelles ceux-ci se manifestent et se développent. Alors, le syndicalisme se voit offrir des occasions de devenir plus international dans sa mission et dans son orientation, tout en tenant compte de façon beaucoup plus sophistiquée de la mondialisation et du projet de société néolibérale. On voit ici la promesse d'un syndicalisme mondial.

MOTS-CLÉS : syndicalisme international, coalition, syndicats, employeurs internationaux, mondialisation

RESUMEN

Lo local es ahora globalizado: Construyendo una coalición sindical en el transporte internacional y en el sector de logística

Los sindicatos hacen frente a una amplitud de desafíos en el mundo globalizado. Así como las relaciones de negocio, de producción y de consumo cambian, los sindicatos han comenzado a considerar cómo deben organizarse y operar. Se argumenta que para que los sindicatos enfrenten efectivamente los aspectos claves de estas relaciones globales, ellos deben hacer pasos para reconstruir la manera como ellos se organizan y operan a nivel local. Las condiciones para este paso avance son un liderazgo reflectivo y de experiencia, oportunidades para que los líderes se encuentren entre ellos y para que los activistas desarrollen prácticas de solidaridad, el intercambio de información y la mutua cooperación sindical. Para explorar estos temas, hemos estudiado un caso prototipo de coalición inter-sindical en construcción. Durante los últimos cuatro años, tres sindicatos locales y lejanos del transporte en Victoria, Australia han desarrollado un Grupo victoriano de la Federación internacional de transporte. Haciendo esto, estos sindicatos están construyendo por encima las formas existentes de organización y en este proceso, ellos están reforzando sus relaciones entre ellos de manera a tener el potencial para enfrentar los empleadores internacionales.

PALABRAS CLAVES: sindicalismo global, coalición, sindicatos, empleadores internacionales, globalización