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Relations industrielles
Industrial Relations

Multi-Scalar Trade Unionism: Lessons from Maritime Unions

Syndicalisme à paliers multiples : leçons tirées du syndicalisme maritime australien

Sindicalismo de multi-escala: lecciones de los sindicatos Marítimos

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Volume 71, Number 4, Fall 2016

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1038524ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1038524ar

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Publisher(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (print)
1703-8138 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Fairbrother, P. & Gekara, V. O. (2016). Multi-Scalar Trade Unionism: Lessons from Maritime Unions. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, *71*(4), 589–610. https://doi.org/10.7202/1038524ar

Article abstract

Union approaches in relation to the global recalibration of work and employment relations and practices over the last three decades are being worked out in practice. The question for unions is by which means they either have leverage or the potential to exercise power in relation to state and corporate decisions and strategies. Unions thus face challenging questions about the ways they organize, exercise their capacities and attempt to meet their purposes. With reference to the Australian maritime sector, the study examines the ways the main union, the Maritime Union of Australia, developed multi-scalar approaches to localized events. The problem unions face is to defend and advance workers' interests. The task is to organize, to realize their capacities to defend and advance maritime workers' interests, increasingly in multi-scalar ways.

The argument is that leaderships and activity that 'bridge' scalar relationships are an important condition in this process. There appears to be a complex set of cross-connections between the local, the national and the international. While transnational connectivity increasingly defines contemporary forms of trade unionism, these scalar relations are defined in relation to the workplace, the everyday world, and by the ways that transport is a defining characteristic of the global world. These relations constitute contemporary class struggle where work and employment relations are always in a process of change and development. Trade unionism, thus, remains a collective expression of power relations, in an increasingly internationalized world of work and employment.

Thus, this research presents important lessons for multi-scalar organization and campaigning by unions to realize their capacities and purpose. Nonetheless, this study is only a beginning. While it indicates the processes of bridging, the next step is to investigate the variety of ways that bridging may take place and with what outcomes for the development of multi-scalar activity.

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Multi-Scalar Trade Unionism: Lessons from Maritime Unions

Peter Fairbrother and Victor Oyaro Gekara

Increasingly unions have to address the challenges of global work and employment relations; to meet this objective, some unions are developing multi-scalar approaches. The question for unions is to what extent they either have leverage or the potential to exercise power in relation to state and corporate decisions and strategies. The argument is that unions face challenges as collective actors, where multinational capital, supported by states, increasingly defines the work and employment relations of workplaces. One response is to organize to promote the definition and deployment of coordination practices. The focus is on the Australian maritime industry and the main union, the Maritime Union of Australia, as well as the International Transport Federation, the global union. This study provides important lessons for multi-level organization and campaigning by unions to realize their capacities.

KEYWORDS: unions, leadership, globalization, multinational capital, maritime.

Introduction

Work and employment relations and practices have been recalibrated over the last three decades, covering the spatial location of work, skills profiles and requirements, the content of different jobs, employment arrangements and the utilization of new technologies. Moreover, production, distribution and consumption of goods and services are increasingly organized in sophisticated global patterns (Goldblatt *et al.*, 2006). Nonetheless, while trade unionism often remains embedded in traditional national spaces (Cumbers, 2004), there are indications that unions and their international counterparts are promoting multi-scalar union activity, and nowhere more so than in ports and in relation to shipping routes. These worksites comprise a combination of relatively immobile (stevedores or port workers) and mobile workers (crew/seafarers). Questions for trade unions include organization; the exercise of union capacities; and a consideration of the objectives of trade unions (see Lévesque and Murray, 2010).

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The problem unions face is to defend and advance workers' interests. The task is to organize to realize their capacities to defend and advance maritime workers' interests, increasingly in multi-scalar ways. The argument is that leaderships and activity that 'bridge' scalar relationships are an important condition in this process. These themes are addressed with reference to the Australian maritime industry, where shipping volumes are likely to double the 2006 level by 2020 and triple it by 2050 (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2009). The prime focus is on the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), as well as the International Transport Federation (ITF), the global union. The MUA has long been a member of the ITF, and hence has a history of engagement with international maritime concerns, ranging from solidarity action in support of maritime workers elsewhere, as well as the 'Flags of Convenience' (registration of a ship under maritime laws of a country that is not the home country of the ship owner) campaigns, involving seafarers. Of note, the focus of the study is on port (stevedores) workers and seafarers, both covered by the same union, although it is also the case that port workers take action in support of seafarers, irrespective of their union membership.

The analysis is presented in six sections. Section one reviews an approach to understanding debates about transnational unionism, while section two describes the context of the study and the methods used to gather data. In section three, the study begins with a vignette showing unions in ports in action, giving support to seafarers, under the auspices of the global union, the ITF. Section four then considers the dimensions of union organization, capacities and purpose in relation to multi-scalar activity. A critical assessment is presented in section five, advancing the thesis that bridge-building activity is necessary to multi-scalar union success. Finally, section six of the article concludes with the observation that such development may be a harbinger of the future, rather than an exceptional occurrence.

Debates

For unions, including maritime unions, transnational forms of organization have been refined and developed in recent decades (Fairbrother *et al.*, 2013). This shift involves explicit cross-connections between the local and the national and international levels of collective organization and representation. While these scalar relations rest on the local, "the space of the everyday" (Cumbers *et al.*, 2008: 375), the challenge is to explain how they also frame national and international union activity. Such scalar relations are open and porous (Mansfield, 2005). Globalization thus "affords new spaces of opportunity for unions to organize transnationally" (Cumbers *et al.*, 2008: 385; Wills, 1998). Thus, multi-scalar union activity increasingly is a feature of maritime unionism.

In the 1990s in Australia, in the context of globalization and the associated restructuring of production and consumption chains, new union strategies were forged so that unions could act simultaneously "at a multiplicity of scales" (Sadler and Fagan, 2004: 24). Of note, with reference to a major maritime dispute of the 1990s in Australia (see Svensen, 1998), Sadler and Fagan (2004) argue that there is a consistency between the situatedness of labour practices (ports) and multi-scalar actions (local unions, national and international). In this respect, local events can be at the core of disputes, while at the same time unions may be successful in drawing out the national and international dimensions of such events. The implication is that relations between scales matter, rather than the pre-eminence of any particular scale (see also Castree, 2000 on the Liverpool dock strike at around the same time). Moreover, such an analysis suggests the importance of disentangling the role and place of the different aspects and dimensions of trade unionism in transnational struggles.

This embrace of multi-scalar activities is not straightforward. On the one hand, unions are often bound by fixed workplaces (ports), usually highlighting immediate work and employment questions. At the same time, unions may follow workers who are employed on mobile workplaces or move from workplace to workplace (seafarers). On the other hand, unions also address broader themes, associated with the political economy of work and employment (Bergmann, 2002). These relations play out in complex ways, the ways workplaces are spatially located, the variety of employment relations that define 'workers' (permanent, casual, mobile) and the often attenuated relations involving managerial decisions, corporate strategy and State regulation.

Some of these themes have been addressed in the union renewal literature (Lévesque and Murray, 2010). One formulation refers to the on-going and tentative construction of unions in relation to collective organization, capacity and purpose (Lévesque and Murray, 2010; Hyman, 2007). First, some unions have long sought to refocus and rebuild the ways they organize and operate in relation to members. Thus, while in some unions these processes are often in a state of flux and uncertainty, in others, they remain routinized and seemingly ossified. Second, for such organizations to focus on the implications of economic restructuring and political innovation, it is often necessary that these developments are crystallized in the form of a major change or, as some have argued, 'crisis' (Voss and Sherman, 2000). And third, unions draw on internal and, increasingly, external resources when dealing with the impact and outcomes of managerial decisions. In situations where these organizations face multinational capital, for example, they must be in a position to challenge a distanced and often disconnected management or suffer parochial irrelevance (Fairbrother, 2015). Increasingly, it is likely that unions will construct their approaches and focus, at the local, national and international

levels, an approach that is termed "complicated scalar practices" (Mansfield, 2005: 459).

Nonetheless, the institutional and relational dimensions of transnational trade unionism play out in complex and contingent ways. Such analysis highlights the importance of continuing to re-examine the different dimensions involved in union renewal as an integrated process involving a dialectic whereby unions frequently reassess their organisation, their capacities and their purpose as collective actors (Fairbrother, 2015). This observation draws attention to the role and place of leaders and activists in the process of addressing multi-scalar relations. The social network literature provides a clue as to how these matters may be addressed, especially in relation to the idea of 'bridging' theories (Granovetter, 1973 and Lin, 2001). While the focus in such theories is on the ways that the intensity of relationships decrease as the movement is from the inner set of network relationships to outer ones, the value of the idea of 'bridging' networks is that it provides a view of linking relationships between union leaders/activists and others, within the same union, across levels and between unions. These propositions will be explored in relation to the ways in which unions organize, develop their capacities and frame their concerns to achieve set objectives. The questions are: What enables unions to address the complexity of multi-scalar practices and how might they do so? These questions are explored via an examination of the maritime industry in Australia, a prototypical case.

Context and Methodology

To address these themes, the focus is on the unions that organize and operate in relation to ports, as the nodal hubs in global production and distribution, and as the sites of long-standing, often militant trade unionism, at local and transnational levels. It also examines the ways unions may follow workers (and union members) irrespective of the mobility of work and how both fixed and mobile workers may intersect. The research is predicated on the assumption that the local is both part of global relations as well as a distinct aspect of the global (Burawoy, 2000); the task is to study globalization and the associated global relations via an examination of globally significant and interconnected yet local contexts, such as ports (see also Saddler and Fagan, 2004).

The maritime transport sector has been selected as emblematic of the processes of globalization. This industry is marked by a progressive integration of ports into the global trade routes. To explore these relations, the focus is on Australian ports because they sit at the edge of the main routes, are expanding, and are the site of long-standing active trade unionism, with strong and robust international associations. Thus, in effect, Australia may provide a litmus test

about the ways unions may begin to address the industry changes that are in process in multi-scalar settings.

While ports have always been part of the international economy, it is only in recent years that they have come to exemplify the way in which globalization is transforming work and employment. Port ownership and control changed so that by the beginning of the 21st Century, Global Terminal Operators (GTOs) controlled 35% of the world port terminals and 42% of the containerized throughput, while ocean carriers accounted for 19% of global terminal ownership (Le Rossignol, 2007). By 2009, the top ten terminal operators accounted for 64.6% of the total throughput handled as compared to 41.5% in 2001 and 60.9% in 2006 (Notteboom and Rodrigue, 2010). In 2013, the top ten container ports shifted 204,190,092 TEUs (twenty foot equivalent units). The average container ship makes two port calls per week. In 2015, there were approximately 400 liner vessels (transporting goods by containerships or roll-on/roll-off ships) on regular routes on fixed schedules (World Shipping Council, 2015).

Industry Context

The six major container ports in Australia are Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Fremantle, Adelaide and Burnie (in terms of size). Port terminal operators in Australia are threefold, with state-owned operators, nationally-based private operators and global port operators. While state-owned port operations remain in place, mostly in bulk ports, the container ports are largely operated by private stevedoring companies. These companies lease berthing and terminal space. Three major operators conduct container terminal operations in Australia: Patrick, Dubai Ports World (DP World) and Hutchison. Of these, Patrick is the largest operator, with facilities in all major container ports.

For bulk ports, six dominate the export trade: three iron ore ports (Port Hedland, Dampier and Cape Lambert) and three coal ports (Newcastle, Hay Point and Gladstone). Each port is managed by a port authority (e.g. Port Hedland Port Authority). Ownership is often mixed so that the mining companies in mine ports are the major partners in these arrangements. Often these types of ports comprise integrated patterns of ownership linked to operations (mine, railway/train, port terminal).

Specifically, private companies provide shipping services, transporting cargo both within Australian waters and beyond, covering a variety of employment conditions for seafarers. Such shipping involves foreign registered international trading ships as well as Australian coastal shipping companies. Hence, there can be different terms and conditions of crew employment, depending on ship registration, making 'Flags of Convenience' shipping an issue in Australian waters (e.g., MUA, 2015).

Union context: scalar organising and representation

A number of unions currently operate in the Australian container ports: Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers (AIMPE); Australian Maritime Officers Union (AMO); Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) along with the Transport Workers Union (TWU) and the RTBU (Rail, Tram and Bus Union). They tend to be distinguished by function and job coverage, with the MUA covering seafarers as well as port workers. The other unions also cover relatively mobile workers, such as road haulage drivers (TWU) and railway drivers (RTBU), although within the national borders. These national unions are also members of the International Transport Federation, the Global Union Federation (GUF, one of nine international federations of national trade unions that organize specific industry sectors or occupational groups across the world).

The major portside union is the MUA, which organizes port by port, under the rubric of State branches, covering the ports in that State. With the shift to port terminal operators, union representation has refocused on companies, rather than port authorities, at least for container and related traffic. The national union committee has delegated powers in relation to the Branches, providing the basis for these State branches to develop their capacities in specific ways, as port-based union entities. Furthermore, the national and State level organization of the MUA have close longstanding connections with the ITF (Fairbrother, 2013).

Union representation in the bulk ports also involves a range of unions: the MUA, TWU, Electrical Trade Union (ETU), Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) and the Australian Workers Union (AWU). The major union in relation to coastal shipping is also the MUA and it focuses on the spectrum of work and employment matters, including 'Flags of Convenience' crews (MUA, 2014). This focus extends to 'decent work', long campaigned for by the MUA and the ITF. As stated: "…work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace…" (International Labour Organisation, 2016).

Maritime union actors define maritime unionism work on the basis of complex scalar relations. First, at a workplace level, the MUA seeks to regulate work by the day-to-day representation on ships, on the port-side, and in relation to the linkages into and out of the ports, whether landside or on seafaring vessels and via Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBA - State ratified agreements between employers and unions). Second, and increasingly, the national union seeks to shift the terrain of organisation so that the employers are dealing with integrated and cohesive cross-company union structures. Third, the global union, via its nationally-located representatives, acts in defence of workers and promotes the possibility of decent work.

Methodology

Research data were gathered in a variety of ways. Alongside extensive documentary research, the data predominantly comprise in-depth informative interviews with national and regional union leaders, workplace union stewards, ports workers (who are members of the MUA), as well as port terminal managers, mainly in the container ports. Beginning in 2004, 35 different respondents from the Australian maritime industry were interviewed (46 interviews) consisting principally of union leaders, at local, national and international levels. In addition, eight sets of individual interviews and one focus group were conducted in European ports in 2008 and six with ITF staff in London in 2009. Further, a major report about port work undertaken by the author and others in turn informs this analysis (Turnbull *et al.*, 2009). The interviews elicited in-depth qualitative accounts on the changing nature and structure of work, experiences of the changes, and the impact on unions and their organizing strategies in the industry.

These data are underpinned by extensive research by the author on union organization, capacity and purpose in the maritime industry, over a period from 2005 to 2015. Another 10 union leaders were interviewed in 2008/9, at different levels in the broader transport union sector, focused principally on the maritime related transport unions, including the ITF. These data are complemented by documentary analysis, in particular focusing on the ways the unions and the main Global Union Federation, the ITF, interact.

Vignette: Serendipity at Work

The ways in which unions as collective actors develop involves on-going, incomplete, and challenging trajectories. To make these relationships visible, a vignette is presented involving two disputes in July-August 2015. The objective is to set the scene for the overall study.

The two disputes occurred in the Port of Devonport (Tasmania), each of which illustrates the relationship between port workers and seafarers, via the maritime unions and related transport unions. In the first case, the future of 36 Australian seafarers from the Alexander Spirit, a tanker owned by Teekay Shipping and charted by Caltex Australia, was in doubt when it was announced that a scheduled journey to Singapore would be the crew's last. The intention by the owner was to redeploy the vessel from Australia to international routes. A crew member stated: "They told us that we didn't have any jobs and that we'd be replaced with foreign workers" (Jarvis, 2015). Of note, the ship sailed under a Bahamas flag and its homeport was Nassau.

The MUA acted to support the crew members, who were MUA members, referring the case to the industrial commission, Fair Work Australia. In addition,

the union led rallies outside the terminal, involving the RTBU, the TWU, AMO, Fire Brigade Employees' Union, Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union and the CFMEU. The MUA national secretary, Paddy Crumlin (also President of the ITF), spoke of the problems in the industry where there has been a major decline of Australian-crewed vessels over the past 20 years. The tribunal twice ordered the crew to return to work and take the final voyage. On the 22 July 2015, after an 18-day delay, the ship departed on its last Australian crewed voyage to be replaced with a 'Flag of Convenience' crew. Six weeks later the vessel returned to Australian waters with a non-Australian crew (also non-MUA).

At the same time, (15 July 2015), also in the Port of Devonport, a second dispute was under way, involving the ITF and the 'Flags of Convenience' arrangements (on these matters, see Lillie, 2007). In this case a coastal tanker, crewed by non-Australians, who had not been paid for two months, was detained in the port by the ITF. A spokesperson for the global union noted:

> Chinese seafarers aboard the Stolt Kikyo tanker, which berthed in Devonport on Saturday, were owed wages for two months and had not received coastal trading payments required under Australian law (Slessor, 2015).

The ITF assistant national coordinator stated:

> You only need to look across the bay from the Alexander Spirit to understand what the cheap alternative to Australian crews looks like […] Flag of convenience shipping is riddled with questionable practices, yet the Australian government wants to make it the new normal, rather than an extreme exception (cited in Slessor, 2015).

The Stolt Kikyo was registered in the West African nation of Liberia, under a 'Flag of Convenience' thereby avoiding tax, stricter regulations and Australian employment standards.

The ITF Inspectorate investigates ship conditions, defends seafarers and links local union groups (seafarers and port workers) to the ITF (Fairbrother, 2013: 114-116). In this case, the Inspectorate found that the payroll records were well documented, but that the premium payments were processed in arrears, when funds were received by the charter company. Following negotiations, in October 2015, it was announced that in future, payments would be made prior to receipt of the funds (World Maritime News, 2015). Moreover, the Australian Inspector received an invitation from one of the owners, the Norwegian company Stolt Norway, to meet in November to discuss the way the company pays its Chinese crews in future.

These two events illustrate patterns of embedded and solidaristic transnational unionism, challenging the replacement of crews and arguing that non-Australian crews receive 'fair' treatment. The organizational arrangements, the resources and capabilities for the exercise of transnational unionism, were in place,

including the ITF Inspectorate. In effect the Inspectorate acts in a 'bridging' capacity, enabling the local unions to show solidarity with other workers and for the ITF to realise its purpose as a guardian of maritime workers worldwide. This solidaristic form of unionism comprised a set of interlinked relationships making for an emergent and embedded transnational unionism (Lin, 2008).

Organization, capacity building and purpose

This vignette is placed in context with an analysis of transnational maritime unionism in Australia.

Organization

Union organization refers to the way unions operate and organize, in the workplace as well as across the levels that make up unions nationally and internationally. Organization covers the structures of relationships, as well as forms of governance, and leadership accountability and responsibility. Central to these provisions is the texture of the relations among members, activists and leaders (Fairbrother, 2015: 3).

As noted above, the MUA organizes port company by port company, and thus in the relatively remote port of Devonport had the capacity to act in relation to the difficulties faced by Australian and non-Australian crews. The union was able to organize wharf side rallies and draw on legal resources to advance its case. Underpinning the rallies and other campaigning activity is the history of MUA engagement with a range of other unions in seeking to improve national and international workers' terms and conditions of employment. Even so, the outcome was mixed, with success in the case of the non-Australian crew and discharge of the Australian crew and their replacement with another 'Flag of Convenience' crew; such action constitutes the contemporary travail of struggle (for other examples, see Carter *et al.*, 2003; Turnbull, 2007).

This vignette draws attention to the principle that the ways that unions develop organizationally also depend on the capacities that they have in order to affirm solidaristic activity and understandings. Capacities refer to the abilities of unions to address and define union concerns. Over the last few decades, the maritime unions have refocused and rebuilt in the course of addressing the developments in port work and shipping arrangements. In the process, union leaders and activists also have explored ways of dealing with managerial practices. Unions are also likely to attempt to build and utilize the resources associated with internal solidarity, promoting collective identities and practices, and external solidarity, developing cross-union alliances and inclusive political structures (Fairbrother, 2015: 3; Lévesque and Murray, 2010).

An important stimulus to union reorganization and the promotion of solidarity action is 'crisis', an event or development that precipitates reflection and reconsideration about current practices. One such event was the Commonwealth government-backed attempt by the stevedoring company Patricks to break the MUA in 1997/98, a 'crisis' that precipitated solidaristic moves by three maritime-transport unions–MUA, TWU, and RTBU (see Voss and Sherman, 2000). In 2004, these three unions established an ITF Working Group in Melbourne Port. These three Victorian transport unions focused their organizational capacities and associated leadership views on Melbourne Port (each with their own bargaining arrangements, and from different positions on the union political spectrum). They founded this Working Group (2004-2012) to support each other, committing "to uphold the charter of the ITF and identify and support the ideals, principles and campaigns of the ITF" (Maritime Union of Australia, 2004). Jointly, these unions sought to deal with employers along the transport service chain as a unified union body. For nearly eight years, the three State leaders met formally and informally to support each other, develop joint approaches to management, undertake solidarity campaigns and to reach out to transport workers elsewhere in the world via campaigns (for a more complete history, see Barton and Fairbrother, 2009). These three leaders provided the social ligaments across the three unions thereby providing the means to 'bridge' for the purpose of promoting a sharing and mobilization of their collective capacities (on underpinning theory, see Lin, 2008).

Preceding this Working Group, the three national unions had explored the possibility of an alliance with each other, as well as with like unions in New Zealand. While unsuccessful initially, it did set the scene for a more formal alliance at a national level in the late 2000s, titled the Australian Transport Union Federation (ATUF), and endorsed on the 18 November 2009 (Brigden and Kaine, 2015). Of note, it took a commitment by the national leaders of the three unions to establish the federation to build collective power within the industry, again despite political differences and diverse industrial concerns (Brigden and Kaine, 2015: 250-254). As stated by one national leader:

> …what we did was we moved from a hierarchical, bureaucratic response to organizing an industry, [one] that had been confined behind very clear parameters… [I]t was left to … the National Council of the Maritime Union to say that we needed to really go out and establish our *bona fides* and build trust based on … our understanding of what was needed and a willingness to engage with any other labour organization in a co-operative and mutually inclusive way (National leader MUA, 2008).

To illustrate, union coverage is an on-going matter for these unions. During negotiations, which are often port by port, the lead union representatives will be in touch with each other, especially when proposals have implications for

other ports. On one occasion, in 2008-09, the road transport union in a northern State negotiated a separate agreement to the port company agreement to cover a railyard connected to the port. When the Victorian union leaders learnt of this development, the local road transport leader stated: "there's no way known I am doing an agreement", thereby breaking with his interstate union counterpart. Moreover, the local maritime union leader accompanied the road transport leader to a meeting with management to protest. In the event:

> But [the national secretary of the MUA and a major leader of the ITF] actually became involved and worked it out with the national secretary of the TWU [road transport] that they would not be doing any TWU agreement [in Victoria] (State leader MUA, 2009).

The unions in this case had established the basis for cooperation, albeit State branch by State branch, while the national leaders played bridging roles in the eventual settlement. The outcome was different settlements by State.

The development of national links across the transport unions began with tentative steps in particular ports and then developed nationally, with an extension of the model into the broader global region of Oceania. The outcome was:

> […] we have got to come together [across Oceania], we have to put all our differences to the side and deal with them one way or another. We just have to get on with protecting ourselves against globalization or using a globalized structure to advance the trade union objectives' (National leader MUA, from Western Australia, 2009)

These steps begin to anticipate the ways in which the union memberships across nations can continue to play a part in shaping the way the international industry develops. In this case, this leader built on a series of informal meetings that he and others organized in the West Australian ports over the previous few years to become an active member of ATUF. As indicated, these developments tend to rely on critically-located union leaders.

Organizationally, the maritime unions, and particularly the MUA, have developed practices and procedures to lay a foundation to represent members in an internationalized work environment. They are dealing with work reorganization and recomposition, as well as the vicissitudes of inter-union differences. Of note, this involves union activists and leaders developing the organizational practices that enable them to deal with the emerging international maritime terrain. Such organizational understandings provide the narratives and considerations for the beginnings of solidaristic engagement between seemingly disparate workforces.

Capacity building: Bridging scales

Employers often seek to undermine the bases of solidarity within unions, via differentiated terms and conditions of employment as well as spatial fragmentation of work tasks. In such circumstances, the responsibilities facing

union leaders and activists are to frame their interests in collective terms. The study illustrates that membership engagement and activism thus occur in those conditions where unions have secured their organizational base, framed their concerns as collectivities and are able to leverage their capacities in effective ways. As will be seen, the unions in this study have aligned bargaining interests across worksites and between union branches (or their equivalents) to counter the power exercised by employers in this industry.

To achieve this extension and deepening of union capabilities, the unions studied here illustrate the relevance of developing bridging forms of leadership and activity, both horizontally across work sites, but equally in ways that link different levels of union activity. One mechanism in this process is the appointment of bridging officials, those union officers who are in positions where they in effect provide the connections and understandings between the local, national and international levels of trade unionism. In the case of the MUA, for example, one national official carries out this role, as indicated:

> I am appointed liaison officer and growth and campaigns…and Asia Pacific women's rep for the ITF… and working on campaigns for affiliates, call centres in India and things like that. … [Also involved with the TUF (Transport Union Federation) and the Tasman TUF covering Australian and New Zealand transport unions]. [Locally] involved in the port project […] It is an education program for Fair Work Australia. It is a grant we have received that means we have to go around and speak to as many people in ports as possible about Fair Work Australia […] It gives us an oversight of who is where, who is who and who is doing what (National leader MUA, 2009).

In this case, the national officer in effect bridges local, national, regional and international union activity. She brings a range of members at different levels and places in the union into an integrated approach via a range of campaigns, events and policy development.

In practice, union purpose is shaped in relation to organizational arrangements and union capacities. To illustrate, the ITF, the international trade union federation for transport workers' unions, has been central to the process of articulating scalar relations. Based in London, it has an affiliation of 751 unions representing over 4,600,000 transport workers in 154 countries. The ITF has long campaigned against the low wages paid on ships sailing under 'Flags of Convenience' (FOC). It supports a range of ITF Inspectors who are central to the FOC campaign. Complementing the focus of the ITF, the MUA is an active promoter of the campaign, with the national coordinator based in the national office of the union.

The objective was to develop the campaign in a bottom up way, from the ships and the ports *and* a top-down way from the ITF, mediated by the MUA nationally:

> So you can start to see for the first time where it comes from both directions. [By linking the] most highly successful campaign in the world, the FOC campaign, with trade union organization [thereby] […] linking […] with one of the smallest unions […] - the seafarers in Australia [which has] … got about 4,000 seafarers. (National leader MUA, 2008)

A further feature of this approach is the appointment of the ITF Inspectors, who also remain members of the local place-based union, in this case the MUA. They are *de facto* lead delegates for the union, with an international remit (see also Fairbrother, 2013). These inspectors are an important conduit for the local union and the global federations and the national coordinating committees or equivalent, providing a practical and on-going link between the different levels of these unions. Their role and place in the union means that its purpose is shaped in ways that work and employment concerns are dealt with as international and solidaristic issues, as evidenced by the vignette (see any selection of MUA publications, at the port level, Branch level and nationally; see also Lillie, 2005: 88).

The union form of organization enables bridging capacities to be developed in this multi-scalar industry. At the international level, a division of the ITF, supported by services covering education, legal provision and research, promoted activity at a local, workplace level, via ITF inspectors and through the promotion of distinctive coordinating committees at a national level. Such activity is complemented by the internal steps that unions, such as MUA, took to establish procedures and practices for key officials to take on bridging roles at a scalar level. This layering of activity and engagement lays a foundation for the on-going re-articulation of union purpose.

Expressing union purpose

Union purpose refers to the articulation and framing of unions as collectivities. These values may refer to short-term immediate concerns, such as the pursuit of specific employment terms and conditions; they also may involve long-term goals about the defence and improvement of social, economic and political provisions, including alternative ways of structuring such arrangements. These processes of narrative building and articulation involve the exercise of capacities, via deliberation, and occasionally by leadership proclamation, depending on the organizational arrangements that define trade unions (Fairbrother, 2015; see also Brigden and Kaine, 2015: 253).

One of the purposes of all unions is to secure ‘decent’ jobs for workers, indicated by wage levels and conditions. Hence, one of the bases for organizational solidarity by port workers and seafarers are in turn rooted in the on-going contestation over job categories. Terminal employers, for example, have challenged the managerial demands that designated ‘new’ forms of work (digitally-

based) should not be covered by the usual industrial relations agreements. Employers claimed that traditional clerical job categories (e.g., control clerk, covered by industrial relations agreements) are redundant and that the new roles of working with automated-software-systems should not be covered by these agreements (Fair Work Commission, 2014). Seemingly, information technology, as the latest variant of socio-technical innovation, has become a tool for controlling the terminal labour processes as well as those on ships. At the same time, it has enabled a consolidation and relocation of some of the terminal functions to external locations, which coordinate cargo and vessel planning and the establishment of one-stop companies to manage terminal and ship information and data flows.

Overall, these developments can be viewed in a dual way, not only negotiating practical outcomes but also hinting at union purpose. As stated by the leader of the ITF and the MUA:

> The Maritime Union of Australia's perspective relating to automation [digitally-based work tasks] is instructive. We know automation is a reality in the workplace. But we are firm that the benefits of productivity or increased competitiveness from new technologies must also partly flow to the workers.
>
> Increasingly, however, we are confronted with a phenomenon I call 'militant capitalism'. It's a mutant strain, virulent, dangerous and unsustainable. Its values place shareholders above wider community responsibilities. (Crumlin, 2013)

Thus, there is a clear recognition that the introduction of these systems provides the basis for unions to focus on the place of work in the transport value chain. By characterizing such developments as 'militant capitalism', this national and international leader is linking or 'bridging' seemingly disconnected developments via narratives of solidarity, casting the employers' case within the overall relations of labour and capital within the industry. As noted by Lévesque and Murray (2010), they "developed, transmitted and learned" (p. 341) their capabilities as trade unionists. By creating new structures of coordination, within and between unions, and locating activity on an international scale through the ITF, the MUA demonstrated union agency and underwrote a process whereby unions learn and develop new ways of confronting employers.

Hence, union purpose in the maritime sector was forged and shaped in complex ways. The union pursued its objectives as both a voice of the port ship membership and as an advocate of equitable work and employment conditions, not always successfully. Equally, for a time, the Melbourne-based coordinating committee, the Working Group, enabled cross union activity in the Port of Melbourne, via leadership meetings, campaigns and rallies. Eventually, this form of organization was supplanted by the nationally-based committee, with links from the national to

the State level. These steps involved the articulation and refinement of solidaristic and international narratives of collective engagement and ambition.

Assessment and discussion

Unions in the maritime industry seek to build solidarity between union members, whether in the same maritime union or not. The main Australian union, the MUA, faces the challenge of members working in mobile and often fragmented workplaces, where employment is often casual. Thus, frequently it is difficult for union leaders to establish the bases of on-going contact with members and it is challenging for members, such as the non-Australian unpaid crew members presented in the vignette, to raise problems because of their vulnerability as employees. The ITF Inspectors, as roving union delegates, have the capacity to provide the links, the bridge, between seafarers, union leaders and members from a number of supporting unions.

At the local level, the MUA organizes in ports, and across ports, as well as on ships as workplaces. As noted, the union organization at this level is premised on accountable and deliberative relations, so that the Branch leaders tend to define and focus on the industrial concerns that confront members on a daily basis. Their collective presence in ports and on ships, allows them to identify points of immediate leverage (the choke points in the transport value chain, within and between ports). In exercising these capacities, these unions have articulated their purpose as unions based on solidaristic relations within ports, seeking to protect, secure and improve the working conditions of maritime workers.

A further challenge facing unions is to bridge the local with the global. There is, for example, a flux and flow between local and national forms of representation, integrating locally-based members and their leaders into a broader union presence. Of note, the appointment and recognition of bridging officials (illustrated above) and the promotion of bridging activity (by ITF inspectors) lays the foundation organizationally for multi-scalar approaches to work and employment matters (conceptually, see Lin, 2008). As with all nationally-based unions, such relations can range from the unitary forms of representation evident in some unions and the more devolved, federally-based relations that define the representational structures of unions, such as the MUA. Moreover, developing forms of external solidarity may be promoted in particular places, such as occurred in the Port of Melbourne in the 2000s. The analytic point is that mediations between local and national/international forms of organization define trade unionism over time. They may reflect the fortuitous links between disparate union leaders, as the Working Group exemplified in the 2000s, and they may reflect the attempt by unions in the sector at a national level to realize their purpose as agents defending transport labour in the changing circumstances of international trade.

These challenges raise questions for unions, in relation to organization, the exercise of union capacity and the articulation of union purpose. These developments within the maritime industry may become the harbinger of the ways that unions more generally may develop as the realities of global work and employment relations bite. In general, the analysis underlines the fluctuating relations that underpin the ways in which unions organize and operate. It draws attention to the dimensions of unionism in terms of both horizontal and multi-scaler relations.

First, these relations are both territorial and relational (Goodwin, 2012: 1188-1189), drawing attention to the contours of organization; the exercise of union capacities; and union purpose (Lévesque and Murray, 2010). There appears to be a complex set of cross-connections between the local, the national and the international (Cumbers *et al.*, 2008). Transnational connectivity increasingly defines contemporary forms of trade unionism (Fairbrother *et al.*, 2013). Nonetheless, these scalar relations are defined by "the space of the everyday" (Cumbers *et al.*, 2008: 375) and national and international repertoires of action. These relations constitute contemporary class struggle where work and employment relations are always in a process of change and development (Bergmann, 2002; see also Cumbers *et al.*, 2008). Trade unionism, thus, is a collective expression of power on a multi-scalar basis.

Specifically, the main maritime unions have reinforced and extended their forms of organization internally, as well as between each other. They have enhanced their capacities, to address terms and conditions of employment as well as the work processes that define port-side and ship work. These unions have sought to frame their concerns in relation to work practices and arrangements. In doing so, multi-scalar relations have been recognized and thus define trade unionism in the sector. On the one hand, the maritime unions have a long history of active trade unionism, with an international focus. As indicated, they have laid the foundation for internal and external solidarity, via a variety of organizational and capacity building practices. On the other hand, while providing an insight into the development of this form of unionism in the industry, it may have limited applicability elsewhere. Nonetheless, by focusing on the industry as prototypical, such relationships and interactions may serve as models of behaviours and focus elsewhere.

Second, and extending the first point, past practices remain salient, in particular the practice of union democracy. In a situation where there is a "multiplicity of scales" (Sadler and Fagan, 2004), it is necessary to disentangle how unions exercise their purposes in relation to their organization and their capacities. This aspect draws attention to the complex arrangements about union leadership and membership and the construction of solidarity within unions and between union members and others. As noted in this case, leadership engagement with members and the articulation of union purpose was expressed in the ports, on the ships, in tribunals and at national and international levels. It also involved expressions of

cross-union support and activity. In these exercises of leadership, and particularly the bridging activity, the question is who is accountable to whom and who is responsible for whom? The question for other unions in different industries is whether the organizational arrangements and the associated capacity building can be put in place in the absence of 'crisis', as indicated?

The analysis has important implications for other unions. Two possible forms of bridging have been presented, one involving the appointment/election of officials who have the capacity to promote such relationships and the other involving the on-going activity of trade union leaders and activists wrestling with the circumstances of multi-scalar linkages. A further step is to view these networks as a matrix, thereby qualifying the evolving radiation of connections, from strong to weaker ones in network analysis (Lin, 2008). After all, union relationships are characterized by the construction and re-construction of collectivities even in the relatively bureaucratized relations that define many unions. These two forms of bridging require both conceptual development to explain and understand the conditions for such activity as well as a consideration of other ways of bridging multi-scalar levels and relationships. Nonetheless, this analysis may serve as a possible model for other unions in other industries. The task is to identify the conditions and processes involved in such situational developments.

Conclusion

This analysis draws attention to the ways in which unions can organize, develop their capacities and frame their concerns to achieve set objectives. The study demonstrates the ways that trade unions can rebuild in solidaristic ways following a 'crisis' event, with practical implications for work and employment matters. Moreover, it shows how multi-scalar arrangements matter for unions and points to the some of the key features involved, in particular the recognition of bridging capacity building. The challenge is to draw out the general principles at work and then adapt in other union contexts.

These aspects of trade unionism underwrite the importance of a clear and evolving articulation of union purpose. Of course, where unions have long histories of international engagement and political awareness, such moves may be easier. Nonetheless, it does require unions to qualify their sovereign focus and consider the immediate and the parochial as well as the national and international. The task is to develop organizational forms that meet the transnational challenges that are emerging, realize capacities and shape purposes to address these objectives. By looking internationally as a local union and locally as a global union federation, unions have taken the initial steps to forge renewed senses of purpose.

More generally, it is not clear whether these initiatives in the maritime industry will either last or shift the terrain of representation in the ports as supply chain

hubs. These are most likely the first steps towards recomposing labour representation in an increasingly linked world, where stevedoring companies are increasingly international. This analysis suggests that it is necessary to reconceptualize the way that unions are often assessed and evaluated. In this respect, the events and activities involving the MUA in Australia and its associated unions are a marker for the future. These initiatives and forms of organization are not exceptional; rather, they take place in the frontline of global change and development. They are a foretaste of the future where companies, nationally and internationally, will attempt to exert more control of the terms and conditions of work and employment. Unions also are likely to seek to build and/or rebuild their repertoires of action, and companies (and states) will be forced onto the offensive again. In other words, this is a dialectical relation, a feature of a dynamic and on-going struggle; not a static and necessarily a capital driven process. The pursuit of such regulation by unions is a pro-active act by labour.

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SUMMARY

Multi-Scalar Trade Unionism: Lessons from Maritime Unions

Union approaches in relation to the global recalibration of work and employment relations and practices over the last three decades are being worked out in practice. The question for unions is by which means they either have leverage or the potential to exercise power in relation to state and corporate decisions and strategies. Unions thus face challenging questions about the ways they organize, exercise their capacities and attempt to meet their purposes. With reference to the Australian maritime sector, the study examines the ways the main union, the Maritime Union of Australia, developed multi-scalar approaches to localized events. The problem unions face is to defend and advance workers' interests. The task is to organize, to realize their capacities to defend and advance maritime workers' interests, increasingly in multi-scalar ways.

The argument is that leaderships and activity that 'bridge' scalar relationships are an important condition in this process. There appears to be a complex set of cross-connections between the local, the national and the international. While transnational connectivity increasingly defines contemporary forms of trade unionism, these scalar relations are defined in relation to the workplace, the everyday world, and by the ways that transport is a defining characteristic of the global world. These relations constitute contemporary class struggle where work and employment relations are always in a process of change and development.

Trade unionism, thus, remains a collective expression of power relations, in an increasingly internationalized world of work and employment.

Thus, this research presents important lessons for multi-scalar organization and campaigning by unions to realize their capacities and purpose. Nonetheless, this study is only a beginning. While it indicates the processes of bridging, the next step is to investigate the variety of ways that bridging may take place and with what outcomes for the development of multi-scalar activity.

KEYWORDS: unions, leadership, globalization, multinational capital, maritime.

RÉSUMÉ

Syndicalisme à paliers multiples : leçons tirées du syndicalisme maritime australien

Les approches syndicales en relation avec le rééquilibrage des relations industrielles et des pratiques en matière d'emploi et de travail durant les trois dernières décennies s'élaborent dans la pratique. La question qui se pose pour les syndicats est de savoir quels sont les moyens qui peuvent leur permettre d'influencer ou qui ont un potentiel pour influer sur les décisions et les stratégies de l'État et des entreprises. Les syndicats sont ainsi confrontés à diverses questions concernant les manières d'organiser et d'exercer leurs capacités ainsi que d'atteindre leurs objectifs. En se basant sur l'expérience du syndicalisme maritime australien, cette étude examine la façon dont le principal syndicat, le Syndicat maritime de l'Australie (*Maritime Union of Australia*), a su développer des approches à paliers multiples pour aborder les situations locales. Le problème auquel les syndicats doivent faire face est celui de défendre et de faire progresser les intérêts des travailleurs. Leur défi principal est d'organiser et de montrer leurs capacités à défendre et faire progresser les intérêts des travailleurs maritimes, en utilisant davantage l'approche à paliers multiples.

Notre argumentation est à l'effet que le leadership et les activités qui permettent de faire le pont entre les paliers multiples constituent une importante condition du processus. Il semble exister un ensemble de connexions complexes entre les paliers local, national et international. Alors que la connectivité transnationale définit de plus en plus les formes contemporaines de syndicalisme, ces relations à paliers multiples sont définies en rapport avec les milieux de travail, le monde du quotidien, et par le fait que le transport s'avère une caractéristique du monde global. Ces relations constituent le lieu de la lutte des classes contemporaine où le travail et les relations industrielles s'insèrent continuellement dans un processus de changement et d'évolution. Ainsi, le syndicalisme demeure une expression collective des relations de pouvoir dans un monde du travail et de l'emploi s'internationalisant de plus en plus.

Aussi, la présente recherche offre de tirer d'importantes leçons pour les organisations à paliers multiples et pour les syndicats qui cherchent à mettre en œuvre leurs ressources et leurs objectifs. Malgré tout, cette étude constitue seulement un

début. Bien qu'elle procure des indications sur le processus d'harmonisation des paliers multiples, la prochaine étape sera d'étudier les diverses manières dont cette recherche d'harmonisation peut se dérouler et avec quels résultats pour le développement d'activités à paliers multiples.

MOTS-CLÉS : syndicats, leadership, globalisation, capital multinational, maritime.

RESUMEN

Sindicalismo de multi-escala: lecciones de los sindicatos Marítimos

Durante las últimas tres décadas, los enfoques sindicales respecto a la re-calibración global de las relaciones y de las prácticas de trabajo y de empleo están siendo reformuladas. Los sindicatos se cuestionan sobre los medios para impulsar o para darles el potencial para ejercer presión sobre las decisiones y estrategias del estado y de las corporaciones. Los sindicatos se enfrentan así a cuestiones cruciales sobre las maneras de organizarse, ejercer sus capacidades y lograr obtener sus propósitos. Tomando como referencia el sector marítimo australiano, el estudio examina cómo el sindicato principal, el Sindicato Marítimo de Australia, desarrolló enfoques multi-escala utilizados en los acontecimientos localizados. El problema al cual los sindicatos se enfrentan es de defender y hacer avanzar los intereses de los trabajadores. La tarea es organizarse para actualizar sus capacidades de defensa y hacer avanzar los intereses de los trabajadores marítimos, cada vez más de manera multi-nivel. El argumento es que los liderazgos y las actividades que hacen el puente entre las relaciones de escala son una condición importante en este proceso. Aparece como un conjunto complejo de conexiones entrecruzadas entre lo local, lo nacional y lo internacional. En el contexto donde la conectividad transnacional define cada vez más las formas contemporáneas del sindicalismo, estas relaciones en escala son definidas en relación al medio de trabajo, al mundo de todos los días, y a las diferentes vías que han convertido el transporte en una característica esencial del mundo global. Estas relaciones constituyen la lucha de clase contemporánea donde el trabajo y las relaciones de empleo están siempre en proceso de cambio y de desarrollo. En ese sentido, el sindicalismo sigue siendo la expresión colectiva de las relaciones de poder, en un mundo del trabajo y del empleo cada vez más internacionalizado.

Esta investigación presenta lecciones importantes para la organización a multi-escala y para la organización de campañas sindicales para hacer efectivas sus capacidades y sus propósitos. Sin embargo, este estudio es solo un comienzo. Después de haber sacado a luz el proceso de "creación de puentes", el paso siguiente es de investigar las diversas maneras de "creación de puentes" que pueden surgir y sus efectos en el desarrollo de la actividad multi-escala.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Sindicatos, liderazgo, globalización, capital multinacional, marítimo.