

Book Review

McCallum, Jamie (2013) *Global Unions, Local Power: The New Spirit of Transnational Labor Organizing*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press/ILR Press. ISBN 978-0801478628

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The nature of globalization's impact on workers is contested. There are two dominant paradigms; the first, the neoclassical liberal paradigm, views a liberal trading order as the main manifestation of globalization and beneficial to the majority of workers. It accepts that there will be job losses and growing wage inequality, and believes the best way for workers in industrial countries to respond is by increasing their human capital through job retraining. The solution to the 'globalization problematic' from a neo-liberal perspective Paul Bowles suggests 'is for the adjustment costs to be minimized perhaps by protection from import surges, but more importantly by longer term retraining programs which shift workers in industrial countries out of those industries in which developing countries have a comparative advantage' (Bowles, 2010: 16).

The second paradigm, what Bowles terms anti-neoliberal globalism, starts from the proposition that globalization is a political project to increase the power of capital over the nation state and labor. Workers responses vary from global social democracy to support for 'delinking' from the global capitalist system. The policy instruments for labor include corporate codes of conduct, including the demand for a social clause in trade agreements, global unionism, international minimum wage campaigns, international labor standards, regulation of global capital, and re-establishing the political autonomy of the state (Bowles, 2010: 17-20).

There is, however, a third approach, predominantly in the global South, which sees labor as an active agent responding to globalization by developing new forms of organization, new strategies and new sources of power. While Jamie McCullum is located within this third view, he takes the approach a step further in *Global Unions, Local Power: The New Spirit of Transnational Labor Organizing* by arguing that labor is an agent of global governance. Workers, he suggests, are not simply victims of the global juggernaut; they can change the rules of global engagement. Indeed, he argues that a new form of labor internationalism is emerging through the creation of a new field of rules that enables workers to exercise power at the local level.

Global Framework Agreements are part of this strategy to expand the bargaining power of national unions over entire industries by forcing major companies to play by union rules. McCullum illustrates this theoretical argument through an analysis of a global campaign led by the global union, UNI (Union Network International), against the multinational, G4S (Group 4 Securior), the largest employer in Africa and, surprisingly, also on the London Stock Exchange. The narrative begins in the United States with the Service Employee International Union (SEIU), an affiliate of UNI, and its successful Justice for Janitors Campaign. McCullum shows how the organizational model they developed was globalised and transferred to the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and then to Europe, and the Netherlands and Germany in particular.

In a nutshell, the model involved the relocation of resources towards new organizing and an increased reliance on strategic research to drive the industrial strategy. The empirical core of the book – chapters four and five – analyses the extension of the campaign in 2008 to South Africa and India. McCullum argues that the campaign was successful because it neutralized the management of these enterprises while simultaneously creating the conditions for workers to organize, build new structures, renew old traditions, and experiment with new strategies.

At the center of McCullum's argument is that the campaign did not win new rights but instead made new rules. He calls this new approach, governance struggles. Governance struggles refer, he says, 'broadly to the exercise of power in the absence of an overarching political authority, usually by a constellation of institutions that make decisions and enforce compliance with norms and rules at the supranational level' (McCullum, 2013: 12). This allows him to theorize global unions as potential agents of governance themselves.

I became aware of the Southern African end of this campaign in 2007 when the research unit I directed at the time, the Society, Work and Development Institute (SWOP) at the University of Witwatersrand, was asked to assist with research on private security guards in Mozambique. On the basis of this research UNI provided the local union, the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU), with resources – money and an organizer- to campaign for a Global Framework Agreement (GFA). The core of the argument is that the campaign – in drawing on global power – was able to make new rules of engagement for the local unions, what he calls governance struggles. In South Africa this meant, for example, that for every one thousand union members, the union was entitled to one full time shop steward. It now has four nation-wide.

The book is an important theoretical and empirical contribution to what has become global labor studies. As McCullum remarks, scholars have recently 'built the semblance of a field – global labor studies – out of the disparate perspectives of geographers, economists, industrial relations experts, business writers, and the occasional sociologist' (McCullum, 2013: 18). The publication of this volume will add great value to the attempt to theorize a more 'optimistic' transnationalism in the current period.

More importantly, McCullum has identified a new source of power, global power. This is a crucial insight, as it allows us to go beyond the widespread view that globalization disables labor – the pessimistic school - to begin to explore the new sources of vulnerability and the strategic possibilities this has created for labor.

McCullum has written a path breaking book that is a model of engaged research on labor. It provides us with an opportunity to raise a number of issues within global labor studies. I identify four; what is new in the new labor internationalism; old and new sources of worker power; union democracy and the bureaucratization of shop stewards; the limits of transferring union models to other countries:

Firstly, there is an ambiguity in the question of how 'new' the new governance struggles are. As McCullum acknowledges, Charles Levinson from ICEM argued for what he called company councils, worker committees extending across countries in multinational companies, in the early seventies. In South Africa in the seventies the emerging black unions targeted transitional corporations and entered into what were called 'recognition agreements' at plant level that established new rules on the shop floor enabling the unions to gain access to the workplace. These are examples of 'governance struggles' where unions were agents filling the 'governance gap' in a context where the rights of black workers were not recognized. These agreements relied on navigating between the local and the global i.e. between local workplace resistance and the global

sanctions campaign of the anti-apartheid movement. But this combination of the local and the global was driven overwhelmingly by the power of the local union organization, as Seidman has pointed out in her comparative study of codes of conduct (Seidman, 2009).

Secondly, is it possible to sustain engagement in these 'new rules' through associational power alone? Put differently, is associational power sustainable without institutional power? To be sustainable, these new rules need to be consolidated. Can they be consolidated without institutions to enforce them? For example, McCullum writes: 'In South Africa, guards used the agreement to demand access **rights** [my emphasis]. Once organizers were able to talk to workers without fear of management reprisal, organizing exploded' (McCullum, 2013: 29). I would argue that rules on their own are not lasting unless they are supported by institutional power. It is institutions that create new 'rules of the game'. Without the sanctions that go with new rules, local management did not really change in G4S in South Africa. Indeed, it required the state funded Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) to facilitate the establishment of an industry wide National Bargaining Forum in 2009, to ensure a successful three year wage agreement.

Thirdly, the outcome of the 'governance struggles', the creation of four full-time shop stewards in G4S, is what Sakhela Buhlungu has called the 'paradox of victory' (Buhlungu, 2010). On the one hand, having elected shop stewards paid by management and able to work full time on union business, is a major gain for workers. On the other hand, these shop stewards have increasingly come under attack within the labor movement for being too close to management. As full-time shop stewards they are entitled to a range of privileges that has often distanced them from the shop floor. By focusing on one multinational in a context where only 16% of the industry is organized, has the campaign not entrenched union leaders at G4S as a union bureaucracy amidst a majority of low wage precarious workers? (Sefalafala and Webster, 2013)

Fourthly, McCullum argues convincingly that the US organizing model is growing in influence globally. As McCullum notes, this is ironic given the experience of many European, African and Asian trade unions of the legacy of US trade union imperialism. This sentiment is captured in this comment by a European trade unionist reproduced in the book: 'If the IMF (International Monetary Fund) had a trade union wing, it would do what the SEIU does. It's weird, but in a way those people (SEIU leaders) are our role models, but they are also a huge pain in the ass' (cited in McCullum, 2013: 150).

The globalization of the US model is ironic for another reason: it had been argued earlier that innovative union organizing linking the workplace to the community in the eighties in countries of the South was circulating in the opposite direction, from South to North (Webster, 2010). More recently, Ercu Celik has shown how the concept of social movement unionism, used in South Africa, Brazil and the Philippines in the eighties, traveled North to the United States mediated through Northern scholars, a case, he suggests, of learning from the periphery (Celik, 2014). Importantly, both authors stress the differences of social context between the Global South and North, reminding scholars of the dangers of transferring union models.

McCullum's *Global Unions, Local Power: The New Spirit of Transnational Labor Organizing* points towards a new body of literature in the field of global labor studies. These publications are challenging the dominant discourse on labor's response to globalization, suggesting that new forms of action, organization and sources of power is emerging in the age of globalization. As McCullum's book demonstrates, they go beyond the simple pessimistic / optimistic discourse and point towards the opportunities that are laying the foundations for a new labor internationalism.

NOTES

1. This review is drawn from the presentation I made on McCullum's book at the Authors Meet Their Critics: Three New Perspectives in Global Labor Studies, Session with Rina Agarwala, Ruy Bragga and Jamie McCullum, XV111, ISA World Congress of Sociology, 18 July, 2014.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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