

## Book Review

**Sabrina Zajak (2017) *Transnational Activism, Global Labor Governance and China*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.  
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*[In July of this year, the Global Labour Journal organised a panel of book review presentations at the International Sociological Association's World Congress of Sociology in Toronto, Canada. This review was first presented there – Editor.]*

In the past few years, China has experienced an increasing number of strikes and labour protests, with workers claiming higher wages and better working conditions. The surge of labour unrest has inspired various scholars to analyse the reasons for this development, such as capital relocation (Beverly Silver, 2003) or the rise of a new generation of migrant workers (Pun Ngai and Lu Huilin, 2010). Less analysed, however, have been transnational activist networks that aim at supporting labour action and pressuring for the implementation of labour rights in China. Sabrina Zajak's book tries to fill this research gap by providing not only an empirical analysis of transnational activism, but also an analytical framework with which to grasp different transnational pathways of influence. Thus, Zajak's main objective is to "enrich our understanding of transnational activism within a multi-layered governance architecture targeting an internally and externally powerful, non-democratic state as China. How do transnational labor activists mobilize within the contemporary multi-layered global governance architecture in order to affect working conditions in China?" (p. 5).

In order to answer this research question, Zajak draws on historical institutionalism and identifies four transnational pathways of influence to show how transnational activist networks can exert influence. First, activist networks can mobilise within or target international organisations (the international-organisational pathway). Second, they can use bilateral relations between states or regions (the bilateral pathway). Third, they can aim at transnational companies and private regulatory arrangements (the market pathway). And finally, they can support the development and the actions of domestic civil society organisations (the civil society pathway). Zajak's analysis is very coherent, as for each pathway she provides a case study on how unions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society actors have exerted political influence in China.

For the international-organisational pathway, the author examines the actions of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) in the International Labour Organization (ILO), the most important institution for global labour governance. The bilateral pathway is analysed by giving a thick description of European trade unions and labour NGOs trying to leverage relations between the European Union (EU) and China. For her analysis of the market pathway, Zajak provides a case study of the Play Fair Campaign during the 2008 Olympic Games

in Beijing. And finally, for the civil society pathway, the author presents her research on four labour NGOs based in Hong Kong, Shenzhen and Beijing.

As part of her analysis, Zajak also refers to several sub-concepts in order to highlight the entanglement of the four pathways – intra-pathway dynamics (changing institutional context within a pathway); inter-pathway dynamics (interactions between pathways and strategic learning of actors enabling them to jump between pathways); and global–local links (domestic factors influencing transnational labour action). The empirical basis for Zajak’s observations is therefore quite comprehensive. In total, she has conducted sixty-nine qualitative interviews and several participant observations along with analysing a long list of policy documents.

One of the main findings of Zajak’s research is that all pathways used by transnational labour activists have had some impact, but that this has remained rather limited. More generally, the Chinese state tends not to be affected by external pressure such as trade sanctions or by internal pressure such as protests, as China has a strong economy and has developed a highly sophisticated system of co-opting and repressing social conflict, thus limiting the opportunities to pressure for social change. In Zajak’s words, “transnational activist networks are most successful when the targeted state is sanctionable by others and domestic allies are in place. In the case of China, these conditions are severely restrained” (p. 4).

Consequently, in the Chinese case the first three pathways had little impact. Regarding the case study on the international-organisational pathway, Zajak observes a slow opening up of the Chinese state to the influence of international institutions. Beginning with the Hu Jintao period, China has become more willing to implement labour law, while complaints before 2002 had little effect. Today, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) is more integrated into global labour governance and, in principle, Chinese policy-makers seem to have embraced some core values of the decent work agenda. However, basic labour rights such as the freedom to form a union or the right to strike are still not guaranteed in China. In EU–China relations, trade unions and NGOs have lobbied in several policy fields. Particularly in the context of sectoral dialogues such as the Dialogue on Labour, Employment and Social Affairs, Zajak states that trade unions were able discuss issues “such as vocational training, CSR, mobility, and aspects of labor law” (p. 134) with Chinese policy-makers. The case study for the market pathway on the Play Fair Campaign during the Olympic Games also shows some success due to international campaigning. The Play Fair Campaign, a multi-stakeholder initiative, did not directly address the state, but aimed at the factory level. The campaign criticised private regulations in the sporting goods industry, with the aim of establishing a sectoral framework agreement that would include labour standards defined by the ILO. The campaign alliance, however, failed to meet this goal and only pushed Chinese companies to implement soft forms of corporate social responsibility (CSR) with few control mechanisms. To sum up, all three pathways have shown limited results in the Chinese case.

More successful was the fourth pathway, the civil society pathway. Thus, the chapter on transnational support for local labour organisations in China might be the most exciting of the book. In this chapter, Zajak highlights different types of labour organisations. She divides them into business-oriented organisations which focus on CSR implementation and NGOs that try to empower workers on the shop floor to claim better pay and working conditions. Zajak understands these two types as “opposite ends of a continuum rather than clearly distinct categories” (p. 211). Consequently, from her perspective, a number of different forms of labour NGOs have emerged, following different strategies. She observes that more independent worker support organisations have survived despite a rather repressive environment – they “show a surprising resilience in the face of continuous governmental and business threats” (p. 215). Zajak

even goes so far as to claim that the influence of labour support organisations tend to shape industrial relations. Instead of “tripartism with four parties” (Lüthje, 2009) – with state, employers, ACFTU and workers who protest without union support – a “contained multipartism” (p. 215) has emerged with new labour support organisations actively intervening in industrial relations.

The book is inspiring and a must-read for scholars interested in transnational labour activism. As mentioned before, the part on labour support organisations is particularly interesting, while the theoretical concept of transnational pathways is also innovative but sometimes tends to be over-complex for empirical work. An interested reader might also wonder about some of the theoretical decisions taken by the author. For instance, both the market pathway (trying to influence capital) and the civil society pathway (trying to support labour) seem to overlap quite strongly, as they both point at the capital–labour relationship in China, a relationship which could have been further elaborated by drawing on materialist concepts (Marx, Gramsci, etc.) instead of mainly focusing on historical institutionalism.

Besides these small critical points, readers may be interested in the implications of more recent events for Zajak’s analysis. Since late 2015, labour NGOs have experienced stronger control and repression by the state, both in practice and in labour law. Foreign funding is strictly controlled and, more generally, transnational networks seem to have lost importance in the Xi Jinping government era. Instead, labour NGOs are sometimes replaced by new student networks, as shown in the recent strike at Jasic Technology in the summer of 2018. Labour studies will have to address these changes, thereby trying to understand the process of “internalisation” of labour support networks and its surveillance and repression by the Chinese state.

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