

Book Review

**Robert O'Brien (2019) *Labour Internationalism in the Global South: The SIGTUR Initiative*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9781108480918. 237 pp.
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Robert O'Brien's book tells a story of trade unions from the Global South building international connections to respond to globalisation. The subject matter is hardly novel, having been at the centre of recent debates on new labour internationalism, but this contribution is of particular interest because it offers a balanced perspective on controversies that a mere ten years ago pitted labour scholars in the opposing camps of enthusiastic optimism and fatalistic pessimism, a clash that seemed to leave little room for nuance. In this book, distanced from the shock caused by information technologies, emerging networks and awe-inspiring protests around the turn of the century, the study has the benefit of hindsight. The author would not have been able to make the most out of this advantage, however, without his rigorous yet innovative theoretical approach, which combines concepts from multiple disciplines, and an impressive research effort that, spanning twenty years, comprised extensive fieldwork on the activities of the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR), an international network of unions from South Africa, Australia, India, South Korea, Brazil, Argentina, the Philippines and other countries that, in some way or another, can be linked to the Global South.

From the start, O'Brien states his preference for the notion of *labour internationalism* over popular alternatives ("transnationalism" is the usual replacement). Far from being an inconsequential quirk, this is meant to emphasise that present-day labour internationalism is the heir to "a long and diverse tradition", a reasoning that foreshadows the sensibility manifested throughout the book to the historical character of labour movements. While the author does not overlook the importance of other influences (in fact, he criticises the notion of "labour exceptionalism" that separates it from other social movements), he acknowledges the weight of the past at the international level, where labour organisations have long been established, and also at the local and national levels, where traditional structures are likewise deeply entrenched. In this sense, one of the book's most illuminating insights is the argument that a study on labour internationalism should pay attention to national perspectives on the matter, and not only to patently global viewpoints. This is especially meaningful because it allows for unions in the Global South to be presented not as a uniform force of international activism, but as a diverse group permeated by conflicting tendencies.

To make sense of this range of possibilities, the author devises an original framework based on a "continuum of behaviours" that respond to the primacy of national or global perspectives, on the one hand, and their rootedness in the economy (production), the state (regulation) or the

ideational realm (ideas), on the other. He ends up with “a matrix with six possible positions covering those that focus on national or global production, national or global regulation, nationalist or cosmopolitan ideas” (p. 20). Among the national strains, we find an *Autonomous Internationalism* that privileges national production and economies (e.g. developmentalist positions); a *Statist Internationalism* characterised by the extension of domestic regulatory concerns to international affairs (e.g. the defence of national priorities in trade agreements); and a *Nationalist Internationalism* that projects national ideas (e.g. national liberation movements and trade union imperialism). Looking at global perspectives, in the same vein, we encounter a *Networked Internationalism* that emphasises global productive interconnectedness (e.g. global unions confronting transnational corporations); a *Globalist Internationalism* focused on international regulation (e.g. lobbying and protesting multilateral organisations); and an *Empathetic Internationalism* based on universal working-class solidarity (provided examples range from actions in the Spanish Civil War to present-day campaigns on the Internet). In this, the exposition goes well beyond the titular subject to provide a broad assessment of labour internationalism across the North–South divide.

The second part of the book begins by applying the “six faces” framework to the study of SIGTUR, a single but diverse entity. This is a fortunate approach, above all because it averts the inclination often found in case studies to focus on extraordinary examples in search of “the one best way” to internationalise. Instead, the author shows how national and global perspectives have been combined within SIGTUR, a situation that has brought about tensions, but also promising intersections. Here, we read about Nigerian delegates criticising fellow SIGTUR members for the use of nationalistic slogans targeting foreigners, about Indian trade union leaders clashing with allies over international labour standards, but also about solidarity between Brazilians and Australians to stop child labour, and global campaigns to free union leaders from prison. This short review cannot do justice to the richness of the book’s first-hand accounts, but the reader will find that the fourth chapter brings the previously defined “six labour internationalisms” to life through many interesting examples.

The subsequent chapters explore how SIGTUR has actively promoted a shared identity and a sense of community, and examine the organisation’s structures and repertoire of mobilisation. Designed to be a “Southern” network of democratic, campaign-oriented trade unions, in practice the contents of this identity are ambiguous and contested, reflecting the ethnic, national and political diversity of the members, a terrain that is further complicated by the limitations of participant unions themselves, bringing into the network issues such as the lack of gender representation in the male-dominated world of trade unions. Furthermore, it is argued that diverse backgrounds and language barriers pose challenges, but that cultural exchanges, the evocation of common struggles and the use of electronic communications have offered viable solutions. Built primarily by trade unions, but open to the participation of scholars and NGOs, the initiative has combined traditional structures with the deliberate adoption of a network mode of organisation. SIGTUR has also been engaged in a variety of campaigns, boycotts and solidarity actions, although it is indicated that engagement with grassroots mobilisation has not been as central as one would expect from a campaign-oriented initiative.

The final chapter notes that SIGTUR has not been able to achieve all of its goals, but suggests that the commitment of SIGTUR members to international solidarity in a wide range of situations is a sign that labour internationalism is not a pipedream. However, it is acknowledged that much greater resources would be needed to realise more ambitious outcomes. Given open-ended, cautiously optimistic conclusions, it is tempting to present three questions that frequently appear in engagements between researchers of labour internationalism and those who do not

share this particular interest. First, are such initiatives relevant in the first place? It is not uncommon for international offices to be perceived as carrying some prestige but hardly any power, and international activities to be derided as events of little consequence to workers on the ground. Second, even if it is true that internationalism has been impactful in certain cases, is this evidence of a general trend or the result of exceptional circumstances? Third, conceding that international action can be adopted in various situations, with the caveat that its features are shaped by different factors in each case, are we dealing with a new labour internationalism or similar practices adopted by actors that do not necessarily share common goals?

The author acknowledges that, for the most part, the relevance of SIGTUR has been restricted to the leaders that take part in its activities, but suggests that some of the impacts are not immediately apparent and, moreover, offers examples of connections with local struggles, adding to a body of evidence presented through many references cited in the book. He is also aware of the constraints shaping international labour action, and combines new insights with factors highlighted by previous studies to make a reasonable case that labour internationalism is viable across different settings. In what could have been a response to the first two questions, then, the book presents a comprehensive assessment of the state-of-the-art of the research in the field, pushing it forward with an original framework and a notable case study.

What sets O'Brien's contribution apart, however, is a convincing answer to the third question, arguably the toughest of the three. Conceptualising plural labour internationalisms without losing sight of their historical, material and political groundings, he demonstrates, as he puts it well, that internationalism is not an "all-or-nothing endeavour". Overlaps between different national and global perspectives should not be discarded as inadequate. That does not mean that labour internationalism should be taken for granted (and certainly not a specific form of it), but it implies that, in a globalised world, the decision not to engage in international action is always a choice, as constrained a choice as this may often be. Understanding these choices, and how they relate to labour agency across multiple scales, is valuable beyond the world of global unions and international networks. The relevance of O'Brien's book should be evident to researchers and activists with an interest in internationalism, but its findings would be useful to a broader audience, and perhaps even more so to those under the impression that debates on labour internationalism have little to say about labour at large.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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