

## Book Review

**Bieler, A., Ciccaglione, B., Hilary, J. and Lindberg, I. (eds.) (2014)**  
***Free Trade and Transnational Labour*. London: Routledge.**  
**ISBN 9780415812696**

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The proliferation of free trade agreements (FTAs) since the early 1990s across the world represents one of the major aspects of advancing neoliberalism. Free trade agreements have negatively affected workers both North and South, and therefore the issue of confronting them became central for national and international labour movements. In this context, *Free Trade and Transnational Labour* is a remarkable contribution to the debate regarding the role of trade union and transnational solidarity as a strategy to challenge such agreements. The book completes a 'trilogy' of studies regarding labour and the challenges presented by globalization in the recent decades (see Bieler and Lindberg, 2010; Bieler, Lindberg and Pillay, 2008). While the previous volumes focused on different experiences of labour opposition to globalization based mainly on collaborative projects between unions, this volume presents both theoretical premises and empirical examples of the ways in which labour movements around the globe confront the different faces of free trade through forms of transnational actions. In doing so, the volume places especial importance to the differences, existing and ongoing, between unions in the global North and in the South. This is certainly a main contribution of the volume, since the problematization of the different approaches North and South to the issue of trade and development is a necessary task for scholars and trade unionists, and one not always easy to carry through. The variety of examples presented allows for a broad coverage of all the major regions of the world. Divided in three distinct parts, *Free Trade and Transnational Labour* provides the basis for action and concrete examples that can be used in a variety of contexts, supplemented by a number of key theoretical interventions that place those struggles in context.

Part I of the volume, 'Conceptual considerations', introduces important theoretical contributions, starting the debate with Samir Amin and his 'Imperialist rent' conceptualization, meaning the product of the colonial-imperial domination of countries in the south by the centre in the North. Accordingly, free trade is presented as a fundamental element in deepening the accumulation of an imperialist rent. Amin argues that there is a shifting power balance with the 'awakening of South', which puts pressure on the imperialist nature of capitalism and its centre in the North, while yet not being able to provide a clear socialist alternative. Amin's writing has been a central component to 'third world' social movements, and in his contribution to this volume he provides contributions mentioned in earlier works (Amin, 2007), but reinforced even more in today's context. He asserts that capitalism is going as far as challenging its own reproduction in the North, therefore putting pressure on the workers that benefited historically from imperialist rent, meaning that there is a possible space for change in the support workers of the North have generally expressed towards free trade projects. The other valuable contribution, later reconsidered in the volume's conclusion, is that of 'delinking', meaning the 'dismantling of the world system before eventual reconstruction' (2007: 15). This is indeed a radical, but also viable contribution, since it

implies the retreat to a regional level integration, in which countries and movements of the South have basically more power over their own decision-making process, and from that they can promote 'globalization on the basis of negotiation, rather than submission' (2007: 21). Amin's contribution is in line to that of other Southern intellectuals like Walden Bello, who put forward the idea of 'deglobalization' earlier on in the past decade (Bello, 2004). These views express a genuine alternative to the seemingly 'unstoppable' global integration process. Following Amin's contribution, Imperialist rent is analysed in the volume by Higginbottom with theoretical and practical examples that include the case of Ireland. The last contribution in this part by Bieler and Morton puts forward the concept of 'uneven and combined development' asserted by Trotsky. The authors apply Trotsky's analysis to today's context, by asserting that free trade has come to reinforce the process of uneven and combined development, furthering unequal exchanges in which countries are 'locked in' (2004: 41). Bieler and Morton provide the empirical and theoretical basis needed for a 'delinking' strategy as suggested by Amin, to break through the process of uneven and combined development.

The following section of the volume, Part II, presents empirical examples of viewpoints on FTAs from all major regions of the world and the perspectives of labour on those agreements. The variety of examples and different degrees of success allow for a critical comparison between regions and experiences. The chapter by John Hilary, focused on the dynamics within Europe, present the ambivalent position of European trade unions, the majority of which have supported free trade agreements while demanding social conditionalities that could offset the negative impacts of such agreements. In this chapter, Hilary confronts the perspective of the major trade union organizations about their support for the European Union's strategy of signing free trade agreements, by asserting that the belief in social dialogue is not going to guarantee a positive outcome for unions. Furthermore, Hilary poses the rejection by Southern trade unions of such agreements. His expectation that collaboration is possible, by looking at the 'NAMA11' countries does not seem viable, especially in the view of the near disappearance of that trade union group and the replacement by more 'geographically-organized' trade unions groups like the Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR). The chapter by Teresa Healy is a clear demonstration that the challenges to transnational solidarity regarding free trade agreements are not solely an issue of a North-South divide. Healy narrates the lack of collaboration and agreement between Canadian unions and their European counterparts to challenge the FTA being signed between Canada and Europe. Similarly, Mi Park suggests that in the case of the Asia-Pacific region, trade union opposition to FTAs has depended on the geopolitical situation and the perceived threat by unions. Park asserts that labour has tended, in the case of this region, to prioritize 'economic nationalism' against transnational solidarity in the cases of different FTAs. Park's empirical evidence from Asia dismantles then the idea that even trade within developing countries is supported by trade unions. A similar ambivalent position takes place in the case of Southern Africa, as Stephen Hurt notices, where COSATU has being a vocal opponent of FTAs with Europe, but has been far less vocal in their criticism of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) which also implied different degrees of free trade. Amanda Latimer presents the case of struggles against the Free Trade Area of the Americas during the late 1990s and early 2000s. This case, in terms of opposition, can be considered as the largest success story so far, since it involved mobilization across the region, including collaborations with social movements. Latimer presents the campaign against the FTAA from the perspective of Brazilian unions, but incorporating the dynamics of the collaboration with unions and social movements from Latin America and from the North (Canada and the US). Aziz Choudry, also basing his standing largely on the FTAA struggle, problematizes the relationship between trade unions and their counterparts in the NGO movement, a central issue when organizing cross-border and cross-sectoral alliances. The tensions that Choudry mentions between mobilizing in

opposition to a treaty or participating in the negotiating spaces are common-place, and it has been a challenge mainly in the relationship with European organizations, whose firm conviction in social dialogue have led them to overestimate the spaces of participation in detriment of mobilization. As the case of the anti-FTAA struggle in the Americas shows, this position, of trying to negotiate, is slowly losing ground in favour of mobilization.

The last part of the volume debates around the issue of transnational solidarity and free trade, intending to provide possible ways forward. Rob Lambert indicates that a central element in the confrontation to free trade is that labour itself has to be reformed. With basis on the collective work done with Eddie Webster and Andreas Bezuidenhout (see Lambert, Webster and Bezuidenhout, 2008), Lambert argues that union reform is already taking place, mainly in unions from South. He mentions a form of New Labour Internationalism, expressed in SIGTUR, as a way to move forward in challenging free trade, with unions that are more militant and democratic at the forefront of the struggle. Ingemar Lindberg puts the premise that the struggle against free trade can be a win-win situation, since solidarity does not need to come at the expense of self-interest – as they are normally confronted. With the neoliberal crisis affecting Northern workers today, the assessment made by Lindberg has remarkable value since it is now a large section of European workers who need solidarity from the rest of the world. Following, Bruno Ciccaglione and Alexandra Strickner discuss the different strategies used by trade unions to challenge free trade and move beyond that model. For the authors, a central element to challenge free trade is the existence of alternative visions, which they claim is the main task the trade union movement has ahead. In mentioning alternative visions, the authors briefly mention recent movements from Latin America, like the Zapatistas in Mexico and the rise of constitutional reforms (they mention Ecuador) that include concepts from indigenous people's such as 'good living'. Further discussion about both these examples is needed in order to claim a concrete alternative, especially if labour is kept in mind as a strategic actor.

Lastly, the editors of the volume, Bieler, Ciccaglione, Hilary and Lindberg, summarize the main debates and put forward a suggestion for labour and its standing on free trade. Following the proposal by Amin ('delinking'), and later on a discussion put forward by Lindberg, the editors suggest that a demand for a national policy space is the fundamental issue for labour to rally around. The argument is that a return to a 'national politics' of negotiation, where unions are active players and where democracy (people's vote) actually plays a role (unlike in the global level), neoliberal policy can begin to be challenged and alternative policies can arise. Some of these policies are underlined later on in the chapter: regulating global finance, food sovereignty, national resource sovereignty, sovereignty over labour market regulation, democratic decision-making on trade policy. These are central contributions of the volume being described. By placing a concrete idea for unions to demand, the authors are doing a remarkable contribution to labour action. The final reinforcement about the need to 'de-link' from the global economy goes hand in hand with reinforcing the national policy spaces. The example of the ALBA integration process needs further examination, but it is a valuable step ahead in moving beyond discussion confrontation with and start thinking what are we confronting for. As this volume rightly points out, reinforcing a strategy for national policy spaces can be a fundamental orientation of the struggles against FTAs in all their forms. However, as the recent experiences of South American countries show, a given degree of regional integration – including democratic participation of labour, social movements, and citizens – is a necessary condition in order to 'de-link', at least partially, from the global economy as it is today.

Overall, *Free Trade and Transnational Labour* presents a revision of a critical debate for workers around the world, how to confront free trade, and puts forward a strategy that can be grasped by most actors: reinforce national spaces, where democracy and trade unions can play a role, in order to later integrate on a better standing ground. This is a demand that can be used by labour

in the North and in the South, and therefore it challenges the divide that presupposes diverting strategies for workers' according to their location. Even though more utopian ideas have been put forward in recent years, this final conclusion is a remarkable contribution, and it is also a challenge for labour to rethink itself on the basis of the areas in which it is stronger.

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