

Book Review

Bieler, A., R. Erne, D. Golden, I. Helle, K. Kjeldstadli, T. Matos and S. Stan (eds) (2015) *Labour and Transnational Action in Times of Crisis*. London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield. ISBN 978 1 7834 8277 1

Reviewed by Bruno Dobrusin, CEIL-CONICET, Argentina

The process of neo-liberal globalisation, characterised by the increasing influence of transnational corporations and global financial markets on national economies, has led to an intensification of labour's efforts to transnationalise. Indeed, the transnationalisation of trade union action is now central to the survival of many labour movements around the world. Trade unions are constantly in search of new strategies and tactics to use and adapt in order to take alternative action against the global forces of capital.

Based on theoretical and empirical contributions, this book provides substantial material on labour's agency in the search for alternative strategies. The book is a product of the project "Globalisation and the Possibility of Transnational Actors: The Case of Trade Unions" hosted by the Centre for Advanced Study in Oslo, Norway. This project included a workshop titled "Labour and Transnational Action in Times of Crisis: From Case Studies to Theory",¹ during which labour scholars and activists from around the world discussed contemporary trade union transnational action. After many rich exchanges and debates, the workshop resulted in this edited volume and two special journal issues.²

This edited book addresses a central question for unions in our time: how do unions position themselves in the age of transnational capitalist social relations of production? The authors address this question using different approaches (Van der Linden; Bieler; Schmidt; Golden; Novak), and analyses of trade union strategies in relation to the challenges and opportunities presented by migration (Kjeldstadli; Matos; Jungehülsing). The book also presents theoretical contributions on the power resources that unions can draw upon in different contexts (Webster; Brookes; McCallum; Föhrer; Zajak), as well as broader theoretical questions on the use of cosmopolitanism in shaping trade union action at an international level (Umney).

Part I is dedicated to contemporary class formation. It begins with Marcel van der Linden's critical assessment of the current situation of the working class around the world. Van der Linden focuses on the weakness of the trade union movement (which represents only 7 per cent of workers globally) and the challenges that globalisation presents for unions. He concludes that unions need to

¹ The workshop took place on 27 and 28 February 2014 at the Centre for Advanced Study, Oslo.

² "Politicizing the Transnational", Special Issue of *Labor History*, 2015: 56(3); and "European Collective Action in Times of Crisis", Special Issue of *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, 2015: 21(2).

rethink their strategies by moving away from their traditional focus on collective bargaining, to focus instead on issues that would be more effective in organising the informal workers that make up the vast majority of today's working class (p. 26). Moreover, Van der Linden is critical of the lack of rank-and-file participation in the international structures of trade unions. For those of us who have been involved in the international trade union movement this is a necessary change. However, the method for implementing such participation remains unclear.

In Chapter 2, Ingo Schmidt draws on the historic work of E.P. Thompson, and posits that a new European working class is in the making. His central argument is that European working classes, in their plural form, could be transforming into a unified class as a result of various struggles against the wave of austerity promoted by the centres of Europe (p. 39). Jörg Nowak argues that there are similar processes of uprising in the Indian auto industry, the South African mines, and the Brazilian construction sector for large infrastructure. He argues that these uprisings reflect a common pattern that fits Rosa Luxemburg's definition of "mass strikes" (p. 63). Although there was no active transnational solidarity in these three cases, Nowak rightly points out that reducing these struggles to national and local levels reflects a weaknesses in the analysis of such struggles. The argument that the sheer contemporaneity of struggles – that they are taking place at the same time and in similar circumstances – is a mobilising factor in itself needs further development and discussion, especially considering the significant differences between the nature and localities of the struggles.

Lastly, in Part I of the book, Andreas Bieler offers an analysis of labour actions in response to free trade agreements (FTAs). He bases this analysis on Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development as a major explaining factor in the development of positions, particularly of trade unions, in the North and South. Bieler's chapter revisits some of his positions in a recently published book on free trade and labour (Bieler, Ciccaglione, Hilary and Lindberg, 2014), which also analyses unions' reactions to different FTAs.

Part II of the book is dedicated to case studies on transnational actions in the past and present. Darragh Golden's chapter reviews the historical positions of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) and the Italian Confederation of Labour (CGIL) on Europe and its integration agenda. Golden's narrative highlights the role of ideology and previous experiences in defining union policy.

Also in Part II, Knut Kjeldstadli shows how Norwegian unions are adapting to the reality of migration and its impact on labour, and Tiago Matos analyses the connections between Norway's Plumber Union and (mostly Spanish) posted workers.³ Both chapters present valuable case studies on the difficulties and complexities that local unions face in working with migrant workers. Countering sometimes negative reactions from local unions to migrant workers, Kjeldstadli and Matos emphasise the potential role that unions could play in organising migrants. The cases presented by these two authors could also have included broader reflection on the possible role of labour migration in furthering transnational action by trade unions, linking to the recent discussion in the work of Ronaldo Munck (2013) who argues that migration is one of the potential positive outcomes for workers' organisation in the current process of globalisation.

Part III presents several theoretical debates on the issue of "power resources" that unions can learn from and apply in transnational mobilisation. Edward Webster argues that there are different sources of power that unions can exercise depending on their agency and strategic capacities. He

³ A "posted worker" is someone employed in one EU Member State but sent by the employer on a temporary basis to carry out his or her work in another Member State (European Commission, Undated).

posits that unions can draw on associational, structural and societal power to mobilise resources and gain victories. Relevant to Webster's analysis is the fact that these sources of power depend largely on a union's capacities at the local level, which can then inform their global strategy (p. 124).

Similarly, Marissa Brookes discusses forms of power that can be exercised by transnational labour alliances: structural, institutional and coalitional power. Brookes argues that labour's position within global production networks (GPNs) allows it to exercise different combinations of these forms of power. However, the exercise of real power and the success of these strategies depends on the impact that workers have on the core interests and needs of the respective companies that they are targeting (p. 136).

Jamie McCallum builds on the contributions by Webster and Brookes in his discussion of power resources in the context of what he calls "governance struggles", in which trade unions fight directly with corporations for rules, not for rights (p. 144). McCallum argues that the growth of transnational corporations and the governance regimes outside of nation-states has led labour to move beyond government protection in search of basic understandings with corporations. Based on the examples of Codes of Conduct and Global Framework Agreements (GFAs), McCallum argues that these struggles carve a space for workers' rights that, although they do not always signal instant victory, challenge the control of multinationals over the political economy.

Lastly in this section, Bianca Föhrer presents a case study on the role that education plays in building transnational action by looking at the case of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) and its educational programme in one of the European Works Councils. Föhrer reinforces the previous debate on power resources by showing how education can contribute to the ability of unions to identify and exercise these resources, and create individual, collective and social identities.

Part IV of the book is dedicated to "varieties of internationalism" based on case studies on transnational action from three different perspectives (p. 173). Sabrina Zajak analyses the ways in which labour has acted in the case of working conditions and conflict in China by looking at four different "paths of influence" – mobilising within international organisations; bilateral strategies; market pathways through companies; and a civil society pathway (p. 176). These pathways have been implemented at different times, in some cases together, with different degrees of success. Zajak presents an interesting framework for analysing a case such as China, although it is difficult to observe the concrete impact these paths have had on the working conditions of Chinese workers. Local union activity, for example in China, is an important component that should also be incorporated into this framework.

Jenny Jungehülsing's contribution is on transnational workers' exchanges and the role that "felt solidarity" plays in enhancing these exchanges. Jungehülsing looks at a case in which transnational action was carried out by a local union in the United States connecting with a local union in Mexico to overcome the limitations of transnational exchanges and the bureaucracy that dominates international union work. In her case study, the role of personal relationships that are developed over time and through exchanges is central for creating solidarity. This "grassroots solidarity" is a model for unions to consider, but as Jungehülsing recognises, is difficult to replicate in cases where the rank and file have different cultures, languages and geographical positions. Transnational migration is a key component in contemporary society and could be central to labour's strategies for transnational action. Studies building on those offered by Jungehülsing, Kjeldstadli and Matos will be valuable contributions to further understand possible union strategies for dealing with the often sensitive issue of the challenges and opportunities presented by increasing transnational labour migration.

Finally, Charles Umney offers a theoretical debate on the role of a “cosmopolitan” identity in contributing to transnational action, while at the same time placing unions in tension with globalisation. Umney argues that cosmopolitan concepts, such as class solidarity, can be a driving force for international trade union action. Further, he argues that the dichotomy of managerial versus mobilising strategies at the international level should not be taken as such, but rather understood and practised as part of a common process of tensions and normality created by cosmopolitanism’s reach within union ranks.

This edited collection, and the workshop upon which it is based, are much-needed elements for advancing the debate on the importance of transnational solidarity and mobilisation in reviving and strengthening the labour movement globally. The contributions presented in this book cover not only several regions of the world, but also topics that are increasingly part of the daily realities of trade unions, and that are often sensitive issues (for example, migration).

The exchange generated by the debates in the workshop, as demonstrated in this edition and the two special journal issues, could significantly contribute to shaping trade union policy and workers’ struggle in a context that differs significantly from the traditional mode under which organised labour has operated in the past. Ideally trade unions around the world will engage with and build upon these case studies and conceptual debates while reflecting on their own contexts. The extent to which the lessons learned and ideas generated in these contributions could be incorporated into future trade union strategies for advancing transnational action remains to be seen.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

BRUNO DOBRUSIN is a research scholar at the Centre for Labour Studies (CEIL-CONICET) in Buenos Aires. He is also an advisor in International Relations at the Argentine Workers' Confederation (CTA). [Email: bdobrusin@gmail.com]