

THE GROWING COMMITMENT TO GLOBAL ORGANIZING BY THE U.S. LABOR MOVEMENT

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Hard times can push social movements toward new strategies, and American trade unions have certainly seen their share of adverse economic and political trends in recent decades. One result has been a turn toward building global alliances. By reaching out to fellow workers across national boundaries, and at times working in concert with other employees of one transnational corporation, U.S. unions have been able to gain new leverage in what has otherwise been an era of receding union power.

Global collaborations involving three mainstream U.S. unions – the Steelworkers, the United Automobile Workers, and the Service Workers International Union – illustrate some of the goals and accomplishments that can be furthered. Counterpart unions can form a pincers movement to pressure a shared corporate adversary, and union drives stand a better chance of success if various national sets of workers participate at the same time.

Latin American Allies Help U.S. Steelworkers Get a Contract

In recent decades the United Steelworkers have seen U.S. steel production shifted to mini-mills in the American South run by staunchly anti-union companies. In 2005, contract negotiations at one of these anti-union companies, Ameristeel, ended in workers being locked out by the company. The ensuing campaign to get a contract was hard fought on many fronts. What made it different from other similar struggles in the American South was that Ameristeel was owned by Brazil's global steel giant, Gerdau. The metalworkers in Gerdau's home country were well organized, and they had long realized that as Gerdau went global, they needed to do likewise.

In 2006, workers from six Latin American countries, Canada, and the United States formed the Gerdau Workers' World Council to coordinate efforts on wages and working conditions at company-owned facilities across the hemisphere. A year later, the United Steelworkers were able to negotiate contracts at the Ameristeel plants where its members had previously been locked out. This turnaround was thanks in good measure to the solidarity made possible by the new alliance, as well as to the pressure applied on corporate headquarters by Brazilian unionists.

The United Auto Workers Build Ties in Brazil to Pressure Nissan in Mississippi

In 2010, the new President of the United Auto Workers, Bob King, made unionizing foreign-owned auto assembly plants in the U.S. South his primary organizing goal for the auto industry. One of the prime targets of this campaign was the Nissan assembly plant in Canton, Mississippi. King knew that efforts to organize auto plants in the South had always failed in the past, so one element of his innovative approach this time was to put global pressure on Nissan. Because of Brazil's relatively pro-union environment and because its market was crucial to Nissan's economic strategy, Brazil was an obvious place to look for allies. The United Auto Workers

hired organizers to help them make their case there, and Bob King went to Brazil himself. The head of Brazil's largest labor confederation came to Canton to express support for the Nissan workers. Equally remarkably, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, former President of Brazil and a former leader of the Brazilian metalworkers' union, came to the United Auto Workers' 2013 National Community Action Program Conference in Washington, DC and declared "It's unimaginable. Labor cannot accept that Nissan comes to America and says workers can't organize." Whether Bob King's efforts at transnational alliance-building will succeed in the anti-union South remains to be seen. That he is even trying represents a portentous shift in the United Auto Workers' approach to unions in the rest of the world.

Global Organizing in the Service Sector

Global corporations increasingly predominate in services as well as manufacturing. The G4S Corporation, which employs over 600,000 security guards in 125 countries, is a good example. In 2002 when the Wackenhut Company, one of the largest U.S. employers of security guards, was bought by the company that would become G4S, the Service Employees International Union realized that only a global campaign would build enough leverage to allow Wackenhut's employees in the U.S. a chance to enjoy union contracts. To organize an international campaign, they turned for help to the UNI Global Union, an international federation of service unions around the world. With strategic help from UNI Global union, national service sector unions waged hard-fought campaigns in countries ranging from Indonesia and India to South Africa, and also put intense pressure on the G4S corporate headquarters in London – and as a result, G4S signed a "Global Framework Agreement" in which top management agreed not to oppose organizing drives in its subsidiaries. This victory gives security guards around the world new possibilities to fight for rights and union representation.

Meeting the Global Challenge

For those who believe unions play an important role in furthering worker welfare, it is encouraging that at least some U.S. unions are forming alliances to confront global realities. For American workers in both the manufacturing and service sectors, a strong bargaining position at home increasingly requires alliances that can bring pressure globally. When U.S. unionists take on a transnational corporation, strong unions based in its home country (or in a market the brass see as strategic) can prove to be invaluable allies. In addition, global union federations can be powerful orchestrators of multi-country organizing efforts. Without taking part in such global alliances and organizations, U.S. workers will find themselves increasingly unable to assert their rights when bargaining with transnational corporations. Solidarity is never automatic, however. Unions in different countries still clash over trade rules, and deep-seated national differences in organizing styles can lead to friction. Even when goals and strategies are complementary, implementing a cross-border campaign is a formidable challenge. Among American labor leaders, the capacity to put a global vision into practice is still the exception rather than the rule. Yet more of them are realizing that alliances across national borders must be a key part of U.S. labor's response to hard times and setbacks. This dawning realization is helping to renew and reshape the U.S. labor movement.

Read more in Peter Evans, "Is It Labor's Turn to Globalize? Twenty-First Century Opportunities and Strategic Responses." *Global Labour Journal* 1, no. 3 (2010): 352-379 and "Global Labor's Evolving Architecture under Late Neoliberalism: National Terrains and Transnational Articulations," American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Labor and Labor Movements Section Mini-Conference on "Labor and Global Solidarity – The U.S., China and Beyond," August 2013.