

Draft for Discussion

International Labour Studies(UK) in the Light of Social Justice and Solidarity (Globally)

[For consideration of *Work, Organisation, Labour and Globalisation*]

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A new idea that blossoms in Britain is not a British idea except for the time that it takes for it to be printed. Once launched into space by the press, this idea, if it expresses some universal truth, can also be instantaneously transformed into an internationalist idea.

(José Carlos Mariátegui 1923-4/1986)

Abstract

This review article covers five recent books and two websites concerned with international labour struggles and/or labour internationalism. It considers these in the light not of classical or contemporary labour theory or ideologies but in that of the global justice and solidarity movement and a new orientation toward global social emancipation. There has clearly been a revival of such labour studies and resources in the UK recently, but this has not necessarily itself been inspired by the new movement. Whilst, however, there might have been no anti-globalisation leap in such studies there has been at least some kind of anti-globalisation creep. Moreover, even the more traditionally inspired international labour studies or resources make contributions or provide challenges to a more consistent emancipatory orientation. Whilst the precise nature of such a new orientation is not spelled out, it is argued that this requires autonomous places or internet spaces for its further development. Whilst such new ideas from the UK are not ‘instantaneously transformed’ into internationalist ideas they nonetheless contribute toward the construction of a new kind of labour internationalism.

International Labour Studies(UK)in the Light of Social Justice and Solidarity (Globally)

Tony Pilch (ed), *Trades Unions and Globalisation*. London: Smith Institute. 86 pp. ISBN 1-905370-14-8. Sheila Cohen, *Ramparts of Resistance: Why Workers Lost Their Power and How to Get it Back*. London: Pluto. 2006, 248 pp. ISBN 13-978-0-7453-1529-4 (pb). Munck, Ronaldo. 2006. *Globalisation and Contestation: The Great Counter-Movement*. London: Routledge. 176 pp. ISBN-10 0415376564; Angela Hale and Jane Wills (eds). *Threads of Labour: Garment Industry Supply Chains from the Workers' Perspective*. Oxford: Blackwell. 2005, 288 pp. ISBN-10: 1405126388. Paul Mason, *Live Working or Die Fighting: How the Working Class Went Global*. London: Harvill Secker. 304 pp. ISBN 978-0-436-20615-3. NewUnionism <http://www.newunionism.net/>. Union Ideas Network. <http://www.uin.org.uk/>

Introduction: two cheers

Two cheers for the newest international labour studies and resources from the UK.

Britons might here wish to express scepticism of the intellect where the Peruvian Gramsci, expressed optimism of the will. And to ask what 'universalism' might humanly and effectively mean in our post-modern and post-postmodern times. But Little Britain, curiously, *has* had some kind of initiating role in the production of international labour studies and resources – and not only on the 'emancipatory left', which is where I like to place myself.¹

Having been involved with the 'New International Labour Studies' (NILS) in the 1970s-80s, and published the *Newsletter of International Labour Studies* (also NILS) through the 1980s, I was also a reluctant witness to their decline as the twin *tsunamis* of globalisation and neo-liberalism struck unions and labour studies worldwide. None of the major labour movement traditions of the previous period, Communist, Social-Democratic or Populist (Radical-Nationalist), had in any way prepared unions for this. With such temporary exceptions as Poland, South Africa, South Korea and Brazil, the forward march of labour was not so much halted as reversed.

The decline of international labour studies was marked in the UK at that time by the failure of a planned Zed Press series to take off from a promising start, as well as by the collapse of the monthly *International Labour Reports*, based in the UK's de-

¹ I am here inspired by a particular argument of Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Santos 2006:35-64), someone little known outside the Lusophone world, despite having six or seven books in English on Amazon when last checked! He, coming from post-imperial Portugal, is pondering the question of his capacity or right to speak on emancipation universally. He seems to think that he/we can, providing we think of emancipations as plural. Although no one in either the Global North, South (or ex-East) is likely to be anxious about the British hegemonising global discussion on the emancipation(s) of labour, it is in this spirit that I write.

industrialising North. Many activist international labour specialists migrated, one of them literally, to what he expected to remain the social-democratic island paradise of New Zealand. Other activists abandoned their little lifeboats to return to the trade union *Titanic*, playing here the role of organisers, advisors, or freelance consultants, often quite impressively.² British projects of the 1968 revolution, such as the Coventry Workshop (combining labour, community and internationalist activities) also went into decline. Clearly there remained exceptions, but these were small voices crying in a political and academic wilderness.³ Other socialists, still committed to international social protest, moved in the direction of the ‘new social movements’ in general or feminism in particular. Or they began reconsidering the international labour movement as a potential part of some kind of new global process. I was one of these Brits, though an expatriate one. So was Ronaldo Munck, an ‘in-patriate’ of the British Isles, my one-time collaborator and occasional interlocutor.⁴ Let us not overstate the depths of the decline, nor the extent of the recovery. Let me simply note my pleasure at what has been coming to my attention, in padded envelopes over the North Sea or down the virtual pipeline to my computer screen.⁵

One final introductory point. The notion of ‘international labour studies’ could include international studies of production, of work and workers, but I have taken it to mean international studies of labour as a community, culture or class, as a movement, in terms of self-organisation, of protest against their condition and demand for something *more* or something *other*.⁶

² One would be Celia Mather, a former editor of *International Labour Reports* (ILR), who has played this role both for traditional trade unions and for the new labour networks. See, for example, her excellent workbook for women workers in the global clothing industry (Mather 2004). Others would be the two founders of ILR, Dave Spooner and Stuart Howard. The first became a leading figure in the International Federation of Worker Education Associations, the second in the International Transportworkers Federation.

³ One of these has to be the quarterly *International Union Rights*, currently, I think, the only autonomous international labour solidarity magazine in the world. In both style and appearance the UK-based magazine is reminiscent of *International Labour Reports*. But the origins of IUR lie not in the shopfloor internationalism of the 1970s-80s but in the sclerotic World Federation of Trade Unions (see below). As the WFTU followed the downward path of its Communist-bloc sponsors, its labour rights network – coordinated in the UK by Tom Sibley – broke away and gave birth to this magazine and associated activities. It is my impression that ILR has been becoming simultaneously more open, more relevant and more radical, whilst showing little if any relationship to the new global justice and solidarity movement. It has a broad left Editorial Board. It deserves closer attention.

⁴ I draw here, and elsewhere in this review, on an autobiography underway as well as earlier reviews (Waterman 1998, 2004a, b, c). Compare Munck (2002, 2003).

⁵ In case anyone should consider I disregard the newest international labour studies/resources from the *non*-UK, I list a number of such: Global Labor Strategies, Kloosterboer 2007, Pro-Position, The Big Sell-Out, International Association of Labour History Institutions 2007, Asia Monitor Resource Centre, No Border Network, New Labor Forum, Streetnet International. To these I think one should add studies of national-immigrant relations, or ‘internationalism in one country’, most advanced probably in the USA. An example would be Ness 2005. For details, check Bibliography and Resources below.

⁶ This is why I do not here consider the undoubtedly pioneering work of Ursula Huws (2003), which is certainly both aware of and relevant to understanding the new global world of work. The book of Huws on the ‘cybertariat’ does occasionally touch on consciousness and protest, but what it is primarily concerned with is the complex nature and implications of a new kind of labour – primarily carried out by women. It is, of course, essential reading for (would be) organisers.

Anti-Globalisation Creep

TU&G, as I will call the Tony Pilch book, has the kind of literal name, and staid yet glossy appearance, one might expect of an establishment production. The establishment it represents, is that of 'social partnership' – i.e. a capitalist partnership between corporations, the state and the unions. It bears these marks also in the contributed texts. But what strikes me is the extent to which it is also marked by the kind of language that NLS (the school) and NLS (the newsletter) were talking 20 or more years ago. Let us not exaggerate here either. In so far as new notes *are* struck by certain contributors, they represent some kind of anti-globalisation creep or infection and hardly challenge the national or international social partnership frame that shapes the collection.

In keeping with traditional unionism and labour studies, TU&G simply *assumes* a national frame of reference, with its two non-UK chapters being – by chance or choice – by holders of the national passport. Contributions are thus made by two New Labour members of parliament/government, three top officials of national trade unions, the General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), and one academic writing on China.

The participation sounds predictable. And, indeed, it is, especially as far as the self-congratulatory politicians are concerned. So is the chapter by the Human Resource Director of BAE Systems – the major British producer and exporter (to lesser breeds without the missile) of weapons of either mass or selective destruction. BAE employs 100,000 worldwide, of which just 32,000 in the UK. This might explain both its anxiety and possibility of keeping the 32,000 satisfied with something which appears to be a model 1970s-80s partnership structure and consultation process.⁷ The success of this marriage of convenience is possibly suggested by the donation of one page, within the author's 10, to the junior partners. Here top union representatives endorse this MNC manager's worldview (meaning both his understanding of globalisation and his *weltanschauung*). BAE, however, is currently better known in the UK, the Gulf, and the USA for press accusations of corrupt business practices, allegedly carried out with the collusion of the British government, which then engaged in a legal cover-up. The consultation structure in which the unions are involved clearly does not extend to what BAE is producing and how it sells this. The junior partner in such a marriage is likely to be a limited, complicit and often silent one.⁸

⁷ This would seem to be a limitation of even the most recent European analyses and proposals for worker participation or economic democracy. See the review of the *New Unionism* site below, and Kester (2007). Yet challenges to what is produced and how it is sold – as well as various other 'managerial prerogatives' is a rising labour and social concern, as suggested, again, by the review of Hale and Wills below.

⁸ However, a (presently low-profile) anti-corruption campaign of the international unions *does* list BAE's dubious dealings, going back several years (<http://www.againstcorruption.org/corruption/newssub.asp?Organisationid=7795>). A first glance at this informative site suggests that the unions are supporting state or interstate initiatives rather than expressing an autonomous and assertive labour-oriented policy. For directly critical views of BAE and its role in a globalising world we therefore still have to go beyond the unions to campaigns directly concerned with the arms trade or its implications for British relations with Arabia (<http://www.caat.org.uk/about/about.php>, <http://www.angloarabia.com/>).

Unfortunately, the chapter by the union-employed General Secretary of the ETUC is similarly marked by the subordinate-partner syndrome. The ETUC is a confederation of national European trade unions of all backgrounds – Social-Democratic, Social-Christian, Communist. And the major point of reference in the piece by John Monks is the European Union itself, its competitive position, its internal market, its technological progress and, of course, its social peace. Although he refers in passing to the shock of the French (*and, hey, Dutch!*) ‘No’ to the European Constitution, Monks fails to mention that, in its loyalty to a Europe of its own imagination, the ETUC (*and, hey, its Dutch affiliate!*) had urged workers to vote ‘Yes’ to this! In the suspicion that, even in Europe, there is no such thing as a free *dejeuner*, one could cynically put the ETUC’s supportive role in regional globalisation down to the 10-12 million Euros it receives annually from the EU.⁹ Here - as elsewhere - cynicism is out of place. The traditional collective-bargaining/social-partner, union is customarily in search of a Big Brother under whose umbrella it can shelter.¹⁰

Having read my Good News introduction, readers may be by now wondering where it is hiding itself. Well, I feel it is possibly concealed within the Monks piece, insofar as he criticises ‘the illusory internationalism of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank’ (52). This is a step forward from the traditional international union practice, which has long been one of *polite dialogue* with these promoters of labour movement auto-destruction - as well as with the World Trade Organisation. Monks goes further:

There is an urgent need for a genuine Europe-wide debate. Fundamental changes in our internal economic and social policies cannot be dictated by the considerations of the traditional political economy. Recent history in the EU shows that trade and globalisation questions are now of wide-ranging public concern [...] We need a debate on the ‘new capitalism’ that is emerging, driven by global rootless capital. (57)

Fighting words. *Unfortunately*, however, his address is to a Europe of ‘rights-based values’ (53), morally superior to the Chinese in their nefarious ‘offensive in Africa’ (55). Not only is this Europe a morally superior entity, it is also one embodying will and power. Do I hear echoes of not only Jaques Delors but of British social-imperialist Joseph Chamberlain?

Fortunately, this is not the best (from an emancipatory point of view) union effort in this publication. Derek Simpson is General Secretary of Amicus, the UK’s largest ‘manufacturing, technical and skilled persons’ union, itself a merger of several

⁹ This was for its various dependent institutes, <http://www.google.co.uk/search?sourceid=navclient&ie=UTF-8&rls=GGGL.GGGL:2006-13.GGGL:en&q=etuc+budget>

¹⁰ Dated though it may be, a piece by Corinne Gobin (1997) suggests the structural/ideological problems that then beset the ETUC. 10 years later, she argues, any radicalisation remains rhetorical (Gobin and Mezzi 2007). Gobin is not only a persistent but also, surely, the most serious critic of the ETUC (Gobin Pending), regrettably little known because she publishes mostly in French.

others, and currently involved in creating other mergers or partnerships with unions nationally and internationally:

The platform for creating multinational unions is larger domestic trade unions and solidarity agreements with our international counterparts. Amicus and the Transport and General Workers' Union are beginning this process, now creating the UK's biggest union. We have signed solidarity agreements with super-unions in Europe and the American unions, the Machinists and the United Steel Workers. I believe it is possible to have a functioning, if loosely federal, multinational trade union organisation within the next decade. (33).

Fortunately, again, Simpson is not simply talking calculable size and speculative reach, he also refers to the necessity of reinvigorating the union image, of developing a 'culture of activism', of becoming 'embedded in local civil society', here referring to a labour-community alliance in London's historical immigrant worker centre, the East End, and noting how this has

Successfully targeted people whom trade unions have found particularly hard to reach – mostly female, ethnic minority and migrant workers and agency staff. (34).

Simpson further talks of what social-geographers might call 'multi-scalar' union action against global corporations, of links between workers and consumers transnationally, of unions recognising the new kinds of work and workers – particularly female, young, ethnic minorities and part-timers - often to be found in private services, retail and distribution, hospitality and leisure. The language on communication and on civil society coalitions is similarly assertive:

[T]he communications advances associated with globalisation can assist us. Robust organising strategies are being made possible and being democratised through the use of global technologies – fax, email, cheap travel, blogs etc – which can be used to spread workers' experiences across the world simultaneously, and can be adopted as readily by trade unions as by global corporations [...W]e have to deploy all the expertise and resources available to maximise...leverage. This may depend on the building of powerful on-going as well as ad hoc coalitions with other groups, be they faith organisations, student networks, shareholders, consumers or charities – either at global, national or local level, or all levels. (38)

This is the evidence for what I have called anti-globalisation creep in the inter/national unions. Creep, rather than leap, since, for all its assertivity, this is taking place within traditional union structures and in terms of its specific benefits to such. One could also argue that there is here some adoption of 'social-movement-unionism-speak', in so far as one can here identify elements of a critical discourse about union transformation going back 20 years (Waterman 2004b). Saying so is not to claim some proximate *victory* for this discourse. But it does suggest that we might say of the union organisations, as Galileo, under the Inquisition, is supposed to have whispered about the earth, *eppur si muove* (and yet it moves).

The sore thumb in this little but evidently rich collection has to be the piece by academic Jude Howell on Chinese workers and unions. This is a balanced and informative article. Unfortunately, in this company, it may be read as another contribution to the New Yellow Peril discourse presently spreading amongst unions and workers in both North (particularly America) and South (including Southern Africa). Howell has no illusions about the present role of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), as transmission belt and shock absorber. She suggests, however, that globalisation will provide the ACFTU with ‘opportunities to engage with the international trade union movement and understand how a trade union could effectively represent workers’ (48). There is here a Eurocentrist assumption that Northern unions provide a model both adequate at home and appropriate for export. The emergence of China as a major industrial producer and centre of the world’s working classes, raises rather more complex issues. Nationally the question is what forms growing labour protest in China actually takes. Internationally the question surely is how the international labour, and global justice and solidarity movement (GJ&SM) can effectively and positively relate to such struggles.¹¹

Perhaps the best one can conclude of this book is that it reveals the British trade unions with one foot still firmly in a passing phase of capitalist and state development, whilst one toe of the other foot explores the new world of work, workers and global solidarity.¹²

A Surfeit of Roots

Ramparts (as I will call the Sheila Cohen book) falls into two parts, the first mostly historical, the second more conceptual/strategic. It concentrates on labour protest since 1968 in the UK and the US. This structuring means the book is bi-national rather than even *international*, far less globally focused or informed. However, the historical half of *Ramparts* provides us with a lively reminder of the upsurge of such struggle in 1968-74 and the following period, of the Reagan-Thatcher counter-attack of the early-1980s, of ‘class warfare in the 1990s’, and of the ups and downs of the period marked by the Battle of Seattle (1999). The second and shorter part of the book consists of three chapters: on the contradiction between the union as institution and as movement; on working-class consciousness; and on the future necessary strategy.

From the beginning, Sheila Cohen argues for ‘putting workplace-based rank-and-file organisation at the head of strategic discussion’ (1). In so far, however, as the crisis of unionism she here records (152) is one of theoretical understanding, worker consciousness and appropriate strategy, I will concentrate on her second half.

¹¹ For which consider http://laborstrategies.blogs.com/global_labor_strategies/2007/05/why_labor_can_a.html

¹² It would be nice if one could report that European unions - or at least Left unionists in Europe - were doing better. A quick search on relevant keywords suggests that these may be even more trapped within the institutional parameters of their organisations or parties, even more bereft of new ideas, than their UK counterparts. Consider the EuroLeft union network: <http://www.european-left.org/positions/workgroups/trade>.

Chapter 7 is concerned to distinguish, both conceptually and empirically, between the unions as institutions and as movements. This follows her initial opposition between the rank-and-file and union leaderships, between the 'intrinsic status of the institution' and the fact that 'most examples of explosive growth and organisation take place *outside* the existing union organisation' (150. Original italics). Cohen's discussion of various theories of union leadership/bureaucracy surpasses the binary oppositions suggested above by reference to her favoured agents of militancy, 'workplace representatives' (163). It is these who do, or have to, preserve the difficult balance between direct shopfloor democracy on the one hand and a broader and more effective (industrial, national) perspective and organisation on the other. Cohen also tries to surpass both the conventional Leftist politics/economics contradiction by insisting once again on shopfloor militancy. This is conceived as containing an essential, if implicit, class consciousness and transformatory potential. (At the very end of her book, on page 221, however, she does allow the archaic reform versus revolution contradiction to creep back).

Chapter 8 seems to reject the opposition of 'false' and 'true' consciousness, yet reformulate it by an opposition between what the working class does '*objectively*' and how it thinks '*subjectively*' (175. Original italics). In an attempt to surpass 'false consciousness' *Ramparts* talks of reformism as a 'default' consciousness, of a

Dialectical *balancing*, within one consciousness, of two 'conceptions of the world', one subordinate, one transformative' (187. Original emphasis).

Chapter 9 presents the conclusions. Whilst insisting on her own optimism, on the potential resting on the shopfloor, and even on the 'inspiring vision of social movement unionism' (220), Cohen feels obliged to admit that, 40 years ago, workers in her two countries were much closer to worker's power (if not social revolution or transformation) than they are today.¹³

Now, as someone who has, like Sheila Cohen, spent a lifetime working in or on the labour movement, who puts considerable energy into both critiquing (mostly international) union leadership, and in seeking conceptual and strategic solutions to the dilemmas she identifies, I can sympathise with her effort. I also appreciate the fact that *Ramparts* is accessible in style, and that Cohen's argument has been made available online, at least in part.¹⁴ However, I think that whilst her emphasis on the shopfloor, the shopfloor activists, and even their alliances (cross-class, international) provides a necessary part of any labour movement alternative, it is far from being sufficient.

The problem is not only that she is looking back to the future, but that her language and attitudes are imprisoned within the period she celebrates. Moreover, that period could be considered as representing the peak of *national-industrial* unionism, and therefore of 'national internationalism'. Even, further, when making gestures in

¹³ Contrast here the contributions of Berlinguer, Ince and myself to *Networked Politics* (2007).

¹⁴ See www.plutobooks.com/cgi-local/readingroom.pl and her own self-critical review, <http://uin.org.uk/content/view/170/71/>

the direction of ‘international social movement unionism’, she is both short and dismissive (as she is of almost all other left theory or strategy over the last 40 years!). Cohen is associated with one of the more open and effective Trotskyist tendencies in the USA, Solidarity, itself behind the union monthly *Labour Notes*, and the socialist magazine *Against the Current*.¹⁵ She also seems to have an independent position within (against?) this current – and to preserve a critical distance from the Trotskyist tradition. I say this to establish that she is her own woman (even making, in her self-review, see Footnote 12, a criticism of her failure to deal adequately in her book with ethnicity, gender and other forms of identity).

What Cohen does, however, preserve from the Marxist tradition is the prioritisation of ‘class’ as *explanandum*; of the working class as privileged agent of emancipation; of the union as universal/eternal organisational form; and of the workplace as the primary site of human social emancipation. Today these are all matters requiring at very least *discussion*. What she puts together out of her experience, reading and reinterpretation is a worldview which has to be called either ‘rank-and-fileism’ or, more simply, ‘workerist’. Thus, even when *Ramparts* is referring to major multi-class, popular or radical-democratic protests, such as the Battle of Seattle, or the ‘petty-bourgeois’ protest against petrol tax in the UK, 2000, she cannot but insist on what she calls, in the second case, its ‘working-class trajectory’ (133). She holds, in other words, to a Marxist eschatology (though in the Marxist case, of course, the Chosen are not simply the Saved but also the Saviours).

Whilst, I think, ‘rank-and-fileism’ or ‘workerism’, are quite understandable amongst rebellious workers – and for that matter amongst revolutionary thinkers and activists during earlier phases of capitalist development – they are hardly adequate for those concerned with social emancipation today. Marxist traditionalists such as Sheila Cohen sit on the horns of a dilemma they have themselves created: that proletarianisation is the most extreme form of human alienation, yet (or therefore) the proletariat is the privileged agent of human emancipation. Following Thesis and Antithesis, comes, of course, Synthesis: the Marxist-ex-Manifesto *and/or* one of several Latter-Day Prophets *and/or* The Party. In the face of repeatedly contradictory evidence, Marxist traditionalists take recourse to rationalisations such as ‘the labour aristocracy’, ‘bureaucratisation’, ‘incorporation’, or, here, ‘default ideology’. But the Marxist paradox is today sharpened rather than blunted, given 1) the simultaneous de- and reconstruction of the working classes (and the multiplicity of those whose dream is primarily of Decent Work within it!),¹⁶ 2) the dispersal of working-class communities, 3) the crisis of the union form (developed against but also within earlier capitalist development models), 4) the rise of more significant order-threatening social movements worldwide – whether of the left or the right. And, finally, 5) the growing recognition that working-class people exist also outside the union-ised/-able workplace (Trott 2005), that they have other interests (as consumers, as women, as ‘precariat’, as the citizens they were not in Marx’ time, as species-beings confronted by ecological meltdown), and other identities (as gays, football fans, Muslims, as secular Jews, as nationals...). The notion that all such are subordinate to, *or have to*

¹⁵ <http://www.solidarity-us.org/atc>.

¹⁶ ‘Decent Work’ is the slogan and campaign that presently joins, in subordinate partnership, the international unions to capital and state in the International Labour Organisation.

be subordinated to, a working-class consciousness, pre-defined by one or other socialist intellectual, is a seriously counter-productive class-reductionism.

Sheila Cohen criticises (Footnote 12 again) her own failure to deal with gender and race as well as class. These are, indeed, damaging absences, in so far as recognition of such can qualify workerism, and suggest other sites of struggle, or negotiation, than the workplace alone - the neighbourhood, the media, the household, the bed. In other words, such recognitions can broaden one's worldview. As serious, however, is the virtual absence, within her account, of international/ism, and the *almost* total absence of what I call a globalised, informatised, service and financial capitalism. Her passing references to international solidarity are not always balanced, as when she repeats a crude Trotskyist condemnation of the Liverpool dockers for preferring international 'globaloney' (122) to local solidarity. It was actually because of the *limitations* of the latter that they opted for the former - in innovatory if ultimately unsuccessful ways.¹⁷ But her meager attention to the international is due both to her disinterest in globalisation/globaloney (101-2). And to a fixation on the shopfloor...despite the movement of so many of these shops to floors in China!

A pity, perhaps, that Cohen fails to give serious attention to 'social movement unionism', a concept developed and popularised, in overlapping if distinct ways, by both myself (Waterman 2004b) and Kim Moody (1997) - who, I am enchanted to discover (viii), is her husband. The concept hovers around her argument but is never explained, far less either integrated into it, or, for that matter, surpassed. It is quite possible that this notion is either undeveloped or simply in error. But, confronted by the global crisis of the trade union movement, discussion around such new ideas is more likely to get us off the horns of the Marxist dilemma than endless repetition of 'shopfloor' or 'rank-and-file'.

Labour's (Limited) Place in the New Global Contestation

Globalisation and Contestation (henceforth G&C) is a book that places internationalised labour and labour internationalism within the new world and discourse of global social protest. Ronaldo Munck has long given labour a special place (most recently, Munck 2002, 2003) amongst a wide range of interests, including nationalism, Latin American politics, development studies, social exclusion, and more. This book shows him, again, as a superb synthesiser of relevant theory, as someone who uses appropriate case studies to illustrate and communicate his argument and who ends up with a well-structured and highly-readable whole. The work, it seems to me, is likely to become a standard textbook on the topic. It is also likely to impact on activists in the global justice movement. An impression of the work may be conveyed by the chapter structure: 1. Globalisation: A New Social, Political and Cultural Matrix; 2. Contestation: Societal Reactions to the Free Market; 3. Transnational Social Movements: From the First International to the World Social Forum; 4. The Anti-Globalisation Movement: From Seattle (1999) to the Future; 5.

¹⁷ For a more complex view of the matter, see Castree (2000) and Castree et. al. (2004). Noel Castree and his colleagues have, indeed, written a pioneering work on labour and labour solidarity, which considers workers as not only existing in particular social spaces and at particular scales, but also as productive of such spaces. Such a view leads them to consider, in technical terms, previously unexplored aspects of labour internationalism. Given that this is, again, a British work, it should have been included in this review. By way of compensation, see the review by Ton Salman (2006).

Transnational Political Fora: Actors, Issues and Prospects; 6. Local Transnationalisms: Workers, Peasants and Environmentalists; 7. Reaction and Globalisation: Nationalists, Patriots and Jihadists; 8. The Great Counter-Movement: Empires, Multitude and Social Transformation. I especially appreciated here the chapter on the new and literally reactionary global movements: those of us in and around the progressive movement customarily forget that in the brave new world of social movements it is *these* that have the widest spread and greatest impact.

What we must focus on here, however, is the place that labour occupies within this work and how this is understood.

The *place* is actually quite limited, with labour and socialist internationalism appearing in a couple of sub-sections in Chapter 3 and unions in one part of Chapter 6. The page on labour and socialist internationalism both recognises and relativises this tradition. No problem here since over-emphasis has done us no good at all. The chapter as a whole presents a concise and thought-provoking background to something that many contemporary activists thought began in either 1999 (Seattle) or, at best, 1994 (Chiapas). But contemporary labour internationalism as a '*local transnationalism*'? This may make sense if 'local' also means 'particular'. But the concept of a 'working class' has customarily referred to at least the state-national, or colonial, parameter. And since Marx, if not Flora Tristán,¹⁸ social scientists and socialists have recognised or argued senses in which working classes have been, could or should be more than this.

Munck's *understanding* is influenced, if not determined, by his preference for Karl the Second to Karl the First - of the 20th century Karl Polanyi over the 19th century Karl Marx. Now, if we can reduce Marxism to the notion of an international working-class-led socialist revolution against capitalism, we can also reduce the Polanyi to the notion of a 'double-movement' within capitalism, in which the attempt to subordinate the social to the economic is confronted with social struggle to reimpose social control over the economic. Whilst I can appreciate that, in the continuing absence of an international proletarian revolution, it is tempting to either abandon or surpass Marx (preferably the latter), I would have thought that the exhaustion of the social evolution (the national Keynesianism Polanyi prefigured) requires that one surpass Polanyi also. So I clearly have problems with Munck's Polanyian turn, as also with the role of the working class in Munck's double movement on a world scale.

Limits to Neo-Polanyism. Munck follows Karl II for the following reason:

Writing just when the long post-[second world] war boom was looming on the horizon, Karl Polanyi foretold a great expansion of the free market but also a great social counter-movement that he saw as 'the one comprehensive feature in the history of the age'...For Polanyi, capitalism was moving towards 'an attempt to set up one big self-regulating market'..., nothing less than a global economy where the

¹⁸ Flora Tristán (1803-1844), a French-Peruvian woman, was the author of *The Workers Union* (1843), considered by many as a precursor to the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 (Lorwin 1929:23. She clearly considered the working class as a national entity. And - as a socialist and feminist cosmopolitan - of its interests nationally as embracing or expandable to workers everywhere.

market ruled supreme. However, there was a counter-movement from within society to protect itself from the anarchy of the market. Powerful social movements and institutions would emerge in a veritable ‘double movement’ to check the actions of the market and reinstate human interests over those of a utopian market economy. My basic thesis is that we are not now witnessing a ‘clash of civilizations’ (Huntington) at a global level but, rather a clash between the free market and society. (ix)

Munck is not an uncritical Polanyian since he declares further that

we cannot simply assume Polanyi’s rather functional analysis of its response to the market mechanisms. Polanyi does tell us that: ‘The ‘challenge’ is to society as a whole; the ‘response’ comes through groups, sections and classes’...but that is still quite under-specified in terms of a political sociology, for a globalised complex era. (xiii)

The problem for me, however, is that Polanyi’s double movement ends not with a surpassing of capitalism through either revolution or evolution, but a reinsertion of the economy in society and under social control. This was surely the vision and practice of Labour Prime Minister Attlee (former social worker) and Foreign Minister Bevin (former union boss) in 1945. Munck, true, does bring in numerous other concepts and theorists to enable him to make an enthusiastic case for the democratic global movements of the present day. However, he seems to at least allow for the Polanyian vision of a civilized capitalism and thus, implicitly, of a global neo-Keynesianism. I would consider the latter as a possible successor regime to global neo-liberalism. And a tendency within the GJ&SM would consider this also desirable. However, what I (and another tendency in the movement, including new labour movements) are interested in is a surpassing of not only neo-liberalism but also of capitalism. And one thing we have surely learned from the past of national Keynesianism is that whilst it might imply a gentler, kinder capitalism, it in no way guarantees us against *another* movement in which the economy again escapes from society and destroys not only the contending classes but everyone and everything! Surely we now need to seek for or create 21st century guides to social emancipation – as well as to labour’s role within such a process.¹⁹

Labour’s local and limited role in the global counter movement. There are here, for me, several problems. *One* is the limitation of labour in this work to five or ten out of 161 pages. Another is Munck’s use of the descriptive term ‘transnationalism’ in place of the analytical/theoretical/ethical one of ‘internationalism’. A third is in Munck’s consideration of contemporary labour internationalism.

This third aspect is illustrated by three cases. They are 1) his model of a local transnationalism, a 1998 strike by a small number of workers in Flint, Michigan, that snowballed internationally and was effective against the globalised General Motors

¹⁹ A starting point here might be Sousa Santos (2006), a substantial compilation on labour and social emancipation, which considers contemporary non-capitalist forms of production and land-based movements, as well as new forms of labour internationalism.

corporation; 2) the Liverpool dockstrike that began in 1997 and revived a flagging dockworker internationalism; and 3) the creation of a union network within the Mercosur free-trade zone in the south of Latin America. These cases are all problematic. The first certainly demonstrates worker struggle against transnationalisation/globalisation but reveals no expansion of a global solidarity awareness or ethic. The second struggle was *not* supported, as Munck suggests (96), by the international union structures: The International Transportworkers Federation was trapped in both state and union legalities, and felt threatened by a locally-initiated dockworker internationalism (of a kind previously denounced by one of its leaders as ‘strike tourism’). And, finally, Munck produces no evidence to show that the Mercosur union structure has increased worker solidarity across the zone, rather than riding, like its European counterpart and model, on the coat-tails of a regional capitalist and state initiative (as strongly suggested by an Argentinean supporter, Julio Godio 2004). *Fourthly*, it now occurs to me, Munck actually fails to deal with cases in which *worker* – if not necessarily *union* – protest has linked up in one way or another with the new social-movement internationalisms. This has occurred both within the GJ&SM in general and within the World Social Forum in particular. I find this absence odd insofar as such cases – also involving such ‘a-typical workers’ as street-traders – would have strengthened his general case for a 21st century re-invention of a 19th-20th century internationalism.²⁰ Munck nonetheless has a dialectical view of the relationship between the local and the global:

To move beyond the global/local optic we need to foreground the complex interplay of social scales in the construction of globalization. We cannot operate with the tacit rather simple divide between the global as smooth and the local as the place where difference is generated. Nor is it simply the case that the economy is always global and culture is situated at the local level. The cultural political economy of globalisation needs to constantly bear in mind both inextricably linked elements. We also need to foreground all the scales including the regional, the still extremely relevant and the supranational that is not yet global. In terms of political practice, the same way that global managers may ‘download’ problems to the national level, so the agents of contestation may take local issues ‘upwards’ in an imaginative ‘jumping of scales’ as it were. (??)

This is, in sum a book about globalisation and the movement response to it that provokes as much as it rewards.

²⁰ Evidence for these criticisms can hopefully be found in those of my works already cited. For a provocative case study written in the same spirit, consider Dinerstein (2003). Interestingly, this is about an innovatory workers’ movement in Argentina, and Dinerstein is another UK-based Argentinian. The struggle may have been short-lived and its international impact more notional than demonstrable, but of its radically innovatory nature there can be little doubt. Another Argentinean phenomenon that demands attention, particularly for its particular international relations, would be the relatively young and innovative CTA (Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos), the website of which is itself a source for consideration of its internationalism <http://www.cta.org.ar/base/principal.php3>.

The Internationalism of Labour's Others

There has, in the previously-reviewed books, been little questioning of the trade union form, a model developed against but also within the period of what I call 'national, industrial, (anti-)colonial' capitalism. And in so far as there has been mention of 'networking', this has been mostly in terms of relations between unions or extensions beyond such. Networking here leaves unchallenged the traditional national-industrial, pyramidal form, with its extension upward to Brussels, Geneva or Wherever. Along with this form has gone the ideal of collective bargaining and social (i.e. capitalist) partnership, again extended either upwards to the international union or downwards from the 'tripartite' International Labour Organisation (ILO).²¹ Yet many of the reviewed authors would agree that neo-liberal globalization has profoundly – if not fundamentally - transformed this old world of labour and just as profoundly undermined the union form, its traditional parameters of action and its equally traditional hopes or assumptions. Yet, reflecting on the massive influx of immigrant workers in the USA, Immanuel Ness (2005:187-8) argues that

We often think of unions as militant or even radical organisations, but in fact most are conservative institutions wedded to preserving the past. By their very nature, unions will oppose any change in a labour market that may weaken the bargaining power of their members. Unions are relatively inflexible institutions that have difficulty reacting to changes in capital formation that alter the predictable composition of work and thereby threaten standards established in the past.

So the question arises of whether another model of worker self-articulation (organisation + expression) is not necessary either for the new work and workers, or for the international labour movement as a whole.

Threads (as I will call the book of Hale and Wills), reveals such a necessity - at least for the new work and workers, both nationally and internationally. In so far, indeed, as the book was produced by academics/organisers within an international labour network, *Women Working Worldwide*, it exemplifies such a new kind of international labour solidarity project. Taking the estimated 40 million mostly women workers in the global garment industry, it considers the global garment industry chain. It reports cases from both West and East Europe, from South, South-East and East Asia, and from Mexico. With the exception of the last, the cases are all drawn from a research project organised by the WWW network itself. The fundamental issues raised by the study are many: whether to understand the industry in 'supply-chain' or 'network' terms; the relevance of union and workplace-based organising to such a fractured industry and vulnerable workforce; the relevance of a collective bargaining model of labour relations; the hypothetical value of 'Corporate Social Responsibility' projects to such workers, the problems of diverse national and international alliances between the worker-support campaigns, community-based organising, traditional unions and consumer-based organisations, and the nature of the action-research project itself:

²¹ For some (very rare) criticism of this quite central yet profoundly -ambiguous international labour hegamon, see Germanotta 2007a, b.

The book seeks to contribute to debates about the globalisation of the economy, the operation of international commodity chains and new developments in labour organising from the perspective of the workers involved. Drawing on internationally coordinated but locally developed action research has allowed us to highlight local experiences alongside global trends. We have sought to embody supply chain analysis, and bring it to life by looking at the experiences and situation of some of the workers involved in the contemporary garment industry. The action research data has already been used by local organisations that support women garment workers, informing educational programmes, political action and organising work. (15).

It is concluded that

The work of WWW can be seen as part of a new form of industrial action which involves political alliances between workers, trade unions, local and regional activists and consumer-based organisations in the key markets and central locations of major buyers. The significance of these alliances...is demonstrated by the evidence we have provided of cases in which there have been notable improvements in working conditions...and...examples of how internationally co-ordinated campaigns have successfully contributed to the establishment of trade union rights in a number of different locations... And, significantly in the case of workers in Bombay/Mumbai, how their support for workers in the USA helped those Northern workers win a trade union recognition dispute... Although *Threads of Labour* is focused solely on the garment industry, the research and action reported...can also be seen as relevant to those tackling the economic and social injustices in other economic sectors, as well as...the wider global justice movement. (237-8).

Threads does not claim to have discovered the secret of fire, but it does have an original vision and it does open new doors. It is also a professional piece of work, with numerous diagrams and boxes to either reveal the immensely complex structure of the industry (varied according to place, level, process or product) and to illustrate the argument. It has a chapter on the WWW network itself (Ch. 3), as well as a theoretically-informed and self-reflective chapter on the action-research process (Ch. 4).²²

One of the most important characteristics of this book is, for me, the bridge it provides between the shopfloor internationalism of the 1980s and the global justice movement of the present day. WWW was founded in Manchester in the early-1980s, has survived and, apparently, thrived. Several of the authors are names I recall from that earlier period, Angela Hale (who regrettably died just before the book was launched), Lynda Yanz, from Canada, Rohini Hensman from Bombay/Mumbai. The book does not trumpet its feminist credentials. Yet I wonder whether we do not have to put its survival through hard times down to the socialist- or labour-feminist

²² This book invites comparison with the pioneering one on 'fashion, free trade and the rights of garment workers' (Ross 1997). Ross, British born but US based, pioneers in drawing the connections between production, workers, labour-organising, consumers and commodity culture internationally.

tradition which nurtured these women. But maybe it is simply a matter of their individual or collective staying power.

For this reason I would like to know more about WWW. We can never simply rely on activists' accounts of the projects to which they may have devoted their lives for 10 or 20 years. One question that remains in my mind is the nature of international solidarity when this is primarily on the North-South axis and running in a North-to-South direction.²³ Another is the relationship of WWW and its members to the profoundly-ambiguous CSR industry. A third would be the always-problematic relationship with the funders. The fact that the book provokes such questions is suggestive of its value to those it is about and to those who produce such.²⁴

Threads of Labour does not necessarily provide answers to the questions I originally posed. The labour network is not presented as *the* answer to the organisation question. Nor is international solidarity networking presented as *the* alternative to institutionalised union internationalism. Nor does it take definite positions on the various old and new forms for negotiating or establishing improved wages or extended rights. The impression it gives is, rather, of a pluralistic orientation. In other words, it relativises the previously universal forms and processes of labour self-activity. And it reveals the possible activity and organisation forms taken by some of labour's others. It thus provides a rich source of material for further discussion on such matters.

The Vital Force of Working Class Cultures Across Time and Space

I feel that with *Live Working*, as I will call his book, Paul Mason has actually invented a new genre - one which reaches places not commonly touched in either recent academic labour history or accounts of contemporary labour struggles. It should communicate that history and those struggles, and the relationship between such, to new generations of workers as well as to those in the global justice and solidarity movement unaware of such.

As someone who literally grew up, and just as literally went to school, with British and European labour history, who has long studied and written about historical and contemporary labour struggles, national and international, I felt enlightened and inspired by this book. Much of this has to do with the genre, a quasi-cinematic one,

²³ I was intending to also review a new book on the globalised sex industry by Laura María Agustín (2007), a brilliant writer and activist, sometimes based in the UK, but who here focuses on Spain and Latin America. I was particularly intrigued by a chapter title, 'From Charity to Solidarity'. In so far as this reproduces the purpose of her whole book, to critique the 'rescue industry', it turns out to be a radical deconstruction of the understanding and use of 'solidarity' by those working with – or on – sexworkers. In so far as Agustín questions the good intentions of top-down, or centre-periphery solidarity, the book is a salutary warning to all involved in international labour solidarity projects. If, however, one wants to compare the international self-organisation of garment workers with that of sexworkers, one might need to consider such operations as the International Union of Sexworkers (actually a UK union of international sexworkers) or the sexwork issue of the UK-based *International Union Rights* (2005).

²⁴ For extensive further discussion and comparison, see the excellent review article by Ferus-Comele (2006)

consisting of flash-backs (or forwards) or montage, that creates above all an image of the working class as a continuing, if irregular, presence, existing on a worldwide stage. Such presence and spread is not offered in terms of a simple rise nor, obviously, in terms of a simple spread. What Paul Mason is both recording and urging upon us, it seems to me, is recognition of the moments and places in which there have existed working-class cultures of protest that had or have messages for humanity more generally:

[This] history needs to be rediscovered because two sets of people stand in dire need of knowing more about it: first, the activists who have flooded the streets in Seattle, Genoa and beyond to protest against globalisation; second, the workers in the new factories, mines and waterfronts created by globalisation in the developing world, whose attempts to build a labour movement are at an early stage. They need to know...that what they are doing has been done before...Above all they need to know that the movement was once a vital force: a counterculture in which people lived their lives and the the main source of education for men and women condemned to live short, bleak lives and dream of impossible futures. (x)

Quite how Mason manages the leaps in his narrative between mutilated workers in Shenzhen, China, today and the Battle of Peterloo, Manchester, 1819 is something of an artistic mystery. I can only say that it works, without parallels being forced or fingers being wagged. Other chapters deal with: 2) Varanasi (Benares), India now and the Lyons revolt of 1831 – both admittedly focussed on silkworkers; 3) The casual labourers of a Lagos slum, 2005 and the Paris Commune of 1871; 4) Oilworkers in Basra, Iraq, 2006 and the invention of Mayday, Philadelphia, 1886; 5) immigrant office cleaners in London's East End, 2004, and the Great Dock Strike of unskilled workers in London's East End, 1889. If we eventually reach the globalisation of unskilled workers' unionism, 1889-1912, we are later confronted by 6) 'Wars between brothers' amongst miners in Huanuni, Bolivia, today and German workers' failures to condemn the war of 1914-18 and to bring about a revolution at its end. Most exotic of all is 8) Mason's 25 pages on the Bund, the socialist union of Jewish workers, in interwar Poland. It is preceded by a sketch of the struggle in El Alto, a giant squatter city (on a plateau 500m above the city and the high-rises of a literally downtown La Paz). There are a half-dozen or more such stories in this panoramic work, often expressed in the words of the men and women activists involved. Coincidentally, I have been, as an international labour researcher, in several of the countries or towns visited by Paul Mason as a journalist. Yet my feeling in reading his accounts is less that of recognition than of admiration for his capacity to evoke them. And to do so with sympathy but without sentimentality or paternalism.

But what on earth is it that holds this patchwork narrative together? I think it is Mason's insistence on this counter-culture of resistance, of rebellion, of creation from the class's own resources, and of aspirations that go beyond the social and human relations of capitalism. He himself argues that

If there is a recurrent theme amid all this, it is control. Politically, the labour movement has debated strategy in terms of reform versus revolution. Practically, to the frustration of advocates of both

approaches, workers have been prepared to go beyond reform but settle for less than revolution. (xiii)

In his concluding chapter, Mason does go into interpretation, offering an explanation for the Post-World War Two loss of working-class independence, and of incorporation into two ruling-class projects, one in the West, the other in the East. However:

It is very different now. Today the transnational corporation is the primary form of economic life. In addition, global consumer culture is breaking down all that was local, insular and closed in working-class communities. There is, for the first time, a truly global working class. But it has not yet had its 1889 moment... (280)

Mason sees the leadership once offered by philanthropists, social democrats, anarchists or communists, now resting with the 'new social reformism' of the anti-globalisation movement.

For myself, as someone equally concerned with labour internationalism and the global justice movement, this is a dying fall. Perhaps the author, at the end of his marathon, ran out of puff. It is not simply that we get a gesture where we need at least a picture. It is because the gesture is to the ameliorative tendency within a movement that also has a powerful emancipatory wing. And because Mason appears unaware of the extent to which the labour movement is (an admittedly contradictory) part of this movement.

Paul Mason's comparative lack of attention to the labour, socialist and anarchist parties and ideologies that have played such a dominant role in the history of labour, and labour history (for better or worse) is due to his stress on the socio-cultural rather than the party-political. I find this focus (on a rank-and-file of flesh and blood, not one seen through ideological spectacles) refreshing. If the old labour and the new social movements are to be fruitfully articulated, Paul Mason's pathbreaking book will have made a not insignificant contribution. It should be read, taught, discussed. And translated, for starters, into Spanish, Hindi and Chinese.

Mason's is a romance of labour but one without sentimentality. Although neither a theoretical nor a policy-oriented work, it is certainly informed by both sympathy and understanding of the uneven (if rarely combined) struggles of labouring people. Many of the major movements he presents actually fused, in varied measure, labour and nationalism, labour and ethnicity, labour and democracy. These movements, their known and forgotten leaders and activists, are, it is shown, never archetypal proletarians, nor paragons of left or socialist virtue. They were and are, however, our forebears and our *compañer@s*²⁵ - people with whom we can in our turn empathise, learn from and with.

²⁵ This is a Spanish figure which has the advantages of surpassing the much-abused 'comrade' and of combining the male and female form.

In concluding, I have to return to where I began, with this book as a new genre. The book has its own website, which is both elegant and transparent.²⁶ Here it is possible to find photos, a 60-second video clip (Paul promoting his book in a Nairobi slum, with the *Internationale* being played in the background!), resource lists, and reviews. The photos and other graphics could be taken as illustrations for a book that regrettably has none. The site as a whole reinforces my feeling about this work as cinematic. And, indeed, when I met up with Paul Mason in London, May 2007, I enquired about the possibility of turning it into a film. I had the name of Ken Loach, the prize-winning British socialist film-maker,²⁷ on the tip of my tongue when Paul Mason said he had already approached Loach. Actually, it now occurs to me, it would be a pity to wait for any such possible film. It would seem from the website that sufficient resources already exist for a half-hour video.

From the Page to the Screen

The cinematic qualities of *Live Working*, and the audio-visual and computer skills demonstrated in its promotion, presage a welcome and overdue shift of international(ist) labour communication from the page to the screen. The activist tendency within international labour studies has long been connected with labour education and occasionally with the audio-visual (cinema, sound, video).²⁸ Yet a marriage between international labour studies and international labour media has been hardly consummated. Today this seems less something to be desired as something required: no new global working-class culture can come into existence without such. Two projects, one based in Britain, the other of expatriates Brits/Antipodeans, suggest to me the way research/reflection and communication/organisation may be moving together.

First a parenthesis. Whilst there has clearly been an explosion in international union computer use over the last 10-20 years, there seems to have set in, at this level, some kind of web-disillusionment or web-fatigue. The prime exemplar here has to be the site of the new social-reformist International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC, founded 2006), a previously adequate if conventional site has been converted into something which combines quite soulless design with information both limited in extent and late in delivery.²⁹ The various Global Unions sites seem to be also marking time.³⁰ We might conclude that unions get the websites they deserve. If so, the booby-prize goes to the (ex-?) Communist World Federation of Trade Unions.³¹

²⁶ <http://www.liveworkingordiefighting.co.uk/>.

²⁷ <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/03/loach.html>

²⁸ A pioneer here, and a survivor where others have faded or died, is Steve Zeltzer's San Francisco-based LaborTech, <http://www.labortech.net/>. A visit to this site and its links reveals the extent to which this project combines researchers, media-makers, computer specialists and internationalists. For a recent labour-relevant video see *The Big Sell-Out*.

²⁹ <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?rubrique1&lang=en>.

³⁰ <http://www.global-unions.org/>. When last visited it was still carrying an item on China dated January 26, 2005. That happens to be my birthday. But, aged 71, I no longer consider my 69th birthday news.

³¹ <http://www.wftucentral.org/>.

Unsuccessful attempts to go beyond its index page suggest less WFTU fatigue at the pace demanded by a computerised globalisation, than a failure to yet enter this new reality and master the relevant technology. If the Web had existed in the 1960s, when I worked for the WFTU, this is what its site would have looked like.³² Finally, or perhaps one should say *firstly*, none of these sites has a feedback feature, far less provides space for discussion, or significant access to independent research.

Once again, readers may be wondering about the Good News. OK, the two (more or less) British sites I want to mention are *New Unionism* and *Union Ideas Network*.³³ *New Unionism* appears to be based fairly close – in more senses than one – to the Geneva, HQ of not only various international unions but also the International Labour Organisation (ILO). It is, however, institutionally independent. Moreover, it is a quite brilliant new website that seems to me a possible winner of the competition organised annually by *LabourStart*.³⁴ It is, however, not only its aesthetics that are innovative:

new unionism>> is work in progress

what? why? how? who? join>>

³² The WFTU also got the history it deserved (Ganguli 2000). Rambling in style, restricted to conferences and declarations, sycophantic in tone, it has a back-cover Congress photo, showing an ageing, portly and exclusively male leadership paying respects not to some working-class or popular hero but the President of an increasingly neo-liberal and globalised India.

³³ <http://www.newunionism.net/>, <http://uin.org.uk/>.

³⁴ <http://www.labourstart.org/lwsoty/2007/results.shtml>. *LabourStart* was the pioneer international union website, with increasingly worldwide news coverage and regular solidarity campaigns. It also has lots of bells and whistles (labour radio, labour videos), and discussion of the latest technologies. What it does not have, at time of writing, is regular open discussion on the crucial international labour issues.

It is also its thematic foci, which break radically with those both customary and predictable from, for example, the ITUC site. The latter has:

About Us; Press Room; Campaigns, Equality, Human and Trade Union Rights, Economic and Social Policy, Members Section, Global Unions.

New Unionism has:

Forums, Youunionize, Inspirations, Free Resources, Success Stories, Lessons Learnt, Online Library, Cast a Vote, Union Work, Contact Us, Join.

Whilst this may seem to exemplify the difference between an institutional union website and a labour network one, *New Unionism* innovates also in relation to other new labour sites. It might, again, be suggested that the *New Unionism* concept and aesthetic is more likely to appeal to call-centre operators than to sub-contracted motor industry workers. But, then, it is the first rather than the second who are likely to have computer access, and we have no evidence to suggest that the latter, or their organisers, *prefer* sites designed by, or for, Brother Apparatchik the Union Officer. *New Unionism* declares boldly that it is

a network, not an organisation. We do not have formal meetings, special task-forces, triennial congresses, steering committees, or annual conferences. We do not decide on collective policies, nor do we elect network officials. We do not run collective lobbies, nor across-the-board campaigns. This is what trade unions are for! And that is why we strongly believe you should **join** them. They, in turn, are often part of global federations and organisations which promote workers' interests at global level. We do not for a moment pretend to be offering an alternative to this. On the contrary, we want to help in the building these organisations.

This involves building input from the ground up. If you want to network with other working people, industrial relations commentators, experienced union reps, labour communicators, and/or social movement activists at an international level, and to work with them in developing a community of support which reaches across borders, then here's the place to start.

My questions about, or challenges to *New Unionism* start here: with its self-confinement within the existing parameters of the inter/national union institutions. My doubts continue with the self-definition of *NU*, which seems to be a combination of 'organising strategy' (assertive union-building rather than servicing existing members) and 'partnership' (the extension of 'economic democracy' within and under capitalism). I am not sure whether the combination of a possibly recent US strategy with a certainly old European one amounts to one relevant for labour worldwide in the era of globalisation. But, in any case each of the conditions assumes

the institutions, procedures and norms of Northern tradition, with questionable relevance to a globalised and neo-liberalised world of labour.³⁵ NU adds 'internationalism' to the formula, but hardly questions traditional understandings or practices here either. However, I am more concerned that this innovative and original site demands of would-be affiliates that they buy the package! And that they be removed if someone (the owners?) consider their contributions inappropriate! Both conditions seem to me in contradiction with those of networking as increasingly understood, and of the kind of dialogue increasingly practised within the global justice and solidarity movement.³⁶ Given, however, the energy and originality of the site, it is likely to be one worth watching...and learning from.

Paradoxically, it is the more union-dependent of these sites, *New Union Ideas*, that seems the more open of the two. It is an initiative, apparently, of the British Trades Union Congress – not a body known historically for its interest in new union ideas. NUI is a much more modest innovation, in terms of both appearance and themes. Yet, whilst clearly also oriented towards the traditional institutionalised union movement, it seems so far to be open ideologically, and to be anyway attracting a rather wide range of (younger?) union organisers, activists and academics. Its major themes are traditional:

Conferences; Economic/ Social Policy; Education and Skills; Employment Law; Employment Relations; Equality and Diversity; Europe/International; Health and Safety; Union Modernisation Fund; Union Organising; Unions and Politics

But its current forums include Union Futures, and Union Engagement with Academia. And contributors to NUI include, for example, Sheila Cohen (see above) and Andres Bieler, coordinating the international Global Working-Class Project at the University of Nottingham.³⁷

Conclusion: From Creep to Leap?

What would be required for me to add a third cheer to the two originally expressed? Well, I would clearly like to see a leap where so far there has been mostly creep. Those of us raised within the Marxist tradition are always awaiting the turning of water into steam, of quantity into quality, of ideology into science, for the transformation of the working class 'in itself' to one 'for itself', from reform to revolution; we are always searching for the weak link in the capitalist chain (or at least for uneven development that is also combined) and, of course, for the final solution to the capitalism question.

³⁵ For a summary statement of the Organising Strategy + Partnership strategy, see Cradden and Hall-Jones 2005. For a critique of the West European tradition of social partnership, see Wahl (2004).

³⁶ Consider here the earlier-mentioned *Networked Politics*. This is a Wiki site, meaning one designed for collective thought. As a project, however, *Networked Politics* also has at least a couple of print publications. And it is taking an interest in international labour networking. In both content and procedure it suggests to me a more radically-democratic model than does *NU*.

³⁷ <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/politics/gwcproject/>. This project, which was present and active at the World Social Forum, Nairobi, 2007, is currently producing a book.

It seems to me, however, that neither in international labour studies nor in labour internationalism are we likely to witness any such apocalyptic transformation. Even less than at state-national level is a transformation within traditional emancipatory paradigms or long-existing social movements/institutions likely to take such dramatic form. Two passages from Raymond Williams, reflecting on Gramsci and Marx (cited Stillo 1998-9), seem here apposite:

A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realised complex of experiences, relationships and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits. In practice, that is, hegemony can never be singular. Its internal structures are highly complex, as can readily be seen in any concrete analysis. Moreover (and this is crucial, reminding us of the necessary thrust of the concept), it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own.

The key to 'revolutionary' social change in modern societies does not therefore depend, as Marx had predicted, on the spontaneous awakening of critical class consciousness but upon the prior formation of a new alliances of interests, an alternative hegemony or 'historical bloc', which has already developed a cohesive world view of its own.

The first of these passages surely also relates to what is hegemonic within the inter/national labour movement. The second is suggestive of the task before the global justice and solidarity movement.

It seems to me, in any case, that what is crucially required for an emancipatory movement within international labour studies and labour internationalism (whether in the UK or globally) is the creation of autonomous spaces/places where such can be developed. In the 1980s, at a time of the growing crisis and exhaustion of the previous such wave, I argued, unsuccessfully, the necessity of such amongst those writing about or practising 'shopfloor internationalism'.³⁸ Given the development of the global justice movement, of the World Social Forums, and of cyberspace today, the possibility of such (relatively) autonomous agoras or foci is today evidently greater

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'It is one thing to recognise the limitations of our own efforts. It is another to concede to traditional unions which are themselves in crisis and moving, in typically contradictory fashion, in a direction we have ourselves mapped out. We need to recognise their influence, financial resources and representativity. We should also dialogue with them (but when will they provide us access to their publications?). But we also need to preserve our own resources: our institutional autonomy, our political integrity and our theoretical/ideological originality. Progressive forces within the traditional trade unions may value these even more than we do!' (Waterman 1989:26).

Whilst, then, I was whistling against the wind, I think the argument likely to be found more acceptable today – both outside and inside the union institutions!

(Caruso 2007). And demonstration of such autonomous initiatives can be found not only at global level but also within Europe and the UK itself.³⁹

Let us finally reconsider universalism and internationalism. Whilst it is easy to deconstruct or dismiss the naïve Communism of Mariátegui, the desire he expressed predated that movement and survives its demise. So here is a post-Communist formulation, from a new (British-based!) forum of emancipatory ideas, that makes at least a provocative contribution toward the renovation of those intertwined concepts:

We need to think in terms of the circulation of commons, of the interconnection and reinforcements between them. The ecological commons maintains the finite conditions necessary for both social and networked commons. A social commons, with a tendency towards a equitable distribution of wealth, preserves the ecological commons, both by eliminating the extremes of environmental destructiveness linked to extremes of wealth (SUVs, incessant air travel) and poverty (charcoal burning, deforestation for land) and by reducing dependence on 'trickle down' from unconstrained economic growth. Social commons also create the conditions for the network commons, by providing the context of basic health, security and education within which people can access new and old media. A network commons in turn circulates information about the condition of both ecological and social commons (monitoring global environmental conditions, tracking epidemics, enabling exchanges between health workers, labour activists or disaster relief teams). Networks also provide the channels for planning ecological and social commons – organising them, resolving problems, considering alternative proposals. They act as the fabric of the association that is the sine qua non of any of the other commons. (Dwyer-Witthford 2007)

When the best that the hegemonic tendency within the international labour movement can come up with by way of inspiration is 'Decent Work', this kind of notion would

³⁹ For the WSF, Nairobi, 2007, see Waterman 2007. At European level, consider the already-mentioned *Networked Politics* project, initiated by British socialist-feminist Hilary Wainright and based at the Transnational Institute, Amsterdam. This has been giving specific attention to labour, as suggested by the publication released before the Anti-G8 Protest, at a workshop in Berlin (*Networked Politics* 2007). At this later event the suggestion was apparently made of having a meeting specifically on labour in the UK itself. Within the UK, finally, we should note the earlier-mentioned Global Working-Class Project at Nottingham University. As with other initiatives mentioned above, the understanding here of the working class or classes allows for the un-unionised and non-unionisable. Another new UK-based project, related to the GJ&SM, and first appearing at the G8 protest, would be the e-journal, *Turbulence* http://turbulence.org.uk/turb_june2007.html. Although, like *Networked Politics*, this project is addressed to the movement more generally, I was impressed by the extent to which it incorporates an interest in inter/national labour – not to mention historical labour concerns such as the Commons and the Utopian. And in what one contributor, Ben Trott, calls the 'directional demand', but I would rather think of as the 'subversive demand'. The latter, in any case, would be the kind of reasonable, realistic and incremental demand which is nonetheless subversive of not only neo-liberalism but also capitalism. The examples given by Trott include the guaranteed basic income grant (subversive of the wage-labour relationship), and the free movement of labour internationally (subversive of the national(ist) self-definition of labour movements). I would expand such to include: subversive demands on the institutions of 'social partnership', such as the ILO; and of the institutionalised international labour movement, by insisting that its policies be determined by labour on the ground globally, not by officers raised above them, in offices.

seem to combine the necessary subversion of the ruling commonsense with the equally necessary leap of the imagination.

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