



## Review Symposium on Jamie McCallum's *Global Unions, Local Power: The New Spirit of Transnational Labor Organizing*

### The Power of Rules

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In *Global Unions, Local Power*, Jamie McCallum (2013) offers an original and intriguing contribution to discussions of labor internationalism. His account focuses on a long-term campaign spearheaded by the Service Employees' International Union (SEIU) and Union Network International (UNI) to develop a Global Framework Agreement (GFA) with G4S, one of the largest global security firms. McCallum argues that the agreement reached between these two organizations and the firm reflects a new form of labor internationalism rooted in "governance struggles" that departs from other forms of transnational labor organizing. He traces the account back to the 1960s when international labor organizations went through a period of transformation, as well as efforts by SEIU to organize security guards in European transnationals in the U.S. following their successful Justice for Janitors campaign.

The book's central argument is that where workers lack structural power (Silver 2003) and where inadequate labor law enforcement limits workers' ability to enact associational power, GFAs can be a crucial resource for unions. Under GFAs that provide workers tangible benefits,



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employers sign neutrality agreements allowing workers to unionize without interference or repression. He argues that in cases like the precariously employed security guards he studied, before organizing workers, unions may need to secure rules that permit unionization via comprehensive campaigns that rely on corporate research and shareholder actions. The fascinating campaign he describes began with European unions' support for their U.S. counterparts; continued with organizing in Europe; was made possible through industry research following strikes in Malawi, Indonesia and South Africa; and was later implemented with unions in South Africa, India, the U.S., and elsewhere.

McCallum's story begins with the development of GFAs in Europe during the 1970s. Global Union Federations (GUFs) used these agreements as tools to hold multinational corporations accountable as they expanded, particularly in the context of Europe's regional economic integration. GUFs used various techniques like Corporate Social Responsibility campaigns or actions by works councils to move these agreements forward. However, as McCallum argues, the agreements tend to be dominated by corporations if the GUFs lack the will or capacity to implement them with individual unions through organizing campaigns.

The discussion continues through a review of the well-known case of SEIU's successful Justice for Janitors campaign in Los Angeles. Rather than focusing on organizers' and workers' disruptive tactics as keys to the victory, McCallum emphasizes the union's choice to target all employers in a given geographic region to prevent an individual firm from undercutting the eventual agreement. In this regard, it became less costly for an individual firm to agree to unionization: that employer knew other firms would not compete with them by offering lower wages or benefits. The "organizing model" developed in this campaign and then utilized to expand the union combined corporate research, visits to workers' homes, protests, and community support. This model would go on to play an important role in the union's efforts to build alliances abroad, initially in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.

Much of the remainder of the book focuses on the campaign for the negotiation and implementation of a GFA with the European-based global security firm G4S. Before this campaign began, SEIU had already established a partnership with UNI, a European-based group of global union federations. Specifically, SEIU provided financial support to the organization's property services arm (UNI-PS), which enjoyed autonomy from the larger organization, allowing it to spearhead aggressive organizing. The G4S campaign emerged from SEIU's difficulties organizing security guards at Securitas, a Swedish firm operating in Minnesota. Through contacts with the union representing workers in the firm in Sweden, UNI organized a delegation of European managers to witness their U.S. counterparts' racist treatment of the largely Somali workforce. Securitas replaced the U.S. managers and allowed SEIU organizers access to work sites.

More institutionalized global collaboration emerged from SEIU's efforts to organize Wackenhut, then the brand name G4S used in the U.S. The union's initial challenges organizing workers in the firm led them to collaborate with their British counterparts via UNI. The SEIU and UNI began to conduct corporate research on G4S in preparation for efforts to target shareholders and institutional investors. However, strikes in Indonesia, South Africa, and Malawi, as well as incipient organizing in India, served as the spark that would catalyze the eventual agreement. SEIU and UNI authored or commissioned alternative annual reports on the company's abhorrent labor practices in these countries highlighting human and labor rights violations. They used these reports as part of a complaint to the OECD, which eventually led Norwegian and Danish institutional investors to divest from the company. In response, G4S accepted the GFA with SEIU and UNI and agreed not to interfere with unionization campaigns in its global properties. The diverse strands of mobilization in distinct countries, research, and strategic investor targeting that came together in this campaign are particularly intriguing.

The book's two case studies focus on implementation of the GFA in South Africa and India. SEIU-UNI dispatched organizers to these two countries to train local union staff in the SEIU organizing model that focused on research and carefully targeted recruitment of workers in specific localities. In both countries the SEIU's strategies and SEIU-UNI staff members' confidence in their organizing formula clashed with local cultural and organizing styles, but eventually won local adherents to differing degrees. In South Africa, SATAWU, the union organization representing security workers, shifted from a servicing orientation to a mobilization model that drew on the SEIU's focus on research and targeted campaigns in specific localities. With SEIU support, SATWU gained access to work sites, permitting expansion of the union's membership and winning key benefits for the union.

In India, the results were more mixed. Local affiliates of G4S refused to abide by the neutrality agreement that was central to the GFA, and unions' strong attachment to political parties meant that the Communist-affiliated unions in Kolkata were more reluctant to work with UNI than their Congress-party affiliated counterparts in Bangalore. Consequently, the GFA did not lead G4S to recognize new unions organized as part of this initiative in India. However, UNI and local unions gained the Indian government's agreement to enforce minimum wage and other laws at G4S and introduced pro-labor legislation that was still pending at the time of the book's publication.

The book's conclusion points to an important irony. While SEIU-UNI's campaign successfully led to the negotiation of the GFA with G4S and its implementation to differing degrees in South Africa, India, and the U.S., the SEIU retreated from its global project because it netted few new U.S. members at G4S, although the agreement made unionization more feasible in other European firms operating there. Additionally, staff changes in SATAWU stalled the South

African project, and unions in Kolkata broke off relations with UNI, even though the organization began a successful campaign in Mumbai. Hence, while SEIU and UNI steered an impressive global campaign, their victories may not be sustainable.

McCallum has produced an impressive and far-ranging study that shows both the prospects and limitations of GFAs as important weapons in the arsenal of transnational labor activism. The GFA undoubtedly promoted unionization in South Africa and wage and benefit gains in India, supporting his argument that governance struggles creating new “rules of engagement” between labor and capital create the possibility for local union organizing among precarious workers.

However, his study raises important questions regarding the factors that make GFAs possible, as well as the relationship between this particular strategy and others adopted by transnational activists. The first question is one of emphasis. With his focus on the methodical work of corporate research and shareholder actions that need to occur *prior to* union organizing, McCallum perhaps understates the centrality of *mobilization*, which preceded shareholder actions and may have ultimately forced the company’s hand. Strikers in Malawi, South Africa, and Indonesia did not enjoy union recognition, and yet their massive strikes provided the crucial raw material that allowed SEIU-UNI to produce reports that were crucial to their effective shareholder campaign. In this regard, perhaps SEIU-UNI’s strategic skill was their ability to utilize those mobilizations to force the company’s hand. However, I wonder if the company would ever have signed the GFA had the strikes not occurred. In this regard, perhaps Silver’s (2003) argument that mobilization follows the inflow of capital to particular locations is a central, but understated piece of McCallum’s larger story about SEIU-UNI’s organizing expertise.

One of the book’s strengths is McCallum’s focus on union-to-union relationships. Several authors point to the limited success of labor rights campaigns led by NGOs from the Global North with weak connections to workers’ organizations in the Global South where states are unwilling to enforce labor laws (Seidman 2009; Bartley and Child 2011; Vogel 2010). However, it is interesting to note that SEIU-UNI’s use of the human rights frame in their alternative company reports echoes the “image jamming” strategies pioneered by NGOs as part of their anti-sweatshop campaigns. In this regard, while McCallum’s focus is on transnational alliances between unions, it would be interesting to consider the extent to which campaign organizers learned from or emulated earlier NGO-led campaigns.

Finally, it would be important to place this particular strategy in the context of the broad array of approaches adopted by unions and labor advocates to secure worker rights across national borders. In the conclusion, McCallum reflects on the possibilities for the export of SEIU’s organizing model or other transnational campaigns led by different U.S. unions. However, it would be valuable to consider the relative strengths and weaknesses of U.S.-based labor transnationalism alongside efforts by Canadian (Aaronson 2001; Ayres 1998; Dreiling 2001),

Belgian (Cumbers et al. 2008), and German unions (Anner 2007), as well as organizations combining unions in the Global North and South (Lambert and Gillan 2010). While McCallum may be correct that U.S. unions' experiences with neoliberalism better prepared them to fight employer intransigence than their European counterparts due to the latter's experiences with co-determination, it would be useful to consider the SEIU-UNI experiment in relation to other experiences of labor transnationalism led by organizations outside the U.S.

Overall, *Global Unions, Local Power* is a compelling and persuasive account of labor transnationalism offering new ideas about how unions can mobilize in response to global capital. McCallum's focus on governance struggles, multi-site analysis of how the global campaign developed, and excellent case studies represent an important contribution to our understanding of transnational labor activism. It will be interesting to see if this model or others gain traction in emerging global struggles for labor rights.

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