



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

Workers of the World Have Nothing, and Everything, to Lose

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Donald Trump was elected president of the United States based in good part on a growing critique of neoliberalism. While Trump himself will continue much of the neoliberal agenda, he is a vocal critic of trade agreements and corporate mobility that are harmful to U.S. workers. Trump promised to “make America great again” by promising to bring back jobs, punish corporations who try to move jobs overseas, deport immigrants, and essentially close the borders to many classes of people. We’ve seen similar nationalist movements emerge in other parts of the world, particularly Europe. The Brexit vote was in part a rejection of more open borders and also of an undemocratic European Union. Nationalism is one response to continued economic hardship.

Another response to the damages of neoliberalism could be an expansion of internationalism. Jamie McCallum’s book, *Global Unions, Local Power*, shows us what such internationalism could look like: unions working to build alliances across national borders in order to organize massive global corporations. This approach would regulate transnational capital, raising the floor on wages and workers’ rights.



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The campaign, led by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), has had mixed results, but overall, McCallum argues, it is the kind of campaign that is necessary in current times. As corporations have more and more freedom to move around countries and across borders, and as states rewrite laws and regulations to favor those corporations at the expense of workers, unions have no choice if they want to survive but to build their own global campaigns.

Internationalism is not a new concept for the labor movement, as McCallum shows. But interestingly, concrete efforts to make internationalist rhetoric real have ebbed and flowed *counter* to the growth of unions. In the wake of WWI, the left, and unions, turned away from international organizing and focused more heavily on domestic organizing. In many countries that took the form of building a role for unions inside the state (such as via corporatist politics), or via strong collective bargaining agreements directly with employers. It is only in recent decades as those systems and union power broke down that unions have turned back to the hope of transnationalism.

McCallum cites scholars that argue that neoliberal globalization opens up new opportunities for workers to organize across borders (Evans 2010). With the expansion of global supply chains, just-in-time production, and global markets, workers may have more reasons to cooperate and more structural power if they can stop production in key places. But McCallum argues that the Group 4 Securicor (G4S) campaign had some success not *because* of globalization but rather in spite of it. Instead, he asserts that it was a combination of strong union leadership and vision at the top, effective research, a global corporate campaign that helped change the rules, and local conditions that, in some places, opened up enough space for workers on the ground to organize. In this way, McCallum does not necessarily share the optimism that some scholars have for labor organizing in the period of neoliberal globalization—he does not think campaigns like G4S are a reflection of a Karl Polanyi-type “counter-movement.” At the same time, his work suggests some key lessons for labor unions and those fighting for workers rights in the global economy. I highlight a few points that I think are key.

First, McCallum’s work suggests that labor scholars and activists should not be overly committed to a specific model or approach. His case study is particularly interesting because the G4S campaign uses a Global Framework Agreement (GFA) with some success. U.S. activists in particular have expressed skepticism about the GFA model, as it is more in line with a European, “social dialogue” approach. The GFA is basically a voluntary agreement between a corporation and a global union; as it is generally not enforceable by law, it is therefore a “soft law” tool. Americans are cynical of this approach, having watched employer after employer violate voluntary agreements. Instead, the U.S. model relies more heavily on “hard law” contracts that are enforceable in court. The U.S. model is more confrontational and aggressive, while the European model is, on average, more cooperative.

At the same time, there are many in Europe skeptical of the U.S. model of confrontation and aggressive organizing, and certainly some resistance to U.S. unions coming into Europe and telling Europeans what to do. After all, the U.S. labor movement is in weak shape—and never even had its own political party. Many activists in the international arena have been frustrated by what they see as American arrogance and another form of cultural imperialism. Finally, SEIU has many critics, in Europe and the United States, who believe the union has been too top-down and overconfident, and too willing to compromise shopfloor organizing for other “faster” methods of organizing, such as making deals with employers.

McCallum acknowledges all of these criticisms and concerns, but then goes on to show how the G4S campaign was more complex than a simple analysis would suggest. There is not really one specific SEIU organizing model, and there isn’t even one specific model for using GFAs. In this case, the models came together with some positive outcomes. It is not easy, and varies greatly with local conditions, so there is no “one size fits all” or “best practice model.”

This underscores McCallum’s call for unions to experiment. This does not mean abandoning existing models or older practices, but being open to a combination of strategies and tactics in all dimensions—research, organizing, global, local.

I share McCallum’s call for scholars and activists to keep an open mind in the search for an organizing strategy. We have much to learn from history, and we must be prepared to learn from other countries, other kinds of social movements, and different types of organizing. For example, unions can work with and learn from movements such as Occupy Wall Street, the landless workers movement, worker centers, and worker co-operatives. Some scholars have even suggested that Alcoholics Anonymous has lessons for social movements in terms of building a non-hierarchical self-sustaining model (Room 1993). Employers have been bold and innovative in their quest to expand around the globe, testing new limits and pushing boundaries. Unions must do the same

The second key point is that unions need to experiment in order to find sources of power. Neoliberal globalization has created new opportunities, but for the most part, has left workers with less power, McCallum argues. Corporations have more power to move their jobs and investments, to fire workers, and to outlast workers’ organizing attempts. Because some service sector jobs, like security guards, are place-bound, employers do not have the same ability to just pick up and move. However, deregulated labor markets mean it is easier for employers to break strikes and bring in replacement workers. It is also easier for employers to use guestworkers or hire unauthorized immigrant workers. Lacking structural power, workers must find ways to exercise associational power.

McCallum cites Frances Fox Piven, who argues that collective actors can increase their power, or make it actionable, by breaking rules. People must disrupt the ways society functions on a daily basis, creating chaos and disorder. In response, policymakers work to restore order.

SEIU worked to gain power for G4S workers through building a global alliance with other unions and working together to conduct research into the company's weak spots. Around that time, 2006, the United Nations created its Principles for Responsible Investment. This allowed the unions to target certain investors and highlight the ways in which G4S was abusing workers and violating human rights in global South countries. The unions attended shareholder meetings, released reports, and filed charges against the company with the OECD.

At the same time, workers were organizing on the local level in multiple countries, including Indonesia, South Africa, Malawi, India, Poland and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The G4S Alliance sent resources and staff to assist with these efforts and draw more unions and workers into the campaign. The campaign used stories of abuses from some of the local strikes in its reports. The campaign began to have success with some investors, such as Norway's largest life insurance company, which agreed to divest from G4S. Eventually the pressure built from multiple angles, and the company agreed to sign the Global Framework Agreement (GFA) in 2008. The GFA required the company to stay neutral in unionization efforts.

This leads to the third point, which is that workers must develop power in order to change the rules of governance. In short: they must stretch and sometimes break the rules in order to change the rules. *Global Unions, Local Power* argues that unions may have more success organizing if they shift from a focus on labor rights, and instead work to change the rules of governance. In my own work on living wages, I have found that passing a law mandating higher wages is of little value if workers don't have the power to enforce the law. Winning legislative victories, or even a union contract, may have little effect.

More importantly, unions should get to the heart of governance. Neoliberal policy has resulted in a massive change of rules: governments have granted corporations and investors more rights, and reduced the rights of workers and unions. This is about rights, but it is also about the power to enforce rights and influence decisions.

If workers and unions play by the existing rules in a neoliberal economy, they will mostly lose. Employers already have more power under capitalism. Social democracy is one way to mediate that: to give workers some more power to even the playing field. Even a true "free market" would be more fair for workers than neoliberalism, because at least then employers could not grow to monopolies and workers would not be barred from moving to other countries. But under neoliberalism the tilt goes back the other way, to an extreme imbalance. Investors and employers have inordinate power relative to workers. The rules of the game must be changed in order to have a more equitable system.

Unions themselves can be a way for workers to change the rules in many countries, where they have a formal role in setting national policy. In others, unions have fought to set or change federal legislation.

Global Framework Agreements are another tool for changing the rules of governance. Other mechanisms that have been used in transnational labor organizing, like corporate codes of conduct, don't change rules of governance. Social clauses, like the labor side agreement in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) don't really either, because they have no mechanism for unions or workers to enforce their rights (unlike other elements of trade agreements, where corporations have legal channels and can win compensation if their rights are violated).

Global Unions, Local Power shows how the campaign won the Global Framework Agreement. By launching a comprehensive corporate campaign, the alliance was able to "disorganize," and thereby neutralize the company enough so that it could run a campaign to build a union. Without changing the rules of governance, G4S, as one of the largest employers in the world, would have had too much power and could have easily continued to fight the union at every turn.

McCallum is right to point out that the need for governance struggles is in part a reflection of the failure of states to regulate. Markets are unequal to start with, and neoliberal markets are even more unequal. Asserting that workers have rights is not enough, particularly in a terrain where there is no way to enforce those claims, especially across borders. Unions cannot rely on states to regulate corporations and must pursue direct mechanisms to hold corporations accountable.

At times I found myself confused by McCallum's arguments about where workers get power and how to use it. In part this might be because there can be a slippery line between workers and unions, between union staff and union leaders. In the G4S case, much of the alliance building seems to have taken place among SEIU staff and leaders, building connections with other unions' leaders. It also seems that SEIU research staff played a big role in setting up the corporate campaign and pushing the company to agree to the GFA. On the other hand, worker strikes also seem important. Here, workers used their associational power to cause disruptions for the company. But is this also structural power, as the strikes did impede the company from making profit? In any case, workers and unions needed to find sources of power to even win the GFA. They then needed to exercise that power in order to organize themselves into unions and win contracts. In this sense, the argument sometimes felt a bit cyclical: you need power to change the rules, and you need to change the rules to gain power. Perhaps that is in fact true, and McCallum's point is that it is an iterative, dialectical process. But it may be that there are different kinds of power accessed at different stages?

A fourth point that McCallum makes is that once they change the rules of governance, workers must then build new institutions. Building transnational labor movements depends on this. It requires more creative experimentation, combining local and international work. Constant mobilizing is not enough: it must be transformed into lasting organization or it will likely fade away. This point makes sense, and history suggests that workers advance significantly when their fight-back results in the formation of unions, political parties, and political structures and policies. It seems unions have had their greatest impacts not just on their members but society overall in countries where they were able to institutionalize their power on the national level, such as through systems of co-determination or formal seats on government bodies.

Unfortunately, many of our models for doing this have failed. Polls show that many young people in particular are skeptical of traditional vehicles like unions and political parties, as they see them prone to bureaucracy and/or corruption. While McCallum makes a strong case that workers benefit from unions, he does not take on the question of whether our unions are functional. Indeed, that question is well beyond the scope of this book. However, part of the challenge for labor activists is to take seriously the critiques of traditional models and find ways to make our organizations and institutions more democratic, accountable and effective.

Finally, McCallum calls for more vision, and, as one of his interviewees suggests, “imagineers.” We are now experiencing a true ideological battle for a new economic and political model, or models. While there are many political theorists, entrepreneurs and elites thinking about 10, 20, even 50-year visions, the union movement rarely makes the time or place for such kind of visioning. At times, this visioning has even been criticized as a luxury or a distraction. Some have argued that we can’t spend time on vision until we increase union density: only then, when more workers are organized, can we talk about alternative models. Yet this leaves us fighting defensive battle after defensive battle, or at best, stuck to old routines that win short-term gains. The G4S campaign was an experiment in thinking longer term, bigger and bolder.

SEIU has since launched the Fight for \$15 campaign, which I think is another example of such experimentation, as union insiders acknowledge they had no real strategy for unionizing fast food corporations when launching the campaign. Rather they worked with workers on the local level, first in New York, then around the country—and then in many countries around the world. This campaign has also tested old tactics (strikes, community support, corporate campaign, legal battles), but with a new approach: targeting city officials for legislative gains, revitalizing old tools like the New York state wage board. So far this effort has achieved extraordinary success in terms of minimum wage gains in U.S. cities and states. It has also assisted some SEIU unions in securing stronger collective bargaining outcomes. It has not yet won unionization for fast food workers, and to date, has had no victories in other countries. Yet it has inspired workers to organize their own

versions of the Fight for \$15 campaign, in Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, Canada and more (Kann 2014; Torio 2016).

This kind of experimentation is good, but I would argue it is still far from the real “imagineering” we need from the labor movement. We want to fight for short-term gains like increased wages, and we want workers to be able to form unions, but we also want to think about the larger system we want to live in. Union leaders and members need to have a critique of capitalism and the ways in which it fails to meet people’s needs. We need to study alternative economic models and have discussion and debate about their strengths and weaknesses. We need to have open, transparent and democratic dialogue about our own organizations.

We are living in a moment of serious economic, political and environmental crisis, and unions cannot afford to remain in defensive mode. The German political theorist Wolfgang Streeck argues that capitalism and democracy are no longer mutually compatible, and most likely, capitalism will survive with the growth of authoritarianism. If this argument is true, we need democratic forces building a challenge, to help the transition out of capitalism by expanding democracy and democratic control over the economy.

By most measures, the left is quite weak at this time, in most parts of the world. Some of it was killed off by outward attacks (red scare, military, state repression). Other parts were demoralized by the collapse of left countries or the failures of hopeful states like South Africa and Brazil. Some of the left has imploded from internal feuding, scandal or simple ineffectiveness. Left-leaning parties have mostly moved to the right, and unions are declining in membership and power. If McCallum’s point that left power and internationalism have had a somewhat inverse relationship, this should be a positive sign for the potential of transnational labor organizing.

Global Unions, Local Power gives us hope that the labor movement can be a force in building an alternative. Indeed, unions have been the backbone of key liberation movements in many countries. Now is time for those unions to build a global liberation struggle.

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