



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

### Charting New Territory: Global Unions and Governance Struggles

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*Global Unions, Local Power* provides hope in the face of dark times for labor organizing. Decades of global neoliberalism has forced round after round of concessions from American workers. It has led to declining union membership and diminished work power. It has also challenged solidarity, pitting worker against worker across the globe. In this midst of this decline, a group of security guards found their way onto the global stage as they organized under one corporation across the world. It is a story about how low-waged, low-skill, low-status workers won a struggle with the world's second largest private employer (just behind Walmart), a security company called Group 4 Securicor (G4S). Victory required an aggressive years-long campaign that included hundreds of thousands of workers across twenty countries. In the end, the Global Union Federation (GUF) forced the company to submit to a global framework agreement (GFA). This agreement allows workers in the company, regardless of where they are located, to organize unions without company interference. It had a cascading effect for workers, as they used the GFA to push for economic gains in places like Poland and Indonesia, and organize new unions in countries like



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Nepal and Congo (7). In sum, the organizing campaign included cross-border cooperation among workers from the Global North and the Global South, transcending the formal/informal divide that separates many of them. Together, they forced an industry-leading multinational to recognize them and their right to organize as workers. It is a true David and Goliath story. They accomplished what is thought to be impossible, or at best improbable, eliciting a desire to learn about the details, which is what McCallum provides.

MacCallum starts by putting global unions in context. The idea that workers will unite internationally against capital is as old as capitalism itself. The book traces the development of international labor cooperation starting with the emergence of International Trade Secretariats (ITSs) in the early twentieth century. During this period, ITSs assisted millions of workers on wage negotiations, struggles over working conditions and unionization efforts. The ITSs were accompanied by the emergence of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1919 and early global union efforts such as the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) and the International Confederation of Trade Unions (ICFTU).

Despite the history of international worker organizations, there has not been much headway made in organizing on the international level. In this section, I wanted to know why these earlier rounds of labor internationalism failed to truly flourish, which is partly answered by the start of the World Wars. I also wanted to know more about what we can learn from these past rounds of international organizing. McCallum does point out that the biggest achievement of the international labor movement in the past was a political campaign, rather than economic bargaining, which targeted apartheid in South Africa. In recounting the history of labor internationalism, McCallum also makes an important observation about the relationship between state-level labor movements and transnational labor organizing. He argues that the relationship is an inverse one, suggesting that stronger national working class labor movements have a lower propensity to participate in international, transnational or global organizing. This may explain why a weakened, embattled labor movement such as that in the United States was the initiator of the international labor organizing and cooperation presented in the book.

In this book, McCallum's key contribution to our understanding of global labor movements is his concept of 'governance struggles,' which extends our notion of how workers gain power, and more specifically how they extend associational power. He notes that work on transnational labor cooperation focuses on understanding partnerships such as collaboration between unions and NGOs, collaboration with new social movements, and the emergence of the European works councils. In contrast, McCallum shifts our attention to how cross-border collaborations achieve goals, identifying what he calls governance struggles, which include 1) struggles for social clauses in trade agreements, 2) struggles over corporate codes of conduct, and 3) struggles over global framework agreements. These governance struggles work to change the rules of the game rather

than to achieve recognition of rights, which extends associational power in new ways. Associational power is the power that workers gain when they organize together to enforce their rights. As McCallum states, “Whereas Silver (2003:14) conceives of associational power as based on the rights granted to workers through state and legal provisions, here it is theorized as the power to act in the absence of such rights” (29).

If we bring together these two important contributions from McCallum, it presents a contradiction. On the one hand, weak national level labor movements are more likely to turn to international or global organizing, but if they succeed and gain new governance structures like a code of conduct or a global framework agreement, they will lack the very thing they need for enforcement: a strong national level movement.

Also, while this example of international labor organizing brings together workers in the Global North and South into one campaign, they are not equal partners in shaping the campaign. Workers in the Global North and Global South have very different relationships to global governance structures and their struggles in the face of neoliberalism take different forms. In the Global North, workers are pushing to develop global governance structures like corporate codes of conduct and global framework agreements (GFAs) with the goal of extending associational power. As McCallum shows, some victories came through spreading the SEIU model of organizing. However, in the Global South, most workers face neoliberalism with a very different form of political struggle targeting their national level governments.

National governance failures, including rollbacks on labor rights, are related to the existing international governance structures. As McCallum notes, the rise of neoliberalism has evolved based on a global governance system centered on the “significance of the Bretton Woods institutions—the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—as governance bodies, especially since the end of the Cold War” (28). In turn, this set of global governance structures has attacked national-level labor standards and labor movements, eliciting strong reactions from workers around the world.

In Latin America, the rise of neoliberalism and failure of national economies in the 1980s and 1990s sparked resistance in the form of national general strikes, popular uprisings, and attempted coups. These actions ultimately took on a political form with the rise of new social movements, political parties, and candidates. In Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, a charismatic military officer and coup leader was elected in 1999, and reelected in 2000 and 2006. In Brazil, Ignacio ‘Lula’ da Silva, founder of the Workers Party (PT) and former steel worker and organizer of the Metalworkers Union, was elected as President in 2002 and finished his second term in 2010. In Bolivia, the rise of the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) and election of Evo Morales in 2006 emerged as a response to global capitalism and the need to protect coca growers.

In Asia, global neoliberalism emerged under international governance structures based on the Bretton Woods Institutions, reaching a crescendo in the form of the 1999 Asian Crisis. The IMF and the World Bank were at the eye of the hurricane, forcing nations to trade national labor protection laws for assistance in re-securing their financial stability. In Korea, the day after Christmas in 1996 the government held a special night session of parliament with no opposition present, voting through a series of labor casualization laws that would allow for layoffs and multi-tiered contracts. The Korean labor movement responded with the first general nationwide strike since the Korean War, bringing millions onto the streets and forcing the withdrawal of the legislation. However, by March, the government reintroduced the bill and passed it. The death knell occurred in the face of the Asian Crisis, as the IMF required massive layoffs as a key conditionality of the Fund's record \$57 billion aid package. It was argued that worker layoffs were necessary to restore financial credibility and attract foreign investment. This would have been impossible under the old national labor laws, but with the new law in place, layoffs started at a rate of 10,000 workers a day from February to May, which sparked another two-day national strike (Kraar 1998).

In contrast, the response to neoliberalism in the Global North has been a push to globalize national models, like the SEIU organizing model. McCallum shows how it emerged in the United States with the early Janitors for Justice campaign in Los Angeles, California (49) and how it was later replicated in the 'Clean start for Cleaners' campaign in Australia, and the 'Justice for Cleaners' and 'Driving Up Standards' campaigns in the UK.

In this sense, global unions, and their related governance struggles are a distinctive model of global labor struggles that dominates in, and spreads through, the Global North. McCallum's logic follows Evans (2000) argument that "Finally, the labor movement can counteract the advantages that globalization confers on corporate capital by demanding the global spread of 'core labor standards,' most essentially the right to organize" (231). However, the idea that traditional unions are a logical vehicle for organizing workers on the national or international level assumes that most workers are formal or standard workers, meaning they are recognized as workers, hired directly by the employer into an employment relationship cemented in a labor contract.

As the SEIU quickly discovered in India, this is not the most common form of employment, and hence, in places like India, unions are not the most common or successful form of worker organization. McCallum recounts how the SEIU took a trip to India to survey its options for a local partner. They chose to work with the Indian National Trade Union Congress rather than the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which is a national-level worker organization with an impressive track record of organizing workers in the informal sector. Here McCallum's detailed case study captures the difficulties of pushing the SEIU model, and shows how, on the local level, unions' approach varied from one city to the next. In Bangalore, the SEIU was confronted by a

relatively new union that held an open attitude towards learning the SEUI organizing model. In contrast, in Kolkata, they met a union with fifteen years' experience working with security guards. This local rejected the suggestion that they should drop its labor broker role and learn SEIU's organizing model.

Surprisingly, McCallum interprets the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) leader's resistance to the Union Network International (UNI) as evidence that Indian unions are isolated and isolationist (141). Reading the well-documented and detailed case studies of how the SEIU successfully built solidarity with workers across different places reveals more about the SEIU than it does about the local unions it encounters. The SEIU's approach comes across as anything but global. Its international relationships are not forged through mutual sharing and learning; instead, the SEIU's leadership based on brash gumption is combined with partners who are willing to follow. It is also based on the assumption that that the SEIU organizing model works, and can or should be imported and adopted in places like India.

While McCallum convincingly diagnoses the need for new approaches to international labor practices because "transformations in the global political economy have shifted the bases of worker power" (145), his prescription for increasing governance struggles which focus on "altering the rules of engagement between labor and capital" seems limited. The boomerang effect that the U.S. unions leveraged with their European counterparts was powerful, but it is less convincing that weak U.S. unions are driving success in South Africa or India. McCallum shows how the SEIU has been a beacon of light among the decimated labor movement in the United States and points out that European unions do not seem prepared to deal with the destructive force that neoliberalism has, and will continue to, wreak on their social welfare model. However, he stops short of extending his purview beyond the Global North when scanning the landscape for viable organizing models to lead a countermovement against global capitalism. The campaign against G4S does provide us with a successful international labor organizing model out of the Global North. However, given that most new workers being drawn into global capitalism are in the Global South, and the form of work is quite different, models originating from there might look quite different as well.

*Global Unions, Local Power* is a powerful and important reminder that global unionism, and more broadly, international labor organizing has ebbed and flowed throughout history, but has always been an important piece part of worker struggles under capitalism. Accordingly, as global capitalism transforms, so must worker struggles.

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