



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

### Rule Making Through Governance Struggles: The Case of G4S

**Fabiola Mieres**

Honorary Fellow, Geography

Durham University

[fabiola.mieres@durham.ac.uk](mailto:fabiola.mieres@durham.ac.uk)

Can global unions build local power? If so, how? McCallum's central thesis is that effective global unionism requires reciprocity with local actors. In *Global Unions, Local Power*, the author strikes a middle ground between the optimism about the prospects for authentic labour internationalism and the pessimism of its demise, by carefully investigating and dissecting the overlapping and complex mechanisms of the 'governance struggles' that lie at the heart of transnational unionism.

To illustrate his argument McCallum researches the case of a global campaign targeted at a private security firm called Group for Securitor (G4S)—the world's largest employer after Walmart—by the Union Network International (UNI), a global union federation, and its relationship with the North American trade union Service Employees International Union (SEIU). The analysis is enriched by two cases studies, in South Africa and India, where private security guards are workers in a precarious industry, and their struggles to improve their conditions have been marked.



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#), [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

The book makes four important contributions. First, McCallum addresses the complexities of transnational unionism as a philosophy and a movement. As a philosophy, it is rooted in historical materialism, disentangling a dialectical method in which the contradictions of history are used to explain the present. This is relevant to the author's elaboration of 'transnationalism,' which he distinguishes from 'internationalism.' The former implies the blurring of nation-state demarcations and a tendency to transcend national borders, not merely cooperate across them (164-165). As a movement, it shows how the crafting of a global campaign through 'governance struggles' (chapter 3) casts new light on the interrelations between the global and the local across time and space. The overlapping complexities and tensions in forming and executing the Global Framework Agreement (GFA) are cautiously researched and described for the cases of South Africa (chapter 4) and India (chapter 5).

Second, the signing and enactment of the GFA between UNI and G4S in the United States, South Africa and India shows the GFA as a maker of new rules, which in turn, enables the potential to achieve further rights. Thus, McCallum moves beyond the static view of GFAs as 'policy instruments' to demonstrate how they shape the rules of engagement and can be used in different ways according to local context. For example, in the South African case, the GFA provided a template to contain management's anti-unionism and promoted the ability to mobilize and organize (121). In contrast, the GFA in India has not managed to constrain anti-union behaviour, but rather led the local union to redirect its claims towards the state, generating a social dialogue process (143).

Third, reciprocity between the global and local spheres of action is a necessary condition for building global unionism (146). However, the case studies show how intertwining complexities at the heart of 'governance struggles'—surpassing strict top-down/bottom-up perspectives—lead to a 'boomerang in reverse effect,' by which unions in the Global North are reinvigorated by building transnational solidarity with their counterparts in the Global South.

Fourth, GFAs are most effective when they are part of a comprehensive strategy. The implications of theorizing GFAs in this way is that the focus is not only on the multinational corporation, but the nature of regional and global markets in which they operate in order to understand whether GFAs can be a tool for worker power, and whether workers really have the capacity to craft the terms of these rules.

The book comes at a juncture in which 'labour studies' as a field of inquiry has managed to permeate a broader spectrum of disciplines in the social sciences beyond sociology. From human geography to international relations, *Global Unions, Local Power* is an important read for academics, practitioners, unionists and activists interested in transnational governance. The book is nicely written, catching the attention of a wide audience comprised not solely of academics, but also activists and union organizers who want to understand the rationale of corporate research, the

thinking process behind adjusting strategies to local contexts, and how to engage labour power across borders.

The way forward? McCallum has provided new light on debates around labour governance through the role of GFAs. What lies ahead is a careful examination of what constitutes a ‘success’ in terms of particular global campaigns and the conclusion of a GFA. From the case studies presented in *Global Unions, Local Power*, success might seem to be in the eye of the beholder and shaped by local context and certain interests of global and local actors. Building on this line of work, further studies can shed light on other cases towards a comparative analysis of GFAs’ effectiveness. In addition, new issues in transnational unionism such as migrant workers, rising xenophobia, and political education can be studied from a ‘governance struggle’ perspective. McCallum has done an outstanding job of presenting transnational unionism and some of its limitations to a wide audience.