

Challenging Employer Power Across Borders – the examples of TPI, COZZ, BOA, T-Mobile-Campaign

Introductory Remarks **Michael Fichter**

(Introduction to the session: Discussions on transnational union activities (01) of the Conference “Transnational Worker Participation – Building Stronger Unions”, September 6-8, 2017, Berlin)

Ten years ago, when I began doing serious research on how trade unions could bring Transnational Corporations to improve labor standards in their global operations, conferences such as this one were unheard of. Even the negotiation and signing of a Global Framework Agreement rarely involved more than a single Global Union Federation and a national union recognized by corporate headquarters of a Transnational Corporation.

But today, as evidenced by the four organizing projects and campaigns represented on this panel, building union power across borders to challenge employers in a global economy is becoming a growing concern of unions around the world.

Of course I am not saying that unions have no history or tradition of internationalism. But their dominant and decisive venue of operation has been within national boundaries. Unions are member organizations, anchored in their membership at local workplaces and embedded in political and legal traditions, country for country. From their earliest days this local and national framework was their arena and rarely, only when it was absolutely necessary, did they venture to wage battles beyond those borders. International activities were mainly for informational exchange and resolutions of solidarity with unions locked in local or national struggles, and not for engaging in jointly supported organizing activities. For most unions, local, national or global, this is a new experience and a new and massive challenge.

So what has motivated unions to invest their limited resources in transnational projects such as the four you are going to hear more about in a few minutes?

All of these transnational projects are seeking ways to combat on-going processes of fragmentation and globalization. The mass production factory of 19th and 20th century capitalism is being dismantled and fragmented, both internally by replacing regular workers with agency temps and contractors, and geographically by the massive spread of global value chains. Outsourcing, offshoring, sub-contracting and agency work have taken their toll on union membership and weakened trade union bargaining positions.

And in countries on the receiving end of the job caravan, generally characterized by lower wages, poorer working conditions, higher unemployment and, last but certainly not least, a culture of anti-unionism, the question has been how to raise standards and wages and improve the prospects of development – not in the least by building unions.

Transnational cooperation is in the self-interest of unions for safeguarding working standards and working conditions that they want to uphold or achieve. Trade unions may have secured niches of power at single workplaces or across a sector of industry or services within their own country. In the face of transnational corporate power based in global value chains, those are fragmented and endangered strongholds.

Just as the limits of exclusive craft union membership became evident as industrialization spawned mass production factories, so too is a patchwork of union strongholds at single company sites or in selected countries insufficient to challenge global capital at eye-level.

To protect the rights of workers and represent their fundamental interests in this globalised world, unions need to secure their local and national power base *within* global value chains by connecting across borders and *along* global value chains.¹

This is the common denominator of these and other transnational projects, and the recognition of its importance is for me a giant step forward. Globalization is continuously redefining the parameters within which trade unions can organise and operate. The power and influence of TNC-controlled global value chains is a defining element of this new context, affecting all workers, even in key areas of the public sector.

But how have these organizing projects turned an understanding of the problems unions face in a globalized economy into viable policies and strategies? That's something that the four projects and campaigns on this panel can best answer for themselves. But beyond each individual project there are some basic challenges they all face. Let me speak briefly to four of them.

One challenge that all transnational projects of this sort face, at least as far as national unions are concerned, is securing broad support for such action in sections of the union not directly or normally involved in transnational issues. Anchoring such transnational organizing activities in the union, integrating them into national and local priorities can be crucial to their success.

A second challenge faced by all of these projects concerns their timeframe. Most projects need to have a long-term perspective to develop sustainability and make an impact. And that impact is often hard to grasp for participants not immediately involved. In transnational organizing projects the impact is dependent on the functioning and cooperation of more than a single trade union; as such, its dynamics are less easy to grasp than in a single union organizing campaign.

This leads me to a third challenge: How to build trust within such projects? Different unions, different countries, different union cultures. Large unions, small unions. Powerful unions and weak unions. Whose resources? What kinds of resources? I think that these four projects can testify to the importance of trust in getting the projects off the ground and enabling day-to-day operations to run smoothly. Openness, realism and commitment are indispensable, as are member exchanges and educational programs.

And a fourth, extremely important challenge concerns decision-making and the need to develop strategic perspectives. A transnational organizing project brings together unions each with their own operational procedures and decision-making structures. And these differing procedures and structures of the participating unions will play an important role in the project. But such projects can easily flounder if they do not have their own clearly defined and transparent communication and decision-making structures that control the project and mesh the project with the participating unions.

¹ <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/11560.pdf>

In sum, trade unions require bold new approaches to fight the power of Transnational Corporations and meet the challenge of global value chains.

Building new bases of transnational power as a counterweight to TNCs challenges assumed priorities in policy-making and operating procedures. And it calls for exercising capabilities required to mobilize necessary power resources, capabilities such as learning from past campaigns and being able to recognize and articulate what is needed to confront a problem or deal with an issue. That is a start, a basis for framing the issue in terms of a strategy and building interest-based support within and across unions.

I am convinced that transnational union partnerships require an honest and open dialogue based on a mutual recognition of self-interest among all partners and potential partners within and across national boundaries. Trade union partnerships are the core and the driving force of transnational worker representation. But the need for waging these struggles and the message they send has to spread beyond the workplace. Union interest representation must be articulated in a way that fosters community support and understanding, and enables non-union organizations to engage on behalf of workers and their families as well.

This requires serious reassessments of organisational structures and resource allotments. And it requires setting new priorities and devising the means for increased union cooperation. Strategies for transnational (and national) action within and along global value chains need to be built on forming networks, networks based on cooperation, trust and defined rules and responsibilities. Basic principles are eye-level partnership and membership involvement, a multi-level task linking the local to the global.

The challenges are formidable, and as these four projects as well as many others in our project "Trade Unions in Transformation"² will show you, there is no one-size-fits-all way ahead. Finding the right mix of organisational change, resource input, member mobilization, campaign focus and alliance politics does not come easy, to which I am sure my colleagues here from these different projects can attest. But it can and is being done. Lets take a closer look at these prime examples.

Thank you.

² <http://www.fes.de/lnk/transform>