

TRADE UNION RESPONSES TO GLOBALIZATION

A review by the Global Union Research Network

Edited by Verena Schmidt

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GLOBAL UNION RESEARCH NETWORK

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TRANSNATIONAL UNION NETWORKS, FEMINISM AND LABOUR ADVOCACY

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Union feminists are playing an important role in mobilizing women's participation in transnational campaigns for labour rights and economic justice. Our research suggests that union feminists, with their structural ties to both organized labour and the women's movement, are in a unique position within both movements to mobilize in response to the issues and concerns that rapid economic globalization raises for all workers. Because union renewal depends on developing new ideas and resources for organizing new types of workers and new types of workplaces, it is important for unions to create a central place for the participation of union feminists in their organizations, campaigns and struggles.

We view union feminism as goal-oriented collective action taken on behalf of the rights of women as a group. Union feminism emerges out of the day-to-day struggles by women for equality, respect and dignity at home, in the workplace, in their unions and in society as a whole. Union feminists use discursive tools (conference resolutions, policy statements, educational programmes, websites, newsletters, etc.) as well as institutionally sanctioned spaces (conventions, workshops, labour schools, committee structures, etc.).

They use these tools to fashion a network of resources that can be called into action to mobilize union members and their potential supporters at strategically important moments. This network helps to establish and sustain more permanent structures of organizational participation, as well as a collective identity based on the belief that social and political action taken by a group can make a difference (Fonow, 2003).

We examine several sites where union feminists are using transnational labour networks to build international solidarity, to create new discourses of advocacy, and to build alliances with activists from grassroots organizations,

NGOs and other social movements. Our examples and illustrations are drawn from research we have conducted on the work of union feminists within the ICFTU¹ and the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF).

Union feminists and transnational networks

As a political environment, globalization has reconfigured the opportunities for politics and the repertoire for collective actions available to social movements (Moghadam, 2001). For example, emerging new political opportunity structures such as transnational labour advocacy networks provide union women with the opportunity to participate in the ongoing construction of transnational labour solidarity. Networks can serve both as actors in politics and as a way to mobilize and structure the actions of participants. However, the existence of networks in and of themselves does not produce collective action; networks have to be framed by movements as useful avenues for mobilization.

Unions have always been involved in international labour networks, but more recently their networks have become stronger and more diverse. There has been a proliferation of political spaces where the interests of labour overlap with other movements and with advocacy organizations concerned with labour rights and development. Increasingly, campaigns for labour rights are organized and funded with non-union support from churches, foundations, NGOs and universities. Labour conferences and periodicals focus more on non-contract issues such as worker empowerment, organizing, union democracy and feminism. Contract issues are being defined in new ways, and many unions are actively engaged in equity bargaining (Kidder, 2002). New players from the non-profit sector and activists from other social movements are joining with unions as strategic partners in the growing transnational advocacy network for labour rights.

Some unions have taken the step of creating their own transnational non-governmental agencies that link unions to grassroots organizations and to NGOs. For example, Canadian steelworkers have created the Steelworkers Humanity Fund. Established in 1985, the fund supports 31 international aid and development projects in 13 countries, including seven women's NGOs in Bangladesh, Bolivia, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru and South Africa. Because of the active participation of union feminists, the projects sponsored by the fund are required to reflect principles of gender equity, democratic participation and environmental sustainability. Applicants must demonstrate how the design, implementation, and evaluation of their project incorporates

¹ In November 2006, ICFTU, WCL and a number of previously unaffiliated unions created the ITUC. As the research was carried out before the creation of the ITUC, the term "ICFTU" will be used.

the involvement of women and how the project will affect gender and the division of labour, property relations and access to education and training. The guidelines go even further by acknowledging that the power differentials between women and men affect economic development, “Development activities have historically affected women differently than men. This reflects the greater poverty and dependence women experience in most parts of the world and the inequality of women relative to men in their political, economic and social power” (Fonow, 2003, p. 179).

Women are encouraged to discover their own unique approaches to empowerment and to develop leadership and communication skills through their participation in community-based organizations serving women. One example of this principle in action is the Women’s Integral Training Institute (IFFI) in Bolivia which received union funding for an educational programme that brought together about 750 women from more than 40 women’s organizations working in poor neighbourhoods. The curriculum was designed to increase the capacity of women to exercise and influence power in both the public and private spheres. According to Carmen Zabalga, IFFI’s Director, “We’re involved in teaching women about their rights, and have been successful in our campaign to enact legislation prohibiting domestic violence. Unless we get involved politically, our work won’t be self-sustaining. We have to institutionalize change if we want to endure” (Fonow, 2003, p. 181).

These collaborations help to expand traditional ideas about the roles unions can play in the movement for global justice. Transnational labour advocacy networks have become mobilizing structures for feminists and labour activists. They have opened the way for union feminists to play an active role in shaping the discourses and mobilizing strategies of organized labour. Within these networks union feminists challenge conventional notions: first, of the class-based solidarity of the labour movement, by acknowledging the differences of gender, race, sexuality and ethnicity within class; and second, of the gender-based solidarity of the women’s movement by recognizing the class differences among women. The creation of gender-specific, class-based political demands defines who is or is not included in the process of developing social movements, thus creating new types of political claims and new solidarities, which Curtin (1999) labels contingent solidarities.² In the case of union feminists, these contingent solidarities are mediated through activists’ and advocacy networks.

² As a tool of analysis, the concept of contingent solidarities provides a framework for identifying how and why women have defined their political interests the way they have within particular political fields. This concept “allows for a cross-national analysis of the ways in which class, welfare state, labour markets and cultural discourse have included or excluded women and how women trade unionists themselves have influenced the construction and formulation of claims, strategies and solidarities” (Curtin, 1999, p. 60).

In the context of intensified globalization, new interconnections of networks and communities produce new alliances and reveal common needs and concerns. In our research, we identify a number of spheres where union feminists have mobilized resources to address the impact of globalization on women's labour rights and to forge collective identities as transnational activists. These alliances can be sites of labour renewal, including formal organizations, networks, and forums such as the ILO, ICFTU, the GUFs and the WSF and less formal alliances such as international campaigns for pay equity and against sweatshops and unfair trade agreements. We have even identified some surprising platforms, such as gay pride festivals. Below we analyse two agencies of transnational labour advocacy, the IMF and the ICFTU, where union feminists are playing an important role in advocating for labour rights and economic justice.

Feminist networks within the global union federations

As alliances of advocacy, unions bring workers together within and across workplaces, firms and communities, and within and across national borders. This can occur at the international level through a union's formal membership in international trade union secretariats and confederated labour bodies. And, less formally, through strategic partnerships and alliances with inter-governmental agencies, transnational social movements and NGOs.

One site of increasing importance to union feminists is the network of women's committees and equity offices within the ICFTU and GUFs.³ The women's committees of each federation are networked through the coordinating activities of the ICFTU, which in 2005 renewed its major campaign to significantly increase women's membership in unions worldwide, and to increase their representation and participation in union programmes, activities and decision-making structures. The organizing campaign, "Unions for Women and Women for Unions", targets specific groups of women workers including women working in the informal economy, young women, migrant women, women from ethnic minorities and women employed in EPZs.

In February 2003 the ICFTU brought women union leaders from 225 unions and 148 countries to Melbourne, Australia, for the 8th World Women's Conference. The event was hosted by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). Delegates participated in workshops and panels on a wide range of topics, ranging from those closely associated with trade unions, such as collective bargaining, to more pressing political issues such as the war in Iraq.

³ For an in-depth discussion of the role of union feminists in the ICFTU see Moghadam, 2005.

Delegates passed a strong feminist anti-war measure that spelled out the specific ways war impacts women and girls. The ICFTU conference organizers made an effort to include in the conference programme prominent feminist leaders from the non-profit development sector. Elmira Nazombe of the Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ) addressed the delegates about building alliances between labour and transnational NGOs. The WICEJ, founded in 2000, is a transnational network of 45 women's economic and human rights organizations from every region of the world. It focuses on the link between gender, race and macroeconomic policy within international inter-governmental policy circles. The coalition works with labour bodies such as the ICFTU, American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO) and PSI to get governments to pay greater attention to ILO core labour standards. The coalition is actively involved in the WSF, UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and UN Financing for Development process. The coalition has developed a methodology that allows activists, unions and NGOs to conduct an analysis of the way gender and race intersect with globalization.⁴ Nazombe told the delegates that improving relations between unions and NGOs is a challenge but necessary if the economic lives of women are to improve. She believes that spontaneous organization of women workers outside union structures has increased the awareness of unions for the need to cooperate with women's rights organizations. "The unions themselves are increasingly aware of the need to meet the demands of women workers. But that will require informing women about the unions and their work, which will in turn mean increasing exchanges between the unions and organizations working with women" (Fonow, 2005, p. 221).

Our second example of feminist union networking involves one of the oldest global union federations, the IMF, founded in 1883. Today the IMF represents 24.8 million metal industry workers in steel, auto, shipbuilding, electronics and precision instruments in 101 countries, and nearly one-third of its membership is female.

A women's conference was held on the day prior to the opening of the 31st World Congress of the IMF held in Vienna in May of 2005, in which 126 of the women delegates came together to strategize how to increase their visibility and effectiveness at the congress. The women introduced two resolutions at the congress. The first resolution, "Women's work under globalisation"

⁴ The elements of this methodology involve collecting and reporting data that are disaggregated by race, gender, ethnicity, descent, citizenship status and other categories of difference; contextualizing the disaggregated data by focusing on social and historical factors such as slavery, colonialism and religious differences that exacerbate the inequities of globalization, and; reviewing policy initiatives and systems of implementation through the lens of the disaggregated data and their context.

(IMF, 2005a), called for the IMF affiliates to take a stand against inferior forms of employment for women; to gather information on gender segmentation and equal pay and use the information to ensure that women are not restricted to the lowest-paid, lowest-skilled work; and to work with women's organizations to organize women workers in EPZs and the other ghettos of globalization to improve the lives of working women. The second resolution, "Statement on gender equality" (IMF, 2005b), focused on steps that the IMF and the affiliates should take to ensure that women are given the opportunity to participate in IMF events and to develop as leaders at every level of the federation. The resolution cited the need to support the work of women's committees, to continue to organize new women members, and to take up the unique needs of women through collective bargaining. The discourse framing the resolutions reflected a feminist understanding of how globalization is gendered. The resolution states, "Women's employment under globalization is precarious. Millions of young women throughout the world are hired at minimal wages, only to be laid off when they get married or start a family. Women's jobs are the first to be lost, often forcing them into even more marginal and potentially dangerous means to earn a living, or to migrate in search of work" (IMF, 2005b).

The IMF Congress included several keynote addresses and roundtable discussions that dealt specifically with global justice and how organized labour can build alliances with other social movements, with NGOs and with civil society to protect and advance workers' rights. Sharan Burrow, President of the ACTU and the first woman elected to the presidency of the ICFTU (elected in 2004), addressed the IMF Congress on the theme of workers' rights and referred to herself as a "feisty feminist and woman warrior". She told the congress that it is essential for labour to enhance its capacity to hold governments and corporations responsible for respecting the hard-won rights of workers throughout the supply chain. One way to do this, she argued, is for unions to build stronger alliances with NGOs and the rest of civil society. According to Burrow, this will require multiple strategies including organizing new workers in the EPZs, fighting for the rights of migrant workers, enhancing human rights in China, joining the fight against poverty, and linking workers' rights with shareholder activism and consumer power (IMF, 2005c). In our interview with Burrow, she told us that union feminists play an important role in helping unions understand how to close the gap between the organization of women and the low labour standards underpinning women's work.

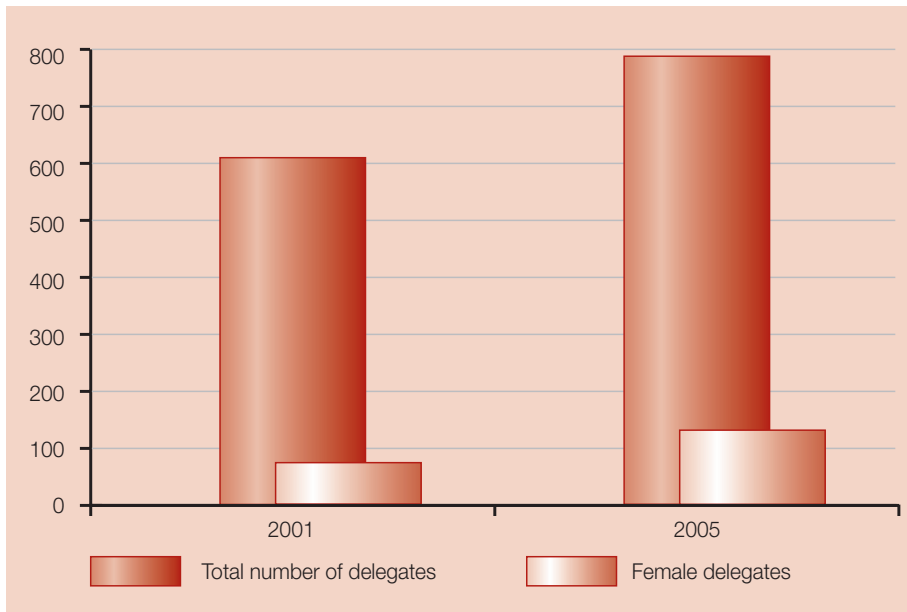
The most dramatic and moving appeal for building new social alliances came from Janet Barzola, President of the Central Nacional de la Mujer Minera, a national organization in Peru that seeks to support the labour rights of subcontracted workers in the mining industry against the practices of multi-nationals. Barzola works with the wives of these mostly unorganized miners to

improve living conditions in mining communities. Her organization is working with an IMF affiliate in the region to organize these miners. She vividly described the conditions of poverty in the mining camps and communities and the hardship those conditions impose on women and children. Alcohol consumption is encouraged among the men who work in the mines, which makes women more vulnerable to domestic violence. The children are undernourished and have no opportunity to go to school. In a speech on advancing workers' rights delivered in Vienna in 2005, she said, "the children have very little to smile about and no teeth to smile with because they must drink polluted water" (IMF, 2005c).

The increased visibility of women and feminists at the 2005 IMF World Congress reflects decades of struggle on the part of women against discrimination in the metal trades and for greater representation within the IMF and its affiliates. However, the movement has picked up steam since the last World Congress in Sydney in 2001 where women delegates confronted the IMF about its poor record of representing women's interests. In fact, the IMF was the last GUF to add women to its highest decision-making body.

Jenny Holdcroft, director of equal rights, EPZs, at the IMF, convened an advisory group to begin rejuvenation of the work of women's committees. The group also addressed the question of organizing women and increasing their

Figure 13.1 Representation of women at IMF congresses, 2001 and 2005



representation in the deliberative bodies of the IMF and its affiliated unions. A small group of women representing metal industry unions from: Brazil, Canada, Colombia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Ghana, Mexico, Sweden, Switzerland, South Africa, Uganda, the United Kingdom and Zimbabwe met in Geneva in October 2002 to map out a strategy to increase the power of women within the IMF. They proposed adding at least six seats specifically for women to the IMF executive. They also proposed establishing women's structures at global, regional and subregional levels, setting a 20-per-cent target for women's participation at meetings of the central committee and congress, and holding women's conferences.

As the result of the women's demands for greater representation within the IMF and its affiliated unions, the IMF recently selected eight women to serve on its highest executive body. In addition each affiliate was required to ensure that 20 per cent of their delegation was women, and to include a section in their activity report that detailed their efforts to increase the membership and participation of women within their unions. These projects range from gender equality training for shop stewards to dialogues or forums on strong families, legal rights of women, and so on.

All of the proposals were eventually accepted, and it seems unlikely that women would have achieved such success without the quotas. Marcello Malentacchi, General Secretary of the IMF, admitted as much when he said in April 2001:

During our long history, we have always rejected the idea of quotas for groups of members which are not represented in the governing bodies of our Federation in the most appropriate way. However, if we are unable to achieve improvements in terms of the level of women's representation, it will become increasingly difficult to continue rejecting proposals to introduce quotas in order to attain this goal.

(Fonow, 2005, p. 230.)

The discursive frame of inclusion is used to justify reserving seats for women within the policymaking bodies of the IMF. It is assumed that women's increased representation will make the IMF and its affiliates more responsive to the concerns of female members. While quotas may not guarantee such an outcome for women, it is one of the important strategies developed by union feminists to increase the likelihood that some women's voices will be heard. This is a precondition for developing the mobilizing structures within unions that can be co-opted by feminists to build transnational solidarity, contingent on acknowledging the power differences among women worldwide.

Because global federations such as the IMF are organized by region and by sector, activists can develop agendas and approaches that address women's rights in the workplace and their representation in unions. Such an agenda must take into account cultural specificities and the differential effects of globalization in different types of workplaces and sectors. This structure becomes an obvious advantage when negotiating with MNEs. The IMF has already negotiated 15 international framework agreements (IFAs) with companies such as DaimlerChrysler, Renault and Volkswagen that require a common set of core labour standards across all locations of a particular company. The core labour standards were established by the ILO and include freedom of association and protection of the right to organize, the right to collective bargaining, the abolition of forced labour, equality and non-discrimination, and the elimination of child labour. Discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, nationality, sexual orientation or social origin is outlawed in the model framework agreement.

The IMF has abandoned corporate codes of conduct in favour of IFAs because workers and their unions have more of a say in crafting their terms and conditions. Corporate codes of conduct tended to be unilateral, less comprehensive in terms of the types of rights protected and who is covered, and tended to provide workers with little input into the monitoring of codes. By contrast, because they are negotiated, the IFAs require dialogue between management and unions and involve the unions more in the implementation of labour standards. In the hands of activists, these global instruments can and are being used as leverage with other stakeholders such as consumers and stockholders. They can be useful to feminists because they contain strong equity clauses, including protection for the rights of gays and lesbian workers.⁵

Conclusion

Those concerned with the renewal of the labour movement must come to terms with the fundamental way that gender structures neo-liberal globalization, labour markets and free trade agreements. We argue for gender analysis because sexual politics is integral to trade unions, globalization and efforts to challenge the neo-liberal agenda. The labour movement already has within its ranks a group that can significantly aid the necessary renewal – union feminists. Union feminists already active within the network of GUFs understand the tensions and contradictions between productive and social

⁵ For a review of the literature on gay and lesbian labour activism see Fortescue, 2000; Hunt, 1999; Irwin, 1999 and Krupat and McCreery, 2001.

reproductive spheres,⁶ the sexual politics of trade unions and the importance of building transnational solidarities contingent on an understanding of cultural and social differences among workers (Franzway, 2001).

Union feminists weave together strengths and strategies that emerge from the labour movement and the women's movements. By building and mobilizing transnational networks and alliances between these various movements, union feminists create political spaces for new workers. They also create a new understanding of workers' issues and concerns that arise out of the rapidly changing impact of globalization on both workplaces as well as personal lives.⁷ However, for labour to benefit from the work of union feminists unions must increase and enhance the participation of women within their ranks. This requires a rethinking of structures and practices that perpetuate male dominance in the labour movement.

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⁶ Social reproduction as defined by Bakker and Gill (2003, p. 18) "involves the institutions, processes and social relations associated with the creation and maintenance of communities – and upon which ultimately, all production and exchange rests." These activities include biological reproduction, socialization of children, care of elders and other dependent family members, the organization of sexuality, and how food, clothing, and shelter are made available. Most social reproduction occurs within the family unit.

⁷ Fantasia and Voss (2004, pp. 107–108) argue for a new "labor metaphysic" that addresses organizationally and symbolically the spaces between unions. They believe union renewal lies in the active cultivation of the spaces between existing unions and between unions and other institutions (communities, churches and religious organizations, civic associations, social movements, etc.) and between the labour movement and those stigmatized groups previously ignored by the labour movement. This is the way for labour to regain some of its former significance in the symbolic vocabulary of society.

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