

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots in various shades of gray, with several dots highlighted in red. The map is centered behind the title and subtitle.

Trade Unions in Transformation

New Horizons for the Hemispheric Trade Union Movement: The Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA)

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- Representing a diverse membership of 50 million workers from Canada to Argentina, TUCA has since its inception in 2008 been successful to make trade unions a progressive political force in the Americas. Starting with a call for internal reform, putting democratisation and unity of the trade union movement first, it has built a common language and positions on socio-political developments in the region.
- TUCA's ability to intervene politically, while maintaining political autonomy and constructing a broad alliance with social movements, political parties and progressive governments, were key ingredients to overcome structural limitations on workers' collective action. In times of a right wing backlash in many countries in the region, these skills of building unity and alliances are called upon to sustaining the gains made during the last decade.
- Trade Unions in Transformation is an FES project that identifies unions' power resources and capabilities that contribute to successful trade union action. This study features among two dozen case studies from around the world demonstrating how unions have transformed to get stronger.



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Abstract

The Trade Union Confederation of the Americas, a regional organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation, is an organisation of recent origin which has managed to establish itself by means of a strategy of innovative action developed in a particularly favourable regional context, after almost one decade of economic growth, falling unemployment and poverty, politically progressive governments, and applied policies in various nations of the continent. The call for internal reform, putting democratisation and unity of the trade union movement first, the decision to actively intervene in the socio-political field without losing autonomy, and the construction of a broad alliance with social movements (including peasants, environmentalists and feminists), political parties and left wing governments in order to face neoliberal globalisation were essential to overcoming the structural limitations on workers' collective action imposed by the contemporary forms of exploitation of labour and social dominance.

1. Introduction

The Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA) is a regional branch of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC).¹ Its scope of representation encompasses North, Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean. Its affiliates number 57 national trade union federations from 23 countries, resulting in a total of more than 50 million affiliated workers.²

Since the beginning of the present decade the TUCA has gained visibility by developing strategic class-oriented action on the hemispheric and the global level. The socio-political context for this action was particularly favourable and development was taking place in a regional atmosphere differing from the neoliberal globalisation process. Against the background of a long international crisis with multiple dimensions, it emerged as a very dynamic socio-political actor in tune with the guidelines promoted by the Latin American progressive and left-wing governments, which were at their height at that time.

The most outstanding success of these political experiences, looking back, was the reincorporation of the

working classes and the low-income sectors into productive activity and their social, political and symbolic inclusion, even when considering the enormous limitations that emerged during these progresses. Hence, even if it did not bring about a radical transformation of the existing relations of dominance and exploitation, it did mean a significant change in the orientation of state intervention in economy and society.

Not seeking to generalise the picture across diverse political environments, the social and trade union movements managed to shape a new generation of public policy through their demands, inspired by the universalisation of rights and the acknowledgment of cultural diversity, which in turn resulted in a restructuring of the lower economic sectors and their organisational structures, such as the trade unions. The regional trade union movement underwent a change of orientation and renewed its programme.

Since 2012, the end of an extreme commodity boom has had a negative impact on those countries whose economies are dependent upon and specialised in the export of commodities, having been affected by the drop in international prices. This made it possible for a liberal conservative offensive to develop throughout the hemisphere. The Mauricio Macri administration, issuing from democratic elections in Argentina, and the Michel Temer administration in Brazil, issuing from a coup, are applying policies of adjustment, cuts in public spending, debt and financial speculation. In Venezuela the economic crisis and the political destabilisation are worsening. More recently, the rise of Donald Trump in the United States has opened a global scenario of extreme uncertainty which poses a threat to peace and human rights in the hemisphere.

1. The ITUC currently is the world's largest trade union organisation. It assembles 170 million workers, 304 affiliated organisations of 161 countries, according to press release of the 3rd ITUC World Congress, held in Berlin in May 2014. Available on <http://www.ITUC-ITUC.org/3nd-ituc-world-congress?lang=es> [accessed on 30/6/2016].

2. Simultaneously there are important national trade union federations which are not affiliated to any international trade union confederation although they maintain fraternal relationships on the international level, namely the Inter-union Workers' Plenary – National Workers' Convention (PIT-CNT) of Uruguay, the Bolivian Workers' Federation (COB) and the National Workers' Union (UNT) of Venezuela, of Bolivarian orientation. In a third group there are the Workers' Federation of Cuba (CTC) and the General Workers' Confederation of Peru (CGTP), both of communist orientation and affiliated to the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU).

In light of the crisis of progressive political coalitions, the abrupt regressive changes occurring under the new conservative governments, the consolidation of a new regional Right which has replaced authoritarian military regimes and state terrorism through the destabilising action of media power, the criminalisation of social struggles, and the prosecution of popular political leaders, the trade union movement in the Americas is facing an enormous challenge both on the national and on the hemispheric level: to articulate the multiplicity of existing forms of resistance, defend the progress achieved and rights attained, and build an alternative able to overcome neoliberalism, commodity dependence and extractivism.

What resources does this organisation draw on? What are its potentials and capacities? To what extent can the TUCA experience be an example for the trade union movements in other regional contexts? The present text tries to answer these questions.

2. Changes in the Regional Trade Union Movement

The TUCA was created in 2008 as part of a process of institutional unification in the global trade union movement within the ITUC dating from 2006. It emerged from the merger of the Inter American Regional Organisation of Workers – International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (IAROW/ICFTU) with the Latin American Workers' Federation – World Confederation of Labour (CLAT-WCL), as well as some other independent groups.³ It was also the result of changes in the regional trade union movement since the 1990s, requiring a reorientation in political ideology of great significance and setting off two simultaneous processes. Firstly, from the first half of the 1990s, the political changes in the US-American trade union movement towards more progressive positions and

the reorientation of the Brazilian trade union movement's international policy, which manifested itself in affiliation to IAROW/ICFTU, rendered possible a series of changes. The signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States, Canada and Mexico in 1992 and the later creation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) from 1994 onwards, made different positions within the regional trade union movement draw closer. However, it was not a process free of conflict. The participation of the trade union movement in the summits convened by the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA), a broad movement against the FTAA, was one of the issues which have generated tensions:

Between 1994 and 1995, the debate about the FTAA started which was to come to fruition in 2005. The trade union movement, which had already been involved in this process of change in the region, was facing a very harsh debate on this issue: of whether to include a labour clause in the FTAA or to oppose it altogether. At the time, the presence of CUT Brazil and of Víctor Báez in the IAROW helped a lot in establishing a policy of closeness with these movements. At the same time, a movement arose against the World Trade Organization (WTO). After various actions, the trade union movement joined in and participated in this struggle against FTAA and the WTO. The trade union movement entered into a difficult phase at that stage due to its participation in the summits. One part of the trade union movement, the CUT (Unified Workers' Central) of Brazil, the CTA (Argentinian Workers' Central) of Argentina, and the union which would later become the CUT (Unified Workers' Central) of Chile, and unions from Colombia were already participating from afar, along with other movements. From 1997 on the trade union movement declared itself against the FTAA and joined the HSA.⁴

Secondly, closer contacts between the national trade union federations of North and South America, with the objective of stopping the progress of free commerce imposed by the US administration, were fostered in turn by the IAROW. At the same time, the IAROW began promoting the establishment of social alliances opposing the free trade agreements driven by the northern countries and transnational corporations:

3. The IAROW from its very beginning was marked by a cold war logic and the predominance of the US-American central, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). For many decades it had been promoting the US administration's principles and had practised open anti-communism. From the seventies on, its weakening and the repositioning of Latin American trade unionism affected the leading role of the North American trade union federation. The CLAT had had a minor trade union development in Central America and the Andean region. In some countries, like e.g. Argentina and Uruguay, it represented an internal current within the trade union federations. It fostered a Latin-Americanist and third-world discourse, as an alternative position to the IAROW and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) of communist orientation (Báez Mosqueira 2012).

4. Rafael Freire, TUCA Economic Policy and Sustainable Development Secretary. Personal interview conducted by the author at TUCA offices, São Paulo, July 2016.

This started around the nineties when our sector of TUCA was still IAROW and a strong opposition towards the free trade agreements set in, first towards the NAFTA and then towards the motion of FTAA. At that time I was in charge of the issue of alliances. My secretary, who was IAROW Head of Economic and Social Affairs Department, was in charge of social alliances and fighting a cultural battle because it was mainly the Canadian CLC, the US-American AFL-CIO and the Brazilian CUT who promoted social alliances.⁵

In effect, at the beginning of the 21st century, a period of public resistance led to the establishment of an organisation of regional opposition against the crisis of global market supremacy. In the Southern Cone and the South American Andean Region, new political powers which had emerged from these multi-sectoral struggles represented an answer to the situation of deprivation and inequality inherited from the Washington Consensus. The trade union movement did not remain aloof from these processes. During the first years of the century the IAROW staged important changes, participating for instance in the Hemispheric Meetings in Cuba, something which would have been inconceivable some years before. At these meetings the resistance campaign against the FTAA was organised. This was proof of the increasing involvement of Latin American trade unionism in the movement: »The idea towards which we worked very clearly was that the Cold War within the trade union movement had to be stopped once and for all.«⁶

From 2005, the IAROW changed its executive and reinforced its relationship with the social movements. Additionally, it approached the new Latin-American progressive administrations which had emerged during the first decade of the century (Wachendorfer 2007).

As Marcelo Saguier (2011) states, under the leadership of the Brazilian CUT, the US-American AFL-CIO, the Canadian CLC and with the mass participation of the Uruguayan PIT-CNT, the Cuban CTC, the Argentinian CTA, the Peruvian CGT and the Chilean CUT, the mobilisation campaign against FTAA indicated new paths for as well as the renewal of the hemispheric trade union move-

ment. It accelerated the convergence of national traditions, facilitating the establishment of TUCA.

According to Álvaro Padrón (2011), in this phase some completely new characteristics emerged in the programme outlines reflected in the Labour Platform of the Americas (PLA), which were made public at the 4th Summit of the Americas in Mar del Plata (Argentina) in 2005, the occasion on which the Latin-American nations rejected the implementation of the FTAA. The main motto of this platform was »Decent work for sustainable development«.

With the establishment of the ITUC in 2006, the process of trade union convergence in the region started. The predominance of the IAROW was not only numerical. Several testimonies confirm that those principles inherited from the IAROW which have not been lost in the process of unification tie in with TUCA's actual political principles: the decision to pursue socio-political trade unionism, trade union self-reform, rejection of the free trade agreement, gender parity of representatives, and the policy of social alliances being most notable. With the creation of TUCA, this direction was consolidated with a growing predominance of organisations of the Southern Cone.

3. Organising What Seems to Be Infinite

The magnitude of TUCA's scope of representation has to be approached taking into account its vast geographic extension and the radical heterogeneity arising from different production models, labour markets, sizes of the hemispheric countries' national economies on the one hand, and the different organisational and ideological traditions determining its internal dynamics on the other hand. In this sense, its nature as an international and third-degree organisation sets certain limits according to the capacities that can be activated. In other words its structural power is comparably less important by the merit of the type of organisation, whereas associational and societal power, supported by institutional power, have more importance.

Regarding the first aspect, it has to be pointed out that in Latin America and the Caribbean the impact of neo-liberal globalisation, the economies' constantly growing transnationalisation and the decrease of the state ap-

5. Víctor Báez, TUCA General Secretary. Personal interview conducted by the author at TUCA offices, São Paulo, July 2016.

6. Rafael Freire, TUCA Economic Policy and Sustainable Development Secretary. Personal interview conducted by the author at TUCA offices, São Paulo, July 2016.

paratus since the eighties have been leading to the exacerbation of financial capitalism's power, political and institutional instability, social exclusion and inequality. The policies of economic liberalisation, deregulation and state reform have led to the commodification of public services, an increase of global players' power, the undermining of social protection systems, and infringement of human and labour rights.

As a result of these processes, intertwining with other inherited problems, it can be observed that while the countries of North America and, to a lesser extent, the countries of the Southern Cone have attained higher levels of urban industrial development and stand out for the size of their economies, the Andean subregions, Central America and the Caribbean are marked by less development, with a significant rate of rural labour, subsistence agriculture and informal economic activity. In some cases the precarious, self-employed, informal, peasant or unemployed workers articulate their requests by means of organisations and forums developing outside the traditional trade union movement. The emergence of strong social movements of rural, peasant and/or indigenous workers is indeed very significant in national contexts where trade unionism is characterised by fragmentation and a low level of representativeness.

These structural traits persisted in the region even after more than a decade of relative economic prosperity linked to the application of progressive policies in various countries. In effect, the new Latin American Left, with all its national forms, implied far-reaching socio-political convergence which re-legitimised the state in its redistributive role. Since 2003, these experiences have been boosted by a pattern of accumulation driven by agribusiness and extractivism in the context of a strong increase in commodity prices, sustainable growth, decreasing unemployment, reduced poverty, extension of rights, recomposition of the domestic markets, and the reform of collective labour standards in some countries, particularly Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay and covering minimum wage, collective bargaining, social security and social dialogue. However, for the last five years these processes have been on the retreat, triggered by the advance of conservative powers.

With regard to the second aspect, a mapping the trade union movement in the Americas as it stands today makes it possible to distinguish three groups of countries. In Brazil and other countries with a high level of

industrialisation and productive diversification,⁷ trade union structures can be seen with considerable weight and representative power compared to the rest of Latin America. In those countries, strong national union federations stand out, in particular the CUT and UGT (General Workers' Union) in Brazil, and the CGT (General Labour Confederation) and CTA in Argentina. These federations have maintained an organic link with the progressive administrations of the Workers' Party (PT) and of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Brazil and Argentina respectively.

Mexico and Colombia both have an economic development level similar to Brazil and Argentina but no comparative progressive political experiences have taken place there. In addition, their trade unions are less developed and have a predominantly liberal-conservative ideological bias.

A third category is made up of the group of countries which are less economically developed and whose productive patterns are specialised in the export of hydrocarbons, mining, food or machines. This category covers countries in the Andean sub region: Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, and including Chile, which are located in the Southern Cone but presenting traits of productive specialisation comparable to the group of Andean countries; Central America, namely Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala; and the Caribbean: the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Barbados, Aruba, Curacao. They are characterized by a fragmentation and weakness of their trade unions and trade union federations and by a diversity of ideological currents.⁸

Finally, the presence of US and Canadian trade union federations, two powers of high economic development, contributes to this complexity when taking the asymmetric dynamics of the North-South relationship and US administrations' interventions in Latin America into account. It is true that the living and working conditions of the working class in both countries have dras-

7. The level of industrialisation in those countries is relative. It stands out when compared to the remaining Latin American economies. They carry on being marked by their peripheral and dependent situation, linked to their inclusion in the international system of a division of labour as exporters of commodities or low value-added products.

8. Uruguay and Cuba are two exceptional cases: they have got a labour movement unified in just one national central, show high levels of affiliation and their federations are not affiliated to TUCA despite a maintenance of strong fraternal links.

tically changed in recent decades and thereby fulfilled some of the Latin American workers' demands. On the other hand, for example, when it comes to the free trade agreements which will affect negatively both the workers of the North and of the South, solidarity and joint action are indispensable and have been a very important element of internal cohesion. Without any doubt, the trade union movement of the Southern Cone over the last few years has played the biggest role within TUCA, but its predominance in defining agendas and political alliances relies to a great extent on the backing of US and Canadian trade union federations.

Definitively, TUCA's primary challenge is to reconcile the interests of trade union movements of different weights, heterogeneous in size, and with diverse ideological traditions and domestic situations. It must not be forgotten that four countries currently make up 80 per cent of the TUCA-affiliates: Brazil, the United States, Argentina and Canada. Thereby, not only do different levels of organisation, different types and degrees of application regarding capacities and power resources emerge, but also occasionally very dissimilar demands that determine the temporality and the internal content of their strategic choices and demands.

As a trade union confederation it does not directly represent the workers belonging to one or several sectors or regions, but instead assembles national trade union federations, i.e. takes part in neither national forums of the tripartite social dialogue nor sectoral collective bargaining. Its field of action lies in the regional and international coordinating bodies. In this way, it receives associational power, indirectly through the weight and organisational capacity of its affiliates, and more directly through its efficiency in joining up the diversity of demands and national traditions into one common regional agenda. This means that it depends on its capacity of mediation and organisational flexibility.

Within its internal structure, the building of participative bodies stands out: the committees of women and young workers functioning alongside working groups as mechanisms of internal democratisation and as expert groups unleashing associational, institutional and societal power.

The committees are formally represented at TUCA's executive with a considerable presence on the Executive

Council, the ruling body in between Congresses. The working groups, for their part, don't have a seat on the executive bodies, instead they depend on the coordination of the Secretariat and are supported by advisers and representatives of the affiliated unions. It's their task to concretise the decisions made at grassroots level. Indeed the participative organisations invigorate the organising and articulating capacity involving the forging of alliances and of dialogue with social movements, political parties and governments.

4. TUCA's Action Strategy

TUCA's action strategy consists of two cooperating principles: socio-political trade unionism⁹ and self-reform¹⁰. Both are geared towards an extension of trade unions' representative bases, their democratisation and the definition of objectives not limited to the economic and corporate demands of traditional trade unionism.

The socio-political orientation is based on institutional and societal power resources. The policy of self-reform principally mobilises associational and institutional power. To attain it, TUCA brings its capacities of education, mediation, structuring, articulation and organisational flexibility into play.

According to the TUCA Secretariat's perspective, a socio-political trade unionism »is grounded in the fact that we speak the same language from Canada to Argentina, that we make similar requests, that we have a homogeneous discourse. That's what strengthens the trade union movement. Not only a high or important number of affiliates, but a clear political position.«¹¹

9. The notion of a socio-political trade-unionism came up in the 1980s. At that time, the transformation of labour, product of the reconfiguration of production and the application of flexibilisation policies which precarised labour, the outsourcing and offshoring of production together with the progressive increase of unemployment and informal labour, foreshadowed a future of weakened trade unions in the corporate respect. Some trade union analysts as the Argentinian Julio Godio (1984) maintained that trade unionism had to orient itself towards socio-political action, promote legislative changes and forums of social dialogue, to counteract the power lost in the field of production. However, over the last few years the trade union movement has appropriated and renewed the concept.

10. Definition of a set of motions for trade unions' internal change. Its principles are unity, democratisation and reduction of bureaucracy within the organisations, higher representation and participation of women workers, young workers, new labour types and informal labour, who traditionally hadn't been integrated in trade unions.

11. Víctor Báez, TUCA General Secretary. Personal interview conducted by the author at TUCA offices, São Paulo, July 2016.

How can a common language and a political position be established? The answer provided: »Establish a truly democratic, transparent and participative international organisation, beyond bureaucratic issues which had marked the past (...) Adopt a programme beyond the mere labour relations trade unions usually cover. And after this rather general programme, clearly adopt a political ideal: a political ideal in fundamental opposition to another one, in opposition to neoliberalism and to capitalism.«¹²

Simultaneously, the policy of self-reform has contributed to the building of consensus on problems concerning the working class and the trade union movement throughout the hemisphere. Where associational power is concerned, one of the most important successes of the self-reform policy was in the field of gender equality and equity with the implementation of parity, the establishment of the Working Women's Committee of the Americas and the chairing of the 1st Conference of Working Women (2015).

The policy of gender parity for representatives was mainly driven by the CUT of Brazil and was without any doubt debated in the ORIT (Interamerican Regional Organization of Workers) in its last phase. Amanda Villatoro, member of the TUCA Secretariat, has pointed out how much effort was put into increasing awareness upon the creation of TUCA in order to prevent regression, keeping in mind the scarce progress that had been made at the CLAT with whom unification had been negotiated. The results turned out positive and were laid down in the TUCA Statutes. Currently the female quota stands at 40 per cent on the Executive Council and the Secretariat and 50 per cent regarding the delegations to congresses. It should be mentioned that it is an effective quota, applied separately both to the list of full representatives and to the list of first and second deputy representatives.

This organisational regulation stimulated the appropriation and renewal of feminist demands, with an innovative discourse empowering the care-economy agenda with the demands for decent work and universal, solidary and anti-patriarchal social security. The integration

of the debate on sexual-reproductive health and abortion was a milestone, almost unprecedented in hemispheric trade unionism. However, these important progresses on the hemispheric level remained unheeded at most of the national trade union federations. The female leaders meet substantial obstacles in promoting the representation and participation of women at the national trade union federations. In many cases, not even compliance with the statutory quotas was achieved.¹³ This puts women on the defence and complicates the qualitative leap seen in the progress from demanding quotas to requesting effective parity, including representation and participation: »The hemispheric agenda facilitates and somewhat pushes ahead the issues at the affiliated trade unions but not with the intensity and commitment we would like to have and are in need of (...) because the affiliates at the Congress decide on agreements and decisions which later on are not complied with at the national federation.«¹⁴

All in all, the challenge presented by the closing of gaps in representation – central in a context of segmented labour markets with precarity and informality as structural conditions – has made valuable contributions as a unifying element and a regional coordinator at the International Labour Organisation (ILO), achieving an open interaction between associational and institutional power.

Yet another relevant aspect in terms of its associational power is the policy of alliances with global trade unions, effected on two levels: externally, in global and hemispheric coordination at Global Unions and Global Unions Americas, and internally, the TUCA statutes providing for the global trade unions to participate in the ordinary Congresses, the Executive Council, the committees and working groups with speaking but not voting rights. A closer look at recent articulations reveals the success that was made in this policy of alliances with the Public Services International (PSI), the Education International

12. Rafael Freire, TUCA Economic Policy and Sustainable Development Secretary. Personal interview conducted by the author at TUCA offices, São Paulo, July 2016.

13. An illustrative example of this is an occurrence at the latest Congress of the Argentinian CGT (22/8/2016), when a semi-clandestine group calling itself »Las Juanas Sindicalistas« distributed amongst the more than one thousand participants a pamphlet requesting compliance with the trade union's women's quota under the motto: »We're all at the table, save for us.« Currently only two out of 35 members of the CGT Executive Council are women.

14. Amanda Villatoro, TUCA Secretary of Trade Union Policy and Education. Personal interview conducted by the author at TUCA office, São Paulo, July 2016.

(EI), the Union Network International (UNI), the Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI) and IndustriALL in the campaign for trade union freedom side by side with the ACTRAV-ILO at the 7th Summit of the Americas in Panama (2015).

In terms of institutional power, TUCA has acted on a logic of influence, particularly in the field of international labour standards. Within the system of the United Nations Organisation (UNO), its participation in the ILO and the Conference of the Parties (COP) Framework Convention on Climate Change stands out.

TUCA does not have official delegations, its influence is political: it develops a strategy of coordination with the region's national delegations who meet in representation of the workers at the International Labour Conference (preliminary meetings, activation in the working groups and lobbying with government representatives) and exercises significant influence at the Workers' Group of the ILO Administrative Council, responsible for the elaboration of the tripartite organisation's agendas. The TUCA working groups set off expert and trade union teams driving the ILO strategy.

With a similar logic of action, TUCA itself has managed to become the mouthpiece of the trade union movement in regional and subregional forums: the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Common Market of the South (Mercosur), the Inter-American Conference of Ministers of Labour (IACML), the COP, and the Regional Women's Conference of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). It needs to be emphasized that this level of articulation has been possible in a unique hemispheric context and is directly linked to TUCA's policy of forming alliances with the region's progressive governments.

However, this progress on the institutional level would not have been possible without the backing and power drawn from the policy of social alliances. There is a kind of pincer movement driving the progresses on the institutional level – both internationally, for example by promoting agreements at the ILO, and nationally, by raising awareness of the government delegations to the ILO or by promoting the ratification of related agreements and legislation. On the one hand, mediating and organising capacities are activated and mobilise associational power. On the other, the capacity for articulation is activated

and mobilises societal power. In this sense, TUCA has made important programmatic progresses synthesising both processes, self-reform and powerful intervention on the socio-political level, in a permanent attempt to recover from weakness in terms of structural power.

A series of special platforms and campaigns on issues of occupational health, social security, informality and precariousness, youth, gender violence, and many others are efforts pointing in this direction. More recently, the articulation of a hemispheric alliance with social movements stands out – inspired by the HSA experiences and its counter-hegemonic summits – towards democracy, against transnational corporations and their free trade offensive.

However, it has to be admitted that these principles did not have any effect at all on some of the national trade union federations affiliated to TUCA. There are national trade union federations who consider international trade union activities to be a secondary aspect of their work and delegate it to experts or intermediate teams, having little influence on the organisational processes and decision-making and thereby giving way to a contradictory dynamic. Therefore internal mechanisms of democratisation, leadership gender parity, and the building of multisectoral alliances for counter-hegemonic orientation on the hemispheric level co-exist with certain corporative, anti-democratic, patriarchal and exclusionary trade union traditions on the national level, which in one way or another cut across almost the entire political and ideological spectrum.

The so-called Patronal Protection Agreements of Mexico¹⁵, denounced by TUCA, ITUC and the National Union of Workers (UNT) of Mexico before the Interamerican Human Rights Court in December 2016, directly involving both the Revolutionary Federation of Peasant Workers (CROC) and the Workers' Federation of Mexico (CTM), represent an extreme case which proves the existence of deep crevices between some national trade union federations' practice and the TUCA programme.

15. In Mexico, a type of »letterhead« or »cowboy« trade unionism and a kind of simulated collective bargaining prevails. The so-called »Patronal Protection Contracts« are negotiated by formal trade unions without any real representation of workers, concluding precarious agreements with companies, pledging not to organise and not to go on strike. They draw on the complicity of government authorities and national trade union federations backing these organisations and practices at tripartite forums.

For many years the General Labour Federation (CGT) of Colombia, the CROC and the CTM, the Brazilian *Força Sindical*, the Workers' Federation of Venezuela (CTV) and other national trade union federations¹⁶ for their part have not shared TUCA's policy towards the progressive administrations. In line with the offensive of the big corporations in control of a huge range of audio-visual media, these national union federations have been arguing that the leaders of those political forces have to be convicted for corruption and for violating trade union freedom and freedom of expression. They opposed the realisation of campaigns aiming at the rejection of new free trade agreements and treaties such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership [TPP], the Trade in Services Agreement [TiSA] and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership [TTIP]), maintaining that the trade union movement should focus on the negotiation of labour clauses within the agreements. Due to its organisational nature as a third-degree agency, TUCA assembles organisations of heterogeneous and even opposing ideological traditions and political orientations, causing internal debates and tensions. In part, these disputes can be attributed to the deferred effect of the diversity of traditions which had been merged at the original establishment of TUCA. Nevertheless, those differences did not prevent coordinated action and the promotion of united policies, some of which will be dealt with in the following sections.

5. ILO Convention 189 on Domestic Labour

In June 2011 Convention 189 on domestic workers was adopted at the International Labour Conference (ILC). The Convention establishes equal rights for domestic workers as for other workers and unites demands regarding precariousness, informality, care-system crisis and gender inequality.

The importance of this Convention is linked to the weight of domestic work in the region. In Latin America and the Caribbean there are 19,600,000 active domestic workers, 18,000,000 of whom are women and girls without access to basic rights. This represents the highest number of domestic workers in the world after Asia Pacific making up 37 per cent of global employment in

this sector, totalling round about 52,000,000 workers. It makes up 17.4 per cent of female employment and 11.9 per cent of any paid employment in the region (ILO 2013; dates corresponding to 2010). 77.5 per cent of this sector's workers in the region are working under informal labour conditions, as the Regional Programme for the Promotion of Formalisation (FORLAC) of the ILO (2016) points out.

What part did TUCA have in this process? What initiatives did it launch? What were the results obtained? The Latin American countries have played a major role in advancing motions, driving the debate and instigating the Convention's adoption. In this effort both the government¹⁷ and the trade union delegations cooperated, according to Amanda Villatoro, TUCA Secretary of Trade Union Policy and Education:

Convention 189 was aspired to by the Workers' Group at the ILO, but was not adopted before there was a correlation of forces promoting the issue. We realised that we didn't have to wager everything but almost everything in this convention. In the case of TUCA we were coming from a lead-up, i.e. the entire debate on trade union self-reform bringing out two things into the open: more female affiliates and more members in our trade unions meant opening up the presence and participation of women within. The trade unions could not limit themselves to those workers with a clear relation of dependency. This was the lead-up to the debate: the necessity of a strong trade union movement, mobilised and capable of transcending the classical affiliated worker.¹⁸

The context in which this convention was adopted was marked by a strong Latin American presence at the ILO, with generally converging positions between workers and progressive governments of the region whereas the employers remained aloof until the very end of the process.

A few months after the adoption, in August 2011, the TUCA Working Women Committee launched the

16. Amongst them are: the Autonomous Workers' Federation (CAT) of Chile, the CGT of Paraguay, the Trade Union Federation of Ecuador (CSE) and the CGT of Panama.

17. According to testimonies the administrations working most towards the Convention's adoption were Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia and South Africa.

18. Amanda Villatoro, TUCA Secretary of Trade Union Policy and Education. Personal interview conducted by the author at TUCA office, São Paulo, July 2016.

hemispheric campaign »Decent work for women domestic workers: for the ratification of C189«, and in December 2011, the global ITUC campaign »12x12« was launched, its objective being to achieve 12 ratifications and the implementation of the Convention by 2012.

The campaign entailed various actions and manifested the multilevel organising and articulating capacity by activating institutional and societal power both on the hemispheric level, taking the initiative to a global organisation, and on the national level, fostering new processes or supporting the existing ones to promote the ratification of the Convention and of legislative change. Substantial effort was put into dissemination and increasing awareness regarding the new standard's content and reach, implying lobbying governments and related political forces at parliament and at different national levels, particularly the Labour Ministries, chairing forums and marches, and articulation to women domestic workers' trade unions or groups, as well as the promotion of new trade unions in those countries where they did not yet exist.

Convention 189 was ratified in 12 countries of the hemisphere: Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Argentina, Guyana, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Panama and Chile, which is exceptional in that the convention was only ratified in four countries outside Latin America.¹⁹ Likewise, new legislation on this sector of workers was passed in Argentina, Brazil, the United States and Venezuela. Furthermore, new trade unions for women domestic workers were founded in the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Guatemala, Paraguay and Costa Rica.

6. The Development Platform of the Americas (Plada)

Between 2012 and 2014, TUCA moved for the establishment of a political programme for the workers of the Americas. The achieved consensus had evolved around the concept of development, but it was not merely a matter of repeating the terms of the debate initiated by various multilateral organisations and fo-

rums, rather of rethinking the concept from the working class perspective.

The TUCA programme aspired to simultaneously be the result of a participative and transparent democratic discussion and an alternative counter-hegemonic organisation. To achieve that, a working method was designed consisting of an agenda of meetings stretching over one year with extensive participation, regular consultations with all the affiliated unions and deliberation with the Executive Council and the Secretariat. Additionally, allied organisations and movements were invited to join in the debate and contribute their points of view and agendas. The result of all this was the Development Platform of the Americas, more commonly known as Plada, currently TUCA's programmatic policy instrument.

Plada has adopted the concept of decent work and defends the right to strike, freedom of association and collective bargaining, but its content is not restricted to the universe of socio-occupational demands. Its point of departure is a conception of development which is unviable if the pattern established by Northern countries is simply followed, impossible without democracy or under the ruling of finance capitalism. It proposes a strategy from and for the people as an alternative to the current multiple crises capitalist societies are experiencing in terms of finance, of the social protection systems, of care and labour, migration, climate, energy and food. It integrates and transports demands and agendas of other social movements as well as policies of regional progressive governments. Its objective is to plan the resistance against transnational corporations' offensives, for democracy and the integration of the people at large.

In terms of associational power, Plada represents an enormous effort of organising and consensus building on the most diverse issues within a group of national trade union federations highly heterogeneous in terms of tradition, size and representativeness, but fundamentally due to the diversity of occupational and political realities existing in the hemisphere. Its elaboration proved TUCA's organisational flexibility as well as its mediating and organising capacity.

This platform fundamentally invigorated the organisation's societal power: it joined together and extended the range of alliances and gained considerable political

19. The convention was also ratified in Italy, the Philippines, Mauritius and South Africa.

acknowledgement.²⁰ In terms of institutional power, Plada was used to consolidate diverse processes developing at the ILO, Unasur or the COP. In 2014 it was publicly launched in Chile at an event organised by CUT Chile, attended by President Michelle Bachelet, and later in Uruguay, at the head offices of the PIT-CNT, a fraternal organisation of TUCA, in the presence of José »Pepe« Mujica and several Ministers.

Leaders of allied organisations testify to the impact that was achieved. Diego Montón, leader of the Latin American Coordination of Peasant Organisations (CLOC) – Via Campesina emphasizes the qualitative leap which Plada meant in terms of articulation with the peasant movement. The fact of having incorporated concepts like agrarian reform and alimentary security or the criticism of developmentalism (i.e. adoption of a vision associating climate crisis with capitalism) proved very important due to the trade union movement's power of multiplication and dissemination (drawing on more important structures than the other social movements): »Plada demonstrates that the issue of the agrarian reform is not a mere peasants' problem but a working class issue«.²¹

REDES Friends of the Earth pointed out that with Plada, TUCA was putting its structure and its organisational capacity at the service of the hemispheric dialogue to build trust and consolidate articulations: »TUCA is paving the way, including other organisations' perspectives and establishing a platform. The internal consensus is a model of transformation for the region, which moreover serves as an example (...) The level of articulation we have is regarded as an example by other regions of the world because they don't manage to bring together trade union actors, peasant organisations, feminists and the environmentalist movement«.²²

20. Since its launch in 2014 TUCA has been promoting the circulation of Plada as part of its policy of democratisation in communication. As testified by TUCA representatives, between 2014 and 2016 more than 20,000 copies were printed for distribution in various languages (Spanish, Portuguese, English and French) in different educational forms: Plada comics, Plada gender, virtual workshops and digital support for smarter distribution. At the national level, the promotion of Plada has been varying. Particularly remarkable are the initiatives of Panama, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and Brazil.

21. Diego Montón, CLOC-Vía Campesina, personal interview conducted by the author at the 3rd TUCA Congress, São Paulo, April 2016.

22. Martín Drago, REDES Friends of the Earth Latin America and Caribbean, personal interview conducted by the author at the 3rd TUCA Congress, São Paulo, April 2016.

In actual fact, Plada can first of all be defined by its capacity to mobilise societal power, but also consolidated the organisation and internal consensus by fortifying associational power resources. To set up this instrument meant applying the capacity to organise and articulate on the part of the regional trade union movement. However a critical point can be made in this regard: although this platform aims to consolidate a socio-political unionism that combines ideological plurality with programmatic unity, for this to be possible it is necessary that the agreements assumed in the continental confederation surpass its merely testimonial and enunciative character and are substantiated in relevant guidelines and actions by national trade union federations.

7. Articulations and Lines of Action in the Current Situation

At the moment, the complex situation in the hemisphere is sending emergency signals. The hemispheric social movements, together with the regional trade union movement, are setting up a strategy which Rafael Freire has defined as »programmatic resistance«. This concept consists of the identification of two cycles, the first referring to the period of offensive capitalism and to the changing correlation of social forces confronting the people at large in a way that is shutting out the possibility of collective action. The second cycle is retrospective, referring to the accumulation of social achievements and to the processes of organisation and politicisation of the working class and the low-income sectors during the period 2002–2015, a benchmark for future demands and struggles to not drop below.

With this method of interpreting the situation, a forum of hemispheric coordination is currently emerging which has as its main reference point the leading role that TUCA played in the campaign against FTAA during the period of popular resistance of neoliberalism in Latin America at the beginning of the 21st century.

In 2014 TUCA, CLOC-Vía Campesina, REDES-Friends of the Earth, World March of Women, *Encuentro Sindical Nuestra América* [Trade Union Encounter Our America] (ESNA), *Articulación de Movimientos Sociales hacia el ALBA* [Articulation of Social Movements towards Dawn] and the Uruguayan PIT-CNT were driving

changes at the Forum for Civic Participation of Unasur with the goal of opening the forum up to social movements, and democratising us, a process which is still underway.

This articulation was repeated at the People's Summit in Lima in December 2014. TUCA formed the contact group together with CLOC-*Vía Campesina*, World March of Women, Friends of the Earth Latin America and Caribbean, *Grupo Carta de Belém*, *Jubileo Sur* and the Bolivian Platform against Climate Change, driving the summit and initiating mass mobilisation. »System change, not climate change«: the crisis of civilisation, global warming and climate change, agriculture and food sovereignty were the key issues.

From the end of 2015 these organisations have put forward a number of agreements. The new forum for regional articulation was further consolidated with the call of a hemispheric action day on 4 November 2016, which was widely followed in various countries, and it was decided to have a big meeting in the city of Montevideo in November 2017. A state of permanent mobilisation for the defence of regional integration, for democracy, and for the people's sovereignty was declared.

8. Questions and Perspectives for the Future

The new economy opens up a set of questions for the future: How is TUCA going to face the unfavourable climate drawing near both in the ILO and in the regional integration processes, particularly in Mercosur and Unasur, considering the neoliberal orientation of the current administrations in Brazil and Argentina? How is it going to face the economic crisis, the increase of unemployment and poverty in the region? How is it going to react to the violations of human rights and trade union freedom, the criminalisation of social struggles and the prosecution of left wing leaders?


Against this background, it is possible that the availability of institutional power will decrease and that the regional trade union movement will have to consolidate its alliances with popular movements and the progressive political forces, currently weakened and out of government in the cases of Brazil and Argentina. Trade union contribution in the shape of a programme and organi-

sational power is a key factor in this new period of resistance, but it will not be achievable as long as the hemispheric trade unionism does not join up and coordinate its strategy with the workers' struggles and demands of each individual country.

In how far now can the TUCA experience be compared to other ITUC regions? Obviously, there are no mechanical answers to this question and regional particularities and local traditions have to be considered. Nevertheless, even when taking into account the particularities and distinct contexts, certain organisational mechanisms and orientations which have brought about positive results can be taken as points of reference, as in particular the construction of regional platforms with participative methods fostering programmatic unity, the intervention in processes of regional integration, fraternal articulation with social movements, and a counter-hegemonic discourse rooted in the regional traditions of struggle and ideals.

One of the lessons learned from the analysis of the TUCA-case is that in view of its weakness in structural power the application of associational power resources by means of an extension of representation, participation and internal democracy, and of societal power resources by means of the articulation with an extensive range of alliances of related sectors and involving social struggles and political projects widely exceeding the limits of traditional trade unionism, has proved to be an alternative strategy for those trade union models based on traditions operating on the economic-corporative level of action, as well as to those labour demands based on an antiquated picture of the worker – male, manual, formally linked to his employer and permanent citizen – as successfully used in developed countries in the 20th century.

The current forms of labour division and organisation require the trade union movement to take the articulation between the distinct local, national, regional, and international levels of action very seriously. The movement must also recognise the new collective labour subjects which are entering the political and social stage with ever more power and stamina, particularly women, migrants, self-employed workers, unemployed workers, workers of the social and low-income sectors, if ever the objective is to stop being the mute guest at a banquet hosted by the big transnational corporations.



Another conclusion that may be drawn from this case to be kept in mind for other regional experiences is related to the possibilities of activating institutional power. The successes on the institutional level of regional and international trade union action are closely linked to the correlation of forces on the associational and social level, as demonstrated by the case of the ILO Convention 189 and in the strategies towards greater participation at Unasur. The longer that regional trade unionism dovetails its principles and agendas with the popular demands and struggles of the countries it represents, the higher the probability that the institutional progress will become dead letter, lacking substantial support for the maintenance and defence of the achievements in the field of labour and human rights.



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