Global Union Networks, Feminism, and Transnational Labor Solidarity

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Our purpose in this paper is to explain how feminists in organized labor forge international solidarity and use the networks and alliances of their unions to create political spaces for mobilizing women’s participation in transnational campaigns for labor rights and economic justice. Union feminists with structural ties to organized labor and to the women's movement, are in a unique position to mobilize both movements to respond to the issues and concerns that rapid economic globalization raises for working class women.

Globalization plays a significant role in shaping local, regional, and transnational political mobilization. Although the imbalances of political and economic power between different types of workers within a country and between workers in different countries are exacerbated by globalization, these same processes create continuities that can become the grounds for mobilizing across asymmetrical differences. Giugni (2002) contends that, because of globalization, social movements in different countries take on similar characteristics and that these similarities can be an advantage in mobilizing across national boundaries. The diffusion of information and ideas about collective action across borders presents different movements with the opportunity to adopt similar discourses, strategies, and tactics. The transnational ties and networks of social movement organizations supply the circuits for this diffusion and help to bridge the cultural and spatial divide between activists in different countries.

Feminists and theorists of social movements caution us not to overlook the power imbalances between actors and organizations within transnational networks. As researchers we need an empirical understanding of power relations and flows within networks and not however, make assumptions about how power differences are negotiated. “The social movement sector does not simply mimic world-system power disparities; but rather, in seeking to transform global inequalities, activists self-consciously act to change how power relations between states impinge on internal SMO [social movement organizations] relations “(Giugni, p. 6). Networks can serve as actors in politics and as a way to mobilize and structure the actions of movement participants. The existence of networks in and of themselves does not produce collective action; networks have to be framed by movements as useful circuits for mobilization. Because networks bring together activists within and across national boundaries in a very uneven way, all exchanges are fraught with power differences and this must be taken into account if genuine alliances and coalitions are to flourish.

Transnational Labor Networks

Unions have always been involved in international labor networks, but more recently their networks have become thicker and more diverse. There has been a proliferation of political spaces where the interests of labor overlap with other movements and with advocacy organizations concerned about labor rights and development. Increasingly campaigns for labor rights are organized and funded with nonunion support from churches, foundations, NGOs, and universities. Labor conferences and periodicals focus more on non-contract issues such as worker empowerment, organizing, union democracy, and feminism. New players from the nonprofit sector, such as the Women’s International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ), Women’s Environment and Development Organization, and Women’s EDGE, and activists from other social movements, such as the “Fair Wear Campaign” and “Students against Sweatshops”, are joining with unions as strategic partners in the growing transnational advocacy network for labor rights.

Some unions have taken the step of creating their own NGOs. For example, the Canadian Steelworkers have created The Steelworkers Humanity Fund. Established in 1985 by the union the Fund supports
thirty-one international aid and development projects in thirteen countries—including seven women’s NGOs in Bolivia, Mexico, Peru, Nicaragua, Bangladesh, South Africa, and Guatemala. All projects sponsored by the Fund are required to reflect principles of gender equity, democratic participation and environmental sustainability (Fonow, 2003).

These collaborations help to expand traditional ideas about the roles unions can play in the movement for global justice. Transnational labor advocacy networks have become mobilizing structures for feminists and labor activists thus opening the way for union feminists to play an active role in shaping the discourses and mobilizing strategies of organized labor. Within these networks union feminists are in a position to challenge the conventional notions of class-based solidarity of the labor movement by acknowledging the differences of gender, race, sexuality, and ethnicity within class, and of the gender-based solidarity of the women's movement by recognizing the class differences among women. The formation and articulation of gender-specific, class-based political demands change the boundaries of those included and excluded in the process of social movement formation, thus creating new types of political claims and new solidarities--what Curtin (1999) labels contingent solidarities. In the case of union feminists, these contingent solidarities are mediated through activist and advocacy networks.

In the context of intensified globalization, new interconnections of networks and communities reveal common needs and concerns and produce new alliances. In our research, we identify a number of sites where union feminists have mobilized resources to address the impact of globalization on women’s labor rights and to forge collective identities as transnational activists. These sites can be sites of labor renewal and include formal organizations, networks, and forums such as the International Labor Organization (ILO), the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the Global Union Federations (GUFs), the World Social Forum, and less formal sites such as international campaigns for pay equity and against sweatshops and unfair trade agreements. And even some surprising sites such as gay pride festivals.

Global Union Federations

As sites of advocacy, unions bring workers together within and across workplaces, firms, and communities and within and across national borders. This occurs at the international level through a union’s formal membership in international trade secretariats and confederated labor bodies and, less formally, through strategic partnerships and alliances with transnational social movements and non-governmental organizations and with intergovernmental agencies.

One site of increasing importance to union feminists is the network of women’s committees and equity offices within the Global Union Federation. These federated international labor bodies originally came into being in the 19th and 20th centuries to ameliorate the effects of economic competition on workers in different countries, to build international solidarity, and to facilitate the exchange of information and resources between unions in the same sector of the economy. They are organized regionally and by sector--representing millions of workers in transportation, public services, textiles, manufacturing, tourism, construction, education, media, chemical, metal, mining, electronics, agriculture, and food processing.

The women’s committees of each federation are networked through the coordinating activities of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which has recently initiated a major campaign to increase significantly women’s membership in unions worldwide and to increase their representation and participation in union programs, activities, and decision-making structures. The campaign 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 the Export Processing Zones.

In February, 2003 the ICFTU brought 300 women delegates from 92 counties to Melbourne, Australia
for the 8th World Women’s Conference. Delegates participated in workshops and panels on a wide range of topics from those more narrowly associated with trade unions such as collective bargaining to more pressing political issues such as the war in Iraq. Delegates passed a strong feminist anti-war measure that spelled out the specific ways war impacts women and girls. The ILO encourages labor to work with NGOs, and the ICFTU conference organizers made an effort to include prominent feminist leaders from the non-profit development sector on the conference program. Elmira Nazombe of the Women’s International Coalition for Economic Justice addressed the delegates about building alliances between labor and transnational NGOs. She cautioned the audience about the need for activists to develop movement strategies that take into account the asymmetrical power relations among different groups of women concerned about the same issue.

The United Steelworkers of America (USWA), an affiliate of the International Metalworkers’ Federation (IMF), has sponsored a number of events and activities to facilitate international solidarity among women. The theme of their 2002 women’s conference was global sisterhood, and conference activities were devoted to building global solidarity and to creating alliances with grass-roots organizations. Women Steelworkers from Mexico, Canada and the U.S. have participated in a number of worker to worker exchanges and the Women of Steel leadership course has been adopted for use in Mexico (Fonow, 2003). Active collaboration with the women of the Authentic Labor Front (FAT) has broadened the understanding of feminist in the Steelworkers about the value of building alliances across various sectors of political struggle including grass roots community groups and NGOs.

Union feminist support each other in their struggle to claim political space for women within the labor movement. Women in the FAT for example view the labor movement as “a space in which women can discuss their problems and channel their demands.” They believe it desirable “that men in the labor movement view the elimination of sex discrimination as their responsibility and not just the responsibility of the women.” Equality between the sexes is valued at work and within intimate relations.

Women of the FAT actively seek alliances with feminist in other unions in Mexico as well as with the United States and Canada and view the struggles around NAFTA and free-trade issues as an opportunity to form strategic alliances. They also participate in community coalitions concerned with broader economic issues and with border relations, such as the Southwest Network for Economic Justice and Mexican Network for Action on Free Trade.

**Conclusion**

Those concerned with the renewal of the labor movement must come to terms with the fundamental way that gender structures neo-liberal globalization, labor markets, free trade agreements, etc. Union feminists already active within the network of global union federations are situated to understand the tensions and contradictions between productive and social reproductive spheres, the sexual politics of trade unions, and the importance of building forms of transnational solidarity contingent on an understanding of cultural and social differences among workers.

Union feminists weave together strengths and strategies that emerge from labor movement, the gay rights movement, and women’s movements. By building and mobilizing transnational networks and alliances between these various movements, union feminists create political spaces for new workers and for a new understanding of workers’ issues and concerns that arise out of the rapidly changing impact of globalization on both workplaces and intimate lives. However, for labor to benefit from the work of union feminists they 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 labor movement. Connell (2005) calls for a “change among the gatekeepers” and welcomes the recent activities of the UN Commission on the Status of Women to incorporate males as agents in the gender-
equality process. Their discussions and recommendations on this topic cover a wide spectrum of policy, including labor.

Notes

1 There are two excellent anthologies that provide detailed empirical analysis of these processes from a social movement perspective. See Khagram, Riker and Sikkink (2002) and Smith and Johnston (2002).

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, pp. 60.).”

3 Fantasia and Voss (2004, 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 labor movement and those stigmatized groups previously ignored by the labor movement. This is the way for labor to regain some of its former significance in the symbolic vocabulary of society.

References


Fantasia, R; K. Voss. 2004. Hard work: Remaking the American Labor Movement ( Berkeley , CA ,


