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10 Social movement unionism

Andrew Vandenberg

Introduction

Social movement unionism is a strategy that unions deploy to attract community support, build alliances with other activists, and mobilise workers' common cause with other campaigns for social and economic justice. It is a form of political activism in which worker-citizens direct unions to act within the channels of national or transnational civil society. Such a strategy includes, for example, efforts to organise consumer boycotts against anti-union global corporations, organising community rallies to protest against anti-union legislation or against the neoliberal policies of the World Trade Organisation, or to urge members to support community campaigns for justice in developing countries. It also includes the unions' central role in campaigns to bring down apartheid in South Africa, end dictatorship in Poland, Brazil, the Philippines, and South Korea, and promote the World Social Forums for diverse networks of protest against neoliberal forms of economic globalisation. Since the end of the Cold War and the rise of the internet and globalised communication, social movement unionism has become an increasingly transnational strategy adopted by unions on both the right and the left.

It is widely argued that social movement unionism can help reverse falls in unionisation densities, address local and transnational problems of neoliberalism, and help to realise the potential that computer-mediated communication offers for greater activism at local, national, and transnational levels. The strategy has its origins in a rejection of the service model of business unionism in favour of mobilising greater activism among members, in a revival of civic republican ambitions to revitalise communities and promote active citizenship, and in a revival of social-democratic ambitions to decommodify labour and expand the domain of democratic decision-making. As a strategy, transnational social movement unionism is sometimes regarded as an attempt to move beyond the 'old' politics of an industrial era to the 'new' politics of a globalised network society (Castells 1997). It offers the hope that unions can operate among the new networks of social movement protest against environmental degradation, sexism,
and global capitalism. It, arguably, also dispels Robert Michels' view that central organisations operate at the cost of local activity and that the centralisation of union activity inevitably degrades members' direct participation. This chapter draws upon recent work on the dynamics of contention and social movements by MacAdam et al. (2001) which implies that structural tension between the industrial bureaucracies of the 'old' labour movement and the postindustrial networks of the 'new' social movements (Meyer 1995) can be overcome. Social movement unionism goes beyond the familiar patterns of the labour movement and radically reengages with citizenship as a practice of political activism within and across nation-states.

Citizenship, democracy and solidarity

Citizenship was not a central concern of most early labour movements in the industrially advanced countries. The socialist tradition in Europe regarded citizenship as a bourgeois concern with the rights of individuals in courts, parliaments, and electoral arenas. This tradition endorsed Marx's critique of citizenship as a deployment of nation-state power to secure the abstract rights of supposedly natural, isolated, and egoistic individuals (Marx 1972a: 41-45). After the Bolshevik breakthrough in Russia, Marx's comments about local forms of direct democracy during the rebellion known as the Paris Commune were entertained during the first few years of building a new form of government (Harding 1992). However, Lenin's new government soon instituted an economic policy that emulated the scientific management techniques of Taylorism in capitalist workplaces and heralded the authoritarian procedures that stifled all semblance of workers' participation in decisions that affected their work (Polan 1984). State communism rejected liberal citizenship, but it also stifled radical democracy. Today, however, citizenship is crucial to extending the continuing relevance of trade unions.

Democracy has a rather more robust history in the traditions of labour movements, but the record suggests that the specific trajectory of individual countries is decisive for social and political outcomes. In the nineteenth century, the idea of workers' self-emancipation inspired high expectations of direct participation and active citizenship within unions and the workers' political parties. Such expectations fired Michels' (1962) well known critique of the tendency to oligarchy among leaders and passivity among members of the newly formed Social Democratic Party in Germany, and by extension unions and all parties competing for advantage against hostile opponents (Lipset 1962; Lipset et al. 1977). Other expectations about the internal operation of unions and their members' activity arose in Britain after the First World War, and more prominently in the USA after the Second World War (Archer 1995: 25). The political pluralism advocated in various ways by Figgins, Cole, and Tawney in Britain,
and later by Dahl, Lindbom, Lipset and many others in the United States, regarded unions as crucial to the good functioning of representative democracy in modern states with large territories, large populations, and complex policy problems. From the perspective of a pluralist model of democracy, unions were something like a permanent opposition to management as the permanent government of workplaces (Rustin 1981; Crouch 1992).

Even after the split between communism and social democracy, democratic socialism in continental Europe continued to look askance at liberal limits to citizenship. Elsewhere, the tradition of labourism (within the right wing of English-speaking labour parties) regarded citizenship as an abstract political matter, not important to union members’ primary concerns with fair wages and employment conditions. Indeed, a leading proponent of social citizenship, T. H. Marshall, ‘made short shrift of industrial citizenship’, regarding it as a matter of union rights to bargain collectively and a minor complement to social citizenship (Gersuny 1994: 211). In the United States, in contrast, the Knights of Labor, along with both the left and the right of mainstream politics, were deeply concerned with the ‘political economy of citizenship’ (Sandel 1996: 168–200, 211–16). This civic-republican tradition remains an important source of social movement unionism in the United States, where it is sometimes called community unionism (Brecher and Costello 1990; Eimer 1999; Robinson 2000; Godard 2004), even though a liberal emphasis on a minimal state and a procedural conception of democracy has gradually displaced civic-republican ideas to the disregard of the political, social and economic rights of workers as citizens.

In Europe, especially after the Second World War, public policy moved towards inclusive views of citizenship. Both democratic socialists, such as Otto Bauer in Austria (Bottomore and Goode 1978) and Ernst Wigforss in Sweden (Higgins 1985a), and labourists, such as Anthony Crosland (1956) in England, focused more attention on social and industrial democracy. After the achievement of universal suffrage and universal access to a minimum of education, unions sought to persuade social-democratic, labour, and other left-of-centre parties in government to introduce legislation for universal child benefits, health insurance, and retirement benefits. Rendering such benefits universal made them an institutional right of citizenship, rather than a means-tested privilege or a charity targeted at the deserving poor on the margins of society (Korpi 1983: 184–207). Unions also sought to persuade governments to institute various means of limiting managerial prerogatives and increasing workers’ influence over decision-making in the workplace.

Sweden of course was the country where unions went furthest towards the ‘decommodification’ of labour in order to secure social and industrial rights of citizenship for wage-earners (Esping-Andersen 1985) in contrast to the liberal minimalism of the USA and the cautious social liberalism of
the European welfare state builders (Meidner 1980; 1993; Vandenberg 2000). In Sweden, solidaristic wages policy saw the blue-collar Confederation of Unions (Landsorganisationen) reject both Beveridge's liberal argument that union wage negotiators should take responsibility for inflation by policing blanket wage restraint, and Keynes' liberal argument in favour of aggregate demand stimulation during recession, and against any intervention into private decisions about the supply of goods and services. In the early 1950s, Landsorganisationen developed a wages policy that increased the pay of the lowest paid, and restricted the pay of the better paid, in an effort to bankrupt low-wage firms and promote job-creation in well paying firms. The unions sought to create a labour market that was more efficient than any free or capitalist labour market because it could combine full employment with low inflation and stable economic development: In the 1990s, this policy came unstuck partly because the rise of globalisation emboldened the employers' federation to abandon nationwide collective bargaining, and partly because the blue-collar federation of national unions could no longer moderate the claims of better paid unionists.

Industrial citizenship was pursued more rigorously and for longer in Sweden, partly because the unions developed an ideologically effective policy of solidaristic wages. Nonetheless, even in Sweden, economic globalisation saw unionisation densities falter in the early 1990s, while tensions between unions and parties of labour have increased. Swedish unions, however, have defended their past achievements more effectively than elsewhere. They have achieved this because both their vertical links between local, national, and international levels of union bodies and their horizontal links with political groups opposed to further integration into the European Union, have proven themselves superior to the comparable vertical and horizontal linkages developed by anti-union international corporations. This underlines the continuing importance of national politics and local activism for the success or failure of transnational activism.

Since 1982, however, there has been a turn away from continued welfare state building and towards neoliberal policies of privatisation, blanket wage restraint, wider distributions of wealth between the rich and the poor, abandoning control over international currency exchange, and abandoning full employment. These policies saw the government lead the country into joining the European Union in 1995. In the 1990s, membership of the Social Democratic Party plummeted while membership of trade unions declined only to recover strongly in the late 1990s (Kjellberg 2000).

In the rest of the industrially advanced countries, unions' attempts to institute first social citizenship and then forms of industrial citizenship faltered sooner than in Sweden. The aim to expand workers' rights of industrial citizenship receded in the 1980s and 1990s, during neoliberal cutbacks to welfare policies and enhancements to managerial prerogatives. It is now widely argued that economic globalisation threatens the existence of union movements and welfare states (Castells 1996; Held et al. 1999).
On this view, unions will need to transform themselves from bureaucracies into networks (Lee 1999; Kochan and Locke 2004) if they are to avoid tensions between 'old' and 'new' social movements and adjust to the economic, political and cultural transformations wrought by globalisation. A longer-term perspective on the history of the labour movement suggests, however, that unions have long had international connections and the rise of globalisation has simply reinforced the need to regard transnational connections as a serious aspect of industrial conflict rather than merely grand rhetoric.

**Labour cosmopolitanism and union internationalism**

Labour cosmopolitanism dates back to the Communist League (1836–52), which adopted the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, and the Working Men's Association, subsequently known as the First International (1864–76) and led by Karl Marx in London. Disputes between anarchists and socialists saw the First International dissolve in acrimony. The Second International (1889–1917) arose at the initiative of Belgian and German social democratic parties and became a 'loose federation' (Walters 2001) of a wide range of Marxist and reformist political parties and unions. Labour cosmopolitanism gave way to a union internationalism in the 1900s when the International Trade Secretariats (ITS) founded in the 1890s (Windmuller 2000) came to embody an international civil society of voluntary organisations that mediate between the individual and the state and corporations (Hyman 2005). After the First World War, the International Trade Secretariats figured prominently in the affairs of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which was formed in association with the ill-fated League of Nations. By the 1930s, it was clear, however, that neither the socialist internationalism of unions nor the liberal internationalism of nation-states could resist either the rise of fascism or the rise of protective tariffs on agricultural imports within many industrially advanced countries.

After the Second World War, there was a renewed interest in liberal internationalism, and the foundation of the United Nations in 1945 saw fifty-six national union confederations from Britain, France, the USA, the USSR, China, South America, and Oceania meet in London to form the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). By 1949, however, the former allies against fascism in the Second World War had fragmented with the development of the Cold War. British and US delegates walked out and led delegates of thirty-eight national and international union bodies to found the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) based in Geneva (Gordon 2000). It aimed to represent unions that could negotiate with employers 'free' from state interference. During the 1950s and 1960s, the ICFTU pursued an intense rivalry with the communist remaining members of the WFTU. Any sense of unions embodying an international civil society withered as international union bodies became vehicles for the
international diplomacy of large and powerful nation-states. Since the 1970s, the Anglo-Saxon labourist model of ‘free’ collective bargaining over narrowly industrial matters has lost favour within the ICFTU, while the European social-democratic concern with the economic, social, and political context of workers’ rights gained favour. In addition, the International Trade Secretariats (ITSs) re-dubbed themselves Global Unions (2006) in 2000.

In recent years, extensive amalgamations have taken place among the Global Unions as the density of unionisation has declined around the world (Visser 2003). Many of the Global Unions have moved beyond the traditional activity of coordinating international support for national industrial conflicts in favour of three wider ambitions. First, they have become much more involved in educating and assisting officials of unions in developing countries. A second, older ambition was to negotiate global employment contracts with global corporations. The ITSs long harboured a vision of negotiating with the very large transnational corporations on behalf of national union bodies. To this end, the International Metalworkers Federation, for example, established transnational automobile manufacturing councils in the 1950s, but they never became a force for the international car companies to reckon with. The rise of neoliberalism among the governments of rich and poor countries, as well as international institutions such as the World Trade Organization, significantly diminished the prospect of moving towards the vision of global unions negotiating with global corporations. In the 1990s, however, attempts to institute industrial negotiation were displaced by contestation and protest in the form of transnational networks of activism between unions enabled by computer-mediated communications. The Global Unions established significant transnational networks of information and support to highlight the corporations’ practices and put pressure on strongly anti-union corporations. These include networked campaigns against Wal-Mart, Toys ‘R’ Us, Bridgestone, and Rio Tinto (Walker 2001). The key aspect of this strategy stemmed from their activity in civil society rather than only in the workplace.

The third ambition of the Global Unions has been to complement these campaigns against anti-union corporations with broader resistance to the policies and ideologies that allow corporations to degrade workers’ rights and working conditions. This strategy meant challenging neoliberal and free market ideologies and institutions – such as the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the spread of bilateral and regional free trade agreements, and neoliberal economic policies of privatisation and deregulation – via the practice of social movement unionism (see the Global Union Research Network (2006)). Their transnational engagement with various social, environmental and religious NGOs and social movements critical of free-market capitalism marked an important development in union activism.
Networks of social movement unionism

It is crucial to realise that the wider concerns of contemporary transnational unionism are consistent with multi-layered and effective networks of social engagement. Thus, although Swedish unionism is sometimes associated with 'corporatism' (Goldthorpe 1984), in fact, Swedish unions are the most successful in the world at local organisation (Kjellberg 1983; 2000) and in the history of the Swedish unions, decentralisation has been equally as important as centralisation (Hadenius 1976; Higgins 1985b). It was the articulation between local, national, and global levels of organisation that allowed Swedish unions to overcome opposition from even the most hostile of anti-union global corporations.

The Toys 'R' Us dispute of 1995 is a significant example of activism with both national and transnational aspects (Vandenbergh 2006). During 1991-92, unemployment in Sweden rose above 3 per cent for the first time in fifty years and peaked at 9 per cent. The refusal, in 1995, of Toys 'R' Us to negotiate a collective contract with the employees of its newly established outlets was widely regarded as test of what might be possible in a new era. As a consequence of economic globalisation, both relations between unions and parties of labour and the densities of unionisation have declined in most industrially advanced countries since about 1980 (Piazza 2001). In 1995 Toys 'R' Us employed 50,000 people around the world in 1,000 outlets, and had never signed a collective contract or been involved in any industrial conflict. After four months of the commercial workers' surprisingly successful coordination of a consumer boycott, and escalating sympathy boycotts of services to Toys 'R' Us by workers in other unions, the final straw came when an international conference of the global union of commercial workers called for an international boycott and the share price of Toys 'R' Us suffered in the United States.

Two lessons about the effectiveness of social movement unionism can be drawn from this conflict. First, the commercial employees' horizontal links to protestors against Sweden joining the European Union were much stronger than the company's non-existent links with other Swedish employers or any sort of links into Swedish politics. Second, the union's vertical links between new members, local activists, its national office, and the international union body proved to be stronger than comparable links between the local Swedish managers, the European managers in London, and the American managers of the company. Furthermore, social movement unionism points to both public pressure and conciliation. Indeed, as the General Secretary of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Bill Jordan, argued in debate with a radical commentator:

We must be both in the streets and at the bargaining table. ... Seattle is a good example of what we are all about: confrontation, when necessary
and engagement, when possible. It is not always easy to take this approach, but it is not impossible. It just takes a certain amount of coordination.

(Waterman and Jordan 2000)

In short, to have any chance of being politically significant and being taken seriously by international corporations, the strength of the links between national union confederations and local unionists, along with links to transnational protest networks, are crucial.

Unions are not only interacting with each other; they are also making connections with other actors in civil society. As ongoing organisations that are capable of deploying power in the labour market and are informed by a coherent ideology of solidarity, union bodies typically organise many more members and employ many more officials, organisers, and researchers at local, national, and international levels than do single-issue networks of protest. Particularly in respect to the development of the anti-capitalist movement, unions can be especially effective at resisting the policies and consequences of neoliberalism because they are strongly organised; have more resources to deploy, and furthermore have a long historical record of realising positive social change. Obviously, between fifty and hundred years ago in most of the industrially advanced countries, unions played significant roles in the process of democratisation and the achievement of universal suffrage (Therborn 1977; Rueschemeyer et al. 1992). Importantly, unions have also played a leading role among the social movements that brought a peaceful end to communism in Poland (Touraine 1983), to apartheid in South Africa (von Holdt 2002; Wood 2004), and to dictatorships in the Philippines, South Korea and Brazil (Scipes 1992; Robinson 2000; Seoane and Taddei 2002).

Unions were also closely involved in the anti-capitalist movement and the wave of protests against neoliberalism and global capitalism at meetings of the World Trade Organisation, European Union leaders, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and similar bodies since the ‘battle of Seattle’ on 30 November 1999. Union leaders organised and participated in rallies and alternative seminars but obviously did not take part in the riots in Seattle 1999, Gothenburg 2001, or Genoa 2001. Unions also played a significant role in the successful opposition to the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) before other groups realised what member states of the OECD were negotiating. ¹ It is less well known that international and national unions have also participated in and contributed to the organisation of the very large gatherings at the World Social Forums in Porto Alegre, Brazil (2001–03, 2005), Mumbai, India (2004), and Karachi, Pakistan (2006).

To move from resistance against neoliberalism to a constructive programme for achieving solidarity among workers around the world, unions need to campaign for means of reducing unreasonably wide distributions
of wealth and income between the rich and the poor both within nation-states and across the world. Collaborating with the International Movement for Democratic Control of Financial Markets and their Institutions, ATTAC (2006) and its campaign for an international Tobin tax on all financial transactions to finance development aid for poor countries might feature in such a programme. It would no doubt also feature campaigns to transform ‘free trade’ agreements into ‘fair trade’ agreements. Union involvement in the Clean Clothes Campaign (Clean Clothes Campaign 2006) exemplifies this. To develop links with protest networks, union leaders need to abandon old prejudices about radical activists and unionists in poor countries. On both these points, Peter Waterman (2001) argues persuasively. Contemporary labour internationalism needs to depart from any Northern sense of superiority over poor countries, and instead incorporate a willingness to learn from the successes of unionism and activism in the South. As unions have embedded their organisational strength in broader transnational concerns of social justice, social movement unionism has become a significant means of defining and promoting workers’ interests in an era of neoliberal globalisation.

Conclusion

The way that worker-citizens attempt to influence political life has taken a significant step away from unions only operating within the workplace or public policy forums, to include wider forms of transnational activism. If unions are to move from protest to wielding significant influence over the formation of public policies, then they must sustain their campaigns against the spread of neoliberal policies as well as policies and businesses that adversely effect workers. Unions must also seek to achieve global solidarity among workers of the world and strengthen both the vertical links within union bodies and horizontal links to allied social movements. This action requires creating and being part of a transnational ideology that is broader than the interests of workers, and addresses the alarming differences in wealth between the rich and poor around the world. An ideology of solidarity is crucial because unions are organisations with a long history. Pride in that history is important to their capacity to constitute their members’ sense of identity, to organise potential members, and to counter the effects of alternative ideologies of neoliberalism and attendant social injustices. With their history, an effective ideology, an effective power to withdraw labour, and long-standing organisations, unions have a considerably sharper capacity for effective action than do the newer networks of protest spawned in the 1960s and recently revived by the radically democratic possibilities of transnational activism. Transnational social movement unionism offers an important starting point for strategies that give a voice to working people around the world in an era of accelerating globalisation.
Note

1 For a detailed account about the role of unions and others groups in stopping the MAI, see Goodman and Ranald 2000.

Bibliography


