

Is an Injury to One an Injury to All? Some Critical Thoughts on Trade-Union Internationalism Today



The necessity of working-class internationalism must surely be one of the left's most invoked truisms, providing the semblance of a solution to the problems facing embattled workers and governments of the left. But too often the concept is deployed in vague, even contentless ways. The global economic crisis has put the issue of 'internationalism' into greater focus – particularly, perhaps, in Europe, where political and monetary union is in question as never before.

The 2015 election of Syriza in Greece, and the dead-end negotiations of the first avowedly socialist European government in decades with international lenders, have underlined the urgent need for working-class internationalism against finance capitalism and austerity. But these 'exceptional' problems for Greece, Portugal, Spain, Cyprus and Ireland are faced every day by workers and left-wing states in the Global South. The inadequate international support for Greece cannot be a lesson for and about Europe alone, but the start of a new, broader, more grounded conversation about building left labour internationalism generally.

Here I examine three brakes on a left working-class

internationalism within the trade-union movement today: economism; absorption by the foreign-policy apparatuses of imperialist states; and top-down technocratic orientations. The common thread is the problem of labour bureaucracy – specifically, that of national labour unions in the Global North. Distant enough from the rank-and-file to make agreements with employers and governments that don't serve their own members' long-term – and often even short-term – interests, they're even less capable of standing up for workers in other parts of the world. Such groups jealously guard power and resources, with which they control priorities of global union federations. There are examples of progressive, successful international efforts from Northern unions: but, relative to their power and resources, they are rare, and heavily self-interested.

Successful local efforts at union reform – what is called the 'union democracy movement' in the US – could, then, have profound consequences for labour internationalism. Indeed, radical labour internationalism has historically come, typically, from the local layers closest to the rank-and-file, and their work to raise consciousness, funds and hell on the shop floor and beyond.

What's needed for a left labour internationalism, then, isn't more progressive global bureaucracies or technical capacities, but reforms to shave away layers of bureaucratic mediation, bringing workers from different countries together more directly. In the meantime, fighting against tendencies that absorb national unions into states' foreign-policy apparatuses, force unequal 'partnerships' with employers, and conduct global campaigns in a top-down manner, would be a good start.

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Solidarity is hard to define: we know it when we see it, but try putting it into words. Take the famous slogan of the

Industrial Workers of the World (IWW): 'An Injury to One Is an Injury to All'. Outside of individual workplaces – or exceptional, extreme antiworker authoritarian states – instances in which an injury to one is an injury to all in the most literal and unmediated sense are hard to find, particularly internationally. In fact, in such immediate and local terms, an injury to one, when not neutral for others, may even, to put it provocatively, be a short-term opportunity for them, on the basis of successful divide-and-conquer strategies pitting workers against one another. Such divisions, great enough locally and nationally, are magnified many times at the international level, by imperialism and uneven development. Across such widely divergent objective conditions, the material bases for solidarity are often shrouded in layers of mystification.

In fact, the principle of 'An Injury to One Is An Injury to All' is most often invoked as part of an imaginative process of proto-class formation, rather than to reflect immediate material realities. When it comes to these at an international level, the ugly fact is that trade union 'interests' – in terms of marginal wage gains – are sometimes better served in the immediate term by making protectionist alliances with national capitalist classes or states to preserve jobs – in exchange, perhaps, for an insular approach to the rest of the world. Yet, it is clear that in the long run, workers everywhere are harmed by harm to workers anywhere, from lowering standards, increasing the size and desperation of the reserve army of labour, and emboldening states and employers to step up attacks. This tension between short- and long-term interests is a classic problem of trade-union economism – a problem that of course remains just as relevant today as it was in the past.

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During the Cold War, the international labour movement fractured along Communist and Social Democratic lines. But the

damage was deeper than just organisational separation, particularly in the US. There the AFL-CIO union federation collaborated with the CIA against left-wing unions (and governments) in the US and beyond. After World War Two they supported anti-communist unions in Europe; engaged in wide-ranging activities to undermine left governments in Latin America, including Allende's Chile; backed the most conservative sections of the labour movement in South Africa during apartheid; and provided support for government sponsored unions in Marcos' Phillipines and death squads targeting trade unionists in Indonesia. Nor were they alone: global union federations, like the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), played a similar role, collaborating with the CIA, with their post-war Mediterranean anti-communist 'vigilance committee', and their activities in Latin America and beyond.

Unions, especially in the US, continue to toe their states' foreign-policy lines – particularly, though not exclusively, when they overlap with perceived economic self-interest. When my own union, UAW 2865, representing 13,000 academic student employees at the University of California, became the first mainstream local union in the US to vote in favour of the call from Palestinian trade unions – including fellow university-teachers' unions – to support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, unions in other sectors put intense pressure on us to back down. The Teamsters issued a public letter stressing the fact that many of the targetted companies – all heavily complicit in the Israeli occupation – are Teamsters (and UAW) employers in the US. Ignoring the repressive conditions faced by Palestinian trade unionists calling for boycott, they wrote,

[w]hatever your motives, we cannot conceive of an action more hostile to the interests of our members and more antithetical to the most basic principles of the union movement than for a union to call for actions which are intended to do harm to

the economic security of other union members.

Even putting aside the absurd argument that a boycott aimed at getting giant transnational corporations to drop business with one small country would harm their employees, it's important to note that with their intervention, the Teamsters harmed 'the economic security of other [Palestinian] union members'. Moreover, they are supporting the occupation, working to ensure the smooth flow of bulldozers and weapons.

There are, of course, rarer, uplifting instances of labour intervention in foreign-policy issues on behalf of workers internationally. There is in particular a strong potential for meaningful, concrete international trade-union solidarity from workers at key nodal points of the global economy, or those involved in producing commodities used directly by the repressive apparatuses of states. The United States West Coast (ILWU) dockworkers have a long history of such actions. They refused to load weapons for fascist countries in the 1930s, and through industrial action, they supported the Chilean resistance during the dictatorship; the fight against apartheid in South Africa; and opposition to US involvement in Vietnam and the Middle East. And last summer, during the siege of Gaza, members of ILWU Local 10 in the San Francisco Bay Area refused to cross a community-led picket to 'Block the Boat', an Israeli Zim line carrier. This minor action was a first in the US – taken for the BDS movement, echoing earlier actions by European dockworkers. In part, it inspired my own union to take up the issue. We refused to be put off by the Teamsters' – and other unions' – arguments, and became the first mainstream local union in the US to join the BDS movement through a membership vote. The great majority of the US labour movement, however, lags far behind.

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Our national union, the United Auto Workers (UAW), has a

tawdry history, ranging from its McCarthy-era expulsion of Communist organisers who had played a central role in forming the union in the 1930s; to the repression of radical black rank-and-file activists fighting racism in the plants and the union in the 1970s; to signing off, during the economic crisis, on shameful multi-tier contracts that that have done untold damage to the workforce. As one of the largest industrial unions in the country, heavily involved in global export, the UAW is important for proponents of left labour internationalism. Recently, it has illustrated the calculated self interest of the international orientation of many American and European unions.

In the mid-2000s, the UAW played an active role in the coalition of US and South Korean labour unions opposing their countries' proposed Free Trade Agreement. In 2007, the UAW highlighted the negative impacts the FTA would have on US autoworker jobs and conditions, but also the difficult and repressive conditions faced by unions in South Korea, and the agreement's lack of protection for South Korean workers. Nevertheless, in 2011 the UAW endorsed the agreement, after protections were added – for the US auto industry. Pressure from the Obama Administration to step into line doubtless played a critical role in the decision, following the government's bailout of the auto industry. While selling out erstwhile allies was bad enough, more galling still was that the UAW cited, as a factor behind its shift, the strength of South Korea's trade-union movement – despite continued opposition from South Korean unions.

The UAW's role in the campaign of General Motors – one of the 'Big Three' auto company UAW employers in the US – in Colombia is also revealing. Colombia has the highest annual rate of murders of union activists, and is widely considered by international monitoring bodies to be among the worst countries in the world for labour organising. Nevertheless, against these odds, since 2011, Colombian autoworkers formerly

employed by the GM plant in Bogotá have been camped, demanding justice, in front of the American Embassy, since hundreds of workers were fired after sustaining severe workplace injuries. The UAW agreed to help negotiate with the company in 2012, but GM came back with minimal concessions: a payout insufficient to cover expenses for, in many cases, permanently disabling injuries – and a refusal to rehire workers, as required by law. When the workers refused these terms, the UAW ended its support for them, and pressured other unions to do the same.

Such behaviour would be appalling anywhere, but this hypocrisy is particularly deep, given that UAW now-former president Bob King staked his legacy in part on developing stronger ties with unions in other countries. The UAW has developed international relationships over the past five years, but as these examples indicate, they will likely only stretch as far as self-interest allows.

Such behaviour serves to illustrate how Northern union interests are constituted within national economic and political environments. Locking unions into corporatist arrangements as the UAW has done since the bailout, is an effective – though not the only – means to prevent the development of left-oriented trade-union internationalism. Ironically, such ‘social partnership’ constraining UAW support for workers in other countries has been a Faustian bargain within the US itself, as UAW members suffer from concessionary bargaining and multi-tier contracts.

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In Europe, ‘social partnership’ is far more common than in the US and often embedded in long-standing formal arrangements. Yet few but the most committed union bureaucrats could argue that such arrangements still function well for workers in Europe today. But memories of seemingly positive experiences have led international departments of many Northern European unions to advocate similar approaches in repressive political

contexts where they are wholly inappropriate, and unlikely to benefit workers. What's needed to bolster labour in most of the Global South is support for militant, democratic class-conscious unionism, not the importing of a strategy which – even at home – is under question. Also common in 'Northern' solidarity is support for unions elsewhere in a purely technocratic fashion without regard to union politics – proceeding as if what is needed is simply training activists, and as if this can be done in a politically neutral fashion. Union strategy, though, is not at all neutral. Where unions are organised along political lines (as in much of the world), simply providing training or support to one union over another is a highly political act, with potentially far-reaching consequences. Decisions disguised as politically neutral can anoint winners or losers, as the Cold War experience shows.

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The need, one might think, is to shift from a framework of national unions to a global level of organisation. But in fact, the international labour movement has more than a hundred years' of experience with global union federations (GUFs, formerly the International Trade Secretariats). The results have been, at best, mixed. For years, the GUFs were caught up in the politics of the Cold War, acting more as proxies for states and blocs than workers' advocates. But they have reorganised in recent years, and, at least on paper, their politics today are improved. And they've racked up important victories, like the ITF's Flags of Convenience campaign, resulting in a global collective bargaining agreement for seafarers on low-standard vessels; and the agreement with primary employers reached by IndustriALL and UNI in the wake of the Rana Plaza disaster.

But what are these federations? They claim to represent millions – the membership totals of their affiliate unions – but they aren't representative bodies in any meaningful sense. With their leadership elected by national officers of their

affiliates and day-to-day work largely carried out by hired professionals, they are several steps removed from members. Additionally, top-level decision making tends to be dominated by wealthy, powerful Northern unions. All of this is no criticism of the good work they often do carry out: it is an appeal for clarity. These are not international labour unions, built on principles of bottom-up democracy: they are, essentially, international labour-rights NGOs set up to provide technical support, industry research, training, corporate campaigns and advocacy. Left labour internationalism requires more than this.

This NGO-like structure underlies serious problems. The GUFs are funded primarily by wealthy Northern unions and are all based in Europe, with mostly European staff. Many observers have pointed out their Northern bias in priorities, and in their relations with Southern unions. As the Teamsters have shown, campaigns for labour in the South that are deemed to threaten the bargaining position of Northern unions will likely be opposed.

The lack of organic connection to rank-and-file workers and the geographic stretch of many campaigns results in a top-down approach to activism. Participation by affiliate unions is often limited to easy-to-organise symbolic actions, typical of bureaucratic unionism, rather than more powerful industrial actions that require rank-and-file engagement. Whatever gains GUFs have made for affiliates, the extent to which such top-down, technocratic activism transforms the consciousness of members is suspect.

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Will labour-union internationalism ever be enough? Of course not. There are real limits to making politics through unions. But the Left must not underestimate unions: better to inquire what is possible within this arena. As long as there is capitalism, workers can strive to organise at the point of

production, and at a moment of much soul-searching on the Left over forms of politics and organisation, we must remember that many people's primary experience of class happens at the workplace. A well-organised workforce can fight for changes that go far beyond its own immediate economic well-being – should it choose. A truly global and leftist labour movement could not just deliver powerful gains at the workplace, but might embolden workers to fight for truly systemic change.

As the hope in Syriza crashes against a brick wall of European and IMF intransigence, we must ask what could have been, had a united European labour movement stood behind Greece's workers. Without state allies, how would Syriza's bargaining position have looked different in the context of mass solidarity strikes in Europe? We mustn't lose sight of this international dimension of left government viability.

European unions could or would not see that in this case, an injury to one is indeed an injury to all –and likely sooner rather than later. With the troika's success in humiliating Syriza, the possibilities of similar projects emerging elsewhere diminishes. Europe's workers will feel the effects of a state with severely eroded labour standards on its periphery. For the sake not only of the local, but for a globalism from below, it is past time for the rank and file.

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