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Book Review

Kate Bronfenbrenner (ed) (2007) *Global Unions: Challenging Transnational Capital Through Cross-Border Campaigns.* Ithaca and London: ILR Press. ISBN: 978-0801473913

REVIEWED BY *Chris Schenk, McMaster University*

'The goal of this book,' writes Bronfenbrenner, 'was to provide a body of original scholarly research that captured global union efforts to take on and win against the world's largest transnational firms' (213). The book fulfills this objective admirably both through its clear approach to conducting corporate research and through its selection of articles from the Global Union Conference held in New York City (February 2006).

The conference theme held that unions from across the globe find themselves compelled to operate in the context of an ever more complex, rapidly changing and often hostile neo-liberal environment, one dominated more and more by transnational corporations that have spawned global problems necessitating global solutions. These, in turn, need cross-border cooperation and common action by a world-wide labour movement. This text builds on a growing consensus that corporate power over working people and their organizations can only be successfully confronted when its inherent vulnerabilities are thoroughly researched and challenged locally, nationally and internationally. Challenges and successes around the world are covered in ten chapters, followed by Bronfenbrenner's constructive conclusion.

In the first chapter Tom Juravich outlines a model for strategic corporate research, arguing that unions today need to acquire a comprehensive understanding of a company, it's industrial sector and the broader social-economic and political context in which it is embedded.

Chapter 2, by Peter Wad, explores how workers at a Malaysia medical supply company were able to unionize their factory in large part due to an interesting alliance with a Danish NGO dominated by the Danish labour movement. Ashwini Sukthanker and Kevin Kolben provide two case studies in chapter 3 which detail the challenges of alliance building between unions in the Global South and those in the Global North.

The three chapters discussing campaigns in Asia by Samanthi Gunawardana follow in her ethnographic analysis of Sri Lanka's Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and the importance of long-term coalition building to union strength.

Henry Fundt next presents a case study of a union comprehensive campaign in the banana sector of Latin America and the Carribean wherein unions work with NGO supporters to gain direct negotiations with large transnational firms and expand union density.

The next three chapters focus on distinct campaigns in Europe. The first, by Peter Turnbull, involves dockworkers who demonstrated how their long tradition of cross-border solidarity can enable a successful strike. This is followed by Valeria Pulignano, who presents a critical analysis of how the European Metal Workers' Federation, hitherto absent of any historical tradition of cross-border bargaining, organizing or solidaristic strikes, coordinated workplace and community actions across borders in Europe in response to corporate restructuring and threatened job security at General Motors (GM). Amanda Tattersall then evaluates the challenges and potential of cross-border alliances in the service sector through her research on SEIU's global partnership unit and the Driving Up Standards campaign conducted both by SEIU and the Transport and General Workers' Union (T&G) in Britain.

Dimitris Stevis and Terry Boswell, in chapter 9, examine both the exciting possibilities and serious limitations of International Framework Agreements (IFAs). The challenge these agreements pose, they state, is moving them from voluntary to enforceable contracts. The last chapter, written by Darryn Snell, concerns the significant increase in foreign direct investment in the Global South and the detrimental practices, arguably including human rights violations, of transnational corporations such as Exxon Mobile, Coca-Cola, Wal-Mart and Talisman.

As each of the campaigns in the book demonstrates, it is of paramount importance that workers and their unions, together with civil society allies such as NGOs, gain much more in-depth comprehension of changing corporate ownership structures and their vulnerabilities.

Yet throughout the text there remains an underestimation of the continued centrality of the state. Put simply, the state in capitalist societies continues to represent the general interests of capital, of which transnational corporations are an increasingly important part. It also remains a decision-maker in terms of laws, regulations and policies, even though this role has evolved given current economic thinking. Only in the rarest of crises do these two roles come in conflict. Perspectives in the text tend to confuse these functions into an either/or dichotomy rather than envision state roles as multifaceted and complimentary.

Virtually every chapter in this text emphasizes the importance of coalitions, of working with NGOs or of building and maintaining networks. Gunawardana's discussion of women workers in the EPZs of Sri Lanka and Tattersall's chapter are fine examples. The message is clear; relationship building at every level is of central importance to the future of global unions. Yet more detail is needed if one is to understand the specific basis of partnerships and precisely how they are to be maintained and expanded over time.

It is through such renewed visions and activities that workers solidarity expands from a particular workplace and union membership across international borders. It will in all likelihood be quickly tested, for as the concluding chapter of the book notes, because one side of a cross-border campaign has obtained its goals does not necessarily mean that the other partners have. Unions in the Global North will need to ensure that unions in the Global South win as well. Union campaigns will need to have the capacity and the solidarity to overcome the pressure to break ranks and not let transnational companies play one group of workers off against another. This excellent text contributes to that end.

Chris Schenk is former Research Director of the Ontario Federation of Labour in Toronto, Canada. He currently teaches in Labour Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, and in the Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources at the University of Toronto, Canada.