Global Labour Journal

Volume 2 | Issue 3 5

10-24-2011

Review of Andreas Bieler and Ingemar Lindberg's 'Global Restructuring, Labour and the Challenges for Transnational Solidarity'

Edward Webster
University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, edward.webster@wits.ac.za

Recommended Citation
Webster, Edward (2011) "Review of Andreas Bieler and Ingemar Lindberg's 'Global Restructuring, Labour and the Challenges for Transnational Solidarity'," *Global Labour Journal*: Vol. 2: Iss. 3, p. 231-234.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/globallabour/vol2/iss3/5

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@McMaster. It has been accepted for inclusion in Global Labour Journal by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@McMaster. For more information, please contact scom@mcmaster.ca.

Review of Andreas Bieler and Ingemar Lindberg's 'Global Restructuring, Labour and the Challenges for Transnational Solidarity'

This review is available in Global Labour Journal: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/globallabour/vol2/iss3/5

Book Review

Andreas Bieler and Ingemar Lindberg (eds) (2010) *Global Restructuring, Labour and the Challenges for Transnational Solidarity*. London: Routledge. ISBN 978-0-415-58083-0.

REVIEWED BY: Edward Webster, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

The slogan 'Workers of the World Unite' is a long standing aspiration of the labour movement. Its roots go back to the mid-nineteenth century, when workers in Europe sought to challenge the logic of the free market. Initial contacts between English and French workers arose because of a common nineteenth century practice where lower-paid workers from Europe were imported into England to break strikes. Employers' threats to import strike breakers swiftly imposed an international awareness on these early craft workers. The First International (the International Working Men's Association, the IMWA), was formed in 1864, as a vehicle to promote contact and communication to resist this downward pressure on the wages and working conditions of skilled workers.

The disintegration of the First International, it has been argued, was not due primarily to political divisions such as arguments over the Paris Commune, but rather to the national recognition and consolidation of trade unions (Olle and Schoeler 1977). This constitution of unions as national entities appeared to diminish rather than strengthen the need for internationalism. When legal recognition was won, and as national bargaining systems and more protective trade policies emerged, the view that workers' problems could be fought and resolved at national level, with limited reference to the international context, became dominant. The result, it was argued was a 'rather feeble internationalism' and the national fracturing of trade union internationalism. Deep political divisions in twentieth century labour, following the creation of the Third International as an instrument of Soviet foreign policy and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in 1949 as an instrument of Western ethnocentrism, brought complicating and tragic divisions to bear on an already fractured movement.

In the context of this unpromising trajectory, many labour analysts have concluded that globalisation's new international division of labour has further deepened the nationalist based conflicts of material interest in a divided international labour movement (Haworth and Ramsay 1986). The movement of jobs from developed to developing countries, where labour is cheap, override any sense of worker solidarity. In such circumstances, workers in one country see workers in other countries as their main enemy, rather than uniting to challenge capital.

For these analysts, the idea of labour internationalism is a utopian idea (Burawoy 2010). Indeed, Silver and Arrighi argue that a North-South divide continues to be the main obstacle 'to the formation of a homogenous world-proletarian condition' and are sceptical of the post-Seattle claims of a New Labour Internationalism based on a Red/Green alliance between Northern and Southern workers (Silver and Arrighi 2003: 13).

However, the collapse of communism and the creation of new forms of information and communication technology has led to a rethink on the role of labour in the age of globalisation. While it is accepted that the creation of a truly global labour market creates opportunities for capital to exploit labour more effectively on a global scale, it has also ironically led to opportunities to transcend past constraints. Bieler and Lindberg's *Global Restructuring, Labour and the Challenges for Transnational Solidarity* breaks new ground in developing this emerging paradigm of global labour studies by suggesting ways in which the notion of solidarity can be redefined. Through Richard Hyman's redefinition of solidarity as involving mutuality despite difference, the book begins to develop an analytical framework through which these emerging forms of transnational solidarity can be examined.

The core idea in the collection, developed by Hyman, is that the old model of labour collectivism has been exhausted. In its traditional form, 'solidarity' was a slogan which easily matched a conception of a working class, which was not recognised as differentiated by gender, skill, ethnicity or other significant characteristics. For unions to survive and grow in the age of globalisation, Hyman argues, the principle of solidarity must be actively redefined and reinvented by workers on the ground. It must go beyond the notion of common interests and identities to include the obligation for the strong to support the weak ('an injury to one, is an injury to all'). But it needs now also to recognise that diversity cannot be suppressed, it must be accepted, even welcomed. 'The issue' writes Hyman, 'is how actual and potential trade union members can be encouraged to perceive common interests despite difference, and to negotiate the tensions which often exist between their own multiple social identities, in a way which is compatible with collectivism' (27).

Of course, Bieler and Lindberg are not the first to analyse the new forms transnational activies emerging in this phase of globalisation. The process of building a transnational movement has been usefully delineated by Sidney Tarrow (Tarrow 2005). 'Rooted cosmopolitans', Tarrow writes, are emerging activists who think globally, but are linked to very real places (Tarrow 2005: 42). Similarly, Kate Bronfenbrenner's edited book contains many examples of how labour is organising across borders, establishing alliances with NGOs and social movements , and countering the negative effects of unregulated globalisation (Bronfenbrenner 2007). The value of the Bieler and Lindberg collection is that it goes beyond traditional trade unions to include informal workers and the sphere of social reproduction. By broadening their understanding of labour internationalism the editors are able to develop their twelve case studies into a typology of three varieties of solidarity (210).

The first examples of transnational solidarity are drawn from manufacturing. The push for building transnational solidarity structures in manufacturing, the authors conclude, is strong. Transnational support for the right to organise is a powerful tool. This is demonstrated in the support given by German workers to striking workers in Turkey. But competitive pressure is a strong limitation. If auto workers in Opel/GM go on strike, other car producers will sell better. If Jaqalanka garment workers in Sri Lanka get better paid, the company may lose its contract with Nike. In this way Polish and German auto workers or Asian garment producers, are played off against each other (210-212).

Contrary to the assumption that transitional solidarity would typically develop in sectors of transnational production, the case studies in this book suggest that for workers in the private services sector the consequences of globalization are potentially even more far-reaching. In manufacturing, unions 'just' have to find ways of coordinating their activities transnationally.

But in the case of the private service sector, basic ideas about union organisation and identity are challenged. Street traders in Mozambique are self-employed, they organise their workplace (the market place) and they do not negotiate with employers but with local government – and yet their association is affiliated to a national confederation of labour. German building workers in Berlin must try to organise workers from Portugal, Poland and the Ukraine, temporarily posted to Berlin. In order to regulate working hours and wages and prevent underbidding, they must create renewed local union structures, involving posted workers and other groups outside the union's traditional core group. They must reach out to subcontracters, employing undocumented migrants at very low wages. New forms of representation have to be created at the local level if these workers are to have an organisational voice (212-214).

The response of labour in the third set of case studies – the services for social reproduction – is quite different from the other two sectors as public services tend to be regarded as rights rather than commodities. This ideological dimension, the case studies demonstrate, provides a special link between these services and trade unions. Professionals in this sector – doctors, teachers and others – often have a social dedication and are committed to reaching out also to under-privileged groups. Thus, a potential ideological link – a struggle for social justice – often exists between unions, on one hand, and consumer groups and popular movements fighting for access to health or water on the other. This link, the authors conclude, does not usually exist in the field of purely private services (215-216). In the case of the defence of the welfare state in Norway described by Wahl, this meant struggling for a new political course, a demand for a change of politics – away from neo-liberalism with deregulation and privatization, towards progressive policies with increased democratic control of the economy (165-176).

The implications of the analytical framework developed in this book is that manufacturing – and the auto industry in particular – are not the paradigmatic case of transnational solidarity. Conditions for solidarity at lower ends of the global value chains and in private services or services for social reproduction are just as important (219). By identifying the varieties of labour's responses and arguing for the need to rethink solidarity this book makes a valuable contribution to the debate on labours response to globalisation.

The book raises a number of questions. Are the new forms of transnational solidarity identified in this book in competition with the 'old' internationalism or are they complimentary? Reading the case studies in this volume it is clear that innovations are taking place within existing international organisations and that the book will have benefited by a more specific focus on responses in the 'old' international labour institutions, particularly the global union federations that are being revitalised under the impact of globalisation.

What this volume makes clear is that if labour is to have a future its notion of solidarity will have to embrace political traditions from all regions of the world and dissolve the blunt reification of North and South. It will need to recognise diverse political origins and political context. In embarking on this ambitious task I would suggest that instead of seeing the challenge as one of building mutuality despite difference, that we begin to see difference as enhancing mutuality. This book provides examples of how this could be done.

REFERENCES

Bronfenbrenner, K. (ed) (2007) *Global Unions: Challenging Transnational Capital Through Cross-border Campaigns*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Burawoy, M. (2010) 'From Polanyi to Pollyanna: The False Optimism of Global Labour Studies', *Global labour journal* 1(2): 301-313.

Haworth, N. and Ramsay, H. (1986) 'Workers of the World Untied: A Critical Analysis of the labour Response to the Internationalisation of Capital', *International Journal of the Sociology of Law and Social Policy* 6(2): 55-82.

Olle, W. and Schoeller, W. (1977) 'World Market Competition and Restrictions on International Trade Union Policies', Capital and Class 2: 56-75.

Silver, B. and Arrighi, G. (2001) 'Workers North and South', in L. Panitch and C. Leys (eds), *Socialist Register 2001: Working Classes, Global Realities*. London: Merlin Press.

Tarrow, S. (2005) *The New Transnational Activism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Edward Webster is Professor of Sociology and Research Professor at the Society, Work and Development Institute (SWOP) at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.