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The Development Platform of the Americas: labour movements' attempt to reshape the neodevelopmental debate in Latin America

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Abstract

The transnationalization of local and national economies in the last three decades has pushed labor movements to increase the efforts in building transnational solidarity, as a tool of basic self-defense in a context of advancing neoliberal ideas and policies. The struggle for workers' rights has been reshaped in this context, and global solidarity became an integral part of building a movement that can challenge neoliberal globalization both at home and abroad. This paper debates the struggles in Latin America in the recent two decades, comparing two distinct situations and the possibilities of building a genuine solidarity movement that cuts across regions but also across sectors, including social, environmental, and human rights movements in the process.

Introduction¹

The transnationalization of the local and national economies in the last three decades has pushed labor movements to increase the efforts in building transnational solidarity, as a tool of basic self-defense in a context of advancing neoliberal ideas and policies. The struggle for workers' rights has been reshaped in this context, and global solidarity became an integral part of building a movement that can challenge neoliberal globalization both at home and abroad. This paper debates the struggles in Latin America in the recent two decades, comparing two distinct situations and the possibilities of building a genuine solidarity movement that cuts across regions but also across sectors, including social, environmental, and human rights movements in the process. The debate is based on a comparative analysis of two recent situations: first, the

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struggle against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) in the late 1990s and early 2000s; second, the currently ongoing struggles regarding development models and natural resource-exploitation. These two moments in recent Latin American union action are essential to understanding the ways in which regional and global solidarity can look like according to the different circumstances.

Building a transnational, global solidarity movement has been a subject of intense debate within labor academics (Lambert and Webster 2001; Munck 2009; Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout 2008; Waterman 2008). The central question in these debates is whether labor's drive for global solidarity has been effective in challenging neoliberal globalization, and whether we have to think of new modes of global solidarity both 'from above' and 'from below'. While there are several different visions on this issue, this paper grounds itself on the work of Peter Waterman and his conception of a Global Justice and Solidarity Movement, GJSM henceforth (Waterman 2008). Waterman asserts that in the current context, the GJSM is the conception that better applies to labor's conditions and its possibilities of struggling at the global level. The GJSM is based on a broad articulation between labor unions, NGOs, social movements and environmental movements, that act mostly at the local level but need to connect internationally (Waterman 2008: 255-9). Waterman portrays the debates in the World Social Forum as an ideal such scenario. Waterman's view, in theoretical terms, fits into the current paper since it analyzes how unions, together with other civil society organizations, built and can continue to build a solidarity movement that focus on local struggles while remaining connected, in this case, at the regional level.

A central focus is on how 'work' and unions can play a decisive role through the construction of such a solidarity movement. Workers' solidarity has been a practice for more than a century, but few times in the recent past have workers' organizations being undermined like they are today. It is therefore essential to look at the new alliances being built from the trade unions with social movements, but also how the unions are re-organizing themselves to incorporate the new subjective identities that became a reality during the neoliberal project (De la Garza 2001).

In the last two decades, Latin America has been a 'testing' ground for these novel alliances. The organization of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in opposition to the economic-elite one named the World Economic Forum, can be considered a product of the changes experienced by workers', their organizations and social movements during the neoliberal period both in democratic and non-democratic contexts—a vast majority of the union-social movement alliances began under the dictatorial military governments of the 1970s---. This paper then intends to bring light to the issue of building global solidarity and workers' internationalism from a regional point of view. The 'globality' of the struggle does not only have to do with the

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geographical characteristics—unions from across boundaries aligning with each other—but also, and mainly in this case, with broader sectors of society, including workers' alternative identities. This means incorporating the identities developed 'beyond the factory' and specifically in Latin America the well rooted territorial-community identity (Svampa 2008), which began to play a significant role again in the recent decades due to the restructuring of society and the economy (Ospina 2004). The territorial identity regained space when factories' were being shut down under the neoliberal restructuring, and informal working conditions were a dominant rule in the region. Unions became a representative of a minority of the working class, reinforcing the distance with territorial organizations.

For many trade unions, especially those considered as social movement-oriented, the question was how to reach those workers that were marginalized from formal representation and participation. This led to a process of shifting union alliances, dismantling the traditional form of unionism and considering broader sectors of society as an integral part of the working class (Palomino 2005). These alliances were organized with community organizations, environmental movements and social movements struggling against neoliberalism, mainly as a way to broaden the capacity to mobilize but also due to the shifting realities that placed trade unions in a position of isolation that needed to be addressed. In addition to contributing to essential struggles against privatization and the dismantling of public services, the trade unions that pushed for the alliances with social movements also managed to gather popular support beyond their own ranks for their struggles against capital.

The coalition strategy at the local, national level had also a replica at the regional, international one, with the events debated in this paper. The first such occasion of regionalizing those local alliances took place in the struggle against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA henceforth), which incorporated labor movements from across the region in alliance with social movements and centre-left governments in rejecting an imperialist project that would have challenge the capacity of the region to take an autonomous development path. The second moment is currently taking place, and focuses on the process of resistance to a development model that been referred to as the "commodity consensus" (Svampa 2013) carried out by, mostly, center-left administrations. The defeat of the FTAA represented a foundational moment for many left movements in the region, and a victory for labour in alliance with social movements. The central question here is to explore whether that alliance, or a similar one, can be repeated today, in a context of advancing extractive-resource exploitation with phenomenal environmental, social and political consequences for the region, implemented under a majority centre-left governments. Which are the challenges, limitations and possibilities of that alliance today? The current crossroads represents a

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challenge for labor—due to its alliance with center-left administrations—but also an opportunity to revive the international solidarity that was intense during the neoliberal period, but decreased in the post-2005 period, when post-neoliberal governments became common-place in the majority of South American countries.

Latin American labor movements experienced dramatic changes during the 1990s, as a consequence of the deepening of neoliberal policies (beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s). Precarious working conditions, flexibilization of labour legislation and the privatization of public services and state-owned companies represented the main elements of a policy that was an integral political strategy by the elites throughout the world. The response of workers to the so-called ‘austerity policies’ was resistance in the most varied form, including increasing solidarity across border and also across sectors. The demise of the national state as an institution capable of responding to neoliberal challenges led workers’ organizations to target larger transnational structures, and also to reorganize internally to include sectors of society that were excluded from the formal sector of the economy. The struggle against the Free Trade Area of the Americas represented a centerpiece of anti-neoliberal mobilization that was already taking place on the ground in the local communities. The continent-wide project represented the ambition of US-led transnational capital, but also it gave the opportunity to build a counter-hegemonic movement. The organization of the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA) with labor in the center of the process, led to a mass movement mobilized throughout the region, eventually defeating the FTAA project in the Argentinean coastal city of Mar del Plata in November 2005.

In the early 2000s, Latin America, especially South America, experienced a ‘turn to the left’, meaning the election into government of a varied arrange of left parties into government. Some can be clearly connected to the anti-neoliberal mobilization of the 1990s, others were more pragmatic political parties that were sensitive to popular demands (Boron 2013). Among others, we can include in this left-of-centre momentum the governments of Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Lula da Silva in Brazil, Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Néstor Kirchner in Argentina¹. The ‘pink tide’ had in common, among other elements, that they witnessed an economic bonanza in the terms of exchange, mainly due to the export of primary commodities. The economic process became known as the “commodities’ consensus”, meaning the exploitation of extractive resources (intensive transgenic agriculture, mining, oil and gas) and the redistribution of a share of that wealth to the poorer sectors of society. While this economic model was successful in the first decade, it has begun to be resisted throughout the region, once its impacts and limitations became obvious. Labor is increasingly critical of many of its impacts, and so are social and environmental movements, especially at the local level.

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A central issue to analyze in this paper is whether an alliance like the HSA is possible today, in this context, and whether labor can lead it. The discussion around neoliberal free trade, and its rejection, was obvious enough for labor to participate in. The consequences on local industries would have been negative (as the case of Mexico shows) and the weakening of labor organizations—in the view of a pro-capital transnational legislation—was forthcoming. In the debate around the commodities-consensus, the position of labor is harder to establish for two main reasons: unions are a central component of the structures supporting left-administrations; the environmental discussion places labor in a defensive mode, due to the presence of strong unions in the so-called ‘dirty industries’. Building transnational solidarity and cross-sectoral alliance has therefore become a challenging action, but one that can be achieved if certain conditions are met, chiefly, the return of social movement unionism to its roots as a radical conception of labor movements and the retrench from a government-dependant mobilization strategy.

This paper is divided in five different sections. Section one discusses the building of the Hemispheric Social Alliance and the role of labor in challenging the Washington Consensus. Section two explains the current dynamics of the Commodities’ Consensus and its oppositions. Section three brings the debate about the role of transnational solidarity, and whether it can be applied in the current context. Section four presents the specific case of the Trade Union Development Platform (PLADA). Section five discusses final remarks.

The struggle against free trade within the Washington Consensus

The neoliberal period in Latin America was firmly implemented from the mid-1980s onwards, with the establishment of structural adjustment programs throughout the region as the only solution to state deficits and imbalance of payments. The so-called Washington Consensus was a set policies composed mainly of: privatization of public services and state-owned companies; flexible labor markets legislation; economic dependence on International Financial Institutions (IFIs); state retrenchment; autonomy of the central banks and the financierization of the economy. This set of policies was implemented throughout the world but in Latin America they had the effect of deepening the already existing high levels of inequality. While structural adjustment was implemented at the local level, the regionalization of economic policy was also an integral part of the neoliberal project. One example of this was the push first to create (successfully) the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA, in 1994) and later on the intention to create a continent-wide Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which was dismissed after years of struggles by labor, social movements and center-left political parties.

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The FTAA was a project that included 34 countries—every country in the continent with the exception of Cuba—put forward by the United States government, with strong corporate support, but also pushed forward by the vast majority of the Latin American governments at the time. Neoliberalism had become the dominant political dogma among governments in every country of the region, even those that were governed by movements that were historically on the side import substitution industrialization, like Priism in Mexico and Peronism in Argentina.

In the case of labor movements, the advance of neoliberal policies and ideology led to two reactions: a conservative side of the union movement—the majority in the countries with strong labor history—negotiated with the administrations, leading to the survival of union structures and leadership at the cost of workers benefits and rights. A more progressive element within labor reorganized unions, extended alliances with social movements, and began reshaping the idea of workers' demands. In many cases, these unions, exemplified mainly in the Central Unica dos Trabalhadores (CUT) in Brazil, and the Central de los Trabajadores de la Argentina (CTA), were considered within the group of 'social movement unionism' (see Seidman 1994; Scipes 1992a, 1992b)ⁱⁱ. This opening in the union movement represented a leading element in the mobilization against neoliberalism, and also in reorganizing labor around novel demands and identities. These new conceptualizations came as a response to increasing informality, high unemployment, and the attack on unions as a central institution of social cohesion (de la Garza 2001; Novick 2001). As De la Garza remarks, the 1990s represented in Latin America not a work crisis, since it was not that jobs were lacking altogether, but rather a crisis of precariousness and informalization (De la Garza 2001: 27), in which the conventional form of trade unions was seriously hampered. The only real alternative for labor survival was to extend the conceptualization of working class, and open union spaces to social movements and informal workers', historically excluded from the process of collective labor representation. This process was carried through with varying degrees of opening, some organizations, like the CTA in Argentina, completely reorganizing labor around a novel structure (Serdar 2012), others, like CUT in Brazil and PIT-CNT in Uruguay, leading alliances with social movements without necessarily changing fully its internal functioning as unions.

In the context of advancing neoliberalization, and the reorganization of labor movements around new subjectivities, a sector of the labor movement led by the CUT in Brazil and later joined by other unions and social movements organized in the late 1990s the initial anti-FTAA campaigns (Saguier 2007; von Bulow 2009; Latimer 2014). The initial steps were to include social movements and NGOs into the already existing trade union forum that was running parallel to the official Summits in the debates around the FTAA. Eventually this alliance between diverse social sectors turned into a

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more formal organization under the name of the Hemispheric Social Alliance, created in 1998 as an umbrella regional organization linking all the national chapters being run against the FTAA (Saguier 2007).

The HSA was represented by a myriad of social organizations, including trade unions that provided a lot of the structural and financial support. It is possible to identify three different moments in the organization of the HSA. The first is the initial organizing of each local, national chapters which actually coordinated on the ground the different social organizations. The second began after 2001, with large mobilizations across the region, including the march of more than 60,000 people in the Quebec Summit of the Americas and a major concentration during the official summit in Miami in 2003 (von Bulow 2009, 2010; Saguier 2007). This stage included as well the organizing of ‘popular referendums’ in 2004, which contributed to gaining the legitimacy and support of the movement in broader sectors of society. The referendums were especially strong in Brazil—10 million people—and in Argentina—2.5 million voters (Berron and Freire 2004). It is not coincidence that the referendums were the largest in the countries with trade union leadership, as was the case with CUT in Brazil (Latimer 2014) and CTA in Argentina (Rossi 2013). The third, and final, stage of this process was the political alliance put forward by the social organizations with the left governments that had come to power throughout the region. The only government support that the HSA gathered before 2003 was the Cuban government (Saguier 2007: 257). With the election of leaders like Lula in Brazil, Chavez in Venezuela and Kirchner in Argentina, social movements gained the leverage point in rejecting the FTAA. This three-stage process concluded in November 2005, with a people’s summit taking place side-by-side with the official negotiations in Mar del Plata, where the proposal was rejected due to the lack of unanimous support.

The HSA and the campaign against free trade in the decade between 1995 and 2005 were the most recent pursuits of counter-hegemonic alternatives to neoliberalism that the region witnessed in the last thirty years in terms of coalition-building. The HSA and the integration of trade unions with other social movements represents what Alvaro Garcia Linera, in his analysis of the counter-neoliberal movements in Bolivia, determines as the ‘multitude form’: “a block of collective action that articulates autonomous organized structures of subaltern classes around discursive and symbolic constructions of hegemony, which have the specificity of changing according to the origin of the different segments of this subaltern classes (Garcia Linera 2008: 294). The organizations integrated within the HSA did not all have the same idea about development and the alternatives. Despite this, they had a clear focus on combating the hegemonic force of the moment—neoliberalism—and its firmest representation at the time, the Free Trade Area of the Americas. The multitude, in Linera’s word, organized

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around a counter-hegemonic movement, without necessarily a common perspective on what an alternative should look like. The relevant aspect to highlight here is that lack of common alternative did not impede combating a common enemy. The diverging paths taken by trade unions and social movements in the pos-neoliberal period, and especially regarding the position on center-left governments, is a central issue for debate in the upcoming section.

Left governments and the commodity consensus

The defeat of the Free Trade Area of the Americas in 2005 coincided with a process of anti-neoliberal mobilization throughout the region, which in many countries, especially in South America, led to the election of popular left parties into government. These parties had, generally, close ties with social movements, and especially with labor movements, who provided an important force of support in the initial years. The period of left-leaning governments witnessed high economic growth, redistributive policies, strengthening of labor market policies—higher minimum wages, increases in collective bargaining, strengthening of trade unions—and the demise of the Washington Consensus as a legitimate policy framework for the countries in the region.

The economic bonanza that has carried through for nearly a decade in the region is becoming popularly known as the ‘commodities’ consensus’ (Svampa 2013; Gudynas 2011). This development model implies certain characteristics, essentially differing from the Washington Consensus in the role of State—the current commodities’ consensus reinforces state participation in the production and redistribution of wealth—. Among others, the commodities’ consensus is characterized by: an international price bonanza for the primary commodities of the region that allowed for sustained influx of income, leading to an economic boom; implementation of redistributive policies, especially in the form of direct cash-transfers to the poorest sectors of society; intense state presence both through collecting taxes but also through national companies participating in production and export of commodities; dependence on extractive industries—fossil fuels, agribusiness, mining—as the predominant form of production (Svampa 2013; Burchardt 2014).

In different ways, the commodities’ consensus differs from the neoliberal period, but it also shares similarities. A central difference is the distribution of resources. While the Washington Consensus represented the retrenchment of the state and the concentration of wealth in few hands, the Commodities’ Consensus has intended, with relative success, to redistribute part of the wealth created by an unprecedented economic bonanza that places the region as main suppliers of the growing Asian, mostly China, markets. This linkage explains as well the growing presence of Chinese investment within the region, in what some have called the ‘Beijing Consensus’ (Slipak 2014). In terms of similarities, the commodity consensus is actually based on legislation and investment protocols set during the neoliberal decades, which have not been altered for the time being (Grupo Permanente de Trabajo sobre Alternativas al Desarrollo 2011). This implies a continuation from the development model already established during

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neoliberalism, but with state intervention and large redistribution schemes (Burchardt 2014).

An example of the continuation from neoliberal times is the policies agreed-upon at the regional level. In the early 2000s, with the push from the Inter-American Development Bank—an institution close to the Washington Consensus—the countries of the region put forward a proposal to create the Initiative for Infrastructural Integration in the South-American Region (IIRSA for its acronym in Spanish). IIRSA had the goal, at least officially, of deepening the process of regional integration through building common infrastructure. It included over 500 different projects, worth over 100 billion dollars (Tavares de Araujo Jr. 2013). IIRSA was portrayed as the leading project in promoting Latin American development. The project was incorporated by the recently-created Union of South American States (UNASUR in Spanish), which was created by the left-leaning governments—with unanimous support from all the countries—to deepen regional integration, autonomous from foreign powers. The leading structural organization that UNASUR created was the Council for Infrastructure and Planning (COSIPLAN), which continued the proposal of the IIRSA (Tavares de Araujo 2013). In spite of the main project being the overcoming of inequalities, COSIPLAN, and its predecessor IIRSA, are actually central projects for the development of a primary commodities' export scheme in the region, with Brazilian and Chinese multinational companies behind it (Turzi 2014). The eight different 'corridors' in which South America is divided in the project mean the division of the region according to the needs of the international commodities market, connecting the extraction site with the ports of the region. There is then a firm connection between the national government strategies of promoting a commodities-export based development model and the strategies implemented at the regional level by UNASUR. Furthermore, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), a historic supporter of autonomous industrial development and critical of primary commodities export in the 1970s, has also changed its position, referring today to the 'tendency to re-primarization of the economy', and this being an effective 'development strategy' for the countries of the region (CEPAL 2011). The ECLAC has jumped in the path of the commodities' consensus promoting a 'strategic alliance' between Latin American countries and China (Rosales and Kuwayama 2012).

Over the last two years, local conflicts related to this development project began to take place, mainly related to the high socio-environmental impact of the project. Increasingly, local communities have started to challenge the dynamics of the extractive industries and the lack of control from the states on the industries, even more so when the exploitation is carried out by a state-owned company. The opposition to this model has not taken place—as with the neoliberal model—at the centre of the political agenda, but rather at the margins, in the territories. This is what Argentine sociologist Maristella Svampa has referred to as the “eco-territorial turn of social struggles” (Svampa 2013). Territorial struggles have expanded throughout Latin America, beginning in the early 2000s but with greater impact since then (Svampa 2008). With the economic slowdown of the last two years, the mobilization and resistance at the local level is moving beyond to the national and regional one.

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The trade union movement, originally reluctant to consider the ‘environmental’ question, is slowly starting to move in the direction of confronting the model of economic development that is based on fossil fuels and extractive industries. As with the rest of the labor movement throughout the world (Cock 2011, 2014), unions have taken two main positions: a conservative one defending their place within the so-called ‘dirty industries’; and a progressive, sometimes transformative, position that reframes the role of workers in the development model and the need to consider the socio-environmental impacts of economic growth. This position is gaining the upper-hand in Latin America especially with the push of the trade unions that have been the most open to social and environmental movements. This change is pushed by the conflicts at the territorial-community levels, but also due to the slow-down in the performance of the economies in the region, where now wages are not growing at the same pace as they did until recently, and informality remains a central problematic for a vast section of workers (ILO 2013). The limitations of the development path become clear not only when wage increases stall, but also when the impact of the extractive industries affects the communities in which workers themselves inhabit (Balchetta 2013).

The changes in the political dynamics of the region have altered as well the relationships between governments and social movements (including labor), but also between social movements themselves. The question of the alliance with progressive forces in government has certainly become a challenge for combative movements who during the struggles against neoliberal administrations presented ‘autonomy’ as a central element of the mobilization. The new left administrations, for different reasons, incorporated social and labor movements within their strategies, including cadres from these movements in government posts. For many social movements, and especially for progressive trade unions, this relationship can be very problematic. Benjamin Dangl (2010), in his analysis based on social movements—labor not included—has referred to this relationship as ‘dancing with dynamite’, due to the complexities and contradictions it brings to progressive forces.

The commodities’ consensus is creating a confrontation that pushes the trade union movement either to confront with government policies, or to defend the extractive industries due to the strategic positioning of unions within ‘dirty industries’ and to the distributional aspects the model manages to implement. The central question at this point is whether the trade unions, placed as they are today in this consensus, can revive the struggle of the FTAA, and recreate the alliance with social movements that made it possible to create a counter-hegemonic space in the region.

Solidarity at a new crossroad?

The campaign against the FTAA took place in a context of increasing hostility towards neoliberal policies, specifically against free trade. At about the same time the HSA was created, thousands gathered in Seattle to challenge de World Trade Organization, and the World Social Forum became a reality during the process of alliance-building against free trade—and even a forum for promoting that campaign (Svampa 2008). The capacity to produce ‘global’ or ‘regional’ events does not come by itself, but it is rather rooted in already existing local struggles. In the case of Latin America, the challenges to

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neoliberal policies were already taking place in each city, territory and country, with important symbolic moments like the ‘Caracazo’ in Venezuela in the early 1990s, or the 2001 social eruption in Argentina. In the words of Voss and Williams (2012, 353) “global processes of neoliberalism are being met by local forms of resistance that both challenge and transform the ways in which global processes get interpreted in local places”. Precisely this connection between the local struggle and the global (regional) process of resistance to the broader project of neoliberal hegemony is what made the anti-FTAA campaign a successful and legitimate struggle.

Does the current crossroad of the commodities’ consensus provide the opportunity to rebuild such a coalition? There are certainly elements of it that can be identified as positive for such a coalition, while others go against the idea. When comparing both situations, there is a change in what has been deemed the ‘political opportunity structure’ to influence a process. According to Sidney Tarrow’s classic definition (1994), social movements can emerge and gain political access to formal politics when there is certain stability and connectivity in the presence of favorable conditions, mainly in the relationship between governments and social movements. The absence of these conditions, leads to firmer opportunities for social movement mobilization. As Saguier (2007) expresses, the lack of such conditions during the negotiations of the FTAA, together with the deep social crisis neoliberalism was producing throughout the region, created a favorable political opportunity structure for mobilization against the FTAA. The role of a clear imperialist image, as in the United States being the central actor behind the project, also contributed to the creation of such a broad alliance.

The structural conditions today make it more complex to advocate for a region-wide movement against the commodities’ consensus. There is no single clear hegemonic project—transnational corporations are an integral factor, but it is not simple to identify in a single form—and the role of foreign powers is more diffuseⁱⁱⁱ. Furthermore, the impacts of the development project are mostly felt on the ground in the rural areas, especially in mega-mining projects and oil exploration. The connection with a large urban public, possible in the FTAA opposition mainly through the issue of public services, is a central challenge for the movement.

Looking at the trade union movement, the conservative unions such as the CGT in Argentina and Força Sindical in Brazil, the commodities’ consensus has been beneficial for their own forces, both in terms of increasing affiliation and higher wages for those workers. These unions did not actively participate in the struggle against free trade (Anner and Evans 2004); and have not shown willingness to ally with social and environmental movements. The trade union movement that is increasingly involved with struggles around the commodities’ consensus negative impacts is the same that was a leading actor in the campaign against free trade. Unions like CUT in Brazil and CTA in Argentina have begun to question the environmental, social and also geopolitical impact of the commodities’ model that most governments are running. This has to do with the characteristics of these unions; as social movement-oriented trade unions, many of their members, and their historic alliances, are from social movements which have been at the forefront of the struggle against the multinational companies carrying-

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out the extractive industries. In Brazil, CUT's alliance with the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and its own composition of small farmers—nearly half of their members—, has led to questioning the model of agribusiness with transgenic soybean production and the leading role multinationals like Monsanto play in it (Constantino 2013). Similarly, CTA's alliance with territorial movements throughout Argentina led to its participation against open-pit mining projects in the Andean region and against Monsanto's fertilizer plant in the province of Córdoba. There are thousands of local struggles throughout the region that include trade union participation, even at the expense of confrontation with national-level directives.

The fact that the local struggles exist does not directly imply that labor confederations will be backing those fights. There is a combination of factors that makes the process of trans-sectoral alliance more viable. A significant change today is that the unions have been growing in discontent at the regional level with the development model put forward by a bloc considered as 'progressive' originally. When UNASUR was created, there were high expectations that the bloc could challenge conventional notions of integration through free trade. The role of IIRSA today and the constant concessions to transnational companies have disenchanted significant sectors from labor, complementing the struggles of social movement in the local territories.

As Voss and Williams (2012) assert, the local struggles against a hegemonic projects have not gathered enough attention from scholars of social movements, who center their studies on the mass mobilizations and in the international networks. In other words, international 'high-profile' and mass events gather more attention than the local dynamics of those struggles. This is certainly a problem when referring to free trade agreements and their challenges. During the anti-FTAA campaigns, the central attention was placed in the regional-international structure, more than on the local community-based struggle. As mentioned earlier, the regional struggle over the FTAA was only possible due to fights and alliances that were already taking place locally. In the case of the commodities' consensus, the equation is actually reversed. The study of local struggles against extractive industries has taken the largest attention over the regional efforts to combat these policies. This has to do with the fact that "the effects of market [extractive industries, in this case] penetration are often felt most intensely at the local level" (Voss and Williams 2012, 358), and therefore the largest mobilization has occurred at that level. It also has to do with the absence of concerted efforts at the regional level to combat extractive industries and this development model.

The trade union movement was unified organizationally across the entire continent 2008, with the creation of the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA), merging the Christian-base unions—represented in the World Confederation of Labor, WCL—with the ones integrated into the formerly International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). This move was a replica of the global unification of the ICFTU and the WLC which had taken place earlier in 2006. The important element for the Americas, is that unification created the largest trade union confederation in the region, and managed to incorporate trade unions that had remained independent from international affiliation up until that moment. This was the case of the CTA in Argentina

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and CUT Colombia. The incorporation of these unions was not only a boost to affiliation, but it also influenced the power dynamics within TUCA (Wachendorfer 2007).

Unions that had been active in the struggle against neoliberalism and free trade were now integrated into a singular organization, managing to re-orient the direction of the main labor movement at the continental level. The participation of these unions increased the potential of CUT Brazil, which became the leading force within TUCA. In terms of the commodities' consensus-struggle, what this has meant is that TUCA can now play a leading role in recreating decades-old alliance, especially around the issue of development and sustainability. The leading role played within TUCA by unions historically in alliance with social movements is a valuable contribution to such a struggle. It represents the only regional confederation, when compared to the rest of the world, and even to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), with the capacity to produce massive mobilization around issues that go beyond specific, workers' demands. The associational capacity is an asset that is increasingly being incorporated into TUCA's strategies.

Since 2012, TUCA began constructing an alliance with social movements and environmental NGOs in trying to present a common position on the development model. The internal dynamics of the confederation make it complex to create a common unified position, but there have been improvements in doing so. The Rio+20 People's Summit, in parallel to the official negotiations, was a moment of re-unification, with striking similarities to the formerly used counter-summits in the case of the FTAA. There were massive mobilizations of unions in alliance with social movements, environmental and indigenous people's organizations. The main aspect addressed throughout the summit was climate change, and specifically the context in which climate problems are exacerbated in the Latin America by the dependence on extractive resources. The Rio+20 summit also represented the political opportunity structure to mobilize around an issue in which the centre-left governments have not being the most 'progressive', and have actually reproduced policies from the former administrations (Zibechi 2010; Svampa 2008). As product of that mobilization was the recently-launched proposal of the Development Platform of the Americas, which intends to be a tool for debate and participation from workers' into the development process that is taking place in the region (CSA 2014). The PLADA intends to be a "strategic tool for workers' and social organizations to overcome structural inequalities in Latin America, with a special focus on the issue of sustainable development" (CSA 2014). The PLADA is not, by any means, a revolutionary tool to combat the commodities' consensus. However, it represents a remarkable effort by the largest trade union confederation in the region to strategize and reposition workers' within the development model. In doing so, it can become a valuable tool to reproduce the alliances of a decade ago.

Conclusion: the question of strategy

Constructing a global solidarity movement is not solely an issue of political opportunity structures, of associational and structural power (Wright 2000) and of building 'advocacy networks' (Keck and Sikkink 1999); it has a lot to do with strategy. Recently,

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the Socialist Register published its yearly volume with a suggestive title: “The question of strategy”. In this issue, strategies for workers’—and people’s—power throughout the world were discussed, in order to challenge capitalism and the attacks on public services (Panitch, Albo and Chibber 2013). Relevant to the topic in this essay is the paper presented by Argentine sociologist Atilio Boron (2013), in which he discusses the strategies used by popular movements in Latin America during the struggles against neoliberalism. Contrary to the views of authors like Holloway (2002), and Hardt and Negri (2000), Boron argues that a central element in the strategy of some of the most radical social movements in recent years in Latin America was the organization of political parties from movements ‘in the streets’ (Boron 2013: 246). The most effective cases in changing the political representation presented by Boron are those of Ecuador and Bolivia. Boron is critical of the insurrectional social mobilizations that overthrew governments and then when governments changed, they were “demobilized by the same parties that had asked their support in the elections” (Boron 2013: 247). This, he considers, were the cases of Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil, where popular mobilization took place in large numbers during the 1990s and early 2000s, only to be decimated with the center-left administrations. Similarly, Massimo Modonesi (2014: 169-170), in a broad review of what he deems as ‘passive revolutions’, argues that once in power, centre-left governments have benefited from relative demobilization, or in the best cases, a control and subaltern mobilization of social movements. This is by no means a universal perspective of scholars in the region, but it is certainly a preoccupation for the left forces.

Boron argues that the division between the “social” demands and the ‘political’ ones rests on faulty assumptions. “The demands of a labor union, a peasant federation, a feminist, youth or indigenous organization is never only ‘social’; their struggles are never fought in the pristine scenarios of ‘civil society’” (Boron: 248). This idealization of civil society, in opposition to the political scene, remains still problematic today, and has led social movements struggling against extractive industries to the use of strategies that tend to isolate them, more than further the link with other movements, including local governments and political parties. South America has become a beacon hope in the recent decades not only for the capacity to mobilize social forces against a hegemonic neoliberal system, but also for implementing strategies that influenced the political system and led to changes in the dynamics of governing. Similarly, Panitch (2001) had also argued that the changes in class composition presented a necessary change for labor movements in order to become truly representative of current societal dynamics. Panitch called on labor to “think ambitiously again” (Panitch 2001: 381).

The reflections of Boron, Panitch and Modonesi are valuable insights into the necessary changes that need to take place today for labor and social movements to regain the capacity of alliance shown during the anti-FTAA days. In the struggle against the extractive industries that are negatively impacting local communities, and replacing Latin American countries again in the role of primary commodities provider for a world market, reorganizing the strategies for struggle is a fundamental step. Firstly, there is the need to connect the different resistances and insurgencies that are taking place at the local level. This can only be done through regional organizations that have shown the

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willingness to express local voices. In this way, the TUCA can potentially be a central player. Secondly, unions need to become more aggressive in their criticism of the current development model. The ITUC motto “there are no jobs on a death planet” is a starter, but not a defining element for a strategy. The trade union movement that has historical links with social movements and community organizations is better positioned to take up the challenge. Increasingly, unions like CUT and CTA in Argentina are moving into this direction. Thirdly, a strategy needs to incorporate the politization of the issue. It is not enough with rejecting and opposing large-scale extractive projects. The political system needs to be engaged in the struggle. The proliferation of local referendums (Svampa 2008) is a positive sign in that direction. A following discussion should refer to breaking the subaltern mobilization into a more autonomous path.

However, further engagement needs to take place at the regional level. If UNASUR is portrayed and presented as an alternative form of regional integration—i.e. different from ‘free trade’-oriented agreements—then it needs to be challenged to do so. The presentation of the PLADA platform by TUCA to UNASUR, and to the center-left governments that have led the process of regional integration certainly contributes to that engagement. The Rio+20 Summit and the Lima 2014 Conference of the Parts represented moments for labor, social movements and environmental organizations to recreate those alliances that were successful in the past. Further engagement, however, is needed to move beyond eventual summits.

The struggle for a more sustainable development model includes a review of the role of union in sustaining the current commodities’ consensus. This implies, like in the 1990s at the peak of neoliberalism, a deep discussion on what unions are, who they represent and what their role can be in the near future. Bringing back to the core the so-called “blue-green alliance” (Foster 2010) that mobilized against the World Trade Organization in the late 1990s, in Latin America is less about the alliance of labor with environmental NGOs, and more so about the relationship with territorial organizations that are struggling against the current development model on the ground, and that were a genuine factor in the struggle against neoliberal administrations. The capacity of both sides to rejoin will also depend on the relationship they can establish with governments, at the local and national levels. The agendas of popular mobilization can only maintain a genuine, vibrant, insurrectional character if they remain autonomous from governments but at the same time engage them as a necessary actor in changing realities. The fear of ‘the political’ needs to be overcome, especially for the social and environmental movements that have been at the forefront of the struggle against the commodities’ consensus. The recreation of the alliance with the trade union movement can be a foundational factor in politizing the struggles, demanding structural transformations from those same governments that claim a “change of times” (Svampa 2008), and taking them up to their rhetoric.

ⁱ There is an intense debate regarding the characteristics of South American governments as “left”, some considering them all too different to include in a same grouping, and dividing them according to moderate and radicals (Robinson 2008; Boron 2013), others defying that distinction (Garcia 2008). In this paper the central focus is not diving the governments between moderates and radicals, but rather asserting the fact that there was a change in governments, and a shift from a model of state retrenchment—during neoliberalism—to one of active state participation in the main areas of political, social and economic life (Natanson 2008). An update on the discussion regarding the depth of the reforms is much needed, but it is not the central issue for this paper.

ⁱⁱ The debate around ‘social movement’ unionism is certainly necessary today. Due to space limit, here it is understood as a type of unionism that engages in demands and mobilizes for issues beyond the ‘conventional’ matters for trade unions, and that seek to challenge the social order. This includes issues beyond the workplace and that affect society as a whole—privatization, precarious work, education and health system, foreign debt, economic dependency—and the inclusion of alliances with social movements as a fundamental element in their practice. Even though many of the unions that were originally considered SMU have experienced set-backs and changes, they remain an alternative to a type of unionism that focuses solely on work-related issues. The debate can be further found in the works of Kim Scipes 1992a, 1992b; and in upcoming publications by the same author, especially regarding the confusion between the social movement unions from the South—contradictions included—and the use of the term to identify labor centers in North America, even though they should not be categorized under the same banner.

ⁱⁱⁱ China has certainly had a role in promoting the commodities’ consensus and investing in infrastructure, since it is the largest world market for these products. The role of Chinese banks in financing development projects (Gallagher, Irwin and Koleski 2012) presents a clear example of the intervention of chinese interest. Furthermore, China has also led a political push for signing trade agreements with the region (Slipak 2014) which poses a similar problematic as with the United States presence. In this model of development, South America is positioned in a “comparative advantage” model in which the sole role is to provide raw materials for the industrialized countries.

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