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Reincarnation or Death of Neoliberalism?
The rise of market authoritarianism and its challenges for labour

Track 2: Global Supply Chains and Implications for Labour

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Economic Nationalism and Trade Union Responses: The End of Transnationalism?

Abstract

For the past several decades, trade unions around the world have been struggling to find responses to the massive growth of powerful transnational corporations (TNC) and their global value chains. For most trade unions, this has not been easy, despite a widespread recognition of the importance of international solidarity (Logue 1980). Beyond the general anti-union thrust of neoliberalism, which has put them on the defensive in many countries, the focus of their collective action has historically and structurally followed the political and economic development of the nation-state. Trade unions are member organizations based on democratic principles and embedded at the local workplace within a particular nation-state system of labour institutions and policies. Building new bases of transnational power as a counterweight to TNCs challenges assumed priorities and calls for exercising capabilities required to mobilize necessary power resources (Schmalz and Dörre 2014; Lévesque and Murray 2010). Moreover, it requires an honest and open dialogue based on a mutual recognition of self-interest among potential union (and non-union) partners in other countries.

Research interest in TNCs, global value chains and transnational trade unionism has grown considerably, and among trade unions – with the Global Union Federations (GUF) providing crucial support and guidance – successful and even sustainable alliances for campaigning and organizing across borders are no longer uncommon. The basic goal overall has not been to fight globalization per se, but to make globalization "fair", i.e. to counterbalance the power of TNCs, build trade unions in the interest of worker voice and secure internationally recognized and decent labour standards. But most recently, the new spectre of economic and authoritarian nationalism, ostensibly rejecting the dominant mode of neoliberal globalization, is seemingly challenging this mode, promising workers a national path to revitalization and prosperity. Many of its globalization-critical promises have swayed workers to support this rhetoric, especially workers in those regions that have suffered industrial job losses. The successful lure of calls for economic nationalism raises the question of what this means for transnational trade unionism and how trade unions – many of whose members have endorsed these calls – can respond.

Using the US trade unions as an empirical case study and drawing on the extensive bodies of theoretical and analytical literatures, this paper will seek to map out the challenges facing transnational trade unionism in general and the potential threats to it posed by economic and authoritarian nationalism. Will local and national attacks on unions increase or will they be bound into "America First" coalitions? Will the typical difficulties in building transnational alliances and fostering international solidarity be magnified? What role can the GUFs play? How can trade unions work to find a transnational and international approach to combating economic and authoritarian nationalism? While the paper may certainly fall short of presenting conclusive answers to these questions, it will offer an analysis and provide a basis of discussion that will contribute to a better and broader understanding of the issues involved in dealing with these emerging new configurations.

References

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