

**XIII GLOBAL LABOUR UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE**  
**The Future of Work: Democracy, Development and the Role of Labour**

*Abstract Submission: “Trade Union Organization and Strategies”*

**Teachers Unions, Political Strategy, and Educational Change in Brazil, Mexico, and the U.S.**

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Under what conditions do unions start acting beyond their economic interest and become broader actors for social change? In this study, I answer this question by analyzing the diverse political strategies of teachers unions in Brazil, Mexico, and the United States. While the labor studies literature has documented how these trade union leaders can engage in “social movement unionism” (Burawoy, 2008), labor studies and social movement scholars have competing analyses of the relationship between unions and social movements. For social movement scholars, the question of what leads individuals to engage in contentious political actions is a central area of inquiry. Scholars identify a range of mechanisms that lead to the emergence of social movements, including political opportunities, mobilizing structures, internal and external resources, and framing processes that shift people’s understanding of their social conditions (Benford & Snow, 2000; McAdam, 1999; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). However, when it comes to social movement unionism, the question of emergence is more complicated, as union members are already part of organizations that defend their collective interests through protest. Furthermore, these collective interests are often in tension with other social justice demands, as U.S. labor’s anti-immigrant and pro-war positions of the 1960s revealed.

This study will contribute to the debate on how “social movement unionism” emerges, through a comparative study of trade union strategies within teachers unions in three different countries across the Americas. Teachers unions are an important case to explore as public sector unions, rarely the focus of studies on social movement unionism, representing workers directly affected by state policy-making. Furthermore, teachers play a contradictory role in society. Cook (1996) writes, “The relations of teachers to social change is . . . often quite tenuous, and teachers often find themselves in an ambivalent position. Their profession and status may make them part of the middle class, yet they possess a stronger potential than other professions to become radical. They are considered professionals, yet they are often thrust into economic circumstances resembling those of blue-collar workers” (p. 21). Teachers engage in intellectual work, which can put them in contact with radical theories, yet, especially in poor countries, they represent an elite sector. Teachers have a progressive potential, but that potential will not necessarily be realized.

The focus of this study is on Brazil, Mexico, and the United States, three of the largest countries in the Americas, but with very different political-institutional histories and state-union relations. In Brazil, the teacher opposition movement was born with the return to democracy in the late 1970s, as thousands of teachers took to the streets. The 1988 Constitution ratified the legality of these already-functioning unions, which were all controlled by social movement unionists. In Mexico, the Party of the Institutionalized Revolution (PRI) supported the creation of one united, national teachers union in the 1940s; however, rather than a bottom-up demand, this was a top-down attempt by an authoritarian political party to control teachers and their schools (Cook, 1996). An oppositional union movement formed in several states in the late 1970s, contesting the legitimacy of the government-sanctioned union. In the United States, the first teachers unions formed in the late 1800s, but only had real force post-1960, after the NYC United Federation of Teachers (UFT) won collective bargaining rights in 1961 (Gaffney, 2007). More recently, teachers unions strikes in Chicago and West Virginia have shown the unique potential of teachers to engage in innovative trade union strategies in the U.S. context. By studying the

strategies of teachers union leaders in each of these countries, I am able to highlight the internal dynamics within unions and how the political-institutional context shapes their different theories of social change.

My research methods for this project are comparative and ethnographic, focusing on the internal politics of teachers unions in three different countries in order to trace the processes of historical change as well as the current manifestations of different visions of the role of teacher organizing. I collected data for the Brazilian portion of this study for 8 months, between September 2016 and June 2017, focusing my research on the São Paulo Teachers Union (APEOESP) and interviewing more than 50 union leaders. In Mexico, I centered my research in Oaxaca, where the democratic teacher union movement arose in the late 1970s. I was in Oaxaca for two months, July-August 2017, shadowing the activities of “Section 22,” the oppositional union local in that state. In the United States, I am in the initial stages of data collection. I have interviewed several teacher union leaders from New York City, and I plan to attend a meeting of teacher union leaders at the Labor Notes Conference in April 2018. In the fall, I will begin a more intensive stage of data collection about teacher union strategies in the U.S. context, focusing on New York, Chicago, and West Virginia teacher movements. I look forward to presenting these initial research findings on teacher organizing in the Brazilian, Mexican, and U.S. contexts at the XIII GLUE conference, as this will provide valuable feedback as I continue to develop this project.