Labour, Globalization and the Attempt to Build Transnational Community

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What is the relationship between globalization, labour autonomy, and community? Is the process of globalization undermining the ability of labour groups to influence their environment? Is it possible that new transnational identities and alliances between workers could compensate for setbacks at the national level?

Globalization simultaneously undermines and strengthens labour autonomy. It breaks existing patterns of local community and provides opportunities for the creation of new forms of transnational community. Although the overall balance suggests that workers face immense difficulties in the process of globalization, the result is not yet fixed and remains the object of considerable conflict. It is this negative relationship that provides the incentive for creating new forms of transnational community. An organization called the Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR) is an example of an attempt to build a new transnational community. SIGTUR's example provides evidence of transnational community building and cautions about the difficulties involved in such a task.

Because labour and worker's organizations and situations vary so greatly across the globe, it is difficult to make a blanket generalization about the relationship between globalization and workers' autonomy. However, it is possible to discern some broad trends when labour is sub-divided according to geographical location and degree of protection. It is useful to think about different types of workers in the North and the South, as well differentiating between those workers who are protected by unions or political parties and those workers who are unprotected or more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

In Northern or advanced industrialized countries many workers have seen their autonomy undermined by globalization. The number of workers belonging to trade unions has declined and political parties which used to support workers have increasingly distanced themselves from worker-friendly policies. In addition, a larger and larger share of the workforce in Northern countries has lost secure full-time employment and is being employed on a part-time or short-term basis. For example, secure high-paying jobs with car makers are disappearing while relatively poorly paid jobs at retailers such as Wal-Mart have increased.

In Southern countries labour has had a wide variety of experiences. In some countries workers have experienced increased political autonomy but decreased market economy. Workers have been at the forefront of battles to bring democracy to their states through their opposition to authoritarian governments. This has particularly been the case in Poland, South Korea, South Africa, and Brazil. However, when these governments became more democratic they often implemented neo-liberal economic policies which created increased unemployment. By rapidly liberalizing trade and reducing the amount of state spending, these governments hurt many of the union members who helped them to victory. Political opportunities increased, but economic ones did not. This is sometimes referred to

as low intensity democracy. It is low intensity because while workers have access to political freedoms, their economic situation is poor and they are unable to have their desired policies implemented.

Another pattern in some developing countries has been continued suppression of political rights, but some improvement in economic terms. This model is most obvious in the case of China where large inflows of foreign direct investment have led to large-scale economic growth. Many Chinese workers have been able to secure work in these foreign finance corporations, but the Chinese state has not allowed them to form independent representative organizations. Many other Chinese workers have lost their jobs in the state sectors or are unable to find work in the countryside or the cities.

In most Southern countries the majority of the workers remain employed in informal or unprotected sectors. These are insecure jobs in poor working conditions for very low wages. Decades of structural adjustment programs and financial cutbacks often advocated by the International Monetary Fund have reduced the number of secure full-time jobs. In some countries such as India, China, and Indonesia the majority of the people still rely upon small-scale subsistence agriculture. The move to create large agribusiness threatens such small-scale producers.

In light of the challenges that globalization poses for workers in the South and North, some workers have tried to cooperate across state borders by creating transnational communities. For example, small farmers and peasants from many parts of the world have coalesced around the group Via Campesina. Via Campesina describes itself as "an international movement which coordinates peasant organizations of small and middle-scale producers, agricultural workers, rural women, and indigenous communities from Asia, Africa, America, and Europe." Informal sector workers such as women working at home making textiles have created their own international organization which is called Homenet. More traditional trade unions have tried to revitalize their existing structures by reforming the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions.

The challenges facing groups trying to create transnational labour identities can be seen in the efforts of SIGTUR. SIGTUR brings together leftist trade unions from the South to mount common action against states or corporations that are undermining labour autonomy by violating basic worker rights. However, SIGTUR members face great challenges in trying to forge this common identity. One challenge is posed by trying to define the concept of Southern. SIGTUR argues that the word "Southern" refers to a common experience of exploitation. However the group includes Australians who live in the developed world. It also includes Koreans who live in the northern hemisphere. Other key members include unions from India, the Philippines, and South Africa. What do they share in common with union members from Australia or Korea?

SIGTUR members also face the challenge of communicating across language and cultural barriers. Trade unionists from Australia, India, South Africa, and the Philippines speak English, but those from other parts of Asia usually do not. In some organisations everyone speaks during debates while in others it is only the most senior members who speak. Some union delegations have bitter memories of colonialism while others do not. All of these differences make it difficult for members to communicate clearly with each other.

In response to these challenges SIGTUR has developed a number of strategies. One strategy is to use cultural exchanges to build a sense of empathy between members. Members expose each other to the music and culture of their native countries. This allows people to develop an appreciation of each other's experiences and accept each other's differences.

A second strategy is to build a common culture by developing new symbols and experiences. For example, SIGTUR has developed its own logo and produced a CD with video footage of its history and common struggle.

A third strategy to overcome differences is mounting joint campaigns to give members a sense of common purpose and accomplishment. For example, SIGTUR members signed on to an existing anti-corporate campaign which targeted mining giant Rio Tinto. SIGTUR also mobilized members to press for the release of imprisoned South Korean trade union members. During its biannual meetings SIGTUR delegates usually join local protests or visit striking workers.

The process of globalization poses immense challenges for workers and worker organizations. These challenges vary in form and intensity across the globe. One response to these challenges has been an attempt to form transnational labour communities. SIGTUR is one such case. These attempts at transnational community building require a shared culture to allow members to take actions on behalf of others. The obstacles they face are large, but a failure to bridge cultural divides is likely to lead to a further reduction of labour autonomy in the globalization process.