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LRR Focus: Solidarity NOT Charity

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LRR Focus: Solidarity NOT Charity

Abstract

[Excerpt] Can global solidarity really help unions with their organizing efforts?

Only if we stop thinking about international solidarity as "charity" work for the "developing" world. Only if we recognize the limitations of isolated local union struggles against international corporations and financial institutions. Only if we build international union structures to support efforts in organizing more workers and bargaining collective agreements.

Keywords

international solidarity, union organizing, global solidarity, trade unions, globalization

LRR FOCUS: Solidarity NOT Charity

Can global solidarity really help unions with their organizing efforts?

Only if we stop thinking about international solidarity as "charity" work for the "developing" world. Only if we recognize the limitations of isolated local union struggles against international corporations and financial institutions. Only if we build international union structures to support efforts in organizing more workers and bargaining collective agreements.

The *International Trade Union Secretariats (ITSS)* are global union structures that provide worldwide campaign capacity to their union members. Many unions throughout the world, including those in the United States, have affiliated with these global structures in order to extend their capacity to organize and bargain, especially against subsidiaries of transnational corporations (TNCs).

Solidarity between trade unions is not new to labor movements around the world. But the complexities and challenges facing trade unions today are new and have forced unions everywhere to step up strategies to strengthen the position of trade unions at national and international levels. In the long run, only mutual and reciprocal efforts can build a solid base for the future.

Not every effort to mobilize international labor support ends in winning an organizing drive or achieving a better contract, but every effort is a step forward in developing our capacities for fresh strategies and tactics in organizing.

SOUTH TO NORTH SOLIDARITY... ORGANIZING BANKS IN THE UNITED STATES

In an era of declining union representation, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union's (UFCW) highly innovative and aggressive organizing tactics have actually increased its membership. The UFCW, affiliated with the International Federation of Commercial Clerical and Technical Employees (FIET), recently demonstrated the effectiveness of international solidarity and how it can help unions organize hard-to-organize sectors. As part of its ongoing effort to organize the banking sector, the UFCW developed a strategy to target Brazilian-owned banks in the United States.

Why Brazilian Banks?

The UFCW in the United States and the Confederacao Nacional Bancaria (CNB CUT), the union representing the National Bank workers in Brazil, have been establishing close ties for several years. When the UFCW asked their Brazilian counterparts for help in organizing those people working for Brazilian banks in the United States, they heeded the request. These unions' recent joint effort is a single "fruit" borne of a long-cultivated relationship.

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U.S. Banks have always pursued aggressive anti-union labor tactics, including direct threats and intimidation of employees. These tactics have been successful in keeping most of the banking and financial sector unorganized. Of the 2 million workers in this sector, only 15,000 are unionized, and 10,000 of those are UFCW members. In remarkable contrast to the low rate of unionization in the banking sector in North America, nearly 400,000 or 80 percent of the bank workers throughout Brazil are members of CNB-CUT.

With the help of the CNB-CUT, UFCW representatives met in Brazil with the labor relations directors of five major Brazilian Banks with branches in North America. The Brazilian directors agreed to allow UFCW organizers unrestricted access to banks in New York, Miami, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, and promised that bank management would remain neutral during the UFCW's organizing drive.

Despite the neutrality agreement reached in Brazil, the branch management steadfastly refused to grant organizers access to their premises, and the Brazilian managers refused to intervene. In response, the UFCW asked Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (known as Lula), president of the Brazil Workers Party (PT) and a leader of CUT, to meet with managers of Brazilian Banks in New York.

Lula was happy to offer his assistance, but the U.S. bank managers were not so cooperative. When the banks refused the request to meet with Lula, the UFCW convened a press conference. Lula stated that the banks' refusal to abide by the

neutrality agreement was an issue of freedom of association, and that it should be the right of workers to decide whether or not to unionize.

While managers in the United States were unmoved by Lula's words, his support and that of CNB-CUT helped raise the awareness of the need to organize bank workers in the United States. It also solidified the bond between the two labor unions – a bond that is sure to be valuable as efforts to organize the banking sector in the United States continue.

SOME RECENT SUCCESS STORIES

Other U.S. unions, such as the Bakery, Confectionery and Tobacco Workers (BCT), and the United Farm workers (UFW) have recently reaped success from their international campaigns. The BCT is a very active affiliate of the International Union of Food Workers (IUF) whose sectors include beverages, tobacco, hotel and restaurants, and agriculture. Because the BCT builds an international component into most of its organizing and bargaining campaigns, the union is at the same time actively developing its international capacity in a systematic way. BCT sends delegates to company-based union meetings in Europe and widely shares its expertise on negotiations over the introduction of new technologies. As a result, other IUF affiliate unions are quick to support BCT. And with this support BCT has been able to:

- Win a first contract at Mederer, a German-owned confectionery plant in Iowa
- Persuade the Finnish-owned transnational Huhtamaki to cooperate in the sale of Clark Candy in Pittsburgh to a buyer that would keep the factory open
- Successfully fight a particularly vicious anti-union campaign waged by the British-based United Biscuits Company at the Emerald plant in Oxford, PA

While many unions think international solidarity means assisting in campaigns against transnational corporations, additional links with ITS-affiliates can also strengthen organizing campaigns even when the unions represent workers in different sectors and corporations. For example, when the United Farm Workers (UFW) called for a boycott against the Chateau Ste. Michelle winery in Washington, the IUF called upon its Swedish union affiliates to refuse to transport or sell wines imported from Chateau Ste. Michelle. The boycott was 100 percent effective in Sweden. It lasted for seven months until the UFW achieved a historic neutrality agreement from Chateau St. Michelle.

FIET and the IUF are not the only ITSs helping unions coordinate international campaigns:

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- The Postal, Telephone & Telegraph International (PTTI) helped coordinate the Sprint campaign launched by its U.S. affiliate, the Communication Workers of America. (For details of this landmark campaign, see "Sprint and the Shutdown of La Familiar" in this issue).
 - Public Services International (PSI), reached out to its affiliate in Lithuania and initiated a domestic and International campaign against the privatization of water systems in Lithuania. (See "Privatizing Lithuania's Water," p. 86, for details).
 - During the UAW Caterpillar strike, the ITS for metalworkers (the International Metalworkers Federation) coordinated a massive sympathy strike among South African Caterpillar workers from the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA).
 - When Samsung opened a new plant in Germany, the company refused to recognize German union's local bargaining structures (Works Councils). German workers received unexpected but welcome support for their struggle from union members at Samsung in Korea, who took secondary action against the Korean electronics giant.

CONCLUSION

These are only a few examples of a growing number of international solidarity strategies. It is no surprise to see such solidarity surfacing and stirring in all directions – its development is necessary given the rapid globalization of the world economy.

As we approach the 21st century, unions around the world are recognizing the need to extend their campaigns internationally by working to build and strengthen global union structures, such as those established by the international trade union secretariats.

International solidarity is not charity, nor is it limited to the unions in the "North" helping unions in the "South." Now we are seeing that unions in the South are providing a valuable contribution to the organizing and bargaining struggles of unions in the North.

Not all attempts at international solidarity will end successfully, but all attempts are definite strides forward; the trade union movement does not march from victory to victory, but rather from struggle to struggle. And through mutual work, each struggle can bring unique experiences and new strength for the next struggle. ■

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