

Class, Race and Corporate Power

Volume 12 | Issue 1

Article 3

2024

Building Global Labor Solidarity: Where We Are Today (Early 2024)

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Recommended Citation

Scipes, Kim (2024) "Building Global Labor Solidarity: Where We Are Today (Early 2024)," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol12/iss1/3>

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Building Global Labor Solidarity: Where We Are Today (Early 2024)

Abstract

Labor activists have long-been encouraging workers to build international labor solidarity to empower each other and to improve all workers' lives and well-being going back to before the First International. This tradition, while dismembered by the Cold War between the US and the UK on one hand and the Soviet Union on the other, has been resuscitated since the 1970s, with efforts by activists, scholars, and some workers to build cross-national border solidarity across the globe for workers, an effort that is growing.

This paper details these efforts, dividing the work between 1978-2011 and 2011 to today, listing some of the most important efforts of each period, and supporting the claim of increased interest in building global labor solidarity. This is important because of labor's potential leadership in the struggle against climate change and environmental destruction, which is a threat to the survival of all species.

Keywords

labor movements, global labor solidarity, international labor solidarity, globalization from below

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Cover Page Footnote

This article was presented for Research Committee 44 (Labor) of the International Sociological Association for session on "Labour Internationalisms from Above and Below," World Congress of Sociology, Melbourne, Australia, June 28, 2023, and at the 2023 Canadian Association for Work and Labor Studies conference, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, May 30.

Encouraged by Flora Tristan's exhortation - greatly amplified by Marx and Engels - "Workers of the World, Unite!" (Armbruster-Sandoval, 2013), activists have been encouraging workers to build international labor solidarity to empower each other and to improve all workers' lives and well-being going back to before the First International. The highest development of this was British textile workers' refusal to process cotton from the slave-based antebellum South, even though it meant their increased suffering due to unemployment (see Featherstone, 2012).

This tradition, while dismembered by the Cold War between the US and the UK on one hand and the Soviet Union on the other, has been resuscitated since the 1970s with efforts by activists and scholars to build cross-national border solidarity across the globe among workers, an effort that appears to be growing. This paper, however, argues that building global labor solidarity is no longer just desirable; climate change and environmental destruction has made this a necessity.

Definition

What do we mean by global labor solidarity? It has been defined as:

Global labor solidarity is an act, or an on-going set of actions by workers, their organizations, and their allied organizations, as well as by writers, artists, and other activists, to support workers across political community borders, in their efforts to enhance workers' lives, wages, working conditions, and sometimes their very existence as determined by those affected. To strengthen the power and well-being of workers globally, workers must develop solidarity across political community boarders in addition to developing solidarity with workers of their own country; global labor solidarity does not undercut solidarity by workers in the same country but instead develops the power, well-being, and knowledge of workers globally.

This solidarity must be on the basis of mutual respect and support, which precludes concepts of clientelism, a unidirectional flow of ideas, money, and other resources, and domination by one labor movement over another (that is, it rejects labor imperialism). This solidarity can emerge from either Southern or Northern workers or their organizations, can include multiple labor organizations, and can be directed toward either Southern or Northern workers and their organizations.

This solidarity may be between workers and organizations on the same level of political organization or between workers and organizations at different levels of political organization.

This solidarity may be motivated by self-interest, mutuality, or altruism (Scipes, 2016c: 45-46).¹

History

The US war in Vietnam served as a watershed in international solidarity in the post-World War II world; millions of people around the world came to understand the horrible effects of the US war, if not came to actively oppose the US war, and a considerable number of these were in conscious solidarity with the Vietnamese liberation struggle; “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the NLF is gonna win!” was not an uncommon chant on many US college and university campuses by the late 1960s/early ‘70s and increasingly so in the wider US anti-war movement. It was this war and the struggles against it that served to get people around the world to look at events outside their national borders in new ways.

This was a time of turmoil around the world. Also taking place were national liberation struggles around the world, aware of the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Chinese Revolution of 1949, the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the Algerian Revolution of 1962; certainly, awareness of the Palestinian struggle was entering global consciousness by 1967.

In this United States, this was joined by the Civil Rights/Black Power Movements, along with the student movement, later the anti-Vietnam War movement, the Women’s Liberation Movement, the anti-war movement inside the US military, the Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement, the farmworkers’ movement, and the environmental movement. This, of course, was paralleled by struggles against oppression in all of the imperial countries, and in many formerly colonized countries around the world.² Also in this period, there was the US-backed coup that overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende in Chile on September 11, 1973, the first “9-11”.

But I argue—following the lead of singer/songwriter Dave Lippmann, “Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam. You lit the fuse of the imperial time bomb”—that it was this war and the escalating

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- 1 “Political community borders” was a concept developed by Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1989); it was more clearly discussed by Scipes (2010b). It allows us to include in our definition of imperialism indigenous and other groups incorporated inside imperial countries, which have been largely ignored by other analysts. As will be quickly seen, I heavily report on and rely upon the work of Kim Scipes. Scipes has been extensively and intensively involved in efforts to build global labor solidarity since 1983. He has been a very prolific author, publishing several books, many articles, and a growing number of video accounts of work he has engaged in, by himself and with others, in the US and in a number of other countries. (For an on-line listing of his publications, many with links to original articles, go to <https://www.pnw.edu/personal-faculty-pages/kim-scipes-ph-d/publications>.) Please excuse the disproportionate citing of his work, but the comprehensive nature of his publications plus the extensive number of them as compared to others demands this attention.
 - 2 I reject the terms “developing” and “developed” countries because *they hide the processes that led to these distinctions*; I argue these distinctions were based on imperialism (see Nederveen Pieterse, 1989). Accordingly, I now refer to “developed” countries as “imperial” countries, while I refer to the “developing” countries as “formerly colonized countries”; as far as I can tell, all of the countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East were colonized by the imperial countries by 1915, with the exceptions only of Ethiopia, Iran (previously Persia), and Thailand (Siam); most subsequently have gained at least their political independence.

struggles against it that exploded into the first mass understandings of the global struggle against oppression in the post-World War II (1945-onward) period.

Things changed. Obviously, the US anti-Vietnam War movement declined during the early 1970s as the ruling elites ended the hated US-military draft, withdrew the US military from Vietnam in 1973, and then watched the Vietnamese victory in 1975 as well as in Cambodia and Laos. That obviously did not end anti-colonial struggles—Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau each won their political independence from Portugal in 1975, and the liberation struggle reignited in South Africa in 1976 because of a massacre of students that took place in Soweto, a Black township outside of Johannesburg. Zimbabwe gained its independence in 1978, and Nicaragua gained its independence in 1979. Yet, by the end of the 1970s, it seemed the “liberation period” had generally run its course.

Why all of this is important is that this period produced a cadre of activists in the imperial countries—admittedly, only a small portion of those who had been mobilized—who had absorbed the “internationalist” understanding, and realized that we had to build solidarity globally, that we could not confine our vision within national borders. There were a few who brought this internationalist understanding into their political work from before the liberation period—they were there, but in small numbers—but it seems that most of these cadres were younger and eager to change the world. Whether they individually developed this internationalism or if it were a product of political organizations and struggles in which they engaged, this liberatory period between roughly 1955-1979 had a profound influence in many long-lasting ways, and we can see it in the labor movements in both Canada and the United States as well as elsewhere. Dividing subsequent developments into two periods, 1970-2010 and 2011 until today, helps illuminate whether global labor solidarity is expanding or contracting.

This paper lists a number of previous efforts since the 1970s so as to enhance current efforts to build this needed solidarity. This began during the Cold War, at least somewhat of a by-product of students and/or activist members of left organizations going into the labor movement, veterans upon their release getting employment, long time aid/development workers, progressive academics, long-time trade unionists, as well as long-time black activists who were aware of national liberations movements in Africa, especially the Pan African movement, and who were embedded within unions.

1978-2010³

Although the awareness of the wider world remained for many activists, this largely was not evident within the labor movement—which was still overly determined by the actions of the AFL-CIO of the United States and the Trades Union Congress of the UK—and so, with few exceptions, there was all-but-no awareness of workers in other countries by imperial country workers.⁴

3 This section is from Scipes, 2021: ix-xi. Some additional endnotes and commentary have been made in this version. For a broader listing of the literature, presented somewhat differently, see Scipes, 2020a.

4 This is not to say that the AFL-CIO and the TUC were not operating outside of their respective countries; they were. They just did not inform most of the leaders of the labor movement—confining this knowledge to those

The 1978-2010 period saw a number of developments that would strongly advance the struggle for international labor solidarity and put these issues on the board: these included strikes against multinational corporations in formerly colonized countries and efforts to gain support from respective imperial countries workers where these multinationals originated; by increased popularity of basically “third world” development studies, especially in Europe; and increasing communication networks—both formal and informal—that transmitted knowledge of these strikes and other developments (especially concerning developments of labor organizations in various of the “third world” countries) among tiny networks of scholars and activists around the world. The basis for further development was laid in this first period, but there was no guarantee that it would continue in the following period.

Actions key to these developments included the militant strikes by the Sao Paulo Metalworkers against multinational auto companies that were the economic bulwark of the Brazilian military dictatorship (see TIE, 1984; Sluyter-Beltrao, 2010);⁵ the publication of a book by Don Thomson and Rodney Larson (1978) titled *Where Were You, Brother? An Account of Trade Union Imperialism*, which condemned the British Trade Union Congress for working against the interest of workers in the countries of the former British Empire,⁶ and the initiation of NILS, the *Newsletter of International Labour Studies* by Peter Waterman.⁷ In 1979, FOSATU (Federation of South African Trade Unions) was founded in that country (see MacShane, Plaut and Ward, 1984).⁸ And on May 1, 1980, unions across the Philippines united to create the *Kilusang Mayo Uno* (KMU-May First Movement) Labor Center (see Scipes, 1996),⁹ while in August of that year, Polish workers created *Solidarnosc* (MacDonald, 1981; see Garton Asch, 1983; Bernhard, 1993; and Bloom, 2014).

This era certainly continued from 1978 until 1997, which saw the publication of Kim Moody’s *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*.¹⁰ However, the era arguably continued until 2010, as signified by the publication of Jeffrey Sluyter-Beltrao’s (2010) book on

working in their respective foreign policy programs—nor did they inform the members of their affiliates, consciously keeping these operations secret. The reason for this secrecy was they basically were supporting their country’s respective empire *against* workers in the formerly colonized countries, betraying the tenets of the global labor movement that they publicly proclaimed they supported. See particularly Radosh, 1969; Scipes, 2010a; Sims, 1992; Thomson and Larson, 1978.

5 This ultimately led to the founding of the CUT (*Central Unica dos Trabalhadores*) labor center in 1983 (see Sluyter-Beltrao, 2010).

6 Thomson later played a key role in founding the British-based journal, *International Labor Reports* (see Scipes, 2021: 43-57), which launched in January 1984.

7 For a warm review of Waterman’s impressive legacy—he died in 2017—see Chhachhi, 2019.

8 FOSATU, which developed into a strong, democratic labor center, later played a key role in the formation of COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) in late 1985 (see Baskin, 1991).

9 The only book to date that has studied the KMU across the nation is Scipes (1996). This entire book has been placed on-line for free: go to <https://www.pnw.edu/personal-faculty-pages/kim-scipes-ph-d/publications/> and the link is below the books shown.

10 Marissa Brookes and Jamie McCallum (2017) basically argue that the new global labor studies didn’t begin until 2000, obviously—and incorrectly—ignoring what has been presented above. Moody’s 1997 book, while important especially in the US, consciously did not include the KMU in his accounts of emerging labor centers of the world. This is discussed in Scipes, 2014c, endnote 15.

new unionism in Brazil and Kim Scipes' book (and subsequent article) on the AFL-CIO's foreign policy program (Scipes, 2010a, 2010b; see 2016a).

This 1978-2010 era is one that is only partially known by most contemporary labor activists, and it is still affecting developments today, although mainly through misrepresentation and misunderstandings. The theoretical concept that unites the 1978-2010 era is “social movement unionism.”

Researchers had discovered a new type of trade unionism being developed by the CUT in Brazil, the KMU in the Philippines, FOSATU/COSATU in South Africa, and possibly by the newly emerging trade unions in South Korea, and Peter Waterman advanced the concept of “social movement unionism” (SMU) to refer to it (Waterman, 1988b). Trying to understand it as a different type of trade unionism, these researchers began an international discussion of how it should be understood, and in a way that would encourage workers in other countries to develop it as well.¹¹ The key findings of these studies was that social movement unionism was a new type of trade unionism that not only challenged employer and/or state domination in workplaces *and* communities, but also challenged the global political economic-cultural networks (i.e., imperialism) in which their countries were enmeshed.

However, based on the writings of Gay Seidman (1994)—who used the term SMU, but who was not part of the international discussion—Kim Moody (1997) later applied this term to a qualitatively different social phenomenon, “new” trade union developments in the United States. This inappropriate application of the concept of social movement unionism to union developments in the US led to massive theoretical confusion that still exists today—among researchers in both imperial and formerly colonized countries—undermining the importance of developments among these three labor centers. This theoretical confusion was not disentangled until 2014, when Scipes re-engaged with the subject and untangled it (Scipes, 2014c; republished in 2021: 231-262).¹²

Nonetheless, despite theoretical confusion among other international labor scholars, a number of significant efforts to build international labor solidarity were initiated during this period, and these included workers' self-initiated activities as well as actions reported in research and scholarly efforts to analyze, theorize and/or project these efforts globally.¹³ Key efforts included:

11 The initial articles in this debate over social movement unionism were Lambert and Webster, 1988; Scipes, 1992a, 1992 b; and Waterman, 1988b and 1993. [The 1992a article was republished as Scipes, 2021: 101-117 (theoretical part) and 131-142 (empirical part).] Scipes followed his articles with a formal, book-length study of the KMU that developed empirically his theoretical arguments (Scipes, 1996). See also Munck, 1988. And then, after much confusion in the debate, Scipes re-entered the discussion and untangled the debate: see Scipes, 2014c, which was also republished under a different title in Scipes, 2021: 231-262.

12 It is argued that Scipes' 2014c article is an extremely important discussion of trade union theory and should be read by all working in this field. As of March 28, 2024, the 2014c version has been downloaded 4,075 times around the world! This ends the section from Scipes, 2021.

13 I assume there are a number of other developments that I have missed; some of these might be in the literature that I overlooked, but my guess is there are a number of struggles that have simply not been written about. I expect that, over time, we'll learn about more and more. My apologies in advance for any I have missed. I hope that as more are reported, they will be added to this article by others.

- Fred Hirsch, a plumber by trade and a member of Plumbers and Pipefitters Local 393 in San Jose, California discovered the involvement of AIFLD (American Institute for Free Labor Development, the AFL-CIO’s regional organization in Latin America) in helping to lay the groundwork for the 1973 military coup in Chile by organizing a devastating truck owner’s strike against the Allende government. Hirsch published two pamphlets (1974, n.d. but apparently 1975) on these operations. He led the South Bay Labor Council into passing a formal resolution condemning AIFLD’s participation, and then led the successful resistance to AIFLD’s efforts—led by Executive Director, William Doherty, Jr.—to get the labor council to rescind the resolution (see Hirsch and Muir, 1987).
- In the 1970s and early 1980s, dockworkers in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU)—the US West Coast longshore union—initiated boycotts of cargoes carrying arms to Chile and cargo from South Africa (Cole, 2018; Scipes, 1985).
- In 1984, the KMU Labor Center of the Philippines initiated its annual “International Solidarity Affair” (ISA), which invited workers and labor leaders from around the world to come to their country and spend 10 days experiencing the reality faced by Filipino workers.¹⁴
- *International Labour Reports*, a British-based journal, was initiated in 1984 to build labor solidarity around the world (see Scipes, 2021: 43-57). This journal published bi-monthly news and information about workers and their struggles from around the world in a very accessible form.¹⁵
- During the 1980s, Canadian workers developed solidarity programs to support progressive struggles in the US (the farmworkers) along with those struggles in Chile, Palestine, and South Africa (see Nastovski, 2014, 2016). These were largely based on the concept of direct worker-to-worker solidarity.
- In 1986, the National Labor Center for Human Rights and Democracy in El Salvador was developed by progressive US labor and church leaders to support human rights and democracy in El Salvador; they played a key role in undermining AFL-CIO support for Reagan’s foreign policy and were important in preventing the US from invading Nicaragua (see Battista, 2002).

14 Scipes has written extensively on the KMU’s international work, arguing that there is much to be learned from these workers. For a brief commentary of the KMU’s international solidarity work, see Scipes, 1996: 199-201; for a theoretical discussion of this international solidarity work with a specific focus on the ISA, see Scipes, 2000a; for a report of how the KMU builds global labor solidarity, see Scipes, 2014b; for report on the 2015 ISA, see Scipes, 2015; for a further-developed theoretical discussion, see Scipes, 2021: 205-229.

The ISA continued until 2020, when it was paused because of the Covid-19 pandemic; it has yet to restart. This author participated in the ISA in 1988 and 2015. As far as I can determine, this program is unique in the world; I have long argued it deserves to be replicated in other countries.

15 This author served as its North American representative from 1984 to 1989.

- In 1988, after traveling for six months in Western Europe and the Philippines, Scipes reported on efforts by activists in a number of countries to build international labor solidarity (Scipes, 1988; republished 2021: 29-42).
- 1989. CISTUR (Committee for International Solidarity for Trade Union Rights) was established in San Francisco by Aubrey Grossman to build international labor solidarity. This was where Fred Hirsch and Kim Scipes met, which later had important ramifications in their joint work in the early 2000s.
- In the 1990s, Eric Lee founded “Labour Start,” an on-line labor solidarity project for workers around the world that continues to date (<https://www.labourstart.org>). Labor Start has focused on bringing attention to labor struggles, to support them and/or their proponents.
- In 1994, Roger Southall examined “Northern” unions support for South African trade unions.
- In 1995, based partially on opposition to the AFL-CIO’s international operations, Lane Kirkland’s successor, Tom Donohue, was repudiated in the first democratic leadership election in its history, and John Sweeney assumed the presidency of the AFL-CIO.
- By 1997, Sweeney had disbanded the AFL-CIO’s regional organizations—AAFLI (Asian American Free Labor Institute) for Asia; AALC (African American Labor Center) for Africa; and AIFLD (American Institute for Free Labor Development) for Latin America—and replaced them with the American Center for International Labor Solidarity, commonly known as The Solidarity Center, although that later became its formal name. The Solidarity Center has been a much more nuanced operation than the regional institutes, sometimes even helping workers, but remains a “core institute” of the imperialist National Endowment for Democracy (NED). (See Bass, 2012; Robinson, 1996; Scipes, 2010a: 96-105).
- In the 1990s, South African dockworkers refused to handle military cargo from China that was destined for Zimbabwe (Cole, 2018).
- In the late 1990s, substantial efforts to build cross-border solidarity with US and Mexican and Caribbean workers were made, mainly in textiles and garment production (Armbruster-Sandoval, 2005; Hathaway, 2000).
- In 1998, Peter Waterman published his important book on *Globalisation, the New Social Movements, and Internationalisms*.
- SIGTUR (Southern Initiative for Global Trade Union Rights) was established by progressive unionists in South Africa and Western Australia, seeking to build

labor solidarity across the Global South. It later expanded around the world. (See particularly O'Brien, 2019; see also Dobrusin, 2014; Framil Filho, 2021; Lambert, 2002; Lambert and Webster, 2001; and Scipes, 2019.)

- Increasing high quality reporting on and analysis of labor organizations developed, particularly in South Africa and the Philippines, and to a lesser extent, South Korea and Brazil: for South Africa, see especially Adler, Maller and Webster, 1992; Baskin, 1991; Friedman, 1987; Kraak, 1993; MacShane, Plaut and Ward, 1984; Pilay, 1990; Scipes, 2001, republished 2021: 173-203; Seidman, 1994; and the bi-monthly *South African Labour Bulletin*; and for the Philippines, see Scipes, 1996 and West, 1997. For South Korea, see Chun, 2003; Gray, 2008; Koo, 2001, Song, 2002; and later, for Brazil, see Seidman (1994) and Sluyter-Beltrao (2010).
- In 2003, rank-and-file leaders founded US Labor Against the War (USLAW) to build solidarity with Iraq workers during the US invasion and following occupation; they later expanded their efforts to build solidarity with workers in Iran, Palestine, and Venezuela. They got a resolution passed at the AFL-CIO's 2005 National Convention in Chicago, during a time when the US was at war in Iraq, to demand that the US withdraw with all possible speed. (See Fletcher, 2003; Onasch, 2003; Scipes, 2003, 2010a: 77-78; Zweig, 2005, 2016.) [This was later ignored by AFL-CIO foreign policy leaders.]
- Over 400 delegates to the California State AFL-CIO Convention—the largest state affiliate and one-sixth of total AFL-CIO membership at the time—unanimously passed a resolution, “Build Unity and Trust Among Workers Worldwide,” that condemned the National AFL-CIO's foreign policy (Hirsch, 2004; see also Scipes, 2004).
- Activists created the Worker to Worker Solidarity Committee and led the fight to condemn AFL-CIO international operations at the 2005 AFL-CIO Convention in Chicago, where the AFL-CIO national leadership changed a resolution from the California State AFL-CIO from one condemning national AFL-CIO foreign operations to one praising them and refusing to let proponents of the original resolution speak on the floor of the convention (Scipes, 2010a: 69-82; Scipes, 2012a).
- In 2010, *AFL-CIO's Secret War against Developing Country Workers: Solidarity or Sabotage?* as well as Scipes' theoretical understanding of its foreign program was published (Scipes 2010a, 2010b; see also Scipes, 2016.). This book not only covered over 100 years of American labor's international operations but gave an overview of these global operations until 2007. In 2012, Scipes gave an in-depth interview to Steve Zeltzer about Scipes' book (2012b).
- Networks, including the Asian Monitor Resource Centre and Australian Asian Workers' Links (AAWL), were established across Asia.

In short, extensive efforts—mostly initiated by activists, most with little institutional support by labor organizations—emerged around the world, seeking to link together and support workers wherever they struggled for social and economic justice.

2011 to date (2024)¹⁶

This period—which continues today—is important because there appears to be a real change in building international labor solidarity, so much so that I’m going to refer to the post-2010 efforts as building *global* labor solidarity instead of *international* labor solidarity (see Scipes, 2020a). This is an important change, but it requires it to be developed.

Developed on the efforts of the 1978-2010 period, it is exposing more and more unions and working people to the need to develop global labor solidarity, while theoretically becoming more sophisticated as the research intensifies while examining and becoming aware of situations further around the world. The communication of this concept and of examples of struggles built on and around building global labor solidarity has become much more sophisticated and has projected this concept to more and more workers and their organizations around the world. We certainly have seen—and this author predicts we will further see at the Labor Notes conference in April 2024—a greater recognition by labor activists of the need to reach out and support workers struggling anywhere and everywhere in the world, along with the increased willingness to fight for this with “ordinary” rank and file members of their unions for expanding our efforts globally.

This also is joined by an increasing rejection of labor imperialism wherever it shows its oppressive head. As Peter Waterman (1998) noted, much of what had passed as international labor solidarity in the global labor movement up to that time had been very paternalistic, had been one-way (unidirectional), from unions in the so-called developed countries (those of Western Europe, Canada, the US, Japan, Australia and New Zealand) to unions in the developing countries (those in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East), and had been accompanied by a lot of “Northern,” often Eurocentric, culture, norms, values, expectations and arrogance. Sometimes, however, this solidarity provided resources and support that has actually helped workers in these struggles in the developing countries. Other times, particularly seen in many efforts by the US labor center, the AFL-CIO, this so-called “solidarity” has actually worked to hinder or sabotage developing country workers’ efforts¹⁷ (see Scipes, 2010a, 2010b, 2012b, 2020c; see also Bass, 2012; Cox and Bass, 2012; Carew, 2018; Radosh, 1969; Schuhrke, 2019, 2020, 2024; Sims, 1992).

16 This section is from Scipes, 2021: xi-xii, and has also drawn from Scipes, 2020a.

17 To summarize quickly: among other things, the AFL participated in overthrowing the democratically-elected government in Guatemala (1954), and the then-merged AFL-CIO participated in overthrowing democratically-elected governments in Brazil (1964), and Chile (1973), and supported the attempted coup in Venezuela (2002). They also supported dictators around the world, undermined efforts by workers to organize and improve their lives and well-being, and a host of other detrimental activities in the Global South. Jeff Schuhrke will update all of this in a book to be published in September 2024.

What has changed is the increasing understanding by those living in the imperial countries of the global context in which they live; they are increasingly understanding that forces outside of the imperial countries can and often affect events in their respective country. I think where this really began to change were the attacks of 9-11, September 11, 2001; no longer were world events simply “over there.”

Subsequently, this growing global consciousness has been largely the product of negative forces around the world under the concept of globalization. Millions of workers in the imperial countries have been displaced from their jobs over the past 40 years by corporate management decisions to shift production from the imperial countries to the formerly colonized ones, and especially to those where their governments can keep labor cheap and controlled (see Scipes, 2006, 2023a).

Yet, there is more to it than this. Even as activists have become aware of people in other countries, this has not generally been connected to globalization. The reason is simple: with the general understanding of globalization that is bandied about as though it has been accepted by one and all (see Friedman, 1999), there is no place for understanding that the concept is much broader than this.

Since 2016, Scipes has been trying to broaden labor’s thinking about globalization. To do this, he built off the work of Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2015). Nederveen Pieterse argues that globalization is multidimensional (more than mere economics, it includes politics and culture) and it predates modernity, and Scipes accepts his expansion of the concept. However, Scipes argues that globalization also is multilayered, with two tiers: top-down corporate/militaristic globalization (which, in reality, was the logic of Friedman’s 1999 conceptualization, even if he did not portray it in the manner), and a bottom-up movement for social and economic development, one that was life-enhancing, and that this bottom-up movement challenges the destructive nature and values of the top-down version (Scipes, 2016b: 16-17; Shiva, 2005; Starr, 2005). Understanding the existence of the bottom-up movement in globalization allows us to make connections with those fighting for a better world all around the globe.

Unquestionably, there is heightened interest in and understanding of labor around the world, certainly by activists and a small but growing number of rank and file union members. This seems to be in conjunction with a growing understanding of the emergence of life-enhancing social movements from around the world (among many others, see Bevins, 2023; Klein, 2014; Moghadam, 2020; Scipes, 2021, 2022b) such as the feminist movement, and particularly the environmental movement. As people have experienced—directly or indirectly—the increasing threat of climate change and environmental destruction (see, among many others, Angus, 2016; Aron, 2023; Harper and Snowden, 2017; Hickel, 2020; Scipes, 2017a, 2017b, 2023b, 2024), they continue to become more aware of the global commonalities with people around the world.

Yet this has largely been confined to activists; and as much respect as I have for my fellow activists, one weakness to our work generally is that we have not connected to “ordinary people” (i.e., non-activists) in imperial countries in ways to earn their trust and following.

The shift in global production has yet to connect with the globalization from below movement because even when they have become aware of people around the world, most imperial country residents do not understand that workers in other countries are *potential allies, not adversaries*. They have been told incessantly by political and governmental “leaders”—along with a considerable number of labor “leaders”—that the Mexicans, the Chinese, whoever, have been stealing “our” jobs, and much of mainstream media has automatically propagated this lie, making foreign workers appear to be our “enemies,” not allies. And we activists have not been able to explain coherently the reality and convince most that corporate management in multinational corporations have been making the decisions to destroy US jobs by moving production overseas, not workers of other countries (Scipes, 2006; see also, among many others, Cox, 2012).

There have been other developments that have demonstrated that the US is operating within a larger global environment; enhanced global communications (including an increasing amount of news from overseas, as well as “foreign” movies), wars around the planet, greater international travel, expansion of education programs from US universities around the world; the COVID-19 pandemic; as well as international migration and, of course, climate change, have each contributed to this broader, more inclusive global understanding.

With these developments, we have not had much action by workers, even with this enhanced knowledge. Much of the knowledge of organizing among workers on a global level within imperial countries has been lost to retirements, old age and in some cases death, and newer organizers have not been taught about the need to develop global ties except for limited cases. Organizers today have not been bringing this international consciousness into workplaces like before. Yet, having a global understanding is more important than ever before; and we need to understand that we have to change this global consciousness from “should” (of the Vietnam generation) to “must” build global labor solidarity if we are going to challenge capitalist firms and climate change (of the later organizers.)

Once made aware of it, Ronald W. Cox’ work (2012) has the potential to help workers see the importance of a global vision.¹⁸ Cox has been studying capitalist firm organization and what he has been writing about is the shift among major multinational corporations from domestic-based production processes to those that are coordinated—whether directly or indirectly—in global supply lines. Others have understood this concept of global supply chains, but to my knowledge, Cox is the first to tie them directly into capitalist firm production processes, and to show how they built political support at the highest levels of US presidential administrations of both major political parties to enhance these processes.

Cox puts this into a historical perspective: by the mid-1960s, the World War II war-torn countries of France, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom had recovered to such an extent that their corporations were able to compete with those of the United States in Europe and Japan. By the 1970s, some of these corporations were competing with US corporations inside the United States. And by the 1980s, foreign corporations were increasingly investing in productive facilities inside the US, enhancing their competitive situation against US firms.

18 This section on Cox’ work initially appeared in Scipes, 2023a.

Cox points out that these changes resulted in “the falling rates of profit faced by US-based corporations during the late 1960s and early 1970s,” which extended throughout the 1970s into the mid-1980s.¹⁹ He focuses on “an examination of the measures taken by US corporations in response to lower profit rates,” which “include both market-based restructuring aimed at lowering input costs, combined with political organization aimed at shifting US state policy in a neoliberal direction,” results he and Cathy Skidmore-Hess had reported in 1999.

Cox explains in some detail:

For US corporations, the traditional approach to maintaining profit rates has been to use oligopolistic market power and position to raise prices. This strategy could only be used by firms whose market share in a given industry was at a level of concentration that made it cost prohibitive for new firms to effectively enter the market and to compete at lower prices. The most globally competitive US-based corporations in automobiles, steel, chemicals, and machine tools enjoyed such an advantage over their competitors through the immediate post-World War II period. This enabled these firms to effectively capture the most dynamic, value-added segments of the US market against domestic and foreign competitors for the first two decades after World War II. However, by the mid-1960s, there were visible cracks in the oligopolistic structures that allowed those firms to dominate the US market.

Rising competition from Japanese and German exporters, followed by market penetration from the newly industrializing countries of Asia, weakened the hold that US-based oligopolies had on the domestic market. The ability of US oligopolistic firms in key industries to raise prices to maintain profitability was undercut by the influx of greater foreign competition. Furthermore, foreign firms that retooled after World War II had a built-in advantage over their US counterparts: they adopted newer technologies that made them more competitive and had a lower time horizon of “sunken” costs compared to their US competitors. US firms, having developed their productive assets during the 1930s, had higher pension and medical care obligations than their foreign counterparts—a reflection of both the high levels of privatization of these costs in the US compared to Europe and the lengthier time horizon for US firms in being obligated to these costs. During the first two decades of the post-World War II period, the most globally competitive US firms could use their status as “early industrializers” to establish oligopolies that dominated the US market in all of the leading sectors of manufacturing. That strategy was becoming untenable with the rise of increased global competition.

US corporations had to look to other strategies in an attempt to overcome the declining rate of profit. A convergence of events in the late 1970s and early 1980s

19 He cites Prechel (1997: 414), writing “... as reflected in a dramatic fall in the rate of profit during this period for the top 500 industrial firms from 7.7 percent from 1973 to 1981 to 4.8 percent from 1982 to 1986...” (Cox, 2012: 18).

led corporations to restructure their operations through merger and acquisition strategies that involved buying out, or merging with, competitor firms, and subsequently shedding assets in a restructuring process designed to focus business operations around a core set of activities. This involved a reorganization of the corporation around global supply chains in which the highest valued-added profits accrued to corporations at the top of the chain. From the mid-1980s to the present, there has been a greater concentration of market share controlled by the corporations at the top of the value-added chain of production, especially in ‘the high-technology and/or strongly branded segments of the global markets....’ This process has coexisted with an increasingly complex global production system of small and medium-sized producers and suppliers that competes with each other to satisfy the terms of production that are increasingly being established by the ‘system integrators’ at the top of the supply chain (Cox, 2012: 15-16).²⁰

The unfettered world that the US economy had operated within after World War II was changing: no longer under control of the United States, it was shifting from a centralized system dominated by one country to a decentralized one that was much more competitive. By the 1980s, increasing competition was coming from corporations from some of the so-called developing countries. These trends have only continued to develop. And, in fact, what we have subsequently seen is both competition against and collaboration with competing firms of other countries, including companies from formerly colonized nations.

Once workers understand that it was corporate restructuring—in desperate efforts to regain their profit rates across major economic sectors—initiated by top-level corporate managers who cost them their jobs and not overseas workers, then that opens the conversation to building labor solidarity with workers around the world.²¹ This has two levels: among those who still have jobs, and those who do not.

The reality now in many multinational firms is that these corporations need the cooperation of workers around the world to create, assemble, transport (including shipping to the imperial countries, and then shipping across the respective continent and distributing to individual retail outlets), and sell each of their products. Should any of these stages be shut down, it affects those at more downstream positions, and it affects the activities and profitability of the entire firm.²²

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- 20 One statement in Cox’ statement deserves attention: he refers to the rising industrial nations of Asia. According to Scipes, “First, clearly, this development started with and/or benefited from the US’ Cold War against ‘communism,’ and later he argues, “this economic development was designed to establish or re-establish capitalist hegemony in the various countries and US imperial hegemony in the region ...” (Scipes, 2020d: 1216). The irony is that by providing “investment sites” to transnational corporations, this provided more possible sites to which US corporations could relocate from the US, destroying millions of what had been US-based jobs.
- 21 This is a tremendously important point that needs to be integrated into labor education processes: it was corporate restructuring—with decisions being made by the highest levels of corporate management—that destroyed millions of US-based jobs, and not workers of other countries.
- 22 As the United Auto Workers (UAW) demonstrated conclusively during their Fall 2023 strike against the “Big 3” auto companies in the US. (Among a number of articles in *Labor Notes* during this period, long-time UAW activist Frank Hammer posted an excellent overview of the strike on-line for the Workers’ International Network at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ivH1q0GE5k>.)

Potentially, there is incredible power in this understanding. Yet, it requires *a global understanding*, a determination to organize to be able to stop local production, and a willingness to seek and connect with workers with organization in similar situations within the firm around the world. The more this can be done in each firm, the stronger the workforce will be against management. And, of course, the more unity among workers across firms in their same industry, the stronger each will be.

Now, there are still those workers who previously worked in those corporations who no longer have jobs. Obviously, regaining jobs in the same firm, whenever possible, would be best.²³ However, the reality is that most who have lost their jobs will never get them back; and those still employed always face that same possible scenario. One thing, especially if job loss is localized, is for those who lost jobs to establish links with other laid-off/fired workers; if nothing else, the social support for getting through a firing—especially if mass and not because of an individual “screw-up”—is important for people rebounding and for maintaining their health, both physical and mental. However, staying together is more important than individual well-being, as important as that is to each person. We must start talking about the future.

And the reality—and I say this after researching and thinking about these issues from a worker’s perspective for over 40 years (see Scipes, 1984, 2023a)—is that *this capitalist economic system cannot and will not ever again provide the jobs and standard of living that North Americans experienced between 1947-1973*. Period.

And yes, I know, traditional politicians episodically get on the soap box and say how they will bring back manufacturing, where many of the better jobs for workers have been concentrated traditionally, along with the building trades. First of all, there’s simply a limit of how much can be sold by corporations, and they won’t risk exceeding that with too much production, whether domestic or overseas. Second, even if they plan to reinvest in the imperial countries, they will use as many machines, robots, and computers as possible so as to minimize the need for human labor (see Harris, 2020). So, building new plants does not mean employment increases anything like in the past. And the politicians won’t tell you this, but I will! It’s a scam to get workers to sit quiescently on their asses—let the politicians handle it for us—while the corporations utilize politicians for tax breaks, favorable land use provisions, enhanced transportation capabilities, etc., all which will come out of taxpayers’ hides to help improve the profitability for each corporation. And which results in workers getting screwed.

Once we realize this—and I’ll guarantee this—then we have to begin thinking about what kind of world we want for ourselves and our offspring. Now, this also has to take place within the reality of global climate change and environmental destruction (see, among others, Angus, 2016; Aron, 2023; Cox, 2020; Hickel, 2020; Scipes, 2017a, 2022b). We have to begin talking with co-workers, friends, neighbors, etc., and then thinking how we can organize together to begin to struggle for a better world.

Tied into all of this, is to recognize there are more and more people researching, analyzing, and discussing what is going on globally among workers and their organizations. And we can see

23 In the Fall 2023 strike, the UAW was able to force Stilantis, the parent company of Chrysler, to reopen its’ closed assembly plant in Belvidere, Illinois.

this from the research being published, some of which I list below. The point being that we are learning more and more about what is going on in the world, and our respective countries' role in this globalizing world, and we need to take advantage of it. The best of this work is on how we globally build this global consciousness and understanding, but also to understand how we can overcome efforts to undercut our efforts.

Key developments in this second period, since 2011 (although some precede that year) include:

- Peter Waterman's (1988a) work on global labor communications.
- Beverly Silver's 2003 book on workers and globalization.
- A 2008 study of the global "white goods" industry by Edward Webster, Rob Lambert, and Andries Bezuidenhout.
- A number of books that look at labor from a regional (Latin America) or global perspective include Anner (2011), Bacon (2004), Hathaway (2000), Kay (2011), Luce (2014), and Taylor and Rioux (2018). And see Thomas Collombat's (2011) unpublished PhD dissertation, which compares labor movements in Mexico and Brazil.
- A number of articles that think about labor from a regional (Latin America/Africa/Asian) or a global context include Anner (2015), Bacon (2016), Burawoy (2009), Brookes and McCallum (2017), Dobrusin (2014, 2016), Evans (2010, 2014), Herod (2003), Johns (1998), Jungehülsing (2016), McElroy and Croucher (2013), McQuinn (2020), Munck (2010), Scipes (2020d), Stillerman (2003), and Waterman (2008).
- Several edited collections that present case studies and discuss developments at the regional and or global level include Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, eds. (2018), Bieler and Lundberg, eds. (2011), Bieler, Lundberg, and Pillay, eds. (2008), Bronfenbrenner, ed., (2007); Hale and Wills, eds. (2007), Hutchinson and Brown, eds., (2001), Nowak, Dutta, and Birke, eds. (2018), Ovetz, ed. (2020), and Scipes, ed. (2014, 2016).
- An account of how the Worker to Worker Solidarity Committee built an awareness of how the AFL-CIO has been operating around the world (Scipes, 2012a).
- A 2013 collection by Robert Waters, Jr., and Gert van Goethem attempted to create a new understanding of AFL-CIO operations overseas; however, see the review by Scipes (2014a), which challenges their efforts.
- Kim Scipes updated his work across this period: on AFL-CIO's foreign operations (2012a, 2012b, 2014a, 2016a, 2018c, 2020c, 2022a, 2022c); on building global labor solidarity (2012a, 2014b, 2015, 2019, 2020a, 2020c, 2021);

on the KMU Labor Center of the Philippines (2018a, 2018b); on theorizing global labor solidarity (2014c, 2016b, 2016c); and began writing about the impact of climate change (2017a, 2022b). Scipes also edited a section on global labor solidarity in *Working USA* in 2014 (Scipes, ed., 2014), and an edited book collection in 2016, which included a number of analyses of building global labor solidarity (Scipes, ed., 2016).²⁴

- Peter Dicken (2015) continued his examination of changing or production relations in the global economy.
- Immanuel Ness' 2016 book on workers explored workers' efforts in China, India, and South Africa, while the 2016 *Encyclopedia on Imperialism and Anti-imperialism*, co-edited with Zak Cope, explored those issues in depth. Ness also co-edited a book with Jake Alimahomed-Wilson (2018) on choke points in the global logistics networks.
- We have seen more works on Chinese workers and their struggles; among others see Bieler and Lee (2017a, 2017b); Chan (2014); Chan, Selden, and Ngai (2020); Friedman, (2014); Lambert and Webster (2017), Lee (2007); Pringle (2011), Pun (2005), Pun, et. al., 2016); Ren, ed. (2016), Zhang (2014); and see Ness, 2016: 107-147.
- Katharine Nastovski's work has focused on building global labor solidarity; her 2016 PhD dissertation examined the labor imperialism of the Canadian labor movement, and she's been trying to advance our understanding of "transnational" labor solidarity (Nastovski, 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2019, 2020).²⁵
- Katy Fox-Hodess' 2018 PhD dissertation examined global labor solidarity among dockworkers. She has continued to develop her research on dockworkers around the world (Fox-Hodess, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020).
- Ronaldo Munck published interesting works in 2010, and 2018a, 2018b, particularly focusing on Latin America in a globalizing world.
- Ron Cox (2019) published a book on the necessity of workers' collective organization in challenging globalizing corporations.
- Rob O'Brien published a book on SIGTUR (Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights), a network of labor organizations mainly in the Global South, in 2019. See Scipes' 2019 review, as well as that by Framil Filho (2021).

24 His article, "Multiple Fragments" (Scipes, 2016c) in that edited volume detailed numerous efforts to build global labor solidarity, and also theorized global labor solidarity.

25 Although trying to understand basically the same thing, this author thinks that building global labor solidarity is a broader, more inclusive term than building transnational labor solidarity; "transnational" can simply refer to crossing as few as two country borders while global correctly includes workers all around the world.

- Jeff Schuhrke (2019, 2020) has continued to examine aspects of the AFL-CIO's foreign policy and has a book forthcoming on it in 2024.
- Jörg Novak (2019) did an innovative comparative study between workers' struggles in Brazil and India. See Scipes' 2020b review.
- Edward Webster and Robert O'Brien reflected upon the first 10 years of the *Global Labour Journal*.²⁶
- In 2021, Scipes published a compilation of a number of articles he had written over the years, brought together in one location, that both considered the work in the previous period while laying the groundwork for the latter one (Scipes, 2021).
- In 2022, Rob McKenzie published his book, *El Golpe: The US Labor Movement, the CIA, and the Coup at Ford in Mexico*, detailing AFL-CIO, CIA, and right-wing labor organizations' operations in Mexico, leading to the undermining of progressive Mexican labor in the early 1990s. This is the most detailed case we have to date of the impact of AFL-CIO foreign operations on workers in other countries, surpassing Scipes' (1996: 116-125) account from the Philippines. (See Scipes' 2022a review of McKenzie's book).
- In the Spring of 2022: long-time labor activists from a number of unions across the US and Canada and their supporters joined together to initiate LEPAIO (Labor Education Project on the AFL-CIO's International Operations) (Scipes, 2022c). LEPAIO's web site is <https://aflcio-int.education>. They presented an educational conference in Washington, DC in April 2022, and followed by another educational conference and leafleting the National AFL-CIO Convention in Philadelphia during June 2022. They presented a webinar for UAW members in April 2023 on Rob McKenzie's book on 1990 events in a Ford assembly plant outside of Mexico City. Working with Chilean workers and their allies, LEPAIO presented another educational conference in Washington, DC on September 10, 2023, and then held a protest outside of the AFL-CIO headquarters, commemorating the loss of life and impact on Chile of the 1973 coup on the 50th anniversary of the coup in Chile, while condemning the AFL-CIO's important role in the coup. (The September 2023 educational conference is on-line at <https://youtu.be/eL7Z2uhxaFc>.) LEPAIO also sponsored a January 27, 2024, webinar on "Zionism, the Histadrut, AFL-CIO, and South Africa" (LEPAIO, 2024).

26 While important to consider *Global Labour Journal* as a source for writings on global labor and the "new" global labor studies, it is also important to not confine one's thinking so that you think it is the only source on the subject, as these authors suggest. As shown in my bibliography, there are number of other outlets including *Journal of Labor and Society* (both under this name as well as its predecessor, *Working USA*), *Critical Sociology*, and *Class, Race and Corporate Power* that are publishing excellent work, and there are others.

- *Labor Notes* (<https://www.labornotes.org/>), a journal oriented toward labor activists across North America, holds a biannual conference of activists, which will be held next in Chicago on April 19-21, 2024. This author just received via e-mail a listing of all of the internationally-focused workshops and talks scheduled for the conference: this listing of internationally and globally focused sessions exceeds by far every previous Labor Notes conference, of which this writer has attended many. While some of us have been working for this for years, it seems that Israel's genocidal attacks on Palestine and Palestinians have stimulated a brand new understanding of global solidarity among workers.

What we see from this list is that the number of articles written, the broader range of issues and labor organizations focused upon, and by a wider collection of authors is that the turn toward global labor solidarity has not only been maintained but is actually spreading. The *Labor Notes* conference—so large that registration had to be cut off a month before the conference—is an indication that this emphasis on global labor solidarity will not only continue to spread, but actually accelerate across North America.

Synopsis & Conclusion

In short, this paper has shown that the interest in labor has been spreading globally over the past 40 or so years. Scholars today know much more about workers and their organizations globally than we have ever known before.

The challenge now is to get this global understanding into activists' understanding so they can incorporate it into their world view, and so they can take it to other workers and their organizations to build upon. The climate crisis—see, among many others, Angus (2016), Aron (2023), Cox (2020), Harper and Snowden (2017), Hickel (2020), McCoy (2021), Scipes (2017a, 2022b)—can only be addressed by a global approach, and labor is the only force that has a chance to stop it if it is to be stopped. Only by activists incorporating this burgeoning understanding into workers' "common sense" do humans have a chance to survive.

This article has argued that there is a growing global understanding of workers and their organizations that has been deepening over the past 40 years, so that scholars now know more about these issues than ever before. It has put this knowledge under the rubric of "building global labor solidarity," which includes both promoting workers efforts to enhance their lives and those others around them around the world, while hindering "labor imperialism," efforts to keep this from happening. It has provided a selection of sources from writers around the world to illustrate this growing interest.

This knowledge extends beyond just the traditional interests of workers but is put forth as key to developing a force that can play a vital role in addressing the climate crisis. Whether this will be adopted and acted upon by workers and their organizations remains to be seen. But the groundwork has been laid.

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