

## The Future of Global Unions: Is Solidarity Still Forever?

Alan Howard (2007)

Last November in Vienna, fifteen years after the demise of the Soviet Union and well into the third decade of corporate-driven globalization, the international trade union movement was reorganized to eliminate its debilitating cold war political divisions and to enhance coordination across industrial lines made obsolete by globalization. The founding of this new organization, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which represents 168 million workers in 153 countries, was hailed as historic by the few dozen people who follow these things, which it may well be, though you probably missed the coverage in your local newspaper.

Earlier this year AFL-CIO president John Sweeney met with Iraqi trade unionists in Jordan (there being no place secure enough in Iraq to hold such a meeting) to support Iraqi union resistance to an array of Bush administration policies, particularly on the privatization and denationalization of the oil industry; Teamster president James Hoffa and Service Employees International Union president Andy Stern were in China with a delegation of Change to Win (CTW) unions, the group that split from the AFL-CIO, meeting with communists and capitalists to exchange views on worker rights in the global economy. In Ottawa, Steelworker president Leo Gerard announced a merger that would bring together nearly three million American, Canadian, British and Irish workers in one union, and Communication Workers president Larry Cohen was in Athens to raise the visibility of an organizing campaign aimed at the world's largest cell phone service company, which operates in twenty-five countries on four continents.

These events reflect the realization at the highest levels of organized labor that unions have no future if they do not become truly global institutions. What is not said publicly, but known only too well, is that unions may have lost so much ground on the international playing field and have been so weakened over the past half century that they will no longer be able to provide an effective counterweight to the inequities of capitalism.

'This is a race against time, and the stakes are very high. As weak as it is, organized labor, with its global reach, its billions in assets, tens of millions of members, thousands of employees, and historic vocation for uplifting the downtrodden, is the largest social movement on the planet and perhaps the last, best hope we have for averting the rendezvous with disaster that our profit-crazed economic system seems determined to keep.

Union structures look much as they did a hundred years ago, rigid but not necessarily coherent hierarchies, from the broad, sprawling base of increasingly diverse workplaces to local union hall to national headquarters reaching a pinnacle in the recently formed ITUC. Alongside the ITUC are ten global union federations, previously known as international trade secretariats, entities formed by the last wave of globalization a century ago. With headquarters located in the grand capitals of Europe and full-time staffs that in some cases do not exceed a dozen people, these global union federations have to organize and promote the rights of the tens of millions of workers in their various overlapping and conflicting jurisdictions around the world.

These are structures, one also has to say, in which all too often the energy and creativity of many talented and selfless people are smothered by a lethal bureaucratic mentality and more than a few leaders whose first priority is to defend their own feudal powers, no matter how stagnant or rapidly shrinking their fiefdoms may be. It would be difficult to design an apparatus more dysfunctional for the purpose of organizing workers in the global economy-including the 200 million of them who have done their own globalizing by crossing borders to work in other countries-than what we now have. But structure flows from function and function from conceptions about the purpose of an institution. This is not a problem with a simple solution. How has organized labor dug itself into this hole and how will it dig itself out?

UNIONS TEND TO be conservative institutions. Historically, as they have evolved with the development of capitalism, they have passed through episodes of militant and even insurrectionary activity followed by longer periods of consolidation and recuperation-periods that can last decades marked by caution and defensive strategies. Cycles of expansion and contraction have also been international in character, such as the growth of unions during the wave of globalization that crested in the last decades of the nineteenth century and crashed with the outbreak of the First World War. We are just now emerging from one of those long periods during which the behavior of unions has been characterized by caution and narrow focus. Like any bureaucracy in a defensive posture, the force of inertia usually defeats all but the most marginal-or determined-changes in behavior. You could fill volumes with stories about the enormous difficulty that unions in this country and others have had in adjusting to new realities, especially when dealing with the world beyond their national borders, but one from my own experience will illustrate the point.

During the 1990s, when I worked for the garment workers' union, UNITE, it had been hemorrhaging members for fifteen years. Some UNITE leaders were taking grim satisfaction from their repeated warnings to other unions that their industry was the canary in the coal mine of American manufacturing-the demise of clothing to be followed by auto, steel, and all manner of goods in the relentless logic of capital seeking ever lower wages, and now with the technological capability to produce anywhere in the world.

For years the strategy of the union was aimed at restricting imports, in alliance with manufacturers who would be inconvenienced by moving production offshore. The strategy was spectacularly unsuccessful. Then the union tried something new, based on its own history of "following the work." Early in the last century, as manufacturers moved production from the original centers of the industry in New York City, first to the outer boroughs and then across the Hudson River to what was referred to as "The Foreign Zones" of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and beyond, the union followed them and eventually organized well over half of all the clothing and apparel workers in the United States.

So why couldn't we follow the work to Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, where over a million unorganized workers were producing clothing for U.S. manufacturers sold by U.S. retailers to U.S. consumers? The plan was not unanimously endorsed. "How many members do we get out of this?" the famously no-nonsense Bruce Raynor, now president of UNITE HERE, wanted to know

(disclosure: Raynor fired me in 2001, in what was probably his first official act as president of UNITE). It was a very pertinent question, insisting in its raw way that we think about solidarity in practical terms. Unions are not-for-profit organizations, but they are not charities.

From 1994 through 1997, at a fraction of the cost it took to organize apparel workers in the United States and Canada, UNITE helped unions in the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Honduras organize nearly 10,000 workers who gained union recognition and signed contracts in a dozen plants in Free Trade Zones where unions had been prohibited for decades. The numbers were relatively small, but a few of us believed they reflected a strategic breakthrough, proving it was possible to organize some of the most exploited workers in the Global South-workers that global capital assumed would not and could not be organized.

There was another ingredient in the high hopes of this period-because organizing workers ultimately requires a supportive political environment. An awareness of global sweatshops had burst into the national consciousness, as nongovernmental organizations and activists exposed Nike factories in Asia and produced the priceless spectacle of Kathie Lee Gifford weeping on national television about her-and Wal-Mart's-sweatshops in Honduras. When President Bill Clinton convened a task force on what to do about global sweatshops, it seemed like one of those moments when an issue reaches a political ripeness and the problem will get fixed. But like other big and complicated problems, this one will take longer to solve.

At one point in 1997, I was dispatched to Guatemala to investigate three factories working for a Philadelphia clothing manufacturer with whom the union had a nasty contract dispute. Conditions in Guatemala were predictably terrible, including dozens of underage workers, which I duly reported. Our campaign people in Philadelphia were delighted to have such damaging information to use against the employer, who would eventually sign a new contract. Meanwhile, the underage workers in Guatemala were fired, and our union allies began to organize workers in the three factories. It was an opportunity to build on an organizing campaign that only a month earlier had won the first contract in the Guatemala maquila industry, which then had 80,000 unorganized workers.

When I reported the firings of the underage workers and the other developments, the union couldn't digest the news. Our people in Philadelphia were in campaign mode and didn't want to deal with anything that could possibly make the company look good, such as not using child labor anymore. Furthermore, the situation in Guatemala was getting even more complicated. The underage workers were legally permitted to work limited hours if they also attended school, so we were talking with a local NGO about monitoring the situation with the underage workers while the union went about its organizing tasks. However, to organize the three plants would require UNITE to put pressure on some other manufacturers and retailers in the United States; and anyway, more than a few UNITE officers and organizers wanted to know, how could we honestly fight for the rights of Guatemalan workers when their employment took jobs away from our own members? And the Guatemalan minister of labor had gotten into the act, indicating she could be helpful in this situation if UNITE would speak with the U.S. Department of Labor about some problem with an unrelated grant. It was around this time that the union began to withdraw from its international organizing projects.

That we were not prepared to deal with such complications was emphatically confirmed that same year when the Guess apparel company moved its production from Los Angeles to Mexico to avoid an organizing drive. Although the union had developed contacts inside Guess's Mexican factories, a strategy of following Guess across the border was never really considered. This was seen as different from our organizing project in Central America and the Caribbean. It wasn't just about extending the hand of solidarity to our exploited sisters and brothers to the South. It was also about helping ourselves in a major organizing drive, serious stuff that was hard enough to do without the cultural, legal, and political complications of figuring out how to organize apparel workers on Mexican soil. It was a slippery slope. Once you crossed the Rio Grande, where did you stop?

It is a prudent and responsible question, variations of which absorb a good deal of time and energy in the institutions of our global political economy. Because whether you are a corporation, a union, a person looking for work-or an imperial army-crossing any national border means a new and often unpredictable complexity in your life for which it is difficult to prepare but fatal to ignore.

ALTHOUGH UNITE'S CANARY in the coal mine is not dead yet, most American unions have gone through a similar evolution over the past thirty years: initially not realizing how serious the problem was; allying with "their" employers to restrict imports; agreeing to all kinds of concessions to save jobs that eventually were not saved; reaching out to unions or friendly NGOs in other countries-and discovering how complicated the world is.

"The challenge is to make these relations ongoing and not merely incidental," says one veteran of international labor work. "Right at the moment you need help you can't just turn on the solidarity spigot. What a lot of this is about is just developing contacts and mutual understanding. It takes time. We're not good at that."

European unions have had a much steeper learning curve. For years they didn't understand the Americans' alarm about the oxygen running out. Now that transnational capital has become so completely integrated and seeks to apply in Europe the labor discipline methods it gets away with in the United States, European unions understand all too well what is at stake, a realization that has spurred the greater degree of cooperation evident among unions in the Global North, which includes Japan and other industrialized countries.

DIFFERENT UNIONS TODAY are at different stages of this process and have responded in different ways to those complications. UNITE had the bad luck to be hit first and to be organized in the most labor-intensive of industries, where "following the work" in the twenty-first century means locating and organizing hundreds of companies and thousands of work sites, not the four or five or even forty or fifty that other unions face, and where tangible victories for one's own members could be years in the making. So it is not surprising that what appeared to be insoluble dilemmas to my colleagues at UNITE ten years ago have proven to be difficult but manageable challenges for other unions in other industries.

No union has forged a more effective program of international work than the Teamsters. They have been doing it for a while, most dramatically in the 1997 United Parcel Service strike, when

solidarity actions by an international network of UPS workers were a critical factor in winning that high-stakes strike. The Teamsters international affairs department-now called Global Strategies-has been integrated into its organizing and bargaining operations. A few other unions have been restructured this way, reflecting both the resolution of a major strategic question for American unions as well as an ongoing tension. The question that has been resolved is the priority of organizing, which is given lip service by unions that still don't do much of it. The tension lies in the problem that UNITE faced between its members in Philadelphia and those workers in Guatemala. Critics accuse some American unions of thinking only about their own immediate campaigns, seeking help from unions in other countries without paying attention to what those unions need. This happens less than it used to for a simple reason. It doesn't work. Word gets around that this or that union sees the relationship as a one-way street, and nobody wants that kind of relationship.

The Teamsters have a method for addressing this challenge. What the union did in 1997 and has since refined is to bring all the unions involved with a targeted company around the table for an honest discussion about what each union is looking for from the company and how they can work together to get it. What that discussion aims at producing is a flexible network with common strategic objectives, not only for the immediate campaign but longer range. On a wall of the "war room" at Teamsters headquarters in Washington you can see the diagrams of these networks marking work sites in a dozen companies as diverse as Coca-Cola and UPS, these lines and organizing nodes virtually humming with the energy of workers on the march across five continents.

SEIU, the 800-pound gorilla of American unions, doesn't like to be told there's something it can't do, so nobody was surprised a couple of years ago when it pursued some multinational companies resisting an organizing drive in the United States to their United Kingdom base of operations, and then upped the ante dramatically by launching a high-profile campaign to organize property service workers in dozens of cities around the world-a kind of "Justice for Janitors" goes global. There are three remarkable aspects to these campaigns: (1) This is about service industries, supposedly a sector of the economy that, unlike manufacturing, was not threatened by globalization; (2) SEIU has poured millions of dollars from its own treasury into this international work; and (3) in typical fashion it is accompanied by a controversial strategy paper.

"At no time in history has there been a greater urgency or opportunity to form real global unions whose goal is to organize tens of millions of workers to win economic and social justice by counterbalancing global corporations on the world stage even as the power of the state declines," writes Stephen Lerner, an SEIU vice president who has played a key role in the inspirational "Justice for Janitors" campaign in cities across the United States.

What SEIU discovered as it organized these property service companies in Los Angeles, Chicago, and other American cities is that the union was dealing with a handful of increasingly global firms in an increasingly concentrated industry. Lerner identifies forty to fifty "global cities" that function as the "engine rooms" of multinational capital and envisions this new SEIU-initiated global union of the poorest and least skilled workers challenging corporate dominance of the world.

Although there is plenty to argue with in Lerner's thesis, like its distorted emphasis on the decline of state power and its sweeping dismissal of other global organizing experiences, even critics acknowledge that SEIU's efforts are a valuable contribution to the project of developing global unions. And SEIU itself is discovering how complicated this work can be as it becomes increasingly engaged in the dynamics and crosscurrents of labor movements in other countries. "We need to create relationships where everyone grows," says Tom Woodruff, SEIU executive vice president. "We're not there yet. We're learning as we go."

A Steelworkers union official made a similar observation in describing the seventeen-year process leading up to the announcement this spring of the unprecedented merger with the U.K.-based Amicus and Transport & General Workers Unions, which is now running on a twelve-month clock. Whatever the outcome of this particular initiative, how the unions got to this point is instructive. It goes back to the 1990 Ravenswood Aluminum strike, when the Steelworkers realized that they could not win that battle without launching an international campaign, demonstrating it was necessary-and possible-to confront employers with a variety of tactics beyond the borders of a single country. By the mid-1990s, the Steelworkers had begun to build a series of strategic alliances with unions in different countries around common industrial sectors and employers that involved exchanges of personnel, sharing of research and bargaining data, and limited forms of joint bargaining with major employers. As this process matured, the Steelworkers and many of their allies saw the need for an intermediate structure between the still useful but cumbersome global union federations and the bilateral relationships between individual unions from different countries. These alliances were the first step. The next, if they can bring it off, will be the aforementioned transatlantic merger.

These alliances are geared to campaigning but are also multilevel and wide-ranging, particularly in regard to political and policy questions. A critical moment that reinforced the merger process with the U.K. unions, for example, came when union analysts took a careful look at certain policies of the U.K.'s Labour Party and the U.S.-based Democratic Leadership Council-and saw they were confronting the same sophisticated ideological assault on both sides of the Atlantic.

At one point in the mid-1990s I was surprised to see the Steelworkers throw themselves into a sweatshop struggle in Central America. But the Steelworkers do this sort of thing consistently, for what the union's international affairs director Jerry Fernandez calls "philosophical reasons: we can't just be concerned with ourselves." He does not use the word "solidarity," though, of course, that is what he is describing.

CURIOUSLY, THERE IS some ambiguity in unions these days about the idea of solidarity. It goes back to the bruising debate within the AFL-CIO a decade ago about organizing, when any activity associated with international solidarity was characterized by some partisans of organizing as little more than "labor tourism" and a waste of money. Now that almost everyone understands the connection between organizing and international relationships, we do not hear much about labor tourism, but a lingering confusion about solidarity remains.

Sometimes it is still juxtaposed to organizing, as in generosity versus self-interest, idealism versus practicality. If American unions were not so ideologically exhausted, it would be more apparent

that these are not mutually exclusive terms. In this context, the vitality of each depends precisely on the synergy of their relationship. Strategy and structure are sterile without the fervor and moral force of solidarity. And of what use is solidarity without the strategies and structures and commitment of resources to organize tens of millions of workers around the world?

Questions about strategy related to the international work mirror the stunted debate prior to the 2005 split in the AFL-CIO. On the one hand, you hear the mantra of growth and greater density and how until that is achieved there's little point in engaging, from our current position of weakness, institutions like the World Trade Organization, World Bank, or state power in any but its most vulnerable forms. On the other, is the view that unions have to walk and chew gum at the same time and that you won't get the growth without the political engagement. This debate generates more heat than light, because in practice the best "organizing" unions do plenty of politics and the best "political" unions do plenty of organizing. The question is whether they will do both seriously or just go through the motions.

There has also been some progress on the question of solidarity and self-interest, at least conceptually and to a degree in practice. Whether we are talking about what the Teamsters call "simultaneous solidarity" or the Steelworkers' "not being concerned just about ourselves" or what the Communications Workers refer to as "the inner life of unions," it is the recognition that to go forward unions must also go back. To navigate the new global economy and move masses of people, they must reexamine the inspirational ideas that gave birth to the labor movement, reexamine them in the light of new circumstances, ideas that have sustained the working class of many nations through its darkest hours and most enduring victories. No idea in human history is more powerful-or more useful in the ideological warfare of this ominous first decade of the twenty-first century-than the idea of solidarity: that across the divides of nation and language, of regions, races, and religions, ordinary working people are responsible for each other. It is the oxygen of any organizing campaign that truly lives and breathes, whether that campaign takes place in Dhaka or Detroit.

We see this beginning to happen, not only in the large-scale mergers and campaigns but also in more modest efforts, like the decade-long alliance between the United Electrical workers union and Mexico's independent FAT federation that has produced solid organizing gains for both; even the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center, often depicted as remote from organizing, has created a unit that does work very similar to the various organizing alliances I have been describing.

There is something else that all of these activities have in common. The structures created to carry them out do not resemble traditional union structures. They are fluid networks in which the agenda is set by participants directly linked to the shop floor. Sometimes they include organizations that are not unions but are integral to the process. They can turn on a dime and discuss anything they think is relevant to their mission. What their relationship will be to the existing global union federations or even their own national centers remains to be seen, but these organizing networks are the seeds of the global unions of the future.

AS THIS PROCESS unfolds, however, American unions have to deal with their own particular political problem of being based in the world's only (for now) superpower, with the advantage of

their unique access to that power and the disadvantage of being held responsible for all the policies imposed by that power on the world.

For more than a century, unions in this country have cooperated, reluctantly or enthusiastically, with the U.S. government's foreign policy. During the cold war they did this more or less on automatic pilot, except for the turbulence caused by the Reuther brothers' opposition to the Vietnam War and a decade later the revolt within the AFL-CIO against Ronald Reagan's Central American policy. The 1995 election of John Sweeney to the AFL-CIO presidency marked a turn toward a more open and pragmatic international policy. Then came the 1999 "Battle in Seattle" and its glimpse of a new political alliance—the labor, environmental, and global justice movements—with a staggering potential for making this world a better place.

September 11, 2001, set back this process, but the war in Iraq has accelerated it. Just how much could be seen earlier this year when Republican and Democratic presidential candidates spoke at a forum attended by 3,000 building trades officials in Washington. The one pro-war candidate was booed off the stage and the more outspoken antiwar candidates got a standing ovation. For those of us old enough to remember building trades guys busting the heads of antiwar demonstrators during the Vietnam War, it was an iconic moment. American unions today are opposed to the war in Iraq, not opposed enough for some activists and officials, but clearly, institutionally and viscerally opposed.

Having broken, at least momentarily, the powerful ideological link between patriotism and war, unions are struggling to work their way out of the conceptual confines that have so inhibited them from understanding the way the world is changing around them. If, for example, they mobilize members to write letters, march, leaflet, and even on occasion sit in or go out on strike to organize new members here or win a contract there or lobby for a piece of legislation, by what logic do they not mobilize with equal or greater intensity to end a war that grows like a cancer on the democratic life of our country? This political timidity is a legacy of the cold war, which still casts its shadow over the new global politics.

WHEN HUGO Chávez was briefly ousted from power in Venezuela by a military coup in 2002, the AFL-CIO was accused by some of being up to its old tricks because of its support for the principal Venezuelan union federation (CTV), which was and still is a major Chávez foe. The AFL-CIO adamantly denied that it was conspiring with the Bush administration to overthrow Chávez, but suspicions persisted.

The image of American unions as junior partners of the American government is harmful for American unions trying to forge new relationships and alliances with unions around the world. "This is not a good time for any U.S. institution taking the lead because the U.S. is more unpopular than anytime in the last century," says Neil Kearney, the longtime secretary general of the Brussels-based textile global union federation, which has tried without much success to organize what Kearney estimates to be at least thirty million apparel workers toiling in sweatshops around the world. "The depth of hostility to the U.S. is like nothing I've ever seen," Kearney says. "Nobody wants to cooperate with U.S. unions."



This image of U.S. unions subservient to the foreign policy of the U.S. government is also unfortunate because it is no longer true, as the scene at the building trades convention suggests. You could also ask the Iraqi oil workers union. In early June its members went on strike with one of their key demands being opposition to the proposed petroleum law, which would open up 70 percent of Iraqi oil to foreign oil companies. With arrest orders issued for its leaders and U.S. fighter planes buzzing its picket lines, the Iraqi union reached out for support from unions around the world-including the Americans-and got it. Political affinity between the AFL-CIO and the Bush administration is nil; they can't agree on underwear imports from China, let alone on governments to overthrow.

But the Venezuela contretemps reminds us of the need to look at the world as it is, with all of its inconvenient complications. There is no question that Hugo Chávez has done some very good things for the Venezuelan working class and has challenged neoliberal policies throughout Latin America. There is also no question that he has steadily consolidated his power at the expense of democratic rights normally associated with an open political process and has made quite clear his intention to destroy the CTV, the union federation that represents over 80 percent of Venezuela's organized workers-"reduce it to cosmic dust" in Chávez's colorful locution. The CTV has lots of problems that can not be blamed on Hugo Chávez. But does that mean that the Venezuelan government has the right to replace it with a federation that supports the government?

There is a problem with the AFL-CIO's overreliance on U.S. government funding for international work, but this could be readily resolved if its affiliates recognized just how valuable the soft power of the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center operations are for global organizing, paid a share of the center's expenses, and took ownership of its work. There's no reason why this shouldn't happen across the AFL-CIO/CTW fault line, either, just as the two federations have developed working relationships on central labor councils and on some national political issues. There's not much point to every union trying to maintain its own miniature-and necessarily inadequate-State Department.

AS AMERICAN UNIONS become more involved in China, as they inevitably must, they are faced with questions similar to those that arose in Venezuela-on a much larger scale-about their relationship to official government unions and to dissidents, about the relationship between development and democracy, about the meaning of solidarity in the post-cold war world.

It used to be that when a factory closed in the United States and moved to China, it was the end of the discussion-except possibly for some racially tinged grumbling about foreigners stealing American jobs. But this past April a meeting took place in New York City that suggests something fundamental has begun to change in this picture. Union officials and activists had come to the meeting to hear an adviser to China's official All China Federation of Trade Unions ask for their support on labor law reform. No, not the "card check" bill in Washington that unions were lobbying furiously for, but legislation proposed by the Chinese government that would make some modest improvements in protecting Chinese workers against arbitrary and detrimental policies of employers.

The reason that Liu Chen, director of the Social Law Institute at Shanghai Normal University, was in the United States is that the American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai was waging a high-

powered campaign to kill or neutralize the proposed reform measure. Liu thought that American unions (he had also notified European unions about European Union multinationals doing the same as their American counterparts) should know about this and would want to weigh in when they did. He had just come from a meeting in Washington with AFL-CIO and other union leaders and was gratified to report that he had indeed gotten their support-so that American unions were now fighting transnational capital on labor law reform simultaneously in Washington and Beijing. Labor ended up batting .500 on this one. Within a week of each other, the U.S. Senate shot down card check and the National People's Congress approved China's new Labor Contract Law.

In describing and analyzing the dire condition of the Chinese working class, which now provides one out of every five industrial workers to the world economy, Liu spoke of the need for "moral solidarity in our global village" and urged his audience to remember the words of Martin Luther King. "The arc of history is long," he said, "but bends toward justice."

Throughout this article I have not used the terms "organized labor" and "labor movement" interchangeably. Workers organized in unions constitute organized labor, which means that 87 percent of the work force in the United States and probably even a greater proportion in the world at large, fall outside of that category. The labor movement exists wherever workers are in motion and advocates have taken up their cause. There are hundreds of worker centers, NGOs, women's, immigrant, community, and research organizations in this country and around the world that defend the rights of workers and function as their advocates before governments and the general public.

Unions need a more sophisticated approach to working with these allies, particularly around issues dealing with the Global South. Union strength is concentrated in the developed economies of the Global North, and the alliances described in this article tend to be concentrated in that geographical area. There are exceptions, and the resource-starved global union federations do what they can to bridge the North-South gap. But organized labor does not have a coherent strategy or the semblance of a practical program for organizing and raising the living standards of the additional 1.5 billion workers, mostly in the Global South, who have entered the global economy over the past two decades. Until this reality is addressed, unions will face a constant and powerful pressure on the wages and living standards of their members-not to mention the inhumanity of a system that keeps more than half the population of the world living on less than two dollars a day.

Whether we are talking about formal and official mergers of entire institutions or the global networks growing organically with specific campaigns, unions have begun a process of global integration that could indeed prove to be historic. Even Bruce Raynor and my former colleagues at UNITE have, by a somewhat circuitous route, become converts to global unionism. With the dramatic decline in U.S. apparel and textile production, the union shifted its organizing focus to targets it believed could not run away, like retail distribution centers and industrial laundry services, a shift reinforced by its merger with the hotel and restaurant workers union. But a funny thing happened on the way to growth and greater density. Like SEIU discovering that property service firms were global, like public employee unions learning that municipal and state governments were using call centers in India and Kenya, UNITE found that the warehouse it was

organizing in Indiana was owned by a French company and that big casinos can expand their operations in Macao if Las Vegas gets too expensive.

"My thinking on this has changed," Raynor told me recently. "For many years I didn't see the point of international affairs, but we've learned a lot in the past few years. What's happening to unions in this country can't be separated from what's happening to unions everywhere else. We're going to rise or fall together." UNITE HERE has begun to build organizing alliances with unions in a half-dozen countries, a process it expects to expand. "We will continue to put resources into this," Raynor says. "This is the future."

It is even possible that the next time the union thinks seriously about organizing the apparel industry and the question is inevitably asked, "How many members do we get out of this?"-the answer from some intrepid soul will be, "At least thirty million."

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