

The International Trade Union Movement: Where It's Been, Where It's Going

To discuss this issue, we first must first address some terminology to be clear. Although the United Nations organisations have adopted the terms “developed” and “developing” countries to address the major differentiation between groups of countries, these terms only obfuscate *why* there is this major distinction: in reality, and using this terminology throughout this piece, I argue these two sets of countries should be labelled *imperial* countries and *formerly colonised* countries. While these terms are themselves inadequate in the real world, they at least acknowledge the cause for this gross differentiation: imperialism, and the fact that the imperial countries – through combinations of their military, political, economic, and cultural power – stole the raw materials, natural resources, and sometimes the peoples of the countries they colonised, and brought them back to the imperial countries to further these countries’ development. And they did not care about the societal devastation this caused in the colonised countries (see Nederveen Pieterse, 1989).

Traditionally, it has been the imperial countries’ labour movements that have controlled and developed the international trade union movement in the post-World War II period (Thomson and Larson, 1978). Accordingly, we need to start from this perspective. However, recognising this, we must first recognise the differentiation of forms of trade unionism that developed historically, especially in the United States before the end of World War II. On one hand, there was the AFL (American Federation of Labor), founded in 1886 and initially headed by Samuel Gompers. As described most completely by Paul Buhle (1999), this trade unionism was based on what’s known as “business unionism” and its foreign policy as “labour imperialism,” as developed by Kim Scipes (2010a, 2010b, 2016); briefly, I argue that the United States is the centre of the US Empire, that the foreign policy leaders of the US labour movement have long thought and continue to think the US *should* dominate the world, and they have devoted their efforts to maintaining if not expanding this empire.

Coming out of the Great Depression of the late 1920s-early ‘30s, there ultimately emerged a new labour movement in the US (actually, more accurately called a labour “centre”), the CIO, or Congress of Industrial Organizations. The general understanding of the CIO is that it was a uniformly militant, if not radical, labour centre that was to the “left” politically of the AFL; however, as my PhD research showed, there were actually two different

forms of trade unionism within the CIO: business unionism as exemplified by the United Steelworkers of America, and social justice unionism as exemplified by the United Packinghouse Workers of America (Scipes, 2003). Basically, the former collapsed trade unionism into focusing overwhelmingly on the workplace and fighting for better wages, working conditions, vacations, and seniority rights of their members, while the latter addressed these issues as well as issues affecting the larger working class (such as racism and sexism); generally, the business unions tended to have a narrow focus and be controlled from the top-downward by formal leaders and their lawyers, where the social justice unions took a broader focus and were controlled by rank-and-file members, from the bottom-upward, differing in scope of vision and amount of democratic control by members. And it was found that conceptualisation of trade unionism determined subsequent organisational behaviours.

To drastically truncate the argument, there emerged three different political poles within the CIO based upon their respective conceptualisation of trade unionism: the right (Steelworkers), the centre (Autoworkers), and left (Electrical Workers), with these three unions the largest within the labour centre.

After World War II, Walter Reuther attained the presidency of the Autoworkers in 1946 and after gaining control of its Executive Board in 1947, moved the Autoworkers to the right, joining the Steelworkers and then, together with Philip Murray – President of the Steelworkers and head of the CIO – forcing the left (led by the United Electrical Workers) out of the CIO in 1949-50. This disembowelled the CIO – removing from the labour movement 11 unions with some of the most militant, “class-conscious” workers and leaders in the country, and with approximately 750,000 to 1 million members (Rosswurm, ed., 1992) – and neutered it, with the remaining right-dominated CIO joining the AFL in 1955 to create the AFL-CIO.

At the same time – beginning in 1947 – the right-wing CIO leaders joined with right-wing leaders of Britain’s Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the AFL to destroy the World Federation of Trade Unions, which had been created in 1945 to give the global working class a singular voice in world affairs; it included the CIO (never the AFL), the TUC, French, Soviet and other labour centres. The right-wing CIO leaders, along with AFL leaders, also worked with the Truman Administration to help create the US National Security State, including the CIA, for the emerging US Empire, as TUC leaders did with the

The “imperial” countries’ labour movements controlled the international movement post-World War II

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Labour Party in the UK. With the creation of the right-wing ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions) in 1949, the AFL, right-wing leaders of the CIO, and the leaders of the TUC formally split the global labour movement, and it has never recovered (Scipes, currently under review).

In reality, by removing the left wing of the CIO from the labour movement, labour leaders transformed the labour movement into a trade union movement; they surrendered the interests of working people in general to only advancing the interests of trade union members.

This went unnoticed for a while, as the trade unions had the power to impede production and widely had a positive image in US and British societies. They helped create the “working middle class” in both countries (as well as ultimately in others in Western Europe, Australia, Canada, Japan, and New Zealand). In the US, for example, this meant the doubling of real incomes (after inflation was removed) within each income quintile between 1947-1973 (see Scipes, 2009).

However, by the late 1970s, increasing global economic competition (as other countries recovered from the aftermath of World War II) caused a major change in imperial country capitalist development (Scipes, 1984): instead of being able to generate desired profits by innovation and organisational efficiency, they shifted to a system of global supply chains, whereby imperial country-based multinational corporations “organised” production, created new products, and controlled profitability while disbursing production to formerly colonised country production sites, where labour was much cheaper than in the imperial countries and could be much easier controlled, meaning greater profitability for the respective corporations (see Cox, ed., 2012).

What this has meant for imperial country workers has been disaster: millions of jobs have been destroyed in each of these countries as production has been offshored, and replacement jobs have offered much less income under much worse conditions; and that’s for those lucky enough to find new jobs! [If the poverty line in the US was drawn at a realistic, liveable level, which it currently is not, approximately 34.1% of all Americans would have been considered in poverty in 2011, according to DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith (2012).]

And the fact is that since about 1981 – with the inauguration of Ronald Reagan to the US presidency and his breaking of the air traffic controllers’ (PATCO) strike that year, with the passive acquiescence of labour in a heavily unionised industry at the time – the US labour movement has largely been useless. While this varies by union, which has affected individual members accordingly, the overall impact has been that labour has been largely inconsequential in efforts to affect the lives of most working people in the US, with (arguably) the single exception being the election of some “progressive” Democratic electoral candidates here and there, with very mixed results from those elected. Labour density

in the US today (2022) is at about 10% of non-agricultural workers, with only about 6% of private industry (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

Yet the AFL-CIO, through its Solidarity Center, remains a key “institute” of the imperialist National Endowment for Democracy (NED). While not as bad as in days prior to 1995, and “helping” in some locations, the Solidarity Center is currently active in something like 60 countries around the world, working with organisations unknown for unspecified purposes, and still has never given an honest report to affiliated unions and their members that can be independently verified (see Robinson, 1996; Scipes, 2010: 96-105).

However, there are changes in the global labour movement. Most importantly, in my opinion, is the emergence of workers’ organisations in formerly colonised countries around the world where production has been established; sometimes formal, sometimes informal, these workers’ organisations are emerging, and they are reaching out to the global labour movement for support (see Ness, 2016).

Arguably, the exemplar of this has been the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU-May First Movement) Labour Centre of the Philippines, which has carried out a formal project to build global labour solidarity since 1984 (see Scipes, 1996; 2014a, 2018). Sometimes this involves reaching out to established global labour organisations, such as the Global Union Federations or even to the Solidarity Center; sometimes this is to established national labour centres, such as the FAT (Authentic Workers Front in English) in Mexico; and sometimes to create their own networks, such as that of SIGTUR (the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights), which includes labour centres and unions from countries such as South Africa, Australia, India, the Philippines, South Korea, Brazil and Argentina, as well as others (for SIGTUR, see O’Brien, 2019).

Most importantly, I believe, has been the emergence of what is called “social movement unionism” or SMU in the period between 1978-2010, and the exemplars have been the CUT in Brazil, the KMU of the Philippines, and COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) in that country. While the CUT and COSATU have seemed to “backtrack” after the establishment of political democracy in their respective countries in the 1987-94 period, the KMU persists, under much greater pressures (Scipes, 2018). In this type of trade unionism, SMU has resulted in workers understanding that not only do the conditions on the shop floor have to change, but that the very global productions relations in which their respective countries are enmeshed must be changed; they consciously call for an end of imperialism as well as capitalism (see, among others, Sluyter-Beltran, 2010 for the CUT of Brazil; Scipes, 1996, 2014a, 2018 for KMU of the Philippines; and Baskin, 1991 for COSATU). While further establishment of SMU may not be possible, what can be learned is the willingness to educate and organise individual

workers is essential to building any labour movement, that there are organisational forms that can advance such organising, and that uniting with non-labour organisations is essential.

In short, the dynamic of the global labour movement has shifted to the Global South, and it is past time for workers and their organisations in the imperial countries to learn from southern workers (see Scipes, 2021).

I argue the international trade union movement must transform itself into a global labour movement, extending around the planet and embracing working people and their allies for the good of all. We cannot confine ourselves only to fighting for our members but must embrace workers and their allies in an effort to remake planetary society: fighting climate change, for example, is going to require the leadership of working people and our organisations (see Scipes, 2017, 2022).

This is going to be a terribly difficult fight, obviously, because it involves challenging capitalism in all of its aspects. It means we are going to have to drastically reduce production; unless we do this, billions of people will die. How are we going to provide food, water, shelter, etc., for everyone around the world during the transition to the new global social order? It is going to require us to address larger questions like what does each society need to produce to maintain a basic standard of living with minimal environmental damage? How is the work required going to be organised: boss on top, shit roll down hill (current model), or as egalitarian as possible? And then, how is going to be distributed most equitably? (See Scipes, 1984).

As I said, terribly difficult problems. I assume problems which we would all prefer to ignore. But if working people and our organisations do not confront them – and provide answers that make sense to a large majority of peoples around the world – I assume they will not be addressed by governmental, corporate, or most social leaders; and so humans, animals, and most plants will be condemned to extermination, beginning around the turn of the 22nd Century.

If we do not begin to confront these issues in all of their complexity now, people will not be prepared down the road to take the measures necessary for survival. The question demands a forthright answer: is the global labour movement up for it? If it cannot do so in its current form, can it be transformed sufficiently in time to do so? What other choice to we have?

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We cannot fight only for members but must embrace workers and their allies to remake planetary society, especially fighting climate change

This involves challenging capitalism, reducing production, and providing food, water, and shelter around the world

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unions will already be participants in these networks, but those that are not would benefit from joining their political efforts with the broader resources of local government and its affiliated community groups, non-government organisations and other supporters.

Unions of the Global South face significant challenges as the world either emerges from the current “polycrisis” or otherwise grapples with it in a more drawn-out way. But it is possible that on-going global turmoil means the fight to control the emerging green industrial transformation is far from settled. Within this context, unions can deploy innovative ways of social, economic and environmental development that reverses decades of

extractivism, by recognising the global supply chain implications of this shift – a situation where extraction-based relationships has entrenched the Global South within the imperialist economic networks of the United States now presents these nations with a foundation from which to wrestle control back and retain the economic benefits of the renewables revolution locally. Capturing value by “flipping” existing supply chains on their head could be the goal, with the pursuit of a globally equitable and democratic distribution of critical minerals, rather than their control by unaccountable multinationals and imperialist superpowers, the goal of a globally united labour movement.