

Workers and world order: the tentative transformation of the international union movement

ROBERT O'BRIEN*

Abstract. The activity of workers' organizations and labour issues is once again on the international relations agenda in fields ranging from labour standards at the WTO, to the terms of regional integration, to corporate codes of conduct, to civil society coalition building. This article argues that the role of the international union movement is transforming from a supporter of US capitalism to a brake on neoliberal industrial relations, to potentially advocating a different form of political economy in alliance with other groups. This transformation has taken place partially because unions have been expelled from the corridors of power in key states and partially because of their encounter with a series of social movements. The cases of the ICFTU's activity in engaging international organizations and MNCs are used as examples to illustrate this trend. The implications for activity in, and the theory of, the global political economy are potentially significant.

Introduction

The activities of workers' organizations are once again on the international relations agenda. At the multilateral level, the World Trade Organization (WTO) has been engaged in a divisive debate over the relationship between core labour standards and international trade.¹ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank have recently responded to the East Asian crisis by reconsidering their formerly cold relationship with organized labour in developing states.² At the regional level (EU, NAFTA), labour organizations have been central to contesting the nature of regional integration and pushing for social protection.³ In the market sphere, labour

* This article has benefited from the constructive criticism of Robert Cox, Randall Germain, Jeffrey Harrod, John MacLean, Ronen Palan, Timothy Sinclair and the reviewers of this Journal. Some of the research was facilitated by ESRC grant # L120251027 (Global Economic Institutions and Global Social Movements).

¹ For an overview of rival perspectives see Brian Langille, 'Eight Ways to Think About Labour Standards and Globalization', *Journal of World Trade*, 31:4 (April 1997), pp. 27–54; Eddy Lee, 'Globalization and Labour Standards: A Review of Issues', *International Labour Review* 136:2 (Summer 1997), pp. 173–89.

² Previous World Bank hostility to labour is outlined in Bob Deacon, Michelle Hulse and Paul Stubbs, *Global Social Policy: International Organizations and the Future of Welfare* (London: Sage 1997), pp. 69–70. Evidence of a new attitude can be seen in structural adjustment loans to South Korea which call for some form of worker assistance. World Bank, 'Report and Recommendation of the President of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development to the Executive Directors on a Proposed Structural Adjustment Loan in an Amount Equivalent to US\$2.0 bn to the Republic of Korea', March 1998.

³ On labour and NAFTA see Kim Moody, 'NAFTA and the Corporate Redesign of North America' *Latin American Perspectives*, 84 (1995) pp. 95–106, 'The Emergence of Cross-Border Labor Solidarity,' *NACLA Report on the Americas*, XXVII (1994) pp. 42–8.

groups have combined with public interest organizations to pressure Multinational Corporations (MNCs) to adopt codes of conduct on worker's rights and working conditions.⁴ In the field of civil society, labour groups are increasing building links with new or alternative social movements to campaign for social justice.⁵

The purpose of this article is to assess the potential implications for world order and international relations of the recent activity of the official international union movement. By 'official' international union movement I am referring to the interstate labour movement as represented by international union organizations such as the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the International Trade Secretariats (ITSS). The article's argument is that the primary impact of the official international union movement is to temper neoliberal globalization, but that in its attempts to do so it is in engaging in a process which may result in its own radicalization. The possibility of radicalization exists because of the encounter between official international unionism and other groups concerned about labour issues such as women's movements. This in turn may lead to the possibility of challenging the existing principles of global economic order.

The argument unfolds in three sections. The first section provides a justification for reassessing the role of international labour. The end of the Cold War and the effects of neoliberal globalization are two major structural changes which prompt a review. The second section considers the recent activity of the major institutional form of the international union movement—the ICFTU. It outlines labour's attempt to affect the course of three different forms of industrial relations through influencing the policies of international organization and corporate behaviour. The ICFTU's role can best be interpreted as a desperate attempt to slow the spread of neoliberal economic practices. The third section analyses the challenges to the 'official' international union movement posed by what some have dubbed a 'new internationalism' of grassroots and social movement unionism. The conclusion outlines some of the practical and theoretical consequences of the international union movement's tentative transition.

The case for reconsidering the role of the international union movement

A good place to start our review of the role of international labour is Robert Cox's 1977 article 'Labor and Hegemony' which analysed the relationship between the International Labour Organization (ILO), the US state and US worker organizations.⁶ Cox argued that the operation of the ILO and the activities of the US labour movement supported a particular form of corporatism which facilitated the expansion of US capitalism and hegemony. The possibility that the ILO might consider other forms of organizing political and economic activity led to the threat

⁴ See the advice given to firms by a consulting firm in *No Hiding Place: Business and the Politics of Pressure* (London: Control Risks Group Ltd., July 1997). For a trade union view see *Human and Trade Union Rights: Codes of Labour Practice*, International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation, Presidium Meeting, Geneva, 3–4 November 1996.

⁵ Peter Waterman, *Globalization, Social Movements and the New Internationalisms* (London: Mansell, 1998).

⁶ Robert W. Cox, 'Labor and Hegemony', *International Organization*, 31 (1977), pp. 385–424.

of US withdrawal.⁷ For its part, US organized labour, as represented by the AFL-CIO, supported the government position by actively undermining foreign labour activity premised upon more confrontational or redistributive principles.⁸

During the Cold War era most Western unions participated in what Maier calls the politics of productivity.⁹ This refers to the political practice of subsuming class conflict by ensuring growth and productivity gains in the economy. It reflected a belief that proper technical management of the economy would create the conditions for prosperity which would eliminate the need for harmful distributional battles. The origins of the policy can be traced back to the uneasy compromise between labour and business that emerged from the Depression and the war-time experience of planning.

This domestic arrangement had an integral international and transnational dimension. The international or interstate dimension was the creation of international institutions and regimes which supported the domestic compromise. Ruggie has used the term 'embedded liberalism' to describe the compromise between commitments to a liberal international economy and domestic welfare.¹⁰ The transnational dimension was the spreading of the US model to other national political economies. This required intervention through monetary diplomacy, use of the Marshall Plan, and opposition to leftist parties to ensure that those opposed to the priority of productivity were excluded from political power. Using a different terminology, one would say that the interstate arrangements supported, and were supported by, an extensive set of transnational relations.¹¹ To function smoothly agreements between states had to be accompanied by the transformation of domestic societies.

It was in this context of the hegemony of the modified liberal state and the politics of productivity that Cox launched his critique of the ILO and US labour. Far from posing a challenge to US hegemony both organizations were seen to support the spread of social relations which reinforced the dominance of the US capitalist model.¹² Ironically, the existing state model was just about to undergo a severe challenge on both sides of the Atlantic. The rise of neoliberal governments in the US and the UK combined with a corporate offensive against workers led to the

⁷ Historically the relationship between the ILO and the US government has been turbulent. See Francis Graham Wilson, *Labor and the League System: a Study of the International Labor Organization in Relation to International Administration* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1934), pp. 325–50 and Mark F. Imber, *The USA, ILO, UNESCO and IAEA: Politicization and Withdrawal in the Specialized Agencies* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 42–69.

⁸ A defence of the AFL-CIO's foreign policy can be found in William A. Douglas and Roy S. Godson, 'Labor and Hegemony: A Critique', *International Organization*, 34 (1980), pp. 149–58. Cox's response is in 'Labor and Hegemony: A Reply', *International Organization*, 34 (1980), pp. 159–76.

⁹ Charles Maier, 'The Politics of Productivity: Foundations of American International Economic Policy after World War II', *International Organization*, 31 (1977), pp. 607–33.

¹⁰ John Gerard Ruggie, 'International Regimes, Transactions and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order', *International Organization*, 36 (1982), pp. 379–415.

¹¹ On the recent revival of interest in transnational relations see Thomas Risse-Kappen, (ed.), *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In: Non-state Actors, Domestic Structures and International Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹² Some critiques of US trade union foreign policy argued that it was more pro-imperialist than anti-communist because its primary function was to facilitate the spread of US transnational corporations to the developing world. For example, Don Thomson and Rodney Larson, *Where Were You, Brother? An Account of Trade Union Imperialism* (London: War on Want, 1978).

ejection of labour from the governing coalition.¹³ In Gramscian terms the historic bloc was transformed by pushing organized labour out of its junior role. The Keynesian state was transformed to a neoliberal or even hyperliberal state as attempts were made to replicate the Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism found in the nineteenth century liberal state.¹⁴

This changing environment leads us on to consider two structural changes which prompt a reconsideration of the international union movement. The first is the end of the Cold War and the second is neoliberal globalization.

End of the Cold War

The end of the Cold War in 1989 led to the collapse of the major ideological cleavage which had split workers' organizations and made it more difficult to organize united class-based politics in the workplace and in the political system. The contest between the Soviet Union and the United States for predominance put an end to hopes for worker internationalism that would cut across state and employer boundaries. The demise of the Cold War offers the possibility of constructing a new form of internationalism, less polarized by ideology. Free of Cold War politics it might be possible to rekindle the spirit of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century internationals.¹⁵ The Cold War had three major effects on worker internationalism.

Firstly, there was an organizational split with the forming of rival international confederations. In the autumn of 1945 trade unions from around the world, communist and non-communist, formed the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). In the United States the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was a member, but the more conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL) was not. Under increasing pressures from the Cold War and conflict over the Marshall Plan, the CIO and the British Trade Union Congress (TUC) withdrew from the WFTU in 1948 leaving it as a communist-dominated international. Along with the AFL, these Western unions assisted in the creation of a rival organization, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. The ICFTU was founded as much to battle communist unions as it was to battle employers' organizations on behalf of their workers. The split not only isolated Eastern unions from the West, but it also sharpened divisions between communist and non-communist unions in Western countries such as France and Italy.¹⁶

¹³ Mark Rupert, *Producing Hegemony: The Politics of Mass Production and American Global Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 167–207.

¹⁴ Robert W. Cox, 'The Global Political Economy and Social Choice', in Daniel Drache and Meric S. Gertler (eds.), *The New Era of Global Competition: State Policy and Market Power* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), pp. 335–50.

¹⁵ See Frits van Holthoorn and Marcel Van Der Linden (eds.), *Internationalism in the Labour Movement 1830–1940*, Vols. I and II (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1998); Lewis L. Lorwin, *The International Labor Movement: History, Policies, Outlook* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1953), pp. 3–44, John Price, *The International Labour Movement* (London: Oxford University Press, 1945).

¹⁶ On the conflict between communist and non-communist labour unions at the WFTU and in Europe see: Gary Busch, *The Political Role of International Trade Unions* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 47–72, Ronald Radosh, *American Labor and United States Foreign Policy* (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 219–82, Lorwin, *International Labor Movement*, pp. 219–82.

Secondly, sections of organized labour were tainted by the operation of national security services and eagerly identified themselves with the task of carrying out the foreign policy of their states. For example, US labour acted as a conduit for CIA funds to bolster non-communist unions in France and Italy during debate about the Marshall Plan and European reconstruction. Similarly, the AFL-CIO supported US government policy to bolster centre and right-wing unions in Latin America against leftist unions. In many cases the foreign policy of the ALF-CIO seemed to have little concern with workers rights, but a great deal of interest in fighting communism.¹⁷

Thirdly, the Cold War undermined union organizations in Western states. This happened in three ways. The purge of communists and other radicals from the union movement in the name of Cold War politics weakened many unions. Communists had been at the centre of union organizing in the 1920s and 1930s and their ejection from the movement led to a loss of energy and commitment in the rank and file. Secondly, the conservative nature of the established unions led to a bureaucratization of union structures and a fixation with wages at the cost of broader social conditions. This was most apparent in the United States where unions abandoned their social role in favour of narrow employee representation through business unionism. A third factor was that the charge of subversion could be used to undermine legitimate agitation for workers rights. Unions were constantly under pressure to demonstrate loyalty to the Western side.

The end of the Cold War does not mean the end of the ideological conflict for international unionism. Conflict between communist and non-communist unions predated the interstate Cold War which began in the late 1940s.¹⁸ The Cold War served to shatter the hopes of early postwar internationalism, but was not the cause of conflict between ideological rivals in the labour movement. The end of the Cold War signals the lessening of ideological conflict based on the divisions over communism and offers a radically new set of parameters for unions to organize across national divides that had formerly been forbidden territory. However, other divisions, such as those between business unionism and social unionism or unions from developed and developing countries have not disappeared.¹⁹

Neoliberal globalization

Globalization is now a widely used term with multiple meanings.²⁰ In this case the

¹⁷ Beth Sims, *Workers of the World Undermined: American Labor's Role in US Foreign Policy* (Boston: South End Press 1992); Radosh, *American Labor*. Busch, *Political Role*, pp. 31–41, analyses the labour-government nexus in general terms.

¹⁸ Denis Macshane, *International Labour and the Origins of the Cold War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

¹⁹ Business unionism represents the immediate financial interests of its members and has little desire to influence the distribution of power within the society or protect the fate of workers it does not directly represent. Sims, *Workers of the World*, pp. 4–6. For arguments in favour of social unionism see Don Wells, 'Building Transnational Coordinative Unionism', in Huberto Juarez Nunez and Steve Babson (eds.), *Confronting Change: Auto Labor and Lean Production in North America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), pp. 487–505 and Kim Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy* (London: Verso, 1997).

²⁰ For two different understandings of globalization and its implications for the state see Jan Aart Scholte, 'Global Capitalism and the State', *International Affairs*, 73 (1997), pp. 427–52, Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson, *Globalization in Question* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996).

word refers to a process in which the barriers of time and space in the conduct of social relations are unevenly decreased and new centres of authority are created beyond the state.²¹ It refers to the compression of time and growing irrelevance of distance in activities such as communication, travel, financial exchange and production. Technical innovations have allowed some people to communicate, travel and do business at an accelerated speed and across great distances. This has led to the creation of new sets of social relations as selected groups of people, formerly isolated, are now connected. The process of globalization is operating under increasingly neoliberal conditions. The rules governing the process are ones that push for deregulation and increasing competition between private actors.²²

The process of neoliberal globalization has its effect upon labour. It simultaneously challenges the power of organized workers and offers the opportunity to transcend national concerns. Relatively secure labour in developed countries has been threatened by globalization as it has led to an undermining of the welfare state and intense competition from low wage producers. Globalization has been used as an ideology to justify economic retrenchment and the dismantling of social welfare provisions. A recent example was the South Korean government's attempt to restructure employment relations in the winter of 1996–97. Accompanying these new threats has been an increased ability for workers in far-flung countries to communicate with each other. This has facilitated the forging of transnational coalitions and networks. The appearance of European trade unionists in South Korea during the 1997 general strike illustrates the point. Although one can see such activity on a worldwide scale, these alliances are more advanced on a regional level where economic liberalization and regulation is more concentrated. For example, the workers of Renault in several European countries took common action in response to the car makers abrupt dismissal of workers at a Belgian plant in March of 1997.

In addition to easier communication, the process of globalization has created the conditions which could assist in a dilution of working class nationalism. As the polarization of advanced industrialized countries continues and the revolt of the elites is clearer, it becomes more practical for workers to look to the international realm for solidarity and assistance.²³ In the US context, Rupert has argued that the NAFTA debate may be a watershed in organized labour's acceptance of the dominant brand of liberalism.²⁴ Not only did labour break with US corporations over the issue of linking workers rights to regional trade agreements, but it also openly opposed a Democratic Party leadership and a sitting Democratic President. A second notable change in the policies of US organized labour was the attempt to work with environmental and consumer groups to forge a common position on this element of economic policy. Finally, the AFL-CIO was forced to cultivate relations

²¹ Jan Aart Scholte, *A Critical Introduction to Globalization* (London: Macmillan, 2000). For examples of authority beyond the state, see Claire A. Culter, Virginia Haufler and Tony Porter (eds.), *Private Authority and International Affairs* (Albany: State University of New York, 1999).

²² Robert O'Brien, 'Shallow Foundations: Labour and the Selective Regulation of Free Trade', in Gary Cook (ed.), *The Economics and Politics of International Trade* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 105–24.

²³ 'Revolt of the elites' refers to the tendency of privileged groups to abandon other members of society to the discipline of an increasingly harsh market and social structure. The term is taken from Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).

²⁴ Mark Rupert, '(Re) Politicizing the Global Economy: Liberal Common Sense and Ideological Struggle in the US NAFTA Debate', *Review of International Political Economy*, 2 (1995), pp. 658–92.

with the emerging independent Mexican unions rather than rely on the Mexican government sponsored CTM union. The CTM proved adequate for US workers' interest in the Cold War when the fight was against communism, but allies in the fight against transnational exploitation would have to be found in unions controlled by their members.

These sketchy examples are not meant to imply that nationalism is dead amongst the working class, nor that international union activity is problem-free. However, they do suggest that globalization provides new opportunities for internationalism, just as it poses severe challenges for national union movements.

The international union movement and the three faces of industrial relations

In its struggle to shape an increasingly global environment the international union movement encounters three faces of industrial relations. The first face is a social democratic one, the second is neoliberal and the third is authoritarian. The authoritarian face is by far the dominant one in terms of the number and geographical spread of countries practising such arrangements. However, the economically dominant countries of the globe demonstrate a continuum of practices from the social democratic to neoliberal models. This section of the article gives a brief overview of these forms of industrial relations and analyses international labour's attempt to strengthen the first and combat the latter two.²⁵

Although much theoretical and empirical Industrial Relations literature stresses the bilateral relationship between employers and workers, the concern here is with the way that particular forms of state interact with workers and employers. This study categorizes systems of industrial relations by looking at variables not usually deployed in traditional analysis. The key variable is the degree to which autonomous or independent worker organizations are allowed to operate in the economic and political arenas of a particular country. A system of industrial relations which not only allows such activity, but supports it through legislation, is labelled social democratic. A system which allows union activity, but discourages it through legislation and uses market forces to reduce the power of organized labour is labelled neoliberal. Finally, a system which either prevents independent organization through state or ruling party infiltration of union structures or regularly uses physical force (military, paramilitary forces, police) to coerce autonomous workers organizations is labelled as authoritarian.²⁶

The social democratic, neoliberal and authoritarian typology is not entirely satisfactory. One disadvantage is that it runs the risk of blurring differences between systems and overemphasizing similarities. Such a criticism might be anticipated from scholars in the Industrial Relations field. Industrial Relations studies tend to be

²⁵ For an overview of the diversity of views about the appropriate subject matter of industrial relations, see Peter B. Doeringer (ed.), *Industrial Relations in International Perspective: Essays on Research and Policy* (London: Macmillan, 1981).

²⁶ Ross M. Martin also puts autonomy at the centre of trade union analysis, but in a slightly different manner: see Martin, *Trade Unionism: Purpose and Forms* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

comparative national studies, or at the most ambitious, regional studies.²⁷ They focus on variation between national systems and highlight differences to a greater extent than the simplistic typology of this study. For example, Frenkel's study of union patterns in nine Asia-Pacific countries divides what is labelled here as authoritarian into two further categories—state corporatist and state exclusionary.²⁸ This greater differentiation occurs because Frenkel uses different variables in his typology. He distinguishes systems in which controlled unions are integrated into decision-making (state corporatist) from those where unions are excluded from decision-making (state exclusionary). This article's typology categorizes the state corporatist form as also being exclusionary because it excludes autonomous workers' organizations.

The term social democratic may also be problematic because it conjures up images of a system prevalent in northern Europe and of little relevance to other parts of the world. It may give the sense of exporting a particular model when it is meant to identify a broad arrangement which could take different forms in various parts of the world. For example, post-Apartheid South African industrial relations could be included in this category even though they have their own unique characteristics.²⁹ A more descriptive term would be 'inclusive' which indicates that autonomous workers' organizations are included in decision-making and economic management. However, as illustrated in the Frenkel study, inclusive in Industrial Relations terminology often refers to the act of incorporating workers organizations which are state-dominated.

The term authoritarian also covers a wide range of government-labour relations. For example, Lucien Pye highlighted a distinct form of East Asian paternalistic authoritarianism.³⁰ While the state can be harsh in its treatment of opponents, the paternalistic element of the equation is said to reward merit, promote modernization and contribute to egalitarian economic development. There are obvious differences in authoritarian structures in different countries, but the outcome for autonomous labour is similar. State forces are used to stifle dissent and prevent the pursuit of alternative economic or political projects. This can involve considerable violence whether the authoritarianism is paternalistic or predatory.

Despite such drawbacks, the social democratic, neoliberal and authoritarian labels serve a useful function. They direct attention to the degree to which

²⁷ Stephen Frenkel and Jeffrey Harrod (eds.), *Industrialization and Labor Relations: Contemporary Research in Seven Countries* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1995); Henk Thomas, *Globalization and Third World Trade Unions: The Challenge of Rapid Economic Change* (London: Zed Books, 1995); Jacques Belanger, P. K. Edwards and Larry Haiven (eds.), *Workplace Industrial Relations and the Global Challenge* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press 1994).

²⁸ Stephen F. Frenkel, 'Variations in Trade Union Patterns: A Synthesis', in Stephen Frenkel (ed.), *Organized Labor in the Asia-Pacific Region: A Comparative Study of Trade Unionism in Nine Countries* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1993), pp. 309–46. Another approach has been to differentiate the labour regimes of South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong by the type, severity, level and effectiveness of labour controls. Frederic C. Deyo, *Beneath the Miracle: Labor Subordination in the New Asian Industrialism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989).

²⁹ Louwrens Pretorius, 'Relations Between State, Capital and Labour in South Africa: Towards Corporatism?', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 8 (1996) pp. 255–81; Glen Adler and Eddie Webster, 'Challenging Transition Theory: The Labor Movement, Radical Reform, and Transition to Democracy in South Africa', *Politics and Society*, 23 (1995), pp. 75–106.

³⁰ Lucian W. Pye, 'The New Asian Capitalism: A Political Portrait', in Peter L. Berger and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsia (eds.), *In Search of an East Asian Development Model* (Oxford: Transaction Books, 1988), pp. 81–98.

independent labour organizations play a wider social role and whether attempts to discipline such organizations are taken primarily through market or state mechanisms. They assist in identifying a major cleavage in industrial and international relations.³¹

The international union movement faces a severe challenge because its favoured form of regulation, social democratic, is being squeezed in a pincer movement by the neoliberal and authoritarian models. As mentioned earlier, US labour has been increasingly marginalized from political and economic power since the early 1980s. In the heartland of social democracy, Western Europe, neoliberal prescriptions for market deregulation are gaining a more receptive audience. Across Western Europe a variety of responses have been initiated to deal with structural transformation and the challenge of increased competition.³² These responses have ranged along a continuum from the neoliberal Thatcherite experiment in Britain to the maintenance and reform of neocorporatist arrangements in Austria.³³ At the pan-European level the issue of labour market flexibility is seen by some as the antidote to Europe's unemployment crisis and competition from abroad. Crucially, the competitive challenge from states employing authoritarian models of industrial relations is often cited as a factor in necessitating the abandonment of the social democratic model.³⁴ This creates a synergy between neoliberal and authoritarian models working to undercut the gains of workers' organizations in developed states and prevent their realization in developing states. The task for the international union movement is to counter efforts at undermining the social democratic model and to create opportunities for it to prosper in the face of competition from the other models.

Before moving on to an examination of unions strategies it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the international union movement and how it is being examined in this study.³⁵ The international union movement is composed of several parts. At the highest level are the international organizations which bring national union confederations together. The largest and most active of these is the International

³¹ For an argument in favour of integrating the study of industrial relations and international relations see Jeffrey Harrod, 'Social Forces and International Political Economy: Joining the Two IRs,' in Stephen Gill and James H. Mittlemen (eds.), *Innovation and Transformation in International Studies* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 105–17.

³² Paul Teague, 'Between New Keynesianism and Deregulation: Employment Policy in the European Union', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1 (1994), pp. 315–54.

³³ Anthony Ferner and Richard Hyman (eds.), *Industrial Relations in the New Europe* (London: Blackwell, 1993).

³⁴ Garry Rodan, 'The Internationalization of Ideological Conflict: Asia's New Significance', *The Pacific Review*, 9 (1996), pp. 328–51. The financial crisis which broke over East and Southeast Asia in July 1997 will presumably cause a reconsideration of this argument.

³⁵ This article has focused upon only one element of an emerging *global labour movement*—the international trade union confederations and international trade secretariats. However, the global labour movement also includes non-unionized labour groups such as NGOs with labour concerns, some consumer groups, peasant organizations and the spontaneous actions of unorganized workers. The significance of these groups is greater than that of the ICFTU or the ITSs alone. For a broader approach see Robert O'Brien, 'The Agency of Labour in a Changing Global Order', in Richard Stubbs and Geoffrey Underhill (eds.), *Political Economy and the Changing Global Order*, 2nd edn. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 38–47.

Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).³⁶ A second element is the International Trade Secretariats (ITSS) which bring together unions in a particular economic sector. Prominent examples include the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF), the International Metalworkers Federation, and the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM). The ITSS engage in day-to-day relations with firms and tend to be on the frontline of labour-capital conflict.³⁷ A third part is the international activity of national unions or confederations. A fourth element is the international activity of union locals.

This study focuses upon the ICFTU. It is the largest umbrella organization of international unions, bringing together independent and democratic trade unions from around the world, representing 127 million people from 136 countries.³⁸ It is at the peak of what some analysts call 'official labour internationalism'.³⁹ Some union activists and labour observers see it as a bureaucracy three times removed from their own concerns (locals, nationals, internationals). As such, it is likely to be more conservative than many activist rank and file members. This article starts with the peak association, but the relationship between the ICFTU and other parts of the labour movement are of central concern.

A good starting point for considering international labour's position is the ICFTU's 16th World Congress held in June 1996 in Brussels where the ICFTU set itself the goal of responding to neoliberal globalization.⁴⁰ The ICFTU's strategy in influencing the direction of globalization is to engage states, international organizations, multinational corporations (MNCs) and social movements in a discussion aimed at committing these actors to support and respect basic labour rights. These rights are meant to provide the foundation for labour's struggle against the neoliberal and authoritarian forms of industrial relations. Their weapons in pursuit of this task include relying on the support of friendly states and political parties, industrial organization and action, legal measures and consumer pressure.

It is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate all of these strategies. Here we will focus upon the ICFTU's (and some of the ITSS) engagement with three inter-

³⁶ With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ICFTU's main rival, the World Federation of Trade Unions, is largely irrelevant. However, for a more positive view of the WFTU's possibilities, see Andrew Herod, 'Of Blocs, Flows and Networks: the End of the Cold War, Cyberspace, and the Geo-economics of Organized Labor at the Fin de Millenaire,' in Andrew Herod et al., *Unruly World? Globalization, Governance and Geography* (London: Routledge 1998), pp. 162-95. The World Confederation of Labour (WCL) is smaller than the ICFTU and represents workers primarily in Belgium, Holland, and Latin America. Its distinction is that it was originally a confederation of Christian unions and continues to stress a spiritual or humanistic dimension to its policies; World Confederation of Labour: *A Spiritualistic Concept* (Brussels: World Confederation of Labour, 1995).

³⁷ Arthur Lipow, *Power and Counterpower: The Union Response to Global Capital* (London: Pluto Press/ICEM, 1996).

³⁸ There is doubt about the democratic credentials of some of the ICFTU's affiliates. For example, the ICFTU's Mexican affiliate is the CTM which has been very closely tied to the authoritarian Mexican state. For a critique of the union structure in Mexico see Maria Lorena Cook, 'Mexican State-Labor Relations and the Political Implications of Free Trade', *Latin American Perspectives*, 84 (1995), pp. 77-94; Dan La Botz, *Mask of Democracy: Labor Suppression in Mexico Today* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

³⁹ For example, Moody, *Workers in a Lean World*, pp. 227-48.

⁴⁰ ICFTU, *The Global Market-Trade Unionism's Greatest Challenge* (Brussels: ICFTU, 1996). Remarks in this article attributed to individuals at the Congress, but not footnoted, are recorded in the author's notes of the proceedings.

national and transnational entities: international organizations, MNCs and social movements. Despite this focus, readers should remember that unions' relationship with the state remains of central concern because the legal structure of labour control systems are largely national affairs. Reference is made to this struggle above in the context of the battle to influence the faces of industrial relations. There are a variety of trends from the disastrous decline of US organized labour to the emergence of independent and vigorous social movement unionism in states such as South Africa and Brazil. These developments feed into the present analysis, but can not be treated in sufficient depth at this time.

International organizations

There has been a long relationship between the unions and the ILO dating back to the early part of this century.⁴¹ Recent union activity is aimed at extending some element of the tripartite nature of the ILO to other major international organizations so that labour has a voice in a wide range of policy issues. Although unions are active at numerous organizations, this section concentrates on institutions that have recently been high on the ICFTU's agenda—the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The WTO is a product of the Uruguay Round negotiations of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). It established a permanent international trade organization with enhanced regulatory powers and the mandate to spearhead further liberalization initiatives.⁴² It is central to the union movement because of the ICFTU's campaign to have a social clause inserted into the WTO. The social clause would commit states to respect seven crucial conventions of the ILO which provide for: freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, abolition of forced labour, prevention of discrimination in employment and a minimum age for employment.⁴³ The rationale for having the conventions as part of the WTO is that for the first time they would become enforceable and not depend upon the whims of individual states. The social clause would provide a minimum floor for workers rights and assist in undermining authoritarian forms of industrial relations by providing a space for freedom of association and collective bargaining.

The case for a social clause at the WTO has been constructed to reduce opposition from its major opponents, liberal free traders and developing states. The ICFTU argues that a social clause will help keep markets open by strengthening the political authority of the WTO.⁴⁴ Protectionist arguments in developed countries will be harder to sustain in the face of an established mechanism to deal with labour exploitation. The implicit argument is that workers in developed states will continue

⁴¹ Wilson, *Labour and the League System*, Robert W. Cox, 'ILO: Limited Monarchy', in Robert W. Cox and Harold Jacobson (eds.), *The Anatomy of Influence: Decision-making in International Organization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 102–38.

⁴² John Jackson, *The World Trade Organization* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1997); Asif Quraishi, *The World Trade Organization: Implementing International Trade Norms* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

⁴³ Conventions 87, 98, 29, 105, 100, 111, 138.

⁴⁴ ICFTU, *International Worker's Rights and Trade: The Need for Dialogue* (Brussels: ICFTU 1996).

to press for labour standards, forcing policymakers to choose between national or multinational regulation rather than multinational or no regulation. A failure to address the issue at the WTO may result in developed states taking their own, less liberal measures.

Converting developing country governments to a social clause requires a message which minimizes the fear of Northern protectionism. The ICFTU proposals raise the possibility of trade sanctions only for the most obstinate offenders and after years of reports, consultations and multilateral assistance. Making it clear that labour standards are not intended to level wage rates between developed and developing countries is essential to create political defences for unions in developing countries which support adoption of the social clause in face of fierce government opposition.⁴⁵ The ICFTU is also trying to attract support by claiming that developing countries have the most to gain from their proposals. The biggest competitive threat to low wage developing countries is from other low wage developing countries.

The campaign to link the ILO's supervisory machinery with the WTO's enforcement mechanism has not yet been successful.⁴⁶ In the 1996 WTO Singapore Ministerial meeting, a coalition of neoliberal, authoritarian and anti-imperialist states were able to limit progress on the issue to a disputed declaration which stressed the continuing importance of the ILO.⁴⁷ Since that time the ICFTU has tried to raise the issue through the WTO's Trade Policy Review Mechanism and has urged that labour standards be included in the next WTO-sponsored negotiating round.

A second institution with which the ICFTU is becoming more engaged is the International Monetary Fund. The IMF is of central concern to many union members in developing countries because its policy guidelines of privatization, deregulation and liberalization are seen to be the cause of enormous suffering, savage decreases in living standards, and a justification for anti-union campaigns.⁴⁸ Previous IMF policies are interpreted as imposing a neoliberal economic model on the weakest countries and tolerating, if not encouraging, authoritarian forms of industrial relations.

The leadership of the ICFTU has been actively courting the IMF in an attempt to have union concerns considered by the financial institution. One of the highlights of the ICFTU's 16th World Congress was the unusual decision of the Director of the IMF, Michel Camdessus, to address union delegates. In his introduction of the IMF Director the ICFTU President, C. LeRoy Trotman of the Barbados Workers' Union, relayed how Barbadian trade unions had met with the IMF and World Bank about their structural adjustment program. Unions felt that through discussions

⁴⁵ The need to clarify the difference between core labour standards and a global minimum wage was stressed by the Malaysian Trade Union Congress delegates at the ICFTU's 16th World Congress, June 1996.

⁴⁶ For details see 'The World Trade Organization and Labour,' in Robert O'Brien, Anne Marie Goetz, Jan Aart Scholte and Marc Williams, *Contesting Global Governance: Multilateral Economic Institutions and Global Social Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 67–108.

⁴⁷ Paragraph 4 of the Singapore Ministerial Declaration states that 'We renew our commitment to the observance of internationally recognised core labour standards. The International Labour Organization (ILO) is the competent body to set and deal with these standards ...' Draft Singapore Ministerial Declaration, World Trade Organization, 13 December, 1996.

⁴⁸ Jeffrey Harrod, *Labour and Third World Debt* (Brussels: International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers' Union, 1992).

about the content of the IMF's restructuring program they were able to scuttle devaluation proposals, reduce the number of required layoffs and participate in a wages policy. Trotman cited this as the first example of a tripartite approach to structural adjustment policies (SAPs) and suggested it as a precedent for union-IMF relations. The IMF Director has called upon organized labour to help hold governments accountable for financial mismanagement and the content of structural adjustment programmes.⁴⁹

While the ICFTU leadership viewed the IMF's mere presence as an indication of the growing trend of international organizations beginning to acknowledge the key social role of their organization, many delegates were unimpressed by the Director's speech. The General Secretary of ICFTU's Inter-American Regional Organization for Workers (ORIT), Luis Anderson, expressed outrage at the idea that workers were responsible for their own poverty because of lack of training. He was reluctant to offer a hand of cooperation when IMF policies promoted exclusion.

Potential interaction between the IMF and the ICFTU is limited by widely conflicting goals. The IMF is seeking the help of unions to limit government corruption and contribute to good governance, whereas the unions desire a rethinking of the core assumptions underlying structural adjustment programs. The IMF wants the unions to contribute to the success of their plans while the unions want to change the plans themselves.⁵⁰ Many World Congress delegates seemed unwilling to accept the severe financial constraints upon states seeking IMF help. For their part, the IMF failed to offer anything other than sympathy for the fact that restructuring hurt the weakest the most, and that those paying the cost were not responsible for accumulating the debt. The significance of the dialogue lay in the fact that it was taking place more than any actual accomplishments of the relationship to date.

While the ICFTU and its affiliates are increasing attention upon their engagement with international organizations, the possibility of influencing policy will take much longer to develop. Relations with the WTO, IMF and World Bank face ideological and interest based opposition. Although the Bretton Woods institutions are in a process of re-evaluating their economic management approaches, neoliberal ideology opposes political interference in the market such as international labour standards or social dimensions to SAPs. Financial interests oppose curbs on speculation, while employers in most countries and entrenched authoritarian governments resist the introduction of meaningful international labour standards.

Multinational corporations

While unions are trying to influence the form of industrial relations in particular states by targeting public international organizations, they are also attempting to influence the structure of the market by shaping the corporate activities of multinational firms. Unions are following a dual strategy which attempts to restore their

⁴⁹ Michel Camdessus, 'The Impacts of Globalization and Regional Integration on Workers and their Trade Unions', Speech delivered to the ICFTU 16th World Congress, Brussels, 26 June, 1996.

⁵⁰ ICFTU, 'Rethinking the Role of the IMF and World Bank: ICFTU Proposals to the Annual Meetings of the Board of Governors of the IMF and World Bank', Washington, 10–12 October, 1995.

power through collective bargaining and restrict the worst abuses of workers rights through consumer pressure. The first tactic is meant to curb neoliberal industrial relations by bringing independent unions into a transnational industrial relations system and limiting the power of dominant market actors. The second tactic is aimed at limiting authoritarian industrial relations by creating a minimum floor for working conditions which will facilitate worker survival and organization.

Since the early 1970s unions have shown an interest in building a system of multinational collective bargaining (MNCB).⁵¹ Such a step would bring organized labour closer to the social democratic form of industrial relations because it would legitimate its role in the economy. The aim is to establish a form of global industrial relations where unions are able to bargain with multinational companies unhindered by geographic dispersal. The ITSs and the ICFTU are taking a number of initiatives. One step is to put all the collective agreements of a particular firm into a single database so that union negotiators will be aware of arrangements at sister plants. Another initiative is to host World Congresses of workers from the same company, such as Nissan.⁵²

An additional example of the globalizing of industrial relations is provided by the conflict around the tyre company Bridgestone. In 1994 Bridgestone refused to accept a union deal similar to those reached at Goodyear and Michelin. Bridgestone demanded wage and benefits rollbacks which led to strikes and the hiring of replacement workers. The United Steel Workers of America responded by working with the ICEM to mount a worldwide campaign. This included lobbying and demonstrations in Europe and Japan as well as in North America. The union viewed the US dispute as the first step in Bridgestone's global anti-union strategy.⁵³

Caution should be exercised in anticipating the growth of MNCB. In its most fertile ground, Western Europe, progress has been extremely slow.⁵⁴ Despite high levels of economic integration, geographic proximity and an overreaching institutional structure in the European Union, the obstacles are immense. Unions remain weak and dominated by national structures, employer organizations and firms are reluctant to engage in such activity and the European Union institutions lack the structure and the desire to become active in the industrial relations domain. Given such difficulty in an area of possible economic and political convergence, the possibilities in more diverse arenas appear limited.

A second area of union activity has been the effort to influence corporate behaviour by introducing, monitoring and enforcing company codes of conduct. Codes of conduct are meant to set basic principles for the behaviour of MNCs (and their subcontractors) with respect to their labour practices and environmental policies. In some cases firms are willing partners in implementing such codes. For

⁵¹ Harvie Ramsay, 'In Search of International Union Theory'. Paper presented to Conference on Production and Regulation of Labour, University of Warwick, 11–13 September, 1996.

⁵² International Metalworkers Federation, *Nissan: Hard Times Challenge Nissan and its Workers* (Geneva: International Metalworkers Federation, 1995).

⁵³ *ICEM INFO 2* (Brussels: ICEM, 1996). The successful conclusion of their campaign is reported in 'Bridgestone Success: US Agreement a Milestone in Unions' Global Campaigning', *Asian Labour Update* (August–October 1996), pp. 23–4.

⁵⁴ Bernhard Ebbinghaus and Jelle Visser, 'European Labor and Transnational Solidarity: Challenges, Pathways, and Barriers', in Jytte Klausen and Louise A. Tilly (eds.), *European Integration in Social and Historical Perspective from 1850 to the Present* (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), pp. 195–221.

example, the Levi Strauss Jean company's code of conduct is reproduced in ICFTU literature as an illustration of a MNC working with the union movement.⁵⁵ Levi Strauss is notable not just for its code of conduct banning labour exploitation, but for its withdrawal from states operating extreme forms of authoritarian industrial relations such as Burma and China.

Although codes of conduct are becoming more widespread, they remain a relatively neglected aspect of doing business. For example, a 1997 survey of Canadian multinationals revealed that only 20 per cent of Canadian MNCs had such codes.⁵⁶ Of the companies with codes only 14 per cent had an independent mechanism to monitor the implementation and respect of the codes. In such an environment the task of raising the issue of codes of conduct and highlighting abuses falls to labour organizations. Due to their limited and relatively recent implementation, the effectiveness of such codes in curbing labour abuses remains in doubt.⁵⁷

One prominent union strategy is to select a particularly serious abuse of workers rights, highlight the abuses in the media and attempt to pressure governments to legislate, consumers to boycott and corporations to change behaviour. Good examples are the campaigns against child labour and labour conditions in Asian toy factories.⁵⁸ Another example is the campaign against child labour in the manufacture of footballs.⁵⁹ Prior to the start of the European Football Championships (EURO 96), the ICFTU revealed that footballs endorsed by the governing football association, FIFA, were made in Pakistan using child labour. This revelation involved cooperation between the ICFTU, Norwegian unions who supplied the camera crew, British unions in the country of the championships and Pakistani unions on site in the targeted country. The adverse publicity resulted in FIFA adopting a new code of practice and more attention being given to labour issues around a key social/sporting event.

The pressure from organized labour and consumer groups in developed countries has forced the hands of government and international organizations as well as MNCs. For example, in April 1995 US President Bill Clinton announced a voluntary code of conduct covering business ethics and workers rights for US companies working abroad.⁶⁰ In an attempt to reinvigorate its role in the labour standards issue the ILO has announced its intention to push for a global social label.⁶¹ The proposal is in response to the numerous private initiatives at social labelling. The ILO's label would be applied to countries respecting basic rights rather than firms. One justification for taking such a step is that under ILO auspices such labels would be policed and prevented from becoming protectionist tools.

⁵⁵ ICFTU, *Behind the Wire: Anti-Union Repression in the Export Processing Zones* (Brussels, ICFTU, 1996); ICFTU, *From the Ashes: A Toy Factory Fire in Thailand* (Brussels: ICFTU, 1995).

⁵⁶ Craig Forcece, *Commerce with Conscience?: Human Rights and Corporate Codes of Conduct* (Montreal: International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, 1997).

⁵⁷ Lance Compa and Tashia Hinchliffe-Darricarrère, 'Enforcing International Labor Rights Through Corporate Codes of Conduct', *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*, 33 (1995), pp. 663–89.

⁵⁸ ICFTU, *From the Ashes*.

⁵⁹ ICFTU, *No Time to Play: Child Workers in the Global Economy* (Brussels: ICFTU 1996).

⁶⁰ *The Economist*, 8 April 1995.

⁶¹ *Financial Times*, 23 April 1997.

Encounter and synthesis with social movements

The attempt by the ICFTU and ITSs to engage international organizations and MNCs has led to an interchange with other social movements which are also attempting to challenge neoliberalism. This interchange forces the international union structure to confront its past practices and expand its activity in the direction of a broadly based social unionism which is compatible with a series of new internationalisms on a variety of issues. This section will take two examples to illustrate these dynamics, one in the area of international organizations (WTO), the other in the rise of women's movements.

Social movement opposition to labour standards at the WTO

The ICFTU's desire to enshrine core labour standards in the WTO has encountered resistance from some development organizations and some unions in developing countries. This has forced the ICFTU and its affiliates to re-evaluate how it might better address the concerns of other workers and people in the informal sector. This point will be illustrated by recounting the debate between the ICFTU and a coalition of southern-based research institutes called the Third World Network (TWN).⁶²

When the ICFTU arrived at the 1996 Singapore WTO Ministerial Meeting they found, much to their surprise, that the TWN had been instrumental in steering a coalition of NGOs to oppose the extension of the WTO's mandate to new issues, including core labour standards. Their primary argument was that the WTO was an inappropriate institution to defend workers rights and advance the concerns of the peoples of the developing world. They viewed the WTO, as well as the World Bank and the IMF, as institutions of northern domination. The TWN and a number of development NGOs argued that 'countervailing measures imposed unilaterally by powerful countries on weaker nations (and hardly conceivable the other way around) would lack legality, moral authority and effectiveness to lead to any effective improvement in workers condition or human rights situations in poor or rich countries'.⁶³

In order to discuss their differences the ICFTU and TWN held a closed-door meeting on the second day of the Conference.⁶⁴ The meeting was facilitated by individuals from two NGOs that had labour union links—the International Labor Rights Fund in Washington and the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development in Montreal. The ICFTU and TWN each brought ten people to the meeting. The ICFTU ensured that it had trade unionists from Africa, Latin America and South Asia attend the session to counter the notion that it solely represented northern interests. The TWN was primarily represented by people from southern research institutes. Although the discussion lasted for a couple of hours the

⁶² For more information on the TWN see their web site at: <http://www.twinside.org.sg/>

⁶³ 'Joint NGO Statement on Issues and Proposals for the WTO Ministerial Conference', 8 December 1996.

⁶⁴ The following account is based upon the author's notes.

main points can be easily summarized. The TWN claimed that the structure of the WTO was biased to such an extent that the incorporation of core labour standards would only be used as a weapon by developed countries against developing countries. Their main agenda at the Singapore conference was to restrict the WTO's powers, especially its attempts to expand in the area of investment regulation. While sympathetic to protecting labour rights the appropriate institution for such a function was the ILO, not the WTO. The ICFTU argument was that the ILO's monitoring activity needed to be supplemented by the WTO's enforcement capability. Capital was using regional trade agreements, as well as the WTO to enshrine its rights. Labour had to do the same. The WTO was not the ideal institution, but it would be far worse to have no link between labour standards and trade. In the same way that one doesn't achieve everything one wants in collective bargaining, the WTO core labour standards relationship was imperfect, but necessary. They agreed to disagree.

Both the ICFTU and the TWN sought to stress their areas of agreement and the fact that on many issues they had no dispute. However, the differences between the two groups were great. The ICFTU advocates achieving gains within the existing structures while the TWN is seeking a new international architecture to give developing states more equality. Whereas the ICFTU saw the prime international cleavage as being between workers and employers, the TWN saw the divide as being North/South. The ICFTU was in favour of international organizations forcing governments to live up to minimum standards; the TWN, because of its view of international organizations, preferred greater state autonomy. In the end, the ICFTU could not answer the TWN's criticism of the structural inequality of international economic institutions and the TWN could not advocate a concrete policy proposal to improve workers rights.⁶⁵

Around the fringes of the debate, but never openly articulated, was a dispute not just about tactics to be adopted to further progressive change, but a contest over legitimacy and representativeness. From the perspective of some members of the TWN, the ICFTU was a naive northern-dominated institution acting on the behalf of northern workers to the detriment of southern workers. It had few links to the poorest of the poor, namely to the millions of peasants in developing countries and the informal sector. Its backing of a strengthened WTO smacked of the strategy of a labour aristocracy trying to protect its own. From the perspective of the ICFTU and the ITSS, the Third World Network was a collection of intellectuals with dubious links to the people they claimed to speak for. They had no mass membership base and no mechanisms of accountability. Their wholesale rejection of working within the WTO offered no hope for improving workers' living conditions.

The distrust many grassroots organizations in developing countries voice over the social clause issue reveals the degree to which northern unions and the ICFTU must work to repair the damage of their Cold War legacy. Whereas the ICFTU argues that the extension of legal protections to corporate interests over issues of intellectual property rights must be accompanied by regulation in the field of workers

⁶⁵ The debate continues after Singapore. One example is a seminar organized by the Organization of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) in Tunisia in September 1997 on the issue of labour standards. TWN members joined OATUU and WFTU officials in arguing against a social clause at the WTO, while ICFTU representatives including confederations which are part of OATUU argued in favour.

rights, some groups in developing countries see extended regulation in terms of past protectionism generated by US anti-dumping legislation. As for the ICFTU itself, newly independent unions resent their cosy Cold War relationship with government-sponsored unions and fear that they will urge the implementation of business unionism rather than engage in anti-capitalist struggles.⁶⁶

The debate has not changed the ICFTU's position on core labour standards, but the critique has had an impact within the organization. More effort has gone into making links with the NGO community. The problem of unequal enforcement of WTO mechanisms is being rethought. Some ICFTU affiliates have urged the organization to expand its WTO work to take account of a range of issues concerning developing countries, rather than just focusing on labour standards.⁶⁷ There is some evidence that the ICFTU is responding to these pressures. For example, during its participation in the March 1999 WTO High-Level Symposia on 'Trade and Environment' and 'Trade and Development' the ICFTU pulled together a much more comprehensive critique of the WTO.⁶⁸ This briefing paper highlighted development, environmental, gender and social concerns, as well as labour standards. This signals a detectable broadening of the ICFTU agenda and a realization that it must champion issues wider than those of concern to its most powerful members if it is to build the alliances crucial for political success.

International unions and women's movements

Of all the new or alternative social movements, the women's movement is likely to have the most far-reaching effect on the international union movement. The increased attention the unions are giving to women workers is in response to changes in the global economy. In the advanced industrialized world, key changes in workplace organization, technical innovation and labour legislation has greatly reduced the power of the masculine mass factory-based union.⁶⁹ Employment is increasingly shifting to conditions formerly associated with women workers—service sector, poorly paid, part time, short term or contracted out. In Britain employment growth is dominated by part time work for women.⁷⁰ With a shrinking male industrial workforce unions must turn to women to revitalize their membership base.⁷¹

The growth of export processing zones (EPZs) to lure investment has focused union attention on women workers in developing countries. Many zones have an 80

⁶⁶ 'Global Business Unionism', *Asian Labour Update*, 4 (August–October 1996); Dave Spooner, *Partners or Predators: International Trade Unionism and Asia* (Hong Kong: Asia Monitor Resource Center, 1989).

⁶⁷ Sentiments expressed by South African, Brazilian and Italian union representatives at the ICFTU 1998 pre-WTO Ministerial meeting in Geneva, May 1998 (author's notes).

⁶⁸ 'Statement to the High-Level Symposia of the World Trade Organization (WTO) on Trade and Environment and Trade and Development,' 15–16, 17–18 March (Brussels: ICFTU, 1999).

⁶⁹ Charles B. Craver, *Can Unions Survive?* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

⁷⁰ *The Independent*, 19 March 1995.

⁷¹ Ruth Milkman, 'Union Responses to Workforce Feminization in the United States', in Jane Jenson and Rianne Mahon (eds.), *The Challenge of Restructuring: North American Labor Movements Respond* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), pp. 226–50.

per cent female workforce. The zone administrators usually engage in policies that frustrate attempts at independent unionization and often institute difficult working conditions.⁷² EPZs bring a mainly female developing world labour force into contact with a formally secure male workforce in the developed world. The concerns of one become related to the other. This is one of the practical meanings of globalization for workers as spatial distances become less relevant.

Reaching out to women workers involves a change in the trade union agenda and operating practices.⁷³ Issues such as maternity leave, protection against sexual harassment, equal pay for equal work, and minimum rights for home-based workers have become significant. Historically, unions have campaigned against home-based work, seeing it as a competition and a remnant from pre-industrial practices. Engagement with women's organizations revealed that for many women such employment is essential. Emphasis is now placed on securing better working conditions for such workers by, for example, pressuring MNCs to implement codes of conduct for their suppliers.

EPZs, home-based working, the informal and rural sectors greatly complicate the task of organizing workers. On the local level, unions may be limited to providing unorganized workers with desperately needed services. Women members of the Malaysian Trade Union Congress run hostels providing affordable housing for EPZ workers. Other examples include providing nursery care or night classes for workers. In parts of Africa attempts are made to assist the work of cooperative movements trying to secure fair prices for agricultural products. In India women workers have taken the lead in forming their own associations when established structures are unhelpful. A prominent example is the Indian Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). In a decade SEWA has grown from 20,000 to 220,000 members.⁷⁴ With up to 95 per cent of India's population working in the informal sector, the potential for increasing membership is immense. It is noteworthy that a SEWA representative attended the 1996 ICFTU Congress.

These small local measures are meant to demonstrate the positive role unions can play in workers' lives. They are supplemented at the national and international levels by campaigns for new legislation. For example, the national union movement pressured the Philippine government to outlaw sexual harassment. At the international level, the ICFTU has pressed the ILO to adopt a new Convention on homeworking. The ICFTU holds World Women's Conferences alternating with their World Congresses. The Congresses produce reports and action plans for the ICFTU on women's issues and organizes strategy such as planning for union's tactics at the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference.⁷⁵ Within the ICFTU itself steps have been taken to educate members about gender issues.⁷⁶

⁷² ICFTU, *Behind the Wire: Anti-Union Repression in the Export Processing Zones* (Brussels: ICFTU, 1996).

⁷³ Natacha David, *Worlds Apart: Women and the Global Economy* (Brussels: ICFTU, 1996).

⁷⁴ Address of Renana Jhabvala, SEWA India to ICFTU World Congress, Brussels, 27 June 1996. See also Ela R. Bhatt and Bishwaroop Das, *Mainstreaming the Informal Sector* (Ahmedabad: Sewa Academy, 1995); SEWA, *Sewa—Self Employed Women's Association* (SEWA: Ahmedagad, 1995).

⁷⁵ ICFTU, *Recommendations of the 6th World Women's Conference of the ICFTU* (Brussels: ICFTU, 1994).

⁷⁶ ICFTU, *Equality: The Continuing Challenge* (Brussels: ICFTU Training Materials, 1995).

International unionism and the pull of social unionism

There is some evidence that structures such as the ICFTU are being pulled in the direction of cooperation with other social movements. The first signs of this can be seen the ICFTU's participation and follow-up to the UN Social Summit.⁷⁷ The March 1995 UN World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen provided an opportunity for the ICFTU and its affiliates to engage in social movement coalition building. The Summit brought together leaders from 114 countries to focus on social issues. The ICFTU expressed concern about a range of issues such as employment, democracy, equality, international labour standards, education, training and sustainable development. Labour took a prominent role at the Summit and believes it exercised considerable influence on the content of the Summit's 'Ten Commitments'.⁷⁸ Perhaps most important for the labour movement was a Summit promise to support basic labour rights and the ILO conventions which form the basis of their campaign for a social clause at the WTO.

In March 1996 the ICFTU sponsored a follow-up Seminar to the World Summit in conjunction with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the ILO. Held on the first anniversary of the Summit, the seminar was meant to reflect upon the degree to which implementation was taking place and what further steps were needed. Representatives from the ICFTU, ILO (including the employer's organization), UNDP, European Commission and social movements gave their views. The general sense was that a spirit of action had been generated at Copenhagen, but little activity in the following year had taken place.⁷⁹ Again, a key element in the agenda for the future was seen to be lobbying for the establishment of national commissions to monitor national implementation.

Three months later at the ICFTU World Congress, the general notion that labour should cooperate with other groups was reinforced by the speech of Ambassador Juan Somavia. Somavia was the Chilean ambassador to the UN and one of the Coordinators of the UN Social Summit.⁸⁰ He called upon labour to be the core of a broad ranging social alliance influencing the direction of globalization.⁸¹ His vision was of labour leading a 'world social movement' to exert pressure upon governments to live up to recommendations of the Summit. Labour was identified as the key actor because of its long history of fighting oppression, existing organizational structure and greater degree of representativeness and democracy in comparison to many other social movement actors.

⁷⁷ One could also point to the attempt by the ICFTU to frame its concern about worker rights in a more universal and liberal human rights framework. See for example, ICFTU, *Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights* (Brussels: ICFTU, 1996).

⁷⁸ ICFTU, *A Users' Guide to the UN Social Summit* (Brussels: ICFTU, 1996), pp. 3–4. The Declaration of the World Summit for Social Development contained ten commitments which bound governments to strive for a more equitable world. These were broad statements which committed governments to human rights, poverty eradication, full employment, social integration, quality education, social dimensions to structural adjustment programs, international cooperation and development of least developed countries. In spirit, these pronouncements are much closer to the social democratic than the neoliberal or authoritarian models of industrial relations.

⁷⁹ ICFTU, *Seminar on 'Follow up to the World Social Summit for Development' Organized by ICFTU, UNDP and ILO* (Brussels: ICFTU, 29 March, 1996). Some have argued that the Summit's primary benefit was to provide a forum for development NGOs and their concerns. William Felice, 'The Copenhagen Summit: A Victory for the World Bank?' *Social Justice*, 24 (1997), pp. 107–19.

⁸⁰ In 1998 Somavia was named as the new Director General of the ILO.

⁸¹ *Free Labour World*, 28 June 1996, p. 7.

While cooperation between labour and other social movements to limit authoritarian and neoliberal forms of industrial relations holds out promise, the mechanics are sometimes difficult to envision. The labour movement has a clear organizational structure, but the environmental and women's movements do not. The insistence by labour that it is the largest and most democratic non-governmental organization may restrict its desire to compromise and cooperate. At the World Congress, the General Secretary of Education International made the point that while the ICFTU should make more use of the Conference of NGOs at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), 'we insist that the UN recognize that representative, democratic organizations like the ICFTU and the ITSS are not the same as the thousands of NGOs and "one person think-tanks" swarming like honey bees around UN summits'.⁸² Cooperation with environmentalists may be particularly problematic. Although some Congress delegates mentioned concern about clean working environments, it often seems that this is a health and safety issue. ICFTU members seem willing to consider cooperation with other social movements, but it is based on a clear hierarchy or on a case by case basis. The possibility of forging a long lasting, broadly based coalition is more problematic.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the role of the international union movement is transforming from supporter of US capitalism, to a brake on neoliberal industrial relations, to potentially advocating a different form of political economy in alliance with other groups. This transformation has taken place partially because unions have been expelled from the corridors of power in key states and partially because of their encounters with a series of social movements. The cases of the ICFTU's activity in engaging international organizations and MNCs were used as examples to illustrate this trend. If this analysis is accurate, it suggests several important implications for the practice and study of international relations. This final section outlines these implications, beginning with practice and everyday life and moving on to how we might integrate such developments into our study of the discipline of international relations.

To begin with the practice of international relations, the continued transformation of the international union movement would have several important knock-on effects. It would change the nature of global competition by making it increasingly difficult to compete on the basis of super-exploitation. MNCs and investors would be more constrained in their strategic options because practices such as using child or unorganized labour for export products would increasingly be contested. Similarly, MNCs would find labour groups supporting campaigns for gender equity and environmental protection. This would form part of a larger campaign aimed at challenging the dominance of market forces as the central mechanism for organizing social life. International organizations would have to amend neoliberal economic prescriptions as they faced increasing resistance in

⁸² Statement by Fred van Leeuwen, General Secretary of Education International, ICFTU World Congress, Brussels, 27 June 1996.

developed and developing states. This would transform policies at institutions such as the IMF, OECD, World Bank, and WTO. States themselves would come under pressure as transnational cooperation bolstered the enforcement of minimum workers rights. This in turn, would challenge the political control of authoritarian states over their populations. The balance would shift toward social democratic forms of industrial relations and states from the neoliberal and authoritarian models. A revitalized labour movement would play a significant role in influencing the structures of the global economy and improving the conditions under which people live and work.

Such potential changes sound important enough, but are barely visible in most approaches to the study of international relations and international political economy. There are three ways in which this can be remedied. The first two are relatively painless and consist of adding labour on to existing fields of research. The third is more far-reaching and less likely to be adopted because it calls for placing social relations flowing from production at the centre of the study of international relations. Even if this study does not persuade scholars to adopt the third option, the first and second may provide valuable insights.

Option one is to build upon the extensive work of scholars such as Susan Strange who urged people to study the firm and its role in international political economy.⁸³ However, similar to the move to unpack the state through an integration of domestic politics, there is a need to unpack the firm by examining industrial relations.⁸⁴ One would then find that the nature of firms is heavily influenced by the industrial relations systems in which they operate and that struggles for labour control influence a wide variety of subjects such as competing models of capitalism.

Option two is for scholars working in the area of new social movements and global civil society to give some thought to the old social movement of labour. Labour organizations, particularly trade unions, occupy strategic sectors in the global economy, possess an institutional structure that brings benefits (as well as the often cited costs) and wield traditional forms of influence and power that can complement new social movement activity. It is interesting, for example, that after almost two decades away from the issue of organized labour, Robert Cox is reconsidering its role as a potentially progressive social force in the struggles of civil society.⁸⁵ If the goal of new social movements is to construct a world that balances liberal economic priorities with more egalitarian values, such an aim only stands a chance of being accomplished if workers' organizations play a large part in the struggle. This observation is not meant to downplay the divisions between workers nor to diminish the importance of new social movements. It is meant to suggest that an important element has been missing from the discussions of global civil society.

The third option is a more far reaching review of the relationship between international relations, the organization of production and the exercise of power. This, of

⁸³ 'An Eclectic Approach,' in Craig N. Murphy and Roger Tooze (eds.), *New International Political Economy* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991), pp. 33–49.

⁸⁴ For a good example of such an approach see Louise Amoore, 'The Contested Firm: Production, Work and the Challenges for IPE,' paper presented to the British International Studies Association Meeting, University of Sussex, December 1998.

⁸⁵ Robert W. Cox, 'Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium: Prospects for an Alternative World Order', *Review of International Studies*, 25:1 (January 1999), pp. 18–19.

course has been the task of much of Jeffery Harrod's and Robert Cox's work.⁸⁶ The tentative transformation of the international union movement suggests that further investigation into these relationships is required. In particular, the international union movement and its interaction with other social groups is a prime candidate for continued research by those seeking sources of change in the global economy and global order.

⁸⁶ See in particular Jeffrey Harrod, 'Social Forces'; Jeffrey Harrod, *Power, Production, and the Unprotected Worker* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Robert W. Cox, *Production, Power and World Order; Social Forces in the Making of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).