

Whither or Wither Global Labour?

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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Whither or Wither Global Labour?

Victor Silverman

Stavis, Dimitris and Terry Boswell, *Globalization and Labor: Democratizing Global Governance* (London: Rowman & Littlefield 2008)

Bronfenbrenner, Kate, ed., *Global Unions: Challenging Transnational Capital Through Cross-Border Campaigns* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University ILR Press 2007)

THOSE OF US WHO WORK in the garden of international labour repeatedly hope for a great flowering of global solidarity but usually find only slim harvests. We have become used to a broad gap between the rhetorical promise of global labour movements and the improvements in the lives of workers around the world that such global efforts actually bring. Thus observers of the workings of international labour organizations and of the connections of unions across borders search hard for the small shoots of collaboration that we imagine may someday allow unions to operate effectively in a globalized world. But all too often, we let our hopes overwhelm our analytical minds.

The Seattle demonstrations of 1999 inspired this writer and many others with visions of a revitalized global left based on the coalition of a new generation of labour, environmentalist, and social justice activists. This renewed left quickly created ongoing connections through institutions like the World Social Forum as counterparts to those of the global elite and appeared to be having some progressive world effects. Rejecting simplistic protectionism as counterproductive and doomed, leftists spawned proposals for “globalization from below,” to use the title of a hopeful book of the time. Trade unions around the world not only participated in this wider left, but also launched reforms of their own to revitalize the global side of their movement. Cold War divisions fell as one-time Communist labour organizations joined the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), an organization of national

labour federations. Then the ICFTU merged with the religious organizations of the World Confederation of Labour to form the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) in 2006. The former International Trade Secretariats reappointed themselves Global Union Federations (GUF) with ambitious plans to actually act as international unions for particular industries, negotiating agreements and coordinating labour actions.

Well before the current economic crisis, this promising movement had faltered. The institutions of neo-liberal globalization proved liberal in the American sense, claiming their good-hearted concern for the world's poor and co-opting many of the activists' claims, if not the activists themselves. Within the left, the World Social Forum, for instance, was able to promote some effective cross-border networking, but has largely proven to be a platform for hot air, self-promotion, and ritualized protests – often directed against the Forum itself – as well as for junkets by activists to travel to exotic locales.

But what of workers and unions? Could this new movement and its exciting coalition reverse labour's decades-long slide? Apparently not. Here, despite mergers and rebranding, the story is just as bad. In recent years, unions around the world have cooperated in new ways, as measured by the number of trade unionists attending international meetings. However, the net result for workers has not been positive. While real wages increased in many countries through the last 15 years, income failed to keep up with increases in productivity. Wage inequality increased. Union density declined in all but three industrialized countries from 1999 to 2007. Labour power in India, Brazil, and South Africa, with some of the strongest union movements in the Global South, also declined. Clearly something is not working for unions and workers on a world-wide scale. While most of these difficulties derive from the increasing power that neo-liberal policies have given business interests, union efforts also bear responsibility. Despite a resurgent international left, the race to the bottom, as far as unions and economic equality are concerned, continues unabated. The current economic collapse has only increased this downward movement.

Indeed, today's financial panic and "great recession" have not yet stimulated a rebirth of labour. Still, the delegitimation of unbridled capitalism brought on by the financial panic of 2008 has revived older ideas of regulation of capital by the state. This tendency may reinforce some of the positive trends outlined in Stevis and Boswell's *Globalization and Labor* and Kate Bronfenbrenner's *Global Unions*. Yet it would be a mistake to overestimate this potential.

Dimitris Stevis and the late Terry Boswell have ably surveyed the history and current state of efforts by labour to engage global institutions to benefit workers. Stevis and Boswell define the predicament of labour in recent years in clear, if understated terms: "While global integration forces unions to consider global collaboration, its uneven pace and its bias toward liberalization and away from social equity can well aggravate existing difference among workers and create new ones." (2) Labour is bound by its history, they argue, a history of uneven though at times positive efforts at global cooperation among unions

and of growing engagement with the institutions and processes of globalization. The authors focus on governance – the rules, processes, and institutions that (for lack of a handy thesaurus) *govern* the globalized economy. Key here, of course, is unions' ability to gain leverage against the true holders of power in the globalized world: transnational corporations and the governments that protect them.

Stavis and Boswell ask two central questions. First, they want to know if global union organizations are making "another world possible," by which they mean not a new planet for us to colonize, but a more democratic and just one for us to live on now. Their answers are equivocal, though optimistic: "We think that unions must increasingly offer themselves as organizations that represent the full spectrum of working people and their needs rather than narrow economic organizations." (147) Unions have only occasionally played this role, but they should do so more. In this prescription they share the common impulse of those of us who study and work in the international labour movement – a wish that there was more effective transborder action than there actually is or has been.

Unfortunately, they also fall prey to a sort of inward looking calculus like the one which distorts unions' own reporting of international activities. For instance, in the 1990s, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions made inclusion of a "social clause" in trade and development agreements a key goal. The ICFTU managed to convince national unions to push for respect for "core labour rights," rights based on International Labour Organization agreements, in instruments their countries negotiated. True, many international agreements now include or at least append statements affirming labour rights. "The ability of global union organizations to forge a common agenda, centered around the social clause and core labor rights," Stavis and Boswell conclude, "is a noteworthy accomplishment." (108) Yet how has this "noteworthy accomplishment" actually made a difference in workers' lives rather than in the proceedings of union conferences? The evidence is paltry.

Still, there have been some real, if limited victories. For instance, Stavis and Boswell discuss the case of Dominican clothing producer Grupo M, a large apparel corporation which produces clothing for major multi-national labels and depends for its profits on paying the lowest possible wages. In pursuit of ever cheaper labour it began investing in Haiti's free-trade zones. Global union organizations pressed the World Bank's International Finance Corporation to include requirements that the company respect labour rights in a 2004 loan for a new Haitian factory. The company indeed recognized the local union, SOKOWA, and eventually negotiated a contract. But it also fired hundreds of union workers and activists and refused most union demands. While the international pressure and organizing by the ICFTU's successor, the ITUC, and the International Textile Workers GUF certainly helped improve the lot of Grupo M's Haitian workers for a time, the vast majority of the company's 13,000 employees remain non-union and all but the top ranks of the company

earn poverty wages. The company's Haitian workers still make less than half the wages of its Dominican employees, barely enough to eat two meals per day. A victory, yes, but a painfully small one. Few others that resulted from global governance spring to mind – though any help that social clauses in aid, development, and trade agreements can bring to shift the balance of power of labour struggles is welcome.

Much of Stevis and Boswell's work is too abstract, confined to advancing generalizations about the nature and history of labour efforts to cooperate across borders. *Globalization and Labor* is not a piece of primary empirical research but rather a review of the literature on unions' involvement in efforts to manage and order the world economy. The authors survey many studies of specific institutions and union campaigns to come up with a set of suggestions for international labour. To their credit, (at least in the eyes of this historian) they recognize the continuing relevance of history to the current problems faced by labour internationalism. Behind many of their broad statements, however, lies some solid secondary research, particularly about international framework agreements. They also feature this research in their chapter in the Bronfenbrenner volume discussed below. Framework agreements are guidelines that individual companies negotiate with GUFs and national trade unions to govern their behaviour toward labour in their international operations. The agreements are, in effect, a somewhat more enforceable form of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) than the usual vapid policy statements on corporate websites or the toothless enforcement mechanisms favoured by less scrupulous companies.

Framework agreements have been negotiated by unions with dozens of multinationals since 1988. The agreements have resulted in some notable positive steps, Stevis and Boswell show, particularly with Chiquita (US, fruit), Accor (France, hotels), and Statoil (Norway, oil). However, only a few non-European companies have signed on. The framework agreements appear to be a way for European companies to pacify unions in their home countries while still operating overseas. Still, most workers in the world would benefit from European conditions, which involve more job security, better working conditions, and higher wages than elsewhere. Indeed, Stevis and Boswell suggest "the most promising scenario" for the framework agreements "is the use of European industrial relations as the springboard to global industrial relations." (135)

Global industrial relations, in which global unions finally balance the power of transnational corporations, would indeed be a positive scenario. Is the scenario plausible? Perhaps, but Stevis and Boswell hedge their bets. They believe the best hope is for unions "to go beyond corporations and take on public rules about the corporation." In other words, labour needs to participate in establishing rules for running the global economy and to join in the ensuing regulation of corporations. I agree: without enforceable rules, corporate responsibility is so much window dressing. Stevis and Boswell are vague about how such a change will occur, simply calling broadly for "continued coordina-

tion of national, regional, and global strategies ... to take advantage of another opening like the one that occurred in the late 1990s.”(138–9)

We are certainly in a moment now which involves a great shift in the global economy. Where is the global labour movement’s coordinated strategy? It is hard to see beyond more international conferences and time-consuming fights for the inclusion of labour-favourable language (without concomitant power) in international documents. Yet there are ways that unions can bring more traditional forms of pressure on corporations in order to aid organizing. Such campaigns form the main focus of the conference papers collected in *Global Unions: Challenging Transnational Capital through Cross-Border Campaigns*.

Edited by Kate Bronfenbrenner, *Global Unions* offers examples of successful transborder corporate campaigns by unions while providing suggestions for how to generalize from these experiences. Corporate campaigns – a catchall term referring to exhaustive research, coalition building, and diverse forms of activism to put pressure on individual corporations – have had some notable successes. Given the decentralized nature of production and the disproportionate power of capital in the globalized economy that reduce the effectiveness of more traditional organizing and local labour actions, campaigns have become an appealing strategy for unions. They bring labour struggles to broader forums, creating a sense of the social movement side of the labour movement that bureaucratized industrial relations often obscure. Plus, in some cases corporate campaigns seem to work better at bringing multi-nationals to the bargaining table than more narrow organizing drives, traditional labour politics, or international agreements. Indeed, Bronfenbrenner sees corporate campaigns as a key way to shift the global balance of power in favour of unions: “With these changes, the balance of power, like the arc of history, will finally be tilting away from capital, toward workers, their unions, and communities in both the Global North and Global South.” (15)

I certainly hope Bronfenbrenner is right, but the research in this book doesn’t actually show the arc bending. At best, some of the chapters make practical suggestions for unions based on substantive research and thoughtful interpretation of insightful case studies. At worst, many still display their origins in conference papers, all too often presenting broad generalizations and vague findings that actually aren’t supported by strong evidence. These weaknesses accentuate a tendency toward wishful thinking about labour’s prospects. Bronfenbrenner inadvertently points to this problem when she admits that there are “fundamental ideological and cultural changes” that unions will have to undergo “to make this happen on a global scale.” (15) Still, she is optimistic about such a tall order: “unions and their allies do have the capacity to change and become a global movement.” (15) She apparently prefers not to dwell on just how unlikely it is they will exercise this capacity to change.

Tom Juravich’s contribution, “Beating Global Capital,” offers matter-of-fact suggestions on how to research and structure global campaigns. Building

on a clear analysis of successful labour struggles drawn from US history, Juravich shows how unions in each era of industrialization adopted strategies that addressed the real “power flows” in corporations. Early unions were at times able to win strikes and gain good contracts with local pressure on a particular plant or employer. As industries developed into national corporations with multiple sites around the country, unions, such as the United Auto Workers fighting for recognition at GM, adopted selective strikes and brought wide political pressure. Pattern bargaining allowed unions in the 1950s and 1960s to counter national monopoly corporate power within the context of a relatively friendly US-government-sponsored tripartite system. Finally, Juravich points to the successful Bridgestone/Firestone strike of 1996 by the United Steel Workers that used an extensive corporate campaign to pressure a large multi-national. Understanding where power lies allows unions to focus actions where they will have the most effect. This is hardly a shocking idea, but one much harder to put into practice than to write.

Juravich suggests a series of steps beginning with strategic corporate research about and analysis of the structure of power both inside a corporation and among “outside stakeholders,” e.g. board members. Juravich provides useful diagrams to help guide a campaign, to identify who holds power, and to plan how to get to them. He also suggests using pressure on wider groups of decision-makers like lenders as well as on key people within the company. Building coalitions is a key part of a successful campaign, as is focusing on segments of the firm that are particularly vulnerable. Unions, Juravich concludes, need to adopt such campaigns in the initial stages of negotiations, not only as “defensive actions when unions have their backs to the wall ... if labor is to have any hope of winning against global firms.” (39)

But what of specific cases where Juravich’s strategic analysis would work? The remainder of the volume promises some salutary examples, a promise that is not always delivered. Peter Wad’s chapter examines international support for the organization of a Malaysian subsidiary of Danish multi-national APM-Maersk. This case shows the unlikelihood of realizing Stevis and Boswell’s hope that European industrial relations could become the basis for improvements worldwide. For more than 25 years the Malaysian company, Euromedical, had fought in the courts and on the shopfloor to block unionization efforts by the National Union of Employees in Companies Manufacturing Rubber Products (NUECMRP). APM-Maersk’s takeover of Euromedical in 1998 spurred a Danish trade union-supported NGO to build relationships with Malaysian trade unionists and to come to the support of the NUECMRP campaign. Pressure from the NGO included inquiries from the Danish “contact point” of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) about whether or not the company violated the OECD’s *Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises*. The OECD *Guidelines*, key documents for CSR and global governance, turned out to be voluntary and therefore unenforceable. Nonetheless, the solidarity encouraged the Malaysian workers, who struck in 2001. Wad does not explain if the

union movement contemplated strikes or boycotts, but Danish law limited actions against APM-Maersk at home because unions may not engage in industrial action against companies that obey the law in Denmark, no matter how they behave overseas. The Danes had to content themselves with providing funds and sponsoring a film about the union struggle. Avoiding a bigger fight at home, APM-Maersk sold the company. Ultimately, a Malaysian court ruled in favour of the union, a result that indicates the importance of national legal frameworks. What Wad terms “a stakeholder-campaign, which may be termed a rudimentary comprehensive strategic campaign” did provide some support to the union activists.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Wad does not detail, however, whether conditions have actually improved at the plant nor if NUCMRP has won a contract, though key union activists among the largely female workforce have been blacklisted.

Perhaps sharing my critical assessment of the efficacy of current international actions, the Indian Labour movement, according to Ashwini Sukthankar and Kevin Kolben, has “real cynicism about international solidarity, whether expressed through trade-labor linkages or by pressuring brands through a discourse on corporate social responsibility.” ⁽⁵⁸⁾ The reasons for this dim view of internationalism, they explain, are rooted in the historical legacy of colonialism and particularly the inconsistent relationship between Indian and British trade unions. Many key anti-labour aspects of globalization – subcontracting to insulate corporate responsibilities, overseas control of plant operations but local rules for labour organizing – were pioneered by British companies in India. Further, Indian trade unions, like most unions elsewhere, distrust voluntary guidelines for Corporate Social Responsibility. It “has been clear to the Indian labor movement for a long time,” the two write, that there is a “distinction between narrowly defined solidarity that comes at minimal cost to the supporting union and a more profound solidarity that requires compromise and sacrifice of real interests.” ⁽⁶⁴⁾

Leaving aside the conceptual problem of how Indian trade unions encompassing nearly 25 million members and divided into a dozen competing federations can be so cohesive as to feel or think with “real cynicism,” this chapter illustrates a number of the problems with the papers in this volume. The cases provided by Sukthankar and Kolben may indeed illustrate the efficacy of cross-border campaigns and the limitations of using Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), but they present scant evidence to show it. A 1990s campaign to unify organizing at Indian Unilever plants with the support of the Dutch FNV “was not successful,” in part, the authors argue, because the FNV tried to use principles of CSR about child labour to pressure the company to agree to a single union at all of its plants. However, they don’t offer evidence that this strategy was the reason for the failure of the campaign. They do note, on the positive side, that the failed effort did build relationships between Unilever workers abroad and in India. The Indians, they claim (again without evidence), developed an “emerging sense that first-world unions could actually exert themselves for the genuine interests of third-world workers.” Not

surprisingly, success in cross-border organizing campaigns involving India has come most easily when they are “developed with real input from Indian workers and unions, rather than through the imposition of discourses and strategies from unions in the Global North.” (58) The example they give is the JustTea campaign, sponsored by an Indian labour-backed NGO and European religious NGOs. JustTea, while admirable, is hardly a trade union initiative, uses “northern” consumerist strategies, and doesn’t actually involve a specific organizing campaign. Indeed, it is hard to distinguish from just the sort of “discourse on corporate social responsibility” they disparage.

Far more concrete is Samantha Gunawardana’s “Struggle, Perseverance and Organization in Sri Lanka’s Export Processing Zone.” Her close examination of women workers involved in a burgeoning industrial area allows her to judge what works for organizing in such conditions. The challenge for global organizing, she writes, “lies in finding and articulating a common context for struggle while accommodating local group based needs and desires.” (79) True enough; but just how will that work? In a case study of the successful years-long effort to organize Jaqalanka, a contractor for multi-national clothing companies, Gunawardana details the militancy of supposedly passive Sri Lankan women in the face of a repressive government and management. The Jaqalanka activists joined the Free Trade Zone Workers Union and, with the help of a local women’s collective, mobilized a “global campaign centered on the struggle for the freedom of association and the right to organize.” (79) In contrast to some of the critical views on Corporate Social Responsibility and foreign NGOs taken by other contributors to the volume, Gunawardana finds that the organizing campaign benefited substantially from inspections by CSR representatives from the multi-national clients of the Sri Lankan company. That these largely toothless CSR inspections made a difference may give a sense of just how bad things were there. She also details positive contributions of international support networks, particularly by the Clean Clothes Campaign, No Sweat, and the International Textile Workers Federation GUF. Gunawardana stresses the importance of the empowerment of women factory workers in the story who were mobilized by a coalition between an NGO and a trade union. This is a fairly positive evaluation of the role CSR could play – but only when multi-nationals are pressed by rank-and-file militancy, local organizing, national trade unions, and international solidarity.

The importance of grass-roots empowerment, particularly local union power, is stressed in Henry Frundt’s chapter on banana labour and the victories of COLSIBA, the Coordinator of Latin American Banana Workers’ Unions, a regional federation. Focusing on the results of the Chiquita framework agreement and on fights over “fair trade” certification, Frundt offers to an overly sunny misreading of events. For instance, after Del Monte subcontracted many of its Guatemalan banana plantations in 1999, goons attacked union workers demanding they give up their organizations, accept layoffs, and swallow wage cuts. After “an intense international campaign” in support of the

union by US and European solidarity groups and the IUF, the Food Workers GUE, the union survived. To Frundt, "it was a major victory." (103) Hopefully, the union won't have too many more victories like that, since it involved a 70 per cent cut in benefits and a 30 per cent wage cut. His other evaluations of banana issues appear more realistic, particularly an insightful discussion of the limitations of global standards and fair trade certification in ensuring labour rights. Fair trade certifications had been designed to protect small producers, not wage labourers, and "failed to fully address freedom of association." (114) Yet COLSIBA was able to work with the TransFair, a US certification NGO to create new standards in 2005 that would involve unions in certifying plantation-grown bananas for fair trade. Did this agreement actually bring about an improvement in conditions for workers and their organizations? Frundt thinks so, crediting banana unions for their militancy and their sophisticated coalition building which "have created a notable counterforce against the global race to the bottom." (116) I am less sanguine, particularly now that violently anti-union Dole has received TransFair benediction.

So if regional cooperation for Latin American commodity workers has had only partial success, what might work for some of the world's most powerful unions in the wealthiest countries blessed with the most favourable political climates? In Europe, Peter Turnbull reports, dockers have had far more success in exercising regional and sectoral power than most. European Commission efforts to "reform" the waterfront worried European dock workers. The dockers feared the creation of "ports of convenience" akin to the shipping industry's flags of convenience that have broken seafarers' union power, confining sailors to miserable conditions at sea. Regional consciousness provided the key to the dockers' movement. "Port workers," Turnbull writes, "soon realized they shared a 'community of fate' as *European* dockers." (emphasis added, 130) The longshore workers launched "the first ever pan-European dock strike in January 2003." After building a coalition on the left, the dockers convinced European ship owners that the social and economic price of changing the ports was too high and defeated the European Commission's proposals in the European Parliament. The dockers won this victory despite having separate unions in each country and competing international federations. Is there a lesson here for labour globally? How did the dockers do it? Port workers, Turnbull explains, "have developed their capacity and demonstrated their willingness to engage in unconventional action, and in the process inflict significant costs on both global capital and the supranational state." (133) (It is a commentary on the institutionalization of European labour relations that strikes and demonstrations would be called "unconventional action.") Yet the dockworkers' centrality to the global economy and the highly capital-intensive nature of their industry allowed their unions to exercise this power. Other workers may not be so well positioned.

Unions in most other industries simply don't have the dockworkers' options, as Valerie Pulignano shows in her discussion of European autoworkers.

Although metalworkers and engineers, as they are referred to, have powerful unions, supportive political parties, and some Europe-wide coordination, they still have lost power, hindering their ability to resist the pressures of globalization as the auto industry has changed. In 2004 Swedish and German unions along with the European Metalworkers Federation united to fight GM's restructuring plans and "agreed on common basic demands for 'no closure and no forced redundancy.'" (144) The unions forced GM to sign a framework agreement on "restructuring and cost cutting." The result, despite this agreement, was substantial layoffs as well as pay cuts and increased work hours – some Swedish and German workers were offered voluntary redundancy, but thousands of others, particularly in Spain and England, simply got the boot. Pulignano uncovers some "international union solidarity in GM Europe" but "it was not enough to restrain management...." (151) In the end, the restructuring came about through local rather than Europe-wide negotiations because international coordination proved too weak a glue to hold the unions together and to prevent whipsawing by GM. Nonetheless, the unions took a "European Solidarity Pledge" to protect jobs and prevent "the playing of workers against each other." (154) Drawing lessons from these experiences, Pulignano advocates "clear rules and principles for the creation of a trusted and binding form of cross-border union cooperation" which would make it possible "to challenge the dominant position of transnational firms." (154) However, such cooperation has proven unable to counter the devastation wrought by GM's restructuring and its subsequent bankruptcy. The companies vying today to buy GM's European divisions all plan substantial layoffs.

If Pulignano does her best to put a good spin on the unsuccessful cooperation of the GM unions, Amanda Tattersal bends over backwards to find evidence of effective international cooperation between the North American Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the British Transport and General Workers Union (T&G). Indeed, she praises the two unions for creating a "deep coalition," which is apparently the best sort to have (at least according to a typological table she provides). She examines the "Driving up Standards" campaign, which targeted FirstGroup, a British-owned operator of American school buses (SEIU, creator of the Justice For Janitors organizing drive that started in LA, is known for catchy branding). T&G participated in conferences, exchanged delegates with SEIU, and appointed a staffer to a campaign that brought wide public pressure on the British bus company. Yet the campaign did not deliver a unionized workforce in the US for SEIU; rather the bus drivers have largely been organized by the Teamsters union – which, to distinguish itself from the SEIU, named its campaign "Drive Up Standards." Tattersall doesn't even mention the Teamsters, quickly passing over the weakness of the SEIU-T&G "deep coalition" with a delicate double negative: "the Driving up Standards campaign has not proceeded without complications." (172)

Darryn Snell's chapter wraps up the volume with the question of what unions can do "to hold transnational corporations more accountable for

human rights violations and social and political instability in the Global South.” He thinks the answer is a lot, but, as is all too typical of this volume, his evidence shows very little. He surveys a number of campaigns from Burmese divestment to an attempt to pressure oil companies in Chad and Cameroon. Snell suggests that unions can strengthen their efforts to rein in the worst human rights abuses abetted or perpetrated by these companies by adding resources to multi-pronged campaigns in cooperation with NGOs. He sees lawsuits in corporations’ home countries, divestment, and boycotts, as well as shareholder initiatives and improved global governance, as key tools. Why he has this confidence in these particular tools is not clear. For instance, it is practically unheard of for shareholders to pass resolutions pressing companies to adhere to International Labour Organization standards, let alone to recognize unions or raise wages; less than one per cent of shareholder resolutions pass. Union pension funds have made executive compensation a focus of their shareholder activism because they cannot get much support for more directly labour-friendly proposals.

Snell has a positive view of Corporate Social Responsibility and its associated system of global pronouncements on how multi-nationals should behave. Echoing Stevis and Boswell, he adds banally that unions “can play a significant role in international affairs” by doing a laundry list of activities including strategic research, corporate campaigns, coalitions with NGOs, prosecutions of offending companies, and work with corporations (presumably not the same ones). Oddly, he doesn’t mention organizing workers or industrial action. “Voluntary codes of practice through global framework agreements,” he concludes, “may be one such option” for expanding labour’s role. (210) Yet his one detailed examination of a “successful” campaign, an international effort on a Chad-Cameroon oil field and pipeline, reveals that laws enacted in Chad, rather than voluntary compliance, brought a more equitable revenue sharing system to the project. When Chad’s government changed the law, the agreement fell apart. Worse, World Bank oversight and sanctions proved ineffective, and the project “continued to be plagued with workers’ rights abuses and corruption allegations.” (210) This ineffective campaign doesn’t deter Snell from concluding: “In another context, however, the World Bank’s influence may be able to prevent corporate projects from fostering corruption and human rights violations and destabilizing vulnerable societies.” (210)

While the Bronfenbrenner volume offers more practical suggestions and concrete examples than does Stevis and Boswell’s monograph, both books present a vision of labour’s path forward that may not be justified given the evidence they present. Corporate campaigns and pressure on the institutions governing the global economy may indeed help shift the balance of power in labour-management struggles, but they can’t substitute for the nitty gritty of organizing – the building of organizational capacity at the local level, the development of skilled union activists, the proliferation of personal workplace relationships, and the commitment to the struggle over the long term that

make up union power. Yet the local strength in negotiations that can come from a good organizing campaign that mobilizes the rank-and-file will be inadequate to face the ability of mobile capital to relocate or to marshal enormous resources to counter unions. Without an effective rule of international law, and without compulsory, rather than voluntary regulation, such campaigns will be doomed to failure.

I do agree with the authors of these volumes that a continuing effort to combine local and global organizing with more effective political action will be necessary. Yet, the unpleasant reality is that this combination has proven elusive, a problem that the authors don't fully face in these works. For the labour movement to reverse its slide there will need to be a much greater transformation in both the effectiveness of labour internationalism and in the system governing the world economy. While the current economic crisis has led to moves in North America and elsewhere to regulate financial markets more closely, these changes are hardly guided by the principles that unions promote. For the most part, the economic rescue has been an exercise in global crony capitalism. Will there be a move to the left in the purpose of such regulation? There are few signs of it at present.

As for global labour cooperation, more conferences on more topics from corporate campaigns to framework agreements to sustainable development are in the offing. While these meetings may develop networks and transmit creative new ideas among trade unionists, such limited outcomes will be the best we can hope for as long as the real power in trade union movements lies jealously guarded at the national level. International coordination, let alone true global organization, remains an intermittent and inconsistent aspect of labour today. Union activists involved in international institutions find themselves devoting their time to internally-focused efforts that have little effect on workers' actual lives. Global and regional governance on the one side and Corporate Social Responsibility and international standards on the other have had only minor meliorating effects on the anti-labour tendencies of the world economy. Despite widespread agreement on its necessity, direct cooperation between unions across borders has proven difficult, fraught with suspicion, and undermined by shallow commitments. Global union organizations, even with their new names and many talented staff, exercise little real power either in the global economy, in international organizations, or in the labour movement itself. Unless union internationalists and the scholars who work with labour take the first step by facing up to these weaknesses, global union power will remain what it has been for more than a century: a nice idea but not a significant force in many people's lives. If the world political economy is a tangled and thorny garden, we should continue to look for labour's new shoots and nurture those we do find. But let us not imagine they are other than they are: stunted, intermittent, and hardly viable yet.