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Rank-And-File Internationalism

The TIE Experience

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RANK-AND-FILE INTERNATIONALISM: THE TIE EXPERIENCE

Beginning in the late 1970s an accelerating number of efforts to link workers or workplace union activists across borders began to take shape. The organizers of most of these efforts felt the official channels of labor internationalism were too removed from the workplace and frequently too ceremonial in nature. As one such organizer described it, “the official trade union internationalism was one of buffets and banquets.”¹ Operating on shoestring budgets, these new unofficial efforts attempted to go right to the base of organized labor, bypassing the traditional diplomacy associated with the old official approach. The variety of such rank-and-file based efforts has become too massive to cover them all. What they have in common, however, is that while they will usually have some union involvement, they are mostly organized outside the structure or supervision of the national unions or federations as well as those of the ICFTU or the ITSs, but they can also affect those organizations.

As 1997 opened, the world was treated to what the U.S. trade paper *The Journal of Commerce* called “the first coordinated, global work stoppage by dockworkers.”² While it was not quite a global walkout, it was indeed an unprecedented worldwide action. One of the most direct international solidarity campaigns of the decade, it was organized by the Shop Stewards’ organization of the Merseyside dockers in Liverpool, England. Locked out and replaced by scabs for resisting privatization, casualization, and drastic workforce reductions, the Merseyside dockers exemplified the struggle against

lean work methods in an industry where the employers were trying to turn the clock back hundred years to the days of the “shape-up”. Although nominally supported by their union, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), the dockers conducted their own campaign for reinstatement, at first within Britain.

They soon resolved to make the campaign international. Shipping is, after all, the backbone of global trade. On the one hand, their employer could isolate them, but action by dockers and longshore workers around the world could turn the tables. In the summer of 1996, the Merseyside dockers held an international rank-and-file conference to call for worldwide actions in their support. Representatives from twelve ports in eight countries attended and agreed to put pressure on their own unions and the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), the ITS for all transportation unions, to call a day of action. The first such day, September 28, was only a partial success. But by 1997 the ITF called on its members to join in a week of actions beginning on January 20 in whatever way they could. An impressive list of unions around the world signed on.³

Longshore and transport workers in over hundred ports participated in the actions. While many of the actions were more symbolic than direct, in the US, Japan, Greece, and elsewhere actual work stoppage took place. In many more countries, workers refused to handle cargo from ships originating in Liverpool. In the US, the International Longshore and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU), closed down the entire West Coast for eight hours on January 20, with ports in Oregon staying on strike for 24 hours, in spite of the fact that the strike had been declared illegal days before.⁴

1) Interview with Jens Huhn, staff TIE-Bildungswerk, Frankfurt, Germany, July 1996

2) *The Journal of Commerce*, January 22, 1997

3) *International Viewpoint*, Number 282, November 1996, pp. 20-21; e-mail from Chris Bailey, UK, January 1997

4) *The Journal of Commerce*, op. cit.

The power of such an action can be seen in the reaction of the mainstream press. The *Journal of Commerce* wrote: “The action showed how powerless shipowners are to prevent work stoppages, particularly on the West Coast, where dozens of walkouts and slowdowns in recent months have drawn promises of harsher response.”⁵ Even more chilling is the description of the West Coast strike in the *Los Angeles Times*: “Pacific rim trade sputtered to a halt and dozens of mammoth cargo ships sat idle in their ports Monday as union dockworkers from Los Angeles to Seattle stayed off the job in a one day show of support for striking longshoremens in Liverpool, England.”⁶

The vision of an international action at the heart of world trade pointed to one more vulnerability in the new more integrated world of international production. Strikes at a few key ports around the world could cripple trade and the “just-in-time” deliveries of containers destined to overseas facilities. The Merseyside dockers had given world labor a lesson in how to counter the power not only of dock, shipping, and other transportation firms, but of all the TNCs whose vast investments rest on this fragile transportation system. While it was the Liverpool dockers themselves who initiated and organized this action, the support given by the ITF was a sign that rank-and-file initiatives can at times move official labor to bolder action.

In the past two decades there have been countless campaigns in solidarity with specific struggles that have drawn on both official and unofficial labor networks, as well as on other social movements organizations. While seldom as dramatic or strategically suggestive as the campaign of the Merseyside dockworkers, campaigns like those in support of unionizing maquila workers in Guatemala and Mexico, organized respectively by the US/Guatemala Labor

Education Project (US-GLEP) in Chicago and the San-Diego-based Support Committee for Maquiladora Workers provide visibility and material support to keep this process going. International campaigns on behalf of individual strikes from the British miners in the mid-1980s to the A. E. Staley workers in the 1990s, are another part of cross-border solidarity. Similarly, ongoing organizations or networks like Asian Pacific Workers Solidarity Links (APWSL) based in Japan and Australia play an important role in mobilizing solidarity campaigns and providing information. So also do research organizations like the Asia Monitor Resource Center (AMRC) in Hong Kong, IBASE in Rio de Janeiro, CILAS in Mexico City, the Resource Center of the Americas in Minneapolis, and many more.

Another related independent approach to organized labor’s problems in the international economy is what might be termed the international labor rights approach. This approach is pursued both by official international labor and by independent, though union supported, organizations like the International Labor Rights Education and Research Fund (ILRERF) in Washington, DC, and the London-based International Center for Trade Union Rights (ICTUR). ICTUR publishes the useful and informative *International Union Rights* several times a year. ILRERF has published reports and books with a focus on the NAFTA area.

ILRERF’s focus is on the political/legal rights side of internationalization. In particular, both official international labor and the trade union rights organizations campaigned for the inclusion of labor rights standards and/or a social clause in the Uruguay Round of GATT negotiations that produced the WTO. This campaign was not successful. Indeed, even the proposal for a working party to examine the idea was re-

5) *The Journal of Commerce*, op. cit.

6) *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 1997

7) Ehrenberg 1996, p. 164

jected.⁷ But in the final days of 1996, under pressure from the U.S. government, the WTO's Council of Ministers agreed, in a rather perfunctory statement, to "renew our commitment to the observance of internationally recognized core labor standards." The International Labor Organisation (ILO) of the United Nations was recognized as the "competent body to set and deal with these standards," evading any WTO responsibility for such standards.⁸

The only detailed worldwide labor rights standards are the Labor Conventions of the ILO. There is no international mechanism to enforce the ILO Conventions. Nations endorse, or in the case of the US fail to endorse, the various Conventions, but they are not compelled to enforce them and frequently don't. This is precisely why the idea of writing such standards into trade agreements gained support in labor and human rights circles.

Insofar as there is an existing model to look to it is the Social Chapter of the Maastricht Treaty and, indeed, this is often put forth as a hopeful beginning for some kind of social, if not precisely trade union, standards. As argued earlier, however, this had been watered down in successive negotiations. In any event, in its final form it contains only very general references to trade union or representational rights, going no farther than the 1961 European Social Charter (ESC). And, as one expert wrote, "the ESC lacks teeth – there is no mechanism for enforcement other than political pressure."⁹ The European Works Council (EWC) directive does not itself add any trade union rights or provisions. As another guide to the subject put it, "There is no European labor law offering employees comparable rights at European level."¹⁰ Ironically, one of the few international mechanisms con-

cerning trade union rights are the side agreements of NAFTA, which, while they provide the forum for publicizing union rights violations, offer no real enforcement.

The actual focus of the international labor rights approach, however, is usually on labor rights violations in the Third World. The idea of using trade agreements to pressure Third World nations to grant unions the right to organize and bargain by applying some kind of retaliatory trade measures has been labeled "protectionist" by many Third World governments and government dominated labor federations. In particular, the US government proposal to link labor rights to the Uruguay Round of GATT/WTO negotiations was rejected by most developing countries. They can point to the record of the nationally-based labor and human rights sections of the U.S. General System of Preferences (GSP) and other US trade laws under which "most favored nation" status can be denied to nations not thought to be in compliance. This can lead to trade restrictions. In general, the U.S. trade mechanisms have been used politically or to advance U.S. trade goals more than in the service of trade unions abroad.¹¹ At the same time, many of the objecting Third World governments are authoritarian and/or neoliberal and would certainly not favor trade union rights in any case.

The basic problem with the international labor rights approach is that there is no worldwide enforcement or appeal mechanism around which to act. Pressure and publicity campaigns in support of trade unionists facing repression abroad are, of course, necessary and can make a difference. In that sense, the work of organizations like those mentioned above is an important part of the broader movement for international labor

8) International Union Rights 4 (1), 1997, p. 31

9) Hepple 1993, p.3

10) Rath 1994, p. 238

11) Gadbow/Medwig 1996; Collingsworth 1996

12) Alston 1996, p. 74

solidarity. But enforcement of trade union rights at home and abroad ultimately falls back on the efforts of both official and unofficial labor and its allies.

The idea of linking human and labor rights to international trade agreements is an old one that received a leg-up in 1980 with the publication of the Brandt Commission Report that proposed linking labor rights to increased trade opportunities.¹² But, ultimately there is a certain irony about wanting to tie labor rights to the WTO. The new worldwide trade agreement that established the WTO will deepen the problems of trade unions everywhere in at least two specific ways. First by unleashing a more “liberal” trade regime across the entire spectrum of products it will intensify competition and restructuring in some industries, notably in deregulating and privatizing services, while compounding the difficulties already faced in goods production. Second, because most of the rules of the WTO are designed to limit the ability of nation states to exercise an independent, much less pro working class economic policy, it will tend to weaken national level trade union rights and standards. Philosophically, of course, the WTO is the neoliberal institution par excellence where labor standards are viewed not only as “externalities,” but as barriers to free trade. The strategy of placing the enforcement of labor rights in the hands of such a body seems highly questionable.

None of this is to say that defending the rights of workers to organize and bargain collectively isn’t important. A good example of a more direct form of upholding labor rights is the alliance between the Ford Workers Democratic Movement at the Cuautitlan, Mexico Ford plant, mentioned earlier, and Local 879 of the United Auto Workers at the Twin Cities Ford assembly plant in St. Paul, Minnesota. Members of Local 879 had come into contact with the Mexican Ford workers when one of their leaders, Marco Antonio Jimenez toured the US in April only months after the shooting of Cleto Nigmo and

the beating of several other workers in the Cuautitlan plant by CTM thugs. This began a long direct relationship between the Mexican unionists and Local 879.

Local 879 set up a MEXUSCAN Solidarity Task Force as an official committee of the union. The Task Force helped to organize Ford Workers Justice Day on January 8, 1991 a year after the shooting. Workers in Ford plants in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico wore black ribbons, donated by the Canadian Auto Workers, with Cleto Nigmo’s name on them on that day. Local 879 worked with TIE North America and Labor Notes to organize tours of Ford Workers Democratic Movement leaders. But the culmination of the solidarity relationship was a signed agreement between the two organizations pledging mutual solidarity. Under this agreement Local 879 also agreed to help fund the Ford Workers Democratic Movement from contributions from the membership. Political disputes within Local 879 sometimes threatened the alliance, but it has held up and in 1996 was renewed.

The alliance between UAW Local 879 and the Ford Workers Democratic Movement is unique. Over the years it has built trust between the two groups and helped to educate the American workers about the conditions, culture, and union views of the Mexican workers. It helped make the 1996 21 cities tour of two Mexican Ford activists organized by TIE North America a success. Furthermore, a delegation of about twenty US and Canadian unionists that went to observe the election, from which the Ford Workers Democratic Movement was ultimately excluded, made a highly visible splash in the Mexican media and brought the Cuautitlan workers plight into public view. It has also allowed for a regular flow of information about Ford management tactics in the two countries. It would certainly strengthen the fight for international labor rights if more such ongoing alliances existed.

The focus here will be on the organization of ongoing contact, exchange, and joint action

among groups of rank-and-file workers in different countries. These are what Thalia Kidder and Mary McGinn have called “transnational workers’ networks” (TWN). They are of many kinds. *Mujer a Mujer* (Woman to Woman), for example, focuses on building networks of women workers in Mexico, Canada, and the U.S. and uniting these with networks of other social movement organizations. They did much of the solidarity work with the Mexico City September 19th Garment Workers Union.¹³ Unfortunately, it is impossible to focus on all of the TWN.

By far the most ambitious and long-lasting of these TWN efforts is the Transnationals Information Exchange (TIE). Though this organization has existed for almost two decades, its functioning, structure, and perspectives have changed over the years. The TIE experience offers lessons that are key to building rank-and-file internationalism.

TIE: The First Two Phases, 1978 – 1990

TIE was born at the 1977 conference on transnational corporations and the Third World in Nairobi, Kenya, sponsored by the World Council of Churches. While this might seem an unlikely place for a rank-and-file trade union network to see the light of day, Jens Huhn, a long-time staffer at TIE Bildungswerk in Offenbach, explains the context: “The real story starts with the conservative wave in Europe in the late 1970s. The high tide of resistance in the plants in Europe was just going down. The strike at FIAT broken. In the universities and research institutes there was decreasing interest in the issues of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the multinational corporations. The churches were the holdouts as centers of left discussion and research.”

The meeting in Nairobi was attended by researchers and activists, but also various national research centers like the Institute for Policy Studies in the U.S., and its offshoot, the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam, the Coventry Workshop in the UK, and the International Documentation and Communications Centre in Rome. In addition there were local union activists from various countries. Informal meetings at the Nairobi conference led to the idea of setting up an ongoing network of research groups, including those from some unions such as the CFDT and the Italian metalworker’s Union.¹⁴

In June 1978 the Transnationals Information Exchange was founded as a network of the organizations mentioned above. In 1980 TIE hired its first employee. For its first few years TIE focused almost entirely on research and publications. It was research “with the people”; that is, interactive research based on 1960s ideas about workers democracy. Task forces of researchers and workplace activists, particularly from Italy and Britain at first, were formed to produce reports. The involvement of these workers, mainly from the auto industry in Europe, led to TIE’s first transformation.¹⁵

During the first half of the 1980s, TIE moved from being the center of a network of research groups to a more direct role in facilitating international exchanges among workers, particularly in the auto industry. Still in line with certain 1960s style ideas, the notion was not to come in with an analysis or a “line” of any sort, but simply to let the workers exchange information and ideas and figure out what to do. “The shop floor knows best,” is how Jens Huhn characterizes their view at that time.

TIE did, however, project a grassroots, internationalist unionism. Jan Cartier of the TIE

13) Kidder/McGinn 1995

14) Niemeijer 1996, pp. 10-12

15) Huhn 1996; Niemeijer 1996, p. 13

Amsterdam office describes this as an attempt to counter the “protectionist” approach taken by many unions in which the union works with management to keep the plant open and regards the other plants as competitors. By the mid-1980s this sort of plant level or company level “protectionism” was becoming widespread in the US and to a lesser extent in Europe.¹⁶

By 1984, TIE was attempting to “globalize” these networks and set them up on a company basis: Ford, GM, VW etc.. Workers from the US, Canada, South Africa, and Brazil were involved as well as the European network. Their 1984 worldwide General Motors conference was a “watershed”. As Huhn describes it: “We wanted to match, to a certain extent, the power of the multinationals – a bit naive, eh – but nevertheless match it, through information and democracy.”

This shift toward active intervention in international labor affairs naturally brought opposition from some official labor organizations. Although TIE always tried to work with official unions, its grassroots approach created some problems. Among other things, some of the church-oriented people left TIE – although TIE would continue to receive financial support from church groups.

TIE activity among auto workers during the second half of the 1980s consisted of an energetic schedule of worldwide meetings by company, an attempt to produce a worldwide GM workers newspaper, numerous informational publications about the industry, and a regular TIE Bulletin. According to Jan Cartier, the worldwide perspective of this “networking” approach was based on an analysis that saw the auto industry globalizing its production methods. In line with both the “World Car” and New International Division of Labor theories of that time, TIE expected more and more component production

to move to different parts of the Third World, while only assembly remained in the North. As Cartier points out, it didn’t happen quite this way.

During this period, TIE also developed a clear way of dealing with the fact that many of the activists from car plants around the world were also political activists, even members of socialist groups hostile to one another. TIE avoided any form of political discrimination, but it also made clear that sectarian wrangling in TIE meetings or propagandizing at TIE events was out. For people to create a functional international network they had to keep what divided them to themselves and share what they had in common – the global analysis and the activist approach to the workplace. Everyone seems to agree that this approach worked well over the years.

One of TIE’s most innovative and difficult projects during this period was the Cocoa-Chocolate network. This was based on “the production chain idea,” according to Huhn, which TIE was among the first to develop. It was an opportunity to link industrial workers in Europe with plantation workers and peasants in Latin America and Asia by extending the production chain back from the chocolate factories to where the cacao beans were grown. Like the auto network, this one was characterized by many meetings, an “internationalism of events.” It also produced a great deal of analytical material and still publishes the Cocoa Newsletter.

To a greater extent than the auto project, the Cocoa Platform, as it came to be called, involved official labor directly. The Dutch and Austrian food workers unions (FVN and ANG respectively) and the IUF played a direct role from the start. The involvement of the unions and the IUF certainly extended the reach of the Cocoa Platform, but it also created problems. On the one hand, as TIE staff acknowledges, “we need the

16) Interview with Jan Cartier, TIE Netherlands, July 1994

IUF for expansion of our activities to other regions.” On the other hand, TIE staff feels frustrated by the limitations this cooperation implies. Tensions between TIE and the IUF continued to be a problem requiring negotiations and compromise.¹⁷

TIE’s global approach in the second half of the 1980s brought it into new areas of the world. On vacation in Brazil, Jeroen Peinenberg interviewed some Brazilian trade union activists and was completely taken by the vibrant style of their social movement unionism. He recommended that TIE open an office there. They did and the Brazilian program became one of the most ambitious of all the developing regional TIE offices and programs. It also meant that the Brazilians brought their critical social movement approach to the various worldwide meetings. As Huhn puts it, “they were both the most critical and most enthusiastic people at the meetings.”

TIE also opened an office Asia where it worked with unions in Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. TIE also works with the APWSL, mentioned above. Asia has been a particularly difficult area for TIE because of its size, repressive governments, the variety of languages and cultures, and the very different levels of industrialization and even types of industry. TIE has tried to overcome this by focusing on the garment and textile industries which cut across the region and have some level of unionization. For example, TIE works with the Bangladesh National Federation of Garment Workers. One recent TIE report briefly described the situation as follows: “In Asia, capitalism has created sharp divisions. There is a lot of distrust among nations and therefore it is difficult to coordinate work in Asia as a whole. The garment/textile project has the potential of bringing together those who are traditionally separated (they have common problems), it makes sense and can be developed.”¹⁸

By the early 1990s, TIE had offices in Amsterdam, Offenbach, Sao Paulo, Bangkok, Detroit, and would soon open one in Moscow. It was led by an International Board chosen at Annual General Meetings, and held annual international staff meetings. But the Annual General Meetings had been European-based, and now TIE was worldwide in structure as well as perspective. In 1992, TIE restructured itself to be more line with its own new reality, but also with a changing perspective. The largely European Board disbanded itself and was replaced by an International Advisory Committee with inputs from all the regional projects, who were themselves given a greater degree of autonomy.¹⁹

TIE’s Third Phase: Regionalization, Analysis, and Education

The growth of TIE and the development of regional offices might have pushed TIE in a more decentralized direction by itself, but there was the problem of simply repeating “exchanges” or of developing activists into “professional internationalists”, some of whom did not really take the information and ideas into the workplace. Additionally, it was difficult to sustain the worldwide networks or the publications meant to hold them together. But there was also the recognition by some TIE staffers of changes in the direction of the very production chains on which the auto perspective in particular had been based.

Cartier says the old “globalization” thesis came into question as it became clear that the industry had, instead, regionalized. There was now a European industry in which outsourcing went not to the Third World, but to Eastern Europe; a North American industry with cross-border out-

17) Huhn 1996; TIE 1995, p. 5

18) TIE 1995, p. 3

19) Niemeijer 1996, p. 13

sourcing or contracting mainly in Mexico and Canada; and an Asian industry in which Japan dominated, with South Korea a distant second, and both of them outsourcing mainly in East Asia. The Japanese had also moved into North America and Europe to become, in effect, part of those industries. In short, the trend in auto and elsewhere, though not really in Cocoa-Chocolate which continued as an almost separate project, industry was taking on a regional character.

Furthermore, in the old global analysis much of the cost-cutting would be done by shifting more production to the Third World, while, in fact, it was now being done within the plants of Europe and North America by introducing management-by-stress. Lean production was hitting these industries, disrupting old patterns of union behavior, weakening unions generally in many countries, and creating a whole new series of problems not envisioned in the old global analysis. This meant not only a focus on the regions, but, as Cartier points out, a need to understand the workplace changes taking place everywhere.

The auto networks were not abandoned, but put on a regional basis and charged with organizing their own events and means of communication. While some national pieces of the network decayed or had ups and downs, by and large the European network continued to provide a useful purpose for the plant level activists involved. Jens Huhn describes one of many such incidents: "The people in GM in Spain were told that the workers at the Bochum (Germany) Opel plant did overtime, so they, too, would have to do overtime. The Spaniards called the TIE people at Bochum and learned that they had been told that the Spanish workers already did overtime so they would have to do it at Bochum. Together they stopped the overtime." Interviews

with workers in Spain, Germany, and Britain who were part of this network revealed many such stories. The European auto network also continued to organize educational meetings. There were conferences at Liverpool and Barcelona.

In 1990, TIE opened an office in Detroit to facilitate a North American auto network. The office was placed in the offices of Labor Notes, discussed in more detail later, because of that project's large network of union activists in the U.S. and to a lesser extent in Canada and Mexico as well. TIE North America decided to focus initially on the NAFTA countries. It held its first Trinational Auto Workers Conference outside of Mexico City in 1991. In 1993 it held a Trinational Auto Parts Workers Conference in Ciudad Juarez, a major center of auto parts maquiladoras on the Mexico-US border.

Unlike in Europe, TIE North America decided also to build a trinational network of union activists in the telecommunications industry of the three NAFTA countries. The first trinational meeting of this network was held outside of Mexico City in 1994 and a second in Tijuana in 1996. The first conference and much subsequent e-mail dialogue focused to the enormous problems of reengineering and downsizing. The 1996 conference focused more on the rapid restructuring and merger process sweeping up the industries in all three countries. While TIE did not attempt to organize such a network in Europe, the independent union SUD (Solidaires, Unitaires et Démocratiques) at France Telecom was working to pull one together and established contact with the North American network.²⁰

Largely, but not exclusively through the auto network, TIE North America also participated in a number of cross-border solidarity cam-

20) Interview with SUD representatives, France Telecom, Paris, August 1996; TIE North America 1994; TIE North America 1996

paigns, particularly those focused on the attempt by the Ford Workers Democratic Movement at Ford's Cuautitlan, Mexico plant first to reaffiliate and then to democratize their CTM union mentioned above.

Alongside the regionalization perspective, TIE in Europe, North America, and Brazil focused on education at the national and even plant level, particularly about lean production and new working methods. Much of this analysis was developed in cooperation with Mike Parker and Jane Slaughter, whose Labor Notes books on the topic were among the first to challenge the pretensions and expose the dangers of this extension of mass production. In the U.S., much of TIE's educational work was done with or through Labor Notes. TIE Moscow faced much more rudimentary educational tasks, arguing that in seeking a new viable unionism there were more options than the American or German models being heavily and generously promoted there by the AFL-CIO, DGB, and others.

Such education in a changing industrial and political environment necessarily meant more than lectures much less exchanges of information. The changing situation described in TIE's new analysis also meant taking a more critical look at the work of TIE activists and groups within the plants. According to Jens Huhn, "the policy of TIE now is to bring people together not just to exchange information, but for political debate about their work and where it will go."

At the same time, TIE in Europe was borrowing from the social movement unionism of the Brazilians by bringing together not only the industrial workers, but unemployed workers who tend to be organized in many European countries. They also put more emphasis than in the past on questions of racism and the rights of immigrant workers, particularly as they arise in the wake of downsizing and outsourcing.

In effect, TIE had become the major worldwide center for the discussion of the new phase of mass production and internationalization, and the concept of social movement unionism. Beginning in 1993, it decided to hold a worldwide conference every 18 months to two years, modelled to some extent on the biannual Labor Notes' conferences in the US.²¹ In effect, these are mainly European-based conferences with participants from the other TIE centers. Three have been held in 1993, 1995, and 1997. These have helped to internationalize some of the analysis and style of unionism TIE now projects.

Over time, it became increasingly clear that despite TIE's policy of working with and avoiding conflicts with official unions, the actual networks that had developed since the mid-1980s were often heavily composed of union activists critical or even opposed to the current leadership of their own unions. TIE was not in the business of organizing oppositions, but its networks rested to a significant degree on such oppositional elements in many countries. There were exceptions. In Spain, TIE worked with the Catalonia section of the Comisiones Obreras. In Britain, TIE had long worked with the leadership of the TGWU District 6, until that group was politically fractured in 1994. But the developing national level networks in Germany, Britain, and France were based mainly on oppositionists who shared TIE's critical outlook on the new working practices and the reorganization of production.

In North America the situation is similar in many ways. There are many local union officials who participate in TIE activities who are not oppositionists in terms of the national union leaderships. The International Solidarity Committee of UAW Region 1A has helped on some TIE projects. But some of the TIE North America auto activists are associated with the oppositional UAW New Directions Movement. So, in

21) TIE 1995, p. 2

many plants across Europe and North America, it is the oppositional militants who bring TIE ideas into the plant and who generally share the TIE analysis of lean production.

In Brazil, TIE worked officially with the CUT and its metal workers union to develop educational programs. But with time and the massive pressures of restructuring and neoliberal policy, the CUT has become more bureaucratic. Although TIE has not lost its status, CUT structures have become less responsive over time. Also, a trend of “modernizers” has arisen with CUT who want to follow the model of the IG Metall and leave behind some of the aspects of social movement unionism. So, TIE finds itself working with those who want to maintain the democracy, militancy, and social outlook of the CUT.²²

What happened was not so much a change in TIE policy toward official union structures, as a change in the political realities within the unions themselves. The enormous transformation wrought by lean production and management-by-stress created both disorientation and new political fissures within more and more unions about how to deal with this changing phenomenon. Alongside this is the pressing reality of neoliberal policies and market regulation that has paralyzed or driven to the right the old social democratic and labor parties. The Keynesian regime has been dying for years. In its wake, the European corporatism that sheltered union structures is crumbling, American liberalism has conceded much of the neoliberal agenda, Canadian social democracy has collapsed, and even the Japanese miracle and its lean export model are unraveling. All the political and industrial paradigms that guided the labor bureaucracy in the advanced industrial world are coming unglued and a debate over the future necessarily taking shape both within the bureaucracy and the ac-

tivist layer on which workplace unionism rests.

TIE finds itself in this context with a clear and sharp analysis of the new situation and a style of social movement unionism that is not shared by most of the officialdom of national or international trade unionism, who cling to variations of neocorporatism. TIE proposes, at the same time, to bring this analysis and debate closer to the shop floor through national and even plant level seminars and meetings. Huhn is very insistent that particularly with the plant level seminars the purpose is to reach beyond the oppositionists and older activists to extend the networks. What seems clear, however, is that TIE has become a major international center for the dissemination of the concept of social movement unionism.

Lessons of the TIE Experience

Perhaps the most obvious lesson of the TIE experience is that it is not really possible for a worldwide network of workplace activists to “match the power of the multinationals.” The worldwide auto networks were stretched too thin and were too uneven across the structures of the auto TNCs to come even near. This is a task more appropriate to the ITS or their world company councils, should they adopt a more activist agenda. In any case, much of the actual fight with the TNCs must be conducted at the national level even if international cooperation and coordination exists. TIE never tried to become an alternative, rank-and-file ITS. Instead, its emphasis during its first two phases (1978-85, 1985-90) was on revealing the global strategy of the major TNCs in the industries it was working in and relying on the activists in the workplace to act appropriately. In the third phase of development (1990 onward), TIE or-

22) Facts from Huhn 1996, though the interpretation is my own.

ganizers took a more active leadership role in promoting the new regional/lean production analysis through local level educationals and, beginning in 1993, biannual worldwide meetings. But action was still up to the activists “back home”, who were strong in some places, but weak in others.

To have tried to reach beyond this, to attempt to create a sort of rank-and-file ITS, would have meant building an alternative bureaucracy much like that of the ITSs. TIE’s decentralized, minimalist organization and structure gives it a flexibility that has allowed it to survive. In the disputes within the Sugar Platform, the IUF said that TIE was not “accountable”, because it did not have the sort of articulated, hierarchical representative structure that the ITSs have.²³ But TIE is not a hierarchy at all. In fact, its staff is accountable to the activists in the networks as well as to the International Advisory Committee. But this misses the point that TIE is a democracy of activists, a movement type organization reflecting one current within organized labor internationally.

While TIE remains a worldwide network, its decision to emphasize regional organization and activities is not only in line with production chain patterns and economic regionalization, but allows TIE to remain close to the workplace. This focus on linking workplace activists, which was part of the second phase of its development, remains key to the whole project. Clearly, this is more viable at the regional level. It has also come to mean more variety in what TIE does in the different regions. In Asia, for example, it has attempted to link together activists and leaders from new unions who have been largely ignored by the ITSs. In Moscow, TIE does very basic education on social movement unionism, although they don’t necessarily use that term. In both these cases they have to build the networks almost from scratch.

In Europe and North America, TIE depended on pre-existing networks within various countries. These weren’t even nationwide networks in many cases. In auto in North America, TIE built primarily on networks pulled together over the years by Labor Notes, UAW New Directions (although it went beyond New Directions members), and the Canadian Auto Workers. In telephone, it began primarily with Labor Notes readers, who were not even a network before the first Trinational Telecommunications Meeting in 1994. TIE Europe’s auto network is a patchwork that includes the Catalonian Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) and individual CCOO members in other plants; a network of German auto workers loosely grouped around the newspaper express, in Italy it has generally been the official metal workers (FLM), most recently in Britain it is an informal grouping around the magazine Trade Union News, while in most other countries it is simply a collection of individuals.

It is clear, that the success of TIE in any given country is dependent on the quality of the network there. In North America, for example, it was possible for TIE to get off the ground rapidly because of the extensive network Labor Notes brought to it, not only in the US, but in Canada and Mexico as well. More recently, the New Direction Workers Education Center run by Jerry Tucker in St. Louis and the Black Workers for Justice in North Carolina, both of whom have worked with Labor Notes for years, have come more directly into the TIE North American network. So have a number of new Latino organizations and local unions, as a result of the Cuautitlan Ford Workers US and Canada solidarity tour in 1996 organized by TIE North America staffer Julio Cesar Guerrero. Similarly in Brazil, TIE experienced a fast takeoff because it could rely on the CUT’s leaders and activists. In Asia and Russia, on the other hand, creating both national and regional networks has proved more difficult.

23) TIE 1995, p. 5

Building national rank-and-file networks, not only in specific industries but across industrial lines, is a necessary part of international and cross-border work. Naturally, it's not a job that can be done solely by the TIE staff. There need to be national level projects to pull together such networks that have their basic purpose in intervening in the national labor movements of each country and dealing with everyday issues that face workers on the job. Publications like Labor Notes, express, or Trade Union News; education centers like that provided by Labor Notes through its lean production schools and biannual conferences, the New Direction Workers Education Center's solidarity schools, the London-based group around Trade Union News that puts on weekend workers' schools, and TIE's own national level seminars; as well as the many solidarity organizations are all crucial to building the type of network on which effective international communications can be based.

This is not to suggest that TIE is or should be a sort of coordinator of networks. Rather, TIE should and does operate through these networks with its own program and goals. What is argued here is simply that creating a viable grassroots workers internationalism requires a grassroots workers movement at each point of the chain. Workers internationalism cannot operate like some financial markets with their "product" flying through global cyberspace. It is not enough to "stay in touch" through the Internet. There must be something of substance on the ground at each point. This appears to be the lesson TIE itself drew.

TIE's role in relationship to these networks has also changed over time. It has gone from being the facilitator of international networks to influencing the analysis and outlook of the network participants through more intense education, discussion, and debate. While the TIE staff does not push a "line", it does present an analysis and a style of social movement unionism that marks it as part of a broader international current

within the working class. It has developed this analysis and concept of unionism precisely by its ongoing contact with the workplace activists who have provided much of the information along with their own overviews and analyses. But it has synthesized all of this and now is presenting an alternative perspective.

From a Network to a Current: Labor Notes

By the mid-1990s national worker activist networks of the sort TIE depended on had more or less simultaneously developed in a growing number of countries. Networks around publications such as Trade Union News in Britain, Solidaritet in the Netherlands, express in Germany, Labor Notes in New Zealand, Rodo Joho in Japan, Labor in Taiwan, Trade Union Forum in Sweden, and Collectif in France had grown during the 1980s as efforts to pull together a national current of militants within different unions. Although these network-based publications had arisen separately without much contact in their early years, they shared many ideas and a certain outlook on how unions needed to change and function under the new circumstances.

What was unique about these publications and the networks they developed was that they addressed the entire labor movement of their country. They were based on networks or currents within individual unions, but they presented an alternative of what trade unions could become to activists across the movement or class as a whole. They were the "other side of the coin" to the retreat and decline seen by unions in many of these countries. Some were "sponsored" by left political tendencies, but all tried to build a broad current among activists promoting the idea of a more democratic, militant, and socially progressive style of unionism, i.e. versions of social movement unionism relevant to the national traditions of organized labor.

One of the most developed of these national rank-and-file network publication centers was Labor Notes in the U.S. Formed in 1978 as the Labor Education & Research Project, it began publication of the monthly magazine Labor Notes, the name by which the project is best known, in 1979. At first it was meant simply to provide information and analysis to rank-and-file activists, union reformers or oppositionists, and workplace militants across the labor movement of the US. Soon, however, Labor Notes began organizing national conferences, sending out speakers, and aiding rank-and-file opposition movements in various unions.²⁴

Labor Notes became well known in the early 1980s for its consistent opposition to the concessionary bargaining sweeping the US at that time. It produced the only book on the topic, *Concessions and How To Beat Them*, by staffer Jane Slaughter. The book argued that concessions were not limited to “troubled” industries or recessionary times, as much of the labor bureaucracy argued. Rather, concessions needed to be defeated by confrontation. The book provided ammunition for workers fighting their union’s concessionary posture. A national Labor Notes conference on this topic attracted several hundred union activists and located Labor Notes squarely in the center of the debate over concessions within the labor movement.

The project went on to get involved in the solidarity movement around the strike against concessions by United Food and Commercial Workers Local P-9 at Hormel’s Austin, Minnesota plant. Though this strike was eventually defeated by the combined forces of the company, the national union leadership, and the government of Minnesota, it spawned an elaborate and widespread network of militants, many already Labor Notes readers, that contributed to the growth of an oppositional current across the

labor movement. Labor Notes both contributed to and grew from this current.

In the mid-1980s, Labor Notes once again broke new ground with the publication of *Inside the Circle: A Union Guide to QWL* by Mike Parker. This book took apart the labor-management cooperation programs then evolving in the US. This would be followed by two more books by Mike Parker and Jane Slaughter, *Choosing Sides: Unions and the Team Concept* in 1988, and *Working Smart: A Union Guide to Participation Programs and Reengineering* in 1994. These books were among the first to reveal the real intentions of the various employee participation schemes proliferating throughout the 1980s and 1990s. National conferences were organized around these themes and a new series of four-day schools on lean production methods and how to fight them were launched in 1989. By 1997 hundreds of workplace activists had gone through these schools.

By the mid-1990s, the biannual national Labor Notes conferences had become the gathering ground of the rank-and-file oppositional and reform forces in the American labor movement. Over 1200 activists attended in 1993, 1994, and again in 1997. Although Labor Notes never attempted to form an organization, it had helped to create a national network of activists from across the entire labor movement. It provided educational and sometimes organizational support and publicity to oppositional movements within many unions, and more generally helped to build a common identity across union lines. In effect, it had been one of a number of organizations, such as the Teamsters for a Democratic Union or New Directions in the auto workers union, that was contributing to a sense of change and direction for thousands of rank-and-file activists and local union officials.

24) This account is based both on my experience with Labor Notes since its origins and on a review of its literature and discussions with other staffers.

In the late 1980s, Labor Notes took one more step into new territory by agreeing to house and support TIE North America. While the staff had been in touch with TIE for most of the 1980s, it had limited its own work primarily to the US. Its main international engagement in the 1980s was around solidarity work with unions in Central America and in opposition to US intervention there. The move toward taking on permanent international work was a big one for the project. It was, however, a mutually productive one. TIE got an extensive, already developed network of activists in the US as well as good contacts in Canada and Mexico. Labor Notes got the benefit of TIE's experience and direction in organizing cross-border exchanges and ongoing networks among workplace activists. Labor Notes also brought TIE into contact with many other organizations in North America that were key to developing a regional international perspective. Furthermore, much of this network already shared the basic analysis and orientation that TIE was projecting by the mid-1990s.

The success of the TIE perspective of grassroots international networks and nationally based educational efforts to strengthen the militant, democratic forces in the unions depends heavily on the existence and/or development of networks within each country. While Labor Notes was not founded on such an international outlook, it brought to that work forces that would have taken years to develop from scratch. This points to the importance of such national networks in any grassroots international perspective or effort.

The bold campaign by the Merseyside dock workers to field worldwide actions against a major user of the scab-run Liverpool docks gives us a glimpse of what is possible when the ranks are organized, persistent, and daring. The ability of the Merseyside dockers to get a warm reception first from rank-and-file activists and then from their unions rested on a common feeling of frustration and anger in ports the world around about the changing conditions being imposed on them. This feeling exists in industry

after industry, nation after nation. By now, it is as global as capital itself. Frustration and anger, however, need analysis and perspective. The embryonic social movement union current that is embodied in the national networks that have emerged in many countries (and need to emerge in others) can provide that perspective, while efforts like TIE's (and there need to be more of them) can carry this outlook across the world and provide the grassroots movement for change without which official labor, national and international, is not likely to rise to the challenge.

Conclusion

By the mid-1990s, cross-border activities had become more common among the activist layer of the unions in many of the countries of the North and South. Links across the North-South line were being forged by activist organizations like TIE, APWSL, Mujer a Mujer, US-GLEP, CJM, and many others. Of these efforts, however, TIE stood out for its worldwide reach, its practical use of the production chain concept, and its clear analysis and developing conception of social movement unionism.

In practice, TIE was addressing the rank-and-file activist layer of the unions in many countries with a unified perspective. It was not a perspective which solved all political or social problems, but it was one that could give rise to a common approach to the workplace and broader social problems created by lean production. More or less unintentionally, TIE found itself based in significant part either on the new unionism in Brazil and Asia or on the dissident or oppositional elements within the older trade unions of the North. Increasingly added to this evolving alliance were newer types of organizations such as workers centers, unemployed organizations, and newer independent unions in some places. All of these were increasingly tied together by national networks presenting an al-

ternative view of unionism. What had begun in a period of retreating unionism as a network of researchers had evolved into one of the more organized parts of an international social move-

ment unionist current that was emerging as the working class once again took center stage across much of the world.

Glossar

AFL-CIO	Am. Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
APWSL	Asian Pacific Workers Solidarity Links
AMRC	Asia Monitor Resource Center
ANG	Gewerkschaft Agrar, Nahrung und Genuss (Austria)
CAW	Canadian Auto Workers
CFDT	Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail
CILAS	Centro de Investigacion Laboral y Asesoría Sindical (Mexico)
CTM	Confederación de Trabajadores de México
DGB	Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund
ESC	European Social Charter
EWR	European Works Council
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GSP	General System of Preferences
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
ICTUR	International Center for Trade Union Rights
IG Metall	Industriegewerkschaft Metall (Germany)
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ILRERF	International Labor Rights Education and Research Fund
ILWU	International Longshore and Warehousemen's Union
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ITF	International Transport Workers Federation
ITS	International Trade Secretariats
IUF	International Union of Food and Allied Workers
MEXUSCAN	Mexican/US/Canadian
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
QWL	Quality of Work Life
SUD	Solitaires, Unitaires, Démocratiques (France)
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union (GB)
TIE	Transnationals Information Exchange
TNC	Transnational Corporation
TWN	Transnational Workers' Networks
UAW	United Auto Workers
US-GLEP	US/Guatemala Labor Education Project
WTO	World Trade Organization

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