Internationalism and Trans-nationalism in American Labor: Cross-Border Organizing, 1199, and LCLAA

by

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Introduction

This thesis explores labor internationalism among US unions and connects this new trend to the trans-national experience of immigrant communities. Questions raised in this study should be of interest to scholars trying to explain contemporary trends in the US labor movement and the experience of trans-national communities, as well as labor leaders and other activists concerned with the state of decline in American labor unions.

American labor, especially in contrast with Europe, has a history of being largely non-international in its actions. When it has had periods of strong involvement overseas, it has often been conservative and in close concert with US foreign policy that was highly detrimental to foreign workers, undermining their basic protections and independent attempts at unionism. The Cold War era record of American labor unions is especially dismal. Chapter 1 explores this record in some detail.

However, there have been signs of change over the last ten years with the growth of overseas activities that break from the non-involvement and conservatism of the past. Many of these activities fit into the model of cross-border organizing, which is, direct strategic partnerships between American unions and unions or workers seeking recognition overseas, always involving an industry and often involving a firm that spans both countries. Cases include the Communication Workers of America, United Auto Workers, Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Workers, and United Electrical. Additionally, unions have engaged international policy around trade, as well as a range of issues on immigration policy and the experience of immigrants.
Scholars have viewed these cross-border organizing efforts in two ways. One view explains the growth in cross-border organizing as a globalized adaptation of the ‘New Jersey strategy,’ a model based on the movement of textile firms from New York to New Jersey at the beginning of the last century. Textile unions brought their organizing efforts to the new locations and fought for policies to regulate wages and working conditions. A second view takes Cold War foreign policy directives as central and views these new trends as part of the wider changes of a post-Cold War world. However, in my review of these cases (see Chapter 2), I suggest trans-nationalism as a central force in driving unions to engage in cross-border organizing. Major immigrant communities of the last few decades maintain strong and ongoing connections to their country of origin, even after they gain citizenship, and even into the second generation.

However, the insightful and thorough literature on trans-nationalism has focused largely on private activities like remittances and hometown associations and is only beginning to see actions like transformations in organizations such as labor unions as part of the trans-national experience.

To demonstrate the importance of this trans-national dynamic, the following chapters detail two cases of international action by labor unions that fall outside of the New Jersey model. New York’s Health and Human Service Union (1199/SEIU), with around 40,000 Haitian members, has been involved in Haitian issues since at least 1990 when it sponsored events in protest of federal directives that associated Haitians with the spread of HIV. The union continued to be involved with the Haitian community over the course of Aristide’s election, the military coup, and his re-instatement, and in 1997 in demonstrations around the Abner Louima police brutality
case. In 2000, the union began a new initiative, at the request of President Aristide, to be involved in Haiti. They have committed to sponsor a public TB hospital by seeking donations of medical equipment to ensure that the hospital is modernized and properly stocked. They have sent two containers of medical equipment to Haiti. They have also committed to do a public information campaign around TB and AIDS, which is currently in the planning stage. Future plans include involvement with the upcoming Haitian bicentennial celebration as well as international work in other countries.

Chapter 4 looks at the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, the Latino constituency group within the AFL-CIO. LCLAA has served since its inception in 1973 to represent Latino workers and effect change in their unions and local communities. However, over the last ten years, it has also begun work not only around the experience of immigrants, but also around the countries to which they remain connected, particularly Mexico. LCLAA work, building on the interests of its members has sent delegations of unionists to Mexico to observe elections, and explore issues of trade union independence and trade policy.

These cases document the presence and possibilities of a trans-national dynamic on American labor involvement overseas. 1199 and LCLAA demonstrate the potential for moving away from protectionism, working closely with community groups, and forging direct connections with foreign governments that could bring significant changes in a range of governance and policy areas. Moreover, they represent an opportunity for unions to engage more of their members in political and community work—seizing on a dynamic that is already present and will likely continue for many years. The primary difficulty in expanding and replicating this work is
building trust and relationships across borders. However, given the crises situation of American unions, and the continuing trends in immigration and globalization, unions need to began making these connections or they will face irrelevance.
Chapter 1

History of US Labor Internationalism

The historical involvement of labor unions internationally fits into two, not fully exclusive, categories: internationalism and foreign policy. Internationalism describes the range of efforts to forge connections and alliances between national labor movements for the greater protection of workers. These efforts may also be incidents of trade union foreign policy, where unions attempt to influence the foreign policy choices of governments—their own or others—or act as agents of their government in carrying out foreign policy. However, unions may also engage in foreign policy work that does not constitute internationalism, such as in times of war, and may even be counter-internationalist in effect. This brief history will attempt to focus on US involvement in this myriad of organizations, agreements, and movements, while also setting a more complete international context.¹

This history captures a subset of the larger movement for the international protection of workers, which includes the work of not only labor unions and socialists, but also humanitarian organizations and governments. The goal of that movement was the establishment of binding international treaties that provide better protections for workers, such as shorter working periods, guaranteed social benefits or the banning of harmful chemicals or processes. I do not cover that history in depth here, because the particulars of the larger movement history were not primarily the work of labor unions. That includes the banning of dangerous chemicals in manufacturing, treaties governing accident payments and insurance for foreign nationals, and the draft conventions of International Labor Organization.

¹ Sources for this chapter are detailed in a bibliographic essay immediately following it.
Origins and the First International

The internationalist movement, having its ideological roots in the socialist traditions of the first half of the nineteenth century, was actually born out of a compromise between British trade unionists, French socialists, German ex-communists, and Italians, Poles, and Swiss of various associations. The move for an international labor organization was precipitated by three major events in the decade leading up to its formation in 1864. Contractors responded to major strikes in the British building trades by bringing in strikebreakers from France, Germany, and Belgium, convincing the British workers it was necessary to form ties with workers from other nations if they were to keep the gains for which they had been fighting. Second, France and Germany sent delegations of workers to the International Exhibition of London in 1862, allowing for the first informal talks about the creation of an international labor association. Finally, the American Civil War caused a major international slowdown in cotton mills, hitting London and Paris especially hard and providing another impetus for mutual communication and support.

The group that came together in 1864 called themselves the “International Working Men’s Association” though it would later be called the First International. The “Inaugural Address” that came out of the first meeting, though prepared by Karl Marx, heavily favored the trade unionists, making no mention of socialism or communism. The association began to hold annual conferences beginning in 1866 and discussed a wide range of issues, from the role of trade unions, female and child labor, and regulation of the working day, to “political questions” around standing armies, the Russian state, and re-establishing an independent Poland. Its only major
growth and victory came in 1868 when a wave of strikes led to the formation of new trade unions, and the International was able to collect strike funds and block international strikebreakers. By 1871 a few dozen American labor unions joined, most of them composed of immigrant workers. Marxian ideas became more prevalent in future conferences and eventually led to a devastating split in the International, with Marx coming out on top but with fewer followers. The association never achieved substantial membership or financial stability, and it dissolved in 1878.

*The AFL, the IWW, the Second International, and Trade Secretariats*

The formation of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1881 under Samuel Gompers gave the American labor unions a much stronger and more centralized point of involvement internationally. Gompers continued and expanded forging connections to unions in Europe, work that the National Labor Union, a predecessor, started. Gompers was especially successful in establishing strong relations with the British Trades Union Congress (TUC), but much less so with the socialist unions of France and elsewhere. The AFL maintained connections with unions throughout Europe, and on several occasions raised funds to support strikes in England and Germany.

The AFL was alienated by the American Socialist Party, which weakened its position with socialists internationally. At the same time, American socialists were coming together in the United States under the banner of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), primarily western unions. Both the Socialist Party and the IWW aligned themselves with the emerging Second International, a movement of European socialists and social democrats started in 1899. The
Germans eventually became the dominant force and led the International to increasing membership and influence in Europe. Because of the lesser role of the Socialist Party in American politics, the Second International was much less influential in the US. The Second International remained strong until the beginning of World War I, when the socialists’ failure to avert war between their countries would eventually lead to the association’s virtual collapse.

During the same period as the Second International, a powerful trade union-oriented set of associations was developing as well. International Labor Secretariats, also known as Trade Secretariats, attempted to bring together national unions of the same trade. Seventeen such organizations formed between 1889 and 1900 and another ten by the start of the war in 1914. These included printers, typographical workers, miners, textile workers, commercial employees and stonemasons among others. They worked to build trust between national unions, exchange information about the trade, provide financial support and prevent cross-national strikebreakers in times of strike, and promote trade unions in less organized countries. While their successes did not measure up to the Second International in terms of increasing worker protections and benefits in Europe, there was much greater participation by American unions. Gompers encouraged AFL member unions to join their respective trade secretariats, and many did so.

A separate but related organization was the International Secretariat of National Trade Union Centers. Formed in 1900 by British and French trade unionists opposed to the socialists of the Second International, by 1904 most trade federations of Europe had joined. The AFL would not join until 1910, after winning a challenge by the IWW for the right to represent the American labor movement. The Secretariat’s major activities were gathering international trade union
statistics and facilitating communication between labor leaders from various countries. The Secretariat changed its name to the International Federation of Trade Unions in 1914, and began contacting trade unions in Argentina, South Africa, and Australia.

War, Peace, and the IFTU without the AFL

War in Europe greatly strained the work of all trade union associations and communication between national labor organizations. However, as peace neared, various national and international labor associations sought to be involved in the peace settlement, and to use this time to strengthen international labor associations and formalize international labor regulations. Gompers and the AFL were heavily involved in these efforts. Gompers was a key figure during the War, visiting workers in the states and in Allied countries to raise morale. He was able to carry his key role into the peace process and chaired the Commission on Labor Legislation of the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919. While Gompers sought stricter regulations and a stronger international association, he was able to get minimal labor requirements of a minimal weekly rest period of 24 hours, and the creation of the International Labor Organization, of limited power.

The same year the International Federation of Trade Unions held the first meeting between all countries since the onset of war. The IFTU reorganized to give itself much greater formality and power for concerted trade union action, including higher dues and binding majority votes. But it was with these two policies that the AFL had serious reservations, and declined membership at the 1919 conference to bring the question of joining the IFTU back to a vote of its membership. The AFL remained at odds with the IFTU over several issues, the amount of dues being
prominent. The AFL took issue with the IFTU’s “political” platform, calling for general strikes, support for Soviet Russia as well as a general socialist leaning, and did not join at that time. The AFL became increasingly distant from European labor movements in the following decade, though the hostility subsided.

This same decade was a time of significantly greater international labor activity in Europe, though it was also a decade rife with divisiveness and conflict. The Bolshevik Revolution changed the dynamic on the continent. The Soviets sought to dominate the international labor associations and push them closer to their ideology. They were successful in weakening the revival of the Second International and launching the Third International, also known as the Communist International, in 1919. Labor unions and socialist parties alike were split over alignment with the Bolsheviks, causing a serious split between the Second and Third International as well as conflicts within the IFTU. The Communist Third International eventually dominated, though this led some from the Second International to re-align with the IFTU. American labor, however, largely absent from all these organizations, was largely uninvolved in these disputes, and only saw its repercussions in the weak Communist Party USA, which advocated the Soviet agenda.

Trans-nationalism in the AFL and the Pan-American Labor Movement

While the years following the First World War saw a retreat of American labor from the formal associations of international labor, it was also a time of significant interest in international affairs within the labor movement. This was the first significant trans-nationalist influence on
American organized labor. Large segments of organized workers were intensely interested in the peace negotiations, because they were immigrants themselves or otherwise had family in Europe. The AFL, which had a significant presence at Versailles, was a major venue for these immigrants to voice their concerns and attempt to influence the outcome. Additionally, the AFL would be a major supporter of an Irish Republic, influenced strongly by Irish and other immigrants. This position aggravated the divide between the AFL and the IFTU, each accusing the other of being overly political.

As the AFL distanced itself from European unions, it became more interested in labor in the Americas, especially in Mexico. The AFL closely followed the Mexican revolution, and Gompers and the AFL were in close contact with several revolutionary factions. This interest was partially driven by unions in the southwest that were concerned about the flood of low-wage Mexican workers coming across the border, associating the problem with the Diaz dictatorship. The AFL used its influence, Gompers personally pressuring President Wilson at times, to push American policy in support of the revolutionary movement and in support of particular factions in the unstable years that followed. The AFL forged close connections with the new government and the newly emerging Mexican unions and labor federation, the Confederacion Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM).

The connections between AFL and CROM led to the formation of the Pan-American Federation of Labor. Though delegates from a few other nations participated, the Americans and Mexicans clearly dominated the organization from the beginning. CROM was able to use the Pan-American association to voice their concerns about the treatment of Mexican workers in the
United States, and their desire to allow Mexicans to be full members of American unions. The AFL did investigate and take action on many fronts. While there was some tension between AFL and CROM around associating with European socialists, the connection remained strong. The AFL remained much more distant from labor unions in the rest of Latin America as many were strongly socialist in ideology or associated with the Communists. The divisions that were ripping through Europe struck Latin America as well, but a compromise was reached between AFL and CROM whereby CROM agreed not to join with the European Socialists or Communists, and in exchange the AFL would support the current Mexican President Obregon against the revolt of a more radical faction, led by Adolfo de la Huerta. They announced this agreement in 1923 as the “Labor Monroe Doctrine”—opposing any efforts by European labor to intervene in the Western Hemisphere. The AFL was able to use its influence in Washington to get greater enforcement of an arms blockade of Mexico that was instrumental in ending de la Huerta’s revolt. American trade unionists, especially the Seaman’s union, were even active in enforcing this policy.

However, this era of good feeling quickly broke down. By 1926 segments of the AFL had become highly critical of the CROM, accusing it of being simply an agent of the Mexican government. American unionists were also concerned about the immigration of Mexican workers, who were exempted from the quotas of the 1924 Immigration Act and were continuing to come in increasing numbers. Temporary agreements were reached, but the issue remained unresolved. There was also distrust among the rest of the members of the federation over growing US military involvement in Latin America. Nicaragua was especially vocal, demanding that the AFL use their influence in Washington. In addition, the socialist unions of
Argentina, Uruguay, Cuba and Venezuela were distrustful of the association as an attempt by the State Department to increase American influence. Those nations abandoned the Pan-Americans and formed a Latin American Federation associated with the socialists of the former Second International. The final blow came in 1928, when the AFL voted to impose immigration quotas on Mexico as well. This ended good relations between the AFL and CROM, which had been holding the organization together. The Pan-American Federation of labor dissolved soon after.

*From Division to Near Unity and Back Again: the WFTU*

The split between AFL and CROM over immigration would not be unique in the coming years as economic pressures led to protectionist policies around the world, throwing many of the international labor associations into division and crisis. In addition, divisions between trade unionists, socialists, and Communists remained strong, including splits in traditional alliances and the formation of new associations. The emerging threat, though, was that of the Fascists, who had already risen to power in Italy before the onset of the Depression, and by 1931 had strong followings in Germany, Austria, Poland, Yugoslavia, Lithuania, and Finland. In a mirror of international relations at the times, the Fascist threat brought trade unions, socialists, and Communists together. Following Hitler’s rise in 1933, the United States joined the International Labor Organization (ILO), and the AFL began sending delegates to ILO conferences. The AFL would re-join the IFTU in 1936, though this was at the same time that a split in the AFL led to the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Both vied for membership in the IFTU, whose rules allowed only one national labor association to join, but the AFL eventually prevailed. The AFL blocked two serious attempts to bring Russia into the IFTU.
Many labor associations, socialists in Europe, Latin America, and Asia, felt it especially important to have full unity of labor movements in the face of the fascist threat. Even the British TUC had taken this stance, arguing that just as their government had allied itself with the Soviets, so should the labor associations. Nevertheless, the AFL and other trade unionists felt association with the communists was unacceptable.

However, as war spread, the IFTU, socialists, and Communists often worked closely together in trying to stem aggression of the fascists, as well as trying to support subversive groups in Nazi-controlled areas. Much stronger ties developed between the British and the Soviets, and socialists and Communists came together under one banner in France and other countries. These united labor forces attempted to bring Americans into this growing movement, but the AFL remained unwilling to accept the Communist unions as true labor unions. Through several meetings during the war, the AFL remained uninvolved in the planning for a new international labor association. The CIO was involved in these discussions, but their participation failed to trump the AFL’s absence. These unions, socialists, and Communists came together in 1945 to form the World Federation of Trade Unions, with a more formidable structure than even the renewed IFTU, and aspirations to replace the trade secretariats as well. The original members of the IFTU voted to disband, and the AFL was largely alone in international labor.

The WFTU was influential in the making of peace and the early planning for post-war reconstruction. It also forged ahead and gained recognition at the newly formed United Nations (UN). The AFL successfully asserted its right to independently represent American workers at the UN. However, serious rifts were quickly taking hold in the WFTU. The WFTU had failed to
reach an agreement with the International Trade Secretariats, so the British TUC and other Western European trade unions were threatening to leave the WFTU if an agreement was not reached. At the same time, anti-Communism was taking hold as a strong political force in England and the United States and the TUC and CIO began isolating—and in the latter case basically purging—Communists from their ranks and leadership. This trend was closely tied to the launching of the Marshall Plan for economic recovery in Europe, which the Russians had declined to participate in on the grounds that it was an attempt to spread capitalism into Eastern Europe. Russia setup their own recovery plan for Eastern Europe, solidifying the Soviet bloc. Several compromises were attempted, but ultimately none could bridge the growing gap between trade unionists and Communists. In 1949, the CIO, the TUC, and the trade unions of most of Western Europe left the WFTU, leaving only the Communists (Russia and Central and Eastern Europe) and the French and Italian trade federations, which were then Communist-dominated. This major split was a clear signal of the beginning of the Cold War. The WFTU continued despite this major setback; though it operated largely as a voice of the Soviet bloc through the Cold War, it has emerged now as a major international association for leftist unions.

*International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and Anti-Communism*

Even before the split in the WFTU, the AFL had been working to undermine Communist influence in labor unions in Europe through the Free Trade Union Committee (FTUC), which had operated since the close of World War II. The split in the WFTU allowed for the formation of an international association that shared its anti-communist stance. The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) formed in 1949 with that purpose. It was quickly
able to overcome some of the major obstacles faced by the WFTU by forging an agreement with the International Trade Secretariats that allowed the secretariats to keep their autonomy while associating with the ICFTU. The AFL and CIO were integral in shaping the ICFTU, though it included a broad range of unions, including some with strong socialist leanings. The ICFTU brought together not only the unions of Western Europe and North America, but also the rest of the Americas, Asia—notably Japan—and parts of the Middle East and Africa. The ICFTU formed regional organizations that reinforced Cold War politics in each region, like the Inter-American Regional Workers Confederation (ORIT) for the Americas.

Despite its integral founding role, American involvement in the ICFTU began to fade rather quickly. As American labor aligned itself more with American anti-Communist foreign policy, it became less interested in working with the ICFTU, which had many socialist and left-leaning unions that were more sympathetic to Communism and certainly not as vested in the Cold War divide. By 1956, the division was already showing when George Meany, head of the newly merged AFL-CIO, blasted the ICFTU for honoring Indian President Jawaharlal Nehru and Yugoslavian President Josip Broz Tito for outstanding work in combating racial discrimination. Meany claimed that both were Communist sympathizers and should not be honored by the organization of free trade unions. Most of the ICFTU disagreed. By the 1960’s the rift had grown more substantial and the AFL-CIO was clearly moving farther away from the ICFTU as a vehicle for its international involvement. This generally marks the end of serious but weak US involvement in the major international labor organizations. That involvement is summarized in the following table.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Association</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>American Involvement</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First International</td>
<td>1864-1878</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade Secretariats</td>
<td>Various, 1890-Present</td>
<td>Many AFL unions joined, and remain members</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second International</td>
<td>1899-1914</td>
<td>Minimal: Socialist Party and IWW</td>
<td>Attempted to revive after WWI, but Third International dominated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Secretariat (IFTU)</td>
<td>1900-1919</td>
<td>AFL joined in 1911</td>
<td>Changed name to IFTU, but fully reorganized after WWI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pan-American Labor Federation</td>
<td>1918-1928</td>
<td>AFL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU)</td>
<td>1919-1949</td>
<td>AFL did not rejoin until 1936.</td>
<td>Ended after creation of WFTU.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third International</td>
<td>1919-1943</td>
<td>IWW only, strongly opposed by the AFL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU)</td>
<td>1945-Present</td>
<td>CIO until 1949</td>
<td>Major split occurred in 1949, mostly Communists remained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Confederation of Free Trade Unions</td>
<td>1949-Present</td>
<td>AFL and CIO (merged in 1955)</td>
<td>Declining role of the AFL-CIO after 1955</td>
</tr>
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**AIFLD and the Americas**

By 1955, the CIO had all but eliminated its Communist insiders and merged with the AFL, and the anti-Communist AFL-CIO dominated the American labor movement. It worked through the ICFTU, the ORIT in the Americas, and the FTUC and Marshall Plan organizations in Europe to contain, resist and undermine Communism. The AFL-CIO developed much closer ties to the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as it worked to undermine
Communist forces overseas. As it moved away from the ICFTU, the AFL-CIO began
developing its own organizations to do work internationally. This process began in earnest after
the Cuban Revolution in 1959, which led to an increase in efforts to prevent Communism from
taking hold in the Western Hemisphere. The AFL-CIO expanded a program run by the
Communications Workers of America to train Latin American labor leaders in “free” trade
unions and financially support their work through the American Institute for Free Labor
Development (AIFLD) in 1961. From its creation, the AIFLD received funding from major
American corporations and the US government.

The work of the AIFLD focused largely on Central America (Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador,
Honduras, Panama and Costa Rica), though it was active elsewhere in Latin America. The
AIFLD worked for many years under a veil of secrecy, never having to produce an evaluation of
its work or an audit of its budget, despite receiving by 1980 around $20 million per year from the
US Agency for International Development (AID). The major work of AIFLD fell under the
auspices of training Latin American labor leaders. The intent and outcome of this training were
unambiguous: to combat any organizing efforts by leftist unionists. To this aim, the AIFLD had
trained over 500,000 unionists by the 1980’s, over 100,000 in Central American alone. To
achieve that aim, AIFLD and its trainees resorted to a variety of un-democratic means, including
the use of the military to oversee union elections, electoral fraud, and hired thugs to intimidate
militant union leadership. The AIFLD also put significant resources into a program to develop
agrarian unions. The Communist threat was especially strong in rural areas, where the AFL-
CIO’s style of trade union organizing was likely to have little influence. The key technique of
the Agrarian Union Development Department (AUDD) was to hire local organizers to build
networks of conservative rural associations to block the formation of more progressive movements. AIFLD had a massive budget to support these programs, which they spent on credit unions, housing, and development and education projects. The AIFLD used these projects to convince rural communities to associate with their organizing programs.

The results of AIFLD’s work in Central America are striking. Across the board in Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica, the AIFLD has supported military regimes, undermined democratic governments and trade unions, and ignored gross civil and human rights abuses. AIFLD and other AFL-CIO programs worked closely with American companies, especially fruit companies, to crush efforts at radical unionism or land reform. AFL-CIO figures testified before Congress in support of oppressive military regimes or military intervention against democratically elected governments.

Other Work and Dissent

While the AIFLD was the AFL-CIO’s largest international effort, it also launched an African-American Labor Center (AALC) and an Asian-American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI), which had programs very similar to those of the AIFLD, though with budgets of only about a third the size. AALC was especially active in Sudan and South Africa, while AAFLI worked primarily in the Philippines and to lesser degrees in Thailand, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and elsewhere. The AFL-CIO also worked through the International Trade Secretariats to support pro-US unions, and even as fronts for CIA counter-Communism operations.
While these programs all surged in the 1960’s and 1970’s, they continued basically unchallenged well into the 1980’s despite rising opposition from within the American labor movement. As early as 1981, a coalition of unionists that challenged American labor’s foreign policy could claim a majority within the AFL-CIO. This growing coalition fought at several levels to enact change in the AFL-CIO’s role, especially in Central America, but achieved only minimal changes through the 1980’s. The leadership of the federation had very strong connections to government and business interests, and was largely insulated from internal pressure. However, change would come slowly as opposition spread to all ranks of the federation, as the Cold War policy frameworks broke down, with changes in the federal administration following Clinton’s election in 1992, and finally when changes swept the AFL-CIO leadership in 1995. By that time, new international actions had already begun to emerge in isolated places in American labor, the trend looked at in the following chapter.

Conclusion

The historical record is clear: US labor lagged behind the rest of the developed world in involvement internationally. When it was involved, it tended to act conservatively and often unilaterally. US labor unions, especially since the Cold War, acted to a large degree as tools of US foreign policy, to the massive detriment of progressive workers’ movements, and to democracy and human rights more generally. US labor also has at best a mixed record on immigration policy and treatment of immigrants. However, labor has also demonstrated a diversity of ideologies and histories, a capacity for dissent and alternative action, and the potential of trans-nationalism as an influential dynamic.
Bibliography

For the most in-depth look at the international labor movement through the First World War see Boutelle Ellsworth Lowe, *The International Protection of Labor* (New York: Ferris Printing Company, 1921), pages xxi-xxiv on the trade union movement, and pages 79-95 on American involvement. For an overlapping account that covers through the beginning of the Cold War see Lewis Lorwin, *The International Labor Movement* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), pages 37-44 and 78-96, including Pan-American labor. Lorwin pages 233-238 and 262-284 covers the formation of the WFTU and ICFTU.


Chapter 2
Recent Cross-Border Organizing

Cross-Border Origins: Activist Networks and Trade Measures

The origin of contemporary cross-border organizing stems directly from the dismal records of American labor presented in the previous chapter. Grassroots opposition to AIFLD’s work in Central America reached significant levels by 1981. This prompted ten union presidents to come together and form the National Labor Committee Education Fund in Support of Worker and Human Rights in El Salvador (NLC). The committee was a major force in driving change in the AFL-CIO’s role in Central America and beginning a process of broader changes within the labor movement. This early movement had strong connections to the broader grassroots activist movement of solidarity with workers in El Salvador that included religious and human rights workers.²

As the NLC achieved success within the AFL-CIO it began to broaden its campaign to bring attention to labor abuses throughout Latin America. Working with labor activist networks like the International Labor Rights Education and Research Fund (ILRERF) and human right groups like America’s Watch, the AFL-CIO began using trade measures to bring attention to labor abuses and attempt to pressure countries to enforce their own labor laws and international labor conventions. When the General System of Preferences (GSP) trade law was renewed in 1984, this coalition of unions and labor activist networks was able to add a provision that allowed for a

review of a nation’s trade benefits based on their labor practices. Between 1985 and 1996, ILRERF, the AFL-CIO and others filed dozens of such petitions against thirteen different nations. Alongside a range of other pressures these nations were facing in regards to their labor practices, the threat of reduced trade benefits did bring about remarkable changes, including strengthened labor codes in Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador Guatemala, Panama, and Paraguay. The trade review was also influential in lessening injustices in Chile. Not all the trade actions were successful; the United States Trade Representatives rejected many petitions and some of the offending nations simply disregarded the threat of action.³

The use of trade measures not only produced mixed results, but also mixed reactions from unions and other organizations in Latin America. Much of the trade measure work built directly on the connections forged through the activist networks, and was carried out with the support if not at the request of unions in Latin America. However, the AFL-CIO pursued some claims without sufficient contact with local unions, leading to resentment, and missed opportunities for building connections to unions in Latin America.

The Guatemala Labor Education Project (GLEP) is an activist network that built on the use of trade measures to conduct a broad-based campaign on behalf of maquiladora workers. GLEP, much like the NLC, grew out of a broader solidarity movement in connection to political oppression, but would later engage in much more targeted action towards specific firms. Besides putting on strong trade pressure through the GSP review, GLEP also coordinated with the textile trade secretariat, the International Textile, Garment, and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF) to give additional organizing capacity to emerging unions. Additionally, the coalition relied on a

³ Ibid.
variety of corporate and consumer pressures against US-based firms that had factories or sub-contractors in Guatemala. Finally, GLEP served as a vehicle for US unions to forge close ties with Guatemalan unions and workers. The next section includes one case of cross-border organizing under the auspices of GLEP.

The Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM), spanning Mexico, the United States and Canada, is the most pure example of an activist network. Rather than using state-level trade measures, the CJM fought to democratize unions and enforce existing union protections and Mexican labor laws through local campaigns, shareholder action, and training and organizing efforts. It worked much more closely with unions in Mexico, but had fewer direct connections with American and Canadian unions, which were involved primarily through financial support, though many individual unionists were more involved personally.

ILRERF, GLEP and CJM are just a few of the dozens of the networks that are supporting workers in the developing world, especially Latin America. While American unions were involved in beginning many of these endeavors, they have not had significant direct contact with foreign unions in official or systematic ways. Rather, they remain connected largely through financial support. Additionally, the use of trade measures to combat labor abuses has had a mixed record from its origin, not always take full account of the real risks of capital flight and personal retribution faced by maquiladora workers. While activist networks are powerful coalitions for raising awareness and exerting consumer pressure, they have achieved only minimal success in creating sustainable connections between labor unions across borders.

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**Cross Border Organizing**

The number of cases of cross border organizing, significant direct ties between unions or workers of different countries, is very few. With the AFILD and the AFL-CIO undermining independent trade unions in the very countries to which US manufacturing jobs were relocating, even interested American unions had little opportunity to forge cross border connections. The handful of cases below represents those few unions that overcame the pressures of conforming to AFL-CIO and American foreign policy pressures, as well as the numerous obstacles of pioneering international connections.

**UNITE**

The Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) is the result of a merger between the International of Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). Once with a combined workforce of 900,000, the two unions had dwindled to 350,000 by the time of their merger in 1995.6 Over the last few decades, they had pursued a variety of efforts to keep their numbers up in the face of the changing economic situation. They aggressively followed firms that relocated within the US, largely to the southern US, and had significant success organizing there.

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In the face of rapid flow of jobs overseas, the unions had to try new tactics. The ILGWU had been involved in some major fights to force employers to keep jobs in the states. As late as 1994, they achieved a small victory against the Leslie Fay Company, keeping 600 jobs in the US for at least a year while labor and management could jointly research ways to keep producing competitively. At the same time, the ACTWU had a history of supporting leftist trade unions in El Salvador in the 1980’s, running against AFL-CIO national policy and risking alienation of the union within American labor.7

By the early 1990’s, the unions were beginning to make direct connections with unions, workers and organizations overseas. The ILGWU started meeting regularly with Mexican unionists, and aiding their organizing campaigns.8 In 1991, the ILGWU formed an alliance with a community organization La Mujer Obrera to organize garment workers in both the United States and Mexico along the Texas border. Despite the same strategic objectives and similar methods, the alliance quickly collapsed. Both organizations cited racial and linguistic differences and lack of trust as aggravating factors. The ILGWU, whose leadership was predominantly white, English monolingual men, was viewed as too external to the workers they were trying to organize. The workers in turn felt they were not adequately represented in decision-making.9

The ACTWU and ILGWU had all these experiences to build on when they came together to support unionists in the Dominican Republic trying to organize at a maquiladora factory of the Bibong Apparel Corporation. They targeted this particular factory for two reasons. First, both

unions had contracts with Bibong, and second, the plant already had an indigenous union structure and began working directly with them. The workers had spent years trying to gain recognition, facing firing, blacklisting and physical threats for union involvement. However, the ILGWU and ACTWU were able to put additional pressure on the firm as well as give additional financial support to the indigenous union. UNITE has continued to take this position; while they have a shared interest in the factories of these companies, they have different levels of financial resources, so they will fund overseas organizing proportionally. Then unions were able to overcome early interference by then still functioning AFILD and the Dominican union obtained recognition in 1994. It was able to gain a contract, the first for maquiladora workers, for three additional companies, covering 2,500 workers. UNITE continues to fund organizers in the industrial zone.\textsuperscript{10}

However, UNITE had more than just a strategic connection to the Dominican Republic. A substantial portion of the textile and garment industry in the US was now Dominican workers and those changes had slowly affected the union leadership as well. It was a DR native, labor organizer Wilfredo Larencuent, who spearheaded the ACTWU’s involvement in the DR after a family visit in 1993. He saw factories of the same companies the ACTWU contacted with in New York. He contacted other organizers, and after an ILGWU firm shifted production from Minnesota to the DR, he started working with a progressive organizer from the ILGWU and another Dominican organizer from New York to start looking at ways to get their unions involved.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} McClure.
\textsuperscript{11} Scher.
UNITE expanded their collaborations with Latin American and Caribbean unions over the next few years. One of their key engagements was in Guatemala. In 1995, UNITE joined GLEP’s campaign for economic justice for maquiladora workers. This was a major campaign targeting a group of Phillips Van-Heusen (PVH) contractors and sub-contractors in Guatemala City. UNITE collaborated with the Guatemalan union representing these workers, the international garment workers trade secretariat and labor activist organizations. The collaboration expanded to include more labor activists, student groups, and human rights organizations.

This campaign went beyond the methods of the campaign in the DR by involving the international trade secretariat, and by using trade pressure. The alliance of labor groups was able to put pressure on US agencies to hold up Guatemala’s trade status renewal under the General System of Preferences until PVH, the Guatemalan union and the Guatemalan Labor Ministry reached a resolution. This led the Labor Ministry to exert pressure on PVH that eventually led to an historic two-year contract that included not only wage increases, but also transportation and meal subsidies, child care, grievance procedures and guaranteed employment levels.\(^{12}\) While this was a major victory for those workers and labor organizing in Guatemala more generally, there was an equally significant setback in 1998, when PVH closed the unionized factory, claiming it had lost an important client. UNITE worked alongside GLEP to keep pressure on PVH to reopen the factory, but was unsuccessful.\(^ {13}\)


Like UNITE, the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), fought hard to keep jobs in the US. When that failed, they launched the Strategic Organizing Alliance with Mexico's Authentic Labor Front, the Frente Autentico del Trabajo (FAT). The alliance formed in 1992, initially focused on a General Electric (GE) plant in Juarez, Mexico that received much of its work from the closing of a GE plant in Indiana that UE had represented. The UE sent a team of organizers down to aid FAT in representing the workers at that factory. Substantial opposition came not only from GE, but also from other labor unions in Mexico, unions known to be undemocratic and often complicit with government and corporate interests. However, with the assistance of the UE organizers and other pressure they were able to exert, the FAT achieved the first secret ballot election in Mexican labor history and the election of a truly democratic union.14

While the alliance focuses primarily on recruitment, they have attempted to use trade-based measures to highlight labor abuses in Mexico. Among the first groups to press claims under the Labor Side Agreement of NAFTA, UE has collaborated with Teamsters and others to pursue cases against GE, Honeywell and Echlin in both the United States and Canada. Through these complaints, the alliance was able to give international recognition to a wide range of issues faced by Mexican unionists, like lack of secret ballots and a more general lack of information about unions and contracts. However, these complaints achieved little beyond demonstrating the ineffectiveness of the NAFTA labor agreements.15

14 Alexander and Gilmore, “The Emergence.”
15 Armbruster, “Cross-National.”
This alliance has grown out of the solidarity model of earlier international labor initiatives that operated solely as support from American unions to Latin American unions. But his alliance is emerging as a true partnership where both sides aid and benefit the other. In an organizing campaign at a foundry in Milwaukee, UE requested FAT send an activist/organizer to aid in communicating with the predominantly Mexican workers, many of whom were wary of trade unions because of their experiences with undemocratic unions in Mexico. The FAT representative was able to speak to workers’ concerns and speak favorably of UE from his personal experience of the work they have done for him. This transnational effort ultimately led to a union victory at that plant. The FAT National Coordinator has stood alongside striking workers in Chicago, and met with other workers before union elections.16

The ongoing and innovative connections between the two unions continue. They have come together around education, cultural exchange, worker to worker connections, emergency action and fundraising. UE and FAT have brought together established and emerging artists from the United States and Mexico to do a series of murals at union offices in both countries. They have also jointly launched a worker center in the border town of Jaurez to educate and support workers. UE continues to support FAT organizers and fired workers through sponsorship programs. Worker exchanges continue to build connections between communities and allow each union to learn from the tactics of the other. UE is especially interested in replicating the

various cooperatives that FAT runs. They have also worked to overcome male-domination within both organizations by devising all-women delegations.\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{CWA}

Communications Workers of America (CWA) has been forced to organize in challenging and competitive fields since the breakup of the bell system in 1984. However, sweeping changes in telecommunications markets globally accelerated that challenge in the early 1990’s. As more nations deregulated and privatized their telecommunication firms, telecommunications workers increasingly faced demands for concessions and threats of de-unionization as foreign firms moved into traditionally protected markets. CWA has responded to these attacks in two arenas, in the developed and developing world.

Privatization and de-regulation of telecommunications has opened up the highly unionized telecommunications sectors in the West to strong de-unionizing pressures. As domestic markets open to foreign firms, workers are pressured into making concessions to avoid site closings, while the same companies seek to open non-union shops overseas. CWA first felt this pressure from Northern Telecom (Nortel), a Canadian firm that had always been successful at keeping its labor force predominantly non-union. When the largest CWA local in Nortel was being cornered into concessions in 1989, the CWA branched out and formed a partnership with the Communications Workers of Canada and the Canadian Auto Workers, who also organized Nortel workers. The Canadian unions were able to put pressure on Nortel at home, by exposing its American labor practices to the public and Canadian institutions.

\textsuperscript{17} Scher, “Coming in.”
CWA has formed similar alliances with unions in England and New Zealand, and has done work to block American companies from attempting to open non-union shops or block unionization. They have worked with the unions of France Telecom and Deustch Telekom to limit the reach of a super-carrier alliance between the European giants and Sprint. They have been able to use CWA’s case against Sprint in San Francisco (detailed below) to prevent the super-carrier plan from moving forward. Finally, CWA has worked with unions throughout Europe to put pressure on Digital Equipment Technologies (DEC), a high-tech firm that has created numerous completely union-free plants in the United States. They have begun shareholder actions at DEC’s annual meetings as well as joining forces with local Jobs with Justice activist coalitions.18

CWA’s cross-border work with unions in Mexico, while dealing with the same strategic issues around deregulation and privatization, focuses much more on organizing as the key activity. CWA formalized an alliance with the Sindicato de Telefonistas de la Republica Mexicana (STRM) and the Communications Workers of Canada after the first wave of telecommunications privatization in 1990. While the first few years of the alliance bore little activity, by 1995 STRM and CWA were hosting joint organizer training events. The largest of these events brought together CWA organizer who were bilingual and attempting to organize primarily Mexican and Central American immigrants with STRM organizers who were trying to organize in the plants of American firms. Two STRM organizers helped in a CWA campaign to organize truckers in California.19

19 Scher, “Coming in.”
STRM would attempt to aid CWA-led organizing in California again in 1994. Workers at Sprint’s Spanish-language facility, La Conexión Familiar (LCF), had successfully petitioned the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) for a union election. However, just a week before the election Sprint shut the facility down, firing all 177 workers. While the CWA raised the case to all the relevant institutions domestically, STRM filed an historic claim under the NAFTA labor agreement, the first by a Mexican union against an American firm. STRM sought to have Sprint banned from operating in Mexico—it was aggressively attempting to enter the long distance market—until it changed its labor practices in the states. The Mexican labor office agreed to the claim and demanded that the US enforce its own labor laws and protect the rights of Mexicans and Americans in the US. This eventually led to a meeting between the labor ministries of all three NAFTA countries and the formation of a special commission to investigate the case. Though Sprint was consistently found to be in serious violation of dozens of regulations, and ordered to reinstate the workers and make back payments, they were largely able to avoid enforcement because NLRB rulings can be continually appealed in federal court.

While this campaign proved to be largely unsuccessful in primary goal of getting the 177 workers reinstated, it did achieve two other significant outcomes. Yet another example of the ineffectiveness of the NAFTA labor agreement to adequately protect workers, it was a key organizing point for opposition to the extension of Fast Track trade negotiation privileges in 1997. Additionally, CWA gained strong ties to STRM, as well as other independent and progressive unions in Mexico. The connections would soon prove valuable for struggling Mexican workers.

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20 Cohen and Early, “Defending Workers’ Rights.”
Maxi-Switch, a US-based subsidiary of a Taiwanese company, manufactured keyboards and other high-technology devices in a Mexican maquiladora zone, before sending them to a Tuscon distribution center for marketing. The Cananea plant paid among the lowest wages in Mexico. Despite ongoing intimidation, brave workers were able to secure a strong majority support for a union election in 1996. The leaders of the union faced strong retaliation; the leader of the movement was badly beaten and the rest were fired or forced to resign. The workers learned that the retaliation came so quickly and easily because a government official had tipped off the company to the union’s work. The union was also told their petition would be denied because they were already represented by a union, affiliated the government associated Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM). Firms in Mexico commonly use these “phantom unions” to prevent independent and democratic unions from forming.

However, CWA Local 7026 represented the distribution center in Tucson. Not only were they working for the same firm, but they were also thirty-five percent of Mexican origin. The local took a strong interest in the case and immediately pursued a case under the NAFTA labor agreement, demanding that Mexico properly enforce its own labor laws. By the time this case was filed in the 1997, they had not only the STRM case, but also the GE and Honeywell cases brought by UE and Teamsters that had showcased the ineffectiveness of these procedures. In the shadow of the Fast Track debate, CWA was able to generate significant support for this case. American labor and trade representatives pressured the Mexican government to recognize the independent union. This was the first effective use of the NAFTA labor agreements. This only
strengthened the relationship between CWA and the new union. They keep in regular contact and often send members to attend each other’s meetings.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{UAW}

Independent trade unions in Mexico struggle against the dominant and corporatist Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM). The CTM was complicit in a 1987 move by Ford to shutdown its highest paying factory in Cuautitlan and reopen it with a new contract that drastically cut wages and workers. Over the next two years, the CTM leadership replaced any oppositional union figures in the Ford union. A group of workers who opposed the replacements formed the Ford Workers Democratic Movement (FWDM) and began to fight for democratic elections at the Cuautitlan factory. The next five years were filled with confrontation between the FWDM, the CTM and Ford representatives. There were several violent incidents over this period that included one death and at least eleven serious injuries, all from gunshots.

United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 879 (St. Paul, Minnesota) and the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) got involved in Cuautitlan starting in 1991, during a union election. The CTM won by a thin margin, but a committee of observers that included UAW Local 879, the CAW and other labor and human rights organizations found numerous voting irregularities and widespread intimidation. At the next election in 1996, the CTM was able to block all non-CTM slates from the ballot. The CAW and UAW Local 879, joined by UAW Region 1A (large portions of Michigan), tried to observe and bring democracy to this election, but they were barred by the CTM. They were able to conduct worker interviews that showed evidence of intimidation,

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
before and during the election, and general disappointment that the FWDM slate was not on the ballot. However, despite their presence during the election and pressure they put on Ford, they failed to put significant pressure on the CTM, and were ultimately unsuccessful in achieving more democratic unionism.\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{Summary}

The proceeding cases represent the most significant examples of direct organizing-focused contact between American unions and workers abroad, and the only such cases explored by recent labor scholarship.\textsuperscript{23} These cases share common difficulties, opportunities and losses: the difficulties of achieving cross-border successes, the opportunities for strengthened ties internationally, and losses of moving away from the solidarity model.

Armbruster has listed on several occasions\textsuperscript{24} the following core difficulties to cross-border organizing: capital mobility, state repression, corporatist state-labor relations and what he calls the “trade union imperialism” (such as the AIFLD involvement in Central America). The threat of capital flight was palpable, especially for garment, manufacturing and assembly workers, like those in maquiladora zones. While state repression had decreased from its peak in most of these nations, the government officials in Guatemala and Mexico were certainly complicit in worker repression. The relationship between the CTM and the PRI government in Mexico was the most formidable and consistent obstacle to organizing free and democratic unions there, even with

\textsuperscript{22} Armbruster, “Cross-Border.”
\textsuperscript{23} This is excluding cases like the UPS global strike led by Teamsters, because it focused primarily on negotiation, not on organizing, and the exchange of unionists between countries was minimal.
cross-border support. While the work of the AIFLD rarely still presents a direct obstacle to organizing, the long term effects of weakening and dividing labor in Latin America and building extreme distrust of American labor is still significant.

I would expand on Armbruster’s last difficulty to show that building trust across borders is difficult even beyond a history of repressive activity. Overcoming cultural and linguistic barriers, and the suspicious of an outsider, especially one from the developed world in the developing world, is significant. This is evidenced most clearly in the early efforts of UNITE to work in Mexico, where the coalition break down on precisely those grounds, and to a less extent in the UAW case. The CTM was able to cast the UAW as outsiders and deny them legitimacy in advocating for the Mexican workers.

With this formidable set of obstacles, the gains of cross-border organizing appear unsurprisingly meek. Recognition of new unions is rare, and even then only a short term guarantee of worker protection, as plants can close or move. Even trade-level labor regulations have proven effective only during times of heightened political sensitivity. If American firms are able to disregard labor regulations abroad and even at home, what hope is there for raising labor standards internationally? I would argue that the gains are significant, not in the immediate victories in specific plants, but in the long-term relationships that unions are forming across borders, and the new ways union members are getting involved in the work of their union. These are proving to be valuable building blocks for winning campaigns against multinationals, protecting workers in the developing world, and revitalizing unions locally.
In moving away from the solidarity work, cross-border organizing loses inclusiveness. It only captures some workers (those formally employed for multinational corporations or their contractors) and fails to be a movement for all workers internationally. Some of this work has been picked up by broader campaigns of the AFL-CIO or individual unions, like UNITE’s Behind the Label campaign around garment sweatshops. Labor’s continuing involvement in the debates around labor standards and corporate responsibility also work towards this end, but have failed to create as strong cross-border connections as earlier solidarity work.

Analysis

Involved union leaders and outside observers have consistently viewed cross border organizing as an extension of the standard labor model of expanding or moving organizing efforts when jobs in a particular trade move. This expansion has at times been called the “New Jersey Strategy” in historical reference to the movement of garment and textile firms from New York to the then “foreign zones” of New Jersey in the early twentieth century. Blackwell offers the most thorough comparison and policy suggestions. Blackwell goes a step further than other analysts in noting that textile unions that followed firms to New Jersey to organize new workers had two additional prongs in their strategy. First, the union worked with management and downstream buyers to push for non-exploitative competition at the firm level. That is, the union pressured the firms to work together locally to find markets they could fill without cutting labor

27 Armbruster, “Cross-Border”; Frundt, “Trade.”
costs. Also, the unions began to form a broader coalition to press for the establishment of interstate commerce rules. One of the union’s complaints was that firms locating across the Hudson could avoid stiff labor legislation of New York; similar arguments were made when firms moved south. This coalition culminated in the Fair Labor Standards Act, establishing national minimum wages and working conditions for goods shipped across state borders.

Blackwell and others argue that the basic interests and incentives are no different for unions today as jobs move overseas rather than domestically. He advocates that’s unions expand their organizing efforts overseas and work with foreign unions, form innovative partnerships to keep jobs competitive in any location, and take steps towards realistic enforceable minimum standards tied to trade. His analysis captures a significant motivation for unions to get involved internationally. It explains the pattern of involvement of many unions, involvement closely related to the patterns of production and capital movement in their trade.

However, this explanation misses another obvious trend. While cross border labor action is a response to the globalization of capital, it is also a response to the globalization of people, specifically to trans-nationalism of migrants. Called long-distance nationalism by Glick Schiller and Fouron29 this is the phenomenon of immigrants, and even their second and third generation, maintaining strong ties to their country of origin. This is a challenge to the assimilation model of immigration, that immigrants quickly drop ties to their home country, especially the future generations. Glick Schiller and Fouron focus on remittances and other private transfers, political

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engagement and debate, and ongoing movements such as retiring to the country of origin as evidence of the long-distance nationalism.

I propose that trans-nationalism is also driving cross-border organizing, interacting with the New Jersey Strategy motivations by both pushing American unions out and pulling overseas unions in. First, because many unions are increasingly immigrant in composition, they have significant constituencies that take not only strategic, but also personal, community or political interest in the rights of workers in their country of origin. This is clear in UNITE’s work in the DR, and UE and CWA’s work in Mexico. This additional motivation may be influential in gaining the critical momentum to begin cross-border work. Additionally, as overcoming the outsider perception is a key difficulty of organizing, these transnational ties make unions more likely to be successful, which will encourage further action.

On the other side, US unions long in a state of crisis desperately need to organize new workers. Increasingly, the unorganized work force, across sectors and regions, contains immigrants from the developing world and their descendents. Unions are struggling to overcome cultural barriers and distrust of unions to organize these workers. Cross-border work aids these efforts by placing unorganized workers directly in contact with unionists from their country of origin, bridging cultural gaps, and allowing for the mistrust of unions, especially in countries with strong state-controlled unions, to be expelled. Additionally, unions benefit from the cross-border relationships they have, demonstrating their commitment to a wider group of workers, not just natives, and their strong partnerships with people and organizations abroad.
Trans-nationalism together with the New Jersey Strategy matches well with the case studies explored in this chapter. Unions expand internationally as firms and industries do, but are pushed and pulled towards engagement and success in certain areas because the ongoing connections immigrants have to their country of origin are significant. Cross border organizing, while extremely difficult, offers the hope of building strong inter-unions relationships that can achieve the much-needed gains in worker rights and organizing. This model, however, does leave behind a broader inclusiveness of an earlier solidarity movement.

The following two chapters detail cases that remove the New Jersey Strategy as a primary dynamic, and focus instead on how the pushes and pulls of trans-nationalism are moving these particular unions to work internationally.
Chapter 3

LCLAA: From Mavericks to Movers

*Origins, Core Work and Early International Involvement*

Leaders of local Latino trade union organizations came together in 1973 to form the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA), a national organization. Individual unionists may join LCLAA and participate through a local chapter. What started as a small movement of a few hundred unionists now represents 1.7 million Latino workers, participating in 65 chapters. Local chapters exist virtually all over the US and in Puerto Rico. One of the earliest members described the organization as formed by “mavericks and challengers” pursuing a popular movement within institutional labor that was “not welcomed by the AFL-CIO.”

However, from the very formation of LCLAA the AFL-CIO acted as if just the opposite were true. George Meany, then AFL-CIO president, said that LCLAA “had the full support of the house of the labor.” This likely represents the beginning of the process described by the early member of institutionalization of LCLAA, moving away from a member-driven popular movement to become increasingly driven by AFL-CIO leadership. The AFL-CIO claims LCLAA as a constituency group—a bridge between organized labor and diverse communities.

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A key moment in this process came when the AFL-CIO insisted that LCLAA could not endorse political candidates and could only pursue non-partisan political work. 33 After spending its first few years aggressively expanding the organization’s membership, LCLAA moved towards large-scale engagement of non-partisan voter registration, voter education and ‘Get-Out-The-Vote’ drives. This three-pronged vote strategy peeked for the 1980 Presidential election year. LCLAA in concert with other labor and Latino groups registered 200,000 Latinos and distributed 100,000 pieces of literature. LCLAA estimates their efforts alone brought over 150,000 Latinos to the polls. 34 These efforts remain a core part of LCLAA’s work.

LCLAA was a leader in numerous local political campaigns, including a campaign to stop a compulsory open shop law from going into effect in New Mexico in 1987. LCLAA also participated in groundbreaking work on women’s issues—particularly of Latinas—within and outside of the labor movement. LCLAA created a Hispanic Women’s Caucus in 1982 and held the LCLAA Women’s Conference in 1984, the first national Latina labor conference. These efforts contributed to a process of bring more Latina women into the labor movement and leadership within LCLAA and labor more generally.

LCLAA only minimally engaged international issues in its first fifteen years of operation. Its only notable work on foreign policy was to offer strong support for the Panama Canal Treaties (which negotiated transferring control of the canal to Panama) in the late 1970’s. This is less remarkable because it was a position taken, albeit less strongly, by the AFL-CIO, a surprisingly

33 Martin del Campo.
34 LCLAA, LCLAA, 18.
progressive stance for that era of labor union foreign policy. In contrast, the LCLAA was
decidedly silent on US interventionist policy and labor complicity in Central America and
elsewhere in Latin America. LCLAA early international work did include sending a delegation
of its leaders to Israel, at the request of the Israeli General Federation of Labor, to meet with
factory workers, kibbutz residents and political leaders. LCLAA was also a key organizer of
humanitarian relief for natural disasters in Latin America, responding to the 1985 Mexican
earthquake and mud slides and flooding in Puerto Rico in the same year. In a 1987 summit
meeting with AFL-CIO top leadership, LCLAA reaffirmed its interest in international affairs in
Latin America and the Caribbean.

The AFL-CIO would recognize this interest, at least superficially. The LCLAA President was
invited to join an AFL-CIO delegation that met with the Mexican labor federation (CTM) in
1988. The conference focused on the emerging maquiladora system, which was cutting US jobs
and exploiting Mexican workers. However, LCLAA was fully deferent to AFL-CIO on this
matter, and left the issue to the AFL-CIO Executive Council. The Executive Council worked
only with the government-associated and arguably undemocratic CTM.36

From Immigration to Internationalism

In 1979 while most of American labor stayed away from pro-immigrant position, LCLAA would
raise questions around immigration with a particular interest in the concerns of undocumented
workers. LCLAA worked in concert with immigration organizations to push these issues to

December 1977: 18.

36 LCLAA, LCLAA.
national prominence, by some accounts against the status quo of the house of labor.\textsuperscript{37} LCLAA’s commitment to undocumented workers manifested itself profoundly in response to the Immigration Reform Act (1986). LCLAA launched an Amnesty Assistance Program to help undocumented workers use the provisions of the new law. The program included production and distribution of a video and widespread outreach across the country. LCLAA worked with immigration organizations to expand the efforts to include Naturalization Classes in some locations.\textsuperscript{38}

Despite the success of these large programs and positive responses, LCLAA did not immediately expand on this work. LCLAA still deferred to AFL-CIO on the larger questions of immigration policy. However, the national LCLAA office became increasingly interested in unionists in northern California that were bridging immigration and solidarity work into exciting new initiatives. Union leaders who had been involved both in solidarity work in Central America from the early 1980’s and immigration work in the mid- and late-1980’s saw an opportunity to bring these two areas together following the 1988 Mexican Presidential election. Opposition Presidential candidate Cuauhtémoc Cardenas of the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) was presenting a major challenge to the 60-year rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). It quickly became one of the most important elections in recent history. The PRI candidate won in a highly contested election. There were weeks of unrest in the streets of the capital and in the legislature. Cardenas and another opposition candidate accused the PRI of

\textsuperscript{37} Martin del Campo.  
\textsuperscript{38} LCLAA, LCLAA.
fraudulently denying them millions of votes, but could not prevail in any of the legal or political angles they took.\textsuperscript{39}

The California unionists took interest in these events for two reasons. First, running as a challenger to the dominant party in Mexico, Cardenas and the PRD represented the potential for major changes in Mexican policy and practice that would allow far more independent and democratic unions to form, and otherwise increase the rights and protections of workers. Taking interest in and supporting his candidacy was consistent with the model of international worker solidarity that brought significant attention and change to Central America. Further, his allegation that the ruling party had illegally interfered with election results demonstrated that the path to broader democratic changes in Mexico was not completely clear, another consistent concern of the solidarity movements. Mexico is an especially strong case because its proximity to the United States puts many of its industries in much more direct competition with their counterparts in America. Labor had an interest in ensuring the rights of workers weren’t being undercut in Mexico to make Mexican firms more competitive and that democracy was functioning properly.

Second, Mexicans living in northern California, many of them unionists, expressed a strong interest in the election, and in Cardenas. In the year following the election, Cardenas became increasing eager to bring his campaign for change to Mexicans living in the United States. Even then, it was not unheard of for local politicians to campaign in the United States, often connecting to specific migrant communities through hometown associations or similar organizations. However, Cardenas was the first national candidate to make significant appeals in

the United States. His visits in 1989 would spark a string of visits that included all three main political parties and received national attention in the US.\textsuperscript{40} A group of northern Californian Latino labor leaders was integral in organizing and encouraging Cardenas’ visit to the United States. Their presence was obvious in Cardenas choosing to focus his visit in San Francisco, when Los Angeles is the largest and considerably most important concentration of Mexicans abroad. During what turned out to be the height of his campaign, the labor leaders organized forums at the local labor hall. These forums drew hundreds of participants and were extremely well received by the Mexican and Mexican-American communities and other labor constituencies.

Throughout his visit in California, Cardenas focused on a range of issues connecting not only expatriate Mexicans back to Mexico, but also broader issues between America and Mexico. Cardenas addressed trade, debt and labor market issues that affected Mexicans at home and in the United States. He was also one of the earliest and strongest supporters of absentee voting.\textsuperscript{41} The Cardenas visit spawned sustained interest in Mexico among northern California unionists, as well as an interest in this work by the LCLAA national. The primary organizer of the Cardenas visit, Frank Martin del Campo—himself one of LCLAA’s earliest members, had fallen out of touch with the organization, but would be put in contact with them again in 1990 because of the attention drawn to his work with Mexico. Currently working as an organizer with the Service Employees International Union, Martin del Campo had over two decades of experience working with a variety of unions across California, as well as prior work with Chicano Nationalism and Chicano student movements. Martin del Campo successfully ran for President of the San


Francisco chapter of LCLAA in 1990 and carried on international work with Mexico from that post.

*Delegations and Continuing Work*

As interest in Mexican issues ran high after the Cardenas visit, Martin del Campo and colleagues decided to organize visits of American unionists to Mexico. The first delegation of 16 members went in 1990 and included union staff and rank-and-file members from local chapters of the Service Employees International Union, the Glass, Molders and Plastics Workers, the California Teachers Association, and the International Ladies Garment Workers. The delegation included workers of Mexican descent and other interested workers. The delegation had an impressive itinerary, meeting with a wide range of individuals within and outside of the Mexican labor movement.

The California unionists met with both top leadership and rank-and-file unionists of not only the PRI-aligned Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), but also independent unions like the Mexican Electrical Workers Union and opposition unions of the Coordination of Revolutionary Workers. This alone was a significant accomplishment for the time, as connections between American unions and non-PRI unions were rare, and connections with both were virtually unheard of. The visit also served as a follow-up to Cardenas’ visit to California. They met with Cardenas and other members of the PRD to discuss the ongoing work of the political opposition in Mexico. This visit also included discussion with important leaders in Mexico trade union history and those currently working with trade unions through the PRD. This added to the
delegations understanding of Mexican labor in a historical and political context. Based on these meetings and the continuing connections they formed, the San Francisco LCLAA chapter was among the few places in the American labor movement to have a broad picture of the situation on the ground for unionists in Mexico.42

The delegation also met with a number of related organizations like worker cooperatives and labor education organizations that were comparatively rare in the US. Individual members of the delegation were also able to meet with their Mexican counterparts in several industries, or with organizations around particular interests like labor law, the situation in the maquiladoras, occupational health and safety, and labor-community work in Mexico.

LCLAA organized the delegation to explore further the issues that came out of the 1988 election around PRI-dominance, as well as concerns of independence and democracy of trade unions. However, interest quickly shifted to include trade policy as well. This change was driven from both sides of the border. Some of the California delegates expressed an interest in Mexico because they were witnessing plant relocations and they knew that what went on within Mexico politically and inside labor would be very important to them. A much wider range of Mexican society expressed strong interest in trade policies. Martin del Campo relates the following anecdote: In the delegation’s first day in Mexico, he was getting his shoes shined in a park. The man shining his shoes, on learning what they were doing in Mexico, asked him what he thought about NAFTA. Neither Martin del Campo nor anyone else with him knew what it was.43

43 Martin del Campo.
Mexican union leaders and rank-and-file unionists, as well as politicians and activists, would repeatedly confront the delegation with questions around trade policy. The delegation would bring back a message from the Mexican unionists: just as business managers, trade ministers and politicians were meeting and negotiating around the upcoming trade measures, so unions should come together. Cardenas and independent trade union leaders made this point especially strong. They wanted to have direct contact between Mexican and American workers to push for policies that would benefit both. Specifically, the Mexican unionists were pressing for dialogues with American labor that went beyond the AFL-CIO’s blanket opposition to NAFTA.\textsuperscript{44} The California unionists, while unable to make significant connections in the short amount of time it took President Clinton to push NAFTA through, continued to received attention from labor groups across the country because they were approaching the NAFTA issue from a standpoint of solidarity and not protectionism.

While LCLAA increased its focus on trade issues, it also maintained an interest in the democratic process of Mexico. They sent another delegation around the time of the 1994 elections, to watch for the irregularities that allegedly plagued the 1988 polls. Cardenas ran again, but his campaign was not as strong as in 1988. The PRI candidate prevailed in a largely undisputed result. The LCLAA delegation continued to strengthen ties between the participating unions and unions in Mexico.\textsuperscript{45} Building on the work around free trade, LCLAA encouraged cross-border action throughout American labor, such as passing resolutions opposing NAFTA or calling for strengthened labor protections. They also encouraged direct connections between American and Mexican unions, especially in the same industry and under common employers. LCLAA San

\textsuperscript{44} LCLAA, \textit{Labor Report}.
Francisco served as a resource to many unions seeking to make such connections. This raised interest among Mexican communities and other labor constituencies in the US and is reflected in some of the early NAFTA era cross-border organizing cases, as well as the current increasing activity between American and Mexican unions.

The LCLAA San Francisco chapter believes their international work is deeply connected to the core organizing work of unions, even as that work has taken a back seat to domestic battles in recent years. Their model of organizing begins with information and education: bringing the reality of the exploited worker out, often an immigrant or migrant worker. Next, they organize and build solidarity around these issues. To do this in the context of the newly arrived immigrant requires international connections to bring these workers into a broader movement that includes their concern. Finally, they press for change within the labor movement. For example, LCLAA has been a strong supporter of organizations like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) that seek to organize immigrant farm workers in Florida, workers largely outside the reach of traditional labor union organizing efforts. LCLAA supported the CIW in its efforts to bring its campaign against Taco Bell national attention by staging teach-ins and demonstrations in California that was the fruit of coalition building with a variety of union, student, anti-sweatshop and anti-globalization groups. LCLAA seeks further support for organizations of this type within the labor movement, rather than waiting for the labor movement to organize these workers.46

Their support for the Immokalee workers is a close parallel to their international work. They seek to move away from institutionalized labor channels and towards grassroots connections between and movements of workers, in this case across borders. Like the Immokalee case, they seek coalitions that include other grassroots organizations. Similarly, they wish to see grassroots organizations driving the policy agendas, not the chosen politicians of institutionalized labor. While the AFL-CIO looked to Democrats like Dick Gephardt to take the lead on immigration—and expected the rest of labor to fall into line behind him—the LCLAA sought to re-establish the independence of immigration groups to advocate for policy and rely on labor for support and coalition building. The LCLAA advocates the same independent and grassroots focus for international work, moving away from the institutional, largely protectionist stance of the AFL-CIO.

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47 Martin del Campo.
Chapter 4

1199: Organizers as Ambassadors

History

1199 began as Local 1199 of the Retail Drug Employes Union, a small union of pharmacists in New York in the 1930’s. The union’s early history is notable for a 1936 strike in Harlem by predominantly white pharmacists for the rights of blacks to work as pharmacists. However, the union remained quite small until it engaged in large and ambitious organizing projects starting in the late 1950’s to organize the non-professional workers in New York’s charitable hospitals. These hospitals, also called voluntary and now non-profit, had wages well below the city’s public hospitals—private for-profit hospitals were still rare—and were not subject to the same labor law requirements as the public institutions. The workforce, porters, kitchen staff, orderlies, nurses’ aides, elevator operators, launderers and other housekeeping staff, was predominantly black and Puerto Rican, and overwhelmingly female. This organizing campaign gripped the city of New York when workers from several hospitals went on strike in 1959 for 46 days to demand union recognition. While that strike was ultimately unsuccessful in gaining recognition, it brought thousands of workers into the union and demonstrated the resolve of the workers and the union to fight on their behalf. The union would take their fight to the policy arena and successfully push for changes in New York’s labor laws that would force the hospitals to recognize the unions. Over the next decade, they would continue their organizing efforts in the non-profit hospitals, also bringing in nurses and technicians and starting to organize in nursing homes. At the same time, the union became closely involved with the civil rights movement.
From the 1950’s the union had given financial support to civil rights activities in the south. They were a key supporter of the Montgomery bus boycott, from which they formed a lasting friendship with Martin Luther King, Jr. The union is associated ideologically with the west coast farm unions of the same era.

The union expanded nationally starting in 1969. The initial expansion came at the request of workers in Charleston, South Carolina. The campaign there was difficult and only a partial success, but 1199’s help was also requested in Baltimore, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh that same year. Through the 1970’s, the union expanded to many other cities, but was still largest in New York. The union continued its drive to unionize all hospital workers in New York, taking on some of the largest and most anti-union employers. The union also expanded its organizing efforts into public sector hospitals, putting it in direct competition with other unions. At the same time, state budget constraints and the related political environment led to a tougher organizing climate in public hospitals. This, combined with the impending change in leadership—ending the old guard that launched the union into prominence—brought on discussions of a merger with one of the main unions competing to organize public sector workers, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). 1199 and SEIU had worked together on issues of labor law reform, and their leaders began talks about how to coordinate more on organizing and representation. The merger and succession of leadership were difficult and controversial issues which entangled the union for several years in the 1980’s. However, by the end of the decade, the merger was fully cemented. 1199, New York’s Health and Human
Service Union, emerged as a strong partner in the new union, but like the other locals, remained largely autonomous in running its day-to-day affairs.\textsuperscript{48}

\textit{Marriage with Haitian-American Activism}

In the 1980’s, 1199 would experience and drive changes that would greatly alter the composition of its workforce. New Haitian and Dominican arrivals would displace African-Americans and Puerto Ricans in many of the low-wage jobs they held in the hospitals. Also, 1199 expanded its organizing efforts into emerging sectors that were also being filled largely by these new wave of immigrants: nursing homes and home health aides especially. 1199 organized in most of the largest sectors for Haitian workers, and quickly became one of the organizations with the most Haitians and Haitian-Americans. Of 1199’s 210,000 members, around 40,000 are Haitian.\textsuperscript{49} It is not surprising then that 1199 was involved in the most important moments for the Haitian-American community.

The first occurred on 10 April 1990. For years, Haitians had been unfairly linked to the emerging HIV/AIDS epidemic. By 1990, the scientific evidence countering such a link was voluminous and irrefutable, but the US Food and Drug Administration would not change their policies. Haitian community activists, coming off a major victory getting Haitian Kreyol recognized as an official medium for English as a Foreign Language students by the New York State Board of Regents, organized a massive rally against the classification of Haitians as an

\textsuperscript{48} For an exceptionally rich history of 1199 through the 1980’s see Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg, \textit{Upheaval in the Quiet Zone}, Chicago: University of Illinois, 1989.

\textsuperscript{49} Agence Haitienne de Presse (AHP), “A labor union of health care workers in the US offers a shipment of equipment and materials to the Ministry of Health,” 23 July 2002, and confirmed by 1199 Administrative Organizer John Alexis.
AIDS risk group. The demonstration was held in concert with a similar demonstration in Miami, the second largest destination for Haitians coming to America, and a protest at the American embassy in Port-au-Prince. In New York, tens of thousands of Haitians marched across the Brooklyn Bridge and poured into lower-Manhattan, shutting down traffic into and out of Manhattan, bringing Manhattan to a standstill. They surrounded city hall and demanded government action. 1199 was a major sponsor of the event, and brought out their Haitian workers by the thousands. The FDA policy changed within months. The importance of this event to Haitians in America and in Haiti did not go unnoticed.50

Haitians in New York would once again take over the Brooklyn Bridge and lower Manhattan in 1991 to protest the military coup, which displaced democratically elected populist candidate Jean-Bertrande Aristide. Like the rally around the AIDS policy, this was directed at the US government. In this case, many Haitians felt the US government had long been opposed to Aristide and had aided the military rebels that seized power. 1199 was once again a key sponsor, and its members were a large constituency. 1199 continued to voice opposition to the coup and in support of Aristide, including lobbying efforts at the national level over the period of the military rule.

An incident much closer to home hit New York’s Haitian community in 1997. New York City police officers arrested Haitian immigrant Abner Louima outside a Brooklyn nightclub. In transit and at the police station he was badly beaten and tortured. Several officers and officials were involved in trying to cover-up the events. While working with an array of community

groups, 1199 took the lead in organizing a response to this incident. Staging demonstrations and protests as well as aiding in Louima’s legal case against the city, 1199 took the lead in bringing together not only much of the Haitian community, but also other communities of color and immigrants.

John Alexis, a community activist who had been heavily involved in the AIDS and Aristide demonstrations in the early 1990’s, had spent 1994 to 1997 working for the Aristide administration in Haiti, but was back in New York when the Louima incident occurred. While only planning to be in New York for a visit, Alexis became the principle organizer of a rally on Louima’s behalf, putting him again in contact with leadership at 1199 with which he had earlier worked. 1199 was in the process of merging with Local 144 of SEIU, nursing home workers, part of a strategy to unite all of New York’s health care workers under one union. The union sought Alexis’ help with the merger, in convincing the members of Local 144, many of them Haitian, to agree to join 1199. The merger was successful, and Alexis stayed on with the union as an administrative organizer, negotiating contracts and representing employees to employers. However, Alexis also acts as the “Haitian Ambassador” within in 1199. Known by the union for his connections and organizing within the Haitian community, Alexis would represent the union to Haitians and to Haiti. He would also try to get the union more involved in issues related to Haiti. 51

Work in Haiti with President Aristide

It would not be the union, however, that would initiate the next level of connection between the union and Haiti. In planning for his election in 2000 (Aristide stepped down in 1996 to comply Haiti’s ban on consecutive terms), Aristide met with several 1199 leaders who he knew from their earlier years of support and other work with Haitians. Aristide was seeking help with his election campaign as well as long-term support for his political vision for Haiti. While the union was not significantly involved in the election, they maintained close ties with Aristide, who invited several union leaders to attend his inauguration. During this visit, 1199 staff continued the conversation with Aristide’s administration about how they could aid Haiti. Because 1199 works primarily with health care workers, they meet with members of the health care and public health community in Haiti. They were told that help was needed with the ongoing tuberculosis (TB) crisis and met with officials in the Haitian Ministry of Health and Population to discuss possible means of support. 1199 committed to sponsor a public TB hospital—to modernize it and ensure it has all the equipment it needs. They would follow this up with a more far-reaching public education campaign focusing on both TB and AIDS done in conjunction with UN agencies.

Alexis, as the Haitian ambassador, is the principal organizer of these activities. Under his direction, 1199 organized a delegation to visit Haiti in 2001 on a fact-finding mission. They saw the current health facilities and met with a range of government officials, international and local NGO’s. They moved forward by soliciting donations of the necessary equipment and supplies from institutions that employed 1199 members. By June 2002, they were ready to send their first
shipment of equipment to Haiti. Before sending it, they organized a rally at 1199’s headquarters in New York that drew hundreds of union members, largely but not entirely Haitian, and included a visit by a Haitian Ambassador to the US.\textsuperscript{52} When the shipment arrived in Haiti the following month, Alexis traveled to Haiti to meet again with health officials and see the hospital work move forward and encourage more action on the public education plan.\textsuperscript{53} A second shipment of equipment and supplies was sent in December 2002, arriving in January 2003. 1199 is now following up and evaluating the support of the TB hospital.

The public education campaign is moving into the detailed planning stages. Like nearly all work in Haiti presently, it is slowed by a complex political and economic situation that has stopped huge amounts of international aid from entering Haiti. While 1199 presses forward on its public health work, it has also been working the multitude of organizations that are trying to get the aid money released. They also attempted to advise President Aristide on some of the political matters, but did not receive the cooperation they thought necessary to maintain that effort. They continue to advocate for political change in Haiti, but have distanced themselves from a more direct relationship with Aristide. Additionally, 1199 continues to work closely with Haitian communities groups in the US that remain interested in these issues. They are participating in early discussions about the possibility of holding a summit for Haitians living outside Haiti around the political crises in Haiti and the US administration policy on Haiti. While they are not at the forefront of this planning, they will likely be a key organizer and sponsor of the event. Finally, 1199 is very interested in the upcoming bicentennial celebration in Haiti. Alexis is

\textsuperscript{52} New York’s Health Care Union 1199 SEIU “,Union Drive to Eradicate TB in Haiti Picks Up Steam,” \textit{Recent News}, \texttt{http://www.1199seiu.org/recentnews.cfm} (20 January 2003).

\textsuperscript{53} AHP, “A labor union.”
working on a proposal for participation that will likely include sponsorship of an event. Because of its immediacy, this remains a pressing issue.\textsuperscript{54}

1199’s work with Haiti uncomfortably straddles two models of international involvement, neither of which fully captures their actions and motivation: humanitarian relief aid and cross-border union organizing. 1199, like other unions, supports a range of humanitarian relief efforts overseas, such as food and health aid after natural disasters or other crises. 1199 has done such work in Haiti,\textsuperscript{55} as well as the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Trinidad and Guyana in recent years alone. However, the public health work in Haiti is different in that it has an additional political dimension. While it does seek to address the public health crises, it also seeks to support the political vision of the administration. While the fact-finding delegation that traveled to Haiti met with international and local NGO’s and sought their input and support, it was not looking for the most expedient or efficient means of addressing health concerns, which might have worked outside the government altogether.

However, cross border union organizing and solidarity efforts place the rights of workers, whether unionized or seeking unionization, as central. 1199’s work in Haiti did not involved Haitian unions or Haitians as workers, but sought to support a government in providing basic health care to its citizens. This is not to say that 1199 has ignored the situation of workers in Haiti. They are concerned about lack of independence of trade unions, government controls and

\textsuperscript{54} Alexis.
\textsuperscript{55} They have solicited support for an assisted care facility that provides health care to children and the elderly. Personal Communication from Luis Matos, “World Organization for The Right of the People to Health Care” 28 March 2003.
other restrictions on organizations. They have raised these concerns to the Haitian government, but are mostly just observing and learning more about the situation presently.56

*International Work in Context*

While Haitians membership in 1199 is 40,000, they are still barely a quarter of the union’s total membership. Yet, the work done in Haiti by 1199 serves to bring union members of different backgrounds together more than push them apart. The drive for equipment donations for Haiti was truly 1199-wide and was helped by many non-Haitians. As Alexis put it, “everybody has a Haitian friend” in the union. They have developed relationships around causes and support each other during campaigns like this one. Much as the union has brought together separate ethnic, racial and national groups for local union and political campaigns, they are building the same coalitions for international work. There is another organizer, Luis Matos, who acts as the ‘Dominican Ambassador’ for that large and active constituency. Matos, Alexis and others move forward in making the union more responsive to a variety of communities and look for ways the union can act on their behalf. The union has long envisioned itself as a social, activist union, not a business union, and considers this international work a continuing part of that. Alexis called the work in Haiti “normal”—it is what they do because it is who they are. This became clear towards the end of a lengthy interview with Alexis when he mentioned that President Aristide’s mother has been a member of 1199 for 39 years. The deep connections been Haitians in the US and Haiti remain strong. Both older Haitians born there and a younger generation born in the US fill 1199’s ranks, and are often deeply connected to both places. Alexis himself was born in the US, though he later spent time serving in the Haitian government. In this sense, 1199 was not

56 Alexis.
creating or forging new international connections, but rather just recognizing and adopting the relationships their members already had.
Chapter 5
Analysis and Conclusion

The international work of 1199 and LCLAA is exceptional within the labor movement. They have gone beyond the prevalent model—cross-border union organizing—to engage with a much wider range of issues around not only labor rights, but also governance and democracy. While this work is exceptional, it is significant because it addresses issues fundamentally important to America unions. First, trans-nationalism will be of continuing importance to millions of American workers, not only because of continuing immigration, but also because trans-national identities are being adopted by second and third generation immigrants. As Glick Schiller and Fouron detail through ethnographic study of Haitian college students in New York, many students of Haitian descent desire strong ties with Haiti and identify as Haitians. While this is partially caught up with the complex landscape of racial identity in the US, it is nonetheless a very significant dynamic.\(^{57}\)

Second, the extent to which a union is embedded in social networks can affect its success in a range of strategic objectives. Safford and Locke’s matched pair case study of pipe trades and carpenters unions in Boston and Portland, Oregon shows that unions that had connections with local stakeholders—broadly including industry, government, financial sector and community and civil society groups—are more poised to revitalize, build membership and win local campaigns for keeping jobs unionized and wages and benefits high.\(^{58}\) Cross-border organizing and the

\(^{57}\) Glick Schiller and Fouron, *Georges Woke Up*, 155.

expanded efforts of 1199 and LCLAA suggest several possible extensions to this conclusion. The interests, campaigns and stakeholders for unions are no longer only local, or even national, in scope, but often international as well. Additionally, the range of campaigns unions may wish to engage in is no longer limited to issues like wages and benefits, but could include affordable housing, childcare, education, transportation and others. Campaigns such as these, whether initiated or supported by the union, would benefit greatly from connections between the union and other community groups.

The cases of 1199 and LCLAA are also exceptional in the trans-national perspective. Few connections have been made between the trans-national connections of individuals and institutions like unions. Even the most in-depth studies of trans-nationalism tend to focus almost exclusively on private connections such as remittances, or local community ties like hometown associations.  Fitzgerald, on the other hand, has demonstrated how these personal and local ties are expanding into broader national and international concerns. In his study of a laborers local in Southern California, he explores the role of hometown associations and migrant networks in not only recruiting and internal union politics, but also in turning the union and its members to engagement with larger political campaigns on both sides of the border. 1199 and LCLAA in a sense began directly with the latter, working at the national level rather than in particular locales. This demonstrates that the trans-nationalism is not limited to the private actions of individuals, but also is affecting the large institutions like labor unions to act across borders. Contrary to the narrow view of trans-nationalism as consisting primarily of remittances

59 Glick Schiller and Fournon, *Georges Woke Up.*

and hometown associations, 1199 and LCLAA represent a trans-national project that incorporates national politics and international relations.

These cases stand out in one other—more foundational—way, beyond internationalism and trans-nationalism: ethnic leadership. LCLAA, in its origin and mission, and 1199, through its practices, have gone beyond inclusion and tokenism to truly incorporate and empower leaders of formerly marginalized or recently arrived ethnic groups. While there have been periods and movements of strong ethnic leadership in American labor,\(^{61}\) the more common story, especially recently, has been of a failure of unions to translate the diversity of their membership into changes in leadership. Racial, ethnic and gender inequalities still plague union organizing efforts.\(^{62}\) The extent to which LCLAA and 1199 actively overcome that trend greatly contributed to their ability to make the connections between the trans-national and the international.

**Gains**

The potential gains for unions that do international work around trans-national issues are large, and directed towards some of the most significant challenges American unions face. In attempting to work cross-nationally, unions struggle against a long history of conservative, protectionist or otherwise self-interested activity. In the face of increasing international competition in many sectors, unions have been slow to break out of this pattern. Even as unions in America and Latin America have taken very similar stands on a range of policies around trade

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and labor standards, there has been surprisingly little cooperation between the organizations. The model of 1199 and LCLAA offers a path to changing this. By working initially and directly with progressive forces in other countries, American unions can form relationships that will push their work to be supportive of workers overseas, and launch or participate in campaigns that will truly create benefit in both places. To the extent that their work has the potential to enact broad policy and governance changes in other countries, it is partially a return to the solidarity work that pre-dated much of the cross-border organizing of the last two decades. It goes beyond the narrow focus of cross-border organizing by seeking broader changes that benefit all residents of the partner country, not just those working in the same industry or company.

Similarly, 1199 and LCLAA have begun to scratch the surface of the possible connections between large progressive political forces across countries. Even the most successful cross-border organizing initiatives—those that maintain ongoing relationships—are greatly limited in their capacity to hold onto or institutionalize their gains without major changes in policy and enforcement. 1199 and LCLAA, both fairly seasoned at connecting to larger political movements to bring about political change in the US, have shown the ability to connect to national politics overseas. Though laden with serious challenges (see below), these connections allude to the possibility of a new internationalism, reminiscent of the periods of strong international labor organizations in the late nineteenth century and towards the end of the inter-war period. That is, a cohesive group of labor collectives and progressive political parties that seeks to protect workers during times of massive global economic and political shifts.
In all these ways, increased internationalism stands to benefit native workers, with no trans-national ties, just as much as recent immigrants or other members of trans-national communities. In fact, these trans-nationalist driven international activities address many of the core concerns for all American unions: how to operate and remain relevant in an increasingly globalized world, how to counteract diminishing influence and rising corporate power, and how to make meaningful connections to new workers.

Challenges

Therefore, the primary difficulty lies not in changing the organizational aims or logistical means of most unions. What 1199 and LCLAA shared and capitalized on—what made them the exceptional successes—was their consistent history of progressive engagement with communities that were largely marginalized within the US political landscape, and in the mainstream of labor. This went a long way towards building connections and trust with the Mexican and Haitian communities that they could use to carry out otherwise risky and unlikely partnerships. The primary difficulty in bringing this work to other unions, as mirrored in cross-border organizing cases, is cultural: the onerous and difficult work of reaching out and building new connections to overcome distrust and form relationships.

A second, and in some sense more daunting, challenge is the complexity of engaging with states in the developing world, especially states with long histories of illegitimate governments and abuses of power and short, if any, histories of stable and functioning democratic institutions. Haiti presents a clear example of this struggle. After putting years of effort into supporting
Aristide as the democratic choice of Haitians, 1199 has now found it has to delicately maneuvering around a protracted political crisis that deeply divides Haitians on the island and abroad. What is at issue is not the particulars of Aristide or even Haiti, but the myriad of competing visions of and demands on states. Glick Schiller and Fouron capture this dilemma most elegantly in contrasting the notion of the “responsible state” to the reality of the “apparent state.” The responsible state view (according to Glick Schiller and Fouron held by most Haitians inside and outside the country), is that the state is largely autonomous to act on behalf of its citizens’ interests. Therefore, any failure to do so is a failure of particular politicians or programs. However, they argue that the historical context, and continuing role of foreign governments, international financial institutions and other forces really make Haiti one of many apparent states, having “almost no independent authority to make meaningful changes within their territorial boundaries.” The specific of the claims is not as important as the complexity of their implications—that unions attempting to work across borders will have to navigate through a wide range of notions of the state within and among constituencies and partners in any attempt to bring about substantive change.

Summary

American labor stands at the crossroads of trans-nationalism and internationalism. Despite a history of largely non-international, self-interested and at times counter-international work, many Americans unions have over the last two decades engaged in a variety of solidarity or cross-border organizing campaigns. Many of these relied on the trans-national connections of their members for impetus or success. 1199 and LCLAA went beyond the cross-border organizing

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63 Glick Schiller and Fouron, *George Woke Up*, 211.
model to build broader movements for change from the trans-national connections of their constituents. While serious challenges face other unions attempting to do similar work, overcoming cultural gaps and distrust for native-dominated unions, and the complexities of developing nation states for all cases, the potential gains are immense. By seizing on this model of forming direct links with overseas progressive associations—be they labor, political or civic organizations—unions stand poised for serious gains. They can simultaneously re-capture much of what was lost by American labor’s lack of participation in past periods of strong labor internationalism, as well as addressing many of the core problems unions must face to remain vital domestically. The trans-national identities of these new internationalism pioneers have exposed what is possible for American labor more broadly.
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