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# Review article:

## reflections on international labour studies in the UK

Peter Waterman

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### ABSTRACT

Reflecting personally on the contribution of the UK to international labour studies over the past forty years and his own role in this history, Peter Waterman reviews some recent publications and websites from both inside and outside the official trade union movement. These are:

**Tony Pilch (ed)** *Trades Unions and Globalisation*, London: Smith Institute. 86 pp. ISBN 1-905370-14-8

**Sheila Cohen**, *Ramparts of Resistance: Why Workers Lost Their Power and How to Get it Back*, London: Pluto, 248 pp. ISBN 13-978-0-7453-1529-4 (pb)

**Ronaldo Munck**, 2006. *Globalisation and Contestation: The Great Counter-Movement*, London: Routledge. 176 pp. ISBN-10 0415376564

**Angela Hale and Jane Wills (eds)**. *Threads of Labour: Garment Industry Supply Chains from the Workers' Perspective*, Oxford: Blackwell, 288 pp. ISBN-10: 1405126388

**Paul Mason**, *Live Working or Die Fighting: How the Working Class Went Global*, London: Harvill Secker. 304 pp. ISBN 978-0-436-20615-3

*NewUnionism* <http://www.newunionism.net/>

*Union Ideas Network* <http://www.uin.org.uk/>

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*'A new idea that blossoms in Britain is not a British idea except for the time that it takes for it to be printed. Once launched into space by the press, this idea, if it expresses some universal truth, can also be instantaneously transformed into an internationalist idea.'*

(José Carlos Mariátegui, 1886-1923)

### Introduction: two cheers

Two cheers for the newest international labour studies and resources from the UK.

Many Britons might wish to ask what 'universalism' might humanly and effectively mean in our post-modern and post-postmodern times. But Little Britain, curiously, *has* had some kind of initiating role in the production of international labour studies and resources – and not only on the 'emancipatory left' (which is where I like to place myself). Having been involved with the 'New International Labour Studies' (NILS) in the 1970s and 1980s, and published the *Newsletter of International Labour Studies*

(also NILS) through the 1980s, I was also a reluctant witness to their decline, as the twin *tsunamis* of globalisation and neo-liberalism struck unions and labour studies worldwide. None of the major labour movement traditions of the previous period, whether Communist, Social-Democratic or Populist (Radical-Nationalist), had in any way prepared unions for this. With such temporary exceptions as Poland, South Africa, South Korea and Brazil, the forward march of labour was not so much halted as reversed.

The decline of international labour studies was marked in the UK at that time by the failure of a planned Zed Press series to take off from a promising start, as well as by the collapse of the monthly *International Labour Reports*, based in the UK's de-industrialising North. Many activist international labour specialists migrated, one of them literally, to what he expected to remain the social-democratic island paradise of New Zealand. Other activists abandoned their little lifeboats to return to the trade union *Titanic*, playing here the role of organisers, advisors, or freelance consultants, often quite impressively.<sup>1</sup> British projects dating from the post-1968 period, such as the Coventry Workshop and the Leeds Trade Union and Community Resource and Information Centre (combining labour, community and internationalist activities) also went into decline. Clearly there remained exceptions, but these were small voices crying in a political and academic wilderness.<sup>2</sup> Others, still committed to international social protest, moved in the direction of the 'new social movements' in general or feminism in particular. Or they began reconsidering the international labour movement as a potential part of some kind of new global process. I was one of these Britons, though an expatriate one. So was Ronaldo Munck, an 'inpatriate' of the British Isles, my one-time collaborator and occasional interlocutor.<sup>3</sup> I do not wish to overstate the depths of the decline, nor the extent of the recovery. But I would like to note my pleasure at what has been coming to my attention, in padded envelopes or down the virtual pipeline to my computer screen.<sup>4</sup>

I would also like to note that, although the term 'international labour studies' could include international studies of production, of work and workers, I have used it here to mean international studies of labour as a community, culture or class, as a

1 One of these is Celia Mather, a former editor of *International Labour Reports* (ILR), who has played this role both for traditional trade unions and for the new labour networks. See, for example, her excellent handbook for women workers in the global clothing industry (Mather, 2004). Others are the two founders of ILR, Dave Spooner and Stuart Howard. The first became a leading figure in the International Federation of Worker Education Associations, the second in the International Transport Workers Federation.

2 One of these has to be the quarterly *International Union Rights*, currently, I think, the only autonomous international labour solidarity magazine in the world. In both style and appearance the UK-based magazine is reminiscent of *International Labour Reports*. But the origins of IUR lie not in the shopfloor internationalism of the 1970s-80s but in the sclerotic World Federation of Trade Unions (see below). As the WFTU followed the downward path of its Communist-bloc sponsors, its labour rights network – coordinated in the UK by Tom Sibley – broke away and gave birth to this magazine and associated activities. It is my impression that IUR has been becoming simultaneously more open, more relevant and more radical, whilst showing little if any relationship to the new global justice and solidarity movement. It has a broad left Editorial Board. It deserves closer attention.

3 I draw here, and elsewhere in this review, on an autobiography underway as well as earlier reviews (Waterman, 1998; 2004a; 2004b; 2004c). Compare Munck (2002; 2003).

4 In case anyone should consider that I disregard the newest international labour studies resources from outside the UK, I would like to note here some of these: *Global Labor Strategies* (Kloosterboer 2007), *Prol-Position*, *The Big Sell-Out*, *International Association of Labour History Institutions* 2007, *Asia Monitor Resource Centre*, *No Border Network*, *New Labor Forum*, and *Streetnet International*. To these I think one should add studies of national-immigrant relations, or 'internationalism in one country', most advanced probably in the USA. An example would be Ness, 2005.

movement, in terms of self-organisation, and as a form of protest by workers against their condition and a demand for something *more* or something *other*.<sup>5</sup>

### Anti-Globalisation Creep

Tony Pilch's *Trade Unions and Globalisation* collection, has the kind of literal name, and staid yet glossy appearance that one might expect of an establishment production. The establishment it represents, is that of 'social partnership' – i.e. a capitalist partnership between corporations, the state and the unions. It bears these marks also in the contributed texts. But what strikes me is the extent to which it is also marked by the kind of language that NILS (the school) and NILS (the newsletter) were speaking two decades ago. Again, I do not wish to exaggerate this. Insofar as new notes *are* struck by certain contributors, they represent some kind of anti-globalisation creep or infection and hardly challenge the national or international social partnership frame that shapes the collection.

In keeping with traditional unionism and labour studies, *Trade Unions and Globalisation* simply *assumes* a national frame of reference, with its two non-UK chapters being – by chance or choice – by holders of the national passport. Contributions are thus made by two New Labour members of the British government or parliament, three top officials of national trade unions, the General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), and one academic writing on China.

This range of participation is predictable, and so, too is much of the content, from the self-congratulatory contributions of the politicians to the self-serving chapter by the Human Resource Director of BAE Systems – a major British producer and exporter of weapons. BAE employs 100,000 worldwide, of whom just 32,000 are in the UK. This context explains the balance between its anxiety and need to keep the minority UK workforce satisfied which seems to underlie what is in many ways a model of the partnership structure and consultation process typical of the 1970s and 1980s<sup>6</sup>. The success of this marriage of convenience is hinted at by the donation of one page, within the author's ten, to a group of junior partners, top union representatives who endorse this MNC manager's understanding of globalisation and his general world view. There is no mention, though, that BAE, is currently better known in the UK, the Gulf, and the USA as the subject of press accusations of corrupt business practices, allegedly carried out with the collusion of the British government. The role of the junior partner in such a marriage is likely to be a limited, complicit and often silent one.

Unfortunately, the chapter by the union-employed General Secretary of the ETUC is similarly marked by what might be termed a 'subordinate-partner syndrome'. The ETUC is a confederation of national European trade unions of all backgrounds – Social-Democratic, Christian-Socialist and Communist. The major point of reference in the contribution by John Monks is the European Union itself, its competitive position, its

5 This is why I do not here consider the undoubtedly pioneering work of Ursula Huws (2003), which is certainly both aware of and relevant to understanding the new global world of work. The book of Huws on the 'cybertariat' does occasionally touch on consciousness and protest, but what it is primarily concerned with is the complex nature and implications of a new kind of labour. It is, of course, essential reading in this field.

6 This would seem to be a limitation of even the most recent European analyses and proposals for worker participation or economic democracy. See the review of the *New Unionism* site below, and Kester (2007). Yet challenges to what is produced and how it is sold – as well as various other 'managerial prerogatives' is a rising labour and social concern, as suggested, again, by the review of Hale and Wills below.

internal market, its technological progress and, of course, its social peace. Although he refers in passing to the shock of the French (and, hey, Dutch!) 'No' to the European Constitution, Monks fails to mention that, in its loyalty to a Europe of its own imagination, the ETUC (and its Dutch affiliate!) had urged workers to vote 'Yes' to this!

Readers may by now be wondering where the good news referred to in my introduction is hiding itself. Actually, I feel it is possibly concealed within the Monks piece, insofar as he criticises 'the illusory internationalism of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank' (52). This is a step forward from the traditional international union practice, which has long been one of *polite dialogue* with these promoters of labour movement auto-destruction - as well as with the World Trade Organisation. Monks goes further:

*'There is an urgent need for a genuine Europe-wide debate. Fundamental changes in our internal economic and social policies cannot be dictated by the considerations of the traditional political economy. Recent history in the EU shows that trade and globalisation questions are now of wide-ranging public concern [...] We need a debate on the 'new capitalism' that is emerging, driven by global rootless capital.'* (57)

These are fighting words. Unfortunately, however, his address is to a Europe of 'rights-based values' (53), presented as morally superior to the Chinese in their nefarious 'offensive in Africa' (55). Not only is this Europe a morally superior entity, it is also one embodying will and power. Does this raise echoes not only Jacques Delors but of British social-imperialist Joseph Chamberlain?

Fortunately, this is not the best (from an emancipatory point of view) union effort in this publication. Derek Simpson is General Secretary of Amicus, the UK's largest union of 'manufacturing, technical and skilled persons', itself a merger of several others, and currently involved in creating further mergers or partnerships with other unions nationally and internationally:

*'The platform for creating multinational unions is larger domestic trade unions and solidarity agreements with our international counterparts. Amicus and the Transport and General Workers' Union are beginning this process, now creating the UK's biggest union. We have signed solidarity agreements with super-unions in Europe and the American unions, the Machinists and the United Steel Workers. I believe it is possible to have a functioning, if loosely federal, multinational trade union organisation within the next decade.'* (33).

Fortunately, again, Simpson is not simply talking in terms of calculable size and speculative reach; he also refers to the necessity of reinvigorating the union image, of developing a 'culture of activism', of becoming 'embedded in local civil society', here referring to a labour-community alliance in London's historical immigrant worker centre, the East End, and noting how this has

*'Successfully targeted people whom trade unions have found particularly hard to reach – mostly female, ethnic minority and migrant workers and agency staff.'* (34).

Simpson further talks of what social geographers might call 'multi-scalar' union action against global corporations, of links between workers and consumers transnationally, and of unions recognising the new kinds of work and workers – particularly female,

young, ethnic minorities and part-timers - often to be found in private services, retail and distribution, hospitality and leisure. The language on communication and on civil society coalitions is similarly assertive:

*'[T]he communications advances associated with globalisation can assist us. Robust organising strategies are being made possible and being democratised through the use of global technologies – fax, email, cheap travel, blogs etc – which can be used to spread workers' experiences across the world simultaneously, and can be adopted as readily by trade unions as by global corporations [...]. We have to deploy all the expertise and resources available to maximise... leverage. This may depend on the building of powerful on-going as well as ad hoc coalitions with other groups, be they faith organisations, student networks, shareholders, consumers or charities – either at global, national or local level, or all levels.'* (38)

This is the evidence for what I have called anti-globalisation creep in the international and national unions. I use the term 'creep', rather than 'leap', since, for all its assertiveness, this is taking place within traditional union structures and in terms of its specific benefits to these. One could also argue that there is here some adoption of 'social-movement-unionism-speak', insofar as elements can be identified here of a critical discourse about union transformation going back twenty years (Waterman 2004b). Saying so is not to claim some posthumous victory for this discourse. But it does suggest that we might say of the union organisations, as Galileo, under the Inquisition, is supposed to have whispered about the earth, *eppur si muove* (and yet it moves).

The sore thumb in this small, but evidently rich, collection has to be the piece by academic Jude Howell on Chinese workers and unions. This is a balanced and informative article. Unfortunately, in this company, it may be read as another contribution to the 'New Yellow Peril' discourse presently spreading amongst unions and workers both in the North (particularly America) and the South (including Southern Africa). Howell has no illusions about the present role of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), as a transmission belt and shock absorber. She suggests, however, that globalisation will provide the ACFTU with 'opportunities to engage with the international trade union movement and understand how a trade union could effectively represent workers' (48). There is here a Eurocentrist assumption that Northern unions provide a model that is both adequate at home and appropriate for export. The emergence of China as a major industrial producer and centre of the world's working classes raises rather more complex issues. Nationally the question is what forms growing labour protest in China actually takes. Internationally the question surely is how the international labour, and global justice and solidarity movements can effectively and positively relate to such struggles<sup>7</sup>.

Perhaps the best one can conclude of this book is that it reveals the British trade unions with one foot still firmly in a passing phase of capitalist and state development, whilst one toe of the other foot explores the new world of work, workers and global solidarity.<sup>8</sup>

7 For which see [http://laborstrategies.blogs.com/global\\_labor\\_strategies/2007/05/why\\_labor\\_can\\_a.html](http://laborstrategies.blogs.com/global_labor_strategies/2007/05/why_labor_can_a.html)  
8 It would be nice if one could report that European unions - or at least Left unionists in Europe

## A Surfeit of Roots

*Ramparts of Resistance: Why Workers Lost Their Power and How to Get it Back*, by Sheila Cohen, falls into two parts, the first mostly historical, the second more conceptual and strategic. It concentrates on labour protest since 1968 in the UK and the USA. This structure means that the book is bi-national rather than even international, let alone globally focused or informed. However, the historical half of the book provides us with a lively reminder of the upsurge of such struggle in 1968-74 and the following period, of the Reagan-Thatcher counter-attack of the early-1980s, of 'class warfare in the 1990s', and of the ups and downs of the period marked by the 'Battle of Seattle' (1999). From the beginning, Sheila Cohen argues for 'putting workplace-based rank-and-file organisation at the head of strategic discussion' (1). Insofar, however, as the crisis of unionism she here records (152) is one of theoretical understanding, worker consciousness and appropriate strategy, I will concentrate on her second half.

Chapter 7 is concerned to distinguish, both conceptually and empirically, between unions as institutions and as movements. This follows her initial opposition between the rank-and-file and union leaderships, between the 'intrinsic status of the institution' and the fact that 'most examples of explosive growth and organisation take place *outside* the existing union organisation' (150; original italics). Cohen's discussion of various theories of union leadership and bureaucracy surpasses the binary oppositions suggested above by reference to her favoured agents of militancy, 'workplace representatives' (163). It is these who, in her view, do, or have to, preserve the difficult balance between direct shop-floor democracy on the one hand and a broader and more effective (industrial and national) perspective and organisation on the other. Cohen also tries to overcome conventional Leftist political and economic contradictions by insisting once again on shop-floor militancy. This is conceived as containing an essential, if implicit, class consciousness and transformatory potential.

Chapter 8 seems to reject the opposition of 'false' and 'true' consciousness, yet reformulates it by an opposition between what the working class does '*objectively*' and how it thinks '*subjectively*' (175; original italics). In an attempt to surpass 'false consciousness' Cohen talks of reformism as a 'default' consciousness, of a 'dialectical *balancing*, within one consciousness, of two "conceptions of the world", one subordinate, one transformative' (187. original italics).

Chapter 9 presents the conclusions. Whilst insisting on her own optimism, on the potential resting on the shop floor, and even on the 'inspiring vision of social movement unionism' (220), Cohen feels obliged to admit that, 40 years ago, workers in her two countries were much closer to worker's power (if not social revolution or transformation) than they are today<sup>9</sup>.

Now, as someone who has, like Sheila Cohen, spent a lifetime working in or on the labour movement, who puts considerable energy into both critiquing (mostly international) union leadership, and seeking conceptual and strategic solutions to the dilemmas she identifies, I can sympathise with her effort. I also appreciate the fact that

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- were doing better. A quick search on relevant keywords suggests that these may be even more trapped within the institutional parameters of their organisations or parties, even more bereft of new ideas, than their UK counterparts. Consider the EuroLeft union network: [http://www.european-left.org/positions/work groups/trade](http://www.european-left.org/positions/work%20groups/trade).  
9 Contrast here the contributions of Berlinguer, Ince and myself to *Networked Politics* (2007).

this book is accessible in style, and that Cohen's argument has been made available online, at least in part.<sup>10</sup> However, I think that whilst her emphasis on the shop floor, on the shop-floor activists, and even on their alliances (cross-class and international) provides a necessary part of any labour movement alternative, it is far from being sufficient.

The problem is not only that she is looking back to the future, but that her language and attitudes are imprisoned within the period she celebrates. Moreover, that period could be considered as representing the peak of national-industrial unionism, and therefore of 'national internationalism'. Even, further, when making gestures in the direction of 'international social movement unionism', she is both short and dismissive (as she is of almost all other left theory or strategy over the last 40 years). Cohen is associated with one of the more open and effective Trotskyist tendencies in the USA, Solidarity, itself behind the union monthly *Labour Notes*, and the socialist magazine *Against the Current*. She also seems to have an independent position within (against?) this current – and to preserve a critical distance from the Trotskyist tradition. I say this to establish that she is her own woman (even making, in her self-review<sup>11</sup>, a criticism of her failure to deal adequately in her book with ethnicity, gender and other forms of identity).

What Cohen does, however, preserve from the Marxist tradition is the prioritisation of 'class' as *explanandum*; of the working class as a privileged agent of emancipation; of the union as a universal/eternal organisational form; and of the workplace as the primary site of human social emancipation. Today these are all matters requiring discussion, at very least. What she puts together out of her experience, reading and reinterpretation is a world view which has to be called either 'rank-and-fileism' or, more simply, 'workerism'. Thus, even when Cohen is referring to major multi-class, popular or radical-democratic protests, such as the Battle of Seattle, or the 'petty-bourgeois' protest against petrol tax in the UK in 2000, she cannot but insist on what she calls, in the second case, its 'working-class trajectory' (133). She holds, in other words, to a Marxist eschatology (though in the Marxist case, of course, the Chosen are not simply the Saved but also the Saviours).

Whilst, I think, 'rank-and-fileism' or 'workerism', are quite understandable amongst rebellious workers – and for that matter amongst revolutionary thinkers and activists during earlier phases of capitalist development – they are hardly adequate for those concerned with social emancipation today. Marxist traditionalists like Sheila Cohen sit on the horns of a dilemma that they have themselves created: that proletarianisation is the most extreme form of human alienation, yet (or therefore) the proletariat is the privileged agent of human emancipation. In the face of repeatedly contradictory evidence, Marxist traditionalists fall back on rationalisations such as 'the labour aristocracy', 'bureaucratisation', 'incorporation', or, here, 'default ideology'. But the Marxist paradox is today sharpened rather than blunted, given first, the simultaneous de-construction and reconstruction of the working classes (and the multiplicity of those whose dream is primarily of decent work within them<sup>12</sup>; second, the dispersal of

10 See [www.plutobooks.com/cgi-local/readingroom.pl](http://www.plutobooks.com/cgi-local/readingroom.pl) and her own self-critical review, <http://uin.org.uk/content/view/170/71/>

11 <http://www.solidarity-us.org/atc>.

12 'Decent Work' is the slogan and campaign that presently joins, in subordinate partnership, the international unions to capital and state in the International Labour Organisation.



working-class communities; third, the crisis of the union form (developed against but also within earlier capitalist development models); fourth, the rise of more significant order-threatening social movements worldwide – whether of the left or the right; and finally, the growing recognition that working-class people exist also outside the union-ised/-able workplace (Trott 2005), that they have other interests (as consumers, as women, as ‘precariat’, as the citizens they were not in Marx’ time, as species-beings confronted by ecological meltdown), and many other identities, whether sexual, religious or cultural. The notion that all such identities are subordinate to, or have to be subordinated to, a working-class consciousness, pre-defined by one or other socialist intellectual, is a seriously counter-productive class reductionism.

As already noted, Sheila Cohen criticises her own failure to deal with gender and race as well as class. These are, indeed, damaging absences, insofar as their recognition can qualify workerism, and suggest other sites of struggle, or negotiation, than the workplace alone, including the neighbourhood, the media, the household and the bed. In other words, such recognitions can broaden one’s world view. As serious, however, is the virtual absence, within her account, of an international perspective, and the *almost* total absence of what I call a globalised, informatised, service and financial capitalism. Her passing references to international solidarity are not always balanced, as when she repeats a crude Trotskyist condemnation of the Liverpool dockers for preferring international ‘globaloney’ (122) to local solidarity. (It was actually because of the *limitations* of the latter that they opted for the former – in innovatory if ultimately unsuccessful ways<sup>13</sup>). Her meagre attention to the international can be attributed both to her disinterest in globalisation/globaloney (101-2) and to a fixation on the shop floor ... despite the movement of so many of these shops to floors in China.

It is a pity, perhaps, that Cohen fails to give serious attention to ‘social movement unionism’, a concept developed and popularised, in overlapping if distinct ways, both by myself (Waterman 2004b) and by Kim Moody (1997) – who, I am enchanted to discover (viii), is her husband. This concept hovers around her argument but is never explained, far less either integrated into it, or, for that matter, surpassed. It is quite possible that this notion is either undeveloped or simply omitted in error. But, confronted by the global crisis of the trade union movement, discussion of such new ideas is more likely to get us off the horns of the Marxist dilemma than endless repetition of ‘shop floor’ or ‘rank-and-file’.

### **Labour’s (Limited) place in the new global contestation**

*Globalisation and Contestation* is a book that places internationalised labour and labour internationalism within the new world and discourse of global social protest. Ronaldo Munck has long given labour a special place (most recently, Munck 2002; 2003) amongst a wide range of interests, including nationalism, Latin American politics, development studies, social exclusion, and more. This book shows him, again, as a superb synthesiser of relevant theory and as someone who uses appropriate case

13 For a more complex view of the matter, see Castree (2000) and Castree et. al. (2004). Noel Castree and his colleagues have, indeed, written a pioneering work on labour and labour solidarity, which considers workers as not only existing in particular social spaces and at particular scales, but also as productive of such spaces. Such a view leads them to consider, in technical terms, previously unexplored aspects of labour internationalism. Given that this is, again, a British work, it should have been included in this review. By way of compensation, see the review by Salman (2006).

studies to illustrate and communicate his argument and ends up with a well-structured and highly-readable whole. The work, it seems to me, is likely to become a standard textbook on the topic. It is also likely to impact on activists in the global justice movement. I especially appreciated his chapter on the new and (literally) reactionary global movements; it is easy to forget that in the brave new world of social movements it is these that have the widest spread and greatest impact.

What we must focus on here, however, is the place that labour occupies within this work and how this is understood. In fact, labour and socialist internationalism appear only in a couple of sub-sections in a chapter on transnational social movements, and unions in one part of a chapter on 'local transnationalisms'. The section on labour and socialist internationalism both recognises and relativises this tradition and the chapter as a whole presents a concise and thought-provoking background to the movement that many contemporary activists assumed had begun in either 1999 (Seattle) or, at best, 1994 (Chiapas). But his conception of contemporary labour internationalism as a 'local transnationalism' is somewhat contentious. This may make sense if 'local' also means 'particular'. But the concept of a 'working class' has customarily referred to at least the state-national, or colonial, parameter. And since Marx, if not Flora Tristán<sup>14</sup>, both social scientists and socialists have recognised or argued that there are senses in which working classes have been, could or should be more than this.

Munck's understanding is influenced, if not determined, by his preference for the 20th century Karl Polanyi over the 19th century Karl Marx. But if we can reduce Marxism to the notion of an international working-class-led socialist revolution against capitalism, we can also reduce Polanyism to the notion of a 'double-movement' within capitalism, in which the attempt to subordinate the social to the economic is confronted with social struggle to reimpose social control over the economic. Whilst I can appreciate that, in the continuing absence of an international proletarian revolution, it is tempting to either abandon or surpass Marx (preferably the latter), I would have thought that the exhaustion of the social evolution (the national Keynesianism that Polanyi prefigured) requires that one should surpass Polanyi also. So I clearly have problems with Munck's Polanyian turn, as also with the role of the working class in Munck's double movement on a world scale.

Munck's reasoning for following Polanyi is presented in these words:

*'Writing just when the long post-[second world] war boom was looming on the horizon, Karl Polanyi foretold a great expansion of the free market but also a great social counter-movement that he saw as "the one comprehensive feature in the history of the age"...For Polanyi, capitalism was moving towards 'an attempt to set up one big self-regulating market'..., nothing less than a global economy where the market ruled supreme. However, there was a counter-movement from within society to protect itself from the anarchy of the market. Powerful social movements and institutions would emerge in a veritable 'double movement' to check the actions of the market and reinstate*

14 Flora Tristán (1803-1844), a French-Peruvian woman, was the author of *The Workers Union* (1843), considered by many as a precursor to the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 (Lorwin 1929:23. She clearly considered the working class as a national entity. And - as a socialist and feminist cosmopolitan - of its interests nationally as embracing or expandable to workers everywhere.

*human interests over those of a utopian market economy. My basic thesis is that we are not now witnessing a 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington) at a global level but, rather a clash between the free market and society.'* (ix)

Munck is not an uncritical Polanyian, however, since he declares further that:

*'we cannot simply assume Polanyi's rather functional analysis of its response to the market mechanisms. Polanyi does tell us that: "The 'challenge' is to society as a whole; the 'response' comes through groups, sections and classes"...but that is still quite under-specified in terms of a political sociology, for a globalised complex era.'* (xiii)

The problem for me, however, is that Polanyi's double movement ends not with a surpassing of capitalism through either revolution or evolution, but a reinsertion of the economy into society and under social control. This was surely the vision and practice of Labour Prime Minister Attlee (a former social worker) and Foreign Minister Bevin (a former union boss) in 1945. Munck, it is true, does bring in numerous other concepts and theories to enable him to make an enthusiastic case for the democratic global movements of the present day. However, he seems to at least allow for the Polanyian vision of a civilised capitalism and thus, implicitly, of a global neo-Keynesianism. I would consider the latter as a possible successor regime to global neo-liberalism. And a tendency within the global justice and solidarity movements would also consider this desirable. However, what I (and other tendencies in the movement, including new labour movements) are interested in is a surpassing not only of neo-liberalism but also of capitalism. And one thing we have surely learned from the past of national Keynesianism is that, whilst it might imply a gentler, kinder capitalism, it in no way guarantees us against another movement in which the economy again escapes from society and destroys not only the contending classes but everyone and everything. Surely we now need to seek for or create new guides for the 21st century to social emancipation – as well as to labour's role within such a process<sup>15</sup>.

In Munck's analysis of labour's local and limited role in the global counter- movement there are here, for me, several problems. One is the limitation of any discussion of labour in this work to five or ten out of 161 pages. Another is Munck's use of the descriptive term 'transnationalism' in place of the analytical/theoretical/ethical one of 'internationalism'. A third is in Munck's consideration of contemporary labour internationalism.

This third aspect is illustrated by three cases. These are: first, his model of a local transnationalism, a 1998 strike by a small number of workers in Flint, Michigan, that snowballed internationally and was effective against the globalised General Motors corporation; second, the Liverpool dock strike that began in 1997 and revived a flagging dockworker internationalism; and third, the creation of a union network within the Mercosur free-trade zone in the south of Latin America. These cases are all problematic. The first certainly demonstrates workers' struggle against transnationalisation/globalisation but reveals no expansion of a global solidarity awareness or ethic. The second struggle was not supported, as Munck suggests (96), by the international union structures: The International Transportworkers Federation was trapped in both state and

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<sup>15</sup> A starting point here might be Sousa Santos (2006), a substantial compilation on labour and social emancipation, which considers contemporary non-capitalist forms of production and land-based movements, as well as new forms of labour internationalism.

union legalities and felt threatened by a locally-initiated dockworker internationalism (of a kind previously denounced by one of its leaders as ‘strike tourism’). And, finally, Munck produces no evidence to show that the Mercosur union structure has increased workers’ solidarity across the zone, rather than riding, like its European counterpart and model, on the coat-tails of a regional capitalist and state initiative (as strongly suggested by an Argentinean supporter, Julio Godio (2004)). Munck fails to deal with cases in which workers’ – if not necessarily union – protest has linked up in one way or another with the new social movement internationalisms. I find this absence odd insofar as such cases – like those involving such ‘atypical workers’ as street-traders – would have strengthened his general case for a 21<sup>st</sup> century re-invention of a 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century internationalism<sup>16</sup>. Munck nonetheless has a dialectical view of the relationship between the local and the global:

*‘To move beyond the global/local optic we need to foreground the complex interplay of social scales in the construction of globalization. We cannot operate with the tacit rather simple divide between the global as smooth and the local as the place where difference is generated. Nor is it simply the case that the economy is always global and culture is situated at the local level. The cultural political economy of globalisation needs to constantly bear in mind both inextricably linked elements. We also need to foreground all the scales including the regional, the still extremely relevant and the supranational that is not yet global. In terms of political practice, the same way that global managers may ‘download’ problems to the national level, so the agents of contestation may take local issues ‘upwards’ in an imaginative ‘jumping of scales’ as it were. (108)*

This is, in sum a book about globalisation and the movement response to it that provokes as much as it rewards.

## The internationalism of Labour’s ‘others’

There has, in the previously-reviewed books, been little questioning of the trade union form, a model developed against but also within the period of what I call ‘national, industrial, (anti-)colonial’ capitalism. And, insofar as there has been any mention of ‘networking’, this has been mostly in terms of relations between unions or extensions beyond them. The term ‘networking’ here leaves unchallenged the traditional national-industrial, pyramidal form, with its extensions upward to Brussels, Geneva or other global centres. Along with this form has gone the ideal of collective bargaining and social (i.e. capitalist) partnership, again extended either upwards to the international union or downwards from the ‘tripartite’ International Labour Organisation (ILO)<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Evidence for these criticisms can hopefully be found in those of my works already cited. For a provocative case study written in the same spirit, consider Dinerstein (2003). Interestingly, this is about an innovatory workers’ movement in Argentina, and Dinerstein is another UK-based Argentinian. The struggle may have been short-lived and its international impact more notional than demonstrable, but of its radically innovatory nature there can be little doubt. Another Argentinean phenomenon that demands attention, particularly for its particular international relations, would be the relatively young and innovative CTA (Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos), the website of which is itself a source for consideration of its internationalism <http://www.cta.org.ar/base/principal.php3>.

<sup>17</sup> For some (very rare) criticism of this quite central yet profoundly ambiguous international labour

Yet many of the reviewed authors would agree that neo-liberal globalisation has profoundly – if not fundamentally – transformed this old world of labour and, just as profoundly, undermined the union form, its traditional parameters of action and its equally traditional hopes or assumptions. Yet, reflecting on the massive influx of immigrant workers into the USA, Immanuel Ness (2005:187-8) argues that

*'We often think of unions as militant or even radical organisations, but in fact most are conservative institutions wedded to preserving the past. By their very nature, unions will oppose any change in a labour market that may weaken the bargaining power of their members. Unions are relatively inflexible institutions that have difficulty reacting to changes in capital formation that alter the predictable composition of work and thereby threaten standards established in the past.'*

So the question arises of whether another model of worker self-articulation (organisation plus expression) is not necessary, either for the new work and workers, or for the international labour movement as a whole.

*Threads of Labour: Garment Industry Supply Chains from the Workers' Perspective*, by Angela Hale and Jane Wills, reveals such a necessity - at least for new forms of work and workers, both nationally and internationally. Insofar, indeed, as the book was produced by academics and organisers within an international labour network, Women Working Worldwide (WWW), it exemplifies such a new kind of international labour solidarity project. Taking the estimated 40 million, mostly women, workers in the global garment industry, it considers the global garment industry chain. It reports cases from both Western and Eastern Europe and from South, South-East and East Asia, as well as from Mexico. With the exception of the last, the cases are all drawn from a research project organised by the WWW network itself. The fundamental issues raised by the study are many: whether to understand the industry in 'supply-chain' or 'network' terms; the relevance of union and workplace-based organising to such a fractured industry and vulnerable workforce; the relevance of a collective bargaining model of labour relations; the hypothetical value of 'Corporate Social Responsibility' projects to such workers; the problems of diverse national and international alliances between the worker-support campaigns, community-based organising, traditional unions and consumer-based organisations; and the nature of the action-research project itself:

*'The book seeks to contribute to debates about the globalisation of the economy, the operation of international commodity chains and new developments in labour organising from the perspective of the workers involved. Drawing on internationally coordinated but locally developed action research has allowed us to highlight local experiences alongside global trends. We have sought to embody supply chain analysis, and bring it to life by looking at the experiences and situation of some of the workers involved in the contemporary garment industry. The action research data has already been used by local organisations that support women garment workers, informing educational programmes, political action and organising work.'* (15)

It is concluded that

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hegemon, see Germanotta 2007a, b.

*'The work of WWW can be seen as part of a new form of industrial action which involves political alliances between workers, trade unions, local and regional activists and consumer-based organisations in the key markets and central locations of major buyers. The significance of these alliances...is demonstrated by the evidence we have provided of cases in which there have been notable improvements in working conditions...and...examples of how internationally co-ordinated campaigns have successfully contributed to the establishment of trade union rights in a number of different locations... And, significantly in the case of workers in Bombay/Mumbai, how their support for workers in the USA helped those Northern workers win a trade union recognition dispute... Although Threads of Labour is focused solely on the garment industry, the research and action reported...can also be seen as relevant to those tackling the economic and social injustices in other economic sectors, as well as...the wider global justice movement.'* (237-8)

Hale and Wills do not claim to have discovered the secret of fire, but the book does have an original vision and it does open new doors. It is also a professional piece of work, with numerous diagrams and boxes to explain the immensely complex structure of the industry (varied according to place, level, process or product) and to illustrate its arguments. It has a chapter on the WWW network itself, as well as a theoretically-informed and self-reflective chapter on the action-research process.<sup>18</sup>

One of the most important characteristics of this book is, for me, the bridge it provides between the shop-floor internationalism of the 1980s and the global justice movement of the present day. WWW was founded in Britain in the early 1980s, has survived and, apparently, thrived. Several of the authors are names I recall from that earlier period, Angela Hale (who regrettably died just before the book was launched), Lynda Yanz, from Canada and Rohini Hensman from Mumbai. The book does not trumpet its feminist credentials. Yet I wonder whether we do not have to put its survival through hard times down to the socialist- or labour-feminist tradition which nurtured these women. But maybe it is simply a matter of their individual or collective staying power. For this reason I would like to know more about WWW. We can never simply rely on activists' accounts of the projects to which they may have devoted their lives for 10 or 20 years. One question that remains in my mind is the nature of international solidarity when this is primarily on the North-South axis and running in a North-to-South direction. Another is the relationship of WWW and its members to the profoundly-ambiguous CSR industry. A third would be the always-problematic relationship with the funders. The fact that the book provokes such questions is suggestive of its value to those it is about.<sup>19</sup>

*Threads of Labour* does not necessarily provide answers to the questions I originally posed. The labour network is not presented as *the* answer to the organisation question. Nor is international solidarity networking presented as *the* alternative to institutionalised union internationalism. And neither does it take definite positions on the various old and new forums for negotiating or establishing improved wages or extended rights. The

<sup>18</sup> This book invites comparison with the pioneering one on 'fashion, free trade and the rights of garment workers' (Ross 1997). Ross, British born but US based, pioneers in drawing the connections between production, workers, labour organising, consumption and commodity culture internationally.

<sup>19</sup> For extensive further discussion and comparison, see the excellent review article by Ferus-Comelo (2006)

impression it gives is, rather, of a pluralistic orientation. In other words, it relativises the previously universal forms and processes of labour self-activity. And it reveals some of the possible activity and organisation forms taken by some of labour's 'others'. It thus provides a rich source of material for further discussion on such matters.

### **The Vital Force of Working Class Cultures Across Time and Space**

With *Live Working or Die Fighting: How the Working Class Went Global*, Paul Mason has invented a new genre - one which reaches places not commonly touched in either recent academic labour history or accounts of contemporary labour struggles. It should communicate that history and those struggles, and the relationship between them, to new generations of workers as well as to those in the global justice and solidarity movement unaware of them.

As someone who grew up with British and European labour history, who has long studied and written about historical and contemporary labour struggles, national and international, I felt enlightened and inspired by this book. Much of this has to do with the genre, a quasi-cinematic one, consisting of flash-backs (or forwards) or montages, that create above all an image of the working class as a continuing, if irregular, presence, existing on a worldwide stage. What Paul Mason is both recording and urging upon us, it seems to me, is recognition of the moments and places in which there have existed working-class cultures of protest that had or have messages for humanity more generally:

*'[This] history needs to be rediscovered because two sets of people stand in dire need of knowing more about it: first, the activists who have flooded the streets in Seattle, Genoa and beyond to protest against globalisation; second, the workers in the new factories, mines and waterfronts created by globalisation in the developing world, whose attempts to build a labour movement are at an early stage. They need to know...that what they are doing has been done before...Above all they need to know that the movement was once a vital force: a counterculture in which people lived their lives and the the main source of eduction for men and women condemned to live short, bleak lives and dream of impossible futures.'* (x)

Quite how Mason manages the leaps in his narrative between mutilated workers in Shenzhen in China, today and the Battle of Peterloo in Manchester, in 1819 is something of an artistic mystery. I can only say that it works, without parallels being forced or fingers being wagged. Other chapters compare: silkworkers in Varanasi (Benares), India now and in the Lyons, France, revolt of 1831; the casual labourers of a Lagos slum in 2005 and the Paris Commune of 1871; oilworkers in Basra, Iraq in 2006 and the invention of Mayday in Philadelphia in 1886; and immigrant office cleaners in London's East End in 2004, and the Great Dock Strike of unskilled workers in London's East End in 1889. If we eventually reach the globalisation of unskilled workers' unionism in 1889-1912, we are later confronted by 'wars between brothers' amongst miners in Huanuni, Bolivia, today and German workers' failures to condemn the war of 1914-18 and to bring about a revolution at its end. Most exotic of all is Mason's 25-page account of the Bund, the socialist union of Jewish workers in interwar Poland. This is preceded by a sketch of the struggle in El Alto, a giant squatter city (on a plateau 500m above the city

and the high-rises of a literally downtown La Paz). There are several more such stories in this panoramic work, often expressed in the words of the men and women activists involved. Coincidentally, I have been, as an international labour researcher, in several of the countries or towns visited by Paul Mason as a journalist. Yet my feeling in reading his accounts is less that of recognition than of admiration for his capacity to evoke them, and to do so with sympathy but without sentimentality or paternalism.

But what on earth is it that holds this patchwork narrative together? I think it is Mason's insistence on a counter-culture of resistance, of rebellion and of creativity from the class's own resources, and of aspirations that go beyond the social and human relations of capitalism. He himself argues that

*'If there is a recurrent theme amid all this, it is control. Politically, the labour movement has debated strategy in terms of reform versus revolution.*

*Practically, to the frustration of advocates of both approaches, workers have been prepared to go beyond reform but settle for less than revolution.'* (xiii)

In his concluding chapter, Mason does go into interpretation, offering an explanation for the Post-World War Two loss of working-class independence, and incorporation into two ruling-class projects, one in the West, the other in the East. However:

*'It is very different now. Today the transnational corporation is the primary form of economic life. In addition, global consumer culture is breaking down all that was local, insular and closed in working-class communities. There is, for the first time, a truly global working class. But it has not yet had its 1889 moment,'* (280)

Mason sees the leadership once offered by philanthropists, social democrats, anarchists or communists now resting with the 'new social reformism' of the anti-globalisation movement. For myself, as someone equally concerned with labour internationalism and the global justice movement, this is a dying fall. Perhaps the author, at the end of his marathon, ran out of puff. It is not simply that we get a gesture where we need at least a picture. It is because the gesture is to the ameliorative tendency within a movement that also has a powerful emancipatory wing and because Mason appears unaware of the extent to which the labour movement is (an admittedly contradictory) part of this movement.

Paul Mason's comparative lack of attention to the labour, socialist and anarchist parties and ideologies that have played such a dominant role in the history of labour, and labour history (for better or worse) is due to his stress on the socio-cultural rather than the party-political. I find this focus (on a rank-and-file of flesh and blood, not one seen through ideological spectacles) refreshing. If the old labour and the new social movements are to be fruitfully articulated, Paul Mason's pathbreaking book will have made a not insignificant contribution. It should be read, taught and discussed. And translated, as a start, into Spanish, Hindi and Chinese.

Mason's is a romance of labour but one without sentimentality. Although neither a theoretical nor a policy-oriented work, it is certainly informed by both sympathy and understanding of the uneven (if rarely combined) struggles of labouring people. Many of the major movements he presents have actually fused, in varied measure, labour and nationalism, labour and ethnicity, labour and democracy. These movements, and their leaders and activists both known and forgotten, are, it



is shown, never archetypal proletarians, nor paragons of left or socialist virtue. They were and are, however, our forebears and our *compañer@s*<sup>20</sup> - people with whom we can in our turn empathise, learn from and with.

In concluding, I have to return to where I began, with this book as a new genre. The book has its own website, which is both elegant and transparent.<sup>21</sup> Here it is possible to find photographs, a 60-second video clip of the author promoting his book in a Nairobi slum, resource lists, and reviews. The photographs and other graphics could be taken as illustrations for a book that regrettably has none. The site as a whole reinforces my feeling that this work is cinematic.

## From the Page to the Screen

The cinematic qualities of Mason's book, and the audio-visual and computer skills demonstrated in its promotion, presage a welcome and overdue shift of international(ist) labour communication from the page to the screen. The activist tendency within international labour studies has long been connected with labour education and occasionally with the audio-visual (cinema, sound, video)<sup>22</sup>. Yet a marriage between international labour studies and international labour media has yet to be consummated. Today this seems less something to be desired than something which is an essential prerequisite for a new global working-class culture. Two projects, one based in Britain, the other largely involving expatriate Britons and Antipodeans, suggest some ways that research and reflection and communication and organisation may be moving together.

Whilst there has clearly been an explosion in international union uses of computers over the last 10-20 years, there seems to have set in, at this level, some kind of web-disillusionment or web-fatigue. The prime exemplar here has to be the site of the new International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) founded in 2006. Here, a previously adequate, if conventional, site has been converted into something which combines quite soulless design with information both limited in extent and late in delivery<sup>23</sup>. The various Global Unions sites also seem to be marking time<sup>24</sup>. We might conclude that unions get the websites they deserve. If so, the booby-prize goes to the former Communist World Federation of Trade Unions<sup>25</sup>. Unsuccessful attempts to go beyond its index page suggest not so much WFTU fatigue at the pace demanded by a computerised globalisation as a failure even to enter this new reality and master the relevant technology. If the Web had existed in the 1960s, when I worked for the WFTU, this is what its site might have looked like.<sup>26</sup> Finally, and significantly, none of

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20 This is a Spanish figure which has the advantages of surpassing the much-abused 'comrade' and of combining the male and female form.

21 <http://www.liveworkingordiefighting.co.uk/>

22 A pioneer here, and a survivor where others have faded or died, is Steve Zeltzer's San Francisco-based LaborTech, <http://www.labortech.net/>. A visit to this site and its links reveals the extent to which this project combines researchers, media-makers, computer specialists and internationalists. For a recent labour-relevant video see *The Big Sell-Out*.

23 <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?rubrique1&dang=en>

24 <http://www.global-unions.org/>. When last visited it was still carrying an item dated January 26, 2005.

25 <http://www.wftucentral.org/>

26 The WFTU also got the history it deserved (Ganguli 2000). Rambling in style, restricted to conferences and declarations, sycophantic in tone, it has a back-cover Congress photo, showing an ageing, portly and exclusively male leadership paying respects not to some working-class or popular hero but the President of

these sites has a feedback feature, far less a space for discussion, or significant access to independent research.

In strong contrast to these are two highly useful and innovative sites: *New Unionism* and *Union Ideas Network*.<sup>27</sup> *New Unionism* appears to be based fairly closely – in more senses than one – to the Geneva headquarters not only of various international unions but also of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). It is, however, institutionally independent. Moreover, it is a quite brilliant new website that seems to me a possible winner of the competition organised annually by *LabourStart*.<sup>28</sup> It is, however, not only its aesthetics that are innovative. So too are its thematic foci, which break radically with those both customary and predictable from, for example, the ITUC site. Whilst the ITUC menu directs readers to: 'About Us', 'Press Room', 'Campaigns', 'Equality', 'Human and Trade Union Rights', 'Economic and Social Policy', 'Members Section', 'Global Unions', *New Unionism* offers: 'Forums', 'Younionize', 'Inspirations', 'Free Resources', 'Success Stories', 'Lessons Learnt', 'Online Library', 'Cast a Vote', 'Union Work', 'Contact Us' and 'Join'.

Whilst this may seem to exemplify the difference between an institutional union website and a labour network one, *New Unionism* also innovates in relation to other new labour sites. It might, again, be suggested that the *New Unionism* concept and aesthetic is more likely to appeal to call-centre operators than to sub-contracted auto industry workers. But, then, it is the first rather than the second who are likely to have computer access, and we have no evidence to suggest that the latter, or their organisers, prefer sites designed by, or for, Brother Apparatchik the Union Officer. *New Unionism* declares boldly that it is

*'a network, not an organisation. We do not have formal meetings, special task-forces, triennial congresses, steering committees, or annual conferences. We do not decide on collective policies, nor do we elect network officials. We do not run collective lobbies, nor across-the-board campaigns. This is what trade unions are for! And that is why we strongly believe you should join them. They, in turn, are often part of global federations and organisations which promote workers' interests at global level. We do not for a moment pretend to be offering an alternative to this. On the contrary, we want to help in the building these organisations.*

*'This involves building input from the ground up. If you want to network with other working people, industrial relations commentators, experienced union reps, labour communicators, and/or social movement activists at an international level, and to work with them in developing a community of support which reaches across borders, then here's the place to start.'*

My questions about, or challenges to *New Unionism* (NU) start with its self-confinement within the existing parameters of the international and national union institutions.

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an increasingly neo-liberal and globalised India.

27 <http://www.newunionism.net/>, <http://uin.org.uk/>.

28 <http://www.labourstart.org/lwsoty/2007/results.shtml>. *LabourStart* was the pioneer international union website, with increasingly worldwide news coverage and regular solidarity campaigns. It also has lots of bells and whistles (labour radio, labour videos), and discussion of the latest technologies. What it does not have, at time of writing, is regular open discussion on the crucial international labour issues.

My doubts continue with its self-definition, which seems to be a combination of 'organising strategy' (assertive union-building rather than servicing existing members) and 'partnership' (the extension of 'economic democracy' within and under capitalism). I am not sure whether the combination of a possibly recent US strategy with a certainly old European one amounts to a strategy that is relevant for labour worldwide in the era of globalisation. But, in any case, each of the conditions assumes the institutions, procedures and norms of Northern tradition, with questionable relevance to a globalised and neo-liberalised world of labour.<sup>29</sup> NU adds 'internationalism' to the formula, but hardly questions traditional understandings or practices here either. However, I am more concerned that this innovative and original site demands of would-be affiliates that they buy the package. And that contributions will be removed if someone (the owners?) consider their contributions inappropriate. Both conditions seem to me in contradiction with those of networking as increasingly understood, and of the kind of dialogue increasingly practised within the global justice and solidarity movements.<sup>30</sup> Given, however, the energy and originality of the site, it is likely to be one worth watching ... and learning from.

Paradoxically, it is the more union-dependent of these sites, *New Union Ideas*, that seems the more open of the two. This is an initiative, apparently, of the British Trades Union Congress – not a body known historically for its interest in new union ideas. It is a much more modest innovation, in terms of both appearance and themes. Yet, whilst clearly also oriented towards the traditional institutionalised union movement, it seems so far to be open ideologically, and to be attracting a rather wide range of (younger?) union organisers, activists and academics. Its major themes are traditional: 'Conferences; Economic/ Social Policy; Education and Skills; Employment Law; Employment Relations; Equality and Diversity; Europe/International; Health and Safety; Union Modernisation Fund; Union Organising; Unions and Politics'. But its current forums include 'Union Futures', and 'Union Engagement with Academia'. And its contributors include, for example, Sheila Cohen (see above) and Andreas Bieler, currently coordinating the international Global Working-Class Project at the University of Nottingham<sup>31</sup>.

### Conclusion: From Creep to Leap?

What would be required for me to add a third cheer to the two originally expressed? Well, I would clearly like to see a leap where so far there has been mostly creep. Those of us raised within the Marxist tradition are always awaiting the turning of water into steam, of quantity into quality, of ideology into science, for the transformation of the working class 'in itself' to one 'for itself', from reform to revolution; we are always searching for the weak link in the capitalist chain (or at least for uneven development that is also combined) and, of course, for the final solution to the capitalism question.

It seems to me, however, that neither in international labour studies nor in labour

29 For a summary statement of the Organising Strategy + Partnership strategy, see Cradden & Hall-Jones 2005. For a critique of the West European tradition of social partnership, see Wahl (2004).

30 Consider here the earlier-mentioned *Networked Politics*. This is a Wiki site, designed for collective thought. As a project, however, *Networked Politics* also has some print publications and is taking an interest in international labour networking. In both content and procedure it suggests a more radically-democratic model than does NU.

31 <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/politics/gwcproject/>. This project, which was present and active at the World Social Forum, Nairobi, 2007, is currently producing a book.

internationalism are we likely to witness any such apocalyptic transformation. Even less than at state-national level is a transformation within traditional emancipatory paradigms or long-existing social movements/institutions likely to take such dramatic form. Two passages from Raymond Williams, reflecting on Gramsci and Marx (cited by Stillo, 1998-9), seem apposite here :

*'A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realised complex of experiences, relationships and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits. In practice, that is, hegemony can never be singular. Its internal structures are highly complex, as can readily be seen in any concrete analysis. Moreover (and this is crucial, reminding us of the necessary thrust of the concept), it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own. (Williams 1977:108)*

*'The key to 'revolutionary' social change in modern societies does not therefore depend, as Marx had predicted, on the spontaneous awakening of critical class consciousness but upon the prior formation of a new alliances of interests, an alternative hegemony or 'historical bloc', which has already developed a cohesive world view of its own.'* (Williams 1992:27).

The first of these passages surely also relates to what is hegemonic within the international labour movement. The second is suggestive of the task before the global justice and solidarity movement.

It seems to me, in any case, that what is crucially required for an emancipatory movement within international labour studies and labour internationalism (whether in the UK or globally) is the creation of autonomous spaces and places where these can be developed. In the 1980s, at a time of the growing crisis and exhaustion of the previous such wave, I argued, unsuccessfully, that there was such a necessity amongst those writing about or practising 'shopfloor internationalism'. Given the development of the global justice movement, of the World Social Forums, and of cyberspace today, the possibility of such (relatively) autonomous agoras or foci is today even greater (Caruso, 2007). Demonstration of such autonomous initiatives can be found not only at global level but also within Europe and the UK itself<sup>32</sup>.

Let us finally reconsider universalism and internationalism. Whilst it is easy to deconstruct or dismiss the naïve Communism of Mariátegui, the desire he expressed predated that movement and survives its demise. So here is a post-Communist formulation, from a new forum of emancipatory ideas, that makes at least a provocative contribution toward the renovation of those intertwined concepts:

*'We need to think in terms of the circulation of commons, of the interconnection and reinforcements between them. The ecological commons maintains the finite conditions necessary for both social and networked commons. A social commons, with a tendency towards a equitable distribution of wealth, preserves the ecological commons, both by eliminating the extremes of environmental destructiveness linked to extremes of wealth (SUVs,*

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For the WSF, Nairobi, 2007, see Waterman 2007.

*incessant air travel) and poverty (charcoal burning, deforestation for land) and by reducing dependence on 'trickle down' from unconstrained economic growth. Social commons also create the conditions for the network commons, by providing the context of basic health, security and education within which people can access new and old media. A network commons in turn circulates information about the condition of both ecological and social commons (monitoring global environmental conditions, tracking epidemics, enabling exchanges between health workers, labour activists or disaster relief teams). Networks also provide the channels for planning ecological and social commons – organising them, resolving problems, considering alternative proposals. They act as the fabric of the association that is the sine qua non of any of the other commons.'* (Dyer-Witheford, 2007:25)

When the best that the hegemonic tendency within the international labour movement can come up with by way of inspiration is 'decent work', this kind of notion would seem to combine the necessary subversion of the ruling common sense with the equally necessary leap of the imagination.

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