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Labor Internationalism and the Contradictions of Globalization: Or, Why the Local is Sometimes Still Important in a Global Economy

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In this chapter I examine two case studies of workers fighting against transnationally organized corporations. In the first case, a 1990–1992 dispute between the United Steelworkers of America and the Ravenswood Aluminum Corporation, union workers developed an international campaign to pressure the corporation to rehire them after they had been locked out in a dispute over health and safety issues. In the second case, a 1998 dispute between the United Auto Workers and General Motors, strikes by workers at just two plants in Flint, Michigan over the corporation's plans to introduce new work rules resulted in the virtual shutdown of GM for several weeks. Drawing on these two cases, I suggest that, in challenging transnationally organized employers, workers may on some occasions best achieve their goals through engaging in practices of transnational solidarity aimed at matching the global organization of their employer ("organizing globally"), whereas on other occasions they may be able to do so through highly focused local actions ("organizing locally") against strategic parts of a corporation. Of course, which of these two strategies is most likely to succeed in particular cases will depend on a coterie of contingencies, such as how interconnected the corporation's component parts are. However, the fact that different geographical strategies may be open to workers challenging globally organized capital means at least two things. First, some workers may not have to organize at the same geographical scale (ie globally) as corporations in order to challenge them. Second, through their choices of which strategy to pursue, workers are clearly shaping the very process of globalization itself and the new global geographies which globalization is auguring.

Introduction

Globalization continues to transform the time-space organization of capitalism. The shrinking of relative distances between places and the speeding up of social and economic life that is central to this transformation are having significant implications for workers and union strategy. However, although neoliberal ideologues have often

attempted to imply that the globalization of capital is an unstoppable juggernaut to which workers can only submit themselves, there are, in fact, a number of paradoxes and contradictions contained within the temporal and spatial reorganization of capitalism which globalization is auguring. Four are particularly pertinent.

First, despite the neoliberal argument that, under a superfluid "Third Wave" capitalism (Toffler 1980) of "friction-free exchange" and "superconductive" financial markets (see Luke and Ó Tuathail 1998), capital is no longer constrained by geography and can pretty much relocate anywhere in the world almost at the drop of a hat (this is unquestionably the thrust of Ohmae's [1990] "borderless world" metaphor), it is still as true today as it ever was that firms must locate somewhere. More precisely, all firms must continue to negotiate the contradiction between being sufficiently mobile to take advantage of new opportunities that may arise elsewhere, and being sufficiently embedded in a region to allow them to develop the business links with local suppliers or to train particular groups of skilled labor that are necessary for them if they are to engage in profitable production (cf Cox and Mair 1988). As I will argue below, the need to be embedded to various degrees in certain locations—what Mair (1997) has called firms' need for "strategic localization"—can provide significant opportunities for workers and their unions when battling transnational corporations (TNCs).

Second, given that individual capitalists may gain significant advantages which they can exploit in the market place by reorganizing their production and distribution systems temporally so as to speed up the circulation time of their capital (a process which also invariably involves a geographic reorganization), the management and control of space and time can be crucial avenues of conflict between workers and employers.

Third, when thinking about the new time-space organization of capitalism it is necessary to recognize that, because this new organization develops in a spatially and temporally uneven manner, new historical geographies of capitalism impact workers in different parts of the world in different ways. Most importantly for what I will argue below, the fact is that some workers live in a faster, more interconnected, and smaller world than do others, a reality which will undoubtedly affect their organizing strategies.

Fourth, the contemporary speed-up of social life associated with a host of new technologies (such as e-mail and the Internet) and ways of organizing social life and work (such as "just-in-time" production—more about which below), contains an important paradox, at least

with regard to the relationship between capital and labor. Specifically, whereas many corporations see the ability to speed up their operations as a way of reducing the turnover time of their capital (thereby increasing profitability), the greater interconnectedness of the global economy in general—and of the separate parts of any individual TNC in particular—that high-speed telecommunications and transportations technologies have augured mean that the consequences of any particular event can be transmitted much further and much faster than ever before. As the speed of communication and interconnectivity has quickened, we have moved closer to what Foucault (1986:22) called the “epoch of simultaneity,” wherein information travels around our globe so quickly that there is an increasing synchronicity between the occurrence of an event and our knowledge of it. Paradoxically, as the speed of the spread of social actions’ consequences has quickened, so do corporations have concomitantly less time in which to respond to, and to try to manage, crises.

In this chapter, I want to explore some of these paradoxes and contradictions as they relate to the issue of workers’ political praxis. More specifically, I seek to question the assumption in much current writing and public proclamation that international labor solidarity is *the* strategy for unions to pursue in an increasingly globalizing international economy—that if they are to successfully challenge TNCs, workers *must* organize transnationally as a matter of course.¹ Specifically, I suggest that, whereas in certain situations the traditional “transnational solidarity” model in which workers attempt to make common cause globally with their confederates who work for the same TNC overseas may be crucial to their success, in other situations a second model may also provide workers with an effective means of challenging TNCs—a model which focuses not upon the global scale of worker organization but, instead, upon the very local scale of organization. At first glance, such a localist strategy may seem somewhat puzzling, given that the impetus for TNCs to “go global” with their operations has often been precisely so that they may play workforces in different parts of the world against each other. Likewise, workers’ abilities to develop solidarity across space have typically been seen as a way to limit such whipsawing. Yet, as paradoxical as it might seem, I want to suggest here that, in an increasingly interconnected planetary economy, a locally focused campaign against a TNC may sometimes prove highly effective, particularly if such local disputes target crucial parts of that corporation’s global operation.

Certainly, which of these two strategies—what we might call “organizing globally” and “organizing locally”—is more effective in specific

cases will depend upon the contingencies of the situation within which workers find themselves. Equally, I do not want to suggest that workers face an “either/or” choice, for organizing at multiple scales simultaneously may be necessary to best serve their goals. The point I wish to make, however, is that rather than simply assuming that workers have to “go global” so as to match the geographic organization of their employers, organizing at other geographic scales such as the local may, in fact, prove to be a more useful strategy in certain circumstances. Such a realization forces us to recognize both that union strategy may be significantly shaped by the geographical realities within which workers find themselves and that the choices workers make concerning which types of strategy to pursue can have significant implications for the ways in which the geography of global capitalism is made (see Herod 2001).

The chapter itself is in three sections. The first two sections outline two case studies reported on in more detail elsewhere (Herod 1995, 2000), which highlight workers’ success in “organizing globally” and “organizing locally” against transnationally organized corporations. My purpose in recounting these disputes is twofold. First, I want to show that, contra the pessimistic views of many on the left and the disavowal by many of those on the right, workers *can* in fact organize against a TNC and win. Second, I want to use these two examples to think through a number of issues related to the geography of worker solidarity across space that these different modes and scales of organizing may augur. The final section of the chapter ponders a number of questions related to the geographical implications for worker solidarity of these strikingly different strategies.

Strategy #1—Organizing Globally in a Global Economy: The 1990–1992 RAC-USWA Dispute

In 1989, the Ravenswood Aluminum Corporation (RAC) bought an aluminum smelter in the small town of Ravenswood, West Virginia. During the next 18 months, five workers were killed and several others injured in accidents at the plant. Consequently, officers of the plant’s United Steelworkers of America (USWA) Local 5668 determined to make health and safety a key part of any new contract negotiated with RAC. However, when the union’s contract with the company expired on October 31, 1990, RAC security officers escorted Local 5668 members out of one end of the plant as they brought nonunion replacement workers in at the other. Thus began one of the most acrimonious disputes between an employer and a union to hit the US

economy during the 1990s. As it turned out, the campaign waged by the USWA and its allies to have the locked-out union workers reinstated would also be one of the most imaginative campaigns implemented by a US union against an employer in recent memory.

Initially, the dispute between the USWA and RAC remained largely a local affair, as both sides made a number of vituperative pronouncements in the local media. Two months after the lock-out began, however, the dispute took an unexpected turn as Local 5668 officials received anonymously a copy of an audit of RAC conducted by the Price Waterhouse accounting firm. Among other things, the report detailed a web of corporate ownership that stretched far beyond Ravenswood, nestled on the banks of the Ohio River. In particular, the document showed that the Ravenswood plant appeared to be a small cog in a much larger financial and commodities conglomerate run out of Zug, Switzerland by international commodities trader Marc Rich. At the time, Rich controlled companies estimated to trade in excess of \$30 billion per year and had operations in many parts of the world. He was also a fugitive from US justice, having been indicted on a number of charges ranging from illegal avoidance of income taxes to mail fraud to breaking the US embargo on trading in Iranian oil (for more on Rich, see Copetas 1985). Whereas part of the plant was owned by local managers, the bulk appeared to be owned by Rich, although his ownership was through various corporate arrangements designed to hide his involvement.

As the connections between Ravenswood and the Marc Rich group of companies became more apparent, representatives from Local 5668 and from the International union's office in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania sketched out a five-pronged plan for ensuring that the locked-out union workers would be readmitted to the plant. First, USWA officials pursued the labor law aspects of the dispute with the National Labor Relations Board, arguing that this was an illegal lockout. Second, they worked with federal regulators to investigate a number of health, safety, and environmental violations for which they argued RAC was liable. Third, Local 5668 members and their supporters engaged in a number of morale-boosting solidarity activities, including leafleting at the New York Stock Exchange and several university campuses and state capitols, plus hosting a number of "solidarity caravans" made up of trade unionists from across the country. Fourth, working closely with the AFL-CIO's Strategic Approaches Committee, the USWA International union initiated a consumer boycott to pressure over 300 end-users of RAC aluminum not to buy metal from the plant during the dispute. In the end this proved highly

successful, as several major (and many minor) users of RAC aluminum dropped their orders with the corporation, including Anheuser-Busch, the Miller Brewing Company, and the Strohs Brewing Company. Fifth, the USWA initiated an international campaign designed to harass Rich wherever he did business around the world.

The locked-out Ravenswood workers and union and AFL-CIO officials in Pittsburgh and Washington, DC quickly realized that, for Rich, the RAC plant was only one of many within his corporate empire. They surmised that, if they were to be successful in their quest to gain back their jobs, they would have to make connections with workers in those countries around the world in which Rich did business. This they proceeded to do. Making use of the fact that the USWA and the AFL-CIO were both members of a number of international labor organizations—including the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF), the International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers' Unions (ICEF), and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU)—union officials in Pittsburgh and Washington, DC began to make contacts with numerous trade unionists and sympathetic politicians around the world.² Their principal weapon was the fact that Rich appeared keen to ward off outside interest in his financial dealings for two main reasons (Uehlein 1992). On a personal level, such interest might have undermined any attempt on his part to negotiate a deal with the US Justice Department which would allow him to return to the United States without facing jail time.³ And on a business level, the USWA's ability to draw attention to Rich's nefarious past might have threatened future deals he was trying to consummate in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

After conducting a thorough analysis of Rich's known holdings and how RAC fitted into them, the USWA and staffers at the Industrial Union Department (IUD) at the AFL-CIO in Washington, DC plotted out an international campaign to bring pressure to bear upon Rich. In June 1991, the IUD and the USWA sent representatives to Switzerland to meet with local unionists and several members of the Swiss parliament. Using their IMF and ICEF contacts, the US unionists persuaded their counterparts in the Swiss metalworkers union to stage several press conferences to bring the Ravenswood situation to the attention of the Swiss nation and lawmakers. They also contacted the Dutch bankworkers' union, which subsequently arranged for them a meeting with representatives of the Nederlandsche Middenstandsbank, which had financed part of the loan originally used to buy the Ravenswood plant. This was significant because, after having been

apprised of RAC's liability should it be subjected to a negative legal decision concerning violations of US labor, health and safety, and environmental laws, the bank's directors subsequently withdrew support from one of the local RAC managers who was trying to raise more funds.

In October 1991, the US unionists also leafleted the London Metals Exchange, where they learned that Rich had a deal pending to buy an aluminum smelter in Czechoslovakia. Fortuitously, at this time the Geneva office of the International Metalworkers' Federation was beginning to make significant contacts with trade unionists in Eastern Europe and so was able to put the US unionists in touch with the national leadership of the Czechoslovakian Metalworkers' Federation OS KOVO (see Herod 1998a, b for more details on the activities of the IMF and OS KOVO during the early 1990s). Fearing that a corporate operator like Rich would strip the smelter of any assets and then close it down, OS KOVO's national leaders successfully pressured President Vaclav Havel to intervene to prevent the proposed purchase.

By late 1991, the difficulties of organizing sustained anti-Rich actions from across the Atlantic had persuaded the USWA and the IUD that they needed to open a European office to coordinate their activities. After opening such an office in Paris and hiring a coordinator to take on much of the day-to-day tasks of writing press releases and conducting research on Rich's other proposed ventures in Eastern Europe, the US unionists were able to work more closely with their European confederates. The International Union of Food and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF), for example, organized a rally of some 20,000 trade unionists on behalf of the Ravenswood workers in Bucharest, Romania, where Rich had planned to buy the famous Athénée Palace Hotel, a deal that was subsequently thwarted. Events were organized in several other Eastern European countries where Rich had deals pending, including Bulgaria and Russia.

Eastern Europe was not the only region in which USWA and IUD officials were active. In Jamaica, the IUD contacted Prime Minister Michael Manley, who in his youth had worked with the USWA as an organizer in the island's bauxite mines. Manley in turn lobbied the Venezuelan government not to allow Rich to consummate a deal he had pending in that country. Through the IMF and the ICEF, the USWA also lobbied Venezuelan trade unionists and briefed representatives of the Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores, the ICFTU's regional organization for Latin America and the Caribbean. Such pressure was ultimately enough to convince Venezuelan President

Carlos Andres Perez to publicly dismiss Rich from bidding on an aluminum deal.

By April 1992, the USWA, the IUD, and their supporters had organized anti-Rich actions in 28 countries (including the Netherlands, Britain, Canada, France, Venezuela, Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Switzerland) on five continents, and had plans to conduct additional activities in Australia, Russia, Israel, Hong Kong, and Finland. Combined with the impacts of their other activities, the US unionists and their overseas confederates had managed to bring tremendous pressure to bear upon Marc Rich and his operations. Although Rich continued to deny that he had anything to do with RAC, on April 11 a representative of the largest shareholder in RAC—a long-time Rich associate—seized control of the corporation's board and fired the local plant manager (who was also a part owner of RAC). During the next few weeks a new union contract was worked out, one which included the dismissal of the replacement workers and the return of the locked-out union workers, a strong union successorship clause, and wage and pension increases. In return, the union agreed to the loss of some 200 jobs through attrition. On June 29, 1992, some 20 months after they had been locked out of their plant, Local 5668 members returned to work.

Strategy #2—Organizing Locally in a Global Economy: The 1998 GM-UAW Dispute

During the 1980s and 1990s, auto producers increasingly came to rely upon “just-in-time” (JIT) systems of production and inventory control. Whereas traditionally auto manufacturers have stockpiled components in large warehouses so that the components will be readily at hand, under JIT components are only brought into an assembly plant shortly before they are needed (see Babson 1995; Dohse, Jürgens, and Malsch 1985; Green and Yanarella 1996; Kenney and Florida 1993; Linge 1991). This means that companies do not have to have so much of their capital tied up in components sitting in warehouses waiting to be used, nor do they have to pay for the land and other costs associated with maintaining such warehouses. However, many commentators (eg Moody 1997; Parker and Slaughter 1988) have argued that the implementation of JIT represents an attack upon workers on the shop floor, who must frequently abandon traditional working methods and work at paces determined not by union contract but by the flow of components into the plant. Although in the 1980s the leadership of the United Auto Workers (UAW) tried to develop a “partnership”

with management concerning the introduction of new working methods designed to keep the US industry competitive, by the late 1990s UAW leaders were coming under increasing pressure from the union rank and file who were suffering the negative effects of such new work organization.

Within this context, on Friday June 5, 1998, some 3400 members of UAW Local 659 walked off the job at a metal stamping plant in Flint, Michigan in protest over the corporation's efforts to change local work rules to limit workers' abilities to "bank time."⁴ For GM, such a change in work organization was important to achieve the flexibility the corporation said it required if the Flint plant were to serve as one of seven in the US, Mexico, and Canada that would provide parts for a new generation of sport utility vehicles and pickup trucks. The impact of the strike at the Flint metal stamping plant was felt almost immediately as the lack of parts led managers at an assembly facility in nearby Orion, Michigan to send 2800 workers home. By the end of June 8, the first full day of the dispute, an additional four assembly plants (including one in Ontario) had sent workers home, and by the end of the first week 50,429 workers at 71 other assembly and components plants had been laid off due to lack of work. Indeed, GM's reliance upon JIT production and inventory control meant that the Flint strikes had a snowballing effect: the inability of assembly plants to get parts from Flint meant that they no longer had need of parts from other components facilities, and this, in turn, led those facilities to send workers home.

The situation was exacerbated for GM when, on June 11, a second plant (also in Flint) was shut down by strike action on the part of 5800 members of UAW Local 651. This plant was a Delphi Automotive Systems facility (at the time Delphi was a GM subsidiary⁵) that provided the corporation with spark plugs, speedometers, and fuel filters. Significantly, it was the only one in North America that made certain crucial components used on GM vehicles. By the end of the second week of the strikes, a total of 121 assembly and components plants had been either partially or totally closed due to lack of work, and 105,514 workers had been laid off. As the dispute continued into July, its effects drew in even more plants and workers. At its height, on July 23, 193,517 workers had been sent home and 27 of GM's 29 North American assembly plants had been closed, while 117 components plants in Canada, the US, Mexico, and even Singapore had been forced either to close completely or to cut back significantly on production.⁶ By the time the dispute ended, the corporation saw its market share drop from 31.9% in August 1997 to 21.6% in August 1998. GM also

lost production of approximately 500,000 vehicles and posted an after-tax loss of \$2.3 billion for the second and third quarters of 1998, while the dispute trimmed almost 1% off the US's gross domestic product (GDP) for 1998 (*Automotive News* 1998:39; *Ward's Auto World* 1998: 37-42).

The principal reason the dispute spread so quickly was the vulnerability GM faced as a result of its adoption of JIT, which left the corporation without large quantities of stockpiled components to ride out any disruptions in the supply chain, while the dispute's wide geographic spread reflected GM's development during the 1980s and 1990s of an increasingly integrated, continent-wide system of production. This temporal and spatial character of the spread of the impacts of the Flint strikes is significant for the argument I am making here for at least three reasons. First, the fact that the impacts of local disputes in a single community were transmitted throughout GM's North American corporate structure and even beyond in a relatively short space of time illustrates how quickly a union may be able to drag into a "local" dispute many more workers and plants. In other words, whereas a corporation may think it is dealing with local issues which may have sparked a strike in a single plant, the fact is that, for corporations operating under JIT, a union may be able to spread a dispute rapidly to other plants, such that it can effectively bring to bear on "local" disputes the weight of its entire membership. Furthermore, the inability of a corporation so affected to sustain such a widespread shutdown may force it to the bargaining table more quickly, whereas the impacts of such "local" disputes on the wider regional or national economy may bring pressure from government to settle early, perhaps on terms favorable to the union. Thus, the ability of a union to identify and shut down critical parts of a corporation's overall operation through engaging in strategically focused strikes (which may technically be over "local" issues but nevertheless impact the corporation in virtually its entirety) can be a powerful weapon in a union's arsenal. Indeed, this is a strategy that the UAW has employed with some considerable success during the past decade.

Second, the fact that workers from communities far and wide can be affected by such "local" disputes may have important—if sometimes contradictory—implications for union strategy. On the one hand, the ability of a particular local union to spread a dispute in such a manner may allow it to secure support and resources in its struggle with a company from many more workers who might consider the issues at stake to be ones that also affect their own lives. On the other hand, such workers may alternatively feel that they have been dragged into

a dispute over issues in a plant which may be hundreds of miles away, and they may resent the fact that they have been laid off—temporarily or even permanently—over matters which they feel do not affect them. In such situations, they may decide to engage not in solidarity across space with their union brothers and sisters working for the same corporation elsewhere but, instead, may criticize workers on strike at other plants for the ways in which such strikes have inconvenienced them. Of course, which of these two responses workers adopt will be conditioned by the contingencies of their location, their attitudes towards their own employers and towards other members of the union, and so forth.⁷

Third, and perhaps most significantly, the ability of workers at just two plants in Flint, Michigan to affect production throughout almost all of GM's North American operations illustrates the power that the local may have in a global economy. As GM has increasingly shifted towards the development of a highly integrated JIT continental production system in which components produced in one part of North America must be whisked as quickly as possible to assembly operations in another part, so has grown the ability of small numbers of auto workers to bring to a grinding halt the corporation's operations through local, strategically focused strikes. To put this in slightly different terms, as GM has sought to shrink the relative distances between the communities in which its plants are located by ensuring speedy delivery of components between them, so, too, has it become easier for workers in certain key plants to spread the impacts of a dispute quickly across large distances. In turn, this has meant that GM has had much less time in which to respond to any disruptions in its production chain, which is giving these workers added political power. Thus, in the case of the 1998 dispute, GM was not able to reorganize its supply chains to restart production at its Silao, Mexico and Bowling Green, Kentucky assembly plants until the end of July. Significantly, this occurred the day before the UAW signed an agreement ending the dispute that committed GM to no substantive changes in work rules in the Flint plants for the immediate future, to investing some \$180 million in the stamping plant represented by Local 659 (in exchange for a 15% increase in productivity), to withdrawing its complaint in federal court charging that the strikes were illegal (thereby freeing the UAW from the threat of imposition by the courts of fines which could have ranged in the billions of dollars), and to agreeing not to close several plants for at least a further two years. It took another week or so after the agreement was signed for all of GM's plants to return to production. The ability of just 9200 workers in two plants in a single

community to disrupt to such an extent the operations of one of the world's largest TNCs, then, is testimony to the power that locally focused industrial actions on the part of workers may sometimes have in an increasingly integrated global economy.

Discussion: Challenging TNCs in a Global Economy

Throughout this chapter, I have considered what some of the changes to the spatial and temporal relationships between places brought about by processes of globalization mean for workers' abilities to secure their interests against TNCs. In outlining the Ravenswood and the GM disputes, I have tried to show how different groups of workers in very different situations resorted to quite different strategies articulated at very different geographical resolutions to achieve their goals. Of course, there are a number of things that are particular to each of the disputes. However, there are also a number of more general lessons that might be drawn from these two cases, lessons that are worth pondering with regard to the role of workers' political practice in shaping the emergent geography of the global economy.

Perhaps the most obvious thing to emerge out of an analysis of these two cases is that globalization contains within it a number of paradoxes and contradictions for workers. Certainly, the phenomenon of the shrinking globe may lead to greater competition between places and workers as many spatial barriers are dismantled, but it may also facilitate greater contact between workers in different parts of the globe and so bring about increased opportunities for solidarity between them. For instance, while the fact that the Ravenswood plant was part of a TNC whose operations stretched around the world clearly provided the locked-out workers with the not insignificant problem of taking on a huge corporation and a powerful set of opponents, at the same time it also facilitated the USWA's expansion of the dispute beyond the confines of a small West Virginia town. The fact that the USWA and its allies in various international labor organizations were able to "piggy-back" onto the organizational structure of Marc Rich's investments and to use this structure to make contact with workers in different parts of the world allowed them to tap into political, financial, and social resources from sympathetic workers and others which probably would have been unavailable to them had the Ravenswood plant not been part of a larger corporate entity.

Equally, the fact that, as Barber (1995) suggests, globalization appears simultaneously to be stimulating in its wake the rise of intense

localisms in many places means that, if they are to be successful, TNCs must frequently pay particular attention to local tastes and desires and to local economic and political constraints.⁸ Such localism has implications for workers. On the one hand, it may provide spaces—both material and metaphorical—for workers to challenge TNCs. Having an island of local stability on which to stand in a sea of global change may provide the necessary support and traditions upon which workers can draw to defend their interests. Furthermore, the fact that TNCs frequently have to tailor their operations to local conditions and tastes because consumers may refuse to purchase imported goods or goods that do not conform to local expectations because they have been produced elsewhere means that local workers and governments may be able to exert considerable influence over them. Thus, if corporations are to operate in particular regions or countries, for example, they may have to cut agreements with various national or local labor federations or politicians respecting certain labor rights, local content in final products, and the like.⁹ On the other hand, defense of the local to preserve traditions and jobs is often one side of a coin whose obverse is rabid xenophobia, and such localism may thus result in a parochial labor politics designed deliberately to protect particular spaces within the global economy at the expense of workers located elsewhere.

Clearly, the resolution of this dialectic of globalization and localization is a geographically uneven process that plays out differently in different places and times. However, it raises, I would suggest, three sets of important questions concerning how class processes relating to the changing terrain of power between capital and labor intersect with, and play out differently across, space. The first of these questions is: how do particular groups of workers view their relationship to globalization, and how may that be shaped by, among other things, their geographic location? Workers whose jobs are threatened by imports are likely to see things differently than those working in locales with industries that are booming due to growing overseas markets. Globalization, then, is likely to mean different things to different groups of workers, and this in turn will affect their political practices and stance towards labor internationalism. Equally, we should not assume a priori that globalization necessarily undermines the power of every worker. Indeed, globalization can also facilitate the bringing together of workers (Ravenswood, Swiss, and Czech metalworkers, for instance). This point is sometimes not recognized by many on the left, but it was certainly acknowledged by Marx and Engels ([1848] 1948: 28), who alluded to this as a possibility a century and a half ago when

they suggested that “national differences and antagonisms between peoples are vanishing gradually day by day, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto” and that “the supremacy of the proletariat will cause them to vanish still faster.”¹⁰

The second question concerns the goals of workers who do engage in international solidarity activities and might be summarized as: what kind of internationalism for what kind of globalization? While there is sometimes a tendency to see international solidarity through rose-tinted glasses as a vaunted example of the workers of the world uniting, it is important to ask for what purpose workers are engaging in such activities. Not all international solidarity is necessarily geared towards bringing about “proletarian internationalism.” Although determining the precise reasons for why workers engage in certain political practices is a complex issue, Johns (1998) has provided in this regard a useful insight concerning the intersection of spatial and class interests. She argues that some types of solidarity may be designed to protect particular privileged spaces in the global economy (eg communities in the US) by, for example, encouraging overseas workers to organize and thus to reduce their attractiveness to capital looking to relocate from such privileged spaces (what she [1998:256] calls “accommodationist solidarity”). Other types of solidarity actions, however, may be designed to challenge the class relations of capitalism without regard to which particular places within the global economy benefit or are negatively affected by such activities (what she [1998:256] calls “transformatory solidarity”). The fact that workers may engage in different types of solidarity actions that have quite different implications for different places raises, of course, the question of which strategies workers choose to use and how they see one or the other as most useful for their immediate concerns. These decisions are likely to be shaped considerably by the contingencies of place—for example, is a local economy booming or in recession? does it have a history of xenophobia or of militant labor internationalism? and so on.

The third question relates to that of strategy and what should be the geographical focal point of action in any particular conflict with a TNC. In presenting the two cases above, I would suggest that workers may face different sets of political, economic, and *geographic* questions concerning the strategies they should adopt when confronting TNCs. Thus, in some instances they may find it more useful to attempt to develop international actions aimed at linking together workers in different locales across the planet. In other instances, they may decide

that engaging in well-articulated, very local campaigns against particular key "control points" in a corporation's structure is more useful for their purposes. In recognizing that the specifics of their particular situation means that different groups of workers may find praxis aimed at different geographical scales—a locally focused campaign versus a global one, for example—more useful in different circumstances, we should not, however, fall into the trap of assuming that one is necessarily a more progressive political stance than the other. Although there is often a tendency to think that transnational labor campaigns are, by their very nature, more politically progressive because they bring together workers across space, as Johns points out, many international solidarity campaigns are, in fact, quite politically regressive in that they are designed precisely to preserve the privileged position of some workers in the global economy (often, those in the global North) at the expense of others (frequently, those in the global South). Equally, we should not assume that local campaigns are necessarily parochial and concerned only with defending local communities' privileged positions within the global economy. They may in fact be designed to challenge directly at key locations in the production process the broader class relations that exist between capital and labor. Indeed, the UAW used this strategy quite effectively during the 1990s to challenge GM's efforts to introduce new work methods (cf Babson 1998). Prohibited from engaging in national strikes during the period of its contract with the auto producer, the national union leadership has used local strikes at high profit plants to pursue its goals across the industry as a whole.

In arguing that in some cases workers may best secure their interests by developing campaigns designed to foster transnational labor solidarity whereas in others implementing targeted local actions against specific key control points of a TNC may be more appropriate, I do not want to present matters in "either/or" terms. In both cases, activities at other scales are often necessary if workers are to be successful—in the Ravenswood case, local solidarity amongst workers in the town was a crucial base upon which to build the international aspect of the campaign, and in the case of the UAW the refusal of workers in other plants to use machinery removed from the Flint plants by GM was an important aspect of worker solidarity during the dispute. Nor am I suggesting that local campaigns are useful for all situations (this is not a "the local trumps all" argument). Rather, what I am trying to suggest is that the primary geographical focus of worker action need not necessarily be at the same geographical scale as that of workers' employers—it is not necessary in all cases for workers to organize transnationally to mirror the scale of organization of their

employers if they are to beat TNCs. There is no set "scalar formula" by which workers and their organizations should go about challenging TNCs. Indeed, the very significance of economic, political, geographic, and other contingencies in any particular dispute means that there cannot ever be a single formulaic guide for workers' praxis.

The ability of the two UAW local unions in Flint, then, to so significantly impact GM's production was the specific result of the vulnerability which the corporation has generated for itself by relying upon JIT, which was not the situation with Ravenswood—a contrast which suggests, perhaps, that those workers who live in the more interconnected world of "fast capitalism" (Agger 1989), with its JIT and highly networked production, may have different strategy options open to them than do those who live in what we might call the world of "slower capitalism," where speed and interconnectedness are less crucial aspects of the production process. Furthermore, suggesting that workers *must* or even *ought* to organize transnationally to challenge a TNC may have unintended negative political consequences for unions' efforts to come to grips with the processes and consequences of globalization, for the very difficulties of trying to organize transnationally may set them up to fail. Workers may think that if they cannot organize globally, there is no point in attempting to organize at other scales. In such instances, not only may the rhetoric of "global solidarity at all costs" result in workers and unions having to spend more time and resources developing international links when challenging a TNC than may be necessary if similar results can be achieved by organizing at other scales, but such a rhetoric may also become quite politically paralyzing, particularly if given the right spin by capital.¹¹

Finally, the fact that workers may have different options open to them—depending, as ever, on the particularities of their own situations—and that they may choose to exercise different options at different times and in different places is also politically important because it challenges the belief that capital alone is remaking the geography of the global economy (cf Gibson-Graham 1996; Herod 1995, 1997a, b). By choosing to engage in one type of campaign rather than another, workers also affect how the geography of the global economy is made, for different strategies will result in different geographies of capitalism. This is important to continually bear in mind if we are ever to realize the possibilities for a more humane world and its attendant economic landscape.

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Endnotes

¹ For example, Richard Trumka, Secretary-Treasurer of the AFL-CIO (*Labor Notes* 1991:4; emphasis added), has suggested that "[i]f we're going to be able to effectively challenge companies like Shell or Exxon or DuPont and other corporations which operate without regard to national boundaries, *we have to redefine solidarity in global terms ...*" In a speech given at the 17th World Congress of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions on April 4, 2000 in Durban, South Africa, John Sweeney, the President of the AFL-CIO, has suggested that "[t]he global economy that corporations have forged *can only be tamed by the international solidarity* of working families everywhere" (emphasis added). There are myriad other examples of such rhetoric.

² The IMF and the ICEF are both International Trade Secretariats with which unions in particular industrial or trade sectors (metalworkers, food workers, journalists, teachers, etc.) may affiliate for the purposes of coordinating cross-border activities. Subsequent to the Ravenswood lockout, the ICEF merged with the Miners' International Federation (MIF) to form the International Federation of Chemical Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM). The ICFTU has several regional organizations.

³ In January, 2001 any fear of serving time in jail appeared to have been allayed when President Clinton issued Rich a controversial pardon.

⁴ Typically, production of parts at the Flint plant had been based upon a quota system: that is, the workforce had to make a certain number of parts per shift. However, many workers would work sufficiently quickly early in their shifts that they might have completed the requisite number of parts before its end, allowing them to "bank" time. In such cases they were entitled to leave the job, though they had to remain within the plant until their shift was over. Whereas UAW members saw this practice of banking time as a legitimate right, the corporation argued that, if workers could complete their work ahead of time, they should remain on the job to produce more components.

⁵ Subsequent to the 1998 dispute, GM sold Delphi off, though GM intended to continue using Delphi as its major supplier of components, and Delphi's agreements with the UAW concerning representation, wages, working conditions, and so forth were to be kept the same as before the sell-off, at least for the immediate future.

⁶ The two assembly plants that remained open were the Saturn plant in Spring Hill, Tennessee (where production is much more self-contained than at most other GM assembly plants and so less open to disruption in the supply chain) and the Ramos Arizpe, Mexico small car plant (which GM kept operating by using local suppliers).

⁷ Examples of both types of reaction were evident during the UAW-GM dispute. Whereas some workers complained that they had been forced to forego much pay over

a dispute which they felt had little to do with their own work situations, in other cases workers in plants not yet affected by the Flint disputes refused to increase production to make up for lost components, while the national leadership of the Canadian Auto Workers refused to accept dies which GM was attempting to remove from the striking stamping plant in Flint and relocate to its Oshawa, Ontario complex.

⁸ For an interesting account of how many US TNCs have had to adapt their products to suit European cultural tastes, see Pells (1997:278–324). Some writers (eg Swyngedouw 1997) have termed this process one of “glocalization” (see also Kanter 1995).

⁹ On such economic nationalism by US workers in the face of globalization, see Frank (1999).

¹⁰ In this statement, Marx and Engels do not appear to have recognized what Barber (1995) has called the conflict between “McWorld and Jihad,” wherein people who feel their local cultures are under threat as globalization erases differences between places resort to rabid defenses of those local cultures. Nevertheless, their point about how (neoliberal) globalization may contain its own contradictions because it may spur some forms of “proletarian internationalism” is well taken, even if they did not quite put it in these terms.

¹¹ I do not want to suggest by such a comment that workers might not want to engage in transnational contacts with other workers for other reasons, such as developing a greater understanding of their situations and the like. Rather, I am suggesting that for the narrower purposes of challenging a particular TNC on a particular issue it may not always be necessary to develop a transnational campaign.

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