

"*Global Unions, Local Power* is marked by its theoretical engagement and solid foundation on the empirical record. Jamie K. McCallum's background as both an academic and a union organizer allows him to fully appreciate what is conveyed to him and to present it both sympathetically and realistically. During times when union decline is the cause of either abject despair or unfounded optimism, research like this provides us with an insightful account of the challenges and promise of transnational labor strategies. More specifically, I hope that it encourages closer attention to the potential and limits of global framework agreements as both regulatory instruments and as vehicles for transnational union collaboration."

—Dimitris Stevis, Colorado State University

"*Global Unions, Local Power* is a trailblazing book. Its subject—the G4S campaign—is an iconic example of the new labor transnationalism. Jamie K. McCallum's dedication to careful ethnographic fieldwork in Europe, Asia, and Africa created the foundational grounding for a pathbreaking analysis. Clearheaded critiques and skepticism are balanced by real appreciation of what global labor organizers are achieving. McCallum's challenges to existing theoretical claims on the structure and evolution of the global labor movement make the book as engaging theoretically as it is empirically. Organizers and academics alike will need to take McCallum's work into account as they try to understand the dynamics of global labor struggles. *Global Unions, Local Power* can rightfully claim a place as one of the most important studies of labor transnationalism in the twenty-first century's second decade."

—Peter Evans, Professor Emeritus of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley, and Senior Research Fellow, Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University

Jamie K. McCallum is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Middlebury College.

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THE NEW SPIRIT OF TRANSNATIONAL LABOR ORGANIZING

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TRANSNATIONAL

LABOR  
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# GLOBAL UNIONS, LOCAL POWER

JAMIE K. MCCALLUM



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It is not a book about why David sometimes wins or a recipe for labor union success. Nor was it written to "give voice" to low-wage workers struggling for a better life. Rather, I undertook the project to make sense of a particular historical conjuncture for labor. Along the way—and it was quite a journey—I accrued many personal debts.

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## INTRODUCTION

Just over a decade ago, the reigning doxa held that neoliberal globalization was a death sentence for labor standards and worker organizations. An inevitable race to the bottom hollowed out trade unions, undermined state protections, and placed national working classes in competition with one another for scarce jobs. Whereas capital had no country, workers, it seemed, were locked in place and left behind. As Piven and Cloward (2000: 413) summarized this belief, "Globalization in turn seems to puncture the century-old belief in worker power."

But the renaissance of global labor activism that began alongside an explosion of alter-globalization<sup>1</sup> movements in the late 1990s has inspired a new perspective on the relationship of workers to the global economy—and a variety of substantive studies on a new dimension of labor movement activity. As a challenge to the fatalistic conception that globalization<sup>2</sup> necessarily undermined the power of workers, scholars, and activists formed the skeletal framework of a counter-thesis, questioning the supposed fixity of labor within the national context and its inherent weakness in the face of

global capital (see Evans 2008, 2010; Herod 2001; Munck 2002). Animated by the prospect of a new “great transformation,” they asserted that unions are forging a new frontier within an old tradition—global unions for the global age.

However, in the scramble to understand the increasing tendency of labor politics to “go global,” scholars have overlooked many of the most critical details on the ground. This book redirects our attention to the manner in which transnational campaigns empower or inspire local movements, still the place it matters most. While some research has assessed the local *impacts* of transnational labor activism, the argument here is from the opposite direction, suggesting that local contexts determine the local strategy. Moreover, while important studies have argued that transnational labor advocacy has the tendency to undermine the autonomy and power of local movements (Seidman 2008), the campaigns examined here are inspired by global priorities and yet have empowered local struggles.

This book is about two parallel stories. First, it relates the account of the most aggressive campaign ever waged by a global union federation (GUF), a years-long effort of private security guard unions to organize against Group4 Securicor (G4S), the world’s largest private employer after Walmart. What began as an isolated battle in the United States blossomed into a worldwide struggle for global unionism impacting hundreds of thousands of workers from over twenty countries. But the global effort also gave rise to deep local struggles. Consequently, the narrative moves among different scales of action, from the global arena, to the national-level context, to the local union office. Throughout the campaign, workers in different places won wage increases, union recognition, benefits, an end to abusive workplace discrimination, and, most importantly, a greater degree of control over their employer’s business model. In the United States, security guard union density (8 percent as of late 2012) is now slightly higher than the national private-sector average, and the campaign settlement provides the union with a clearer path to bring more workers into the fold. Rarely have global campaigns meant more than superficial changes in workers’ lives—this struggle set a new standard.

The second story describes a transition to a new spirit of transnational labor activism. The word “spirit” implies a shifting idea about how labor should best confront the problems posed by global capital. In a context of rising corporate power and declining or unenforceable worker rights

(publicly enforceable claims), many of labor’s tried and true strategies have proven wholly ineffective. In response, since the early 1970s unions have engaged in what I call “governance struggles,” a panoply of strategies to subordinate the rules-based logic of private companies to democratic oversight by workers and their unions. The significance of the fight against G4S is the complex and contradictory ways in which those gains at the global level were articulated onto the local context, enhancing worker mobilization and transforming local union movements.

Most global union campaigns seek to assert universal labor standards and core values within a given company. But the inability to transfer any gains to the local context has often meant that workers’ lives remain unchanged. Rather than insist on the incompatibility of global and local levels of activism, the findings in this book suggest a paradox—effective global unionism requires reciprocity with local actors. The conclusions also permit cautious optimism about the prospects for authentic labor internationalism where others have asserted an overriding pessimism (see Burawoy 2010). The question therefore posed here is simple: How can global unions build local power?

## Backdrop

In 2008 I hosted two trade union organizers from India who coordinated global campaigns for Union Network International (UNI) Global Union, the largest of the global unions. They were on their way to a conference in Puerto Rico hosted by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), a prominent and controversial North American union. Their job was to coordinate a campaign to raise the living and working standards of five million private security guards. They claimed to have built a coherent network of unionists sufficiently mobilized to take on the country’s largest employer, a private security firm called G4S. Moreover, they were not alone. Others like them were coordinating the same campaign against the same employer in Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the United States.

As a former organizer myself, I was deeply cynical about the prospects for cross-border collaboration among unions. The obstacles always seemed insurmountable. Aside from a common employer, in some cases, what did the workers of the world truly share? It seemed wise to heed the cautionary tale of history, which suggested that hostility, in some form or another, was

a far more likely response to globalism than solidarity. The brief outpouring of internationalism around the dramatic 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle had come and gone rather quickly, with labor retreating into national protectionism. Besides, it was hard enough winning campaigns in New York and New Jersey—forget about New Delhi.

Moreover, at that time the US labor movement was deeply embroiled in fratricide. For example, the Puerto Rico conference ended with the dramatic takeover of the local democratically elected teachers union by the SEIU (through its cooperation with corrupt local political elites).<sup>3</sup> This was a disheartening finale to an event that was to ostensibly focus on building global solidarity. Given these circumstances—when leading unions were driving wedges into their own organizations, and when labor imperialism seemed to be making a surprising comeback—it seemed justifiably insane to suggest they should lead a global organizing agenda. Yet that is exactly what my houseguests were proposing.

Further inspection, however, inspired me to reconsider my position. Maritime seafarers across the globe had recently concluded one of their first rounds of global collective bargaining, realizing an unfulfilled dream of the automobile worker unions in the late 1960s (Lillie 2006). European workers seemed to be embracing the “works councils” that emerged from the post-Maastricht environment to coordinate efforts across borders (Waddington 2011). Campaigns by international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and watchdog groups had directed the corporate charters of some multinational garment producers toward fairer working conditions in export processing zones (Anner 2011). GUFs in Europe were winning framework agreements in an attempt to constrain management behavior so that workers could organize (Wills 2002). Overall, scholars began heralding the beginnings of an inchoate worldwide labor movement, a perspective that gained support with the 2008 merger of the American, Canadian, and British steelworker unions. Finally, the SEIU and a handful of other US unions were developing genuine cross-border coalitions with sister unions in Europe, Australia, and the United Kingdom. This upsurge in labor transnationalism inspired a scholarly interest in labor as a vital counterweight to unfettered global capitalism (Moody 1997; Gordon and Turner 2000; Bronfenbrenner 2007; Stevis and Boswell 2007a and b; Waterman and Wills 2002; Munck and Waterman 1999; Munck 2002; Webster, Lambert, and Beziuidenbout 2008; Evans 2010).

Absent from these accounts, however, was the heart of unionism—campaigns by workers against bosses. Searching for cases of actually existing union transnationalism was symied for multiple reasons. For starters, global unionism is not the product of where we would most expect it, the International Trade Union Confederation, the umbrella organization for the global labor movement. Rather, nearly all instances of labor transnationalism emerge from within individual GUFs, and many of those are driven by large national affiliates in the United States. Second, many campaigns that claimed to be “global” in scope were only one-way foreign aid efforts. And on the rare occasions when unions were able to extract promises of good behavior from employers at the global level, they had no ability to enforce the changes locally.

Most confusing of all was the seeming schizophrenia at the SEIU. Though the union seemed, on the one hand, committed to a more comprehensive and cooperative global union approach, its indefatigable leader at the time, Andrew Stern, had recently declared his intention to outsource strikes to low-wage countries. Such an interpretation of international solidarity would be comical if it did not recall the ugly history of US labor’s role in the American imperium. Consequently, the most paradoxical part of the story in this book is the leading role currently played by American trade unions in the global labor movement. Why should such enfeebled unions in the United States have any solidarity to offer the comparatively stronger traditions in Western Europe and in the leading countries of the South?

The emerging scholarly literature on global unionism was as intriguing as it was filled with generalizations and hyperbole. Some scholars’ accounts were wildly optimistic, full of exuberant comparisons to Marx’s First International. Other perspectives were from committed pessimists—but without the critical engagement to offer anything constructive. In either case it was heavy on speculation about a new global possibility but light on how it actually worked.

In the spring of 2009 I attended UNI’s global conference at SEIU’s downtown headquarters in New York City, hoping to gain a greater insight into actually existing labor transnationalism. Instead, the meeting showcased a variety of campaigns that reinforced my worst fears about global unionism—bureaucratic approaches to convince transnational companies to “do the right thing,” a vague and uninspiring platitude that evoked the common story of labor’s weakness more than its strength. Then the talk

turned toward the G4S campaign; against this backdrop, it seemed all the more incongruous.

G4S puts 650,000 security guards to work in 125 countries, keeping watch over everything from strip malls to nuclear weapons laboratories, from the tennis courts at Wimbledon to the battlefields of Iraq. It shepherds the rich and famous throughout the developing world, occasionally fighting pirate ships in the Indian Ocean.<sup>4</sup> It has steadily grown richer and more powerful not *despite* the global economic crisis but *because* of it, having benefited from the perceived increased need for its services given public budgetary shortfalls, crime spikes, and heightened threats of terrorism and political violence. The mostly failed attempts to unionize within the company's US-based subsidiary, Wackenhut, were well known, making the achievements of the global effort all the more perplexing. Interested in unraveling the exceptional nature of this campaign, I decided to study an example of what was possible rather than what was predictable.

## Organizing the Global Security Sector

The SEIU grew into the most dynamic union in the country during the 1990s, and its momentum continued in the early years of the new century, as it organized security guards at some of the same large retail office buildings where it had begun the pioneering Justice for Janitors campaigns (see chapter 2). The union set its sights on the \$34 billion security industry at just the moment when it became dominated by European companies. While some of those firms promoted high standards in their home countries, low wages, high turnover, and dangerous working conditions were endemic to the US market. Buoyed by significant early success at multiple security companies—it remains the largest labor campaign for African American workers since A. Philip Randolph organized the Pullman Car Porters in the 1920s—the decision to pursue unionization at G4S, the largest player in the market and also a European firm, made perfect sense. “I was guilty of suggesting it would be another easy win,” recalled one SEIU staffer. “But I can’t remember ever being so wrong.”<sup>5</sup>

In response to the company’s ardent rebuke of union recognition in the United States, the SEIU looked beyond its national borders for allies—first in Europe, then in the Global South. As part of a corporate “southern strat-

egy,” G4S dropped its unionized European clients for higher profit margins and expanding markets in the Global South, and it soon became the largest employer on both the African continent and in India. The stage was then set for a dramatic confrontation in some of the world’s most anti-union climates. The campaign took on a global dimension almost immediately. As workers occupied corporate headquarters in Indonesia, struck in South Africa and Malawi, and crashed shareholder meetings in London, the SEIU and UNI worked to tarnish the company’s public profile and weaken its status with potential clients. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development determined that the company had violated fundamental worker rights in four countries, and an investor in G4S withdrew its financial support out of moral outrage.

In 2008, after five years of battle, the company finally submitted to a global framework agreement (GFA),<sup>6</sup> a policy instrument guaranteeing new rules that allowed G4S employees to organize trade unions without management interference, including in some places where local law had formerly forbid unionization at all. When the threat of management reprisals was neutralized, workers went on the offensive, winning concrete economic gains in India, South Africa, Malawi, Mozambique, Indonesia, and Poland. New security guard unions emerged in Nepal, Congo, and Ghana. Security guards in the United States, who began the campaign years earlier, won a clear path to union recognition in nine major cities. This book sheds light on the South African and Indian cases because they tell different sides of the same story. In both places private security guards are poor workers in a precarious industry, though their struggles to improve conditions—wages, benefits, job security, employer misconduct—have nonetheless been very distinct.

South African guards fought to oust racist managers and build stronger workplace unions. The militancy and social movement character of trade unionism that all but disappeared in the post-apartheid era seemed reinvigorated through this campaign—a massive strike, workplace mobilization, transnational collaboration, and community involvement. In contrast, the Indian situation did not recall an old tradition; it reflected a new one. There is a growing tendency in India’s labor movement toward independent unionism outside the sphere of political party control. Embracing this new movement, the SEIU and UNI spent months touring the country in search of willing coalition partners to build a new multi-union organization to organize security guards on the basis of industry and class, not politics and



case. In both places the commitment to a global strategy paid off locally, as workers won diverse gains and built stronger organizations. Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998), who largely ignore labor struggles, have shown that social movements in poor countries can make use of a “boomerang strategy” by enlisting the support of rich country allies.<sup>7</sup> That process is present here, though we also see how unions in the North were strengthened by recruiting solidarity from unions in the Global South, a “boomerang in reverse.”

This book also emphasizes a less visible dimension of the campaign—the transformations of foreign union movements under the influence of the SEIU and UNI. Call it “mimetic isomorphism” or “open-source organizing.”<sup>8</sup> American unions are remaking some of their most powerful counterparts around the world. Critics often claim that after hiring the SEIU and submitting to an internal reorganization, unions in Europe, South Africa, and India will bear the unmistakable imprimatur of an SEIU local and continue the legacy of the AFL-CIO as a junior partner in a national effort to extend American hegemony. But so far the risk seems unfounded. The SEIU and other members of its breakaway federation, Change to Win, have found willing partners abroad who understand the benefits of learning from the US experience and translating some aspects of a new strategy. One German unionist recalled, “One day we woke up and realized we were in trouble and the next thing we know we’re doing whatever SEIU tells us to do. And I hate to admit it, but they have a point.”<sup>9</sup>

But the lessons for labor are by no means clear. Cultural friction and hostility broke out almost everywhere the SEIU went, creating discord between North American, European, and Southern union movements. The end result was a settlement that generated accolades for its scope and persistence but also doubts as to whether or not it was “worth it.” Of the 35,000 security guards the SEIU claims to represent today, only a thousand work for G4S, a surprisingly minuscule figure given the extent of the campaign. Consequently, there are those within the SEIU who interpret the campaign as “too long, too expensive, too destructive, too aggressive and didn’t get us what we wanted anyway.”<sup>10</sup> To some extent, that position has won the day. Since concluding the G4S campaign the union has recreated from some of its prior commitments to global unionism.

Nonetheless, woven throughout this book is a story of the campaign largely portrayed as successful. Beyond the material gains won for workers,

compared to the resources spent winning them, the real feat of the campaign is the leverage it gives the national union over the industry as a whole—now that its largest player has submitted to union rules.

## Globalization and the Sources of Worker Power

How were poor security guards and their unions able to force the hand of one of the world’s largest corporations?

Recently there has been great interest in reading transnational labor struggles as if they were cast in a theatrical version of the *double movement*, Karl Polanyi’s term for how nineteenth-century civil society instinctively and spontaneously “protected itself against the perils of the self-regulating market system” and re-embedded it in a variety of collectivist projects. Much the way capitalism might produce its own gravediggers, globalization is said to create the very conditions that allow workers a kind of “built-in” power to fight back.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the new international division of labor, the geographic dispersion of production, the vertical consolidation of corporate power, the emergence of global cities, and new labor process innovations such as just-in-time production models—in short, a new cartography of economic activity—actually make global capitalism more vulnerable to disruption (see Evans 2008, 2010; Herod 2001; Webster, Lambert, and Beziuidenhout 2008).<sup>12</sup> These circumstances, it is said, suggest that “the hour of von Hayek is gone and the hour of Polanyi has arrived” (Munck 2002: 177–178).

One variation on this general theme argues that free-trade pacts, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, typically the bane of labor movements, provide workers certain opportunities for transnational labor activism (Kay 2005, 2011). Another suggests that the immiserating conditions of neoliberalism paradoxically lay the foundations of social movement-inspired forms of unionism (Chun 2009). Labor activists make similar claims. Stephen Lerner, a former director of the SEIU’s Property Services Division and a major player in the G4S campaign, argued that “the spread of multinational corporations and the increasing concentration of capital have created the conditions that can turn globalization on its head” (Lerner 2007: 17). There is no such happy irony in this book. This line of argument is seductive, but ultimately it provides the relationship between global capitalism



and worker power a coherence it does not possess. Situated awkwardly astride this optimistic theoretical outlook rests the daunting record of failed attempts to win meaningful gains through transnational activity. Power is not, as Piven (2008: 26) says, "there for the taking," and we need to more seriously consider the conditions under which workers are able to exercise it.

Building on Erik Olin Wright's (2000) terminology, Beverly Silver (2003) explains that workers utilize *structural power* when they occupy an advantageous position in a particular economic system, or *associational power*, which flows from their self-organization into unions, political parties, or other collective organizations.

The place-bound nature of service work might seem to lend security guards a degree of structural power because their work cannot be outsourced globally. Unlike auto manufacturing or garment factory work, there is no obvious point of conflict between janitors or security guards in New Jersey and New Delhi. This power is magnified when placed in the context of emerging global cities, the command and control hubs of global capitalism. Sassen (2001), whose analysis has directly inspired the SEIU's strategy, argues that global cities require a conglomeration of low-skill, low-wage, service-sector jobs, such as security guards. And precisely because the process of making a global city global is so expensive, requiring high inputs of fixed capital (Goldman 2011), it is less simple than we think for business to simply up and leave. Therefore, Manuel Castells's (2000: 506) assertion, "At its core, capital is global. As a rule, labor is local," which is intended to derive labor's weakness, is seen from this perspective as its saving grace.

The problem is that place-bound workers experience some of the same downward pressures as those whose jobs are more subject to a spatial fix by capital. Guards endure long hours of tedium, low pay, and, being a profession that requires relatively little skill, heavy competition. This is a perfect prescription for employers keen on depressing wages, given that labor is such a large factor of production. In the end, whatever power could theoretically be derived from the industrial setting is overshadowed by the negative effects of the reserve army of labor, myriad forms of subcontracting, labor brokering, and the disaggregation of trade union movements, all of which tend to militate against any kind of labor power built into the logic of globalization.

But Silver (2003: 123) says the conditions that have systematically undermined workers' structural power have placed "a renewed premium on the

importance of associational power" and that we should see low-wage service workers such as security guards increasingly rely on their collective action to leverage gains. The catch is that the capacity to exercise associational power is embedded in state and legal frameworks guaranteeing trade union rights, freedom of association, and so on, all increasingly rare commodities (Silver 2003: 14). This raises a curious problem. On the one hand, associational power is premised on particular political opportunities. Yet the less one's job and livelihood are protected by such frameworks, the more necessary—and unattainable—associational power would seem to be. The erosion of social welfare provisions everywhere and the increasing informalization of the global labor force can only mean that the growing percentage of workers who would count on exercising associational power is less and less likely to be able to do so. How then can associational power become *actionable*?

Frances Fox Piven suggests power moves from a potential to an actionable status when collective actors break the rules that structure a given social context (Piven 2008). In other words, exercising power entails disrupting the interdependent relationships in society that are normally bound by rules.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, I use Piven's concept here to connote *rulemaking*. More precisely, this means new terms of engagement between labor and capital that allow associational power to be made actionable. Modifying the normative framework of employment regulation and the cultural logic that proscribed workers as submissive—in effect, new rules governing the industrial context—was the central way otherwise powerless security guards were able to fight back.

### Governance Struggles and Worker Power: The New Spirit of Labor Transnationalism

Recent shifts in power among states, corporations, and labor groups have encouraged unions to seek gains through new kinds of *governance struggles*, a strategy that enhances the potential for global unionism to empower workers locally. Governance struggles seek to exert a degree of discipline and control over the business practices of transnational corporations and free-trade pacts. In so doing, they alter the otherwise unilinear channels of decision making that impact workers' ability to organize. Although the governance

concept usually implies a generalized political authority vested in nonstate actors and institutions, I use it here specifically to connote worker struggles that seek to enforce new “rules of engagement” with transnational corporations. Whereas traditional union strategies seek to exert pressure on management or the state to increase wages or benefits packages, or to respect a panoply of *rights*, governance struggles target the corporation at a level removed from the workplace in the hope of creating a new field of *rules* that will enable workers to exercise power. These rules include “neutrality agreements,” by which management concedes its right to actively oppose workplace organizing or any clause or conduct code that alters management’s relationship with its employees in a direction that is deemed favorable to unionization.<sup>14</sup>

Governance struggles, explored in depth in the next chapter, constitute the heart of labor transnationalism since the late 1960s but have only recently managed to translate global gains into local possibilities beyond a superficial level. The GUFs are the latest actors to modify this general repertoire through the implementation of GFAs. GFAs are policy instruments signed by transnational corporations and GUFs that seek to create an arena for global labor relations (Fichter et al. 2012). GFAs also link unions around the world in an effort to impact the behavior of companies throughout their supply chains. GFAs have been studied from myriad directions. Many scholars have sought to demonstrate the ways in which GFAs help unions win specific demands, a process that is present in this book, too. But my analysis suggests their greater utility is as part of a larger strategy to expand the bargaining power of national unions over entire industries by forcing major companies to play by union rules.

The labor movement is in fundamental crisis almost everywhere. Shrinking union densities, increasing casualization, flexible employment regimes, and disappearing labor legislation are only the most visible symptoms of widespread decline, a telltale sign that the opportunities for unions are increasingly limited by developments outside their national contexts and sphere of influence. Governance struggles, in various forms, have emerged as a structural response to mitigate the dilemmas posed by global capitalism. The idea is to reconstruct the rules-based power of transnational corporations to assert a degree of control for local actors.

Governance struggles have come to play such a large role in global labor activism as a direct outcome of three interrelated phenomena. First, the

analysis that placed transnational corporations as the motive force of the world economy, and largely outside the purview of national states, has convinced some parts of the labor movement that it cannot rely on government protections. Although it is intended to support the normative globalization thesis, Tilly’s (1995: 21) maxim nonetheless captures a fundamental historic development: “As states decline, so do workers’ rights.” This is exactly why labor turned toward governance struggles—to fight about rules, not rights. The largest and most successful recent victories for unions have been won not through the power vested in them by the National Labor Relations Act, for example, but by circumventing it. The relatively recent failure of unions to successfully win the Employee Free Choice Act, despite massive resources spent trying, is even more of an indication that labor will be unable to depend on national legislation. Instead, the erosion of the right to organize, bargain, and win a contract has pushed some unions toward a strategy of creating new rules. This is even more crucial at the global level, where international labor rights barely exist or are unenforceable. Second, rapidly changing investment patterns and employment regimes, especially in the growing services sector, have emphasized the perceived need for labor to insert itself more firmly into the operating protocols of global business. For many unions, even those without the capacity, resources, or know-how to change, it is now clear that waging battles in one country (against a corporation in many countries) is a recipe for failure. Finally, the increasing consolidation of corporate ownership into fewer and fewer hands presents an opportunity for unions to reach more workers and apply more leverage to a sector as a whole with a single campaign.

Governance struggles are typically associated with processes of globalization because the strategy evolved from a need to regulate capital as it shifted production to places unable or unwilling to enforce labor standards. But they are not solely transnational efforts. The fight against G4S involved the hallmarks of what are now known as “corporate” or “comprehensive” campaigns, most of which happen within national borders, which I conceive of as a governance struggle as well. As the name suggests, corporate campaigns target specific companies with the intent of weakening their public image, economic stability, or political clout in order to extract concessions. A product of ideas born in the New Left of the late 1960s, corporate campaigns have become an exceptionally popular tactic in American unionism to constrain corporations, sometimes as corollaries to actual organizing

drives, though many times not (Manheim 2000). As described in chapter 2, the corporate campaign was a crucial first step in the G4S fight, and a major source of inspiration and transformation for unions around the world.

None of this is to say that governance struggles offer a panacea where other strategies have failed. However, the G4S campaign was successful because it neutralized the company while simultaneously creating the conditions for workers to organize, build new organizations, renew old traditions, and experiment with new strategies. That happened because unions and workers found a way to unleash their power—not because of capitalist globalization but in spite of it and not because they won new rights but because they made new rules.

### A Theory of the New Labor Transnationalism

Scholars have produced a significant body of descriptive case studies of labor transnationalism, but the facts do not speak for themselves. The insights of Polanyi and Silver and others explored in this book notwithstanding, the field lacks a theoretical lens through which to understand the complexities of new modes of cross-border worker activity. This study endeavors to formulate such a theory—first through an analysis of governance struggles and second by finding a place for the G4S campaign in the past and present attempts of unions to reach across borders. Precisely because it is so multifaceted, this campaign can help us more confidently speculate on the potential of such activity to expand in the future.

Transnationalism is not so much a *tactic* as it is a revised *modus operandi*, given new political, economic, and sociocultural conditions. In the chapters that follow I argue that the bleak prognostications for labor's revitalization in the global era—the polemical context for this book—can be challenged if we expand our understanding to include new experiences of transnational labor collaboration, particularly those that link struggles in the global and local arenas. From this general argument I raise three inter-related propositions.

The first is that globalization is not the death knell of worker power, as is often stated on the Left and on the Right. Globalization performs a powerful ideological function as a component of its restructuring dynamism,

most famously voiced by Margaret Thatcher's triumphant TINA proclamation: There Is No Alternative.<sup>15</sup> But the negative forecasts that associate union decline with neoliberal globalization, or foreclose other outcomes, cannot explain the growing number of cases in which unions have generated some form of power over global companies. The emerging counter-thesis, however, has generally overemphasized and oversimplified the structural opportunities for workers and underestimated the audacious strategies of transnational capitalists. My analysis extends beyond the limits of the counter-thesis and the focus on "structural power." Instead, evidence presented in this case shows that workers can find ways to exert "associational power" in the absence of almost any structural advantage whatsoever through governance struggles. It is worth remembering at this point that for all the structured inevitability purported by the Marxist paradigm, the most revolutionary element bequeathed to us in the *Communist Manifesto* was the conscious agency of workers.

Second, I show that transnational governance struggles are a viable means to empower workers locally. Common sense tells us that workers who have the support of a global campaign behind them are necessarily more powerful in facing down global corporations. But often the very strategies that appeal to the international community end up sidelining local labor rights by redirecting the grievance resolution to a different forum of governance (Seidman 2008). Moreover, governance struggles focus their energy on undermining corporate rules, not immediately on organizing workers. But the campaigns studied in this book have empowered local organizing and have also been strengthened by local campaigns. These strategic approaches are considered the basis for a "new labor transnationalism," a wholly different conception than the one advanced in the existing literature.

Last, successful labor transnationalism may depend on a good deal of restructuring of local union movements. In all the empirical chapters there is a focus on struggles within unions to overcome their own strategic deficits—revitalization from the inside out. But nowhere is the connection between internal revitalization and transnational collaboration more important to the story than in North America. I argue against the conception of the "new labor transnationalism" as a bottom-up phenomenon emerging predominantly from movements within the Global South. In fact, one of the most striking impressions from this book is the degree to which today's

global labor movement is led by unions in the United States and how much traction US strategies have around the world. By linking global labor campaigns and local union revitalization, it makes the case for rethinking the dynamics of transnational collaboration. It argues for a shift away from a top-down perspective, in which transnationalism is bound up in the institutions of the global labor movement, without surrendering to a totally bottom-up angle, which suggests that change must come from the global grassroots. If workers are going to succeed in forging transnational power, they need an approach that draws on diverse forms of governance and mobilization at the global and local levels (including information sharing, strikes, boycotts, solidarity campaigns, corporate campaigning, etc.), depending on particular constraints and opportunities.

But beyond the lessons derived from the contours of the case study, the larger story here is about new experiments in strategy and vision that are largely absent from most of the labor movement. The outcomes reveal both the horizons and the limits of such possibilities today. According to two experienced unionists and labor scholars, Bill Fletcher Jr. and Fernando Gapasin, "the future of the union movement lies in a combination of renewed internationalism and the ability of local union movements to transform themselves" (Fletcher and Gapasin 2008: 186). That is essentially the process described in this book.

## Overview

This book's six chapters lay out a theoretical framework and an ethnographic narrative about a new spirit of labor transnationalism. The first chapter recasts the history of labor transnationalism from the standpoint of governance struggles. In so doing I theorize a transition to a new kind of global labor politics that appears alongside a new kind of capitalism. The complex issues surrounding global governance regimes have been at the heart of debates about globalization. Though most of this literature centers on the institutions of the global political economy, this chapter explains how unions have engaged in governance struggles "from below." In particular, I take up the strategies for codes of conduct, social clauses, and trade-labor linkages, and then I move on to address global framework agreements in detail.

The second chapter explores the antecedents of the G4S campaign through an analysis of the SEIU's global campaigns. I demonstrate that the union's internationalism emerges from both external and internal pressures, an inside out self-transformation that highlights the link between union revitalization and labor transnationalism. It further documents the wide influence that the SEIU has had on union movements across the world, and the various ways in which its strategies and its staff have come to play such a large role in the global labor movement. The SEIU's transformation into a global actor is seen here as a kind of historical preface to the campaign against G4S. This is especially true as it acts through UNI, its main GUF.

Chapter 3 begins the ethnographic narrative of the campaign to win a global framework agreement with G4S, starting with security guard organizing in 2001 in the United States. It goes on to describe the globalization of the campaign strategy into Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America, ending in December 2008. Furthering the story in the first chapter, it discusses the development of another kind of governance struggle integral to the campaign and so much transnational labor activity today, the corporate or comprehensive campaign. Chapters 4 and 5 transposition the global campaign onto different local contexts, Johannesburg and two Indian cities, Bangalore and Kolkata. Here we see the ways in which local dynamics shape the strategic choices and opportunities offered to the SEIU and UNI, and the ways in which governance struggles open up pathways for local union mobilization, revitalization, and social dialogue.

The conclusion suggests that workers of the world can in fact unite, if not around common demands then around common employers. I argue that scholars and unionists should more seriously consider the local dimension of global unionism in order to fully grasp the potential and limitations of labor transnationalism. Readers may be disappointed by the absence of a principled call for unions to "be more like movements" that seems to punctuate the conclusion of most books on labor. Instead, I discuss the crucial role played by union leadership in transnational campaigns. Finally, the book would be incomplete without some speculation on the future trajectory of global unionism, given the pace at which it has changed even since this fieldwork was completed.

**Workers of the World...**

The prospect of a unified workers movement that transcends national boundaries has been central to the radical imagination for almost two centuries. Today, the pragmatic position—global companies require global unions—often seems new, but this position is as old as the union idea itself. In 1897, Tom Mann, the veteran British trade union leader and communist, declared it “next to impossible to effectively organize nationally unless international effort be made concurrently” (Mann 1897: 9). And though the iterations of labor internationalism have fascinated writers since then, only recently have scholars built the semblance of a field—global labor studies—out of the disparate perspectives of geographers, economists, industrial relations experts, business writers, and the occasional sociologist.

When I began this research five years ago I was suspicious of arguments that insisted the potential for transnational unionism was living within the contradictions of global capitalism. I wanted to see the internal workings of a global campaign—how unions struggled to transcend the challenges posed not only by global political economy but also their own entrenched organizational inertia. Though I set out with a great deal of skepticism I am now convinced that in order for unions to become a force for social transformation they will need to answer the challenges posed by global capitalism—and their own institutional blinders—with the kinds of global labor organizations that can facilitate sustained cross-border collaboration. As will become clear in the pages that follow, those formations are now coming into existence for the first time.

## Chapter 1

## FORGING THE NEW LABOR TRANSNATIONALISM: GOVERNANCE STRUGGLES AND WORKER POWER

By now we can definitively point to growing tendencies toward transnationalism within some segments of labor movements around the world. Take any large and expanding industry with a global footprint—telecommunications, automobile production, property services, retail, transportation and logistics, food and agriculture, hotels and tourism—and there are active campaigns involving workers, unions, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other civil society groups in dozens of countries. This activity has increased since the mid-1990s beyond regional cooperation to develop legitimate global structures that can carry out sustained campaigns against some of the world's largest and most union-resistant corporations. But the most successful transnational labor campaigns are not bubbling up from below, as many might hope. Nor are they mere instruments for self-interested developed-country unions. In both positions, prospects for labor transnationalism are evoked rather than investigated, and we are often left with an unhelpful choice between Pollyanna or pessimism (see