Transnational trade union action in the port sector – from the old to the new labour internationalism

Maritime transport is the primary means of transporting goods around the world. This, including port activity, is one of the most important sectors of the current "global factory" because any failure in their “just in time” supply chains can cause disruption in the production and circulation of products in the world market, with onerous economic consequences (Silver, 2005). Presently, transnational companies in the sector are able to operate on a global scale, exploiting economies of scale arising from containerization, the building of ever bigger ships and new transhipment techniques. There is also a trend towards vertical integration between maritime transport, port management, logistics and other modes of transportation to ensure a service adjusted to customers´ preferences (Hummels, 2007; Turnbull and Wass, 2007).

Port activity was traditionally a labour intensive industry. Although earlier innovations such as electric cranes and cargo pallets were introduced, the great technological revolution occurred in the 1960s with the container revolution (Levinson, 2006). This transformation has had a direct impact on the drastic decline in employment, in the labour process, based on less physically intense activity and on more stowage in the operation of heavy machinery, but also in the very location of ports, increasingly further away from the initial urban cores, so that it can accommodate larger vessels (Clua-Losada, 2011:4).

Pressures towards port restructuring establish as "best practice” the Landlord Port model. This model, widely promoted by various international institutions (World Bank, 2007), is associated with significant changes in the employment relationship. In this context, port activity is relevant because it is part of one of the most integrated sectors in the world economy. If international competition puts an element of pressure towards liberalization and deregulation, growing concentration of economic activity in a few companies with globally integrated operations makes them more vulnerable since it reinforces the strategic insertion of dock workers in the production process (Lillie, 2005: 94, Turnbull and Wass, 2007: 584; Carmichael and Herod, 2012: 209). Thus, the concrete situation in port activity is not destitute of opportunities for union activity, because its spatial embeddedness and its strategic role in the production process, gives these workers a greater structural power.

Dock workers unions have a strong setorial identity (Clua-Losada, 2011: 3) and a long tradition of solidarity and mutual support based on the principles of the old labour

internationalism. The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) has launched, since 1998, a debate on how to transform the attitudes, approaches and organizational culture of transport unions in order to meet the challenges of the international economy. Its 2002 Congress under the theme "Globalization of Solidarity" is a milestone on the debate about their practical activity of solidarity, taking as reference the inability to effectively support the Liverpool Dockers' dispute in 1995-98, and a more successful campaign in a similar situation with Australian stevedores (Waterman, 1998; Munck, 2010: 221). ITF underwent a process of transnationalization of union structure and strategy, promoting denser trans-scalar connections but also increased inter-union cooperation in various sectors of transport (Lillie, 2004: 63; Lillie and Lucio , 2004: 167; Barton and Fairbrother, 2009). Another important union organization is the International dockworkers Council (IDC) a transnational network of unions founded in 2000, which has significant representation in the sector (Clua-Losada , 2011) .

The Common Transport Policy defined its commitment to reducing technical barriers that prevented the growth of the maritime sector and the strengthening of market integration. The European Commission presented twice (2001 and 2004), a " Proposal for a Directive on market access to port services " which recommended that port authorities allow at least two companies operating load for each port to ensure the inter and intra port competition; as well as the issue of self-handling, i.e., to allow for certain services normally provided by the port authority could be performed by workers hired directly by a company using the port.

Trade unionism in the sector, in order to deal with the Europeanization of port operations (Slack and Fremont, 2005), developed a strong articulation between ITF-ETF and IDC and a cross-scale approach to collective action, with European level protests in ports (with symbolic stoppages and 24 hour strikes) and streets (demonstrations near the European Parliament) and pressure on MEPs of each country and the European Commission , which allowed to derail on two occasions in the European Parliament , the proposal from European Commission (Carmichael and Herod, 2012) . It is currently under discussion a third package that follows in the same direction (European Commission, 2013)

This presentation is part of an ongoing reflection on transnational trade union action in ports (dockers), a sector that is a valuable empirical terrain that captures the (dis)continuities between the old and the new labour internationalism.

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Research Interests – Industrial Relations, Trade Unionism and Labour Movement, Sociology of Work, Social Movements and Collective Action