Problematizing International Labour Solidarity as Development Aid

In 2013, the federal conservative government announced that it will move the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) into the Foreign Affairs and Trade Ministry.[1] This announcement formalized a process already at work over the last several years which has shifted aid funding towards trade promotion to facilitate the interests of Canadian business abroad. A consequence of this CIDA overhaul has been the gutting of extensive funding to development NGO's. One of the longstanding recipients of development aid funding through CIDA (prior to the establishment of the agency even) has been the Canadian labour movement. Since the formalization of international affairs in the institutional life of the Canadian labour movement in the early 1950s, aid and development projects have been at the core of the work of the international department(s) and their staff. Now, without CIDA funding these departments and programmes inside Canadian unions are in crisis, forced to re-think their purpose, capacities and what international solidarity is and could be. I argue that this crisis provides an opportunity to evaluate past practice and consider alternative models of international labour solidarity.

The purpose of my paper is two-fold. Firstly, my aim is to raise questions about the efficacy of development aid delivery as the dominant paradigm for labour international solidarity. It is important to note that international solidarity defined as development aid and practiced primarily as the negotiation and delivery of state funds is not something limited/particular to the Canadian labour movement. This definition and practice has been a dominant framework in many unions and federations in what was defined as the West during the Cold War and what is increasingly being defined as the Global North today. The relationships between these unions/federations and their respective states internationally sometimes pre-dated the Cold War but were in many cases expanded during the Cold War. These state-union relationships led to aid projects with a variety of ends, some of which have been useful for workers struggles. However, other projects, whether developed in the context of active anti-communism or in the post-Cold War period, could be more properly understood as instances/practices of labour imperialism. I consider some of the central dilemmas arising from this model of labour internationalism. These include questions regarding relations with the state, the role of racism/paternalism, and limitations in this approach with respect to its ability to serve as a bridge across differences between movements. This approach also raises a question about the extent to which labour internationalism differs from the work of other mainstream development NGO's.

Secondly, I aim to tease out some of the counter-currents in the history of labour internationalism in Canada that point us to openings for how to build international solidarity in a post-aid context. Based on interviews with union activists who organized international labour solidarity in the context of the Canadian labour movement in the 1980s, I consider how they worked to build new strategies and goals. My discussion focuses on the debates and activity in the 1980s because this was an era where the definition and practice of solidarity was hotly contested. In the 1980s there was extensive mobilization of rank and file union activists in strikes and political protests around growing neoliberalism as well as in feminist, LGBT and anti-racist struggles inside and outside the labour movement. Alongside this was also the growth of grassroots international solidarity campaigns often spearheaded by rank and file workers and in coordination with broader solidarity movements developing at this time. This included the organizing of solidarity

[1] http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorials/2013/03/24/federal_budget_2013_the_canadian_government_shouldnt_plunder_aid_to_promote_trade_editorial.html

actions against South African apartheid and in support of struggles in Central and South America. The work of these activists posed a challenge to the existing practice of international solidarity within the labour movement, presenting types of practices often aimed at member education, mobilization and action inside and outside the workplace. I outline some of the ways the activities of this era provide potential openings and models for a new definition and model of labour internationalism today.

Katherine Nastovski is currently completing a Ph.D. in the Department of Social and Political Thought at York University and works as a Sessional Lecturer at McMaster University in the School of Labour Studies. She is a long-time trade union activist, organizer and educator, mostly inside the Canadian Union of Public Employees. This work has included serving as the chair of the Ontario International Solidarity Committee and as the Ontario representative on the National Global Justice Committee. Her dissertation entitled, "Challenging Labour Imperialism: Contests in Building a Transformative Vision of Labour Internationalism in Canada" offers an analysis of the development of diverse visions and practices of internationalism within the Canadian labour movement since the mid-1940s.