International Solidarity Reloaded Abstract

Opportunity, capacity and power: drawing on social movement theory to improve international union campaigns and build union power

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In reaction to globalisation trends such as the expansion of transnational corporations and the fragmentation of production and outsourcing, there is a growing trend for unions, at both the international and national levels, to focus on new forms of international organising and campaigning. Such strategies include organising along the supply chain and organising within transnational corporate networks, e.g. campaigning to negotiate an international framework agreement (IFA), organising workers globally within a company, and mounting international campaigns to put pressure on a major corporation.

However, as with national campaigns, international strategis are frequently undertaken without a) sufficiently understanding the context in which action takes place, b) adequately studying the power potential of the oppositional forces and of their own side, and c) without a realistic assessment of the requirements for the management of an extended strategic campaign or the individual elements or an understanding of the basis for building support for action. That is, without sufficiently understanding the external environment, power dynamics, the capacity of their own organisation/s, and the basis for solidarity.

We argue that an approach derived from social movement theory concepts can address many of these problems. In recent decades a lot of research has focused on the success or failure of social movements. This has led to the emergence of a wide range of theoretical strands and categories designed to explain the operation and chances of social movement success.

In order to make these available to the trade union research, McGuire (2013) utilises three main categories: Political opportunity structure (POS), Mobilisation and Organisational Capacity (MOC), and Framing. To this she adds a four-fold labour power typology — associative, structural, institutional and discursive power. These theoretical categories provide a basis for analysing the sources of power that unions are able to draw on to exert influence and for understanding how these sources of power are enhanced or weakened by the external context and unions' own internal capacity (or lack thereof).

This analytical framework was successfully applied to analyse the global and local trade union struggles against the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) (see McGuire 2013).

We demonstrate that this approach can provide the analytical framework and strategic guidance needed to plan and implement effective strategic organising campaigns, which are, after all, an essential aspect of international labour solidarity.

Such an approach also has implications for the allocation of union resources, particularly for research (Schwetz 2013). Considerable research capacity is needed to: a) to make a systematic assessment of the industry and broader social/political environment in which a campaign will take place (POS), b) assess the internal capacities of the union movements' own organisations (MOC), and c) develop a narrative that has broad appeal to members, workers, potential allies and the general public (framing). With a few exceptions, the research deficit in the union movement at the national and international levels means that unions and their international bodies are currently underequipped with the kind of research needed to plan and implement such campaigns.

Biography and research profiles:

Dr. Donna McGuire

Biography: Donna McGuire holds a doctoral degree in political science from the University of Kassel (Germany). She is a graduate of the Global Labour University (GLU) Master's programme in Germany, a Post-Doc Fellow of the Global Social Policies and Governance (GSPG) graduate college and an Altstipendiatinnen of the Hans Böckler Foundation. Her research focuses on union renewal and building union power in the global political economy. She has worked as a journalist and communications specialist in the labour movement in Australia. She is active in union renewal discussions at the international level and currently works as an independent labour researcher in Germany and Australia.

Recent Publications:

McGuire, D. (2013) Re-Framing Trade: Union mobilisation against the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), Rainer Hampp: München, Mering.

McGuire, D. (2014) 'Analysing union power, opportunity and strategic capability: Global and local union struggles against the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)', Global Labour Journal: : http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca

Wilfried Schwetz

Biography: Wilfried Schwetz holds a Magister in Sociology and is a graduate of the Global Labour University (GLU) Master's programme in Germany. His research focuses on union renewal and the use of strategic research as a basis for improving strategic campaigns. He currently works as the head researcher at the IG Metall in Germany and is active in union renewal discussions in Germany and at the international level.

Recent Publications:

Schwetz, Wilfried (2013) 'Strategische Recherche - die unverzichtbare Basis für strategische Kampagnen', Strategic Research Book to be published by the IG Metall.

Schwetz, Wilfried (2008) Strategische Recherche, in: Organizing. Neue Wege gewerkschaftlicher Organisation, Supplement der Zeitschrift Sozialismus, 9/2009, 14-21, Hamburg: VSA