Transnational migration as an opportunity for international labor solidarity?

On the role of migrant workers' transnational ties in cross-border union collaboration

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In times of economic globalization, international solidarity becomes ever more necessary for labor. With constantly growing global economic interdependence and capital operating more and more transnationally, the possibilities to defend workers´ rights at a national scale are becoming increasingly limited. Labor movements, too, need to overcome national barriers and confront capital on a global scale. While certainly not the only strategy to be pursued by labor in today´s world, without international solidarity, labor´s prospects to defend workers´ rights against global corporations and governments increasingly dominated by a global competitiveness rhetoric in the long term are dim.

However, labor has historically struggled to attain this goal. Most labor unions do not have a strong internationalist orientation: as international solidarity implies the allocation of resources for goals that are often not directly linked to immediate 'bread and butter' issues, a reluctance against international activities often exists among memberships and leaderships, and solidarity work is usually not part of unions´ everyday practice. Also, it is clear from international labor solidarity research that for stable cross-border relationships of solidarity, more than a mere community of interests of workers is needed: while a shared interest of workers in different countries is the primordial basis for international labor solidarity, stable relationships also presuppose a shared identity or 'sense of togetherness' among workers. However, in practice, such a 'felt solidarity' is often lacking, thus hindering the establishment of trustful relationships of solidarity. This is frequently linked to workers´ limited cross-border contact and knowledge about each other: as unions´ solidarity work is typically highly bureaucratic and located at the level of union leaderships, workers´ possibilities for developing an understanding of common challenges and shared goals with workers in other countries are often quite limited.

The academic debate on international labor solidarity has until now failed to deal with a recent development that could be of crucial importance in overcoming these challenges: transnational migration. In a context of increasing transnational economic and social interconnections, and enhanced transport and communication technologies, as well as global media that brings people together around the globe, also workforces are becoming more and

more transnational in many countries. With neoliberal globalization and economic restructuring causing the layoff of millions of workers and destroying livelihoods in many, especially Southern, countries, international migration flows are growing. In many of the main migration-receiving countries, migrants make up an increasing share of the workforce – and, with some delay, union memberships. At the same time, many migrants today are what has been called *transmigrants*: migrants with 'transnational identities' and a feeling of belonging to both their 'home' and 'host' countries who, while being in the latter, maintain strong emotional bonds and personal relationships to families and communities the former. As has been shown in transnational migration studies, in the emerging so-called 'transnational societal spaces' (Pries 2008), migrants develop transnational cultural and social practices and frequently remain culturally, socially, or politically engaged in their countries and communities of origin.

This paper explores the consequences transnational migration has for the prospects of labor solidarity with migrants´ countries of origin. It is argued that transnational migration needs to be considered in our thinking about international labor solidarity, as the close cross-border ties and emotional bonds many contemporary migrant-origin union members maintain may help overcome the above-described obstacles. Based on explorative research in two US labor unions with large migrant memberships, the paper argues that (1) the cross-border ties and emotional bonds many contemporary migrant-origin union members maintain can *help overcome the lack of a 'felt solidarity', and, through a stronger involvement of the rank and file, promote a solidarity at the grassroots level*; and (2) the concern many migrants have for their country of origin, as well as their relationships to organizations 'back home', can *contribute to overcoming unions´ reluctance to international work, promote a more internationalist orientation, and lead to the establishment of relationships of solidarity with their countries of origin*.