Unions and transnational migration
On the impact of migrants’ transnational ties on international labor solidarity

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Outline

1. Points of departure
2. Research question
3. Methodology used
4. Main argument
5. Findings
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Points of departure

1) **International solidarity**

- Growing need for international labor solidarity vis-à-vis an increasingly global capital
- Major challenges:
  - Lack of 'felt solidarity' of workers in different countries
  - Limited 'internationalist' orientation of most unions
Points of departure

2) Transnational migration

• Increasing global migration flows

• Migration is increasingly *transnational*:
  • Many migrants maintain close social ties to and stay socially, culturally, politically involved in countries/communities of origin
  • ‘transnational identities’

→ also labor forces and union memberships in many destination countries increasingly transnational
Research question

What role does transnational migration play in international labor solidarity, and can it help overcome some of the obstacles?
Empirical research

• 2 US unions with large migrant membership
• Research on the local resp. regional level:
  • USW district in Illinois/Indiana: alliance with the Mexican union 'los mineros'
  • SEIU local in Los Angeles: the local’s work with the FMLN in El Salvador
• Interviews with local/regional officers, staff, active members (migrant and non-migrant)
Argument

Main argument

Transnational migration can strengthen a ‘felt solidarity’ with migrants’ countries of origin and promote a willingness in unions to engage in solidarity activities
Findings

1) Migrants´ 'transnational identities’ and cross-border relationships promote a ‘felt solidarity’ with countries of origin

1. Migrants´ ‘transnational identities’ can promote a particular commitment to solidarity with their origin countries, based on a personal bond

2. The cross-border relationships that migrants establish promote a shared identity across borders
Findings

2) These cross-border relationships can promote a grassroots solidarity

1. The relationships promote an identification with, involvement in, and ‘ownership’ of international work

2. Low-level cross-border information exchange through these relationships that circumvents national and district leadership levels
Findings

3) Establishing relationships with migrants’ countries of origin and promoting a willingness to engage in international solidarity

• Through contacts to and involvement with organizations ‘back home’, migrants can initiate unions’ solidarity relationships with these countries
Reasons for euphoria?
Some cautionary remarks

- *Explorative* research
- Favorable conditions in the researched cases may not necessarily be found in others
- Bureaucratic and hierarchical structure of unions may hinder migrants’ influence
- Strategic character of international labor solidarity
THANK YOU FOR YOUR COMMENTS!