

A 'Spill-Over' Theory of International Trade Unionism

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This paper use neo-functionalist and institutionalist theories of geo-political integration to develop a theory of international trade unionism. In brief, the theory asserts that the type of international 'context' in which international trade unions operate presupposes the types of 'imperatives' that will dominate their interests and concerns. These imperatives are taken to operate along one of three dimensions - industrial, political and ideological, and are seen as evolving in accordance with the 'logic of spill-over' in global and sub-global integration processes. Using this interpretation the discussion provides reasons as to why ideological imperatives have historically dominated international trade union thinking, the only exception being regional trade unions operating in Europe, which have evolved beyond the ideological to embrace industrial and political imperatives in their modes of organisation and operation.

1. Introduction

Theories of trade unions are typically concerned with analysis situated in a national context (see: Poole 1981; Fleetwood 1999). By comparison, theories of trade unions operating at an international level have attracted relatively little attention (though, see: Lorwin 1953; Levison 1972; Logue 1980; Busch 1983, Herod 2003, Ghigliani 2005). There are good reasons for this division of attention. National unions are more numerous, deal more directly with workplace industrial relations and are more accessible than union operating at the international level. It is also easier to analyse the major influences which shape the organisation and behaviour of trade unions operating within the political confines of the nation-state. The following discussion seeks to make some in-roads into this neglected area of research by positing a theory of international trade union organisation and behaviour. In so doing the discussion first sets out the different types of global and sub-global 'contexts' in which international trade unions operate, as well as the associated 'imperatives' that dominate their interests and concerns. It then goes on to theorise why ideological imperatives have historically dominated international trade union thinking.

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2. Contexts and Imperatives

Most of the industrial relations literature to date has failed to distinguish between different types of trade union. The organisation and behaviour of national occupational and industry trade unions (hereafter simply referred to as sectoral unions), for instance, have often been assumed as being the same as those of national trade union confederations (hereafter referred to as national confederations) (see, for example: Ball & Millard, 1986, chp 4; Jackson, 1980, chp 3). The assumption of different trade union types sharing similar modes of organisation and behaviour, however, cannot be sustained. Employees organised at the level of the workplace invariably act and hold concerns that differ to those undertaken and held by the sectoral unions to whom they belong. National sectoral unions similarly act and hold concerns which differ to those of national confederations). If it otherwise there would be few reasons for the division of responsibility that invariably comes to exist within the hierarchy of trade union relationships (Crouch, 1982). This being the case it is therefore worthwhile to distinguish international trade unions from other types of trade unions organised at the national level.

In terms of the geo-political scope of their operations and affiliations there are four types of international trade union. The first engage in transnational exchanges and affiliate national confederations from countries that need not be geographically contiguous. Represented in this group are the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), each of which affiliate national confederations (e.g. Britain's Trades' Union Congress and Portugal's *Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses*) from all parts of the world. The second similarly engage in transnational exchanges along the same geo-political dimensions, but affiliate national sectoral trade unions rather than national union confederations. Examples represented in this group are the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers Union (ICEM), the *Fédération Internationale du Personnel des Services Public* (IFTCP) and the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), each of which affiliate nationally organised sectoral unions. Because these two types of international trade union cover countries from all parts of the world, it can be said that their organisation and operations are *global* in scale.

The third type of international trade union engage in transnational exchanges involving affiliated union confederations from countries that are geo-politically confined or contiguous. Examples represented in this group are the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the *Central Americano de Trabajadoras* (CLAT) and the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU), each of which affiliate national union confederations drawn from within a definable geo-political region (e.g. Europe, the South America and the Middle East in the examples cited). The fourth type similarly engage transnational exchanges within a definable geo-political region, but affiliate nationally organised sectoral unions rather than national union confederations; the European Metalworkers' Federation (EMF) and the South American *Federación Latinoamericana de Trabajadoras Jubiladas y Pensionados* being two such examples.

Because these latter types of international trade union cover countries within a confined geo-political region, their organisation and operations can be said to be *sub-global* in scale

Having set out the different types of international trade unions our theory argued in the following centres the proposition that the types of 'imperatives' that dominate their activities and concerns depends on the type global or sub-global 'context' in which they exist, and that these imperatives operate along three dimensions. The first is where a global or sub-global industrial context exists, which can be identified in situations where the majority of multinational companies operating either globally or sub-globally are willing and able to engage international trade unions on a transnational basis. In such circumstances the organisation and behaviour of an international trade union will be dominated by *industrial* imperatives. By this it is meant that its existence and basis of support will be predicated upon its ability to achieve material gains for members through cross-border bargaining relations held with multinational companies, whether operating globally or within a more limited sub-global region. Where no such context exists other imperatives will come to the fore. Thus, a second dimension emerges where a global or sub-global political context exists, which can be identified in situations where constituent countries have ceded certain aspects of their domestic political sovereignty to a global or sub-global polity (e.g. the United Nations, the European Union, International Labour Organisation). In this instance an international trade union's existence and support will be predicated upon its ability to achieve political gains through the type of relations it holds with the global or sub-global polity. In other words, its existence and support will be dominated by *political* imperatives. A third dimension is where no global or sub-global industrial or political contexts exist, in which case an international trade union's existence and support will be based upon less concrete imperatives. These can be termed as *ideological*, in the sense that they are aimed at attracting and galvanising members around a particular vision of trade unionism's role in society. This can involve calling public attention to perceived injustices committed by national governments or employers operating globally or sub-globally. It may also involve appealing to the wider international community to exert moral pressure on behalf of some labour-related cause or on behalf of an affiliated trade union. Or it can involve the provision of financial and other forms of assistance likely to strengthen the position of member trade unions which share the philosophical views represented by international trade union (the 'context determined' concept used here draws on a theoretical characterisation of collective bargaining hierarchies first formulated by Clegg, 1976).

Setting out these distinctions is not to imply that the organisation and behaviour of international trade unions will be dominated by a single imperative to the exclusion of others. Like all trade unions, international trade unions inevitably subscribe to some form of ideological conviction, hold expectations of developing substantive relations with companies (whether national or multinational) and seek to exert political influence wherever possible. The point to be made is that the prevalence of global or sub-global industrial or political contexts, or lack of them, can be expected to promote one

imperative over others as the foundation upon which an international trade union's principal activities, concerns and support will be based.

This three dimension theory can be given a degree of dynamism by drawing on the literature relating to neo-functional theories of transnational political integration. The most elaborate and most criticised theories in this regard came to prominence in the 1950s (see, for example: Hass, 1958) and 1960s (see, for example: Lindberg 1963) as a means of explaining the early economic and political development of the European Union (EU). They fell into disfavour during the 1970s and early 1980s when this development stalled, but have since re-emerged as a means of explaining the EU's recent drive to implement its Single Market project (see, for example: Transholm-Mikkelsen, 1991). Neo-functional theory of transnational political integration holds that integration within one industrial or business sector will provide its own impetus and spread to others, such that transnational institutions established to coordinate and/or administer specific economic tasks between nations will set in motion economic, social and political pressures for further integration. Called the 'logic of spill-over' (or more specifically, 'the expansive logic of sector integration'), three aspects are said to epitomise this snowball effect. The process is said to begin with various forms of *functional spill-over*, in which the technical characteristics of economic tasks undertaken in developing industrial societies become so interdependent that it becomes impossible to treat them in isolation. Attempts to integrate the tasks lead to economic problems, which can only be solved by integrating more and more tasks, beginning at the national level and eventually spilling-over to the transnational level. As these processes unfold, an impetus is provided for 'negative' forms of integration to be put in place (e.g., the removal of economic barriers between nation states), which are later supplemented by the establishment of more complex forms of 'positive integration' (e.g., the adoption of coordinated or common policies). The need to manage the problems associated with these developments in turn lead to a *political spill-over* as government leaders and other public officials undergo a learning process which culminates in the collective perception that the interests of their respective countries are better served by seeking transnational rather than national policy solutions. This perception is made possible as processes of 'bureaucratic interpenetration' and 'informal cooptation' emerge from the efforts of political elites seeking to manage the problems of functional spill-over. This in turn leads to the establishment of intergovernmental political institutions, and eventually to the foundation of fully fledged supranational institutions. As these institutions develop and grow they are said to generate new pressures which lead to a *cultivated spill-over*. In this final stage the traditional expectations and loyalties of political and business elites are ultimately transformed, leading them to call for ever-more comprehensive forms of integration between member states, and for the establishment of ever-more powerful supranational institutions to govern their processes.

To the extent that the development of the EU can be taken as a model of this form of sub-global economic and political integration, coupling the 'logic of spill-over' with the notion of global and sub-global 'contexts' mentioned earlier provides a means of understanding how international trade union 'imperatives' evolve.

3. Globally Organised International Trade Unions

We can establish this line of reasoning by first looking at how ideological imperatives have dominated global forms of international trade unionism for much of the past century. It is reasonably clear that multinational corporations have long been successful at resisting the cross-border activities of international trade unions, such that transnational industrial contexts, whether global or sub-global, have been either weak or non-existent. The same can also be said of global and sub-global political contexts. The Trade Union Advisory Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (TUAC-OECD) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), for example, have for years been moribund as agencies for advancing the transnational interests of workers, whilst the sub-global polities of continental America (e.g. North American Free Trade Agreement - NAFTA), Africa (e.g. Organisation of African Unity - OAU) and the Asia Pacific (e.g. Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum - APEC) have been confined to dealing with commercial and trading matters only, and had few powers to deliberate on social and labour issues of any substance. Under these global and sub-global industrial and political circumstances, it is hardly surprising that both global and sub-global international trade unions seeking to attract or maintain membership support have had little option but to act as standard-bearers for one of the major international working class ideologies: communism, social Catholicism and democratic socialism.

This is apparent in the way globally organised international trade unions are divided in accordance with these three competing ideologies. The first is represented by the WFTU, which has long subscribed to the view that trade unions should support national and international political endeavours that seek to raise workers to a level of revolutionary class-consciousness. This organisation historically drew the bulk of its membership from national union confederations operating in former Eastern Bloc countries (Upham 1993), though its membership these days are drawn more prominently from China, Cuba, Vietnam, Africa, the Middle East, and parts of South America and Asia; in short, from countries where the more exploitative forms of international capitalism are most keenly felt. The WFTU also directly controls several Trade Union Internationals (TUIs), which represent a number of national sectoral unions holding the same ideals. Its ideological predilection towards revolutionary politics has mellowed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, however its class-based perception of workplace relations and conflict still persists. Apart from covering union confederations in countries ruled by communist political regimes, the WFTU and its associated TUI have only limited coverage of the workforces in the countries where they operate. In these latter cases the principal concerns are confined to simply offering ideological and moral support for affiliated trade unions seeking rights of recognition in countries where these rights are denied (see: WFTU 2006).

The second vision is represented by the ITUC, which formed in November 2006 when the former World Congress of Labour and the International Confederation of Free

Trade Unions merged. The ITUC presently affiliates 304 national confederations from 153 countries, which in turn represent around 168 million workers (ITUC 2007). As an organisation that subscribes to the ideals of democratic socialism, the ITUC supports the concepts of independent trade unionism, workers rights to association and to collectively bargain, industrial and political democracy, and welfare capitalism. It holds close associations with Global Union Federations (GUFs), which affiliate national sectoral unions subscribing to social democratic ideals, and its most important regional organisations are the Inter-America Organisation of Workers (ORIT), which covers the Americas, the African Regional Organisation (AFRO), which covers Africa, and the Asia Pacific Regional Organisation (APRO), which covers Asia (ITUC, 2007). ETUC, which represents trade union interests in Europe, is organisationally independent of the ICFTU, though is closely aligned in sharing the same ideals and regional aspirations; indeed the two organisations share the same building in Brussels. The ITUC is now far the largest, wealthiest, and most important in terms of its global coverage and influence. Even so, its main areas of activity are in drawing world attention to injustices committed by national governments that supplant workers' rights and the cause of independent trade unionism (see: ITUC 2007)

Two things should be noted before leaving this section. The first is that most of the organisations listed above claim representation in various global and sub-global political forums as part of the activities. But to reiterate comments made earlier, the forums cited in these types of activities are either moribund in terms of advancing the transnational interests of workers (e.g. ILO, TUAC-OECD), or else have no mandate to deal with social and labour matters that supersede the national policy prerogatives of member nations in these areas (e.g., NAFTA, OAU, APEC). The existence of a global 'political context' is therefore weak at best. The second is that some GUFs have been able to conclude so-called 'Global Framework Agreements' with several multinational companies, which, on face value, may suggest a global 'industrial context' is in the offering. However the existence of such a context can only be adjudicated as being extremely limited. Not only are the provisions in these Agreements themselves extremely limited, they are largely promulgated by multinational companies headquartered in Europe; a region in which transnational exchanges with trade unions is already a part of doing business as a product of the type of sub-global political context that already exists in that part of the world. As such, and in accordance with our theory of international trade unionism set out earlier, because there is a lack of any substantive global political and/or industrial context it is hardly surprising that global international trade unions are defined more by *ideological* rather than *political* and/or *industrial* imperatives in the manner of their organisation and behaviour.

Sub-globally organised international trade unions operating in Europe are an important exception to this more general observation of their globally organised counterparts. The ETUC, for example, affiliates national confederations in a sub-global region (i.e., Europe) where there exists a sub-global political context (i.e., EU) of some *significance*. It is significant in the sense that the EU has a legal identity where settled legislation is binding and often comes into existence without necessarily passing through the political apparatus of member states. It is significant, also, in that the governing institutions of

the EU have a mandate which extends beyond purely trade and commercial matters to include issues such as political union and social cohesion. In the absence of any substantive industrial context, the ETUC has to some extent always depended upon the promotion of a particular vision of trade unionism, in this case the cause of social democratic trade unionism, but it has also depended upon the ability to act as a political intermediary between its member organisations and the institutions of the EU (see for example: Kirchner, 1977).

This dependence can be described as a symbiotic relationship between the ETUC's internal political relations and the type of external political relations it has been able to develop with the institutions of the EU. As the ETUC's 'imperatives' have come to rest more squarely on political objectives specified in claims made upon EU legislators, there has been an implied demand made on its part for increasing levels of political authority from affiliates to speak and act on their behalf. The generally favourable reactions of European legislators to such claims, evidenced most notably in the policies of inclusion under the Val Duchesse and Social Protocol processes (see European Communities, 1992), has seen the ETUC's external political legitimacy (or its external political imperative, if you like) steadily grow. This, in turn, has seen the ETUC's internal political authority (or its internal political imperative) similarly grow as affiliated organisations have come to perceive its claims are being increasingly recognised by European legislators (note: the use of this type of external and internal dynamic is drawn from a characterisation of the political development of Britain's Trades' Union Congress first identified by Martin, 1989, chapter one). In short, the accelerated integrative processes of the EU over the past decade and a half has extended the logic of spill-over beyond government and business elites to include the leadership of this important representative of European labour, with member organisations coming to rely more and more upon it as a political intermediary for advancing their interests at the national level (Marginson & Sisson, 1996, p.11).

It can be argued from this brief synopsis that as the 'globalising' processes of regional integration unfold an impetus is provided for regional trade union 'imperatives' to undergo a transition. In the case just referred to the transition has been from the ideological to the political, and has been predicated upon the existence (or developing existence) of a *significant* sub-global political 'context'. To put it in general theoretical terms, the 'imperatives' of sub-globally organised international trade unions may be historically, or in the first instance, dominated by ideological concerns, but as the processes of sub-global regional cooperation and integration unfold in a manner consistent with the 'logic of spill-over', there will be a natural transition to political concerns. The course and timing of this transition, however, will be dependent upon two factors. It will first be contingent upon where the loci of effective political authority resides in the administration of a transnational polity at any given time; and second, it will be dependent upon the type of matters governed by the polity. If, for example, the structure of authority is dominated by intergovernmentalism and the matters administered are limited to commerce and trade, then the sub-globally organised international trade union will be disposed to rely on its affiliates and their national channels of action to support what will ostensibly be its labour and social demands. Its

internal political authority will be low as a consequence of this reliance, which in turn will be to the detriment of its ability to influence the governance and outcomes of the transnational polity. In such circumstances, ideological imperatives will more likely dominate the union's basis of support and appeals for membership action, with political imperatives being of secondary importance. If, however, the structure of political authority is dominated by supranationalism and the matters administered extend to labour and social issues, then the converse set of conditions are likely to be more operable, with political imperatives coming to the fore and ideological concerns being relegated to a lower level of importance. It follows from this that if the 'logic of spill-over' unfolds as expected, then the movement in trade union imperatives will be from the ideological to the political.

It remains to say something about sub-global industrial contexts and sub-global international trade unions whose existence and activities are dominated by industrial imperatives. In this regard there is little in terms of precedent upon which to make any definitive statements, theoretical or otherwise. As previously stated, few, if any, international trade unions, whether globally or sub-globally organised, can claim their existence and support is principally based upon the ability to achieve material gains through cross-border bargaining relations held with multinational companies. Yet there is some evidence of an industrial context emerging under the umbrella of the type of emerging political context mentioned above in relation to the European Union. In this regard we refer to the European industry committees of GUFs, which over the past decade and a half have been integral to the establishment and rapid expansion of transnational information and consultation forums within multinational companies operating within the EU (*EIRR*, No.228 and No.229, 1993). Whilst this offers an exceptional instance of sub-global international trade unionism being dominated by industrial imperatives, it needs to be weighed against the fact that the powers of these information and consultation forums in the decisional structures of multinational companies are minimal, and that on-going trade union involvement in their processes is negligible (Streeck, 1997, pp.25-38). What is clear, however, is that the establishment of such forums also owes much to the political desire of the EU to implement its Single Market programme in a socially acceptable manner. The passing of the European Works Council directive in 1994 was a reflection of this desire, and paved the way for European industry committees by making it a legal requirement for European multinationals to engage workers and their representatives in negotiations over the implementation of transnational workers councils (see: Abbott, 1998; *EIRR*, No.242, 1994).

The suggestion here is that the establishment of a substantial global or sub-global political context appears to be a necessary precondition for the emergence, and presumably the maintenance, of a global or sub-global industrial context. Thus, just as a nexus could be said to exist between the ideological and the political in the way international trade unions deal with the existence or non-existence of a transnational polity, so also could it be argued that a nexus seemingly exists between the political and the industrial in the way international trade unions deal with significant and insignificant sub-global political contexts – 'significant' here meaning a context in which

a transnational polity has supranational powers to deliberate on labour and social matters of some substance, as opposed to 'insignificant', where the transnational polity is governed by intergovernmentalism and confined to dealing with commercial and trading matters. It follows from this, assuming the theory presented in this paper has some connection with the facts, that the movement in international trade union 'imperatives' will typically run from the ideological to the political, and *only* then from the political to the industrial. This thesis is depicted in Table 1, with the most likely transition of *Dominating Imperatives* moving typically from top to bottom as the *Global or Sub-Global Contexts* change in accordance with the 'logic of spill-over'.

4. Conclusion

Aside from the European example set out in the above, the present lack of industrial and political contexts globally and sub-globally means that international trade unions will continue to be confined to the role of providing moral, logistical and educational support to member organisations. The inability to act industrially and politically in any substantive global or sub-global institutional environment, in turn, will mean that member organisations of international trade unions operating outside Europe will be unwilling to cede the authority and resources necessary for them to coordinate cross-border campaigns of any substance. In other words, there is little or no organisational mechanism within, or 'globalising' integrative stimulus from without, which will enable the international trade union movement to bring organised pressure and influence to bear on multinational companies and transnational polities operating either globally or sub-globally.

This situation seems unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Globalism may be presently driven by commonly-held 'free-market' ideals and notions of minimal state action, but the reality of entrenched national parochialisms still persist as a major constraint upon the possibility of supranational institution-building of the type that has come to exist in Europe (Snitwongse, 1990, p.56). The preservation of trade union inabilities to act transnationally also remains highly desirable among many powerful economic and political interests throughout the world. Business interests in developed countries see the possibility of greater cost efficiencies to be gained by relocating capital and operations to under-developed and developing countries where trade union activities are tightly controlled and labour standards are kept low as a matter of state policy. Conversely, political interests in under-developed and developing countries see the possibility of underwriting rapid economic growth through foreign investment attracted by cheap and compliant labour (Palmujoki, 1997, p.271). So long as these circumstances remain, the assumed automatism of the neo-functionalist model seems likely to be perpetually suspended.

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