

# Global unions

## Will it halt labour's decline?

As the debate around the rise and fall of labour continues, **Steve Lerner** argues that global union solidarity is failing in the face of the growing power of global capital. He calls for a plan to organise global unions which would give workers real power.

Since the formation of early global companies, like the English East India Company (1600) and the Dutch East India Company (1602), multinationals have spread around the world. As multinationals have grown, wealth and capital have become increasingly concentrated. Of the 100 largest economies in the world, 52 are not nations – they are global corporations. The top five companies are each financially larger than 24 of the world's top 100 nations.

As corporations grow in power, the state will find it increasingly difficult to mediate their behaviour to protect workers and their unions. The state must be pressured now to assist unions in gaining the ability to deal directly with multinational corporations both in their own countries and across the globe. This is a crucial distinction. Instead of depending on national governments to control global corporations, as states become weaker and corporations stronger, we need to pursue a strategy that anticipates the continued decline of state power and works to rebuild workers' strength today so we can deal independently and

directly with global corporations in the future.

As global corporations grow and state power declines, national unions are shrinking in membership and power. Union density is down across the globe. While the specifics and timing are different in each country, what is remarkable over the last 30 years is how similar the story and the results are.

No country, no matter how strong its labour movement or progressive its history, is immune from these global trends. Density is starting to decline in Scandinavia, South Africa, Brazil, and South Korea, countries that until recently had stable or growing labour movements. In France, general strikes and mass worker and student mobilisations have slowed the rollback of workers' rights, but these are defensive strikes desperately trying to maintain standards that workers in surrounding countries are losing.

### THE ANTIDOTE TO GLOBAL CORPORATIONS: GLOBAL UNIONS

Why aren't there global unions? For 150 years much of the argument for global unions has been abstract,

theoretical, and ideological. The simple argument was: Capitalism is global, therefore worker organisations should be too. However, even though capitalism was global, the reality was most employers weren't. Theoretically, workers were stronger if united worldwide, but the day-to-day reality of unionised workers enabled them to win in developed and some developing countries through organising and bargaining and using the power of governments to help them. Unionised workers saw workers in other countries as potential competition for their jobs rather than their allies.

It is an ironic twist of history that globalisation is itself creating one of the greatest opportunities to organise global unions among the poorest and least-skilled workers employed in the historically least organised sectors of the world economy that are increasingly dominated by giant corporations. Even as manufacturing and mobile jobs – aided by new technology – are being shifted and dispersed around the globe, the infrastructure of the FIRE sector (finance, insurance and real estate) and the

jobs needed to support it are increasingly concentrated in some 40 global cities.

These economic hubs directly depend on these service jobs, dramatically increasing the potential power of these workers. It is among the most invisible and seemingly powerless workers that we can build a global movement, reinvigorate unions, and face global corporations with genuinely countervailing power sufficiently strong to ensure that workers have the chance to lift themselves and their communities out of poverty.

#### STARTING IN PROPERTY SERVICES

Given my background in SEIU's Property Services Division, it will come as no surprise that I start by imagining a global union in this industry. But this is not merely a personal choice - rather, it reflects the central role the FIRE infrastructure plays in globalisation.

Companies that clean, secure, and maintain commercial, residential and other properties around the globe comprise an industry that annually grosses more than \$170 billion, and multinational property services companies directly employ more than three million workers. Increasingly, the building owners are global, the investment capital is global, the contractors are global, and the workers are global. Rather than jobs being off-shored, in the property services sector migrant and immigrant workers are moving to jobs in global cities.

Commercial office rents in global cities and corporate profit rates are pegged to world levels, as are executive salaries and benefits, but workers' wages are set by the locally defined minimum wage. The sheer scope of the industry makes the organising task look daunting. Hence, the challenge is to decide on the minimum number of

countries and cities we need a presence to build enough power to exercise the maximum influence over specific corporations and the industry as a whole.

A global union needs to be in the six continents - Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, South America, and Australia. It needs to be in the biggest, most important political and financial capitals within those continents that allow us to engage with the key real estate, financial, and multinational corporations that dominate the industry. But it doesn't need to be in every country or major city to have the breadth and reach to tackle the largest global corporations.

Property services allows us to organise in a global industry that offers unique opportunities to build off the strengths of both existing unions and movements for justice in the world as part of a new movement for global fairness and equality. The three million workers directly employed by

property service multinational corporations can provide the platform to strengthen and expand existing unions and to organise and establish new unions in cities and countries where they don't exist. Strengthened by agreements with global multinationals, national unions can expand their unions, uniting workers employed by smaller local employers as part of a broader strategy of uniting a majority of property services workers on a national and global level.

#### A NEW GLOBAL UNION MOVEMENT

Global unions should be true international unions rather than unions that operate in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico, and call themselves internationals. They must organise workers and negotiate contracts to raise living and working standards across the globe. They need to focus on organising and negotiating agreements with global companies, while they support and help



organise companies and workers within national borders. They must be global unions that grow to amass real power, so they are not relegated to making policy suggestions, but have the strength to negotiate with the entities that set the rules under which global corporations operate.

There were tremendous obstacles to birthing national unions within one country: battles over leadership, balancing local versus national interests, protecting democracy locally while making decisions and governing nationally. And so will it be in forming global unions. Nationalism is growing in some countries, and unions from the US are viewed with suspicion, not only because of their past ties to the CIA but due to general distrust of US initiatives given its economic and political dominance. National unions worry about loss of autonomy. These issues and many more create greater obstacles to forming global unions than workers faced in forming national unions.

#### WHAT GLOBAL UNIONISM SHOULD LOOK LIKE

We need to be clear about what global unionism is, and what it is not. It is not enough to finance worker tours of another country, leaflet a common employer in multiple countries, or pass a resolution of support. Funding or supporting the activity of a union in another country, or engaging in any kind of solidarity activity, cannot be all there is to global unionism.

To understand the difference between global campaigning and global unions, we need to understand what existing global organisations currently do and their capacities and limitations, and consider recent successful global campaigns.

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) is a

federation of national labour federations. Global Unions Federations (GUFs) are federations of national unions, loosely organised along sectoral lines. Historically, the ICFTU and most GUFs have been under-funded, with limited resources and capacity. A need to balance the politics of national organisations, combined with a lack of fundamental commitment from national affiliates to provide resources and support global activity, has severely limited what these organisations can take on or achieve. Their work has included the drafting of global framework agreements (GFAs), which are often little more than declarations of a commitment to core ILO standards on labour rights.

The time for these types of GFAs has come and gone. These general statements of principle are too weak and it is proven that they cannot be enforced. They should be abandoned in favour of agreements with language that concretely helps workers around the world. These new agreements should be part of plans to organise companies on a global basis to establish unions where they aren't as well as rebuild union strength in open shop countries where membership is in decline. No employer should be allowed the cover of a global agreement when it resists workers organising in other parts of the world.

The International Transport Federation (ITF) – the global union federation for transport – and Union Network International (UNI) – the global union federation for services provide examples of campaigns that united workers and unions in multiple countries to grow and raise standards. They illustrate the potential to go beyond defensive 'solidarity' and instead to go on the offensive in dealing with global corporations.

The ITF negotiated a global Maritime agreement covering 75 000 seafarers with the major shipping companies and with their global employer association. UNI's Telecom sector has signed two global agreements in telecommunications. UNI's property service sector signed an agreement in March, 2006 with Securitas, a global security company, that calls for union recognition in any country they operate in globally.

#### BUILDING STRONG GLOBAL UNIONS

The following is required to build strong global unions.

*Global unions need organisational support:* A global union needs ongoing funding, staff, and other resources to lead comprehensive campaigns to unite workers of multinational corporations. National unions that grow as a result of successful global campaigns should agree to dedicate 20% of new dues income toward global union growth campaigns, and assign key leaders and staff to work on organising global unions. National unions need to invest their full organisational support at every level, using their collective bargaining power, and mobilising their members to support global organising campaigns. Workers could become members of both their national and global unions, so they take pride, symbolically and practically, in being part of a global union, recognise the name of the new union, have a sense of ownership, and feel solidarity with workers in other countries. Engaging leaders and members in developing and implementing global organising plans will increase their ability to negotiate with their unionised employers and with their governments to put pressure on



global corporations to recognise and negotiate with workers around the globe.

*Global unions need the ability to negotiate with global employers:* As part of an agreement where corporations commit to recognising workers' rights to have a union and bargain collectively, they will want an end to the global accountability campaign that led to the agreement. There is no incentive for a company to settle globally if the agreement doesn't lead to improved labour relations. National unions that support negotiating global agreements will need to be bound by the terms of agreements that are negotiated. This will be one of the hardest parts of forging a global union. It raises important issues about democracy, national traditions, and member involvement and control. A national union's natural reaction is to fear that it will lose control of the union, lose autonomy, or be dominated by other unions if it agrees to cede authority to a global organisation to negotiate a global agreement. In fact the opposite is true. National unions are increasingly powerless in the face of global corporations and being part of a global union will increase their power and ability to win in their home country, when global agreements give them greater rights and authority. A critical challenge in forming global unions will be to protect and increase union democracy, as global organisations become larger and more complicated.

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## A global property service union strategy

Creating a global union for property services workers could be based on the following strategies:

1. Negotiate global agreements with multinational property services contractors and the companies that hire them.
2. Enforce responsible investment policies at pension funds. The world's 300 largest pension funds have 6.9 trillion Euros in capital. Much of this money is set aside and then invested as the result of union-negotiated or legislated pension agreements. Unions representing the participants in these pension funds should ensure that these pension funds adopt responsible investment policies that guard against poor human resource practices and violations of labor law. To act as effective stewards of their members' pension capital, unions should monitor the governance and investment policies and practices of these pension funds in the cities and countries in which they are based.
3. Unite millions of property services workers in 40 global cities. Property services workers in global cities don't compete with workers in other countries for jobs because their buildings can't move, they don't have the fear that organising will result in their jobs shifting to another country. Workers doing the same work, for the same companies that operate in multiple countries, see the need to organise across borders, even when they speak different languages and come from different countries.
4. Build broad-based public support. In these key global cities, workers and their unions rarely have the strength to win alone. They need the support of community, religious, and political leaders. Corporations value the image of their companies and care if their image is tarnished and their prestige tainted by the highlighting of the terrible conditions of those who clean, maintain, and secure their property. By building broad public support, property services workers can magnify their strength in the cities in which they are organising.
5. Push for legislation for global union recognition and immigrant rights. Even as borders fade, and multinationals grow, local, regional, and national governments will retain some ability to enact laws and regulations that limit the movement of jobs, allow workers to organise and raise standards both in their own and other countries. As property services unions grow larger and stronger in the key global cities by adding members and building broad community support, they will have a greater ability to pass laws that support property service and other workers.