

## CLASS AND PLACE IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER

### **CLASS AND PLACE IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER: INTERNATIONAL LABOR SOLIDARITY**

Rebecca A. Johns  
Department of Geography  
Rutgers University  
New Brunswick, NJ 08903

**ABSTRACT:** The new world order, marked by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the restructuring of Eastern Europe and the unprecedented political prominence of the United States, has been touted as one in which class struggle is abandoned in favor of the universally accepted competition of global capitalism. However, while class relations may be obscured by the increasingly visible competition between places for capital investment, they are not obliterated. Scholars and activists alike are confronted with the need to create avenues of social transformation appropriate to the contemporary political landscape. One response of organized labor in the U.S. has been an increased emphasis on international solidarity: the support of organizing efforts of workers abroad. International solidarity provides a provocative approach to social change by explicitly addressing spatial relations of production. This paper explores the implications of international solidarity as a contemporary political movement that illuminates the complex relationship between class and space.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The international labor solidarity movement in the United States consists of workers and trade unionists joined together by a common commitment to support the organizing efforts of workers in other countries. The movement commands the attention of geographers because it has the unique characteristic of directly addressing the spatial dynamic of global capitalism; and it offers the opportunity for social change through the transformation of capitalism's spatial structures of production.

To understand why labor solidarity's spatial agenda is so significant, we must review briefly the important economic and political changes that shook the world in the last two decades. The central attribute of the economic restructuring that took place from the late 1960s through the 1980s was the internationalization of capital. Aided by the development of sophisticated communication and transportation technologies, corporations gained a new mobility and a new power. Keeping their financial headquarters in world command cities like New York, Tokyo and London (Sassen, 1988), corporations willfully moved production to areas of cheap labor, no unions and few environmental or health and safety regulations. Capital's new freedom shifted the balance of power not only between workers and their bosses, but also between places, nations and regions (Kamel, 1990).

In the U.S., this phenomenon was commonly known as deindustrialization, as the industries which were once the foundation of a strong economy -- auto, steel, mining, textile, clothing -- were decimated. For American workers, deindustrialization meant union busting, plant closings, job loss and the destruction of entire communities (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982). Between 32 and 38 million jobs were lost in the 1970s, according to Bluestone and Harrison, and over nine million jobs were lost

from 1983 to 1988 (Kamel, 1990). The changing position of the U.S. in the world economy was similarly reflected in the rise of imports: by the mid-1980s, 25% of manufactured goods were imported to the country, up from only 5% in 1960. Direct American investment abroad went up from \$20 billion in 1970 to \$226 billion in 1983 (Cavanaugh, 1988). Deindustrialization also meant the loss of a prestigious position within a spatial hierarchy of workers within the international working class: America could no longer be said to be a place of unquestionable prosperity for workers and their families. The American dream was dead.

Deindustrialization in the U.S. had an impact on workers in the less developed countries as well. Their low wages, lack of unionization, few regulations and often high levels of government or military repression made these areas ripe for investment and attractive to runaway capital seeking to stop falling rates of profit. Capital movement into the less developed regions of the world was aided by the creation of free trade zones, in which foreign companies were allowed to operate tax and tariff free. By the mid- 1980s, there were 79 free trade zones in 35 countries around the world (Kamel, 1990).

While the jobs resulting from capital relocation might well have been welcome in these regions, they most often brought with them pitiful wages, no benefits, terrible working conditions, and sometimes physical abuse (Kamel, 1990). In Guatemala, for example, over 100,000 people have been assassinated, and over 45,000 disappeared in the last thirty years (NLC, 1991). In the maquila or free trade sector, most factories routinely fire their entire workforce every six months to prevent unionization. Sexual and physical abuse of a largely female workforce is widely reported (Petersen, 1992). In Honduras and El Salvador, in the Philippines the conditions are much the same (Kamel, 1990). In capital's favorite places, to organize is to quite literally risk one's life.

While workers around the world tried to cope with the new conditions of international capitalism, intellectuals struggled to identify, define and understand the more abstract nature of capitalism's changing face. A recurrent theme in the myriad of discussions that ensued was the critical importance of capitalism's spatial dynamic. In the discipline of Geography, a number of scholars contributed to the resurrection of space as a central theme in social analysis. This assertion took on a variety of forms, but one critical idea emerged: now, more than ever, capital uses space to subdue labor, to counter falling rates of profit and to reproduce exploitative social relations:

The key point is that capitalism...intrinsically builds upon regional or spatial inequalities as a necessary means for its continued survival. The very existence of capitalism presupposes the sustaining presence and vital instrumentality of geographically uneven development (Soja, 1989:107)

And in so doing, capital creates relations across space between actors and places in the production process. It is the manifestation of these spatial relations that simultaneously creates divisions within the international working class and links the fate of U.S. workers ever closer to the fate of workers abroad.

The second event of historical significance in recent years was the so-called fall of communism, heralded by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restructuring of Eastern Europe. In the resulting new world order, the U.S. gained an unparalleled political prominence, and class struggle was declared dead in the universally accepted competition of global capitalism. However fervently governments and corporations may wish to believe that this is so, the reality is that the fight between workers and their bosses goes on unabated. The need for social change is desperate in the vast majority of the world's places.

What is new and compelling is the growing realization among both intellectuals and activists that the battle for social change must be overtly spatial. Soja quoted Lefebvre on this point: "No

## CLASS AND PLACE IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER

social revolution can succeed without being at the same time a consciously spatial revolution" (1989:92). The conditions of the world economy were leading the U.S. labor movement down the road to a spatialized politics in the form of international solidarity. That it is within the labor movement that a spatialized political agenda begins to emerge is exciting precisely because of labor's relatively large resources and widespread infrastructure. Despite the recent loss in membership, trade unions still have the ability to reach and mobilize literally millions of average Americans. Organized labor's potential to effect economic and political life is profound.

### **INTERNATIONAL LABOR SOLIDARITY**

The international labor solidarity movement (ILS) is a potentially decisive move away from the more reactionary and protectionist positions of the mainstream American labor movement in the post World War II era (Radosh, 1969; Sims, 1992). Because of this capacity for truly radical politics, international solidarity is still a contested strategy in the halls of labor.

There are two basic types of solidarity. The first is what I have chosen to call worker-to-worker solidarity. This type of solidarity is most often conducted by loose coalitions of unionists from a variety of unions (local level staff and members). The Philippine Workers Support Committee (PWSC) provides a good example of worker-to-worker solidarity. Formed in the mid 1980s, the PWSC has chapters in eight U.S. cities; a mailing list of 300, and a committee chair in Honolulu who is a staff member of an AFSCME local. PWSC's solidarity takes the form of campaigns in support of striking or embattled workers at multinationals operating in the Philippines; monetary support for individual organizers in the Philippines; mobilization of its mailing list membership in support of jailed unionists, and an ongoing educational campaign carried out through a quarterly newsletter. The committee frequently sponsors visits of Philippine unionists to the U.S., and sends a delegation to an international gathering of trade unionists held each May in Manila. PWSC has no formal or informal ties to any union; rather, its membership is diverse and the committee works with whatever U.S. union is appropriate for a particular campaign. For example, in its corporate campaign against Dole in 1991 and 1992, PWSC acted as a conduit of information to the International Longshore Worker's Union which represented Dole workers in Hawaii and California (Witeck, 1991 and 1993; PWSC, 1991; PWSC, 1992).

The second form of solidarity is union-to-union solidarity, primarily conducted by the high level staff of U.S. unions. The Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) is a good example of a relatively large industrial union with a strong commitment to international solidarity. ACTWU has carried out a variety of programs on behalf of the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union, SACTWU, including multi-faceted and protracted campaigns to pressure U.S. multinationals against whom SACTWU members were striking. Fundraising for strike support and exchange of union staff and rank and file are important components of ACTWU's solidarity program (Hudson, 1991).

ACTWU has also been a key union in the continuing campaign to prevent the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The union was one of the first to start a dialogue with unions in its industries in Latin America, and participated in and helped organize the two key summits of unions on the issue (taking place in San Jose, Costa Rica, and Caracas, Venezuela). Out of its anti-NAFTA campaign, ACTWU developed a sophisticated solidarity agenda that includes a controversial emphasis on hemispheric development. This program, which is still very much contested within the union, is based on the belief that in order to prevent competition between workers over the

location of jobs, there must be a dramatic increase in the number of jobs in the region. This requires a development program for Latin America that includes debt relief, real aid, increased investment and political reform (Blackwell, 1993). Such a strong emphasis within the program on improving conditions in other countries is in conflict with a narrower idea of solidarity focusing on protecting ACTWU's members, i.e., preventing capital flight (LaLuz, 1993).

Quite a few solidarity organizations fall within these two poles. The United States/Guatemala Education Project (US/GLEP), a highly successful organization that recently carried out a lengthy campaign against the Phillips-Van Heusen shirt manufacturing company, is an independent organization that has informal ties to a number of unions. The group carries out a worker-to-worker program targeting multinationals in the maquila sector in Guatemala. The PVH campaign used a variety of tactics including an intense leafletting campaign aimed at the company's customers; a letter writing campaign to CEO Larry Phillips urging him to recognize the union and make a commitment to keeping the Guatemalan plants open; a letter campaign to then-President Serrano of Guatemala, urging him to grant legal status to the union; and an action at the company's annual meeting. The final step in the fight was the filing of a petition requesting removal of Guatemala as a favored nation under the General System of Preferences, which allows Guatemalan products to enter the U.S. with no tariffs. The GSP allows trade benefits to be revoked if the recipient country is found to be in violation of internationally recognized worker rights, such as the freedom of association and the right to organize (Cavanaugh et al, 1988). The filing of the petition shook the Guatemalan business community sufficiently to force PVH to recognize the union and aid in the election of human rights ombudsman Leon de Carpio to the Guatemalan presidency (US/GLEP 1993).

The National Labor Committee in Support of Human and Worker Rights in Central America (NLC) is another example of a group falling between worker-to-worker and union-to-union solidarity. An independent committee of 24 international union presidents, the NLC has a fulltime director and several part-time staff. Housed in ACTWU's international office in Manhattan, the NLC works closely with ACTWU President Jack Sheinkman. Over the years the committee's main function has been to produce periodic reports on working conditions in Central America, with its primary focus having been on El Salvador until recently. However, the main accomplishment of the NLC was its stunning expose, Paying to Lose Our Jobs (NLC 1992), that detailed funding of capital flight out of the U.S. by the tax-supported U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Posing as a businessman, NLC Director Charlie Kernaghan took a camera team from the CBS news program "Sixty Minutes" to Central America, where they captured on hidden video USAID representatives offering funding and support for the fictitious company to relocate to the region. Blatant promises of "no unions" completed the attractive package. The expose was used widely by Bill Clinton in his campaign for the presidency. Following his election and congressional hearings on the issue, the funding of programs to move U.S. corporations offshore was outlawed, and respect for worker rights was made a requirement of aid in the 1993 foreign appropriations bill. The impact on workers in Central America of the huge success of this campaign is yet to be determined; however, the program demonstrates a shift in the work of the NLC from a focus primarily on conditions of workers in other countries to a focus on capital flight out of the U.S. and its prevention. While the NLC is an independent organization, to some extent it necessarily represents the interests of the unions that constitute its board.

## CLASS AND PLACE IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER

### CONCLUSION

International labor solidarity provides the opportunity at a critical historical moment for the labor movement to become a vehicle for truly progressive change. But there are criticisms of international solidarity that must be considered, and it is in confronting the dangers of ILS that the complexity of the relationship between class and space is revealed. One critic of the movement aptly said that ILS can be a Trojan horse, for the motivation for unionists to offer support for organizing efforts of workers in other locations is often an attempt to destroy the incentive for capital flight out of the U.S. By eliminating an attractive pool of cheap labor, U.S. workers may hope to "keep jobs here". Solidarity then reinforces the spatial competition that capital so loves. One solidarity advocate put it this way:

The worse conditions are abroad for...workers, the more likely U.S. companies are to move production overseas. The more we help foreign workers...to defend their rights and raise their living standards, the more likely it is that we can preserve those jobs in the U.S. (Hogness, 1989).

In this sense, solidarity is a sugar-coating for protectionism. Workers trying to win an advantage within the spatial relations of production, trying to further their interests as workers by playing capital's game of spatial competition can, in the end, only lose. For today's greenfields of investment are tomorrow's wastelands, in what Smith (1984) called the see-saw of uneven development.

The reality of ILS is that it may be an attempt to reassert the dominance of American workers in a continuing spatial division of workers. Rather than transforming the economic system, it is an accommodation of capitalism's social relations. On the other hand, ILS has the potential to be a truly revolutionary movement: by eliminating spatial divisions and competition within the international working class, the movement seeks to cripple capital's spatial power. In this version of ILS, the end goal may be socialism, communism, a reformed capitalism, or some unknown entity, but it is surely a system transformed.

In a recent article in Antipode, Beynon and Hudson (1993) argue that place-based political movements may be either socially progressive or reactionary, pitting place against place in the competition for jobs. "There is no inevitability about...the political character of their campaigns or proposals. Such issues are resolved through a political practice which is itself historically contingent" (1993:189). The political character of class based movements is also historically, and spatially, contingent. In analyzing the different solidarity organizations, we begin to see constraints on the political character of union-based solidarity which arise out of the spatial nature of the groups themselves. This tension is clearly illustrated within ACTWU, where the legitimacy of the institution depends on meeting the needs of a geographically defined and limited membership. To protect U.S. jobs is to appear to satisfy those needs in the present moment; to protect jobs in the long run requires the more controversial hemispheric development plan. Worker-to-worker coalitions are not bound by a membership that has so clear a national character. Members of groups such as the PWSC are joined together, not by complex institutional ties, but only by their shared beliefs.

The vital question is under what conditions ILS has been able to overcome the very real emotional and material attachment to place that U.S. workers feel, in favor of their wider class interests in the international economy. We can, I believe, isolate some of the factors that create the conditions under which ILS takes a more progressive path. Those factors begin to emerge as we compare worker-to-worker solidarity with a more spatially constrained union-to-union solidarity. These questions must be answered, in order to ensure that a critical moment is not lost, and so that U.S. labor may fulfill its potential for contributing to social transformation.

**REFERENCES**

- Beynon, Huw and Hudson, Ray, 1993. "Place and Space in Contemporary Europe: Some Lessons and Reflections." *Antipode*, Vol. 25, Number 3, July 1993.
- Blackwell, Ron 1993. Personal interview with ACTWU's economic advisor.
- Bluestone, Barry and Harrison, B. 1982. *The Deindustrialization of America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Cavanaugh et al, 1988. *Trade's Hidden Costs: worker rights in a changing world economy*. Washington: IPS.
- Hudson, John, 1991. *South African Labour Bulletin*, April, 1991.
- Hogness, Peter 1989. "One More Hole in the Wall: Lunafil Strikers in Guatemala," *Labor Research Review*, Vol. 13.
- Kamel, Rachael, 1990. *The Global Factory: Analysis and Action for New Economic Era*. Philadelphia: AFSC.
- LaLuz, Jose 1993. Personal interview with ACTWU's Director of International Solidarity.
- National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador, 1991, June. *Worker Rights and the New World Order*.
- National Labor Committee in Support of Worker and Human Rights in Central America, 1992. *Paying to Lose Our Jobs*.
- Petersen, Kurt, 1992. *The Maquiladora Revolution in Guatemala*. Yale Law School Occasional Paper Series, 2.
- PWSC, 1991. *Briefing Paper, 1991. Dole Campaign Update*.
- PWSC, 1992. "PWSC/U.S. 1992-April 1993 Report."
- Radosh, R., 1969. *American Labor and U.S. Foreign Policy*.
- Sassen, Saskia, 1988. *The mobility of labor and capital*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sims, Beth, 1992. *Workers of the World Undermined*. Boston: South End Press.
- Smith, N., 1984. *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Soja, Ed, 1989. *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. London: Verso.
- US/GLEP, 1993. *A Short History of the PVH Campaign*.
- Witeck, John, 1991 and 1993. Personal correspondence from PWSC Director.