THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE EMERGENCE OF GLOBAL LABOR SOLIDARITY

Kim Scipes

This article recognizes that there is no theory of global labor solidarity and tries to lay some groundwork specifically toward developing such. It begins with an examination of "labor imperialism," which has recently been theoretically grounded, and rejects that. It then discusses previous efforts to theoretically develop the concept of "new labor internationalism," particularly highlighting the thinking of Peter Waterman. It joins this with Kim Scipes' three levels of labor internationalism. Following, it replaces the concept of international labor solidarity with global labor solidarity so as to recognize new developments by workers in multiple sites around the globe: workers around the world are no longer waiting for "Northern" labor movements' resources or even ideas, but are trying to build real labor solidarity across the globe, acting in solidarity with their brothers and sisters from across the world.

There is no theory of global labor solidarity to date, so what people who are trying to build international labor solidarity are working off of is a moral prescription, initially made by the French socialist, Flora Tristan, but more famously by Marx and Engels: "Workers of the World, Unite!" (Armbuster-Sandoval 2013, 614). Can we give this more grounding?

It should be noted that we now have a theoretical conceptualization of labor imperialism. By first addressing this concept, we can use this as an example of which global labor solidarity is not, and then we can discuss what is meant by global labor solidarity.

Labor Imperialism

Building off the work of Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1989), Kim Scipes (2010b) discusses Nederveen Pieterse's conceptualization of imperialism, and extends it to certain acts by labor, which Nederveen Pieterse does not. Importantly, Nederveen Pieterse's conceptualization goes beyond that of the Marxists, and he argues that "imperialism is domination extended across political community borders" (Scipes 2010b, 467, based off Nederveen Pieterse 1989). Scipes explains:

A political community usually refers to a nation-state; however, while including nation-states in this category, Nederveen Pieterse's understanding of imperialism extends beyond the nation-state level. He recognizes that because of
external domination during past history, groups who share common culture, traditions, languages, and political organization (i.e., “political communities”) may have been incorporated within the boundaries of other political communities. Examples of this include Native American nations being incorporated into the U.S., the Palestinians into Israel, the Kurds into Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq, and certainly this is also true of the indigenous people around the world. Thus, instead of ignoring these peoples or making them irrelevant by confining the understanding of imperialism to only nation-states, Nederveen Pieterse broadens the conceptualization of imperialism to include the domination of one political community over another, and this can exist within the current boundaries of a nation-state; these cross-political community border relationships are based on unequal power relations, with the stronger dominating the weaker (Scipes 2010b, 468).

Nederveen Pieterse also sees different levels of domination. Instead of just confining the concept to political communities, however, he recognizes different levels of domination, which can be at a superstate level and a substate level.

In other words, Nederveen Pieterse not only expands the concept of imperialism on a horizontal axis through broadening it to include domination across political community borders, but he also extends it vertically by including different levels of domination. It is in recognizing that domination can take place at a level below nation-state domination that allows Labor’s across-political-community-borders domination to be included within the concept of imperialism (Scipes 2010b, 468).

And finally, Nederveen Pieterse’s conceptualization is not economic. In addition to the Marxist claim that imperialism can be for economic gain, that is, profit, he “recognizes that imperial domination also can be implemented to achieve political power in the global realm, such as through geopolitical positioning, and through mobilizing and/or controlling social forces in other countries for the benefit of the imperialist force.” These, however, are often in combination, so “the issue is not a dichotomous categorization and choice between economics or politics, but rather is a search for primacy at any one time and/or situation: in other words, economic motivations maybe primary with political ones secondary, and in others, political control may be primary, and economic ones secondary” (Scipes 2010b, 468).

Scipes applies this conceptualization to theoretically understand the five sets of interrelated empirical findings on the AFL-CIO’s foreign policy program, which has shown that the U.S. labor has actively sought to dominate foreign labor movements since the early years of the twentieth century under Samuel Gompers, and it continues today, despite changes suggested in the early years of the [John] Sweeney administration:

1. Labor’s foreign policy leaders have worked to help overthrow democratically elected governments, have collaborated with reactionary, pro-dictator labor movements against progressive labor movements, and have supported reactionary labor movements against progressive governments...

2. Th
3. Th: an and act
4. Th beh refu have
5. U.S dom

“It has been ex imperial
Ac
ism” is cur
we efforts, W
We
It is l

In th

alism all ot the m
creati
	essary

states

of sue

After crit 
suggests t and twen 1998, 2).
Water contemp between implicitly important
2. This dominative project is a product of forces within the labor movement, and not of external forces, such as the U.S. Government, White House, and/or the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

3. That labor's foreign policy leaders have voluntarily chosen to be conscious actors in major initiatives by the U.S. State

4. That labor imperialism has been carried out in union members' "name" yet behind union members' backs, and labor's foreign policy leaders have refused to "come clean" about past operations even when union members have advanced their request for information through established labor movement processes and procedures

5. U.S. labor activists have fought over the years in opposition to this domination

"In short, the range of operations in this effort to dominate labor globally has been extremely well-established, and has generally been referred to as 'labor imperialism' (Scipes 2010b, 466-7).

Accordingly, the key word that we get from understanding "labor imperialism" is domination.

We want to contest labor imperialism, based on domination or dominating efforts, with labor solidarity. To that, we now turn.

Global Labor Solidarity

We want to argue that solidarity is opposed to domination.

It is here that we turn to the work of Peter Waterman. Waterman begins his book on internationalisms (plural) with some background:

In the nineteenth century, Marxists presented labour and socialist internationalism as internationalism, or at least as the primary internationalism, with all others subordinate to it. Anti-capitalist internationalism was understood as the negation of nationalism. . . . The aim of such an internationalism was the creation of a world socialist community, understood as the desirable and necessary future society, one which would replace hostile relations between nation-states with peaceful co-operation. It was understood that there was one bearer of such internationalism, the industrial proletariat (Waterman 1998, 1).

After critiquing the statist turn that this took in the twentieth century, he then suggests that we could have an alternative concept, "drawing on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century values of liberty, equality and solidarity" (Waterman 1998, 2). And he argues quite strongly for the creation of new internationalisms.

Waterman gives us an important understanding when he argues that "[a] contemporary internationalism—based on recognition of the interconnections between capitalism, racism, sexism, statism, etc.—would need to be at least implicitly critical of all of these" (Waterman 1998, 51). However, his most important point regards "solidarity":

By solidarity, I mean a community of interests, feelings and actions. This is the more general ethical value and human relationship underlying internationalism. International solidarity should be taken to mean not only an expression or striving for human identity, but also reciprocity (mutual advantage), affinity (shared feelings), complementarity (differential contribution), and substitutionism (taking the part or place of the other) (Waterman 1998, 52).

And to try to “concretize” his conceptualization of “new labor internationalism,” Waterman advances 13 propositions:

1. Moving from the international relations of union or other officials toward face-to-face relations of concerned laboring people at the shop floor, community, or grassroots level

2. Surpassing dependence on the centralized, bureaucratic, and rigid model of the pyramidal international organization by stimulating the self-empowering, decentralized, horizontal, democratic, and flexible model of the international information network

3. Moving from an “aid model” (one-way flow of money and material from the “rich, powerful, free” trade unions, workers, or others) to a “solidarity model” (two-way or multidirectional flows of political support, information, ideas)

4. Moving from verbal declarations, appeals, and conferences to political activity, creative work visits, or direct financial contributions (which will continue to be necessary) by the working people concerned

5. Surpassing an “export solidarity” model by practicing “international solidarity at home,” combating the local causes/effects of international exploitation and repression

6. Generalizing the solidarity ethic by combining national, racial, political, religious, ideological, and gender discrimination among working people locally

7. Basing international solidarity on the expressed daily needs, values, and capacities of ordinary working people, not simply on those of their representatives

8. Recognizing that while labor is not the privileged bearer of internationalism, it is essential to it, and therefore links up with other democratic internationalisms so as to reinforce wage-labor struggles and surpasses a workerist internationalism

9. Overcoming ideological, political, and financial dependency in international solidarity work by financing internationalist activities from worker or publicly collected funds, and carrying out independent research activities and policy formation
10. Replacing the political/financial coercion, the private collusion, and public silences of the traditional internationalisms with a frank, friendly, constructive, and public discourse of equals, made available to interested workers

11. Requiring of involved intellectuals, professionals, and officials that they are open about their own interests, motives, and roles, that they speak with workers and take on a service and training role, rather than that of political leaders or official ideologists

12. Recognizing that there is no single site or level of international struggles, and that while the shop floor, grassroots, and community may be the base, the traditional formal terrains can be used and can also be influenced

13. Recognizing that the development of a new internationalism requires contributions from and discussion with labor movements in the West, East, and South, as well as within and between other sociogeographic regions (Waterman 1998, 72–3).

These were listed in detail because they are the most complete thinking of that this author is aware of on the subject of labor internationalism. That does not mean they are correct or even acceptable; but they represent Waterman’s range of thinking.

Scipes (2000), while appreciating Waterman’s clarity and sophistication, nonetheless challenges his approach:

Rather than limit our understanding of labor internationalism to a “shopping list” of propositions, such as the [13] that Waterman advances but that imply none are any more important than others, it seems helpful to recognize that there are different levels of labor internationalism and they should be prioritized. By suggesting that some efforts are more developed (or even more desirable!) than others, I am not suggesting that those less desirable should be neglected—as in saying, if they don’t meet my standards, they’re “bourgeois,” harmful or even worse—but rather it implies that they should be appreciated for what they accomplish, while suggesting more can be done.

With that understanding, I suggest there are three levels of labor internationalism, which I list from the lowest to the highest, although they are on a continuum and not discrete. And each successive level incorporates efforts at the lower level(s). The first level is where workers cooperate with each other across international boundaries: this can include everything from letter writing and donating funds up to and including taking direct action (sabotage, “hot cargoing”/black-listing of goods and equipment, strikes) in support of other workers’ labor and democratic struggles. The second level is where workers help people in the “target” country change their social order: thus workers supporting social movement unions which are specifically fighting to change their social order; workers supporting different social sectors such as women who are struggling to change the social order, as well as workers supporting liberation struggles as a whole, would be forms of this level of labor internationalism. And the third level is where workers in one country struggle to
change their own social order so as to be able to both support peoples in other countries struggling to change their respective social orders and to live in solidarity and on a more equitable level with people throughout the world.

Approaching labor internationalism in this manner recognizes the reality of imperialist (oppressor/oppressed, dominator/dominated) power relations in the world and suggests that ending them is better than allowing them to continue to exist. And approaching labor internationalism in this manner validates the struggles by workers in an oppressed nation—such as Brazil, the Philippines or South Africa—as being just as important as those by workers in an oppressor nation—such as the United States—when they struggle to change their respective social order: by challenging their social order to no longer allow itself to be dominated by others or to dominate others, workers confront domintive power which is ultimately the very basis for their own subjugation (Scipes 2000).

We need to learn from the approaches both of Waterman and Scipes. The three levels delineated by Scipes allow us to understand similarities among and differences between solidarity efforts. Accordingly, we see that most international labor solidarity today takes place at the first, or lowest, level. That being said, however, this allows us to address the propositions put forth by Waterman.

We must apply this thinking to the larger social context today. New labor movements are currently emerging across the Global South. This is happening in countries as disparate as China, Egypt, and Iran. New developments are taking place within labor movements in places such as Colombia, Indonesia, Iraq, Mexico, Pakistan, and Venezuela.

Previous efforts to build cross-border labor solidarity, especially in the post-World War II period, have been done under the rubric of international labor solidarity. When this has happened, much of this has been between two labor movements at a time, and has generally proceeded from the stronger to the weaker, in a clientelistic manner rather than a solidaristic one, and this has generally been from labor movements in the Global North toward labor movements in the Global South (see Waterman 1998). And that is when this “solidarity” was not really labor imperialism (see Scipes 2010a, 2010b).

This writer believes that we are in a new period, when labor solidarity can include multiple labor movements, can originate in the South or the North, and be directed toward either southern or northern unions, and is based on solidaristic relations. Accordingly, I argue that these efforts should be considered global labor solidarity to differentiate them from previous efforts.

Accordingly, we can see that the larger sense of Waterman’s proposals is already being made real: the struggle of workers is increasingly seen in a global context, and links by workers and their organizations across political community borders are being made, and to a greater and greater extent. And as the articles in this special issue of WorkingUSA show, the relationships are changing: no longer dependent upon “Northern” labor movements for resources or, perhaps more importantly, ideas, “Southern” labor movements are emerging and are trying to find ways to build real labor solidarity across the globe. Concurrently,
however, activists in a growing number of “Northern” countries are pushing for their unions, and ultimately their nation-states, to create new, non-oppressive relationships with those of the Global South.

Thus, workers around the world are seeking new ways to build global labor solidarity, and are not waiting for the “big boys and girls” at the “top” of labor to come save them; they have learned clearly that no one will “save” them but themselves, acting in solidarity with their brothers and sisters from around the world (see also Ness, ed., 2014).

Yet what about other propositions from Waterman? Let’s focus on what this author considers Waterman’s three most important other propositions: the call for “grassroots” internationalism, a network form of organization, and mutual respect and shared resources.

Waterman certainly prioritizes “grassroots” labor internationalism, which basically means face-to-face contact between workers on the shop floor and/or in the community. While unquestionably desirable, financial and other resource limitations constrain this approach.

He prioritizes the “network” form of organization, and this is something that SIGTUR (Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights) has been developing. However, while networking between labor centers and their unions is to be encouraged, ultimately unions have found the necessity to be organized in a more hierarchical manner nationally. While some of the reasoning may be “we’ve always done it this way in the past,” the reality is that it has helped some labor centers to both act powerfully in a coordinated manner and to defend their member unions from repression.

And finally, Waterman argues for mutual respect and shared resources, including political support, information, and ideas. This, in fact, gets back to the point made above: there is more interaction, more sharing, and more political support back and forth than ever before. What I think is new, however, is that a growing number of activists are getting involved, whether joining and working within established international networks or creating their own, and not waiting for the “international office” of their union to mobilize them. The work developed by the Canadian activists in challenging Israeli apartheid is exemplary, likewise U.S. Labor Against the War (USLAW). And although not included in this issue, the communications and solidarity work being done by Eric Lee and his “Labour Start/Union Book” network are exciting and commendable.

Michael Zweig’s article on the USLAW is quite encouraging. Not only have activists in the U.S. created a whole new organization since 2003, but it has now grown to almost 200 affiliated local unions, central labor councils, state federations, international unions, and other worker organizations, which come from all sections of the labor movement. Its presence and active program over the years—including organizing three tours by Iraqi labor leaders across the U.S.—have led to getting help from the AFL-CIO’s Solidarity Center regarding issues in Iraq. The USLAW has developed the strength to get progressive resolutions on international labor solidarity passed at national conventions of the
AFL-CIO. And while it has yet to be able to garner enough support in the AFL-CIO’s National Executive Council to get these passed resolutions enforced as policy, USLAW still continues to develop, now challenging the U.S. government’s militarized foreign policy and building support for their position. In his article, based on these years of activities and from his position in the national leadership of USLAW, Zweig calls for the development of a new foreign policy for the AFL-CIO. This certainly is an example of labor activists not waiting for “the big boys and girls,” but of rolling up their sleeves, putting their “thinking caps” on, and getting the job moving, if not done.

Synopsis

Where does all of this leave us theoretically? Moving forward, but not yet solidified. We still do not have a theory of global labor solidarity. However, it seems clear that any such theory must be based on concepts of grassroots, emancipatory globalization based on the concepts of mutuality, equality, and respect for all working people wherever they may live and work.

Conclusion

After examining our growing theoretical understanding of labor imperialism, we used that as something we want to overcome; that is, we want to reject labor imperialism and develop global labor solidarity.

Building off the work of Peter Waterman, and to a lesser degree Kim Scipes, we have theoretically placed the studies of building labor solidarity across borders that appear in this issue, with the most important developments being that workers and labor activists at the grassroots level are not waiting for the “big boys and girls” to save them, but rather placing their struggles and efforts in a global context and advancing their own efforts to build global labor solidarity.

We hope you find these articles stimulating, and that we can all work even more vigorously to develop global labor solidarity.

Kim Scipes Ph.D., is a longtime labor activist, Chair of the Chicago Chapter of the National Writers Union/UAW #1981/AFL-CIO, and an Associate Professor of Sociology at Purdue University North Central in Westville, Indiana. He served as an elected member of the Board of Research Committee 44 (Labor) of the International Sociological Association from 2006 to 2010. He is the author of AFL-CIO’s Secret War against Developing Country Workers: Solidarity or Sabotage? (Lexington Books, 2010 hardcover, 2011 paperback), and KMU: Building Genuine Trade Unionism in the Philippines, 1980–1994 (New Day Publishers, 1996). Address correspondence to Kim Scipes, Associate Professor of Sociology, Department of Social Sciences, Purdue University North Central, 1401 S. US Hwy 421, Westville, IN 46391, USA. Tel: +01-219-785-5294. E-mail: kscipes@pnc.edu. Web site: http://faculty.pnc.edu/kscipes.
Notes

1. References to support each of these claims are in the original article (Scipes 2010b, 466–7). For a more complete explication of the AFL-CIO’s foreign policy program, see Scipes (2010b). For a theoretical account of how these labor activists joined together to oppose the AFL-CIO’s labor imperialism, see Scipes (2012).
   As noted, efforts to radically reform the AFL-CIO’s foreign policy program has been a major effort, albeit not the only one, by American labor activists to contribute to building international labor solidarity. “Thus, while this author focuses on the foreign policy program, it is to advance the larger project of building international labor solidarity, while seeing the AFL-CIO’s foreign policy program as a major impediment to the success of this larger project” (Scipes 2010a: 216, endnote 1).

2. As a result of labor activists’ growing opposition to the AFL-CIO’s foreign policy program, what appears to be the result of internal differences within the AFL-CIO and especially among staff members within the international affairs department, and efforts such as USLAW (discussed below), the Solidarity Center has carried out some progressive projects, perhaps most notably in Central America and in the Dominican Republic, as well as in Iraq and Bangladesh (see Armbruster-Sandoval 2011; Scipes 2010a, 73, 218, endnotes 12 and 13; see also Kumar and Mahoney, Langford and Zia, and Zweig, the latter three herein). We also received articles for this volume that discussed progressive efforts by the Solidarity Center in Asia and Africa, although space limitations precluded us from including them.
   However, while unable to yet confirm, it appears to this writer that the Solidarity Center has made some internal decisions regarding its projects around the world, perhaps classifying them into areas strategic and nonstrategic to the U.S. empire, and allowing progressive projects to take place in the nonstrategic areas or strategic areas (such as Iraq) where considerable pressure from within the labor movement to do good things has been developed. As far as this author knows, there have been no detailed published reports by the Solidarity Center of their operations in the former Communist-led states in Eastern Europe or Russia, nor in oil-producing countries around the world, especially in the Middle East, nor have there been any reports by independent researchers about their efforts in many parts of the world.
   Thus, while I am glad to know they are doing some things in some places that are progressive or at least not totally detrimental, as long as the Solidarity Center is integrally tied to the National Endowment for Democracy—see Scipes (2010a, 96–105)—then the charge of engaging in labor imperialism, regarding the overall program, remains. See also Barker (2011). For an in-depth study of the Solidarity Center’s operations from 2002 to 2009, see Bass (2012). See also Scipes (2014a).

3. Scipes argues that there is a lot to be learned from the experiences of the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU-May First Movement) Labor Center of the Philippines. (Waterman and Scipes have strong disagreements over who controls the KMU: the Communist Party of the Philippines [Waterman 1998, 125–7] or the members [Scipes 1996]) Scipes, who has done the only in-depth, nationwide study of the KMU, argues that the KMU has developed a new type of trade unionism (similar to COSATU [Congress of South African Trade Unions] and CUT [Central Unica dos Trabalhadores] in previous years); has created a new organizational structure that combines both vertical (hierarchical) and horizontal networks; has fostered widespread rank-and-file education; has fashioned ongoing relationships with sectoral organizations of peasants, women, students, urban poor, etc., which has led to the development of powerful “people’s strikes”; and has established a conscious program to build international labor solidarity, including a unique annual program where unions and workers are invited to visit the Philippines to learn from their experiences (for a detailed examination of the KMU’s program to build international labor solidarity, see Scipes 2000). See Scipes (2014b).

References


