

**Sefton Lecture, University of Toronto, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2013 -  
Tony Burke, Unite Assistant General Secretary  
“Labour’s Responses to Globalisation – Alternative Forms Of Organisation”  
Why Unite and the USW created Workers Uniting – the Global Union**

First of all can I thank the organisers of the Sefton Memorial Lecture for inviting me to take part in this prestigious event.

I bring you the best wishes and solidarity of the Unite General Secretary, Len McCluskey and the Executive Council of our Union, Unite.

Just a few words about Unite the Union.

Unite is the biggest Union in the UK and Ireland with 1.5m members in every sector of the economy including manufacturing, financial services, the public sector, education, defence, transport, energy, construction, voluntary sector – indeed we are in every sector of the UK and Irish economies.

We were formed by a merger of Amicus and TGWU – two of the UK and Ireland’s biggest Unions.

But this evening I want to talk about how Unite and the United Steelworkers have come together to form our global union, Workers Uniting, in response to the globalisation of companies and the attacks they make on our members wages, conditions, pensions and trade union rights.

We believe that Workers Uniting is an alternative for of union organisation.

I have been a full time Union official for over twenty years and a lay activist for ten years prior to that.

I have always held the view that the only way that workers can combat the political and industrial power of multinational companies is through the creation of a powerful globalised union.

Now, I come from a background of a craft printing union, the National Graphical Association, later to become the GPMU. The Typographers Union had been in existence since the since the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

When you trace the history of the GPMU (now part of Unite) you find there were 150 small unions based on craft and geographical location.

These Unions were formed to deal with local issues, local pay and conditions - with local employers.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century unions in the UK were busy competing with each other, all being played off against each other by employers and trying to fend off the ravages of technological change that saw jobs, crafts and skills disappear.

I know that many unions in the USA and Canada probably operated in the same way.

I looked at the USW's 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary poster and saw the names of many proud unions - lots of small unions fighting to exist and eventually coming together to form one powerful union.

It wasn't until the 1960's that UK unions encountered nationwide corporations and recognised the need to create mergers within industries to combat the power of national employers.

Only a decade later we were faced with multinational corporations for whom international and continental boundaries do not exist – an many of these companies ignore ILO conventions on key issues such as the right to organise and bargain collectively.

They were and are able to move work at the click of a mouse – destroying jobs and livelihoods on every occasion, playing one union off against another and one country against another.

Of course Unions tried to combat the power of multinational corporations and global capital through the organisation of “Global Union Federations”.

I believe those Global Union Federations have done a good job in trying to bring together Unions across industries and sectors.

Indeed Unite is affiliated to every Global Union Federation that currently exists – and we play the fullest part as possible.

However, they are not sufficient to protect union members from the ravages of globalisation, the erosion of worker's rights, the reduction in living standards in every country and the undermining of trade unionism throughout the world.

As I said I believe they have done as good a job as possible.

However many of our members don't understand how they work, they see them as remote and as they have no decision making powers any Union can walk away or not implement those policies.

There is also a criticism that they have become “perpetual debating societies”, with no industrial power to stop multi-national companies from destroying jobs and livelihoods or abide by agreements.

A recent example is the situation the Steelworkers faced at Siemens in Maryland.

The new manufacturing global union federation, IndustriALL, signed a Global Framework Agreement with Siemens guaranteeing the right of workers to organise within the giant German engineering company globally.

Within matter of weeks the company had ridden roughshod over the agreement by attacking the Steelworkers organising campaign in Maryland.

They hired two union busting companies to take apart the campaign and succeeded in persuading the workers to vote against unionisation.

The reality is the Global Union Federation could do little to stop the company union busting even though Siemens recognise and work with the Unions in Germany and the UK.

Is there any wonder why Workers Uniting members question the role of Global Union Federations.

The idea to form Workers Uniting, an independent Global Union, not a Federation, which operates in four countries, came about earlier in the decade when Unite and the Steelworkers got together after recognising that:

- We were dealing with the same neo liberal political system in the four countries,
- That we were dealing with the same employers in the same industries.
- These include metals, papermaking, oil and chemicals, healthcare, rubber, glass, engineering and general manufacturing.

The Founding Constitution of Workers Uniting, signed in July 2008 said “Workers Uniting will challenge exploitation anywhere in the global economy since it is fundamentally unjust and is destructive of decent living standards everywhere.”

Unite and the USW recognised that the economy had globalised and it wasn't going to change back!!

Decisions about jobs, work, pay and conditions and the future economic wellbeing of families were being made far from the factory or office floor.

And politics was globalising.

Over the last decade we have seen the rise of Right Wing political parties in all four countries, using the same tactics across the UK, US, Canada and Ireland. Squeezing the last drop of profit – before moving onto another profitable country, where labour is cheaper and there are weak labour laws.

We can no longer look to the BRIC countries, Brazil, Russia, India, China – there are others that are growing at a rapid pace and will attract companies to move to them. Jim O'Neill of Goldman Sachs who coined the phrase BRICs calls them MISTs (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea and Turkey) all countries with weak unions.

Half a century ago only a few employers operated in more than one country. The fact is now nearly all of them do.

Therefore there was a clear need to create a global, fighting back Union that could stand up to employers and governments wherever they operated.

In four years Workers Uniting, which is registered as an independent in all four countries is establishing itself as a global force.

Of course we recognise that developing Workers Uniting will take some time but I have always been of the view a global union would have to be developed – so why not now?

I believe that the steps both of our Unions have taken will make sure that Workers Uniting is built on a solid foundations.

Let me give you just a few examples of our joint work.

In the papermaking industry Union Reps at local level from both our Unions are working together on a range of issues, exchanging information using social media as well as having regular meetings to plan strategies to deal with global companies in that sector.

One example is Graphic Packaging, the US packaging company which recently purchased packaging companies in the UK and the EU.

Already Workers Uniting is working on how we respond and organising meetings of our local union reps. Three years ago the International Vice President of the Steelworkers, Jon Geenen took part in the negotiations for the new collective agreement for the papermaking industry in the UK.

This year USW Reps took part in strategy meetings with Unite to look at the oil refining industry and in a few weeks time USW Reps from the steel industry will join Unite Reps for a week's worth of strategic planning in regard to the metals and steel sector.

We have joint work in the glass industry and are looking at, oil, chemicals, aerospace and healthcare.

Last year Workers Uniting came together to put pressure on Rio Tinto, the giant mining company, over the lock out of USW members at Alma in Quebec.

Besides showing total solidarity with our USW colleagues, we were able to mobilise Unite activists in the UK to demonstrate at the Rio Tinto AGM in London. But more importantly, we put pressure on the London Olympic Organising Committee over Rio Tinto's involvement and sponsorship of the London Olympics.

I don't suggest it was Workers Uniting that won it, but we had a significant effect on the decision, I believe, for Rio Tinto to settle with the USW in Canada and win a just settlement for not just USW members – but OUR members in Workers Uniting.

To continue to build firm foundations Unite and the USW have exchanged officials in the US and Canada with local officials working side by side in a range of industries learning about each other's problems but building real solidarity and support.

Our young members are coming together and taking part in each other's events and conferences. We are building a new cohort of officials with a "Future Leader's" programme, aimed at identifying Union officials for the future with a vision to recognise the need to build a strong global union which can truly fight back.

Equally both Unions are involved in each other's equalities work including USW's Women of Steel Conference.

And so friends you can see that the vision of the founders of Workers Uniting is now coming together – it will take time – but if not now when would we do it?

We are developing a structure that can respond to global corporations whilst dealing with local issues at home – we are flexible but we work as “one union” internationally and are governed by a board of both Unions led by Len McCluskey and Leo Gerard.

Without Workers Uniting I believe that groups of workers in our individual countries will be – as we say – “doomed to scrabbling over the crumbs from the giant’s table”.

And I believe that Workers Uniting will face further significant challenges and that we will be able to respond in a manner that means that workers win - rather than face what some see as inevitable defeat.

Finally, in an age of global capital we have no alternative but to become more global and confront global companies which we cannot do if we are locked within our own national borders.

If Trade Unions are really serious about challenging the power and dominance of global financial markets and global companies then we need to be capable of acting in a global fashion just as they do – that is why Workers Uniting is an “alternative” organisation.

As Leo Gerard, the President of the USW and a proud Canadian said at the first ever congress of Workers Uniting in 2011, “We can globalise the fight for working people all around the world. We have the vehicle to fight back and that vehicle is Workers Uniting”.

In an age of austerity where in some countries workers are just three pay cheques away from destitution, where workers rights are under attack, where the 1% take all – I believe that Workers Uniting is the right response.

Thanks for listening.