

Global Unions, Global Companies, and Cross Border Campaigns: The
Vision, Opportunities, and Challenges Raised by the Global Union
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Dr. Kate Bronfenbrenner
Director of Labor Education Research and Senior Lecturer
Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations
Ithaca NY

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I am deeply honored to have been chosen to be giving the Sefton Memorial Lecture tonight. For me the honor has double meaning. First it has deep significance given the great respect and relationships I have developed with my many colleagues and friends in universities and labor unions across Canada in the last two decades. But what makes it even more meaningful is the historic link to the United Steelworkers, a union that for many reasons is very close to my heart.

I am going to speak to you tonight about an historic event that took place at the Crown Plaza Hotel in New York City on February 9-11, 2006 —the Global Companies-Global Unions-Global Research-Global Campaigns conference.¹ Now, since I was the person who had prime responsibility for coordinating that event it would seem rather self-congratulatory for me to label it historic. Yet, I can say in all honesty that I had no delusions of grandeur when I and the rag tag committee of academics and trade unionists, including several individuals in this room, first set out to try to pull this conference together three and a half years ago. We struggled to raise money, we struggled to get any institutional commitment from every union and university who supported the conference, and we nervously hesitated to set the date and put a down payment on a hotel, fearful whether we would even get the two hundred person minimum we needed to not have a complete financial loss on the conference.

So what allows me to be so presumptuous as to say it was historic? It was historic because for the first time ever trade unionists and scholars came together from around the

¹ See <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/globalunionsconference/> for more information about the conference.

world, from the Global North and the Global South, from every sector of the economy, with every global union federation represented, for the sole purpose of discussing how to strengthen labor's capacity to take on the world's largest multinational corporations through more effective strategic global research and comprehensive cross-border campaigns.

It was historic because we had 560 people in the room, 300 of them not from the US and because there were real debates and discussions about strategies, issues, and goals, and because of the divisions that fell to the wayside for the three days of the conference such as the split in the US labor movement, the tensions over Global Union Federation protocols, and old cold war legacies about which unions should be invited to the table. At this conference we had speakers from the CUT in Brazil, the FAT in Mexico, NUMSA/COSATU in South Africa, and the general secretary of the ICFTU as plenary speakers and yes, even the secretary treasurer of the Canadian Labor Congress, and no one ever questioned our choice of speakers.

Yet, most of all what made this conference historic was who was in the room. From around the world the people gathered there were representatives from unions, academia, and NGOs who were actively involved in either researching or conducting cross-border campaigns with the world's largest multinationals, a group that has never gathered together in one place before. Most important, it included significant representation from the Global South. And a large part of what the conference was focused on, both inside and outside the formal session, was a chance to share strategies, make connections, learn

from each other, and build lasting networks for the future. That could not happen without bringing everyone into the same room.

Background and purpose

So how did this come about and what exactly were we trying to accomplish in the first place? The idea for the Global Unions conference had its origins in discussions I started having with Ron Blackwell, who was then director of Corporate Affairs for the AFL-CIO, and then later Rich Trumka, Secretary Treasurer of the AFL-CIO, and Bruce Raynor, then President of UNITE, in the fall of 2002. Basically our discussions focused on three areas:

a) There continued to be a severe shortage of individuals trained in strategic corporate research in the US and around the world, and even those that were conducting research tended to use a simplistic model that failed to capture the complex and diffuse nature of corporate structure and ownership among the world's largest multinational employers. In recent years Tom Juravich, from UMass Amherst, and I had worked with Keith Mestrich then of the AFL-CIO, to develop a model for teaching strategic corporate research and comprehensive campaigns that better captured the more complex nature of today's multinationals. But now we were not only receiving more requests than we could handle for training in this model from US unions but increasingly getting requests from unions and universities in other countries as to how we could best facilitate getting our model out to the widest audience possible.

b) Most US unions were failing to research the employer they were dealing with in both organizing and bargaining campaigns, and while some industrial unions had run very noteworthy cross border-campaigns when confronted with aggressive employer opposition in strikes and lockouts, such campaigns were almost unheard of in the organizing context and remained still quite rare in most bargaining campaigns as well.

c) Even those campaigns that did exist were primarily unilateral in nature, always with the expectation that unions in other countries would come to the rescue of US unions faced with tough foreign-owned multinationals. Campaigns initiated by US unions to support union organizing and bargaining struggles in other countries remained extremely rare.

d) These issues were not limited to the US, but unions engaged in struggles with employers in the UK, Canada, Australia and to a lesser degree some European nations also tended to seek help from workers in the Global South in support of their fights but would not reciprocate in kind.

e) At the same time there was another tension developing with some unions in Europe continuing to argue that the comprehensive campaign model interfered with positive relations with employers while others were wanting to link more with unions in North America and the Global South in these campaigns as they watched the same employers that had been battling unions in North America begin to move towards privatization and

shifting of union work out of Western Europe towards Eastern Europe and the Global South.

It was from these discussions, which then expanded to include other unions and scholars, that the idea of the Global Unions Conference was born. At first we thought the solution was to have an event that would be co-sponsored by the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Council and a small number of US universities and would then expand to seek co-sponsorship from other unions and universities from around the world. But we quickly found out that that was the wrong way to go. A conference like this could not start within the institutional labor movement. International union presidents would have to vote it down because it raised so many jurisdictional issues between international affairs, strategic campaign, and research staff within unions, and between global union federations and national union federations, and between unions and universities.

Despite enormous enthusiasm and interest for the idea from many individuals within the labor movement the idea simply could not move forward if it remained rooted within the institutional labor movement. I was told, off the record, you have our support, but you have to take the ball and run with it on your own, and trust us, we are right behind you. So I decided to gamble and literally assume that if we built it, our targeted audience would come. We would have a conference that would be “university sponsored and union supported” meaning both groups would give money but no union would have to officially declare themselves an institutional sponsor.

The first step was to put together a planning committee with representatives from unions and universities who have been interested in strategic corporate research and cross-border campaigns from around the world and come up with a common set of goals and benchmarks which would allow us to move forward in planning the conference. The first conference call had 21 people on the call from unions and universities in the US, Canada, Europe, and Australia. We started out with consensus decision making, which continued all the way through the planning process to the very end, by which time we had a total of sixteen unions and fifteen universities sponsoring the conference, including three Canadian universities (all affiliated with CRIMT), and the CLC, NUPGE and CSN.

The goals we agreed upon were as follows:

1. Share and learn from recent union initiatives in strategic corporate research and strategic global organizing and bargaining campaigns in order to more effectively take on multinational companies through global comprehensive campaigns.
2. Expand our collective knowledge and understanding of the changing nature of corporate ownership structures, practices, and strategies for the world's largest multinationals.
3. Lay the groundwork for building a sustainable global network of unions and academics to continue to work together to effectively engage multinational corporations worldwide.

In order to reach these goals we came up with two more specific commitments:

- a) To ensure full participation from the Global South we wanted to raise enough funds to cover travel expenses for at least 50 trade unionists and academics from Asia, Africa, and Latin America.
- b) In order both to model strategic corporate research methods and to help build and strengthen lasting cross-border networks among unions we also chose ten of the world's largest multinationals where there were not yet existing global union networks in place.

That meant we would also need to raise enough money to fund in-depth strategic corporate research on these ten companies, which were selected based on input from all the members of the planning committee to represent a diverse cross section of industries and sectors: Wal-Mart (retail), Kraft Foods (processed food), Siemens (electrical engineering and electronics), Exxon Mobil (petrochemical), Suez S.A. (energy and water), Alcoa (aluminum), SSA Marine (marine cargo handling), Bouygues (construction, property development, and telecommunications), Starwood (hospitality), and Sanofi Aventis (pharmaceutical).

It was decided that at the conference researchers would present and discuss the most effective methods for understanding and mapping the structure and flow of corporate power at the target companies, and then there would also be a second session devoted to developing ongoing strategies for future organizing and bargaining campaigns for each target company. Part of the purpose of the travel fund was to help bring together trade

unionists from the Global North and South to participate in both the research and strategy sessions for each target company.

This meant that fund raising became one of the biggest challenges of the conference planning process. Yet at the same time it also became an organizing tool because it required getting unions and universities committed to participate and engage with the conference. The good news is that we were able to raise more than \$260,000 from unions, universities, and NGOs for the research and travel fund. Most contributions from unions and universities averaged between \$3000 and \$10,000. So it was a slow process but it also built support from many different constituencies.

The bad news is that we were rejected by all major foundations we applied to, such as Ford and the Rockefeller Brother's Fund, on the grounds that our proposals did not provide a "positive alternative to globalization." Needless to say, capital was not comfortable with funding a conference that had as its goal strengthening labor's power to take on multinational corporations quite so directly.

Nor did the conference take place without any multinationals taking notice and making at least some effort to interfere. From the beginning we had been worried about visas for our participants from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East and wrote numerous letters to consulates and embassies assisting individuals in their efforts to get visas. Luckily I had done some research about what steps to take to smooth the process and had learned that one could register large academic and business conferences involving more than one

hundred foreign visitors with an official US State Department conference web site. Just as soon as that process was complete our participants from the Exxon Mobil company session began to apply for their visas. Trade union representatives coming to the Exxon Mobil session from Bangladesh, then Cameroon, and then Nigeria were all denied visa applications from US Embassies in their countries. In each country the embassy gave a different reason, but the most surprising one was told to the eight trade unionists who sought to attend the Exxon Mobil session from Nigeria. They were told by the US Embassy that they were being denied visas because the Embassy had learned that “it was an illegitimate conference.” It took a week long battle of repeated letters, emails, and phone calls from the United Steelworkers, Solidarity Center, Cornell University, and our local US Congressional Representative, Maurice Hinchey, before we were finally able to win visas for six of the eight Nigerians, and one of the Cameroonians, and even then only when we threatened that there would be international press at the conference and we would be speaking about the apparent ties between Exxon Mobil and the Bush State Department. As for Bangladesh, we did get an apology from the US Embassy stating that yes, in fact it was a mistake, he should have been allowed to come, but it was too late, maybe next time.

Then on the eve of the conference Jose Bove, who was going to speak at a panel session at the conference on cross border campesino movements against Monsanto, was stopped by US Homeland Security at JFK airport and deported without even being let into the country. This did make international news, in fact was the only major news story coming out of the conference despite the fact that press was invited to all the plenary sessions.

Bove was still able to participate in his session via speaker phone but does not plan to attempt to return to the US any time in the near future. Capital not only did not want foundations to fund our conference but it worked hand in hand with the US government to stop some participants from attending the conference.

Yet, Exxon Mobil, Monsanto, and Homeland Security notwithstanding, somehow, with a lot of free labor and just plain hard work we pulled it off. As the AFL-CIO had predicted, we organized it and they came. We sent out a call for proposals for papers, panels, and workshops and received several hundred proposals which meant we had to reject half. In the end we had forty-eight different workshop sessions including a combination of papers, panel presentations and workshops by representatives from unions, universities, and labor related NGOs. The subjects ranged from everything from critical debates on the role of international framework agreements or capital strategies; to more tactical sessions on the use of the media, popular education, or the internet in cross-border campaigns; to sessions which analyzed cross border campaigns in specific industries such as logistics, auto, entertainment, retail, or building security; to sessions which critically examined the particular challenges faced in campaigns in specific countries such as Thailand, India, Columbia, or China, or regions such as Asia or Latin America.

And there was active debate and disagreements for example, between trade unionists who believed the academics were too distant from what was happening on the ground and from academics who believed the trade unionists were not giving research a chance;

between those who believed that International Framework Agreements were still the most effective high road path towards freedom of association and those who felt IFAs had proven to be a false crutch and should be abandoned because they had no teeth and were just an excuse for employers to avoid a commitment to real collective bargaining; or between those who felt that applying standards developed in the Global North to the Global South without adapting them to the realities of the situation in each country was insensitive to the very different circumstances in which workers and trade unionists had to operate and those who felt that it was essential that we apply the highest possible standards worldwide in order to force companies to maintain a uniform standard wherever they operate.

Opportunities and challenges

At first glance it appears that the conference was able to achieve many of its objectives. It brought the audience together that it sought to bring together. There was engagement, skill building and networking around the issues of strategic corporate research and cross border campaigns in multiple subject areas over a three day period. In-depth strategic corporate research reports were prepared for the ten target companies (in most cases the first ever strategic corporate research ever done on these companies), and trade unionists were brought together from around the world to put together a network for future strategies with the target companies. This was especially true of the largest groups, Exxon Mobile, Alcoa, and Kraft, but even for the companies with smaller attendance, what was important was that connections were made and networks were established

between Europe and Asia, the US and Latin America, Eastern Europe and Africa, that had not been there before.

But it is easy to be glib about what we had achieved. There was a reason I had specifically asked Hassan Yussuff, the Secretary Treasurer of your labor congress to be the closing speaker for the conference. I wanted someone to challenge everyone present to both make the most of what they had gotten from their time there and recognize that if we do not take seriously the need to build a truly global labor movement we are truly at risk of becoming insignificant. And that is exactly what he did. He reminded everyone present that each national organization there still had its primary obligation to defend its interests and concerns, which in a global context, where employers were playing worker against worker, made building a global labor movement all the more challenging. At the same time, ultimately the interests of everyone in the room, including our national organizations, depended on building a global labor movement, through the very kinds of strategies that had been discussed and debated over the three days of the conference.

The conference ended with excitement, and enthusiasm and the worst snowstorm that New York City had ever seen in its history. However, being from upstate New York, frankly I was a bit puzzled at how anything that remained well under three feet of snow (a meter for all of you sensible people who have converted to the metric system) could be a historic snowstorm. And so, stuck for another two days in New York I had time to reflect on what we really had accomplished at the conference. And frankly I had a

somewhat different perspective, because I knew better than anyone where we had fallen short.

First of all I knew who should have been at the conference but was not there. I knew that while we had many British academics and a good showing of French trade unionists, it was significant how few European trade unionists were in the room overall. I also knew that there were some US unions who should have been there in larger numbers who weren't (such as the majority of the building trades unions), and key labor movements such as the KCTU from South Korea who were unable to attend because they had had new officer elections in late January, too late to get visas in time for the conference. Yet the KCTU has been very active in supporting unions around the world and would have made a significant contribution to the conference if they could have been there.

Second I knew the limitations of each of the company sessions and why. Whether it was lack of commitment on the part of the primary global union federation, US union, or parent country union in that industry, for at least half of the target companies we simply were not able to get enough financial resources committed or union representatives recruited to make significant strides in developing a global organizing or bargaining network or strategy.

Third, unlike what we had originally hoped for, I knew we had no money left after the conference. Worse yet we actually have a deficit, and so have no money to do follow-through on the networks that have been established, to keep the company reports updated,

or to make sure that this isn't just one moment in time but is a movement towards something lasting.

But that doesn't make this a lost opportunity. It just means that this is where we have to hand the ball back to the labor movement. Organizing this conference may indeed have been something that could only be done outside the institutional labor movement. And we gambled and pulled it off. We opened up the floor for discussion and they stepped in the room and they engaged. But now the follow-through is up to them. And what should be done?

1. For each of the target companies it will be up to all of the unions involved to build and expand on the networks established and to continue to update and expand on the company research that has already been completed as they move forward with future organizing and bargaining endeavors. This means that this initial meeting should be a jumping off point for future meetings, next time hopefully outside the US, that bring even more participants and more research to the table. But it also should mean that any future research, organizing, and bargaining endeavors with each of the target companies will be more global in focus.
2. That more of the academics who attended the conference become trained in strategic corporate research so that they can help track the changing corporate ownership structures and practices of the world's largest multinationals but also can help provide research support and training to unions involved in cross border campaigns. In addition, labor academics need to continue to critically evaluate

- and chronicle the strengths and weaknesses of union and employer strategies in comprehensive campaigns so that unions can learn from both their successes and their failures.
3. Most important of all, unions need to greatly expand their efforts at building global networks at all major multinational companies through worker exchanges, company councils, global solidarity actions, and sharing of information and strategies. However, these cross border initiatives must be truly multilateral in nature. Their goal ultimately is to stop the race to the bottom and shift power away from global capital towards workers, unions, and communities around the world. Thus these initiatives must begin to focus just as much if not more on strengthening and building union power in the Global South as they do on shoring up union power in the Global North.

If the global conference was a one-time event that simply brought strategic researchers and strategic campaigners together it will be seen in retrospect as an opportunity missed. But if unions and labor academics are able to take full advantage and build on all the information exchanged, ideas discussed, networks established, and strategies put forward, then conference could turn from being a one-time occurrence to the real beginning of a global labor movement that has the power to challenge global capital in the race to the bottom and win. That is a grand challenge indeed. But we have to start somewhere, and 560 trade unionists and labor academics gathered in the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Times Square in New York City, with a snow storm on its way, seemed a good place to start.

Thank you.