

RÉSUMÉ

Au-delà des frontières: politique commerciale et éducation ouvrière transnationale

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Cet article étudie l'initiative développée par l'International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) et le Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) de l'Université de Californie à Berkeley, pour l'organisation d'un projet pilote d'éducation ouvrière transfrontalière. L'émergence de ce projet remonte à la signature controversée de l'Accord de Libre Échange Nord Américain (ALENA) en 1993 et au débat que cet accord a provoqué sur les bénéfices potentiels du commerce international. À l'instar d'autres syndicats, la position de l'IAM dans ce débat stipulait qu'à moins que les accords commerciaux n'incluent des normes strictes sur le travail et l'environnement, les nouvelles dispositions commerciales ne pourraient que nuire aux travailleurs et à l'environnement. Une décennie complète après le début de l'implémentation de l'ALENA, les voyages organisés dans le cadre de l'initiative transfrontalière ont permis d'étudier sur le terrain les effets d'une multiplication du volume des échanges commerciaux par trois sur les conditions de travail et sur l'environnement.

L'article discute les hauts et les bas de cet effort d'éducation transfrontalière, débutant avec une présentation sommaire des débats sur le commerce et le travail. Suivront ensuite une discussion sur les problèmes, possibilités et complexité générale que présente la solidarité syndicale internationale, une courte histoire de l'IAM, l'analyse de la mondialisation qui a informé l'initiative, et un examen détaillé des découvertes, réactions et réponse des participants lors de leurs voyages à Tijuana au Mexique. Les autres concluent avec une discussion de l'impact de ce programme d'éducation sur le syndicat et sur les communautés impliquées, et une réflexion sur les limites rencontrées dans le déroulement de ce projet.

Crossing Borders: Trade Policy and Transnational Labour Education¹

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Introduction

On a morning in December 2002, the global labour movement confronted the global economy in Tijuana, a mile or so south of the United States-Mexico border. The executive committee of the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF)—about 30 trade union presidents from around the world—visited sprawling *colonias*², a toxic environmental site, and state-of-the art industrial parks filled with the *maquiladoras* or export-oriented factories that define the city's economy. These trade union leaders spoke with *maquiladora* workers about their dreams and their desperation and listened to community leaders speak about their struggles for a better life. The trip's purpose was for representatives of the international labour movement to see first-hand the cutting edge of the global economy and to consider its impact on

¹ This article is dedicated to Melinda Peraza, who contributed to the transnational labour education project we describe here with her joy, insights, and commitment. She is so alive for us she will always be more than a memory.

² *Colonias* is the name given in Mexico to neighbourhoods or settlements.

labour worldwide. Seasoned trade union leaders from South Africa, Brazil, Great Britain, Japan, Russia, Ghana, the United States and other developed and developing economies were seeking to define a common vision of the global economy and to develop new ways in which workers might collaborate with each other across borders.

The trip was initiated by the North American-based International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), an IMF affiliate, and organized by the Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) at the University of California, Berkeley.³ The visit was the culmination of a much larger effort by the IAM and the CLAS to inform the union's members and leaders throughout North America about the realities of the global economy and the importance of the union's role in trade policy. Between 1998 and 2002, almost all the elected officials and appointed representatives of the Machinists union in the United States and Canada — about 600 people in all — journeyed to Tijuana in an effort at what might be called “transnational labor education.” To our knowledge, these trips marked the first time that a major North American union has embarked on a cross-border educational effort of this scale.

The roots of this initiative can be traced to the contentious ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993. During the NAFTA debates and in subsequent discussions on trade issues, proponents of free trade contended that expanding trade alone would lead to higher incomes throughout North America and that this prosperity, in turn, would lead to improved labour and environmental standards in Mexico. The Machinists and other unions argued that unless trade agreements included strong core standards for labour and the environment in the first place, both these areas would suffer, even with expanded trade. A decade after NAFTA's inauguration, these trips examined

³ The Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) is an organized research unit at the University of California Berkeley (<http://socrates.berkeley.edu:7001/>). A Ford Foundation sponsored project at CLAS on “Development, Labor Standards, and Economic Integration in the Americas” focuses on social issues raised by regional integration. This research and policy project has sought to develop a network of labour leaders, academics, leaders from social movements, and policy makers throughout the Americas to develop more effective approaches to labour standards, trade and development.

“on the ground” what labour and environmental conditions looked like once cross-border trade has tripled.

In this article, we detail how this transnational labour education effort unfolded. We begin with an analysis of the context of labour and trade debates. We then discuss the problems, possibilities, and overall complexity of international labour solidarity; briefly look at the history of the IAM; present an analysis of globalization that frames the trips; and examine in some detail what these trade unionists have encountered during their visits to Tijuana and what their responses have been. We conclude by discussing the impacts on the union and the community, and reflect on the limits the project ran up against.

The Context of Labour and Trade Debates

Manufacturing unions such as the IAM face a tough challenge: how to promote the interests of their members and at the same time build bridges of solidarity to other workers, unions, and social movements both nationally and internationally. These two goals — self-interest and solidarity — can at times collide. At other times they operate in tandem, reinforcing one another. These goals have coexisted uneasily in the trade union movement since its inception, but the demands of the global economy have made many labour leaders conclude that it is imperative for unions to deepen solidarity across borders or risk a narrower vision, thus potentially undermining their leverage.

The IAM and other North American unions played a pivotal role during the debate over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (MacArthur, 2000; Cameron & Tomlin, 2003). Although the agreement was ratified by a narrow margin in the United States Congress — the vote was 234-200 in the House (MacArthur: 274) — the struggle to defeat it resulted in a far more important role for civil society in general, and for unions in particular, in the formation of U.S. trade policy. According to James Shoch, “[i]n House and Senate voting on the treaty, various studies have shown that the higher the percentage of blue-collar workers and union members in a representative or senator’s district or state, the more likely he or she was to vote against NAFTA” (Shoch: 125). This new role for labour unions has been evident in subsequent, often highly-charged, congressional debates about the World Trade Organization (WTO), fast track

legislation, China trade policy, and, most dramatically, in the streets of Seattle in 1999. The debates about fast track legislation in 1997 and 1998 were a particular landmark (Shoch: 132-34). As Shoch observes, “[d]uring the fast-track fight, labour sought to build what, following Karl Polanyi, might be termed a broad *protective countermovement* to limit globalization’s various adverse and disruptive effects” (Shoch: 133). Given the absence of effective labour and environmental provisions in fast track, labour led the countermovement that torpedoed the proposed legislation in both years. Labour’s input likely will prove important, possibly decisive, in shaping the debate over the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA). “As negotiations towards the constitution of a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) develop,” Marisa Von Bulow observes, “labor organizations from all over the hemisphere are trying to construct a common discourse and a shared practice” (Von Bulow: 1).

Workers in manufacturing unions such as the IAM in the United States and Canada are on the front lines of the global economy. Their experiences have been decidedly mixed. Many members of the Machinists union are in export industries such as Boeing—the largest US manufacturing exporter—and see first hand the benefits that increased trade can bring. These same workers, however, also experience the ferocious pressures of globalization.⁴ Like workers throughout manufacturing, they have seen plants shuttered or moved offshore. Even the threat of plant closure drives down wages and erodes working conditions, as a study by Kate Brofenbrenner at Cornell confirms. In her three-year study of U.S. union election data, managers threatened to shutter factories in 60 per cent of union organizing drives post-NAFTA, compared to 29 per cent of organizing drives in manufacturing prior to the agreement’s passage (cited in Shoch: 144).

Two broad union responses to these pressures are possible. One is to turn inward, circle the wagons, view foreign workers as “stealing our jobs,” and adopt an “isolationist” stance. The other is to accept globalization, but press for rules of the game that insure fairness, transparency, and equitable distribution of its benefits. Key to this second approach is the understanding that

⁴ As used here, globalization refers to a process of deepening economic integration across borders, in the form of increased trade and cross-border production.

workers in other countries can be allies rather than adversaries and that the best way to ensure better conditions at home is to work for trade policy that promotes workers' rights globally.

AFL-CIO president John Sweeney has emphasized that “[t]he question is not...whether we are internationalists, but what values our internationalism serves” (Shoch: 133). Ron Blackwell, the director of corporate affairs at the AFL-CIO, adds that “the strategy of simply stopping imports at the border to save our jobs was not one that was going to succeed. The new strategic premise [is] to fight for the establishment of worker rights as a part of any trade and investment agreement” (Blackwell, 2002). The leadership of the Machinists union is also strongly committed to this internationalist vision. As R. Thomas Buffenbarger, the president of the IAM, commented several months after the Seattle demonstrations in a talk at U.C. Berkeley, “given the nature of our representation, we [in the IAM] realize as much as anyone that our jobs are dependent upon the global economy” (Center for Latin American Studies: 13). The question for Buffenbarger is not whether the union participates in the global economy but rather if the global economy “is based upon international rules that will raise the standard of living for the world’s citizens” (Center for Latin American Studies: 13).

To achieve this ambitious goal requires far greater transparency and civil society input, particularly by labour, in trade negotiations — in short, the democratization of trade debates. How might a union move trade policy in this direction? Certainly a sophisticated understanding of globalization, an effective strategic plan, and a strong leadership commitment are all critical to the task. Trade policy has traditionally been developed by a union’s top leadership and pushed by its lobbyists and technical experts in Congress. Buffenbarger, however, felt that something more would be required. He maintained that deep roots would have to be struck throughout the union involving elected local officers, workplace representatives, organizers, regional and headquarters staff, and rank-and-file members on the shop floor. In other words, democratic trade policy would require participatory education for all the union’s leaders.

This vision resulted in a collaborative initiative between the IAM and the Center for Latin American Studies at UC Berkeley in a new union-wide effort in transnational labour education. The

program combined three closely related elements: an overall analysis of globalization and its alternative possibilities; an on-the-ground view of the global economy; and a conversation between IAM members and maquiladora workers and community leaders in Tijuana, Mexico. The goal was to develop a common theoretical framework and a powerful set of personal experiences that would define the union's perspective in an international way.

The project began modestly. It was originally conceived as a single trip of the entire headquarters staff of the IAM and its international executive council — about 130 people in all — to Tijuana for a day, preceded by a briefing and followed by a half-day discussion of what took place. This experience in May 1998 proved so powerful for those who were there — some viewed it as a life-changing event — that IAM general vice-presidents who made the trip began asking for a similar event to be organized in each of their U.S. regions and in Canada. The IAM-CLAS collaboration informally grew out of these responses and led to six additional trips involving every one of the union's regions in North America.

Eventually, a total of over 600 current and future leaders of the union, from the U.S. and Canada, journeyed to Tijuana and participated in briefings and discussions on globalization. They came from all the industries the union represents, including Boeing machinists from Seattle, United Airlines ramp workers from Chicago, Greyhound bus mechanics from Los Angeles, Pratt and Whitney production workers from Hartford, and aircraft workers from Montreal. Participants reflected the racial, geographic, gender, and age diversity of the union's staff and leadership. Many experienced intense personal interactions with workers and community leaders in Tijuana. As the project unfolded, the union sought to institutionalize the effort through its educational facility — the Winpisinger Education and Technology Center — in Placid Harbor, Maryland, and through its four-year international convention, among other venues. IAM leaders also raised these issues throughout the global labour movement, culminating in a seventh trip of the International Metalworkers Federation executive board in December 2003.⁵

⁵ The international nature of this event was underscored by the fact that the discussions throughout the day were translated into eight languages.

The net result of these efforts was the development of an unusual understanding and commitment on trade issues running throughout the union. Now, when the IAM holds a local union meeting anywhere in the United States or Canada, or a national conference anywhere in North America, the chances are high that a number of people in the room would have been to Tijuana and would have discussed globalization on one of these trips. While this project has had an important impact on the union's perspectives and activities on trade, an unexpected result has been a broader public outreach from congressional lobbying to presentations at church groups, local public television programs, and Veterans of Foreign Wars chapters, among many other efforts.

Cross-Border Labour Solidarity

The academic literature on cross-border solidarity helps illuminate some of the challenges and opportunities the Machinists union has faced as it seeks to implement an internationalist agenda. As is well known, "workers of the world unite" is a goal far easier stated than attained. Given the process of deepening economic integration across borders, it seems natural that unions should also increase their international ties. As Edna Bonacich, Professor of Sociology at U.C. Riverside notes, "[r]apidly globalizing capital obviously calls forth the need for a global labor movement." She further observes that "[i]f capital can shift production from one country to the next in an effort to find the lowest living standards and most politically oppressed workers, then the efforts of workers to improve their conditions anywhere will be undone. Workers worldwide need to join together in an effort to set standards and protect the political rights of all, so that capital cannot pit one group against another in a race to the bottom" (Bonacich: 4).

Cross-border labour activities, however, are notoriously difficult to put into practice. Where such efforts have been attempted, results have been limited. "Where advocacy networks have formed around labor issues," Keck and Sikkink report, "they have been transitory, responding to repression of domestic labor movements (as in labor support networks formed around Brazil, South Africa, and Central America in the early 1980s)" (Keck & Sikkink: 15). Jonathan Fox lays out four reasons that have made Mexico-U.S. labour partnerships, in particular, difficult to set-up: a powerful

legacy of nationalist ideology; conflicting interests in the short term; dissimilar union structures; and, finally, the diplomatic security some unions feel working with their most formally compatible counterparts — which often are the least innovative (Fox, 2002). These factors are complicated further by protectionist strategies on both sides, unequal political relations between the U.S. and developing nations, skewed economic development, and resentment at past AFL-CIO intervention in support of undemocratic unions. The interests of U.S. labour in protecting employment and wage standards in the U.S. may also conflict with the need to generate employment at much lower wages in developing countries. For unions, another obstacle involves building support within their membership for international solidarity programs, especially when they face so many tough, unresolved issues within their own workplaces.

The fact that transnational labour cooperation is difficult does not mean that it has been nonexistent (Gordon & Turner, 2000). Frundt points to four areas where to one degree or another it has taken place: Global Union Federations (GUFs); international unions; the international affairs department of the AFL-CIO and its affiliated Solidarity Center; and NGO support groups (Frundt: 10). A global union federation, formerly a trade secretariat, is essentially a loose federation of unions throughout the world in a given production sector such as the International Metalworkers Federation, which is composed of affiliated unions representing 22 million workers (IMF, 2003). Global union federations make possible transnational cooperation and coordination among unions — they have mounted a number of important campaigns often linked to human rights — but are hampered by insufficient staff support and limited resources.

International unions in a North American context generally mean labour groups that have both Canadian and U.S. affiliates, although some include Puerto Rico. These unions often have active international affairs departments that provide a transnational focus. The international affairs department of the AFL-CIO has demonstrated a new vitality with regard to international issues and campaigns in recent years. Its affiliated American Center on International Labor Solidarity, or “Solidarity Center,” assists workers around the world who are struggling to build democratic and independent trade unions (Frundt: 4). Finally, NGOs play a

growing role. Fox points to the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM), founded in 1989, as “the most sustained, multisectoral trinational coalition in any sector” (Brooks & Fox: 14; Williams: 139-166), although it has experienced considerable internal conflict of late. More recently, groups such as United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) have brought to bear innovative and effective new tactics (Fruendt: 4).

The IAM exchanges represent a limited approach to fostering deeper consciousness about the international character of production among union leaders, but they have an unusually wide reach — they involve a significant number of local leaders and rank-and-file members throughout North America.⁶ This effort does not preclude further international activity; in fact, it may lay the basis for other cross border work in the future. This transnational education effort is intended to give participants an experience of “globalization on the ground.” The idea is that the visceral experience of meeting counterparts, in their homes and communities, combined with a framework on globalization can contribute to building support within the union for its international agenda and can make the union’s public activities on trade issues more effective. The hope is that more people within the union will come to share the viewpoint of a general vice-president of the Machinists union, who stated that the trip had confirmed his view that “Mexican workers are not our enemies.”

The Machinists’ Union

From its earliest days, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers has played an international role. The union was founded in Atlanta on the eve of the twentieth century. As a craft union, its original members were limited to the highly skilled machinists who laboured in the railroad industry. Today, it is one of the largest and most diverse unions in the world, representing over 700,000 active and retired members and embodying a much broader industrial structure. In the late nineteenth century, a machinist attended the founding Congress of the International Metalworkers’ Federation (IMF) in Zurich (IAM,

⁶The Machinists Union has not used the exchanges as a method for practicing international labor solidarity, but has carried on that work in other forums such as the IMF.

1996: 21) and the union affiliated with the IMF soon after the First World War (Pearlman:126). After the Second World War, the IAM was present at the creation of the International Labour Organization and continued its international involvement throughout the following decades.

The IAM's active involvement in international activities has reflected the commitment of its top officers. In the 1980s, under the leadership of William W. Winpisinger, the union deepened its understanding of and engagement with the international arena. Winpisinger spoke eloquently about the world economy and led some of the first union delegations to the former Soviet Union and China. Unusual among trade union leaders at the time, he developed relationships of solidarity with independent unions under attack by Central American dictatorships, and criticized U.S. policy in the region. He also led the IAM in developing detailed and comprehensive positions on trade and international relations. His successor, George J. Kourpias, continued the union's focus on international affairs in the 1990s, serving as an active member of the IMF's Executive Committee and later as chair of the AFL-CIO's committee on international affairs.

When the IAM's current president, R. Thomas Buffenbarger, was elected to succeed Kourpias, he pledged the union's continuing involvement in international activities (IAM, 2000: 47-55). As part of this commitment, he expanded opportunities for union members to learn about globalization first-hand. He has sent "missions," for example, to China and Europe to investigate the growing aerospace industry (IAM, 2000: 54). In 1999, Buffenbarger made history in Seattle. He spearheaded the union's involvement in the peaceful protests held there on the eve of the World Trade Organization's Third Ministerial Conference. Seattle was selected as the site of these meetings to showcase a Pacific Rim city at the heart of the export economy. Boeing, for example, is among the largest employers in the region and is also the nation's largest manufacturing exporter. The machinists were to play an unusually important role in the events that unfolded. As the largest union in the Seattle region, over 900 IAM shop stewards served as marshals for a peaceful labour demonstration, marching alongside tens of thousands of IAM and other union members (IAM, 2000: 54). Addressing the pre-march rally,

Buffenbarger declared “a trade policy without worker rights is a trade policy that is doomed to failure” (IAM, 2000: 7).

Prelude

Seattle was a transforming moment in the politics of globalization, when trade debates again became a popular public issue. Seven years earlier, as NAFTA was being negotiated, trade debates galvanized similar labour protests and organizing. The IAM, like many other unions, was an active participant in lobbying around the labour consequences of the increasing economic integration NAFTA symbolized. During both the NAFTA debates and the WTO negotiations, the Machinists sought to anchor their trade policies in personal experiences, focusing on the realities of globalization as lived in the maquiladoras. The labour-exchanges grew out of this interest, emerging spontaneously and somewhat serendipitously in 1993. When one of the authors of this article, Professor Shaiken, was still teaching at the University of California in San Diego, his friend Tom Buffenbarger — then a general vice-president with the International Association of Machinists — asked whether he would be willing to lead a delegation of union leaders to witness working conditions in the maquiladoras. But when Shaiken agreed to bring 40 members of the Machinists Union to Tijuana in September 1993, no one anticipated the result or that it would become an issue in the congressional debate over NAFTA.

At the request of a maquiladora plant owner in the midst of a labour conflict, Mexican authorities detained the group for three and a half hours. According to later testimony by Congressman David Bonior, “[t]he group was detained in a fenced area, they were isolated, not allowed to make phone calls, not even to the American consulate” (U.S. Congress: 139). Furthermore, the authorities told them that they were violating the law by discussing working conditions with maquiladora employees (U.S. Congress: 139). Congressional leaders later cited this event as evidence of both the repression directed against maquiladora workers, and the collusion between the police and Mexican factory owners (U.S. Congress: 139). The 1993 trip made a powerful impression on its participants, and the story circulated widely throughout the union. After Buffenbarger became president of the IAM, he asked Shaiken, now chair of CLAS at UC

Berkeley, to lead the union's entire national headquarters staff in a similar educational experience.

The Framework

An analysis of the forces shaping globalization and the alternatives that are available to contest it framed the design and objective of the field visits. Keck and Sikkink point to cognitive frames as critical to the political strategies of international advocacy networks and the concept is useful here as well. They cite David Snow who terms this strategic approach "frame alignment" and then argues that "by rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective" (Keck & Sikkink: 17). A related concept, "frame resonance" links a movement's analysis with its ability to shape a broader, public debate which is a core goal of these trips.

A brief presentation before participants initiate their visit, as well as an ongoing narrative throughout the day, provides the framework for interpreting the experience in Tijuana. The presentation maintains that expanded trade can offer potential benefits to workers, communities, and entire countries but that these benefits are not realized automatically (Shaiken, 1994; Shaiken, 1990). In the case of the U.S. and Mexico, trade has soared under NAFTA, almost tripling from \$79 billion in 1993 to \$235 billion in 2002 (Shaiken, 2001: 241). Underlying this vast expansion, however, is a new phenomenon combining world-class manufacturing and very low wages: high productivity poverty. Unlike the poverty in Haiti or Bangladesh, this poverty exists despite an impressive industrial base, not because investment is lacking. State-of-the-art export plants churn out high-tech products from projection televisions to computer memory systems at high levels of quality and productivity, often rivaling facilities in Silicon Valley or on the outskirts of Tokyo. While manufacturing sophistication has soared, wages have slipped or sputtered for much of the last two decades, depressed by government policies to attract investment and by a lack of labour rights, among other reasons. Real hourly wages in manufacturing lag behind their pre-NAFTA 1993 levels and are only about two thirds of where they were in 1980 (Shaiken, 2001). Moreover, in a global economy in which rules govern investment but not labour or environmental conditions, modest wage improvements in Tijuana spur manufacturers to threaten produc-

tion moves to lower wage and less restrictive areas such as China or Guatemala.

What alternatives might realize the promise of globalization and ensure that its benefits accrue to ordinary people and their communities? The briefing presented to the trip participants lays out three possibilities: first, a pattern of trade and economic integration that also promotes widely shared economic development; second, trade agreements that are based on fundamental principles of fairness and transparency; and, finally, effective and enforceable labour and environmental standards as central to trade expansion. In addition, the trip provides the ideal setting to raise an oft-ignored question in debates over trade in the U.S.: what impact does a trade agreement have on workers elsewhere in the world?

The Trip

For participants, the real impact of the day comes from the direct observation of the conditions at the border. The theoretical framework ceases at that moment to be an abstraction: high productivity poverty translates into workers who labour during the day in clean rooms and then lack running water or toilets in their homes at night.

The journey begins in the advanced industrial parks along the border, underscoring the upsurge of new, more sophisticated factories in Tijuana. It then pauses at a high-profile environmental disaster—an abandoned battery recycling plant in the midst of an industrial park — where virtually nothing has been done for more than a decade despite serious health risks. Finally, participants visit two communities to talk with residents about their living and working conditions.

Crossing the border can be either the most routine or the most remarkable of personal experiences. The international frontier in Tijuana is among the busiest in the world — many people from both countries routinely pass through every day to work or shop on the other side and tourists flock from the U.S. to Avenida Revolución in Tijuana, a narrow strip near the border. A significant number of the Machinists have never been out of the country except for brief tourist visits to Mexico or for military-tours-of-duty abroad in Korea or Vietnam.

As participants make their way into downtown Tijuana, signs of prosperity abound. The maquiladora industry has spurred

economic and population growth in Tijuana. The city's population is about 1.4 million, making it Mexico's seventh largest city and one of the country's fastest growing urban areas. This surface prosperity, however, is not widely shared with the industry's workforce. Familiar U.S. commercial icons have a different meaning in Tijuana. At a McDonald's, for example, the cost of a value meal can equal the equivalent of half day's wage for a maquiladora worker. While McDonald's is a luxury in this context, the average maquiladora wage of \$1.25 US an hour makes it difficult for a householder to buy the basic necessities for a family of four, including food, housing, clothing, and school supplies.

The unionists cross a wide residential swath of the city and head up to the Mesa de Otay, one of Tijuana's principal industrial centres. Before reaching the factories, however, the participants follow the border itself to witness an elaborate triple wall constructed to deter undocumented crossings, a portion of Operation Gatekeeper. The effort, while costly, has been of limited effectiveness. According to a study by the Public Policy Institute of California, "The nation is spending \$2.5 billion annually to keep illegal immigrants out, and more are coming than ever before," in part because of the economic desperation in Mexico (Reyes, 2002). Although the focus of the trip is not the migration aspects of economic integration, it is impossible, as a painted sign at the border reads, "to pass indifferently by the suffering of so many people." Groups including the Border Arts Workshop have posted hundreds of crosses on the Mexican-side of the border fence running along the road near the international airport in Tijuana, commemorating the migrants who have died crossing along the 2000 mile divide.⁷

The industrial parks in Otay Mesa are physically impressive and indicative of the more than 600 plants in Tijuana in which 141,000 workers are employed. Driving by the intersection of "quality" and "productivity" — in a newly manicured and well-tended industrial park unlike the infrastructure in Tijuana immediately outside its gates — a visitor gets a sense of the industrial

⁷ Tougher migration enforcement has pushed these migrants to attempt crossing further east of Tijuana, where the crossing across desert and mountains is far more arduous and creates conditions in which dying of thirst or heat or cold become possibilities.

capability from the state-of-the-art plants displaying familiar high-tech logos. The earlier briefing details important dimensions of typical assembly and manufacturing operations.

The second key location of the visit is a site which reveals the environmental consequences of unchecked globalization. Located in an older industrial park, *Metales y Derivados* is now a rusting skeleton of a lead smelter perched on a mesa that overlooks the 10,000 person community of Chilpancingo. "According to the Mexican environmental officials and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency," the Washington Post reports, "the toxic dump here exemplifies how much of the border area is a no man's land, a place where international companies have polluted the environment" (Sullivan: 15). It is one thing to propose in the abstract that stronger trade institutions are needed for effective environmental enforcement and quite another to stand on a mesa, observe thousands of tons of highly toxic environmental waste, and follow the path of water runoff into the community. More importantly, speaking to the workers and their families who are affected by this environmental disaster adds a profoundly different dimension to the experience. The fact that a significant expansion of trade alone has done almost nothing to address this crisis, despite a decade's worth of public attention, raises the question of what does need to be done to protect the environment and the community.

Before the Mexican government closed the U.S.-owned plant in 1994, it had extracted lead for more than ten years from thousands of old car and boat batteries shipped from the U.S. Today, the abandoned smelter sits in the midst of 8,500 tons of hazardous remains from thousands of batteries, tossed over three acres in rotting barrels and shifting piles. The wind blows these toxins into the surrounding area and when it rains the runoff flows into the community below. The Commission for Environmental Cooperation, an agency set up under the environmental side agreement to NAFTA, issued a report in 2002 stating that "exposure to these heavy metals can severely harm human health" and maintained that a cleanup effort was "urgent" (Sullivan, 2003).

A machinist later wrote on his local lodge's Website that "the toxic waste is so corrosive and poisonous that the brick and mortar wall that encloses the waste dump is deteriorating from the acids that leach out of the slag mound." Standing in a scrub-filled mesa with the sprawling industrial park behind and the community

below, the machinists witness a panorama of high productivity poverty in Tijuana. At this point the unionists generally speak with either members of the nearby community, community leaders, or representatives of the Environmental Health Coalition, a San-Diego based environmental group that has done organizing in the community and mounted legal challenges against the owners of the abandoned plant.

After *Metales*, the group heads to Chilpancingo, the community directly below the *Mesa de Otay*. The living conditions in the community illustrate the practical meaning of the fact that hourly wages in manufacturing are now 7 per cent lower than they were in 1993 and about one third lower than they were in 1980.

The visitors walk from the central square of Chilpancingo about a quarter mile to a fast-growing squatters' community built out of packing crates and cardboard that straddles the polluted Alamar River, which can look like a small stream in the dry season and flood during the rainy season. This is the moment where the visit makes a sharp emotional shift: the machinists come face-to-face with workers and their children seeking to survive in this part of the global economy. A smaller creek runs from a drainage pipe under the industrial park on the mesa into the stream that bisects the community. At night residents say that the flow is multi-colored and emits a powerful stench, signs that chemicals are being illegally dumped. Surrounded by toxic waste, some children in the community have severe rashes and suffer from their hair falling out — as well as far more serious illnesses such as anacephaly and hydrocephalus, which organizers believe may be related to the toxic waste. A machinist writing for his union's Website reported, "There is one image I can't get out of my mind: a small boy — he can't be more than three or four years old — standing barefoot in a dirt street overflowing with garbage. Where he stands, the ground underfoot is strewn with broken glass and metal fragments ... They are squatters here beside a filthy river that flows with the effluence of unregulated corporations."

Most of the maquiladora workers in this area are new arrivals to Tijuana, many from the southern Mexican states of Oaxaca and Chiapas. The lack of land and livelihood propels them northward. These workers want their jobs — particularly since the onset of an economic slowdown — but can be deeply critical of the conditions under which they must work. Machinists and the workers

they meet have the opportunities to forge personal connections despite the vast gulfs of language, history and culture. The Machinists have a sense that the people who staff these assembly plants are their counterparts, not their competitors. Dionicia Ramos, a staff member at the Center for Latin American Studies, recalls translating a conversation between a union representative from an aerospace firm and a former maquiladora worker. Both workers were anxious to learn how problems were resolved in their respective workplaces and both realized that in many instances they faced the same issues on either side of the border. The machinists are affected by the toughness of the struggle these workers face and by the fate of their children whom they see; they are also haunted by the feeling that had they been born on this side of the border this might have been their future.

From the park, the participants travel a short distance to the community of Vista Alamar where they meet with representatives from a community and from workers' advocate organizations, the *Comité Urbano Popular* (Popular Urban Committee) and the *Comité de Apoyo Fronterizo de Obreros Regionales* (Regional Border Workers' Support Committee). At a community centre built by area residents, Eduardo Badillo and Aurora Pelayo, the leaders of the two organizations, as well as a group of maquiladora workers, receive the machinists and introduce them to a group of maquiladora workers. Badillo and Pelayo describe how their community began as a squatter settlement, and recount the battles they fought with government agents to win title to their land. Both leaders also present their analyses of the industry, explaining that they are not opposed to maquiladoras locating in Tijuana if management would respect worker rights under Mexican law. Instead, they claim workers are routinely short-changed on their checks, forced to work long hours, or fired when they insist on their legal rights, let alone try to organize. Officially recognized unions are often simply another institution for controlling workers rather than genuine advocacy organizations (De la Garza, 2002). As Badillo comments, "el sindicato, el gobierno y el patrón son el mismo cabrón" (The union, the government, and the boss are all the same oppressor).

At the close of the meeting, Badillo asks participants to welcome his countrymen when they meet them in the United States. He says these Mexicans are only seeking a better life and

are struggling to realize dreams for themselves and their families that are the same dreams as workers in the U.S. have. He also asks people to stay in touch, and to share with him the information they gather and the advocacy they undertake as a follow up from their trip in the United States. On one occasion, a union member was so moved he came up to Badillo after the talk to ask him in what ways he might be able to help. Remarkably, he worked in a U.S. aircraft facility that had announced it was closing and moving to Mexico.

Impact

These Tijuana visits have had a significant impact on IAM participants and on the union as a whole.⁸ Although this effect is difficult to quantify, all the top leaders of the union with whom we spoke as well as many of the local leaders on the trips strongly expressed the view that the union had gained considerable knowledge of the issues raised by globalization and a far stronger motivation to pursue an active trade policy. Union president Buffenbarger credits the trips with having exposed a significant number of his members to the living conditions of some of Mexico's workers. He also credits the trips with giving his members a deeper understanding of trade and globalization and energizing their participation on these issues.

One measure of the effectiveness of the trips is the way the project itself initially unfolded. The original plan called for only a single trip — the entire national headquarters staff. The response to this first visit was so strong that every territorial general vice-president of the union then chose to organize a similar trip and a number of the vice-presidents made the journey two or three times. The result is that within the union pivotal constituencies — top officers, appointed staff members from communications to organizing, and elected local leaders — now share the same frame of reference on these issues. As Keck and Sikkink point out in their discussion of advocacy networks, “an effective frame must show that a given state of affairs is neither natural nor accidental, identify the responsible party or parties, and propose credible solutions. These aims require clear, powerful messages that appeal to

⁸ The following discussion reflects numerous oral and written comments made by participants after completing the tour.

shared principles, which often have more impact on state policy than advice of technical experts” (Keck and Sikkink: 46). In the case of the IAM, the approach has also broadened the constituency in the union concerned with trade. “An important part of the political struggle over information is precisely whether an issue is defined primarily as technical—and thus subject to consideration by “qualified” experts — or as something that concerns a broader global constituency,” Keck and Sikkink observe. This broadening of focus and representation on trade within the union mirrors what the machinists hope to spur in broader public considerations of trade.

Members and leaders who went on the tours highlighted a number of different experiences. First, meeting workers in Mexico broke down many existing barriers and gave a human dimension to globalization. The social and environmental issues faced by the workers they met in Mexico moved many of the U.S. and Canadian unionists and they identified with the struggle they witnessed. Second, the machinists commented on the inadequacy of current trade policy in general and NAFTA in particular to deal with the conditions they witnessed. Third, the trips underscored the importance of the union pursuing an active trade agenda to protect what it has been able to achieve at home. The most effective way to do this, in the minds of many, became through an international vision rather than an isolationist one. Finally, many leaders at all levels of the union began a grassroots campaign to inform their constituents and co-workers about what they had experienced through articles, talks, websites, and engagement with other community and advocacy groups. This grassroots effort both supports the union’s national policies and extends their reach.

Many machinists specifically mentioned the dire poverty that they witnessed and then tended to link these conditions to the shortcomings of NAFTA. They noted the inadequate living conditions of maquiladora workers — no running water, no electricity, and homes made out of wooden and cardboard boxes. An IAM member who went on one of the visits said he now knows “how bad it really is and what the people are up against every day.” Participants also took specific note of the devastating environmental conditions where workers live. They recalled shacks built next to polluted streams and other environmental hazards. One participant said that the most important impression he took away

from this visit was “that these kids have no future the way things are” and “the chemical[s] [sic] could certainly shorten their lives.” Another noted that he was struck by how the people who were living under these conditions worked in some of the most technologically advanced manufacturing facilities he had ever seen.

Every participant said that they would share their impressions with other IAM members, families, neighbours, and people in their community when they returned home. Several also said that they would contact their elected officials about what they had seen. Participants who had not been particularly concerned before about the conditions of workers elsewhere felt that improving conditions in Mexico was important in its own terms and could have a direct impact on their work and lives. A union member said, “...these workers in Mexico are barely subsisting — they are not making any progress in their lives.” Another member concluded, “[P]romises of better lives for those who have jobs because of NAFTA have failed miserably.” One member said, “What is happening to the Mexican workers will happen to us if we do not do anything about it.” The notion of Mexican workers trying to “steal” their jobs was difficult to sustain after having met these workers and their families. Instead, many of the trade unionists emphasized the shared experience across borders. As one member put it, “Both are getting the short end of the stick. We lose jobs, they are kept poor.” Another member concluded that workers in Mexico and the U.S. are all “trying for a better life for their families.” A third member responded that both U.S. and Mexican workers were “just trying to work and live with dignity.”

Impressions of the trips have been captured in speeches, articles, videos, newsletters, websites, and magazines at every level of the IAM. International President Buffenbarger has referred to maquiladora tours on numerous occasions, including speeches before the Quebec Federation of Labour and in Germany before the Executive Committee of IG Metal, one of the world’s largest labour unions (Buffenbarger, 2001; Buffenbarger, 2002). Other IAM officers have included references to the trips in their speeches. Videos of the visits were featured at the IAM’s Quadrennial Convention in 2000. They have also been shown at numerous IAM meetings and have been posted on the IAM Headquarters Website. The 1998 trip to Mexico, which included over 130 IAM staff members, was described in the IAM Officer’s

Report to the Convention issued every four years in conjunction with this gathering (IAM, 2000: 53).

Articles written by IAM headquarters' staff have also appeared in *The IAM Journal*, which is mailed to every IAM member. Along with videos, separate written stories have appeared on the union's website as well. In addition, the IAM has utilized the information and impressions gathered on the maquiladora trips as part of its extensive leadership education program at the William W. Winpisinger Education and Technology Center. References to the trips are also included in the union's educational course on the global economy which several hundred members take every year at the union's educational centre.

At the grassroots level, local lodges have generated their own newsletter articles and web coverage. Some have produced very detailed accounts of the trips. Two reports posted by local lodges on their websites are representative. The first, an IAM District Lodge in British Columbia, issued a comprehensive report of the Canadian IAM delegation's tour. It listed Canadian companies with factories in the maquiladoras. The report contained many photographs of the living conditions of maquiladora workers. It informed local IAM members that Mexican workers were forced to live "as squatters in shanty towns" and that some of the areas were located next to environmental disasters. Like many other IAM reports, it makes a direct link to the poverty that workers face in Mexico and the effect of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

A second IAM local lodge in Iowa has also posted a website report on a trip to the maquiladoras. Again, the author notes a direct link to the poverty experienced by workers in Mexico and the effects of unregulated trade: "NAFTA has allowed multinational corporations to exploit workers in Mexico and reap huge profits without any commitment to clean up toxic wastes." The report went on to inform IAM members of the exceptionally low wages and young ages of workers "living in poverty" while working in the maquiladoras. Beyond the web, the maquiladora experience has been shared face-to-face. During union meetings, IAM local officers have given speeches and presentations on the trips as well. For example, an IAM Woodworkers District Lodge officer who had recently been to Mexico told his members about

the importance of “keeping the maquiladora issue and so-called free trade issues on the front burner.”

On several of the trips there have been intense debriefings. On one, an IAM general vice-president, posed three questions to the leaders who had been in Tijuana: how do you plan to share your experiences on your return? What do you think we should do to make a direct contribution to improving conditions? What impressed you most about the day? He led off by describing some specific help he would be interested in providing. At CUPAC, the last community group they had visited, he told one of the community leaders that he would like to provide more than just monetary support, and asked what the IAM could do in collaboration with the university. After this introduction, the vice-president opened the floor to discussion. The machinists were very open and frank as predicted. Almost everyone spoke. The conversation began with presentations about what had impressed people most, but quickly shifted into concrete proposals for action and a debate on trade policy.

IAM members returned with a sense that they should be far more involved and continue to stay informed on trade policy. As one member said, “We must make changes. We must get involved. We need to get the message to our representatives in Washington, D.C.” After returning from these trips, many participants expressed a wish that they could have brought their own congressional representative with them on the tour. Beyond issues of trade, the maquiladora visits have had a profound personal effect on many participants.

Limits

The IAM-CLAS effort at transnational labour education has some important limits, both analytically and practically. Analytically, a single case, no matter how compelling, will not capture the full complexity of globalization. Moreover, issues of development, the nature of production networks, and larger political and economic factors go well beyond what can be raised in a single visit. That said, the observations and interactions “on the ground” are invaluable in constructing a richer, more nuanced portrait of globalization and in introducing Mexican workers and community leaders as active protagonists in the process.

On the practical side, the obstacles also are daunting. U.S. participants usually only have limited time to dedicate to the experience. Factory managers in Mexico are unlikely to welcome U.S. unionists to observe conditions *inside* the plants, so trip organizers have limited the visits to viewing the outsides of the factories and touring industrial parks. Maquiladora workers in Tijuana are not organized into genuine unions and the extent of representation by community-based organizations is also small relative to the 140,000 maquiladora employees in Tijuana (as is true across the border). Further, language can be a barrier because few of the U.S. unionists speak Spanish, and few of the maquiladora workers speak English. Other barriers, of course, include differences in wealth, power, and personal experiences among and between the U.S. unionists and Mexican maquiladora workers. Finally, the fact that a large U.S. union does not have a ready counterpart in these situations is also an issue. That said, the trips have nevertheless proven to be a powerful experience for their participants.

The trips do not always produce a straightforwardly internationalist reaction, but give the machinists more information with which to shape their policies on trade and globalization at the local and national levels. There can be isolationist and paternalist reactions as well as responses of solidarity, but nonetheless internationalism is one consistent result for many participants.

These trips have also impacted the Tijuana participants in positive and negative ways. These union groups are among other U.S. visitors to Metales y Derivados and Chilpancingo, for example. Long-term organizers in Chilpancingo comment that these multiple visits can cause confusion and frustration among some residents, who are unclear what they may gain from these encounters. Acknowledging that some of the difficulties associated with all cross-border organizing have surfaced in our efforts does not, however, lessen the contribution they have made to reinforcing the machinists' overall internationalist approach to globalization issues. They have made some contribution to the communities visited as well. As discussed above, the effort stops short of a full-scale cross-border solidarity network. If the trips are open to criticism because of this limitation, on the other hand, recognizing this limitation has made it possible to organize the visits with more minimal investments of time and resources. Nor has

concrete support for Tijuana maquiladora workers been absent. The machinists have made monetary donations to CUPAC/CAFOR and to the new collective at Chilpancingo, as have CLAS affiliates. Badillo and Pelayo have also commented that the trips help facilitate leadership development among their members. The machinists have publicized conditions at Metales y Derivados and at Chilpancingo, sometimes featuring the issue in their lobbying on trade issues and thus contributing to pressure on the U.S. and Mexican governments to clean up waste.

Conclusion

The IAM and the Center for Latin American Studies have collaborated on an innovative transnational educational effort. As a result of their cross-border journeys, the IAM, one of the most aware and internationalist North American manufacturing unions to start with, has added throughout its membership an important degree of depth and commitment concerning trade and globalization. These are issues that are now understood in a more effective way both theoretically and in human terms in regional councils and local lodges. For many IAM members and leaders the notions of shaping the directions of globalization and solidarity — a core underpinning of the union itself — are not in conflict with one another. In fact, solidarity is the vital component necessary to shape a cross-border trade union response to globalization.

The trips underscore the fact that broader understandings between workers on either side of the border might be advanced in a variety of new ways that stop short of more formal networks. Transnational labour education may be one of these approaches. These contacts are not suggested in lieu of broader labour and human rights efforts but rather as a supplement, or perhaps a precursor to these more established linkages. Nor is a program this extensive being laid out as the only model. Rather, what we have found is the value of contacts between unions and workers that span borders and are integral to understanding key policy issues. More extensive contact at all levels of a union adds important depth and understanding to the formation of trade policy and contributes a new dimension to a more open and democratic public consideration of globalization.

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