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International labour organizations in a global economy

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Fredrik Håkansson, *Standing up to a multinational giant: the Saint-Gobain World Council and the American window glass workers' strike in the American Saint Gobain Corporation in 1969*, Linnaeus University Dissertation 54 (Växjö: Linnaeus University Press 2011). 263 p.

This doctoral thesis explores an important social issue: how can employees develop sufficient instruments to counterbalance the powers of the employers in an increasingly global and open economy? In other words, can employees take a tough line on labour issues at both the national and international level?

Fredrik Håkansson's research can be placed in the broader context of recent developments in the field of the history of international labour organizations. Until recently very little academic attention was paid to this subfield. Looking at Håkansson's work, it is not hard to see why. International labour history is at a crossroads of different fields, such as global history, diplomatic history, political history, labour sociology, economic history, migration history, social history, the history of social conflict, et cetera, encompassing a wide range of theories, definitions and paradigms. Moreover, many sources have been destroyed or lost over the years; if they are still available, they are not always accessible, and if they can be located, they are sometimes found across the world in different languages that forms an additional barrier that the historian has to overcome. Nevertheless, the past years have seen the development of a growing community of young researchers, engaged in new labour history, who try to take a transnational approach to these issues. Undoubtedly, initiatives such as the European Social Sciences History Conference have already had a major impact, together with the online accessibility of finding aids, catalogues and digitized collections.

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"New" labour history is different from "old" labour history in many ways. The latter was more or less abandoned by young scholars because it was atheoretical, uncritical and very institutional. Labour history needed a new focus, which was provided by, among others, E.P. Thompson, whose book *The making of the English working class* (1963) turned out to be very influential. Organizations and institutions were no longer in the foreground, but were replaced by people or workers. New categories of analysis were introduced, such as class, gender and ethnicity. However, as critics such as Marcel van der Linden and others have pointed out, the nation-state framework remained largely unchanged. Labour historiography, even if it dealt with the international history of labour organizations, limited itself to comparing national trends and phenomena. Van der Linden, together with Jan Lucassen and Jürgen Kocka¹, made a plea for "the end of national history", aiming to develop an alternative approach: a "global labour history", which aims to take a transnational perspective and focus on transnational trends. *What you study* – local or international developments, people or organizations, ideas or events – matters less than *how* you do it, as long as you take a transnational approach. It is this new approach which has paved the way for many recent research projects, publications and PhD theses. Håkansson's work should be placed in this context.

The topic of Håkansson's dissertation is the Saint-Gobain World Council and the American window glass workers' strike in 1969. The aim is "to investigate and understand the origin and character of the Saint-Gobain World Council and its international action". The study provides new insights into the way in which "structural background conditions" affected the capacity of American unions to mobilize workers and develop international strategies. Above all, it seeks to explain why the world councils, a new form of international organization, were short-lived and failed to meet expectations.

The study consists of four parts and presents an overview of past research. Håkansson concludes that no extensive research on his topic has been conducted before, as many other historians in the field of international labour history have observed. Håkansson, however, gives an additional reason why historians show this lack of interest, namely "that the ambitious objectives of the international labour movement have never been achieved". He agrees with Victor Silverman that the "history of labour internationalism is a history of failure, broken dreams, vanished ideals and corrupt institutions."² Not a very attractive record, indeed. Past research has also been criticized

1. Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the world: essays toward a global labor history* (Leiden 2008).

2. Victor Silverman, *Imagining internationalism in American and British labor, 1939–1949* (Urbana, Ill. 2000)

for basically taking a horizontal approach, ignoring the vertical dimension and the different levels – local, national and international – at which action is taken. Håkansson also introduces the agency concept, suggesting that it should be linked to a more structural approach. I will return to this issue later.

The outcome of the action against Saint-Gobain has been a matter for discussion. The author wonders why a single event has provoked so many conflicting interpretations. Having observed this, Håkansson identifies five research topics: 1) the outcome of the Saint-Gobain World Council action; 2) the council's failure to become a permanent institution; 3) the implementation of the council's policies; 4) wavering between protectionism and trade union internationalism, and the role of Charles Levinson, the charismatic trade union leader; and 5) the broader context of the conflict, that is highlighting "structural conditions" in the flat glass industry in the United States, which led to international action by the United States trade union.

According to Håkansson, the lack of historical sources may account for the wide range of conflicting interpretations of the outcome of the Saint-Gobain World Council action. His study draws on some important primary sources to address this problem, although he admits that this is not always the best option. Insufficient language skills and technical expertise, such as accountancy, may result in preference given to the study of literature. Nevertheless he has consulted some important archives: the International Confederation of Chemical Workers' (ICF) and the International Federation of Chemical Energy and the General Workers' Unions (ICEF) archives in Stockholm and Amsterdam, the United Automobile Workers' (UAW) archives and the Walter Reuther collection in the Walter Reuther Library of Labour and Urban Affairs in Detroit, the Glass Workers Collection (UGCW) in the West Virginia State Archives. His research does not include oral sources, but he does mention the correspondence with former UGCW staff member Harvey Martin. In addition, the author has consulted secondary literature.

All academic work need a solid theoretical framework. This study accepts two basic assumptions. The first one, from Erik Olin Wright,³ concerns the conflicting interests of parties and the opportunities to pursue their respective interests. Secondly, the class concept is used, but it is broadened to the concept of "class location" and the interplay between agency and structure. These assumptions are complemented by four distinct theories exploring international trade union action. Looking at them in more detail would be too much of a digression, but let me just mention the inevitable John Logue and his theory of trade union internationalism.⁴ It was developed

3. Erik Olin Wright, *Class counts: comparative studies in class analysis* (Cambridge, UK 1997).

4. John Logue, *Toward a theory of trade union internationalism* (Göteborg 1980).

some thirty years ago. It was not based on much empirical research, but it was provocative and tempting. The basic idea behind his theory is that trade unions act to defend their members' interests, and if they cannot deal with them effectively at the national level, they try to do so at the international level. Unlike Håkansson, Logue clearly states that trade unions tend to pursue their international activities longer than necessary; that is even if their members' interests are no longer sufficiently served by them. That is because a "parasitic trade union elite" very much enjoys the benefits which such activities involve (mainly free travel).

It amused me very much to read about the game theory developed by the political scientists Peter Lange and George Tsebelis.⁵ They speak about how trade union leaders successfully bluffed their way through the negotiations – it seems that the ability to do so is enhanced when the margin for error of the negotiating parties is larger, which seems to be the case in multinational companies. I did not know this, but, as a specialist in American labour history, I do know that poker was the favourite game of the trade union leadership and that trade union matters were not usually dealt with in meetings and conventions but in hotel rooms, during nights of bourbon and poker.

The empirical part of this study consists of three chapters. The first is a descriptive account of the conflict, whereas the second and third chapters take a more analytical view. The second chapter takes a closer look at the different parties, the protagonists of the conflict, their interests, values and long-term objectives. Special attention is paid to the International Federation of Chemical and General Workers' Unions (ICF), which was one of the most influential international trade secretariats (ITSs) at that time, and its leader Levinson. The international non-communist trade union movement was (and is) a two-pillar organization. The first pillar includes the national trade union federations (British, American, French, Swedish, Australian, etc.), which formed a confederation, the International Federation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), in 1949. It was dissolved in 2006, when it merged with the smaller Christian World Confederation of Labour (WCL) to form the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), of which the Swedish Landsorganisationen (LO) is also a member. The second pillar consists of the national professional or occupational unions (unions whose membership is restricted to certain professions or occupations, such as transport workers, metal workers, miners, textile workers, etc.). Their international unions are called international trade secretariats (ITSs), hence the ICF was an ITS.

The relationship between ICFTU and the ITSs was non-hierarchical

5. Peter Lange & George Tsebelis, "Strikes around the world: a game theoretic approach" in Sandford M. Jacoby (ed.) *The workers of nations: industrial relations in a global economy* (New York 1995).

and characterized by intense rivalry and jealousy, particularly between the ICFTU leadership and the leadership of the most powerful ITSs. The interesting thing about Håkansson's study is that it highlights an experiment with a new form of international organisation, the world council, launched by one particular ITS. World councils consisted of trade union executives from various branches of multinational companies such as Michelin, Shell, Unilever, Saint-Gobain, et cetera. Apparently this form of organization offered a much higher potential for taking "direct international industrial action" and counterbalancing the globalization of production. However, it has never realised its potential. Why? This is a key question, not only to historians, and this study attempts to provide an answer to it.

The third chapter tries to capture the essence of the class compromise in the American glass industry in the 1960s. It draws its inspiration from Erik Olin Wright's theory about the three different spheres: production, exchange, politics. The author concludes that conditions for reaching a positive compromise between labour and employers were relatively favourable in the production sphere, while they were markedly less favourable and starting to deteriorate in the spheres of exchange (labour market) and politics. That is to say, due to its limited ability to exert significant influence over wages, working conditions and employment opportunities and its declining ability to pursue working class interests in the political arena, the union felt compelled to develop international strategies and activities.

I would like to conclude with a question: Did the conflict have a positive outcome? The answer must be yes because the main goals were achieved in the short run. However, it is impossible to say if the same holds true in the long run.

A trade union engages in international activities because it does not achieve its goals within a national context. However, it is not a matter of choosing between strategies. Trade unions can very well adopt different and seemingly conflicting strategies at the same time, such as internationalism and protectionism. Strategies need not be conflicting, provided they serve the same purpose. John Logue's theory may, therefore, be valid: trade unions do not chose *either* national *or* international actions.

More importantly, with respect to a key theoretical issue in this study, namely the interaction between agency and structure (based on the work of Walter Korpi⁶), the mere will to achieve something is not enough. Structural conditions and real power are equally important. Erik Olin Wright's theory of positive class compromise and the three spheres extensively address this issue methodically. The study concludes that the negative class compromise

6. Walter Korpi, *The working class in welfare capitalism: work, unions, and politics in Sweden* (London 1978).

which existed in the spheres of exchange and politics made it difficult for the American glass industry unions to achieve their goals within the national policy context. Hence they decided to go international.

Another important conclusion is that parallel action may be taken at both the national and international level, while not being integrated with one another. This was actually the case with Saint-Gobain. However, local action could have been taken without international action, but not vice versa. A vertical implementation of policies did not involve all levels, but was limited to the national and international level.

Why did this form of organization not last? First of all we have to ask if this was the intention at all. According to Håkansson's research, it was not, because proper care was not provided to ensure that councils could "develop in a more sustainable way". The point is that Levinson, the executive secretary of all the councils, had made himself indispensable to the organization. Perhaps that is why the world councils were abandoned after he had left. We should not, however, overestimate his importance, as Windmuller has done.⁷ Perhaps world councils did not develop into a new, third pillar of the international trade union movement, because their strength largely depended on "bluff", that is the ability to mislead the employers about the real strength of the union. Consequently, when councils were put to the test, they proved to be weak.

To conclude, does Håkansson's thesis contribute to answering the question we asked at the beginning of this review, that is how unions can develop tools and strategies to counterbalance the powers of the employers in an increasingly global and open economy? Håkansson's research concerns only one world council and one industrial action. Hence, the question arises whether the study is not too limited to draw general conclusions and whether the main conclusions are sufficiently well-founded. Moreover, secondary literature is used sparingly by the author, while his lack of language skills prevented him from consulting existing French and Italian archives. We cannot turn a blind eye to these fundamental weaknesses. Once again it proves that historians indeed face serious difficulties in this subfield. Lack of language skills among researchers becomes a real problem when it starts to affect research results. And this seems to be the case with this piece of research.

The study has failed to live up to the expectations. Nevertheless, it should be given credit for putting a topic on the agenda which has been somewhat overlooked. It has wet my appetite for more research in this field.

7. John Windmuller, *The international trade union movement* (Deventer 1980).