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Joel Stillerman

Transnational Activist Networks and the Emergence of Labor Internationalism in the NAFTA Countries

Recent accounts of transnational activism have examined a variety of social movement organizations (SMOs) but have paid little attention to labor transnationalism. This article utilizes and adapts this new transnational social movements scholarship to understand contemporary labor activism in the NAFTA countries. Exploring the pre-existing networks and intramovement cleavages that helped spawn labor opposition to NAFTA, it focuses on labor activists' complaints under the treaty's labor side accord. I explore how rising political opportunities associated with the treaty and its new institutions created new political arenas, targets for activists, and incentives for cross-border collaboration. The cross-border political exchanges that formed part of labor activists' strategies to utilize these new institutions helped activists create new movement frames, transnational identities, and coalitions. While these outcomes support the findings of literature on transnational SMOs, they point to the particular dilemmas labor activists faced in confronting these issues due to their vulnerability, their status as formal organizations embedded in national institutional structures, and the difficulty of imagining policies and strategies that might be effective in this new transnational sphere.

Accounts of the role of nonstate actors in world politics argue that the recent growth of free-market trade regimes, the diffusion of new communications technologies, and the proliferation of both international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) and inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) have facilitated the emergence of transnational advocacy networks (TANs) and transnational social movements organizations [TSMOs] (Keck and Sikkink

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1998; Smith 2001). While the Battle of Seattle protests (staged against the 1999 ministerial meetings of the World Trade Organization [WTO]) and subsequent protests at similar meetings are the most obvious examples of this phenomenon, we could certainly point to earlier precedents, such as the growth of efforts to stop Amazonian deforestation (Keck 1995), the movement for divestment in South Africa under the apartheid regime (Waterman 1998), and the 1980s movement opposing U.S. military aid in Central America (Frundt 1996).

While this scholarship mostly focuses on NGO-based issue-oriented activism, it has not explored labor activism in the international arena. Though this omission follows a convention within the social movements literature that views labor as an institutionalized interest group and other movements as more informal or contentious (Josselin 2001), it is curious given the importance of labor activism to these transnational movements as well as to the origins of internationalist protest activism among trade unions.

This essay seeks to utilize and adapt this new scholarship on transnational social movements to understand contemporary labor activism in the NAFTA countries. Exploring the preexisting networks and intramovement cleavages that helped spawn labor opposition to NAFTA, it focuses empirically on labor activists' complaints under the treaty's labor side accord. Here I explore how rising political opportunities associated with the treaty's negotiation as well as a supranational institution created new political arenas, targets for activists, and incentives for cross-border collaboration. Moreover, I argue that the cross-border political exchanges that formed part of labor activists' strategies to engage and utilize these new institutions had long-term effects in creating new movement frames, transnational identities, and coalitions for subsequent action. While these outcomes support the findings of literature on transnational SMOs, I point to the particular dilemmas labor activists faced in confronting these issues due to their vulnerability, their status as a formal organization embedded in national institutional structures, and the difficulty of imagining policies and strategies that might be effective in this new transnational sphere.

An examination of labor internationalism is particularly appropriate for understanding the dynamics and limitations of recent mobilizations against free trade. First, legal protections for labor as well as the economic and institutional prerogatives of trade unions have been the implicit or explicit target of free-trade accords and agencies like NAFTA, GATT, and the WTO. Thus

the capacity of labor to develop an effective response (and alternative?) to these accords has significant implications for their character and effects on social inequality. Second, the entry of new nonunion labor rights organizations (student activists, think tanks, solidarity organizations, and faith-based associations) points to the growing influence of labor issues outside unions, creating new possibilities for alliances as well as potential challenges. Finally, many have argued that labor unions' only hope of reversing their downward tide since the 1970s lies in alliances with broader social movements (community, environment, poverty, etc.). Hence, an examination of labor's efforts to develop new alliance strategies in the specific context of NAFTA-related mobilization will provide important insights into the potential (and limits) embodied in this strategy.

My findings suggest the utility of the TAN/TSMO approach for understanding contemporary labor internationalism. The twin crises of neoliberal reform and welfare state rollback have demanded an internationalist response from complacent (and largely nationally oriented) labor movements. Similarly, the decline of the USSR created a less ideologically charged environment that permitted broader alliances between unions and a wide array of social movement actors. This more open environment coincided with the growth of NGO efforts to build solidarity with Central American groups (including unions) and with Mexican workers. At the same time, significant insurgent movements emerged within sector-based unions in the United States, as did an important independent union movement in Mexico. Additionally, U.S. and Mexican activists in the fight against NAFTA and future coalitions challenging global trade regimes could model the experience of Canadian activists during the mid-1980s opposing the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States. Finally, the broadened political opportunities created by the NAFTA negotiations and the labor side accord facilitated further cross-border and union-NGO alliances.

This complex process of shifting political opportunities (both within movements and due to the emergence of new supranational institutions) and the intersection of complex organizational fields both reaffirms and builds upon existing research on transnational activism. The growth of cross-border solidarity resulted from increasing opportunities and new targets in an emerging transnational political arena as well as activists' efforts to use cross-national alliances to change policies at home and broader movement frames emerging from new cross-border and cross-movement alliances. This image

of growing international labor activism is not surprising, except that it applies to a movement that has much earlier origins than the post–World War II wave of transnationalism, suggesting that older, more institutionalized movement organizations also can take advantage of and adapt to this relatively new movement environment. However, this transformation in labor activism was also due to internal ideological and organizational changes that are side-stepped by broader discussions of transnationalism. Likewise, unlike TANs, trade unions have a direct material stake in the outcome of these struggles and have a more independent resource base than the mostly foundation-funded NGOs. Additionally, though labor movements have long articulated an ideological predilection for internationalist action, their entrée into international alliances in the recent period (no longer under the auspices of Cold War governments) has been more organizationally costly than human rights and environmental groups' activism.

Because modern labor movements emerged within the institutional framework of states, and there are no international collective bargaining institutions, these movements owe their legal existence to the nation-state. As a consequence, their use of resources in the international arena will not likely produce immediate material results for members and may yield only symbolic gains. In this regard, the emergence of labor internationalism in the recent period is more impressive than these other movements, as labor has had to “unlearn” existing patterns of action that are no longer effective in the current neoliberal era. These patterns include national-level collective bargaining, the promotion of protectionist trade policies (particularly beginning with the 1970s economic downturn), and efforts to “take wages out of competition”—creating standardized scales to prevent employers from reducing salaries by pitting union members against lower paid nonunion workers. From approximately 1945 to 1975, these union strategies succeeded with the implicit or explicit aid of national institutions, but they are much less effective in the current era of trade liberalization, heightened capital mobility, and declining welfare states.

Transnational Social Movements

Discussions of transnational activism build on political process models of national social movements. The latter framework argues that social movement emergence and success depend on the availability of preexisting net-

works, resources, and organizations; a favorable political opportunity structure (divided elites, available elite allies, and low levels of repression of contenders); and the ability of movements to construct frames (or collective identities) that appeal to members and bystanders while also neutralizing elite opposition (Tilly 1978; McAdam et al. 1996; Tarrow 1988; Snow et al. 1986). Historical discussions of movements' emergence argue that their mobilization styles (*repertoires*), the locus of their action, and the targets of their claims evolved with the rise of the modern nation-state (Tilly 1978). Hence, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, movements evolved from local, spontaneous performances to national, highly coordinated bargaining with state actors.

Discussions of transnational activism build on this framework while extending its assumptions to a transnational political arena. Margaret Keck and Katherine Sikkink (1998) argue that the post-World War II growth of international institutions (such as the United Nations and the World Bank) and the emergence of electronic communications facilitated the emergence of transnational advocacy networks, including grassroots activists and NGOs, researchers, and sympathetic foundations. The emergence of these networks is particularly important for movement actors in resource-poor settings with closed political opportunity structures. Actors in these contexts can appeal to resource- and information-rich members of principled networks for international advocacy as well as pressure on governments and international institutions to strengthen activists' hands against local governments. They dub this phenomenon the "boomerang effect."

While Keck and Sikkink are principally concerned with ties between multicountry NGOs, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and funding agencies engaged in policy reform, others have expanded on their concerns to focus on more contentious forms of transnational action. Jackie Smith (2001) and Jeffrey Ayres (1998, 2001) argue that economic globalization, the information revolution, and the emergence of multilateral institutions (such as the IMF and the WTO) have created new opportunities for transnational alliance formation and collective action that targets these agencies. Hence, they observe the emergence of a new transnational polity and, building on the work of Charles Tilly, suggest that the emergence of this supranational political arena implies the appearance of new repertoires and targets of action. Further, they examine how transnational social movement organizations (TSMOs) unite preexisting local movement organizations (church,

union, and community groups), expand the access of Third World actors to global corridors of power, develop new movement strategies and action repertoires (e.g., mobilization via electronic communication), create decentralized organizational structures, and generate new movement frames. Within the international political arena, these actors are able to exploit divisions between states as well as citizens' feeling of exclusion from the discussion of multilateral accords to build support and challenge powerful institutions.

While this work enthusiastically anticipates the new opportunities open to TSMOs, others are more sanguine about the real impact of TSMO activism. Sidney Tarrow (1998) argues that international coalitions are mostly ephemeral because they are not rooted in the face-to-face networks that are the backbone of national movements. Moreover, he differentiates between transnational movements and more ephemeral transnational political exchanges (Tarrow 2001a). Finally, in empirical research on contentious politics within the European Union. Doug Imig and Sidney Tarrow (2001a and 2001b) and their collaborators note some unexpected findings. While most contention is still nationally based (even in a setting with strong multinational institutions and short distances between countries), the bulk of transnational contention is "domesticated": actors oppose EU policies by targeting their home government rather than protesting at the EU headquarters in Brussels, Belgium.

Labor Internationalism

While authors debate the relative importance and prospects for transnational activism, few have examined labor activism directly (but see the following exceptions: Waterman 1998; Josselin 2001; Martin and Ross 2001). Though labor may be subsumed within broader anti-free trade coalitions, few authors have examined the peculiarities and importance of labor internationalism. First, we should emphasize that unlike Keck and Sikkink's (1998) transnational advocacy networks, trade unions and other labor support groups have existed since the early nineteenth century and have had significant organizational inheritances from artisan guilds dating back to the middle ages. In contrast, TANs are post-World War II phenomena, though the authors do point to analogous movements in the nineteenth century.

The earlier emergence of labor movements and their growing legal certification and incorporation into state institutions have important implications for their contradictory positioning regarding international activism.

For, as Peter Waterman (1998) and Andrew Herod (1997) argue, trade unions began as international associations of artisans. However, as they grew with the nation-state, they became more embedded in national systems of collective bargaining, political parties, trade law, and so on. Hence, unions have a considerable stake in moving wages out of the market by utilizing national institutions. Moreover, with the emergence of partisan labor organizations, internationalism became the purview of party and high-level trade union leaders, and particularly after World War II, became captive to interstate Cold War rivalries (Herod 1997; Josselin 2001; Sims 1992). Hence, much of labor movements' international activities were extensions of their home governments' foreign policies, often resulting in actions that undermined labor movements abroad (Waterman 1998).

However, the thawing of U.S.–Soviet relations in the 1970s created an opening for a more straightforward economic internationalism based on existing trade union organizations (particularly sectorally organized international trade secretariats [ITSs] in concert with the ILO) as well as more informal ties between rank-and-file workers and the establishment of emerging transnational advocacy networks that combined a focus on human rights, labor rights, and social justice. These new strategies often occurred at the margins of official labor organizations and moved some labor activists closer to the TAN/TSMO model. Specifically, Daphne Josselin (2001) points to European unions' efforts at Multinational Corporation (MNC) “containment” during the 1970s. By coordinating cross-national action against specific employers, unions successfully negotiated codes of conduct and international collective bargaining agreements.

In the United States, severe threats to union power, due to declining numbers, corruption, industrial restructuring, limited effectiveness of protectionism, erosion of social welfare guarantees, and creation of new trade agreements, forced more established (and conservative) sectors of labor to confront the limitations of their nationally centered strategies. In this context, interesting possibilities emerged for developing new strategies, allying with prolabor NGOs, and working with other movement sectors.

Labor Internationalism before NAFTA

Activism that ultimately led to a trinational movement challenging NAFTA had a variety of sources that were geographically, ideologically, and organizationally dispersed. These included Canadian opposition to the FTA; insur-

gent union activism in Mexico originating in the 1960s; a group of U.S. unions, particularly rank-and-file members, who attempted to organize their Mexican counterparts and organized tours of U.S. and Mexican workers in their respective countries; the construction of organizational links between Mexican migrant agricultural workers and their home communities; as well as faith-based and secular NGO labor organizing on the U.S.-Mexican border. How do we make sense of this complex organizational field and the eventual coalitions that brought many of these disparate actors together?

The FTA (signed in 1989) and the planned NAFTA accords, whose negotiation began in 1991, challenged both labor and environmental actors to develop new transnational strategies and to confront trade liberalization. The threats to national-scale regulation of labor/social rights and environment posed by the accords held the potential to undermine these movements' and their constituents' influence on these regulations, as well as to "whipsaw" unions and promote environmental devastation. Hence, movement actors in the three countries had strong motivations to try to shape NAFTA to benefit their constituents. Moreover, Canadian activists were able to model their experience and organizational successes for U.S. and Mexican activists. Finally, the FTA and NAFTA became new targets that suggested the need for transnational activism; the labor and environment side accords served this purpose after NAFTA was passed. However, long before the early 1990s, the seeds of the movement to challenge NAFTA had been planted.

Beginning in the 1940s and continuing through the 1970s in Mexico, insurgent labor activists fought with some success to create independent unions in the railways, auto and other industries (Hathaway 2000; Alegre 2000; Roxborough 1984). During the consolidation of the postrevolutionary state in the 1930s, President Lázaro Cárdenas established authoritarian corporatist institutions designed to ensure political support from workers, peasants, business, and later the middle class (Middlebrook 1995). The government required unions to affiliate with the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional or PRI), crushing union democracy with both legal regulation and strong-arm tactics by armed bands of supporters. However, periodic efforts in distinct sectors sought to build independent unions. The Authentic Workers' Front (FAT) is the dissident organization that became most important to subsequent anti-NAFTA organizing. Created by the Catholic church during the 1940s, the FAT later became radicalized and moved to the forefront of cross-border independent

unionism during the 1980s and 1990s (Hathaway 2000). Hence, insurgent strains within an authoritarian political and union setting later spearheaded internationalist organizing.

Second, the economic ties within multinational corporations and between migrant groups and their home communities made opportunities for transnational organizing quite visible to labor activists. Capital flight to Mexico was evident in the wave of U.S. plant shutdowns beginning in the 1970s, as was the growth of Mexico's in bond assembly (*maquiladora*) sector¹ after the 1982–83 debt crisis. While many U.S. unions responded to industrial restructuring, capital flight, and the Reagan revolution by promoting protectionist policies (still evident in the United Steelworkers' recent successful demand for increased tariffs on imports), other organizations experienced internal movements for greater democracy and tried new organizing strategies. These latter processes facilitated a more internationalist approach.

The most important example of this phenomenon, and perhaps a unique case, is the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE). Expelled from the AFL-CIO during the late 1940s because of communist influence in its leadership, the UE continued its progressive stance and strategies in contrast to the growing conservatism in the AFL and CIO particularly after these two organizations merged in the mid-1950s. One example of the UE's alternative politics was its vibrant campaign to prevent the closure of Stewart Warner in Chicago during the 1980s. Based on strong rank-and-file support, ties to community organizations, and alliances with progressive local politicians, the ultimately unsuccessful mobilization represented an aggressive organizing model that most unions had forgotten after World War II (Jonas 1998).

In the context of early discussions regarding NAFTA, the UE met leaders of the FAT in a Canadian sponsored trinational conference. After that meeting, the two unions decided to construct a strategic alliance to coordinate organizing in multinationals in which both unions worked. As a consequence, the UE has been directly involved in various organizing campaigns in Mexican plants, and the FAT has sent organizers to U.S. plants with significant Latino representation in the workforce. In this regard, the UE and FAT took the most direct and obvious steps toward building international solidarity—they became directly involved in their counterparts' organizing and collective bargaining campaigns (Hathaway 2000; Cook 1995; Dreiling 2001; Ayres 1998).

In a distinct case, beginning in the late 1970s, the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) forced the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), who had been expelled from the AFL-CIO for corruption, to adopt more democratic practices and to rein in corruption, though their subsequent president followed the union's corrupt traditions. The United Auto Workers (UAW), with strong traditions in the CIO 1930s' organizing push as well as within the Civil Rights movement, took a more independent stance from the AFL-CIO's conservative leadership (Dreiling 2001). Both the IBT and UAW began sending delegations of rank-and-file workers to Mexico in the early 1990s, eroding protectionist sentiments among their workforces and building trust among their Mexican counterparts. Later, the UAW tried to organize workers in a Ford plant in Cuautitlán, Mexico (Carr 1999; Dreiling 2001). Since NAFTA's passage, both the UAW and IBT have actively promoted cross-border worker exchanges and supported organizing in Mexico's *maquiladoras*.

While less active on trade issues, the Service Employees' International Union (SEIU) and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) engaged in aggressive, innovative, and community-based campaigns, most notably in the Justice for Janitors successes in the San Francisco Bay area and more recently in Los Angeles. These organizing successes became important models for industrial unions (Johnston 1994; Waldinger et al. 1997).

Beginning in 1989, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) embarked on a series of solidarity actions with international unions in Canada, Mexico, Europe, and Australia. Responding to deregulation and globalization in the telecommunications sector, the CWA organized parallel actions with unions working for multinationals like Sprint to prevent union-busting and extend membership to nonunionized sectors in the industry. This organizing became significant in two complaints under the NAFTA labor side accord, discussed below (Cohen and Early 1999).

The Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE!)—a merger of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) and the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), with a large and increasingly Latino membership, and tremendous losses to capital flight—began adopting some of the strategies of ethnically based NGOs. It opened community-based worker centers that provided immigrant workers—often nonunion members—English courses and assis-

tance with immigration issues with the goal of recruiting more immigrant organizers. UNITE! has also conducted international corporate campaigns against garment brands like the Gap and Guess (Bonacich 2000; Dreiling 2001; Ness 1998).² Hence, a variety of unions began to adopt cross-border initiatives in the late 1980s as part of broader experimentation with alternative organizing strategies and rank-and-file activism.

Likewise, the economic and social ties between migrant workers and their home communities have been a source of information flows regarding agricultural decline at home and poor working conditions abroad, fueling cross-national labor organizing. This development in turn fueled cross-national organizing by the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, an AFL union primarily focused on farm workers in the Midwest, against Campbell's Soup (Cook 1995). These efforts represent important precedents for the current IBT/FAT joint organizing effort among Washington state apple pickers (see below and Hathaway 2000).

All of this union-centered activism coincided with and occasionally overlapped with significant NGO-based work supporting labor rights in Mexico and Central America. These efforts can be divided into three categories: organizations based on the U.S.-Mexican border, faith-based organizations, and left-oriented solidarity groups. American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) engaged in the first and most pioneering effort, creating the Border Workers' Committee (CFO) along the Texas-Mexico border in the late 1970s. Organizers reasoned that because PRI-supported unions controlled most of the *maquila* plants and would stop at nothing to block independent unionism, the only effective organizing strategy would need to operate outside the plants (cf. Williams and Passé Smith 1992). As a consequence, the CFO organized "Know Your Rights" door-to-door campaigns, offering women *maquila* workers copies of the Mexican labor law. Because of the systematic nonenforcement of Mexican labor law, the campaign was quite effective at raising consciousness and in reducing employer abuses inside the plants.³

Another example is the Texas-based organization Sin Fronteras (Without Borders), formed in the mid-1980s and focused on the multiple needs of farm workers in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Chihuahua, Mexico. The organization created a workers' center in Chihuahua that provides social services, children's activities, English classes, and advocacy for farming families. It also operates a Border Agricultural Workers' Project based in El Paso,

Texas. The latter seeks to organize chili pickers and to assure that their rights as workers and immigrants are respected (Sin Fronteras 2002).

Additionally, in 1991 an innovative project serving indigenous groups from Oaxaca, Mexico emerged. The Bi-National Oaxacan Workers' Front (FIOB) works on a wide variety of issues, including labor rights, occupational health and safety, cultural preservation, and economic development in Oaxaca. This binational organization has offices in several California cities with large Oaxacan migrant populations as well as in Oaxaca. Both organizations respond to the specific needs of migratory farm workers who may move back and forth between Mexico and the southwestern United States.

The Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC), founded in 1979, is another significant New Mexico-based NGO. Maintaining an archive on U.S. foreign policy in Latin America, the center offers independent policy analysis and news on small border-based labor and environment NGOs through its newsletter, *Borderlines*. The center's publications have been an important medium for the diffusion of information regarding border issues and activism to a broader public.⁴

In addition to these U.S.-Mexican border organizations, several scholars point to important parallel dynamics within the U.S.-Central America solidarity movement. While considerable faith-based and politically committed solidarity focused on human rights during the Central American wars of the 1970s and 1980s, much of this work involved support for Central American unions. Moreover, this NGO-based solidarity work intersected with U.S. rank-and-file workers' activism on behalf of their Central American counterparts, especially via the Chicago-based Guatemala Labor Education Project. This work resulted in the dramatic success of Coca-Cola workers during the mid-1980s. The union, after several of its leaders disappeared or were killed, staged a year-long factory takeover. Religious activist shareholders pushed through a resolution forcing Coke to sell its Guatemala operations.

During the 1990s, as peace accords were signed throughout the region, activism shifted more directly toward labor issues, specifically via corporate campaigns against garment brand names. NGOs such as the National Labor Committee and the Committee on Labor Rights, at times in alliance with UNITE! and other unions, through sophisticated research and media strategies forced the Gap and other corporations to sign codes of conduct for their global operations. Anticipating anti-NAFTA activism, activists criticized the 1980s Caribbean Basin Initiative as well as USAID financial support for the

emerging *maquila* sector in the region. This strategy has now become the hallmark of antisweatshop activism during the 1990s, with “image jamming” one of the key strategies of activism that seeks to build support for labor rights among consumers (Levenson-Estrada 1994; Frundt 1996).

The emergence of this bewildering array of solidarity activity has two significant implications. First, “old” trade union–based labor solidarity emerged from activated rank-and-file union members who sought to break with the dominant conservative union federations in their countries. The critique of complacent and hierarchical union leadership coincided with a more aggressive stance toward neoliberal policies, declining union membership, and labor’s traditional national focus. These shifts facilitated cross-border solidarity emerging in the late 1980s. Moreover, as early as the late 1970s, U.S. NGOs began a significant focus on grassroots labor organizing, advocacy, and information dissemination among Mexican, Central American, and Latino immigrant factory and farm workers. Incipient alliances between unions and NGOs anticipated more significant cross-fertilization during the NAFTA debates.

Labor Challenges to NAFTA

Labor challenges to NAFTA reflected cross-border ties with Canadian social and environmental activists; emerging alliances among unions, environmental groups, progressive think tanks, and social justice–oriented NGOs; litigation, intensive congressional lobbying; and trilateral solidarity efforts. The treaty’s negotiation created a more explicitly transnational political opportunity structure, as activists saw the importance of coordinating their efforts to shape or defeat the accord and recognized that NAFTA would have serious consequences for actors in all three countries. Moreover, the treaty’s negotiation permitted the creation of broader alliances and movement frames, allowing some segments of labor and environmentalists to overcome past conflicts, and facilitating broader union-NGO ties. In this regard, anti-NAFTA activism prefigured the broad and complex alliances evident in mobilizations against the Multilateral Accord on Investment (MAI), the Battle of Seattle, and subsequent protests during IGO negotiations in Davos, Genoa, and elsewhere.

However, as was true of cross-border activism prior to the treaty’s negotiation, only segments of the labor and environmental movements promoted

international collaboration. Much of the activism did not break out of the habitual focus on the national arena. Hence, the seeds for cross-issue, cross-border activism had been planted prior to the treaty. Its negotiation intensified these incipient alliances rather than creating them.

Canadian activists played a crucial role in advising U.S. and Mexican activists about how to respond to the NAFTA negotiations. After the passage of the FTA and a conservative turn in Canadian politics, activists found local political opportunities closed off. In this context, they sought to teach their U.S. and Mexican counterparts about their own experiences regarding free trade, and to model their successful coalition and network building strategies through regional councils, a national umbrella group, lobbying, protests, and the inclusion of a broad array of social movements (Ayres 1998).

Activists discouraged their counterparts from taking an overtly nationalist stance, as they found this approach largely unsuccessful in forestalling free trade in Canada and anticipated that it risked alienating potential allies abroad. Moreover, beginning in 1991, Canadian activists, through the think tank "Common Frontiers," organized a regular series of trinational meetings and assemblies in Mexico that coincided with the NAFTA treaty negotiations. These meetings helped form the Mexican Action Network on Free Trade (RMALC), an important think tank, and facilitated the FAT-UE alliance. Canadian activists also promoted exchanges among women's and workers' groups, intensifying "people-to-people" encounters (Ayres 1998, 2001; Dreiling 2001; Aaronson 2001).

The Canadian "transnational" approach had varying degrees of resonance with the two U.S. coalitions organized to oppose or radically reform the NAFTA. The Citizen's Trade Campaign (CTC) included the AFL leadership, some AFL-CIO unions, seasoned lobbying organizations, and mainstream environmental groups. This mass-based and politically connected coalition pushed to defeat the treaty in Congress, and, at times adopted protectionist orientations. In addition, both environmentalists and the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) sought to challenge the treaty in court in separate lawsuits (Aaronson 2001; USWA 2002).

The Alliance for Responsible Trade (ART), less capable of mobilizing large groups of people or resources than the CTC, included unions that had been more active in cross-border exchanges (UAW, UE, IBT, UNITE!), labor and environment NGOs from the three countries, and progressive think tanks, such as the Institute for Policy Studies and Development GAP. Addi-

tionally, some unions, such as the IBT, participated in both coalitions. ART focused much more on cross-border exchanges and developing a fair-trade alternative to NAFTA than on defeating the accord in Congress or the courts (Dreiling 2001; Aaronson 2001).

In addition to the obvious goal of defeating or reforming the NAFTA, the period of mobilization from 1991 to 1994 had two other important outcomes. The first was the creation of trinational coalitions of labor and NGO activists that became important vehicles of support in particular for organizing campaigns in the *maquiladora* sector. The most prominent network is the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM). This organization, as stated in its 1996 annual report, is a “trinational coalition of religious, environmental, labor, Latino, and women’s organizations that seek to pressure U.S. transnational corporations to adopt socially responsible practices within the maquiladora industry, to ensure a safe environment along the U.S.-Mexican border, safe working conditions inside the *maquila* plants, and a fair standard of living for the industry’s workers” (quoted in Alexander and Gilmore 1999). By August 1998, the coalition included approximately 500 groups from the United States, Canada, and Mexico. The CJM has become a major focus of labor solidarity in Mexico, combining consciousness raising, union organizing, and legal strategies.

In addition, unions as well as fair trade coalitions increased cross-border meetings of rank-and-file workers and tours of Mexican workers in the United States as part of mobilizing campaigns. Michael Dreiling (2001) and Dale Hathaway (2000) note that U.S. rank-and-file workers who visited Mexico’s assembly plants became radicalized and active spokespeople for transnational solidarity. Unions saw these exchanges as effective means of challenging protectionist or racist sentiments toward Mexican workers among their members.

Moreover, coalition activism permitted an opportunity for activists to broaden movement frames. Labor-environmental alliances permitted the construction of a discourse of sustainable development that sensitized union members to environmental contamination and led environmentalists to develop economic and class critiques of free trade (cf. Keck 1995). Moreover, activists in both coalitions developed the concept of “fair trade” which distinguished them from free-trade advocates while avoiding charges of protectionism. Moreover, the fair-trade frame could be a rallying cry for social justice activists in various countries (Dreiling 2001).

The mobilizations against NAFTA intensified preexisting efforts to build labor internationalism by exploiting new transnational political opportunities, organizing cross-nationally to defeat NAFTA or to influence uncertain treaty negotiations, targeting elites of the three societies and the treaty itself, building broader cross-issue/cross-border alliances, and developing new movement frames. The coalitions that emerged, combining unions, researchers, environmentalists, and pro-labor NGOs approximated Waterman's (1988, 1998) notion of the "new internationalisms." He suggests that by acting independently from but without discarding the traditional international labor bureaucracies, and allying with issue-based movements, labor internationalism can be much more effective than it has been in recent years. The alliances built prior to and during the NAFTA fight would endure into initial efforts to file grievances under the NAFTA labor side accord and subsequent mobilizations against the Multilateral Accord on Investment (MAI) and the WTO. We begin exploring these medium-term legacies through a discussion of complaints under NAFTA's labor side accord.

NAFTA's Labor Side Accord

The NAFTA labor side accord (the North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation or NAALC) provides a vehicle for workers and their advocates in the three member countries to file grievances regarding the violation of a set of labor principles: freedom of association and the right to organize, collective bargaining rights, the right to strike, the prohibition of forced labor, protection of child labor, minimum employment standards, nondiscrimination, equal pay for men and women, prevention of occupational injuries and illnesses, compensation for workplace injury and illness, and protection of migrant workers. In order to file a complaint regarding legal violations in one country, activists in a second country must file the grievance with their own national administrative office. In this regard, the NAALC provides an international grievance machinery, creates a potential target for activists, and facilitates cross-border activism (NAALC 1993).

The structure for evaluating complaints is highly cumbersome and selective, including public hearings, ministerial consultations, expert committee studies, arbitration at the ministerial level, fines, or possible suspension of NAFTA benefits. The process can last for several years, and, most important, there are no enforcement powers for punishing violations of the rights

to assemble, bargain collectively, or strike. Moreover, enforcement powers are directed at governments that do not enforce their laws, while companies whose legal violations are not addressed through labor arbitration boards are not accountable for their lapses. Hence, the accord's significance for workers lies in the public forum it provides to air grievances and in the potential for activists to use NAALC reports to pressure governments and employers, rather than in material gains it cannot offer (see Williams and Stillerman 2001 for a more detailed review of the NAALC).

Complaints under the NAALC

Due to popular challenges to NAFTA, President George H. W. Bush promised labor and environmental side accords for the agreement, and after his 1992 election, President Bill Clinton carried out this promise. To date, there have been 25 formal complaints under the NAALC, mostly referring to labor conflicts in the United States and Mexico. Of these complaints, most refer to violations of rights to free association, rights to collective bargaining, and rights to strike, while an increasing number refer to health and safety issues and immigrants' rights to fair treatment in the United States (U.S. Department of Labor 2002). As I have argued elsewhere (Williams and Stillerman 2001), the labor side accord can offer little concretely to workers' organizations because of its weak enforcement powers. As one author wryly notes (Hathaway 2000), the worst sanction against governments that do not uphold their labor law is "punishment by seminar" because most complaints have resulted in cross-national informational seminars.

However, the NAALC has become part of increasing cross-border collaboration among North American labor activists. Though I will not review each of the cases in detail, I point to significant innovations in mobilization strategies emerging in relation to the NAALC complaints. First, unions in distinct countries have reciprocated their counterparts' complaints on their behalf. Second, organizations have targeted specific employers through trilateral coordination and information exchanges. Third, unions in distinct countries have shared organizers with their counterparts. Each of these strategies points to ways labor activists have begun to grapple with capital mobility, and have formalized mechanisms for international collective bargaining.

The first example of unions filing successive complaints on each other's

behalf involves telecommunications workers in California and Mexico. In 1995, the Mexican Telephone Worker's Union (STRM) filed the first complaint under the NAALC regarding the closure of a California Sprint facility. The shop had closed preceding a union election, and CWA organizers charged the firm with union-busting tactics and discrimination against the largely Latino work force. In addition to the NAALC petition, which led to a public hearing and ministerial consultations, the union challenged Sprint (ultimately unsuccessfully) in court. The following year, the CWA filed a petition on behalf of the STRM against Maxi-Switch, a Mexican-based producer of computer switchboards. STRM charged Maxi-switch and a government-supported union of violating the right to a free and fair union election. After the Mexican government certified the STRM as the shop's rightful union, CWA withdrew its case. Both these cases indicate the possibilities of reciprocal support and strengthened cross-border ties facilitated by the NAALC (Cohen and Early 1999; Compa 1997, 1998).

In a second case, in 1997, "the FAT met with six other North American unions to form the Echlin Workers Alliance" (Hathaway 2000: 190). The unions, including the UE, USWA, UNITE!, IBT, Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), and United Paper Workers (UPIP), had all organized shops owned by Echlin, a multinational car-parts manufacturer. Through the alliance, workers in each of these unions were able to share their own experiences organizing Echlin shops with other unions engaged in active campaigns, compare wages and benefits, and strategize about how to respond to management. Additionally, the alliance filed a NAALC complaint during the same year regarding violations of freedom of association and free elections in the Mexico City ITAPSA plant. As a consequence of the NAALC report, the company agreed to conduct a study of the alleged violations and to discuss the implementation of a code of conduct for all of its affiliates. These sorts of exchanges could potentially prefigure the kind of multinational corporation (MNC) containment activism discussed by Josselin (2001) involving cross-national codes of conduct and collective bargaining agreements (Hathaway 2000; U.S. Department of Labor 2002).

A third significant form of collaboration is the use of organizers from one country in a campaign in the second one. Both the UE and the IBT have utilized FAT organizers in two campaigns. As the UE (2002) notes:

Although the UE has had occasion to support the FAT in a number of campaigns, this too, is definitely a two-way street. The FAT provided

critical support for a successful UE organizing campaign in a Milwaukee foundry. At the UE's request, a rank-and-file activist from the FAT traveled to Milwaukee for two weeks in December to accompany UE organizers.

In meetings with the workers, who were predominantly of Mexican origin, he was able to speak from his own experience in telling them that the UE is a democratic union, unlike the "official" unions in Mexico. Together with excellent work by staff and members, this led to a union victory at the 400-worker Ace/Co. plant!

Likewise, in a campaign against Washington State apple growers who intimidated Teamsters activists, also involving a NAALC submission, the union utilized a FAT organizer to help mobilize the largely Latino apple pickers (Hathaway 2000: 245; IBT 2002). These forms of collaboration suggest another way that labor activists can concretely support organizing across borders. The UE and IBT acknowledge that Mexican organizers have better insight into the cultural attitudes, concerns, fears, and political experiences of Latino migrant workers. Moreover, these campaigns demonstrate how some unions are beginning to see the organizational advantages created by increasing immigration of working people to the United States, particularly from Mexico and Latin America, during the past two decades. These migrants' ties to their home countries as well as these nations' proximity to the United States create new opportunities for cross-national organizing.

Conclusion

Scholarship on transnational advocacy networks and social movement organizations has led social movements scholars to move beyond viewing the nation-state as the sole political arena in which movements operate. Franklin Rothman and Pamela Oliver (1999) have usefully summarized the multilevel character of many contemporary movements with the concept of "nested opportunity structures." This notion suggests that activists today, and perhaps more in the past than was imagined, may operate simultaneously within multiple political arenas, and may use allies at different levels to gain greater leverage to achieve their goals. With growing economic integration, international NGOs and inter-governmental agencies, this multilevel political process becomes ever more complex.

I have suggested that this literature takes us a long way toward understanding contemporary labor internationalism in the NAFTA countries. However, I argue that because unions developed their capacity to take wages out of the market by bargaining with state actors at the national level, and because states utilized unions to carry out their foreign policy goals during the Cold War, unions and labor activists have had considerable difficulty “going global,” whereas human rights or environmental organizations have had less difficulty in this area.

However, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, a variety of factors opened possibilities for a more substantial labor internationalism, specifically in the North American context. Insurgent movements in Mexico and the United States began to challenge union leadership and promote cross-border ties between rank-and-file workers. Canadian activists’ opposition to the FTA, and their vocation for internationalist politics, became a model for NAFTA opponents. A rich tradition of pro-labor NGO activism eventually fed into union organizing. Finally, growing capital mobility, migration, and the impending NAFTA negotiations created grievances, a target, and a new political arena for cross-border activism. While NAFTA did not create grassroots North American labor internationalism, it certainly gave activists a new target, arena, and organizing tool, the NAALC.

Based on discussions of labor participation in the Battle of Seattle (Smith 2001; Dreiling 2001), it appears that the cross-border, cross-issue alliances and pursuit of international targets that emerged before and during the NAFTA debates will only increase with continued efforts to extend free trade via the WTO and the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Unions and NGOs can hope to build on the fair-trade frame to construct a more global consciousness among labor, its supporters, and a broader coalition to confront an international system that inevitably affects a variety of constituencies—including workers, environmentalists, farmers, and immigrants—in profound ways.

However, while these trends are certainly encouraging signs of growing possibilities for collaboration, such efforts have failed to fundamentally change the downward pressure on real wages, working conditions, and workers’ rights in the NAFTA countries and many other places around the world. Indeed, these coalitions represent small minorities within the labor and NGO sectors. The larger question of how to effectively confront global neoliberalism remains unanswered.

Notes

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- 1 Mexico's Border Industrialization Program (established in 1965 and subsequently modified in 1971, 1972, and 1977) stipulates that foreign assembly plants pay taxes only on the value added to imported raw materials when they re-export assembled goods or components abroad. This legal arrangement is known as "in bond assembly" because final stages of production usually occur in plants in the United States or other countries where the multinational corporations that own the *maquiladora* plants are based. The NAFTA treaty will gradually phase out these tax advantages for border plants, leading some to speak of the "maquilization" of Mexico, as the country's low wages compared to developed countries (particularly after the 1994–95 peso crisis and subsequent currency devaluation) facilitate the spread of assembly plants throughout the country beyond their traditional base in northern Mexico (Kopinak 1996).
- 2 While the above cited authors view UNITE's! workers' centers as their own innovation, the author's participation in the Global Sweatshop Coalition (GSC) in New York City during 1997–98 suggests that other dynamics were at work. The GSC is a labor solidarity group founded by former Central America and Caribbean solidarity organizations (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador [CISPES], Nicaragua Solidarity Network, and Disney-Haiti Justice Campaign). During that period, I conducted an informal survey with UNITE! organizers as well as activists in prominent community based workers' centers, e.g. the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association (CSWA) and the Workplace Project. Several organizers at independent workers' centers had already worked as organizers for UNITE! As Asians and Latinos, these individuals left the union because they argued that it saw immigrants as dues payers but made no serious efforts to respond to these groups' complex needs and that it was closed to immigrant organizers moving up within the union hierarchy. The CSWA's success in organizing Chinese garment and restaurant workers led UNITE! to emulate the workers' center model.
- 3 In the late 1990s, the CFO began a similar campaign in Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico run by the AFSC Arizona office. This group, called the Maquila Organizing Project (MOP), used similar techniques to successfully win severance payments for workers in a garment shop after it shut down. Comments are based on the author's summer 2000 participation in MOP activities and on a presentation by MOP organizers at a University of Arizona conference on labor in the Americas held in April 2001.
- 4 FIOB and the IRC maintain Web sites that provide information on their goals and activities. Information on the FIOB is available at www.laneta.apc.org/fiob (accessed

17 April 2002). Information on the IRC, including an on-line version of *Borderlines*, can be found at www-irc-online.org (accessed 19 February 2000).

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