Labour and Globalisation
Results and Prospects

Edited by

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8. Labour and NAFTA: Nationalist Reflexes and Transnational Imperatives in North America, 1991–1995

John D. French[1]

The fight against the North American Free Trade Agreement helped to open up a belated public debate, especially among trade unionists, regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the current model of international trade and investment contained in 'free trade' agreements such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, NAFTA, and Mercosur. Although such supranational phenomena seem distant, alien, or alienating to most non-specialists, the common people of today's world cannot afford to ignore the accelerating and largely negative impact that such developments have had on their lives, living standards, and collective and individual rights.

In the early 1990s, the backers of NAFTA hailed this model of market-driven development subordinated to the United States as the path forward for the world's peoples. Having ignored NAFTA's severe limitations, they were taken by surprise when the December 1994 peso meltdown revealed the brutal truth that NAFTA had nothing to do with creating jobs in the US, Canada and Mexico, nor did it improve the living standards of the people of any of the three countries. Instead, the speculative bubble underlying the drive to pass NAFTA was revealed as an elaborate hoax; the predictable outcome has been a devastating assault on the well-being of Mexican citizens and, to a lesser extent, those of the US and Canada.

Like all great public controversies, the NAFTA debate had its defining phrases and images that synthesised collective fears and embodied them in concise form. Most US citizens no doubt remember Ross Perot's famous 'sucking sound to the South' as jobs left the US for Mexico. Far fewer, however, are likely to recall its equally pithy Mexican counterpart: the 'giant gulping sound to the North' as the US gobbles up Mexico. It is useful to deconstruct these two very different 'soundbites' because these representations of self and other, when read against each other, do in fact reveal a great deal about both societies (Kingsolver, 2001). Perot's graphic 'sucking' image is about jobs as the lifeblood of the nation and their loss, it is suggested, is a slow process that gradually weakens the victim. The image also suggests that there is a perpetrator, such as a vampire or a blood-sucking leech – a sneaky opponent who is both dishonest and indirect.

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[1] This chapter originated in a 1991–1995 research project co-directed with labour economist Russell E. Smith. Entitled 'Labor, Free Trade, and Economic Integration in the Americas: National Labor Union Responses to a Transnational World', the project was hemispheric in scope and covered both the tri-national NAFTA and Mercosur, which brings together Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay. Placing the trade union movement at the centre of analysis, it examined both the obstacles to and the prospects for labour transnationalism in today's world. See the 1995 special issue of *Latin American Labor News* (12–13) for a report on the conference's deliberations, and abstracts and excerpts from the papers and briefing books.

The Mexican image of 'gulping' is equally vivid and negative, of course, but suggests a quite different threat: that of being swallowed whole by something or someone larger than oneself. The image of being swallowed is more immediate than the sucking image: it happens in an instant (1 January 1994 perhaps) and then you find yourself inside someone or something else, still largely whole, but now subject to disaggregating, dissolving assault by digestive juices. 'Gulping' also suggests a gross slob who swallows meat and potatoes whole – probably without even noticing what he has eaten, oblivious to what is happening.

It is significant that these very different images of victimhood clearly work in tandem with each other, and that they so aptly capture aspects of the national psychology of the two societies. Unfortunately, the real-world problems captured in these soundbites are not merely discursive constructions. Both images of threat and bodily harm have come true over the decade since the meltdown of the Mexican economy. Not only has it produced job losses in Mexico but it has accelerated job losses in the US, in addition to hastening the further denationalisation of the Mexican economy and loss of national sovereignty on the Mexican side of the border.

So in the end, NAFTA has proven to be far from the 'win–win' cooperative agreement suggested by its US, Mexican and Canadian proponents. Instead, we find that a 'sucking gulping' sound best captures the negative effects that are in store for the common people of all three societies. Let us end this deconstructive exercise with one final observation: the power of these images is testimony to the reality of national identity and difference. At the same time, the people of these very different societies are not going to arrive at freedom until they clearly understand that the 'sucking gulping' sounds are two sides of a single threat, one that does not originate with the 'other' people or nation. Rather, the blood-sucker and the gross gulper represent the worst elements of both societies: the beneficiaries of a system that is making real today the worst fears of the common people of both NAFTA North (the US and Canada) and NAFTA South (Mexico).

This paper is divided into three parts. It begins with a discussion of NAFTA and the process of 'silent integration' in North America before turning to NAFTA and the prospects for labour transnationalism, primarily in North America. It ends with some broader global reflections on the path ahead and mastering the transnational challenge.

NAFTA and the 'silent integration' of peoples and economies in North America

NAFTA, which came into effect on 1 January 1994, represents a high point in a century-long trend towards increasing economic integration between Mexico, Canada and the US. Although NAFTA itself was new, the agreement can only be understood in the light of an ongoing process of 'silent integration' involving long-term flows of trade, investment and population within North America. In all three countries, the dynamic expansion of US capitalism since the late nineteenth century gave rise to democratic and class struggles in which the working class and its trade unions played a major role – with Mexico taking pride of place as the site of the twentieth century's first great popular revolution in 1910.

Yet the parallel struggles between the workers of Canada, Mexico and the US and their common, as well as conflicting, interests have long been neglected. To the north, one can point to a history of bi-national trade union structures which brought together Canadian and US citizens, though by no means without tension. In the US, Mexicans and Mexican–Americans have made important contributions to, and have benefited from, the success of labour organisation since the 1930s despite an earlier history of discrimination and racist abuse in many unions. Moreover, the US trade union movement has provided support at key points for trade union movements and progressive causes: in Canada during the 1930s, and in Mexico before and during the revolution, and again, in solidarity with the government of Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s.

Yet the acceleration of capital mobility within North America, and the further integration of its economies (but not peoples) through NAFTA, represents a fundamental challenge to the working- and middle-class people, both organised and unorganised, of all three countries. As we contemplate the ties that increasingly bind peoples together, we should keep in mind the following advice – equally relevant to Canada as to Mexico – offered in 1916 by Samuel Gompers, then president of the American Federation of Labor:

> Those who know and understand the force of the industrial ties that unite Mexico and the United States know that there is no boundary line between the industrial problems of the workers of the two countries. This is not only because of the overlapping of the interests of the employers of the two countries but because of the intermingling and blending of the workers of the two countries. . . There must be understanding and cooperation between the workers of Mexico and the United States, in order that neither may permit themselves to be used for the undoing of all.[2]

Unfortunately, the history of solidarity between the working peoples of North America, with its high and low points, has to date proven shallow and intermittent when compared to secular trends in investment and trade. Most of all, it is inadequate to the challenges facing all three peoples at the beginning of the third millennium.

My four central propositions are that NAFTA was not inevitable in origin; that it was not the only path to integration; that it represents a flawed and dangerous form of integration; and that it points inevitably towards social and political conflict in the future within and between the three societies.

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[2] Gompers made this point in a 1916 discussion of an up-coming Mexican–US labour conference (Levenstein, 1971: 36–37).

NAFTA was not inevitable but conjunctural in origin

As we look at a post-NAFTA North America, it is important to emphasise that the creation of a common 'economic constitution for North America' was not the inevitable result of the creation of a shared North American economic space. Despite the overwhelming dependence of Canada and Mexico upon the US, many earlier governments, social movements, and political actors – especially labour – had long struggled to win greater national autonomy vis-à-vis their more powerful neighbour. This struggle took an especially dramatic turn in Mexico. Facing a US-backed dictatorial regime at the turn of the century, the country's fight for sovereignty and independence was marked by tragic episodes during the Mexican Revolution as well as by fundamental turning points of national affirmation, such as Mexico's 1938 expropriation of US and British oil companies. In the case of Canada, the push for national autonomy and the drive to limit US economic control were especially marked from the late 1950s through the 1970s.

Given such nationalist aspirations, why did the leaders of both countries come to accept forms of economic integration with the US in the late 1980s that they would have rejected five years earlier? First, we must review the immediate precursors to NAFTA in the mid-1980s. Devastated by the debt crisis and ravaged by the debt-fuelled austerity, Mexico's weakened rulers opted for a process of structural adjustment and economic opening that led Mexico to join the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1986 – although the country had refused to join six years earlier. Because of their countries' uniquely trade-dependent economies, Canadian and Mexican business people and politicians had come to view closer ties to the US, in the second half of the 1980s, as a defensive move in the face of protectionist tendencies within the United States and Europe. This led Canada's conservative Tory party, in late 1987, to enter into discussions with the US for a proposed Canadian–US Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which was finally enacted by the minority Tory government that emerged from the 1988 elections.

With both the Mexican entry into GATT and the Canada–US FTA, one saw the effects of a brutal reordering of international power relations during the 1980s as weaker powers lost the manoeuvrability they had gained during the depth of the crisis of US hegemony in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, the conservative crusade symbolised by Reagan and Thatcher brought into play political and ideological factors with broad transnational appeal to the upper classes while their opponents were reeling and in disarray.

By June 1990, when Presidents George Bush and Carlos Salinas first proposed a Mexican–US free trade agreement, later joined by Canada in February 1991, the international situation had shifted radically with the attenuation and eventual elimination of the Soviet bloc. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the international order lost its structuring principle, and divisions within the West gained greater salience, with a new, more open expression of rivalry and conflict over trade and investment.

Indeed, it seemed in early 1990 as if the new post-Cold War international order was moving in the direction of regional power blocs. The announcement of the Mexican–US FTA in early June 1990 was followed later that month by President Bush's proposal for a Western-hemisphere FTA – the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative, or EAI, as it was called. Within this context, Mexico's new president Carlos Salinas believed that advantages for Mexico could be gained by formalising the country's dependence upon the US in a manner analogous to Canada.

In both countries, and especially in Canada, the turn towards de jure and not just de facto integration with the US economy produced misgivings and at times controversy. The response of Prime Minister Mulroney and President Salinas was that if Canada and Mexico were to defend their national interests effectively, they needed a less rigid and more 'modern' vision of sovereignty based on the allegedly more solid economic foundation offered by closer ties with the United States.

NAFTA also reflected a departure for the US which now sought, with renewed energy, to tighten further its links with its immediate neighbours and eventually the Western hemisphere. Both NAFTA and the EAI reflected the US desire to marshal its forces in the face of increasing international competition for influence and power. Responding to a fear of its own relative decline in world power, US leaders saw NAFTA as both a partial defence against the consolidation of rival Western European and Japanese trade blocs and a useful bargaining strategy designed to gain leverage in the then stalled Uruguay round of negotiations in the GATT. Through the Canada–US FTA and NAFTA, US government and business officials successfully drew Mexico and Canada into a new stage of deeper and more formal subordination as all too junior partners under US hegemony.

NAFTA was not the only path to continental integration

There were multiple ways in which North American economic and social relationships could have been formalised. Although NAFTA was portrayed by its proponents as the sole method of continental integration, the existing trade agreement represented but one of several possible paths facing the people of North America. Indeed, even the term 'free trade agreement' was a misnomer for the 2,000-page treaty, since trade barriers had already been largely dropped – by Mexico unilaterally and by Canada through the Canada–US FTA of 1989. As a legally binding international agreement, NAFTA aimed for far more ambitious objectives than mere free trade, namely to establish a common regime for investment, trade and finance in line with the US market-driven model of economic, social and political development. More an investment than a trading agreement, NAFTA codified a set of rules, especially in Mexico and Canada, that liberalised access for foreign financial, service, agricultural and industrial investors and producers – primarily to the benefit of US-based capital (even prior to the US takeover of Mexico's economic management in the aftermath of the peso crisis).

In particular, NAFTA established firm guarantees of the inviolability of foreign investments and served to 'lock in' concessions made by weak governments in Canada and Mexico. In doing so, NAFTA offered a type of investors' 'insurance policy' that raised the price to be paid by any future Canadian or Mexican government that departs from the conservative economic policy-making model of the Reagan–Bush era. In return, producers in Mexico and Canada received improved – but by no means absolute – access to the US market through the neutralisation of various US trade barriers and instruments.

NAFTA is a flawed and dangerous agreement that integrates capital but not peoples

Unlike the European Union, NAFTA does not in fact integrate markets per se since it makes no provision for freer mobility of labour within North America. From the very outset, the US government resisted all efforts to bring the reality of labour market integration between Mexico and the US into the negotiations. Moreover, the agreement's supporters worsened the situation by selling NAFTA dishonestly as a solution to the 'evil' of Mexican immigration to the United States: 'create jobs there so they won't come here'.

The poisonous fruits of this pernicious aspect of the NAFTA campaign in the United States could be seen in the 1994 passage of the anti-immigrant Proposition 187 in California. This anti-foreign hysteria and bigotry, now intensified by the events of 9/11, have led to further charges in the US that Mexicans are 'stealing our jobs' as the flow of Mexican-based MNC production, and of Mexican workers, has increased.

Again, in contrast to the EU vision of creating 'Europeans', NAFTA provides for the creation of no common institutions, whether governmental or civic. Instead, NAFTA limits itself to establishing a unified set of rules favourable to powerful economic actors such as banks and transnational corporations – hardly a broad or inclusive basis upon which to build a future for the peoples of the three countries. In this regard, the agreement's long-term consequence is to restrict the ability of all three governments to regulate and direct investment in the future, thus limiting their ability to use active government intervention to contain or limit the damaging effects of current trends.

By eliminating restrictions on capital, NAFTA fulfils the classical objectives of nineteenth-century English liberalism. 'By free trade,' Karl Marx wrote in 1852, 'they mean the unfettered movement of capital: freed from all political, national, and religious shackles . . . There are, in short, not to be tolerated any political or social restrictions, regulations, or monopolies, unless they proceed from "the eternal laws of political economy", that is, from the conditions under which capital produces and distributes' (Marx, 1852).

NAFTA's socio-political underpinnings point inevitably towards social and political conflict in the future within and between the three societies

Beyond the historical quest for lessened restraints on the investment of capital, the immediate domestic political context for the negotiation of NAFTA was the crisis period of the late 1970s and early 1980s. During those years, the 'golden age' of post-World War II capitalist development came to a close in each of the three countries and with it came a crisis in the social and political alliances between labour, the state and capital. In all three countries, the structural weakening of organised labour and the mass impact of deteriorating economic conditions, especially in the 1980s, made feasible a more aggressive drive to use a supranational discipline – 'free trade' and 'global competitiveness' – to reshape the internal alignment of class, sectoral and regional forces. For Canada and Mexico, this meant a shift away from a weak, but nonetheless real, emphasis on enhancing autonomy vis-à-vis the United States.

In each of the three societies there were popular explosions and protests in response to this deepening process of 'silent integration' and its accompanying domestic crises: the Cuáhtemoc Cárdenas 'surprise' in the 1988 Mexican presidential elections; the Canadian–US FTA 'surprise' that dominated the bitterly fought national parliamentary elections in Canada in 1988; and the NAFTA 'surprise' in the US from the Fast Track debate in 1991 to the final vote in late 1993. In each country, new coalitional forms were pioneered that succeeded in connecting to mass sentiments in ways that surprised political pundits and analysts. In all three cases, organised labour and the working classes played fundamental roles.

These popular mobilisations, it should be emphasised, took place in response to the cumulative impact of similar processes: downward economic pressure, deteriorating living and working conditions, and increased anxiety and uncertainty – all of which occurred within the context of a shared crisis in inherited socio-political assumptions and institutions. Unfortunately, the three insurgencies occurred in a staggered manner restricted to each national space and its respective political arena. Although a byproduct of broader North American and global trends, these popular struggles did not yet coincide in time or focus (Ayres, 1998). The inability of these popular insurgencies to unite and act together on a tri-national basis stands in marked contrast to those forces at the top of the three societies who were enacting their common agenda for the region.

The challenge is clear: for working- and middle-class people to win upcoming battles it is essential that a true tri-national dialogue be established that can unify the peoples of the three countries. The objective must be a common platform for the continental integration of peoples rather than just capital: one that is social and not anti-social in nature, one that unites rather than divides, and one that improves people's lives rather than making them worse.

NAFTA and the prospects for labour transnationalism

NAFTA hit the US labour movement at the end of a decade and a half marked by massive assaults on its membership, power and even legitimacy within the US. The NAFTA issue also dates from the end of the Cold War, which at one stroke weakened the ideological imperatives of anti-communism and anti-radicalism that had so long informed the international policies of the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL–CIO).

The recent past has also brought home to US trade unionists that the international arena has a direct connection with the welfare and well-being of its members. The result of these two trends has been a period of transition for US labour, which is slowly shedding its previous hidebound conservatism in international affairs. As part of this process, a new internationalism has come to characterise the trade union movement in the US, a country where such a transnational emphasis has been weak in the past. As then AFL–CIO president Lane Kirkland admonished convention delegates, 'You can't be a [real] trade unionist unless you are an internationalist'.[3]

Kirkland has even joined his Latin American counterparts in denouncing current proposals for Western-hemisphere economic integration as an initiative by 'the capitalists of North America' that makes it 'all the more evident that the wage earners of these countries must also unite for their common protection and betterment'.[4] Kirkland's point was echoed by the Venezuelan president of the InterAmerican Trade Secretariat for textile workers, who toured the US in March 1992. The increasing 'union of capital,' he argued, 'demanded an ever stronger opposing organisation of Inter-American labor to protect the working people of the western hemisphere'.[5]

Yet it was NAFTA that challenged the North American labour movement in the clearest and most direct manner. The realisation that a 'go-it-alone' strategy can never succeed has prompted an encouraging increase in solidarity activities and contacts between North American and Mexican labour activists since the mid-1980s. As border visits have become increasingly common, US trade unionists have realised that efforts 'to bring about a better understanding between the workers of the US and Mexico' require the establishment of 'a more reciprocal and cooperative intercourse' than has been true in the past. Avowing a goal of unionism without borders, one group has even proposed mutual acceptance of union cards as well as cross-border sympathy strikes in order to secure 'economic, political, and social improvements' for workers in the two countries.[6]

At the same time, there have also been efforts – spearheaded by the Teamsters union under its reformist president at the time, Ron Carey – to give an action-oriented grassroots character to such initiatives. Some Ford locals in the US, for example, joined their Mexican counterparts in Cuatitlán to commemorate the anniversary of the 1990 murder of a dissident Ford worker killed by thugs acting on behalf of the government, its favoured union and the enterprise. 'That US businessmen are deeply involved in this latest attack on the rights of Mexican workers is not seriously questioned,' commented one UAW official, who went on to argue that attacks on 'the rights and liberties and hopes of Mexican wage-earners' were a direct threat to the interests of Ford workers in the United States.[7]

As one top Teamsters' official puts it, North American workers must realise that they have a direct stake in saying 'No to NAFTA' and its backers, whatever their nationality. 'American capitalists support Salinas,' he argued, precisely because 'they are looking to Mexican cheap labour to help them break the back of organised labour in the United States and Canada, by transporting a part of their capital to Mexico'.[8] Or as another US labour leader argued, 'Deny Mexicans the right to strike and . . . the opportunity of a fair and just wage, [and] . . . the mines, mills, and oil wells of America can well be closed while Mexican products of cheap labour may be freely dumped into the markets of the United States'.[9]

US labour has even begun to discuss possible alternative formulas for socially responsible free trade regimes. Speaking on behalf of the AFL–CIO, the former secretary treasurer Tom Donahue advanced proposals designed to defend US jobs while helping the peoples of Latin America. He proposed government credits for the purchase of US-manufactured goods in the region, combined with a practical social programme designed 'to raise the standard of living in Latin America'. Increasing Latin American purchasing power, he went on, would also help make up, in part, for the markets that the US has lost in the last two decades to rivals such as Japan and Germany.[10] Indeed, Donahue's proposal – which included debt relief – in many ways paralleled the logic of the proposed 'Continental Development and Trade Initiative' put forward by Mexican opposition leader Cuáhtemoc Cárdenas in early 1991 – a proposal that was all but formally endorsed when the AFL–CIO's Industrial Union Department hosted Cárdenas in September 1991.

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[3] To illustrate the continuities in the place and discourse of labour within North America long before as well as after NAFTA, I have placed quotations from earlier decades in the mouths of contemporary labour leaders in characterising their response to NAFTA. The quotation attributed here to Lane Kirkland was originally from a speech by his immediate predecessor George Meaney at the 1961 AFL–CIO national convention (Levenstein, 1971: 230).

[4] The quotation attributed here to Lane Kirkland is paraphrased from the 1917 Conference Committee Manifesto of the Pan American Federation of Labor (Snow, 1964: 29).

[5] The quotation attributed here to the Venezuelan trade unionist José Ramírez is paraphrased from a 1915 statement by Puerto Rican labour leader Santiago Iglesias (Snow, 1964: 29).

[6] The quotation attributed here to a US labour fact-finding mission is from the official statement issued by an AFL commission dispatched to Mexico in 1918 (Snow, 1964: 37).

[7] The quotation attributed here to a leader of the United Auto Workers is paraphrased from Gomper's 1919 response to an anti-labour threat by the Mexican President Venustiano Carranza (Levenstein, 1971: 100).

[8] The quotation attributed here to a Teamster official is paraphrased from a famous 1911 book, *Barbarous Mexico*, by US socialist John Kenneth Turner, which attacked Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz (Foner, 1989: 105).

[9] The quotation attributed here to a US labour leader is another paraphrase from Gomper's 1919 response to Carranza (Levenstein, 1971: 100).

[10] The quotation attributed here to AFL–CIO secretary treasurer Tom Donahue is from a speech by CIO president John L. Lewis to the 1939 convention of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (Levenstein, 1971: 169).

At this point, I would like to turn, however briefly, to Mexican labour responses to NAFTA. Not surprisingly, opposition to NAFTA was strongest among leftist labour leaders who saw NAFTA as a scheme to despoil both US and Mexican workers to the benefit of multinational capital. In the words of Berta Luján of the Frente Autentico de Trabajo (FAT), 'the great corporations voraciously exploiting the workers of the world constitute the common adversaries' of the workers of both the Mexico and the US.[11]

Unlike his dissident Mexican counterparts, Fidel Velásquez, the then 94-year-old president of the dominant pro-government Confederación de Trabajadores de México, supported NAFTA not only as a source of needed jobs for Mexicans, but as part of labour's duty to the nation. Foreign affairs, however interesting, he explained, are necessarily secondary for the union movement, whose role in this area is to maintain itself united behind President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.[12] Having once spoken with warmth of a special relationship with the AFL–CIO, Velásquez and his fellow CTM leaders now denounced what they saw as the patronising and arrogant attitudes of their North American counterparts who, along with their Latin American 'satellites', had criticised the CTM's stance on NAFTA.[13]

A quite distinct pro-NAFTA line was sounded by Francisco Hernández Juarez, president of the Mexican Telephone Workers' Union. A self-styled labour moderniser, Hernández Juarez was close to President Salinas and made no secret of his desire to head the Mexican labour movement in the future. Unlike Velásquez, however, he justified the country's economic opening as a necessary consequence of the failure of Mexico's previous development model based on Import Substitution Industrialisation (ISI).[14] As he repeatedly emphasised, today's world demonstrates that there is, in fact, 'a direct correlation between domestic prosperity and foreign trade'. At the same time, Hernández Juarez emphasised that 'the basic problem of Mexico is not that of the distribution of wealth . . . but rather of low productivity', and that economic growth can only be 'achieved by an intelligent coordination of the three factors that produce wealth: state, capital, and labour'.[15]

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[11] The quotation attributed here to Berta Luján of the FAT is from a 1939 speech by CIO president John L. Lewis when he addressed the founding meeting of the Confederación de Trabajadores de América Latina in Mexico City (Levenstein, 1971: 158).

[12] The quotation attributed here to the CTM's eternal leader Fidel Velásquez is actually from one of his speeches in the early 1960s (Levenstein, 1971: 223–24).

[13] The sentiments attributed here to Fidel Velásquez are from two of his speeches in the 1950s. The first is from the late 1950s, after he had reconciled with the US-dominated Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajo (ORIT). The latter hostile comment is from 1951 when he angrily denounced ORIT and the North Americans for excluding the Peronist Argentine Confederación General de Trabajo from a hemispheric trade union conference, despite the promises they had made to him to the contrary (Levenstein, 1971: 197, 221).

[14] The quotation attributed here to Francisco Hernández Juarez, leader of the Mexican telephone workers, is from the late 1940s by the anti-communist CIO leader James Carey of the International Union of Electrical Workers (Kofas, 1992: 293).

Having completed this all too brief and condensed bi-national survey, I must now admit to having played a trick on you, albeit one with a higher purpose. At the outset of this research project in 1992, I began by reading the preliminary materials that I had accumulated on contemporary labour responses to NAFTA in Mexico and the United States. Having grounded myself in contemporary reality, I then plunged into the half dozen books that have explored the relationship between the labour movements of the United States, Mexico, and Latin America during the twentieth century. The experience was eerie because I found that, at the level of discourse and actions, every dimension of the current Mexican/US problematic had been played out before – at least once and very often more than once. Thus the quotations that I used above to summarise the labour discussion of NAFTA were all drawn from the statements made by US and Mexican trade union leaders between 1915 and 1963.

This striking parallelism between past and present leads to a series of nine interrelated observations and conclusions.

1. The issues that working- and middle-class people are facing today in North America and the world as a whole are by no means new or unprecedented.

2. There is a rich but neglected history of transnational labour contact that has much to offer us in terms of both positive and negative examples.

3. We should avoid a rigid juxtaposition between the national and the international. Indeed, I believe that greater analytical clarity would be achieved by replacing the term 'labour internationalism' with the concept of 'labour transnationalism'. In doing so, we can avoid the oversimplification that stems from the use of dichotomous categories – nationalist or internationalist – when examining a labour movement's supranational practice. Moreover, the proposed terminology better captures the reality that a given national labour movement's policies have always been marked by an uneasy coexistence of nationalist and transnationalist responses to a capitalist system that long ago pierced borders and created a global economy.

4. We must avoid the romantic illusion that a pristine labour transnationalism can be found or created that is free of conflict and frank differences of interest and perspective. If we do not do so, we will be left to conclude, at the end of each episode or invocation of the concept, that labour transnationalism is merely a vain illusion, an impossibility. In this regard, the author of a fine 1971 history of relations between US and Mexican labour unions has spoken quite rightly about 'the myth of international labor solidarity'. 'The necessity for international labor cooperation,' Harvey Levenstein argued, was long accepted on both sides of the border 'as a given, and therefore not even mentioned, or [else was] relegated to the realm

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[15] The quotation attributed here to Hernández Juarez is from US trade union leader H. W. Fraser, the chairman of the Railway Labor Executive's Association of the United States, speaking in 1948 (Kofas, 1992: 323).

of platitudinous oratory. This is understandable,' he went on, 'for the ideal itself, *separated from specific interests*, becomes almost inoperative' (emphasis added). When no interests are at stake, he concludes, 'the demands of the [internationalist] ideal are easily satisfied by ritual exchanges of greetings and by membership in powerless international labor organisations' (Levenstein, 1971: 5–6).

5. To lay the groundwork for future struggles on the transnational plane, we must also recognise the limitations of labour's current approaches to international mobilisation, which leave even many of its practitioners doubtful and frustrated. We cannot progress until we recognise, in the words of Mike Press in 1989, that the world's national labour movements have long pursued a 'narrow sectional approach to trade union internationalism' that is even less adequate during the era of unchallenged capitalist power that has followed the collapse of the communist world between 1989 and 1991.[16] In this regard, we should listen to individuals such as Burton Bendiner, who served as an official of the International Metalworkers' Federation, the most active of all of the international trade union secretariats. 'While international trade union conferences to discuss world economic problems are taking place with increasing regularity,' he observed in 1989, 'there is generally a wide gap between the convening of these meetings and meaningful international action taken as a result.' While Bendiner notes an 'impressive increase in cooperation' among unions 'on a world-wide scale', he observes with sober realism that 'it is an inescapable conclusion that little or no progress has been made' towards achieving some of labour's more ambitious international objectives (Bendiner, 1987: 182, 179, 151).

6. Differences in national interests among workers must be acknowledged if they are to be conciliated in common pursuit of agreed-upon objectives. As part of the larger briefing book from which this chapter is drawn, I examined, with the assistance of my collaborators Jeff Cowie and Scott Littlehale, how workers' interests differ in the three countries while working to identify those elements that could provide the basis for a common transnational platform of struggle. Indeed, we spent a great deal of time examining such tri-national initiatives, even though they were largely unsuccessful and usually marginal in relation to the mainstream of labour and politics in the three countries.[17] We called for the recognition of differences in interests between workers because, if divergences are never admitted, the result is that one party, always the strongest, simply imperially asserts its 'own interests' as the 'common interests' of all. Such power-plays by the strong, in which so-called 'universal' interests are imposed by fiat, reproduce patterns of great power domination that are by no means alien to the transnational relations between unions.[18] Such unilateralism constitutes a major obstacle to transnational solidarity and serves to alienate trade unionists from the weaker countries, who are often sensitive to national slights. This danger is all the more significant in the case of Mexico and the US, given a history of violent conflict, racial hostility, discrimination and insensitivity between the strong and the weak – practices to which the US labour movement has not been immune.

7. NAFTA is a North–South economic integration agreement and, as such, poses especially difficult and thorny issues for the creation of tri-national labour solidarity – especially when the issue is defined as a conflict over jobs. Too little attention has been paid to what makes NAFTA unique in comparison with other free trade and integration schemes. On the one hand, there are North–North integration pacts such as the Canada–US FTA or the European Union prior to its expansion to Eastern Europe; on the other hand, there are South–South agreements, of which the most notable is Mercosur. NAFTA is unprecedented precisely because this North–South free trade zone is marked by disparities of wealth and power far larger than those to be found in other cases.

Returning to Bendiner, we find a very frank discussion of precisely those issues – 'stealing jobs' and 'defending jobs' – that came to define the controversy over the North American Free Trade Agreement between NAFTA North (the United States and Canada) and NAFTA South (Mexico). Labour attitudes towards capital mobility in the developing world, Bendiner observes, necessarily differ from the position held by unions in the developed world. Indeed, Bendiner admits that this 'conflict of interest among trade unions in different countries, [even] within the same industry', is 'not the least' of the roadblocks to concerted world labour action (Bendiner, 1987: 179, 151). As Bendiner observes, trade unions in the Western industrialised nations have commonly reacted to capital mobility through a 'campaign for protectionism through tariffs on imports and products manufactured abroad'. Secondarily, and with 'very limited success', they have campaigned to 'convert the labour organisations in some low-wage areas into a more efficient force for the raising of standards in pay and working conditions, which might at the same time eventually discourage the MNCs' flight to these very countries'. As for the developing world, Bendiner notes that their trade unions 'necessarily have different priorities . . . [and may] make concessions . . . in order to entice multinational corporations away from high-cost production areas . . . [because] their top priority [is] to reduce . . . massive unemployment by importing jobs'. Yet Bendiner is careful, even here, to draw a nuanced picture that avoids automatically picturing such labour organisations as governments' or employers' stooges (Bendiner, 1987: 187, 168).

8. On an issue such as NAFTA, a labour movement's discourse should be framed with an eye to the larger transnational context. Although a US trade unionist's 'domestic' message will never play as well in Mexico City as it does in Peoria, Illinois, he or she should at least take care that the message does not bomb in Mexico City, producing detrimental effects that undermine prospects for cross-border solidarity in the future (Cowie, 1997). This warning is aimed especially at the United States, where the public debate on NAFTA was characterised by an obsession with numbers

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[16] Press, 1989: 43. For an assessment of the trajectory of the ideological crisis of labour and the left in both a regional and global context, see French, 2000; 2002.

[17] French, Cowie and Littlehale, 1995. See also the project's related publications about a South/South integration scheme: Smith and Healey, 1994a; 1994b. Available for purchase from http://www.duke.edu/web/las/papers.html.

[18] For a fine example of clashing national interests within the transnational labour sphere, see Perosa, 1995.

of hypothetical 'jobs to be lost' versus 'jobs to be gained' in the event of NAFTA's passage. The US labour movement's overwhelming reliance on such 'NAFTA math', as we came to call it, may have been understandable and even relatively successful as a tactic in domestic politics. However, my collaborators and I concluded that the 'jobs body count' approach, which we deemed diversionary, was far too easily read by the mass US audience as 'Mexicans are stealing our jobs' – the charge that was the mainstay of the right-wing anti-NAFTA opposition led by Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan. While fear of job loss had to be central to the fight against NAFTA, most US trade unionists embraced it as a strategy, not merely a tactic. Reflecting deeply ingrained nationalist reflexes and 'big power' self-centredness, the zero-sum jobs discourse of the anti-NAFTA campaign worked against prospects for establishing transnational labour unity with NAFTA South in the future.[19]

The perverse logic of basing strategy on the 'jobs gambit' can be seen when we look from the other side of the border. On what grounds could a US trade unionist criticise his or her Mexican trade union counterparts who overwhelmingly supported NAFTA? Given that the Mexicans follow the same nationalist logic of 'jobs' as their US counterparts, it is only right and proper that they hail an agreement that brings jobs to the far poorer and more desperate Mexican workers. In truth, the majority of the US and Mexican labour movements operated solely on the national terrain that was most comfortable and familiar to them, and decided their courses of action exclusively in relationship to a domestic calculus of gains and losses. They were, in truth, unable to conceptualise their actions in any consistent way on a transnational basis.

9. To meet the challenges of the future, we must realise that, first, there can be no purely national answers to the problems of working people today in any country, North or South, and second, that there are likewise no purely *international* solutions. The challenge lies in adding a stronger transnational dimension to labour's national strategies.

The path ahead: mastering the transnational challenge

However clear the lines of class may be within a given national society, such domestic conflicts operate within a hierarchical and profoundly unequal global world order, to which most workers and many trade unionists, especially in the OECD countries, are oblivious and which unionists in the South feel powerless to affect. This division reproduces, in part, the classic debate within the world labour movement in the first half of the twentieth century: what should the relationship be between working-class movements in the metropolis and the workers and peoples of the colonised and dependent countries? The eventual liquidation of the formal colonial system, in the aftermath of World War II, suggests that progress can be

made – as in today's world – but only with a maximum of honesty and tough-minded thinking on the part of labour and its allies.

It is a truism today that the international economy is no longer neatly segregated from the domestic affairs of workers in their respective nation states – even in the developed world. The irony is well captured in a 1975 article on MNCs by Nat Weinberg of the US United Auto Workers' Union. He begins with a quotation from a British trade union leader in 1970 who recalls, with considerable irony, the simpler world of the mid-1950s.

> I remember about 15 years ago one of our local officials negotiating with Phillips demanding higher wages for the technicians inside the British company. The management replied by saying, 'You [already have] higher wages than those paid in Holland', and the reply our official gave was, 'Well, it is a bloody good job your Head Office is not in Hong Kong or you would be offering bowls of rice.' (Weinberg, 1975: 91)

Fifty years later, the story has acquired additional layers of meaning, even for the workers in Hong Kong who now lose jobs to still poorer Asian countries. The point, as Weinberg notes, is clear:

> The aim of employers everywhere, nationally or internationally, is to minimise labor costs and to extract the maximum possible in productivity and profit from the workers they employ. Despite frequently heard lip-service to the contrary, workers are treated not as human beings who are ends in themselves, but as mere instruments to be bought as cheaply as possible, to be used with ruthless efficiency and to be discarded when no longer needed. (Weinberg, 1975: 91)

The history of labour in all countries is the story of the workers' resistance to such treatment and the lessons to be learned from that struggle.

The same drive that undercuts workers in England to the 'benefit' of workers in Hong Kong brings with it, as surely as night follows day, the certainty that tomorrow the loser will be in Hong Kong. Uncurbed, this drive imperils the future of all in a world of violent inequalities in wages and living standards. A future – of a sort – is gained in Mexico today because a worker in the electronics industry there must work 416 hours in order to purchase a refrigerator, unlike his or her more highly paid US neighbour for whom 28 hours suffice. Yet how secure is that future when, looming behind both, lies the reality that 1,069 hours are required in still poorer India (Bendiner, 1987: 184–85)?

The immensity of this gap within today's world can be seen with graphic, even frightening clarity in the extraordinary 1993 book by Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado, *Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age*, published in a luxurious edition by the Aperture Foundation in New York, which brings together beautiful and moving photographs of manual labour throughout the entire world (Salgado, 1993). Organised not by country but by product, the book covers everything from the most modern automated factory production in France to the breathtakingly primitive, purely manual production in the ship-breaking industry in Bangladesh. When you see Indian women building canals entirely by hand, basket by basket, you cannot see even Latin American poverty in the same light.

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[19] See 'The Politics of Jobs in the United States: The Limits of NAFTA Math', by Scott Littlehale as well as Chapter 3's examination of the strategy adopted by the US labour movement and its allies of convenience such as Pat Buchanan (French, Cowie and Littlehale, 1995: 28–54, 55–119).

Yet Salgado's book is to be hailed for something else as well, something that is vital if we are to overcome current defeatist intellectual trends which have made a fetish of 'difference', whether originating in nationality, race, religion or gender. Salgado's book is a manifesto that reveals, even revels, in difference, but it does so without absolutising or reifying it. Instead, Salgado sketches out a vision of the common humanity of all working people across boundaries of gender, race, nationality, culture, religion and politics.

Sebastião Salgado's book is a welcome call to arms. The challenge before us is to link the fight for a decent life for South Dakota slaughterhouse workers with that of autoworkers in Kazakhstan or gold-diggers in Serra Pelada in Brazil. The direction, I believe, is clear and new only in its urgency in today's world: the struggle for a more just domestic social order in all countries is inseparable from the fight for a new international economic order based on egalitarian principles, consciously applied through the cooperation of humankind everywhere.

Such an objective will not come without titanic struggles. As we face the task, we should recall the words of the nineteenth-century African-American leader Frederick Douglass, born a slave, who helped abolish a barbarous system that had prevailed for thousands of years, not just a few centuries, as in the case of capitalism. As Douglass declared,

> The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle. . . If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.[20]

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[20] Frederick Douglass, 'The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies', a speech given at Canandaigua, New York, 3 August 1857. Reprinted in Blassingame (ed.), 1985: 204.

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