Employee Representation in the New World of Work: The Dynamics of Rights, Voice, Performance and Power

“The prospects for convergence and internationalism in the ‘new economy’: Insights from Unite, Union Network International and the United Steelworkers in Canada”

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Abstract

Dramatic technological innovations and the business-led shift towards increasingly competitive market structures have undermined many of the gains made by organized labour in the past century. Economic globalization, and the companion practices of offshoring and outsourcing, has constructed a “new” international division of labour. Having broken free from the constraining regulatory framework that defined much of the post-World War II economic period multinational capital has brokered more favourable conditions that involve, among other things, an undermining of legislated and socially-oriented labour relation regimes. This paper explores the prospects for new labour regulatory models based on the efforts of global unions, federations, and international labour organizations.

The central component of the research is informed by personal open-ended interviews conducted in 2008 and 2009 with senior officials affiliated with the Swiss-based Union Network International (UNI), the International Labour Organisation, the USW, and Unite. Questions primarily focused on organizing efforts and labour standards in the information technology and information technology enabled services sectors. Insights offered by officials within these organizations shed light on the increasing relevance of global framework agreements (GFAs) as a means of regulating the global operation of multinational enterprises. Solidarity between international federations, such as UNI, and national unions is assessed as a necessary means of ensuring an effective implementation of GFAs. Second, union convergence at the national and international level is recognized as an affirmative step towards stemming the tide of union decline, as well as equipping unions with the strength to reconfigure their strategies and adapt to the so-called “new economy”. In this regard Workers Uniting, the trans-Atlantic merger between the USW in North America and UK-based Unites, and UNI are deployed as case studies.

Finally, approaches to organizing adopted by these associations that depart from the traditional union structures and focus on professional and highly skilled workers, are explored in terms of their possibility of building sustainable representative models in industries where union presence is minimal. Together, these three dimensions of the paper contribute to the task of addressing prospects for union renewal and emerging models of representation and regulatory mechanisms determined to address globalization.