

Class, Race and Corporate Power

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 7

2017

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Recommended Citation

Bass, G. Nelson III (2017) "Review: "Building Global Labor Solidarity in a Time of Accelerating Globalization" edited by Kim Scipes.," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 7.
DOI: 10.25148/CRCP.5.1.001675

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol5/iss1/7>

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**Review: "Building Global Labor Solidarity in a Time of Accelerating Globalization"
edited by Kim Scipes.**

Abstract

A review of *Building Global Labor Solidarity in a Time of Accelerating Globalization* edited by Kim Scipes (2016).

Keywords

Global Labor Solidarity, International Labor Solidarity, Social Justice Unionism, Social Movement Unionism

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Review: *Building Global Labor Solidarity in a Time of Accelerating Globalization*
Editor: Kim Scipes
Haymarket Books, 2016

With the specter of a [national “right to work” law](#) hanging over us and a president who routinely invokes ultra-nationalistic rhetoric about reviving the greatness of America via the [repatriation of manufacturing jobs](#), one could be forgiven for momentarily forgetting that there are some 7 billion people in the world today struggling to create an existence for themselves, and very few have the ability to take out a small loan of \$1 million. This mix of xenophobia and nationalism so present in recent elections in the US and Europe, though not historically novel, is bringing out the worst in politicians and elites, and our political reality continues to reflect a world that is “hugely” connected yet tragically unequal.

Against this backdrop, the debate over the best strategies for connecting workers in a common struggle against the forces of neoliberal capitalism continues. As the writers of this volume demonstrate, one of the primary arenas of debate has been about how to move beyond the parochialism of “business unionism” (with a long history in the United States), which views the purpose of labor organizations as fighting for higher wages and stronger benefits for members, usually in legal terms via collective bargaining. Most strongly associated with the Samuel Gompers tradition of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), business unionism has more often than not been packaged with a strong sense of nationalism and basic support for the broad tenets of capitalism. On the other hand, “social justice unionism” or “social movement unionism” looks to combine labor with other struggles for equality and solidarity. Critically, these often include international efforts that reach well beyond bread and butter issues, including anti-sweatshop, anti-racism, and anti-slavery movements as well as environmental campaigns.

Encapsulated in this simplified summary are a host of other questions in need of answer: Can movements based on working-class cross-border solidarity overcome entrenched ideologies of business unionism? How might workers be able to increase efforts toward a more direct form of solidarity when so many large labor centers are dependent upon funding and support from state entities and entrenched political parties? Moreover, what examples and strategies of successful efforts to create solidarity across borders can we look to for inspiration?

A new edited volume by Kim Scipes helps put some of this into a perspective that is well worth considering in an era of Trump and rising nativism. *Building Global Labor Solidarity in a Time of Accelerating Globalization* (2016) is a well-written and pleasantly eclectic mix of some of the brightest and most passionate thinkers today on the subject of *global* labor solidarity. The aim of the manuscript is rather high: to rethink the way in which the working class analyzes and theorizes about the possibilities and pitfalls of creating meaningful solidarity amongst the world’s workers. As Scipes makes clear in his introduction, this is not the first text to tackle the issue of global labor solidarity, however what sets this volume apart is the range of authors included. Graduate students, activists, and scholars are all represented in *Building Global Labor Solidarity* to produce a well-researched and empirically dense book that should be useful both in the classroom and in the hands of organizers and activists.

Born out of a special issue of *Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society*, the volume includes seven authors, and importantly (in the words of the editor) brings in the voices of “non-academics” (David Bacon and Timothy Ryan), as well as “new academics” (Bruno Dobrusin, Jenny Jungehülsing, and Katherine Nastovski). The result feels a bit jumbled at times (in fairness, this isn’t meant to be read in one sitting), but when considered as a whole adds some extremely valuable insights into different strategies and ways of conceptualizing solidarity in the 21st century.

Scipes’ introduction nicely dissects the various terms used to describe our era (“globalization”, “neoliberal economics”, etc.) before arguing that what is needed is a reflection on the nature of a “multilayered” globalization.” Moreover, in the first chapter, we see Scipes attempting to tackle the larger subject of this collection. Thus, as he notes with his citations, there is no shortage of writing *about* international labor solidarity, however there has been precious little done to outline a *theory* of global labor solidarity. Scipes argues that specific steps are necessary to build solidarity, and while the first two will be obvious to those familiar with much of the literature, the third lays out the case for appreciating the rest of the volume: abstracting from prior scholarship and historical examples to build a theory of global labor solidarity.

Scipes then builds an impressive primer on our current situation, locating and describing the US tendency towards business unionism and his own expertise in sociological theory to argue convincingly for understanding power networks that place the US in a position of *empire*. This is a key point, as Scipes (borrowing heavily from both Jan Nederveen Pieterse and David Harvey) moves to elaborate on the idea of a multilayered imperialism, which can ideally only be pushed back against using multiple levels of solidarity. Refining Peter Watermans “Thirteen Propositions”, Scipes puts forth an argument for three levels of “global” labor solidarity and then gives nine examples of how these multiple levels can be practically analyzed in a variety of case studies with citations (the references alone here make this collection worthy of perusal).

The rest of the collection essentially expands on this lead, examining specific case studies of international solidarity in a variety of settings and time periods. Katherine Nastovski argues that the worker-to-worker model of labor solidarity by Canadian workers gave space and agency to international labor solidarity, often at odds with the dominant impulses of the Canadian Labour Congress’s (CLC) International Department. Based on interviews with activists, Nastovski puts this model forth as a “counter-hegemonic” practice with transformative potential. Though she argues this model has limitation (for example the funding of NGOs by the state, deindustrialization, etc.), she also makes a strong case for the usefulness of the worker-to-worker model during the 70s and 80s in the Canadian context.

Also based on extensive interviews, Jenny Jungehülsing makes an intriguing case for considering the way in which the flow of workers across borders might increase the “felt solidarity” by union members in both countries. This practical consideration is worth considering, as it presents another way in which unionized workers can spread labor solidarity across borders at the grassroots level. Jungehülsing’s analysis focuses on Mexican and Salvadoran union members and opens the door to further research on the subject. David Bacon adds a chapter which fits nicely with Jungehülsing’s piece, adding to this conceptual puzzle by focusing on US-Mexican cross-border solidarity both during the Cold War and importantly surrounding the

implementation of NAFTA. These two articles, though one is framed in a specific historical context while the other utilizes more current interviews, are provocative when read together and indicate a new avenue for further research and organizing possibilities.

Bruno Dobrusin analyzes two examples of labor solidarity within Latin America: the battle over the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and resistance to the “Commodities Consensus” development model. Dobrusin argues for a model of social justice unionism which brings local groups together via coordination at the continental level, and puts forth a political demand based on a focused critique of existing development models. Also putting forth an account based on a successful model of organizing in a highly fragmented (and repressive) society, Scipes addresses lessons to be gleaned from the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) Labor Center of the Philippines.

In the final chapter of the collection, Michael Zweig gives a brief overview of the transition of AFL-CIO policies in the US following the election of the “New Voices” slate in 1995, and how the Federations outlook towards internationalism has followed suit. Specifically, Zweig argues that the impressive US Labor Against the War (USLAW) campaign (of which he continues to play an important role) provides a model for the nucleus of a new brand of international labor solidarity. Though, in this reviewer's opinion, Zweig's overview of the evolution of AFL-CIO foreign policy is a bit optimistic (he has a footnote concerning the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center and the short-lived 2002 coup in Venezuela), the discussion of USLAW and their important role in opposing a wide range of actions in Iraq and how that can be translated into a new culture of global labor solidarity are important and well taken.

However, perhaps the most interesting piece in the collection is by Timothy Ryan, who brings his own experiences working for the AFL-CIOs Solidarity Center (ACILS) to the volume. Ryan, currently the Asia Regional Program Director for the ACILS, describes the evolution of Bangladeshi unions (historically adjuncts of the two major political parties) and especially the explosive growth of independent unions in the past five years in the wake of numerous preventable tragedies (including the Rana Plaza disaster). Ryan argues four factors (technical training, external leverage, opportunism, and presence) are critical for creating independent and powerful unions, which clearly is a necessary starting point for building global labor solidarity. Moreover, he provides insight into what the ACILS does around the globe, and illuminates the ways in which critiques of the ACILS as an adjunct to the US state need to be nuanced.

In sum, *Building Global Labor Solidarity in a Time of Accelerating Globalization* is an important read for scholars and activists interested in different strategies and methods for working towards increasing solidarity. The examples discussed within give optimism for the ways in which organized labor can break free of the bonds of business unionism and vie for more than just a larger piece of the pie. From the challenges to the Canadian CLC from the rank-and-file in Canada, to the founding of the anti-imperialist KMU under dictatorship, and the actions of USLAW to connect in solidarity with Iraqi workers under occupation, there is much to be learned here. In a world that is becoming increasingly interconnected in terms of value chains and the movement of capital, we are also seeing a resurgence of nativism and xenophobia in the United States and Europe that poses a serious threat to cooperation by the world's workers. It would be wise for those interested in a better world for all to take note of the strategies and concepts presented in this collection.