

**Solidarity or Competition: Mexican Workers, NAFTA, and the North
American Labour Movement**

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Part I. Introduction

This paper explores the prospects for and obstacles to the development of continental labour solidarity in North America in the context of continental integration of production under neoliberal labour regulation. Our focus in this paper is on continental labour solidarity, which is a form of international solidarity within one geographical area. The contiguity of the three countries, the deepening integration of continental production chains, the significant and growing presence of the Mexican working class in the US, give strategic significance to this continental focus. Some of these characteristics also strongly apply to Central America and the Caribbean as well as to non-contiguous and far-away places, such as China. Therefore many of our arguments for continental labour solidarity can be extended as propositions that may need qualification for various areas with differing forms and degrees of integration with North America. And there are other aspects of labour solidarity that are not as closely related to union struggles, such as the struggle for democracy, the opposition to war, the defence of self-determination, et cetera.

Capitalism pits individual workers and different labour forces against each other in the search for jobs. This competitive struggle for jobs undermines effective resistance that workers could mount against the power of capital. Capitalism promotes a culture of competition among workers and plants to undermine collective worker resistance. Capitalism also takes advantage of pre-existing differences and tensions between groups (ethnic groups, different nationalities, men/women, domestic-born/immigrant, etc), to enhance its divide and rule strategy. These stratagems have always been an important part of capitalism. But during the long Fordist/Keynesian period in the US and Canada and the ISI (Import Substitution Industrialization) period in Mexico, workers in oligopolistic sectors were able to insulate themselves from the general competition and make some very important gains in terms of wages, working conditions and benefits. These forms of sectoral labour solidarity (craft and industrial unions) always left out major sectors of the working class. Their exclusion was not simply the result of the sectoral focus of unions but also of the aggressive resistance to the unionization of workers in the competitive sectors of the economy by capital and the state.

Labour solidarity is as much, or even more, a cultural and political concept than an economic one. It can have varied specific contents and organizational forms. It can draw its boundaries more widely or more narrowly. Craft unions, as the guilds that preceded them, expressed and developed solidarity among certain skilled crafts. Industrial unions organized and helped create fraternal sentiments among workers in specific industries. General unions, such as the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) and the Casa del Obrero Mundial sought to develop solidarity among the whole of the working class, as did socialist, anarchist and communist labour movements. The concept of international solidarity does not differ in principle from the concept of solidarity within the working class of one local community, one region, one nation. But the process of developing international solidarity is necessarily more complex and difficult for a variety of reasons. Different national working classes exist under different industrial relations regimes, often are linked to national political parties in different systems, and there may also be language and cultural barriers as well as national antagonisms. Great differences in incomes and working conditions between working classes in countries whose economic development is very unequal also creates much greater complexity for the development of international solidarity.

The extension of continental production systems to include Mexico enhances the possibilities of using competition as a tool of labour control. Both the threat and practice of

relocation, along with increasing casualization of the labour force, have been part of an intertwined dual strategy that have transformed the conditions of work in all three NAFTA countries and increased managerial power.¹ It has been part of the move to neoliberal regulation of labour which includes increased management power over workers (flexibility), lean production, weakening or destroying unions, lower wages, deterioration in health and safety standards and practices. This assault on workers rights, wages, and working and living conditions did not start with NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement). But NAFTA deepened, widened, and gave international treaty support to these neoliberal practices. Neoliberalism and NAFTA are aimed at reducing labour costs and increasing labour discipline and productivity. The use of the threat or practice of relocation as a tool of capital to discipline workers is not new nor is it unique to cross-border or international situations. (Cowie; Bronfenbrenner)

Relocation of manufacturing plants – or just the threat of it – has long been a weapon in capital’s struggle against workers. Jefferson Cowie has described this well in his study of RCA, *Capital Moves: RCA’s 70-Year Quest for Cheap Labor*, in which he traces RCA’s moves from Camden, New Jersey to Bloomington, Indiana to Memphis, Tennessee and finally to Ciudad Juárez, to escape unions and keep wages down. The wage disparities and anti-union policies of many states within the US that motivated RCA’s moves pale in comparison to those disparities between the US and Mexico. The strategy of local or plant-level struggles in isolation from regional, national, and continental struggles can only win durable victories in exceptional circumstances (e.g., industries where proximity to market is crucial). The threat and practice of relocation as a weapon against workers has been made all the more effective by its extension into labour markets with greater poverty, more surplus labour, and a more repressive state. The spectre of poor Mexicans “stealing” the jobs of US and Canadian workers has been joined by the spectre of poor Chinese “stealing” the jobs of North American workers, including Mexicans. The race to the bottom in terms of wages, working conditions, and democratic rights of workers is relentless. But it is not a race propelled by the “natural” workings of the market. It is being shaped and propelled by corporate and governmental policies that express themselves in actions ranging from plant-level threats and intimidation to international treaties and new international organizations that can even discipline governments.

Relocation has always been an effective tool as threat and practice through which capital could control, defeat or discard troublesome labour. Traditional union methods are ineffective against relocation, especially when governments join with companies in blocking worker organization in the new locations. The incorporation of pauperized Mexican labour into the North American labour market has made the relocation tool all the more powerful. And that tool is wielded by capital against labour within Mexico as well as within the US and Canada. Further, the threat and practice of moving to even cheaper and more vulnerable reserve armies of labour in southern Mexico, Central America and China shows the self-defeating character of competing for jobs by offering cheap, flexible and non-union labour or by entering into productivity alliances with companies.

¹ The greater instability of employment (location, duration, security) is also a strong obstacle to the efficacy of traditional forms of union organization as a tool of collective resistance. The casualization of labour fragments the working class and obscures their common situation. Sub-contracting, hiring workers through temporary employment agencies, creating several categories of workers (casual and permanent) and other devices all undermine the basis of collective resistance that previously existed in workplaces with a relatively stable labour force.

Part II. Transnational Aspects of North American Labour Markets and Labour Movements

Before addressing the prospects for a continentalist movement of labour solidarity, it's necessary to explore further the history and present situation of labour market and labour union/movement integration in North America.

History of North American Transnational Labour Markets and Labour Movements

There have been two very different processes of labour integration in North America. In the case of Canada and the US, there is a long history of transnational unionism ("international unions"). And, in the case of Mexico and the US, there has been a long history of Mexico as a reserve army of labour for the US economy and limited integration into the labour unions within the US.

Both Canada and Mexico have long had significant degrees of economic integration with the United States, though few links with each other directly. The integration of the Mexico and Canada with the US has had a number of forms: export and investment are two of the most well known. But there has also been a significant degree of labour market integration between the two sets of countries and a remarkable degree of trade union integration between Canada and the US. These relations did not start with the FTA or NAFTA. They have a long history. And they have undergone important changes over time. The FTA between Canada and the US preceded NAFTA by five years. Its primary concern was not labour market issues. Wage levels and associated costs were not that disparate, and, in fact, Canadian social benefits were and are, in general, superior to those in the US. As well, Canada has been more a receiving than a sending country of immigrants.² Labour market concerns, however, were central to NAFTA. Various waves of Mexican labour had been incorporated into US industry through immigration and expelled repeatedly in Mexican/US history. But the development of the BIP (Border Industrialization Program)³ later to become the maquila industry, created the institutional framework within which Mexican labour could be used within Mexico in a US corporate controlled transnational production system. This was a crucial step in the deepening integration of the Mexican labour force into the US labour market from the other side of the border. Both the development of maquilas and the expansion of informal immigration involved the incorporation

². And in those periods when there was significant emigration from Canada to the US, Canadians were received in the white stream, which will be discussed below. And Canadians entered the north and west of the US where state labour regulation tended to be less repressive and wages higher.

³ The BIP developed out of a number of related concerns. The Mexican government was concerned about the rise of unemployment with the ending of the bracero program in 1964. And US manufacturers were concerned about lowering costs of production to compete with Japanese and European companies. Many US companies (as well as Japanese and European companies) were already engaged in some shared production or contracting out of production to cheap labour areas in Asia, Puerto Rico and Haiti. Items 806.30 and 807 of the US Tariff Schedule facilitated partial production abroad. When the goods were shipped back to the US market, duty would only be charged on the value-added. As value-added would be very low due to low wages and low over-head and transfer pricing, duty could be minimal. Mexico's common border with the US and short transportation distances were key advantages over Asia. In addition to reduced costs on the part of manufacturers, major retailers wanted to label products as Made in the U.S. The major retail chain in the U.S., Sears, provides a good example of this aspect. Sears became concerned that so much of its merchandise had foreign labels. Thus, Sears pushed its suppliers to relocate Mexico and take advantage of the BIP. Sears suppliers could now compete with Asian suppliers and Sears could label its products as "made in America." Leslie Sklair, *Assembling for Development*, 1989, pp. 50-52.

of the Mexican labour force into US production under conditions and terms that were far inferior to those of other workers in the US. A central, but not exclusive purpose of NAFTA was to institutionalize neoliberal labour market relations by treaty. The fear of accelerated plant relocation and job flight that this prospect produced was the reason that US and Canadian unions opposed NAFTA.

The Pre-NAFTA Labour Markets⁴

The British origins of many of the early immigrant workers to both the US and Canada facilitated a common identity among them. And common histories and identifications within crafts in the home country also contributed to this development. And the later massive waves of European immigrants were incorporated into this white stream,⁵ whose ethnogenesis was forged in a complex process of inclusion and exclusion. This shared background of the Anglo immigrants facilitated the forging of a partially common Canadian-US labour market in some periods. Therefore Canadian labour's relationship to US labour was one that had strong aspects of a regional integration. This is typified in the development of Canadian unionism as a regional sector of US unionism.

The experience of Canadian immigrants to the US was similar to the experiences of "white" European immigrants. The European immigrants often faced severe prejudice, discrimination and ethnic stereotyping (e.g., the Irish and Italians) but over time became part of the mosaic or melting pot of the US or Canadian "white stream". Ethnic categories are socially created and involve ongoing processes of setting the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. The ethnogenesis of "white" identity in the US involved struggles to overcome racist-like attitudes towards certain groups (Southern Europeans, Irish) and maintain other groups as non-white. While there is prejudice, hierarchy and discrimination within the white stream there is a relative inclusiveness in the differentiation from the non-white groups. Part of the process of the ethnogenesis of the dominant group is the development of a sense of shared reputability and inclusion as good and worthwhile "Americans" or "Canadians. These ethnic and class categories relate in important ways to labour market segmentation as they involve ethclass (Gordon, Assimilation in American Life) networks of inclusion and exclusion into various labour market niches.

In the case of the two major non-white streams in US history, a very different picture emerges. Both the Chicanos and the Blacks were conquered peoples and became specially victimized labour forces. The Blacks, of course, came from various African origins and were brought to the Americas as slaves. After the abolition of slavery new mechanisms of control, exploitation and victimization were developed. And the Mexicans, already resident in the

⁴ There are at least three important dimensions in the formation of the different labour market situations between the two sets of countries: 1) different skill characteristics of the labour forces in the respective border regions (US north/Canadian border; US South West/Mexican border; 2) differential insertion (timing, mode, and location) into the labour force; 3) racism as a mediating factor. This paper will focus on the latter two.

⁵ By white stream, we are referring to the development of various levels and degrees of shared ethnic identity amongst different groups of "white" people. In this sense, Milton Gordon's notions of the various aspects of assimilation can be applied to the assimilation of different "white" groups into a broadly common identity with boundaries of exclusion of groups labeled as non-white. Milton Gordon, Assimilation in American Life.

conquered territories, were a conquered people. Social control over both populations was maintained by a combination of coercion and racist ideology that fostered cohesion among whites and exclusion of non-whites. Law, labour market manipulation, and coercion by both the state and vigilante groups were used to keep Mexicans and Blacks in super-exploited segments of the labour market.

There was a great flow of population both from the US to Canada and from Canada to the US at various times in the 19th and early 20th century, But no distinctly American communities developed in Canada nor Canadian communities in the US, with the exception of French-Canadians. They did not see themselves as being different people but fragments of a common people. There was an integration, or, as one author put it, a “mingling” of people (Hansen, 1940). Other immigrant groups were incorporated into Anglo dominance, whether within the melting pot ideology of the US or the multicultural or mosaic ideology of Canada.

The French-Canadian labour migrants to New England often formed distinctive communities, given their linguistic differences and their continuing links to and contiguity with Quebec. But they were treated as Europeans.⁶ Thus Anglo-Canadians and French-Canadians entered the US as immigrant labour, similar to the Europeans and became part of the white working class. The competitive recruitment of farmers on the part of the two countries also indicates the ethnic acceptability of the two national groups.

The mode of entry of the Mexican population was very different. The initial entry was through the conquest of what was then Northern Mexico in the mid-19th century. While the numbers of Mexicans were not great in the conquered territories, the nature of this initial contact between the “Anglos” or “Americans”⁷ and the Mexicans would come to be crucial in the development of a colonized and racialized form of ethnic subordination. After an interlude of some coexistence between the Mexican population of the area (elites, skilled workers, and others) with the conquering “Anglos” or “Americans”, there followed a period of displacement of these elites from their land and power base and of the skilled workers from their crafts. These displacements were a result of both force and economic developments. It was a process of “primitive accumulation” in a colonial manner (Montejano 1987). The Mexican population in the conquered territories was transformed from a population with significant heterogeneity in social class to one that was more homogeneous. Most Mexicans in the conquered areas came to be landless and concentrated in the lowest paying jobs.⁸ Thus an internal colonialist model was

⁶ They, in fact, seemed to have faced less vicious discrimination than the Italian immigrants in both Canada and the US. See Bruno Ramirez (1991) For an excellent study in the processes of assimilation of French Canadians in New England, see Gary Gerstle (1989).

⁷ There is a serious conceptual and historical difficulty in the use of the term “Anglos,” which is often used to label the non-Hispanic and non-Black population. The term “Anglos” is used as a catch-all term that obscures the historically heterogeneous character of the “Anglo” population at different moments, a population that at times, even had a number of different first languages. But as if not more important that this classification problem is the problem of the obscuring of the process of ethnogenesis of, the ethnic origin and creation of, the “Anglo” and “Hispanic” or “Mexican” groups. “Anglo” or “white” and therefore non-Mexican consciousness was itself a process of social formation. The formation of ethnic consciousness and ethnic cleavages has itself to be seen as a socially produced process. For a good discussion of this issue in relation to the formation of the working class, see Mellinger: 15-16 and 208n20.

⁸ Montejano cites a study by Arnaldo De León that shows this compression of Mexican social stratification from 1850 to 1900. “At mid-century, the rural Mexican population was equally divided in thirds among ranch-farm owners (34%), skilled labourers (29%) and manual labourers (34%). By the turn of the century, the two top tiers had

institutionalized with a variety of institutional mechanisms and ideological justifications. Thus, in the 2nd half of the 19th century, with a very open border, subsequent waves of Mexican migrants would be incorporated into this internally colonized population. Labour control and recruitment came to be melded in with racist ideology and all Mexicans came to be labelled as non-white and inferior. The argument was made that Mexicans were unworthy of citizenship; segregated institutions were developed and state force and popular vigilantism were used to enforce the colonized character of the Mexican population and its availability as a cheap and acquiescent labour force. When the big waves of migration took place in the 20th century, encouraged by active labour recruitment by US capitalist interests, the newly arriving Mexicans became part of a vast aggregate of cheap labour that was labelled and treated as racially inferior.⁹ State force and popular vigilantism were used to keep Mexicans in their place as a colonized population and cheap labour force.

The Pre-NAFTA Labour Movements

The same argument can be made in regard to the formal links between unions in these countries. Canadian and US workers were and are often members of the same unions, with the Canadian sections being viewed as regional sections of an “international” (US-Canada) union. The Mexican case is very different.

Canada

Canada is unique in the world in that much of its labour movement has been--and continues to be--part of US “international” unions. The United Steel Workers of America (USWA) has several Canadian regions. Their “international” headquarters is Pittsburgh. Until 1985 the United Auto Workers (UAW) was structured in the same manner, with its “international” headquarters in Detroit. And many craft unions were and continue to be US/Canadian unions. This is a good indicator that US union leaders and members considered and consider their Canadian brothers and sisters to be worthy of membership, of trade union “citizenship” in the same unions. While Canadian nationalism, discontent with head offices, and disagreements about union strategy has led to various struggles for separation from their US links, US unions have generally battled strongly against separation.

British skilled workers who had migrated to both countries started some of the early American Federation of Labour craft unions as common Canadian/US unions. Common union

shrunk – ranch-farm owners comprised 16 percent of the Texas Mexican population, skilled labourers 12% -- and the bottom tier of manual labourers had expanded, comprising 67%, or two of every three adult Mexicans. In contrast, the segment of the Anglo-American population that showed the greatest increase in the nineteenth century was the ranch-farm owning class, from 2 percent in 1850 to 31 percent by 1900.” (Monetjano, 73, citing Arnaldo De León, *The Tejano Community*, p. 63). This study was from Texas. Similar processes took place in other parts of “occupied Mexico.”

⁹ The U.S. state played a central role in controlling the ebb and flow of Mexican labour into the US and back to Mexico (deportations). But it’s important to avoid reductionist views of the role of the state in this process. While the labour needs of particular capitalist interests played a central role, there was an ongoing struggle between these interests and restrictionist and racist US trade unions, politicians and lobbies. The ebb and flow of these struggles, the labour supply situation, and the dynamics of US politics would shape the ebb and flow of Mexican labour recruitment and expulsion.

membership facilitated labour mobility between countries. And this transborder character of certain sectors of the labour market and of union membership itself fostered cross-border solidarities within particular ethnic groups and craft groups. Canadians were welcomed into the various railway brotherhoods and craft unions of the US.

Mexico

We find a completely different pattern in the case of Mexico. The US railway brotherhoods did organize skilled rail workers in Mexico, but only those who were American and British. English was the working language of Mexico's railways until 1907 when the Diaz dictatorship "Mexicanized" the railways. Mexicans--in Mexico-- had been formally excluded from the skilled railway brotherhoods and relegated to the less skilled jobs. Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in both Mexico and the US were excluded from these railway unions (as were Blacks in the US), whereas Canadian whites were welcomed.

The attitude of the AFL was long one of restricting immigration and excluding Mexicans (whether they were US citizens or immigrants from Mexico) from US unions. Thus for most of the twentieth century, US unions – both in Mexico and in the US – excluded Mexicans and sought to preserve jobs for whites. And, today, the relations between the unions of the two countries are inter-national whereas the relations between some Canadian and US unions are trans-national. The concerns of US labour towards their Mexican brothers and sisters have been ones of protectionism of US jobs through protection or accommodative solidarity, not transformative solidarity and certainly not of integration in common organizations.

We have just explored some key differences in the historical formation of the two sets of cross-border labour markets and labour movements. There are other important elements that would have to be included in a more complete comparison, such as the great differences in the historical development of the Mexican and Canadian economies, the different degrees and modes of integration of these economies with the US economy in different periods, as well as differing demographic characteristics (immigration, population growth).

Part III. Prospects for an Internationalist Labour Response

The extremely uneven development of North America poses a great obstacle to a continental fight back even though all three working classes are under a similar and related attack. Differences in culture, language, national traditions, industrial relations regimes, and standards of wages and working conditions make solidarity more complex and difficult but by no means preclude it. Canadian workers have built a labour movement within Canada that is bi-national (Quebec and the rest of Canada) and bi-lingual (French-English) and which has incorporated immigrants from all over the world. And the US labour movement –after a long history in major sectors of anti-immigrant and racist exclusion of Blacks, Latinos and Asians – has been struggling to develop a more inclusive unionism and has reversed its historic opposition to undocumented immigrant workers. The task of overcoming language, cultural and national differences has been a constant one throughout working class history. The tool of "divide and rule" has to be overcome by the practice of solidarity.

The developments in the last two decades have intensified and deeply institutionalized the differential and uneven integration of North America. The two different cross-national experiences raise important issues for the possibilities of cross-national, international unions.

The “international” unions that have joined US and Canadian workers in common organizations demonstrate that national boundaries and different industrial relations regimes do not preclude common organization. Many of these cross-national unions continue to exist, e.g. the United Steelworkers of America and Unite (garment workers). Many Canadian trade unionists were sharply critical of continental unions for two interconnected reasons. These unions were generally dominated by the much larger US sections and, with few exceptions, they played a conservative, anti-left role in the long Cold War period. While this was generally true, it is ahistorical to believe that this was and has always to be the case. While it was true of the AFL in the early part of the 20th century, it certainly was not true of the IWW in the first two decades of the 20th century or of the CIO in the 1930s and early 1940s.

There are fundamental processes of transformation going on in the American working class. For one, the weight of immigrants and Latinos is sharply increasing. Secondly, neoliberalism has largely destroyed a key component of the bourgeois hegemony over the working class, the belief in social mobility and a constantly improving standard of living within and between generations. The polarization of incomes, working and living conditions, and life opportunities in the US means that discontent will continue to grow. Whether (and in what mix) this discontent turns into class consciousness or is captured by some forms of right-wing chauvinism depends in large part on whether organized labour provides a meaningful alternative of understanding and method of struggle. That battle is always ideologically hard in imperialist powers. But there is a great difference between the present moment of imperialism and earlier ones. In earlier periods, the profits of imperialism often allowed important sectors of the working class to make gains. The imperialism of cheap resources and the export of manufactured goods from the imperial power raised the standard of living and employment opportunities in the imperial power. But the present moment of imperialism involves shifting jobs abroad and declining wages and working conditions at home.

This deep integration of the Mexican working class in US industrial production and services has important implications for the development of working class movements in both countries for there are now many Mexican working class families that are simultaneously part of two working classes in contiguous nations (Heyman). The Mexican working class is unique among the three working classes in that it straddles the border of two countries. Even though there is still significant labour market segmentation based on ethnicity and national origins, there is now an increasing, to use a term from the Canada-US context, mingling of working people (Hansen). The Mexican working class is a trans-national working class and provides a trans-national reserve army of labour.

The struggles in each society are likely to have some direct and indirect effects on the struggles in the other. Mexican workers – or members of the same working class family – may be, at the same or different times, engaged in labour conflicts on both sides of the border. They may share similar work-related concerns. Mexican workers in the US not only have ongoing links with their old communities but they have the potential of being important sources for the transmission of ideas, moods, tactics, strategies and formal links between workers on both sides of the border. The “making of the Mexican working class,” in the sense of E.P. Thompson, has a strong trans-national character.

The impact of this trans-border character of the Mexican working class on its formation will depend both on the dynamics of the North American political economy and the responses of the North American labour movements. In a period of capitalist expansion and labour market improvement, this trans-border character of the Mexican working class could have a conservative impact on both sides of the border. In this period of capitalist assault, it has the potential to be a radicalizing influence. Mexican workers in the US have the potential to play a pivotal role in the development of cross-border solidarity. There are the beginnings of formal transnational organizations of Mexican workers as well as a myriad of formal and informal links with Mexican communities. But what happens with this potential will be most significantly influenced by the role of the US labour movement. US labour, itself with formal and informal linkages to Canada, is a potential source of alternative interpretations of the life situations of immigrant workers to those that emphasize competitiveness and individual and familial mobility. The organized labour movement has the potential of contributing to the development of a new culture of solidarity that builds on the transnational links and identities of Mexican workers and extends their boundaries to the rest of the class. There is thus a reciprocal relationship between the changing characteristics and dynamics of the political economy, of the workers themselves and the character and influence of the labour movements in both countries.

The Mexican and, more broadly, Latino, working class stands at this intersection of casualized labour in the US and super-exploited labour out of the US. In both countries, they are largely denied the right of free association, the right to collective representation through unions. In the US, these democratic rights are denied to most workers (Compa) but most thoroughly to immigrants. In Mexico, they are also denied the right to democratically chosen unions by the combination of state control and by the existing labour organizations, which continue to have the support of the state. Mexican workers have to struggle on both sides of the border for elementary democratic rights that are denied by the historical system of labour control in Mexico, state legislation, and their precarious legal status in the US, and neoliberalism in both countries.

Fragmented and, at times, protectionist solidarity is a reflection of the historical triumph of fragmented, business unionism in the US and Canada. And, in Mexico, the triumph of the state in incorporating unions as controlled junior partners in the project of nationalist capitalist development led to a collaborationist and authoritarian unionism that even supported NAFTA to win jobs from Canada and the US. These characteristics did not emerge from some inherent nature of trade unionism or of workers' organizations under capitalism. They involved the repeated defeats of class-inclusive, transformatory projects of the working classes of the three countries, such as the Wobblies (the IWW -- anarcho-syndicalists) and the Socialist currents in the US workers movement in the 1900-1920 period (Kimeldorf). The defeat of the One Big Union movement in Canada was a similar experience (McCormack). And, in Mexico, the defeats of transformatory class-inclusive movements, such as the Casa del Obrero Mundial during the Revolution and other radical, class-independent currents later are other examples (Carr, Anguiano, Stevens, Middlebrook). These defeats were the result of state repression and cooptation, cooptation that was rooted both in ideology and the sectional interests of some leaders or sectors of the working class. The triumph of fragmented, depoliticized business unionism in the US and Canada was – and is – promoted by government agencies when they are not

engaged in attempting to destroy all unionism. The neoliberal government of Mexico similarly would like to eliminate unions or, where not possible, create fragmented, depoliticized business unionism. In previous historical periods, this type of bargaining produced economic gains for important segments of the working class in all three countries. These economic gains -- along with varying degrees of state repression -- were the material underpinning of the domination of narrowly economistic-oriented unionism in the US and Canada and corporatist unionism in Mexico. While these conditions (Keynesian welfare state and oligopolistic position of key industries) no longer exist, unions in the US and Canada and authentic unionist currents in Mexico still operate with previous conceptions and organizational forms that are certain to fail.

Efforts at labour solidarity in the last decades have reflected the fragmented and weak character of worker organization as well as its limited vision. This limited vision promoted accommodation – rather than challenges -- to the boundaries of struggle set by the capitalist class, their governments, and the new international treaties. No workers' movement can ignore these real constraints of bargaining and struggle. But they can be approached in different ways –accommodative or transformatory, to use (somewhat differently) the categories of Rebecca Johns in her work on US unions and Guatemalan workers. Johns has called “accommodative solidarity” the form of solidarity that supports struggles in foreign labour markets to protect jobs in the workers' home country (though humanitarian and solidaristic sentiments may also be involved). She distinguishes this form of solidarity (which has much in common with business unionism) from what she calls “transformatory solidarity,” a form of solidarity that seeks to transform the system that pits workers against each other. The former is consistent with a business unionist approach that remains within a competitive, zero-sum frame of protecting some workers against other workers. The latter challenges those limiting conditions that contribute to worker competition and enhance the power of capital.

These constraints of organization and vision have led to solidarity efforts being confined to support for struggles in specific plants. Henry Frundt has examined some of these solidarity efforts by US unions in Mexico and elsewhere and has classified them into four categories of cross-border organizing: coalitional organizing, federation-to-federation organizing, international campaign organizing, and clandestine targeting. All of these methods focus on specific plants and have had very limited success in spite of heroic struggles on the part of local workers and communities and committed support from outside. They can, on occasion, win victories but these victories have not been – and in our view can not be - sustainable without a strong national labour movement and a political-juridical framework that is at least neutral, if not favourable, to workers' rights to collective organization. Neither of these conditions exist in Mexico and until they do these efforts are doomed to ephemeral successes, if any at all. This is not to say that these efforts have no value. They sow the seeds of cross-border solidarity but the defeats can also be demobilizing and demoralizing.

Unions represent specific groups of workers and the navigation between protecting those specific groups of workers and fighting for the general interests of the class is very difficult. It is really only possible within a transformatory framework in which important sectors of the working class have developed an ideology and culture of opposition to the existing system and hope of transformation to a new system. This was the key characteristic of the movements mentioned earlier, the Wobblies, the Casa del

Obrero Mundial, the One Big Union. These radical workers' movements grew in the early part of the 20th century when fundamental rights to citizenship (social, economic, associational) were denied by business and state. Repression and the emergence of the welfare state, and in its different form, the ISI development in Mexico, destroyed these movements. The neoliberal transformation of capitalism is reproducing the conditions of the late 19th and early 20th century for workers.

But the present situation differs in that production chains are continentally integrated as are the working classes of the US and Mexico, which means struggles in one location are much more likely to have ramifications elsewhere on the continent. Canada and the US still have many continental unions that need to reinvent their character. The invention of new forms of continental worker linkages that are transformatory in their goals and solidaristic in their practices is a necessity for the agenda of the North American working class. This is not an alternative to the development of strong national labour movements but an integral component in the new situation. The local, regional, national and continental struggles have become interwoven by the geographical and structural reorganization of production. The challenge for workers and unions is to develop appropriate means to fight back at these different levels simultaneously.

First of all, it requires changes in the labour movements in all three countries. The US labor movement needs to change significantly. Some important changes have already begun. In the past, the dominant sections of the US labour movement have been strongly business-unionist, racist, protectionist, pro-imperialist and anti-immigrant. These tendencies still exist but the objective context has changed. From the 1920s to the early 1970s, US corporations and US labour were in favor of free trade (Robinson). Exports of US companies created more jobs for Americans. But when free trade came to mean imports rather than exports, job losses rather than job gains, US unions were in a quandary. Some of their first responses were racist (the anti-Japanese sentiments in the auto industry) and protectionist (Buy American). These America-first responses had little positive effect for workers. The loss of manufacturing jobs to overseas production combined with government and corporate attacks have led to a tremendous loss of union membership in the last few decades. At the same time, the lower ranks of the working class became more Latino. Sections of the AFL-CIO, especially service sector unions, began to more aggressively organize (e.g. Justice for Janitors campaign) and there was a change in the top leadership of the AFL-CIO. The AFL-CIO's position on free trade and immigrant labour has gone through significant changes recently. It now opposes free trade and supports the rights of immigrant labour. (Unfortunately, it remains tied to a party, the Democratic Party, which is pro-corporate and pro-free trade.) The struggle for the soul of the American labour movement is not over but it is underway. These changes have resulted from the crisis through which the movement is passing which has led to a growing awareness of the necessity of organizing immigrant workers as part of the working class movement and of international solidarity.

Canadian workers have suffered from many of the same problems as US workers. And while Canadian workers are not linked to US and Mexican workers in an overlapping labour market, they are linked through the continental production chains of the large multinational corporations. And many Canadian unions in the private sector continue to be part of US-Canadian unions. These linkages provide potential for

Canadian unions to have an influence on US and Mexican unions. And Canadian unions, including most that are sections of US unions, have some important differences with their US counterparts. The fact that Canadian unions are linked to a social-democratic party, however moderate that party, presents an alternate model to that of both the US (where unions are linked to one of the two capitalist parties) and Mexico (where unions have long been linked to the old ruling party and the state). As well, Canadian workers and Canadian society more generally, compose the working class of a periphery (albeit a relatively privileged periphery) of the US Empire. This means they are less tainted by imperial ideology. These two factors provide much of the explanation for the differences in working class and union culture between the US and Canada, though, of course, there are many commonalities in terms of the influences of consumerism, individualism, and Cold War ideology. But these exist in a more attenuated form in Canada. And one important difference is that the left has been more influential in Canada. Social movement unionism has been stronger in Canada than in the US and Canadian labour has been less a part of the imperial project. As well, there has been greater resistance to alliances with management to compete against workers in other locations, though the competitive pressures of neoliberalism and the absence of a clear alternative strategy have begun to undermine that.

Mexican unions -- excluding the vast majority that are phantom unions that only exist on paper -- are hybrid institutions that blend features of a state institution, a party machine, and an authoritarian union. They have long "represented" the organized sections of the working class in a corrupt and undemocratic manner. They delivered some benefits for their constituencies while using their control over workers to deliver even more benefits for themselves and for the major beneficiaries of the regime's development strategy. They controlled labour market access, disciplined the work force, extorted money from workers and capital, and used their labour-control role (both workplace and political) as part of their base for negotiating their interests with management, and for their influence within the power bloc. But the power and privilege of this "labour" elite required their ongoing control of the union and its related institutions. The government facilitated this control. This labour bureaucracy played and continues to play an important role in controlling the working class which is the key reason that they've continued to receive regime support even after the old ruling party lost the presidency to Mexico's conservative party.

The leaders of Mexican unions gave unqualified support to their government's proposals for NAFTA without any protection for workers. While the trade unions of Canada and the United States saw NAFTA as an attack on workers in all three countries, the Mexican union leadership saw it as an opportunity for new jobs and a larger dues-paying base. Whereas US and Canadian unionists lobbied against the adoption of NAFTA, Mexican union leaders gave their strong support to its adoption. The AFL-CIO proposed a North American social charter, modeled on that of Europe. This proposed social protocol foresaw coordinated efforts to better social conditions, including the right of unions to consultation and information on the financial condition of the multinational corporations, the consolidation of labour rights, et cetera. The main union federations in Mexico were totally unsympathetic to proposals by US labour for a common front to fight for a social clause. They argued that such a proposal was protectionist on the part of

US and Canadian labour. They shared with their government the competitive strategy of attracting jobs to Mexico through the offer of a cheap and docile labour force.

The current character of Mexican unions is an obstacle to workers' rights in Mexico as well as to the solidarity of Mexican workers with workers in Canada and the US. The fundamental task of Mexican workers is to gain democratic control of their unions. This is a prerequisite for fighting for their rights in Mexico as well as for continental solidarity. This is a difficult task as Mexican workers face the combined opposition of corporations and government. But the right to unions and union democracy is a fundamental right of workers and should be a central element in a North American labour struggle.

There is now an increasing basis and pressing need for greater continental labour solidarity. This notion of continental labour solidarity refers to a process that moves beyond the more recent meanings of solidarity and back to older meanings, that is, of a common struggle, not simply as aid to a weaker partner. The process towards a new continental unionism will not be easy. The major corporations of NAFTA and the three governments will do whatever they can to prevent it. The process will assume many partial forms, some ad hoc, some more enduring. They will involve a variety of organizational forms and processes with varying geographical spread and degrees of intensity. In order to have hopes of continuing and leading to more permanent organization, the relatively more privileged working classes of the US and Canada, will have to be sensitive to the more extreme necessities of the Mexican working class. Projects and alliances will have to develop in ways that respect the national differences of the three working classes. This will require that the labour movements of the three North American countries develop a culture of international solidarity and a program that unites workers around their common interests rather than dividing them as competitors for scarce jobs. The program will have to challenge the boundaries of neoliberalism and the draining debt load that Mexicans suffer. A North American workers' culture of solidarity would involve workers transforming themselves as they transform their collective organizations and struggle to change the system that is driving down working and living conditions in all three countries. Solidarity today has to be international, inclusive and transformatory to be effective.

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