

Movement Theory and International Labor Solidarity¹

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Abstract

As international labor solidarity becomes an important counterweight to corporate globalization, practitioners can benefit from guidance that social movement theory provides. This study applies three strands of movement theory to actual and potential cross-border strategies in the Americas. It explores the structural relevance of political opportunities, the mobilization of networks as a resource, and the emphasis by New Social Movement theory on framing and reflexive identity. It discovers that each strand offers important insights, one clarifying limitations, a second demarcating and cultivating supporters, and a third motivating participation. Taken together, the strands comprise a dynamic basis for solidarity that enriches organizing strategies and gains measurable victories.

When the International Textile, Garment, and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF) approached David Morales regarding the possibility of organizing in the nation's maquila sector, Morales, leader of FESTRAS, a Guatemalan food workers' federation, pondered the proposal. The ITGLWF offered its support because FESTRAS was in the best position to engage clothing workers. Morales knew that FESTRAS had a solid reputation, but its affiliates included no clothing unions and very few female workers, so other militant federations might do a better job than FESTRAS. On the other hand, despite numerous attempts, those federations had failed to sustain campaigns. What strategic guidance could Morales and ITGLWF leaders anticipate if they collaborated to unionize this very recalcitrant sector?

The strategic guidance these labor leaders sought encompasses an essential aspect of international labor solidarity: furnishing ingredients for a successful organizing campaign. Various authors have well summarized what

LABOR STUDIES JOURNAL, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer 2005): 19-40. Published for the United Association for Labor Education by the West Virginia University Press, P.O. Box 6295, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26506. © 2005, West Virginia University Press.

solidarity ingredients ought to include (see Rose 1952, 4). Fantasia (1988) views solidarity as conscious class action. Dreiling defines it “as a unique form of political unity, founded on organizational and cultural elements” (2001, 5). Nissen, 2002, has drawn together specific international labor manifestations. As groups cooperate, three aspects of solidarity are noteworthy: a shared assessment of possible actions within existing limitations (i.e., structural realities), an identifiable assemblage that is potentially ready to take such actions (i.e., a mobilizing network), and a possible coalescence of subjective commitments into a unified vision (i.e., a commonly forged identity). As David Morales’ concerns become replicated in various countries, it is useful to tap our theoretical knowledge of these elements as they become translated into cooperative strategic preparations and tasks that constitute the gist of labor solidarity. Although organizational theories have relevance, most practitioners agree that labor solidarity is a dynamic concept. The time is ripe, this article argues, for solidarity promoters to integrate contributions from the social movement literature.

While social scientists have legitimately categorized movement theories in various ways, this author believes they lend themselves to three aspects of international labor solidarity noted above: structural assessment, mobilizing networks, and forged identity. Structural theory often focuses on class-based movements; resource mobilization and network theory explains why certain movements are more successful than others; reflexive awareness and identity theory emphasizes the subjective aspects of movement participation. The intention here is not to offer comprehensive theoretical summaries, but rather to point out salient theoretical aspects that relate to solidarity and strategy.

Structural theory stresses social forces that appear to consolidate as well as challenge objective inequalities. One oft-cited structural claim is that the social basis for collective action stems from a contention for power between those who hold it in society and challengers who are excluded (Tilly 1978). When this contention (or past contentions) result in conditions for political participation or the stability of alignments, structural theorists describe the emergence of “political opportunity structures” (Koopmans and Statham 1999; McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1989; Smith and Johnston 2002), i.e., the bones and sinews of struggle. Structural theory gives solidarity activists a clearer understanding of the specific aspects of upper class exploitation, and a rational likelihood of working class and status group reactions. Guided by structural theory, solidarity supporters could share their understandings, build on the class factions identified in their analyses, and locate various points at which pressure can be brought to bear.

Resource mobilization and network theory helps explain why similar

structural conditions may produce differing results (see McCarthy and Zald 1973). Some movement theorists employ the term “mobilizing networks” or even “mobilizing structures” such as professional movement organizations that connect rank and file with movement spokespersons (Smith and Johnson 2002). This outcome can be related to differing “nerve impulse” responses from similar skeletal frameworks. By looking at nerve networks, the resource approach focuses on the more dynamic and interactive aspects of movement organizations. It provides solidarity activists with fresh ideas about how to confront organizational barriers using informal linkages in addition to regular channels. It also reveals how contradictory approaches endemic to purely structural considerations may play out in practice.

A third approach, New Social Movement theory, emphasizes the more subjective aspects of solidarity. It examines identity formation and the symbolic expression of shared meanings that emerge in movements (see Touraine 1985) that often impact labor campaigns. Some sociologists describe this as “framing” either through culturally inherited or creative processes (Snow and Benford 1992). Such theory motivates activists to examine why certain individuals become involved in solidarity, and what sustains their involvement. It probes more deeply into personal self-definitions that can be affected by “outside factors” such as gender, ethnicity, national patriotism, or a suspicion of North Americans. It also cues in on what it *means* for participants to be union members, and finally, how union leaders from various locations forge a common organizing strategy for a particular campaign.

Thus, elements from these three theories can help guide today’s labor activists as they, like the ITGLWF field staff, seek to enhance labor solidarity. I will briefly illustrate the application of these theoretical approaches to North to South labor solidarity in the Western hemisphere. Other analysts have shown how solidarity applies bi-directionally across various continents (see Smith and Johnston 2002, 6f).

Structural Theory

Following structural theory, international solidarity must consider the contending social forces involved in any labor campaign or union organizing effort. This includes an analysis of specific class relations within an industry, as well as the organizing capacities and strategies of the workers themselves. We will consider each in turn.

Industry Assessment

An early task of international solidarity is to help assess class-based structural aspects that affect a particular organizing “opportunity,” i.e., one that

allows or encourages participation and alignment. Pursuing this approach, solidarity activists help local unions identify upper-class divisions and areas of organizational weakness, as well as formal sources of cross-border strength.

Michael Dreiling (2000) and Jeffrey Ayres (1998) both probed upper-class divisions when they examined political opportunities that emerged in the anti-NAFTA campaign. In assessing a company's support for NAFTA, Dreiling looked at what he titled "organizational interests," which included the number of subsidiaries a corporation had in Mexico, its employee/asset ratio, and its contributions to PACs that opposed NAFTA. He found that the first two factors held some explanatory value in predicting a company's pro-NAFTA involvement (Ayres 1998, 32-3). Ayres considered the Canadian Progressive Conservative coalition's strategies and susceptibilities in dealing with labor and community group opposition to free trade. Such findings became useful for anti-NAFTA activists seeking corporate targets.

Solidarity supporters can also utilize the structural approach to assess differing strategies for highly competitive market situations as distinct from monopolistic conditions. For example, in the very competitive textile and clothing sector, when David Morales and the ITGLWF considered building solidarity around an organizing campaign in Guatemala, one of their first tasks was to comprehend specific class relationships. (Morales 2002; Fieldman 2002).

The ITGLWF examined the manner in which brand-name companies contracted for production; and how, where, when, and under what conditions factory owners produced and delivered the product. It discovered, for example, that the brands they hoped to target preferred "full packaging," which means that the local factory must provide the client with every clothing item packaged, priced, and labeled. Factories that were only able to deliver only "a mixed sourcing package" that met part of supply as demand increased would therefore not be a good choice for a contested campaign. However, the coalition also identified possibilities among factories that produced for the higher end retail market since they required ready adaptation to buyer conditions and rapid delivery. Often such factories had adopted a modular system in which workers collaborated in teams to finish the product in less than a week (Klewer 2002). Such plants held an advantage over lower-end sourcing from China which normally takes two months, and were therefore more susceptible to organizing.

Thus, using the structural approach, supporters can appraise a particular target "opportunity" by investigating who owns the plant, how many other plants are linked with it, how susceptible the plant is to the various kinds of orders and marketing strategies such as just in time delivery and college code scrutiny (see below). Activists may utilize such information to anticipate

capitalist repression of workers as they attempt to organize or obtain a contract by bringing pressure on co-owners, brand contractors, their board members, consumer purchasers, etc.

Working Class Opportunity

In addition to its guidance about industrial sector organizing opportunities and ruling class divisions, structural theory also helps supporters identify embedded elements of working class organization to determine where collaboration can be most useful. Before the ITGLWF approached FESTRAS, it first had to assess the local federation's objective readiness for participation and alignment. Likewise, FESTRAS had to assess the strengths that the International Federation brought to the table.

Local Labor Structures

When international solidarity supporters step into a local labor struggle, they enter an arena of historical conflicts in which dedicated and competent local organizers have achieved major victories as well as defeats. What structurally remains embodies both of these as Gay Seidman (1993) showed in tracing movement growth in Brazil from wage struggles on the shop floor to widespread community protests. Theoretically, supporters like the ITGLWF must consider: 1) The nature of the local leadership and their commitment to union processes, 2) The types and training of local organizers, 3) The relationships between local leaders, local organizers, and the sponsoring federation.

For example, solidarity activists may encounter local leaderships in certain sectors who are very skilled and have a strong tradition of labor militancy, as the ITGLWF found with FESTRAS in the food processing area. Other sectors may have natural and committed leaders, but the sectoral design or union type may exclude extensive outside involvement (see below). On the other hand, in rapidly expanding maquila locations, the recruitable pool of labor leaders often displays limited experience with union issues and time-tested procedures. Had the international union visited workers in San Juan Sacatepequez Guatemala they would have encountered women who knew little about unions or had negative impressions based on what their fathers told them (Quiroa Cuéllar 2001).

Another structural reality that organizers face is that newly-emerging leaders are often unfamiliar with basic tenets of union discipline. They may have been recruited for their ideological commitment, not their skills in supporting a coherent executive committee. Local officers may lack crucial abilities or training. They have not experienced why it is essential that the executive committee not reveal differences of opinion to management, but

rather work out these differences among themselves. This lack of experience produces vulnerabilities. Spies can be planted, leaders can be manipulated against one another, and personal preoccupations can easily subvert long term goals and strategies. Without having internal mechanisms for resolving such difficulties, many new executive committees quickly become vulnerable to divisive subterfuge. By pointing to such limitations, structural theory helps international activists anticipate these possibilities.

For effective solidarity, local officials like those at FESTRAS must also determine their chances for dynamic participation and alignment with international labor. Their challenge is to discover where solidarity opportunities reside among the complicated layers of global union formations. Structural theory can help elucidate these layers as well.

International labor structures

International labor organizations are quite different from international corporations. The latter more easily employ "class discipline" to present a unified consensus on issues like free trade, or to facilitate a specific IMF national structural adjustment program. Being more democratic, and more dispersed with less interactive resources, international labor finds the coordination of common positions and actions to be eminently more challenging. Structural theory urges leaders like Morales to consider how different levels of union bureaucracy clarify organizational goals and make decisions to sustain integrated support; it reveals lacunae that could guide adaptation.

The primary international labor stakeholders that solidarity activists encounter in local struggles include: (1) International Trade Secretariats (ITS, like the ITGLWF), (2) International Unions (like the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees, UNITE), (3) national confederation outreach (like the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center), and (4) supportive non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Studies of ITS structures reveal organizations with tiny staffs, usually based in Europe, that have elected regional representatives in Asia and North and South America (see Levenson 1972; Gallin 1980; Waterman 1998). However, while the European secretariat staff may create special regional programs, more permanent activities must be approved by the secretariat's elected regional representatives. Despite the democratic character of ITSs, their regional bodies and officials may become entrenched. This can make it much more problematic for local unions like FESTRAS and the secretariat staff to effectuate common goals and strategies.

International unions represent a second structural component of international solidarity. U.S.-based "internationals" are often nationally based unions that have made adjustments to include some foreign locals from

Canada and Mexico. In the past, certain of them have created their own missions or projects in developing nations, at times in collaboration with and at times independent of their related ITS. Like corporations, the “interests” or *types* of international unions can make a critical difference in how solidarity is developed, as Dreiling and Robinson (1998) have shown. In testing resistance to NAFTA, the authors established that social (movement) unions² were much more likely than business unions to act. Defined by their degree of inclusivity of outside groups and the radicalness of their opposition to the current political system, social (movement) unions were found more willing to volunteer time to fight for better trade policy and to contribute financially to overseas union organizing efforts (174). They also had stronger ties to coalition efforts (178). We will see that this difference in union type can markedly affect the other components of social theory discussed below—a point Morales would do well to consider in analyzing international labor backing.

The United Auto Workers (UAW) is one social union whose locals have traditionally extended support abroad, in Canada, Mexico, and Brazil (Babson 2002). Another international that has stressed democratic participation is the United Electrical Workers (UE), which has long advocated cross-border union collaboration, for example, between the U.S. and the Mexican *Frente Autentico del Trabajo* (FAT) (See Hathaway 2000). Descriptive studies may further document the modifications in international support when unions change administrations as UNITE did in 2001. The international union devoted greater attention to domestic organizing campaigns, and committed fewer material resources to international action.

A third structural player offering solidarity support is the AFL-CIO and its new outreach center, the American Center on International Labor Solidarity or “Solidarity Center.” The Solidarity Center backs specific organizing projects. It maintains a small international staff with somewhat more open funding guidelines than those of ITSs. Solidarity Center representatives have played important roles in maquila organizing campaigns in Mexico, Central America, and the Dominican Republic as well as in banana organizing in Ecuador. They hold an interest in campaigns like that of ITGLWF/FESTRAS.

The final structural element susceptible to cross-border working-class solidarity theory is union-related NGOs such as the U.S./Labor Education in the Americas Project (US/LEAP), the Support Team International for Textileras (STITCH), and the National Labor Committee (NLC). US/LEAP and STITCH quickly responded when Morales and the ITGLWF sought assistance: US/LEAP had expanded from a support group around Coca-Cola workers in Guatemala in the late 1980s, and has aided various campaigns in the maquila, banana, and food processing sectors. STITCH, inaugurated by

a former US/LEAP staffer, specifically provides assistance to female maquila workers. The NLC, which promotes many campaigns, grew out of AFL-CIO leaders' opposition to the U.S. war in Central America in the mid-1980s. Local leaders might also encounter other northern NGOs such as the Campaign for Labor Rights, the International Labor Rights Fund, and the Canadian-based Maquila Support Network (MSN). These labor solidarity NGOs have union officers on their boards and offer informational and legal support to organizing. They relate to other international NGOs that have broader political and social agendas. Another key labor support group is the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) which promotes the purchase of sweat-free products on school campuses. USAS endorses the Worker Rights Consortium as a mechanism for assisting higher education institutions in verifying that products bearing their logos comply with a code of corporate conduct toward employees (see Featherstone 2002). It has played a key role in labor campaigns in Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Bangladesh, and elsewhere.

While all four of these international support structures have much to contribute, labor leaders like David Morales often discover that in building international labor solidarity each group holds a different vision of agency (see Frundt 2002), not to mention its own strategic repertoire (see below). The NLC has emphasized a U.S.-based approach for mobilizing consumers of products made abroad more than the organizing priorities of workers within specific plants. This approach has generated considerable public support against sweatshops, yet at times it has lacked coordination with specific unionization or contract efforts. On the other hand, US/LEAP and STITCH, both of which have field staff abroad, have stressed the importance of following locally determined priorities. At times their strategy has held off an international campaign because workers on the ground have not called for one even when other signals indicated ripe conditions for such an effort within the U.S. Drawing from these experiences, solidarity activists at both international and local levels are becoming increasingly attentive to how such "opportunity structures" become defined.

Resource Mobilization and Network Theory

The second strand of social-movement theory helps remedy some of the dilemmas raised by focusing on opportunity structures alone. Via its emphasis on the more informal and dynamic aspects of social movement organizations, the resource mobilization approach helps explain why similar objective structural conditions can generate stronger or weaker movements or organizational solidarity. As Bourdieu (1990) suggests, social and cultural capital as well as economic capital are required for a successful movement.

Different capital combinations lead to various group dynamics and leadership qualities that result in distinct strategies for building coalitions.

One key characteristic of social capital that resource theorists have identified as paramount for success is a group's linkage to a "network" or "mobilizing structure." The network emphasis adds vigor to structural considerations, and has generated intriguing application as an approach to organizational action (see Narayan 1999; Wellman 1999). Examples include the way representatives of upper-class interests tap corporate networks to forge alignments between company and state policies. In his study of NAFTA's passage, Dreiling (2000, 33f) demonstrated that corporate linkages and policy group memberships were substantially more important than the more formalized organizational interests noted above.

For the working class, a network approach may facilitate recognition of which networks serve as a resource, and help identify steps to move the network from a parochial to an international focus. While effective mobilizing networks may arise among union locals and internationals, studies show they are equally likely to emerge between unions and NGO groups at both local and international levels (Dreiling and Robinson 1998; Ayres 2002). Other scholars have applied this local-international bridge in other contexts. One influential example that unions could imitate is Keck and Sikkink's boomerang model in which domestic groups utilize an international network to strike down local organizational blockages (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

David Morales could apply the resource network model to international-local labor networks in the Guatemalan case on at least three levels. One is by exploiting FESTRAS' ties with the official union structures discussed above. A second involves the federation's selection of pre-existing local networks as an organizing resource; a third could be an effort to construct linkages between FESTRAS, international NGOs, and civil society.

While we have discussed union formations as structural entities, when viewed dynamically, union members themselves can also be viewed as ready-made networks, depending on the mobilizing capacity of their local and national federations and confederations; and in turn the coordinating ability of national federations, international federations, and ITSs. A network emphasis focuses on the informal and energizing aspects of such linkages. Informal networks among unions have long existed as a resource for material aid and political pressure. Positive examples include rank-and-file contacts and cross-border affiliations encouraged by the UE-FAT alliance. As an international whose leadership has remained very internationally-oriented, the UE has devoted a significant portion of its small budget toward building a cross-border solidarity network. Despite being officially outside the AFL-

CIO, it has worked collaboratively on border projects. On the negative side, when it was the predecessor to the Solidarity Center, the unabashedly pro-U.S. government American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) used its influence to informally manipulate local unions. David Morales could rightly ask the ITGWLWF to demonstrate how it was facilitating network experiences among affiliates.

Second, and equally important as resources, are the networks that exist among the worker communities, and how unions tap these networks for support. Building such solidarity involves engaging a *pre-existing* network as a resource for the movement /organization. In selecting *which* network to choose, international organizers have discovered, for example, that fertile ground for labor action exists among individuals with some historical connection to the labor movement. As David Morales pursued his quest, he learned that when the ITGLWF ITS organized a maquila campaign in Honduras in the late 1990s, it quickly realized that many of the activist women came from the families of banana workers that had traditionally held strong pro-union sentiments (Fieldman 2002; Pearson 1987). Likewise, when a church/labor coalition emerged in Costa Rica to resist banana company exploitation of area workers, lands, and waterways, it depended on networks created by both groups separately. Although some church leaders retained a conservative orientation, most experienced "conversion" toward labor concerns when corporate practices threatened to reduce church memberships through lay-offs, land displacement, and environmental damage (Foro Emaus 1998). David Morales might search for other types of pre-existing social networks within Guatemalan communities, such as neighborhood associations, youth groups, and consumer activists. With luck, he might discover a potential local support network for workers similar to the Puebla committee that rallied to support the Kukdong workers in Mexico (see Featherstone 2002, and below). Similar groups have been mobilized to help union formations in Honduras and elsewhere.

Finally, informal international NGO networks are also valuable for cross-border action. In addition to groups like US/LEAP and STITCH that operate in various Latin nations, networks can emerge from a plethora of organizations that champion issues for specific countries, such as the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), the Nicaragua Network, Witness for Peace, the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA), and the Campaign for Labor Rights. When properly focused, these movement organizations strengthen solidarity campaigns by adapting their cause-related activities to encompass workers rights. In certain campaigns, they have turned out substantial numbers of network supporters to leaflet stores, picket consulates, and lobby officials. USAS has been most

effective at mobilizing student networks for anti-sweatshop support. Its pressure has caused companies to identify their sourcing factories and to implement third-party monitored corporate codes. In some campaigns, such as Kukdong, the threat of losing the student market stimulated company managers to recognize unions and settle contracts. USAS has also created campus networks for other union-friendly actions such as the living wage campaign.

Other international NGOs likewise fund local groups that have a labor interest. Currently in Central America, foreign donors have supported educational and health-based programs of various women's groups in maquila areas. A more contested activity has been NGO involvement in *monitoring* company codes of conduct (see Compa 2002; MSN 2002 for evaluation). While network collaboration with such groups contains pitfalls, under certain conditions these networks can become potential allies as an organizing campaign develops.

Networks as Eliciting Resources

While networks serve as a mobilizing element for achieving solidarity in their own right, analysts also point out that network contacts potentially increase a group's ability to mobilize additional economic and cultural resources (Klandermans 1990). On the economic front, in addition to contributing direct material assistance, a network can aid a local committee in generating its own resources internally. However, tied assistance often comes with a caveat. For example, wealthier ITS affiliates that approve seed program funding believe that in order to avoid dependency, at some point local union committees must learn to fly on their own.

The resource process deserves special scrutiny from leaders like David Morales and ITGLWF staff. The intention of most ITGLWF programs has been to provide local campaigns with sufficient start up assistance to build a self-sustainable organization. For example, following the dictum that local organizing struggles must become self-sufficient at an earlier rather than later stage, the ITGLWF program on maquila organizing kept very strict rules regarding local contribution requirements. It held that domestic federations must soon cover their own transportation and telephone expenses. Local officials often discovered that such rules made sense as principles for avoiding potential manipulation by outside influence. Applied rigidly, however, they could lead to misunderstandings and prematurely end potentially viable organizing efforts. All leaders must learn that some contexts require lengthy outside commitments without immediate pay off. While a degree of dependency develops, other benefits accrue.³

A second measurable test of labor solidarity could be the degree to

which Morales and FESTRAS or any local federation committee is able to summon assistance via its international union or NGO linkage to implement “strategic repertoires of contention.” These include various union strategies that are “culturally inherited.” Such repertoires could range from technical assistance and information to letters of support exerting political pressure to the orchestration of influential delegations. They could include actions taken abroad such as pressure on corporate boards or information campaigns aimed at retail consumers. From a more scientific viewpoint, support for various repertoires could be converted into quantitative measures, forming a matrix of indices and types of assistance. Such studies might reveal the extent and manner in which types of solidarity are affected by the culturally-developed strategies of international network leaderships.

In applying network theory, however, one caution that David Morales and the ITGLWF must consider is that networks can function at cross-purposes as they elicit resources. Organizers often face conflicting pressures as they seek to maintain relations with the local union executive committee, relations with the sponsoring federation, and interventions by representatives from international unions and support groups. These relationships can easily become enmeshed in concerns over funding and support, such as what transport is available, who receives pre-paid cell phones, what account covers expenses for potential union recruits, i.e. the practical necessities that enable the local committee to function with some autonomy. Organizers may receive direct assistance from international representatives, but this may be withdrawn abruptly, or given out inequitably. Organizers begin to wonder why, for example, they receive transport aid from an international union rep, but not from an ITS rep or the local federation. Such questions have pragmatic answers, but they also suggest that like structural theory, network theory needs an additional dimension to build labor solidarity—the convergence of the identities of participants to assure campaign success.

Reflexivity and Identity

The third consideration for building solidarity comes from the interactional process of identity formation stressed by New Social Movement (NSM) theorists. Recent movements, as Habermas (1984, 1989) and others describe them, often emerge in public space outside of state and market relations. They frequently emphasize social or cultural values. As movements react to non-market aspects of reality such as the need for peace and ecological balance, NSM theorists stress how individuals and groups in contemporary society are guided by their reflective consciousness. Analysts maintain that group public actions are often more symbolic than practical, more an asser-

tion of identity than an attempt to achieve a durable organization. Such movements also devote special attention to how their message is subjectively understood. Goffman and other theorists have characterized this process as identity formation or “framing” (see also Snow and Benford 1988; Snow and McAdam 2000).

At first glance, the NSM approach to framing and group identity appeared to bypass collective manifestations of international labor solidarity. Nevertheless, the debate it generated over these newer social movements focused increasing attention on the subjective aspects of cross-border labor support. Solidarity activists discovered a congruent application of NSM and framing in their own understandings of third-world workers who warmly responded to symbolic expressions of approbation, through which they more easily grew to appreciate the utility of global corporate campaigns.

One example was the welcoming reception such workers gave to visiting students who opposed the exploitative conditions of those producing products bearing university insignia and college athletic logos. The campus anti-sweat movement first emerged from the students’ reflexive awareness. As noted above, USAS and anti-globalization demonstrators tapped symbolic expressions and subjective feelings to challenge objective inequalities in southern countries (as described by Barlow and Clarke 2001; Klein 2000; Featherstone 2002 and others). The workers also responded on a personal and subjective level.

Such student reactions caught the attention of the ITGLWF and local leaders like David Morales. They kept pace with how the Solidarity Center; international unions such as UNITE; and NGOs like US/LEAP, STITCH and others helped channel student and public sentiments to coincide with cross-border organizing campaigns. Other labor groups considered how NSM theory explained varieties of activist responses in Latin America and elsewhere (see Chomsky and Santiago 1998; Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998, Eckstein and Wickham-Crowley 2003). As it opened consideration of the subjective aspects of union identity, NSM also encouraged solidarity activists to direct attention to notable preoccupations among third-world rank and file normally not addressed by traditional solidarity approaches. Three touch on worker self-definitions expressed symbolically and reflexively in public space: what it means to be a union member, how gender impacts this membership, and how past northern interventions affect subjective southern union assessments. A fourth is more visionary: how identity colors the strategic response to political opportunities and mobilizing networks.

Union Identity

First, how workers see themselves as trade unionists is a key issue. What often happens after an initial organizing effort backed by labor solidarity is that as workers achieve some measure of success, they do not anticipate the challenges ahead. Then when company operatives buy them off, segment them, and threaten their families, etc, participants become divided over strategies, tactics, time demands, and support issues. Few mechanisms are available to accommodate their differences or help them prepare for intense manipulation. Concerning difficulties the ITGLWF maquila campaign faced in Guatemala, Fieldman (2002) noted, "the attack against the workers was way off the scale of what employers normally direct against us. It terrorized them, and the company used this fear to prevent other potential actions." FESTRAS and solidarity activists had to invent alternative approaches to meld "partial" ethnic, religious, and communal identities into a coherent worker consciousness that readied itself for corporate onslaught.

Gender Relations

As offshore assembly production has expanded, activists are also considering how the handling of gender identity can benefit successful solidarity action (see Colgan and Ledwith 2001). Historically, men have tended to dominate organizational action in Latin America, so organizers have searched for ways to bring gender participation into balance. They recognized that women faced many in-home demands. At the same time, they sought mechanisms for women to develop greater self-confidence in developing their organizational abilities within the workplace.

Gender issues arise when local organizers encounter difficulties interacting with executive members of a federation that is built fighting traditional battles. A federation's leaders have often grown accustomed to a male-dominated, hierarchical process that leaves little room for collaborative strategizing for long-term organizing support. Often they view recently hired female organizers as temporary, green, and while well-intentioned, not attuned to larger political realities; or at least this is how the organizers experienced their reception (Traub-Werner 2001). During organizing campaigns, when women sense a dismissal of their concerns (such as about family relations), they routinely express their frustrations indirectly. Understanding this, cross-border organizers linked with STITCH have helped women to cultivate their own sense of gendered union identity, to persistently articulate their needs, to assert leadership roles and to take autonomous action (Podolsky 2002).

Fear of Imperialistic Control

A third identity consideration that can interfere with international solidarity is the workers' own historical memory of northern interference. In Latin America, this includes recollections of past linkages to imperial U.S. foreign policy of several ITSs, certain U.S. international unions and the AFL-CIO's former AIFLD program. Remembrance of these linkages lingers even if the structures and leadership do not. An example of collective recollection occurred in 2002 when the U.S. played a role in the attempted coup against President Chavez in Venezuela. A significant portion of that nation's major union confederation opposed Chavez. When Solidarity Center representatives held meetings with confederation leadership, U.S. solidarity groups and local Venezuelan activists criticized the Center for repeating traditional AIFLD maneuvers.⁴

But even when local unions clearly understand that U.S. labor representatives are not spokespersons for the U.S. State Department, domestic union leaders negatively react to the "go it alone" American style, and similar international union staff tendencies to assert northern strategies. Local labor activists feel isolated when international reps appear to share ideas with NGO allies, but make fewer attempts to communicate with them directly. They then suspect that the primary objectives of U.S. unions and NGOs are to prevent the loss of U.S. jobs, and control southern union affairs.

In grappling with imperialistic influences, local federation officials also feel caught between conflicting approaches emanating from a specific ITS, the related international union, the Solidarity Center, and NGO support groups. This explains why they hedge structural support by mobilizing additional network resources. At the subjective level, while local officials may not always be savvy about the differing philosophies among labor internationals or ITSs, they legitimately wonder if international union officers are in sufficient contact with leaders from the Solidarity Center and the appropriate ITS regarding coordination of approaches and clarification of disagreements. Their confusion may prevent these same local leaders from fully testing the potential applicability of outside support programs, or from communicating with interested northern representatives. In turn, this creates deep frustration among international union stakeholders, AFL-CIO reps, and labor-based NGOs that local confederation officials do not share information concerning recent campaign or organizing developments.⁵

To make the dilemma concrete, when union locals are engaged in or sponsoring an organizing drive, funding and resources are at stake as indicated above. Knowing this, leaders are unsure how to negotiate their own time commitments in relation to their other priorities, which include

administering current contracts, meeting membership needs, and responding to political obligations. They also puzzle at the manner in which international support programs are funded and later defunded. As tensions arise, some react by playing out in symbolic form conflicts among themselves that tend to destabilize organizing efforts. One local federation may blame the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center for intervening or supporting a struggle sponsored by another federation. This can happen even though the first federation did not have sufficient time to explore a way to utilize a Solidarity Center or ITS initiative. International activists are counseled to avoid choosing sides in these symbolic conflicts, even as they grow more cognizant of them as dilemmas of identity.

Finally, many local feds likewise do not know how to best negotiate among the various NGO labor support groups. Sometimes, they may be persuaded by one, and then by another that offers a different approach to an international campaign. Specifically, certain unions have grown suspicious about corporate campaigns, notably when such campaigns are launched without adequate communication with workers affected. This happened in Honduras and Nicaragua in connection with certain NLC campaigns (see Quinteros 2000). This confusion partially explains the cool reception by some Central American unions to offers of support. Following approaches taken by US/LEAP and STITCH, NGOs interested in labor issues such as the Campaign for Labor Rights, the Nicaragua Network, Witness for Peace, etc., have applied an identity focus as they stress the importance of local agency, communication and collaboration.

In taking into account issues of identity in union consciousness, gender relations, and the fear of imperialistic overreach, solidarity activists are learning to apply theory *strategically*. Strategy, after all, is a key goal of solidarity. Such strategy is shaped by the horizon of what both local and international activists perceive as possible. They do this by building from their personal identities to identify the political opportunity structures and network resources that are presently accessible.

An essential aspect of such "reflexivity in practice" is that the organizers themselves have a clear sense of their own role and limitations. They can gain this by paying careful attention during organizing efforts to union subjectivities and cultures of solidarity (see Bonfenbrenner 1998, Fantasia 1988). New work on labor organizing by young scholars offers further guidance (Anner 2001; Armbruster 1999; Bonacich 1994). Solidarity activists must not only be adept at conceptualizing strategies, supporting in-house visits, and expanding membership; they also must be skilled in personal relations, including being able to factor in their own roles and biases. Those developing successful leaders

must be clear about the role they play within their sponsoring federation.

Applying such principles in 2000-2004 in Guatemala and Honduras, the ITGLWF and local federation organizers found themselves answering questions of union identity, gender relations, and imperialistic control, as NSM theory anticipates. FESTRAS and the ITGLWF strategically collaborated in a maquila-organizing campaign that targeted two plants that produced for Liz Claiborne; The Honduran SITRACOR and ITGLWF also did so near San Pedro Sula. Both collaborations gained important victories: viable maquila contracts.⁶

Conclusions

This essay draws on three strands of social-movement theory to lay out important components for building international strategy and solidarity: structure, network, and reflexive identity. In a recent critique, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) find these elements overly static unless they are placed within a more dynamic, interactive framework. But the evidence above reveals that by combining each theoretical strand vitality does emerge. Taken together, the three components provide substantial insight into international labor solidarity as David Morales and the ITGLWF experienced it.

Solidarity includes a comprehension of the immediate class situation of a particular struggle, i.e., both the arrangements of dominant class exploitation and the forms of labor organization at local and international levels. Solidarity's objective is to pinpoint those structural opportunities most salient for exerting campaign pressure. Of course, solidarity is always threatened by the manipulations of corporate power and the unleashing of brutal repression by the dominant classes. But these can be anticipated by a strong, durable campaign of strategic international solidarity. First, this requires identifying a suitable target "opportunity" and an on-ground participatory organizing effort led by local leaders. Activists must simultaneously maximize coordination among international supporters, the relevant ITS, international unions, national federation personnel, and international labor NGOs, with local labor leaders.

Secondly, solidarity is more likely where it can mobilize a pre-existing network as a resource. Such a network is often built on informal ties, first within the levels of union affiliation, second among family and community-related linkages, and third with international NGOs acting as social movement organizations. Besides *being* a resource, networks can also summon additional resources. Such networks can enhance the ability of local workers to develop and experience their own empowerment as well as to incorporate fresh repertoires of contention. Yet network functions can be disrupted by a

go it alone “American” approach, as well as the uneven and/or rigid application of support and funding guidelines. Competing network contacts also generate confusion.

For this reason, at the subjective level, NSM theory shows the importance of solidifying identity by building strategy and solidarity through framing and reflexivity. International solidarity activists must attend to how participants construct their movement involvement. Lessons emerge from the symbolic expressions of support from students concerned about sweatshop workers. Solidarity proponents must be mindful of other aspects of identity: the knowledge of what union membership requires, a sensitivity to gender equality, and the fear of imperialistic or northern control. Activists must preempt situations where union locals feel caught between competing claims of loyalty and affiliation, unable to articulate their own sensibilities. Cognizance of gender differences is likewise essential for incorporating women into decision-making processes. Finally, northern workers must eschew a predisposition to offer solutions that bypass local historical and cultural experience, something attention to identity can help them avoid.

While leaders like David Morales and unions like the ITGLWF can win campaigns without social-movement theory, social-movement unions are the type most adept at achieving international solidarity and collaborative strategy. By examining the contributions of movement theory—structure, network, and reflexive identity—activists can create a more sustainable basis for local/international support.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this article was presented at the Latin American Studies Association’s XXIV International Congress, Dallas, Texas, March 27-9, 2003. The author is grateful for *LSJ*’s assistance in editorial revisions.
- 2 The authors distinguish social movement from social unions but the predictive results are fairly similar.
- 3 While Anner (2001) has documented cases of detrimental labor dependency in El Salvador, other studies have shown what happens in other contexts when funding is withdrawn too early. Murray (1997) demonstrates how the withdrawal of payment for tree plantings in Haiti had disastrous environmental consequences. Lecomte and Krishna (1997) argue that a ten-year funding commitment is required for sustainable community development in the Sahel.
- 4 Global Women’s Strike (Philadelphia), “An Open Letter to John Sweeney” April 2, 2003. See also Gacek (2004) and follow-up exchange in *New Labor Forum*, 2004 (summer): 93-99.

- 5 Based on interviews in 2002 with Robert Perillo, US/LEAP; Laura Podolski, STITCH; and in 2001 with Gilberto Garcia, CEAL
- 6 See U.S./LEAP, July 2003 and March 2004. In Honduras, two solid apparel unions achieved contracts. Although a contract was signed in Guatemala, the union itself has yet to fully solidify.

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