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**The Global Union Federations in International Industrial Relations: A Critical Review**

Michele Ford and Michael Gillan

**Abstract**

In recent decades, trade unions have been challenged to attempt to develop new forms of representation, action and institutional engagement in response to the increasingly transnational character of production and service delivery. This has necessarily required a shift in focus beyond national boundaries, and thus beyond the traditional scale of industrial relations systems. Among the most important actors in these attempts to globalize industrial relations have been the global union federations (GUFs), which represent national sectoral federations in key industries. Over several decades, the GUFs have sought to engage with multinational corporations through various strategies including policy campaigns and the negotiation of Global Framework Agreements and have provided support for workers and their unions in different national settings, including emerging labour movements in the Global South. This article reviews the growing literature on transnational industrial relations, focusing on the historical development of the GUFs, their core repertoires of action and their impact on industrial relations practice both internationally and within national boundaries. In doing so, it identifies and assesses not only the opportunities for GUF interventions in international industrial relations, but also the many obstacles – including resource constraints and dependence on unions at other scales – that limit their reach and ability to achieve these strategic goals.

**Keywords:** Global framework agreements, global unions, international industrial relations, multi-national corporations, policy campaigns, union education and aid, union networks

**Introduction**

The advent of intensified forms of economic globalization has led to a situation where relationships between employers, employees and their organizations and the state can no longer be thought of primarily in ways that are bounded by the nation-state. Although national institutional patterns remain the primary concern for industrial relations scholars, increased economic integration across national boundaries has engendered ‘heightened complexity in terms
of the connections between different types of actors across a variety of national contexts, and the interdependent effects of their strategic actions across a wider geographic scope’ (Jackson et al., 2013: 427). There is consequently a global dimension to the changing character of work and employment relations – whether it be through the influence of neoliberal ideology and governance (Brenner et al., 2010); the re-composition of production and employment relations via complex chains or ‘networks’ of suppliers and contractors across space (Coe, 2013); the challenges posed by labour mobility and migration (Ford, 2006); or the growth of a variety of forms of contract or ‘precarious’ work which have undermined many of the forms of security achieved by workers under past employment regimes (Kalleberg, 2009).

This reconstitution of the world of work and the heightened complexity of relations between actors it has brought have significant implications for the world’s labour movements. Although the national scale remains the key locus of trade union activity, it is poorly aligned with the structure of contemporary capitalist development and therefore confining trade union activity to it is self-defeating. Recognizing this, trade unions have begun to explore various means of moving beyond national boundaries, and thus beyond the traditional scope of industrial relations systems. This has, in turn, prompted intense debate within the disciplines of industrial relations and labour sociology about the capacity of worker mobilization and collective representation to influence emerging patterns of globalization. At the heart of this debate is scholars’ assessment of the challenges posed by globalization – and especially by the increasingly transnational character of competition, investment and production – to the labour movement. These challenges have been tracked through many studies of specific geographic settings and institutional and economic contexts. A related analytical concern has been the relative capacity of trade unions to reinvent themselves through new forms of representation, action and institutional engagement to rebuild bargaining power and social relevance in the reformed global economy.

As some of these studies have asserted, a key concept in attempts to understand the complexity and spatiality of industrial relations is scale. While this term is commonly understood to denote a system of conceptual ordering and representation of space at various geographic resolutions – local, regional, national and global – scale has been understood by some scholars as a political construct ‘produced’ via economic structures and social relations (Herod, 2009). Emphasis has been placed by these scholars on the need to move away from the conceptualization of scale as something that is discrete, bounded and hierarchical towards a more fluid and network-based understanding that recognizes the interconnections between the local, national and so on (Herod, 2009). These concepts have been increasingly invoked by scholars of employment relations, some of whom have used the term ‘multi-scalar’ to explain how trade unions can work at multiple and overlapping geographic resolutions. Some, such as Tufts (2007: 2387), have even suggested that multi-scalar trade union activity may in fact be crucial to labour movement renewal.

What catalyses shifts in the repertoires of action of trade union bodies such that they seek to engage in multi-scalar transnational labour organizing and representation? What institutional
agents are best placed to facilitate this? Arguably, among the most important actors in attempts to ‘globalize’ industrial relations are the global union federations (GUFs), which represent national sectoral federations in key industries. The GUFs are distinct from national and local unions in that they have an identifiable mandate to think, act and represent workers on a transnational basis (Evans, 2010). At the same time, however – since the locus of union resources, authority structures and mobilization remains local and national – their capacity to effect change and implement their strategic goals is still largely dependent on their ability to identify effective union partners at local and national scales and to play a facilitation and coordination role rather than dictating or directing the implementation of strategy from ‘above’. This, we argue, points to the need to think about GUFs as institutional industrial relations actors that have their own distinct historical origins, organizational forms and internal governance and strategic goals and methods, which determine the limits of their capacity to act. As an entry point to doing so, this article reviews the growing literature on transnational industrial relations, assessing various perspectives on the historical development of the GUFs, their core repertoires of action and their impact on industrial relations practice both internationally and within national boundaries.

**Labour, globalization and GUFs**

The literature on transnational industrial relations and ‘global’ unionism encompasses a variety of perspectives and disciplines, but can perhaps most simply be categorized into three distinct although intersecting streams. First, there is the literature that via macro-level analysis generally addresses globalization, capitalist restructuring and the fate of labour movements. This literature has been framed around debates over the strategic capacity and socio-political relevance of unions in the context of globalization and economic change. A key question here has been the extent to which unions can ‘globalize’ (in the sense of working across multiple and overlapping geographic resolutions) their activities and repertoires of action to unlock new sources of power and reconstruct collective agency in industrial relations (McGrath-Champ et al., 2010).

Some sociologists have pointed to the weakness of organized labour and suggested that effective trade union representation is incompatible with a ‘networked’, globalized form of capitalism (Castells, 1997). A related line of argumentation has cautioned against the excessive optimism of much of the labour studies literature, which, it has been suggested, does not adequately recognize how effectively capitalist restructuring has disaggregated work, commodified social life and disoriented trade unions (Boyer, 2010; Burawoy, 2010). Counter arguments, largely from labour movement sociologists, have suggested that such pessimism underestimates the abilities of trade unions to adapt their strategies and forms of worker representation over time, or even the unexpected opportunities that neoliberal globalization presents such as technological platforms for rapid communication exchange, the emergence of transnational union networks and the power of alliances with other civil society actors across various scales (Evans, 2010; Munck, 2008; Webster et al., 2008).
Another set of studies takes up these questions and concerns but with a greater degree of specificity, typically through the use of empirical studies of a specific campaign or labour conflict where a transnational (or ‘multi-scalar’) dimension had an effect on the process and its outcome. In other instances, transnational industrial relations and ‘global’ union action have been discussed with reference to local trade union development in a specific nation or region (Ford and Dibley, 2012; Gillan and Lambert, 2013), or explored using a specific economic sector, industry or global production network to describe and analyse the extent to which workers’ mobilization and union bargaining power have been achieved via multi-scalar strategies and action (Cumbers et al., 2008; Lillie, 2005; McCallum, 2013). In detailing the significance of context to the process and outcomes of such campaigns, these analyses engage more specifically with the organizational tensions and structural obstacles that impede the realization of the potential of multi-scalar labour movement strategies. Global unions feature in many of these analyses insofar as they are one of many actors germane to the playing out of the matters under investigation. However, in and of themselves, the GUFs have seldom been the primary object of study.

A third and much smaller body of literature is concerned specifically with understanding the global unions – a category that includes the GUFs but also the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) – as institutions and as social, political and industrial relations actors. Some of this literature has mapped and analysed the architecture of international labour organizations and their relationship with global institutions and governance (Anner and Caraway, 2010; Harrod and O’Brien, 2004). Other studies have traced the development and role of the ITUC, and of its predecessor, the ICFTU (Cotton and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012; Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012). Early work on the GUFs themselves includes Fairbrother and Hammer’s (2005) study of their transition from isolated and bureaucratic international trade secretariats to more expansive and engaged labour movement actors, suggesting that the ‘recomposition of the international political economy in the 1980s provided the opportunity for global unions to address the international features of work and employment’, which in turn meant they had ‘embarked upon a complex process of renewal’ (p. 423). The most prominent book-length work in this category is Croucher and Cotton’s (2009) study of the GUFs, which details their activities across various domains and assesses their relative resources. Such studies were nevertheless relatively scarce, perhaps in part because of perceptions of the marginality of the GUFs as labour movement actors in their earlier incarnations, as well as a consequence of the tendency towards methodological nationalism in industrial relations.

In recent years, however, there has been a notable expansion in analysis of the GUFs, reflecting their role in the reimagining of industrial relations. The various strands within this literature have been published across different yet interrelated disciplines: political sociology; industrial relations; an economic and labour geography literature that has a special concern with spatial and scalar analysis and an emphasis on labour agency; and a literature that frames the question of ‘global labour’ within concepts drawn from international relations and political science. Given
this plurality and diversity of approaches, our intention here is to extract from the existing literature – and from publications and communications produced by GUFs themselves – an appreciation of three major questions about the GUFs and their role in employment relations. First, what are the historical and social origins of the GUFs and to what extent have they developed in different ways over time including in their organizational and leadership structures? Second, what are their core concerns, strategies and repertoires of action in transnational union activity? Third, what does the existing body of research tell us about their actual and potential effect on industrial relations and what are the constraints that may prevent them from realizing this potential?

**Trade secretariats to global unions: The historical and social origins of GUFs**

The GUFs include Building and Wood Worker’s International (BWI); Education International (EI); IndustriALL; the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF); the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations (IUF); Public Services International (PSI); International Arts and Entertainment Alliance (IAEA); the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ); and UNI Global Union (UNI). These organizations represent a collective membership of some 140 million workers worldwide (see Table 1). As trade unions, the GUFs seek to represent the economic and social interests of workers, but also their broader human rights. Where they differ from national trade unions is that their work has an explicitly international scope, whether this involves channelling solidarity funds from one national union to another or attempting to negotiate directly with the headquarters of multinational corporations (MNCs).

The GUFs grew out of the International Trade Secretariats (ITSs), the first of which was founded in 1889, and whose number had increased to over 30 by 1914 (Bendt, 1996). The International Trade Secretariats emerged in a context where the spread of industrial capitalism had given rise to waves of labour and socialist internationalism (Waterman and Timms, 2005). Yet, while inspired and supported by the Socialist Labour Movement, their main activities were not particularly ideological (Bendt, 1996), focusing rather on sharing information about wages and working conditions and mobilizing financial and industrial support for their union affiliates (Snyder, 2008: 16). Following World War II, the ITSs came to be aligned with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the peak union body that was formed when non-communist unions left the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), which had been established in 1945 to promote labour internationalism in the post-war context. They experienced growth in membership with the advent of decolonization in third world countries after the war. But while this period saw an increase in activity (Bendt, 1996: 23), the ITSs remained highly bureaucratized, acting as ‘little more than disseminators of information’ and a ‘channel for resources’ (Davies and Williams, 2006: 2). It was not until the end of the Cold War that the ITSs began engaging in a serious process of renewal (Fairbrother and Hammer, 2005).
### Table 1. The global union federations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GUF</th>
<th>Current Form</th>
<th>Affiliates (members)</th>
<th>Sectoral Focus</th>
<th>Recent Amalgamations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BWI</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>326 (12 million)</td>
<td>Building, wood and forestry</td>
<td>International Federation of Building and Wood Workers (IFBWW) and the World Federation of Building and Wood Workers (WFBW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EI</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>400 (30 million)</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IAEA</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>300 (800,000)</td>
<td>Arts and entertainment</td>
<td>IAEA is an alliance of International Federation of Actors (FIA), International Federation of Musicians (FIM) and UNI-Media, Entertainment and Arts (UNI-MEI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFJ</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>161 (600,000)</td>
<td>Media</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IndustriALL</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>632 (50 million)</td>
<td>Mining, energy, manufacturing</td>
<td>International Metalworkers’ Federation (IMF), International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers’ Unions (ICEM) and International Textiles, Garment and Leather Workers’ Federation (ITGLWF)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITF</td>
<td>1896</td>
<td>700 (45 million)</td>
<td>Transport</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IUF</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>390 (2.6 million)</td>
<td>Agriculture; food and beverages; hotels, restaurants and catering services; tobacco</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSI</td>
<td>1907</td>
<td>669 (20 million)</td>
<td>Public services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNI</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>900 (20 million)</td>
<td>Cleaning and security; commerce; finance; gaming; graphical and packaging; hair and beauty; ICT; media; post and logistics; care; sport; temp agencies; tourism</td>
<td>International Federation of Employees, Technicians and Managers (FIET), Media and Entertainment International (MEI), International Graphical Federation (IGF) and Communications International (CI)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Müller et al. 2010; Global union federation websites.
During this period, growing dissatisfaction with the emerging global order and the role of MNCs within it provided a context where coordinated approaches to industrial relations across national boundaries became not only more attractive but increasingly necessary. It was in recognition of the need for change that in 2002 they changed their names to GUFs and began initiating a number of amalgamations, perhaps most significantly the 2012 amalgamation of the International Metalworkers’ Federation (IMF), International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers’ Unions (ICEM) and International Textiles, Garment and Leather Workers’ Federation (ITGLWF).

This was not the first time that the ITSs had attempted to respond to economic globalization. In the 1960s, they had established a number of World Company Councils (WCCs) as part of a strategy to better engage with MNCs (Levinson, 1972; Platzer and Müller, 2011). However, this ambitious strategy did not have the ‘institutional stability and continuity’ required to achieve its goals of international collective bargaining and worker representation (Platzer and Müller, 2011: 183). Significantly, there was a renewed interest in this sphere after the fall of the Berlin Wall, initially via the growth of codes of conduct within MNCs, then in debates over social clauses in trade agreements and finally through the pursuit of GUF-initiated International Framework Agreements (Bourque and Hennebert, 2011; Fairbrother and Hammer, 2005). These agreements, now known as Global Framework Agreements (GFAs), are negotiated with MNCs, most commonly headquartered in Europe. This strategy was later complemented by an increased focus on organizing. In recent years, for example, the IUF has shifted its focus from signing GFAs to using its scarce resources to strengthen union membership through organizing initiatives (Garver et al., 2007).

Despite this shared history, the GUFs are quite different in ideological and political orientation, their governance arrangements and their capacity for engagement. In terms of governance, most remain hierarchical. All are headquartered in Western Europe. In the 1990s, however, GUFs made attempts to regionalize, with the exception of ICEM (now part of IndustriALL) (Müller et al., 2010: 6). The IUF, for example, has chosen to reduce spending on international meetings and use funds to hire full-time regional coordinators for Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe (Garver et al., 2007: 241–242). While GUFs’ regional offices have considerable flexibility and influence over their work (Ford, 2013; Ford and Dibley, 2012), there is still criticism from some quarters of GUFs’ avoidance of contentious political engagement and their ideological and institutional moorings in European style ‘social partnership’. Related to this is criticism of the domination of unions from the global north over agendas and interests as a consequence of their role in the governance and funding of the GUFs.

The GUFs also vary significantly in terms of resourcing. The ITF is the only GUF to be funded independently from members’ dues (Anner et al., 2006). This strong economic position reflects the facts that the transport sector is characterized by relatively high levels of unionization and around two-thirds of ITF affiliates are located in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Müller et al., 2010). Other GUFs are not nearly as well-
funded, and so depend largely on national trade union Solidarity Support Organizations (SSOs) such as the Dutch FNV Mondiaal. For example, the ITGLWF, now part of IndustriALL, represented workers mostly located in poorer countries and so dues collection was low. As a consequence, it depended on funding from solidarity funds from affiliates like the American union UNITE and from SSOs (Anner et al., 2006), as well as working with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the anti-sweatshop movement (Telljohann et al., 2009). Similarly, the IUF relies heavily on funding from donors such as LO Norway and the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation to fund its programmes (Garver et al., 2007).

The politics and resourcing of the GUFs influence their strategic orientation. In the case of the ITF, the strength of its affiliates means that its campaigns are often driven from below. In a waterfront dispute in Australia, for example, three left-wing transport trade unions came together to form an ITF working group to combat de-unionization (Barton and Fairbrother, 2009). The ITF also gains bargaining leverage through the location of its affiliates in different parts of the transport chain. For example, dockworkers may refuse to unload ships in solidarity with workers in another country (Anner et al., 2006). UNI has since its formation in 2000 positioned itself as being more campaign oriented (Müller et al., 2010).

7 The IUF is also well known for its campaign-based orientation. BWI, ICEM and IMF, meanwhile, have traditionally favoured social dialogue and social partnership and therefore the strategy of signing GFAs (Telljohann et al., 2009), though BWI and IndustriALL are becoming increasingly involved in campaigning and organizing. Although their strategic orientation differs, both BWI and IUF have taken on the issue of migrant labour with particular gusto, reflecting the high numbers of mobile and migrant workers in the sectors they represent (Ford, 2013).

**Repertoires of action in global industrial relations**

What is known about the repertoires of action through which the GUFs pursue their aims? The first domain of activity that has been prominent over time is that of knowledge production and dissemination. GUFs produce and circulate (via various forms of media) reports on the campaigns, organizing initiatives and the challenges that confront affiliates in various countries and industrial sectors, alongside reports on broader global concerns and initiatives. Examples of the latter include reports and articles produced by IndustriALL on the global prevalence of ‘precarious work’ and various union initiatives to combat insecure employment (Holdcroft, 2013); reports by the IUF on the implications of financialization and private equity for workers (IUF, 2007); and a wide range of GUF communications and reports on topical issues such as union representation of migrant workers and gender justice at the workplace. In some instances, knowledge production within GUFs has an immediate and applied dimension. For example, with regard to production networks and specific corporations, the ITF has attempted to research and map the activities of third party logistics firms as an entry point to union organizing in these key actors in global logistics and transport networks (Anderson et al., 2010). Similarly, in the garment sector, the ITGLWF mapped – with varying degrees of success – a selection of lead firm and supplier networks to create bargaining leverage to work on joint campaigns with civil
society partners such as NGOs (Croucher and Cotton, 2009: 92–93; Miller, 2004, 2008).

Nonetheless, in the context of the complex and fluid character of supplier networks and corporate strategy, the ability of global unions to provide accurate and effective research on a sustained basis is very much in question (Anderson et al., 2010: 392).

The second domain has been education and training. As detailed by Croucher and Cotton (2009), workshops and training initiatives have long been a central feature of GUF activity. Trade union education, which is typically funded by SSOs, tends to focus on the training and development of union delegates in various forms of worker representation; training of union educators within affiliates on other topics such as women’s participation in union activities; and health and safety issues such as HIV–AIDS (Croucher and Cotton, 2009: 83–87). The prevalence of these activities has led to some internal and external critiques that the hosting of workshops and education programmes may not always translate to actual effect in organizing workers or increasing union power. Several GUFs are now seeking to better link such education activity to organizing and union building outcomes.

The third domain of activity, which is closely related to knowledge production and circulation, is the role of GUFs in providing formal worker representation and participation in various global institutions or transnational initiatives. The role of the GUFs in the International Labour Organization (ILO) in coordination with the ITUC is no doubt most prominent here. However, GUFs also lobby and make representations to a number of global institutions, including, among others, the World Bank and a variety of international inter-governmental bodies (Müller et al., 2010). A prominent criticism of this type of activity is that it prioritizes a form of ‘labour diplomacy’ that provides formal representation and lobbying capacity in global institutions, but is disconnected from grassroots union activities and member involvement and takes precedence over other more contentious traditions of labour internationalism built around transnational campaigns and organizing (Hyman, 2005). Indeed, Dan Gallin, the former general secretary of the IUF, has argued that decades of lobbying global institutions have produced few gains for the international labour movement and rather has detracted from the grassroots effectiveness of global unions (cited in Lambert and Gillan, 2010: 398). While Gallin’s is among the sharpest critiques, others have observed broad disenchantment with the limited effect of international institutional lobbying and engagement (Croucher and Cotton, 2009: 61; Fairbrother and Hammer, 2005).

The fourth domain relates to GUFs’ role as a resource for workers and local trade unions. While GUFs have been required to act at the global scale – especially on problems and initiatives that are clearly transnational and that require to some extent the formal engagement of global representation – they also help unions ‘internationalize’ local conflicts involving violations of rights or health and safety standards, resistance to or denial of collective bargaining, and union recognition. There are many studies that provide descriptive accounts and critical analysis of strikes, disputes or industrial or political campaigns where local and/or national unions and workers have sought to strengthen their power and capacity by connecting with a GUF as a
strategic resource for rescaling their struggle or concern. Examples of these studies of local industrial conflicts or campaigns that have become ‘global’ (multi-scalar) with the assistance or coordination of GUFs include IUF campaigns in South and Southeast Asia and Latin America in plantation agriculture and food and beverage manufacturing enterprises (Garver et al., 2007; Gillan and Lambert, 2013: 195–196; Rossman, 2013).

Direct engagement of GUFs in trade union formation and/or recruitment of union members in various locales and industries have also been observed and analysed (Garver et al., 2007; Lillie, 2005; McCallum, 2013). However, this strategy is less typical than others. In part, this is due to the limited authority of the GUFs, which have no directive power over national or local affiliates and have historically worked to support and facilitate established organizing efforts of affiliates rather than engaging directly in union formation or organizing programmes. This orientation of GUFs has been referred to as ‘subsidiarity’ whereby ‘power resides in local or regional structures with the central body carrying a frameworksetting, coordinating and monitoring function’ (Cotton and GumbrellMcCormick, 2012: 718). Limited direct engagement in organizing is also no doubt due to the significant costs associated with such initiatives and the uneven ability of GUFs to access donor funds for organizing programmes. Nonetheless, while access to financial resources remains an ongoing problem, there is growing interest among GUFs in project-based work that results in measurable impact with regard to union presence or membership growth in sectors or employers where unions have been weakly present or non-existent (BWI, 2013; Holdcroft, 2013).

The domain of activity that has generated the greatest scholarly interest over recent years are the efforts by GUFs to negotiate and implement global agreements with MNCs to open new space for the supra-national regulation of labour standards and employment relations practices within a global corporate network (Fichter et al., 2012; Hammer, 2005; Niforou, 2012). Over recent decades, GUFs have engaged to varying degrees with the governance and design of a proliferation of increasingly voluntaristic and generally weakly enforceable forms of supranational regulation – ranging from ethical trade initiatives and labelling systems, to multi-party initiatives such as the global compact, to the development of private corporate codes of conduct purportedly regulated via forms of audit and monitoring. The development of International Framework Agreements (IFAs)/GFAs can be seen as an attempt by global unions to define this terrain of voluntaristic regulation on their own terms.

While their content varies, IFAs/GFAs generally affirm core labour standards including freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. Some also secure better working conditions, wages and safety standards for core employees (Telljohann et al., 2009: 6). According to Hammer (2005), the initial batch of global agreements were focused on protecting core labour rights, although some were more clearly intended to open space for ongoing union bargaining at global, national or local scales. The first IFA/GFA was signed between the IUF and the food production MNC Danone (then known as BSN) in 1988. Although a signed document between the IUF and its corporate counterpart, it was intended as a broad-based commitment to
upholding trade union rights and improved access to information throughout all subsidiaries of that corporation (Gallin, 2014: 164–165). Since that time, most GUFs have established at least some IFAs/GFAs. As noted in several studies, GFAs have varied widely in their content and coverage. Some agreements are limited to a formal commitment to observing ‘core’ ILO labour standards in all subsidiaries, whereas others include clauses pertaining to monitoring and implementation and employment relations practices in firms within the corporate supply and contracting network. IndustriALL, BWI and UNI Global union have been most active in terms of signed agreements.

GUFs have also attempted to articulate with non-union regulatory and monitoring initiatives. In conjunction with a variety of international NGOs and advocacy groups, they have sought to shape the design and implementation of codes of conduct and ‘multi-stakeholder initiatives’ (Miller, 2008: 177–179). These interventions have been especially evident in industries such as electronics and textiles, clothing and footwear where unions are weak and supply chains highly complex and fluid. There is also some interaction between GFAs and these other voluntaristic forms of supra-national regulation such as corporate codes of conduct and social reporting, and various multi-party corporate social responsibility initiatives such as the United Nations’ ‘Global Compact’ and the Ethical Trading Initiative. However, what has especially engaged interest in global agreements has been the independent status of trade unions in negotiating and potentially activating the instruments and therefore the potential for opening new forms of bargaining leverage and union coverage throughout a corporate network.

Finally, there is an emerging focus on the role of GUFs in developing or supporting transnational trade union networks – not least because the creation of union networks across a corporate network or sector are regarded by some observers as essential for monitoring global agreements and utilizing their provisions for increased union presence and effect on the ground. According to a typology developed by Helfen and Fichter (2013), these can be corporate union networks or GUF-facilitated networks. The former are linked to the varying capacity of unions to leverage bargaining power and union presence within some MNCs for the development of intra-corporate union-to-union networks which can be either more durable and institutionalized (e.g. world works council and union network meetings in companies such as Volkswagen) or of a more contingent and campaign-based form. Although a distinction is made here between GUF and corporate union networks, almost all transnational corporate union networks involve GUFs as a relevant constituent. The questions of available resources and function are especially significant when considering the broad range of initiatives and activities that could be considered as union ‘network building’. As Helfen and Fichter (2013: 560) have noted, GUFs are in general ‘largely dependent on the resources and inputs of their most powerful and internationally active affiliates’, and thus transnational union network construction and maintenance is demanding in that the GUFs cannot ‘draw on hierarchical authority’ and instead must coordinate ‘participants operating under their own organizational constraints and often widely differing policy agendas’. However, given that resources are very limited for unions
across all scales, it is unclear whether it is feasible or even desirable to attempt to build durable and institutionalized union networks. Questions also remain about the primary purpose of these networks – should they facilitate formal ‘dialogue’ and exchange between unions and management or increase the capacity for ‘on the ground’ organizing of union members and representation where and when necessary through campaign-based mobilization?

**Agents of change or marginal actors?**

For all the possibilities that are opened up by the inherently multi-scalar forms of action and span of global unions, the question of how this potential translates into demonstrable effect on industrial relations is very much unresolved. With regard to global agreement making, for instance, some studies have pointed to the positive effect of IFAs/GFAs under certain circumstances, but many others emphasize the limited translation of formal agreement making at global/corporate level into action by managers, workers and unions at industry or enterprise level (Davies et al., 2011; Niforou, 2012). This is in part a problem of the failure to build implementation measures into agreements that are ultimately far removed from local contexts. A multi-country study of the prevalence and effect of GFAs (Fichter et al., 2012) has found that, in the majority of instances, GFAs were unknown or poorly understood at enterprise and local levels, rarely relevant for supplier firms and infrequently activated by local unions. This is a situation that some GUFs are now seeking to redress. IndustriALL, for instance, has recently concluded a GFA with Inditex – one of the largest garment manufacturers in the world – which includes undertakings by the corporation to provide funding for independent trade union officers in India, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Turkey, Latin America and China to monitor and report on the compliance of corporate subsidiaries and supplier firms with the agreement (Guguen, 2014: 22).

Additionally, these instruments must be operationalized in contexts which are often hostile to union presence and labour regulation, such as the USA (Fichter and Stevis, 2013), or in developing country environments where workers have little bargaining power and unions are weak and/or fragmented (Brookes, 2013). For instance, one study of the scope and operation in Malaysia, Brazil and Ukraine of a global agreement between BWI and a multinational construction firm originating in Germany, notes that it was ‘crucial to go beyond mere complaints mechanisms and to actively address local obstacles to building capacity’. The study went on to note that there was a ‘politics of application’ that meant that the interpretation and implementation of the agreement in diverse settings was strongly related to the local context of labour–capital power relations, governance and market structure (Davies et al., 2011: 135). In a book-length collection of studies of the design and implementation of IFAs/GFAs, it was observed that while they may ‘improve the prospects for the effective implementation of fundamental rights at work’, the ‘links between the existence of an IFA and the improvement of working conditions are much less evident’ (Papadakis, 2011: 12). Ultimately, such agreements also remain bounded by the MNC itself (Papadakis, 2011: 16–17). Indeed, the sole global collective agreement with sectoral coverage and clear procedures for implementation remains that between the ITF and international maritime employers – an agreement which itself was
reached only through sustained mobilization through the Flag of Convenience campaign that conjoined the ‘struggles of sea farers and port workers through a global strategy of union networking and coordinated industrial action’ (Lillie, 2005: 89).

Clearly, one of the intentions behind the promotion of trade union networks, particularly within IndustriALL (which has been the most prominent GUF in promoting and seeking resources for building transnational union networks), is to strengthen the effectiveness of monitoring and implementing GFAs through stronger and more active union networks and exchanges. Nonetheless, the sustainability and effect of union networks within GPNs or MNCs have yet to be proven, and there is a concern in some quarters that formal networks and structures support the sporadic exchange of information between union participants rather than effective and directly engaged transnational campaigns and organizing initiatives to rebuild union power. This concern is supported by the fact that the most developed union networks at this early stage appear to be in the auto sector where several MNCs have been prepared to fund union network meetings largely as an instrument of social dialogue (Guguen, 2014).

As we have also noted, GUFs are often called on to support and raise awareness of local industrial conflicts and concerns. On the one hand, this is an aspect of their work where effect can be clearly demonstrated: there are many documented instances where sustained, concerted struggle and campaigning by a global union and its local partner have led to improved worker representation and working conditions. On the other hand, such campaigns are resource intensive and may or may not lead to sustained local bargaining power and union capacity within the firm (Anderson, 2014). Enterprise or firm-based campaigns are most often driven from below: when confronted with evidence of egregious labour practices or union avoidance, GUFs are typically compelled to respond in some way to local appeals. Yet, as Anderson (2014) has noted, even successful local campaigns may have limited spill-over effects in strengthening rights, conditions and ability to represent workers in other workplaces in the same sector.

One possible answer to this dilemma is the extent to which GUFs can transform specific ‘local’ struggles, campaigns and concerns into ongoing and sustained bargaining leverage within the corporate network or broader demands for structural change. In the case of the former, we have seen how the IUF has sought to develop vigorous campaigns across multiple sites within certain MNCs to exert some degree of sustained pressure on a corporate hierarchy. In the latter, recent examples include campaigns run by BWI (in conjunction with the ITUC) on the exploitation of migrant workers in large construction projects associated with global events such as the football World Cup or the recent campaign by IndustriALL, in the wake of the death of over one thousand workers in a factory collapse in 2013, to create and monitor an accord for supplier firms in the garment industry in Bangladesh. In both instances, these are campaigns that are linked to contingencies – heightened media attention around global events or in the context of a horrific industrial disaster – which provided the opportunity for efforts to drive through structural change at industry or national level to labour practices and enhance space for union recognition and representation.
Conclusion

In most respects, GUFs are perhaps best characterized as organizations that are grappling with both the constraints and the opportunities of scale. As elsewhere noted, while there is an emerging ‘consensus on the multiscalar nature of successful labour action, there remains little agreement on the processes which foster such power’ (Tufts and Savage, 2009: 946). One pathway to an understanding of these processes is closer attention to the characteristics and internal dynamics of key institutional actors that are intermediaries or facilitators in multi-scalar initiatives. As we have discussed here, GUFs are in a unique and even privileged position to imagine, trigger and coordinate transnational labour action. They have expanded their scope in terms of members and geographic spread and this has increased their relevance and legitimacy. They act across multiple spheres of governance and have attempted to extend and develop transnational union campaigns, networks and bargaining capacity. Yet the GUFs have largely engaged in a patchwork of interventions in economic sectors, production networks and specific national settings rather than through a sustained transnational strategy. Their ability to effectively represent workers and affiliates remains severely constrained by limited resources with regard to finance and personnel; their own internal organizational characteristics, including their still distinctively European composition and the difficulty of implementing and coordinating different scalar levels within their own structures; and, finally, the reality of their limited authority when compared to national trade union federations.

Several scholars have pointed also to the significance of context in shaping whether a multi-scalar union strategy or action actually translates to effect and change in a particular industry, occupation, territory or workplace. It has been argued that GUFs, as sectoral federations, are positioned in very different ways with regard to strategy and the implementation of action across production networks and this is also thought to shape the politics of inter-union relations (Cumbers et al., 2008). The need for GUFs to develop varied, carefully designed and context-appropriate strategies in order to exercise power and influence over employers and states has also been noted (Brookes, 2013: 194), while studies of specific campaigns and initiatives (Davies et al., 2011; McCallum, 2013; Niforou, 2012) have shown the significance of local or regional context in determining the success or failure of avowedly ‘global’ initiatives – whether it be the established organizational forms and repertoires of local or national unions or the configuration of politics, governance or employment relations in particular settings. This would appear to be especially relevant to the effect of global campaigns and regulatory initiatives on workplaces situated in the Global South where unions are often weak, fragmented and have limited institutional and associational power (Brookes, 2013). To a large extent, however, our understanding of the flows and dynamics of interactions between GUFs and other unions across scale remains limited. A substantial research agenda – including more detailed empirical analysis of the strategic and historical development of each global union and the effect (or lack thereof) of their interventions in specific industries, occupations, production networks and
References


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**Biographical notes**

**Michele Ford** (michele.ford@sydney.edu.au) is Professor of Southeast Asian Studies, Director of the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre and an ARC Future Fellow at the University of Sydney.

**Michael Gillan** (michael.gillan@uwa.edu.au) is Associate Professor of Employment Relations at the University of Western Australia.
Notes

1 On the emergence of this literature, see McGrath-Champ et al. (2010) and Tufts and Savage (2009).
2 The use of the term ‘repertoires of action’ to discuss and analyse the tactics of social movements began with Charles Tilly and later was extended by scholars such as Tarrow (1993), who studies among other things the means by which repertoires of action have changed over time. For a recent overview of the use of these concepts drawn from social movement theory in industrial relations research, see Gahan and Pekarek (2013).
4 See, for instance, studies of various union campaigns and actions in edited collections of studies by Bronfenbrenner (2007), Fairbrother et al. (2013) and McGrath-Champ et al. (2010).
5 For a recent discussion of the multi-disciplinary character of this literature, see Brookes (2013).
6 Although the International Trade Secretariats continued to operate autonomously from the ICFTU, they agreed to cooperate on ‘matters of common interest’ (Snyder, 2008: 19). This relationship was maintained when in 2006 the ICFTU amalgamated with the World Confederation of Labour (WCL) to become the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC).
7 Note, however, that different elements within UNI take different positions on this issue. UNI-Graphical, for example, argues that IFAs must be used to strengthen campaigns, while UNI-Finance is more concerned with establishing transnational frameworks that can then be used to argue for greater union rights (Telljohann et al., 2009).
8 Croucher and Cotton (2009: 91) assert and defend the significance of trade union education, while acknowledging that these activities are often marginalized within global union executives – a tendency that they link to the ‘profound problem of demonstrating palpable outcomes from educational work’.
9 For instance, the ‘strategy plan’ adopted by BWI at its 2013 World Congress discusses education programmes and other related forms of capacity building as one component of a strategic focus on ‘organising, negotiating and mobilising’ (BWI, 2013: 10).
10 Policy and institutional interventions can and do occur at a broad systemic level, as in instances where GUFs have articulated general policy positions on behalf of members and affiliates on common global concerns such as the global financial crisis (Le Queux and Peetz, 2013) and environmental sustainability (Felli, 2014: 379–380; Räthzel and Uzzell, 2011). However, interventions on issues such as the environment can also have a particular and applied dimension, as is evident, for instance, in the efforts of BWI to link ‘sustainable forestry’ (resource management and the certification of forestry products) with the incorporation of labour standards and trade union rights (Khazri et al., 2009; White, 2006).
11 They have simultaneously been vocal in their criticism of the generally weak and unenforceable nature of such initiatives, which they argue never can nor should substitute for independent worker representation via trade unions.