

The final, definitive version of this paper has been published as:

Ford, M. (2013). The Global Union Federations and Temporary Labour Migration in Malaysia. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 55(2), 260-276 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185612473216>

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The Global Union Federations and Temporary Labour Migration in Malaysia

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Abstract

Since the mid-2000s, the Global Union Federations have played a pivotal role in the reshaping of Malaysian trade unions' attitudes towards temporary migrant workers, providing the conceptual tools and material resources – and, in many cases, the motivation – required to reach out to this most non-traditional of non-traditional constituencies. This article documents the different approaches taken by a number of Global Union Federations as they seek to apply lessons learnt from the experience of their European affiliates in the Malaysian context. It argues that while Global Union Federation agendas are largely determined by donor and head office priorities, those agendas are mediated, and sometimes transformed, as they are rolled out through the Global Union Federations' regional offices and to local affiliates in 'target countries' like Malaysia. This finding not only has consequences for temporary migrant workers in particular destinations, but also for our understanding of the structures of the international labour movement and the practices of trade union aid.

Keywords: Europe, international labour movement, Malaysia, migrant labour, trade union aid

Introduction

International labour solidarity continues to be dominated by an aid-based model, with all the trappings of upward accountability that this implies (Ford, 2006b). Millions of dollars of trade union aid – much of it sourced from the overseas development assistance programmes of European governments – is distributed every year to trade unions in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe. Yet, despite the magnitude of these flows and their significance for developing country labour movements, we have very little understanding of how trade union aid is allocated or what it achieves. There is a growing literature on transnational solidarity campaigns and the role of the Global Union Federations (GUFs) in negotiating international framework agreements (e.g. Anner et al., 2006; Cumbers et al., 2008; Fairbrother and Hammer, 2005; Garver et al., 2007; Ghigliani, 2005; Wills, 2002), but virtually no studies of GUF trade union aid projects or their impact in particular national contexts (exceptions include Croucher, 2004; Ford and Dibley, 2011, 2012).¹

Trade union aid is used for many different purposes, among them, to underwrite the basic running costs of developing-country trade unions, fund organising projects or specialist training, or mount particular industrial or policy campaigns. In recent decades, temporary labour migration has emerged as another target for trade union donors. Trade unions have traditionally been hostile towards migrant labour because of the threat migrant workers were seen to pose to the interests (and even jobs) of ‘local’ workers (Haus, 1995; Nissen and Grenier, 2001). However, growing exposure to migrant labour has forced a significant rethinking of this approach in some sectors in Europe, North America and, to an increasing extent, Australia. There are also a growing number of countries in other regions in which trade unions are struggling to maintain membership and bargaining power in the face of increased flows of temporary labour migrants, not least of which is developing Asia.

Malaysia receives the highest numbers of documented temporary labour migrants in South-east Asia. It is not surprising, therefore, that it has been a key target of campaigns by the GUFs – and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – to encourage local trade unions to engage with the migrant labour question. In conjunction with the bilateral initiatives of some Solidarity Support Organisations (SSOs) and multilateral programmes by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), GUF projects have had a significant impact on Malaysian trade unions’ rhetoric and practice around temporary labour migration. Notably, however, the extent, focus and structure of those projects have varied considerably, raising the question of precisely what determines these differences.

This article explores the motivations behind the GUFs’ interest in temporary labour migration and the impact of GUF projects in Malaysia. It argues that while GUF agendas are largely determined by donor priorities and the experiences of their European affiliates, those agendas are mediated, and sometimes transformed, as they are rolled out through the GUFs’ regional offices and to local affiliates. In other words, the Malaysian case suggests that, rather than simply representing a response to labour market developments, the intensity and the models of engagement employed in migrant labour projects in ‘target countries’ like Malaysia are determined by the distribution of power and resources within the structure of the international labour movement, and by contingency and local context.²

Determinants of Global Union Federation approaches to temporary labour migration

The extent to which the GUFs engage with the issue of temporary labour migration is determined by the complex interplay of a range of factors. Most important are the extent to which a particular GUF is committed to campaign work (determined by the internal politics, history and ideology of each GUF), their financial capacity to undertake it and the extent to which migrant labour is prevalent in the sectors for which it has responsibility. Also important, however, are the mediating factors of contingency and local context. These additional factors operate in sometimes unpredictable ways at different scales of the international labour movement, sometimes with fundamental consequences for the ways in which particular initiatives take shape.

Financial and sectoral drives within Europe

GUFs' capacity to work in developing-country contexts depends on their ability to amass the financial and human resources required to implement campaigns and projects. The establishment and continuation of any given initiative is therefore contingent on donor priorities, project cycles and the level of discretionary funds available in any given year.³ It is not surprising, then, that GUF agendas reflect the prevailing concerns of the European labour movement, where the wealthiest trade union donors are located. In some parts of Europe, SSOs run by national trade union confederations can access substantial funds for trade union work in poorer countries through their governments' development assistance programmes. Some funds flow bilaterally, direct from SSOs like the Dutch FNV Mondiaale or Trade Union Solidarity of Finland (Suomen Ammattilittojen Solidaarisuuskeskus (SASK)) to trade unions in developing countries. SSOs also invest heavily in GUF projects. In addition, wealthy GUF affiliates provide direct support for the GUFs' outreach work. Thus, although the GUFs are a step removed from the national interests of individual countries or regions, their dependence on support from nationally-based affiliates and SSOs requires that their programmes at least in part reflect the priorities of those organisations. In other words, as Gallin (2002: 238) has argued, GUF affiliates 'think and act in national terms'.⁴ And although the direct influence of home governments on SSOs waned considerably after the end of the Cold War (Wills, 1998: 116–117), states continue to attempt to determine the form and direction of trade union aid projects. As a result, projects funded by the SSOs also reflect the priorities of their home governments to some extent.

The migrant labour issue gained traction in Europe as a result of labour mobility arrangements put in place with the expansion of the European Union (EU).⁵ The commitment to labour mobility, a founding principle of the EU's Single Market, was challenged by successive expansions of the EU in 2004 and 2007. The pattern of transitional restrictions put in place before the 2004 enlargement diverted mobile workers from Central and Eastern Europe away from their traditional destination in Western Europe (Germany) and towards the UK and Ireland, which, along with Sweden, were the first countries to grant access to their labour markets. Germany, by contrast, maintained restrictions for the maximum period allowable (Holland et al., 2011: 15). Migrants from the countries joining the EU in 2007 have favoured Italy and Spain as destinations, partly as a result of geographic and/or linguistic proximity (in the case of Romania), but also because a number of bilateral agreements were reached between Spain and Italy and the sending countries in the lead-up to the 2007 expansion (Kahanec et al., 2009).⁶

Engagement with the migrant labour issue by individual GUFs within Europe has varied dramatically as a result of their sectoral exposure to migrant labour.⁷ As a consequence, affiliates of the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) – whose mandate covers hospitality and agriculture – and the Building and Wood Workers International (BWI) – the GUF responsible for construction workers – are most active on migrant labour. The conditions of Moroccan agricultural workers in Southern Spain emerged as a major issue during the IUF's 2002 Congress. Since then, the IUF has campaigned on migrant labour in agriculture, hotels and meat processing, most actively in the agricultural sector. As part of its migrant labour initiative, the IUF has established an agreement under which union members of good

standing in their home countries have automatic access to membership of an IUF-affiliated union in their destination country. Other key initiatives in the European context include the employment of members of migrant communities to help attract migrants to the union (e.g. its Dutch affiliate employs an Arabicspeaking organiser to target the horticultural sector). They also include solidarity campaigns, such as the campaign against the retail giant Marks and Spencer, when UK meat-processing unions lobbied for equal treatment for agency workers (most of whom are migrant workers), initially expanding to involve unions representing workers in other parts of the production chain in the United Kingdom and then protests against the chain internationally. In addition, affiliates of the BWI in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, Holland, the Czech and Slovak Republics, Poland and in the Nordic countries engage in activities to support migrant workers – in many cases, involving organising. For example, BWI's affiliates in The Netherlands are both actively involved in organising Polish workers – a focus reflected in its constitution, which includes a commitment to reciprocal union membership. The BWI also promotes bilateral cooperation, agreements and exchange of information among members and has developed the European Construction Mobility Information Network.

By contrast, although the manufacturing sector also employs a considerable number of migrant workers, the European affiliates of the manufacturing GUFs – the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF), the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF) and the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM) – have historically taken little interest in migrant labour issues. Of these, the IMF, the GUF responsible for metalworkers, has been most active on the migrant labour question, responding to demands from its affiliates in Spain and Italy, where migrant workers constitute a significant proportion of the workforce in the sector. In 2009, the IMF released data from a survey focusing on the migrant worker experience and trade unions' attempts to organise migrant workers in the metal industry, compiled from data gathered from their affiliates in all regions of the world (IMF, 2009a). At the end of the same year, affiliates from Europe, Latin America and Asia met for a purpose-specific conference in Bangkok, where delegates identified a broad range of possible activities, including cross-border campaigning, collaboration with NGOs, service work and organising (IMF, 2009b).

Contingency

Occasions like the IMF's 2009 Bangkok meeting provide structures through which a GUF programme can be formulated and garner support among wealthy affiliates, while the extent to which affiliates are prepared to engage with the migrant labour issue reflects their interest in the migrant labour issue in their home context. When interest is accompanied by targeted funding, affiliates can have a defining influence on a GUF's decision to actively pursue the migrant labour agenda. At the same time, however, the extent to which the migrant labour agenda (where it exists) translates into a global programme is also influenced by a GUF's established ways of working (interventionist, passive), the focus and effectiveness of head office staff, and – importantly – the priorities, networks and individual characteristics of the regional secretaries and other staff tasked with programme development and implementation.

The resulting variations demonstrate how strategically placed individuals can shape the ways in which donor agendas are operationalised at different scales. The influence of the head office is nowhere clearer than in a comparison of the global programmes of the BWI, IUF and IMF, the most active GUFs on the migrant labour issue within the European context. As of 2009, the BWI had 55 trade union development programmes globally that included a migration element (interview with Tos Añonuevo, Geneva, 27 April 2009). By contrast, IUF head office staff acknowledge that its migrant labour programme has very much focused on Europe, even though a number of the sectors that fall into the IUF's jurisdiction – which include agriculture and hospitality – host large numbers of temporary migrant workers in the developing world (interview with Sue Longley, Geneva, 30 April 2009). Similarly, the IMF, which has well-established organising projects in some developing countries, has demonstrated little interest in the migrant labour issue in those contexts (interview with Jenny Holdcroft, IMF, Kuala Lumpur, 18 August 2009).⁸ This is despite the fact that the metals sector (which includes electronics) provides employment for significant numbers of temporary migrant workers (e.g. Borman et al., 2010). It is thus clear that the different decisions made by the IMF, BWI and IUF are not driven entirely by assessments of urgency or need in different national contexts, but also by the policy priorities of head office.

The lean and geographically dispersed staffing profile of the GUFs also means that a sole programme officer or a regional secretary may have considerable flexibility in project focus, design and implementation. This structural decentralisation creates space for the regional secretaries and programme officers to promote some initiatives and not others (Ford and Dibley, 2012), and to introduce particular strategies or emphases within programmes. For example, Public Services International (PSI), which has very little focus on migrant labour within Europe, engages with the migrant labour question through its Gender and Health Programme in selected developing countries. The approach adopted within this initiative has been driven largely by a single programme officer, who openly admits that her approach to her work is informed by her background as an NGO activist (interview with Genevieve Gencianos, FerneyVoltaire, 29 April 2009). Similarly, the orientation, experiences and personal attributes of the regional secretaries helps explain the focus of a particular GUF migration project and the strategies it uses.

Local context

Local context is the final determining factor in the complex multi-scalar web of opportunities and constraints in which GUF projects are implemented. Although developing-country trade union movements are generally weak, they differ greatly from country to country as a result of factors such as the nature of political systems and countries' industrial and labour market profiles. In some contexts, such as India and Sri Lanka, trade unions have maintained a role not just in the formal sector of the economy, but also in the institutions of the democratic polity. In others, including South-east Asian states like Malaysia and New Order Indonesia (1967–1998), trade unions were co-opted into (semi-)authoritarian state structures in ways that contained rather than allowed them to freely represent their members' economic and political interests (Ford, 2009; Jomo and Todd, 1994).

Developing-country labour movements also vary in strength within national boundaries, sometimes by sector and or geographical area. Politically or economically sensitive sectors can attract close scrutiny or be subject to sector-specific restrictions, as has been the case in Malaysia's electronics industry where, until 2010, non-in-house trade unions were banned (Bhopal, 1997; Borman et al., 2010). Similarly, trade unions can be concentrated in core geographic areas and far weaker or even effectively absent elsewhere, as is the case, for example, in the Thai–Myanmar borderlands (Arnold, 2013; Ford, 2007). As a result, an individual GUF may or may not have an affiliate in a given country context. Where they do have one or more affiliates, those trade unions may or may not have good coverage in the industry or political clout.

In addition, government policies may facilitate or impede GUFs' capacity to mount projects involving those affiliates, limiting either opportunities for foreign labour movement organisations to engage directly, or the extent to which affiliates are permitted to accept foreign funding. Indonesia is a case in point. Although some SSOs – most notably, the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (then the Asian-American Free Labor Institute) – worked with unregistered alternative unions, the International Trade Secretariats (the precursors to the GUFs) and most SSOs engaged with the official trade union during the New Order period, and then only in ways deemed acceptable by the state. Although GUFs and SSOs have been able to engage much more freely with local trade unions in democratic Indonesia (see Ford, 2009), as the labour movement gained momentum, Indonesia's State Intelligence Agency and other arms of government again engaged in closer monitoring of the activities of trade unions and their international partners.

These and a host of other local variables effectively determine the space available to the GUFs in any particular country and, consequently, their capacity to implement specific projects or otherwise influence the local labour movement, as demonstrated in the following discussion of GUF projects on temporary labour migration in Malaysia.

The Global Union Federations in Malaysia

As a region, South-east Asia has been a key focus for GUF campaigns on temporary labour migration outside Europe because of the intensity of flows of temporary labour migration from and within it. In terms of countries of origin, the Philippines and Indonesia are the most significant. Both have large, long-standing government programmes to facilitate labour migration to the Middle East and wealthy countries in East and South-east Asia. Vietnam and Thailand are also source countries for documented labour migrants to Singapore and Malaysia, as well as East Asia and the Middle East. In terms of destination countries, Malaysia and Singapore are the most significant recipients of documented migrant workers from elsewhere in South-east Asia or from further afield. Malaysia and Thailand are also destinations for millions of undocumented workers, in Malaysia's case, predominantly from neighbouring Indonesia (Ford, 2006a, 2010).⁹

As the most developed country in South-east Asia behind Singapore, labour-starved Malaysia is an attractive destination for economic migrants from throughout the region and beyond. In terms of sectoral distribution, documented migrant workers are located across the spectrum

(see Table 1). Temporary labour migrants constitute a majority of the workforce in some industries. For example, in construction, some 70% of workers are foreigners; they also dominate large sections of plantation agriculture, and are a significant presence in specialist occupations like dock work and hospitality (interview with Rajasekaran, General Secretary of the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC), Kuala Lumpur, 18 August 2009).

For a long time, local trade unions were reluctant to engage constructively with an issue they saw to be at best peripheral, and more often detrimental to the interests of local workers. This reluctance in part stemmed from prejudice, but also from the knowledge that it is logistically difficult to organise temporary migrant workers in any national context – let alone in a context characterised by punitive legal and industrial relations structures and weak trade unions (Crisis, 2003). In fact, in the past, Malaysian trade unions actively campaigned for the expulsion of migrant workers on the grounds that they were taking local jobs (Crisis, 2005).

Table 1. Sectoral distribution of documented temporary labour migrants, 2010

Country of origin	Sector					Total
	Domestic work	Construction	Manufacturing	Services	Agriculture	
Indonesia	203,225	192,789	198,643	38,684	284,591	917,932
Bangladesh	18	61,303	170,332	27,002	48,711	307,366
Nepal	84	3785	135,764	26,901	9176	175,810
Myanmar	118	13,542	92,135	22,654	11,811	140,260
India	236	5002	13,866	47,021	47,672	113,797
Vietnam	901	3021	68,433	2018	469	74,842
Pakistan	11	5922	2217	1593	13,246	22,989
The Philippines	9657	1031	1915	2944	3093	18,640
Cambodia	9166	92	2353	218	261	12,091
China	15	1303	935	6592	49	8894
Thailand	346	811	893	4588	464	7102
Sri Lanka	753	69	1382	665	545	3414
Laos	2	7	16	3	29	57
Other	12	45	2	7	0	66
Total	224,544	288,722	688,886	180,890	420,218	1,803,260

Source: Department of Immigration Statistics, cited in Sabri Bin Haji Karmani (2010).

Since 2005, there has been a dramatic shift in the public position of the Malaysian trade union movement on the issue of temporary labour migration. This shift was in part the result of a change in the senior leadership of the MTUC in that year.¹⁰ It was, however, also very much a response to pressure from the international labour movement (interview with Rajasekaran, MTUC General Secretary, Kuala Lumpur, 18 August 2009). The MTUC's efforts to reach out to migrant workers have included the appointment of a full-time programme officer to deal with the foreign domestic worker question; the secondment of another staff member half-time to deal with migrant workers in other sectors; and the

provision of legal support in selected cases concerning migrant workers through its industrial relations department.

Migrant labour programmes have also been initiated by a number of national sectoral unions. A small number of Malaysian trade unions have also been actively recruiting migrant workers. One key example is the Union of Employers of Port Ancillary Services (IEPAS), which is an affiliate of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) but has received no support for its organising efforts (interview with IEPAS General Secretary Balasubramaniam, Kuala Lumpur, 17 August 2009). However, the majority of migrant labour projects in Malaysia have had external support, much of it from the GUFs.

Table 2. Typology of GUF activity on temporary labour migration in Malaysia

Model	BWI	UNI	PSI	IUF	ICEM	IMF	ITF	ITGLWF	EI	IAEA	IFJ
Organising	**	*		*							
Servicing		**		*							
Advocacy	**	**	**								
Minimal or none					*	*	*	*			
Irrelevant									*	*	*

Global Union Federation modes of engagement

As elsewhere in the developing world, the GUFs are involved in a wide range of projects in Malaysia, only a small proportion of which are concerned with temporary labour migration. Importantly – unlike SSOs, whose direct interventions in Malaysia have prioritised female domestic overseas workers – most GUF projects have focused primarily on workers in the formal sector, reflecting their sectoral mandate. Within their respective sectors, each GUF has chosen particular modes of engagement, which can broadly be characterised as organising, servicing and advocacy (see Table 2).

Organising and servicing are modes of trade union engagement that are well recognised in the general literature on trade unions (e.g. Boxall and Haynes, 1997; De Turberville, 2004; Heery et al., 2000). In reference to temporary migrant labour, these modes of engagement reflect the extent to which a union is inclusionary in integrating migrant workers into local trade union structures. Servicing refers to the relationship between unions and migrant workers not part of the trade union structure. This mode of engagement maintains distance between local and temporary migrant labour, as unions ‘reach out’ to ‘service’ migrant workers without integrating them into the union. Organising, however, necessitates greater integration, but is a monolithic category that involves either separate organising of migrant workers into purpose-specific trade unions (which also maintains distance between local and migrant workers) or their recruitment into an existing trade union.

The clearest example of organising in the Malaysian context is in the construction industry, where BWI has encouraged the Timber Employees Union Peninsular Malaysia (TEUPM) to develop links with its sending-country counterparts and funded a full-time organising position for a Nepalese trade unionist to organise Nepalese workers in Peninsular Malaysia.¹¹

BWI has also reached out to smaller unions in Sarawak and Sabah in an attempt to expand its migrant labour programme in Eastern Malaysia. The Indonesian-registered trade union, Unimig Indonesia, which represents Indonesians working in Malaysia, is another example of organising. Its formation was sponsored by UNI Global Union (UNI), the GUF that has responsibility for myriad service sector occupations ranging from telecommunications to hair and beauty. UNI Asia-Pacific Regional Office (APRO) Telecom director Kun Wardana Abyoto (an Indonesian citizen) is Unimig's vice president.

UNI also illustrates a servicing approach among GUF initiatives in Malaysia. For several years, UNI's Malaysian Liaison Council supported a migrant labour hotline, which initially targeted foreign domestic workers but has since expanded to cover other sectors. Fielding several hundred calls a month from documented and undocumented migrant workers experiencing employment-related difficulties, the hotline is run by members of UNI's 40 Malaysian affiliates, which also provide legal support in cases where wages have been withheld or other violations of migrant workers' labour rights have occurred.

The third GUF approach to migrant labour revolves around advocacy. Although not as domestically prominent as the MTUC, the GUFs have engaged individually and collectively in regional and international campaigns around the plight of migrant workers in Malaysia. With regard to the latter, Malaysia has been a key focus (along with major sending countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines) of the regional network that developed in the lead-up to the 2008 Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) in Manila. In addition to UNI and the BWI, the PSI has played an important role in driving regional initiatives that have sought to raise awareness of the migrant labour issue at the government and intergovernmental level, encourage other GUFs to engage with this issue, and promote collaboration between trade unions and NGOs.

Networking is a key component of all three modes of engagement in Malaysia. In cases where sexual harassment or other abuse has taken place, the UNI migrant worker hotline refers victims to Tenaganita, Malaysia's most prominent migrant labour NGO, which has the expertise and capacity to provide services to abused workers. TEUPM's ties to trade unions in Nepal and elsewhere and the Unimig cross-border strategy both involve bilateral networks between sending and receiving countries. GUFs' individual advocacy initiatives link local trade unions to the world, while their collective campaigns represent an unusually high level of collaboration within the international labour movement, as well as between GUFs and NGO networks.

The impact of contingency and local context

To what extent, then, are GUF strategies determined by head office policy and donor interest? And to what extent have contingency and local context contributed to the GUFs' modes of engagement in Malaysia?

First, it is clear that the pattern of GUF engagement in the Malaysian context is strongly influenced by – but does not fully reflect – either the sectoral distribution of temporary labour migrants or GUFs' head office policies. Although concentrations of migrant workers are strongest in manufacturing and agriculture, the GUFs with the most developed migrant labour

projects in Malaysia are located in construction and the services sector. Despite the strong presence of temporary migrant workers in manufacturing (and a record of successful organising initiatives in neighbouring Indonesia), the IMF's regional office, which is located in Kuala Lumpur, has no interest in migrant labour. Similarly, the IUF's Australia-based Asia-Pacific office – which is extremely active in South-east Asia on a range of organising and other projects – has virtually no engagement with migrant workers in Malaysia despite their significant presence in both hospitality and agriculture, nor does it actively engage with regional advocacy initiatives on the migrant labour question.

Second, it is evident that not only organisational culture but also the personal interests of regional secretaries have been a defining factor in GUF initiatives on migrant labour in Malaysia. While it is true that the BWI has a strong institutional commitment to the organising model and a relatively strong interest in the migrant labour issue, in the Asia-Pacific region, the BWI's migration agenda very much benefited from the presence of an extremely energetic programme officer and a young and very capable regional secretary, both of whom have since moved into roles in the head office. According to the BWI's regional secretary, migration was his office's 'major agenda' (interview with Ambet Yuson, Kuala Lumpur, 12 June 2008), a commitment that manifested itself in destination countries like Thailand and Malaysia, but also in countries of origin such as Indonesia.

By contrast, although the IUF is widely acknowledged as a leader on the migrant labour issue globally, the fact that regional officials have little interest in the issue is a significant factor in the IUF's lack of engagement with migrant workers in Malaysia. Conversely, while not prominent internationally on the migrant labour question, the background and interests of UNI's regional secretary explain why this GUF plays a leadership role in the region. The pragmatic, primarily service-oriented approach to migrant labour by Regional Secretary Christopher Ng is in part explained by his long experience with the politics of Singapore and Malaysia. Similarly, his personal interest in non-traditional forms of labour activism and openness to collaboration with NGOs have been important drivers in the regional campaign on migrant labour, described by observers within the international labour movement as involving an unprecedented level of cooperation between GUFs (Field Observations, Annual Meeting of GUFs and SSOs, Singapore, November 2009).

The regional campaign further highlights the importance of geographical location as a contingent factor determining the form and focus of GUF migrant labour initiatives. The regional secretaries of the BWI, PSI and UNI located in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, South-east Asia's most important destination countries, have driven the campaign. Not only has their location heightened the regional secretaries' awareness of temporary labour migration, but proximity to one another has facilitated collaboration between them and the NGO network Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA) on this issue. Moreover, the staging of the 2008 GFMD in Manila, where MFA is based, offered a firm focus for the network's initial phase of activities.

Third, the presence of affiliates and their strength and focus greatly influence GUFs' capacity to engage around migrant labour issues. For example, the IUF's only affiliate in the country is the white-collar Malayan Estate Staff Union (MESU). The fact that the blue-collar National

Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) is not affiliated with the IUF presents a real obstacle to attempts to engage with migrant workers, who are almost by definition blue-collar workers (interview with Navamukundan, NUPW Executive Secretary, Kuala Lumpur, 13 August 2009). In the BWI's case, the approach taken has been strongly influenced by the fact that Malaysia's national trade unions only cover the Peninsula, and trade unions in Eastern Malaysia are particularly weak. As a consequence, although migrant labour is clearly important in Eastern Malaysia, the BWI's migrant labour programme concentrates on the Peninsula, where its affiliate, the TEUPM, is relatively well established.

The BWI's use of the embedded organiser strategy with the TEUPM also illustrates the final aspect of local context that determines the form, focus and prospects of migrant labour programmes in Malaysia, namely, the influence of the local regulatory context. The embedded organiser strategy has been used successfully by BWI affiliates in Europe and elsewhere, including Australia.¹² However, it is very different from the strategy used in Hong Kong and South Korea, where the BWI has encouraged separate organising by migrant workers. This difference can be attributed in part to the regulatory restrictions on trade unions in Malaysia where, as in neighbouring Thailand, migrant workers are permitted to join local unions but not to form their own. These same restrictions have informed UNI's decision to support a separate migrant worker union operating in Malaysia but registered in Indonesia.

Conclusion

The GUFs have played a pivotal role in reshaping Malaysian trade unions' attitudes towards temporary migrant workers. Projects sponsored by the international labour movement have encouraged a change in trade unions' public discourse and the development of programmes designed to either support migrant workers or better integrate them into existing trade unions. These developments are highly significant in a context where millions of migrant workers have little or no guarantees of access to their labour rights.

Equally important, however, are the insights that the Malaysian case provides into the workings of the international labour movement and, in particular, the GUFs. As the Malaysian case demonstrates – whether it be through the BWI's, PSI's and UNI's unprecedented level of cooperation at the regional level, the IUF's inaction, or UNI's much more active stance on the migrant labour issue in Malaysia than at head office level – the GUFs' level of engagement and the form that engagement takes can differ significantly. As has been shown here, these differences can be explained by a close examination of the processes through which GUF agendas are formulated and translated into trade union aid programmes, which makes it possible to recognise and track the extent to which contingency and local context shape the contours of those programmes.

In the case of temporary migrant labour, the relatively peripheral status of the migrant labour question within the overall agendas of the GUFs has meant that donors and individual programme officers and regional secretaries have played a particularly strong role in defining the form and focus of migrant labour initiatives. At the same time, because temporary migrant labour is heavily politicised in receiving countries such as Malaysia, the local context (and particularly government regulatory and policy environments) is an important

determinant in the success or otherwise of initiatives in this area. The balance between internal institutional politics, donor interests, contingency and context may play out differently in different areas of GUF engagement, but it is clear that the lessons offered by the migrant labour case has implications for our broader understanding of the structures of the international labour movement and the practices of trade union aid.

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Funding

This article is based on research conducted as part of an Australian Research Council Discovery Project entitled ‘From Migrant to Worker: New Transnational Responses to Temporary Labour Migration in East and Southeast Asia’ (DP0880081).

Biographical Note

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Notes

¹ The GUFs, which replaced the International Trade Secretariats, are sectoral federations that operate at the international level, to which national and regional sectoral unions belong. They complement the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), whose affiliates are national trade union confederations. The GUFs not mentioned in this article are Education International (EI), the International Arts and Entertainment Alliance (IAEA) and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). At the time of writing, ICEM, IMF and ITGWLF were separate entities. They have since merged to form a new GUF called IndustriALL.

² Interviews were conducted in 2009 in Geneva and Ferney-Voltaire with ILO and GUF head office staff. Interviews were conducted with the representatives of the ITUC, the GUFs in Singapore and Malaysia in 2008, 2009 and 2010. In those years, I also had opportunities to engage in observer-participation at GUF and donor meetings in Singapore, and in the 2008 Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) events in the Philippines. Interviews with local trade unionists were conducted in Malaysia in 2009 and 2010.

³ For a discussion of GUF financing, see Croucher and Cotton (2009).

⁴ Research into GUF campaigns in Europe suggests that discourses of accountability to member unions can sometimes act as a conservative force in international labour movement organisations and, consequently, in their transnational campaigns (Coe et al., 2004; Ghigliani, 2005). It should be noted, also, that Europe's economic difficulties have had a significant impact on donors and their priorities.

⁵ In 2004, the 15 founding countries of the EU (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Austria, Portugal, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom) were joined by 10 Eastern European countries (Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia). In 2007, the EU was expanded further to include Romania and Bulgaria.

⁶ Although no definitive figures are available, survey evidence suggests that in original member states, migrants from the countries added to the EU in both the 2004 and 2007 expansions are strongly over-represented in sectors that rely on unskilled and semiskilled manual labour, in particular, agriculture, hospitality and construction (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EFILWC), 2009: 6–7).

⁷ For accounts of trade union responses in individual countries, see Krings (2009) and Woolfson and Somers (2006). Note also that although it clearly reflects sectoral exposure, the ITF's programme for seafarers is an important exception to the generalisation that GUF trends have necessarily been driven by events in Europe.

⁸ For example, the IMF played a role in the formation and initial years of the Federation of Indonesian Metalworkers Unions (Federasi Serikat Pekerja Metal (FSPMI)), the union recognised as the best organised in post-Suharto Indonesia. For details, see Ford (2008, 2009).

⁹ The question of labour migration to neighbouring Thailand, and to a lesser extent in Malaysia, is greatly complicated by refugee flows. As neither country is a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, they do not differentiate between refugees and irregular labour migrants. For details, see Ford (2010, 2012).

¹⁰ Established in 1949, the MTUC is the peak body for private sector unions in Malaysia. Public sector unions are brought together in the Congress of Union of Employees in the Public And Civil Services (CUEPACS).

¹¹ According to the TEUPM's general secretary, the migrant worker project has transformed the mindset at the branch level, and the embedding of a Nepali organiser resulted in significant recruitment of migrant workers (interview with M. Khalid Attan, Kuala Lumpur, 13 August 2009).

¹² The technique has been successfully used by the Construction, Forestry and Mine and Energy Union in Australia.