FEMINIST SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM FROM SOUTH TO NORTH

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ABSTRACT

Employer crackdowns on trade unionisation, neoliberal governments' gutting of trade union protections, and increasing bureaucratisation and risk–averseness of unions themselves, have led to declines in traditional trade union membership. This coupled with informalisation, feminisation, increased migrant labour, newer workforces, and alternate modes of worker organising, has forced trade unions to alter their methods of organising in order to retain their base and their relevance. One way that this has manifested is through social movement unionism, where trade unions explicitly partner with social movements and NGOs on campaigns and social movement work. In this paper, I assess the viability of these social movement unionism coalitions by examining several case studies in the Global North and South through secondary and primary research and identifying conditions for success and failure. I argue that due to increased migration of workers from the Global South to the Global North, the relocation of labour and capital to the Global South itself, and increasingly radical feminist lenses in worker organising and social movements, unions who have prioritised strategies led by people of colour and praxis that is explicitly decolonial, feminist, and transnational have greater success. This is true both when unions work independently and when collaborating with social movements. When such collaborations between unions and non–union social movement forces fail, it is often due to the opaque and top–down organising methods that plague traditional trade unions, and using outdated organising models that preference white, heterosexual men. But when collaborations occur successfully, these coalitions exhibit explicitly feminist and decolonial modes of organising through horizontal and diversified leadership that centre the most directly impacted organisers and activists, transparent and democratic decision–making and communications channels, and expansive and radical worldviews that reach beyond campaign wins to orient towards transformative change.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maya Bhardwaj (she/they) is a community organiser, researcher, musician, and artist originally from Detroit with roots and/or community in Bangalore and New York. Maya wrote this paper while completing a Masters student at SOAS, University of London, where she studied South Asian diaspora queerness, leftist activism, and solidarity with Black liberation. Prior to living in London, she was based between Mexico City and New York City as the It Takes Roots National Coordinator with Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, and before that worked as the Housing Lead Organizer with Faith in New York. In London she is a member of LGSMigrants and Ceilidh for Social Justice; in India, she serves on the advisory board of Haiyya：Organise for Action; in New York, she supports the work of Northern Manhattan is Not for Sale and FemJam՚s femme-led bluegrass, jazz, and strings; and she is also active with several QTPOC and South Asian direct action, art, music, and organising collectives and community groups in the UK, India, and the US. Maya is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Pretoria, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written heralding the demise of traditional trade union politics. Organisers and activists note declining membership, erosion of political power, contract losses, and general malaise within the labour organising world. Simultaneously, neoliberalism has diminished trade union power through anti-union laws at the government level, the global flow of capital has displaced labour from historic union strongholds in the Global North, and greater worker informalisation, feminisation, and retaliation against unionisation from employers has changed the ball game on the shop floor.[1] But decentralised worker organising is also growing, with women's worker centres building power and informalised and formalised workers walking out of exploitative workplaces to fight the effects of globalised, neoliberal, racialised capitalism.[2]

Much of this organising has more recently taken place outside the traditional union model within collectives, community organising groups, and broader social movements.[3] As unions react to this shift and seek to remain relevant, we see examples of Social Movement Unionism, where unions partner with social movements and community organising groups.[4] These partnerships are at times tactical and oriented around campaign goals, and elsewhere oriented around long-term joint struggle. In many countries, particularly in South Africa and the US, as examined more deeply here, social movement unionism has provided a foundation for the revitalisation of trade union politics – but it has also stoked and exacerbated tensions between the differing organising, political, and leadership styles of unions, NGOs, and social movements.[5]

In this paper, I examine the success and longevity of these union plus social movement alliances. I explore when social movement unionism produces campaign wins and relational successes versus when it results in further fragmentation. More specifically, I

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[1] David C. Lier and Kristian Stokke, "Maximum working class unity? Challenges to local social movement unionism in Cape Town," *Antipode* 38, no. 4 (2006): 802–824.
[2] Jan Breman and Marcel van der Linden, "Informalising the Economy: The Return of the Social Question at a Global Level," *Development and Change* 45, no. 5 (2014): 920–940.
[3] Naila Kabeer, "Women Workers and the Politics of Claims Making: The Local and the Global," *Development and Change* 49, no. 3 (2018): 759–789.
[4] David C. Lier and Kristian Stokke, "Maximum working class unity?"
[5] *Ibid.*

ask how social movement unionism can help us understand how unions do or do not participate in coalitions with community-based groups, activists, and/or other social movement structures, and what factors allow these unions able to successfully collaborate with other actors to meet shared tactical goals and visions for broader social transformation.

I first ground this question in a review of social movement unionism and an examination of academic texts documenting failed and successful coalitions between unions and social movements, both in the Global North and the Global South. I particularly examine texts on social movement unionism in South Africa, where there is a longstanding history of collaboration – as well as tension – between trade unions, social movements, and political parties, reaching back to the anti-Apartheid movement.

I then explore two primary research case studies of coalitions in the US, where coalitions engaged in explicitly transnational organising and grassroots membership included significant representation from migrants and members of the Global South diaspora. In these case studies, I examine what factors around decision-making, leadership models, membership consultation, and long-term goals allowed coalitions to successfully bridge between trade unions and social movements, and what factors led to difficulties or coalition failure. I use these case studies and my broader theoretical foundations to draw conclusions regarding trade unions' adaptations and shifts, and the possibility for successful alternative modes of organising with social movements.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis in this paper draws upon both secondary and primary methods. The secondary research draws upon the canon of labour studies, particularly focusing on case studies that examine social movement unionism and the impacts of informalisation and feminisation, on disrupting traditional modes of trade union organising. My primary research builds on this framework of social movement unionism and feminisation. I use these frameworks to analyse events within two social movements and the two coalitions that they were respectively active in, from June of 2015 to July of 2019. During this time, I was embedded in these social movements as an organiser as well as a researcher. My research

methods included participant observation and unstructured and semi-structured interviews, in both group and individual format.

In my participant research, I observed how trade union representatives and members interacted with social movement and NGO representatives and members during coalition meetings that took place in person and over conference calls, during strategy retreats, and during various direct actions and weeks of non-violent direct action that took place between 2015 and 2019. I also observed and documented topics discussed, processes used, and interpersonal and inter-organisational dynamics in coalition spaces.

In my unstructured and semi-structured interviews, I spoke with members and organisers from social movement groups, NGOs, and trade unions about their experience working with their respective coalitions, the relationships they built with other organisers and members from other sectors, and the tensions and challenges they observed in working in a coalitional format. Interviews did not have a stipulated list of questions but included questions on leadership; race, class, and gender dynamics; modes of organising; what constitutes success; changes social movement and/or union makeup over time; and their hopes for organising and social movement unionism in the future. The unstructured and semi-unstructured nature of interviews allowed me to dig into the particular topics that interlocuters addressed as well as probe themes that they did not bring up.

All personal and identifying data in this paper has been anonymised to protect my interlocuters, their organisations, the coalitions I studied, and the work therein. I have used pseudonyms instead of organisational and coalitional names, and I have omitted interlocuters names. I have also changed details about organisational and coalition work to prevent identification. This anonymisation is critical not only to protect my interlocuters' safety, but also to protect the integrity of the work they conduct and to allow them to speak frankly, as much of this movement work is still ongoing.

A note on research and political climate: this research and documentation took place prior to the global spread of COVID-19. This pandemic has had a massive impact on worker organising and trade union response, as COVID-19 and lockdowns have expanded worker exploitation across the globe. The topic of union and social movement organising broadly,

and social movement unionism particularly, under COVID-19, merits further study. Though I do not engage with COVID-19 explicitly in this paper, I hope my engagement with the underlying characteristics of worker organising and social movement unionism protect the usefulness of this analysis in a shifting climate.

CHANGES IN UNION DEMOGRAPHICS AND POWER

The causes for unions' declining membership and reduced power are diverse. Informalisation has made worker organising more challenging, led to fragmented contracts and complex collective bargaining, and has created an underclass of workers often not captured within the traditional union structure. This has been compounded with the rise of migrant labour, both from the Global South to the Global North, as well as within countries themselves.[6] These divisions between workers have damaged the sense of a global proletarian consciousness[7], and have led to a reduction in perception of unions' relevance by many workers whose contract or employee status causes them to be shut out of formal bargaining structures.[8]

The feminisation of labour, or the growing number of women in the workforce and the sometimes particular recruitment of women due to assumptions about their ability to complete work or their docility and unwillingness to unionise, has also caused massive shifts in labour politics, particularly within informalised work. As women do indeed also organise against exploitative labour conditions, labour feminisation has shaken the often male and patriarchal model of top-down labour organising,[9] where the previous heterosexual, working-class, and often white membership no longer hold an unequivocal majority in the workplace and have to shift organising modes, from times of meeting, to styles of decision-making, to what qualifies as a union issue at all. Feminisation has pushed unions to decide whether to address misogyny and harassment in the workplace, to

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[6] Pun Ngai and Lu Huilin, "Unfinished Proletarianisation: Self, Anger, and Class Action among the Second Generation of Peasant-Workers in Present-Day China," *Modern China* 36, no. 5 (September 2010): 493–519.

[7] Beverly Silver and Giovanni Arrighi, "Workers North and South," *Socialist Register: Working Classes, Global Realities* 37 (2001): 53–76.

[8] Jan Breman and Marcel van der Linden, "Informalising the Economy: The Return of the Social Question at a Global Level," *Development and Change* 45, no. 5 (2014): 920–940.

[9] Alessandra Mezzadri, "Class, gender and the sweatshop: on the nexus between labour commodification and exploitation", *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 10 (2016): 1877–1900. Alessandra Mezzadri, "Class, gender and the sweatshop: on the nexus between labour commodification and exploitation", *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 10 (2016): 1877–1900.

address issues around care labour, and whether to explicitly incorporate feminised informal sectors like domestic work into the trade union ecosystem.[10]

These changes in worker demographics have also led to an increase in worker organising outside of collective bargaining and other traditional union strategies. Feminist models of worker organising have shifted focus to policy reforms rather than a sole focus on collective bargaining and contract negotiation.[11] Support systems for women's labour have grown, including tactics like explicit spaces for childcare to support women membership in union structures. Women's worker centres have also created more active ties with social movements, as in the Women's Centre in Sri Lanka's relationships with Sri Lankan feminist organising, and the Working and Unemployed Women's Movement that grew out of gendered struggles within the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.[12]

This feminised and informalized worker organising has also taken place entirely outside of union or worker collective structures. Across the Arab Spring, rank and file workers joined the looser social movements in protests in the streets while formalised unions often stayed silent while tied down in bureaucratic decision-making structures.[13] Similarly, in the anti-austerity Indignados movement in Spain[14], and in workers movements through Occupy and teachers strikes in the US[15], workers operated outside of the structure of unions and came together in struggle through decentralised organising meetings and in the streets. And under the worldwide spread of Coronavirus, ensuing global lockdowns, and fear of disease spread, expanding worker exploitation has sparked workers to engage in work slowdowns and walkouts, some under the auspices of traditional trade unions, but many as wildcat strikes in collaboration with social movements across the globe.[16]

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[10] Naila Kabeer, "Women Workers and the Politics of Claims Making: The Local and the Global," *Development and Change* 49, no. 3 (2018): 759–789.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Naila Kabeer, "Women Workers and the Politics of Claims Making: The Local and the Global."

[13] Maha Abdelrahman, "In Praise of Organisation: Egypt between Activism and Revolution," *Development and Change* 44, no. 3 (May 2013): 569–585.

[14] Cristina F. Flesher, "Debunking Spontaneity: Spain's 15-M/Indignados as Autonomous Movement," *Social Movement Studies* 14, no. 2 (2014): 142–163.

[15] Lauren Langman, "Occupy: A New New Social Movement," *Current Sociology* 61, no. 3 (July 2013): 510–524.

[16] Michel Sainato, "Strikes erupt as US essential workers demand protection amid pandemic," *The Guardian*, 19 May 2020.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM

Unions, in turn, have begun to shift their strategies and modes of organising to recapture lost power and to adapt to the flow of capital and labour under globalised neoliberalism. This has given rise to increased social movement unionism (SMU), which often manifests in coalitions and alliances between trade unions and NGOs, non-profits, and community organising and activist groups. Literature exploring social movement unionism emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s as scholars more deeply examined the impacts of globalised trade and capital flow on social movement fights and struggled to define the shifting of union organising in relation to new social movements. Authors like Moody, Waterman, Scipes, Webster, and Lier and Stokke, who I explore more below, assess the shifting political climate of expanded multinational conglomerations, global free trade agreements, and the consolidation of global neoliberalism during the fall of the Soviet Union. They jointly argue that this transnational nature of capitalism provoked social movement unionism, or deeper collaborations between trade unions and social movements sparked by the need for broader worker and leftist organising.

I echo Moody's exploration of transnational capital flows, shifting migration, and subsequent impacts on organising. Moody indicates that the shift in factories and labour to the Global South provoked a new rise of worker organising. In order to contend with global capital holders based in the Global North, unions had to reach more broadly into partnership with neighbourhood and community groups, national social movements, and across borders to invest in what he terms "international social-movement unionism" (Moody 1995:52). In my case studies, I return to his argument that anti-capitalist forces in the Global South like Brazil, South Africa, and Venezuela will lead this refiguring of anti-capitalist struggle in partnership with co-conspirators in Europe, the US, Japan, and other seats of business and capital.[17]

Seidman takes this argument further, positing that these social movement unionism forces have risen out of the dynamism of the Global South, due to later industrialisation and

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[17] Kim Moody, "Towards an International Social Movement Unionism," *New Left Review* 225 (1995): 52–72.

growth of working-class communities experiencing multiple intersections of power and oppression at once. He places SMU in relationship to new social movements forming both in the Global South and North that have created broader-based movements and indicates that union organising in the Global North will need to reformulate strategies to engage more explicitly with the new social movements dominating the political scene.[18]

I draw on Waterman's analysis to situate these shifts in capital, migration and organising within a landscape of debates between Marxist analyses of capital and postmodern or post-Marxist analyses. Waterman argues that new social movements have reformulated their understanding of the working class from homogeneity to heterogeneity. Trade unions must similarly shift their understanding of their base by appealing to unorganised workers from varied backgrounds and with experience of varied organising methodologies. Waterman concludes that a synthesis between these schools of analysis is necessary to properly understand the shifting strategies that can propel primarily ununionised, working poor workers into power and shared space with diverse, and sometimes factionalised international movements.[19] I assess how trade unions and social movements alike are adopting Waterman's analysis of the working-class through a Gramscian united front model. This also recalls Scipes' exploration of SMU in the Philippines that synthesised Marxist and post-Marxist debates into a framework of democracy and rights.[20]

Finally, I draw examinations of the rise of social movement unionism in its foundational case, South Africa, to indicate fractures in SMU that derive from unions' incorporation into political parties and hence, the ruling class. Through assessing collaborations between Black workers and unions, churches, NGOs, and political parties in the fight against Apartheid, Webster argues that these ties initially transcended localised barriers to form

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[18] Gay Seidman, "Social movement unionism: From description to exhortation," *South African Review of Sociology* 42, no. 3 (2011): 94–102.

[19] Peter Waterman, "Social-Movement Unionism: A New Union Model for a New World Order?," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* (1993): 245–278.

[20] Scipes, Kim. "Social movement unionism and the Kilusang Mayo Uno." *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies* 7, no. 2 (1992).

national political unity and grow international support for a post-Apartheid government.[21]

Lier and Stokke go further in their exploration of South Africa's social movement unionism. They argue that while influence in nationwide politics allowed South African unions to build power through relationships with political parties, it ultimately led to unions' consolidation within the auspices of the state, thereby reducing the possibility for truly transformative change or liberatory Black politics. Instead, unions became side-tracked by the concerns of retaining power.[22] I apply this lens to unions' incorporation in the Global North, and the possibilities of feminist SMU to disrupt this.

Amidst these debates, there lacks a clear understanding of the impact of Global South social movement unionism on the Global North. Northern unions currently contend with an influx of migrant worker members who have organised with or whose family members participate in these new social movement forces in the Global South prior to migration. They have experienced or built democratised and militant methods on the ground.

In the subsequent sections, I argue that this South-North migration flow is contributing to destabilising regressive union politics. Global South migrants are challenging unions' fortification within liberal state power in the Global North. These workers, particularly those who are women of colour, are demanding greater fluidity in decision-making and hierarchy as modelled by social movements. Unless unions adapt, they will continue losing diaspora members to social movements that incorporate a multiplicity of issues outside of pure contract negotiation.

In the first two sections, "Pitfalls of Social Movement Unionism" and "Failed Social Movement Unionism," I explore instances where tensions between unions and Global South-led social movements in the Global North have caused ruptures of SMU. I argue that tensions around ideology and organising praxis fractured SMU and coalition spaces.

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[21] Eddie Webster, "The rise of social-movement unionism: The two faces of the Black trade union movement in South Africa," In *Work and Industrialisation in South Africa: An Introductory Reader,* Randburg: Ravan (1994): 174–196.
[22] David Lier and Kristian Stokke, "Maximum working class unity? Challenges to local social movement unionism in Cape Town."

Moreover, unions' difficulty to adequately organise with Global South partners and Global South diaspora members hampered union power within social movement unionism.

Conversely, in the final sections, "New Modes of Worker Organising and SMU," and "TWRA," I explore where SMU has been successful due to centring leadership of members of the Global South, and adopting decolonial practices modes of analysis and organising. By expanding their organising framework beyond collective bargaining to multi-issue, transformative systems change, they grow what I call "feminist social movement unionism."

FAILED SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM: GRASSROOTS AND TRADES IN NEW YORK CITY

New York City's Housing is a Human Right (henceforth HHR) coalition was comprised of non-profits, tenant organising groups, faith groups, and unions primarily from the building trades. These groups united to challenge a 2015 Mayoral plan for private, affordable housing development within new luxury housing. In this section, I assess the tensions and spaces for solidarity between unions and social movements in this coalition, based on my primary research on this group's organising from 2015–2018.

As described to me by various housing organisers, the HHR coalition was initially dominated by non-profits and grassroots social movements whose work in housing dated back decades through New York's tenants' movement. Organisers noted that conflicts existed even within the housing movement, where some organisations accepted city funding in order to conduct wider base-building under more reformist goals, while others eschewed city funding in order to pursue more militant and combative strategies targeting the mayor.

HHR was then joined by a set of major construction unions including UCW (the Union of Construction Workers), who were primarily focused on expanded construction contracts. This caused a difference in tactics and goals, where housing and community groups' agitation for affordable housing development or no development at all contrasted with the

unions' willingness to compromise if union construction contracts were ensured.[23] These conflicting tactics recall Waterman's analysis of heterogeneous working-class struggle, where the incorporation of working-class social movements with trade unions can cause frictions without a clear analysis of the end goal through a class-struggle perspective.[24]

These tensions were further exacerbated by differences in organising structure that manifested in the coalition space. I observed that decisions were often called by unions within the space of the coalition meetings, as these representatives had the mandates of their unions to speak for rank-and-file members. Conversely, most of the grassroots groups and social movements could not make an immediate decision in the space without first discussing with members, leading to accusations of movement groups slowing down the process and of unions forcing decisions through. Though there was individual rapport between union representatives and community organisers, coalition spaces often remained opaque with more decision-making happening in one-on-one calls between coalition members, as representatives avoided fanning open conflict within coalition meeting spaces. The likelihood of fragmentation simmered beneath the surface as groups harboured doubts about each other's commitment to housing and worker justice, and the unions and smaller neighbourhood movements particularly moved politically further apart.

Under agitation from these smaller housing movement groups, the construction unions moved from unequivocally supporting development as long as it offered living wage contracts, to targeting unaffordability in the Mayor's housing plan. This forced a severing of their deep relationships with the formerly leftist Mayor and also created conflict within the larger union landscape in New York. Many traditionally leftist unions in New York City embraced the Mayor's rezoning plans on the belief that the plan would create housing that, while not affordable for HHR members and New York's working-class, would be attainable for their members who made higher wages. This infighting between the unions

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[23] The information in this paragraph and the following paragraphs in the section derive from my primary research as an organiser and researcher with HHR.

[24] Peter Waterman, "Social-Movement Unionism: A New Union Model for a New World Order?," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* (1993): 245-278.

themselves, and between unions and community groups, detracted energy from HHR's work and fragmented NYC's left.

Ultimately, the HHR coalition was forced to settle luxury development in exchange for small amounts of affordable housing and unionised work in a highly technical compromise that lacked community resonance. The coalition was accused of being bureaucratic, exclusionary, and severed from its people; community members accused the unions and HHR of caving to the Mayor in back-room negotiations; and HHR fell apart.[25]

This is similar to Engerman's analysis of Los Angeles' Day Without an Immigrant (Dia Sin Imigrantes) organising in 2006, where two coalitions separately organised the day due to distrust between smaller and radical movements, and non-profits and unions.[26] Like in Engerman's study, organising and ideological splits formed due to differing structures and decision-making tactics. While a separate coalition did not form as in LA, HHR's negotiations for demands that they deemed winnable and immediately implementable, and the power of union organisers over the rank-and-file member, caused tensions. Similarly, smaller community-groups felt the tactics were reformist and reported similar feelings of ineffectiveness and discontent with unclear decision-making.[27]

HHR's failure also recalls Lier and Stokke's exploration of similar discontent in recent union and social movement tensions in South Africa. As in South Africa, unions' embeddedness with local party politics in New York led to a distrust of the unions by leftist community organising groups and social movements. This similarly caused coalitional fragmentation and also sparked relationships that were adversarial between the unions and conflicting social movements. Like in South Africa, some non-union members of NYC's HHR considered some unions to be co-opted by the ruling powers of the state.[28]

In these examples, we see some of the largest pitfalls of SMU. When unions preference coalitions that favour a more top-down organising structure akin to their internal

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[25] Bakry Elmedni, "The Mirage of Housing Affordability: An Analysis of Affordable Housing Plans in New York City." *SAGE Open* vol 8, no. 4, 2018.

[26] Cassandra Engerman, "Social movement unionism in practice: organisational dimensions of union mobilisation in the Los Angeles immigrant rights marches," *Work, Employment and Society* 29, no. 3 (June 2015): 444–461.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] David Lier and Kristian Stokke, "Maximum working class unity?"

decision-making processes, processes and decisions can lose buy-in. Communication processes can feel shallow and opaque. As a result of extensive compromise, demands can feel overly reformist. This can provoke fragmentation and distrust by social movement forces and unions alike. And when unions prioritise goals around contract negotiations in coalition spaces with non-labour groups, fissures can be exacerbated, watering down transformative visions into goals and tactics that may work in the short-term but can divide the left and preclude long-term social change.

NEW MODES OF WORKER ORGANISING AND SMU

In the previous section, "Failed Social Movement Unionism" focusing on HHR coalition, I explored where SMU has fallen apart due to disconnects both in organising practice and ideology between unions and social movements. However, hope remains. In these following sections, I explore where SMU has been more fruitful, and posit that this is due to union organising that is less hierarchical, more feminist, and more led by members of the Global South.

In unions and outside of formal union structures, workers have found ways to break away from traditional union bureaucracy. Within feminised informal labour sectors like domestic work, nursing, teaching, and other care-oriented labour, workers have embraced more horizontal modes of organising in partnership with social movements.[29] There has been a marked increase of women-led chapters of unions – and independent workers collectives – who employ strategies that starkly differ from more traditional, male unions. These women workers may orient around issues outside of worker contracts, identifying sexual harassment in the workplace, lack of childcare, and other "women's issues" as equally key points for collective struggle. The type of negotiations and tactics also differ: while male-dominated union structures may focus on contract improvements and use strikes as a primary tactic, organising by feminised and informalised workforces may

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[29] Naila Kabeer, "Women Workers and the Politics of Claims Making: The Local and the Global."

prioritise different tactics from targeting the boss, like creating alternate systems or fighting for policy reforms at a national level.[30]

Kafala workers organising in Lebanon have embraced both policy lobbying with the Lebanese government as well as a cooperative model of organising that brings domestic workers out into the public eye in partnership with allied social movement forces.[31] In the US, the explicitly feminist National Domestic Workers Union has made the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights a lynchpin of its strategy, and has passed this at the state level in many states across the country. NWDA achieved this through many explicit choices. Grassroots members' concerns and leadership were amplified. NWDA employed a less hierarchal decision-making structure. Organisers and members centred care and rest as a necessary component of movement work, including a significant focus on generative somatics. NWDA also integrated ancestral practices and diverse Global South organising strategies that were brought in from members who migrated from across the world. This all was combined within an explicitly decolonial and feminist lens. Moreover, this work was accomplished in a firm coalition with social movement forces.[32]

Teachers in the US have also expanded organising outside of traditional union structures, often with feminist leaders at the fore. In some cases, teachers broke rank with the teachers' unions to demand higher pay, different teaching models, and in some cases policy protections for undocumented students, and picketed with DREAMers organising groups, student organising groups, and other social movement structures. These teachers employed strikes in historically disenfranchised areas like Oakland, California and West Virginia, where much of this work was led by working-class women who articulated this organising as a resistance to the devaluing of care.[33]

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[30] Naila Kabeer, "Women Workers and the Politics of Claims Making: The Local and the Global."

[31] Ghiwa Sayegh, "Resistant Borders: A Conversation on the Daily Struggles of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon," *Kohl Journal* 2, no. 2 (Winter 2016): 141–153.

[32] Magally Alcazar, "Women Workers Make All Other Work Possible: Latina Immigrant Organising at the Oakland Domestic Workers' Centre." In *Where Freedom Starts: Sex Power Violence #MeToo*. London: Verso, 2018. eBook.

[33] Campbell, Alexia Fernandez. "West Virginia teachers are on strike again. Here's why." *Vox*, 19 February 2019. https://www.vox.com/2019/2/19/18231486/west-virginia-teacher-strike-2019.

While these groups do not characterise policy wins as a pathway to transformative liberation, they articulate policymaking and alternative worker organising structures as a necessary pivot to fight new decentralised working conditions. They also use these fights to politicise their membership and to shift the public conversation to be around patriarchy and racialised capitalism in the care economy. This strengthens a grassroots feminist left. These organisers also articulate an internationalist and intersectional feminist politic, linking care workers across countries and communities and attempting to break down Global North–South divides.[34]

Global movements are also incorporating feminist social movement unionism by employing a more feminist and decolonial analysis in their organising in partnership with unions. La Via Campesina, a global social movement, collaborates with national trade unions in order to build a Gramscian worker–led united front.[35] While a more thorough exploration is outside the scope of this article, I argue that La Via's collaboration with unions and social movements across nations represents a form of feminist and decolonial social movement unionism that is being echoed in the Global North to unite differing leftisms.[36]

Workers, social movements, and peasant organisations are incorporated together in La Via's charter structure, but each group makes decisions locally in their own design, following horizontal feminist social movement praxis.[37] In India, La Via partners explicitly with unions in Kerala like the fishworker groups as well as more traditional party politics like Kerala's communist party.[38] Similarly, in Brazil, La Via has brought together the MST's landless peoples' struggle, MAB's indigenous resistance and land occupation against dams, activists and organisers in the favelas, as well as elements of worker organising.[39] La Via's

[34] Naila Kabeer, "Women Workers and the Politics of Claims Making: The Local and the Global."

[35] Harmony Goldberg, "Intro to Gramsci," *Minneapolis Study Group,* 2016.

[36] Martha Harnecker, "Forging a Union of the Party Left and the Social Left," *Studies in Political Economy* 69, no. 1 (2002): 137–155.

[37] Saturnino Borras, "La Via Campesina and its Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 8, no. 2–3 (2008): 258–289.

[38] Subir Sinha, "Transnationality and the Indian Fishworkers' Movement, 1960s–2000s," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 12, no. 2–3 (2012): 364–389.

[39] Saturnino Borras, "La Via Campesina and its Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform."

model of uniting social movements with trade unions has heavily influenced feminist social movement unionism in the Global North, as I explore in the following section.

TWRA: Just Transition and Feminist Social Movement Unionism from South to North

One group attempting to more deeply involve unions and workers in global leftist broad-based coalition and united front politics in the Global North is the Third World Roots Alliance (TWRA). While they have experienced both hindrances and success in organising with unions, the social movement unionism spaces that they have participated in have had the most success when centred around an explicitly feminist and decolonial practice. This argument derives from my primary research on their organising and movement work from 2018–2019.

The Third World Roots Alliance functions as an "alliance of alliances" bringing together four national networks in the US. These networks focus on a host of issues, including climate justice, indigenous sovereignty, global anti-neoliberalism organising, feminist ties between the Global North and Global South, housing justice, and land justice. The concept of Just Transition or Buen Vivir unites these four national networks and each of their respective hundreds of diverse grassroots member organisations. This concept includes a decolonial view of reshaping capitalism and reducing the emphasis on capitalist growth. It also includes the goal to move from an extractive economy of racialised capitalism to regenerative and indigenous modes of land stewardship. At the heart is balance with local ecology.[40] Each of these four alliances has membership structures of grassroots organising groups, community-based organisations, non-profits, indigenous tribal membership, and worker organising groups across the US and Canada, as well as strong ties with leftist movements in the Global South. These alliances – and their member groups – previously collaborated through the World Social Forum process and the Battle of Seattle struggle in the 1990s. Both these events centred an ethic of anti-neoliberal and often anarchist organising led by people of colour in the US with deep relationships with similar

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[40] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "The World Social Forum and the Global Left," *Politics and Society* 36, no. 2 (2008): 247–270.

movements in the Global South such as La Via Campesina, the MST, and the World March of Women.[41] The four alliances thus shared this ethic through shared history.

In order to position itself as a united front vehicle for leftist people of colour in the US, the Third World Roots Alliance pivoted in 2018 to a more explicit discussion of expansion. TWRA particularly debated how to bring in trade unions in order to expand its people of the colour-led working-class base. Until this time, each of the alliances collaborated with national trade unions, but only as partners. None of the four national alliances included local or nationwide trade unions as formal members. Some of the four alliances had workers centres as formal members. However, these centres largely operated outside of traditional worker and labour movement strategies. They employed worker collective models and prioritised horizontal decision-making in order to lift up workers who are undocumented migrants, women, queer people, and other subaltern people often excluded from formalised union membership.[42]

This conflicted with many formal US-wide trade unions who employed more bureaucratic and top-down structures. In discussing expansion, TWRA had to contend with what engaging explicitly with nation-wide trade unions, rather than local worker centres, would look like. TWRA hoped to retain its core methodology and focus on members of colour and Global South strategies, but also to bring trade unions into core leadership.

TWRA experimented working more closely with SEIU, one of the US's largest unions with members of service workers in the millions, and the Blue-Green Alliance, a body of unions in partnership with environmental groups, under the big tent structure of the Grassroots Climate Action Coalition (GCAC) from 2013–2019. GCAS's core decision-making committee of this body also included environmental and climate justice groups that had often had tension with the more grassroots new social movements like TWRA. These tensions arose from strategy disputes, arguments between adopting reformist strategies within the system versus the TWRA's more Marxist systems-change an and anti-capitalist analysis.

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[41] Lauren Contorno, "Turtles & teamsters revival? Analyzing labor unions' environmental discourse from the 2014 People's Climate March," *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements* 10, no. 1–2 (2018): 117–148.
[42] Somini Sengupta, "Protestors Have their Day at California Climate Talks," *The New York Times,* 13 Sept 2018.

Groups like TWRA also felt that the environmental and climate justice groups, the "Big Greens" as TWRA organisers called them, had disproportionately white middle-class membership and leadership, and that these groups took funding away from working-class people of colour who were also fighting for environmental and climate justice. Under GCAS's coalitional structure, unions, activist groups, "Big Green" non-profits, grassroots new social movements, and indigenous communities were brought together for the common goal of Just Transition away from extraction and towards a regenerative economy.[43]

During the GCAS's week of action in 2018, rank and file union members did successfully mobilise alongside TWRA's people of colour cohort of environmental and climate justice activists. Union members also held forums with TWRA-allied tribal communities exploring models for Just Transition for workers, indigenous communities, and the environment.[44] TWRA also brought in the voices of global groups like MST and MAB to work with these unions to hold a thousands-strong blockade that temporarily shut down a corporate- and government-led, and fracking-funded, climate conference in 2018. Leaders and organisers from unions and the TWRA alike adopted language that targeted this climate conference as an example of false neoliberal solutions that skirted structural problems of climate change and extraction under racialised capitalism.[45]

While these examples of rank-and-file workers and union representatives working alongside TWRA's primarily Black and Brown activists and organisers exist, differences in organising structures between TWRA and the unions caused frequent frictions. While the TWRA hoped to expand its own structure to include trade unions, the differences in decision-making structures – more top-down for the unions and more member consultation oriented for TWRA – troubled the possibility of unity under a long-term network rather than a short-term tactical coalition.

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[43] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "The World Social Forum and the Global Left," *Politics and Society* 36, no. 2 (2008): 247–270.
[44] Lauren Contorno, "Turtles & teamsters revival? Analyzing labor unions' environmental discourse from the 2014 People's Climate March."
[45] Somini Sengupta, "Protestors Have their Day at California Climate Talks."

Differing member and leadership demographics compounded these difficulties. Rank-and-file union members were often also working-class Black, Indigenous, and people of colour like the membership of the TWRA. However, the unions' leadership were much more white, male, and often middle-class, whereas TWRA's members and leaders were largely female, nonbinary, trans, queer, and people of colour. This class, race, and gender disconnect sparked both interpersonal frictions as well as larger schisms around political ideology, where the TWRA's invocation of grassroots feminist leadership and indigenous knowledge often failed to persuade union leaders.

These frictions slowed down GCAC decision-making processes, caused interpersonal tensions between coalition organisers, and created difficulties in identifying long-term goals or establishing what would quantify a victory for the groups involved. This caused the groups to ultimately pursue differing tactics in how they messaged the Climate summit shutdown and caused the GCAC to fragment after the summit, mirroring the struggles described in Engerman's analysis of the Dia Sin Imigrantes in Los Angeles[46] and tensions between unions, party politics, and activist groups in South Africa.[47]

As these fractures expanded, TWRA focused its attention on expanding partnership instead with the National Domestic Workers Alliance – a union previously examined as uniquely feminist, grassroots, migrant-led, and in opposition to the model of traditional union structure. Both bodies shared alignment around holding deep relationships with Global South movement structures, respecting ancestral practices of organising that diaspora members held through migration, and understood their vision for systems change as explicitly feminist, anti-capitalist, and internationalist.

At the conclusion of this research, conversations between TWRA and NWDA were still ongoing. Organisers shared longstanding personal ties as well as belief in diasporic decolonial practice, feminist leadership, and centring working-class members of colour.

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[46] Cassandra Engerman, "Social movement unionism in practice: organisational dimensions of union mobilisation in the Los Angeles immigrant rights marches."
[47] David C. Lier and Kristian Stokke, "Maximum working class unity? Challenges to local social movement unionism in Cape Town."

These synergies allowed for more productive conversation around expanding the structure of TWRA to involve the NWDA long-term.

In this case, uniting work between social movements and unions already deconstructing patriarchal norms in their organising opened space for common ground and for sustainable social movement unionism in the Global North. We can more broadly understand this as a stronger possibility for the hope for partnerships between unions, workers, and social movements where decolonial and feminist organising practices are adopted by both, and for the possibility of social movement unionism creating global transformative change.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have traced the large impact that informalisation and feminisation of labour has had on declining membership in traditional unions, and the way that alternate models of worker organising – particularly centring migrants, women, and people of colour – have bypassed traditional union bureaucracy and politics. Unions, in response to this diminishing power, have often increased collaboration with social movements, forming what academics have termed "social movement unionism."

However, within these union plus non-union coalitions, I explore the frequent tensions that arise about decision-making structure, goals, tactics, and long-term vision, as in the Dia Sin Imigrantes protests in LA, South African worker and party politics, housing organising in New York, and global climate justice organising for Just Transition by Third World Roots Alliance. I argue that tensions arise, particularly when unions work with social movements in top-down coalition structures. Conversely, tensions can be reduced when unions centre an explicitly internationalist, feminist, and decolonial analysis. More fruitful SMU also occurs when unions reduce internal hierarchy and patriarchy within their internal structures first – as in domestic worker and teacher organising – and apply these models in their relationships with social movements.

As seen in the examples of the NWDA and the TWRA's work alongside them, unions can re-galvanise global worker resistance by embracing more these feminist, horizontal, and

transparent organising and communication structures and applying these to united front structure within social movement unionism. In many cases, unions support transformative change best when they support the existing work of social movements, rather than imposing union structures of collective bargaining and top-down decision-making onto coalition spaces with non-profits, community organising groups, and social movements.

Particularly in the current wave of uprisings sweeping the globe, and the spread of worker walkouts under exploitative conditions from Bangladesh to France resulting from COVID-19 and global lockdowns, it remains to be seen how traditional unions and worker organising will embrace – or resist – transformative change. If more unions embrace alternative, feminist, horizontal and transparent structures both internally as well as with social movements in the streets, we may see a re-articulation of social movement unionism and worker solidarity as a key component for global systems change. In this feminist process of social movement unionism, the Global North will follow the Global South.

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