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Solidarity Transformed: Labor Responses to Globalization and Crisis in Latin America **edited by Mark S. Anner. A Review**

Francesca Sperotti *

Solidarity Transformed: Labour Responses to Globalization and Crisis in Latin America (from here on *Solidarity Transformed*) is a product of both lived experiences and careful academic research carried out by Mark S. Anner, Assistant Professor of Labour Studies and Political Science at The Pennsylvania State University (USA), in the field of unions organizing and solidarity in Central America.

Mark Anner developed his interest for labour unions and Latin America during his college years, when he took Latin American history courses and Spanish classes. After graduation, he collaborated first with a local union in the Boston area, and then with unionists in El Salvador looking for some form of solidarity with international labour unions and human rights organizations. Since then, the author has spent several years working with unions in communicating with foreign activists and raising funds internationally to maintain local strikes and other union activities. This was a long period during which the author had the opportunity to directly experience unions' lives and above all meet the representatives for Latin America of the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (from here on LO-Norway), who after 1991 gave him the chance to oversee Norwegian-funded programs focusing on labour union growth, capacity building for

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The present review refers to Mark S. Anner *Solidarity Transformed: Labor Responses to Globalization and Crisis in Latin America*, Cornell University Press, New York, 2011, ISBN 978-0-8014-4959-8.

tasks and international campaigns in El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil. It was in that period that the author focused on documenting labour rights abuses in the apparel export factories producing North American brands for North American consumers. Through countless visits to the factory, numerous interviews and lengthy negotiations, Mark Anner learned how certain dynamics – such as the complexities of supply-chain management, production order cycles, the role of suppliers consortiums and the impact of complex trade rules – influence working conditions, employment relations and union organizing.

This short premise about the ten years experience in Central America is fundamental to the origins of this book and the foundations of the author's ideas and arguments that were further enriched by several years of academic study.

By departing from his two main research questions – why union organizing has been so difficult following authoritarian regimes in Latin America, and what strategies unionists have adopted ahead of a stateless and globalized scenario – his research strategy combined in-depth case studies with an analysis of a large number of campaigns. He selected one buyer-driven commodity chain, the garment manufacture, and one producer-driven commodity chain, automobile assembly. He chose two countries, El Salvador and Honduras, where garment manufacture was the main industry and, two countries, Brazil and Argentina, where auto production was the main industry. In each country, he selected the main left-oriented labour unions and the main moderate one.

Solidarity Transformed begins by examining the transformation of labour solidarity – defined as “how workers and their organizations support each other in pursuit of common goals” – since the end of the Cold War in Latin America. Two changes have contributed to this transformation: the decline in state labour protection and the international restructuring of the industries. Chapter 2 maps the impact of these two changes in the garment manufacture and automobile assembly industries and the four countries. In particular, it illustrates how the creation of export processing zones – industrial parks in which imported materials are processed and re-exported – and modular production – a process in which the production is divided into autonomous subsystems, modules, which are developed and preassembled separately by independent firms located inside the final assembly facility – did not lead to higher wages and stronger collective representation. On the contrary, on average wages were 38.58 per cent lower in segmented production regimes than in traditional production regimes and unionization rates were 61.25 per cent lower in the

segmented production regimes. In other words, these production changes fragmented labour solidarity and reduced labour's ability to pressure for higher wages and stronger unions. All this happened despite the fact that these countries were emerging from decades of authoritarian rule and beginning a process of democratization.

As Mark Anner argues that to respond effectively to these changes, no one or predetermined path for labour can be discerned, but rather a range of different responses shaped by economic and institutional structures and by labour identities, political threats and opportunities. Evidence from the countries observed suggests that where states are able to provide labour with at least some of the protections it needs from the challenges of economic globalization, the desire to pursue new strategies is mitigated. And where industry is centralized and controlled by producers (as in automobile assembly), labour activity will tend to be sustained. Where industry is decentralized and controlled by retailers (as in garment manufacture), labour is more likely to pursue NGO alliances and sporadic campaigns. Combined, these interacting influences result in two major types of transnational labour response to political and economic transformation: transnational activist campaigns (TACs), which are built on shorter-term labour and NGO cross-border alliances, and transnational labour networks (TLNs) which are characterized by stable, class-based solidarity.

TACs have been observed in El Salvador and Honduras (Chapters 3 and 4), where the issue of transforming labour strategies in the face of industrial restructuring began with modifying local tactics. Unions realized that, to be successful, they had to target each point of the "triangle of power" in which the new industry (in this case the garment manufacture) was embedded: multinational corporations, local suppliers, and the state. The aim was, on the one hand, to get corporations to agree to transparent and meaningful global standards and not to move to other regions where labour laws are more lax; and, on the other hand, to organize local factories and pressure the state into improving labour regulations. Political inclination played a role too. While left-wing unions turned to new forms of local organizing and transnational activism to target multinational corporations through consumer awareness campaign and local organizing efforts, moderate unions shunned transnationalism in favour of pacts with employers at the plant level.

Like garment workers in El Salvador and Honduras, autoworkers in Brazil (Chapter 5) have found that the restructuring of their global production has forced a rethinking of labour strategies: they gradually turned to transnationalism (TLNs) in order to complement domestic strategies.

Unlike in the experience of TACs, here the node of power was mainly on the headquarters of the multinational auto producer. For this reason local unions looked for support from transnational allies. Some of the most effective transnational auto activities resulted in stronger works councils, a higher level of job protection, and the negotiation of international framework agreements.

However, transnationalism has not been the sole response. In Brazil and Argentina moderate unions, having their roots in corporatist labour traditions where labour was seen as a partner with the state and employers' organizations, started to collaborate to enhance national development and present more flexible alternatives to those of their main rival unions (Chapter 6). This resulted in micro corporatist labour-employer pacts based on new management ideas – such as flexible worker-employer relationships, flexible working hours and jobs assignments linking salaries to productivity – that well fitted the new global economic scenario.

Therefore, new labour strategies have emerged and matured in the new context of global supply chains and weak states. The transformation of labour solidarity, however, can have different forms according to labour identities, sector of production and state. Furthermore, evidence suggests that there is no one best strategy, but when successful, unions and their allies have the potential to intervene in the restructuring processes and improve working conditions.

Solidarity Transformed is a valuable contribution to research on how industrial relations and labour movements evolve with globalization and the changed role of the state that continue to shape the world of work and workers. The data collection and presentation the main arguments plus Anner's personal experience make *Solidarity Transformed* a "must-read" book for anyone wanting to understand contemporary industrial and labour relations in Central and Latin America from an international and comparative perspective.



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