

**'We need to win ...' Making feminist politics  
in trade unions and transnational labour  
activist networks.**

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'It's not good enough to be right. It's important to win something. In order to win something, we ... need to agree on something. That something does not need to be an over-arching pre-ordained ideology into which we force-fit our delightfully fractious, argumentative selves. It does not need to be an unquestioning allegiance to one or another form of resistance to the exclusion of everything else.'

(Arundhati Roy, Plenary, World Social Forum, Mumbai, January, 2004)

### **Introduction.<sup>1</sup>**

This paper is offered in the spirit of Arundhati Roy's call to political activists that we need to win something, and in order to win we need to find ways to make this possible. The focus here is on union feminists concerned with mobilizing women to secure workplace rights and greater visibility within the broader transnational social movements for economic and social justice in the context of globalisation. Hope and confidence in the potential of progressive social movements have been severely tested by the successes of the ideological, political and economic projects of neo-liberal globalization. The possibilities for political activism are thus being challenged and transformed to the extent that a major consequence of the current transitions in globalisation and 'its discontents' is that progressive and effective collective action appears increasingly difficult or futile.

This is how it appears. But we want to argue that this appearance is part of the problem. Opportunities for progressive political activism may be found; indeed

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on research conducted in collaboration with Mary Margaret Fonow, Arizona

policy actors and political movements already engage in creative and effective global/local politics. The point is to recognise, understand and incorporate these into our analyses and practices. It is also being recognised that sexual politics is integral to this political activism. This is not the time to claim, once again, that sexual politics is 'all too hard', an irrelevant distraction (Wichterich 2000). Rather, feminist theorizing and practices provide useful and inclusive perspectives on political activism in relation to globalisation from above.

### **Globalisation**

Meanings of 'globalisation' are many and varied, depending on what elements are emphasised. They include the compression of world space and time, the permeability of state borders, and the accelerated integration of capital through the internationalisation of trade, labour, finance, cultures and communities.

Whether a truly global economy currently exists is still being debated, but there is general agreement that processes of economic globalisation are intensifying (Castells 1996).

For some commentators, globalization is already under threat with a prolonged economic crisis, the spread of global resistance, the reappearance of the balance of power among centre states, and the re-emergence of acute inter-imperialist contradictions (Bello 2003). For others, globalization is construed as constituted by anonymous forces, which no one controls. It therefore seems untameable and unstoppable. We may say this is a discourse of globalisation from above in which

capitalism and the multinational corporation are hegemonically represented as superior and ultimately invincible (Gibson-Graham 1996, 147).

### **Gender and globalization**

This certainly seems to be the case from feminist perspectives on gender and globalisation. Global restructuring has increased gender divisions with the feminisation of the international workforce and of poverty. Both the World Bank and the International Labour Organization acknowledge that unequal gender relations lead to women making up 70 per cent of the world's poor. The construction of women workers, in the international division of labour, as cheap labour, or as Jan Jindy Pettman (2001, 590) puts it, 'labour made cheap' is worsening. Traffic in women is a significant aspect of the expanding worldwide migration of labour. Poorly paid women workers are gathered together to subsidise the operation of 'free' trade zones created in deregulated labour markets; women domestic workers flow from poorer states to wealthier states, while sex workers are caught up in the international sex tourist industry, both within and across nation states. Although some men on the bottom rungs of the global economy suffer from these oppressive effects as their labour is exploited or made expendable, and their bodies may be sexually degraded, overwhelmingly the beneficiaries of globalisation from above are men on the top rungs of the global economy and in senior positions in corporate and corporatized institutions.

Feminist scholars argue that gender and globalization are mutually constitutive (Moghadam 2000 and 2001; Mohanty 2003; Naples and Desai 2002) so that gender

relations are no longer matters of 'local' conditions and cultures and thus require analysis and a politics of global dimensions. If we define enduring patterns of gender relations as gender orders then a global gender order is constituted by gender practices that are reshaped by global processes. Such practices may be local but they 'carry the impress of forces that make a global society (Connell 2002, 111). Trans-national feminist politics and women's movements are both response and expression to this global/local gender order. Both loose and more formal organisations build alliances and campaigns within proximal and extended communities and organisations that extend across borders and boundaries.

### **Challenging globalisation**

The challenge is to identify and analyse alternative discourses and politics to the dominance of globalisation<sup>2</sup>, which can provide more useful ground for progressive activism than simply the righteous resistance of its victims. One possibility for new kinds of progressive activism may be found by starting with Claus Offe's (1996, vii) question: What political agency has the capacity to make collectively binding choices and to carry them out?

We suggest the trade union movement, a traditional institution of political activism, as a good possibility for feminist challenge to hegemonic globalization.

It is useful on two counts. One, it has the capacity, by virtue of its essential

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<sup>2</sup> Gibson-Graham (1996) cautions us not to replicate conceptualizations and representations of capitalism and of globalization as monolithic, unitary, and fixed. To do so, makes it much more difficult to imagine alternatives and to find places where opposition can flourish.

characteristics, solidarity and universality, to challenge a key element of the political and cultural economy of globalisation, given the effects of globalisation on work, particularly women's work; two, trade unions are a potentially important resource for feminist politics since women have made some gains within the trade union movement. Under pressure from neo-liberal global capital, it has modified its traditional politics to include the needs and interests of the great variety of potential members. The foundational concept of the universal worker, that is the full-time male industrial worker, has had to change in recognition of the complexities of others.

Making feminist politics within and through the trade union movement involves contesting explicit but nevertheless complex structures of power. Women union activists use political structures and discourses across and beyond trade unions. Their political strategies take more fluid notions of gender that allow for the heterogeneity and diversity of women's experiences to create a politics that confronts and resists, challenges and transforms. It may be said that feminism has been enlivened by the requirement to include the diversities of global gender relations. In recognising these shifts and changes, the search discovers that there is no lack of possibilities for progressive action. Such possibilities are exemplified in the constructive strategies that are shaping feminist and union politics in the examples discussed here.

## **Method**

Our argument draws on research we have conducted about women union officials and activists in Australia, Canada, and the U.S. over the last decade.<sup>3</sup> We have interviewed women who occupy formal positions (either elected or appointed) in labour organizations with coverage of workers across a wide range of industries and occupations, as well as women who work in related non-government organizations, such as Working Women's Centres, in intergovernmental agencies such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), and with feminists in the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and Global Union Federations.

Australia, Canada, and the U.S. are among those countries that have enduring patterns of gendered power relations in common, but the circumstances in each country differ, partly due to the differences between their centralized and decentralized industrial relations systems, and partly due to the historical distinctions between their labour movements and in the way relations between the labour movement and the women's movement differ. Nevertheless, the women are confronted by similar and serious challenges from dominant processes of globalisation from above, with increasing attacks by the state that are destabilising labour markets, eroding the state's commitment to underwriting public socio-economic security, and recasting the relations between public and private spheres in favour of the latter. The analysis also relies on document analysis and observations of relevant activities and events.

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<sup>3</sup> See Franzway (2001) and Fonow (2003) for separate accounts of union feminism and sexual politics in the labour movement. Franzway compares Australia and Canada and Fonow compares US and Canada. The authors recently conducted field work together in Australia.

### **Trade unions, sexual politics, and borders**

The trade union movement claims a history of over a century of international alliances and political activism, and it is this internationalism that now may be a valuable political resource. Unions have always been involved in international labour networks, but more recently their networks have become thicker and more varied.<sup>4</sup> There has been a proliferation of political spaces where the interests of labour overlap with other movements concerned about workers' rights.

Increasingly campaigns for labour rights are organized and funded with non-union support from churches, foundations, and universities. Labour conferences and periodicals focus more on non-contract issues such as worker empowerment, organizing, union democracy, and feminism.<sup>5</sup>

New players from the non-profit sector, such as the Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ), Women's Environment and Development Organization, and Women's EDGE, and activists from other social movements, such as the Students against Sweatshops, are joining with unions as strategic partners in growing transnational labour advocacy networks.

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<sup>4</sup> Transnational organizing is not really a new challenge for labour. Resolving tensions between nationalism and internationalism can be traced back to the efforts by Marx and Engels to build international organizations of workers (Nimtz 2002). The U.S. labour movement, however, lost much of its credibility in international labour circles when Cold War politics made it nearly impossible for labour to align with progressive or left-wing movements abroad.

<sup>5</sup> The Canadian Steelworkers, for example, have made domestic violence a workplace issues and hence a union issue (Fonow 2003, 15-16).

However, the trade union movement is fractious. The international labour movement is not only riven with national barriers between states, but unions are also separated by borders of their own creation. A trade union that recruits members from areas outside its traditional coverage is seen as 'poaching' and as hostile to other unions. This continues to be the case in countries like Australia in spite of the compression of hundreds of unions into a couple of dozen through amalgamations in the early 1990s – a process that was a calculated response to neo-liberal hostility to unionisation.

In addition, the historically specific divisions created by industries, occupational hierarchies (managers, skilled, unskilled workers), gender, 'race', public and private sectors, 'blue' and 'white' collar differences and boundaries are difficult to bridge let alone blur. As a result, the potential effectiveness of united groups of unions, such as peak national and international trades and labour councils, can be limited.

Sexual politics too often creates such limitations. Integral to trade unions as much as to schools and other social organisations, sexual politics typically works through practices of invisibility. As with so many fields of politics and research, women are absent from, or insignificant to, the central concerns of the history, culture, politics and economy of (paid) work, industrial relations, and organisational studies. Judy Wajcman's (2000) substantive review of industrial relations shows that attention remains limited to a narrow band of 'women's issues'. This is partly because only women are imagined as gendered; gender is

detached from men. Since subjects are male, gender is not considered a relevant factor of analysis. Where women are inescapably present, as they are in female-dominated unions, such as teacher unions, 'gender' is still regarded by many in these fields as an insufficient analytical tool. But this approach fails to explain how men achieve and maintain their dominance of union leadership, even where women constitute significant proportions of the membership.

Although women make up 40 percent of trade union members in Australia with similar proportions in Canada and the US, women are still under-represented at almost all levels of union activity, especially at the more powerful levels of full-time and paid, secretary and president positions (Mezinec 1999).<sup>6</sup> Relative to other public institutions, women have gained some leadership positions and made inroads into union agendas and resources, but these are quite disproportionate to women's participation rates.

As one woman official in our research observed, 'When I go to the national office I look around their walls and their photographs over years and years, and there is not one woman in sight, not one.' This same pattern holds up at the transnational level where women are under-represented in the deliberative bodies of the global union federations. In any case, feminist politics aims for much more than winning leadership positions for women. It seeks to gain women's rights and social justice comprehensively and in all their necessary diverse manifestations.

### **Social movements**

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<sup>6</sup> Labour density however, differs widely with the greatest union density in Canada and the least in the US.

We suggest that contemporary women union activists, or rather feminist unionists, do not simply draw on available feminist theories and politics – out of the air as it were, or perhaps out of books and seminars. In our feminist research practices and theorising we are sometimes at risk of overlooking the connections and commonalities that occur across the broad spectrum of feminisms. Feminist unionists do not rely on creating their own theories and politics entirely separately from other feminists. Rather, they draw on, and participate in a 'new' social movement that is usually known as the 'women's movement'.

In this era of growing discontent with and resistance to globalisation, social movements play visible and tangible roles on international stage. The considerable literature on contemporary or 'new' social movements is as complex and diverse as is that on globalisation. We adopt Sarah Maddison's working definition:

Social movements are made up of discursively constructed groups, networks and organisations that express social and cultural conflict through a reflexively negotiated and contested, permanently evolving collective. Social movement activities are oriented towards both broad and particular change at all levels of the social and political system/s. (Maddison 2003, 38)

So we could say that the 'women's movement' has a discursive function, which is part of the creation and maintenance of an evolving collective identity of feminism. The women's movement is characterised by discourses and practices that aim to identify, analyse and challenge gender and sex oppression. Feminists

in trade unions participate in the networks, discourses and evolving collective identity of the women's movement. Not only do union women find feminist theories and politics in a women's movement, the process is mutual, and the women's movement gives their own politics within the trade union movement a visibility, strength and authority that even substantial groups of union women would not have without it.

We can see this when we look at campaigns that union women have undertaken in periods when a women's movement was much less tangible than it currently is, eg May Francis in the clothing Union in the 20s, or women unionists in the 1950's had to rely on union principles of equality to make their case, which was often undermined by another key union principle, solidarity.

Contemporary union feminists are bringing qualities of 'new' social movements into the traditional trade union movement – not only to make their claims about union sexual politics, but also to develop strategies that revitalise the overall movement itself. However, this is not without precedent. The New Left of the 60s and 70s also made forays into the TUM with campaigns to expand the concerns of unionism made some gains. Consider the educational programs of blue-collar unions such as the AMWU and the BLF in Australia, which were wonderfully creative about political issues that went well beyond wages and conditions, such as peace and the anti-Vietnam war, multi-nationals, and the environment.

(Teasing out these strands requires another paper.)

## **Feminist Spaces in Transnational Labour Networks**

The confluence of labour movements and social movements has produced transnational labour advocacy networks. According to Keck and Sikkink (1998, 2), transnational advocacy networks include all 'those relevant actors working internationally on an issue who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services'. Networks serve as actors in politics and as a way to mobilize and structure the actions of participants--thus embodying elements of both agency and structure. Within these networks discourses are mobilized strategically to help create new issues and categories and to persuade, pressure, and gain leverage over much more powerful organizations and governments.<sup>7</sup>

Trans-national networks connect women across areas of concern as well as across national borders. For example, the World March of Women 2000, born out of the experience of a Women's March against Poverty held in Canada in 1996, brought women together from peace organisations, community groups and trade unions in an explicitly global campaign for peace and equality. The Canadian Steelworkers were active in the coalition and mobilized 1,000 of their members to participate in the march (Fonow 2003). The international network created by this action has developed into an international organisation, under the same name,

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<sup>7</sup> New norms and discourses are emerging from and helping to shape the process of restructuring world politics. Transnational advocacy groups can help initiate a shift in norms and discourses about global governance from one of economic liberalism and free trade to one of corporate responsibility, debt relief, transparency of economic institutions, global justice, etc (Sikkink 2000, 303).

which connects with other feminist global networks such as the World Social Forum.

Unions link their members locally and globally to the broader network of activists, social movements, and organizations concerned with similar issues. As sites of advocacy, unions bring workers together within and across workplaces, firms, and communities and within and across national borders. Because unions are formally structured to represent the economic and political interests of workers on the local, national, and international level, they connect workers organically to the multiple and contradictory processes and levels of globalization.<sup>8</sup>

Transnational labour advocacy networks have become mobilizing structures for feminists and labour activists that open new sites for union feminist activism.

Such networks can be vehicles through which women are mobilized to struggle

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<sup>8</sup> Globalization plays a significant role in shaping local, regional, and transnational political mobilization. Although the imbalances of power between different types of workers within a country and between workers in different countries are exacerbated by globalization, these same processes create continuities that can become the grounds for mobilizing across asymmetrical differences. Because of these continuities, social movements in different countries take on similar characteristics-- an obvious advantage when trying to mobilizing across national boundaries (Giugni 2002). The transnational networks of social movement organizations supply the circuits for the diffusion of information, discourses, strategies, and tactics and help to bridge the cultural and spatial divide between activists in different countries. This lays the foundation for developing cultural frames of reference that resonate among activists and movements across borders. But there is a downside to this potential as well. Religious fundamentalists have also been adept at using transnational networks to organize on behalf of an agenda very different from the one feminists might imagine for themselves.

for economic justice and through which they forge collective identities as transnational feminist actors. Feminist politics and the trade union movement have used resources of globalisation to create trans-national networks of political activism. Unions have the resources to bring together women from different countries and different sectors of the economy to exchange information about their experience of globalization and to build new forms of transnational labour solidarity. It must be a solidarity that does not ask women to repress the differences among themselves, but rather encourages the productive use of these differences to expand our ideas about democracy and human rights. Without the material resources, networks, and rhetorical tools of their unions fewer working-class women from any part of the world would have the opportunity to participate in the debates and struggles concerning the politics of trade and globalization.

Transnational labour advocacy networks provide material and virtual spaces, where union feminists come together with feminists from other social movements, and with feminist NGOs. Some of these are obvious sites that focus solely on unions, such as the ILO and the ICFTU, and some are not so obvious, for example, the regional feminist encuentros in Latin America. According to Alvarez (2000, 35) these gatherings 'provided a unique space for activists to debate collectively the always contested meanings and goals of feminism and its relationship to other struggles for rights and social justice in the region.'<sup>9</sup> She

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<sup>9</sup> Encuentros have brought together thousands of women active in a broad range of popular movements from different countries to exchange ideas and information. Because union activists have the opportunity to meet with lesbian-feminist collectives, indigenous movements, landless movements, NGOs, academics, guerrilla

believes that these encuentros have played a critically important role in fashioning common discourses and in providing activists in individual countries with tools of analysis and symbolic resources that they subsequently translate and redeploy locally. Union activists take back to their own movements and organizations new ways of thinking about and defining women's rights – ways that are decidedly more feminist. It is hard to imagine, for example, unions taking up the issue of violence against women on an international level without this input.

*Trans-national networks and the possibilities for advocacy, alliances and activism*

What is being done depends on the capacity to seize opportunities for progressive political activism, but putting resistance into effect is no simple or easy task. The impact of global/local forces can be daunting. Women's non-government organisations, international conferences and projects struggle with differences among women while they simultaneously campaign for justice and equality for all women. Thus it is important to give attention to specific cases from which lessons for future political actions may be drawn.

In the following section, we examine a few examples of the political strategies devised by union feminists to seize opportunities and possibilities available in

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organizations, and mainstream political parties these encounters help to make possible an understanding of women's labour rights that can accommodate women's multiple and contradictory locations in the global economy.

trade unions for building and utilising progressive forms of transnational feminist mobilizations and contingent solidarities.<sup>10</sup>

### **Leadership or culture**

The trade union movement is a valuable resource, but making progressive politics through trade unions has its own difficulties. The question for unionists is how best to access this political resource. Broadly speaking, the contemporary women's movement has developed strategies focussed on gaining the power of public leadership, while others were aimed at cultural change.

Union feminists took up the strategy based on winning hierarchical positions in the trade unions. Targeting the top is, in some senses, an individualist strategy, although creating and winning positions for women depends very much on a viable political movement. It is a risky business for those in such positions since they must negotiate dominant structures of cultural power while championing feminist interests. In trade unions, some formal positions, with their associated resources have been won, but these victories have come to seem quite tenuous.

In Australia, trade union restructuring and union amalgamations took place in the late 1980s as a defence against neo-liberal globalism and its assaults on

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<sup>10</sup> As a tool of analysis, the concept of contingent solidarities provides a framework for identifying how and why women have defined their political interests the way they have within particular political fields. This concept 'allows for a cross-national analysis of the ways in which class, welfare state, labour markets and cultural discourse have included or excluded women and how women trade unionists themselves have influenced the construction and formulation of claims, strategies and solidarities' (Curtin 1999, 60). See also Mohanty 2003.

workers' organisations and their industrial conditions. In consequence, the numbers of formal union positions were markedly reduced with serious impacts on designated 'women's' positions and on those that served the needs for industrial training (Cooper 2000).

Canadian trade unions were also forced to respond to these global pressures, including the demands for so-called 'free trade', with internal conflicts over strategic priorities consuming union attention. Unlike most trade union movements in the West, the Canadian movement has managed to maintain a high rate of unionisation, close to 32 per cent in 2002, but the effects on the sexual politics have been similar:

The boys [male union officials] have really succeeded in retaining their positions inside organised labour ... and they're in a position now where they can just trade with each other (Canadian union official).

Such defeats are disheartening for political and policy activists. They demonstrate very clearly the limits of a politics aimed at getting women into formal, paid and influential positions. This has led many women union activists, as well as women outside the labour movement, to conclude that intervening in hierarchical structures of power in this way is not sufficient to produce successful progressive politics. Both Canadian and Australian union women are moving to this view:

I think it's hard for any woman in a difficult position in a male culture. There was a time when we considered that to get a woman in the position would change the culture of the organisation ... we have changed dramatically from getting individuals into positions to trying to look at cultural change ... I would say we've got to do both (Australian union official).

Women have therefore looked for ways to change that 'male culture', which is connected to the male dominance of trade unions and power networks. Since very few union women accrue appropriate experience and knowledge, feminists are attracted to the political utility and feasibility of pedagogic projects; a strategy that union women have derived from other social movements as well as from trade union traditions. Or as the ILO declares 'Educate, educate, educate' (ILO Booklet 5, 3; see also Burke et al 2002).

Trade unions have a long history of providing educational programs for their members, while the women's movement has produced its own knowledges and pedagogic methodologies. Although the meaning of 'pedagogy' is problematic, it can be a valuable site of challenge and transformation. Women union activists, including those in Canada and Australia, have had some political success with pedagogic projects. They have devised creative and useful 'training' initiatives such as intensive 'schools'. In Australia, we have a program of training support for union members in Australia, the latter known as the Anna Stewart Memorial Project.

The Anna Stewart Memorial Project, created in 1984, aims to increase women's active union involvement and to increase the union movement's acceptance and understanding of women members. Although women's feminist activism in the labour movement and around workplace issues was particularly strong developing the Working Women's Charter and organisations such as Working Women's Centres few women had formal, paid union positions. In 1981, women

held only 41 out of a total of 281 full-time positions in 25 ACTU affiliated unions (Kleimaker 1999, 6).

Many current women officials began their careers with 'Anna Stewart'. It was designed to encourage union women to become activists and formal officials, i.e. as a kind of affirmative action program by 1998, (Mezinec 1999, 18). It is not particularly innovative as a pedagogic project, but the point is that it is endorsed and funded by the union movement as a way to meet union women's needs, and accepts these are different from men unionists' needs. This requires a significant change in union political discourses and practices.

Similar programs are sponsored by peak union bodies at national and international levels, as well as by individual unions. The ILO, the ICFTU and the world-wide trade union organisation of education personnel, Education International, endorse, develop and provide varieties of educational programs aimed at social change for equality. None of these would have occurred without considerable efforts by women themselves who came to feel that ways needed to be found to sustain themselves and their activism, and to confront what they saw as the hostility of men unionists and the union movement's blindness to women's interests (Franzway 2001).

### *Queer organising*

In the context of intensified globalisation, new interconnections of networks and communities reveal common needs and concerns, and produce new forms of alliances. Take, for example, sexualities and workplaces: there are alarming rates

of homophobic discrimination and prejudice in many workplaces (Ferfolja 1998).

A recent study of Australian workplace experiences of lesbians, gay men and transgender people, 'The Pink Ceiling is Too Low' reports that over half of the respondents suffered from homophobic behaviour or harassment, and eleven per cent experienced verbal abuse, including threats of physical and sexual abuse (Irwin 1999). The report was launched under the auspices of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), demonstrating that the trade union movement can become a useful resource for challenging and transforming oppressive practices of sexuality.

This might seem unlikely since trade unions have a well-known reputation for defending patriarchy based on their domination by an overwhelmingly masculine heterosexuality. In this sense, the trade union movement is little different from other public organisations in most societies in the ways it contests challenges to patriarchy through widely held repressive meanings of sexuality, including homosexuality and homosexual desire amongst men.

Nevertheless, inroads into the politics of sexualities in trade union movements have been made through the efforts and impact of trans-national gay and lesbian movements, as well as the broader women's movement. Ostenfeld (1998) argues that the trade union movement has a relatively sound history of responding to the needs of gay and lesbian workers, particularly through the efforts of white-collar and 'left' wing unions, despite the resistance of some 'right' wing union officials.

We also found that Canadian and Australian women officials recognise the political significance of patriarchal expressions through hegemonic sexuality. They unite with other activists to push peak union councils to develop relevant policies and organise national conferences for gay and lesbian unionists. The Canadian peak union body, the Canadian Labour Council (CLC) held its first national conference for lesbian, gay and bisexual union activists in 1997, described as 'a bit late in the day coming, but it's a major victory' by a Canadian union activist.

Groups of lesbian and gay unionists have campaigned on explicit issues such as protection from homophobia in workplaces and in trade unions since the early 1970s in the face of much opposition. In 1980, the May Day parade of the labour movement in Sydney (Australia) had a gay section organised by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, which was not well received by some in union hierarchies. More recently, networks of lesbians and gay men have established support committees such as the Gay and Lesbian Australian Services Union Members, which won the award for best recruitment campaign at the ACTU Congress 2000, with their slogan 'Job security never goes out of style'. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has a national Pink Triangle Committee that tackles homophobia and challenges the attitudes that isolate and demean people who aren't 'straight'.

The impact of events like the Sydney Mardi Gras derives from the development of networks, organisation, debates and material support that is necessary for such

participation. Some unions participate in the annual Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in spite of internal conflicts and threats of resignation by union officials and members. Provocatively, Fortescue (2000, 64) suggests that Mardi Gras has become 'the biggest labour festival of the year.' Similarly, the world conferences of lesbian and gay trade unionists grew out of, and extend, global/local networks of gay, lesbian and transgender workers.

The second conference held in Sydney in 2002 was endorsed by the ACTU, along with nine out of the 10 global union federations. Its organisers stress the political value of such networks, but also the political necessity of global campaigns to tackle the appalling working conditions of those who 'live in countries that still execute their homosexual citizens' (Workers Online 2002, 139). Such transnational networks have the capacity to be effective when they are able to draw on trade union resources, to create forums and spaces for lesbian, gay and transsexual workers.

### **International advocacy and alliances**

One site of increasing importance to union feminists is the network of women's committees and equity offices within the Global Union Federations.<sup>11</sup> These federated international labour bodies originally came into being in the 19<sup>th</sup> and

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11 The GUFs include, International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation, International Federation of Building and Wood Workers, International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers Union, International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Association, Public Service International, Educational International, International Transport Workers' Federation, International Federation of Journalist, International Metalworkers' Federation, Union Network International, International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

20<sup>th</sup> centuries to ameliorate the effects of economic competition on workers in different countries, to build international solidarity, and to facilitate the exchange of information and resources between unions in the same sector of the economy. They are organized regionally and by sector--representing millions of workers in transportation, public services, textiles, manufacturing, tourism, construction, education, media, chemical, metal, mining, electronics, agriculture, and food processing.

The women's committees of each federation are networked through the coordinating activities of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which has recently initiated a major campaign to increase significantly women's membership in unions worldwide and to increase their representation and participation in union programs, activities, and decision-making structures. The campaign targets specific groups of women workers including women working in the informal economy, young women, migrant women, women from ethnic minorities, and women employed in the Export Processing Zones.

In February, 2003 the ICFTU brought 300 women delegates from 92 countries to Melbourne, Australia for the 8th World Women's Conference. Delegates participated in workshops and panels on a wide range of topics from those more narrowly associated with trade unions such as collective bargaining to more pressing political issues such as the war in Iraq. Delegates passed a strong feminist anti-war measure that spelled out the specific ways war impacts women and girls. The ILO encourages labour to work with NGOs, and the ICFTU

conference organizers made an effort to include prominent feminist leaders from the non-profit development sector on the conference program. Elmira Nazombe of the Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice addressed the delegates about building alliances between labour and transnational NGOs. She cautioned the audience about the need for activists to develop movement strategies that take into account the asymmetrical power relations among different groups of women concerned about the same issue.

### **Labour Rights as Human Rights**

The ICFTU has also contributed to campaigns for human rights. Union feminists have insisted that freedom from discrimination is a basic human right and that corporations have the responsibility to eliminate all forms of discrimination. The preamble of the Charter of Rights of Working Women developed by the ICFTU explicitly addresses the rights of women within the context of trade agreements.

The Preamble states,

As social inequality rises across and within countries that engage in the global economy, so does the need to redress these wrongs. To that end, substantial changes must be made to ensure that world trade regimes promote gender equality, poverty eradication, respect for human rights and environmental protection and sustainability. Women like men, are entitled to basic human rights, including the right to organize into unions, and other workers rights as outlined in the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.<sup>12</sup>

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12 Prohibitions against discrimination are found in many other UN conventions. These include The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

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Here we see an example of the claim that Labour Rights are Human Rights, and women's rights. International labour norms that strengthen the right of workers to belong to a union and to bargain collectively will benefit women workers in the low-wage and informal sectors of the global economy. Labour rights, however expanded or redefined, are only meaningful for women if women participate in the process of their formulation and enforcement. In addition, focusing on the human rights of women means focusing on the ways that race, ethnicity, class, caste, religion, culture, immigration status, sexuality, disability, and indigenous status matters when it comes to understanding the specificity of human rights claims.

Feminism can make a meaningful contribution to the movement for global economic justice because feminism can contribute to our understanding of how gender and globalization are mutually constitutive. Hutchings (2002) contends that there is now a second wave of feminist writing on human rights that shifts the focus away from equal treatment and equality with men to an approach much harder to characterize that includes attention to the differences among women and to the way that human rights have too often been constructed with the male citizen as the model subject. She writes, 'universal human rights have been

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defined to reflect the lives and experiences of men, focusing on the public realm of the paid economy and institutional politics' (Hutchings, 432). Many Latin American feminists have helped to expand the discourse on citizenship by focusing on the intersections between gender, democracy, and the politics of rights. This opens up discursive space to include discussions of human rights abuses that occur in private such as domestic violence as well as in public. It also opens up discursive space to include unconventional human rights violations such as economic insecurity and to explore both the lack of women's formal rights and substantive rights (Nicola 2002).

Transnational union feminists serve as a bridge between the international labour movement and the global women's movement and are in a position to use the resources and networks of their organizations to help women realize their rights as women and as workers. The rhetoric of human rights as labour rights and as women's rights can be used to mobilize participants transnational in a movement for a more equitable and economically just world, but only if such discourses are connected to the local realities of workers' lives. Abstract appeals to universal human rights will not mobilize a feminist response to the economic injustices of globalization.

Unions connect their members to national politics and to transnational labour networks and alliances that are much broader than labour unions per se. It is within these networks that workers can find the political space to imagine a world different from the one we now have. It is here that workers find the discursive

tools, including feminism, to fashion new ways to articulate their rights. It did not take long, for example, for women at the ICFTU's world women's conference to forge an anti-war resolution that linked militarization to human development and economic justice. Furthermore, unions are creating their own labour NGOs like the Steelworkers Humanity Fund which helps workers to see their connections to workers internationally.

Through worker-to-worker exchanges, participation in international forums and active engagement with various UN programs and activities, unions expand and deepen their transnational labour networks, engage with new ways of thinking about rights, and expand their repertoire of collective action. These growing external links between labour and NGOs are particularly beneficial for women and union feminists because their positions are strengthened by the discursive and material effects of the women's movement in progressive NGOs.

## **Conclusion**

Globalisation from above causes problems for progressive politics because it appears impervious to human agency, and at some levels, the anonymous forces of the political and global economy are destructive of communities that imagine themselves as tied exclusively to some geographic or political locality. And yet, opportunities for political interventions are available as differences proliferate and as those on the periphery gain access to new resources from the flows of trans-national processes.

We argue that the processes of globalisation are far from impermeable, but rather present opportunities as well as obstacles for progressive political activism.

Although it is a traditional institution, and thus not usually regarded as relevant to these times, the trade union movement is identified as having the capacity to challenge the appalling effects of globalisation on work, particularly women's work.

Feminist politics is central to this argument, since gender, understood in terms of gendered power relations, is no longer a matter of local conditions and cultures.

Through discussion of two general approaches to making politics based on parallel strategies and trans-national networks, the problem of the oppressive impact of neo-liberal and neo-conservative globalism on the world may be challenged.

But alliances are always difficult to sustain, particularly when groups are under the pressure of competing interests and demands. It is the case, whether alliances are being forged at local or at trans-national levels that they are always at risk of breaking down over questions of strategy. Painful conflicts may occur over whether to focus on what can be done, or on achieving consensus about political principles. For example, sexual politics campaigns may be curbed; issues around sexuality may be sanitised in exchange for human rights. Queer organising gives way to calls for same-sex pension rights.

In spite of the considerable obstacles, women's workplace and political commitment, activism and militancy are not insignificant. The minority positions of union women activists, their feminist politics supported by the women's movement provide strong incentives to make creative and useful alliances across state and union borders. As always, progressive political activism demands mutual respect, recognition and representation of diverse interests and needs. Feminist politics is being made within, through and across contemporary discourses and practices of labour movements and social movements.

