

Mobilizing and Organizing for Transnational Solidarity: The Case of ExChains

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Global supply chains in the garment industry are marked by labour standard violations in their periphery (Anner, 2015). Workers in garment production in the “Global South” often suffer from excessive overtime, low wages, and various forms of harassment and abuse in addition to potentially deadly health and safety risks. Collective representation to establish bargaining power is made difficult by adverse regulation and often aggressive anti-unionism in the countries where production is located. But also garment retail workers in the “Global North”—although usually not risking their lives at work—suffer from comparatively poor working conditions relative to other sectors, ranging from high demands for working time flexibility, an intensification of work, verbal abuse, and managerial control and surveillance. Garment retailers and brands are often hostile towards unionization and worker representation, and the peculiar workforce characteristics in retail—often female part-time workers with a migration background—provides further obstacles for effective collective action.

Against this background it is paramount to find ways to strengthen the bargaining power of workers in garment production and retail along the supply chain. Several scholars argue that transnational labor solidarity is needed to counter unilateral management power in internationally segmented and dispersed global supply chains (Anner, 2000: 254). Such solidarity relations need to go far beyond international campaigns and global framework agreements (GFAs), because ultimately only well-coordinated union cooperation and bargaining across borders can put sufficient pressure on multinational corporations (MNCs) to improve labor standards (Lueterbacher, Prosser & Papadakis, 2017). However, such transnational bargaining power is difficult to establish for reasons like divergent interests and structural differences between unions in the core and the periphery of supply chains, power struggles among unions and exclusive union strategies within many countries, and the lack of resources for transnational activities of trade unions (see e.g. Bieler, 2013). Thus, overall, the literature is mostly sceptical regarding the potential for mobilizing and organizing for transnational solidarity between workers involved in global production and retail (e.g. Burawoy, 2010; Gennard & Newsome, 2005; Greer et al., 2013).

In this paper we seek to examine more closely the barriers and possibilities for strengthening transnational solidarity, especially that among workers working in different positions in global supply chains, by looking at the example of the ExChains network that aims at mobilizing and organizing for transnational labour solidarity in the garment industry. ExChains is a network of works councillors and union members working along the global garment supply chain—from Asia's garment production factories to European retail stores. ExChains has members from Germany (Ver.di as well as works councillors from H&M, Zara, Primark, and Esprit), Bangladesh (National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF)), Sri Lanka (Free Trade Zones and General Service Employees Union

(FTZ&GSEU)), and India (Garment and Textile Workers Union (GATWU) in Bangalore and Garment and Fashion Workers Union (GAFWU) in Chennai). The ExChains network exists since 2002 and is part of a wider network called TIE (Transnational Information Exchange). ExChains' financial situation is quite precarious. While the two coordinating functions in Germany are financed via TIE, which again is partially financed by the foundation "Menschenwürde und Arbeitswelt", through the Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst (EED), as well as a private donor from the US who is sympathetic to TIE's goals, the political work – campaigns or meetings for instance – has to be co-financed by third party funders, such as the Bewegungsstiftung or the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. The networks in Asia are partially funded by the respective unions but have also received funds from various foundations, including the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. There are further sub-networks connected to TIE, which likewise try to organize transnational solidarity, such as the network "Eisenbahn ohne Grenzen", which seeks to organize workers from West-Africa and France. Whereas TIE operates in different sectors, ExChains focuses on the global garment industry. The aim of the network is to build transnational solidarity among workers and, ultimately, to permanently change the global structures of the garment industry.

Based on an empirical analysis of data from (so far) six interviews with unions and union-related organizations, including members of the ExChains network, as well as 66 documents published by the ExChains network and its members and field notes from participating in a number of industry events we show that ExChains differs from other transnational initiatives because of two features: ExChains manages to balance, first, the short- and the long-term, and second, different interests, thereby establishing two-way bonds of solidarity among workers in garment production and retail. We conclude by discussing transformative potential agency of transnational labour solidarity with regards to substandard working conditions.

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