

Einreichung Momentum 2021 – Arbeit – 14.-17. Oktober 2021

Gewünschter Track: Track # 9: Nachhaltige Arbeitsteilung vs. globaler Standortwettbewerb

Alternativ-Track: Track #4: ArbeiterInnenbewegung: Klasse - Kampf - Kooperation

Karin Fischer, Signe Moe, Cornelia Staritz

**Transnational labor organizing instead of global competition – limits and possibilities
Findings from a special issue of the Austrian Journal of Development Studies (JEP)**

Abstract

Globalization has led to globally interconnected productive structures in many sectors and regions. So-called global production networks or commodity chains are controlled and governed by transnational corporations which transfer capital and jobs to locations which offer specific advantages, be it cheap labor, lax environmental legislation, tax gifts or access to agricultural and extractive resources. Global competition between localities in attracting foreign investors or orders from global buyers has generated a “race to the bottom” that puts pressure on wages, working conditions and collective labor rights.

Labor organizing along the chain is probably the most effective means of counteracting corporate strategies of globalized competition. In the past two decades, there has been a rise in cross-border labor activism as workers and their organizations together with less formal transnational collaborations and campaigns with other civil society organizations have attempted “to meet capital at its own scale”. But as an increasing literature has shown, transnational organizing is anything but easy. Many attempts to win gains through cross-border organizing collapsed related to conflicts which emerge along divides caused by ideological and strategic differences, resource inequalities and differentiated priorities and access to decision makers and elites.

We, the submitters, coordinate a special issue of the Austrian Journal of Development Studies (Journal für Entwicklungspolitik/JEP) on this subject. The issue consists of case studies from different world regions and sectors conducted by established scholars and young researchers. From different theoretical/conceptual perspectives, the studies focus particularly on five aspects of labor organizing:

- (1) Challenges and power relations within transnational organizing between different types of actors (e.g. unions, labor and non-labor civil society actors, more and less institutionalized actors, etc.) and also between different groups of workers (e.g. according to type of work and contract, gender, ethnicity, race, location etc.);
- (2) Organizing objectives and strategies, including the interrelations of more ‘classical’ workers’ issues such as wages, working conditions and freedom of association with ‘issues beyond the workplace’ such as reproductive and livelihood issues, ecological concerns and broader questions about specific development models, and how forms of organizing take them up (or not) and deal with potential contradictions;

- (3) Organising as a multi-scalar process taking into account the interrelations of and potential contradictions between different levels/scales of organizing (local, national, regional, global);
- (4) power relations of workers and transnational organizing initiatives vis-à-vis actors like the state, transnational corporations or employers` associations, and, finally;
- (5) the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on transnational organizing.

The case studies cover an overview of transnational labor alliance campaigns, the role of global framework agreements and global unions in the garment industry in Asia, cotton farmers and workers and all-day labour unionism in Burkina Faso, voluntary initiatives on workers` rights in sports shoe production in Asia, cross-national organizing of precarious platform workers in Latin America and organising initiatives in South Africa`s platinum mines.

In our contribution, we will highlight challenges, limits and achievements which the case studies collected for the special issue show. We will systematize the findings and draw conclusions in relation to the potential of transnational labor organizing to leverage corporate strategies of outsourcing and offshoring and change power dynamics in global production networks.

Our contribution is both an overview of the articles of the special issue and our analytical substrate that we draw from them. Our contribution to the track will be published as the introduction to the special issue of the JEP. It will appear in December 2021.

Kontakt

Karin Fischer, Institut für Soziologie, Johannes Kepler Universität Linz, Karin.Fischer@jku.at

Signe Moe, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of

Geneva, Signe.Moe@unige.ch

Cornelia Staritz, Institut für Internationale Entwicklung, Universität Wien,

Cornelia.Staritz@univie.ac.at