

**Several Souths: Assessing Latin American Involvement  
in a Renewed International Labour Movement<sup>1</sup>**

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Since modern trade unions have appeared, between the middle and the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they have had international activities. Whether it is socialist internationalism, Christian universalism or more “pragmatic” needs to build ties in order to improve their relation of force, trade unions from different ideological backgrounds found various motivations to internationalize their activities. These activities were progressively institutionalized through the founding of International Labour Movement Organizations (ILMOs)<sup>2</sup>. ILMOs are to trade unions what International Organizations are to nation-states. They were launched by national trade unions in order to facilitate cooperation and exchange of information among themselves and to give them an international representation (Gordon and Turner 2000, Harrod and O’Brien 2002). Just like domestic trade unions, ILMOs are two-fold. Political ILMOs gather trade union centres and aim at providing political representation to the labour movement at the international level. Sectoral ILMOs are joined by branch-based unions and focus on issues specific to the industries they represent. In this paper, I will deal only with political ILMOs.

ILMOs have been the object of a number of criticisms. For many observers on the left, they are too far from the day-to-day realities of the workers (Waterman 2001, Moody 1997). These authors denounce the mostly diplomatic function and bureaucratic nature of ILMOs and call for a “new internationalism” based on grassroots initiatives more than on “top-down” structures. Another frequent comment is that ILMOs tend to reproduce the patterns of domination of the global economy. In other terms, they are controlled by organizations from the Global North, and more specifically by European trade unions (Hyman 2005, Jakobsen 2001, Gallin 2002). Nonetheless, the end of the Cold War has raised some hopes that a rebalancing of power could occur, in particular through the action of new affiliates coming from the Global South (Jakobsen 2001, Eder 2002).

In the context of this latter debate on ILMOs’ internal politics, I explore in this paper the involvement of Mexican and Brazilian trade unions in the international labour movement. More specifically, I focus on the evolution of their implication in the Interamerican Regional Workers Organization (known under its Spanish acronym, ORIT), above all since the end of the Cold War. I argue that this evolution has not been the same for Mexico and Brazil, because each national trade union’s involvement depends on international, regional and domestic dynamics. This strengthens the idea that “Global South unionism” is not a homogenous entity, and hence a poor analytical tool. This work is part of a broader reflection on the necessity to develop a dialectical approach of the international labour movement in the Americas, which is the object of my doctoral thesis.

Research for this paper is based on a review of the literature on Mexican and Brazilian labour movements, critical analysis of trade union documentation, observation of events organized by ILMOs and 52 interviews conducted between January and December 2007

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<sup>2</sup> I prefer to call these organizations ILMOs instead of “international unions” as they are often referred to in the literature because this might create confusion with North American so-called “international unions”, i.e. US-based unions with local sections in Canada. The expression “global unions”, recently adopted by the main ILMOs, seems rather confusing too as it does not reflect the actual nature of ILMOs which have more to do with International Organizations than with supranational bodies.

with trade union representatives and observers of the labour movement (both academic and non-academic) in Mexico and Brazil.

I will start by drawing a brief portrait of the evolution of ILMOs since the end of the Cold War, particularly in the Americas. I will then review the recent involvement of Mexican and Brazilian trade unions in the ORIT. Finally I will show how international, regional and domestic dynamics influenced each labour movement in its relationship to the ORIT.

### **ILMOs After the Cold War**

Until recently, the landscape of ILMOs looked much like the one of many Western European countries during the Cold War. Three main organizations were sharing most of the trade union centres across the world. The oldest, the World Confederation of Labour (WCL), represented the Christian labour movement, while the World Federation of Trade Union (WFTU) brought together unions sharing a Communist ideology and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) gathered social-democratic and more broadly anticommunist organizations.

The fall of the USSR and of its satellite countries in Eastern Europe obviously weakened the position of the WFTU, not only in former Socialist countries but also in the Western world. Now relying mostly on the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) and on some affiliates in Arab countries, it is a dying organization. After having lost many of its members to the ICFTU, the WCL has also been in a difficult position for the last two decades. This probably helped its decision to merge with the ICFTU in 2006, when both organizations dissolved themselves to found the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which is now considered as the most representative political ILMO (Hennebert 2007).

Among other challenges, the founding of the ITUC raised the issue of regional organization. Indeed, both the ICFTU and the WCL had their own regional structures, and merging them on each continent was not necessarily an easy task. In the Americas, this issue took a particularly problematic dimension (Wachendorfer 2007).

The regional organization of the ICFTU for the Americas was the ORIT. Just like the ICFTU was founded out of the WFTU in order for the Western camp to have a relay organization in the labour movement, the ORIT was launched with the very idea of fighting the emergence of Communist unions in Latin America. Its interamerican nature reflected, to a lot of extent, the Monroe Doctrine following which the US were to be the “guardian” of Latin America. It has been shown that the ORIT, during the Cold War, was narrowly related to the American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), which foreign policy was itself aligned on the US Department of State, and even occasionally on the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)’s operations (Battista 2002, Hill 1993, Spalding 1992). In Latin America, the AFL-CIO’s American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) was in charge of this policy. A representative of the AFL-CIO mentioned in an interview that the AIFLD was controlled by the most conservative branch of the US labour movement.

The WCL did not establish a panamerican regional organization. Its presence to the North of the continent had always been negligible and it was more supportive of having a

regional organization specific to Latin America (Xelhuantzi López 2002). This organization was the *Central Latinoamericana de Trabajadores* (CLAT). The CLAT was composed of the WCL affiliates in Latin America but also had a number of training and research facilities in various countries, in particular Venezuela. In countries where it did not benefit from substantial membership, it was unofficially represented by foundations working on labour movement related issues, such as the *Centro de Promoción Social* (CENPROS) in Mexico.

The founding of the ITUC imposed the merger between the former WCL and ICFTU regional structures. The Americas was the last region of the world to comply with this obligation. Although regional mergers were supposed to happen quickly after the founding Congress of the ITUC, held in Vienna in November 2006, the ORIT and the CLAT formally merged only in March 2008 to found the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA). Among the contentious issues were the geographical span of the new organization, its precise relationship with the ITUC and also the fate of the former CLAT numerous research and training facilities<sup>3</sup>. After a long bargaining, the former ORIT imposed its vision on all aspects: the TUCA would be panamerican, formally affiliated to the ITUC and would not incorporate the former CLAT institutes. The relation of force was indeed favourable to the ORIT, as it brought to the new TUCA more than 80% of its membership. The ORIT Secretariat in Sao Paulo became the TUCA Secretariat, and the composition of the leadership of the TUCA is largely the same as the one of the former ORIT (TUCA 2008).

### **Mexican Involvement into the ORIT**

Mexican trade unionism has been strongly influenced by the corporatist regime put in place by the Mexican government since the 1920s. This regime led to a strict control of trade unions by the state. Compulsory registration of trade unions to the Ministry of Labour and the broad competence of government-controlled *Juntas de Conciliación y Arbitraje* are the main tools used by government officials to maintain a solid grip on the labour movement (Villegas Rojas 2006, Xelhuantzi López 2006). As Mexico was until recently a *de facto* one-party regime, this situation also led most trade unions to align themselves on the hegemonic *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI).

Although almost unanimously associated with the corporatist regime, the Mexican labour movement has never been structurally unified under a unique, or at least dominant, organization. On the contrary, the Mexican government has always made sure to maintain an organizational diversity among trade unions, encouraging the founding of new union centres when one became too powerful. Hence, when the *Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana* (CROM) gained too much influence, the founding of the *Confederación de Trabajadores de México* (CTM) was supported. Similar support was granted in 1955 to the founders of the *Confederación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos* (CROC) in order to limit the expansion of the CTM (Gutiérrez Castro 2006).

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<sup>3</sup> This information appears on a presentation given by an ORIT representative to a Latin American meeting of bank workers unions in Sao Paulo in November 2007 (ORIT 2007) and was completed by several representatives of the ORIT during interviews.

If it never became the hegemonic representative of corporatist trade unionism at the domestic level, the CTM was, nevertheless, granted the monopoly of Mexican workers' representation at the international level (Xelhuantzi López 2002, Villamar 2007). The CTM was the only Mexican affiliate to the ICFTU and to the ORIT until 2001. It has also been responsible for the labour section of the Mexican representation to the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The CTM was an active member of the ORIT during the Cold War era. When the ORIT had to move its headquarters out of Havana, after the Cuban Revolution, they were relocated in the very building of the CTM in Mexico City, where they remained until 1989. Furthermore, the type of corporatism practiced by the CTM matched the model defended by the ORIT at that time: a disciplined trade unionism containing the emergence of Communist organizations. During this period, the CTM maintained a good relationship with the AFL-CIO, considering the prominent role of the US labour movement in the ORIT and its orientations during the Cold War.

The 1989 decision to move the ORIT's headquarters to Caracas, Venezuela, is diversely interpreted by the persons I interviewed. For some, generally opposed to the CTM, this was the first sign of the increasing "malaise" between the ORIT and the CTM. As the Soviet Union and its allies were crumbling down, the "Red Fear" turned weaker on the continent and the need for the ORIT and the AFL-CIO to support corporatist unions became less obvious. For other interviewees, in particular from the CTM, the moving of the ORIT's headquarters was due to either a need to rotate between countries or to asthma problems experienced by the son of the then Secretary-General, who could not stay in Mexico City.

The relationship between the CTM and the AFL-CIO really started to degrade with the debate on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), at the beginning of the 1990s. The CTM supported NAFTA, following as always the position of the Mexican government. This position obviously contradicted the one defended by not only the AFL-CIO but also the Canadian labour movement, who both opposed NAFTA. As the ORIT agreed with the position of the AFL-CIO on that issue, this led to widening the gap between the ORIT and the CTM.

When George Sweeney became the AFL-CIO President in 1995, he announced a profound reform of the union centre's foreign policy (Scipes 2005, Shorrock 2002). The regional institutes who had been the symbols of the AFL-CIO's contribution to the containment policy of the Cold War era were dissolved and replaced by a network of "Solidarity Center" offices. In Latin America, this led to the end of the AIFLD and to the opening of an office of the Solidarity Center in Mexico City. Concretely, Sweeney started to send signals that the AFL-CIO would no longer maintain exclusive relationships to the CTM but that it would look for building links with other, even "independent", unions. An AFL-CIO representative told me that it was precisely in 1998, during a speech he gave at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM), that Sweeney announced this shift, and that since then the relationship of the AFL-CIO with the Mexican labour movement has changed a lot.

The campaign against NAFTA led the AFL-CIO and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) to build ties with independent Mexican unions, most notably the *Frente Auténtico del*

*Trabajo* (FAT). The FAT is one of the oldest organizations to oppose corporatism in Mexico but it has never reached a substantial membership (Robles *et al.* 2005). As a matter of fact, it was underlined by several interviewees that the FAT's international presence is disproportionate to its actual influence in the Mexican labour movement. As from 1997, the AFL-CIO had another potential new partner: the *Unión Nacional de Trabajadores* (UNT). The UNT was founded by both dissidents of the corporatist *Congreso del Trabajo* and unions that had always opposed the corporatist system, in particular university workers' unions (Leyva 2005). This unlikely alliance led the UNT to adopt a collegial leadership that had, until today, rendered its position somehow confuse. Although it claimed quite early in its life to join the ranks of the ICFTU, the UNT was blocked by the CTM, in spite of the support of a number of Northern trade unions<sup>4</sup>. In 2001-2002, a compromise was found between the CTM and the ICFTU: the UNT would join, but so would the CROC too<sup>5</sup>.

This diversity of representation was not easy to deal with for the Mexican labour movement, who had been used to the CTM monopoly for almost 50 years. When the ICFTU was replaced by the ITUC, Mexico remained for months one of the only countries with no representation on the ITUC General Council. Indeed, the three Mexican affiliates could not reach a compromise on who would sit on that Council<sup>6</sup>. Whereas other countries represented by several affiliates generally manage to find agreements by playing with the titular and substitute positions, the three Mexican affiliates came up, after several months of discussion, with a one-year-based rotation formally entrenched in the ITUC official documents (ITUC 2008). This episode illustrates the current discord among Mexican trade unions when it comes to international affairs and the impact of the reminiscence of corporatism on Mexico's international representation.

Mexican involvement in the recently born TUCA remains unclear. The CTM is not expected to come back closer to ILMOs, but the CROC attitude is less explicit. CROC representatives made lots of representations to many ILMOs before they decided to join the ICFTU. But just like its domestic political positions, its attitude in relation to the TUCA and the ITUC is uncertain. The CROC seems to present a much different face in Mexico and abroad. In Mexico, it is still considered as one of the representatives of traditional corporatist unionism, while it tries to be perceived, abroad, as a reforming organization. This might have to do with its own internal structure and with the relative autonomy left to its international department in relation to the national leadership<sup>7</sup>.

As for the UNT, its international policy is still quite dominated by its most influent affiliate, the *Sindicato de Telefonistas de la República Mexicana* (STRM). But as a branch-based union, the STRM focuses much of its international activities on its own sectoral ILMO, Union Network International (UNI). So the international policy of the UNT is still to be

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<sup>4</sup> It is a legacy of the original socialist internationalism that no country can be represented by more than one organization, except if the organization already representing this country agrees to it. This practice, strictly applied by the Communist International, was also surprisingly adopted by anti-Communist organizations.

<sup>5</sup> This information was confirmed by several interviewees from the UNT, the CROC and the ORIT.

<sup>6</sup> Representatives from the UNT, the CROC and the CTM confirmed this information during interviewees.

<sup>7</sup> This information was taken from an interview with a CROC representative.

defined and the exact nature of its future involvement into the ITUC and the TUCA is uncertain.

One of the few significant initiatives taken by the ORIT in relation to Mexico in the recent years has been the campaign against protection contracts launched in 2007. Protection contracts are “fake” collective agreements signed by ghost trade unions commonly called *sindicatos de protección*. These unions can exist because of cracks in the Mexican labour laws that allow an employer to “choose” the union that will represent workers in his company as long as he can count on the “cooperation” of a few of them. The ORIT ordered and published a study on that topic, along with seven Global Union Federations (GUF, sectoral ILMOs), because it was afraid that this model could spread in other countries with similar labour laws (Bouzas Ortis 2007). This study denounces, among other things, the presence of protection trade unions in the CTM. At the launching of the campaign, representatives from both the UNT and the CROC pledged to take action against protection contracts. The representative from the CTM did not talk<sup>8</sup>.

### **Brazilian Involvement into the ORIT**

The Brazilian labour relations system is inherited from the era of Getúlio Vargas. Inspired by Mussolinian corporatism, Vargas imposed a legal framework that would forbid trade unions to federate themselves across sectors (Pazzianotto Pinto 2007, Antunes 1995). Concretely, this came to forbid the founding of union centres. This rule was maintained under the military dictatorship, and if union centres were tolerated in Brazil from 1988 on, it is only in 2007 that the law officially recognized them as trade union entities.

This explains why, until the beginning of the 1990s, there was no representation of Brazil either at the ICFTU or at the ORIT. When the *Central Única dos Trabalhadores* (CUT) was founded in 1983, it was a clandestine organization and it could not, therefore, formally join the ICFTU. Besides, many groups at the origin of the CUT came from the far-left and were quite sceptical about tying themselves to an explicitly anti-Communist organization. This latter reason explains why, even after Brazil exited from the dictatorship, the CUT decided not to join either the ICFTU or the WFTU, the former being too close to the US government, and the latter being too close to Moscow, which was a problem for less radical and Trotskyite groups inside the CUT<sup>9</sup>.

In fact, the first Brazilian union centre to join the ICFTU and the ORIT was the *Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores* (CGT), at the beginning of the 1990s. The CGT was founded in 1986 and represented the most moderate part of the Brazilian labour movement. The ICFTU imposed two conditions to the CGT for it to join: abandon its position in favour of the *Imposto Sindical*<sup>10</sup>, and pledge that it would not use its veto, should the CUT

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<sup>8</sup> This information was given by the organizer of the event during an interview.

<sup>9</sup> This information was given by several interviewees from the CUT and is also given in CUT (2003).

<sup>10</sup> The *Imposto Sindical* (literally the “trade union tax”) is a compulsory fee, equivalent to one day of salary per year, imposed to all Brazilian workers of the formal economy and aiming at funding trade unions and the Ministry of Labour. It is a legacy of the corporatist regime and is considered by the ICFTU/ITUC as a violation of the right of workers to freely join a union of their choice.

eventually want to join the ICFTU. The CGT complied with both<sup>11</sup>. In 2007, the CGT merged with two smaller union centres to found the *União Geral dos Trabalhadores* (UGT), who has taken over its affiliation to the ITUC and to the TUCA.

When the leadership of the CUT decided to put in debate the possibility of an international affiliation, at the 1991 Congress, exchanges were so heated that the decision was postponed to the 1992 *Plenário* (the highest governing body between Congresses). The *Plenário* voted at 60% in favour of the affiliation to the ICFTU and to the ORIT (CUT 2003). This was a real turning point in the history of Brazilian unionism, as it represented the end of the isolation of Latin America's most populous country, along with the moderation of the traditionally anti-American line of the CUT.

A few years later, the ICFTU and the ORIT were joined by a third Brazilian affiliate, *Força Sindical* (FS), a union centre traditionally associated to a business-friendly attitude and quite at odds with the CUT (Giannotti 2002). In spite of this diversity, and contrary to the case of Mexico, representatives of the three union centres all told during interviews that the cooperation was good between the three Brazilian affiliates. Before attending international meetings, they meet and discuss the issues at stake. A common position is built on the topics on which a consensus can be reached while other topics are ignored.

Almost all interviewees, not only in Brazil but also in Mexico, acknowledge the gain of influence of Brazilian trade unions inside the ICFTU and the ORIT. Many also mention that this shift was much more pronounced inside the ORIT than inside the ICFTU. The first manifestation of this change has been, obviously, the moving of the ORIT's headquarters to Sao Paulo in 2006. When the ORIT decided to leave Caracas, mostly because of its deteriorating relationship with its local affiliate, the *Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela* (CTV), Brazilian affiliates insisted that it moved to Brazil. The fact that they won is an obvious sign of their influence on the organization.

A year earlier, in 2005, the Congress of the ORIT had been organized in the Brazilian capital, Brasilia, and saw the former CUT's International Relations Secretary become ORIT's Secretary for Economic and Social Affairs. This position, the second most important in ORIT Secretariat, is highly strategic, as its holder is in charge of major issues such as trade, development, and regional integration. It is precisely on this topic of regional integration that Brazilian representatives, in particular those from the CUT, consider they influenced the ORIT the most.

Brazilians take much credit for the fact that the ORIT has been very much involved into the campaign against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). They consider that the ORIT would probably not have taken such a place into the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA) without their impulse. Brazilians consider themselves to be closer to other social movements than other unionists on the continent, in particular from the North. Hence, they think that the HSA strategy was much more inspired by their own practices than from those coming from the North. This kind of broad based social movement initiative is indeed not

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<sup>11</sup> This information was given by a representative of the CGT during an interview.



without remembering the practice of World Social Forums, another initiative in which Brazilians played a major role.

Also, the fact that the discourse of the opposition to the FTAA turned to be more “constructive” than previous campaigns against free trade is considered by some Brazilians as part of their legacy. The HSA developed the “Alternatives for the Americas”, a document presenting a social-movement-based project of integration for the continent. The ORIT then launched the “Labour Platform for the Americas”, another document for which Brazilians take credit and which locates the ORIT more clearly into the camp of “alternative globalization” (Godio 2007).

The ORIT has also started, in the last few years, a process of regionalization of its structures<sup>12</sup>. In other terms, it is now encouraging the founding of regional coordinations that would help affiliates from the same region to meet on a regular basis and coordinate their activities. This was clearly thought out of the example of the *Coordinadora de Centrales Sindicales del Cono Sur* (CCSCS). The CCSCS was founded in 1986 by the main union centres of Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay and Brazil (Portela de Castro 2007, 2000). It was launched independently from the ORIT, and was even considered as some kind of competition in the region by the then Secretary-General of the ORIT. The CCSCS has always been composed of both ORIT affiliates and non-affiliates. It was originally pursuing two goals: fighting against the remaining military dictatorships in the region (in particular in Chile) and developing an analysis and a strategy facing the issue of external debt, which was particularly striking at that period in the region. With the launching and expansion of the *Mercado Común del Sur* (MERCOSUR), the CCSCS progressively gained interest and expertise on the issues of regional integration, and later managed to become one of the first non-governmental interlocutors of the MERCOSUR<sup>13</sup>.

The CCSCS has not only allowed a stronger labour presence in the region and in MERCOSUR affairs, it has also led its members to know each other better and to develop ties of cooperation. Hence, far before it joined the ORIT, the CUT already had a relationship with one of its historic members, the *Confederación General del Trabajo de la República Argentina* (CGT-RA), despite the fact that both union centres do not come from the same ideological background. The same could be said of the *Plenario Intersindical de Trabajadores – Convención Nacional de Trabajadores* (PIT-CNT) of Uruguay who is a founding member of the CCSCS but who remains unaffiliated to either the ITUC or the TUCA.

With the launching or reinforcement of regional coordinations, the ORIT aims at reproducing the benefits of the CCSCS in other regions of the continent: building ties between union centres, whether they are affiliated to the ORIT or not, allowing poorer organizations who cannot participate in ORIT’s events to get involved in its work and reinforcing weaker organizations at the local level. Hence, the strategy of developing regional coordinations can be clearly related to the increasing weight of Southern Cone members, in particular Brazilians. This strategy has led the ORIT to support the *Consejo Consultativo Laboral Andino* (CCLA), to encourage the launching of the *Coordinadora*

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<sup>12</sup> This information was given by representatives of the ORIT during interviews.

<sup>13</sup> This information was given by several representatives of various Brazilian trade unions to the CCSCS.

*Sindical de América Central y el Caribe* (CSACC) and to formally become the major sponsor of the CCSCS, without really integrating any of them into its own structure, as this would harm their role of “bridges” between the ORIT and non-affiliates in the region.

### **A Diverse Latin American Involvement**

The startling contrast between the cases of Mexico and Brazil shows by itself how diverse the Latin American involvement in the ORIT has been since the end of the Cold War. On the one hand, corporatist Mexican trade unions are isolating themselves, and independent unions have not yet defined themselves clearly enough to give a precise idea of what their future contribution will look like. On the other hand, the relatively “young” Brazilian labour movement has managed to deal with its diversity in a collaborative way and to regain the influence due to the second most populous country of the continent. Hence, it is not appropriate to talk about “Global South unionism” as a homogenous entity. In Latin America only, the two most important countries in terms of population and GDP followed diametrically opposed directions in relation to the ORIT. Therefore one cannot talk about the contribution of “Global South” to the evolution of ILMOs without making distinctions between countries or even organizations.

Variations between Latin American countries, and particularly between Mexico and Brazil, cannot be explained by only one factor. An analysis of the situation should focus on at least three levels: international, regional and domestic. At each level, specific dynamics contributed to lead both the Mexican and the Brazilian labour movements to take different directions. Without being exhaustive, I will suggest three sets of factors that seem crucial in explaining the differences between Mexican and Brazilian involvement into the ORIT.

Both Mexican and Brazilian trade unions have been influenced by the changes occurring at the level of the ORIT itself and of ILMOs in general. With the end of the Cold War, the ICFTU and its regional structures progressively abandoned their strong anti-Communist tone and started to accept the affiliation of organizations previously associated with the Eastern bloc. Similarly, as the ICFTU started to clearly put social democracy at the core of its ideological corpus, it became less and less comfortable with the idea of supporting corporatist trade unions just for the sake of fighting Communism. In the countries that interest us here, this led to the furthering of the CTM from the ORIT and to the joining of more “radical” members such as the CUT.

Nevertheless, this did not influence all corporatist trade unions in the Americas the same way. The Venezuelan CTV certainly suffered the same fate as the CTM, but it was not the case, for example, of the CGT-RA, which managed to build ties with other trade unions like the CUT before the latter actually joined the ORIT. Therefore, the CGT-RA did not react so negatively to the changes occurring inside the ORIT. This is why regional dynamics should be taken into consideration too. I argue that NAFTA isolated Mexican trade unions as much as the MERCOSUR contributed to the integration of Brazilian trade unions to ILMOs. It is not so much the Agreements themselves than the way trade unions reacted to them that had an impact on unions’ attitude toward the ORIT.

Clearly, by taking a totally different stand from its counterparts in the US and Canada, the CTM isolated itself in the NAFTA debate and never really came back from it. This led to the rupture of its historical alliance with the AFL-CIO and consequently with the ORIT. It is not a coincidence if North America is the only region where the ORIT did not settle a regional coordination. Canadian and US trade unions have maintained organic ties for more than a century, in spite of sporadic confrontations. Above all, their resources allow them to keep participating in and influencing the ORIT without having to be integrated into a regional coordination. So the country that suffers the most from this lack of a “North American coordination” is Mexico. As a Latin American country, it should benefit from the power shift to the South of the continent, but it is not integrated into this dynamic. As a “North American” country, it does not benefit either from the advantages of the US and Canada, and does not even take the “opportunity” of NAFTA to build stronger ties with them. The Mexican labour movement’s isolation in its own region contributes to its isolation in its continent.

Conversely, Brazilian trade unions used the CCSCS as a footstep to the ICFTU and the ORIT. Their work in the CCSCS not only opened them to work with trade unions from other countries and other backgrounds but also gave them the expertise and the assets to assert a more significant role once they joined the ORIT. Indeed, the Southern Cone not only represents one important pole of economic development in the continent, it is also a space where a more “socially-oriented” kind of free market has been experienced and where trade unions have managed to cross national and ideological barriers in order to build some kind of common front. The experience of the CCSCS served Brazilian unions to gain legitimacy and was actually used as an inspiration by the ORIT leadership to develop other regional coordinations. Hence, the regional dynamics had a significant role in the Brazilian involvement into the ORIT.

Finally, domestic dynamics have to be taken into consideration. We saw how Mexican trade unions differ from their Brazilian counterparts in terms of coordinating their international presence. This has a significant impact on their respective capacities to influence the international organizations they are affiliated to. Mexican unions send, to say the least, mixed messages. This is narrowly related to the conditions in which the UNT was founded. Indeed, the so-called “independent” labour movement was launched *in opposition* to the CTM and everything it represents. But since the CTM held the monopoly of international representation, obvious tensions and contradictions were to be expected. So, it is clear that the reminiscences of corporatism and the efforts made by some elements of the Mexican labour movement to break away from it, both have an impact on the way Mexican trade unions act internationally. Even the difficulties encountered by the UNT to formulate a precise international policy have to do with the way it was set up and the collegial leadership it adopted in order to satisfy all its founding members.

Brazil represents a totally different type of post-authoritarian unionism. As trade union centres were prohibited under the dictatorship, all of them share a certain degree of opposition to authoritarianism. Even the most moderate of trade union centres, such as the former CGT (now UGT), have at least some kind of political consciousness that distinguish themselves from the heirs of state-controlled unionism. This certainly helped Brazilian affiliates to the ORIT to find some common ground, at least regarding international affairs.

Also, it was quite striking to hear both UGT and FS representatives acknowledge that the CUT was the biggest player and consider, to some extent, that CUT victories at the international level were a little bit theirs too. On its side, the CUT does not try to use its superiority as a way to shut up the other Brazilian organizations, contrary to what the CTM has been trying to do with other Mexican affiliates.

### **Conclusion: Towards an International Political Economy of Labour**

Although the scope of this paper is mostly empirical, I want to conclude by briefly locating it into the theoretical debate on international labour activities. The cases of Brazil and Mexico clearly show that talking about “Global South unionism” makes no analytical sense. Of course, those cases cannot either be generalized. My intent here was to show the diversity of situations and to suggest an analytical grid that would allow to assess and understand this diversity. Taking into consideration intertwined international, regional and domestic dynamics is a necessary step toward a dialectical analysis of ILMOs’ politics.

This argument is to be related to the efforts of critical geographers to re-think labour geographies, in particular by connecting the different scales of political activity (Herod 2001). More broadly, it will contribute to the establishment of an international political economy of labour as called for by Harrod (2002), where barriers between academic disciplines like Industrial Relations and International Relations are challenged in order to provide a complex analysis of the state of the international labour movement.

Hyman (2005) has shown that the international labour movement has always been crossed by different trends, which he labels as agitation, bureaucracy and diplomacy. Therefore, it is misleading to simply characterize this movement as “too far from the reality” just as it is wrong to see in it the alpha and the omega of a workers’ response to the challenges of globalized capitalism. Contributions like the ones of Munck (2002), O’Brien (2000) or Stevis and Boswell (2008) set the ground for a genuine dialectical approach to ILMOs’ dynamics. But this cannot be done by simply looking at ILMOs’ structures themselves, or by collecting local case studies without bridging them together (e.g. Bieler *et al.* 2008). The affiliates own dynamics have to be taken into consideration *and* articulated with the ILMOs’ own logic. That is why I think this brief assessment of Brazilian and Mexican involvement in the ORIT modestly contributes to the edification of an international political economy of labour.

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