

Trade Unions and the Alter-globalisation Movement: a Lost Moment for Labour?

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ABSTRACT

Criticism of neoliberal globalisation has become associated with xenophobia, racism and nationalism, enabling far-right populist demagogues such as Marine Le Pen and Donald Trump to exploit working-class discontent with globalisation. Yet less than two decades ago a radical leftwing movement was seriously challenging globalisation and demonstrating that critique of corporate globalisation was compatible with internationalism and working-class solidarity across national borders. Where was labour in this important movement? Did unions participate in blockading the citadels of corporate power? Evidence from case studies of four mobilisations (Seattle November-December 1999, Melbourne September 2000, Québec City April 2001 and Genoa July 2001) suggests strong working-class involvement, especially of white-collar workers from the public sector, and important contributions from union activists and particular radical unions as organisations. However, trade union officials often preferred union contingents keep a safe distance from centres of action. Significant conflicts were apparent within unions between class-conscious activists, who wished to embrace the growing left-wing movement against globalisation, and more conservative officials. It confirmed the truism of union movement scholarship: the problem of full-time bureaucracies with interests distinct from those of rank-and-file workers; and the existence of the “universal tension” between the contradictory elements of “movement” and “organisation.” Ambivalence and prevarication did not present the union movement in the best possible light to workers angry and distressed by the effects of globalisation. Did the hesitant role played by unions in alterglobalisation campaigns contribute to union decline and prepare the ground for right-wing populist opposition to globalisation? Was this a lost moment for labour?

Keywords: right-wing populism; anti-capitalist globalisation movement; labour unions; Seattle; Melbourne; Québec City; Genoa.

Large parts of the Western working class now seem to gather around right populists, demagogues and racists. They vote for reactionary and fascistoid political parties. They helped to vote the UK out of the EU, to make Trump president of the world's superpower.¹

Statements such as this, representative of many similar comments, must be treated with caution. Middle-class liberals like to point to any regressive impulses within working-class ranks to fortify their own sense of righteous enlightenment—while ignoring evidence that workers remain less likely than other people to espouse reactionary views, and organized workers considerably less likely.

Such issues were brought to the fore by Donald Trump's upset win over Hillary Clinton in November 2016. Instead of acknowledging that Democrats' neoliberal policies had increased class inequalities and lost them working-class support—cemented by Clinton's failure to campaign in the “Rust Belt”—American liberals blamed those they had failed for the election of Trump. Adding insult to injury, they called such Trump supporters “deplorables.”

Clinton lost the election in the upper Midwest, with its declining workforce participation and rising mortality rates, while CEO pay ratios roared and the stock market boomed.² Trump's promise to bring jobs back home, to scrap the Trans Pacific Partnership “free trade” deal helped win him States such as Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin. Here, Bernie Sanders observed that Trump tapped into the anger of people “tired of working longer hours for lower wages, of seeing decent paying jobs go to China and other low-wage countries, of billionaires not paying any federal income taxes and of not being able to afford a college education for their— all while the very rich become much richer.” Based on research by the Economic Policy Institute in Washington, Sanders emphasised that the North America Free Trade Agreement—signed by Bill and supported by

¹ Wahl, Asbjørn. “Reactionary working class?” First published in Norwegian in *Klassekampen*, 28 January 2017. Republished in English in *The Bullet*, Socialist Project EBulletin No. 1383, 16 March 2017. <https://socialistproject.ca/bullet/1383.php> (Last Accessed 15 June 2017).

*Workers'of'the'World,*Volume*I,*Number*10,*October*2021**

² Watkins, Susan. “Beating the Beadles.” *New Left Review*, 119, September/October 2019, p. 155, 158.

Hillary Clinton—had cost more than 850,000 American jobs.³

Sanders offered a coherent social-democratic critique of the freemarket globalisation agenda that has sacrificed jobs and eroded wages and working conditions in developed countries. Yet most US trade unions championed Clinton over Sanders as presidential contender against Trump. Under the headline, “Disillusioned by Leadership, Many Union Rank-and-file Turned to Trump,” Michael Lighty argues the refusal of union leadership to support Sanders’ political revolution as alternative to the status quo helped set the stage for Trump.⁴

So, notwithstanding skepticism about liberals blaming allegedly prejudiced workers for supporting right-wing populists, labour movement adherents do need to consider whether the “de-socialdemocratisation” of their political parties—and the timidity of trade union officialdom—has contributed to a rise in right-wing populist attitudes amongst workers.

Norwegian welfare campaigner Asbjørn Wahl regrets that workers’ exploitation, their increasing powerlessness and subordination now hardly have a voice in public debate. For Wahl, left parties have “failed their constituencies.” They are “not seen as usable tools to defend the interests of those who have the least power and the least wealth in today’s society” because:

Rather than picking up the discontent generated in a more brutal labour market, politicize it and channelling it into an organized interest-based struggle, middle class left parties offer little else than moralizing and contempt. Thus, they ... push large groups of workers in the arms of the far-right parties, who support all the discontent and do their best to channel people’s rage against other social groups (immigrants, Muslims, gays, people with different colour, etc.) rather than against causes of the problems.⁵

Scape-goating attacks on other victims, such as refugees and migrants, are much more noisily articulated than condemnations of corporate power. Labour is denounced and reviled if it crosses borders in desperation, while capital globetrots at the whim of increased profit, destroying working-class communities in the process. It is far-right populist politicians, rather than centre-left parties, that have capitalised upon working-class discontent with

³ Quoted in Scott, Andrew. “Left Right Out: It’s Always Been About Jobs and Equality.” *newmatilda.com*, 26 February, 2017 (Last Accessed 10 April 2017), p. 2.

⁴ Lighty, Michael. “Disillusioned by Leadership, Many Union Rank-and-file Turned to Trump.” *The Real New Network*. 9 November 2016. http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=17644 (Last Accessed 27 January 2017).

⁵ Wahl, Asbjørn. “Reactionary working class?” First published in Norwegian in *Klassekampen*, 28 January 2017. Republished in English in *The Bullet*, Socialist Project EBulletin No. 1383, 16 March 2017. <https://socialistproject.ca/bullet/1383.php> (Last accessed 15 June 2017).

neoliberal globalisation. Criticism of neoliberal globalisation has thus become associated with xenophobia, racism and nationalism.

The support bases of right-wing populist parties are predominantly “petty bourgeois,” but their electoral viability has been facilitated by working-class voters reacting angrily to the “de-social-democratisation” of parties such as the British Labour Party under Tony Blair, the French Socialist Party, the German Social Democratic Party and the Australian Labor Party.^{6 7} Their embracing, to varying degrees, of free-market principles in the era of globalisation has alienated traditional working-class supporters, ensuring the right-wing populist response to corporate globalisation has gained far greater political traction than its left-wing critiques.

The alter-globalisation movement

Yet twenty years ago, it was a vibrant, left wing movement that was seriously challenging globalisation—and seen as its foremost opponent. Terminology varied but the most common descriptions of the new movement were “anti-capitalism,” “anti-corporate,” “global justice” or, simply, “anti-globalisation.” In later years, particularly in academic circles, “alter-globalisation” also became accepted usage.

The left political orientation of these protests was obvious. Its principal slogans were: “Human Need Not Corporate Greed” and “Our World Is Not For Sale!” Typical placards waved were: “Capitalism destroys all life” and “Stop exploiting workers.” Crowds sang: “We don’t need no corporations, We don’t need no thought control.” Renowned for creating carnivalesque spectacle in “a global carnival against capital,” protesters crafted huge puppets, such as a ten-foot rolling “pyramid of corporate power.” Naomi Klein’s *No Logo*, the unofficial manual of the movement, took clear aim at the “brand bullies.”⁸ Leaflets explained the reasons for such collective anger, for example:

Countries must compete for corporate investment. They must remove environmental protection. They must drive down wages and conditions. They must cut government expenditure and corporate taxes. It’s a race to the bottom and we all lose.⁹

⁶ See: Moschonas, Gerassimos. *In the Name of Social Democracy: The Great Transformation from 1945 to the Present*. London: Verso. 2001; Scott, Andrew. *Running On Empty: ‘Modernising’ the British and Australian Labour Parties*. Sydney: Pluto Press, 2000; Seymour, Richard. “Bye Bye Labour.” *London Review of Books*. 23 April 2015, p.

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⁸ Charlton, John. “Talking Seattle.” *International Socialism* 86, Spring 2000, pp. 4-10; <http://seattle.indymedia.org>; Bila-Gunther, Gaby. “Tram Ride from S11.” *Overland* 162, Autumn 2001, p. 85; Klein, Naomi. *No Logo, No Space, No Choice, No Jobs: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. London: Flamingo, 2000.

⁹ S11. “From Seattle to Melbourne. Stand Up for Global Justice. Why Protest?” Leaflet. Melbourne. September 2000, p. 2.

Arguably utopian in inspiration and aspiration, it insisted that “Another World is Possible.”¹⁰

The principal targets of this significant turn-of-the-millennium social movement were the transnational institutions that manage the common affairs of the international ruling class. In a dramatically effective form of protest known as “summit-hopping” or “summit-storming,” demonstrators besieged meetings of these institutions, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Economic Forum (WEF), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the G8, and so on.¹¹ Each summitstorming episode named itself after the month and day it commenced, for example “N30,” the spectacular “Battle of Seattle” from 30 November to 4 December 1999.

This naming practice indicated that the episodes were connected; and implied that protests would continue into the future. And the movement seemed unstoppable, until derailed to a large extent by the dire impact of extremist fundamentalist Islamic terrorism that commenced in September 2001 in response to US-led Western incursions in the Middle East. A week after 9/11, Russ Davis, a labour organizer with Massachusetts “Jobs with Justice” told an interviewer of its effect on anti-capitalist politics: “The labour movement’s pulling out, students will go off to form a new anti-war movement, and community-based groups will go back to local organizing. I don’t know if there is a movement now.”¹²

While it persisted, the summit-storming strategy was a stroke of brilliance on the part of left-wing forces that had for years been battling with a seemingly all-powerful and impregnable enemy.¹³ The WTO, IMF, World Bank and WEF manoeuvred in various ways to placate the left critics of globalisation. For a time prior to 9/11 there were serious gains made by anticapitalist agitation.¹⁴

Chris Carlsson maintains that summit storming also reversed much of the effects of the co-option of social movements new and old in the previous two decades. The quiescence of those decades he attributes to the success of ruling-class policies in dismembering working-class communities that had a memory of resistance and the know-how to carry it out, and in encouraging

¹⁰ McNally, David. *Another World is Possible. Globalization and Anti-Capitalism*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2002.

¹¹ For details, see McNally, David. *Another World is Possible*. Op. Cit., pp. 13-14; Bircham, Emma and Charlton, John (eds). *Anticapitalism: A Guide to the Movement*. London/Sydney: Bookmarks Publications, 2001, pp. 340-341.

¹² Quoted in Couch, Jen. “This is what Democracy Looks Like: The Genesis, Culture and Possibilities of Anti-corporate Activism.” PhD diss., Victoria University, Australia, 2004, p. 204.

¹³ Starr, Amory. *Naming the Enemy: Anti-Corporate Movements Confront Globalization*. London: Zed Books, 2000, p. 223.

¹⁴ For examples, see Burgmann, Verity. *Power, Profit and Protest. Australian Social Movements and Globalisation*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003, pp.317-321.

divisions between trade unions and social movements such as environmental and feminist groups. Such policies had demobilised social opposition. “The Seattle/WTO meeting brought all these diffuse and fragmented constituencies back together in a unified front against the most tangible and obvious expression of global capitalist governance.” At Seattle, Carlsson witnessed:

a profound unity among people fighting for decent lives as workers, people fighting for a healthy relationship to global ecological well-being, people fighting sweatshops and child labor, people fighting to save oldgrowth forests and stop toxic waste dumping, people fighting to save subsistence agriculture and family farms, and so on.¹⁵

The protesters were internationalists who were not objecting to global connectedness, but aspiring to transnational solidarity in order to challenge the exploitative and undemocratic nature of neo-liberal globalisation. “We are the real globalists,” concluded a leaflet from the S11 mobilisation in Australia in 2000.¹⁶ S11 participant-observer David Glanz objected to the characterisation of the protesters as backward-looking, insular and nationalist.¹⁷ “Nothing could be further from the truth,” insisted the S11 organisers:

S11 was an internationalist mobilisation. We welcome the free movement of peoples, above all of refugees. We welcome the sharing of culture and knowledge. We welcome the growing solidarity between US unionists, European environmentalists and Third World farmers. But we are bitterly opposed to a system that guarantees only one kind of global freedom— the freedom of corporate capital.¹⁸

Neoliberal globalisers like to present a false dichotomy: supposedly progressive cosmopolitan embrace of the global market or regressively xenophobic and protectionist nationalism. However, the strength of anticapitalism at this moment contested this deceitful distinction and demonstrated that critique of globalisation was compatible with cosmopolitanism and technological progress, and indeed internationalism and working-class solidarity across national borders.

Unions in the heyday of the alter-globalisation movement

The “Blairite” de-social-democratisation of centre-left political parties contributed to the rise of right-wing populism, because it betrayed natural working-class constituencies and undermined capacity to inspire new constituencies, thereby encouraging some workers to express their grievances through reactionary channels. However, in the debates around de-social-

¹⁵ Carlsson, Chris. “Seeing the Elephant in Seattle.” San Francisco, January 19, 2000, Version 1.4, from ccarlsson@shapingsf.org (Received 7 February 2000).

¹⁶ S11. “Think Globally, Act Locally.” Leaflet. September 2000.

¹⁷ Glanz, David. “Opposed to the Global Freedom of Capital.” *Australian Options* 23 November 2000, p. 7.

¹⁸ Quoted in *Melbourne Indy Bulletin*. Issue #04. Monday, 11 September 2000, p. 3.

democratisation, little attention has been paid to the behaviour of trade unions as the industrial wing of the labour movement.

Amory Starr's groundbreaking, early study of the anti-globalisation movement argued at the time that the labour movement, rapidly globalising its capacities, was positioned as the "natural leader" of "globalization from below".¹⁹ Did the labour movement assume this natural leadership role? Or did trade unions, like centre-left parties, hesitate in articulating the discontents of globalisation? This article focusses on the conduct of unions during the heyday of the alter-globalisation movement. How were unions involved in this popular upsurge against neoliberal globalisation? Did unions participate in the blockading of the citadels of corporate global power? With particular attention to participant observations, it takes as casestudies four summit-storming mobilisations, in Seattle, Melbourne, Québec City and Genoa.

N30: The Battle of Seattle, 30 November-4 December 1999

It was fitting that a city with a rich history of militancy²⁰ should host the mobilisation regarded as the "coming out" party of the anti-corporate movement, because this movement's composition was clearly different from earlier new social movements when, by and large, the working class and labour unions were not involved.²¹ In Seattle the largest contingents were from that constituency. According to Carlsson's internet diary of his direct experience of the N30 mobilisation, the essence of this battle was that: "Working people came together to contest trade policies being negotiated behind closed doors." He insists:

Although the idea of class, especially working class, is not widely understood or accepted in U.S. culture, the movement that discovered itself in Seattle is fundamentally a working class movement. The people in the streets may identify themselves more formally with their cause, whether it be ecological or human rights or what have you, but you can be sure that few if any of them are anything in their daily lives but wage workers.²²

Wolfe and Curtis maintain that organised unionists provided "the bulk for the demonstrations" at Seattle.²³ The Seattle Coalition brought together

¹⁹ Starr, Amory. *Naming the Enemy*. Op. Cit., p. 84.

²⁰ Levi, Margaret and Olson, David. "The Battles in Seattle." *Politics & Society* 28 (3), 2000, pp. 309-29; Winslow, Cal. "Company Town? Ghosts of Seattle's Rebel Past." *New Left Review* 112, July/Aug 2018, pp. 131-143.

²¹ Danaher, Kevin and Burbach, Roger. *Globalize This! The Battle Against the World Trade Organization and Corporate Rule*. Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 2000, p. 8; Charlton, John. "Talking Seattle." *International Socialism* 86, Spring 2000, p. 6; Cockburn, Alexander, St Clair, Jeffrey and Sekula, Allen. *5 Days that Shook the World*. London: Verso, 2000.

²² Carlsson, Chris. "Seeing the Elephant in Seattle." Op. Cit.

²³ Wolfe, J. and Curtis, J. M. "The WTO in the Aftermyth of the Battles in Seattle" in M.A. Molot and F. E. Hampson (eds), *Vanishing Borders? Canada Among Nations*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000.

30,000 demonstrators organised by labour groups with 20,000 from environmental and other movements, according to Hurd, Milkman and Turner, who claim that “in this high-profile campaign, American unions showed a strong capacity to mobilize members and to build broad coalitions addressing the very nature of the new global economy.”²⁴ Carola Frege and John Kelly also emphasise that union movement participation at Seattle was significant as an example of coalition-building with other social movements, serving to broaden the range of interests and agendas that unions seek to represent and thus broaden their appeal to poorly represented segments of the labour force.²⁵

In solidarity with the protesters, on 30 November 1999, more than 9,600 dockworkers of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union shut down every port on the west coast and staged a rally at San Francisco’s Ferry Building. Hundreds of Seattle port workers joined in blockading the doors of the WTO’s conference centre. Union spokesman Steve Stallone said “The union feels the free-trade policies of the WTO destroy workers’ rights, environmental protection and democracy.”²⁶ A massive labour rally and march, sponsored by the AFL-CIO, was the highlight of this first day, according to Doug Henwood, who describes the scene enthusiastically:

Togetherness was the theme of the labour rally—not only solidarity among workers of the world, but of organised labour with everyone else. There were incredible sights of Teamster president James Hoffa sharing a stage with student anti-sweatshop activists, of Earth Firsters marching with Sierra Clubbers, and a chain of bare-breasted BGH-free Lesbian Avengers weaving through a crowd of machinists.

He notes that the change in US union rhetoric over the preceding five years had been amazing: the nationalist rhetoric had largely gone, replaced by a rhetoric of international labour solidarity.²⁷

However, other observers provide more nuanced accounts. Jeff St Clair emphasises rank-and-file unionists’ rejection of the moderation of their own officials. Of this march of organised labour led by the AFL-CIO, St Clair explains that labour’s legions—a predicted 50,000—were to march from the

²⁴ Hurd, Richard, Milkman, Ruth and Turner, Lowell. “Reviving the American Labour Movement: Institutions and Mobilization.” *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 9 (1), 2003, p. 114.

²⁵ Frege, Carola M. and Kelly, John. “Union Revitalization Strategies in Comparative Perspective.” *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 9 (1), 2003, p. 9.

²⁶ DelVecchio, Rick and Finz, Stacy. “Dockworkers Shut Down Oakland Port.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 December 1999. [https://www.sfgate.com/news/article /Dockworkers-Shut-Down-Oakland-Port-2893654.php](https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Dockworkers-Shut-Down-Oakland-Port-2893654.php) (Last Accessed 24 April 2018).

²⁷ Henwood, Doug. “A Daily Report from the World Trade Organization Summit, Seattle.” *Left Business Observer*. 30 November 1999. <http://www.leftbusinessobserver.com/SeattleTuesday.html> (Last Accessed 27 April 2017).

Space Needle to the Convention Center and peacefully prevent the WTO delegates from assembling.

It never happened. Instead, the labour chiefs talked tough but accepted a cheap deal. They would get a Wednesday meeting with Bill Clinton, with the promise that, at future WTO enclaves, they would get 'a seat at the table'. So, instead of joining the throngs bent on shutting down the opening of the WTO, the big labour rally took place at noon around the Space Needle, some fifteen to twenty blocks from the Convention Center where the protesters on the front lines were taking their stand. When the labour march finally got underway around 1 PM, its marshals directed most of the marchers away from the battle zones down by the Convention Center.²⁸

The protesters kept asking. "Where are the labour marchers?" They were expecting thousands of longshoremen and teamsters to fortify them in the fray.

The absent masses never came. The marshals for the union march steered the big crowds away from the action and the isolation of the street protesters allowed the cops to become far more violent. Eventually, several phalanxes of union marchers skirted their herders and headed up 4th Avenue to the battlegrounds at Pine and Pike. Most of them seemed to be from the more militant unions, the Steelworkers, IBEW and the Longshoremen. And they seemed to be pissed off at the political penury of their leaders. Randal McCarthy, a longshoreman from Kelso, Washington, told me: 'That fucker, Sweeney. No wonder we keep getting rolled. If he were any dumber, he'd be in management'.²⁹

Carlsson agrees that, in spite of organised monitors attempting to turn the union march away, thousands of rank-and-file workers poured into the streets to reinforce the front-line blockaders in their efforts; this surge of new people into the streets during the afternoon consolidated the day's victory and made possible the victorious retreat in the evening, in spite of the dubious directives from national union leaders.³⁰ Charlton concurs: AFL-CIO bureaucrats attempted to keep the union forces away from the battle zone by forcible detouring of the labour rally; despite these machinations, many rank-and-file militants defied their lieutenants to join the troops downtown:

Tens of thousands of union members marched downtown to join the protest. Having shut down all the ports along the Pacific coast from Alaska to San Diego, union members chanted and waged picket signs as their ranks filled the streets as far as the eye could see. Each union's members marched

²⁸ St Clair, Jeffrey. "Seattle Diary: It's a Gas, Gas, Gas." *New Left Review* 238, November/December 1999, p. 86.

²⁹ St Clair, Jeffrey. "Seattle Diary." Op. Cit., p. 89.

³⁰ Carlsson, Chris. "Seeing the Elephant in Seattle." Op. Cit.

together, each with its own colour jacket or T-shirt, each carrying banners and hundreds of signs printed for the occasion.³¹

The unions identified as present included: steelworkers; electrical workers; teachers; bricklayers; longshoremen; painters; Stanford workers; service employees; teamsters; sheet metal workers; marine engineers; transit workers; boilermakers; plumbers; steamfitters and refrigeration workers; public service workers of Canada; cement masons; pulp, paper and wood workers; nurses; Canadian airlines workers; carpenters; autoworkers and machinists. Charlton claims these sections of labour were in a close and harmonious relationship with the “natural” constituency of demonstrators, such as students, environmentalists of several stripes, 1968 veterans and their children.³¹

This harmonious relationship continued the following day, the March for Environment day. The Earth Island Institute had prepared hundreds and hundreds of turtle costumes for marchers to wear. The symbol of Seattle was the sea turtle, because the WTO tribunal had ruled that the US Endangered Species Act, which requires shrimp to be caught with turtleexcluder devices, was an unfair trade barrier. The broad coalition brought together rank-and-file workers, especially militant trade unionists; greenies; “people in poverty”; lobby groups, such as Non-Government Organisations; and church groups.³² This cross-class alliance inspired the popular motto: “Turtles and Teamsters Together at Last.” St Clair describes this march:

In the first display of a new solidarity, trade union members from amongst the steelworkers and the longshore-men showed up to join the march ... The throng of sea turtles and blue-jacketed union folk took off to the rhythm of a chant that would echo down the streets of Seattle for days: “The people united will never be divided!”³³

Amongst the direct-action warriors on the front lines was the Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment. This new enviroteelworker alliance ran an advertisement in the *New York Times*, asking “Have You Heard the One About the Environmentalist and the Steelworker?” Because of its spread, global capitalism, they found, was bringing them together in spite of themselves. They discovered they had a common enemy: Charles Hurwitz, the corporate raider. Hurwitz owns the Pacific Lumber Company, the northern California timber firm that was slaughtering some of the last stands of ancient redwoods on the planet. At the same time, Hurwitz was also controlling Kaiser Aluminium, which had locked out 3,000 steelworkers at factories in Washington, Ohio and Louisiana. David Foster of the United Steelworkers of

³¹ Charlton, John. “Talking Seattle.” Op. Cit., p.6. ³¹
Ibid., pp. 7-8, 17.

³² St Clair, Jeffrey. “Seattle Diary.” Op. Cit., p. 88.

³³ Ibid., p. 83.

America explained: “The companies that attack the environment most mercilessly are often also the ones that are the most anti-union. More unites us than divides us.”³⁴

In an upbeat commentary in the wake of the Battle of Seattle, Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff hailed “a new internationalism.” One of the most important developments in “this period of growing rebellion” has been “the partial revival of the labor movement that is finally showing signs of attempting to chart a new course.” They considered the AFL-CIO’s “central role” in the anti-WTO protests in Seattle a concrete indication of this new course, providing hope that organised labour was at last rising phoenix-like from its ashes, the decline in membership would be reversed and the way opened to “a broader labor internationalism.”³⁵ Halil Hassan likewise insisted that the Battle of Seattle revealed “a willingness on the part of organized labor to engage in what have been for its leaders fairly unconventional struggles, and there appears to be a growing basis for a coalition of forces against neoliberalism and globalization.”³⁶

The behaviour of AFL-CIO officials at the Battle of Seattle suggested this degree of optimism was unwarranted. What was undeniably true is the extent to which working-class people were active in the encounter and many union activists crucial to the success of the mobilisation. This was a truly significant development. Barbara Ehrenreich has commented that the vision of a working-class and middle-class alliance in opposition to corporate power is “almost the defining dream of the American left”.³⁷ Seattle—and other summit-storming episodes—provided glimpses of such a vision. But it was union activists—largely in opposition to their union officials—who dared to dream. Jeff St Clair went to sleep on the last night of these five days with the words of a locked-out steelworker in his head. “The things I’ve seen here in Seattle I never thought I’d see in America.”³⁷

S11: Melbourne 11-13 September 2000

At this summit-storming down under, Australian protesters blockaded the Asia-Pacific Economic Summit of the WEF at Melbourne’s Crown Casino. The WEF was obliged to meet behind wire fences and was protected by 2,000 police, its participants ferried in by helicopter, while sit-ins and sound systems,

³⁴ St Clair, Jeffrey. “Seattle Diary.” Op. Cit., pp. 83, 86, 88 92-93.

³⁵ Sweezy, Paul M. and Magdoff, Harry. “Editorial: Towards a New Internationalism.” *Monthly Review* 52 (3), 2000, pp. 2-3.

³⁶ Hassan, Khalil. “The Future of the Labor Left.” *Monthly Review* 52 (3), 2000, p. 62. ³⁷ Quoted in Rose, Fred. *Coalitions across the Class Divide. Lessons from the Labor, Peace and Environmental Movements*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000, p. 5.

³⁷ St Clair, Jeffrey. “Seattle Diary.” Op. Cit., p. 95.

puppetry and protest mingled outside.³⁸ With delegates physically prevented from attending the Summit, Kurt Iveson and Sean Scalmer noted how the S11 protesters “transformed Crown Casino into a place from which they could *contest* corporate capital’s domination of global space.”⁴⁰ Melbourne University newspaper *Farrago* reported that: “Only one quarter of WEF delegates attended...while outside crowds swelled to more than twenty thousand people, as union members marched from Trades Hall to join the blockade.”³⁹

Observers agree that the union contribution to the amalgam of protesters was substantial. However, as at Seattle, ambivalence on the part of union officialdom was evident. Unique to S11 in Melbourne, there were even organisational ties between unions and those hosting the WEF Summit, because the Labor Party, to which the vast majority of unions are affiliated, was in government in the State of Victoria at the time.

Tom Bramble and John Minns depict the unions as an occasional, rather than an organised, part of the anti-capitalist mobilisation.⁴⁰ According to some commentators, the union movement hierarchy prevented full union support of the S11 blockade; according to others, union leaders also ordered unionists not to prevent delegates attending the WEF meeting. S11 organiser David Glanz thought unions were hesitant due to pressure from the State Labor Government and the police officers’ union, distrust of the far left organising the protest, and concern that the media would use the event to accuse unions of violence.⁴¹ Trades Hall Secretary Leigh Hubbard was critical of the S11 organisers, complaining that they did not approach the unions for support until after the event was planned.⁴² Left-wing Electricians’ Union state secretary Dean Mighell explained: “It’s not a matter of not supporting the cause, it’s a matter of having confidence in the way things will be conducted, because the first people to be blamed for any disasters will be us.” He was particularly annoyed that workers attempting to do their jobs at the Crown Casino were hassled by

³⁸ Rundle, Guy. “Now, S11.” Editorial, *Arena Magazine* 49, October/November 2000, p. 2. ⁴⁰ Iveson, Kurt and Scalmer, Sean. “Contesting the ‘Inevitable.’ Notes on S11.” *Overland* 161, 2000, p. 12.

³⁹ *Farrago*, 2000, p. 21.

⁴⁰ Bramble, Tom and Minns, John. 2005. “Whose Streets? Our Streets! Activist Perspectives on the Australian Anti-capitalist Movement.” *Social Movement Studies* 4: 2, September 2005.

⁴¹ David Glanz, Interview with Joshua Roose, quoted in Roose, Joshua. “‘Shades of Red’”: The Political Relationship between the Trade Unions and Socialist Organisations in Melbourne, Australia.” Honours diss., School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University, Australia, 2002, pp. 50-51.

⁴² Leigh Hubbard, Interview with Joshua Roose, quoted in Roose, Joshua. “‘Shades of Red.’” Op. Cit., p. 50.

the protesters: “Our people were called scabs and spat at. Our people just wanted to go to work.”⁴³

Nonetheless, unionists turned up in large numbers, both inside and outside of the union rally on 12 September, the second day of the three-day siege. Participant-observer Barrett-Lennard testifies: “Many working people were in attendance, including trade union members who had taken un-paid or holiday leave and were attending as individuals and were not connected with the official union rally.”⁴⁴ At least 10,000 unionists marched from Trades Hall, headquarters of the Victorian Trades and Labor Council, to the Casino Complex, but, rather than formally and obviously joining the blockade, these unions staged their own rally alongside the blockade.⁴⁵ However, significant numbers of unionists attending the union rally then joined the blockade at the conclusion of the union rally.⁴⁶

Barrett-Lennard argues the union contribution to S11 was “somewhat of a balancing act”: the march was staged so as to minimise conflict with the police, due to police union pressure; and the right faction of the Labor Party pressured Australian Council of Trade Unions officials to oppose S11. He concludes:

If union leadership had been at all serious in shutting down the WEF, it probably could have done so by initiating strikes by airline crews and those involved in the hospitality industry. Union leadership had absolutely no intention of taking such a course of action; they are far too beholden to their political masters to consider it. Union support was warmly welcomed at S11, but in substance little was achieved by it.⁴⁷

Other commentators are more upbeat about union involvement in S11, stressing the significance and novelty of a sizeable and official union presence at an anti-corporate protest event. According to Tracey Mier, the union movement’s “mass display of solidarity added to the inclusiveness and cohesiveness of the S11 alliance,” and proved to be the first time in twenty years that unions en masse had joined such a project.⁴⁸ S11 activist Jeff Sparrow asserted that, despite the equivocations and hesitations of Trades Hall Council, S11 forged a much closer relationship between left activists and the union movement.⁴⁹

⁴³ Dean Mighell, Interview with Joshua Roose, quoted in Roose, Joshua. “Shades of Red.” Op. Cit., pp. 1-2.

⁴⁴ Barrett-Lennard, B. *Anti-Globalisation*. Melbourne: Beach Box Books, 2001, p. 123.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁴⁶ Mier, Tracey. “The Impact of the Anti-Corporate Globalisation Movement S11.” Honours diss., Political Science Department, University of Melbourne, 2001, p. 23.

⁴⁷ Barrett-Lennard, B. *Anti-Globalisation*. Op. Cit., p. 129.

⁴⁸ Mier, Tracey. “The Impact of the Anti-Corporate Globalisation Movement S11.” Op. Cit., pp. 23, 36.

⁴⁹ Sparrow, Jeff. “The Victory at S11.” *Overland* 161, Summer 2000, p. 20.

Québec City, 19-21 April 2001

At the Québec City mobilisation in April 2001, the Declaration of the Second People's Summit declared:

We are ... the voices of the unions, popular and environmental organizations, women's groups, human rights organizations, international solidarity groups, indigenous, peasant and student associations and church groups. ... We reject this project of liberalized trade and investment, deregulation and privatisation. This neo-liberal project is racist and sexist and destructive of the environment. We propose new ways of continental integration based on democracy, human rights, equality, solidarity, pluralism, and respect for the environment.⁵⁰

Approximately 70,000 demonstrators were opposing the Summit of the Americas to plan the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The FTAA was seen as a threat to labour and environmental standards, the quantity and quality of jobs, and democracy. *Our Times* correspondent Laurie Kingston witnessed thousands of concerned citizens coming to Québec City "to participate in an exchange of experiences, hopes and alternative visions to the corporate-led drive that threatens the very foundations of democracy."⁵¹ Not just North Americans, but summitstormers from around the world attended. For example, leader of the Narmada Bachao Andolan movement in India, Medha Paktar, stressed the diverse transnational connections of the growing movement: "All you are part of the puzzle, in your workplace, company, union and community...Each part is not only necessary, but also needed."⁵²

Again, ambivalence and hesitation characterised official union involvement. Kevin MacKay refers to "the important, yet contradictory, role that workers play within the current politics of anti-capitalist mobilization."⁵⁵ He argued there was great variation *among* unions in terms of their participation in anti-capitalist summit-storming, but that a more important conflict highlighted by Québec City, Seattle and other such demonstrations was the conflict between the executive and rank-and-file *within* unions. In Québec City, as in Seattle, rank-and-file unionists went against the official position of avoiding confrontation. "These recent demonstrations speak to the persistence of grassroots radicalism among workers, in which they are able to move

⁵⁰ Quoted in MacKay, Kevin. "Solidarity and Symbolic Protest: Lessons for Labour from the Québec City Summit of the Americas." *Labour/Le travail* 50, Fall/Automne 2002, p. 31.

⁵¹ Kingston, Laurie. "Our world at a crossroads: a Quebec City Diary [Summit of the Americas]." *Our Times*. 1 June 2001. <https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P3-372476721.html> (Last Accessed 30 April 2017).

⁵² Quoted in Couch, Jen. "This is what Democracy Looks Like." Op. Cit., p. 169. ⁵⁵ MacKay, Kevin. "Solidarity and Symbolic Protest." Op. Cit., p. 22.

beyond conservative structures and connect directly with their own power to resist, and with the concerns of other movements.”⁵³

Much of the conflict between labour and newer social movements, MacKay argues, can be attributed to the conservative, bureaucratized structure of unions. In Québec City, the division between unions and other movement groups was highlighted by labour’s big event, the People’s March, being directed away from the scene of direct action, the 3.9 kilometre chain link and concrete fence erected around the old city to keep Summit delegates protected from the protesters.⁵⁴

Brendan Myers, a rank-and-file activist in Local 3913 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), describes how union presence was both immense, yet deliberately concealed; and how the unions dealt with the issue of the approach to the fence. His first impression on arrival was: “There are already hundreds of people there, and most of them labour, and most of the labour people are steelworkers, as we can tell by the distinctive yellow flags. We soon notice the blue of CAW and the white of CEP, but the CUPE flag in my own hand is the only burgundy that anyone can see.” He describes how he and his comrades join the march that the Federation du Travail du Québec (FTQ) had organized: CUPE has lined up behind the CAW, who appear to be at the front, and CEP is behind us; people with whatever affiliation are everywhere; he could not see more than about twenty feet in any direction because of the density of the crowd, so it was impossible to estimate how large it was; he could only see the people, and above them the colourful flags, balloons, banners, puppets, and signs. FTQ marshals, he tells us, inform the crowd that there is a break-off point along the march route, and at that place, those who do not want to go to the fence can continue marching one way, and those who do can go the other way. Significantly, he recalls:

Then we get to the break-off point. An FTQ marshal asks me to get rid of my union flag. I understand this—the unions don’t want to be lumped together with the molotov cocktail throwers by the media. I stuff the flag in a friend’s backpack ... We group together somewhere to prepare for the confrontation with police that we know will happen: we can already see the thick clouds of tear gas wafting among the buildings less than a kilometer in front of us.⁵⁵

MacKay maintains that the many unionists who broke off from the sanctioned march and confronted the fence provide evidence of serious divisions within the union movement, between rank and file and union leadership, and among unions from different sectors.⁵⁶ More activist-oriented

⁵³ Ibid., p. 35.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 22-23, 26, 33.

⁵⁵ Myers, Brendan. “Le Carnaval Contre le Capitalisme.” <http://frightlibrary.org/citizen/quebec.htm#dave> (Last accessed 8 November 2019).

⁵⁶ MacKay, Kevin. “Solidarity and Symbolic Protest.” Op. Cit., p. 23.

unions, such as CUPE, wanted to take the march towards the fence; a radical CUPE contingent refused to follow the direction of the People's March and instead marched to the fence. Thomas Walkom described the fence as dividing ideals at the summit.⁵⁷ Union activist Paul Jones wrote:

Where was labour? That is an angry question that I cannot answer. The process of expedience and concession that came up with the plan to avoid the fence is beyond my understanding. It was as if the Second World War generals, who were preparing to drive the Nazis out of Europe, turned around and launched an attack in the direction of Baffin Island. The presence of individual workers at the fence on Saturday was no compensation for the mistaken union decision to avoid meaningful protest in the first place.⁵⁸

Ken Davidson, co-chair of the CUPE International Solidarity Committee, stated after the mobilisation: "We can't leave it up to the youth. We have to take it on ourselves. Once our members understand how trade deals affect their jobs, they'll be willing to engage in civil disobedience."⁶² Other unionists defended the move away from the fence, crediting the large numbers in the People's March with assurances from Québec unions that it would be safe for more moderate workers and their families.⁵⁹

For example, Morna Ballantyne argued critiques of the labour movement's role centred too much on how close union members and unions were to "the wall" and to the route of the march and gave insufficient credit to the fact that the People's March mobilised 60,000 people "many of whom are union members but many of whom aren't—to take part in a protest against free trade: this in a province where popular support for free trade is much, much higher than anywhere else."⁶⁰

MacKay hoped that the experience of the Québec City mobilisation suggested that, in the fluidity and intensity of mass direct-action protest, the rigid structures of conservative institutions are more easily broken down. With rank-and-file unionists exposed to the solidarity-building and radicalising effects of civil disobedience, these effects might consequently ripple up the

⁵⁷ Walkom, Thomas. "'My city is broken': the fence divides economics, ideals at the summit." *The Toronto Star*, 22 April 2001. B.02. WAB. <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/thestar/offers.html?url=%2Fthestar%2Fdoc%2F438278992.html%3FFFMT%3DFT%26FMTS%3DABS%3AFT%26type%3Dcurrent%26date%3DApr%2B22%252C%2B2001%26author%3DWalkom%252C%2BThomas%26pub%3DToronto%2BStar%26desc%3D%2527My%2Bcity%2Bis%2Bbroken%2527%2B%253B%2BThe%2Bfence%2Bdivides%2Beconomics%252C%2Bideals%2Bat%2Bthe%2Bsummit> (Last Accessed 30 April 2017).

⁵⁸ Jones, Paul. "Going to the Wall [Summit of the Americas]." *Our Times*. 1 June 2001. <https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P3-372476741.html> (Last Accessed 30 April 2017). ⁶² Quoted in Kingston, Laurie. "Our world at a crossroads." Op. Cit.

⁵⁹ MacKay, Kevin. "Solidarity and Symbolic Protest." Op. Cit., p. 34.

⁶⁰ Ballantyne, Morna. "Going on a march [Summit of the Americas]." *Our Times*. 1 June 2001. <https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P3-372476731.html> (Last Accessed 30 April 2017).

union hierarchies. “The resulting organizational changes could then lead to greater democratization within unions, and stronger connections between workers and other movement groups.”⁶¹ However, Dave Marshall, who attended the mobilisation along with a busload of “Rise Up!” anarchists from Toronto, was left with the impression: “If the unions were there at all, they kept a low profile.”⁶²

Genoa, 18-22 July 2001

The protest in Genoa in July 2001 is often regarded as the highpoint of alter-globalisation mobilisation. The G8 Summit meeting of leaders of the world’s eight richest countries (including the European Union) attracted more than 200,000 protesters, a doubling of the numbers that amassed in Seattle.⁶³ This Genoa protest is also renowned for the extraordinary brutality meted out by the Carabinieri, including the killing of 23-year-old Carlo Giuliani and the serious injuring of hundreds of protesters, and the statesanctioned use of agents provocateurs to discredit the protests.⁶⁴ In an award-winning German documentary about the protest, Carlo Giuliani Senior, identified as a proud trade unionist, expresses his grief. “To lose a son is against the order of nature.”⁶⁵

There was strong local feeling voiced against the Berlusconi Government’s excessive, money-wasting security measures, from Genoa’s mayor to cafe-worker Stefano, who told media: “We feel like rats in a cage.” Many Genovesi, including the mayor’s Left Democratic Party, intended to participate in the protest; most seemed sympathetic to the protesters.⁶⁶ Representatives from unions in general announced they would take part in the protests.⁶⁷ Local contingents were augmented significantly by summit-stormers from around the world. For example, an Irish anarchist wrote online about the experiences of himself and other members of the Workers Solidarity

⁶¹ MacKay, Kevin. “Solidarity and Symbolic Protest.” Op. Cit., p. 37.

⁶² Marshall, Dave. “Quebec’s Peaceful Revolution.” <http://frightlibrary.org/citizen/quebec.htm#dave> (Last accessed 8 November 2019).

⁶³ This was surpassed at an alter-globalisation mobilisation on 16 March 2002 in Barcelona with the media reporting 300,000 and organisers claiming 500,000. However, by this time, media obsession with the threat of Islamic terrorism deprived the protests of the intense and occasionally sympathetic coverage given prior to 9/11.

⁶⁴ “Genoa: 300,000 rock G8 Summit.” *Global Action* 1, 31 July-7 August 2001, p. 1.

⁶⁵ *Gipfelstürmer—die blutigen Tage von Genua*. 2001. 34.53 minutes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpk5EFLY2lY> (Last Accessed 10 May 2017). See also “*Generation Genua“ oder “Ein Tag mit Folgen.“* 2001. 53.08 minutes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33VxKYWBBPc&feature=youtu.be> (Last Accessed 10 May 2017).

⁶⁶ Johnston, Bruce. “Genoa on war footing to beat G8 protests.” *Telegraph*. 19 July 2001. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/1334590/Genoa-on-war-footing-to-beat-G8-protests.html> (Last Accessed 12 June 2017).

⁶⁷ Johnston, Bruce. “Bomb blast raises fears for Genoa summit.” *Telegraph*. 17 July 2001. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/1334344/Bomb-blast-raises-fears-for-Genoa-G8-summit.html> (Last Accessed 13 June 2017).

Movement, who travelled to join this gathering of kindred anti-corporate souls. His narrative attests to the tensions evident from the outset between the moderate Genoa Social Forum and radical Italian unionists organized in COBAS.⁶⁸

COBAS is a radical, syndicalist rank-and-file trade union grouping formed in the late 1980s by unionists dissatisfied with the moderation of the three main Italian union confederations.⁶⁹ Around the time of the Genoa protests it advocated the formation of a new front stemming from “the fundamental terrain of trade unions ... extended into the more general political terrain,” to oppose “the aggressive dynamics of capital, which invades all aspects of human activity.”⁷⁰ A few days before the Summit, the Government closed the Brignole railway station, making it difficult for visiting protesters to arrive. Mainstream unions, along with the Genoa Social Forum, merely condemned the closing of the station; COBAS, however, announced national strikes because of the station’s closure, saying they would halt high-speed trains.⁷⁵

Information about the composition of the protests was obtained by researchers working amongst the 200,000 demonstrators in Genoa. They distributed questionnaires at the various meeting points of the networks that co-organised the protest, weighting them according to organisers’ estimates of the number of participants, subdivided by political coalitions.⁷⁶ According to this data, one quarter (24.5 per cent) of the protesters were “dependent workers,” one tenth (9.7 per cent) were “autonomous workers,” one tenth (9.7 per cent) were unemployed or underemployed, and just over half (56.1 per cent) were students. The protesters were disproportionately young. Only one tenth (10.3 per cent) were born before 1956 and nearly half (44.1 per cent) were born after 1977; the average age was calculated to be about 28.⁷⁷

Global labour markets have dealt harshly with most young adults in developed countries, so the age profile of the demonstration is predictable. The proportion of tertiary students is lower than in the new social movement protests of the late 1960s to 1980s, but still more than half. However, it is no longer appropriate to equate tertiary student status with privilege in an era when a greater proportion of the age group attends university and when tertiary qualifications are no longer the passport to well-remunerated and secure employment. Students are aware that their prospects are grimmer than those of their forebears who mobilised in the new social movements and could afford,

⁶⁸ “Four Days in Genoa.” 2001. <http://struggle.ws/wsm/news/2001/genoa.html> (Last Accessed 12 June 2017).

⁶⁹ “Confederazione dei Comitate di Base.” 2017). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confederazione_dei_Comitati_di_Base (Last Accessed 13 June 2017).

⁷⁰ “Confederazione Cobas: chi siamo e per cosa lottiamo.” *COBAS—Giornale della Confederazione COBAS*, 2002, No. 12 Supplement, quoted in Gamble, Andrew. *Labour*,

therefore, to emphasise issues apart from economic ones. The white-collar employment to which the tertiary educated aspire is not

the State, Social Movements and the Challenge of Neo-liberal Globalisation. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007, p. 210.

⁷⁵ Johnston, Bruce. "Bomb blast raises fears for Genoa summit." Op. Cit.

⁷⁶ della Porta, Donatella. "Multiple Belongings, Tolerant Identities, and the Construction of 'Another Politics': Between the European Social Forum and the Local Social Fora." In Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow (eds), *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, p. 179. See also della Porta, Donatella and Mosca, Lorenzo (eds). *Globalizzazione e movimenti sociali*. Roma: Manifestolibri, 2003; Andretta, Massimiliano, della Porta, Donatella, Mosca Lorenzo, and Reiter, Herbert. *Global, Noglobol, La protesta contro il G8 a Genova*. Rome: Laterza, 2002.

⁷⁷ della Porta, Donatella. "Multiple Belongings." Op. Cit., pp. 181-2.

what it used to be. The new militancy of such occupations is encouraged by the proletarianisation of educated labour that has occurred in recent decades.

According to the survey of the Genoa protesters, one fifth (19 per cent) were trade unionists; and certain unions, such as the Federazione impiegati operai metallurgici (FIOM), were notable participants in the demonstration.⁷¹ Another interesting statistic gathered at Genoa was in relation to "self-location on the left-right axis." Of the 683 demonstrators questioned at the Genoa mobilisation, 37.5 per cent identified themselves as "Extreme Left", 54.2 per cent as "Left", 7.3 per cent as "Center-Left", 0.6 per cent as "Center" and 0.4 per cent "Center-Right and Right."⁷²

Donnatella della Porta, who led the research team, is unsurprised by the findings. She notes that the participation of "dependent workers" and trade unionists was even higher in percentage terms at the Perugia-Assisi March for Peace just after 9/11; at the European Social Forum, a "countersummit" in Florence in November 2002; and at the International Day of Protest against the Iraq War on 15 February 2003 in Rome. In Florence, 44.3 per cent were trade unionists, compared with 63.4 per cent who identified with all the various new social movements in general. In Rome, only 32.6 per cent were students, while 40.7 per cent were dependent workers, 21.4 per cent autonomous workers and 5.3 per cent unemployed or underemployed.⁷³ Union buildings were targeted in the police raids that continued for a time after the protest.⁷⁴

The data from Genoa and the other anti-capitalist protests in Italy confirm the strong working-class component of the alter-globalisation movement. While the literature on new social movements stresses the strong representation of educated professionals of the "new middle class," Della Porta

⁷¹ della Porta, Donatella. "Multiple Belongings." Op. Cit., pp. 183-4.

⁷² Ibid., p. 192.

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 182-3, 185.

⁷⁴ "27th G8 summit." 2017. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/27th_G8_summit (Last Accessed 28 April 2017).

emphasises that “the protest against neo-liberal globalization also increasingly involved workers and employees, especially from public service.”⁷⁵ She alludes to the important role of public-sector unions in France, Italy and Germany, in seeking consensus in public opinion by claiming to defend public against private values rather than merely supporting old public sector employees’ privileges. Aside from the participation of workers and trade unionists as individuals, she observes that many trade union organisations in the North officially joined in protests against neoliberal globalisation.⁷⁶

She alludes to the divisions within unions, apparent at the Genoa protest, which had developed over the preceding decade. Union federations in European countries had supported privatisation, deregulation and the “flexibilization” of labour, but opposition had also grown both inside and outside unions. In justifying their participation as organisations at the Genoa mobilisation, unions accused neoliberal globalisation of subordinating workers’ and indeed citizens’ rights to the free market, thus increasing the inequalities between North and South and within their own countries. She insists: “The forerunners of the Seattle protests can in fact be found, at least in part, in the world of work.” The 1990s, she claims, saw a “transformation of labor action.”⁷⁷

A lost moment for labour?

Charlton argues the intensity of the anti-capitalist demonstrations of the fin-de-siècle period showed there was an “army” ready to respond to calls to mobilise against globalisation. “That there was speaks of an enormous depth of feeling—a raised consciousness across a significant swathe of society.” He concluded from his interviews at Seattle:

For workers across the Western world the past quarter of a century has been an experience of retreat and retrenchment, faced with declining wages, rising prices and severe discipline in the workplace. Joe B from Portland expresses it well: ‘You go out to work—if you’re lucky. Some trumped up bastard tells you the time of day. Your wages go up—but not at the rate of cabbages at WalMart. Then the plant shuts down.’⁷⁸

Most of the Seattle demonstrators, according to William Tabb, “had the sort of class analysis which working people intuitively, if inchoately, often have ... The proposals for confronting transnational capital are in class terms and,

⁷⁵ della Porta, Donatella. “Multiple Belongings.” Op. Cit., pp. 180-81.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 182-3.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 182-3.

⁷⁸ Charlton, John. “Talking Seattle.” Op. Cit., pp. 16-17.

for the most part, inclusive.”⁷⁹ Hassan insisted the lesson of Seattle was that the fight against global capitalism and neoliberalism had begun to emerge as a struggle of the American working class, despite pundits who believed such concerns were irrelevant to most workers.⁸⁰ For Robin Hahnel, the mobilisation emphasised “the pernicious effects of corporate sponsored globalization, including the terrible effects on U.S. workers and the U.S. labor movement.”⁸¹

This was a vibrant, strong movement that articulated a left-wing critique of globalisation and expressed working-class discontent with its adverse effects. Evidence from the four case-studies of summit-storming episodes suggests strong working-class involvement, especially of white-collar workers from the public sector, and important contributions from union activists and particular radical unions as organisations, representing workers in all manner of occupations, white-collar and blue-collar, public and private.

However, mainstream trade union hierarchies were ambivalent about, absent from, or downright hostile to, these anti-corporate protests. These case studies indicate remarkably similar responses by most union officials, who manipulated union contingents to keep a safe distance from the centres of action. These incidents reveal much about the tensions within unions between militant, class-conscious activists and more co-opted and conservative officials. The result was that the contribution of unions to alterglobalisation politics was important, yet highly contradictory, as MacKay discovered in Québec.⁸²

The internal divisions within the union movement, typified in the snapshots offered of the mobilisations at Seattle, Melbourne, Québec City and Genoa, had unfortunate consequences. With the exception of radical new unions like COBAS in Italy, union leaders mostly preferred the industrial labour movement shadow the rightward drift of the political wing of the labour movement in centre-left parties rather than throw its fullhearted support behind rank-and-file union activists who wished to embrace the growing left-wing movement against globalisation. Such prevarication did not present the union movement in the best possible light to workers aggrieved at the effects of globalisation. Did the hesitant, indecisive part played by union hierarchies in alter-globalisation campaigns contribute to preparing the ground for right-wing populist opposition to globalisation? Was this a lost moment for labour?

⁷⁹ Tabb, William K. “After Seattle: Understanding the Politics of Globalization.” *Monthly Review* 51: 10, March 2000, p. 2.

⁸⁰ Hassan, Khalil. “The Future of the Labor Left.” Op. Cit., p. 82.

⁸¹ Hahnel, Robin. “Going to Greet the WTO in Seattle.” *Z Magazine*, 1 November 1999. <https://zcomm.org/zmagazine/going-to-greet-the-wto-in-seattle-by-robin-hahnel/> (Last Accessed 27 April 2017).

⁸² MacKay, Kevin. “Solidarity and Symbolic Protest.” Op. Cit., p. 22.

Unlike the political wing of the labour movement, which was clearly making its peace with capitalism, the record of the trade union movement was marked by ambiguities rather than determined neglect of working-class interests. Union behaviour in these four summit-hopping episodes confirms the truism of union movement scholarship discussed by Ralph Darlington: the existence in unionism of the “universal tension” between the contradictory elements of “movement” and “organisation.”⁸³

Compared with other social movements, the trade union movement consists of organisations that are bureaucratic. In his analysis of the Québec protest, MacKay argues that the bureaucratized structure of unions creates conflict *between* the union movement and other social movements.⁸⁴ There is a clash of styles and culture at stake. On the other hand, many social movements also value the resources, institutional solidity and continuity often brought to campaigns by bureaucratized unions. More of an issue in exploring the role of unions in the alter-globalisation movement is not their bureaucratic nature as such, but the extent to which those who staff the fulltime bureaucracy have interests at odds with the workers they represent.

Darlington emphasises the particular problem of trade union bureaucracy, a permanent apparatus of full-time union officials who specialise in negotiating the terms of compromise. While the rank-and-file of the union have a direct interest in fighting against the exploitation of employers and government, and stand to gain from fighting for the success of militant strikes, “full-time officials have a vested interest in the continued existence of a system upon which their livelihood and position depends, and so end up trying to reconcile the interests of labour and capital, which usually leads them to temper workers’ resistance.”⁸⁵⁸⁶ This structural contradiction within unions certainly helps explain the ambivalent responses to summitstorming episodes.

Richard Hyman has written at length about the ways in which “institutional pressures create within unionism a perpetual ambivalence.”⁸⁷ Unions create a means whereby workers can collectively win real improvements in their situation yet they provide a means by which workers’ disaffection can be controlled and conflict can be contained in the interests of employers and governments. He insists there are “important limits to institutionalization,” because a union which damps down workers’ discontents

⁸³ Darlington, Ralph. “The Role of Trade Unions in Building Resistance: theoretical, Historical and Comparative Perspectives” in Maurizio Atzeni (ed.). *Workers and Labour in a Globalised Capitalism. Contemporary Themes and Theoretical Issues*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 133.

⁸⁴ MacKay, Kevin. “Solidarity and Symbolic Protest.” Op. Cit.

⁸⁵ Darlington, Ralph. “The Role of Trade Unions in Building Resistance.” Op. Cit., pp. 126-86.

⁸⁷ Hyman, Richard. *Strikes*. 3rd edn. London: Fontana, 1984, p. 84.

too far destroys its own reason for existence.⁸⁸ When unions fail to represent working people, “to articulate seriously their members’ grievances and aspirations,” those whom they represent take it upon themselves to reform and reform their representative organisations. Unionists will put their own house in order or face “the emergence of rival channels for the expression of workers’ discontents”.⁸⁹

Hyman undoubtedly had in mind the development of more radical forms of collective working-class representation, such as COBAS in Italy. Such promising processes have been evident for a few decades now in response to globalisation, wherever existing union leaderships have ducked the task. These developments in working-class organisation and mobilisation around the world are explored, for example, in Issue 9 of this journal in 2018 and by this author in 2016.⁹⁰ There are, however, dangerous alternative “rival channels.” To counter the drift of angry workers to right-wing populism—and stem their own decline as organisations—unions need to pay less heed to the “organisation” and embrace instead the “movement” inherent within unionism.

To change the world, unions must, as Hyman emphasises, change themselves.

the struggle for the democratization of work and of the economy requires a new, imaginative—indeed utopian—counter-offensive: a persuasive vision of a different and better society and economy, a convincing alternative to the mantra of greed, commodification, competitiveness and austerity, a set of values which connects with everyday experience of the workplace.

The urgent need, therefore, is to regain an inspiring vision of unions as a “sword of justice,” which many unions have lost; unions have to articulate a more humane, more solidaristic and more plausible alternative if they are to vanquish neoliberalism, finding new ways to express their traditional core principles and values and to appeal to a modern generation for whom old slogans have little meaning. “And since defending the weak is inescapably a question of power, unions have to help construct a new type of *politics*—in particular, by engaging with campaigning and protest movements ... in ways which most trade unions have failed to do ...”⁹¹—and which unions did not wholeheartedly do in the case of the great anticapitalist globalisation movement.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 79.

⁸⁹ Hyman, Richard. *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction*. London: Macmillan, 1975, p. 200.

⁹⁰ Burgmann, Verity. *Globalization and Labour in the Twenty-First Century*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016.

⁹¹ Hyman, Richard. “The very idea of democracy at work.” *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 2015, 22 (1): 11-24, reproduced in LSE Research Online at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/65573>. 2016, p. 11.