Mobilising feminist politics: globalisation, alliances and sites

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Abstract:
The political economy of globalization has been celebrated by some as the ultimate victory of "free-market" forces and decried by others as the cause of all that is wrong in the world. In the Australian context, both readings appear to be relevant to an alarming degree. However, there is increasing evidence that progressive global activism is on the rise. But sexual politics is crucial to successful collective politics. Part of a larger project on transnational feminist alliances between women and labour, which aims to explain how women build alliances across many lines of difference, this paper will focus on alliances between union feminists and the women’s movement that challenge sexual politics of labour movements. Networks, political spaces and community organizations are created and used to enhance women’s participation in workers’ issues and concerns that arise out of the growing impact of globalization. The paper looks at two examples of such alliances. Working Women’s Centres are a significant political and material resource that articulate issues in labour and women’s movements to achieve positive changes for women workers. Likewise, rights discourse is only meaningful for working women if women participate in the process of their formulation and enforcement.

Introduction
The political economy of globalization has been celebrated by some as the ultimate victory of "free-market" forces and decried by others as the cause of all that is wrong in the world. In the Australian context, both readings appear to be relevant to an alarming degree. However, there is increasing international evidence that workers and their organizations are breaking through this impasse by imagining the possibility of another, more just world (Tarrow 2005; George 2004). If the upsurge in global activism is to be
relevant to women workers, then worker organizations and social movements must develop the political spaces where women can make collective politics. In recognition of this necessity, women in trade unions and in feminist social movements are moving together in new alliances.

Union feminists see the potential of labour movements to serve as a mobilizing structure for political action on behalf of women workers in all their diversity. They no longer rely on the traditional politics of labour movements. A critical mass of women activists working at both transnational and local levels has utilized prevailing discourses of the women’s movement, the human rights movement, and the global justice movement to forge a dynamic feminist politics (Moghadam 2005; Fonow 2005). By creating women’s committees, forums, conferences, and women’s centres or units, women activists within the labour movement have developed effective mobilizing structures that can be used to harness the resources of their organizations to build solidarity among women.

This paper is part of a larger project on transnational feminist alliances between women and labour (Franzway and Fonow, forthcoming), which offers an empirical analysis of the efforts of union feminists to secure workplace rights and economic and social justice for women in the global economy. Our principle concern is with the process of building alliances across the many lines of difference and fragmentation associated with globalisation. We argue that contemporary union feminists are bringing their concerns with women workers into the traditional trade union movement. However, making feminist politics within and through the trade union movement involves contesting explicit and complex structures of power.

In the Australian context, the effects of the latest round of federal Government industrial legislation are threatening the rights of workers and unions. New alliances and political spaces are gaining even more significance as sites of advocacy. Th paper discusses the bases for alliances between feminists inside and outside trade unions that have mobilised and benefited working women in Australia and at transnational levels.

**Feminism, globalisation and the union movement**

Feminist scholars have made us aware of the specific ways in which gender articulates with globalization, and their analyses have important implications for labour politics.
Globalization has a differential impact on countries, on regions, and on different groups of workers whose gender, race, nationality, education, etc. have structured their location in the labour market in very different ways. Global restructuring has increased gender divisions with the feminization of the international workforce and of poverty. Both the World Bank and the International Labour Organization acknowledge that unequal gender relations lead to women making up 70 percent of the world’s poor. The construction of women workers in the international division of labour as cheap labour is worsening. Poorly paid women workers are gathered together to subsidize the operation of “free” trade zones created in deregulated labour markets; women domestic workers flow from poorer states to wealthier states, while sex workers are caught up in the international sex tourist industry, both within and across nation states.

Under pressure from neo-liberal global capital, the trade union movement has modified its traditional politics to include the needs and interests of the great variety of potential members (Silver 2003). Because unions are formally structured to represent the economic and political interests of workers on the local, national, and international level, they connect workers organically to the multiple and contradictory processes and levels of globalization. Unions link their members locally and globally to the broader network of activists, social movements, and organizations concerned with similar issues, i.e., labour rights and justice (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Where the interests of labour overlap with other movements that focus on workers’ rights political spaces are expanding.

As sites of advocacy, unions bring workers together within and across workplaces, firms, and communities and within and across national borders (Khagram et al. 2002). Such networking occurs at the international level through a union’s formal membership in international trade secretariats and confederated labour bodies and, less formally, through strategic partnerships and alliances with transnational social movements, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and with intergovernmental agencies (Bakker and Gill 2003). On the local level, unions connect workers within and across workplaces and structure their collective relationship to regional labour bodies, to local governments and NGOs, and to grassroots community organizations and campaigns.
Unions and Sexual Politics

To describe the trade union movement as gendered has become commonplace, but such categorization remains of limited political value as it is usually implies merely the presence of two ‘genders’. We prefer a more dynamic concept, ‘sexual politics’, which identifies the complex gender relationships of power as domination, resistance, alliances, and pleasures that are central to all social institutions, including the trade union movement. Sexual politics typically works through practices of invisibility (Franzway, 2001). When women are absent from, or insignificant to, discussion and analysis of the central concerns of work, industrial relations, and social movements, it is not just a matter of ignorance or carelessness. Rather, it is a strong signal that an inegalitarian or patriarchal sexual politics that advantages men is in play. The concept, patriarchal sexual politics, recognizes that not only are men the norm, but also it draws attention to the invisibility of men’s power as men in which questions about how men achieve and maintain their dominance (in this case, of unions) rarely arise.

The persistence and ubiquity of patriarchal sexual politics in the trade union movement creates obstacles and limitations. It takes considerable effort for women to make inroads into union agendas and resources and to win leadership positions. Women’s participation rates are quite disproportionate to their leadership rates and, on any measure, inequalities continue. As one woman official in our research observed, “When I go to the national office I look around their walls and their photographs over years and years, and there is not one woman in sight, not one.” Feminist politics aims for much more than winning leadership positions for women. It seeks to gain women’s rights and social justice comprehensively and in all their necessary and diverse manifestations.

In spite of the obstacles, women’s workplace and political commitment, activism, and militancy are not insignificant. The minority positions of union women activists in trade unions together with their feminist politics give them strong incentives to work across state and union borders to make alliances that are creative and productive. For example, the World March of Women 2000, born out of the experience of a Women’s March against Poverty held in Canada in 1996, brings women together from peace
organizations, community groups, and trade unions in an explicitly global campaign for peace and equality.

Unions have the resources to bring together women from different countries and different sectors of the economy to exchange information about their experience of globalization and to build new forms of labour solidarity. It must be a solidarity that does not ask women to repress the differences among themselves but rather encourages the productive use of these differences to expand ideas about democracy and human rights. Without the material resources, networks, and rhetorical tools of their unions, fewer working-class women from any part of the world would have the opportunity to participate in the debates and struggles concerning the politics of trade and globalization.

**The Contribution of Union Feminists: Mobilizing at Multiple Sites**

In our research on transnational alliances, we identify a number of sites where union feminists have mobilized resources and discourses to address the impact of globalization on women’s labour rights and to forge collective identities as transnational activists. These can be sites of labour renewal and include formal organizations, networks, and forums, less formal sites such as international campaigns for pay equity or against sweatshops and unfair trade agreements, and even some surprising sites such as gay pride festivals. The following two sites illustrate the diversity of the kinds of alliances that are being created: the Australian Working Women’s Centres, and the utilisation of rights discourses in workers’ campaigns. Both examples also demonstrate that such alliances and constructions are rarely permanent.

**Working Women’s Centres**

The group of four Australian Working Women’s Centres (WWC) in South Australia, Queensland, Northern Territory and Tasmania result from alliances of union and non-union feminists working with unions, community groups, state agencies and the women’s movement. Each centre has a specific biography, and at the time of writing, the Tasmanian centre is closing from insufficient funding by the state agency while the Queensland centre has developed a new funding relationship with its state government. The e South Australian centre, which is also the longest standing was established by feminists working within and around the state, feminist groups and union feminists,
gaining funding from the state government and the union peak council, the South Australian United Trades and Labor Council. Centres generally employ several people with industrial relations expertise and are managed by boards drawing their membership from community, state and union organisations. They are sites of advocacy and empowerment, particularly for vulnerable working women including women who work in precarious and/or low status employment, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women from non English speaking backgrounds, women in regional or remote areas, women with disabilities and women with family responsibility (Working Women’s Centres 2006).

The ways the WWCs frame their goals are derived from feminist perspectives on women’s work, and women’s needs for economic and social justice. Such framing identifies and analyses issues that are specific to women workers. Issues of equity, education and opportunities are translated into tangible goals and campaigns to gain access to political agendas of unions, the state, and even some areas of the women’s movement. Knowledge and analysis are gained from educational, advocacy and case work with women workers, from action research projects, and from alliances with union and feminist activists at local and international levels.

The Centres have played major roles in bringing issues such as outwork (Tassie 1989), sexual harassment, homophobia, workplace bullying and the impact of domestic violence on women’s work to the attention of unions, policy makers and the community. Sexual harassment, for example proved to be a critical issue for union feminists as they struggled to develop appropriate policy for workplaces where both perpetrator and victim were union members. Unions are often confronted by members’ conflicting interests; the emergence of sexual harassment as a critical issue for working women threw the sexual politics of both workplaces and unions into sharp relief. The experience of tackling problems of sexual harassment for (mainly) women workers raised issues of gendered and unequal relationships of power, discursive dominance of masculine heterosexuality, and practices of invisibility, none of which were easily resolved by feminist principles or by union responsibility for members’ representation. WWCs proved to be a valuable resource for activists attempting to develop ways to solve sexual harassment as they could provide relevant research and industrial experience, based on their case and
advocacy work, as well as political space for the necessary debates among union and other feminists (Franzway 2001; Working Women’s Centre 1994). Such work pushes feminist analysis to confront difficult political and strategic issues that are relevant to working women. The Working Women’s Centres provide valuable political and material contributions to these developments. Based on alliances of feminists, trade unionists and their organisations that are engaged with these issues, WWCs help to mobilise labour and women’s movements to achieve positive changes for women workers.

**Rights Discourses**

The women’s movement and the labour movement use similar and divergent discourses to mobilize participants. Each movement has distinctive ways of speaking and writing that establish what make sense. Words, images, ideas, symbols are deliberately chosen to produce certain effects. For example, feminists have used ‘choice’ as in ‘women’s right to choose’ in campaigns for access to abortion, and for bodily autonomy. Unions have recently taken up ‘workers and their families’ to counter the renewed pressure for longer work hours. Traditionally, trade unions have highlighted abuses of union leaders in non-Western places where they have been murdered, tortured and imprisoned for their union work. As the discourse of rights has become increasingly more integral to the labour movement’s fundamental role and to its campaigns, unions have begun to recognise local abuses such as the harassment of union members on picket lines.

The trade union movement’s turn to human rights discourse has been inspired by the work of its new partners in the struggle against the negative effects of globalisation, including those in the non-government sector. The ILO adopted the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work in 1998 committing government, employer, and worker constituents to achieving universal workers’ rights. The peak Australian body, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), has adopted the slogan “Rights at Work” for its campaign against the federal Howard government’s proposal to demolish the centralized industrial relations system, replacing enterprise collective agreements with individual contracts (ACTU 2006). By formulating human rights as workers’ rights, labour utilizes rights discourses to foster alliances and to limit employers’ arbitrary authority.
Feminist writers and activists tend to be sceptical of universalizing and naturalizing tendencies of rights discourse, and are now moving away from a focus on equality with men towards an approach that incorporates differences among women and seeks alternatives to the male citizen as the normative subject of rights discourses. Labour rights are only meaningful for women if women participate in the process of their formulation and enforcement. The rhetoric of human rights as labour rights and as women’s rights can be used to mobilize participants only if such discourse is connected to the local realities and the differences of women’s lives.

Conclusion

We argue that globalization causes problems for progressive politics because it appears impervious to human agency, and that at some levels the anonymous forces of the political and global economy are destructive of communities that imagine themselves tied exclusively to some geographic or political locality. And yet, opportunities for political interventions are available as differences proliferate and as those on the periphery gain access to new resources from the flows of transnational processes. The processes of globalization are far from impermeable; rather they present opportunities as well as obstacles for progressive political activism.

In spite of the considerable obstacles they face from the sexual politics in workplaces and labour movements, women’s political commitment and activism are not insignificant. Union feminists in alliances with the women’s movement are creating and using networks, political spaces and community organizations for mobilizing women’s participation to address workers’ issues and concerns that arise out of the rapidly changing impact of globalization. Union feminists’ activism is a site of the contestation of sexual politics as well as a vehicle for its transformation.

References


