

Worker resistance in global supply chains

*Wildcat strikes, international accords
and transnational campaigns**

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Workers in global value chains are finding new strategies to address harsh working conditions in global supply chains. These strategies are shaped not only by the exigencies of hyper-competitive global production regimes, but also by state structures and local market conditions. The highly statist system of Viet Nam with its party-controlled official unionism has engendered a powerful wave of wildcat strikes. The harsh, despotic labour market conditions in Bangladesh, with a weak and fragmented labour movement, have pushed activists to pursue international accords. Hegemonic labour control in Honduras, built on factory-level repression, has motivated labour organizing and transnational corporate campaigns.

Thus, an analysis of labour strategies in global supply chains must begin with an analysis of the labour control regimes in which they are embedded. Proponents of a race-to-the-bottom argument would suggest that production goes where wages are lowest, but that argument cannot explain why China continues to dominate apparel production while its wages are four times higher than in Bangladesh. At the same time, those who suggest that production goes where logistics are the most efficient and economies of scale are the greatest (as in China) cannot explain why Viet Nam is one of the fastest-growing major apparel exporters in the world, or why Honduras is the largest Latin American exporter.

Buyers in apparel global value chains want not only to keep costs low, but also to reduce the likelihood of disruption to supply chains caused by worker organization and mobilization. Indeed, what this article will show is that the ten top apparel exporters in the world today reflect three models of labour control. These include state labour control regimes, market labour control regimes, and employer labour control regimes. In the case of state labour control, labour is controlled by a system of legal and extra-legal mechanisms designed to prevent or curtail independent worker organization and collective action. Extreme examples of such regimes include China and Viet Nam, which I label as authoritarian state labour control regimes.

In market labour control regimes, unfavourable labour market conditions discipline labour; strong worker organizing is curtailed because workers are afraid that active participation in a union may result in job loss and prolonged unemployment or underemployment. Low-income countries with very weak labour markets, such as Bangladesh and Indonesia, exemplify despotic versions of market labour control regimes.

Finally, employer labour control regimes in their most extreme form include highly repressive employer actions against workers, including the use of violence or the threat of the use of violence. Examples of such regimes can be seen in Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

These three general forms of control are not mutually exclusive or static; all countries have had elements of each system and all countries go through changes over the course of their histories. Bangladesh is a market labour control regime, but workers in Bangladesh also have been killed while organizing

collective action. And in Viet Nam, control is mainly exercised through an authoritarian State, but the fear of unemployment also looms large and serves to increase worker discipline. In sum, these are typologies of labour control regimes that illustrate dominant, not exclusive or static, models of control. They should be seen as a heuristic tool used to elucidate the relations between typical labour control regimes, which are present to various degrees in all cases.

This article makes a second claim: the three models of labour control outlined above in their more extreme manifestations have engendered three patterns of worker resistance: wildcat strikes, international accords and transnational corporate campaigns. That is, how workers protest is partially shaped by how they are controlled. Workers with extremely weak labour market power will have limited effectiveness in attempting to organize and protest at enterprise level since they can be easily replaced, just as workers facing repressive employers and a complicit State will be disinclined to believe they can resolve their demands locally.

Workers in an authoritarian regime who may face imprisonment for developing ties with outside interests will be reluctant to pursue cross-border campaigns or international accords to address their grievances. Rather, wildcat strikes are often prevalent in such regimes, because workers need to circumvent official unions and labour internationalism is not an option. Since only one official union centre is allowed to operate and since that state-sanctioned centre does not effectively represent workers' interests, workers are forced to take matters into their own hands by organizing unauthorized strikes. Yet, as we shall see, they need to do so very carefully, notably by protecting the identities of their leaders.

International accords build on global framework agreements, but they go a step further in that they hold the lead firms in global value chains partly responsible for the cost of decent work through binding agreements. The most recognized example of such an accord can be seen in Bangladesh, a country which, not coincidentally, is one of the more extreme examples of a market labour control regime. Such an accord was pursued in Bangladesh because labour market conditions were so unfavourable to labour that it was necessary to address local market conditions by going outside the national State and using international pressure.

Finally, transnational corporate campaigns have emerged in repressive employer labour control regimes, because the threat of bodily harm by

Table 1. Labour control regimes, resistance patterns, and country examples

Labour control regime	Pattern of resistance	Country case
State-party	Wildcat strikes	Viet Nam
Market despotism	International accords	Bangladesh
Repressive employers	Transnational corporate campaigns	Honduras

employers gives local activists a means by which to frame their concerns through international campaigns that generate maximum impact. Honduras exemplifies a case of a repressive employer labour control regime, because employers have used violence or the threat of violence to control labour. Not coincidentally, Honduras has one of the most vibrant traditions of effective transnational corporate campaigns. Table 1 summarizes types of labour control regime, patterns of resistance, and country-case illustrations.

Labour control and worker resistance in global supply chains

Traditional theories of labour control – often referred to as *labour process theory* – begin on the factory floor. Burawoy (1979) observed how employers built consent among workers by, for example, encouraging them to produce more by competing with one another. In so doing, employers “manufactured consent” by having workers buy into the system. In the decades that followed, a rich stream of scholarship examined hidden and informal mechanisms of hegemonic control, consent and resistance within capital–labour relationships.

This article builds on this tradition by linking domestic patterns of control with the international dynamics of supply chains. In the context of global competitiveness pressure, it explores patterns of labour control at the workplace, labour market and state levels. The formation of national States, for example, has been notoriously linked to patterns of labour control, with the State using its security forces to control labour unrest.

Communist States offer an extreme example of labour incorporation and control. In their study of trade unions in communist countries, Pravda and Ruble (1986) observed how such systems adhered to the Leninist model of dual-functioning unions through which unions are subordinate to the State and must work to defend the socialist system by encouraging labour productivity – the productivity function. At the same time, unions should also protect workers against any potentially harsh treatment by management – the labour protection function. Over time, in many socialist countries the productivity function was emphasized over the protection function, and control over unions shifted from the State to the party.

Market labour control regimes are in many ways the opposite of state labour control regimes in that they often occur in weak States, especially in terms of labour regulation and enforcement capability. Workers have less bargaining power during economic downturns, as high unemployment forces them to accept poor working conditions and makes them cautious about organizing labour unions for fear they might easily be replaced. Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout (2008) find that growing labour market flexibility has led to “market despotism”, which is a return of an “old” form of

Table 2. Contribution of wages to a family's basic needs, selected countries, 2011

	Prevailing wage (in US\$)	Wage/Basic needs (%)
Bangladesh	51.67	14
China	214.49	36
Honduras	250.01	47
Indonesia	142.32	22
Mexico	376.27	67
Viet Nam	112.09	29

Source: WRC (2013).

control through coercive market power “where the whip of the market was used to discipline workers” (p. 52).

Any labour market dynamic that increases workers’ sense of vulnerability – whether due to an increase in part-time work, short-term contracts or outsourced labour – will also increase labour control. Workers in such contexts are inclined to put up with bad conditions and low wages rather than risk unemployment and poverty, out of fear that should they speak up they may lose their jobs as a result. Indicators of a labour market control regime are low wages and a high proportion of the workforce that is unemployed or underemployed.

Given its low start-up costs and high competitive pressures, the garment industry is notorious for low wages, outsourcing and precarious employment practices. Some countries, however, face far more difficult circumstances than others. Using data on prevailing and living wages recently compiled by the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC, 2013), we see that Bangladesh has had the lowest wage rate among major apparel exporters, and that in 2011 wages were able to cover only 14 per cent of a family’s basic living needs (table 2).

The third system of labour control examined here is employer workplace repression. As noted above, most theories of labour control begin with employers and the workplace. This is because it is precisely at the point of production that capital is most concerned with ensuring worker discipline in order to realize gains. Harvey (2004) argues that much capital is still accumulated by dispossession through what he refers to as predation, fraud and violence. Indeed, in regions of Latin America and Asia, we are seeing a rise in violence against unionists and worker activists. Colombian employers have for decades notoriously turned to paramilitary forces in order to rid themselves of worker organizers (Gill, 2007); and in El Salvador and Honduras almost every major attempt by workers to form unions since the early 2000s has entailed the threat of violence against activists (CGWR and WRC, 2015).

Worker resistance

The three models of extreme labour control outlined above are conducive to the three patterns of domestic and transnational worker resistance already mentioned: strikes, international accords and cross-border campaigns. Strikes have been a fundamental mechanism through which workers have sought to address their concerns since the beginning of industrial relations. Indeed, whereas scholars such as Scott (1985) have popularized everyday forms of resistance such as pilfering and absenteeism, Perry (1995) rightly contends, “The strike is only one weapon in the arsenal of workers, but it is an especially efficacious and important one” (p. 7). There are two reasons why wildcat strikes are the most common form of worker resistance in state labour control regimes. First, official unions – because of their links with the State and the party and their resulting interest in maintaining “harmonious” employment relations – do not respond to the needs of workers, especially workers in foreign-owned private enterprises where unions are especially weak and working conditions notoriously harsh. Second, the State prevents workers from having strong, direct ties with international advocacy groups. Thus, the State on the one hand blocks access to formal national institutional mechanisms that might address workers’ concerns, and on the other blocks workers’ ability to pursue a “boomerang” (Keck and Sikkink, 1998) – that is, it prevents them from bringing pressure to bear on the State from the outside via transnational alliances. This leaves workers only one option: to take matters into their own hands via localized collective action.

International accords build on global framework agreements (GFAs). In an effort to hold lead firms in global supply chains accountable for employment relations practices and conditions in suppliers, international trade unions have established GFAs with multinational companies (MNCs) (see for example Hammer, 2008). These agreements reach beyond the enterprise and national State levels to achieve labour agreements at the transnational level, and, unlike corporate social responsibility programmes, they are negotiated between labour and MNCs. Yet the clauses in these agreements can be vague, are not legally binding and do not address pricing issues.

A substantive transformation took place when labour unions negotiated the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh with MNCs in 2013. Through this Accord, which can be called a “buyer responsibility agreement” (Anner, Bair and Blasi, 2013), lead firms (the buyers in global supply chains) are held jointly liable for conditions in their supply chain and partly responsible for the costs of producing their products under decent working conditions. The Accord focuses on safe buildings in Bangladesh, but its framework could easily be expanded to cover other issues and more countries.

It is not coincidental that such an accord has been designed to address issues in Bangladesh, with its despotic market labour control regime. No doubt, the dramatic building collapse at Rana Plaza motivated the Accord,

but this event itself did not dictate the outcome – a major international agreement in which northern (mostly European) MNCs agreed to increase the price they pay for the production of their product in order to ensure safe buildings. The reason that worker activists and their allies pursued a transnational accord of this nature is because domestic market conditions have made labour so weak that a more traditional domestic approach would only have reflected this weakness and thus done little to address the problems faced by the workers. Hence, transnational leverage in the form of a binding agreement was a logical choice for worker activists in this context.

The third pattern of worker resistance, cross-border organizing campaigns, builds on a long and complex history of labour internationalism that goes back two hundred years. As Lorwin (1929, 1953) documented, centuries of labour internationalism were shaped by mass migration of workers, competitive world markets, wars, and socialist ideals on the emancipation of labour. And, as Erne (2008) finds, although labour movements have been primarily linked to their nation State through neo-corporatist social pacts and nationalist worldviews, the pressures created by the most recent era of economic globalization have also pushed them to build ties across borders.

The more complex questions are: When will labour pursue internationalism and, if it does occur, what form will it take? Building on the literatures of transnational advocacy and global supply chains, I have previously argued that labour is more likely to pursue transnational solidarity when blocked from resolving its demands through domestic structures and when labour movements are influenced by class-based ideologies (Anner, 2011). What I also suggest here is that extreme forms of employer labour control regimes that involve violence or the threat of violence provide labour movements with a mechanism to frame their issue that is particularly conducive to effective cross-border campaigns.

Labour control regimes and restructuring in apparel global supply chains

Current patterns of labour control regimes in the apparel sector are largely a consequence of the recent dynamics of hyper-competitiveness fomented by restructuring and changing trade rules. In 2001, the World Trade Organization (WTO) admitted China as a member. China's position was enhanced when WTO member States negotiated the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC) that, on 1 January 2005, phased out the system of quota-based trade in apparel. By 2003, China had overtaken Mexico as the largest exporter to the United States and had become the largest apparel exporter to the world. Asian competitiveness increased further with the Bilateral Trade Agreement of 2001 between the United States and Viet Nam. Like China, Viet Nam offered labour control through state-controlled unions, but with much lower wages.

An additional factor shaping competitiveness dynamics in the apparel sector is brand, and especially retailer concentration relative to suppliers. Since start-up costs in apparel are relatively low, apparel production has been widely dispersed to a very large number of factories in developing countries. By 2006 there were a total of 3,500 export processing zones (EPZs), each with many independent factories within them, employing 66 million workers in 130 countries.¹ At the same time, retailers greatly concentrated their power through advances in logistics and technology. The result was a dramatic increase in value chain monopsony (power consolidation of lead firms relative to downstream suppliers), exemplified by an enormous number of small apparel producers who are forced to compete with one another for contracts with a limited number of retailers and manufacturers. In such a context, the retailers and other buyers largely dictate the price they will pay per garment (Abernathy et al., 1999).

These macro-level political and structural changes have had two dominant effects on workplace dynamics. First, the ability of lead (upstream) firms to set the price paid to smaller production contractors has generated persistently low wages. Second, the push for lead firms to demand just-in-time inventory has generated a work intensity crisis in workplaces. The real dollar price per square metre of apparel entering the US market declined by 46.20 per cent between 1989 and 2011 (Anner, Bair and Blasi, 2013). This suggests that apparel suppliers are indeed producing under increasingly tight economic margins as competitiveness at the supplier level intensifies.

One of the most direct impacts of the shift to shorter lead times, more styles and more volatile orders is in the area of working hours. Forced, excessive and inadequately compensated overtime is an endemic problem in the global apparel industry. Because each new worker hired incurs training and fixed benefit costs for employers, many firms prefer to maintain a smaller workforce and demand that these employees work excessive hours during periods of peak demand. In effect, just-in-time inventory practices have meant that upstream lead firms are increasingly able to shift the risks associated with volatile product demand onto their suppliers, and the suppliers in turn shift the burden onto their workers.

The result of this heightened competitiveness and the resulting pricing and sourcing dynamics is that all major apparel exporting countries now fit into at least one of the three models of extreme labour control regimes outlined above. The largest apparel exporters to the United States are China and Viet Nam, which have authoritarian state labour control regimes. Indeed, approximately half of all apparel imported into the United States (and the world) comes from these two countries. The third and fourth largest apparel exporters to the United States are Bangladesh and Indonesia, despotic market

1. Apparel makes up a large share, but not all, of EPZ production. Consumer electronics and other light manufacturing can be also found in EPZs.

labour control regimes. The fifth largest exporter of apparel to the United States is Honduras, which has a repressive employer labour control regime. Honduras is also the largest apparel exporter to the United States from Latin America, having surpassed in recent years previous apparel powerhouses in the region, notably the Dominican Republic and Mexico. Indeed, Mexico is noticeable for the dramatic decline in its apparel exports to the United States.

Certainly, part of these shifting trade dynamics can be explained by costs. Mexico has one of the highest prevailing wage rates in the apparel sector (see table 2), and it has not been able to compete with other countries, notably in 2011 with Bangladesh. However, a simple race-to-the-bottom wage argument clearly does not tell the entire story, because the largest share of apparel is produced in China and wages are much higher in China than in Bangladesh. Nor does the wage story explain how Honduras came to dominate exports in Latin America, since its wages are higher than in other apparel-exporting countries such as Nicaragua.

Sourcing decisions are no doubt the result of several factors, including production scale, logistical capabilities, infrastructure, and so forth; but these traditional sourcing arguments do not tell the entire story either. This is because, besides keeping costs down, investors want to limit the potential for disruption to their value chain operations that strong, active unions may cause. In addition to production costs and infrastructure advantages, all major apparel-exporting countries offer investors some form of labour control.

In the sections that follow I explore each of the three cases of labour control and worker resistance through three case studies: authoritarian state labour control and wildcat strikes in Viet Nam; despotic market labour control and an international accord in Bangladesh; and repressive employer labour control and cross-border organizing campaigns in Honduras.

Authoritarian state labour control and wildcat strikes: Viet Nam

By 2011, the apparel sector in Viet Nam employed 2 million workers, making it the largest source of formal sector employment in the country (Better Work Vietnam, 2011). Apparel production in Viet Nam has remained mostly in the low-end, Cut-Make-Trim segment (Gereffi and Frederick, 2010), although in recent years full-package production has been growing. Wages have failed to keep pace with inflation and, as shown in table 2, covered only 29 per cent of workers' basic living needs in 2011. Other problems in the sector include chronic overtime, abusive managers and poor food quality in workplace cafeterias (Anner, 2014).

Workers' ability to respond to these concerns, however, is limited by the state labour control regime. The Communist Party's control over trade unions is firmly established in law and practice. The Labour Code states, "Trade

unions are [...] an integral part of the political system of the Vietnamese society under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam.” Article 4.6 of the revised Labour Code states that the purpose of the law is “to develop harmonious, stable and advanced labour relations”. The law also allows for only one national labour centre, the Vietnamese General Confederation of Labour (VGCL), to which the Communist Party appoints national leaders. Strikes are legal in Viet Nam, but they must be organized or approved by the official unions. And trade unions, following the dictates of the Communist Party and its desire for social control and labour peace, do not organize strikes. The regime tolerates isolated enterprise-level strikes that focus on economic demands and grievances, but there is no tolerance for coordinated strikes, strikes that involve any form of violence, or strikes with political demands. The leaders of such actions could be arrested and face imprisonment.

In this context of state labour control via party-controlled labour unions, Viet Nam has experienced one of its greatest wildcat strike waves in its contemporary history. From fewer than 100 strikes per year in the 1990s, by 2006 there were 387 strikes, and by 2011 the country experienced 978 strikes annually. Strikes focus on common worker issues such as wages and benefits. Workers will also strike over bad cafeteria food or an abusive supervisor. Notably, the strikes tend to be short – three days on average – and are remarkably successful. In 95 per cent of the 97 strikes that I studied, workers achieved at least one of their demands (Anner, 2014). Since workers are afraid to identify themselves as strike leaders, employers are often forced to discuss strike demands with large groups of workers, often determining how to respond to strike demands by the level of applause given by the workers when issues are mentioned (*ibid.*).

This form of worker action can be understood in terms not only of the harsh conditions and low wages, but also of the nature of the labour control regime. They are worker-led strikes because official unions do not organize strikes. They are isolated to one factory because isolated strikes are tolerated by the State whereas coordinated strike activity is not. And they are perceived as largely leaderless strikes because an outspoken leader would be perceived as a troublemaker and could face imprisonment.

The short lead times given to suppliers by buyers are also a source of worker power that is leveraged by wildcat strikers. As Kimeldorf (2013) argues, time-sensitive tasks give workers a source of disruptive power. In the apparel sector, the need for urgent orders to meet retailer needs in a lean retailing system of constantly changing fashions and seasons means that a short strike can put a lot of pressure on employers to get workers back on the production lines quickly. Indeed, my field research in Viet Nam suggests that brands and retailers may even communicate with contractors experiencing a strike to demand that they resolve it quickly in order to get the order out on time. This is another reason why wildcat strikes in Viet Nam have such a high success rate.

The question that remains is what wildcat strikes leave in their wake. Although they are remarkably successful, they are also short actions that lead to quick fixes. The result is that the problems repeat themselves, and workers have to make the effort to strike again and again to meet basic demands. More sustained solutions would necessarily involve transforming the system of state labour control. Here, the impact of the current strike wave is more limited, but it is not insignificant. Indeed, a strike wave in the early 1990s contributed to the National Assembly decision to legalize strikes in 1994 (Kerkvliet, 2001). The strike wave of 2005–06 led to a significant increase in national minimum wages (Tran, 2007). Most recently, striking workers helped to motivate the National Assembly to adopt the Dialogue in the Workplace chapter in the revised Labour Code, which went into effect on 1 May 2013.² The revised law requires the election of worker representatives and the holding of worker–management meetings once every three months to discuss production, implementation of collective bargaining agreements, working conditions and other issues requested by worker representatives (Labour Code of Vietnam, Chapter V, Articles 63–65; see also Decree 60/2013/ND-CP).

Despotic market labour control and international accords: Bangladesh

Bangladesh provides an extreme example of a despotic market labour control regime. With a population of 155 million and a labour force of over 76 million, some 32 per cent of workers are underemployed, 31.5 per cent of the population lives in poverty, and the annual per capita gross national income stands at US\$840 (World Bank, 2015). Workers in Bangladesh received an average monthly wage rate of US\$52 in 2011; Bangladesh has long had the reputation for paying the lowest wages among major producers in the industry. And, as shown in table 2, these wages covered only 14 per cent of basic living needs (WRC, 2013). Outsourcing, part-time work, temporary employment and informality all contribute to workers' sense of extreme vulnerability, characteristic of a despotic market labour control regime.

Labour market vulnerability has also contributed to a very fragmented labour movement. This has greatly curtailed labour's ability to organize and demand greater social protection as part of a counter-movement as might have been anticipated by Polanyi (1944). Counter-movements, however, often presuppose a certain degree of structural power to be effective. Apparel workers lacking labour market power also lack the power to demand more effective state protection. The result in Bangladesh has been a weak and corrupt labour

2. Author's interviews, Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, March and April 2014.

inspectorate and poor social protection. Workers cannot expect a solution to their most pressing concerns from the State. Indeed, Bangladesh is one of a few countries in which the freedom of association rights do not fully apply to workers in export processing zones.

The hyper-competitiveness of the global apparel industry contributes to a system that seeks to save on costs not only through low wages but also through low commercial property rents. This is because, after wages, rents are one of the major costs of doing business in the apparel industry. The push to keep rents to their lowest possible level has resulted in extremely unsafe buildings. This was brutally illustrated on 24 April 2013, when Bangladeshi apparel workers were victims of the worst industrial disaster in the history of the industry. An eight-storey building with five garment factories, Rana Plaza, collapsed and killed over 1,100 workers; and the Rana Plaza disaster was not the only one of its kind. Since 2005, there have been 11 major factory disasters in the industry, which have taken the lives of 1,728 workers.

These tragedies were especially horrific because in many cases employers had been informed that their buildings were unsafe, but refused to stop production in order to meet the tight lead times imposed on them by buyers. For example, the day before its collapse, Rana Plaza was inspected and deemed unsafe by a government official. The bottom floor of the building was occupied by a bank, which immediately instructed all its workers to leave. The upper floors were occupied by garment factories. In those cases, the factories were attempting to meet the production deadlines imposed, through a system of outsourcing, by the brands and retailers. This illustrates how dynamics upstream in value chains have an impact on working conditions. That is, the despotic market control regime is the result not only of domestic labour market conditions, but also of the exigencies of global value chain pricing and sourcing practices.

What is also important about the Rana Plaza incident is the labour response that followed. Workers protested to demand better state protections, and the international labour movement and labour NGOs immediately began pressuring lead firms to accept greater responsibility for the safety conditions under which their clothing was produced. The idea for a building and fire safety accord had already been pursued by international labour NGOs. When Rana Plaza happened, European firms quickly responded to labour pressure and public outrage and signed up to what became the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh.

The Accord is a significant improvement on a generation of GFAs. Like GFAs, it was negotiated with labour unions, and thus it is a step up from traditional corporate codes of conduct, which are either unilateral or the result of partnerships with NGOs but not labour. The Accord differs from other initiatives in that it is legally binding and includes a pricing clause. According to the text of the agreement, the brands and retailers that signed the Accord should be committed to paying contract prices that would allow

contractors to produce in safe buildings, although in practice they have been reluctant to pay.³

Some observers consider the Accord as a top-down solution. Yet it is important to note that Bangladesh has experienced a considerable wave of labour protests, and in this regard it has something in common with Viet Nam's strike wave. However, the vast majority of factories are not unionized, and in the few unionized factories that do exist the unions are relatively weak and fragmented. Hence, the wave of protest has been weaker than in Viet Nam because market despotism contributes to weaker domestic bargaining power. As a result, Bangladeshi workers have gone beyond the national State, partnered with international labour unions and NGOs, and sought to address some of their demands through the support of an international accord.

What is also notable is the role of symbolic power and framing. When Bangladeshi worker activists pursued labour transnationalism, images of the human horror created by the building collapse were used to shame brands and retailers in the global North. In sum, international labour and NGO pressure, and worker mobilization, resulted in changes for workers in the country despite their extremely disadvantageous market power. Buyers are now committed through a legally binding accord to pay the price for safe buildings, and the country's minimum wage was increased by 77 per cent in January 2014. Labour laws were also reformed, although some of the reforms were inadequate and enforcement remains an issue. At the time of this writing, the final texts on labour implementation procedures were still being written and debated.

Repressive employer labour control and cross-border solidarity: Honduras

Honduras, which has been named as the most violent country in the world on the basis of its annual rate of homicides per capita (UNODC, 2013), represents an example for the purposes of this article of the use of violence and the climate of violence for controlling labour. Although Honduras did not experience the extreme death squad repression of neighbouring countries like El Salvador and Guatemala during the 1980s, state security forces and paramilitary groups did repress labour (Acker, 1988). Yet Honduras has had one of the relatively strongest labour movements in Central America, which can be traced back to the great banana workers' strike of the 1950s (MacCameron, 1983). Partly as a result of this legacy, by the 1990s Honduran unions were organizing far more apparel export plants than any other country in the region (Anner, 2011). Unlike in Viet Nam, there has been a vibrant tradition

3. Author's interviews with Bangladeshi garment manufacturers in the Dhaka region, 22–30 June 2015.

of independent unionism in Honduras. And, unlike in Bangladesh, the union movement has been relatively less fragmented. This has provided the foundation for sustained domestic organizing campaigns.

No doubt, despotic labour market conditions have hurt organizing attempts. Yet wages are higher and labour markets somewhat better in Honduras than in Bangladesh. More significant in controlling labour are efforts by employers, who have pursued a range of union avoidance techniques including the aggressive promotion of company unions (Anner, 2011). Anti-union violence also escalated significantly after the 2009 coup d'état that removed a pro-labour reformer, Manuel Zelaya, from power. In the years following the coup, union leaders of major campaigns to organize workers in the apparel sector faced death threats. For example, Norma Mejia, a garment worker who attempted to organize a Russell Athletic factory, found a note on her sewing machine during the organizing campaign showing a stick figure with its head cut off (YouTube, 2009). When she still refused to stop her organizing efforts, she and all other union members were fired and the factory was closed.

The threat of violence and other repressive actions are similar to conditions faced by worker activists in Central America in the 1980s, but the difference is that the violence during that period was tied to the State, whose leaders saw workers organizing as a political threat to their regimes. In this regard, the 1980s reflected a period of state labour control. In the 2000s, labour control shifted to the employers, who now fire workers and then blacklist them, and also at times threaten them. The State creates a permissive environment through its inaction, as a result of either a lack of capacity or a lack of willingness to punish the perpetrators of the violence.

The question is what sort of response labour pursues in such a context. What we find is that Honduran workers have developed a practice of combining sustained local organizing with transnational pressure on brands, a pattern of resistance to which I refer as cross-border organizing campaigns. As in Viet Nam, strike actions may be common, but strikes are used when necessary to complement an organizing drive; they are not the main mechanism to achieve workers' goals. And as in Bangladesh, there is international pressure on buyers that often results in signed agreements. Unlike the Bangladesh Accord, however, the goal is not to directly influence the price paid for production in order to improve working conditions, but rather to ensure respect for the right to organize and bargain collectively, which in turn should improve wages, benefits and working conditions.

Perhaps the best illustration of such a campaign is the abovementioned campaign to unionize Russell factories in Honduras. Steven Greenhouse of the *New York Times* (18 Nov. 2009) proclaimed this campaign to be one of the more important victories in the history of the anti-sweatshop movement. In this case, while maintaining their workplace organizing drive in Honduras, local unionists reached out to US labour and student activists. The worker–student alliance made sense because Russell was one of the

largest producers of American collegiate apparel. This gave the students a source of economic leverage that they could exploit by demanding that universities cut their contracts with Russell until such time as Russell respected internationally recognized workers' rights.

One particularly effective campaign strategy was to bring Honduran union leaders from the Russell factory to the United States to speak on university campuses. The campaign achieved two objectives. First, it personalized and legitimized the workers' demands. Many campuses cut or suspended their contracts with Russell days after such speaking events on their campuses. Second, it ensured that the Honduran unionists were integrally involved in the campaign. Thus, although the campaign did involve external pressure on the factories, this was not a top-down solution devoid of significant local worker participation.

Approximately 100 major US universities terminated their licensing agreement with Russell on the basis of evidence of anti-union activities in Honduras. And in November 2009, after years of union organizing efforts and an intense one-year transnational campaign, Russell announced that it would reopen the factory and re-hire 1,200 workers. Russell also agreed to recognize the union, begin collective bargaining, and adhere to a neutrality clause for all its other seven factories in Honduras.⁴

The question that remains for Honduras is the sustainability of this pattern of resistance. Organizing cross-border campaigns for every apparel factory to obtain a union is impractical because of the cost and coordination constraints of such efforts. The most logical response would be to campaign for better labour laws and stricter enforcement that would facilitate domestic organizing. This was part of labour's efforts when it lobbied around the free trade agreements with the United States, such as CAFTA-DR. Yet the greater challenge is to work toward modifying the economic dynamics around which the market liberalization model is based, and that would entail engaging in direct bargaining with lead firms in supply chains.

Conclusions

This article has explored how changing dynamics in the global apparel industry have engendered three models of labour control: authoritarian state labour control, despotic market labour control, and repressive employer labour control. It has also explored how variations in labour control regimes have shaped variations in forms of worker resistance. In the cases described, the system of state labour control was conducive to worker mobilization from below in the form of wildcat strikes. The system of market labour control

4. Author's interviews with labour organizers, San Pedro Sula, July 2009; see also Hobbs (2009); Russell Athletic (2009).

contributed to international buyer accords that force brands and retailers to pay the price of safe buildings. Finally, the repressive employer labour control regime resulted in cross-border organizing campaigns that combined international and domestic labour organizing.

The results have been substantial. Not only did Vietnamese garment workers achieve increased wages, better benefits and other workplace improvements in 95 per cent of their strikes, but they also forced the Government to reform its labour laws to allow for more worker participation in workplace governance. In Bangladesh, workers and their transnational allies forced brands for the first time to accept a legally binding accord that holds them accountable for the price of safe factories. And in Honduras, workers and their allies forced the country's largest private sector employer to reopen a factory, re-hire fired workers, recognize the union, bargain for substantially increased wages, and agree to a company-wide neutrality clause that is allowing workers to expand unionization and collective bargaining to other Russell-owned facilities in the country.

There are, no doubt, limits to these patterns of resistance. The wages of Bangladeshi workers remain below subsistence level. Strikes in Viet Nam ebb and flow depending on market conditions and the State's shifting tolerance for contained protests and its desire to provide stability to investors. In Honduras, although some unions are growing, so too is the climate of violence that restrains all but the boldest of workers from protesting. Indeed, the challenge facing labour is not only to achieve limited protection or economic gains within the current model of market liberalization, but also to work toward a modification of the model itself.

Much more research remains to be done, notably on other sectors and other regions of the world. In many ways, the apparel sector provides for sharper examples because the industry is extremely competitive and notorious for paying low wages and providing poor working conditions. This helps to explain the more extreme forms of labour control that can be found in this sector, but such labour control can be found in other sectors facing similar conditions, notably agriculture and extractive industries. The brutal conditions faced by the Marikana miners in South Africa, fomented by a despotic labour market, no doubt contributed to the contentious strike which in turn resulted in violent state repression.

In larger economies such as the United States, we find more mixed models of labour control regimes and worker resistance. In higher-end sectors such as automobiles, we can still find elements of hegemonic control and traditional union organizing, especially in northern, more unionized regions of the country; but we also see labour market despotism in low-end sectors such as the fast-food industry, with patterns of worker resistance based on disruptive street protests. For workers based in the largely non-unionized south of the country, we see unions building cross-border solidarity with unions not only in countries such as Germany to help organize workers, but

also in Brazil. US security industry workers have also used the rules provided by international accords, notably GFAs, to subordinate capital to worker and union oversight (Anner, 2011).

This article illustrates that patterns of global production are not based solely on costs, but also on labour control. Labour control regimes will vary depending on local contexts, but all major apparel exporters subject their workers to one form of control or another. However, just as labour control regimes vary, so too do patterns of worker resistance. Workers are finding the appropriate mechanisms to circumvent their particular form of control; and in many cases they are achieving many of their most immediate demands. More sustained solutions would require restructuring the economic model that has engendered these labour control regimes.

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