

SOUTH–SOUTH LABOR INTERNATIONALISM: SIGTUR AND THE CHALLENGES TO THE STATUS QUO

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Labor internationalism and solidarity has been dominated historically by the European trade union movement. The 2008 economic crisis and the rise of emerging economies have led to a gradual reorientation of labor relations, increasing the capacity of a group of southern trade unions to influence transnational labor solidarity. This article reviews the increasing connectivity between southern trade unions, with a focus on the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR), which groups confederations from the Global South, with leading unions from Brazil, Argentina, Korea, South Africa, and Australia, among others. The leading argument is that despite shortcomings, SIGTUR has the potential to revitalize labor internationalism through extending the network into articulated global actions that challenge dominant neoliberal globalization.

The need for labor to globalize its struggles has been a historical concern for the academics and activists. The constraints placed on labor organizing by the transnationalization of capital around the globe and the decreasing levels of unionization in that context have revived the debate on labor internationalism. The neoliberal era that started in the early 1970s, and was expressed by governments throughout the world, has continued to deepen the crisis of a labor movement that was used to facing local and national challenges, not international ones. Indeed, labor has historically intended to create international solidarity, but the main focus remained on the national state and in solidarity campaigns beyond it. Since the late 1990s, the attacks by transnational companies on trade union rights led to debates within trade unions regarding the need to internationalize labor struggles through building transnational solidarity, and this remains to this day a fundamental challenge for workers.

This article presents the case for labor internationalism that began in the late 1990s and intended to promote solidarity across labor movements, with a central focus on the Global South. These new spaces of labor internationalism are represented by members participating in the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR), but are not constrained to it. SIGTUR is a network of trade unions from four continents—Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania—organized under a common goal to promote south–

south union integration, based on a loose organizational basis and directed toward militant campaigns. Since its inception, SIGTUR and the main trade unions participating have expressed a challenge to system of labor solidarity by breaking the dependence on northern—that is, European and American—funding and agendas. This is a critical aspect especially in the current context of a neoliberal crisis taking place in the most advanced economies, while the emerging countries are increasing their participation in the world economy with larger state intervention, and in some cases postneoliberal contexts. The text argues that SIGTUR's intervention in labor's international arena has the potential to reframe union action across borders. However, the successful use of this potential depends largely on the lessons learned from past actions and current union contexts.

The current economic crisis that began in 2008 represents a window of opportunity for labor movements from the Global South. Structural adjustment programs throughout Europe have weakened labor organizing and the capacity of unions to carry through international cooperation schemes—historically dependant on state funding. The European trade union movement has, overall, been stagnant in terms of new organizing forms and opening up to workers from unorganized sectors. The belief in social dialogue as a central tool for improving working conditions has proven insufficient and has led to the demobilization of labor. On the contrary, unions in the Global South, and specifically the ones considered here, were borne out of struggles in which conventional trade unionism was not willing or able participate.

These unions were originally understood through the conceptual framework of “social movement unionism” (Scipes 1992a, 1992b), sharing a set of characteristics that distinguishes them from the conventional—“orthodox”—trade unions: militant base and internal democracy, challenge to social dialogue schemes, alliances with social movements, demands that extend beyond the traditional “factory bias,” and challenges to the existing social order. However, the framework of autonomous struggles has come into question for a significant number of the participating unions. Their institutionalization in the domestic sphere—mainly through alliances with different political parties—placed into question the capacity of these unions to provide autonomous struggles, independent of political parties. Despite this critique, trade unions belonging to SIGTUR have increased their share of relevance in the international scene, and therefore the coordination of common struggles turned a fundamental issue. The reluctance of international trade union organizations—the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU)—to further incorporate southern unions and more militant campaigns can be considered a main element in the upsurge of SIGTUR.

SIGTUR as a coordinating element has been effective in creating awareness of the need to articulate a South–South connection, and in breaching the gap existent between unions that were used to looking north. However, there still remains to be seen the capacity to organize cross-border, beyond expressing international solidarity. This is a central challenge that the unions in the South

are better positioned to face since they are not in a defensive mode but rather in an offensive one, gaining confidence in the international sphere. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the Unified Workers Central (CUT for its acronym in Portuguese) from Brazil, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), and the Workers Confederation of Argentina (CTA for its acronym in Spanish) are among the few confederations in the world whose membership has actually increased throughout the last decade, mainly due to the organizational efforts beyond the conventional wisdom. This capacity to organize new sectors has to be channeled to the international arena, where the main confederations—ITUC and the WFTU—remain paralyzed in negotiations and empty slogans (Gallin 2013).

This article focuses on SIGTUR and the actions taken recently by some of its core organizations to face labor insecurity produced by neoliberal policies throughout the world (Webster, Lambert, and Bezuidenhout 2008). The article outlines the formation of SIGTUR and the potentialities of this network to become a central actor in facing neoliberalism, while at the same time pushing the rest of the international workers' organizations to adapting more militant strategies and not relying on "social pacts" and compromises for their actions. The article reviews actions taken by SIGTUR and also by its members, deepening the analysis in a case that can contribute to build strategic campaigns at the international level. The case considered is the buildup of the anti-Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) led by unions belonging to SIGTUR. The campaign against the FTAA becomes a significant example of the possibilities to construct global social movement unionism that engages in areas affecting labor but also broader movements in society.

The challenge for SIGTUR is to enhance these South–South struggles, connect them, and provide valuable strategic and organizing tools. SIGTUR can potentially be a central element for labor internationalism, one that has to contribute to "building the strategic and material resources for working-class struggles in each country" (Panitch 2001, 389). In this form, the international labor actions have to be reinforced by local actions, and the local actions need to use the strategies and tools used elsewhere to combat capital. The experience of SIGTUR actions coordinated within the network remains elusive. The campaigns organized during the late 1990s (against mining company Rio Tinto) were a starting point, mostly Australian-led, but the network has not been able to match its original momentum with recent actions that coordinate the new participating unions. A debate around the need to enhance this capacity is presented further in this article.

This article then intends to debate the recent events in the construction of international labor solidarity by focusing on the southern trade unions and their potential for creating more effective tools of labor organizing globally. The article does not consider the labor movement from the Global South as a unique force nor without its contradictions. The southern trade union movement is predominantly weak as compared with its northern counterparts. However, here the intent is to focus on those trade unions that have grown in numbers through

organizing at times of perils for labor and have shown a possible path for the rest of the trade union movement. The challenge to organize internationally is not a minor one but remains essential for labor's survival. As Silver (2003) has expressed, the working class is made, unmade, and remade, and new worker movements emerge under new conditions. The current conditions of retrenchment in the northern unions and increasing confidence by southern counterparts provide for the space to build labor solidarity from the spaces considered as passive receivers of solidarity in the past. The patience building of solidarity and action by SIGTUR members is a road to be explored that can redress the paralysis of resistance that the current economic crisis has engulfed labor in, including southern unions. Revitalizing solidarity involves, among other elements, reconsidering past actions and considering examples elsewhere.

This essay is divided in four different sections. The first one briefly outlines SIGTUR and the unions participating within it, focusing on comparisons with recent events in the international labor organizations. The second outlines some of the actions taken by SIGTUR throughout its two decades of existence. The third section presents the campaign in Latin America against the FTAA as a case sample to consider for alliance-building unionism and the potential use for SIGTUR. The last section provides for final remarks and places the question of SIGTUR's potentiality in creating an alternative paradigm of union internationalism.

SIGTUR and the Novel Trade Union Movement

SIGTUR was created formally in 1999 but has been informally ongoing since the late 1980s (Lambert and Webster 2001; Munck 2009; Webster, Lambert, and Bezuidenhout 2008). SIGTUR is initially a coordination organized by the close links between Australian and South African trade unions, as well as the relationships of the first one with Southeast Asian unions. In that sense, the network has benefited from the input of the Australian working class traditions and the recently emerging—in the late 1970s anti-apartheid struggle—South African trade unions (Lambert and Webster 2001, 342). As the current international coordinator signals, SIGTUR does not consider the “Southern” characteristic geographically, but rather *politically*, as in “an initiative to bring together some of the most exploited working classes all over the world, where union rights are negated or constrained, and political situations restricted” (Lambert and Webster 2001, 342).

This political stance is related to the fact that in comparative terms, the trade union movement from Australia and New Zealand has much resemblance to the conventional European trade unions. However, by placing the focus on those without rights and organization, SIGTUR presents the first initial challenge to conventional organizing. Interestingly enough, since the time of its inception, SIGTUR has attracted labor organizations that were initially in an array of sectors and regions with difficult organizing contexts, but have managed to become significant actors in organizing workers and challenging conventional

union practices. The central characteristic of SIGTUR participating organizations are democratic, action-oriented, and allied with social movements outside the conventional union spectrum (Lambert and Webster 2001; Waterman, 2012). These three characteristics are critical in the formation of new alliances that can engage workers—and people—throughout the world. The working class is an unorganized majority, and in order to coordinate organizational efforts labor movements have to include the workers organized in different forms beyond their class identity. The characteristics of the countries integrated within SIGTUR with high levels of informal, nonunionized employment had led the trade union movement into extending its membership to workers beyond the conventional sectors.

SIGTUR is a network, not a formalized organization with a bureaucratic structure whose decisions are made on the basis of consensus between its members. This is a key characteristic that distinguishes it from other international labor organizations, especially the two most representative ones, the ITUC and the WFTU. The characteristics outlined above (action-based, independent, alliance-oriented) place SIGTUR in a different situation as compared with the ITUC and the WFTU, which are based in Europe and firmly associated with the European trade union model of social dialogue within the welfare state (in the case of ITUC) or the socialist republics (for WFTU in the past). Both these models of international trade unionism have begun to be questioned (Waterman 2008, 2012), especially for the lack of emancipatory potential in the outlook of the organizations. The clearest contestation was in the latest (2012) COSATU Congress, in which the debates regarding the ITUC and WFTU took center stage (Gallin 2013). The best example of this stagnation is the campaigns organized every year on October 3 (by WFTU) and October 7 (by ITUC), both of which gather symbolic manifestations by affiliated unions but no profound content on class struggle. In a sense, they reinforce concepts like “decent work” but do not envision a role for the trade unions in improving livelihoods.

However, SIGTUR does not intend to compete with either of the other international organizations, especially when many of its members are also members of either the ITUC or the WFTU. The potential—and this is still to be realized in a concrete form—is to challenge the stagnation of these organizations by organizing actions that improve the capacity to organize and confront transnational capital. Moreover, SIGTUR can provide visibility for the trade unions of the South that are actively engaging in struggles and gaining ground in their local spheres, and that remain secondary players in the international trade union scene.

SIGTUR has a defining element in the composition of its membership. As stated clearly in its principles, it organizes with democratic unions from the Global South. The level of internal democracy and militancy can be considered the most common aspect of the trade unions participating. Even though it is definitely influenced by the Australian Congress of Trade Unions as the initial organizing force, SIGTUR’s capacities are enhanced by the unions that have

joined in later years. This is the case with the KCTU, the COSATU, the Unified Workers' Central (CUT, Brazil), and the Argentine Workers' Central (CTA, Argentina).

These four unions represent workers from countries with a relevant industrial base—especially when compared with the rest of the southern countries—but also novel forms of organization. CUT and COSATU were born out of the struggle for democracy in each country (Seidman 1994), and later turned the fights against neoliberal policy making as a central element of their platforms. Similarly, the KCTU and the CTA were products of the 1990s neoliberal restructuring in each country and the lack of democracy at the shop floor levels of union organizing (Bieler, Lindberg, and Pillay 2008). These four confederations struggled at the national level against predominant trade union confederations, but also, and especially in the case of the CTA, with the role that the historical union movement from each country had within established international organizations.

The presence of SIGTUR represents then the possibility to align militant confederations with each other at the international level, and to open a space of participation at a stage in which most of them are novel actors, with an emancipatory potential. The unions mentioned above generated high expectations since their inception. The contradictions within each of these confederations require an in-depth discussion for each of the cases, which is not the focus in this piece.¹ However, it is relevant to see that even though the unions mentioned above are not new, they remain secondary players within the main international organizations, and this has led the search for new channels of actions and solidarity, chiefly among them being SIGTUR. Whether the potential to convene new strategic alliance and production of novel actions has been met by SIGTUR is addressed in the final section of this article.

A Record of Action: What Has SIGTUR Done So Far?

Since its formation as a network, SIGTUR presented an ambitious program for international action that continues to be reproduced after each of the network's congresses. This program generally focuses on challenging neoliberalism and the orthodoxy of free trade, together with exerting further solidarity among the people from the Global South (Lambert 2013). Despite the efforts placed in analyzing and denouncing the advances of neoliberalism, little has been done in the way of common effort, as SIGTUR, against it.

The majority of the mobilization produced by SIGTUR has been targeting different embassies, according to the actions taken by governments against SIGTUR members. This is no minor achievement, especially when it implies sharing the realities of unions from places unknown to the average militant before. Further, it implies global solidarity by acting outside of the historical networks of information. The main campaign that targeted a transnational company was the one carried in 1997 against the mining giant Rio Tinto (Lambert and Webster 2003). This campaign targeted one of the major mining companies in the world,

which was running through an aggressive de-unionization campaign in Australia that affected Australia's construction and mining union, the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (Goodman 2004). The campaign against Rio Tinto's labor policies included intervening in corporate meetings in London and throughout Australia. Even though SIGTUR members participated and supported the campaign, the main element in the campaign came from the Australian trade unions, and little was done by other members of SIGTUR beyond expressions of solidarity. The campaign did generate solidarity between Australian unions, including the active participation of the Maritime Union of Australia and its international affiliate, the International Transport Federation (Kellow 2007). The lack of participation of unions from the South also had to do with Rio Tinto's operations being mainly concentrated in the Global North (Kellow 2007, 119).

The campaign against Rio Tinto has been presented as an example of SIGTUR's action, but this is a partial reality since the main actors were the local unions and their international federations. This does not mean that SIGTUR played no role, but the question remains whether it can play a leading role in which all its member federations actively participate. A similar question needs to be raised regarding the shipping boycotts exerted by South African unions in solidarity with Australian ones, and earlier on by Australian unions against the apartheid regime. In order to revitalize its momentum, SIGTUR needs to incorporate its members into a concerted campaign with a common target that engages the majority of its members while linking local struggles that are already taking place on the ground. The following section presents a case intended to provide examples of possible ways forward in this aspect.

Trade Unions and the Direct Challenges to Free Trade

The transfer of local, regional, and national capacities to the international sphere remains a central element for a network like SIGTUR. As of now, we can divide international organizing and campaigns in three forms: from below against multinational companies, from above in the form of global framework agreements, and across-borders through solidarity campaigns between unions (Anner 2011). The role of the confederations has been mostly associated with providing solidarity campaigns and mobilizing in front of embassies (therefore targeting states more than transnational capital). Similarly, the ITUC seems to be more engaged on global forums and round tables with governments and businesses than in actively participating in mobilizations. In their writings about SIGTUR, Lambert and Webster remain positive about the capacity to build a "global social movement unionism" (Lambert and Webster 2001, 350). This movement is meant to exist when "unions move beyond the traditional workplace boundaries to form alliances with other civil society movements within the nation state, whilst at the same time creating a new global union form" (Lambert and Webster 2001, 350). Similarly, Waterman (2008, 255) refers to the Global Justice and Solidarity Movement based on the connections that labor could, and still can, establish with social movement struggling for social justice, especially in

the context of the World Social Forum. Both these visions have been incorporated into the SIGTUR as a general goal to build throughout the process.

A fundamental tool that needs to be incorporated is organization and strategic campaigning in order to build a truly global social movement unionism and to challenge the existing structures of union organizing internationally. The Latin American trade union movement has been relatively successful in organizing with allies against the FTAA—in the 1990s and early 2000s, eventually with the participation of North American unions—and currently during the Rio+20 summit that took place in 2012 in Brazil. Both the FTAA proposal and the current climate debates are global issues in which the trade unions build alliances of resistance to the advances of transnational capital—through government cooperation. For SIGTUR, the campaign against the FTAA is a central example of the potential to build a global movement from the south challenging free trade. This is especially important in the view of the upcoming Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) being signed between Asia, North Americas, and some countries of Latin America. This new push for global free trade affects most SIGTUR members, and the necessity to build a countermovement was mentioned as a central focus for SIGTUR in its past congress (SIGTUR 2013).

During the early 2000s, the trade union movement in Latin America engaged in a massive campaign against the FTAA. The FTAA consisted of a proposal by the U.S. government from 1994, intended to sign a free trade agreement with the entire continent (Estay and Sánchez 2005). The FTAA was the fundamental element of a larger trend in the Americas during the 1990s, when more than 140 different trade agreements were signed between countries (Ghiotto 2005, 168). The FTAA proposal intended to be the extension of the NAFTA agreement among Mexico, Canada, and the U.S. The trade unions from the North had a large experience in struggling against free trade areas, while they did not present such a history of aligning with other social movements. The project against the FTAA included counter-summits, known as People's Summits, in every occasion there was a presidential or ministerial-level meeting. The conformation of the Hemispheric Social Alliance was essential in aligning the trade union movement with other social movements, including peasants and indigenous movements from the region (Smith 2004).

The mobilization led to a strategic event in 2004, which was a popular referendum regarding the FTAA. The CUT in Brazil and the CTA in Argentina were two of the most militant unions behind this referendum and a central factor leading to a widespread vote (10 million people in Brazil and 2.5 million in Argentina) rejecting the FTAA (Berron and Freire 2004). The popular referendum had become a strategic tool to incorporate massive participation trade union campaigns, as similarly used by the CTA in its National Front Against Poverty in 2001. Even though the struggle against the FTAA included friendly left-of-the-center governments (Lula in Brazil, Kirchner in Argentina, and Chavez in Venezuela), events like the massive referendum throughout the region were fundamental in building the momentum for those governments to stand in opposition to the agreement.

The final blow to the FTAA came in the Mar del Plata Americas Summit in 2005, where thousands mobilized to the counter-summit from Argentina and from the entire region (de la Cueva 2006). The counter-summit was significant in size but also in political impact, since the then-president of Venezuela Hugo Chavez and the to-be-president of Bolivia Evo Morales were active participants in the summit, and the organization received a lot of logistical support from the Argentine government. Mar del Plata was the harvest of more than a decade of mobilization and alliance between labor and social movements. The counter-summit to bury the FTAA was close coordinated, with the decision being made within the official negotiation space, where the Brazilian, Venezuelan and Argentinian governments were facing the majority proposal to approve the agreement (de la Cueva 2006, 90). The plan was aborted by the pressure that the trade unions in alliance with social movements managed to exert on governments from the region that had recently began reversing the wave of neoliberal administrations in the region and opposed its most overarching project.

The campaign against the FTAA represented the closest example of how global trade unionism can look like in the current context. It comprised trade unions from the north and south, but it was the push from the southern members (particularly CUT and CTA) that manage to mobilize an alliance with other social movements that were rallying against free trade. The fact that both countries witnessed the largest participation in the popular referendum is a clear element substantiating this affirmation. A second element of this campaign is that it went beyond the conventional demands of the trade union movement, including the more conservative elements. In the beginning of the process, the first attempt, pushed by the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations, was to place a “labor rights clause” in the overall agreement. Eventually, this option was rejected and the broader interest of the society was taken into consideration. Third, it engaged in nonconventional forms of mobilization, especially with the use of “popular referendums” as a form to build consensus within the society. Last, the campaign also showed the necessity to pressure governments and produce alliances that can influence the overall events.

In the view of the preoccupation expressed by SIGTUR and its members regarding the proliferation against free trade agreements, the union-led campaign against the FTAA is a useful example of the capacity to build counter-movements. The rejection of the FTAA is not solely explained by the campaign, but it is undeniable that it had a positive impact on the decision making for a few governments in the South. The revival of free trade agreements as suggested recently by the U.S. administration implies that SIGTUR can certainly use the anti-FTAA campaign to build its own momentum against free trade by campaigning locally and connecting internationally. Moreover, regarding the upcoming TPP agreement between countries across continents, the leading international organizations—including the international federations—have not yet come to produce a significant position on the issue. It, therefore, leaves open the space for a network like SIGTUR to use its members’ historical

achievements and current connections. Moreover, it provides for a common challenge, simpler to identify than “neoliberalism” as a general conception. Specific free trade agreements are a rallying and unifying element that can be used by SIGTUR.

Challenging the Status Quo?

SIGTUR and its members can play a significant role at the international stage in bringing about a model for labor action and solidarity that challenges the current Eurocentric model as expressed by the two international confederations and the majority, not all, of the global union federations. This challenge does not imply confrontation, but rather intent to push these organizations into taking more radical approaches, toward direct action and mobilization and away from negotiations and U.N.-style summits. The focus of many international unions on global framework agreements and in placing a “social clause” to free trade agreements has proven insufficient to improve living conditions for workers. Already a decade ago, Panitch (2001, 375–6) warned of the legitimizing effects that attaching a specific labor rights amendment to free trade agreements can have. Moreover, Panitch also mentioned the difficult task of enforcing these agreements and the possibilities of them leading to yet another technocratic bureaucracy distant from the workers at the shop floor (Panitch 2001, 376–7). The case presented here of the FTAA and the possibility to build such style of campaign in the current context intends to follow the same line, as Panitch suggested in 2001, moving beyond the specific “labor-clauses” in trade agreements to engaging the broader issue.

As Munck (2010, 221–2) mentions, trade unions have continued to organize beyond the social clauses and compromises at the international level, especially after the struggles against the World Trade Organization in the early 2000s. However, “most solidarity of this solidarity appears to be in the North–South direction” (Munck 2010, 222). Further, and especially with respect to European countries contributions, it is closely linked with “development-cooperation,” joined by issues of conditionalities and paternalism. In a similar line of thought, Achim Wachendorfer, a supporter of the unification of the social-democrat ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions) and Christian-based WCL (World Confederation of Labour), points out that there is a structural problem in the international sphere of trade unionism. Of the 304 confederations that participated in the founding congress of the ITUC, more than 200 were structurally dependent upon foreign financing (Wachendorfer 2007, 6). This structural dependence has a clear North–South direction, since most of the foundations and development cooperation from the North allow for the functioning of many unions in the South. This dependence, which manifests itself in the staffs and executives of the international organizations, is one of the elements that SIGTUR breaks away from and can then challenge.

The moment narrated in this article—the campaign against the FTAA—represents a case upon which SIGTUR can build itself and provide fundamental

changes and inspiration to the international labor movement in order to counter neoliberal economic forces. A main challenge is the alliance with other social movements beyond labor, as much praised on Southern unionism recently (Bieler, Lindberg, and Pillay 2008; Munck 2010). The campaign against the FTAA was mainly composed of a strategic alliance between southern trade unions at the beginning with social movements from the region, later with the support of northern trade unions, and finally with the push toward “labor-friendly” governments like Lula’s, Kirchner’s, and Chavez’s. A similar strategy can be incorporated considering the current dynamic of the TPP agreement presented throughout the Pacific.

The role of SIGTUR should focus beyond connecting and communicating the local struggles. As the case with the Rio Tinto campaign, there is further organizational role SIGTUR could provide. The case taken up in this article is an example of the strategies used by unions in the South to challenge neoliberalism. The campaigns imply a significant role for the state, and therefore target the state as a fundamental ally for change. The largest contribution by SIGTUR, and this is also the challenge, is to move to places of action that other labor movements are not considering, for different organizational and ideological reasons. By addressing as a common force the specific challenges of current free trade agreements—therefore moving beyond the rhetorical analysis—SIGTUR has the potential to also confront the main driving forces behind free trade, transnational corporations.

In a recent essay published by Gindin (2013) on the need to rethink the trade union movement, he describes that in spite of the usual acts of mobilizations “trade unions as they now exist no longer appear capable of adequately responding to the scale of the problems working class face” (Gindin 2013, 26). Even though the essay focuses on trade unions in the U.S., and the Global North, the fatalism of the lack of alternative to neoliberalism is a general one throughout the spectrum. The advantage of the trade union movement in the South, and particularly of SIGTUR, is that this fatalism took place already two decades ago and the trade unions began then a process of readapting. The road to challenge neoliberal hegemony road is not easy nor absent of contradictions. The main issue for SIGTUR, if it is to challenge the current status quo in the international trade union movement, is to move beyond the analysis and recreate the original militancy that the network showed. SIGTUR will not be the defining solution for trade union conflicts. The local struggles, based on place and territory (Gindin 2013, 35), remain the central focus of the strategy. But internationalism can provide the tools necessary for succeeding in confronting the international links of the struggles faced locally.

The current economic crisis, like most crises, presents the opportunity to reshape international solidarity, by strengthening the links between southern trade unions. The focus on free trade agreements is central to the upcoming struggles. The capacity of SIGTUR to coordinate such struggles depends on the political will of its members, but also on the audacity of moving beyond the government agendas (especially for the case of those unions with close links to

the parties in government). It will also depend on whether SIGTUR can become an organizational tool, within its structural condition as a network. The fact that unions from the South are looking at each other and finding coincidences is a fundamental step forward. If the status quo of labor internationalism is to actually be challenged and not reinforced, then this movement has to show the strength it presents in its local context beyond its borders. And the essence of that move is organization, communication, and mobilization.

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Note

1. The majority of the major unions participating in SIGTUR have been originally considered within the spectrum of social movement unionism (Lambert and Webster 2001; Scipes 1992a, 1992b; Seidman 1994), implying independence, democratic control, alliances with social movements, high degrees of militancy, and challenges to their respective social order and the global political-economic networks. However, this characterization has been placed into question after recent developments regarding COSATU (Pillay 2013; Seidman 2011), CUT (Sluyter-Beltrao 2010), CTA (Serdar 2012), and KCTU (Park 2007).

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