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Building Labour Internationalism 'from below':
Lessons from the International Dockworkers Council's European Working Group

Abstract

This paper considers whether the efficacy of transnational unionism, a strategy for trade union movement revitalisation, might be increased by a second revitalisation strategy – rank-and-file trade union democracy. This question is examined through a study of the International Dockworkers Council, an exceptional case of institutionalised rank-and-file union democracy at the transnational level. A shadow comparison examines the work of the International Transport Workers Federation, a bureaucratic trade union organisation active in the same sector. The IDC's structure is found to increase the efficacy of transnational unionism by removing layers of bureaucratic mediation that slow down action, fostering a culture of militant solidarity among participants. Nevertheless, participants noted the heavy personal burdens placed on activists under this model and some difficulties operating without the assistance of paid professionals. Additionally, differing national legal and political contexts for unionism remain significant barriers to effective internationalism.

Keywords: dockworkers, Europe, internationalism, trade union bureaucracy, trade union democracy,

Global Unionism, Union Democracy and Movement Revitalisation in Europe

The declining power of trade unions in Europe has inspired a sizeable literature on strategies for revitalisation (Frege and Kelly, 2004; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2013). Within the trade union movement, consistent calls have been made to internationalise (Gallin 2014) as the increasing Europeanisation of capital and regulation have made transnational collaboration a greater necessity than ever. However, Europeanisation has simultaneously undermined the conditions for the emergence of trade union internationalism by weakening national trade unions and forcing them into defensive battles for survival (Bieler and Schulten 2008; Dribbusch 2015; Bieler and Erne 2014; Bieler 2013; Stan, et al. 2015; Nowak and Gallas 2014). Furthermore, despite the growth of transnational regulation, persistent national

differences in labour law may impede more militant and effective forms of cooperation (Pulignano et al. 2013: 141; Dufresne 2015: 147-8; Larsson 2014: 391-2). Consequently, trade union activities within Europe remain heavily focused at the national level (Martin and Ross 2000; Erne 2008).

Transnational collaboration nevertheless remains a potent, though underutilised, tool in labour's arsenal. This paper examines whether the efficacy of trade union internationalism may be enhanced by a second revitalisation strategy: an organisational model of rank-and-file democracy. While many scholars (Dufresne 2015; Harvey and Turnbull 2015; Hyman 2013; Moody 1997; Waterman 2001; Wills 1998) argue that building transnational structures firmly connected to shop-floor unionism would result in more effective internationalism, few studies have tested out this proposition empirically and arguments tend to rely on anecdotal evidence. This article therefore contributes to the literature through analysis of original empirical research into the efficacy of the International Dockworkers Council, an organisation which provides a model of rank-and-file union democracy at the transnational level. A shadow comparison with the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), a professionalised, bureaucratic organisation, facilitates analysis of the broader implications of organisational form for transnational trade unionism.

The next section of the paper provides an overview of long-standing debates on the efficacy of bureaucratic and rank-and-file forms of trade unionism, followed by a discussion of research design, case selection and methodology. Findings examine the advantages and disadvantages of the IDC's organisational model, as well as remaining challenges for transnationally-organised workers to resolve. Interview respondents argue that the IDC's rank-and-file structure does indeed facilitate more effective coordination of solidarity among

European dockworkers than the bureaucratic structure of the ITF. Yet, the IDC's model also imposes significant personal costs on activists as well as occasional difficulties of operating without professional assistance. Additionally, problems of effective transnational coordination stemming from differing national contexts for trade unionism remain. In the conclusion, the applicability of these findings for transnational trade unionism more broadly are explored.

Theorising the Effects of Trade Union Governance Models

Bureaucratic and Rank-and-File Forms of Trade Unionism

As used herein, *bureaucratic trade unionism* – or 'professional unionism' (Heery and Kelly 1994) refers to the direction and management of trade unions by full-time officials, whether elected or appointed, while *democratic trade unionism* – or 'participative unionism' (Ibid) refers to the direction and management of trade unions by rank-and-file workers. While these are ideal types and elements of both are often present in the same organisation, key distinguishing factors include the degree of 1) participatory or representative democracy 2) local union autonomy and 3) control over organisational resources by full-time officials or rank-and-file workers. In his classic study, Michels (1911) views the bureaucratisation of political parties and trade unions, regardless of their politics, as an inevitability — an 'iron law of oligarchy' – a view shared by Offe and Wiesenthal (1980) who argue that bureaucratisation is an inevitable effect of growth and institutionalisation. Writers in the Marxist tradition tend to agree, arguing that because full-time officials depend for their livelihoods on the stability of trade unions as institutions, they hold back the militancy of the rank-and-file and reach unfavourable compromises with management (see Darlington and Upchurch 2011 for a review).

This doubly negative view of trade union bureaucratisation as both inevitable and always detrimental, however, is not universally shared. Another school of thought, evident in much of the classical industrial relations literature (Webb and Webb 1920; Kerr et al 1960) takes a positive view of bureaucratisation as a hallmark of trade union maturity and a necessity for efficacy. As Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (1995: 834) put it:

> 'The underlying premise of the theory that monolithic, bureaucratic unions are superior in winning material benefits for their members is that rationality and efficiency are enhanced by bureaucracy. . . Nondemocratic or oligarchical rule is required for the effective defense of union members' interests because to cope with "bargaining pugilism," the union needs a centralized apparatus that parallels the structure of modern industry and enables it to countervail the concentration of corporate power'.

This position is elaborated by Voss and Sherman (2000: 309, 337-338, 342-4), for example, who find that contemporary trade union movement revitalisation depends on the 'bureaucratic power' of the national union (342-343 to shake local branches out of their complacency. Voss (2010: 377) concludes that 'paid union staff, strong leadership and central coordination have played a more consistent key role in union renewal' than rank-and-file union democracy.

While some scholars question whether rank-and-file democracy is ever truly sustainable in the long-term (see Darlington and Upchurch 2011: 78 for a review), others argue that though unions tend towards bureaucratisation, the development of strong rank-and-file structures from within can resist this tendency (Ibid: 90). This position is supported by a number of empirical studies of trade unionism in the United States (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 1995; Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 1996; Levi et al 2009). Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (1996: 3, 27) take perhaps the strongest position on this question, arguing that whether trade unions develop in democratic or bureaucratic directions is simply the result of contingent internal political struggles.

Bureaucratisation, therefore, is by no means inevitable, and can be staved off by 'insurgency and radicalism' (3).

In addition, studies by Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (1995), Levi et al (2009) and Levesque and Murray (2002) conclude that rank-and-file democracy is not only possible but increases the ability of trade unions to win major gains for their members. Levesque and Murray (2002) in fact conceptualize local-level participatory trade union democracy as a power resource and critical precondition for revitalisation. Levi et al (2009) demonstrate that heavy-handed intervention by national trade union bureaucracies – what the authors term 'The Voss and Sherman strategy' – is not the only way to bring about 'a renewed emphasis on organising and more militant confrontation of employers' (223). Instead, the ILWU, which represents dockworkers on the West Coast of the United States, 'possesses a strong and long-standing rank-and-file democracy and a demonstrated capacity for winning good contracts' (204), as well as a commitment to organising (223).

Implications for Transnational Unionism

Moving to the international scale, Stevis and Boswell (2007) and Pulignano (2007) highlight the far greater logistical difficulties trade unions face in carrying out effective campaigns of global scope and argue that a high degree of delegation by national unions to an international organising body and centralisation of command is therefore necessary. Hyman (2005) and Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick (2013) take a different view, however, arguing that some of the same problems emanating from bureaucratic forms of trade unionism at the national level are evident at the transnational level: a disconnect between full-time officials and rank-and-file workers, without whose 'understanding and commitment, there is little capacity to act collectively' (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2013: 12-13.)

Consequently, many scholars (Hyman 2013; Harvey and Turnbull 2015; Dufresne 2015) argue that building effective trade union internationalism in Europe requires breaking out of the 'elite embrace' of Brussels to form transnational organisations with a stronger base at the shop-floor level. Nevertheless, Hyman (2005: 150) calls for a mix of top-down and bottom-up approaches to global unionism, arguing that 'It is necessary to build on the resources, historical understanding and strategic capacity of 'bureaucratic' union organisation while also cultivating the initiative and flexibility of grassroots initiative'. Moody (1997), Waterman (2001) and Wills (1998), on the other hand, go further, arguing that trade union bureaucracy is neither necessary nor inevitable and calling for the development of international rank-and-file democracy.

Research Design

Case Selection

Dockworkers provide an ideal case for the study of trade union internationalism because of the inherently internationally-oriented character of their work and the long history of internationalism in the sector. Their successful campaign to defeat a European Directive on port work in the early 2000's is frequently cited as one of the most important examples of transnational European trade unionism (Turnbull 2006; Leiren and Parks 2014). Dockworkers are well-known for the strength of their trade unions and militancy (Turnbull 1992), grounded in their key position in the economy and the nature of the labour process (Bonacich and Wilson 2008; Kerr and Siegel 1954) — even if, in practice, their strength and militancy has varied across space and time (Turnbull and Sapsford 2001), particularly as they have encountered the rise of global neoliberalism (Turnbull and Wass, 1994). Dockworkers possess a high degree of 'workplace bargaining power' as a result of their ability to prevent the docking and unloading of

megaships, and by extension, the global circulation of commodities (Author). This provides them with an exceptional degree of leverage during industrial disputes which may be wielded in solidarity with fellow dockworkers in other countries. Dock work within Europe may therefore be understood as a 'best case scenario' for trade union internationalism: an internationally oriented sector in which workers possess a high degree of industrial power, within a region of the world in which trade unionism enjoys strong legal protections.

Dockworkers are also unusual within the world of global trade unionism in that they have available to them two competing international trade union organisations – the International Dockworkers Council (IDC) and the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) -- along with its European affiliate, the European Transport Workers Federation (ETF). The IDC and the ITF/ETF are characterized by marked differences in organisational form. The ITF/ETF exemplify the dominant model of mainstream global union organisations: a high degree of centralisation of command, with decisions taken by top officials of national affiliate unions aided by a bureaucratic structure staffed by professionals. The IDC, in contrast to the ITF/ETF, is organised along principles of horizontalism, voluntarism and rank-and-file democracy.

The IDC was founded in 2000 following a multi-year labour dispute at the Port of Liverpool in the 1990's (Saundry and Turnbull 1996). The Liverpool dockers had found themselves at odds with their national union, the T&GWU, which had initially refused to back them during the dispute and blocked support from their international organisation, the ITF. Dockworkers active in the Liverpool campaign had therefore seen the need for a more horizontally organised body that would redress the issues of bureaucratization that they believed lay at the heart of the failed Liverpool dispute (Author). Building on a long-standing tradition of ad-hoc rank-and-file internationalism in the sector, the IDC modelled itself organisationally on

the independent Spanish dockworkers union La Coordinadora (Waterman 1998), which has continued to play a central role in the IDC.

Organised along the principle of mutual aid, the IDC's European affiliates are drawn from a wide range of left political orientations, including social democrats, Christian democrats, Communists and independent, non-aligned leftists. The IDC is an entirely independent global union organisation; it is not affiliated to any other international trade union or political bodies. Nineteen years since its founding, the Barcelona-based IDC represents 100,000 dockworkers in 30 countries and has become a major force in international dockworker activism (http://www.idcdockworkers.org/en/). While a handful of trade unions in Europe have dual affiliations to the IDC and the ITF/ETF, and the organisations have worked together productively at times, they are often locked into a fierce competition for affiliates (Turnbull 2010). What advantages – if any – then, does the IDC's organisational model of rank-and-file democracy provide in the effective coordination of international trade union activities as compared with the ITF/ETF model of bureaucratic internationalism?

TABLE 1 HERE.

Methodology

An exceptional case – the International Dockworkers Council – is selected as the primary focus of the research on the basis of its unusual organisational form within the field of global trade unionism. Exceptional case selection is often used for exploratory research to consider explanations that have not been adequately considered in the past (Seawright and Gerring 2008) – in this case, the impact of organisational form on the efficacy of international trade unionism. The shadow comparison methodology – frequently used in comparative research in political science – is used to elucidate various aspects of the exceptional case through comparison to a

typical case of international trade union organisational form, that of the ITF/ETF (Gerring 2006). The ITF/ETF is a far larger organisation than the IDC, representing workers across the transportation sector, so a true apples-to-apples comparison is not possible at this level. Instead, rather than a fully fleshed out comparison, the shadow comparison focuses only on areas of overlap: that is, the ITF/ETF's work with dockers in Western and Mediterranean Europe. The ITF/ETF's work in other sectors and regions of Europe where the IDC is not active have therefore not been included in the study.

Research for this article was conducted between 2012 and 2016 in Spain, England, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Italy, Greece, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Cyprus. Forty-six semi-structured interviews with IDC and ETF activists and staff, along with participant observation at a dozen international meetings, form the core of the analysis. Participant observation, conducted with the permission of the IDC, enabled the researcher to build rapport with research participants and form working hypotheses which were then explored through interviews. Interview participants were selected through purposive sampling on the basis of their participation in international dockworker activism in Europe. Additional research participants who met the study criteria of participation in the IDC and/or ITF/ETF were selected through snowball sampling.

Research into the efficacy of global trade unionism has tended to focus on the outcomes of specific campaigns. The innovative feature of the research for this article, by contrast, is its focus on participants' perceptions of the efficacy of divergent organisational forms in general, providing novel insights into an understudied, though critical, dimension of trade union internationalism. Semi-structured interviews of 1-2 hours in length were generally conducted at activists' home ports. With the exception of the Maltese union, IDC working group members

from every European affiliate union at the time of research were interviewed. Interviews were conducted with core ITF/ETF activists from Germany, England, the Netherlands and Belgium, as well as with staff in Brussels and London. Table 2 provides details on the number of interviews conducted in each country and the international affiliations of the trade unions. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and themes were identified and coded manually by the researcher. The researcher utilised an iterative framework for data analysis in which interviews were first coded individually upon completion and then re-coded in stages as further interviews were conducted, allowing for a reconsideration of earlier codes and themes in light of later interview data.

TABLE 2 HERE

Appraisal of the IDC's Organisational Model

In contrast to the ITF/ETF, IDC participants are all dockworkers themselves, the majority of whom serve on local branch committees of their trade unions, rather than as top national officials, and are not compensated for their international work. Local unions, and even individual dockworkers, may affiliate directly to the IDC, a significant benefit for activists who find themselves at odds with their national organisations, as in the Liverpool dispute described above. There are no executive officers and only a single staff member. Instead, decisions are taken by consensus of the participants and must be ratified in assemblies of rank-and-file members at the ports before action is taken. Annual general assemblies open to all members set the overall direction of the organisation. The analysis in this research article focuses primarily on the IDC's European working group, formed in 2012 as a body that would meet more frequently than the annual assemblies, with participation from each affiliate, in order to respond rapidly to issues facing European dockworkers as a result of the economic crisis and austerity politics.

Advantages of the IDC Model: Agility, Militancy, Culture and Community

Working-group participants identified what they viewed as a number of key advantages of the IDC's organisational model – agility, militancy, culture and community – and argued that they derived from activists' embeddedness in local port workplaces and trade unions. As a Spanish IDC participant from Algeciras put it:

> 'A person that wants to defend the dockworkers and that doesn't go to work at the port can't defend the dockworkers because they don't know what happens. They can know a lot about laws, they can know a lot about negotiation, they can be the best guy in the world, but if they aren't in the port and can't go and see and smell the odor of the sea and experience heat and experience cold and work at night and get wet when it rains, they can't transmit or can't feel what it is that the *compañeros* demand. . .'

A Greek IDC participant concurred, arguing that the organisation's strength derives from 'the fact that we don't hire persons but we give our personal time. . . it means that you believe in this. . . And you love, somehow, this thing. You care about your colleagues in other ports.' The ITF, in contrast, according to a Danish IDC participant, is:

> 'a reverse funnel. . . If you want to create solidarity, it's the rank-and-file, it's the docker that needs to do it. . . We're not machines. We've got our own minds. We can think. And that's why . . . ITF has been really bad. . . it's a top-down organisation.'

The non-hierarchical, direct and collective approach of the working-group, coupled with the lack of a decision-making role for staff, were cited by participants as key differences between the organisations.

Working group activists noted the importance of their person-to-person ties, not mediated or constrained by a bureaucracy, in delivering powerful solidarity actions in a timely manner. An English IDC participant contrasted his experience with the IDC to his experience with the ITF:

> 'it's totally run by the bureaucracy. . . I spoke to a docker from [an ITF port]. I said, 'look, let's get your phone number, it'd be good to have a bit of a contact'. And he said, 'no, no, no, you can't have my phone number'. 'Why not?' He went, 'that's not the way we've got

> to do it. . . you need to go through your official to go to your national officer to go to the ITF who will then contact the national officer. . . who will contact my local officer who will speak to me'. So I said, 'but I might just want to chat. I might just want some information, what time's a ship leaving your port'. But he said, 'you know how it should go'. So at that point, I thought, this is a complete and utter waste of time. . . '

Instead, as a French IDC participant argued, 'with IDC, it's really simple. I have my phone, I have the numbers, I can . . . simply call him if I need information or I need to bring some solidarity. . .' A Spanish IDC activist concurred:

> 'For us, bureaucracy is a slowing down of all conflict. If we have a conflict tomorrow in Costa Rica, the next day we have people already prepared to look for alternatives, to carry out solidarity actions. . . With a higher degree of bureaucratisation, if tomorrow we have a conflict in Costa Rica, the conflict won't arrive at the central office until Monday and a decision won't be made until Friday, until the next week, . . . And we understand that we dockworkers enduring a conflict cannot wait three weeks . . . We have to make decisions at the base-level and make them with force and directly.'

A key ITF/ETF participant from Belgium, while emphasizing the ETF's greater ability to navigate institutions of European governance, in fact shared a similar perspective: 'IDC is much stronger than ETF in going directly to each other. . . ITF/ETF is slower. It's bigger. It works much easier. . . as an IDC member because they inform each other.'

Several IDC participants gave the example of a hastily-organized meeting in 2013 by the British union UNITE in support of the unionization campaign at the newly opened London Gateway Port. Though UNITE as a national union is an affiliate of the ETF, none of the national-level ETF reps from Europe attended the meeting, citing the short timeframe in which it was organized. Local-level port leaders in England affiliated to the IDC insisted that IDC reps be invited, and nearly twenty showed up with just a few days' notice, in addition to a local-level ITF/ETF activist from Antwerp with close ties to the IDC. IDC activists at the Port of Algeciras

in Spain quickly took action against the first ship to arrive from London Gateway, providing a major push to the employer to resolve the dispute (Author).

An English ITF/ETF activist reflected on the organisations' very different responses to the hastily organised meeting:

> 'they've [ITF/ETF] been a bit critical . . . for the short notice we gave in calling the meeting. . . But . . . the ship was coming in and we had to deal with it . . . on the spot. . . If you're an official, you're obviously very busy. And so your diary is planned weeks and months in advance. So if you give somebody a week's notice, it's difficult. Whereas, a rank-and-file member, it's a lot easier for them to get to a meeting called at short notice.'

The only ITF/ETF activist to attend, a Belgian dockworker from Antwerp, expressed surprise that the Dutch union FNV, which represents dockworkers at Europe's largest port in Rotterdam, had not been there:

> 'They were very busy . . . But for me, what they can do is like what [our union leadership] does with me. Somebody should be sent, another activist. At least to follow up the idea. But this is difficult for such a union. . . Those leaders, they want to keep everything for themselves. . . A leader cannot be everywhere.'

The ITF/ETF-affiliated Rotterdam dockworkers subsequently slowed down the first ship to arrive from Gateway for one hour by utilizing the ITF's global agreement on maritime labor to inspect the seafarers' working conditions. Yet, most shipping lines are well-equipped to work around short stoppages. Instead, an ITF/ETF activist from England argued that the 24-hour blockade by IDC dockworkers in Algeciras would have 'had a massive impact on the shipping line. I imagine they put a hell of a lot of pressure on DPWorld to get something agreed.'

Working group participants attributed the IDC's militancy to its organisational form. A Spanish IDC activist from Algeciras emphasised that 'The rank-and-file worker sees me in the port and can perfectly well ask me whatever appeals to them, tell me how they see it, and

moreover I'm able to feel if what we are doing is good, if what we are doing needs more reflection. . .' In additional to enabling them to make accurate assessments of where the rank-and-file stand on different issues, IDC activists argued that their embeddedness in local worksites allowed them to more easily engage in education and organising on international issues. A Spanish IDC activist from Barcelona reported:

> 'Before making decisions . . . we have all had the obligation to bring them to our ports . . . and debate them with our workers to arrive at a position. There is not a decision taken by the IDC that comes from the working group saying 'this is it, tomorrow there has to be a strike'. . . The workers see the decisions as our own. . . At the end, the decisions become their own and they believe in them. . .'

Consequently, activists argued that because actions were both decided upon and implemented by the rank-and-file at the local port level, the IDC was better positioned than the ITF/ETF to take aggressive positions on international issues.

Working Group members argued that the IDC's worker-centred culture and community facilitated trust, friendship and feelings of brotherhood, which they viewed as key factors in the organisation's success. An English IDC participant appreciated:

> 'the laughing, the joking, the mickey-taking—it's identical, you know, absolutely identical. . . there's that comradery, that's what it's built on, isn't it? . . . in the limited ITF stuff I've been involved with, you know, I meet colleagues, associates. In the IDC, I kind of meet my friends. I regard them as good friends now because I know they think like me, they act like me, muck about the same as me. And I feel really comfortable in meetings with them. I know I can speak freely and openly and discuss anything I like.'

This sense of closeness was fostered through frequent in-person meetings that moved among different port locations, providing participants with the opportunity to visit one another's work places and union offices and meet rank-and-file dockers across Europe. These person-to-person

ties were often maintained through social media. Meetings also involved a significant social component. As a result,

> 'Because we see each other periodically, we already know who we are, we have direct contacts, and at the end, we have a relationship that's, apart from the union, a human relationship. We already know who can and who can't, who has and who doesn't have, and that way, we can advance a lot.' (Interview, Spanish IDC participant, Algeciras)

Interview participants emphasised the significance of major pan-European dockworker mobilizations against the European Directive in 2006 in Strasbourg and in support of Portuguese dockworkers in 2012 in Lisbon in forming a common identity and sense of purpose. A Swedish IDC participant from Gothenburg reported of his members' participation in Strasbourg:

> 'they're tough guys, in their own opinion. But we're not used to the Southern European approach to protests. The Spanish or the French, they brought gas masks, and then the teargas comes. So our guys were quite shocked and they were very proud, and still are, like they're veterans from Strasbourg!'

A Danish IDC participant from Aarhus shared his impressions of the Portuguese demonstration: 'it was amazing to walk through the beautiful streets of Lisbon with so many dockers from all over Europe. . . it created a lot of network and [we] met a lot of people and started talking, got involved.'

This strong sense of community was also evident in slogans and visual culture. 'Never Walk Alone Again' – a slogan adopted from the Liverpool dispute in the 1990's – has been followed up more recently by 'Proud to Be a Docker' and 'Don't Fuck My Job'. These messages were visible on mass-produced t-shirts, posters, banners, stickers and social media. (At least one long-time activist had an IDC tattoo). Logos superimposed a dockers' hook or fist over a map of the world. The IDC has an official Facebook page, primarily for sharing press releases and

photos of actions from around the world, but key activists participated frequently in larger rank-and-file online fora as well. These included International Docker Force, Dockers Society and Dockers Hangaround, which collectively have several thousand followers globally and post a wide range of material, from serious news items on issues affecting dockers around the world to photos from work to humorous memes. Affiliate unions also maintained their own pages, as did key activists, who used the site frequently for information sharing, support and encouragement, and occasional debate.

IDC participants volunteered time and again in interviews how personally significant relationships formed with counterparts in other countries had been for them, and the role this had played in building the organisation's strength. ITF/ETF participants, by contrast, did not mention non-professional relationships in interviews. IDC participants contrasted the strong sense of community within the IDC to the ITF/ETF, highlighting the issue of trust. A Swedish IDC participant from Gothenburg explained:

> 'If I called a Spanish guy and said, 'can you do something for us?', and he called me and said, 'we can just slow down the ship', and you see on the computer that it's not even there, that would be devastating. But for [the ETF], that is normal. It's just something that you include in a press release, and everything is fine. The employers of course know this, so it has no effect anymore.'

Problems of trust within the ITF/ETF were evident from interviews with a number of ITF/ETF participants as well. A German ITF/ETF participant shared a perception voiced by both IDC and ITF/ETF participants with regard to the ITF/ETF affiliated Dutch union which represents workers at Europe's largest port in Rotterdam: 'they are weak. They bark like dogs but they cannot make industrial action.' A Belgian ITF/ETF participant shared the difficulties he had experienced getting his members to support the Dutch: 'my members say, those Dutch guys, in

Ports Packages I and II, we did five strikes of 24 hours. They did a small part. We sent more than fifty coaches to Strasbourg. And they sent two coaches.' Other participants from both the ITF/ETF and IDC faulted the Dutch union for its willingness to accept solidarity from others without reciprocating in meaningful ways. Nevertheless, a Swedish IDC participant noted that whereas in a bureaucratic organisation, it is the bureaucracy itself that holds the participants together, 'The thing is that trust is very important [in the IDC] . . . when something is going wrong because you lose trust in somebody, the hole is very deep.'

Disadvantages of the IDC Model: Personal Costs and Lack of Professional Expertise

IDC participants emphasised the high personal costs of participation and occasional difficulties of operating with a very low budget and no professional staff as key disadvantages of the IDC model. With the exception of a small number of single male participants and one mother with primary childcare responsibilities, nearly all of the working group participants were men who either had older children with fewer childcare needs and/or partners who took primary responsibility for care work in the home. Frequent travel to international meetings, in addition to their regular work on the docks and union responsibilities at home ports, placed significant burdens on family relationships:

> 'last week my wife said to me, 'why do me and the kids always come second?' And she's right. Because I find it extremely easy to say, 'but I can take the kids out tomorrow. . .This meeting's on this day at this time. I can't put it off'. And I've spent way, way too many years saying to my wife and kids, 'I'll do that with you tomorrow.'
> (Interview, IDC participant, Northern Europe)

An IDC participant from Southern Europe concurred:

> 'it takes a lot of time away from the family. . . it's necessary to dedicate many hours to this. . . it's necessary to travel. . . when I'm at home, I'm reading news about the sector . . . all I do is talk on the phone with people that call me from the sector, with my

comrades.'

Similar experiences were echoed in interviews with participants from a wide range of countries.

Due to the high cost of hiring translators, active participation tended to be somewhat limited to those conversant in English. Yet, an IDC participant from Greece noted that this is less of an issue than it might have been in the past since

> 'the people that work in the ports now. . . know. . . many more things than our colleagues twenty or thirty years back. . . they are more qualified, they know languages, they can use new technology, they can go through legal papers and create politics and develop strategies . . .'

Additionally, widely available internet access helped to ameliorate these problems. Email and Whatsapp, for example, cut down on the cost of communication and the availability of free translation sites online made this a particularly valuable way to communicate.

On the other hand, some participants noted that they would like to see both a greater financial investment in the organisation to support the costs of participation, as well as greater flexibility in hiring specialists to take on particular tasks. As an IDC participant from Greece put it, 'We are not exactly amateurs, but sometimes we need more professional help'. An IDC participant from Spain centrally involved in the health and safety committee agreed:

> 'In the end, we are dockworkers whose profession is to load and unload ships, and we play . . . at being experts in health and safety, in training, when there are people who really are experts in these subjects. . . I think that the structure of the ITF and ETF in this aspect is much more powerful. They directly have very qualified specialists thinking about these issues. . . The companies have people that work, that they pay to think eight hours a day how to fuck us. So they're always a step ahead. . . we dedicate a lot of time and effort to it, but we're never going to reach the same level as them just by willpower and effort. . .'

In a similar vein, an IDC participant from Lisbon noted the importance of media strategy: 'in the last weeks, if we wanted this [victory] in Portugal, we needed to have here a press journalist talking with everybody. So we need to . . . invest more in the structure [of the IDC].' The IDC's DIY approach was also evident in their efforts to build the organisation further on volunteer efforts alone: 'what we can do is actually see if someone has a vacation close by, ask them to go there, and say, here are a few email addresses, if you need help, please write, and they do' (Interview, Swedish IDC participant). A Spanish participant from Algeciras argued that, in consequence of the lack of funds and staff, the IDC function as 'firefighters. . . when there's a fire, we go and put it out'. In this respect, he argued that the IDC had far greater agility than the ITF/ETF, but a more difficult time implementing long-term projects.

Additionally, though IDC participants shared criticisms of the ITF/ETF's model, ITF/ETF participants and staff argued that the more professionalised ETF had a much greater ability to successfully navigate the institutions of European governance, which they emphasised had proven crucial on several campaigns. An ETF official based in Brussels put it quite simply: the IDC 'have not understood yet how Europe functions.' A German ITF/ETF participant, extolling the virtues of social partnership, argued that the IDC instead engages in 'class struggle': 'If you do the struggle in this way . . . You lose, because . . . the shipowners and the finance industry and also some states. . . have a high potential for lobbying and working together.' IDC participants, conversely, shared a diversity of views on the 'EU question', ranging from the view that the ETF did in fact have superior capacities, to the view that the IDC had greatly improved its capacity over time in Brussels, to the view that the importance of EU lobbying at the end of the day paled in comparison to the importance of grassroots mobilization and industrial action.

Remaining Challenges for Labour Internationalism in Europe:
National Legal and Political Differences

The IDC's organisational model provided a number of distinct advantages over the ITF/ETF model but could not in itself overcome difficulties emerging from the differing national legal and political contexts of affiliate unions. The most significant obstacles to effective internationalism were restrictions on industrial action at the national level. Swedish and Danish dockworkers from the IDC emphasised the difficulties they faced in effectively communicating their legal constraints — and the subsequent need for more flexible transnational tactics — to southern European comrades who faced a more legally permissive environment for industrial action. A Danish participant argued:

> 'one of the weaknesses in the working group has been that some have said . . . 'we all need to do the same thing'. . . 'let's just say that we agree on supporting Portugal. And what can you give?' . . . 'We can only do slowdowns.' 'Fine! So just slow down.' 'Denmark?' 'We boycott the ship'. . . We do what we can do. Why is it so important that we all do the same?'

While participants argued that communication and understanding of these differences had improved over time, they continued to pose challenges at a practical level.

In addition, differing socio-political contexts in affiliate union countries impeded successful cross-border collaborations in some cases. For example, though the left-wing CGIL dockers from the northern Port of Genoa were long-time affiliates of the IDC, they had virtually no participation in the organisation as a result of port reforms carried out in Italy in the 1990's which made many of the key issues facing European dockworkers redundant for them (interviews). Political contexts also played a significant role in blocking successful internationalism in cases where potential affiliates were unable to translate foreign political contexts to their members effectively. For example, a long-standing dispute at the Port of Piraeus

in Greece against port privatization failed to receive the same kind of robust international solidarity in the form of ship blockades in Spain that IDC dockworkers in England and Portugal received in recent years as a result of the difficulty of 'selling' the Greek anti-privatization issue within the Spanish context (Author).

Conclusion

Many scholars of global unionism (Bieler and Schulten 2008; Hyman 2013; Harvey and Turnbull 2015; Moody 1997; Waterman 2001; and Wills 1998) have argued that forms of labour internationalism putting the rank-and-file at the centre may substantially reduce problems of efficacy created by more bureaucratic forms of labour internationalism. While there has been substantial research into 'one-off' global solidarity campaigns organised in a non-bureaucratic fashion (for example, Cole 2018), this research article contributes to the literature by systematically examining the efficacy of an institutionalised form of rank-and-file internationalism through original empirical research into a novel global union organisation.

The findings suggest that contrary to the arguments of Stevis and Boswell (2007) and Pulignano (2007) on the need for centralisation of command in international trade union bodies, an international organisational model of rank-and-file democracy instead provides significant advantages, facilitating greater agility, militancy, a shared culture and sense of community. Nevertheless, participants noted the heavy burden placed on individual activists and their families and the difficulties arising from a lack of professional staff. In consequence, as one activist put it, the IDC is most effective as 'firefighters' during disputes and faces greater difficulty in carrying out long-term projects. Furthermore, despite positive organisational innovations, differing national political and legal contexts of the affiliate unions continue to pose

major challenges for effective coordination in Europe, as Pulignano et al. (2013), Dribbusch (2015) and Dufresne (2015) argue.

European dockworkers face particularly propitious industrial and political conditions for international trade union organising that raise questions of transferability of the findings. Trade unionists in less internationally-oriented sectors of the economy; in sectors with less industrial power; and in parts of the world in which trade unionism is poorly institutionalised no doubt face far greater challenges which innovative organisational form alone will certainly not resolve. In fact, research suggests that in countries like Colombia in which trade unionists struggle for basic recognition, the superior resources and bureaucratic capacities of the ITF may provide significant advantages as compared with the IDC (Author). Nevertheless, the finding that a poorly resourced but well-networked organisation (the IDC) was able to provide significant advantages to European trade union affiliates as compared with a far better resourced but more bureaucratically organised body (the ITF/ETF) suggests that, at the very least, the role of organisational form in international trade unionism merits further research. Though it may not be possible to implement such a model for every group of workers in every part of the world, trade union activists interested in building internationalism 'from below' would do well to note that the IDC's success depends on a flexible, responsive and participatory democratic structure that puts shop-floor trade unionists into direct contact with one another, fostering a culture of militant solidarity.

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Table 1: International Trade Union Organisational Models

	International Dockworkers Council	International Transport Workers Federation/ European Transport Workers Federation
Organisational Form	Rank-and-file democracy: governance by shop-floor activists with little mediation by the international organisation.	Bureaucracy: pyramidal structure of governance by international body, with direction from national trade union officials and professional staff.
Key Actors	Rank-and-file union activists.	Full-time officers of national unions; professional staff at the international level.
Primary Contentious Repertoire	Coordinated industrial action at the local port level in different countries.	Lobbying of EU policy makers; symbolic actions at the local and national level.

Table 2: Summary of Interviews

COUNTRY	PORTS	UNIONS/ INTERNATIONAL AFFILIATIONS	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS
BELGIUM	Antwerp	ACV-TRANSCOM (ETF and IDC); BTB (ETF)	2; 2
CYPRUS	Limassol	SEGDAMELIN – PEO (IDC)	2
DENMARK	Aarhus; Aalborg; Copenhagen	3F Dockers (ETF and individual branches in IDC)	5
ETF Headquarters	Brussels	ETF staff	2
FRANCE	Le Havre	CGT-Dockers (IDC)	2
GERMANY	Hamburg	ver.di (ETF)	1
GREECE	Piraeus	Piraeus Dockers Union (IDC); OMYLE (ETF and IDC)	1; 1
ITALY	Genoa	CGIL (IDC)	3
ITF Headquarters	London	ITF staff	2
NETHERLANDS	Rotterdam	FNV (ETF)	2
PORTUGAL	Lisbon	Sindicato dos Estivadores e da Actividade Logistica (IDC)	3
SPAIN	Barcelona; Valencia; Tenerife; Algeciras	La Coordinadora (IDC)	6
SWEDEN	Stockholm; Gothenburg; Helsingborg	Svenska Hamnarbetarforbundet (IDC)	6

UNITED KINGDOM	Tilbury; Felixstowe; Southampton; Thamesport; Liverpool	UNITE the Union (ETF and individual branches in IDC)	6