Varieties of Power in Transnational Labor Campaigns
Understanding Workers’ Structural, Institutional, and Coalitional Power in the Global Economy

MARISSA BROOKES
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Political Science
Northwestern University

Abstract: Workers are increasingly cooperating across national borders in campaigns aimed at influencing employers to improve or maintain wages, working conditions, and labor rights. These transnational labor alliances all exercise power in their attempts to alter the behavior of employers. Nevertheless, the nature and exercise of workers’ power in transnational campaigns is under-theorized in the literature and only partially understood in practice. In order to understand why some transnational labor campaigns succeed and others do not, closer attention to the specific ways in which workers exercise power collectively on multiple scales is essential.

This paper therefore contributes to our comprehension of labor transnationalism in the present era of globalization by identifying and analyzing the three types of power workers exercise in transnational campaigns: structural power, institutional power, and coalitional power. These three power types are characterized by, respectively, the capacity to physically disrupt an employer’s operations beyond a single worksite, the capacity to hold an employer accountable through legal or regulatory institutions, and the capacity to expand the scope of conflict by mobilizing non-labor stakeholders to whom the employer must respond. By critically examining the source, dynamics, and effectiveness of workers’ power in transnational campaigns, this paper not only integrates insights from significant works in labor geography, comparative institutional analysis, and the sociological and industrial relations literature on union renewal but also clarifies, through numerous empirical examples, how workers’ embeddedness in global production networks, (sub)national institutional frameworks, and social relations conditions their capacities to exercise power over employers in the global economy.

Finally, I argue that workers’ exercise of structural, institutional, or coalitional power will effectively alter an employer’s behavior in certain contexts but not others. In particular, workers succeed in transnational labor campaigns only when they exercise a type of power that challenges the core material interests and long-term strategic aims of the employer in question. Hence, success is context-dependent. Exercising power and succeeding in a campaign are not the same thing. Moreover, actually exercising any of these three power types in a transnational campaign requires workers to coordinate not only within their own organizations (intra-union coordination) but also across national borders (inter-union coordination). Solving this “double collective action problem” is a vital precondition for success. I thus conclude with the hypothesis that transnational labor campaigns must meet three necessary conditions – intra-union coordination, inter-union coordination, and a context-appropriate power strategy – in order to succeed.

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Comments are welcome: mbrookes@northwestern.edu
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Introduction

“I do not know of many examples where true progress for the labour movement has come without some kind of fight. I do not know of many situations where we have moved companies without forcing them to do something they essentially did not want to do.”

– Ron Oswald, General Secretary, International Union of Food Workers

No single snapshot could capture the extensive range of tactics workers utilize in transnational labor campaigns. Action could come in the form of dock workers refusing to unload cargo at ports around the world, auto workers striking at key factories in different countries to halt whole production processes, or hotel workers urging a global boycott of a particular hotel chain. It might mean internationally coordinated protests outside clothing stores in developed countries on behalf of garment workers in developing countries, miners’ unions from different continents pressing corporate shareholders to vote for a resolution on core labor standards, or food service workers from different nations combining efforts to report labor rights abuses to a supranational regulatory agency. Strikes, pickets, go-slow, protests, rallies, boycotts, shareholder activism, legal appeals, e-mail blitzes, and formal and informal political pressure are just some of the tactics workers use in transnational campaigns. Yet despite such diversity, a common thread ties all tactics together: Each is an attempt to improve the position of the workers involved by altering the behavior of an employer, the state, or other relevant actors. Put simply, all transnational labor alliances attempt in some way to exercise power.

The concept of power is essential to any analysis of social conflict, yet despite its pertinence to the study of transnational labor alliances, power has generally been ignored or only indirectly addressed in the literature on this subject. Closer attention to the myriad ways in which workers, employers, and other actors exercise power throughout the course of a transnational campaign is essential for tracing out the specific processes that link strategies to outcomes. This paper thus examines the varieties of power in transnational labor alliances and develops a theory of how organized labor exercises power over employers on the international scale. It also explains why the exercise of certain types of power is effective in some contexts but not others.

Three key areas of study – labor geography, comparative institutional analysis, and the sociological and industrial relations literature on union revitalization – have been at the forefront of theoretical development on the dynamics of power between workers and employers in transnational campaigns. Key works on power and conflict from political sociology and American politics also shed light on the subject. Separately, these literatures have yet to provide a coherent theoretical framework through which to approach the larger question of why some transnational labor alliances succeed. Combining their insights, however, offers a promising route to the establishment of such a framework.

Below I argue that transnational labor alliances variously draw on three main types of power to influence the behavior of multinational employers: structural power, institutional power, and coalitional power. Actually activating any of these power types, however, requires members of a transnational labor alliance to coordinate not only within their own internal structures (intra-union coordination) but also across national borders (inter-union coordination). Moreover, I argue that each power type is only effective in certain contexts. When workers exercise a type of power that does not threaten the target employer’s core interests, it will not be

effective in compelling the employer to change its behavior. Put simply, exercising power and succeeding in a campaign are not the same thing. I thus argue that three factors – intra-union coordination, inter-union coordination, and a context-appropriate power strategy – are necessary for a transnational labor alliance to attain any level of success.

This paper proceeds first by defining power in general. I then develop and critically assess the concepts of associational power, structural power, institutional power, and coalitional power as they pertain to transnational labor alliances. Following that is an explanation of the main problems workers face in attaining both intra- and inter-union coordination. Finally, I highlight the conditions under which workers’ power is effective in transnational campaigns.

Defining Power

Following Knight (1992: 41), I define power generally as the ability of an actor A to make another actor B do something B otherwise would not do by affecting the alternatives available to B. This definition has four important advantages over competing definitions. First, power is conceptualized here not as that which produces an outcome but, rather, as a capacity that can remain latent indefinitely. This corrects for what is by now a well-known flaw in the classic pluralist view (Dahl 1961), which sees power as something evidenced only by who prevails in decision making. As Lukes (2005: 69) argues, “power is a potentiality, not an actuality – indeed a potentiality that may never be actualized.” For the purposes of analyzing transnational labor alliances, viewing power as a capacity prevents the researcher from ascribing power post-hoc to those who gained from the outcome of a campaign. This is not to say that outcomes cannot tell us anything about the capacities of the actors involved. Rather, the essential point is that power should be observable as a capacity at any point in time, even if it is not being exercised and even if actors’ capacities fluctuate throughout the time period under analysis.

Secondly, Knight, like Piven (2008) and Lukes (2005; 1974), conceives of power as relational; “to have power is to have power over another or others” (Lukes 2005: 73, emphasis in original). In contrast, Wright’s (2000) definition of power as “the capacity of individuals and organizations to realize class interests” (Wright 2000: 962) is somewhat problematic. Leaving aside the limited utility of focusing solely on class interests, Wright’s general definition of power is only relational to the extent that realizing one’s class interests requires directly affecting the behavior of those opposed to and capable of thwarting those interests. Yet if, as Wright implies, there are other ways of exercising power that do not involve influencing the behavior of other actors, it is not at all clear what such a solitary exercise of power would entail. Presumably, power in that sense is visible only through its supposed effects, leading again to the problem of identifying power only as something revealed by an outcome.

The concept of “power to” is similarly problematic. According to Lukes, there is a difference between “power over” and “power to,” the latter defined as “agents’ abilities to bring about significant effects, specifically by furthering their own interests and/or affecting the interests of others, whether positively or negatively” (Lukes 2005: 65, emphasis added). It is the “and/or” that makes this concept problematic. By stating that furthering one’s own interests is an act of power even if it does not involve affecting any other actor, Lukes is suggesting, like Wright, that exercising power can be a solitary, non-relational act. “Furthering interests” is conceived of as the capacity itself, i.e. the locus of power. This thus implies that any rational act – i.e. any “furthering of interests” – is an act of power. Yet furthering one’s own interests is also an outcome, one that presumably requires some as-yet unspecified antecedent capacity.
that “original” capacity is never explained, rendering the concept of “power to” vulnerable to abuse as convenient rhetorical cover for the vague assertion that causing effects requires some ability to cause effects. “Power to” is therefore at best an elusive concept, at worst a catch-all label for any effect-causing action for which the mechanisms are not known. As this is not the appropriate space for a lengthy discussion of the analytic utility of “power to,” I argue simply that the notion of “power over” will suffice for the purposes of the present analysis.

A third analytic advantage of Knight’s definition of power, which distinguishes it from both Lukes’ and Wright’s definitions, is that Knight allows the researcher to focus on actors’ behaviors and strategic options rather than their interests. This is in contrast to Lukes, who defines power by saying that “A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests” (Lukes 2005: 37). It is true that actors exercise power in attempt to serve their own interests. It is also true that the exercise of power implies an asymmetry in the capacities of the actors involved. Nonetheless, the difference between A compelling B to do something he otherwise would not do (Knight’s definition) and A compelling B to go against his own interests (Lukes’ definition) is that the former scenario allows for exercises of power that result in mutual benefit. It is therefore possible to have a relational view of power that takes into account the potential mutual benefit to both actors involved in a conflict. For example, a transnational labor alliance (A) could launch a campaign to improve occupational safety measures across a particular employer’s (B) operations, and the result of the successful campaign could ultimately improve the firm’s productivity and therefore increase profits for B, an outcome very much in B’s long-term interests (in contrast to what was perhaps B’s earlier strategy of short-term cost cutting.) Knight’s definition allows for the possibility that sometimes B acts a certain way not because such actions are necessarily in B’s objective interests but because B is short-sighted, lacking information, bound to institutionalized yet counterproductive patterns of behavior, or subject to other factors related to the complex process of organizational decision making.3

Finally, Knight’s definition of power is useful because it encompasses both direct and indirect forms of control. Most clearly it applies to situations involving a conscious attempt by A to affect the behavior of B in situations of overt conflict or decision-making – what is referred to as “the first face of power” (Bachrach and Baratz 1963; Lukes 1974, 2005; Gaventa 1980). Arguably, however, Knight’s definition is also compatible with analyses of “the second face of power,” a concept explored by Bachrach and Baratz (1963) and developed by Lukes (2005, 1974) and Gaventa (1980). The second face of power is characterized by A’s ability to keep certain issues, people, or ideas off of the political agenda; it is the power of A to influence others’ perceptions of what is relevant. As Knight puts it, “A can change B’s understanding of the alternatives” (Knight 1992: 42) or, in other words, A can exercise power over B indirectly by limiting the range of issues under consideration.4

3 Lukes’ definition of power also differs subtly from Piven’s definition of power “as the ability of an actor to sway the actions of another actor or actors, even against resistance” (Piven 2008: 3). The difference, of course, is that Lukes suggest the exercise of power is by definition contrary to B’s interests, while Piven at least theoretically allows for exercises of power that are either contrary or supportive of B’s interest. Nonetheless, Piven still suggests that the “zero-sum assumption” applies in most instances of social conflict (Piven 2008: 3).

4 Schattschneider makes a similar point in his eloquent commentary on agenda-setting: “Political conflict is not like an intercollegiate debate in which the opponents agree in advance on a definition of the issues. As a matter of fact, the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power; the antagonists can rarely agree on what the issues are because power is involved in the definition. He who determines what politics is about runs the country, because the definition of alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power” (Schattschneider 1960: 68, emphasis in original).
The second face of power comes into play frequently in the political arena, and it is especially pertinent to situations in which workers and employers are struggling to either suppress or bring to light potential issues of contention. I do not explore in depth the relationship between transnational labor alliances and the second face of power here; however, I will touch on the relevance of framing and agenda-setting in the section on coalitional power below.\(^5\) Rather, of primary interest are the forms of power most directly relevant to the first face – that is, those types of power workers exercise in attempt to directly influence employers in situations of overt conflict. Drawing from a wide range of scholarly writings, I have identified these as: structural power, institutional power, and coalitional power. A fourth type of power, associational power, will be discussed first in order to clarify how the capacity to act collectively is fundamental to workers’ abilities to exercise the other three forms.

**Associational Power**

“Organization is itself a mobilization of bias in preparation for action.”
- E. E. Schattschneider (1960: 30)

In analyzing the types of power workers have vis-à-vis employers, scholars commonly rely on Wright’s (2000) distinction between the power workers derive from their location in the economic system – which Wright calls structural power – and the power workers have by virtue of being organized into a collective entity such as a trade union, political party, or works council – which Wright calls associational power. Structural power is the capacity of workers to either withdraw from the labor market or disrupt the production process, damaging a firm’s operations not only at one site but potentially along its entire production network (Wright 2000: 962; Silver 2003: 13). Although structural power derives from workers’ economic position, the *substance* of this power type is in the *capacity* of the workers to directly withdraw from or disrupt production (or the provision of services) and thereby alter an employer’s strategic alternatives. More will be said about structural power in the next section.

As for associational power, although it is often bolstered by national legal frameworks and institutionalized provisions for union organizing and collective bargaining (Silver 2003: 14), it would be incorrect to conceive of laws and institutions themselves as associational power. Likewise, although associational power derives from the organization of workers into collectivities such as trade unions, those collectivities are not themselves the substance of associational power. Power, as defined above, is a *capacity* – specifically an actor’s capacity to alter the behavior of another actor. Unions, parties, and works councils are not capacities; they are actors or perhaps vehicles for action. What, then, is the substance of associational power?

Part of the problem with conceptualizing associational power is that nearly every reference to the concept involves a confusing semantic overlay in which the reader is told only

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\(^5\) The “third face of power,” Lukes’ major theoretical contribution, is characterized by A’s covert, perhaps unconscious ability to secure the willing compliance of others, who “are enlisted into wider patterns of normative control, often acting as their own ‘overseers’, while believing themselves, sometimes falsely, to be free of power and believing they are acting in their own interests when in fact, objectively, they are not” (Lukes 2005: 106). The extent to which Knight’s definition of power applies to the third face will not be explored here, as the debates surrounding the dynamics of ideological control and even the very existence of the third face are far too involved to engage in presently. While possibly relevant to the study of transnational labor and capital, the issue of the third face of power goes beyond the present research agenda and must be left for a future project.
where associational power comes from but never what it actually is. Wright’s own definition – “the various forms of power that result from the formation of collective organizations of workers” (Wright 2000: 962, emphasis added) – explains nothing about what associational power actually enables workers to do. The same is true for Selwyn’s definition, “a product of workers’ collective organization” (Selwyn 2011: 16, emphasis added), and Chun’s definition, “the process whereby a group of workers actively transform themselves from a state of invisibility and marginality to one of explicit recognition as a collective social group” (Chun 2005: 490, emphasis added). Wright and Selwyn identify the source, not the substance, of associational power, while Chun explains not what it is, only the process of attaining it.

The problem with associational power is not merely semantic. Scholars, union officials, and others frequently emphasize that simply belonging to a union or other labor organization does not necessarily empower workers (Hyman 2010), who might discover that the potential for collective action is precluded by a divided, apathetic, or unwilling membership or stifled under the weight of a leaden bureaucracy. As one former staff member explained about his union, “Management basically recruits the employees to sign up for the union as they’re being hired. People fill out the form that management gives them. That is the extent of it.”6 The same problems prevail to a certain extent on the international level with organizations such as the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the global union federations (GUFs), whose memberships face similar collective action problems.

The failure of scholars to conceptualize associational power as a capacity is thus a failure to analytically differentiate between an organization that simply exists and a true collective actor capable of influencing the behavior of other actors. Associational power must therefore be identified not simply as the product of collective organization but through specific qualities an organization possesses internally that facilitate the capacity for collective action. For a union, this capacity requires both a coordinated leadership and high membership participation (Hyman 2010: 23). To deconstruct the concept yet further, Lévesque and Murray’s (2010) understanding of “union capacity” is useful here.

Lévesque and Murray argue that union capacity (which I argue is synonymous with associational power) comprises both resources – “fixed or path-dependent assets that an actor can normally access and mobilize” (Lévesque and Murray 2010: 335) – and capabilities – “sets of aptitudes, competencies, abilities, social skills or know-how that can be developed, transmitted and learned” (336). Resources include “internal solidarity” (common identity, unity of purpose, and members’ participation in the life of the union), “network embeddedness” (linkages to other unions and other social groups), “narrative resources” (values, stories, and ideologies that facilitate mobilization), and “infrastructural resources” (material resources, human resources, and organizational practices) (336–340). Because unions “can have power resources (or attributes) but not be particularly skilled at using them” (341), union capacity also depends on capabilities, which enable “union leaders and activists to develop, use and transform those resources as required by the circumstances they face” (341). Lévesque and Murray identify four types of capabilities: “intermediation” (the ability to mediate between contending interests, build consensus, and foster networks of social relationships), “framing” (the ability to autonomously define a proactive agenda for action), “articulation” (the conscious directing of the union’s actions across space and time), and “learning” (the ability to reflect on the past and apply lessons to act in the future) (341-344).

6 James Rees, former Education Officer, Union of Shop, Distributive, and Allied Workers (USDAW), personal interview, October 22, 2009, Manchester, UK
With above formulation in mind, I propose a conceptual clarification that is meant not as a challenge to Wright and others but, rather, an attempt to dispel the ambiguities inherent in present uses of the term. To that end, I define associational power as the capacity of workers to mobilize themselves to act collectively. That capacity, in turn, comes from the resources and capabilities internal to a labor organization, as formulated by Lévesque and Murray (2010). The substance of associational power is thus neither the organization itself nor the laws and regulations that make it possible for workers to organize in the first place. The substance of associational power is the capacity of workers to act through their organization.

From a “power over” perspective, it further follows that the “power” in associational power is not exercised by workers on outside actors but rather by workers (or their representatives) on other workers. That is, associational power is the ability of A (some workers, e.g. union officials, rank and file activists, labor party leaders) to get B (the other workers comprising the union or other organization) to do something B otherwise would not do (e.g. speak with one voice in contract negotiations, go on strike), perhaps not by limiting their alternatives but more likely by making use of resources (e.g. common identity, internal democracy, union dues) and capabilities (e.g. mediating contending interests, learning) in a way that solves collective action problems.7

The above adjustment to the standard definition of associational power clarifies, for example, the difference between the capacity of workers to disrupt the production process by withdrawing their labor (structural power) and the capacity of workers to come together and consciously decide to take such action (associational power). It also implies that associational power is a prerequisite for the exercise of other types of power, a topic that will be discussed in this paper’s section on intra-union coordination.

Structural Power

“The ability to take industrial action lies at the heart of trade unionism…. We should never forget that we are listened to not because we are right but because we are strong.”

- International Transport Federation, “Mobilising Solidarity”8

Structural power is the ability of workers to influence employers because of their location in the economic system (Wright 2000: 962; Silver 2003: 13). Following Wright, Silver divides structural power into two subtypes: Marketplace bargaining power is the capacity of workers to influence employers because of tight labor markets (low unemployment), scarce skills, or the ability to withdraw from the labor market and survive on non-wage sources of income (Silver 2003: 13). Though an important source of labor power in general, marketplace bargaining power rarely comes into play in transnational labor alliances, which often emerge because the workers involved lack alternative employment opportunities and decommodifying support systems in the first place.9 More relevant to labor transnationalism is Silver’s other subtype: workplace bargaining power, which “accrues to workers who are entangled in tightly

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7 Once more, I am not disputing the existence of “power to,” only arguing that it is too slippery a concept to be of analytic utility in this instance, whereas “power over” offers a clearer conception of what is meant by power overall.

8 quoted in Urata (2010: 60)

9 Globalization undermines marketplace bargaining power through “the world-scale reserve army of labour [and] the spread of commercial agriculture which undermines non-wage sources of income” (Webster et al. 2008: 13).
integrated production processes, where a localized work stoppage in a key node can cause disruptions on a much wider scale than the stoppage itself” (Silver 2003: 13).

Workplace bargaining power is, in a sense, labor power in its most direct form. It involves physical action (or sometimes inaction), such as preventing the delivery of parts to an assembly line that relies on just-in-time production or shutting down an entire transport system by striking at key transit stations. The important point is that workplace bargaining power is not just industrial action but industrial action that impacts an employer’s operations beyond the particular worksite where the action takes place (Selwyn 2007: 549). It is selective and tactical (Juravich 2007: 21). Not only might a relatively small number of strategic strikes “disrupt the output of an entire plant”; it could also “bring all downstream plants, and even an entire corporation, to a standstill” (Silver 2003: 15). In extreme cases the impact could ripple through an entire industry or national economy.

For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to workplace bargaining power simply as structural power even though the term technically encompasses both workplace and marketplace bargaining power. The reason for this is that structural power is the most well-known and widely used term to refer to workers’ capacities to disrupt economic processes. Hence, from here on the term “structural power” refers to workplace bargaining power unless otherwise noted.

On one hand, structural power is not new, historically speaking, nor is it possessed solely by transnational activists. The “bread and roses” strike by textile workers in Lawrence, MA, in 1912, for example, occurred at a company whose “structure meant that the company could be brought to its knees by the withdrawal of labor in a simple strike. . . . This was a local strategy, one often based in craft unionism or unions at the local level” (Juravich 2007: 20). Similarly, the United Auto Workers’ famous sit-down strike at the Fisher body plants in Flint, MI in 1936-37 was an exercise of structural power. “By targeting the Fisher plants, the UAW understood the vulnerabilities of GM and was able to take full advantage of them” (Juravich 2007: 21).

On the other hand, there is something new and distinctly transnational about workers’ use of structural power in recent years. According to Piven (2008), the modern globalized economy creates new interdependencies that can be exploited by organized labor and other economic actors. Employers depend, for example, on extended chains of outsourcing whose individual links are vulnerable to strike action, just-in-time (JIT) production that “removes the protective cushion of accumulated inventories,” and a complex electronic infrastructure likewise vulnerable to interference (Piven and Cloward 2000: 423). These vulnerabilities enable labor to create the “bullwhip effect” in global commodity chains, which refers to the way in which “a small disruption at one point in a supply chain becomes increasingly magnified further up or down the chain” (Selwyn 2007: 549).

The increasingly globalized nature of produce markets, for example, has enhanced the structural power of workers in exporter countries under pressure to meet their overseas customers’ high expectations of quality. Selwyn’s (2011; 2007) studies of fruit pickers in North East Brazil show how farms producing grapes for export must meet strict quality requirements and hence depend heavily on a labor force that is detail-oriented yet efficient in its work. “[T]he precision required to produce export quality grapes means that even the shortest delay can reduce fruit quality substantially and leave farms with below-export quality produce” (549). Hence, while fruit pickers perhaps have some structural power on farms producing grapes for domestic consumption or low-quality export, those working on high-quality export farms have much more potential to affect the competitiveness of their employer, if not their country, in those markets.
The geographical expansion of firms’ operations also creates new opportunities for the use of structural power by transnational labor alliances. The successful campaign targeting United Parcel Service (UPS) in 1997 is an early example of this. Through the ITF World Council of UPS, the Teamsters union in the United States reached out to other UPS employees around the world to take actions that would complement their national strike. UPS workers in Belgium commenced a wildcat strike, German and Dutch employees of Mercedes Benz and Philips convinced their respective employers to stop using UPS services, a motorcade of local workers in the Philippines shut down UPS operations in Manila, and the French union CGT threatened to prevent UPS deliveries going through Paris Orly Airport (Urata 2010: 61; Russo and Banks 1998). As a result of these transnational acts of structural power, UPS agreed to longer rest periods, improved occupational health and safety measures, renewed health insurance plans, and a new collective agreement with the Teamsters (Urata 2010: 64).

The structural vulnerabilities inherent in courier services, transport, manufacturing, and agricultural export are all somewhat intuitive. Perhaps less obvious, however, is the structural power possessed by those “invisible and seemingly powerless workers – whose labor is nonetheless essential to the economic success of the most powerful corporations” (Lerner 2007: 17). Workers who clean offices, maintain buildings, provide on-site security, and perform other services vital to the day-to-day operations of finance, insurance, and real estate firms have structural power not only because they can collectively refuse to perform those tasks that keep these businesses functioning, but also because coordinated campaigns have the potential to impact whole industries, not just a single company (Lerner 2007: 17).

Still, not all industries afford workers substantial structural power. Highly mobile industries such as customer service and clothing manufacturing enable employers to react to labor unrest by relocating call centers and garment factories to other countries with relative ease (Merck 2009: 601; Silver 2003: 41). This spatial fix (discussed below) also enables employers to quell potential industrial action through the threat of job losses. Even site-specific industries pose problems for structural power. For example, in mining, unions have found that strikes, demonstrations, and other “conventional industrial techniques don’t work anymore,” even if these occur simultaneously at multiple mines owned by the same company across different countries, because “major multinationals can afford to have big operations shut down at one time.”

Here the issue is not capital mobility but the fact that a work stoppage does not have the same effect as it would in, say, the transport sector or in manufacturing processes that rely on the single sourcing of parts.

Understanding the nature of particular industries is useful starting point for analyzing variation in workers’ (and employers’) structural power; however, structural power is not merely a matter of industries’ intrinsic characteristics. Rather, it is a product of economic actors’ interdependent relationships and their deliberate efforts to shape the way their relations unfold across space. To fully comprehend structural power, it is not enough to analyze an industry in isolation; one must situate the relevant actors and industries in spatial context. A grasp of geography – particularly the theoretical contributions of labor geographers, who analyze “workers as being involved in the creation, manipulation, and use of space” (Herod 2001: 18) – is therefore essential.

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10 Peter Colley, National Research Director, Construction, Forestry, Mining, and Energy Union (CFMEU), personal interview, March 25, 2010, Sydney, Australia
When labor geographers refer to “space,” they are referring not merely to the physical landscape but to “how social life is organised geographically” (Herod et al. 2007: 248). Space is the interlocking of social relations that have been “stretched out” across geographic distances (Massey 1984: 22; Ellem 2006: 370). All social relations are spatially embedded, and space is meaningful only in the context of social life. Therefore, “the spatial and the social cannot be separated from each other: the processes shaping unionism do literally ‘take place,’ and the meanings of, and power over, space change in mutually constitutive ways” (Ellem 2010: 363). As Herod explains,

Rather than view space as something which simply muddies the explanatory waters – and whose influence must be removed if ‘true’ economic or other principles at play are to be understood – it is important, I would contend, to conceptualise space as structured and structuring, as existing in a dialectical relationship with society in which social relations and spatial relations are mutually constitutive (Herod 2002: 14).

If space and society are mutually constitutive, then so too are space and power. This is perhaps most evident in light of workers’ and employers’ varying mobilities. Corporations’ abilities to ensure profitability and labor control by relocating production within a country or abroad is a major source of power for employers (Gill and Law 1989), which Harvey (1989, 1999) and Silver (2003) refer to as the “spatial fix.” As noted above, the actual or threatened geographic relocation of worksites not only inspires docility in workers fearful of job losses but also pits them against other workers in other places (Merck 2009: 603). In this way, the spatial strategies of capital shape the alternatives available to labor as well as labor’s interrelations across space. Capital mobility is thus a form of structural power.

Although capital has been portrayed as inherently more mobile than labor, while labor tends to be viewed as set in place, these generalizations are not always accurate (Ellem 2010: 353; Herod et al. 2007: 250). First, capital is not infinitely mobile. As Silver notes, the use of successive spatial fixes “only succeeds in rescheduling crises [of profitability and labor control] in time and space,” as capital’s new spatial fixes reproduce its previous problems (Silver 2003: 39). Yet even from the shorter term, capital’s mobility is limited because corporations need to stay in particular locations at least long enough to profit from them (Silver 2003: 108-109). Hence, “even the most footloose capital can never be entirely free of spatial constraints or considerations” because capital needs not only “sufficient geographical mobility” to seek new sites of investment but also “sufficient geographical fixity” to actually accumulate and profit (Herod et al. 2007: 253; see also Herod 2002: 7; Harvey 1999: 380; Smith 1990). Eventually, even the most mobile capital becomes bound by its own investments and sunk costs.

Secondly, capital’s mobility is not entirely self-determined. In his critique of Harvey’s (1987) portrayal of the spatial fix, Herod (2001) argues that workers also actively exercise power in space, as they too “seek to shape the landscape in ways they see as beneficial” (Herod et al. 2007: 254). Often, labor “tries to impose its own spatial fixes” (Ellem 2006: 373). For example, in the shipping industry, the introduction of containerization – which enabled cargo to be shipped directly to its final destination, then unloaded on site – allowed employers to relocate stevedoring jobs to inland warehouses hundreds of miles away from the waterfront (Herod 2002: 12). On the U.S. East Coast, however, this restructuring of work sparked “an intense struggle over the physical location of what work remained in the industry” by union workers who fought for the
loading and unloading of containers to be done back at the waterfront and eventually forced the inland warehouses to shut down (Herod 2002: 13). In this way, workers actively contested their employer’s power to shape the spatiality of economic relations, demonstrating that “it is the conflicts over whose spatial fix (capitalists’ or workers’) is actually set in the landscape that are at the heart of the dynamism of the geography of capitalism” (Herod 2001: 36).

A third factor constraining capital mobility is the fact that some industries really are immobile, i.e., immune to the spatial fix. Transportation is one obvious example, as it would be impractical to relocate roads, airports, and railroad tracks in response to labor unrest from truck drivers, pilots, and train conductors, given “the upstream and downstream ramifications for all other industries” (Silver 2003: 100), not to mention the enormous cost. Moreover, the prevalence of migrant labor in construction, domestic care, property services, and other industries drives home the fact that sometimes labor is more mobile than capital. As a result, employers who cannot relocate worksites have an interest in developing “placed-based labour control practices” (Jonas 1996: 325, cited in Ellem 2010: 353), which is no less an exercise of power than capital mobility is. Mining companies’ use of fly-in/fly-out labor to inhibit workforce solidarity is an example of place-based labor control (Ellem 2006: 376). These practices are an object of political conflict, however, and through such conflict both employers and workers exercise power in ways that shape their spatial relations.

The fact that capital and labor mobility are to a great extent socially constructed and politically contested indicates that power derives not just from the characteristics of an industry but, crucially, from key actors’ interdependent relationships, which both shape and are shaped by the spatiality of economic activity. Hence, from a geographer’s perspective, structural power becomes a more versatile concept. The researcher can now comprehend more clearly the use of structural power in transnational labor alliances by mapping the geography of transnational campaigns in terms of the “stretched-out” social relations that comprise space. This means identifying “the contradictions within spaces, within both global-local intersections and capital-labour relations” (Massey 1994: 138-9, quoted in Ellem 2006: 372).

To return to an earlier example, the ability of low-wage service sector workers to exercise structural power is as much due to the nature of the cleaning, property maintenance, and security services industries as it is a product of the geography of capitalism. One of the most important aspects of globalization is the rise of “global cities,” epicenters of commerce and finance “where corporations are concentrating, not dispersing” and which “cannot operate without the global workers, who literally feed, protect, and serve the richest and most powerful corporations and people in the world” (Lerner 2007: 21). Transnational labor alliances can take advantage of this fact, as well as the fact that the majority of these service sector jobs are site-specific and hence cannot be offshored, which means workers in different countries have more potential to develop cooperative ties because they are not competing with each other for jobs (Anderson et al. 2010: 387; Piven and Cloward 2000: 424). These cooperative ties are enhanced by the fact that the service sector itself is becoming increasingly globalized, whether through increased subcontracting by large multinational corporations or the growing number of migrant workers undertaking temporary jobs outside their home countries (Lindberg 2010: 209). “By using TNCs as key nodes in the cartography of international employment, unions can use the infrastructure and connections laid by corporations to forge networks of solidarity between workers across space” (Wills 2001: 183). Understanding “the interstices between the physical geography of particular spaces and the economic structures of particular industries” (Ellem 2006: 372) thus enables transnational labor alliances to exercise power in explicitly spatial ways.
Structural Power and the Concept of Scale

How workers mobilize power across space also depends crucially on their engagement with scale. The concept of scale refers to geographic and socially constructed notions of the local, national, regional, international, and global spaces of human interaction (Lier 2007: 823). Scales are not only “relatively coherent bounded areal units” but also “networks of interaction at various geographical resolutions” (Herod 2001: 45). Analytically, scale is the “geographical mechanism whereby spaces exhibiting similarity of conditions are delineated from those experiencing different conditions” (Herod et al. 2007: 257). Scales are not ontologically given (Swyngedouw 2007); rather, like space, scales are socially constructed and politically contested (Anderson 2009: 960; McGrath-Champ 2005: 328; Herod 2001: 38). The “regional” scale, for example, is constituted by political actors through trade arrangements and other forms of economic activity that give meaning and coherence to regions such as the European Union or the NAFTA countries (McGrath-Champ 2005: 329).

Instead of seeing scales as hierarchical like ladder rungs or nested like concentric circles, labor geographers have moved toward a networked view of scale (Cumbers et al. 2008: 375; Herod et al. 2007: 257-58; Ellem 2006: 374; Amin 2002: 386; Cox 1998). This view sees scales as “interconnected, interwoven, interdependent” (McGrath-Champ 2005: 329) networks that are “contingent upon particular historical and geographical constellations of social relationships” (Herod 2001: 43). The implication of this networked view of scale for employers’ and workers’ power – and for transnational labor alliances especially – is that power can be multiscalar in its exercise. “Jumping scales” – the process whereby actors strategically shift the locus of their engagement with other actors – therefore need not indicate the wholesale relocation of conflict to a different “level” or “stage” and can instead refer to the remapping of conflict to play out on multiple scales simultaneously (Lier 2007: 824; Cox 1998: 2; Herod 2001: 43).

This understanding of actors’ interactions as potentially multiscalar helps correct for an earlier assumption that capital’s “global” power can only be challenged when labor “upscales” its own power to the global level. Instead, workers “may act at a range of scales separate or jointly to combat the power of capital, be it global or otherwise. Power is not mobilized at one scale or another but at many – and in diverse ways” (Ellem 2006: 374). The UPS campaign cited above is an example of workers’ use of multiple scales in that it involved a national strike by the Teamsters, which was complemented by international industrial actions and other forms of protest, which in turn could be understood as local actions spatially linked by the economic network of a global company. Similarly, the Driving Up Standards campaign, which involved an alliance between American and British unions representing bus drivers, was multiscalar. “By expanding the scale of their resistance to transnational corporations, the unions involved [were able to] multiply the connections amongst countervailing forces and thus also the points of corporate vulnerability which [could] be targeted” (Anderson 2009: 959). A networked view of scale therefore gives us “a much greater sense that ‘local’ actions are simultaneously ‘global’ (and ‘regional’ and ‘national’)” (Herod et al. 2007: 260).

If labor geography’s main contribution has been to politicize the concepts of space and scale by demonstrating how “space is both a product of, and a medium of, power” (Herod 2002: 12), its main weakness has been in its portrayal of workers’ power – especially structural power – as almost entirely the product of socially constructed scales and spatial relations. That is, there has been insufficient attention to the other factors (besides’ workers’ location in the economic system and the socio-spatial nexus characterizing that location) that both facilitate and constrain
workers’ power. Understanding power thus requires a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between structure and agency than labor geographers have so far put forth (with some exceptions: see Sadler and Fagan 2004; Cumbers 2004). Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) have recently urged labor geographers to “re-embed” the agency of workers in the social relations that condition their potential,” arguing that “agency is relational and can only ever be understood as such by considering, in turn, labour’s positionality with respect to global production networks, the state and the public sector, the wider community and labour market intermediaries” (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011: 216, 214).

The call for a “constrained agency” (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011) approach to workers’ power might be new to labor geography, but it is far from a foreign concept in other subfields, including comparative politics and comparative political economy. A deeper investigation into the way in which other strands of scholarship negotiate the structure-agency nexus reveals not only constraints on agency but also other sources of power that stem not from workers’ and employers’ positions in the economic system but from the formal and informal rules that structure these actors’ preferences and rational expectations. I call this “institutional power.”

**Institutional Power**

“Unions need institutional protections and advantages on which to do good campaigning. It’s very hard to campaign vigorously if you have no institutional framework or rights.”

- Peter Colley, National Research Director, CFMEU Mining and Energy Division

Only so much about workers’ power can be understood by analyzing their location in the economic system and the relationship of particular occupations, worksites, or industries to global commodity chains and production processes. Equally important is institutional context – meaning the constellation of laws, regulations, procedures, practices, and other formal and informal rules that persist over time, structuring actors’ incentives, channeling their interests, and creating rational expectations of each other’s behavior. Institutions are of special significance to understanding power dynamics because they are themselves the product of past and ongoing power struggles (Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Thelen 1999; Hall 1986). For organized labor, national institutional context is particularly important since industrial relations laws, collective bargaining procedures, welfare states, court systems, and other national-level institutions significantly shape workers’ employment conditions, legal rights, political resources, and relationships with employers.

Differences among national institutional contexts can both hinder and help transnational labor alliances. On one hand, national institutional differences generate conflicting loyalties, priorities, and understandings among potential labor allies. On the other hand, workers’ embeddedness in different institutional settings can benefit transnational labor alliances when workers in one country are willing to draw on their more advantageous institutional position to support less privileged workers in another country – that is, when workers in the former country are willing and able to exercise their institutional power.

By **institutional power** I mean the capacity of workers to influence the behavior of an employer (or another actor) by invoking the formal or informal rules that structure their relationship and interactions. Institutional power could be as straightforward as taking an

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employer to court for the alleged violation of labor laws, or it could be as complicated as the (actual or implied) threat of a breakdown in the stable, cooperative relationship between a union and management on which the company relies for its productivity and overall competitiveness. Though institutional power derives most often from national or sub-national political and economic institutions, it is also potentially present in the formal and informal rules that structure actors’ interactions on the international level. For instance, regulations upheld by the European Union sometimes provide institutional protections for workers beyond those they possess nationally (Juravich 2007: 18). Moreover, even when legally non-binding, companies’ formal commitments to international codes of conduct signal to workers and other stakeholders a willingness on the part of that company to meet certain expectations; if these expectations are not met, then there are grounds for raising the matter with an international regulatory body or other third party with the capacity to pressure the company into compliance (Merck 2009: 609).

Vast disparities in workers’ access to institutional resources – such as procedures for resolving conflicts between unions and employers or even laws protecting freedom of association in the first place – are clearly evident between the advanced, industrialized democracies of North America, Western Europe, and Asia-Pacific and the majority of developing countries in Latin America, Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere. Yet even among the economically advanced countries, there is a noticeable divide between the relatively strong institutional power of workers in the coordinated market economies (CMEs) – those countries that are characterized by high firm coordination, patient capital, relatively centralized collective bargaining, and formal employee participation in corporate decision-making – and the relatively weak institutional power of workers in the liberal market economies (LMEs) – countries in which business strategies are premised on firms’ low coordination, minimal regulation, labor market flexibility, and cost-driven competition (Hall and Soskice 2001).

For example, while American workers have virtually no access to the decision making machinery of large corporations, German workers have rights to codetermination, including representation on companies’ supervisory boards and the right to information and consultation on matters of employee concern (Greven 2008: 6). In Germany, as in other CME countries, institutions promoting coordination and social partnership “are valued because they underpin and sustain the long-term and trustful relations between workers and employers that are so important for the success of manufacturing strategies based on flexibility and high-quality production” (Thelen 2010: 47). Seen one way, CMEs and LMEs simply encompass two distinct modes of organizing capitalism around two different sets of interrelated, complementary, and mutually reinforcing national political-economic institutions, which afford CME and LME countries distinct comparative advantages. Seen another way, however, the differences between CMEs and LMEs can mean a substantial difference in workers’ institutional power. These broad-brush national differences are all the more significant if it is indeed true that “despite the rhetoric of globalisation and the reality of multi-layered governance, the ‘national’ space remains the critical scale at which unions operate” (Cumbers 2004: 829).

In the decade since the publication of Hall and Soskice’s (2001) edited volume, the varieties of capitalism (VoC) approach has been subject to numerous corrections and criticisms. These include reassessments of the role of the state, additions and refinements to the two ideal types, questions about the framework’s applicability beyond the core manufacturing sector, deeper explorations into the mechanisms of institutional change, and continued debate over whether or not CME institutions are converging toward the neoliberal model (e.g. Becker 2009; Schmidt 2006; Pierson 2004; Howell 2003). One particular criticism is especially pertinent to the
analysis of workers’ institutional power: the contention that national institutions are far less of an important of a factor influencing the interests and strategies of employers and unions than proponents of the VoC approach claim. This is because VoC scholars tend to ignore or treat as exogenous the wider international economic context. As Lillie and Greer argue,

> With the decline of nation-level class compromises, national industrial relations institutions no longer perform the function comparative institutionalists ascribe to them: they do not channel capital and labor into particular patterns of behavior based on national comparative advantages. . . . As actors shift among national settings and draw on rules and resources from supranational contexts, new configurations of interest and balances of power emerge, in ways that nationally bounded institutional analysis finds difficult to predict and understand (Lillie and Greer 2007: 575-576).

> If national institutions no longer encourage employers to behave the way VoC scholars predict, then the impact on workers’ institutional power would be game-changing, especially in CME countries. This appears to be the case – at least in industries where transnational capital and labor markets have prompted CME employers to pursue neoliberal practices. Yet there is also evidence that CME institutions still encourage employers to engage in cooperative relations with organized labor in ways not evident in LMEs. Over 90% of International Framework Agreements (IFAs) have been signed within the past ten years by MNCs headquartered in the continental EU-15 countries or Norway and by request of the union in the company’s home country. For the most part, these IFA “negotiations have taken place as an extension of the continental European style of labor relations,” and even in those cases in which unions had to pressure management into negotiations, in general “both sides quickly adjusted to the task of developing an atmosphere of social dialogue and pursuing constructive and mutually acceptable solutions” (Fichter et al. 2011: 78). In contrast, IFAs signed by LME-based corporations are few, and most came only after bouts of intense conflict.

> There is also evidence that unions from LME countries request help from their CME counterparts precisely because they seek to leverage the latter’s stronger institutional power. For example, in 2003, the Swedish union Handels assisted the American union UNITE in a dispute with multinational retailer H&M by arranging meetings between UNITE officials and H&M’s CEO, Stefan Persson (Hyde and Ressaissi 2009). Handels officials’ strong and cooperative relationship with management lay in stark contrast to UNITE’s negative experience with H&M in the U.S. More recently, the Communications Workers of America (CWA), facing trouble in their attempt to unionize workers employed by Deutsche Telekom’s U.S. subsidiary T-Mobile, formed an alliance with the German union Ver.di. “Our role as Ver.di is to use our relationships and our contacts on every level in the company. . . to support CWA’s efforts here in the United States,” explained Ver.di official Ado Wilhelm on a visit to the U.S. “Ver.di will use its seats on Deutsche Telekom’s supervisory board to press German managers to accept union representation at T-Mobile USA and then coordinate any bargaining that follows” (Reuters 11/18/09).13

> Clearly, national institutional frameworks still afford economic actors certain advantages and capacities. The key question is not whether institutions still matter but, rather, in what ways

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12 http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/areas/industrialrelations/dictionary/definitions/internationalframeworkagreement.htm
13 “German Union to Represent T-Mobile USA Workers,” Reuters, November 18, 2009.
do national institutions continue to shape actors’ relationships and power dynamics, not despite but in light of employers’ and workers’ deepening engagement with other geographic scales, including the international scale? In other words, how do national institutional frameworks condition the possibilities for power in a multiscalar world? Integrating institutional analysis with theories of geographic scale not only resolves the tension between VoC approaches and those concerned with processes of internationalization but also deepens our understanding of how institutional power operates in the context of transnational labor alliances.

**Institutional Power, Constrained Agency, and Scale**

Undoubtedly, Lillie and Greer are correct in arguing that “comparative industrial relations should take seriously the connection between action at the national and transnational levels” (Lillie and Greer 2007: 551). Slightly puzzling, however, is their conclusion that “the focus of analytical emphasis needs to shift from norms and institutions to actors and strategies” (555) – as if institutional analysis were somehow devoid of agency. Although early works in the VoC tradition exhibited a functionalist view of institutional feedback, later writings emphasize that actors and strategies play a crucial role in both reinforcing and altering national institutional frameworks. Hence, the claim that the “self-reinforcing sets of national institutions emphasized by institutionalists have lost the coherence needed to self-reinforce” (Lillie and Greer 2007: 555) misses the crucial point made by comparative historical scholars that institutions are not at all self-reinforcing but rather, even in times of apparent stability, actively shored up or contested by actors who strategize, form coalitions, and exploit institutions’ inherent ambiguities in order to maintain, redirect, or otherwise alter them (Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Streeck and Thelen 2005). National institutions are constantly undergoing change – in part due to internal dynamics, in part due to international economic factors – and understanding these changes is in fact essential for understanding that institutions and agency are two sides of the same coin.

Integrating studies of national institutions and transnational processes is therefore not about “bringing agency back in” but about analyzing the extent to which national institutions still impact power relations even when actors are no longer nationally bound. In lieu of approaches that privilege either the nation-state or the international economy, a global production networks (GPNs) perspective can help illuminate the present nature of employers’ and workers’ strategies, power, and preferences. GPNs “can be thought of as the globally organized nexus of interconnected functions and operations of firms and non-firm institutions via which goods and services are produced and distributed” (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011: 221) As Rainnie, Herod, and McGrath-Champ argue, the GPN approach has an advantage over a narrower focus on global commodity chains (GCCs) since the former “restores the territoriality of institutional and regulatory contexts and the state as an actor,” enabling the researcher to consider how production networks “are constituted and reconstituted by the economic, social and political arrangements they inhabit” (Rainnie et al. 2011: 159). Thus, in the context of GPNs, workers’ power is as much about actors’ political and institutional ties as it is their economic location (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011: 222).

The GPN perspective fits well with Coe and Jordhus-Lier’s (2010) call for a “constrained agency” approach to space and scale. The fact that actors exercise power spatially by jumping or creating scales does not mean that national institutional differences no longer matter. Strategic uses of scale – such as a local company’s use of international labor markets – link different institutional contexts together through networks of actors whose abilities to accept and contest
each others’ scalar strategies both condition and are conditioned by the institutional settings of specific places. “Networks are the product of scaling practices, just as much as scale is produced in and through networks of connectivity; networks connect places, and the differences among these places matter” (Sadler and Fagan 2004: 41, emphasis added). Therefore, it is true that “industrial relations actors now operate in a trans- and supranational environment” (Lillie and Greer 2007: 552), but not all such actors have equal capacity to jump scale in attempt to eschew deep-rooted national institutional frameworks, nor do all actors have an interest in doing so in the first place. Even those who do strategically jump scale often find themselves bound by prior commitments, investments, and institutionalized practices that constrain, though perhaps do not completely obstruct, those courses of action. Thus, while transnational processes and actors’ scalar strategies create complications for institutional analysis, the multiscalar world is not a hopelessly unpredictable free-for-all. As Sadler and Fagan (2004) emphasize, “global processes are mediated politically by national states in ways that reflect particular local and national legacies and trajectories” (Sadler and Fagan 2004: 28).

The above-cited examples of the Swedish-American labor alliance at H&M and the German-American labor alliance at T-Mobile illustrate how both the enduring grip of national institutional frameworks and the global economic networks created by these firms’ overseas ventures enabled the unions involved to exercise institutional power in transnational campaigns. Employers in both cases found that operating outside their home country did not necessarily free them from the obligations of social partnership on which their original home-country strategies were based. Conversely, the two American unions found they were not bound by their own national institutional setting and thus sought out a more favorable negotiating environment. This dialectical relationship between institutional anchoring and scalar mobility – that is, between structure and agency – is what makes institutional power effective in transnational campaigns.

While national institutional frameworks are certainly a key source of institutional power, nationally specific differences in laws, political structures, and other institutions that do not necessarily map onto the VoC framework also afford actors varying levels of institutional power, as do sub-national (local) institutions and institutions at the supranational level. These different institutional layers give labor-capital conflict a multiscalar character. An example from the hotel industry illustrates this point. In the late 1990s, the North American union HERE, having faced years of difficulty attempting to unionize workers at the Novotel hotel in New York City, finally won a NLRB election – only to have Novotel’s managers dispute the election results through continual court appeals (Wills 2002: 692). Through the IUF, HERE learned that Novotel’s parent company, the Paris-based multinational corporation Accor, maintains a positive and cooperative relationship not only with unions in France but also with the Accor European Works Council, which allows Accor employees throughout Europe to influence corporate decision-making in a manner similar to German codetermination. Two HERE officials then flew to Geneva to attend a meeting of the European Works Council, during which they expressed their concern about Novotel managers’ union-avoidance tactics to their European colleagues, who in turn pressed Accor’s corporate leadership to address the situation. Accor heads quickly appointed three new managers to lead their North American operations, who openly agreed to recognize and negotiate with HERE not only at Novotel but also in the soon-to-be built Sofitel luxury hotel in New York City (Wills 2002: 695-696).

The Accor case shows how employers and workers simultaneously use institutional power at different scales. Novotel management thwarted HERE’s local efforts in New York by contesting the union election nationally, appealing the case all the way to the Circuit Court in
Washington, D.C. (Wills 2002: 692). HERE responded by further jumping scale, leveraging its European allies’ institutional power to convince Accor’s head management to support the union in New York. Following Sadler and Fagan, what is of interest is not which single scale predominates but the way in which scales are contested as actors negotiate space and “the connections between national institutions and processes that operate at other scales” (Sadler and Fagan 2004: 28, emphasis in original).

By now the parallels between structural power and institutional power should be evident. Both types of power take advantage of interdependencies constituted through space and at various scales. Both are also enhanced by the abilities of employers and workers to jump scales and operate on a multiscalar basis. This is especially true in the context of transnational labor alliances, which form when workers in one country seek to leverage the capacities of workers in another country. The key difference between structural power and institutional power is the source: the former depends on one’s location with respect to the production of goods or delivery of services, while the latter hinges on one’s embeddedness in the formal and informal rules, laws, regulations, and practices that constitute political and economic institutions.

As much ground as these two power types cover, there are limits to theorizing workers’ and employers’ capacities as only the product of economic systems and institutional settings. Power also derives from the wider network of societal relationships through which workers and employers have ties to (or are themselves) local community members, consumers, voters, journalists, shareholders, investors, activists, political leaders, and various other actors with the potential to influence the dynamics of labor-capital conflict. “The politics of production are therefore neither confined to the workplace nor to the industrial relations of the nation-state” (Lier 2007: 816). The capacity to form coalitions with actors who exist outside the workplace relationship and do not necessarily identify primarily as workers or employers can be a source of leverage, which I call coalitional power.

Coalitional Power

“Everything changes once a conflict gets into the political arena – who is involved, what the conflict is about, the resources available, etc. It is extremely difficult to predict the outcome of a fight by watching its beginning because we do not even know who else is going to get into the conflict.”

- E. E. Schattschneider (1960: 37)

Globally, the majority of workers have neither the structural capacity to disrupt economic processes nor the institutional capacity to invoke protective laws and rules. Yet almost all workers have access to networks of social relations by virtue of the multifaceted aspects of their lives. Workers are not just workers. They are citizens, consumers, and family members (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011: 218), who interact with neighbors, community leaders, religious associations, non-profit organizations, students, pensioners, and countless other different actors and interest groups. To gain leverage in conflicts with employers, workers can draw on their various social connections, especially if the conflict at hand encompasses issues of broad societal interest. The capacity of workers to expand the scope of conflict by bringing in other, non-labor actors who can alter the behavior of an employer through their use of financial, communicative, or political resources is what I call coalitional power.

Unlike structural power, which entails direct disruption of a company’s operations, or institutional power, which draws on the institutional frameworks that define and regulate
workplace relations, coalitional power involves leveraging the capacities of actors outside the employment relationship. It would be misleading, however, to characterize the world of work as wholly separate from the places in which workers live their lives. Work, place, and society are inextricably linked. This is in part because “the labour market – the sphere of production – is dependent upon the ways in which workers consume and biologically reproduce, and how they learn, socialise and are being cared for – the sphere of reproduction” (Lier 2007: 817-818). It follows that “[w]orkplace struggles cannot be dissociated from the communities and environments in which they are embedded” (Goodman 2004: 106).

Understanding the concept of place is essential for understanding the dynamics of coalitional power at the local level. Citing Agnew (1987), Herod, Rainnie, and McGrath-Champ conceptualize place as a combination of physical location, everyday interaction, and locus of identity formation (Herod et al. 2007: 254-5). Place denotes both a specific territory and the dense networks of social relations within that territory (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011: 219). People give places meaning through their personal attachments, feelings, and ties (Hudson 2001: 263; Herod et al. 2007: 249; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011: 219). Hence, the localities in which people interact – cities, towns, villages, and neighborhoods – inevitably shape people’s perspectives, loyalties, and priorities, and workers can draw on the specificities of place to impose their own spatial fixes on capital (Selwyn 2011: 15; Herod 2007; Ellem 2005).

The capacity of workers to draw strength from their local social ties and form coalitions on the basis of “place consciousness” (Ellem 2010: 351) has been most thoroughly dissected in the literature on community unionism (e.g. Tattersall 2010, 2008, 2005; Nissen 2004; Wills and Simms 2004; Ellem 2003; Wills 2001; Banks 1991). Community unionism occurs when unions and non-labor actors join forces at the local level in order to strive for mutually beneficial goals. Ideally, union-community coalitions not only address issues of shared concern such as the provision of local services or a living wage but also help renew unions by strengthening their connections with women, minorities, immigrants, and other traditionally marginalized social actors, as unions organize new members on the basis of shared identities and interests (Wills 2001: 466; Tattersall 2010: 22; Anderson et al. 2010: 384). Rather than an add-on to existing union practices, community unionism can be a means of renewing and revitalizing unions (Tattersall 2010: 3; Ellem 2005: 354).

Perhaps the best known example of a union-community coalition is SEIU’s Justice for Janiters campaign, which used public demonstrations and civil disobedience to win rights for building cleaners in major cities in the U.S. (Piven and Cloward 2000: 425). The campaign’s U.K. version, dubbed Justice for Cleaners, is also a good example of how having a strong sense of place facilitates local coalition building. The Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) built a broad base of supporters throughout London by appealing to local communities’ sense of social justice and “tapping into the multi-faceted experiences and identities of the workers themselves” (Wills 2008: 320). The union drew prominent support from The East London Communities Organization (TELCO), a chapter of the grassroots organization London Citizens comprising several local faith-based, labor, and community groups (Wills 2008: 312; Ince 2007). Christian and Muslim community leaders from TELCO spoke at Justice for Cleaners rallies and demonstrations. The coalition also confronted discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and immigration status by campaigning for migrants’ rights. Cleaners thus “looked to the union for support in . . . a wider set of grievances that operate beyond the scale of the workplace, including labour market opportunities for immigrants, racism and a lack of respect” (Wills 2008: 316).
According to Tattersall (2010), coalitions are most effective when they are “deep” – that is, long-term, reciprocal, and positive-sum. Deep coalitions that promote genuinely mutual interests and share in the responsibilities for planning and executing strategies are more likely to gain traction than ad hoc, instrumental coalitions in which unions simply seek a one-way transfer of resources (Tattersall 2010: 161). Deep coalitions, in turn, tend to depend on a frequency of face-to-face interaction and intimacy of mutual understanding that only the common context of place can provide. A certain rootedness in place thus enables workers to develop the relationships of trust, reciprocity, and common identity that make deep coalitions possible.

Since union-community coalitions depend so crucially on mobilizing actors “in place,” it seems counterintuitive that coalitional power can be exercised in transnational campaigns. It is important to clarify, however, that while community unionism is highly relevant to the concept of coalitional power, these two concepts are distinct. Community unionism is a long-term strategy for building power by better integrating trade unions into their local communities (Yates 2003: 232), while coalitional power describes the capacity of workers to cooperate with other actors in general – a capacity that includes but is not limited to workers’ local, place-based ties.

Hence, in almost all coalition-based campaigns, “there is a question to be asked about the geographical scope of community. In some instances, the community is inherently local and the issues with which the union is engaged are also so defined. In other cases, community is invoked in a much more expansive sense” (Sadler 2004: 45). An expansive notion of community is partly a product of the growing extent of human interaction at all geographic scales. Such increased mobility makes “modern man . . . a member of more and larger communities than any of his predecessors. . . . The political processes of large-scale society are unlike those of the old, and the balance of forces is inevitably different” (Schattschneider 1960: 111). Furthermore, communities need not be based on direct, personal acquaintance; they can be “imagined” (Anderson 1983) or socially constructed, as in a community of citizens of a nation-state, an academic community, a community of business leaders, or a community of political activists.

Not all coalitions need to be deep to be effective in the context of a transnational campaign, depending on the campaign’s objectives. Unions’ coalitions with consumers or shareholders, for example, could be relatively short-lived yet still be useful for influencing the behavior of a company. That is not to say, however, that there is no role for deep coalitions in transnational labor alliances. Rather, because the multiscalar nature of transnational campaigns enables workers to exercise power at a range of different scales simultaneously, deep, in-place coalitions of workers and local community members can anchor and enhance campaign actions on other scales. Indeed, “the coalition-building activities of organised labour, and the growth of labour internationalism, are potentially mutually reinforcing” (Sadler 2004: 44).

**Coalitional Power and the Concept of Scope**

Despite its broad applicability, coalitional power overall rests on a single underlying logic captured in what E. E. Schattschneider (1960) referred to as “expanding the scope of conflict.” This theory of scope is as relevant to the dynamics of labor transnationalism today as it is to the dynamics of American politics that he was writing about half a century ago. According to Schattschneider, the outcome of a conflict between A and B depends heavily on the extent to which other actors get involved. Increasing the number of actors involved in a conflict tends to disproportionately benefit one side in over the other (Schattschneider 1960: 3). It follows that if B is weaker than A, B will have an incentive to bring into the conflict additional actors whose
support for B will tip the balance of power in B’s favor. “Private conflicts are taken into the
public arena precisely because someone wants to make certain that the power ratio among the
private interests most immediately involved shall not prevail” (Schattschneider 1960: 38).

Yet just as B attempts to expand the scope of conflict, A will naturally attempt to restrict
it in order to maintain the upper hand.

Since the contestants in private conflicts are apt to be unequal in strength, it follows that
the most powerful special interests want private settlements because they are able to
dictate the outcome as long as the conflict remains private. If A is a hundred times as
strong as B he does not welcome the intervention of a third party because he expects to
impose his own terms on B; he wants to isolate B. (Schattschneider 1960: 40, emphasis in
original)

Such struggles over the scope of conflict inevitably have a spatial dimension. While
expanding the scope of conflict may mean mobilizing support within a particular place, as with
union-community coalitions, it could also be a matter of mobilizing other actors across space and
at various scales, as when transnational labor alliances form coalitions with transnational
environmental activists or global human rights NGOs. Restricting the scope of conflict is also a
spatial strategy. For example, an employer might attempt to keep a labor conflict local by
denying foreign investigative journalists access to local worksites. Hence, as Herod, Rainnie, and
McGrath-Champ argue, power depends on both “the capacity to move beyond the local spaces . . .
by building linkages to actors located elsewhere” and “the ability to confine one’s opponents to
operating at a particular spatial scale by preventing them from building such scalar links” (Herod
et al. 2007: 257). Put another way, controlling the scale of conflict can be an effective strategy
for limiting the exercise of coalitional power in so far as doing so restricts the scope of conflict.

Workers’ transnational coalitions with consumers illustrate the complementary nature of
expanding scope and jumping scale. Anti-sweatshop campaigns are one example. Because
traditional industrial action in garment factories (mainly in developing countries) fuels
whipsawing and capital flight (Silver 2003), workers have turned to campaigns that instead
encourage consumers (mainly in developed countries) to boycott sweatshop-produced clothing
and put pressure on retailers to source their garments from factories with ethical labor practices
(Johns and Vural 2000: 1202). Campaigns against sweatshop conditions in garment factories
have shifted the scale of conflict from the local factory floor (the “sphere of production”) to
various overseas clothing retail stores and other “spaces of consumption” (Sadler 2004: 38;
Johns and Vural 2000: 1196), thereby simultaneously expanding the scope of conflict by
enlisting the support of countless potential purchasers of these retail stores’ products (Merck
2009: 606). Such campaigns involve the exercise of coalitional power to the extent that workers
and their unions are able to draw on the support of other actors (consumers14) who can threaten
retailers’ profits and public images and are thus better positioned than the workers themselves to
alter the behavior of the employers in question (the garment manufacturers that supply retailers).

14 Depending on the campaign, workers’ coalitions with consumers could mean the informal support of a relatively
undefined mass of consumers in general or a more formal coalition, such as the Stop Sweatshops Campaign, which
is co-chaired by the American union UNITE and the National Consumers League and comprises over 60 additional
organizations concerned with improving labor conditions in garment factories, including “women’s groups, ethnic
organizations, . . . veterans groups, students’ groups, environmental organizations. . . civil rights organizations, and
religious groups” (Johns and Vural 2000: 1199).
Employers also consciously attempt to control the scope of conflict, often through efforts to limit the extent of outside support solicited by workers. For instance, the unions SEIU and TGWU attempted to involve consumers – more specifically, public transit passengers – in their transnational campaign targeting bus company FirstGroup by handing out thousands of postcards and leaflets to transit customers in the U.K. In response “FirstGroup devoted considerable resources to prevent the campaign from spreading their message” to a potentially sympathetic public by paying dozens of people to take the leaflets away from transit customers and otherwise physically remove the unions’ materials from transit stations (Anderson 2009: 964). FirstGroup thus employed a rather direct method of restricting the scope of conflict.

Of course, controlling scope often requires tactics more sophisticated than distributing and rounding up leaflets. Framing issues to resonate with key audiences is crucial for convincing outside actors to support one’s side. Those attempting to expand the scope of conflict thus benefit by evoking “[u]niversal ideas in the culture, [such as] ideas concerning equality, consistency, equal protection under the laws, justice, liberty, freedom of movement, freedom of speech and association and civil rights” (Schattschneider 1960: 7). Tattersall notes that unions in particular can combine their vested interests with what Flanders (1970) refers to as a “sword of justice” in order to “connect workplace concerns with a broad agenda that in turn can transform the broader political climate” (Tattersall 2010: 3).

Issue framing is especially important in consumer-based campaigns. In the Stop Sweatshops Campaign, successful coalition building hinged on the workers’ strategy of intentionally downplaying the issue of labor rights and instead emphasizing sweatshops as a moral concern for middle class consumers. The campaign invoked “the notion of broad, ideologically benign community of consumers, not as a move to abandon the goal of workers’ empowerment at the point of production, but as a political strategy to make the struggle for justice more palatable to the public…” (Johns and Vural 2000: 1205). In this way, workers effectively wielded a “sword of justice” that integrated their own interests with the moral values of a broader public.

Framing is also a key component of unions’ shareholder campaigns15, such as the one coordinated by the CFMEU, AFL-CIO, and TUC16 in 2000 to convince shareholders of multinational mining corporation Rio Tinto to vote for resolutions on labor rights and corporate governance. Together with environmental and human rights organizations, the unions released a report highlighting Rio Tinto’s poor record on labor rights, human rights, and the environment, “defining these as threats to the company’s financial viability, rather than simply threats to its moral credibility” (Goodman 2004: 115). Although the campaign failed to win a majority of shareholders’ votes, sizeable minorities voted in favor of both resolutions, thanks in part to effective framing – which helped “prevent the company from characterising [the unions’] intervention as that of a self-interested labour confederation” (Goodman 2004: 114). Similarly, as part of their Driving Up Standards campaign, SEIU and TGWU submitted a resolution at FirstGroup’s annual general meeting calling for a company-wide human rights policy, arguing

15 “Publicly listed companies are susceptible to campaigns focused on capital markets by unions because of union influence over certain major institutional investors through workers’ pensions” (Lambert and Webster 2003: 233). Moreover, because union members often own shares in companies, they can attend corporate shareholders’ meetings, propose resolutions, and attempt to convince other shareholders to vote for those resolutions.

16 the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (Australia); the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (United States); and the Trades Union Congress (U.K.)
that such a policy would serve “to minimise threats to shareholder value” (Anderson 2009: 965). FirstGroup countered with their own framing tactics, however, by releasing a highly positive report about their own safety and labor rights record and requesting that shareholders vote the resolution down (Anderson 2009: 965).

The use of framing to restrict the scope of conflict and, consequently, obstruct coalition formation is evident in employers’ investments in sophisticated public relations tactics that portray corporate decisions in a positive light and weaken public sympathies for workers involved in a dispute, thereby restricting labor conflict to the workplace, local courts, arbitration bodies, or other venues generally insulated from public opinion, consumer activism, and other forms of social pressure. Yet it is also possible to restrict the scope of conflict not by framing existing issues but by preventing issues from appearing on the public agenda entirely. Agenda setting – or, in other words, A’s capacity to limit the options under B’s (or perhaps C’s) consideration by ensuring that certain issues never penetrate B’s (or C’s) consciousness in the first place – is what Lukes (2005, 1974), among others, refers to as the second face of power. Arguably, an employer’s ability to prevent a certain issue from ever gaining public attention can be far more devastating to a workers’ campaign than an employer merely promoting its own interests with respect to an issue already present in the public consciousness. Indeed, with a touch of hyperbole, Schattschneider argues that “the most catastrophic force in the world is the power of irrelevance” (Schattschneider 1960: 74, emphasis in original).

In sum, understanding the dynamics of coalitional power in transnational labor alliances means understanding the ways in which actors’ “strategies are shaped by multiple relations beyond the particular power relations at issue” (Piven and Cloward 2000: 414). Attempts to form coalitions or prevent coalition building depend not only on actors’ capacities to frame issues but also on their abilities to network at various scales. A spatialized understanding of expanding and restricting the scope of conflict can therefore inform analyses of workers’ use of coalitional power in transnational campaigns, whether they are forming coalitions through local community networks or drawing support from “communities” in a more expansive sense.

Nonetheless, the potential of workers and employers to exercise coalitional power cannot be analyzed in isolation. Coalitional strategies always take shape in the context of these actors’ structural positions and embeddedness in (sub- and inter)national institutions. Place-specific variables such as the character of local civil society organizations and workers’ historical relationships with political parties also affect coalition building potentials (Tattersall 2010: 150). Hence, those who seek to exercise coalitional power inevitably confront the challenge of tapping into social forces that are outside the workplace yet still subject to particular economic, political, and institutional constraints, which can vary widely from place to place. It should not be surprising, then, that coalitional power assumes such a diversity of forms.

Structural, institutional, and coalitional power each come from different sources and involve very different methods of execution. What each power type has in common, however, is the basic capacity of A to compel B to do something B otherwise would not do. Yet because each power type is, by definition, a capacity, there is a difference between having structural, institutional, and coalitional power – a potential – and actually putting that power to use. Put crudely, power must be “activated” to be exercised. In the following section, I revisit structural, institutional, and coalition power from the perspective of workers and argue that workers must coordinate both within their own organizations and externally with other members of the labor alliance in order to exercise power in transnational campaigns.
From Coordination to Power

There are several possible reasons why “there is not a strict correspondence between workers’ bargaining power and the actual use by workers of that power to struggle for better working and living conditions” (Silver 2003: 15). Workers might lack awareness of their own capacities, or they might not see how disrupting the production of goods and services, invoking institutional rules, or forming coalitions with other actors could have a positive impact on working conditions and labor rights. Lack of leadership, inability to apply lessons from past experiences, and conflicts of interests among workers could also explain why workers do not always exercise the power they hold. Underlying all of these potential problems is one fundamental issue: lack of coordination.

In the context of transnational labor alliances, the coordination problem is twofold: First, workers must be sufficiently organized among themselves to act collectively in particular places. Since every transnational campaign relies on concrete actions carried out in actual cities, towns, and neighborhoods, as opposed to some abstract “international arena” (Lillie and Martinez-Lucio 2004: 176), it is essential that workers coordinate among themselves locally, at each site of action. The second challenge labor alliances face is coordination among the various unions comprising the transnational alliance. Unlike multinational corporations, which are by definition international actors, trade unions still operate primarily at the national and sub-national scales. Conflicting commitments and priorities often hamper cross-border cooperation, which requires not only a shared strategic outlook but also sustained commitment on the part of each alliance partner over the life of the campaign. In short, to exercise power in a transnational campaign, workers need both intra-union and inter-union coordination.

Intra-Union Coordination: Key Elements

Transnational labor alliances are only as effective as the individual unions that constitute them. Simply “forming transnational union relationships has little impact on power relations within firms, what matters is the ability of unions participating in such alliances to tap their locally- and nationally-scaled powers and project or diffuse them through the networks of TNCs (transnational corporations)” (Anderson 2009: 961). Tapping into power is fundamentally about the capacity of workers to mobilize themselves to act collectively, which was defined above as associational power.

To refresh, associational power is indicated by the resources and capabilities of a union (or other labor organization) that enable workers to consciously plan and implement collective action. I argue that in order to exercise structural, institutional, or coalitional power, workers require not just an organization but one through which they can act in a planned, directed, and effective way (Lévesque and Murray 2010: 336). In other words, “activating” these three power types requires coordination among workers within their own organizations, and such intra-union coordination is a product of associational power. The degree to which different aspects of associational power matter for each transnational campaign likely varies from case to case; however, for transnational labor alliances, four aspects appear to be particularly important: basic material resources, common identity, learning capabilities, and supportive union leadership.

Though fairly self-evident, the importance of basic material and human resources such as financial resources, offices or other meeting spaces, and dedicated research staff should not be underestimated (Lévesque and Murray 2010: 340; Piven 2008: 11). Because transnational labor
alliances engage employers through strategic, comprehensive campaigns, which “go far beyond traditional organizing and bargaining and develop creative and complex processes that pressure firms in a multitude of ways” (Juravich 2007: 17), research capacity is indispensable. Workers organized in a union with a well-coordinated division of labor, including dedicated research staff and campaign organizers, are able to map out corporations’ production networks and key relationships to locate potential leverage points (Juravich 2007: 25, 35; Rainnie et al. 2011: 165). Such capacities also enable workers to consciously articulate strategies over time and across space by deciding which short- or long-term objectives to pursue and on which scales (Lévesque and Murray 2010: 343-44).

Common identity is equally important. As Silver notes, Marx and Engels were incorrect to suggest that the salience of age, sex, race, ethnicity, and other categories would diminish as capitalism transformed all workers into a homogenous working class. “Indeed, precisely because the ongoing unmaking and remaking of working classes creates dislocations and competitive pressures on workers, there is also an endemic tendency for workers to draw nonclass borders and boundaries as a basis for claims for protection from the maelstrom” (Silver 2003: 22). Yet unions can counter these tendencies by promoting a unity of purpose and emphasizing shared values, ideologies, and stories that establish cohesive class identities within the union – that is, by fostering internal solidarity (Lévesque and Murray 2010: 336 –340).

Learning – the ability to “reflect on . . . past and current change in contexts and organizational practices and routines in order to anticipate and act upon change” (Lévesque and Murray 2010: 344) – is another essential component of workers’ associational power that is particularly relevant to transnational labor alliances, especially those that deal with companies whose constant restructuring renders the locus of corporate decision making “often unclear and shifting” (Lillie and Martinez-Lucio 2004: 176). In such cases unions must not only apply lessons from past experiences but also be able to learn quickly in the short-term and rework strategies over the course of the campaign (Anderson 2009: 95-9). Because workers’ tendencies to fall back on traditional repertoires, union leaders’ resistance to change, and other forms of organizational inertia tend to prevent unions from adapting to changed circumstances and exercising power in novel ways (Piven and Cloward 2000: 415, 423; Johnston 1994: 37), the effective exercise of power might depend on unions’ abilities to “unlearn” strategies that are no longer useful (Hyman 2010: 21).

Finally, leadership is another key aspect of associational power that facilitates workers’ collective action. Union leaders can use their skills as campaign strategists to help workers develop a proactive and autonomous agenda (Tattersall 2010: 144; Lévesque and Murray 2010: 343), convince the membership to support transnational strategies, and obtain the necessary material and human resources to support transnational campaigns (Greer and Hauptmeier 2008: 80). On a more basic level, leadership plays a vital role in mediating contending interests and conflicting identities between union members (Lévesque and Murray 2010: 341; Piven and Cloward 2000: 415; Kelly 1998). Leaders can foster internal union solidarity by emphasizing workers’ common identity and unity of purpose and by encouraging democratic participation in union proceedings (Lévesque and Murray 2010: 336-340).

Nonetheless, as Hyman argues, “strategic capacity in trade unions is a product of both leadership and internal democracy” which exist in “a complex dialectic” (Hyman 2010: 23, 20, emphasis in original). Because collective action depends as much on membership-driven activity as it does on leadership guidance, unions need a balance between bottom-up and top-down approaches (Bieler and Lindberg 2010: 229; Hyman 2010: 23; Milkman 2006: 152-53; Heery
Although excessive decentralization inhibits collective action, so too does leadership that resists rank-and-file decision-making. Conservatism on the part of union leadership – which can be a product of the political environment, industrial relations laws, the historical development of a particular union, or union officials’ vested interests in resisting strategies that threaten their personal control (Durrenberger 2009: 133; Voss and Sherman 2003: 75) – can be particularly detrimental to transnational labor alliances, which seek precisely to transcend standard practices.

The Charleston Five campaign – named for the five members of the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) arrested in 2000 for protesting the use of non-union labor on the docks of Charleston, South Carolina – is an example of how internal union conflicts can complicate a transnational labor alliance. It was more than a year into the dispute before ILA national president John Bowers approved support for Local 1422 in Charleston, having initially denounced the workers’ actions as illegal (Durrenberger 2009: 131). Bowers then attempted to sanction Local 1422 for accepting support from the ILWU (the other major maritime union in the U.S.), who offered to connect the local with an international network of maritime unions willing to campaign against the shipping company in question (Erem and Durrenberger 2008: 113). Bowers also requested that all financial contributions to the Charleston Five campaign go “directly to him rather than to [Local 1422 leader Ken] Riley because he feared that the funds would be used to support the reform coalition” within Local 1422 that had been calling for greater democracy in the ILA (Durrenberger 2009: 135). Evidently, “the personalistic and hierarchical organization of ILA not only paralyzed it but also moved the organization to act counter to the interest of its members” (Durrenberger 2009: 135). Union leaders’ abilities to stymie rank-and-file initiatives can thus inhibit intra-union coordination and prevent transnational campaigns from reaching their full potential.

Material and human resources, common identity, learning, and leadership are all aspects of associational power that contribute to coordination within unions. Intra-union coordination, in turn, facilitates workers’ exercise of structural, institutional, and coalitional power – though in different ways for each power type. The connection between internal coordination and structural power is perhaps the most straightforward. Since structural power hinges on disruptive action at key nodes in supply chains and production networks, random and isolated disturbances are unlikely to ripple through corporate operations in ways that make employers take serious notice. Workers therefore “have to act in concert before the withdrawal of their contributions exerts a disruptive effect” (Piven 2008: 10). Doing so requires research to map out production networks, funds (such as a strike fund) to help workers endure the disruptions, common identities that motivate collective action, and leadership that supports the strategic use of structural power. Intra-union coordination is thus essential for structural power because it enables workers “to formulate clear demands backed by a coherent strategy (potential and actual withdrawal of labour) through relatively militant [unions]” (Selwyn 2007: 551).

The relationship between intra-union coordination and institutional power is slightly different. As with structural power, exercising institutional power – for example, submitting a formal complaint about a company to the OECD or drawing on a union’s good relationship with an employer to negotiate an international framework agreement – requires workers to be sufficiently coordinated to convey their demands clearly. Yet because the actual steps to be taken are less a matter of the rank-and-file’s physical actions and more a matter of staff filing paperwork or officials meeting with management, certain elements of intra-union coordination are not as important for institutional power as they are for structural power. Strong common identities among union members, for example, might be less central to institutional power than...
union leaders who are willing and able to translate rank-and-file concerns into formal demands. This sort of leadership-membership coordination is especially important for ensuring that the exercise of institutional power actually benefits the rank-and-file rather than resulting in empty agreements that fail to address (or, worse, contradict) the workers’ actual concerns.

Finally, coalitional power requires intra-union coordination for numerous reasons. On a basic level, it is difficult to see how workers can effectively connect with other actors if the workers are not even coordinated among themselves. Even when workers are organized, however, unions can only reach out to other groups if they have the resources with which to do so. Resources such as funding, organizing staff, and research capacity are also crucial for actually putting coalitions into action. Justice for Janitors, for example, was a union-community coalition that “involved extensive resources that could only be provided by the pooling and redistribution capacities of a large organization” (Silver 2003: 111). Yet perhaps the most crucial aspect of intra-union coordination for coalitional power is learning. Of the three power types, coalitional power takes unions furthest away from familiar workplace-based tactics as they confront other organizations’ “contrasting repertoires of action and mobilization strategies” (Lévesque and Murray 2010: 342). Unions that can reflect on and reconfigure their own strategic outlooks thus stand a better chance of cooperating effectively in coalitions than those who lack learning capabilities. Learning capabilities often come from the “presence of activists with a non-union background” who “can act as bridge builders, linking unions to the other movements in which they have experience. . . . [as well as] innovators introducing to unions the ‘repertoires of contention’ used by other movements” (Frege et al. 2004: 147).

**Inter-Union Coordination: Problems and Solutions**

No matter how well-coordinated unions are internally, they cannot execute a transnational campaign unless they also coordinate with each other across national borders. Conflicts of interest, legal and institutional obstacles, and incentives to free-ride all complicate inter-union coordination. Moreover, unions must not only establish cooperative relationships but also maintain them over the course of a transnational campaign, inter-union coordination is not a one-off exercise but something that must be continually renegotiated and renewed over time.

Most difficulties with inter-union coordination stem from the fact that “unions remain primarily national, regional, or local in orientation” and “still view international activity . . . through the frame of their national institutions of employment regulation” (Lillie and Martinez Lucio 2004: 164). While this focus on (sub)national interests and institutions does not always inhibit transnational cooperation, problems arise when competitive pressures drive workers to embrace protectionism and other inward-looking strategies that exacerbate rather than transcend international divides. Widespread deregulation and privatization, corporations’ constant restructuring and relocation, and other aspects of neoliberal globalization have rendered workers increasingly vulnerable to precarious employment, dislocation, and declining labor standards (Lillie and Martinez-Lucio 2004: 175). Since the state has lost much of its historical power to regulate capital and provide social safety nets in the advanced industrialized countries and has rarely ever played such a protective role in most developing countries (Pierson 2001; Scharpf and Schmidt 2000; Piven and Cloward 2000: 418), workers’ heightened sense of vulnerability is as likely to breed intra-class resentment and distrust as it is to encourage transnational action.

Nevertheless, the competitive pressures generated by globalization affect some sectors more than others. Because the threat of capital flight is particularly strong in the manufacturing
industries, manufacturing workers are often hesitant to help those with whom they are competing for jobs. As one union official remarked, “We will get criticised if we are too heavily involved in international efforts. People are still seeing a view of their own plant and are unwilling to share information with other UK workers let alone European ones” (interview with Amicus European Officer, July 2003, quoted in Cumbers 2004: 841). Unions in service sector industries may be more open to transnational alliances since many public and private service jobs cannot be offshored (Anderson 2009). “Teachers, nurses, and security guards in Mexico aren’t competing with teachers, nurses, and security guards in South Africa, and they all have something to gain by . . . confronting the global corporations that increasingly determine service sector working conditions in both countries” (Evans 2010: 358). Still, these broad generalizations obscure the fact that many manufacturing unions, such as the United Steelworkers, have played quite active roles in transnational campaigns, while there are plenty of service sector unions that have not. Moreover, not all service sector jobs are immune to offshoring or otherwise free of competitive pressures. Unions’ proclivities toward transnational cooperation are therefore only partly a function of sector and industry.

Whether unions coordinate across borders also depends on the nature of national and sub-national institutions in which they are embedded. Cross-national institutional differences can create practical obstacles for labor alliances, which range from relatively straightforward prohibitions on secondary strike action to more idiosyncratic rules that preclude otherwise standard practices. In India, for example, present-day legal restrictions against trade unions receiving funds from foreign donors are the legacy of a colonial-era court ruling interpreted to mean that Indian trade unions “are creatures of the state and that by accepting cross-border support they assert a challenge to state sovereignty” (Sukthankar and Kolben 2007: 66). National institutional differences can also be the source of basic misunderstandings that frustrate transnational cooperation. When Colombian employees of the Swedish company Ericsson asked a union in Sweden to approach head management about Ericsson’s labor rights abuses in Colombia, the Swedish union rather unhelpfully suggested the Colombian workers first affiliate with a union, join the International Confederation of Trade Unions, then negotiate with management through those channels (Sjolander 2010: 48-57). “While this may have been logical in a Swedish context, it made no sense in Colombia,” a country in which paramilitary violence and death threats against trade unionists tend to dampen the prospects for productive negotiations (Bieler and Lindberg 2010: 222).

Institutions also complicate coordination in other ways. While national institutional frameworks can be a source of power for transnational labor alliances, differences in labor laws, negotiation systems, and other institutions also create material conflicts of interest that inhibit cooperation. Institutions of codetermination and social partnership arrangements give unions in some countries not only more power to negotiate with management but also incentives to maintain their positive relationships with employers and promote corporate interests over those of foreign workers (Greven 2008: 6). Unions that have a good relationship with an employer that is the target of a transnational campaign will likely prioritize the interests of the employer.

Such conflicts of interest are especially problematic when members of a transnational labor alliance are attempting to coordinate with a union in the home country of the employer the alliance is targeting. On one hand, home country unions have potential to provide transnational campaigns with strong leverage because they “represent the strongest point of union organisation within the firm . . . [and] invariably constitute an important set of resources,” given their accumulated knowledge of the company’s vulnerabilities and closer understanding of legal and
political institutions that can be used to hold the employer accountable (Anderson 2008: 75). Moreover, home country unions have played a significant role in convincing employers to sign IFAs (Fichter et al. 2011: 81). On the other hand, close relationships with management can bias home country unions against confrontational tactics and can lead them to emphasize national-, company-, and even plant-level interests over transnational solidarity (Hege and Dufour 2006).

Several examples illustrate the home union dilemma. In 2007 employees of Novamed, a pharmaceutical manufacturer in Turkey, requested help from the German union IG BCE in pressuring Fresenius Medical Care, the German owner of Novamed, to negotiate an international framework agreement. IG BCE, however, refused to put pressure on the company and instead prioritized its strategy of “social partnership and dialogue” which “rules out a more adversarial campaign aimed at pushing FMC to negotiate and sign such an agreement” (Fougner & Kurtoglu 2010: 112). A similar situation prevailed two years earlier when construction unions from Australia, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Malaysia approached the German union IG BAU about supporting a resolution on improving the labor practices of Australia-based construction and contracting group Leighton Holdings, in which the German company Hochtief owns over half the shares. Even though Hochtief had already signed an international framework agreement to respect ILO labor standards, and despite the fact that the new resolution was worded in “very bureaucratic language,” IG BAU refused to “offend the company” by supporting the resolution.17

The home union dilemma is not always due to unions’ embeddedness in national institutional frameworks. A union could have a social partnership arrangement with an employer in the absence of formal codetermination. Unions can also have positive working relationships with employers because the workers they represent share management’s interests in avoiding bad publicity and selling products at competitive prices, in contrast to workers at lower levels of the value chain who are more concerned about low wages and poor working conditions (Lindberg 2010: 212). “Thus, the potential for unions and their members to take a more progressive stance internationally is highly uneven and heavily structured by the material realities of their own position within the global production system” (Cumbers 2004: 37).

Aside from basic conflicts of interest and problems due to cross-national differences in institutional settings, inter-union coordination can also be frustrated by basic collective action problems. Transnational campaigns tend to be more time-consuming, resource-draining, and uncertain in their outcome than traditional union strategies, and although the potential gains of cooperation might be greater than those possible through acting alone, the benefits of a successful campaign (such as an IFA covering all employees of a company) often cannot be excluded from and are not diminished when consumed by those who did not participate in gaining them. Hence, in some cases, inter-union coordination is a classic collective action problem – that is, a situation in which several individuals (in this case, individual unions) with common interests do not pursue those interests as a group because, from an individual standpoint, it is rational to free-ride on others’ efforts instead (Olson 1965).

Finally, even when unions do decide to cooperate across borders, each union in the alliance must determine how much of its limited resources to devote to the transnational campaign (Hyde and Ressaissi 2009: 31). Unless a union has a positive, preexisting relationship with other members of the alliance or a strong stake in the outcome of that particular campaign, it will commit very little – or not at all. Hence, ad hoc, one-sided requests for solidarity tend to invite apathy or resentment from potential alliance partners who are not guaranteed any benefits.

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17 David Noonan, Assistant National Secretary, Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) personal interview, March 2, 2010, Melbourne, Australia
in return. American unions in particular have been criticized for forming “ad hoc” and “peculiarly asymmetric” alliances in which they are “interested in obtaining support for their struggles from foreign unions, but have offered precious little support in return” (Hyde and Ressaissi 2009: 16). Greven describes such alliances as “last-minute, one-way-solidarity” – that is, transnational cooperation that is “merely tactical and short-lived” (Greven 2008: 6).

Following Ramsay (1997), Lillie concludes that “one of the major problems unions encounter when asking for international solidarity is that by the time the need for such solidarity is evident, it is too late to develop the long term relationships solidarity implies” (Lillie 2006: 78).

Despite all of the difficulties that conflicts of interest, institutional obstacles, and collective action problems present for inter-union coordination, there are also several factors that make coordination easier. The most fundamental of these is having shared material interests between potential alliance partners. Material (as opposed to ideological or value-based) interests provide clear incentives for cooperation, enabling unions to focus on specific shared goals like securing collective bargaining rights or improving safety standards at a particular company. “Alliance-building needs to have an instrumental component – there have to be clear benefits for the union, and ultimately for the union membership” (Goodman 2004: 108). Still, cooperation based solely on shared interests is too weak a basis for something as complex and drawn-out as a transnational campaign. Even closely matched interests between unions operating in similar institutional contexts never completely overlap, and without some deeper basis for long-term commitment, labor alliances might not withstand pressures that inevitably arise. Shared interests also fail to solve the collective action problem since they do not eliminate incentives to free-ride.

A stronger basis for inter-union coordination is a shared strategic outlook that extends beyond a single issue, enabling unions to cooperate on the basis of broader, long-term issues of mutual concern. Maritime unions’ participation in the successful Flags of Convenience campaign, for example, “is a result of an organizational interest in maintaining the resources to resist globalization, liberalization and de-unionization in the port industry” (Lillie 2006: 78). Similarly, the alliance between SEIU and TGWU “is not premised on particular campaigns but on a broad, long-term strategic outlook. As such, the relationship has proved able to absorb tensions arising within particular campaigns and it has served as a platform for a variety of global initiatives” (Anderson et al. 2010: 389). Shared strategic outlooks encourage unions to engage in transnational campaigns with a longer time horizon in mind, which reduces incentives to withdraw from the alliance in the face of short-term pressures. Shared outlooks also encourage unions to devote resources to campaigns for which there are few benefits in the short run.

Nonetheless, shared strategic outlooks are not a substitute for genuine reciprocity between unions, which develops as unions establish a track record of taking action in support of each other over time. If shared outlooks are about unions’ explicit recognition of their long-term mutual interests, reciprocity is about unions internalizing norms of solidarity based not just on shared interests but on the experience of reciprocated support and mutual expectations of future assistance. As Greer and Hauptmeier illustrate, reciprocity can be an especially strong basis for transnational cooperation, even in the highly competitive auto industry.

Even though the Zaragossa plant [in Spain] was the direct beneficiary of the transfer of production, the local unions did not hesitate to organize a strike in solidarity with their Portuguese colleagues. This act of solidarity, which went against the economic self-interest of the Spanish unions, showed to what extent worker representatives had developed and internalized the common norms to resist plant closures and dismissals in Europe. After co-
operating for more than 10 years, the Spanish unions believed that they could count on their European colleagues in a similar crisis (Greer and Hauptmeier 2008: 88).

As the above quote suggests, reciprocity is not established overnight. Rather, reciprocity develops through repeated instances of active support among unions over a period of time. In other words, “solidarity is shaped in action” (Lindberg 2010: 206). Reciprocity is also fostered by individuals who reach out to potential labor allies despite differences in institutional settings, cultural practices, or positions with respect to the international division of labor. The United Steelworkers’ alliance with IG Metall, for instance, was strengthened by USW’s effort to adapt to the German context by “working with consultants knowledgeable in both contexts and able to mediate between organisational cultures and institutional systems” (Greven 2008: 7).

It is not practical, of course, for unions that seek to form transnational alliances to first spend decades demonstrating their commitment to mutual support through piecemeal displays of active solidarity. To provide assurance of reciprocity in transnational cooperation, unions thus need more efficient means of coordination. One solution is to cooperate under the aegis of international organizations such as the Global Union Federations (GUFs), European Works Councils (EWCs), and International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which formally link national union federations, individual unions, or individual works councils together on the international scale. GUFs, EWCs, and the ITUC promote unions’ shared interests, regularize communication, establish rules of engagement, and afford affiliates some measure of mutual accountability. They are, in effect, “coordinating bodies that link, or articulate, unions at other levels to each other and to international institutions and employers” (Croucher and Cotton 2009: 8). Essentially, they “assure unions that the cooperative project is permanent, not transient; strategic, not tactical; and reciprocal, not one-sided” (Hyde and Ressaissi, 2009: 32).

GUFs in particular play an important role in fostering inter-union coordination by developing networks of contacts for unions, advising on and supporting transnational campaigns, and representing union interests for particular industries or in global political contexts (Lillie 2006: 125; Goodman 2004: 112). In doing so they help unions coordinate campaigns that defend freedom of association and collective bargaining rights, compel multinational corporations to sign IFAs, and build union capacities to further extend their rights across space (Croucher and Cotton 2009: 116). Yet whether GUFs truly promote reciprocity among unions, as opposed to weaker forms of coordination, depends on how well these organizations help unions overcome conflicts of interest, institutional obstacles, the home union problem, and incentives to free-ride. There is evidence that these organizations do promote genuine reciprocity among their affiliate unions. At the same time, however, GUFs also suffer from power imbalances that threaten to bias their agendas and resource commitments.

Essentially, Global Union Federations are controlled by their national affiliates, which fund them, govern them, and appoint their staff. As a result, Lillie argues, “the ability to produce solidaristic rather than competitive outcomes is lacking. GUFs (or any transnational union organization for that matter) do not have authority to make binding decisions, or to enforce them” (Lillie 2006: 128). Exacerbating this problem are power imbalances among affiliate unions. Power in each of the GUFs weighs heavily on the side of unions from the advanced industrialized countries, which derive clout not only from their substantial financial contributions but also from what Croucher and Cotton call “political authority,” which comes “from the

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18 I focus here on Global Union Federations, though much of the following is arguably applicable to EWCs and the ITUC as well.
perceived political importance of an affiliate’s country and its trade union movement” (Croucher and Cotton 2009: 44). For example, in their examination of the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers’ Unions (the GUF for chemicals, energy, mining, and paper), Cumbers, Nativel, and Routledge (2008) find that the German union IG-BCE “is the largest individual contributor to the ICEM” and thus retains “considerable power to block initiatives if they are perceived as contrary to national union interests” (Cumbers et al. 2008: 376). The French union CFDT plays a similar role, contributing to “an in-built bias towards areas with established union presence in Western Europe and the Nordic countries and against ‘developing’ areas in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia especially” (Cumbers et al. 2008: 377). Power imbalances are also evident in European affiliates’ tendencies to “take their own experience from a period of social contracts as the guiding principle” for negotiations of international framework agreements despite the fact that the political environment in most developing countries in which these agreements are to be applied is nowhere near conducive to their enforcement (Lindberg 2010: 218).

Still, power imbalances do not entirely preclude reciprocity-based coordination among unions. Croucher and Cotton (2009) argue that GUFs facilitate a type of reciprocity based not on direct give-and-take but on multilateralism, defined as “an institutional form that coordinates relations among three or more states [or in this case unions] on the basis of generalized principles of conduct . . . without regard to the particularist interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence” (Ruggie 1993: 77, cited in Croucher and Cotton 2009: 50). This “diffuse reciprocity” (Axelrod and Keohane 1986) fostered by GUFs means that affiliate unions “do not expect short-term payoffs for their membership,” which is instead “expected to yield a rough equivalence of benefits between members in the aggregate and over time” (Croucher and Cotton 2009: 50). Contrary to Lillie’s (2006) argument that GUFs cannot produce solidaristic outcomes, this alternative view suggests that GUFs do in fact help unions overcome conflicts of interest and other divides and foster a form of coordination based not on shared interests or a strategic outlook but on actual expectations of reciprocity, albeit a diffuse reciprocity.

The extent to which the multilateral nature of GUFs can compensate for power imbalances within them remains debatable. GUFs may be key to maintaining inter-union coordination in transnational campaigns especially among unions that lack a long history of transnational cooperation and solidarity. Still, only a case-by-case examination of inter-union power dynamics within these organizations can determine the extent to which the involvement of a particular GUF improves prospects for inter-union coordination and, consequently, impacts the outcome of a transnational campaign.

From Power to Success

I have argued above that intra-union coordination and inter-union coordination are necessary conditions for labor alliances to exercise power in transnational campaigns. Intra-union coordination, a product of associational power, is what enables labor alliances – or rather, the workers comprising them – to physically disrupt production processes, hold employers accountable through institutions, leverage the capacities of non-labor actors, or otherwise exercise structural, institutional, and coalitional power. Inter-union coordination is equally indispensible because it is the means through which organized groups of workers combine forces
and draw on each others’ capacities, thereby exercising power in new ways and at multiple scales to an extent that is impossible for a single union to do on its own.

Exercising power and succeeding in a transnational campaign are not, however, the same thing. Success requires not only intra- and inter-union coordination but also a power strategy that actually compels an employer to alter its behavior, resulting in some benefit for members of the labor alliance. Structural, institutional, and coalitional power only achieve this result when their exercise directly impacts (or threatens to impact) something on which the employer in question depends for fulfilling its present or future material and strategic interests. Put simply, the power type exercised must be context-appropriate in order to contribute to success.

Defining “context” requires a closer examination of employers’ interests and priorities than has so far been pursued. This paper has mainly proceeded from the perspective of workers. Yet because power is relational, it makes little sense to talk about one actor’s (A’s) exercise of power without reference to the impact of that exercise of power on another actor (B). Hence, to understand the circumstances under which structural, institutional, and coalitional power are each effective, it is important to consider the relationship between each power type and different employers’ interests and needs.

The key is interdependence. Just as workers rely on employers for their livelihoods, employers depend on workers (and other actors) in multiple ways. For instance, because employers have an interest in the smooth and profitable functioning of business, they depend fundamentally on workers performing their assigned tasks. When workers withdraw their labor or otherwise directly disrupt business operations (i.e. exercise structural power), they threaten the basic functioning of business on which the employer depends. Nevertheless, structural power will be less effective on an employer that can endure a brief or even extended disruption to its operations, easily replace its existing workforce, or isolate instances of industrial action to avoid ripple effects throughout its extended operations.

Likewise, when workers invoke laws, rules, regulations, and other institutions (i.e., exercise institutional power), they do so on the assumption that the employers with whom they are in conflict depend on the continued functioning of certain institutions for securing their long-term interests. An employer whose viability is premised on its own and others’ continued compliance with the law, or a firm whose production strategy depends on institutions that enable management to receive input from a stable, skilled workforce with accumulated shop floor knowledge, is more likely to negotiate with workers in ways that maintain those institutional structures than an employer for whom those institutions are not so important. This logic applies regardless of whether or not employers face the threat of third party sanctions for failing to comply with institutionalized practices.

Finally, employers are dependent on consumers to purchase goods and services, investors to provide capital, politicians to pass business-friendly legislation, and innumerable other non-labor actors whose contributions to the functioning of capitalism are indispensible. When workers leverage the capacity of these actors to boycott, disinvest, exert political pressure, or otherwise disrupt the processes on which a company depends (i.e. exercise coalitional power), they threaten that company’s viability. Yet as with structural and institutional power, coalitional power is more effective on some employers than others. For example, a company that does not depend on maintaining a positive public image will be less vulnerable to consumer-based campaigns than one for whom public image is essential, such as a restaurant or retail chain.

To summarize, understanding how the effectiveness of different power types is conditioned by variation in employers’ structures and core interests is a matter of understanding
the different ways in which “capital and labor remain locked together in relations of interdependence that are the fulcrum of worker power” (Piven and Cloward 2000: 423). Viewed from this perspective, structural, institutional, and coalitional power can be considered subtypes of what Piven (2008) refers to as “interdependent power.” Interdependent power is “rooted in the social and cooperative relations in which people are enmeshed by virtue of group life” and describes “the ability to exert power over others by withdrawing or threatening to withdraw from social cooperation” (Piven 2008: 5).

Nevertheless, despite this link between power and interdependencies, it is not possible to fully predict the outcome of a transnational campaign simply by identifying a correlation between the type of power workers exercise and the nature of the employer in question. Rather, the ability of both workers and employers to consciously strategize and recalibrate their approaches over the course of a given conflict creates a dynamic interplay between structure and agency that renders the outcomes of transnational campaigns neither entirely under nor completely out of the control of the actors involved. Hence, while workers can “calculate how to deliver pressure depending on the various types of power at the table” (Tattersall 2010: 147), as well as determine when and how to exercise power across space and at which scales, they cannot control the political and economic context in which a transnational campaign plays out, how an employer exercises its own power over the course of the campaign, or the windows of opportunity that invite the use of certain power strategies at certain times.

Conclusion

This paper began by defining power, a concept that is central to all aspects of social and political conflict yet only now becoming integrated into analyses of transnational labor alliances. By elaborating on the concepts of associational, structural, institutional, and coalitional power and analyzing the latter three in the context of space, scale, and place, I hope to have shed some light on the way in which transnational labor alliances exercise different types of power in transnational campaigns, why intra- and inter-union coordination are crucial for transnational labor alliances, and why power only sometimes leads to success.
References


