

Chapter Twelve

Labor internationalism

The words “proletarian” and “internationalism” were not usually joined together in one phrase until the First World War.¹ Since that time, the expression “proletarian internationalism” has often been abused, justifying oppression and foreign military intervention by governments in a way which reduces the whole idea to empty rhetoric. If we are to use the concept again today in its proper sense, it seems advisable that we apply it to activities “from below,” excluding the activities of governments, but including the autonomous activities of subaltern workers in full.

“Proletarian internationalism” suggests associations with “socialism” and “communism,” and with efforts to abolish world capitalism. Consistent with these connotations, those who use the concept to refer to workers’ activities normally mean *the collective actions of a group of workers in one country who set aside their short-term interests as a national group on behalf of a group of workers in another country, in order to promote their long-term interests as members of a transnational class.*² Instances of “proletarian internationalism” in this sense have occurred many times. The

¹ Friedemann and Hölscher, “Internationale, International, Internationalismus.”

² I am aware of the fact that in North America “internationalism” may also refer to inter-ethnic solidarity in one country. This form of solidarity is however not discussed in the present chapter.

question however is whether any narrow interpretation of the concept does real justice to the internationalist impulse. First and foremost, it fails to encompass the most numerous forms of cross-border workers' solidarity; after all, in addition to "strategic internationalism," there are at least four other reasons why groups of workers in different countries would jointly undertake promotion of their shared interests:

- *Identity of group interests in the short term:* The living and working conditions of workers in two or more countries change in such a way, that their interests become more or less identical, giving rise to the possibility of a joint promotion of interests. In such instances, trade unions need to do no more than 'total up', as it were, the individual interests involved.
- *Identity of group interests in the longer term:* Workers in one country support the interests of workers in a worse situation elsewhere, and forego the prospect of short-term success on their own, expecting that they could or would eventually find themselves in the same bad situation. In this case, they try to influence the improvement of the situation of foreign workers which in time could prove to be their own situation.
- *Indirect identity of group interests:* Workers in one country support improvement in the position of workers in another country facing conditions inferior to their own, because such an improvement constitutes a precondition for the successful promotion of their own interests.
- *Normative involvement:* Workers support fellow workers abroad whose treatment by the state or by employers conflicts with the standards of justice and decency they themselves uphold. No material interests of their own are involved here. Humanitarian or political considerations may play a part, while cultural and religious influences (e.g. Islam or Christianity) may likewise be unifying factors.³

³ An important example was the solidarity shown by British and French workers with the North during the American Civil War. About the question of how extensive this support really was, opinions have differed for a long time. See on this issue: Bernstein, "Opposition of French Labor"; d'A. Jones, "History of a Myth"; Greenleaf, "British Labour Against American Slavery"; Harrison, "British Labour and the Confederacy"; Harrison, "British Labor and American Slavery"; Sancton, "Myth of French Worker Support"; Park, "English Workingmen and the American Civil War"; Wright, "Bradford and the American Civil War."