Global production networks and global union federations: Re-assembling transnational union networks by International Framework Agreements?

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Abstract

Despite a growing scholarly interest in global labour standards, an integrated concept and detailed understanding of how Global Union Federations (GUFs) can contribute to their dissemination has yet to be developed. Among other things, this has to do with the fact that unions have yet to find an organizational solution to overcome the dilemma of transnational solidarity. As a contribution to filling this gap, we argue that GUFs forming transnational union networks (TUN) around Global Production Networks (GPN) might contribute to the enforcement of global labour standards. In particular, we focus on TUNs formed within the global arena concerned with International Framework Agreements (IFAs). By using IFAs as our empirical case, we illustrate how those GUFs currently most active in the global arena of labour relations coordinate national trade unions and employee representatives through inter-organizational networks. By scrutinizing the organizing and management practices within two exemplary cases, i.e. MetalCorp and SecureCorp, we derive conclusions on the barriers and facilitators for effective TUN.

Introduction

After the end of the Cold War and with the enormous expansion of transnational corporations (TNCs) in the process of economic globalization, the international union movement responded by reorganizing the International Trade Secretariats into Global Union Federations (GUFs), giving more attention to union organizing and labour-management relations over a primary reliance on traditional lobbying at international institutions (Platzer and Müller 2009). This new focus by trade unions on the global level reflects the massive globalization and cross-border networking of production which leave national unions at a strategic disadvantage within their national habitats (Fairbrother and Hammer 2005; Hyman 2005). This focus also reflects that the goal of a comprehensive solution founded in a global regulation of labour standards appears to be quite remote (Mund and Priegnitz 2007) and a traditional single country "go it alone" strategy has been undermined by the broad erosion of the nation-based institutional and organizational foundations of trade union power.

Under these circumstances GUFs have crafted International Framework Agreements (IFAs) into an "IFA strategy" as a means of improving working conditions by setting norms and standards and furthering the building of trade unions in the interest of achieving more collective employee voice in global labour relations and reducing the global power asymmetry between labour and capital. GUFs have identified IFAs as a strategic lever for their influence on TNCs by negotiating a cross-border framework of recognized norms, principles and procedures of global labour relations (Papadakis 2008, 2011). Simultaneously, for the GUFs, IFAs are a means of securing trade union recognition, providing space for organizing, and influencing HRM practices of TNCs throughout global production networks (Croucher and Cotton 2009; Routledge and Cumbers 20098a; Platzer and Müller 2009; Fichter et al. 2011).

This strategy represents a very ambitious attempt to intervene in the governance of global production networks (GPN) by agreeing standards, establishing procedures for conflict resolution, fostering union building and securing a leading role for the GUFs. By opening a new space of labour-management relations it provides GUFs with a perspective for invoking union power beyond the norms and legal provisions of country-specific collective bargaining systems.

In referencing TNCs and their global production networks, the IFA strategy has defined a new focus of activity for the GUFs and their affiliates. In contrast to lobbying activities directed at national governments and international institutions, and in contrast to sectoral activities which build on the organizational underpinnings of the member unions, the corporate orientation of the IFA strategy is not only more organizationally and geographically focused; it may also require cross-sectoral activities. To meet this challenge, GUFs are proceeding to build and expand what we would designate as transnational union networks (TUN). Available empirical evidence shows that in regard to IFAs, TUN may be initiated both as a means of negotiating and signing an IFA as well as ensuring its implementation. However, although the term "network" is used abundantly and often indiscriminately along with "alliances", and "coalitions" to depict a variety of such union activities, not much is known about the organizational and inter-organizational foundations of such networks. For example, it is an open question as to whether and how GUFs can use TUNs to

interact with global production networks on different levels and exact some leverage at strategic nodes of these operations. What does such an organizational and inter-organizational policy require? What are the challenges facing the GUFs? Under what conditions can global unions become effective by organizing themselves as inter-organizational networks?

To answer this question we argue first of all that GPNs are the relevant organizational form of economic activity upon which GUFs need to focus their policy and organizational strategies. Secondly, we suggest that global unions might anchor their organizational response by forming their own transnational union networks around GPNs. Our approach to this topic is interdisciplinary, because there is a need to broaden the horizon of the field of labour relations by linking it to different strands of theory from the economic and social sciences. Labour relations theory itself has been predominantly occupied with national systems. But the body of literature on international trade unionism with a theoretical perspective is growing. In particular, Richard Hyman has devoted increasing attention to the challenges facing unions in globalizing economies and in building transnational solidarity (Hyman 2005). As important as this input has been, the theoretical foundation for developing the essential organizational underpinnings of a strategic approach to transnational solidarity is still missing/underdeveloped. Indeed, although there is widespread use of the term "network" among unionists, and even some references in the literature to the need to build networks of unions and movements (Evans 2010) there is a glaring lack of empirical analysis within a theoretical framework which could provide a more substantial basis for understanding of the dynamics of union responses to globalization.

In this paper our arguments will draw heavily on organizational and network theory, both in regard to global production networks and to transnational union networks. From an organization perspective, questions about the general political economy of networks (Benson 1975), about the opportunities and constraints they pose on the capacity of participants to act (Stevenson and Greenberg 2000), and about forms of network governance (Provan and Kenis 2007) become highly relevant. We will also reference the rich interdisciplinary input on global production networks which has been published over the past decade. In particular, distinguishing different modes of network governance contributes to a better understanding of the first attempts of GUFs to group the collective voice of labour around GPNs and its organizational foundations of representation. Global unions can potentially use different network management approaches for organizing their initiatives.

Empirically, we want to explore how a network management approach might contribute to GUFs' capacity to shape labour standards throughout the different levels of GPN. As exemplary cases we will examine the multi-level, multi-actor relationships characterizing two cross-border union networks, i.e. MetalCorp and SecureCorp, involved in the initiation, negotiation, implementation and dispute resolution of two IFAs. To control for the policy field within which our empirical cases of network management are situated, we have selected IFAs as our defined area of actor-structure relationships. Although between 1989 and 2010 only 80 of the 70,000 to 80,000 TNCs signed such agreements, IFAs as "work in progress" represent an exemplary policy field for studying and exploring how global unions are developing into network coordinators to grapple with the challenges of transnational solidarity. IFAs are a joint agreement between representatives of employees and employers, initiated and fostered by organized labour, in particular, by the Global Union Federations (GUF). IFAs contain both substantive standards and procedural

standards. Substantively, the ILO core labour standards (International Labour Organization (ILO) 1998) are the bottom-line of virtually all IFAs, with freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining representing the most contentious issues. The first IFA was signed in 1988. At the end of 2010 there were 76 functional IFAs. Five GUFs account for over 90% of all IFAs. The vast majority of IFAs have been negotiated with TNCs with headquarters in the European Union. While all of these TNCs regard IFAs as an element of their policy on corporate social responsibility, GUFs argue that they represent a means of globalizing labour-management relations.

In essence, our findings suggest that global unions can enhance labour's collective voice in the governance of GPN by developing network models for managing transnational union relationships which bridge institutional levels and recognize both the differences in GPN structures - distinguished by degree of fragmentation and integration – and the locational and institutional embeddedness of trade union organizations. Adequate modes of transnational union network governance contribute to overcoming organizational problems posed by economic globalization and strengthening labour's overall role in global governance. In other words, the basic idea is that global unions can use network management to facilitate and stabilize interaction among the various actors on the labour side in order to coordinate interventions at the strategic nodes of GPN in the interest of improving working and employment conditions. Conversely, without an adequate organizational response to the varieties of GPN governance, labour's collective voice is very likely to remain highly fractured and diffuse.

The arena of global labour relations: Global production networks and transnational union networks

In our view, academic research is only beginning to deal with what we would define as an emerging arena of transnational labour relations. While some scholars have focused on institutional and governance dimensions, already postulating the existence of a global labour regime (Hassel 2008; Haworth, Hughes and Wilkinson 2005), we would argue that transnational labour relations are still in a nascent, formative stage as far as institutionalization is concerned, presenting a very fragmented, heterogeneous and patchwork picture of development. From this, we need to re-conceptualize the debate on global labour relations by introducing a more adequate analytical framework capturing the most relevant conditions of globalized union activity. Hence taking the currently formative context of transnational labour relations into account, we argue that the arena concept (Kädtler 2006, Müller-Jentsch 2004) offers a more viable starting point for investigating the interaction between GPNs and global union federations (Papadakis 2011; Stevis 2010; Cumbers et al. 2008a, b; Levy 2008; Palpacuer 2008) than notions of a global labour regime. In our approach, we regard the existence of "contested fields" (Levy 2008) in GPNs, in which actors' interests conflict, as a given; but we prefer the term "arena" because it is more clearly associated with a defined space and collective actors, and with processes of institutionalization.
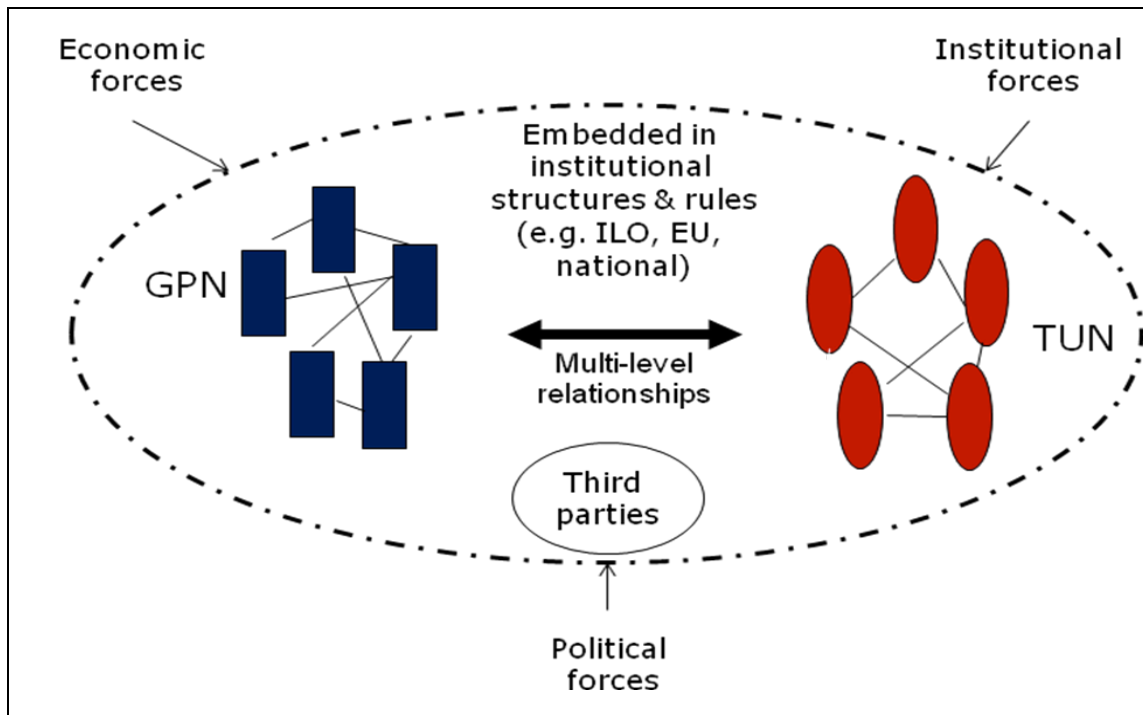
Figure 1: The transnational arena of labour relations

Admittedly, transnational labour relations currently consist of little more than a patchwork of such fields and nascent arenas. But we understand these contested fields to be within an *emerging arena* of the global governance of labour. In this emerging arena, we can delineate the multi-level relationships within and between two sets of networks, transnational union networks (TUN) and global production networks (GPN) (s. Figure 1). Building on this arena concept allows us to show how the evolvement of transnational labour relations is contingent upon the transformative capacity of TUNs.

To be able to impact arena creation, GUFs need to take three interdependent steps: First of all, they must identify the strategic nodes in GPN, i.e. points of access to the network; secondly, they must choose the issues around which they could intervene; and thirdly, they need to muster and organize the necessary power. In our view, this power is fragmented and even diminishing at the single node (local labour market) of a GPN, especially as the locational distance between core and periphery increases. However, we argue that GUFs can seek to cope with this development by mobilizing power resources and exerting ideological and institutional leverage to influence the dynamics and outcomes of production networks. We use the concept of Transnational Union Networks to measure and evaluate the extent to which GUF "networking" activity is developing in this direction and fostering a new mode of labour governance in GPNs.

In our view transnational union networks within a fragmented transnational arena of industrial relations can be defined as follows: A TUN is an inter-organizational network among three or more labour organizations from different countries and institutional levels spun around an economic network structure, i.e. a GPN. No one organization will have the hierarchical authority to absolutely control the contributions and resources of the participating organizations, although differences in resource input and allocation may be reflected in policy decisions. Overall, the determination and achievement of its goals must be based on collective action. An analysis of the governance – or for that matter also management – of these TUN enables us to gain

insights into two important aspects of this organizational approach. For one, investigating TUNs helps us to interpret the means and extent of their impact on shaping labour conditions and labour relations in GPNs. Secondly, we can gain a better understanding of the inner-organizational demands which TUNs may make on their participating unions. We would argue that the creation of a new multi-level arena around GPN alters the strategic parameters and conditions of union work, both locally and globally. And following our definition of union networks, we need to specify how different institutional structures and differently structured GPNs influence the policy options and available modes of network governance for transnational union networks in the transnational arena(s).

Global production networks as structural constraint and political opportunity

As TNCs bridge spatial, institutional and organizational distances, they evolve into globally dispersed production networks, with complex supply chains and different, often plural and overlapping forms of contractual governance arrangements: hierarchy, market and hybrid (Levy 2008; Palpacuer 2008; Gereffi, Humphrey and Sturgeon 2005). In characterizing these evolving economic entities, we prefer to use the term "global production networks" for the whole set of core TNCs, their system component suppliers, second and third tier material suppliers as well as auxiliary and main service units such as design, distribution, information systems, industrial and manpower services and marketing (Coe, Dicken and Hess 2008). We use GPN instead of other related designations such as "global commodity chains" (Bair 2009) and "global value chains" (Gereffi, Humphrey and Sturgeon 2005), because it captures the peculiarities of TNCs' global operations for transnational labour relations most comprehensively and allows us to link the configuration of global production to the organizational literature on inter-organizational network management (e.g. Provan and Kenis, 2007).

Since we are interested in the impact of political contestation of GPN governance, we need to highlight those aspects of GPN which open or close opportunities for political intervention. This consideration is embodied in earlier concepts of "chains", for example, when Gereffi et al. (2005: 98) state that value chains do not only depend on technological aspects, but also "on effectiveness of industry actors and the social processes surrounding the development, dissemination, and adoption of standards and other codification schemes. It is the latter set of determinants, in particular, that opens the door for policy interventions and corporate strategy." However, as we would argue an analysis of these aspects is neglected for the most part in their further analysis.

This concept is not meant to downplay the importance of understanding the varieties of technological-economic relationships in the governance of GPN and how production processes are distributed within the overall configuration of the GPN, i.e. its system component suppliers, second and third tier material suppliers as well as auxiliary and main service units such as design, distribution, information systems, industrial and manpower services, and marketing. These aspects are highly relevant in determining the overall network configuration, but they are also subject to political contestation and strategy building giving the analysis of GPN structures a political component by reflecting upon their socio-political embeddedness (Coe, Dicken and Hess 2008). This is important for our analysis, because it helps to explain why GPNs in the same industry differ considerably from each other when it comes to governance structures.

However, we disagree with the GPN framework in one decisive point. Relying on the embeddedness approach, Coe et al. (2008: 275) conceive of non-firm actors like states, international standard agencies, consumer NGOs and unions as being "constituent parts" of GPNs. Inasmuch as GPN consist of "contested fields" in which actors such as employees, managers, investors, government officials, etc. pursue their interests, then trade unions may be "constituent parts" of one or of many of such fields. But as they construct networks in pursuit of policy goals, they must bridge differing organizational boundaries with varying political, social and institutional logics. TUN are inter-organizational structures of primarily social and political origin subject to political goal formation involving global union federations, national and local unions and (European, world) works and company councils as key actors. Therefore, to grasp the political economy of TUN, we regard TUN and GPN as separate entities, because for us both network structures represent different, but structurally related social entities, i.e. transnational business and transnational labour. Corporations construct their GPN according to business goals and market strategies. GPN are distinct from TUN, since they are inter-organizational structures of primarily economic origin and situated in the "economic sphere" (Giddens 1984). Thus, they are primarily subject to economic goal formation involving a specific set of key actors from this sphere, i.e. central and local management, management of subcontractors, and suppliers. In most cases, if there is labour input, it is generally fragmented and uncoordinated, limited to single national or local institutional settings. TUN may thus be seen as a means for labour to meet capital in the form of GPN on a global scale, in which both sets of actors are subject – albeit differently – to the same set of economic, institutional and political forces within a common social space, i.e. an emerging arena of global labour relations.

Governance of Transnational union networks

Confronted with GPN, unions face a burgeoning economic structure not conducive to their traditional local and national bargaining approaches. The major strategic dilemma which arises for the trade unions is in the trend of "global players" to disaggregate their production "chains" toward more network-like organizations, resulting in an erosion of labour standards and practices as they were developed in an organizationally more integrated context, and within clear-cut boundaries of either the firm or the industry (Sydow and Wirth, 1999). The organizational reach of standards negotiated between unions and management shrinks with every outsourcing step. In many cases, the corporation itself has a "no growth" employment record; rather, its expansion is based on network co-ordination, making the extension of labour standards to workers on the periphery more difficult (Palpacuer, 2008).

In political-economic terms, the spread of global production networks has transnationalized the arenas of labour relations and introduced new conflicts of interest. In particular, the management of TUN is confronted by the dichotomy of the core and the periphery, both in a spatial and an economic sense: The more peripheral to the TNC core an organizational unit is, the more likely a violation of core labor standards becomes (Palpacuer, 2008). Unions are confronted with employment policies throughout GPNs which segment workforces into core employees, with relatively good benefits and favourable employment conditions, and those peripherally employed in outsourced units and as temporary and contract workers sub-contracted from the first tier down to the informal economy (Atkinson, 1985;

Fichter and Sydow, 2002). Existing local and national imbalances between actors and across networks are reproduced, opening differing opportunities for "institutional work" (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Lawrence 2008) and "contestation" (Levy 2008; Amoore 2002). For example, given the wage squeezing effects of much sub-contracting and out-sourcing/off-shoring processes that underlie any form of GPN it is no surprise that the extension of core labor standards to a TNC's subsidiaries, suppliers and subcontractors of different legal status is one of the most controversial issues between TNCs and GUFs.

Without institutional safeguards, union network coordination may need to rely on what Silver has called "associational power", i.e. the strength of their own membership and alliances with other sympathetic interest groups. To be sure, says Silver in regard to the historical struggles of textile workers, "more commonly, associational power was not sufficiently strong to compensate for the weak structural power of textile workers." (Silver 2003: 94).It is hard to imagine how transnational unionism might develop organically into a hierarchically integrated union organization in the face of a fragmented production configuration in many industries. This is due to the fact that in GPNs industrial relations might be "organized" or "structured" not only either along the traditional industry divisions (classical industry union) or on the company level (company union), but within GPN that cross industries and single firms as a unit. However, what else could GUFs do to enhance their associational power on a global level, when hierarchically integrated structures become economically less predominant? We suggest that GUF could develop into network coordinators of union actors involved allowing the GUFs to enter into interactions with management on different levels along the fluid structure of GPN in order to bring collective representation into the "contested fields" of transnational labour relations (Levy 2008).

First, although GPN provide certain barriers and obstacles for union organizations, their detrimental aspects are only one part of the story. In fact, the expansive cross-border economic activities of TNCs give rise to different configurations of GPN affecting the extent to which unions can build on structural power to lever their influence on corporate decisions affecting labour conditions (Silver 2003). For example, a GPN based approach can make use of the contradictions between fragmentation and integration of global production processes.

Second, whether GUFs can actually exert pressure to raise labour standards in GPN depends not only on structural constraints but also on their associational power. If GUFs could acquire a position as "network coordinators", i.e. actors that can deploy their links to various other national actors and networks, they might also become effective in coordinating the overall union-management relations of a GPN and devising adequate organizational responses to GPN. In short, we argue that effective input into the governance of labour in GPN network management depends on global union capacity for "network management" to solve a number of coordination and collaboration problems.

Within the arena's opportunities and constraints, GUFs – not unlike TNCs – may employ various modes of network governance in order to manage relationships among labour actors. Using the concept of Provan and Kenis (2007), one can distinguish three basic types of network governance, i.e. (1) decentralized, collective self-governance; (2) coordination by a lead organization or a tightly-knit leading

group of organizations; and (3) a network broker with delegated authority. These modes can be distinguished by the underlying network structure (e.g. resource and power distribution, task interdependence and need for collaboration), by the governance mechanism applied to integrate different actors (e.g. based on ideological consensus, pragmatism, inclusion rules, and coordination technique) and by the role of supportive external relationships (e.g. dependence on third parties, centrality within other policy networks). For example, collective self-governance seems to be more suitable for TUN governance if resources and power are more equally distributed among the network participants, if there is a clear need for collaboration for most participants, if transnational solidarity is a widely shared conviction, and if inclusiveness is high and GUF centrality within other policy networks is low. However, which mode of governance is chosen for relationship management is an empirical question.

In order to capture the complexity of the heterogeneous set of actors involved in TUN, we distinguish several relationships. Most broadly, these relationships are built around actors who are more centrally positioned within the respective GPN; or they link such centrally positioned actors to the periphery, i.e. from HQ level to local level. Regarding the first type of relationships we concentrate mostly on relationships between GUFs and internal representation bodies of employees at the plant level as well as (home country) trade unions at the headquarter level. Employee representatives like works councillors or single plant trade unions with no external staff of officials represent employees more directly, however within a narrower domain of workplace or company-related policies. Such bodies may also have cross-plant organizational ties or structures, as with Group Works Councils in Germany or European Works Councils, in particular, if they are linked with unions through interorganizational ties. While trade unions also represent employees of the corporation they transcend workplace level policies to build an independent external representation at domestic sites of a single corporation, or within a country for the sector or industry as a whole. Occasionally we also find GUF-GUF coordination along a given supply chain. In a few cases, such coordination has resulted in the signing of an IFA.

The second type of networking involves the relationship between local/national and the transnational level. With the exception of national trade unions at the HQ level, GUF affiliates have rarely participated directly in negotiating an IFA, although they are charged with the responsibility of monitoring its implementation. In concentrating on internal relationships between labour actors, what might also be called labour-labour relations we make external relationships with other actors (labour-management relations, labour-NGO relations) a part of the context indirectly influencing the management of TUN.

Network management in Practice:
Empirical approach and findings

We have selected the TUN formed around IFA negotiations, because in these negotiations GUFs actively seek to use IFAs to bring transnational labour standards (i.e. norms and procedures established by the ILO) to bear on what we conceive of as being exemplary GPNs. First, TNCs which have signed IFAs are a well-suited group to study transnational union networks formed around their production

networks. Our sample of 75 TNCs with an active IFA (April 2011) all organize their production in networks on a global scale, varying in regard to sector, structure and size as well as in regard to their degree of subsidiary autonomy and the influence of HQ policies. All of these MNCs are examples of complex networks of subsidiaries, suppliers, joint ventures and contractors spanning many institutionally and culturally diverse settings, differing in their degree of subsidiary autonomy and the influence of HQ policies. Although a few of our sample TNCs are „small" international firms with an employment figure of less than 5,000 and operations in a handful of countries, others, especially in retail and wholesale trade, or in the service sector, have close to 500,000 employees and an almost global presence. On average, the sample TNCs directly employ about 95,000 people at 22 production sites across the globe.

Secondly, we contend that the IFA strategy of the GUFs, drawing on ILO norms and directed at GPNs as they reach across and beyond national institutions of regulation, reveals how different forms of network governance are applied in the transnational arena of labour relations. A close examination of how the GUFs manage to coordinate union actors from different levels and their relationships in the policy process around concluding IFAs promises to reveal more general insights about the opportunities and constraints of GUFs to effectively coordinate TUN. To be clear on this point, an IFA is a policy initiative that allows pars pro toto the study of the functioning of TUN.

Given the novelty of the phenomenon under study a qualitative approach seems to be appropriate. This also requires from us a multi-actor approach for data gathering which targets a considerable range of actors and their relationships in order to understand how global unions might coordinate TUN. As a consequence, we collected and analysed data from a variety of sources, i.e. semi-structured interviews, secondary material (annual reports, press releases, etc.) and workshop participation in order to understand how global unions coordinate TUN. Our key variable to analyse TUN and the role of GUFs in managing TUN is relationships between the key players involved in IFA processes. In detail, we focus on what respondents told us about how they qualitatively assess their relationships.

For this paper, we rely on two very illuminating cases (MetalCorp within the domain of the IMF, SecureCorp within UNI's jurisdiction) which are exemplary for IFA related TUN.

Case	Domain of	GUFs	national unions Works council/empl oyee reps at HQ	host country unions and employee reps	total
MetalCorp	IMF	2	3	8	13
SecureCorp	UNI	3	1	6	10

Table 1. Number and distribution of case interviews

For capturing the TUN around these IFAs, we conducted at least one interview for each group of key respondents from global unions (GUFs), trade unions at TNCs' home countries, and where appropriate European works councils and employee representatives in supervisory boards, and union/employee representatives in host

country locations. For these cases we can draw on 23 interviews with core representatives of the respective networks (s. Table 1). The interviews had an average length of 45 minutes and have been audio-taped and transcribed.

Since these two case studies are part of a broader comparative case study design we can make occasional use of additional statements across all interviews we have conducted to put these two cases into a wider perspective. In total, between November 2008 and April 2011, we obtained 94 semi-structured interviews with key actors of TUN directly or indirectly involved in 26 initiatives for negotiating IFAs; compared to 75 global agreements signed and active until April 2011. This also includes 6 initiatives which have been unsuccessful or have an unclear status at the time writing. Additionally, we can use some two dozen background interviews with 26 interviews with managers from TNC's headquarters and 23 managers of local subsidiaries as well as with actors in the wider field of international labour (including civil society organizations, employer associations, and academic experts on national industrial relations systems). We participated in three workshops (2 for the GUFs, 1 for the MNCs) in which representatives of the GUFs and managers debated their stance on the IFA related issues among participants of each group respectively.

Transnational union networks and IFAs

In presenting the case material, we proceed within three steps. First, we examine the overall connection between the GUFs' IFA strategy, here the IMF and UNI responsible for the IFAs at MetalCorp and SecureCorp respectively, and the GUFs' respective role in the formation and coordination of the two TUNs. Next, we look more closely at the relationships between union organizations within the respective TUN. In particular, we document how the actors involved characterize the barriers and facilitators in establishing and maintaining adequate relationships, and how these are assessed in terms of supporting or complicating GUF's network coordination. In so doing we look first at the relationship between the central actor of the IFA process and then look at the relationship between those actors and the actors in the more peripheral parts of the respective TUN. After discussing the cases separately, we conclude with a short comparison of the major commonalities and differences between the two cases asking for what might be learned from this for the opportunities and constraints of TUN governance in general.

The IFA strategy of the International Metalworker Federation (IMF)

Because of the relatively strong position of its affiliates and the widespread existence of legally mandated employee representative bodies in corporations headquartered in Europe, the IMF has not yet had to resort to disrupting production, public campaigns or to enlisting the support of consumer or community activists to reach an agreement. While core labour standards are included in all of its 18 IFAs, the strength of the IMF is reflected in the fact that in many cases it has been able to incorporate further workplace issues and ensure the extension of implementation beyond the organizational boundaries of the TNC to include suppliers and sub-contractors. Instead the IFA strategy is a reflection upon already working organizational structures of employee representation. For example, the IFA policy has its antecedents in the

World Corporation Committees (WCC) in the automobile industry which never fully developed their potential (Platzer and Müller, 2009: 115, 120). As a policy answer to the proliferation of unilateral and voluntary codes of conduct, the IMF has been able to develop a countervailing power approach by relying on traditionally well-organized core sectors such as auto and aerospace. "Of course, the idea to build solidarity among the subsidiaries around the world is always there (...) and too, preventing whipsawing is also part of the calculation, in the long run." (MetalCorp, works council rep).[1]

However, also within the domain of the IMF there are huge differences leading us to the conclusion that technological and economic constraints are only one part of the story to explain variation between TNCs and TUNS formed around their GPNs. While still operating from a position of relative strength, IMF affiliates have suffered extensive membership losses and have repeatedly come under pressure for concession bargaining. Most distinctively, in the IMF's core industries GPNs are being reconfigured through sub-contracting of industrial services and temporary work, thus undercutting the standards of the core firms. Moreover, expanding industries in the IMF domain such as electronics, information technology and renewable energy have remained largely unorganized. As part of its action program 2009-2013, the IMF has sought ways to both ensure the implementation of existing IFAs and develop the organizational strength necessary to bring more corporations to negotiate and sign an IFA. One approach is to build trade union networks in TNCs. In its guidelines on networks from December 2010, the IMF points to the need to address problems resulting from an increasing "shift from secure to insecure forms of employment, fragmentation of collective bargaining, corporate restructuring, and abuse of human and workers' rights" in the metal sector. The IMF seeks to encourage its affiliates from the home countries of TNCs to utilize their core sphere of strength at the workplace in key TNCs to build cross-border cooperation. The network should, "wherever possible extend into supply chains, particularly into outsourced or subcontracted parts of the original company." An important objective of networking, according to the guidelines, is "to negotiate with management for recognition which may include financing of networks", without sacrificing independence. And regarding the relationship of networks to IFAs, the IMF regards both as viable strategic approaches to ensuring trade union recognition, collective bargaining and decent labor standards, without either approach being solely a function of the other (International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF), 2010).

MetalCorp is exemplary of an IFA policy for the core of automotive manufacturing in which the major goal is to reduce the gaps in the representational structure of a company-related TUN. Through high levels of membership, political recognition and well-placed employee representatives, the union at the MetalCorp HQ used the strong culture of co-determination at the German headquarter to create a world council structure with a global mandate as the backbone of its TUN around IFA negotiations. As such, it turned its associational and structural power into a strong institutional foundation for the representation of workers' interests. The IMF was formally involved, but more as a background coordinator. This coordinating role of

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[1] Still, IFAs are contested within the International Metalworkers Federation. In particular, US affiliates have not been convinced that IFAs will strengthen their bargaining position and organizing capabilities (Herrnstadt, 2007; Platzer and Müller, 2009: 125f.).

the IMF has been oriented towards facilitating cooperation among national affiliates as a kind of coordination among equals. One might even conclude from the following quote that the IMF has (re-)delegated its mandate for coordinating the TUN back to the employee representation operating at the HQ level: "It's easiest when there is a strong employee representation at the HQ location which claims ownership for the question of creating and maintaining a network and provides personal capacity for (...) organizing meetings, providing a communication platform and contacts (IMF automotive coordinator). As a result, the network coordinating role of the IMF is a modest one and not without conflicts. These conflicts can only be resolved by what we call representational pragmatism which values effective TUN coordination higher than formal accuracy of representational chains.

MetalCorp

MetalCorp operates in a sector characterized by a few dominant global players coordinating relatively integrated GPNs. Production is concentrated in relatively few locations within the (newly) industrialized world, production processes rely on highly-skilled labour forces, whose role and position imparts them with structural and associational power (Wright, 2000: 962; Silver, 2003: 13).

At MetalCorp, the strong union at the headquarter level is joined by other relatively strong national affiliates of the IMF like the Brazilian metal workers CNM-CUT or the US union UAW involved in negotiating the agreement on an institutionalized basis, because there exists a world council structure which has been responsible for the IFA negotiations. Interestingly enough, MetalCorp is the only case in which unions or employee representatives from subsidiaries had been immediately involved in negotiating IFAs through their presence in the world council and through one director of the National Confederation of Metalworkers (CNM-CUT) who is also member of MetalCorp's supervisory board. As a result, the IFA appears more as a stepping stone within a longer process of establishing a corporate-bound basis for global labour representation than a unitary initiative standing alone.

At MetalCorp, the goal to initiate TUN around an IFA is definitely there, however practical coordination problems of various kinds provide considerable evidence for the challenges to have a functioning TUN coordination. Although there is clear indication of the willingness to support local unions in their activities and organization drives, simple communication with these local unions already provides for the first major coordination problem. As the global council representative puts it: "Communication is a permanent challenge. If you sit at your desk and think about how to reach colleagues worldwide, you start to doubt how this could be accomplished at all." (MetalCorp, BR)

These "communication barriers" usually go beyond pure technical and cultural issues of just getting the information across. Often economic, political and institutional barriers are the cause behind these communication problems. Economically, the dominating role of the headquarter location within the overall structure of the GPN provide for obstacles in this regard. If a GPN is concentrated in a few locations and is coordinated by rather strong HQ management intervention, then the respective unions often fail to see the necessity of network coordination in the first place.

Institutionally, coordination problems arise out of diverging union representational structures and organisational strength. In the words of the IMF automotive coordinator: "(...) Of course, union representation is different from country to country. If we have a good unionization and clear union structures, networks are much easier to manage and to develop than in cases where unions are not present at all" (IMF automotive coordinator). And even if unions are active in the respective host countries, politically, there must be some sort of centre structure that is willing to carry the burden of providing the resources and infrastructure for TUN coordination without directly benefitting from this role. But, there must also be local unions willing to use the IFA and deploy it within their local activities. Both preconditions are difficult to meet where the sheer number of relationships to be coordinated is so high that even rather resourceful headquarter unions are not capable of coordinating them all.

This holds in particular for the relationships to the most peripheral actors in the GPN, i.e. the suppliers especially of the second tier and beyond. Successful examples for subsidiary union-supplier union cooperation are in general very rare. However, we observed one at MetalCorp's Brazilian operations where the local subsidiary union was also able to use the IFA in a struggle over labour relations at suppliers. Cooperation is also a problem where local unions are divided on ideological grounds and different locations are organized by unions of different ideological orientations, as is the case with other TNCs from our sample operating in Brazil.

This becomes even more pronounced where headquarter unions, instead of recognizing the need for using network coordination of the GUF, still try to centralize all procedures: "Direct connections between subsidiary unions? I have no experience with that. As a rule, when there are problems anywhere in the world, the first thing is to expect help and assistance from headquarters" (IMF automotive coordinator). Additionally, coordination of TUN is complicated by the type of management approach each participant within the TUN is confronted with. Typically for IFAs, the relationship between HQ management and national unions located at the HQ are characterized by social-partnership, or at least cooperative relationships, whereas locally very often relationships might be characterized by hostility and disrespect. Since these relationships also influence the overall outlook on labour-management relations, coordination between unions with this sort of different experiences might be difficult, since expectations on what an IFA should accomplish are diverging between different local industrial relations traditions. In the case of MetalCorp, this becomes obvious if one compares the different approaches of the management side towards IFAs. Whereas the HQ representative argues for a rather bureaucratic procedure, in essence not questioning the legitimacy of the whole process, in India the instrument is denounced as some sort of Western affair not relevant to the Indian context. In the US, it is however also the unions that come forward with a very different understanding on what an IFA should be.

From this list of obstacles and given that such difficulties are usually present simultaneously, it becomes obvious that the current role of the GUFs in coordinating TUNs is severely limited and far from being that of a hierarchical network coordinator. However, there are also signs of improvement in this regard. For example, the IMF begins to reflect upon approaches to form effective networks according to their development stage and using resources pragmatically, bringing together the relevant actors. And there also initiatives for bringing together all the relevant actor in the automotive sector, not only the union representatives of the large OEMs, but also those of major suppliers including other industries. Similarly, there is the idea to

develop a partnering program where single national unions representatives and works councils at the headquarter level become mentors for local unions in India.

The MetalCorp TUN has strong connections to Brazil, where the union actively pursued the recognition of the IFA, and weak, tenuous connections to the US, where the union did little to support the IFA and was very sceptical regarding its potential. In the case of MetalCorp, India is regarded as uncharted territory. Contacts between the HQ level coordinators - regardless whether the council structure or the GUF is concerned - are still an occasional affair marked by many interruptions and misunderstandings. The IFA is not known to all unions present at the local level, indicating the fact that the TUN sometimes even is not capable of fulfilling basic coordination functions, not to speak of action-based cooperation and collaboration. In Turkey, the situation is even more difficult since the local union predominantly organizing subsidiaries (and suppliers) is not affiliated with the GUF because of opposing ideological orientations. In the US, problems for coordinating the TUN originate in diverging approaches for organizing as dictated by institutional differences between the European HQ country and the US environment of labour relations. In particular, the role of a council structure is conspicuous of joining HQ management when it comes to bread-and-butter issues of collective bargaining. The only case, where these considerations did not play a major role for effective TUN coordination was in Brazil where the local union was self-confident enough to act upon the agreement independently, but in contact with the HQ level.

The IFA strategy of Union Network International (UNI)

UNI has devised a rather ambitious strategy of concluding as many Global Agreements (IFAs) as possible. In this way, UNI strives to move from individual corporate standards to general sectoral standards. Another important goal of this strategy is to use IFAs as a means of overcoming structural and associational weakness by organizing and building new unions. As one UNI representative stated, "But, in our case, certainly the ability to freely organise unions is the key goal of a Global Agreement: to enable us to establish that multinationals are going to respect some key elements that allow workers to more easily organise." (UNI rep 2). However, this goal of quantity has been a mixed bag as far as quality is concerned. Especially in regard to the applicability to suppliers and sub-contractors, and in regard to implementation procedures, many of the recent agreements are not very specific.

UNI's most important segments are retail and wholesale commerce, banking and telecommunications. As with all private services, there is very little in the way of social partnership tradition on which UNI can build. For example, global structures of employee representation like in some metalworking TNCs are largely unknown to private service companies. In addition, flexibilization through outsourcing and temporary employment, and internationalization have weakened union footholds in privatized services considerably. Many private services are operated at the weaker ends of the supply chain by providing auxiliary services to large corporate and public customers. As a consequence, service TNCs' subsidiaries themselves are of major concern when it comes to labour standards.

SecureCorp falls under the jurisdiction of UNI property services division which is in charge representing workers in facility management, cleaning and maintenance, as well as security. While numerically small, UNI property services has been the key segment of policy development with regards to testing new approaches to organizing by using IFAs - or global agreement in the words of UNI. On the one hand, UNI has taken a lead from the social movement unionism of its US affiliate SEIU (Woodruff, 2007) and its organizing experiences, targeting specific TNCs as global players for international campaigns and mobilizing workers and community support in the process. Working closely with key affiliates at major corporate sites to develop strategies for local activities, UNI's intention is to build solidarity networks and ensure that the affiliates are part of the Global Agreement (IFA) process from the beginning. This emphasis on involvement and "ownership" is intended to provide the impetus for successful implementation and trade union recognition.

SecureCorp

SecureCorp is a prime example of the organizing strategy of UNI. After an acrimonious international battle, SecureCorp signed a Global Agreement with the UNI in late 2008. The agreement quickly proved its value as it enabled local union organizations in several host countries of SecureCorp to begin organizing from scratch. As far as networking is concerned, the results present a much different picture from the MetalCorp case. From this divergence in strategy, different coordination approaches of horizontal and vertical inter-union relations follow. At SecureCorp, a single national affiliate of the global union has had a leading role similar to that of the IG Metall, the fact that it is in the US and not at SecureCorp headquarters has made a difference. In this case, the GUF has a much stronger role. A representational council structure or extensive communication with affiliates in the many host countries of SecureCorp has not played a prominent role in this process, except for some solidarity actions during the campaign. Inclusion in the network was based primarily on a decision to join the campaign through participating in action rather than on institutionalized representational rights. "Even in [SecureCorp] which was a much longer campaign and involved a lot more really fighting for a global agreement; we chose our negotiating committee. The negotiating committee, we informed them about every discussion, but we did not inform the whole sector about every discussion." (UNI rep 2) At SecureCorp the role of the headquarter union was assessed with some ambiguity by the global union, because it was suspicious of acting more in the interest of a coalition with the HQ management than in solidarity with local affiliates in more distant countries.

In contrast, SecureCorp and UNI have defined a joint implementation strategy that focuses on selected countries as a testing ground, however, after a severe dispute at the HQ level. "So, they are challenging relationships. But, you know, I think the CEO certainly has some residual anger over the campaign. I've seen that in his discussions with us from time to time." (SecureCorp, UNIrep2) "So with that [organizing campaign] in mind we started exploring whether we could even talk to each other, to start with. And then if we could talk to each other whether it was going to be any room for us to meet and areas that we could get agreement." (SecureCorp, ManRep) The rationale is that in many countries no unions are present and that SecureCorp's headquarter attempts to support UNI in its efforts to trigger local initiatives in this direction. If the unions are strong enough they are expected to get recognition from local management to finally conclude collective agreements.

However, at present, in the vast majority of countries the situation is far from this point, increasing frustration of local unionists. For example in India, SecureCorp's local management has simultaneously intensified its retaliation against organizers and member activists. As one unionist concluded vehemently: "The global agreement is a waste of paper that we cannot afford." (Interview ISWOI council member). From the perspective of UNI, the frustration is also caused by high expectation about the IFA: "We have an issue of expectations. They [Indian unionists] thought that [the IFA] would solve all our problems. That the company would react. Well, it has actually. It has, but not the way they'd like. We need to show them that this can work. Patience is not easy to come by here though." (Interview with UNI official).

Apart from the situation in which simply no union is present, UNI values the need for communication quite highly. This usually requires face-to-face activities to bring together a multitude of actors. For this reason, UNI, with the strong support of the US union SEIU, has been particularly active in starting to establish links with local partners in India. UNI has started with local communication and consultation processes first, and then organized joint consultations between local management, the global union and the local unions. Often unions at the local level need to be supported in building up functioning processes in the first place: "And fundamentally in every case I find, it goes back to very serious basics, do we have a strong union, can they enforce the contract they have, or can employers undercut standards because they can't enforce them." (UNI rep)

Usually, Indian industrial relations are marked by fractured unionism in which unions are divided by caste, class, religion, and party affiliation. However, following an initiative by the SEIU in 2005, UNI has managed in 2007 to create a unique organization in the Indian Security Workers Organizing Initiative (ISWOI) that crosses regional and ideological cleavages by involving two competing trade union federation in this cooperation with a focus on SecureCorp, i.e. the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) and the Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). ISWOI is comprised of a ten-person governing council chaired by an SEIU official from the USA and coordinated by an India-based UNI official, consisting of UNI staff and representatives of the federations and their affiliates in the security industry. Management representatives also participate regularly in its quarterly meetings. Apart from devising an organizing campaign strategy, ISWOI watches over the regional domains of the two federations, with INTUC organizing in Bangalore and Kochi and CITU operating in Kolkata and New Delhi.

In Turkey, apart from severe ideological cleavages among unions, the situation in facility services is even more complicated because organizing private service workers like cleaners is a completely new idea to this IR environment. In Brazil, the situation is also complicated through the ideological separation of service unions according to affiliation to umbrella organizations and the union recognition rules that state that there is only one union for each trade within one municipality.

Discussion and conclusions

A union approach which is able to engage in GPN governance by analysing the pertinent structural demands of global production relations and defining an adequate organizational response promises to be an advantage for organized labour. Using

network governance as a theoretical tool, we have argued how the expansive cross-border economic activities of TNCs and their global production networks could be countered by global unions that use network governance in order to regain territory in the multi-level arena of transnational labour relations. In their approach to economic globalization, GUFs are striving to find opportunities to benefit from the complexities emerging out of the interplay between GPN and a changing scope for coordination at all levels of union activity. With functioning TUN, unions can challenge violations of labour standards, poor working and employment conditions. In theory, if GUFs take GPNs into account, i.e. by forming policy networks around these production structures, they might be capable of redefining the boundaries of labour relations beyond the nation-state, the industry or single firm level to match the economic fluidity of today's global production processes.

Institutionally, union intervention can build on established and collectively negotiated standards at core firms. For some participants, participation and contribution to networks is facilitated if the respective union/employee representation can build on institutional backings. For example, if the core company has a European origin it is likely that the union at the HQ home country has a disproportionate influence in a TUN. However, this also facilitates the coordination and formation of a TUN as long as these privileged unions involve their resources in support of the network. On a political dimension network management is facilitated if there is a sort of a pragmatic frame of coordination/ collaboration which allows for diversity and plurality in company cultures, IR traditions and union approaches. For example, if transnational solidarity is a strong political value among affiliates, global union efforts for network management are also facilitated because it becomes easier to shape vertical and horizontal labour-labour relationships.

However, our two cases also reveal the serious practical limitations of such a strategy on TNCs' global production networks as measured by the workings of what must be said to represent rather advanced TUNs. Although IFAs are regarded by the GUFs as a policy tool to be used in the interest of strengthening the organizational foundations of their affiliates and promoting cross-border union cooperation, our cases reveal how the practical IFA process is dependent on a variety of obstacles and barriers. Not only is the actual value of an IFA very corporate-specific and thus quite heterogeneous across – and even within – GUF domains, but diverging actor preferences, huge gaps in economic conditions, institutional settings and locational distances between host (periphery) and home (core) countries all contribute to make TUN coordination a difficult and complicated affair.

First of all, the actor constellation on the labour side is characterized by considerable heterogeneity. Looking at the signatures under IFA documents, one might expect the GUF as the leading actor of TUN formation and coordination. However, as our exemplary cases reveal, this position may just as well be held by other influential labor actors. In this regard, three similarities are striking in both of the TUNs under consideration: First, apart from the GUF strategy and its coordinating role in the background, the unions and employee representations at a TNC's headquarter or from influential subsidiary locations are of major importance. Second, the collaboration/coordination of these "dominant" actors with unions and employee representation of other major subsidiaries influence the success of TUN. And third, industry-industry GUF collaboration has not play a role in both cases. From this, we conclude that GUFs are not in a position to act as a single, highly centralized network broker, but that TUN governance is more often than not carried out by an alliance among a small group of national affiliates.

Secondly, looking in more detail at the two cases, striking differences become obvious regarding the potential for a more active network coordinating role of the GUFs. Based on diverging strategies, representing to a certain extent the extreme points of a scale sorting IFA strategies across all the GUFs, at least those still in the business of concluding such agreements, also the coordinating role of the GUF is different in the two cases. Although for both GUFs support for union organizing is key, for UNI – in contrast to the IMF – the campaign around an IFA comes in preparation for an organizing drive that might bring later achievements in organizing after a campaign has been waged. For the IMF, operating at core European metalworking manufacturers, IFAs are an expression of already achieved representational structures, however, still unsatisfactory ones – as seen from a GUF standpoint – with large gaps in cross-border representation.

Thirdly, major cooperation problems in TUN arise out of the fact that institutional divergence provides for different institutional power resources of network participants that clash with associational strategies and formal representation structures. In particular, the role of relatively powerful employee representatives (as in many European companies like MetalCorp) or national unions at the HQ level exemplify power asymmetries which needs to be addressed by GUFs. The challenge for TUN coordination is to connect core and periphery of GPN. This challenge becomes obvious by looking at the ground level of TUN, i.e. the respective countries in which TUN should become most effective if coordinated appropriately. We have documented examples for India, USA, Turkey and Brazil that reveal the many complexities of establishing working connections between various unions and actually creating some sort of a coordinating role for the respective TUN to give an IFA initiative a transformative direction.

In spite of these barriers, the political challenges arising out of potential conflicts of interest within and between horizontal and vertical relationships in TUN, can be resolved if GUFs address the representation-ownership issue openly, for example, by making clear who plays a leading role in coordinating the TUN. Is it the GUF? How are locals involved and are national affiliates ready to cooperate with each other? In addition to this, GUFs are well advised to reflect on the issue of international cooperation under the condition of local/national actors' embeddedness in national arenas. Usually, the national arena dictates to a certain extent the union approach. Under this condition, network building is facilitated if there is a frame for coordination/collaboration that emphasizes "transnational solidarity" as a political value and uses pragmatism in the dealings with diverging interests and political orientation which allows for diversity in company cultures, IR traditions and union approaches.

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