

Trans-national labour and the implications for representation under globalisation; examining the case of seafaring labour and the Nautilus International cross-border merger

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Abstract

As globalisation has taken shape over the past half-century the internationalisation of economic sectors is no longer just characterised by multinational capital but increasingly an internationally mobile and trans-national workforce. The shipping industry undoubtedly exemplifies a sophisticated level of globalisation, whereby, both its capital and labour are organised seamlessly across national boundaries. Seafaring labour, particularly the ocean-going merchant navy, is not only developed and sourced globally; it is employed in a highly multinational context. Seafarers, mostly drawn from ‘vulnerable economies’ routinely traverse international borders in service of the global trading fleet and, more often than not, lead a dual, sea/home existence since they serve on board ‘foreign’ ships on a time on/time off arrangement. Although the length of a seafarer’s tour of duty has reduced significantly over the past few years, a six months on, six months off pattern is common. In this environment, a number of visa restrictions prevalent in the majority of sectors have been relaxed to accommodate a highly mobile workforce. Moreover, the nature of employment in the industry has shifted greatly towards casualization where employment is increasingly defined in voyage terms and controlled entirely by third party satellite recruitment agencies. The consequence has been growing vulnerability. In this environment, an innovative model of worker organisation and representation is required to ensure effective protection of seafarers’ rights in their transnational existence and multinational employment context. This paper highlights the kinds of challenges presented by trans-nationalism in the sector and discusses the possibilities for effective union representation. It interrogates the arising opportunities for cross-border union organising, including international mergers, in the attempt to establish effective representation under globalisation. To this end, it closely examines the creation, structure and work of Nautilus International – a recently established cross-border union in Europe.

Key words: Globalisation; Transnational labour; seafarers’ unions; Nautilus International Union; cross-border union mergers; labour revitalisation

Introduction

Owing to the international mobility characterising shipping business, seafaring labour has become highly mobile and increasingly trans-national. Seafarers routinely traverse international borders in service of the global trading fleet and, more often than not, serve on board 'foreign' ships. It is also increasingly the norm to have a multinational crew on-board any one vessel. Furthermore, the nature of vessel ownership and the nationality of ships are both vague and fictitious, which presents yet another layer of complexity, whereby the workplace is ordinarily multinationally owned, multinationally staffed and continuously mobile across national borders. In order to ensure an adequate just-in-time supply of seafarers to the international fleet at low cost, a global labour market has emerged for seafaring labour. In this market seafarers are trained and recruited and supplied from multiple locations, mostly in the developing world through satellite recruitment companies. This level of globalisation in the labour force presents challenges, particularly relating to organising and representation. However, collaboration among sector unions is exemplar of transnational union working. Since members of different national unions operate across many borders, host-country unions are routinely called upon, and expected, to assist in the protection of foreign crews on-board vessels in their waters. Although such collaboration is mostly ad-hoc and informal, a global organising and representation yardstick has been set under the work of the (ITF) International Transport Workers Federation, particularly its Flag of Convenience (FoC) campaign which has successfully sought to establish equitable terms and conditions for seafarers working on-board vessels registered and operating under foreign flags, specifically those popularly referred to as FoCs (Lillie, 2004). At a more regional level there have been examples of cross-border workings abound, particularly in America and Canada, including the International Organisation of Master, Mates and Pilots (MM&P), which is the marine section of another a bigger US-based international union organisation - the International Longshoreman's Association (ILA)¹, and the Seafarers International Union of North America (SIU)².

More recently, the concept of a single union entity cutting seamlessly across national borders has been conceived in the form of Nautilus International. Nautilus International union was inaugurated in May 2009 after an amalgamation between two key seafarers' unions in Europe - the *Federatie van Werknemers in de Zeevaart* (FWZ) of Netherlands and the UK's National Union of Marine, Aviation and Shipping Transport Officers (NUMAST). This new model of organising is premised on the argument that, in order to effectively represent workers in an environment where multinational capital structures and operations have blurred national

¹ The ILA organises marine workers in the US's East Coast, Canada, the Gulf Coast, the Great Lakes and Puerto Rico. For more information on the ILA and MM&P refer to their websites at www.bridgedeck.org (MM&P) and www.ilauion.org (ILA).

² SIU represents US merchant mariners sailing aboard US-flagged vessels in deep sea, Great Lakes and inland trades. Refer to www.seafarers.org.

borders; unions must also become borderless and develop seamless structures across traditional geo-political barriers. There is even greater necessity considering that the prevailing context whereby labour is becoming increasingly global and mobile.

In this paper we examine the prevailing debates on globalisation (particularly relating to the concept of the new international division of labour) and trans-national labour in the context of seafaring and highlights the implications for union strategies and worker representation. We will present the case of Nautilus International as an example of unions attempting to reposition in a complex international context characterised by a highly influential and powerful body of employers and states, more concerned with leveraging the revenue benefits of labour exportation than the protection of the same via stringent employment regulation. By examining the merger process culminating in the establishment of Nautilus International; the union's representation ideology and core objectives, the paper raises important questions regarding the main challenges and essential conditions for effective cross-border representation under globalisation.

The Core Debates

This analysis is developed at the convergence of three important bodies of literature around the growing vulnerability of labour under globalisation and the challenge of effective work representation. The first body of literature relates to globalisation and the consequent new international division of labour. Recent processes, associated with economic globalisation, have transformed the environment in which labour is developed, sourced employed. The environment is, in part, characterised by a rise in global economic competition, international capital mobility and the global outsourcing of production. The resultant context is one in which workers in certain industries have become increasingly mobile on a global scale and often lead a trans-national existence. The second set of literature discusses the nature and implications of trans-national existence while the third explores union response, and/or need to respond, effectively to the challenges of trans-national workforces via new and innovative organising strategies. An important part of this last set of debates is the decline of the global labour movement in recent decades, largely as result of a combination of political-economic developments in the 1980s and 1990s associated with neo-liberalism State policies.

Globalisation and the Seafaring Sector

The globalised nature of the shipping industry has been analysed extensively, with the consistent conclusion that, undeniably, it stands out as exemplar of industrial globalisation and corporate foot-looseness (Lillie, 2004; DeSombre, 2006; Sampson and Schroeder, 2006). Often highlighted is how shipping capital is internationally owned and operated; the global nature of crew sourcing and employment; and the ease with which a ship's nationality can be shifted from state to state (Alderton *et al.*, 2004; Wu, 2005; Sampson and Bloor, 2007; Sampson and Kahveci, Sampson and Schroeder, 2006). As Kahveci and Nichols (2006) observe, ownership and nationality of assets in the shipping industry is both vague and fictitious because they are increasingly difficult to ascertain and can be switched and shifted with extreme ease.

Whereas this arrangement presents enormous benefit for ship-owners, there are many challenges for labour, regarding organising and representation in the face of growing seafarer vulnerability (Lillie, 2005; DeSobmbre, 2006; Gekara, 2010), and for national states, regarding the control and regulation of the industry. Generally, a lot of the challenges for labour arise from a systematic withdrawal of state support in favour of business-leaning neoliberal policies, geo-political obstacles to international organising, and a general decline in bargaining power, and by extension, increasing employment vulnerability for workers at different points along the global commodity supply chain (Munck, 2004; Fiorito and Gallager, 2006; Lévesque and Murray, 2006).

The shipping industry, owing to the global foot-looseness of its corporations and international mobility of its primary capital – the ship, perhaps more than any others, presents the best environment for the examination of labour trans-nationalism, consequent worker vulnerability and the need for new, more internationally effective union strategies.

That the shipping industry presents a good environment for growing effective cross-border union strategies is well exemplified by the structure and work of the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), which has successfully sought, through its complex global Flag of Convenience (FoC) campaign, to negotiate equitable pay rates for seafarers employed on-board FoC ships (Lillie, 2004). The structure of the ITF presents a good case of sophisticated and effective international organising. Formed in 1896, the ITF currently brings together 654 affiliate organisations across 148 countries and represents five million workers. Its affiliates include national seafarers unions, dockworkers' unions and other unions in the wider transport sector. In this way the ITF has been able to successfully mount a campaign against shipping multinationals who flagged their vessels outside their 'home' flag regimes (particularly in advanced maritime countries where regulations are stringent and labour more costly), took advantage of lax FoC regimes in order to recruit seafarers cheaply from emerging seafarer labour supply countries, employed them in violation of global labour standards, and paid below industry set rates (Lillie, 2004). Furthermore, owing to the mobility and trans-national nature of shipping labour and the need to take care of seafarers wherever they are, irrespective of nationality and union affiliation, informal inter-union arrangements have historically characterised the sector. In this way all national seafarers' unions around the world share a common bond, albeit informal. The ITF is however not mandated to represent seafarers in much beyond issues of wages, and particularly for those employed on-board FoC vessels. This leaves an extensive area of vulnerability, which national unions should address but often fail to due to their national focus. There is therefore a disjuncture between global and the national whereby seafarer employment is inherently global whereas the core structures and focus of their unions is local. It is this disconnect which necessitates the internationalisation of union strategies.

Labour Transnationalism

An immediate concern pertaining to a globalised world order is the consequent effect on work and employment. Often viewed with a tinge of optimism, a borderless regime is perceived to encounter a variety of economic, social and political challenges. Of main concern in the unbounded nature of both the market and the states is the wage condition and labour relationship. The increasingly rapid cross-border movements of labour evidently make

explicit the question of the extent to which the realities of work have been transformed. Amidst such changes, according to Belussi and Garibaldo (1996), the influence on work organisation rather than the ideological new work order should be the main focus. In many respects, this has spurred major concerns on a worker's diminished labour power and the trajectories of change it has to mandatorily contend with. Under conditions of transnational movement, the various experiences of workers have shed light on a new labour regime.

An important characteristic of labour transnationalism is the prevalence of contractual migration, which made significant inroads in 1970s. The structural reorganization was most visible in the decline of manufacturing industries, giving way to the rise of a service economy. For instance, in some advanced economies, particularly in the UK, manufacturing employment has been halved to give way to poorly remunerated temporary work (Nolan 2004). The deindustrialisation of many advanced economies in the 1980s led others to uphold the importance of knowledge-based jobs that highlighted skill development, among others. Various conceptions such as weightless economy (Quah 1997), information economy (Castells 1996) and learning society (Coffield 1996) have come up in an attempt to describe the promises of the service-oriented industries as engines of growth. Revitalised interests in research and development, information and communication technologies (ICT) and sciences have emerged to explore their viability as knowledge industries.

A distinctive outcome of this sectoral shift is the temporary nature of jobs being required in the labour market (Euwals and Hogerbrugge 2004). There has been rapid increase in temporary agency work and fixed contracts in advanced economies such as in Europe (Heery and Salmon 2002; Storrie 2002). Hence, service sector jobs, although flexible, have become detached from the technical work and more routinised in nature. By the same token, labour has become increasingly female-dominated as part-time employment coincides with fulfilment of domestic duties (Walsh 1999). By the late 20th century women, mostly Asians comprised a half of the total number of migrants in the global market (Sharpe 2001). The disparity in income growth across economies resulted to the feminisation of labour (Standing 1989) and heralded the growth of new labour supply countries such as Philippines and India. The demographic implications of the exodus of workers, skilled or unskilled, evidently sparked anti-developmental sentiments (Abella 1984, Hugo 1998) as opposed to the bonus of foreign exchange injected to an economy. The other side of the border deals with the issues surrounding the absorption of labour in destination, often western, economies. Thus, whilst these changes have been viewed constructively as one form of labour flexibility, the link to dissatisfaction stemming from a lack of job tenure is simultaneously demonstrated. The transition to the global market, often in part-time and casual conditions, created a form of insecurity among contractual workers.

As improvements in communication technologies run parallel to increased migration flows in the wake of globalisation, it became easier for labour migrants to maintain relations in both host and home countries. The classical notion of migrants has therefore changed as emphasis on technology, higher levels of social capital and proximity to homeland posit distinctively emergent patterns of behaviour (Portes et al, 1999: 224). The institutionalisation of such cross-border practices amongst recent temporary migrants led to an evolved perspective on labour migration currently described as transnational.

Transnationalism in the Seafaring sector

As prior-highlighted, shipping is arguably the globalised industry *per excellence* and its core workforce is exemplar of a globally mobile labour (Gekara 2009). The economic motive underlying the seafarers' form of migration along with the regularity by which linkages to home countries have been maintained corresponds to the notion of transnationalism by Portes (1996). Improvements in ICT for the shipping industry provided means of connecting to home (Thomas 2003) thus establishing a dual cross-border existence for seafarers in the context of a highly globalised industry and a mobile workplace. Mainly driven by considerations of cost minimisation, shipping companies through satellite recruitment agencies have developed structures for hiring seafarers from anywhere in the world and establishing a unique global labour market (Wu and Sampson, 2005). Kahveci et al. (2002), Wu and Sampson (2005) have noted that a significant number of those hired come from poor economies. Indeed, the shipping industry has evolved into an exemplar global business outlook as evinced by the outsourcing of able-bodied seafarers. In addition to the blurring of national boundaries at sea and the breakdown of cultural barriers in the multiethnic and multinational workplace, seafarers' movement across national borders is relatively unrestricted. The operation of the shipping industry differs from other industries because, as Sampson and Schroeder (2006) observe, it "faces less difficulty and fewer restrictions relating to visas and to the social embedding of workers in a host society".

The distinctive life and work patterns on a ship as a host society without territorial boundaries, highlights issues on labour transnationalism. Not only do they move from home and acquire a dual home/sea existence, they, in the course of their normal work establish a mobile transit existence. Furthermore, multinational crewing and highly striated work hierarchies present complexities. The dominance of one nationality in the higher tier positions undermines social cohesion in the workplace resulting in a racialised employment context. The social separation arising from a racialised hierarchy was, for example, critical in highlighting the Filipino seafarers' subordinate position. Being in lower ranks, Filipino seafarers felt constantly at risk of losing their jobs and this reinforced the tendency to form a closed group amongst Filipinos. The Filipino seafarers, as a result, remained separate from their European officers by keeping within professional limits, and thus reinforcing the feeling of isolation, making it more difficult to feel attached to the ship. Similar experience is also reflected amongst land-based migrants who suffer what Lucassen (2003) calls a "double minority" in terms of rank and status. Under the transnational migrant experience, this is instructive in terms of how constraints in adapting to a new society is manifested and influenced by the processes in place. Although alienation always accompanies any forms of migration, the study by Westlund and Bolton (2003) points to the value of informal interactions in accommodating new norms and practices. Accordingly, this emphasizes the importance of having captains more concerned with the socialisation of the crew with different cultural backgrounds. Without a "common collective identity, cultural – ideological outlook, and memory of their homeland," identifying towards the ship presents a challenge (Wight 2000). The important point to note within such scenario is that because of the distinctiveness of the ship both as a place of living and working, the form of belonging is about accommodating the manifold differences and this is qualitatively different when compared to "land-based" community commitment. Obviously, in an institutionalised sort of

workplace, integration at the level of the community cannot be expected to occur. The closed system in the ship shows a narrow form of integration. Whereas seafarers may function effectively as a group due to their position in the hierarchy, the differentiation along ethnic lines make them socially less cohesive when on the ship. Occupational integration therefore decisively embeds seafarers to the ship and there is a lack of other kinds of integration such as social and cultural integration. Experiences of seafarers revealed certain vulnerabilities such as feelings of dispensability and notion of unfair judgment that parallels the experiences of other economic migrants ashore. The lack of a complete membership on-board is circumscribed to the “profit before safety” priorities (Nichols 1997). Whereas this cannot be as genuine as those found ashore, it carries with it a high regard to the dignity of labour and an enduring role of the family.

A social and political consequence for the Philippine State is an active construction of the family as a source of Filipino seafarers’ identification. As the government is actively involved with the Filipino seafarers’ contractual employment, its role within the transnational frame relates to evoking a sense of belonging and loyalty. Tyner (2009) traced the government discourse from self-fulfilment to self-sacrifice. Filipinos’ identification with the Philippines contains the sacrifice they undertake in order to provide for their families. As “new heroes,” seafarers’ identification with their families is emphasized and shares in the construction of a transnational outlook for seafarers. Whereas most of the seafarers may express cynicism with this, they nevertheless agree with its sacrificial tone. This is akin to Guarnizo’s (2003: 689) concept of transnational living, which incorporates the “role of state in granting special rights to migrants to promote integration into national project.”

However, the Philippine government’s approach to migration is more reflective of the competition state approaches discussed by Cerny (1997). In that, between managing economic interests and social welfare, the state focuses on the former and thus aids in commodifying its labour. In the Philippine’s seafaring context, this maintains the competitive advantage of labour in the global market while it supports local business growth related to the maritime industry (i.e., maritime agencies and academies, training centres etc.). As national obligation becomes shifted to these private agencies, the regulatory protection of seafarers becomes subsumed under the more immediate goal of foreign exchange profits (Dacanay and Walters, 2011). Even within a much broader scale, this shows how active state intervention contributes to invoking a sense of bifocality (Vertovec 2004). A dual orientation concurrently locates seafarers’ life-world in the national and global scale but with a certain measure of fragility. Togetherness in the community is encouraged by a national imagination inasmuch as it is also a reflection of the vulnerability of labour. The links to the family, such as dispositions and strong approach to kinship, is therefore sustained as one way of moderating that insecurity. The regularity by which identification to the homeland may be expressed should be equally articulated with the catalysing power of the state.

The major preoccupation of the Philippine state on remittances and the mandatory feature particularly attached to Filipino seafarers’ income constitute an important transnational attribute. The findings in this study showed that remittances symbolically sustain seafarers’ social networks in the community despite long periods of absence. More than the economic use of remittances, the emotional and social security also determined regular flow of remittances. At both the national and the local levels, positive impacts of remittances have

been empirically documented as a development tool while its social implications have been hardly examined. Sending remittances to maintain social networks is reflective of a more serious concern relating to the Filipino seafarers' integration. An important issue along this line is the competing interests faced by the Philippine government: between maintaining the remittance economy or protecting the labour entitlements of its seafarers. Presently, the stance adheres to the former as it is regarded as stable prop to the economy. The dire social consequences are excluded in tackling the vicissitudes in the global seafaring trends. As it appears, total remittance impact may seem paltry if the precarious employment relationship and levels of insecurity seafarers have to face are factored in. Two important concerns such as Filipino seafarers' vulnerability in terms of labour market position and social mobility, where partly shaped by national interests, are also globally produced. The sense of obligation and reciprocity attached to remittance exchange within a fragile employment set-up shows another layer of reality on why seafarers connect to the community. The process of social and economic integration has become a strategy for counteracting the resulting labour insecurities.

Transnational realities in the seafaring sector have therefore raised the importance of putting forward solutions that will temper widespread vulnerability. As seafarers face weak representation at home and onboard the ship, strategies should be explored. As such, the presence of seafaring unions, as one of the opportunity structures in place, should be considered.

The Union Renewal Debate

The hereabove-highlighted developments have happened during a period of sustained decline in labour movement fortunes. In an environment characterised by the growing exploitative power of global capital and a state, perceived to be in decline, and/or to have withdrawn essential support for labour in pursuit of neo-liberal ideologies, workers have become increasingly vulnerable and defenceless. An important debate, which has gained momentum since the 1990s, relates to the ways in which the strength of unions can be rejuvenated in order to provide globe-wide protection for an increasingly vulnerable workforce. Such renewal is deemed particularly necessary in the context of globalisation, capital transnationalisation and declining union influence and fortunes (e.g. Fairbrother et al, 2009; Beukeman and Coenen, 2009; Cornfield and McCammon, 2009). Some of the options available to labour in this regard include renewed and increased organising, negotiating labour-capital partnerships, reform of union structures, coalition building and building international solidarity.

The literature shows that, in recent years, there have been marked attempts by local unions to reinvigorate efficiency and instrumentality, restructure governance, and internal organisation and expand and consolidate resources (Waddington, 2006b; Gekara, 2010a). One way by which unions have sought renewal is cross-sector and cross-border solidarity (see Grenier, 2006; Havien, 2006; Lévesque and Murray, 2010; Guille, 2009). The thesis, in this light, posits that unions should bridge geo-political divides and begin to organise on a similar cross-border scale as multinational capital in order to effectively represent members. In this regard Borgers (1999) highlights the disparities between the organising capacities of trans-national capital and that of labour as the key argument for cross-border union solidarity. The

possibility for global unionism, or perhaps union internationalism, has therefore become a focus in union literature in recent years. However, there seem to be more questions than answers regarding the definition of global unionism and union internationalism. Questions mainly centre on nature and form, the conditions for effective global organising and representation, particularly in the face of global outsourcing and a growing North-South rift.

Seemingly, the concept of union internationalism has so far manifested itself in various forms, representing different levels of international labour organising, including, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and Global Union Federations (GUF). Other forms include nationally based unions operating internationally and cases of local unions or union branches actively engaging in international union activities (O'Brien and Harrod, 2002). In their analysis, O'Brien and Harrod (2002:5) conclude that these manifestations do not really amount to internationalism, but rather cases of 'international trade union organisations attempting to coordinate national unions, which are primarily local in intent and operations'. In a similar analysis, Gallin (2002) concludes that most of the union mergers taking place so far happen within national borders, an indication of failure in this respect. This limits unions' potential as instruments of international solidarity and restricts their ability to represent those workers employed in a trans-national context. The predominant view is that in an environment dominated by multinational corporations, continually playing national labour groups against each other, extending such merger strategies across borders would be a more effective way of repositioning. On this subject, Gallin (2002:247) wonders at the fact that 'a simple idea such as merging unions of different countries is regarded as utopian' and suggests that cross-border union mergers should by now be widely practised considering the environment in which labour operates currently (Gallin, 2002; Guille, 2009).

Perhaps taking cue from what has been described as 'past experiences of frustration and failure' in the various attempts to create effective international union structures (O'Brien and Harrod, 2002:7), a significant section of the literature in the late 1990s and 2000s has highlighted the need for a more structured approach towards global unionism and analysed the conditions necessary for it (e.g., Stirling, 2010; Smith, 2010; Gallin, 2002; Penfold, 2007; Guille, 2009; Hubbard, 2006; Waterman, 2001; Lambert and Webster, 2001).

The Data

The material informing the discussion is drawn from two parallel and ongoing ethnographic qualitative research projects. One focuses on labour trans-nationalism and its implications on the wellbeing of seafarers, which involved semi-structured interviews complemented with a structured questionnaire and non-participant observation aboard a ship. Three research sites were utilized for this study: a seafarer's dormitory in Manila, a rural community in Iloilo, Philippines, and a container ship where the researcher spent 41 consecutive days observing and speaking to seafarers about their work and life experiences. At the dormitory and in the community, a total of 75 interviews were conducted, including both seafarers (in-between contracts) and their partners.

The parallel study involved an ethnographic qualitative research conducted between 2005 and 2010 focusing on transnational union representation in the seafaring sector. The research

mainly involved formal qualitative in-depth interviews as well as informal discussions with top leaders and members of the Nautilus International union. The lead researcher has also attended some of the union's council and committee meetings, as part of the research process. The discussions with the various leaders revolved around the motivations, processes and challenges in creating cross border union structures for effective representation of seafarers in highly globalised context. Some information also came from a review of the Nautilus International Telegraph going back several years. In total, 20 formal interviews and about 10 informal discussions were been conducted. The interviews in both studies were formally transcribed and consolidated with field notes from the informal discussions, as well as the material from documents and records, coded in NVivo and thematically analysed.

The Trans-nationalisation Problem for Seafarers

In the seafaring sector, cross-border solidarity and collaboration between the many national maritime unions is essential. The argument being that, in an industry characterised by footloose trans-national capital and employing a globally mobile and trans-national labour-force, national unions in the industry must similarly trans-nationalise if they are to effectively counter the exploitative power of shipping capital, ensure decent and equitable conditions and protect worker's rights in the workplace both locally and abroad (Gekara, 2010).

A lot of the tensions evident in globalised labour markets and multinational workplaces such as the seafaring shop are engendered by an underlying racialised structure and approach to recruitment, employment and designation (Lucassen, 2003). As globalisation has intensified global competition, deindustrialisation, particularly in advanced economies, and consequent shifting manufacturing bases to low-cost developing countries, perceptions of lost jobs has heightened north-south tensions in the international labour market. In such a context an important question regards how to respond to job losses at home while at the same time pushing a transnational union agenda. As illustrated by discussions with Filipino seafarers employed on the international fleet, the perception that seafarer jobs have been exported to the south has created a 'we' verses 'the others' attitudes, which apparently determine the level of one group's opportunities and vulnerabilities in the workplace. On one vessel where the researcher stayed, seafarers explained that Filipino seafarers' felt highly expendable and constantly feared termination of employment contract. They, apparently, saw other nationalities as competitors for their jobs leading to constant mistrust. The hierarchy was highly racialised with Europeans forming senior officer, followed by Indian officers while the ratings positions were mostly occupied by Filipinos. The Filipino ratings viewed the actions and decisions of the officers as calculated towards and leading to their eventual replacement with Indians. . A Filipino engine rating explained:

Here in the ship, all your actions are observed [by Indian officers]. So if they see a mistake, then that is counted. Here that is what is hard, even if you have done a lot of good things and you made just one mistake, then all the good deeds are erased (Filipino engine trainee)

Generally, this reflects one level of vulnerability experienced by 'vulnerable' nationalities at the multinational workplace. They think that they are not being treated equitably and that they are in a more fragile position as most of their performance evaluation ultimately rest on

the officers who would be more inclined to replace them with their ‘own people’ at the slightest opportunity. The engine trainee further elaborated:

Even if it is their fault, they sometimes pinpoint us. This is just to cover up their faults. So I can't[sic] avoid that because they will be the one who will always be heard out even if this goes to the company (Filipino engine trainee)

Not only do these ‘vulnerable groups’ risk the immediate danger of contract termination, they also risk long-term blacklisting which would diminish chances of being offered future contracts on other ships. This feeling of vulnerability and mistrust was, apparently, not only reported by Filipino ratings but even officers, thus reinforcing the dire implications of racialization at the shipboard workplace. The solution, as explained below was to be as subservient and follow instructions to the letter, work diligently and make sure they do not upset anyone from the perceived ‘superior nationalities’:

The thing is, Filipinos are perseverant, and they will bear it out cause they are thinking about the salary. Once they have trouble, they will be removed from the office. Sometimes if those in the office know this person, they can say that this person is troublesome. It is hard to transfer if you have a bad record. So they will always think to just bear it out (V0138 Second mate)

The possibility of premature termination of contract was therefore, always presented in juxtaposition with the widespread blacklisting practice in the Philippines whereby having been blacklisted on-board ship, one’s chances of getting jobs through the manning agencies (which recruit and supply seafarers to the international fleet) were severely jeopardised. This clearly unlawful system currently affects around 10,000 Filipino seafarers who have allegedly committed a range of offences (ICONS 2000). To further complicate matters, the nation state which would be expected to establish policies and legislation that cushion workers, albeit at the national and local level, from such unfair treatment by hiring companies has been weakened by their its narrow focus on the remittance and foreign-exchange value of these international workers (Dacanay and Walters, 2011).

Another issue raised by many seafarers from the so-called ‘vulnerable’ group(s) is one of general prejudice with regards to aptitude and competency. As explained by those interviewed, there was tendency to place people into ranked competency categories based on nationality, irrespective of certification. In such an environment two people doing the same job and possessing similar certificates of competency but belonging to different nationality groups would be ranked differently and remunerated as such. One’s ranking in this sense also determined their level of dispensability:

Like for example, we have here 4th engineer (Indian), he is not that good but there is another 4th engineer (Filipino) but was backstabbed. He was much better but he was sent home because of that. If they made a mistake, then that is just fine with them but if it is Filipino then you are dead. So you have to be careful. You really have to be careful if you are a Filipino because they have a different treatment. V0031

Such a racialised view of aptitude and competency also tends to determine the level of rank ceiling so that people from certain nationality groups would rarely rise above a certain rank – mostly 3rd officer rank, that is, from junior officer to senior officer levels.

Focus, in this paper, on workplace racialization and its vulnerability implications is informed by the fact that, whereas it is relatively easy for national unions to cooperate on technical issues such workplace injuries, unpaid wages, repatriation, and other welfare-related issues, more complex discussions about equal treatment and representation across different nationality groups, particularly belonging to opposite sides of the North-South rift, present a problem. In an era characterised by deindustrialisation, job losses, and intense global economic competition, worker representation is increasingly protectionist, with *our people, our industries and our jobs*, as the key mantra. Therein lies, arguably, the greatest challenge to cross-border unionism. In the seafaring sector, especially, where highly levels of worker mobility, reduced visa restrictions and intense North-South competition in the global labour market, the concept of one union representing workers equally across borders may seem daunting and impossible. As highlighted, unions in the sector have so far demonstrated a high level of cross-border working, albeit ad hoc, informal and largely focussing on non-controversial labour standards related issues.

The Trans-nationalisation Challenge for Seafaring Unions

As highlighted, an important objective for unions under globalisation is to organise internationally and sufficiently counter the power of transnational business to exploit labour across national borders. Key challenges include how to North-South rift which has lately widened with global outsourcing, and establishing seamless cross-boundary union structures. In the seafaring sector, the mobility and trans-national character of the workforce, certainly calls for a more structured approach to cross-border organising. Such will not only ensure labour standards across board but also equitable representation. In this respect, the Nautilus merger, which created a single union structured and formally organised across national borders, represents a departure from the norm and, perhaps, suggests a model, which could potentially revolutionises the concept of organising and representation.

The process of establishing Nautilus International (see Gekara 2010a) highlights some of the key challenges. Firstly, convincing members of the potential benefits of a cross-border merger and obtaining their support; secondly, erecting organisational and administrative structures capable of delivering effective and equitable representation; and thirdly, broadening the scope beyond the immediate constituency. Regarding the first challenge it must be understood that the process was an initiative of the leadership with a vision shaped by developments related to globalisation. This vision was not necessarily shared by the membership whose focus was on local employment and workplace issues. Due to the drastic decline in European shipping and loss of seafarer jobs between mid-1970s and the end of the century (Gekara, 2009), individual European market segments were more concerned about securing their employment futures. As explained by one union leader:

When faced with issues of job loss and off-shoring such as we are the temptation is to view other nationalities as the problem. People tend to forget that the core of the problem is often

their governments and their anti-labour policies and the companies and their bottom-line recruitment policies (Nautilus Official, April 2006).

The view among ordinary members tends to be that the best way to fight for British seafaring jobs is, “*to fight for [British] jobs locally and not for the Dutch jobs as well*”. Some, apparently, argued that the new union would not “*be able to fight for [local] jobs because it will have to look after them [the Dutch] as well*” (Nautilus Union Member, Dec. 2010). Relatedly, there seems to have existed a tension regarding the status of the two unions after amalgamation. The fear among ordinary members on both sides, especially the Dutch, was that being much smaller, in terms of membership, that their counterpart, they would end up losing all identity and a local agenda:

In terms of numbers, resources and overall influence, we are a much smaller union and therefore our members worry that, ‘well, they are so much bigger than us; they are going to eat us all ... (Nautilus Official, April 2006)

Members were apparently anxious about the dangers of losing their identity as a national workers union. Identity was presented as engulfing the history and the cultural values and practices, which would be a great loss if diluted as a result of the merger.

There was also the important question about amalgamating organisational structures which were, hitherto, very different in order to establish an effective democratic structure to ensure effective integration. There were differences in, for example, approaches to management approaches whereby Nautilus UK retained a more top-down hierarchical approach while Nautilus NL employed an egalitarian ‘Polder Model’ approach. Whereas the ultimate decision lay with the General Secretary under the UK system, the Dutch had to reach general consensus however long it took. The president was simply a *Voorzitter* (chairman) – a coordinator of the process.

The solution to some of the key challenges was to create a well-balanced cross-border organisational structure and adopt a management approach, which combined the strong points and avoided the weaknesses. For example, while the Dutch *polder model* meant that consensus was sought on all issues and, in the end, all parties were happy with decisions, it tended to take long to arrive at such decisions. The hierarchical approach, on the UK side, on the other hand, did not “*necessarily take everybody happily onboard*” but it meant that decisions were arrived at quicker. The middle point was, therefore, a carefully negotiated balance between expedience and consensus so that they:

We get to decisions quickly ... but we do want to take people with us on the basis of consensus ... (Nautilus Official January 2009).

Therefore, whereas the amalgamation has been described as a possible model for effective union futures (e.g. Gekara, 2010, 2010), the question remains whether it will disprove Borgers’ (1999:109) prediction that ‘many of these alliances will not survive the inevitable political and organisational tensions that will emerge between the participants over time’. Question such as does the model; for example, present an immediate remedy to the

challenges of trans-nationalism, racialization and growing vulnerability of seafarers internationally?

Conclusions

The question that academic debates have so far circumvented is what globalisation means for the labour movement and national unions. A major challenge is how unions may structure their organisations in order to accord workers internationally, equitable and effective representation. The damaging consequence of globalisation in this regard is the expansive influence of multinational businesses across borders and their exploitation of difference in economic situation across regions. In this way, they have been able to undermine the power of unions through a systematic restructuring of production and distribution through outsourcing and offshoring, leading to deindustrialisation and massive job losses in the North and casualization and employee vulnerability in the South.

In the shipping industry, the move by shipping multinationals to export seafaring jobs to the South has achieved the objective of, at once cutting labour costs, and weakening the unions in the North as a result of employment loss and consequent membership decline. By pitting workers in the North against their counterparts in the South at the global labour market, the businesses have effectively complicated union organising efforts across borders. Yet, as explained by Nautilus Union officials, and as argued in the literature, unions must effectively organise internationally in order to offer effective representation for workers who are, otherwise, becoming increasingly vulnerable at the workplace (Stirling, 2010; Smith, 2010; Gekara, 2010).

As highlighted in the Nautilus Union case, union leaders must come up with a formula for overcoming the North-South tensions as well as those of the local versus the global. How can North seafarers work with South counterparts without feeling threatened by the other? How can unions address problems of internationalisation while at the same time keeping intact the fabrics of the local? Ultimately, what are the essential conditions for effective cross-border unionism?

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