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Toward a Vision of Sexual and Economic Justice  
Thought Paper

**Sexuality, Globalization, and Labor Activism, Mary Margaret Fonow  
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As a political environment, globalization has reconfigured the opportunities for politics and the repertoire for collective action available to social movements.<sup>1</sup> What constraints and opportunities does globalization pose for gay labor activists concerned with questions of economic and social justice? My way of exploring this question is to focus attention on how gay activists are capturing the resources, networks, and discourses of the international labor movement to mobilize for labor rights and economic justice in a global economy. Much like women and other marginalized workers who are underrepresented in “the House of Labor,” GLBT workers are using self-organizing as a strategy to build political spaces within unions from which they can make claims for representation and participation. It is also from these spaces that alliances with activists from other social movements, from grass-roots organizations, and from civil society concerned with similar issues are forged.

To illustrate how we might conceptualize the gay-labor alliance at the transnational level, I will use as my example the joint efforts of two large Global Union Federations, Public Service International (PSI) and Education International (EI), to confront homophobia and discrimination against gay teachers and public service workers. These organizations are reconceptualising traditional labor issues to include GLBT issues and creating equity structures that seek to enhance the participation and representation of gay workers in the leadership and life of the union.<sup>2</sup>

**Globalization and Labor Internationalism**

Labor internationalism has roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the idea that workers in different parts of the world might have common interests led to the establishment of international federated labour bodies, mostly headquartered in Europe, whose missions included building international support and solidarity for workers and their struggles for labor rights. These organizations have expanded to every region of the world and have grown in size, scope, and political influence. Today there are ten different global union federations representing millions of workers in almost every country in the world. The two that have been most receptive to gay activism have been female-dominated, feminist-influenced public sector federations with well developed equity programs and structures in place.<sup>3</sup> The Public Service International, founded in 1907, is comprised of 650 affiliated trade unions in 150 countries representing 20 million public sector workers in government, health and social care, municipal and community services and public utilities. The Education International is comprised of 348 affiliated organizations in 169 counties representing 30 million teachers and education workers from pre-school through university. Both

Federations have broadened the scope of their mission to include basic questions of equity, justice and free access to public services and education. EI states on its website "We promote democracy, sustainable development, fair trade, basic social services and health and safety." PSI and EI maintain permanent standing within international organizations concerned about labor standards, practices and rights. These include the ILO and various UN sub-organizations, employer organizations, and the newer financial institutions like the WTO. In the case of violations of human and trade union rights, joint action with human rights groups and consumer rights organizations can make protest more effective. Joining forces with activists from women's, environmental and social-work associations contribute to achievements not possible without a cooperative approach.<sup>4</sup>

### **International Gay Labor Activism**

The emergence of a gay labor activism at the international level is the outcome of several decades of queer organizing within national unions in Canada, U.S., Australia, South Africa, Britain, Germany, etc. and many of these struggles have been documented by others.<sup>5</sup> In addition there has been a proliferation of political spaces (real and virtual) where transnational activists from a variety of movements--gay, human rights, feminists, labor, global justice--can meet to exchange information and strategies for change. These spaces include various UN Forums, international labor conferences, the World Social Forum, the gay games, etc. Increasingly, campaigns for labor rights are organized and funded not by the unions alone, but with support from churches, foundations and universities. Labor conferences and periodicals focus more on non-contract issues such as worker empowerment, organizing, union democracy, and feminism.<sup>6</sup> The international Gay Games are now scheduled in conjunction with an international World Workers' Out Conference. The Sydney conference drew 1700 participants from 113 countries. Conference declarations and action plans stress the political necessity of global campaigns to tackle the appalling working conditions of those who "live in countries that still execute their homosexual citizens" (Workers Online 2002, p. 139). Such transnational networks have the capacity to be effective when they draw on trade union resources to create forums and spaces for lesbian, gay and transgendered workers.

It was prior to the 2004 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre (Brazil) that gay activists from PSI and EI sponsored a joint forum on sexual diversity. It is common for organizations and movements to hold pre-Social Forum events to articulate their role in the larger WSF and in the movement for global justice. The purpose of the forum on sexual diversity was to develop a set of proposals for action on the rights for GLBT workers that would be presented to PSI and EI. Their declaration on GLBT labor rights was framed as human rights. The declaration recognized the diversity of the GLBT communities and lifestyles and asserted that the workplace must be a space free of discrimination of any kind and urged that trade unions take the lead in eliminating discrimination. It also acknowledged that equal rights for GLBT workers would be strengthened if they were successfully integrated into broader campaigns for labor rights at national,

regional and international levels. The Declaration expressed the concern “that the rights of sexual minorities are not explicitly recognized in most international and national standards and instruments; and that therefore discrimination and inequity based on sexual orientation and gender identity continue to persist at different levels. These include employment; access to public services; criminal and civil law; failure to recognize legally atypical personal relations such as same sex partnerships and de facto couples; lack of support for GLBT young workers and the specific needs of transgender people”

In only three short years the action plan adopted at the WSF was accomplished. The plan called for establishing a sexual diversity network between PSI and EI that would facilitate the sharing of resources and coordinate national and international campaigns for GLBT labor and social rights; linking web pages to provide a regular supply of news and updates about the work of the national networks; participation in the Montreal World Workers’ Out Conference, and holding an international forum on sexual diversity prior to the PSI World Congress in 2007.<sup>7</sup>

We know that globalization has a differential impact on countries, on regions, on households, and on different groups of workers whose gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation, education, etc. have structured their location in the labor market in very different ways. Globalization creates difference, fragmentation, and competition, which makes the construction of solidarity and collective action more challenging. To be successful social movements will need an understanding of the proliferation of differences and the opportunities and constraints these differences pose for organizing and for creating a transnational response to globalization. Sexuality is only one dimension of difference and must be understood in relation to other categories of difference, in relation to scale and geographic location, and in relation to historical context.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Coalitions across Borders: Transnational Protest and the Neoliberal Order*, eds. Joe Brandy & Jackie Smith, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005; *Transnational Protest & Global Activism*, eds. Donatella Della Porta & Sidney Tarrow, Lanham, MD, Roman & Littlefield, 2005, Valentine Moghadam, *Globalizing Women” Transnational Feminist Networks*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Franzway and Fonow, *Making Feminist Politics: Transnational Alliances between Women and Labor*, under contract with the University of Illinois Press argues that union feminists are bringing qualities of the women’s movement into the traditional trade union movement-not only to make their claims about union gender politics, but also to develop strategies that revitalize the labor movement itself. Gay labor activists use some of the same strategies employed by feminist to expand the scope and range of labor to incorporate attention to sexuality. Cultivating links between movements is key component of union renewal. The strength of gay labor activism is tied to the gay rights movement and to the women’s movement.

<sup>3</sup> For the value of self-organizing see the special *Industrial Relations Journal*, 37, 4, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> PSI web site is at <http://www.world-psi.org/> and EI web site at <http://www.ei-ie.org/en/index.php>

<sup>5</sup> See *Labouring for Rights: Unions and Sexual Diversity across Nation*, Gerald Hunt, ed., Philadelphia: Temple, 1999; *Out at Work: Building a Gay-Labor Alliance*, Kitty Krupat and Patrick McCreery, eds., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

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<sup>6</sup> See Kidder, Thalia. "Networks in Transnational Labor Organizing", in *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks and Norms*, Khagram, S., J. Riker, and K. Sikkink, eds, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> These unions are struggling with new ways to think about family issues. Under globalization private life merges with the public, and it becomes harder and harder to distinguish among work, family, and intimate spheres. This has important implications for labor politics, and it is essential for labor to understand the sexual politics of everyday life including family, intimate relations, social reproduction, sexuality, and self-care. Union feminists are calling on labor to move far beyond nominal support for policies that help women balance work and family and to challenge the fundamental relations of power based on gender in every sphere of life. Responding to the challenge will be difficult for labor. Some men who have been subject to the economic dislocations of globalization often experience these dislocations as a threat to their masculinity rather than a basis for labor militancy. As a consequence they are vulnerable to political discourses and movements that call for a return to traditional "family values." It is unproductive to use political frames that center on the "working family," as a way to co-opt the conservative discursive hold on "family values," because it does not take into account the sexual politics of intimate life or kinship or recognize the great variation in family structures and gender relations that are part and parcel of globalization. Progressive organizations that make a simple appeal to "working families"--without recognizing the complexity of families, e.g., that some members of families are exploited outside of families or are at risk within them, trapped in authoritarian, exploitative, or violent living arrangements--will not be able to mobilize a viable progressive labor movement (Duggan L., "Crossing the line: The Brandon Tina case and the social psychology of working class resentment", in *New Labor Forum*, vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 37-44 2005, 38). Cognitively such language evokes the patriarchal family based on traditional gender roles and leaves little room for labor to address the real needs of many workers who live their lives within alternative families including single-headed households, multigenerational households, gay and lesbian households, co-habiting adults, single households, childless couples, and unrelated adults sharing domestic responsibilities.