Abstract: This paper takes as its context (1) the widely recognised global crisis of organised labour in an era of capitalist globalisation, (2) the ability of transnational capital to play workers and governments of different countries off against each other, (3) the resurgence in the last decade of labour internationalism as both an academic discipline and as a countervailing political strategy by organised labour movements to global corporate power, and (4) the growing role that new ICTs, in particular the Internet, are playing in mobilising cross-border labour solidarity. Part 1 of the paper argues that although globalisation has made labour internationalism prerequisite for trade union revival, achieving this means confronting the historical obstacles and inherent limitations of international worker solidarity. Part 2 critically analyses what is called here the 'net-internationalist' perspective and argues that the problematic past of internationalism is in many ways being overcome by the Internet. The conclusion, however, warns that despite its potential, the Internet must not itself become fetishised as the virtual solution to real-world solidarity building.
Introduction: the Global Crisis of Organised Labour

In the age of globalisation, trade unions and labour movements find themselves in crisis and decline. From the post-war apogee of working class power, the last two decades have witnessed a “dramatic and far-reaching employer and state offensive” against trade unions with their widespread “ejection” from post-war governing tripartite coalitions and renewed state repression in developing countries (Kelly 1998:61; O’Brien 2000:536). For 65 countries surveyed by the ILO\(^1\) between 1985 and 1995, 75 percent experienced falling membership, two-thirds of which by more than 20 percent (ILO 1997). Explaining this reversal reveals many, often competing, perspectives in the literature, but nearly all acknowledge the importance of capitalist globalisation, which through the unprecedented mobility of global capital has enabled TNCs\(^2\) to decimate national trade union power and government autonomy. Meanwhile, the dominant trade union response to globalisation – ‘partnership’ with the employer in the interests of national economic competitiveness – is only serving to legitimise, reinforce and exacerbate the globalisation process and trade union decline.

Instead, based on a decade of both resurgent international labour studies and labour internationalism, this paper argues that unions can only regain power and influence in the workplace and the economy by confronting global capital at the global level and engaging in international solidarity with unions and movements in other countries. However, the necessity of cross-border worker solidarity is countered by an appalling historical record of past internationalisms ruined by divisive Cold War politics, ideological splits, imperialist interventions and nationalism, factors which for many confirm the “inherent” objective and subjective barriers to international solidarity. This is where the Internet comes in. Not only is the

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\(^1\) International Labor Organization

\(^2\) Transnational Corporations
Internet seen as largely responsible for the re-emergence of internationalism in the last decade, many argue that by eroding the historical, objective and subjective obstacles to mobilising cross-border solidarity, the Internet is providing unions for the first time with “the means to coordinate globally in the age of the multinational corporation” (Davison 2000:1).

The aim of this paper is to come to some preliminary conclusions about the potential of the Internet to overcome past and present obstacles to labour internationalism through a critical review of ‘net-internationalism’ in theory and practice. The paper is in two parts. Part one first argues that capitalist globalisation necessitates an international labour response but then reviews the limitations and dilemmas of labour internationalism. Part two critically reviews the claims of labour-internet enthusiasts that the Internet is overcoming the obstacles to internationalism. The conclusion argues that although the Internet has provided new and important tools for international worker solidarity, given the problems of Internet access, ownership and control, as well as the complex subjective dynamics of developing a “global solidarity culture”, the Internet must not itself become fetishised as the virtual solution to real-world solidarity building.

**Globalisation, Trade Unions and the Dilemmas of Labour Internationalism**

*Globalisation: the End of Organised Capitalism or Labour?*

Globalisation is a highly contested term and many even dispute its existence, but there is little doubt that something quite unprecedented has happened to the world economy in the last thirty years. The view here is that globalisation is both an inevitable historical-capitalist process of expansion and also a sudden shift in contemporary global power relations between capital, state

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2 Transnational Corporations
and civil society. This is in-keeping with Held & McGrew’s perspective (1998:220) that although there have been “different historical forms of globalisation”, our contemporary globalisation is distinguished by its “unique spatio-temporal and organisational attributes”. These attributes are often described in terms of the “compression of time and growing irrelevance of distance in activities such as communication, travel, financial exchange and production” (O’Brien 2000:536). While descriptively true, this camouflages both the central role played by new international capitalist strategies in an era of intensified global economic competition and falling profit rates, and the actual qualitative transformation of global class relations through the compression of time and space in production and finance capital mobility.

A better definition, therefore, is that globalisation has led to the unprecedented global mobility of capital, dramatically re-ordering the post-war structures and dynamics of class-state power relations in favour of particularly transnational capitalist interests. This is because globalisation has eroded the foundations of organised labour’s post-war strength, a strength which previously forced national capitals into an uneasy ‘class-compromise’ with trade unions and interventionist states. These foundations were several interrelated and historically contingent structural and political phenomena: an unprecedented post-war economic expansion driven by reconstruction and part-financed by the Marshall Plan; full employment and historically tight labour markets which gave labour strong bargaining power; welfare states effectively removing wage-determination from competitive labour markets; the underlying Fordist mass-production manufacturing model, conducive to unionisation and collective bargaining; and the domestic capacity of states to pursue demand-management and full employment policies was supported at the international level by the post-war international monetary system that restricted short-term capital flows and speculation (Drache 1996a:41, 1996b:230).
Globalisation, however, has undermined the state-capital-labour compact in three main ways. (1) The dramatic increase in global economic competition and volatility has seen the return of mass unemployment, placing the reduction of labour costs and the intensification of the labour input at the heart of globalising strategies and forcing their re-insertion into competitive labour markets, but on a global scale. (2) Governments are “increasingly constrained in their freedom of manoeuvre by the economic policies of other states as by the investment decisions of internationally mobile capital” (Gill & Law 1988:92). The breakdown of the International Monetary System, under pressure from globalising financial market speculation, and the increasing dependence of national economies on global economic flows of investment, has seen “quicksilver” financial capital able to play off one territorial jurisdiction against another to gain the optimum “investment climate”, thus reducing the state’s capacity to pursue ‘Keynesian compromise’ policies favourable to trade union influence (McKenzie & Lee 1991). (3) The deterritorialisation of production, facilitated by the flexibilisation and disaggregation of production processes, and the gradual acquisition by TNCs of globalised corporate networks and production structures through strategic links, affiliates and mergers, has enabled TNCs to quickly transfer many parts of its production line virtually anywhere in the world. This has overcome the historic national-territorial limits on which workers used to win concessions from capital and state and has created an embryonic global labour market.

In summary, globalisation now allows capital to “divide and rule” over governments and workers by threatening to transfer production and jobs to another country, or to curtail future investments. Lash & Urry (1987) famously called this the “end of organised capitalism”, but in reality it has been the ‘re-organisation’ of capitalism through the disorganisation of labour. Consequently, developed world workers no longer have a quasi-monopoly of jobs in
manufacturing but must compete with an apparently “inexhaustible pool of potential labour” in the global economy (Boswell & Stevis 1997:291). This exit threat is buttressed by workers knowing that industrial relocation has taken place before, and that in Third World countries, labour is dramatically cheaper, more flexible and more easily subjected to hard work and longer hours. Half of civil aviation unions involved in a 1998 report by Cardiff University and the ITF³ reported that airline management used the threat that work would be contracted out, even abroad, in order to force workers into new working arrangements.

*The Trade Union Response*

It is in this context of a highly competitive global economy, in which TNCs are decisively weakening labour, states and democracy, that trade unions must revive. Pessimistically, an influential apocalyptic analysis associated with first Touraine (1986) and more recently Castells (1997:354, 360) dismisses the contemporary relevance and role of organised labour as “a major source of social cohesion and workers representation”, and sees the labour movement as “historically superseded”. Such claims are in one sense premature and to a certain extent misconceived, especially against the last decade which, as Moody (1997) argues, witnessed the beginnings of a trade union “rebellion against capitalist globalisation” spanning both sides of the North-South divide. He points to the “significant upward trend in levels of industrial action” since 1994 in the US, Britain, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Brazil and South Korea. While it is easy to exaggerate the existence of labour militancy in core countries, the opposite is true in the rest of the world where dynamic union movements in semi-periphery countries like Brazil and South Korea have successfully raised labour standards and pushed for political reforms and

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³ International Transport Workers Federation
However, when we consider this trade union ‘comeback’ as a response to globalisation, two patterns emerge: (1) all trade unions, however progressive, militant and anti-globalisation they might be, are overwhelmingly locked into national outlooks and strategies; (2) the dominant approach of the most powerful and still influential trade unions in the core countries is to accept globalisation, intensified economic and labour market competition and global capital mobility as inevitable and unstoppable. In this view, trade unions must adapt to competitive business considerations, by engaging in “enterprise egoism” – making the “survival of the establishment” the union’s top priority (Hyman 1999:104) – to ensure that their members maintain their jobs and secure future investment flows (Moody 1997:55).

This national competitive strategy is highly flawed – as Moody (1997:54) argues, the underlying “contradiction between the new demands of capital and the unions old line of defence” means that a national and, even worse, competitive response to a global problem can only accelerate and deepen the growing power of TNCs and harm the overall position of labour in the global economy. TNCs force unions to compete with each other for investment, and although they make the necessary adjustments to wage levels, working conditions and productivity, it is not a one-off adjustment but part of a constant process of bluff and blackmail that hits the poorest workers and countries hardest first and keeps going. Partnership, therefore, actually enhances capital’s blackmailing ability to force competitive wage deflation, productivity gains and job losses on workers everywhere. By accepting and engaging themselves in the globalisation process, unions are being reconstituted from both inside/outside into mere agencies of global capital. Even where unions take on TNCs in their own country independently of other trade unions, this is often just as self-destructive as welcoming them with open arms. TNCs have
enormous resources and can afford to move production in the short-term or long-term or “cross-subsidise losses in resisting industrial action” (Ramsay 1997:505).

Making the Case for Labour Internationalism

Against this critique of the dominant national competitive trade union model, it would appear axiomatic that for trade unions to survive let alone perform their historic function, some form of international worker cooperation and solidarity is required to successfully confront and constrain global capital. Articulations of this ‘global action’ vary according to different normative and analytical perspectives, many of which are embedded in existing and historical structures and movements of labour internationalism. Although beyond the scope of this paper, I will briefly mention two of the most prominent: (1) the top-down institutional perspective (enshrined within the existing forms of ‘official labour internationalism’ such as the ICFTU\textsuperscript{4} and the ITSs\textsuperscript{5}), which seeks to coordinate national trade unions in international campaigns to influence both the “form of industrial relations in particular states” and “the structure of the market by shaping the corporate activities of multinational firms” with the endgame of achieving global tripartite agreements (O’Brien 2000:545; Breitenfellner 1997); (2) the bottom-up global-local-network perspective of “global social movement unionism” in which labour, NSMs and radical NGOs network at the grassroots level to construct a “global solidarity culture” in the interests of mobilising mass direct action in pursuit of a radical transformation of global society (Waterman 1993; Moody 1997; Munck 1998).

Despite the different approaches, and there are many more, all agree on the practical need for internationalism and the opportunities for this that global corporate structures create. The
mutual benefits of cross-border networks of information-sharing on corporate economic data, pay-bargaining and management strategies between different national trade unions have recently been demonstrated in discussions between the British AEEU and Germany’s IG Metall about a merger to create a pan-European union. Union officials argued that if the two had been merged previously when BMW was planning to drop Rover in the UK, German industrial relations laws would have made it impossible to keep such plans secret from the UK workforce (Morgan 2000). Global campaigns against TNCs, meanwhile, could have a major impact because while only a minority of workers are employed by TNCs, they dominate many “nominally independent employers” and set “world-wide trends in working conditions” (Moody 1997:62). Successful action is feasible because TNCs are vulnerable at many points of their cross-border chains and thus local strikes in key locations could “close down international production systems in whole or part [and]...cripple even the largest TNCs in their major markets” (Ibid:63-64). This is compounded by the widespread adoption of Just-in-Time production, which leaves “businesses vulnerable to strikes affecting the production of essential components without which the entire production network can be brought to a standstill” (Breitenfellner 1997:547).

This resurgence of interest in labour internationalism has been matched by an upsurge of both ‘vertical’ international trade union activity and ‘horizontal’ cross-border solidarity. In 1996, the ICEM\textsuperscript{6} coordinated a successful international protest campaign to reinstate sacked striking workers against tyre giant Bridgestone/Firestone Inc. In 1997-98, dockers in the US, Australia, Spain and Israel took “sporadic solidarity action, in support of the sacked Liverpool dockers, which was followed by the Australian Waterfront dispute when in response to government

\textsuperscript{4} International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
\textsuperscript{5} International Trade Secretariats
\textsuperscript{6} International Chemical, Engineering and Mineworkers Secretariat
attempts to de-unionise the Waterfront, the ITF\textsuperscript{7} coordinated South African, Japanese and US unions in a threat to boycott any Australian shipping loaded with non-union labour (Lambert 1999). Armbruster (1998) cites his own study of the Phillips Van-Heusen (PVH) workers in Guatemala City who, despite being recognised by the Guatemalan government in 1992 after a concerted international campaign by US unions threatened the government with losing trading benefits with the US, STECAMOSA (the PVH union) would not be recognised by PVH because it represented less than 25 percent of the workforce, a legal requirement. Through a joint campaign of STECAMOSA, the textile ITS Latin American branch (FITTIV), and two US unions, a “strategic cross-border labor organizing model” was formed which was then put into action, increased membership and in 1997, the union was recognised by PVH.

\textit{Looking Back in Anger: the Divisive History of International Labour politics}

However, despite both this undoubted revival of labour internationalism and the strong intellectual case for cross-border solidarity, Stevis (1998:1) asserts that “the comprehensive network of global and regional labor organizations continues to play a marginal role” in international politics. Moreover, he argues that by placing the “contemporary predicament of international labor organizations within its historical context”, the overall future of labour internationalism appears decidedly “uncertain”. This is because throughout its history, labour internationalism has always been subordinate to national interests and undermined by ideological, political, factional, economic and organisational factors. During the Cold War, nationalism combined with the ideological affiliations of unions to split the international trade union movement into two rival factions, subordinate to the power politics of East and West. In 1948,

\textsuperscript{7} International Transport Workers Federation
the anti-Communist unions withdrew from the WFTU and created the ICFTU with the aim to “battle communist unions” as much as “battle employers’ organisations on behalf of their workers”. This not only isolated Eastern unions from West, it also “sharpened divisions between communist and non-communist unions in Western countries” (O’Brien 2000:536-7).

The ICFTU and the WFTU became “transmission belts for the priorities of the interests of US and USSR labor-state alliances” and domestic labour politics of developing countries were increasingly penetrated by Cold War politics through “divisive interventions rather than assistance towards the creation of autonomous unions” (Stevis 1998:9). US unions actively sought to expand the global market for US capital in order to preserve and create jobs for labour at home, whilst simultaneously seeking to deter companies from moving plants abroad by encouraging wage-raising unionism at potential sites overseas (Spalding 1988). For example, the AFL-CIO’s Latin American affiliate, the AIFLD received corporate, CIA and State Department funding to undermine militant labour unions and establish conservative unions throughout Latin America that supported US foreign and economic policies.

Nationalism, Cold War politics and US imperialism were not the only factors in previous failures of labour internationalism. The attempt to create World Company Councils (WCCs) in the 1970s and achieve global contract and multinational bargaining broke down because, as Stevis (1998:13) asserts, the ICFTU and WFTU unions “did not share a common discourse or politics”, and because national unions and the ITSs wanted to prevent WCCs from “creating autonomous horizontal linkages”. But the poor means of communication between trade unions of

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8 World Federation of Trade Unions
9 According to Armbruster (1998:22), the AIFLD “divided labor federations that opposed their policies, bribed labor leaders, and supported El Salvador’s labor rights record, even though military and death squad officials killed thousands of unionists”.
10 American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations
11 American Institute for Free Labor Development
different industries, countries, continents and ideologies also contributed. As Lee (1997:13) explains, the cost of flying trade unionists from around the world to meetings meant that the ‘company councils’ could not function and international conferences that might have built solidarity were non-starters. The lack of resources has also kept international labour organisations virtually anonymous to rank and file members of national trade unions, unable to widely circulate their publications and employ the necessary full-time staff to deal with administrative tasks such as constructing and updating databases, analysing TNC activities and strategies, and organising cross-border activities.

The end of the Cold War in 1989 has supposedly removed “the major ideological cleavage which had split workers’ organizations” and offers the possibility of reviving an internationalism that is no longer “polarized by ideology” (O’Brien 2000:536). Unfortunately, the legacy of the Cold War remains disruptive in several ways. First, the domination of international trade union structures by Cold War politics has left them weak “with limited powers and resources” (Stevis 1998:12). Second, ideological divisions still exist between unions as demonstrated by the existence of competing union models and political outlooks. Third, the past “divisive interventions” of the ICFTU and the AFL-CIO have not been expunged from the collective memories of developing countries. For example, the ICFTU’s campaign to get the ILO’s basic conventions on labour standards and rights incorporated into the WTO as a ‘social clause’ received substantial criticism from Third World social movements at the 1996 Singapore WTO Ministerial Meeting, not only for its ‘paternalism’ but also because they believed it was driven by Northern worker interests to prevent the export of jobs to the Third World by improving the conditions of workers there (O’Brien 2000:549).

This problematic past of labour internationalism merely confirms for many the “inherent
limits to the prospects of international trade unionism” (Munck 1988:199). Such a view dismisses the “evolutionary optimism” of internationalist thinkers like Charles Levinson who argued that through creating the objective conditions for solidarity, globalisation inevitably created the subjective conditions (Ramsay 1997). Instead, “left pessimist” approaches argue that building international solidarity is a perilous task given the natural “disunity of labour” in contrast to the intrinsic “organic unity of capital” (Ibid:510). This is because while capital is inherently expansionist and takes decisions on an international basis and increasingly at the international level, workers struggles are necessarily specific, tied to locality and generally inward-looking (Munck 1988:199-200). Therefore, all workers share the same structural relationship to capital as wage-labour in the abstract, but in the concrete they do not share the same circumstances, realities and relations “among themselves and with actually existing employers” (Hyman 1999:95). This tendency for localisation leads to division, fragmentation and “organizational segmentation”. Form (1995:13) identifies factors such as ‘autonomy’, ‘hierarchy’, ‘locality’, ‘technology’, ‘factionalism’, ‘ideology’, ‘external politics’, ‘skill’, ‘wealth’, ‘gender’, ‘education’, ‘ethnicity’, ‘race’ and ‘religion’ which cause intra- and inter-union cleavages and often “prevent the organisational merger of two or more unions of the same national movement”. If such factors divide national labour movements, then they are more than likely to divide international movements.

Globalisation may erode such differentiation by compressing the global and local experience. However, under acute internationally competitive conditions with the threat to jobs and livelihoods of possible capital flight, globalisation is more likely to divide not unify labour along national lines. In this situation, there is little enthusiasm for international solidarity, either on the potential victims or potential benefactors of capital flight; more likely is resentment of
foreign workers. Solidarity must therefore be *politically* constructed, but this is always threatened by national states and firms fighting political campaigns appealing to nationalist and protectionist sentiments to obstruct such consciousness. As Gennard *et al* (2000:58) argue, union members remain “nationalist and parochial…Members want to retain their jobs in the enterprises for which they work. They see their interests lying first and foremost in their own employing establishment.” Moreover, the economic divide between developed and developing countries is being widened by globalisation, something that Arghiri Emmanuel (1970) called “the international disintegration of the proletariat”. How can we compare the direct experiences of workers in AICs with those in South-East Asia (rapid economic growth), Latin America (uneven development) and sub-Saharan Africa (decline)?

Faced with this pessimistic analysis, the foundations for mobilising international labour campaigns against global capital structures seem extremely weak and must overcome serious objective and subjective obstacles. Indeed, the very history of ideological splits, the dominance of nationalism, the use of international trade union structures as instruments of Cold War politics and US imperialism, and a lack of resources demonstrates that the politics of engineering widespread, mass international worker solidarity might be the ‘art of the impossible’. However, a growing number of theorists argue that the qualitative form of the resurgence of international solidarity activity in the past decade contains one important difference from the past – the Internet. Although still limited in use, they see in the Internet new, revolutionary communicational tools that have the potential to overcome the “inherent limitations” of cross-national cooperation by eroding the historical and contemporary informational, organisational and cultural barriers. It is these claims we now turn.
Labour and the Internet: a New Tool for the Old Gravediggers?

Computer Communications and the New Internationalism

The Internet is of course in many ways the face of globalisation and the driving force behind the global crisis of trade unionism. Evolving out of the US military’s 1969 ARPANET\(^{12}\) project to create a reliable network of computer connections in the event of nuclear war, the various components of the Internet – email, discussion groups, online chat, videoconferencing, databases and online publishing (World-Wide Web) – have helped TNCs both to “increase profits and competitive advantage” and by improving their “marketing, purchasing, internal and external communications, and research and development”, have made it “easier than ever before…to outwit and outmanoeuvre unions” (Lee 1997:13). The basis of what I call the ‘net-internationalist’ approach is the belief that these very instruments of TNC power can be turned against global capital through their adoption and adaptation by the trade union movement in its pursuit of international solidarity.

In Eric Lee’s (1997) groundbreaking book, The Labour Movement and the Internet: The New Internationalism, the author sets out the definitive ‘net-internationalist’ perspective. He demonstrates that not only have trade unions and labour been using the Internet since 1981, but that figures such as Charles Levinson had been thinking about using new communication technologies strategically for internationalism as far back as 1972. His central proposition, embracing most other contributions in this area, is that computer-mediated communications are actively (re)-internationalising the labour movement by solving the problems that beset previous internationalisms. Although he consistently refuses to believe it a panacea, Lee is convinced that

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\(^{12}\) Advanced Research Projects Agency Network
the Internet is a fundamentally ‘necessary’ tool not only for internationalism but also trade union survival itself. Lee’s growing contributions to this subject are clearly some of the more sophisticated in a literature still in its infancy and lacking much critical theoretical analysis and serious empirical investigation. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify two distinct but overlapping traditions emerging which I call here organisational-instrumental approaches (Darlington 2000a; Lee see references; Shostak 1999), and solidaristic-dialogical approaches (Bailey 1997; Cleaver 1999; Waterman 1998, 1999, 2000).

Organisational-instrumentalism is usually nationally focused, with the obvious exception of Lee, and sees in the Internet an instrument for “faster, cheaper, further-reaching” communication, presenting new opportunities for organisational efficiency and mobilising trade union action (Waterman 2000:16). Solidaristic-dialogical perspectives accept the organisational qualities of ICTs and the Internet, but argue that the Internet is also ‘cyberspace’ – a place with “unlimited possibilities for international dialogue, creativity and the invention/discovery/development of new values, new attitudes, new dialogues” (Ibid:16). Taken together, the general net-internationalist perspective argues that by revolutionising global communications through the annihilation of time/space/cost, the Internet is breaking down the historical and inherent objective/subjective fetters to mobilising labour internationalism in three areas: (1) information, (2) organisation, (3) solidarity culture. I briefly review these arguments in turn and then with reference to two decades of Internet use by trade unions and labour movements, as well as other NGOs and NSMs, critically engage with the net-internationalist perspective in theory and practice.
(1) *Information*

For internationalism to take place, trade unions and labour activists need information – knowledge is power. The Internet has enabled hyper-rapid day-to-day cross-border information sharing between trade unions. Through email, trade unions can send electronic messages containing anything from simple text to computer programs, databases and pictures, right across the world to an unlimited number of other trade unionists in seconds and at very low cost, enabling members to be immediately alerted to changes in national collective agreements, current negotiations, macroeconomic data, employer strategies, and production techniques as well as labour disputes, strikes and employer/state assaults. The World-Wide Web is characterised by hyper-linked websites that store text, pictures, sounds and even videos which can be used by trade unions to publish information on virtually everything and accessible to anyone, anywhere when connected to the Internet. Even in countries with limited Internet access, online articles could be printed and circulated, placed in local publications (Lee 1997:18-40). For Lee, the Internet is inevitably fulfilling Levinson’s (1972:103-4, 104) dream of a “computerized data bank” on TNCs through which relevant information on the condition of a company can be made “immediately available” to different national and eventually international bargainers with these companies.

By linking every national trade union website home page to the other, and to the ICFTU, ITSs’ and even independent labour news service websites (like LabourStart\textsuperscript{13}), members can just as easily find out international union news as local and national news, effectively joining up all the trade union and labour movements around the world in what we might call a ‘global labour information highway’. Through online strike newspapers, websites can be used to refute
management or government propaganda and explain workers actions, gain media coverage and international support by helping to “speed up the availability of counter-information which can be used to contradict false (or the absence of) reporting in mainstream news services” (Pollack 2000:2). Moreover, email and websites can help to by-pass the “elite-controlled mass media in terms of both obtaining information and getting it out” (Cleaver 2000:16).

(2) Organisation

Through this informational power the Internet is overcoming past organisational obstacles to coordinating international solidarity efforts. First, implicit in Lee and explicit in Darlington (2000a) and Shostak (1999) is the belief that by turning trade unions from the branch to the international level into “e-unions” or “cyberunions”, not only can they achieve an optimum level of organisational efficiency releasing scarce resources, they can also become what Bill Gates calls in business circles “digital nervous systems”: able to “perceive and react” to their environment, to “sense competitive challenges” and “to organise timely responses” through the “accuracy, immediacy, and richness” of information and the consequent qualitative shift in the “insight and collaboration made possible” (Darlington 2000b:2).

Second, by combining global interactive databases with email, online chat and videoconferencing, trade unions can hold ‘virtual’ international conferences and meetings in order to internationally coordinate a “single set of demands and a single strategy” for the purposes of multinational collective bargaining with TNC employers. Over time this will become a global database of collective bargaining information which will “enable rapid assessments to be made and will support moves towards an upward harmonisation of important contract clauses and

13 See www.labourstart.org.uk
common contract renewal dates” (Thorpe 1999:219-20). The Internet enables the possibility of “virtual company councils” and, as a natural progression, virtual multinational bargaining as “the solution to the budgetary problems faced by the earlier experiment” in 1970s (Lee 1997:13). This is reinforced by the increasing availability of Internet translation programmes, although imperfect, which enable such information to be shared to all trade unionists of whatever nationality and language.

Third, Lee argues that as every trade union gradually comes online, it will eventually be possible to have what he calls a “global early warning network” on trade union rights. Through email (or phone or fax if necessary), any news story of a worker or union involved in a sudden and serious violation of their human and labour rights could be posted to every trade unionist in the world instantly asking for their support. Although already a limited reality, Lee (1997:184) envisages a body such as the ICFTU which spans all countries and sectors running this network which would have a central email (phone number) address to send urgent information to multilingual 24 hour a day operators who would receive, check and process this information electronically in every language to trade unions, human rights organisations, government bodies in the incident country and all over the world.

Fourth, organisation through cyberspace can also become militancy in cyberspace by using the Internet to directly target employers and states (Cleaver 1999:17). Through “hactivism”, international action can be directed towards sending mass emails of protest often by simply clicking on a specific link on a trade union website that has a specially designed web engine to launch ‘ping’ or mail bomb attacks against websites that overtax its ‘reload’ function or load memory banks with emails (Ibid:17).
(3) *Solidarity Culture*

Although the global information and communication flows of (1) and (2) are seen as prerequisite for the achievement of cross-border solidarity, Waterman (2000) argues that for global solidarity to take place, a shared “global solidarity culture” must develop among trade unionists in different countries and industries. Cyberspace is helping to forge these cross-border cultural affinities in two main ways. First, Lee (1997:179) argues that the Internet can help trade unionists “transcend their own local and national limitations” and feel “part of a global community based not on language or skin colour, but social class - and a vision of a new society”. With its use of hypertext and hyper-linking and its ability to instantly pick up foreign workers’ news, culture and struggles, the web “*contributes by its very nature* to internationalism and the ideals of global solidarity” (Ibid:39).

Second, constructing an “organic solidarity” for a new global workforce is a “complex and difficult task which requires continuous processes of negotiation” in order to “recognise and respect differentiations of circumstances and interests” at the branch, local, regional, national, and international level (Hyman 1999:107). Waterman argues that a “global solidarity dialogue” is needed and can take place in cyberspace. Such a dialogue would not be a uni-directional, one-to-many, top-down instrumental flow of information, nor even a debate or discussion, but a multi-directional, reciprocal, dialogical exchange that could take place through e-conferences, mailing and discussion lists and because the very “logic of the computer is one of feedback”. Through this cyberspatial dialogue, a dialectical process can emerge “in which initial positions are transformed and a new synthesis reached” between workers of different countries (Waterman 2000:18).
A Decade of Labour-Net-Internationalism

The claims made by net-internationalist theorists receive powerful support from a decade of Internet use, and not only by trade unions and labour movement. The Mexican Zapatistas first demonstrated in 1994 the spectacular mobilising and democratising power of the Internet for political protest and activism on a transnational basis. As Cleaver (1999:4) has noted, the Internet enabled the Zapatistas to “get their message out despite governmental spin control and censorship” and “facilitated discussions and debate among concerned observers that led to the organization of protest and support activities on over forty countries around the world”. In 1998, the Internet played a key role in stopping the MAI\textsuperscript{14} negotiations being completed in virtual secrecy, being used to leak details and immediate critiques of the MAI and then becoming a “vehicle for circulating and organizing a mobilization campaign against the MAI in dozens of countries” (Ibid:7) Most recently, George (2000) argues that the shutting down of the WTO at Seattle in 1999 was “thanks primarily to the Internet” as it enabled “tens of thousands of people” to unite in “a great national and international effort of organisation”.

Although only minor players in the struggles above, trade unions and labour movements have been using the Internet since 1981 and in the last decade there has been an explosion in the adoption of new ICTs at local, national and most importantly here international labour levels. Lee (1999c) found that in 1999, more than 1,500 labour websites existed. The ICFTU, ILO and ITUs are all on-line with multilingual website access to their press releases, campaign information, resource tools and latest international trade union news. The Doorn group of Belgian, Luxembourg and Dutch trade unions is actively working to achieve cross-border collective bargaining agreements through creating an online database of national collective agreements and
a website (EIRO Observer 2000). Similarly, the ICEM is overseeing a process to create “really global networks between workers organised within the far-flung subsidiaries of individual multinational companies,” for the purposes of collective bargaining and resource/information sharing. And the ILO/ICFTU joint-sponsored 1999-2000 “Conference on Organised Labour in the 21st Century” was an international electronic conference with an online translation programme permitting the general sense of messages posted to be translated into five European languages (Waterman 1999).

Most significant has been the use of the Internet to rapidly mobilise international acts of solidarity through posting requests for solidarity on either mailing lists such as the British based Union-d and the North American-based Labour-L and/or appeals which are “blazoned across the front of the home page” (Lee 1997:15). The Liverpool Dockers campaign 1995-1998 received international prominence through the Internet and saw dockers in the US, Australia, Spain and Israel take solidarity action in their support. In 1997, the Bridgestone/Firestone dispute with the United Steelworkers of America came to an end when the ICEM helped the US union launch an international ‘cyberstrike’ against the tyre corporation: unionists and other web surfers were shown how to bombard the company with protests during a global ‘day of outrage’ by “providing a list of addresses on its website to facilitate the unauthorized occupation of the sites and electronic mailboxes of the company’s management, as well as of those of car makers and distributors, tyre retailers and other bodies with a stake in Bridgestone” (Breitenfellner 1997:547). The Internet was vital to the success of the MUA (Maritime Union of Australia) campaign against the Australian government in 1998 in receiving international solidarity coordinated by the ITF. As Lee (2000a:5) argues, within days of the dispute starting “the threat of

14 Multilateral Agreement on Investment
a boycott of Australian shipping emerged…largely thanks to the web and email”. Finally, in early 2000, the South Korean union KCTU won the release of 17 workers arrested and brutalised during a non-violent trade union sit-in by sending urgent appeals by email to international contacts, publishing President Kim Dae Jung email address and urging protest messages to be sent (Ibid:7).

Defetishising the Net-Internationalist Discourse

The evidence briefly reviewed above does, in many respects, support the net-internationalist view that the Internet is progressively dismantling the obstacles that have compromised previous solidarity efforts. However, it important to step back from this incredibly seductive cyber-world and look critically at the Internet’s potential from a much broader, global perspective informed by time, place and political economy. Doing so brings to attention two main issues which I investigate in this final section. First, continuing obstacles posed by problems of Internet (1) access and (2) ownership and control, mean that we should not exaggerate what the ‘Internet as instrument’ can achieve. Second, the idea of the ‘Internet as cyberspace’ being a medium for a ‘global solidarity dialogue’ and subsequent solidarity culture to emerge is problematic and needs a more profound theoretical basis that can be empirically tested.

(1) Access

Only about 5 percent of the global population is actually online, nearly all users are from the rich, largely white North and therefore the vast majority of trade unionists do not and cannot use the Internet. Most of the developing world has no real telecommunications infrastructure. Therefore,
as Pape (1999:7) argues, until “the overall development paradigm shifts” from neoliberal marketisation to egalitarianism with “basic need provision”, the Internet will simply reinforce both intra-national class divisions and the North-South divide with a “cyber-linked Northern labour movement and a cyber-marginalised labour movement in the South”. Moreover, as Lee (1997:169) asserts, the Internet is dominated by English and as translation software still “isn’t good enough” especially for non-Latin languages such as Mandarin or Hebrew, producing truly internationalist websites that respect all workers languages means huge financial costs.

(2) Ownership and Control

Using the Internet for trade union and political activity, especially whilst at work, is increasingly prohibited. Employers in the US, Britain and Germany have recently been given powers to legally monitor and sack workers browsing websites and using email for personal use and even union work. This highlights the weakness of email itself which Lee (2000b) compares to “sending a postcard…open to reading by all the computers that pass it along the internet to its destination”. Consequently, employers are actively challenging and prohibiting employee use of corporate computer networks for union activity as a recent dispute between the Washington Post and its employees' newspaper demonstrated (Miller 2000). Moreover, the corporate ownership and control of the Internet means that not only are search engines and web browsers inherently designed to steer users to away from trade union news stories and websites, the cost of registering and maintaining websites is set by the very private corporations that a global labour movement must challenge head-on. As recent research by Lee (2000c) reveals, the institutions created by the US government to manage, govern and decide the future of the Internet, the main being
ICANN\textsuperscript{15}, are “completely unrepresentative, undemocratic, and unaccountable…all completely dominated by transnational corporate capital”. If, in effect, the Internet’s root servers are controlled by TNCs and the US government, does this not mean that disruptive use of the Internet by trade unions could be stopped simply by shutting down union websites and barring mailing lists? This issue obviously requires more research but we have already seen corporations turning the tables on cyber-solidarity actions. For example, in December 2000, the Narco News Bulletin – a US-based publication highlighting the role of US corporations in Narcotics production and trade – suffered a six day shutdown after its email account and website suffered major technical problems from an alleged mail-bomb attack by the US lawyer-lobbyist firm Akin Gump who allegedly represent the Colombian government and drugs traffickers (Giordano 2000).

These problems will come as no shock to even the most enthusiastic labour advocates of the Internet. Articles by web-activists like Eric Lee are usually laden with honest admissions of the Internet’s shortcomings as a medium for labour internationalism, and even when these limitations are downplayed in the literature, there is always is an implicit assumption of them. Moreover, many of the Internet’s weaknesses are being overcome by time and technological development. For example, Internet use is “more-or-less doubling in size every year”, and new technologies are being designed to re-secure email, such as PGP\textsuperscript{16} software which makes it virtually impossible to break an encrypted email (Lee 2000b). Most importantly, as Waterman has argued, the “active bearers of internationalism” are being linked up and are increasing in numbers because of the Internet.\textsuperscript{17} However, the net-internationalist perspective is at its theoretically and empirically weakest in its most important and radical claims concerning the potential for cyberspace to

\textsuperscript{15} Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers
\textsuperscript{16} Stands for Pretty Good Privacy, see \url{www.pgpi.com}
overcome the subjective barriers to labour internationalism which remain the biggest challenge. It is not just memories of the Cold War and the divisive interventions of the ICFTU and AFL-CIO in developing countries. The everyday experiences of workers in a globalising economy remain nationalistic, parochial, highly localised and differentiated, and are continually shaped by capitalist ideology and in particular the ideology and practice of economic nationalism. Against this background, Waterman in particular is correct in his analysis that a “global solidarity culture” can only come through a “global solidarity dialogue”, qualitatively distinct from the ‘solidarity by osmosis approach’ that others seem to imply. Dialogue is the only way to construct the kind of organic solidarity required for it to be internationally felt and adhered to and the Internet undoubtedly creates new and unprecedented opportunities for that dialogue to take place. So far so theory so good.

Where Waterman and others could be accused of being understandably vague and where much more theoretical and empirical research is required is in the detail. In practical terms, how and when is this dialogue going to take place? Who will it take place between? Are we talking about the *leaders* and elites of the world’s various trade unions, including the official international organisations, getting cosy in cyberspace? Is it a dialogue between elite and grassroots? Or intellectuals and elites/activists? Or even is this just a grassroots thing? Bringing back issues of access and audience briefly, how ‘global’ do we envisage this dialogue being given that the Internet is still only and likely to remain so for the considerable future a plaything of mainly North America, Europe and sporadic elements in the developing world? Waterman is right that the logic of the computer is ‘feedback’ – but who will be sending and who will be feeding back?

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17 Private email exchange with Pete Waterman, 19.2.01
These questions aside, there are further issues that must be addressed. Tarrow (2000:11,13) reminds us that solidarity culture comes from social networks which provide the “interpersonal trust, the collective identities and the social communication of opportunities that galvanise individuals into collective action”. Such identities are “negotiated among people who know one another, meet frequently, and work together on common projects…identities are dependent on networks”. These vital social networks have, therefore, only been hitherto accessible to local and national people. Can they be accessible to an international community? Does the Internet recreate the necessary conditions for such global social networks to evolve into solidarity activity itself? Waterman clearly believes so, and although I am inclined to agree with him, it is perhaps insightful that he refers to the work of Escobar (1999:32) as his inspiration. Escobar argues that through “an ongoing tacking back and forth between cyberpolitics…[and] place politics, or political activism in the physical locations at which the networker sits and lives”, it is possible to talk of “the creation of cybercultures that resist, transform or present alternatives to the dominant virtual and real worlds”.

The power of the Internet to create a political community of feeling in this way is undeniable and can be witnessed during the unsuccessful 1996-97 Citizens for Local Democracy (C4LD) campaign in Ontario, Canada, in the preliminary organisation of global civic movement which shut down the WTO at Seattle in 1999. Through browsing the website and becoming involved in the online cyberpolitical community, C4LD saw local people actually inspired to go to physical meetings and participate in the campaign. Just as Escobar argues, solidarity was built by what C4LD’s principal web-activist Liz Rykert called “breathing in and breathing out” with members from both real and virtual worlds continually moving back and forth between the two realms, creating a community of feelings and shared values (O’Malley 1998:22). The same is true
of Seattle. George (2000) argues that the ‘StopWTO Round’ distribution list put “people in touch with the whole movement”, information of meetings, workshops, rally’s in each participants country was relayed, an “international division of labour” emerged, dividing up tasks among various different organisations and movements. So organisation and information in cyberspace led directly to action on the ground.

Clearly, the Internet can create solidarity cultures, but can the models of C4LD and Seattle be applied to labour internationalism? I am cautiously optimistic or perhaps optimistically cautious about this. The success of this solidarity building, and indeed the strength of Escobar’s argument, lies in the fact that activists, even during the Seattle build-up, *could* move in and out of real and virtual activist communities due to their proximity, and that these two supposedly different worlds were actually the same because it was the *same* people doing the ‘tacking in and out’. But can workers engaging in internationalism move as easily move back and forth from cyber- to real-world activism? Perhaps not, as the workers of different countries do not live in the same locality nor work in the same conditions. The social networks created on the Internet are unlikely to be cemented by real world contact between the Canadian and Japanese trade union movements, but it is this very interface between cyberspace and real place of everyday, face-to-face relations that is the key to the most important part of solidarity – building trust.

Moreover, C4LD and Seattle were essentially single-issue campaigns working towards a definite end-goal in a fixed real-world location and dominated by pre-existing, and in the case of Seattle *internationally* organised, social movements and NGOs – perhaps symbolically, organised labour played a very small part of these cyber-communities. So the Internet didn’t so much create a global solidarity culture as link different solidarities together globally. Groups such as the environmental movement were already coherent activist movements with an inherently global
ethic and outlook and a long history of internationalism and even pioneering cyberactivism. So when Seattle activists left their cyber-communities, they re-entered their actual-communities and their existing coherent activist groups and engaged in local workshops, meetings and events. If these were the ingredients for the success of Seattle and to a lesser extent C4LD, do these ingredients correlate to trade unions and the pursuit of labour internationalism?

Again, possibly not. Labour internationalism does not have a specific target, goal or project and the international labour movement does not have a pre-existing global solidarity culture. Moreover, global solidarity must form on the basis of workers and trade unions who are already suffering from a crisis of national solidarity, who are arguably inherently non-internationalist and many of whom harbour deep suspicions of the Internet as a threat to jobs and their way of life. Labour internationalism must operate in less certain conditions, often without a specific cause or strategy, with constant pressures from national states and multinational employers. This makes international networks, especially between trade unionists, extremely ephemeral and fragmentary, and whereas this might be a strength for horizontal social movement networks, it might be a weakness for labour internationalism.

Finally, it is possible that these difficulties are reflected in the overwhelming use of the Internet by trade unions being for non-international solidarity purposes: recruiting new members (customers) online and using e-commerce to provide members with attractive pension and financial deals and personalising websites so that members can use the Internet for legal advice (competitive service provider) (Darlington 2000a). Most Internet-mediated internationalism tends to be the ultimately conservative and uni-directional ‘e-greetings’ form of solidarity – the sending of solidarity messages to striking or struggling workers to let them know that other

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18 This is based on a commercial website which sends birthday cards, valentines cards via email etc called ‘e-greetings’.
people support their struggle, know about it and are behind its continuation. For example, below is a short extract of a message sent out on the labor-l mailing list in December 2000 from British to South African trade unionists:

Comrades,
Revolutionary greetings and season’s compliments!
We in the West Midlands Region of Unison, the United Kingdom’s largest trade union, congratulate the South African Public Service Unions in their historic struggle against the evils of multinational privatisation…

Thus, overall, the Internet so far seems to be sophisticating the medium of the solidarity message, but not changing the message itself from ‘lip-service internationalism’ to the kind of proactive cross-border cooperation pioneered by non-labour social movements and NGOs. Overcoming this impasse, however, may not so much mean changes to the Internet but changes within the labour movement itself.

Conclusion

This paper has made the following main arguments. First, the global crisis of trade unions and labour movements is primarily caused by the emergence of globalisation. Second, the dynamics of capital mobility and global corporate power necessitate international solidarity between workers of different countries to confront and reverse globalisation. Third, the history of labour internationalism demonstrates that achieving effective cross-border worker solidarity is highly problematic, being continually jeopardised by nationalism, ideological and political divisions, a lack of resources and memories of this historical legacy itself. Fourth, the Internet is actively
overcoming many of these past obstacles to labour internationalism by enabling unions to mutually inform, organise and construct solidarity across national borders with unprecedented speed and reach. Finally, however, continuing obstacles posed by problems of Internet access, ownership and control as well as the Internet’s shortcomings for building a solidarity culture mean that we should not exaggerate and fetishise what the Internet can achieve for internationalism. In saying this, the ultimate problem may lie not with the Internet, but with labour itself.

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