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Kann Solidarität „von unten“ in globalen Zuliefererketten organisiert werden? Der Fall ExChains **

Zusammenfassung

Globale Lieferketten in der Bekleidungsindustrie sind durch Arbeitsstandardverletzungen in ihren Produktionsbetrieben, aber auch zunehmend im Einzelhandel gekennzeichnet. Vor diesem Hintergrund ist es wichtig, die Verhandlungsmacht von Arbeitnehmerinnen und Arbeitnehmern entlang der Lieferkette zu stärken. Ein Weg, dies zu erreichen, ist die Schaffung von transnationalen Beziehungen zwischen Arbeiterinnen und Arbeitern. Basierend auf der bestehenden Literatur zu transnationaler Solidarität hebt dieser Artikel die spezifischen Herausforderungen des Verständnisses von Solidarität im transnationalen Raum am Beispiel der globalen Bekleidungskette hervor. Dabei wird versucht, über „Solidarität“ als bloße Metapher für jegliche Form der transnationalen Zusammenarbeit zwischen Gewerkschaften und Arbeitnehmerinnen und Arbeitnehmern hinauszugehen und stattdessen die kulturell-normativen Dimensionen des Solidaritätsbegriffs als gegenseitige Bindung von Arbeiterinnen und Arbeitern zu verstehen. Am Fall des ExChains Netzwerks werden die Möglichkeiten und Herausforderungen der Schaffung und Aufrechterhaltung transnationaler Solidaritätsbeziehungen beispielhaft untersucht. Abschließend werden das transformative Potential, aber auch die Grenzen transnationaler Arbeiterinnen- und Arbeiter-Solidarität hinsichtlich der Arbeitsbedingungen in globalen Lieferketten diskutiert.

Schlagwörter: Arbeit, Zwangsarbeit, Arbeitsdiskriminierung, Arbeitsbedingungen

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Can solidarity be organized "from below" in global supply chains? The case of ExChains

Abstract

Global supply chains in the garment industry are marked by labour standard violations in factories as well as retail stores. Against this background it is important to strengthen the bargaining power of workers along the supply chain. Establishing direct relationships among workers along the supply chain could be one way to achieve this aim. This paper builds on extant literature on transnational solidarity and highlights the specific challenges of understanding solidarity in a transnational social space by looking at the empirical context of global garment supply chains. It hereby seeks to go beyond treating “solidarity” as a mere metaphor for any form of transnational union or worker cooperation, and instead engages with the cultural-normative dimensions of the concept as referring to mutual bonds among groups of workers. By looking at the case of the ExChains network, this paper examines some of the opportunities and challenges involved in establishing and maintaining transnational worker solidarity. The paper concludes by discussing the transformative potential, but also the limits of transnational labour solidarity regarding substandard working conditions in global supply chains.

Keywords: Labor, coercive labor markets, labor discrimination, labor standards (JEL: J47, J5, J7, J8)

1. Introduction

Global supply chains in the garment industry are marked by labour standard violations not only in supplier factories typically in the “Global South”, but also increasingly in retail stores in the “Global North”. Workers in garment production often suffer from excessive overtime, low wages, and various forms of harassment and abuse in addition to potentially deadly health and safety risks (e.g. Schüßler, Frenkel & Wright, 2018). Often, collective representation to establish bargaining power is made difficult by adverse regulation and aggressive anti-unionism in the countries where production is located. But also garment retail workers—although usually not risking their lives at work—suffer from the comparatively poor working conditions in the retail sector relative to other sectors (e.g. Anner, 2015). In retail, the often female part-time workers with a migration background face severe constraints for effective collective action and are subject to high demands for working time flexibility, wages below the national minimum, an intensification of work, verbal abuse, and various forms of managerial control and surveillance (Appelbaum & Schmitt, 2009; Grugulis & Bozkurt, 2011; Köhnen, 2006; Wirth, 2016). Garment retailers and brands in particular have previously been described as being hostile towards unionization and worker representation (Geppert, Williams & Wortmann, 2015; Geppert & Pastuh, 2017).

Numerous scholars from diverse backgrounds have argued that transnational labour collaboration is needed to counter unilateral management power in internationally segmented and dispersed global supply chains (e.g. Anner, 2000; 2009; Gordon & Turner, 2000; Juravich, 2007; Stevis & Boswell, 2007; Croucher & Cotton, 2009; Bieler & Lindberg, 2011). This literature agrees that transnational labour relations need to go beyond single campaigns or initiatives because effective pressure on multinational corporations (MNCs) to improve labour standards ultimately needs to be grounded in well-coordinated cooperation

and collaboration among unions and their potential allies (Luterbacher, Prosser & Papadakis, 2017). However, such coordination and collaboration is difficult to establish for reasons like divergent interests and structural differences between unions in the core and the periphery of supply chains, power struggles among unions, exclusive union strategies as well as the lack of resources for transnational activities of trade unions and their global federations (see e.g. Bieler & Erne, 2014 for transnational union activism and its limits in Europe). Not surprisingly, in the face of these challenges, the literature is mostly sceptical regarding the potential for transnational mobilizing and organizing of workers in global production and retail alike (e.g. Burawoy, 2010; Frege & Kelly, 2004; Gennard & Newsome, 2005; Greer, Ciupijus & Lillie, 2013).

In this paper, we argue that the literature tends to analytically equate coordination and collaboration among unions and union federations with the idea of transnational solidarity. It hereby overlooks the cultural-normative dimension of effective union coordination and collaboration that builds on direct worker interaction and mobilization “on the ground”. Against this background, we examine more closely the barriers and possibilities for strengthening solidarity among workers as the normative-cultural glue of transnational labour coordination and collaboration by empirically examining a “grassroots initiative” aimed at connecting workers in different positions in global supply chains: the ExChains network in the global garment industry. ExChains was founded by members of the German trade union Ver.di in 2002 with the aim to build transnational solidarity among workers in garment production and retail by raising issues such as better fire and work protection, higher wages, trade union access rights and supplier transparency from the bottom up. It is a particularly interesting case for studying transnational aspects of solidarity, as it allows us to examine how traditional notions of craft or class solidarity (Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014) extend to or need to be refined in the new context of global production. In this effort, we refrain from treating “solidarity” as a mere metaphor for any form of transnational union cooperation or collaboration. Instead, we engage directly with solidarity as the cultural-normative dimension of labour cooperation and collaboration (also Fantasia, 1988; 1995), defining solidarity as the mutual bonds among groups of workers that are built around a communal sense of obligation to support collective action.

In what follows, we critically examine the previous literature on transnational solidarity and discuss the problems of a structurally over-determined view on transnational labour collaboration and labour power. We then examine the ExChains network as an illustrative case of the opportunities and challenges of establishing and maintaining transnational solidarity among workers. We conclude by discussing the transformative potential of transnational labour solidarity of this sort with regards to substandard working conditions.

2. Transnational solidarity in global supply chains

The concept of solidarity—as distinguished from more structural aspects of unions’ collective action (Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014)—adds an understanding of the cultural-normative dimension of structural, associational, institutional, and societal power of workers. In the employment relations literature, worker solidarity is widely regarded as a basic

condition for collective action on behalf of workers, particularly concerning the formation of unions, the staging of industrial action and collective bargaining (Doellgast, Lillie & Pulignano, 2018). In the theory of collective action, solidarity is seen as more important for workers than for employers, because workers are weaker in power and resources. For example, Offe and Wiesenthal (1980, p. 78) explained "(...) that those in the inferior power position can increase their potential for change only by overcoming the comparatively higher costs of collective action by changing the standards according to which these costs are subjectively estimated within their own collectivity". Similarly, Hyman (2001) considers the strategic construction of solidarity as one of the main purposes of trade unions. In a more recent contribution, Tapia (2013, p. 671), looking into union re-vitalizing strategies by leaning towards social movement type of activism, emphasizes a "relational culture," that is, a "culture based on fostering relationships, leading to high levels of trust and loyalty towards other members and the organization" as fostering commitment. And analyzing successful organizing attempts in the UK entertainment and higher education sector, Simms and Dean (2015) identify the capacity of organizers to frame collective interests as "cultures of solidarity" (Fantasia, 1988) as a key ingredient for evoking collective action.

Nevertheless, solidarity is rarely explicitly theorized as an ideational foundation of collective action and thus, potentially, as part of an independent power resource of workers (for a prominent exception s. Fantasia, 1988; 1995). In other words, solidarity might not just be a pillar of structural power resources (cf. e.g. Schmalz & Dörre, 2014), but might also foster the ideational power of workers especially in situations where structural sources of power are weak, as in the context of most global supply chains.¹ While the concept of international or transnational solidarity is receiving increased attention in the literature (e.g. Pernicka & Glassner, 2014; Pernicka, Glassner, Dittmar, Mrozowicki & Maciejewska, 2017), the specific context conditions of global supply chains are rarely explicitly addressed. Here, transnational forms of solidarity are particularly hard to construct, because two traditional pillars of solidarity more or less present within a given workplace or country—daily social relations and locally shared ideologies or causes (Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014)—are usually absent. Thus, solidarity needs to be actively created through organizing for shared experiences and identifying common reference points among workers in these settings.

2.1 Structural obstacles to trade union power in global supply chains

As workers across the world are put in systematic interconnection through global supply chains, their shared experiences of economic exploitation could be seen as a potential enabler of links of transnational labour coordination and collaboration. However, workers along the supply chain are socially, culturally and spatially separated from each other, have few direct personal connections, and their individual economic incentives contradict each other (but see Sassen, 2012 on connections among activists via electronic links). Hence, the coverage of labour standards is typically observed as being decreasing with every step "upstream" the value creating processes, especially in the smaller, usually subcontracted factories in the Southern parts of global supply (Grimshaw, Marchington, Rubery & Willmott, 2005; Levy, 2008; Palpacuer, 2008). But also "downstream", in the retail or logistics and

¹ Other dimensions of ideational power resources might be shared knowledge, traditions or customs.

service functions of global buyers', labour standards are deteriorating due to outsourcing and other flexibility measures.

The unilateral response of multinationals to this problem, most commonly in the form of firm-level codes of conduct drafted in response to pressure from external stakeholders, is widely considered as insufficient (Barrientos & Smith, 2007; Locke, Amengual & Mangla, 2009; Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014). While a transnational "texture" of labour-related norms and regulations might be emerging (Pries & Seeliger, 2013), local union power and related collective action capacities are still weak in the—both geographic and organizational—peripheries of global supply chains due to outsourcing dynamics within Western capitalism and offshoring to countries with weaker or weakly enforced labour laws (e.g. Bieler, Lindberg & Pillay, 2008). Likewise, there is widespread scepticism about the capacity and willingness of governments to enforce the global standards of the ILO given their belief in benefitting from regime competition through lowering labour costs (Anner, 2015).

Hence, unions and union federations have increasingly become aware of transnational union coordination and collaboration as a prerequisite for organizing countervailing power in the transnational arenas of global supply chains spanning across several national industrial relations (IR) systems (e.g. Fichter, Ludwig, Schmalz, Schulz & Steinfeldt, 2018; Helfen & Fichter, 2013). At the same time, however, the problem of employment and working conditions below the ILO standards in global supply chains is fuelled by severe structural obstacles for workers to organize into unions. Using the power resource framework we see structural, associational, institutional, and societal power as weak in the global garment industry. Similar to Crozier and Friedberg's (1979) conceptualization of power in organizations, the literature on trade union power has distinguished *structural power resources*, i.e. power derived from workers' location and role in a production system, from *associational power resources*, i.e. power related to unions' collective action capacities resulting from their membership and organizational infrastructure (Jürgens, 1984; Wright, 2000; Silver 2003). Furthermore, continental European scholars have introduced *institutional power resources*, which refer to the enforceable rights and duties of unions and their resulting social acceptance (Dörre, Holst & Nachtwey, 2009; Brinkmann, Choi, Detje, Dörre, Holst, Karakayali & Schmalstieg, 2008; Schmalz & Dörre, 2014) as well as *societal power*, i.e. a union's capacity to develop influence outside the workplace through cooperating with and gathering support from other societal actors (e.g. churches, NGOs, political parties) (Schmalz & Dörre, 2014).

Regarding *structural power*, in garment production the "thousands of relatively small firms with minimal sunk costs in any given location and mobile equipment (sewing machines)" together with possibilities for subcontracting, provide lead firms with "the ability rapidly to shift the location of work at little cost" (Anner, Greer, Hauptmeier, Lillie & Winchester, 2004, p. 20). This mobility of capital—often expressed in notions of 'spatial fix', 'regime shopping' or 'race to the bottom'—stands in stark contrast to the local dependence of labour ('immobility'), a problem that is often seen as being at the roots of worsening working conditions (Anner, 2015; Merk, 2009). The relative abundance of workers with low resource endowments and a lack of alternative employment options—especially in the producing countries—weakens the structural power of workers vis-à-vis employers (Brookes, 2013; Hardy, Calveley, Kubisa & Shelley, 2015). But also the retail sector in the

US and Europe relies heavily on women and young workers, often with a migration background, who are employed with a minimum of fixed hours and for low wages (Appelbaum & Schmitt, 2009). These workers have equally limited employment alternatives and low bargaining power. In the transnational space, the fragmented nature of global supply chains undermines the usage of single hotspots as levers for union influence. Unions in this context tend to apply exclusive strategies, i.e. they focus on representing shrinking core membership rather than working towards solidarity across workplaces, skill levels and ethnicities (Doellgast, Lillie & Pulignano, 2018).

The *associational power* in garment production and retail is weak, too. As most garment manufacturing has been subcontracted and offshored, the bulk of employment in Western economies is within retail groups and some niche garment and textile production (Bosch & Lehdorff, 2004). Some of the large retailers in the West are known to be rather adversarial towards unions and works councils and have cancelled collective agreements (Geppert, Williams & Wortmann, 2015). Frequent dismissals of works council members in this sector provide obstacles to the organization of retail workers (e.g. Köhnen, 2006). In supplier countries like Cambodia or Bangladesh, the number of unions has been increasing (Oka, 2016; Labowitz & Baumann-Pauly, 2015). However, this development is not necessarily a sign of greater associational power. On the contrary, as Oka (2016, p. 664) reports for Cambodia, the growth in the number of unions has led to increased competition between unions, compromising “unions’ effectiveness in promoting collective bargaining and broader pro-worker agenda as they compete for members and obstruct each other’s activities.” Moreover, the fragmented nature of global supply chains again leaves national unions at a strategic disadvantage (Fairbrother & Hammer, 2005).

Although the *institutional power* of retail unions has been eroding more or less intensely in different national capitalisms, institutional power is particularly weak in producing countries in the Global South (e.g. Brookes, 2013). In countries like Bangladesh or Cambodia, governments are either not able or not willing to implement labour laws (e.g. Mosley, 2017). Furthermore, the strong interrelationship between the state and employers particularly in Bangladesh reinforces the oppression of unions, resulting into a labour control regime that Anner (2015) called ‘market despotism.’ For example, a 30% threshold for union formation as well as continued intimidation of workers when they try to register to a union places a high burden on unions to lever their formally granted institutional power.

In countries like Bangladesh, where unions are usually portrayed as hampering economic growth and prosperity, also the *societal power* of unions can be expected to be rather weak. When attitudes towards unions are relatively sceptical – or workers have limited knowledge about unions and often even lack a clear worker identity (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2018) – it is unlikely that unions will be able to establish cooperative relationships with other societal groups or that their demands will be seen as encompassing broader societal concerns, although ties particularly to international NGOs are strengthening (e.g. Merk, 2009). Bieler (2012) lists a number of promising efforts through which organized labour has been able to reach beyond its immediate constituencies. For instance, the overarching “Labour and Globalisation Network” promotes a broader understanding of workers and workplaces that is more suited to the globalized economy and encourages cooperation between unions and social movements in the sphere of social reproduction and the environment. Digital technology is seen as an enabler of

this new type of labour movement. However, strong competition between different unions and between unions and social movements has so far prevented transnational solidarity and joint action. While rightly seen as an important power resource to promote union's issues, such relationships can be seen as limited when it comes to organizing, i.e. strengthening union work itself rather than unions' causes.

Despite these structural barriers, different forms of cross-border union organization are emerging, which we will review below. Additionally, it has been argued that the changing temporality of global supply chains with an increased focus on speed and just-in-time production might enhance the structural positions of workers and create new spaces for resistance (Fichter et al., 2018; Herod, 2000). While we see little changes in this direction in the still intensely buyer-driven garment supply chains (Gereffi, 1994), strategies for organizing and managing workers might indeed be changing in producer-driven ones (see Helfen, Schüßler & Sydow, 2018).

2.2 Prevalent forms of transnational unionism and their limits regarding transnational worker solidarity

Most of the literature on transnational unionism focuses on extant institutions and organizations which are sometimes equated with transnational solidarity. For example, as for the European Union, European Works Councils are emphasized as a space in which transnational solidarity might be constructed (e.g. Pernicka & Glassner, 2014; Pernicka et al., 2017; Kotthoff & Whithall, 2014). In the more limited literature on global supply chains, the focus is mostly on global union federations (GUFs) and how they shape the collaboration among unions across different countries in the spirit of solidarity through various practices. Here the most common organizational practices of cross-border union cooperation and coordination are international campaigning, GFAs, and international accords.

First, (inter-)national campaigns seek to establish external pressure in cases of acute labour violations. Especially in "the garment industry, the past 15 years have seen numerous such grassroots social struggles, in which workers have successfully mobilised allies overseas to support them" (Merk, 2009, p. 606). These campaigns are mostly organized by international NGOs, often focusing on consumers 'buying power' (Donaghey, Reinecke, Niforou & Lawson, 2014) in order to tackle working conditions and substandard wages in producing countries. Campaigns, such as those organized by the Clean Clothes Campaign, are said to "build labour solidarity across space" (Merk, 2009, p. 600). While especially international campaigns have been effective in raising awareness for weak labour standards, they are not targeted at unionizing workers. Often, workers remain in the role of information-providers (e.g. Bieler, 2012, p. 371) thereby reproducing, if not reinforcing, already existing power asymmetries (Featherstone, 2012). Additionally, the temporary nature of these campaigns lends itself to focusing more on short-term goals rather than on establishing continuous and sustainable forms of countervailing power. Power of workers is 'borrowed' from international partners and NGOs, which follow their own campaign logic. Thus, while international campaigns expand the reach of unions into society and are therefore fostering societal power, they are limited in supporting structural, associational or institutional power of workers and their representatives, particularly in the "Global South".

Second, with the enormous expansion of transnational corporations (TNCs) in the process of economic globalization the international union movement reorganized the International Trade Secretariats (ITS) into GUFs, giving greater priority to union organizing and negotiating activities vis-a-vis TNCs than to lobbying international institutions (ILO). In spite of other attempts of trade unions to (re-)gain influence on the global organization of production such as European works councils, transnational wage coordination or cross-border union alliances (e.g. Müller, Platzer & Rüb, 2006; Levesque & Murray, 2010), GUFs have identified global framework agreements (GFAs) as a strategic tool for establishing a cross-border framework of recognized norms, principles and procedures with MNCs that is independent from and supplemental to national-level bargaining and legal provisions (Papadakis, 2008). For the GUFs, GFAs are a means of securing trade union recognition, providing space for organizing and influencing employment practices of MNCs within their global supply chains (Croucher & Cotton, 2009; Hyman, 2005; Platzer & Müller, 2009; Stevis & Boswell, 2007). GFAs, while effective in establishing certain boundary conditions in labour-management relations, cannot directly affect local union membership and local union power in supplier countries (Helfen & Fichter, 2013). However, GFAs do have the potential to enhance the associational power of unions in producing countries in that they often explicitly endorse the right to collective bargaining as specified by the ILO. To implement this right in adversarial contexts, GFAs rely on associational, institutional, and societal union power in MNC host countries (Helfen, Schüßler & Stevis, 2016). GFAs, thus, might support the structural, associational, institutional or societal power of local unions through transnational solidarity between unions in MNC's host countries and worker representatives in supplier countries.

Third, as an extension of GFAs, international accords comprise multiple brands (Alexander, Ashwin, Lohmeyer, Oka & Schüßler, 2017) and hold them accountable through binding agreements with GUFs, typically on the basis of a multi-stakeholder dialogue involving NGOs as well. The Bangladesh Accord is the prime exemplar of such an agreement and is seen by many as a promising opportunity for workers in despotic regimes of labour market control (Anner, 2015; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2015; Schüßler et al., 2018). Again, however, the Accord remains limited in its potential to strengthen workers' structural, associational and societal power (Baumann-Pauly, Labowitz & Banerjee, 2015). For instance, “[w]hile union members have the right, under the Accord on Building and Fire Safety, to participate directly in the inspection process, not all factories have union representation” (Mosley, 2017, p. 158). The challenge, thus, remains to link these initiatives to the local level in order to build union power and capacity to act on the factory level. Although generally optimistic regarding the Accord's potential to achieve these aims as Bangladeshi trade unions were able to strengthen their associational, institutional and societal power resources through interactions with workers and international allies, Zajak (2017) also concedes that relying on external support might decrease local unions' internal potential for organizational development, democratic organizing and solidarity-building across unions. Also, the Accord has so far failed to be endorsed by actors outside the factories, with for instance the Bangladeshi government articulating open dissent, and thus is limited in strengthening workers' societal power.

In our view, these forms of transnational unionism express a concern for transnational solidarity but should not be equated with it, because they tend to overlook the ideational

dimensions of “two-way mutual bonds of solidarity” (Davis, 2017, p. 167) that is experienced reciprocally rather than granted in a one-way direction (Dribbusch, 2014, p. 338). This kind of support, although effective in many ways, often remains “dependent on episodic overlaps of interest and consumer preferences” (Anner et al., 2004, p. 22) and leaves fundamental power asymmetries untouched.

2.3 Revisiting solidarity as a theoretical concept: Transnational solidarity as an ideational power resource?

Against the background of unions’ structural, associational, institutional, and societal weakness both in the centre and the periphery of global garment supply chains, workers and unions face tremendous in gaining bargaining power vis-à-vis employers (e.g. Bieler, Erne, Golden, Helle, Kjelstadli, Matos & Stan, 2015). Where global production leaves few structural power resources to workers, their associations and state regulations are weak, and chosen forms of collective action like campaigns, agreements, and dialogue often fall short of producing a lasting impact, it might be justified to examine the ideational and cultural dimension of power resources like knowledge, solidarity, norms or customs. The role of ideas and identity has been largely acknowledged in the literature on union organizations. Trying to understand the challenges of European trade unions, Hyman (2001, p. 173), for instance, argues that “part of the problem is an erosion of credible mobilizing rhetorics, of visions of a better future, of utopias. Building collective solidarity is in part a question of organizational capacity, but just as fundamentally it is part of a battle of ideas.” But what is solidarity and how does it relate to the ideational power resources for collective action?

As noted above, from a political economy perspective, solidarity is more important for workers than for employers because they are weaker in power and resources. Two statements can be derived from this condition: solidarity includes a foregoing of individual advantages for the sake of a greater good for a collective; and, if present, solidarity empowers individual workers by correcting resource scarcity in cases of conflict. In contrast to this rather economic definition, Doellgast and colleagues (2018, p. 13) define worker solidarity as “the adherence to principles and patterns of behaviour that support mutual aid and collective action; particularly those that concern labour union strike and bargaining strategy.” As a corollary, solidarity as a normative orientation or behavioural disposition of individuals is related to group identity, which is formed from within a group and in relation to other groups (inclusive vs. exclusive). From a social constructivist perspective, however, rather than being taken as a given, Fantasia (1995, p. 280) argued that “cultures of solidarity” or “collective consciousness” form in relation to specific strategic encounters and moments of conflict, so that solidarity is best considered as mobilized and largely independent of collectivized, individual ideas and beliefs.

Like other norms, solidarity can be expected to emerge more easily in smaller groups or in groups regarded as similar (by whatever criterion), because these groups are connected by structurally dense social networks (Grannies, Smith & Stepan-Norris, 2008). As Tapia (2013, p. 672) writes: “According to social commitment theory, people will develop affective ties to the group (a) when they work together on joint tasks, and (b) when there is a sense of shared responsibility.” Similarly, Davis (2017), studying the case of global social movements, argues that a shared sense of mutual oppression is consciously created by ena-

bling visits among activists and organizing joint experiences of eating, dancing, and living together. The importance of such agency has also been highlighted for unions, e.g. when organizing migrant workers across borders. Here, Hardy (2015) highlights the importance of piecemeal achievements realized through visits of delegations, the set-up of joint websites and the creation of joint experiences through campaigns. “Transient” forms of solidarity can be established using social media (Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014).

We will define transnational worker solidarity as mutual bonds among workers, building on a communal sense of obligation to support collective action focused on issues that connect to work, but not exclusively to workplace issues (Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014). Following Fantasia (1988; 1995), we consider transnational solidarity as collective, dynamic, based on cultural practices, collective action, and social organization. Thus, although bearing a strong ideological component, transnational solidarity stems from lived experiences (e.g. shared experiences of substandard working conditions and exploitation) and strategic encounters and conflicts (e.g. organizational restructuring or industrial dislocation) and is situated in specific forms of social organization (e.g. fragmented production or individuated work). In short, solidarity needs to be organized, but is also at the roots of organizing. Understood in this way, transnational solidarity depends on an active facilitation of interactive processes among workers that create shared experiences and a common understanding that norms have been violated (Fantasia, 1988; Doellgast, Lillie & Pulignano, 2018; Banting & Kymlicka, 2017; Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014). Unions play a key role in organizing and framing such activities, but face at least two fundamental dilemmas and tensions.

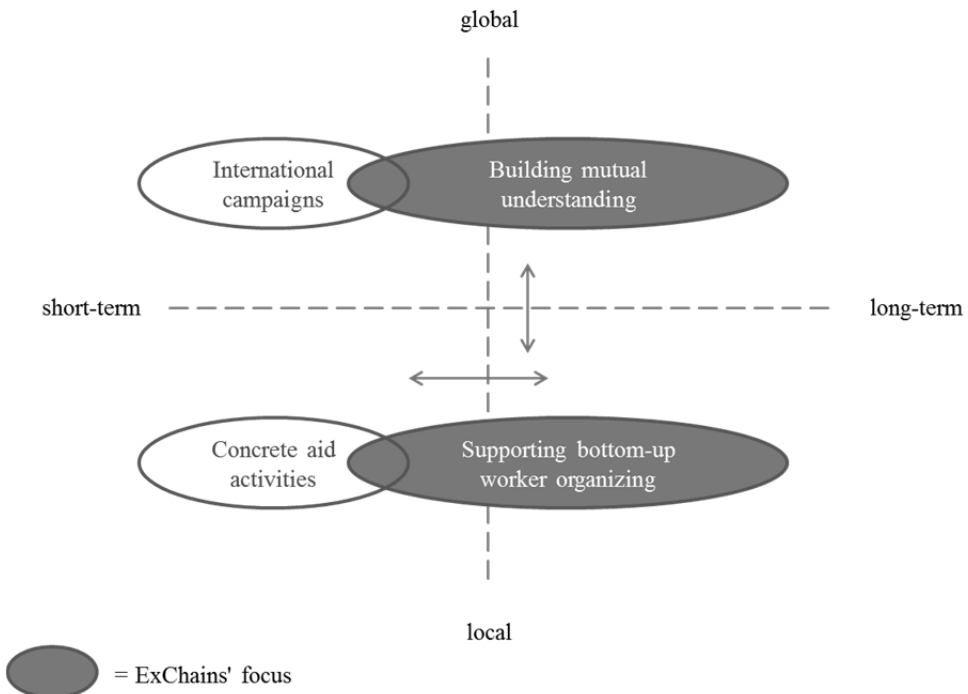
First, while organizing workers needs long-term, continuous efforts, international campaigns have been criticized to aim for ‘quick fixes’ rather than long-term developments on the ground. A dilemma thus lies in bridging the long-term goals of unions with the short-term gains of international campaigns to establish long-term worker power. Transnational strategies of unions often aim for long-term, political interests, which hamper local mobilization for transnational solidarity as they remain distant from the reality of local workers (e.g. Bormann, Jungülsing, Bian, Hartung & Schubert, 2015, p. 7). However, campaigns in the garment industry (in Guatemala and Haiti), which in the short-term seemed successful, ultimately ended in the closure of the focal factory (see Anner, 2000, p. 248-252). There is, thus, a need to bridge the long-term goals of unions and the short-term gains of international campaigns to establish long-term, yet local and grassroots worker power.

Second, and relatedly, the local and the global level are intrinsically tied together in global supply chains (Anderson, 2015). For getting some ground in countervailing MNCs’ activities, workers must therefore organize simultaneously across space as well as in space (Davis, 2017). That is, while counter-movements need to be global (Burawoy, 2010), the local level cannot be dismissed (Caspersz, 2010). There is a need for local actors to ‘jump scale’ (Merk, 2009) to withstand powerful employers on the transnational level, while simultaneously seeking to establish the necessary effective structures on the ground on which transnational action is dependent. Put differently, while “campaigns with a weak or non-existent international component will fail or meet with limited success (...), international support can never replace sustained organizing efforts by local actors at the point of production” (Anner, 2000, p. 248, see also Jessup & Gordon, 2000, ‘pressure from below’ and ‘pressure from above’).

Successful cases can be found in Europe, where for instance the European Metalworkers' Federation has partly successfully coordinated national-level collective bargaining rounds at a European level (Schulten, 2005, cited in Bieler, 2012). In a global supply chain context, Merk (2010) highlights the Asian Floor Wage initiative as an attempt to establish solidarity between workers and prevent wage competition. The campaign highlights that only through the joint effort of workers can pressure be put on factory owners, buyers, and governments. But, as already highlighted above, several obstacles to transnational union cooperation prevail, such as a continued focus on national contexts, resource constraints, and the absence of cross-country frameworks to support solidarity (Gennard & Newsome, 2005).

Figure 1 summarizes our discussion and highlights the two tensions that transnational worker solidarity faces. While the local and the global as well as the short-term and the long-term need to be balanced, the arrows show that addressing one part of these tensions also requires addressing the other. Without addressing the short-term, for instance, long-term goals cannot be reached. And without addressing the local level, global solidarity relations are unlikely to emerge.

Figure 1: Tensions in organizing transnational solidarity in global supply chains



Methods and Data

As outlined above, ideational power resources might be particularly important in the context of the global garment industry where structural, associational, institutional, and societal power resources tend to be weak both in the periphery and increasingly also the core of global supply chains. The ExChains initiative in this sector is thus a critical case to examine whether and how transnational solidarity among workers can be organized.

We build our analysis on data from six interviews with unions and union related organizations, 65 documents published by the ExChains network and its members, and field notes from participating in 10 industry events revolving around transnational solidarity issues. We systematically analysed all 81 documents using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo). In a first step we reviewed all documents to get a better understanding of the network's structure, aims and activities. In a second step and following our theoretical framework (see Figure 1) we analysed how the ExChains network approaches the identified tensions (long-term vs. short-term and global vs. local), focusing on the concrete practices through which this is done. This second step involved several rounds of going through the material and discussing as well as revising emerging findings. In the following we introduce the ExChains network and outline its approach to fostering transnational worker solidarity.

Some of the practices we are going to present address both tensions, whereas others are addressing just one of them, although both tensions often overlap. The ExChains network as a critical case

Programmatically and according to their bylaws, all unions of the DGB (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund) are supportive of transnational worker solidarity, and are dues-paying members of the respective international organizations, GUFs and European union federations (EUFs). Within that setting, ExChains is a Ver.di-affiliated network of works councillors and union members working along the global garment supply chain—from Asia's garment production factories to European retail stores. ExChains has members from Germany (Ver.di as well as works councillors from H&M, Zara, Primark, and Esprit), Bangladesh (National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF), Sri Lanka (Free Trade Zones and General Service Employees Union (FTZ&GSEU)), and India (Garment and Textile Workers Union (GATWU) in Bangalore and Garment and Fashion Workers Union (GAFWU) in Chennai).

The ExChains network exists since 2002 and is part of a wider network called TIE (Transnational Information Exchange). ExChains' financial situation is quite precarious. While the positions of two coordinators in Germany are financed via TIE, which itself is partially financed by the foundation "Menschenwürde und Arbeitswelt" through the Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst (EED) as well as a private donor from the US who is sympathetic to TIE's goals, the political work—mostly campaigns or meetings—has to be co-financed by third party funders, such as the Bewegungsstiftung or the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. The networks in Asia are partially funded by the respective unions but have also received funds from foundations such as the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. There are further sub-networks connected to TIE, which likewise try to organize transnational solidarity, such as the network "Eisenbahn ohne Grenzen," which seeks to organize railway workers from West-Africa and France. Whereas TIE operates in different sectors, ExChains focuses on the global garment industry. The aim of the network is to build transnational solidarity among workers and, ulti-

mately, to permanently change the global structure of the industry. The issues addressed by ExChains are diverse. In its current campaign, ExChains raises four demands: better fire and work protection, higher wages, trade union access rights, and supplier transparency. We argue that ExChains differs from other transnational initiatives because it decidedly aims to establish two-way bonds of solidarity among workers in garment production and retail.

ExChains tackles the tension between both short and long-term goals as well as the need for both local and global mobilizing and organizing by building on an iterative process of active mobilization on the local level, which enables the worker's engagement for long-term, transnational goals and, ultimately, establish bonds of transnational solidarity. Mobilizing workers for transnational solidarity in the case of ExChains, thus, starts on the local level and is then built upon to establish transnational connections between workers in Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka on the one hand, and Germany on the other hand. Mobilizing locally, however, is seen as a continuous process and a goal in itself, rather than 'just' a means for transnational collaboration. It is intended to also build the ground for long-term organizing of workers, both in garment retail and production, and thus the fostering of local union structures.

3.1 Local/short- and long-term: Direct and active involvement of union members and workers and the creation of shared interests

One important pillar of this approach, which differs from other transnational initiatives such as international campaigns, GFAs or accords, is to *actively and directly involve second-line unionists and workers* rather than union officials. While building on established works councils in garment retail and local unions in garment production as well as the relationships between local unions at both ends of the supply chain that have been established in the realm of TIE, ExChains explicitly seeks to involve workers in a 'grass roots' fashion. Rather than the mere participation of workers in forms of otherwise organized collective action, this involves the active participation of workers in identifying issues, formulating interests and demands and planning and organizing campaigns. ExChains thus seeks to involve workers on the shop floor directly and in an active manner.

"... our approach is really to say: well, if we really want change, then we need to empower those that are concerned or, better, they need to empower themselves—which is the better term—to be able to enter into negotiations about collective agreements," (170922).²

Reaching such empowerment and involving all workers in the identification and formulation of interests is of course a difficult process, which needs to be actively guided by members of the network:

"There is no such thing as given interests for which you just have to search. Rather there are only interests that you have created for yourself, to say it this way. This means there is a philosophy to sit together and think about: 'What is your problem? What is my problem? Are there any connections? Let's formulate our interests jointly.' This way of thinking is established for years—at least within the strong [unionized] works

2 Where interviews were held in German, the interview quotes were translated from German to English by the authors. To preserve the anonymity of our interviewees, we only provide the date of the interview for identification.

councils—and this way of thinking of course matches our current idea of international cooperation very well” (170922).

He recounts that the organising strategy—to identify what common interests are and jointly develop strategies for how they can be reached—had been established in German works councils for a long time before being applied in garment factories. ExChains thus seeks to follow a bottom-up approach, allowing workers to address themes that are important to them and actively participate in planning and realizing activities, enabling stronger identification, learning, and experiences of self-efficacy.

A central means through which *shared interests* among local workers—and, as we will see later, workers along the supply chain—are created are so-called work place or health mappings. Here, groups of workers jointly identify the work-related problems they face (e.g. health issues), which tasks in their work are responsible for causing these problems, and how these affect their private and family lives. The joint mapping helps workers to realize that they all face very similar problems, that these are related to working conditions rather than their individual weakness (as factory managers and supervisors often make them believe), and that their unhealthy working conditions have huge impacts on many parts of their private and family lives. Finally, the mapped causes of health problems are listed and ranked according to their importance. Workers then vote which issues are most severe and should be addressed first, to then jointly develop ways through which these can be addressed. Work place mappings facilitate local organizing and mobilization through, first, reflecting on and bringing to light shared problems and accordant interests. Such efforts may also help to establish a form of “worker identity” among garment workers in the first place – often young women that do not envision a long-term trajectory as workers. Second, concrete and practical issues are addressed that can be realized in the short-term and from which workers profit locally, such as negotiating better lighting or air conditioning in the factories or retail stores. These short-term improvements allow for the organization of workers and ultimately strengthen local union power, also in the long-term. One of the workers reports that the experience of factory-level negotiations has encouraged him and his colleagues to fight against social security cuts: “It showed what we can achieve when we stand together. The government eventually had to withdraw the planned cuts. That was a victory for all garment workers.” (cited in ExChains, 2016)

In order to maintain the engagement of workers, the network began focusing on getting the workers’ families on board as well. Inviting family members to meetings and explaining the importance of unions to them seeks to foster understanding for their family member’s engagement despite their long working hours and family duties (180309). This is even more important where unions are regularly de-legitimized by powerful actors, such as the government or industry associations, and where workers engaged in unions face repressions.

The direct involvement of workers as well as the strong focus on local organizing is presented by our interviewees as an explicit response to transnational initiatives, which aim at implementing international labour rights, but often miss to strengthen labour power on the shop floor. Often providing little room for the demands of workers, these internationally organized initiatives thus tend to overemphasize the global scale. As one interviewee reported, the necessity for such a strong focus on strengthening the power of local workers was a learning process within the ExChains network and resulted from the experience that

allying with international initiatives or NGOs – while positive in many ways – often grants workers not more than a form of – what he called – ‘borrowed power’: “...one reason for our quite fundamental strategic reorientation, but at the same time criticism of our previous practice, is that often these campaigns do not lead to the development of counter-power on the ground...” (170824). It was also reported that their experience showed that the international campaign strategy brought local unions to focus more on reaching international donor project’s goals than unionization.

3.2 Global/short- and long-term: bi-directional partnership and mutual understanding

The local mobilization and organizing is then built upon to foster global collaboration and ultimately transnational solidarity. It has been argued that many transnational initiatives suffer from a North-South bias and that transnational solidarity is often ‘one-sided’ (e.g. Featherstone, 2012), with existing power asymmetries being overlooked or even reproduced. Transnational solidarity however builds on mutuality despite differences (Hyman, 2011), thus, the forging of a collective identity (Davis, 2017), while at the same time acknowledging differences of workers in different contexts. ExChains actively seeks to avoid such biases, following an approach of ‘*transnational partnership*’ which, first, seeks to address workers in the periphery as change agents and, second, aims to foster a support network that is explicitly seen as bi-directional. As stated by the network itself:

“ExChains wants to help irritate the Northern perspective on women and men in the global South as mere victims of their social conditions. Working closely with unions and workers in the global South, the campaign takes them seriously as actors. Actions are being jointly planned and coordinated.” (ExChains, 2012)

However, such feelings of transnational partnership rather than one-sided aid have to be actively created and constantly maintained. While the initial motivation to engage in the ExChains network—especially by workers from the global North—is often a feeling of discontent with the situation in the Global South and an accordant motivation to ‘help’, the ExChains network seeks to develop this feeling of ‘wanting to help’ into one of ‘partnership’ and ‘mutual support’ as one of our interviewees reports (180309). He goes on to argue that while the motivation to help is certainly important to mobilize workers, it is important to the members of the ExChains network to not see such motivation as an end-point, but rather ask how it might open up possibilities to support each other, in order to avoid trapping into paternalistic practices. He thus underlines: “It is a big part of our political work to discuss at length what we have in common and why we work together—beyond the motivation to say ‘I perceive the current situation as unfair’” (180309). Also on the side of workers from garment production, the approach of ‘mutual support’ requires a change in perspective. He recounts, for instance the realization that support from their side can be meaningful and can have an impact for workers from garment retail. “Here in Bangladesh we will also support the struggles and demands of German retail workers with campaigns. That’s clear to us” (worker from NGWF cited in ExChains, 2016). Such processes of understanding and realization are enabled during Skype conferences and mutual visits, such as a visit from works council members from H&M and Zara as well as members of the TIE network in India and Sri Lanka in 2014, but also need to be part of the everyday discussions at both sides of the supply chain. Given the undeniable

structural differences between workers in garment retail and production, he also adds that for everyone involved it remains a constant struggle to challenge one's own prejudices and perceptions: “So, I do not think that we are immune or protected from it (stereotyped perceptions). But it's part of our political work that we try to break out of them” (180309).

Given that even on the local, national level the existence of a shared ‘worker identity’ as well as shared interests among workers—as one ingredient to solidarity—cannot be assumed and, as we have seen above, needs to be created, the creation of a shared consciousness and the carving out of shared interests appears even more difficult on the transnational level, where huge—geographical and cultural—distances as well as enormous economic differences between workers exist. Despite all these differences and without talking them down, ExChains seeks to actively create shared perceptions and interests. This requires the creation of a *mutual understanding* between workers along the supply chain:

“The discussion of common ground and differences is central to our work, because the work in the ExChains network is based on the fact that employees at all places along the production chain meet as colleagues and work together on equal terms. This requires understanding for the situation of each other” (ExChains, 2015).

During visits for instance, the above mentioned workplace and health mappings are also used to identify the similarities and differences between the situation of workers in garment retail and production. One of our interviewees gives an account of such a mapping and its effect on the workers' perception:

“We just started by comparing what amount of their monthly pay participants spend for certain things, where commonalities and differences lie and what that means etc. And that causes some irritation: on the one hand it irritates the image of our colleagues in Asia that people from the North don't have any problems. And on the other hand, it irritates our image to say that in Asia everything is doomed and we only have luxury problems” (180903).

Although working and living conditions of workers in garment retail and production are different in many ways, some commonalities can be identified and are put into focus by the members of the ExChains network: for instance the experiences of humiliation, annoyance at indecent conditions, or difficulties concerning union and workplace organising—despite variance in their degree—are highlighted as shared issues between workers along the supply chain (ExChains, 2011). What is also emphasized during these visits and exchanges is that next to a feeling of shared experiences, these experiences are caused by the same actors:

“You can imagine it like this: The active workers came together and started to tell each other about themselves and then something become clear: the problems in retail in Germany are comparable to the problems we find in India and Bangladesh—on a different level for sure, but generally speaking they are comparable. And at some point, we came to the conclusion that this was of course not surprising, because the actors are the same everywhere – be it here as an employer or there in India as a buyer” (170922).

The creation of shared identity and interests along the supply chain, thus, can be also fostered by emphasizing the shared opponent. Emphasis is thus put on the fact that the powerful actors responsible for the working conditions of both retail and production workers are the same: lead firms. Workers in the periphery—both in retail and production—thus address the same actors in their fights. This creates a further reason for why collective action might—despite all differences—be important.

“Companies make profits at the expense of employees. They reduce wages, increase working hours and demand more and more from the workers; here in Germany and even more so in Bangladesh. (...) We can only fight back together” (worker from NGWF cited in ExChains, 2013).

Through such linkages, local fights in garment production can be supported by garment retail worker’s involvement of lead firms. For instance, the workers in the supplier factories, together with their unions, are developing demands and ways to negotiate them with factory owners on site. These can be demands for drinking water or clean toilets, but also more extensive demands for higher wages or shorter working hours. In their actions and negotiations, the workers include the lead firms that produce in their factories, which can effectively be supported by workers from garment retail.

“Some of the demands we can enforce ourselves, for others we will have to go beyond the factory level and bring lead firms to the negotiating table. They determine the conditions most under which we work” (worker from GATWU cited in ExChains, 2016).

Through such active framing processes mutual understanding is created. Telling each other about their work and private lives, a feeling of shared experiences is created among workers, because it becomes apparent that at least some of their problems are shared by their co-workers as well as by workers in other parts of the supply chain. Workers also learn that the hardships they face are often caused by the same source, namely buyers’ demands. This facilitates an understanding of why it makes sense to engage in collective and mutual support and provides the ground for the formulation of shared interests and demands. Understanding the problems of others can also support the realization of ones’ own situation and the creation of individual agency: “I recognize myself through the other” as one of our interviewees put it (180309). Here, the exchange on the transnational level feeds back and reinforces the work on the local level.

Besides ExChains’ ability to balance the tensions revolving around transnational solidarity, a few more structural characteristics make ExChains’ different from other initiatives. First, compared to other cross-border networks, ExChains brings together workers from different sectors—garment production and garment retail—thereby addressing workers that do not stand in direct competition to one another. Second, as there is almost no labour mobility between Asian production countries and European retail countries, workers do not compete for jobs. Whereas in “clothing manufacturing, unions in the global North have not been able to prevent the exodus of jobs to the global South” (Anner et al., 2004: 8), retail cannot be relocated and thus the retail sector in the North and production in the South do not stand in competition with one another. In such a constellation, employers cannot play off groups of workers against each other.

4. Discussion

Given the frequent labour standards violations in the garment industry, it is paramount to find ways of strengthening the bargaining power of workers along the supply chain. Departing from a critical review of the previous literature on transnational union coordination and collaboration as mixing the structural, associational, institutional, societal, and ideational components of transnational collaboration and coordination, we highlighted the challenges

of understanding transnational solidarity as a cultural construction in a globalized social space. Particularly, we highlighted that the concept of solidarity adds an understanding of the cultural-normative dimension of unions' collective action that differs from their structural, associational, institutional, and societal power, and hence may be considered as part of an independent ideational power resource itself. Using a case study on an initiative meant to foster transnational solidarity among garment and retail workers connected in a buyer-driven global supply chain, we have argued that structural, institutional, associational, and societal power—though to varying degrees—are weak in both garment-producing and garment-selling countries. We have furthermore argued that previous forms of transnational initiatives—most importantly international campaigns, GFAs, and accords—often fail to establish mutual support among workers and are—in their current forms—better understood as some sort of aid than as forms of transnational solidarity.

Given these challenges of previous initiatives, it is important to understand the structures and mechanisms by which particularly the associational power of workers in global supply chains can be strengthened and how transnational workers solidarity—understood as mutual bonds among groups of workers—can be established. By analyzing ExChains' attempts to mobilize and organize workers for transnational solidarity, we see that transnational solidarity depends on an active facilitation of interactive processes among workers that create shared experiences and a common perception that norms have been violated. Skype conferences and mutual site visits are used for exercises to reflect on one's own problems and identify commonalities and differences between workers in garment production and retail. We have furthermore highlighted the importance of local worker mobilization and organization based on direct links between workers and local unions as a supplement to official relationships between global union federations and international organisations, and the accordant importance of bridging short-term gains with long-term goals for establishing sustainable forms of transnational labour solidarity. What ExChains thus shows us is that the importance of local mobilizing and organizing lies in the process. Realizing short-term goals for workers develops a sense of empowerment and builds commitment. The realization of these local and short-term goals then allows to connect globally and approach longer-term goals. It also shows that fostering ideational power through digital technology (Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014) as well as through more conventional means such as sharing health mapping documents or organizing mutual visits of workers across the supply chain might be a useful complement to extant discussions of transnational labour power (Zajak, 2017).

We have argued that this ExChain's strategy goes beyond what previous transnational initiatives achieve. Its potential lies in the fact that the analysis of problems and the formulation of demands for changing the conditions at the workplace arise directly in a collective process among workers at the factory and shop level. This is important as “transnational solidarity will have strong leverage only when shared by rank and file workers” (Lindberg, 2011, p. 206). Such a strategy perceives workers in garment factories as active subjects rather than passive receivers of international aid, information providers or ‘watch dogs’ over standard compliance for international actors. Workers are thus not seen within “‘categories of need’ but are considered active citizens with strength and talent, democratic and entrepreneurial potential” (Tapia, 2013, p. 675). This shift in perspective provides the ground for mobilizing and organizing workers and accounts for the often proclaimed idea that sustain-

able transnational solidarity needs to be organized, but also results from organizing (e.g. Davis, 2017). Focusing on local organizing in this way therefore bears the potential to foster sustained labour power rather than build on temporary or ‘borrowed’ power of international actors. That this strategy promises success is confirmed by victories such as in Bangalore, where through joint action and negotiation among workers from garment production and retail the lay-off of cleaners could be hindered and three free Sundays per month could be negotiated for workers in a local factory (ExChains, 2016).

Although we are confident that our case highlights how the formation of solidarity can be supported through active efforts to organize for the emergence of weak ties bottom-up in transnational space even where strong associational ties or class identities do not exist, we must concede that it is too early to say whether ExChains’ efforts will have a lasting impact. Given the sheer number of garment workers in countries like India or Bangladesh as well as the huge structural difficulties reported above, efforts like the one of the ExChains’ initiative certainly remain limited, particularly concerning the endurance and reproducibility of the efforts. What happens if the single activists involved from all sides change? How are conflicts resolved if divergence of goals materializes in contradictory demands? And how are gains defended against oppositions from single employers? One way to deal with these and similar challenges is to connect to already existing global networks such as global unions federations in order to translate the ideational solidarities into institutional, associational, and societal power resources.

Bringing the locally organized workers together is important to withstand powerful employers on the transnational level and acknowledges that those employers are often the same for workers in garment retail and production. An approach of constructing transnational workers solidarity by trust-based, relational culture-based forms mobilization that create member commitment instead of focusing directly on organizing campaigns (Tapia, 2013) along the supply chain thus responds to the fact that the global and the local are intrinsically tied in supply chains. While oppression is produced at all scales, workers must organize simultaneously across space as well as in space (Davis, 2017). Local actors need to ‘jump scale’ (Merk, 2009), but transnational organization needs to build on effective local structures. That is, while counter-movements need to be global (Burawoy, 2010), the local cannot be dismissed (Caspersz, 2010).

In sum, our study not only reiterates that new forms of associational power are needed to organize precarious workers (see Fichter et al., 2018), but argues that a stronger focus on ideational power resources, particularly the creation of solidarity relations among workers, might be a fruitful starting point for organizing countervailing worker power. Further research might investigate how the relationship between such grassroots organizing and unions’ more higher-level organizing develops over time. Do these activities unfold largely in parallel? Does one undermine the operational efficiency of the other? Or do they mutually support each other? Additionally, further research should look for similar initiatives in other sectors. Are the strategies for organizing transnational solidarity among workers similar or different in buyer- versus producer-driven supply chains, for instance? Finally, our conceptualization of ideational power and particularly its foundations—solidarity, but also shared knowledge, traditions or customs—should be examined further.

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