

New frontiers of trade unionism

Globalisation of the economy, underway for several years now, poses new challenges for trade union bodies, be they national, regional – in particular European – or worldwide. After years of negotiations between international organisations (the ICFTU, WCL and others), 2006 saw the founding of a unique new world structure which is democratic, pluralist and independent: the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Its establishment reflects a desire to unify the aims, strategies and actions of workers' organisations throughout the world in response to accelerating globalisation which has been dictated, especially over the past thirty years or so, by the financial interests of transnational enterprises. But even before the ITUC was founded, we had been seeing the emergence since the 1990s and then more recently a proliferation of 'International Framework Agreements', i.e. texts negotiated jointly by the managements of multinational companies on the one hand and international trade union federations on the other. The role of Europe, and of European sectoral organisations, in the signature of such agreements is important, if not crucial, in most cases.

In the following paragraphs we shall outline the key circumstances surrounding the unification of the world's trade unions; thereafter we shall investigate what appears to be one of the principal means of global union action nowadays, International Framework Agreements (IFAs), as well as their scope and content. In section three we shall attempt to examine the specific role of European sectoral trade union organisations in this process of global 'collective bargaining'.

1. Key circumstances

The founding congress of the new International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), held in Vienna in November 2006, undertook 'to change globalisation fundamentally, so that it works for working women and men, the unemployed, and the poor' (ITUC, 2006: 1) (1). 'It is essential', the inaugural declaration goes on, that 'the policies of free market neo-liberalism, and the manifest failings and incoherence of the international community in respect of the current process of globalisation, give way to governance of the global economy'. Does this undertaking reflect a global consensus within the trade union movement in analysing the causes to be addressed and strategies to be implemented in order to achieve its aims? Globally, the component parts of the international trade union movement in Europe, Asia, America and Africa agree on the responsibility of neoliberal policies and the failings of current global governance. They likewise share basic demands in the social, environmental and regulatory fields: compliance with fundamental social rights and trade union rights, improvement of working conditions, enforcement of health and safety standards in the workplace and environmental protection; but also measures to combat tax havens, free-trade zones, unfettered capitalism, forced labour, child labour, slavery etc. 'Global governance' as envisaged by the ITUC implies in particular making the international trade rules of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) comply with the rules of the International Labour Organisation (ILO); another requirement is to draw up rules on multilateral investment which take into account workers' fundamental rights.

Beyond these major points of consensus, however, the experience of the European trade union movement shows that different approaches and methods, but also different forms of representation, tradition and culture – and even interests – exist between national organisations. Within the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) there are national splits,

¹ The Pan-European Regional Council (PERC) of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) came into being on 19 March 2007 at the close of its constitutive assembly held in Rome, Italy.

but also, depending on the matter in hand, splits between sectors or between the sectoral and cross-industry levels ⁽²⁾. Compounding these divisions are management strategies which seek to promote competition between the individual sites of multinational companies (threats of relocation, etc.), turning employees in different localities, countries or continents into rivals. As has been pointed out by Guy Ryder, the first General Secretary of the ITUC, in the process of globalisation with which we are familiar 'the biggest trap is enforced competition between workers' ⁽³⁾.

1.1 Falling membership rolls

Moreover, if neoliberal policies have had ample opportunity to evolve over the past twenty or thirty years, it is partly thanks to the transformation in global capitalism (industrial decline, internationalisation of methods of production, trade, finance, transport and networking) ⁽⁴⁾ concomitant with the steady fall in trade union membership rolls. For instance, on this last point, the large US union federation AFL-CIO is experiencing the most serious crisis in its fifty years of existence. This crisis has resulted in a lower trade union density and deep rifts (the Service Employees International Union and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters announced their withdrawal from the Federation in July 2005). According to observers, the US union movement is now more deeply split than at any time since the 1930s ⁽⁵⁾. In Europe too, union membership has declined significantly in recent

² By way of example, the recent 'REACH' initiative, aimed at a more judicious handling of chemicals in Europe, has been the subject of discord between Europe's sectoral federations and the cross-industry level.

³ 'The division of labour must be socially acceptable', Interview with ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder, *Le Monde*, 4 November 2006.

⁴ This aspect is not dealt with in the present chapter. We would refer readers interested in an analysis of this trend to the articles by Pierre Defraigne in *Social Developments in the European Union 2005* (Defraigne, 2006) and in the present volume.

⁵ See *Le Monde* of 28 July 2005.

years, down from 32.6% in 1995 to 26.4% in 2001. Jeremy Waddington informs us that this decline is particularly marked in the new Member States, where trade union density has been reduced by more than half in just a few years, falling from 42.7% to 20.4% between 1995 and 2001 (Waddington, 2005). He states that, 'in Europe, the proportion of trade union affiliates has never been as low as it is today since 1950'. In the United Kingdom and France, but also in countries with strong union traditions such as Sweden or Belgium, information and recruitment campaigns have become a top priority with a view to attracting sociological groups that generally have a limited presence in the trade union world: young people, migrants and women. In Germany, membership of the *Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund* (DGB) now seems to be stabilising, but after having experienced a sharp drop (from 9.76 million to 6.58 million between 1994 and 2006). Of course, trade union density does not necessarily reflect the vigour of a labour movement: France, with its low rate of union membership (under 10%) but strong mobilisation of protesters, particularly in 2006 and 2007, is a case in point.

The trend towards falling rolls is likewise affecting Japan, Australia and New Zealand, where rates have halved in recent years (from about 40% to 20%). In China, despite the absence of large independent trade unions, labour movements are proliferating. They now extend to the private sector (Walt Disney, Wal-Mart, McDonald's, etc.) and no longer, as in the 1990s, concern only State factories (⁶). The NGO China Labour Watch reports that, in 2004, three million workers participated in thousands of protests calling for more favourable working conditions. The 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, in October 2007, was moreover used by the country's President, Mr Hu, as an opportunity to promote his 'social harmony' slogan, which some observers explain in terms of the country's need, given its present circumstances, to redistribute the surpluses produced by Chinese economic growth in favour of individuals. We should, lastly, mention the emergence of labour movements in Russia, such as the intermittent strikes at the Russian Ford

⁶ See in particular <http://www.chinalaborwatch.org/>.

plant, where the employees are calling for better working conditions. Overall, therefore, the recent trend towards falling union membership rolls in the industrialised countries seems not to be accompanied by a weakening of labour movements; rather, they appear to be gaining strength in the emerging economies.

1.2 Regional strategies

The international trade union movement is simultaneously confronted by the external challenge of global governance and the internal challenge related to its own national and regional foothold. Thus, if the ITUC is to achieve the aims it has set itself, it must *inter alia* strengthen the links, common analyses and shared strategies between regions of the world. At European level, the ETUC has embarked on the slow task of forging ties with regional union organisations in Latin America (a central trade union coordinating body and the *Consejo de Trabajadores*), Asia (in the context of UE-ASEM meetings), Africa (see in particular the trade union summit of October 2007 bringing together more than sixty African and European union leaders), Russia and the United States (in particular via the joint ETUC/AFL-CIO declaration of April 2007, addressed to the European and US governments, calling on them to safeguard workers' interests in their management of the world economy), and so the list goes on. The aim of these regional strategies is, in certain cases, to introduce a social dimension (workers' rights, the creation of joint advisory committees, etc.) into bilateral agreements signed by the EU with these regions of the world; sometimes the goal is to set up joint trade union platforms to counterbalance bilateral employer platforms; it may also be to incorporate social dialogue into relations between the European Union and other countries.

As far as China is concerned, the absence of any real independent trade union partners hampers the ETUC's strategy, which therefore has to focus on the conduct of European companies established in that country: questioning them about employee representation, freedom of association,

respect for health and safety, working conditions and decent wages (⁷). The same applies in the case of India, where the ETUC and the ITUC are trying to pressurise the European Commission into including a social chapter in India-EU trade agreements and into reminding the Indian government of its international obligations (in 2007 with regard to Burma in particular, the trade unions demanded compliance with the obligations arising out of the ILO and UN resolutions on workers' rights and other human rights).

However, the trade unions' desire to firm up joint analyses and strategies worldwide is thwarted by a series of difficulties: social dialogue structures vary from one country and region of the world to another (bipartite or tripartite structures), union strength and representativeness are very diverse, and the economic situation, commercial position and also unemployment and poverty levels make every national or regional situation specific – without even counting the political difficulties in many countries where trade union rights are severely suppressed (⁸), and in Europe where an anti-union climate is spreading (see, in 2007, the case of Sweden).

Finally, it is sometimes hard to bring solidarity to bear when it comes, for example, to coordinating wage strategies, even within the EU (⁹). So, if we

⁷ In June 2006, for instance, ETUC General Secretary John Monks stated: 'It is outrageous that profit-chasing European companies are threatening to disinvest if very basic standards are introduced in China' (ETUC, 2006). His reaction followed on from the publication of reports that the European Chambers of Commerce in Beijing had said that, if new labour laws were introduced to cut working time and improve pay rates, this would 'increase Chinese production costs and would force foreign companies to reconsider new investment or continuing with their activities in China'.

⁸ See the Annual Survey of violations of trade union rights – 2007 from the ITUC (<http://survey07.ituc-csi.org/>).

⁹ See for example the difficulties encountered by the Doorn Group in coordinating collective bargaining (the Doorn Group has since 1997 brought together trade unions from Germany (DGB), France (CGT, CFDT, FO & CFTC), the Netherlands (FNV & CNV), Luxembourg (CGT-L & LCGB) and Belgium (FGTB, CSC, & CGSLB).

cannot adopt a single vision of international trade unionism, we must put our faith in fundamental principles. According to Tom Jenkins, external relations coordinator at the ETUC, 'Our approach is to link trade with core labour standards, freedom of association, collective bargaining, and an end to child and forced labour. We want coherent policies, so that trade is not divorced from development and social issues. (...) The ETUC wants to see independent trade unions established around the world, able to engage in free collective bargaining' (¹⁰).

2. What tools of the trade should global trade unionism adopt?

To this day, there are no structures framing global social dialogue, global collective agreements or global collective action and strikes. International trade union action is based mainly on international institutions: trade preferences linked to social rights, the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises (OECD, 2000), and the Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning multinational enterprises and social policy (ILO, 2001). At international level, however, the absence of a hierarchy of rules weakens the scope of these documents vis-à-vis other organisations, especially the World Trade Organisation (WTO). And yet the globalisation of economic activity, the growing importance of multinationals and the proliferation of large-scale corporate restructuring exercises, mergers and acquisitions, have made trade unions wonder about the geographical limits of their capacity to act. Telljohann *et al.* note that 'as a consequence of TNEs' (Transnational Enterprises, author's note) growing flexibility and capacity to shift production from one country to another, trade unions began to attempt to create a social framework for the global economy in order to bridge the growing gap between TNEs' strategic options, which transcend national borders, and their own limited capacity to act, since it is largely circumscribed by national boundaries. In the light of the limited capacity for political regulation at global level, the only realistic option to create such a social framework was to push for more

¹⁰ ETUC, 'Interview with Tom Jenkins', *Newsletter*, No.9, June 2006, pp.10-12.

self-regulation through the conclusion of IFAs at global company level' (Telljohann *et al.*, 2007: 11).

It is in this context that, since the early 1990s, we have witnessed the emergence of global agreements on workers' rights concluded between certain multinational enterprises and global union federations. These agreements, known as 'International Framework Agreements' (IFAs), are aimed at promoting embryonic social dialogue at an international level. In 2002, the ICFTU gave the following definition of them: 'International Framework Agreements (...) are agreements on certain principles which, although they do not constitute collective agreements in the same way as agreements concluded at national or local level, lay down a framework of rights to encourage recognition and negotiation at this level' (Bourque, 2005: 9). Such agreements are negotiated and signed between unions and employers – which sets them apart from codes of conduct, drawn up unilaterally by company management – and the employers undertake to comply with the social standards laid down in them at all the multinational's sites. A more militant take on IFAs prompts the CGT (France) to state that 'the idea is to reduce, or even wipe out, the profits made by shareholders who build their "competitive advantage" on low wages and the absence of social rules' (CGT: 1). A study conducted by Isabelle Schömann *et al.* counted some 52 IFAs in July 2007. It is indicative of the acceleration in this process that there were already 59 in late December of the same year.

¹¹ Each of these federations, known as Global Unions, represents its sector of activity at global level: Education International (www.ei-ie.org); Building and Wood Workers International (www.bwint.org); International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Union (www.icem.org); International Federation of Journalists (www.ifj.org); International Metalworkers' Federation (www.imfmetal.org); International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (www.itglwf.org); International Transport Workers' Federation (www.itf.org.uk); International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Association (www.iuf.org); Public Services International (www.world-psi.org); Union Network International (www.union-network.org). The International Trade Union Confederation (www.ituc-csi.org) and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (www.tuac.org).

2.1 Signatories and sectors

IFAs are signed by the management of a multinational enterprise and the global union federations (¹¹). In certain cases they are also signed by the European Works Council concerned and/or by national trade union organisations. A Global Unions Council, resulting from an agreement with the global union federations and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (CSC-TUAC), was established at the founding conference of the ITUC.

Table 1: List of International Framework Agreements (IFAs) (1989-2007)

Enterprise	Year	Country	Global Union
Danone	1989	France	IUF
BSN	1989/95	France	IUF
Accor	1995	France	IUF
Faber Castell	2000	Germany	BWI
Hochtief	2000	Germany	BWI
Freudenberg	2000	Germany	ICEM
Carrefour	2000	France	UNI
Merloni	2001	Italy	IMF
OTE	2001	Greece	UNI
Skanska	2001	Sweden	BWI
Telefonica	2001	Spain	UNI
Chiquita	2001	United States	IUF
IKEA	2001	Sweden	BWI
Anglogold	2002	South Africa	ICEM
Endesa	2002	Spain	ICEM
Ballast Nedam	2002	The Netherlands	BWI
Fonterra	2002	New-Zealand	IUF
Volkswagen	2002	Germany	IMF
Norske Skog	2002	Norway	ICEM
DaimlerChrysler	2002	Germany	IMF
Leoni	2002	Germany	IMF
Eni	2002	Italy	ICEM
ISS	2003	Denmark	UNI

GEA	2003	Germany	IMF
Statoil	2003	Norway	ICEM
Rheinmetall	2003	Germany	IMF
SKF	2003	Sweden	IMF
Lukoil	2004	Russia	ICEM
H & M	2004	Sweden	UNI
Bosch	2004	Germany	IMF
SCA	2004	Sweden	ICEM
Prym	2004	Germany	IMF
Renault	2004	France	IMF
Impreglio	2004	Italy	BWI
Röchling	2004	Germany	IMF
BMW	2005	Germany	IMF
Rhodia	2005	France	ICEM
EDF	2005	France	ICEM, PSI, IFME, WFIW
Veidekke	2005	Norway	BWI
EADS	2005	The Netherlands	IMF
Schwan Stabilo	2005	Germany	BWI
Lafarge	2005	France	ICEM, BWI
Arcelor	2005	Luxembourg	IMF
Nampak	2006	South Africa	UNI
Portugal Telecom	2006	Portugal	UNI
PSA Peugeot Citroën	2006	France	IMF
Royal BAM	2006	The Netherlands	BWI
Euradius	2006	The Netherlands	UNI
Securitas	2006	Sweden	UNI
Staedler	2006	Germany	BWI
France Telecom	2007	France	UNI
NAG	2007	Australia	UNI
Volker Wessels	2007	The Netherlands	BWI
Umicor	2007	Belgium	IMF, ICEM
Inditex	2007	Spain	ITGLWF
Brunel	2007	The Netherlands	IMF
Quebecor	2007	Canada	UNI

Suez	2007	France	EPSU
WAS	2007	Germany	IFJ
Umicore	2007	Belgium	ICEM, IMF

Source: Schömann *et al.* (2008) + updated at 31 December 2007.

Although most IFAs run for an indefinite period, others are concluded for multiannual periods (two or five years). A preliminary analysis of the enterprises signing up to an IFA tells us that the vast majority of them are European. 52 out of the 59 Agreements in existence at the end of 2007 concern multinationals whose head offices are in an EU Member State (or in Norway). Almost half of them are German (15) or French (10). The countries of origin of the seven non-European IFAs are South Africa (2), New Zealand (1), Australia (1), Russia (1), Canada (1) and the USA (1). This initial finding leads us to believe that, beneath their global character, IFAs are strongly influenced by European traditions of collective bargaining. As for the sectors concerned, still according to Schömann *et al.*, the following three sectors of industry are the main ones: metalworking and electronics; chemicals and energy; woodworking and construction. A less significant role is played by the food industry and textiles. The signatory union federations most heavily involved are, in order, the IMF (metalworking), the ICEM (chemicals, energy and mines), UNI (telecommunications, commerce, private security etc.), BWI (woodworking and construction) and the IUF (food).

2.2 Content of IFAs

Most of these Agreements draw their inspiration from the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. Unlike local or national agreements on working conditions, IFAs seek to ensure compliance with fundamental principles, such as freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, in all of the signatory company's operations. Reference is usually made to the ILO Conventions, in particular those relating to freedom of association ⁽¹²⁾, the right to

¹² Convention on freedom of association and protection of the right to organise, Convention No. 87, 1948.

collective bargaining⁽¹³⁾ and the worst forms of child labour⁽¹⁴⁾. Over and above the ILO Conventions, most Agreements also include the issues of health and safety, pay, vocational training and working hours in their provisions. However, like European voluntary framework agreements, these documents do not impose any legally binding obligations on the companies signing them. It is more a matter of companies making a moral commitment, at their own initiative, to observe the provisions of these texts, without any sanctions being possible if those provisions are violated. Yet Bourque notices an evolving trend in the content of IFAs: 'the first Agreements are essentially declamatory in nature and amount to a commitment by the multinational enterprise to comply with the fundamental ILO Conventions and cooperate with the signatory trade unions in ensuring compliance with this commitment. The other Agreements are generally more detailed and more explicit, both in the number and enumeration of the ILO Conventions to which they refer and concerning their more binding character as regards compliance by subcontractors with the stated principles and rights, and as regards procedures for monitoring the Agreement' (Bourque, 2005: 11).

2.3 A tentative assessment

The vast majority of IFAs are rooted in European traditions of social dialogue (the German, Swedish or French model, etc.). Thus one might think that, in a context of globalised production processes, they are a way for European trade unions to disseminate these traditions beyond the continent of Europe with a view to reducing the potential for labour competition, even within multinational enterprises, between sites in different regions of the world. If that were the case, IFAs would do nothing – or very little – to improve working conditions for European workers. But Schömann *et al* note that 'even within the European Union, there is potential for progress, in particular in the development of rights

¹³ Convention on the right to organise and collective bargaining, Convention No.98, 1949; Convention on collective bargaining, Convention No.154, 1981.

¹⁴ Convention on the worst forms of child labour, Convention No.182, 1999.

that are not directly related to working conditions and that correspond to much broader social or environmental aspects linked to the lives of workers and their families' (Schömann *et al.*, 2007: 25).

IFAs are more than a instrument to disseminate the European model. Other elements are relevant, such as placing labour relations in a globalised context (beyond the European confines of European Works Councils), devising tools to prevent labour disputes and arbitrate in the event of conflict, and even, in the minds of some company managers, the benefit of having a mechanism for showing off the company's labour standards with a view to gaining market share. Indeed, according to Telljohann, 'IFAs offer an instrument to address the growing social concerns of consumers and investors' (Telljohann *et al.*, 2007: 14). From this perspective, then, IFAs represent the search for a meeting point between workers' interests and those of management or the company as a whole.

Virtually all Agreements cover every one of the multinational's sites, and 80% of them likewise apply to suppliers. This reflects a higher degree of commitment on the part of management than is the case for the codes of conduct adopted unilaterally by certain multinationals (some of which have also signed an IFA). In this sense, the adoption of Framework Agreements 'can be seen as the start of international collective bargaining' (ICFTU, 2004: 95). However, verification that the entire production chain complies with the provisions of the IFA appears to be insufficient in some instances. Admittedly, most Agreements do foresee monitoring mechanisms, with trade union involvement. But these mechanisms sometimes amount to nothing more than the mere circulation of information about the Agreement within the company. Certain multinationals do go further, however, and make provision for joint inspections by the national trade union concerned and the Global Union, aimed at verifying enforcement of the Agreement on the ground. Where there is violation of an IFA and/or its provisions, the Global Union is expected to notify the management. Finally, certain IFAs provide for verification of their implementation to be entrusted to external audit or certification agencies.

Even though we lack hindsight to assess the implementation of the provisions of IFAs, that implementation depends not only on the goodwill of employers but also on the ability of union organisations to verify their enforcement and exert pressure on the signatory companies. As Stevis and Boswell put it (2007: 175), 'While IFAs aim to establish certain rules that regulate the corporation's labor practices at the global level, they are not collective bargaining agreements that can be enforced in national or international law. Their value depends on the regulatory provisions that unions have managed to negotiate and, of course, on the ability of unions to exert pressure on the corporation through organizing and campaigns'. But the ability of unions to engage in monitoring IFAs is anything but a marginal issue: 'experience has shown that the effective implementation and monitoring of IFAs requires significant resources to conduct meetings, maintain networks and co-ordinate activities' (Telljohann *et al.*, 2007: 15).

On the trade union side, the ultimate aim is to create a legal framework for labour relations at international level (IFAs currently sit mid-way between European codes of conduct and framework agreements). Such a framework should serve as a beacon for the prevention and settlement of labour disputes. According to the ICFTU, 'Most problems that have been resolved so far, through global social dialogue or with the help of an FA, have been worked out informally and quietly. Unlike campaigns and other public action, the intention is to implement common, agreed principles in a way that leads to a speedy resolution of conflicts or even anticipation of conflicts, partly with the aim of preventing damage to the reputation of a company' (ICFTU, 2004: 95). Thus the attraction for management may also lie in this sort of implicit social peace clause: no media campaign takes place; everyone sits down around the table and finds a joint solution. But other authors stress the need, for trade unions, to combine IFAs and media campaigns: 'campaign and agreements strategies can be fused into cohesive global strategies' (Stevis and Boswell *in* Bronfenbrenner, 2007: 188). Others still point out that in sectors where the balance of power is very unequal and/or the employers are traditionally hostile to trade unions, 'IFAs are often the result of campaigns at local and global level, aiming to secure organising rights in

the first place' (Hammer, 2005: 513); one need only mention the Agreement signed by Chiquita.

3. IFAs and European social dialogue

In a way, IFAs reflect the international dimension of Europe's method of structuring labour relations. Several directives have been adopted in the EU since the 1990s organising employee information and consultation (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2002), establishing European Works Councils in European-scale undertakings (Council of the European Union, 1994), and on the involvement of employees in European companies (Council of the European Union, 2001). In parallel, over the past ten years, European sectoral social dialogue, now affecting almost forty economic sectors, has flourished and been institutionalised (see the chapter in this volume by Philippe Pochet). It would seem – although there is a lack of research in this area – that the Global Unions active in IFAs (IMF, ICEM, UNI, BWI, IUF) correspond to the European industry federations which are likewise active in European social dialogue (EMF ⁽¹⁵⁾, EMCEF, UNI-Europa, EFBWW, EFFAT). The main sectors affected are metallurgy, chemicals, energy, mines, telecommunications, commerce, private security, woodworking, construction and Horeca. These sectors alone account for almost a third of all the sectoral joint texts signed in the European Union. It would be interesting to check whether most of the companies signing IFAs are the same ones in which European Works Councils operate effectively. In other words, the whole issue could be summed up in one question: does good employee representation and/or participation in a company belonging to a sector where social dialogue is productive contribute to generating a larger number of International Framework Agreements, covering all of

¹⁵ The EMF is an unusual case: European metallurgy is divided into various sub-sectors (metalwork, shipbuilding, steel, automobile, machine tools, garage work). It has a strong tradition of European trade unionism but, paradoxically, it only very recently formed a sectoral social dialogue committee (even though coordination of collective bargaining is well developed in the industry) (see Dufresne *et al.*, 2006).

that company's sites and employees? If the answer to this question is affirmative – no studies have yet been conducted in this area – we shall no doubt be able to infer that IFAs constitute a tool for extending the European social model to the rest of the world ⁽¹⁶⁾.

Conclusion

The establishment of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) in 2006 is now testing the ability of national and regional labour organisations to pool their thinking and articulate their strategies in a global context. Although no overall structure for a 'global social dialogue' exists as yet, several Global Unions have over the past ten or fifteen years developed a new instrument liable to serve as a test-bed for such social dialogue: International Framework Agreements (IFAs). The recent proliferation of IFAs represents an attempt to shift the global balance of power within multinationals in favour of workers. IFAs – which are strongly rooted in the European social model – aim to establish social dialogue at this international level. For employees, they can help to promote labour rights such as those set out in the ILO Conventions, in order to combat various forms of labour competition between different sites, countries or regions of the world. For management, they can help in the prevention and arbitration of labour disputes. So far, IFAs represent no more than a drop in the ocean of international labour relations. They covered fewer than 5.3 million workers in total throughout the world at the end of 2007, and their effective, long-term implementation has yet to be assessed. Nevertheless, IFAs could serve as a model for the gradual construction of an international sectoral social dialogue.

¹⁶ While bearing in mind, of course, that the number of IFAs, in proportion to the number of multinationals, remains very small.

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