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*Employment Relations and Global Governance
The Dialogue between the Global Unions and the IFIs, by Yvonne Rueckert. Routledge, ,
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h/b.*

For decades, the regulation of work and employment have been studied primarily as a matter of domestic politics. This is not surprising, as states remain the main source of labour regulation, whereas employment relations actors tend to be organized first and foremost at the national level. Over time, however, methodological nationalism in the study of employment relations has appeared increasingly untenable in light of the enduring, albeit uneven, internationalization of the world economy. Such internationalization has emerged not only as increased interconnectedness of national labour and product markets, but also with the increased importance of international institutions and actors in shaping labour market policy.

As far as back in the 1980s, international financial institutions (IFIs) as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank fostered a wide range of commodifying structural reforms – also affecting employment relations - in developing countries subject to conditional financial assistance. In the 1990s, both institutions had a major influence in the process of transition from state socialism to market economy in Easter Europe and the former Soviet Union. Conversely, since its foundation in 1919 the International Labour Organization (ILO) attempted to promote decommodifying improvements to global labour regulation, but with much less coercive power. While the role of IFIs in shaping employment relations has been increasingly acknowledged by the literature, especially following the outbreak of the 2007-2008 global financial crisis, we still don't know much about their internal functioning, nor about their interaction with trade unions. This gap is addressed

by the new book by Yvonne Rueckert: 'Employment relations and global governance. The dialogue between global unions and the IFIs'.

As it is clear already from the title, the author focuses her analysis on the interaction between IFIs and unions at the international level, and in particular on the structured dialogue that exists since 2002 between IFIs and global union federations. To study the topic, the author combines semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation of meetings and documentary analysis. Every two years, there are high-level meetings between representatives from the World Bank, the IMF and global unions, with some ILO officers also in attendance. In addition, there are thematic meetings every year, and some irregular interim meetings. According to Rueckert, this dialogue between the IFIs and global unions differs from bipartite social dialogue as traditionally understood by the industrial relations literature – as the organisations involved do not act as social partners and do not sign formal agreements – but it is not a case of pure lobbying either. It is instead an exchange of views on topics of interest to the actors, which can also be seen as 'an instrument of transnational trade union policy which serves to integrate a social dimension within the globalisation of financial and labour markets' (p. 5).

Chapter 2 delineates the theoretical framework which informs the book. The author combines insights from the literature on global governance and organisation theory. Contra state-centred approaches to international relations, Ruckert assumes that international organisations have a certain degree of independence which allows them to develop their own priorities and ideas and to conciliate conflicts between their stakeholders. The book is also sensible to asymmetric power relations between actors within the system of global governance. Vis-à-vis trade unions, IFIs are in a more powerful position. Global unions have limited power resources in structural terms and high mobilisation costs. While the structured dialogue is not going to change this asymmetry in power, it can, according to the author, 'help the Global Unions to achieve a more favourable positions within the system of global governance, which in turn may allow them to take a more active role as interest representing organisations' (p. 23).

Power resources are dealt in more details in the following chapters, which describe the actors involved in the structured dialogue and their organisational characteristics, respectively the Global Unions (Chapter 3), the IMF and the World Bank (Chapter 4) and the ILO (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 describes how the dialogue between the IFIs and the Global Unions works, and some of its outcomes, and chapter 7 concludes. Results of the dialogue are 'mixed'. Unions wanted recognition by IFIs of the importance of ILO's four Core Labour Standards¹ (CLS) and to ensure 'that their own policies do not undermine these principles in order to prevent the exploitation of labour' (p. 147). The World Bank now acknowledges the ILO's CLS in some of its policies, including some lending instruments, but not all of them, while the IMF never committed to adopting the CLS. In terms of labour market issues and social protection, while there is increasing recognition by the IFIs of the issue of inequality, there has been overall little development in terms of these institutions' positive view on neoliberal labour market reform. The same could be said for what concerns other policy areas such as privatisation and public-private partnership. For what concerns conditionality and austerity – the most contentious issue associated with IFIs – there has been some change in rhetorical terms, but not much in practical ones. The author then traces drivers and obstacles to the dialogue, which ultimately would require organisational change within IFIs to achieve more results. That, however, depends on their shareholders (i.e. national governments). On their side, trade unions will need to form alliances with NGOs and exercise pressure on governments at the national and international level.

The author also lists as an achievement for the unions to have obtained and maintained 'a seat at the table', having ensured a continuity of the dialogue since 2002. In light of the results, however, this achievement might be seen as a pyrrhic victory, and would warrant a more critical examination. Nevertheless, the book provides a good entry point into a subject as of yet unexplored, and will be a helpful tool for those wanting to open the black box of global labour governance.

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¹ These are: Freedom from forced labour; Freedom from child labour; Freedom from discrimination at work; Freedom to form and join a union, and to bargain collectively.

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