



## Transnational Solidarity Playbook | Essay

*This essay is part of a series that will be included in a Transnational Solidarity Playbook to be published by the US-Africa Bridge Building Project. The series is based on the premise that progressive forces must increase our capacity to join forces across national borders, defeat authoritarian regimes and movements based on hate, and find the strength to build a future based on common humanity and justice for all.*

### Lessons Learned In Transnational Solidarity: Towards a Partnership of Equals

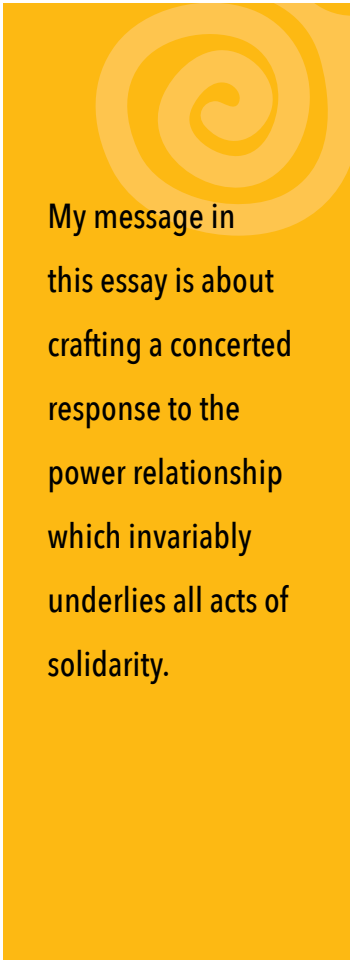
by Sahra Ryklief

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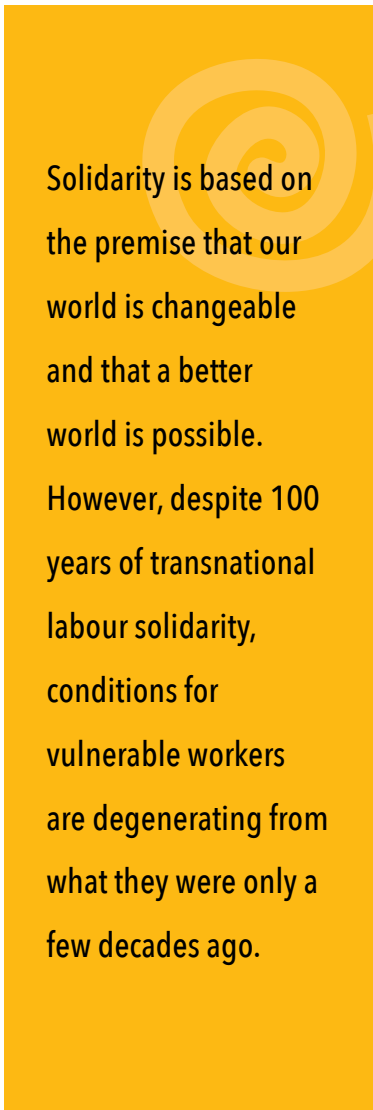
Ten years ago, I sat in a coffee shop and listened to an influential member of a fraternal international organisation relate how an office bearer in my organisation had succeeded in persuading all the disenchanted key people in my organisation to rally, unite and contribute, thereby single-handedly, ‘saving’ the organisation. Having over 20 years in the South African labour movement and an additional 15 of international exposure at that point, it was not even an effort to keep my facial expression pleasantly blank, nod gently, and burble some noncommittal response to this utter nonsense.

Listening to my and several others’ collective efforts being condensed into this messianic narrative, reducing my role as lead actor to that of passive beneficiary of someone’s heroic largess, did not require much restraint, apart from a need to mask my internal amusement at the irony of the situation. No one thrives or even survives in international work by being overly sensitive. Dear reader, you may even be observant enough to notice that I avoided any national, racial or gender description of either the narrator, or the office bearer singled out for such distinction. For my message in this essay is about crafting a concerted response to the power relationship which invariably underlies all acts of solidarity, and I do not wish to distract you with how it is perceived when it manifests.

The vehicle for crafting this response is the organisational home for my wonderful adventure in international exchanges with the IFWEA. This transnational organization was founded in 1947 and I have had the privilege of being its General Secretary since December 2007. Prior to that, I served as a member of the IFWEA Executive Committee for a decade. My work with IFWEA has



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led me to develop a deep respect for the education organisations which make up its membership. I am continuously inspired by the resilience, dedication of service, comradeship and respect the people of my international ‘tribe’ display to one another. Together, we have agreed that crafting a 21st Century model of international solidarity is fundamental to our education work with our partners in the labour movement, **as the most pressing labour market and also social issues of our time are interconnected and global.**

An essential testing ground for this work has been IFWEA’s annual programme for young leaders called the **Youth Globalisation Awareness Programme**, which we have conducted since 2012. By 2020, 198 YGAP graduates from 33 countries had participated. YGAP targets young educators, trade union and youth leaders between the ages of 18 – 35 years. The YGAP curriculum changes annually and is designed by an international co-ordinating team. For two weeks, delegates participate in a curriculum of interactive activities designed to enhance their political understanding in a way that is inclusive, creative, diverse, respectful and, most importantly, fun. YGAP culminates in a few days of field placements in organisations working on labour, social justice and democracy issues, such as the Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union. **Delegates graduate with a renewed perspective of internationalism** and are able to confidently design and deliver communication and/or education on global solidarity in their home countries.

One of the initial exercises is to ask participants to give us their personal understanding of what solidarity means, and also ask them what the word for solidarity is in their home language. By their responses, most have a self-defined view of themselves as social rather than personal. They see themselves as part of something larger than their immediate self, family and friends. This is a likely consequence of their organisational experience in their national labour movements or global trade union federations. Such membership is often grounded in a shared perspective of **common humanity**. They embrace the Southern African concept of ubuntu when it is introduced to them. Some go so far as to describe the personal value they have gained from human interaction across national/local and language divisions, their feelings of interconnectedness, of being part of a wider community, of needing to solve one another’s problems together.

There is something very powerful in believing that humanity is one. It is but a short step to a perspective that the rights and resources you enjoy in your country or continent should belong to all who live in the world. To embrace people’s struggle for economic and democratic freedom, equality and justice as your struggle as well. To feel their suffering as yours. To believe that until their battles are won, you cannot rest. It warms my and my colleague’s hearts to hear this expressed every year by young leaders from diverse countries and organisations in the global labour movement.

So if I were asked, what my most important observation about international labour solidarity after more than three decades of international work, I can say with total conviction that it is powered by an immense faith in our common humanity, premised on a view that our world is changeable and a better one is possible, and executed by people with the best of intentions who want to be a part of this change.

The complications occur when we move from the realm of emotions and ideas into the act of solidarity and its results. It is here that the unravelling begins. Underlying the idea that we *should* all be equal, is the reality that we are not. Firstly, whilst solidarity's universal ideological premise decries fundamental differences, its actions are a response to the concrete reality that there are.

Secondly, solidarity is based on the premise that our world is changeable and that a better world is possible. However, **despite 100 years of transnational labour solidarity**, first pioneered, inter alia, by unions such as the **IWW in the USA**, the trade union federations in the Nordic countries, and the **ICU in Southern Africa**, conditions for vulnerable workers are degenerating from what they were only a few decades ago. Global inequality, while it appears in relative terms to

## Selected Resources on Inequality and Transnational Solidarity

"Underlying the idea that we should all be equal, is the reality that we are not. Firstly, whilst solidarity's universal ideological premise decries fundamental differences, its actions are a response to the concrete reality that there are." – Sahra Ryklief

As Ryklief notes in this essay, unequal power relations are pervasive. They can and must be overcome to build a better world, whatever the causes of those inequalities.

Much of the debate to date has focused on racial division and the "white savior" complex. That debate was sharply focused by the **Kony 2012 campaign** by the U.S.-based group Invisible Children, calling for U.S. intervention to stop the Lord's Resistance Army led by Joseph Kony in central Africa. African critical response to this campaign was both immediate and eloquent, as illustrated in this widely distributed **video by Ugandan blogger Rosebell Kagumire (transcript and more background on African criticism)**. The critique was amplified by Nigerian American novelist and literary critic Teju Cole in a

twitter thread and an article in the Atlantic entitled the **White Savior Industrial Complex**.

On the wider power issues, and possibilities for addressing them, in addition to Ryklief's essay, two recent background resources, focused on the United Nations and on religious institutions respectively, are the story of former UN under secretary-general **Noeleen Heyzer**, from Singapore and a **study-guide** for the Unitarian Universalist College of Social Justice.

For a hilarious take on celebrity fundraising in Western countries for Africa, see the **video** and **website** Radi-Aid: Africa for Norway.

For resources on education for solidarity, see **Education for Empowerment** and **Identity Change and Popular Education**, forthcoming papers by Sahra Ryklief and colleagues.

**Ubuntu in the modern era** on The Azania Mosaka Show. 17-minute podcast with Dr. Trevor Ngwane, University of Johannesburg

Can imported policies and structures and top-down approaches initiated by those in totally different conditions, inspire sufficient actors on the ground to change their socio-economic and political realities?

be decreasing, **has in actual fact been increasing in absolute terms**, especially if applied to income averages and in-country differentials. Adding to this is the rapid digitization of multiple aspects of our working life, thereby reinforcing and intensifying existing social inequalities in our societies and between countries.

With these severe inequalities as the environmental context, to be a persistent proponent of transnational solidarity is to accept that our immediate acts of solidarity are not going to change the world any time soon. It is for this reason that we have to, at the very least, ensure that it changes us, the people and organisations involved in labour solidarity, in such a manner that we become better equipped and prepared to shape the longer term change we seek to achieve.

How then, can we forge transnational labour solidarity in a way that does this? I chose to advocate that we do this by paying close attention to the narrative which frames our approach. In crafting that narrative, we tell the story of what is wrong with the world, and what we would like to see. When confronting the profound structural changes to the forms of labour, we do not yet have all the answers to the big organizational challenges confronting us. So who is doing the telling of what the change should be?

To understand and appreciate the **scale of informalisation in the south which drives non-wage economies; illegal migration; low union densities and weak political influence**, is difficult from the well-resourced north. To those advocates of transnational solidarity shining the spotlight on those who are not being heard, who have been made invisible by being left out of the innovative solutions for economic development, often means that they call on their solidarity partners to give testimony as their only role in transnational exchanges.

I cannot begin to list the number of international conferences, seminars and workshops I have attended in Europe and North America, where the speakers' panel consists of Africans giving witness to their conditions, whilst the analysts and formulators of policies for change come from experts in the north. Can imported policies and structures and top-down approaches initiated by those in totally different conditions, inspire sufficient actors on the ground to change their socio-economic and political realities? A perfect example is the Pan African Parliament, **which imploded recently and has been suspended** until it seeks guidance from the EU, its main supporter, on how to proceed.

In recent years, we have witnessed the rise of the new movements, such as “Rhodes must fall”; “Black Lives Matter”; “Climate Justice” and “Me Too”, who have and continue to challenge the prevailing structures and narratives of the day in our countries. They have energised the youth and influenced debates on multiple issues. It is not always possible to expect mainstream trade unions to connect with these movements in an organisational manner. Our most important connection could be by bringing that which is relevant and refreshing from these movements into the dialogue of ours.

One of the issues which has emerged, is a strong critique of the “**saviour complex.**” I am disregarding the racial classification of “white saviour.” I have seen too many of my fellow black South Africans portray a similar set of attitudes to Africans from other countries on the continent. It is the naming of the debilitating power relationship of well-resourced benefactors and poorly resourced beneficiaries that interests me. Solidarity has to have as its core the building a relational community, crafting the narrative collectively, solving our problems together. Collaborative effort provides motivation and builds the capacity of trade unions, NGOs and social organisations to work together. Unless we give due attention and significance to the role definition and relationship as partners in solidarity, we will not engender change.

As IFWEA, we argue that part of any improvement of our current approach is education that encourages collective empowerment towards global and transnational activism. This should not be interpreted that we are advocating eternal workshoping. You can start by listening before speaking, learning before acting and partnering instead of leading. You can trust that the leadership of the organisations you seek to support are bound to have a pretty solid vision of the solutions to their problems, and that they see your relationship as part of that solution. If that part is merely to provide resources, you can work to broaden it, to exchange ideas, methods, outcomes and learning experiences as an integral element of any and all transnational solidarity exchanges. You can make sure that you acknowledge and celebrate all who have contributed towards your collective partnership, and not only focus on those who provided the resources.

The way is now clear, thanks to these new movements, to confront the power issues openly. We should not lose this opportunity, or any possible regeneration of labour activism will be of short duration.

*A Luta Continua!*

*Sahra Ryklief*

*August 2021*

## Selected Resources on Transnational Trade Union Movements and Workers' Rights

### IFWEA

<https://ifwea.org/>

The International Federation of Workers' Education Associations (IFWEA) is a global federation of worker educators. We focus on adult education opportunities for workers and their communities.

### ITUC-Africa

<http://www.ituc-africa.org/>

The African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) is a pan-African trade union organisation created in November 2007 following the merger of two former African trade union organisations, namely ICFTU-Afro and DOAWTU.

### WIEGO

<https://www.wiego.org/>

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy to secure their livelihoods.

### Public Services International

<https://publicservices.international/>

Our global union federation, our movement, our members: together we make society happen. Public service workers run hospitals and emergency services, schools and universities, public administrations and local governments, water and electricity utilities. Imagine a world without us.

### International Labour Organization (ILO) Resources on Decent Work

<https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang-en/index.htm>

Productive employment and decent work are key elements to achieving a fair globalization and poverty reduction. The ILO has developed an agenda for the community of work looking at job creation, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue, with gender equality as a crosscutting objective.

### Solidarity Divided: An Interview with Bill Fletcher, Jr.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/racethmulglocon.4.2.255>

"The South African comment [at a meeting in 2010 in Johannesburg] went way beyond the parameters of what the SEIU folks identified as progressive trade unionism. For example, let's just take the issue of unemployment. The union movement in the United States, by and large, ignores the unemployed as a sector of the working class, and ignores the unemployed from their own sectors, after a few months, upon layoffs."

## About The US–Africa Bridge Building Project

### Crossing Borders, Building Power for Economic and Social Justice

#### Vision

A world in which everyone pays their fair share to solve common problems.

#### Mission

Build powerful transnational alliances between local economic justice activists in the United States and Africans working to achieve this common vision.

#### Description

Communities in Africa and the U.S. share many things in common, from struggles for human and civil rights to the central importance of family and culture. But they also share a common experience of financial exploitation, as governments and businesses find ways to extract resources from communities of color. Estimates of the money diverted from health, education, jobs and infrastructure in both Africa and the United States through corruption, tax evasion and outright theft run as high as \$500 billion a year and contribute to the current historic levels of income and social inequality. The few transnational bodies charged with monitoring and curbing these abuses frequently lack both the authority and the political will to do so effectively.

As a result, affected communities and grassroots social justice campaigners, themselves often the victims of racial and political marginalization at home, find themselves without the resources and information they need to forge strong global alliances for change.

The US–Africa Bridge Building Project is an initiative to catalyze engagement between local struggles and global problems and promote mutual solidarity between Africans and Americans working to end corruption and tax injustice. The Bridge Building Project will draw on the strategies developed by the African liberation solidarity movement to facilitate international links between community-based advocates in Africa and the United States fighting to end racism and economic exploitation.

In the months ahead the project will publish the first of a series of resources, a Playbook for Transnational Solidarity, for use by grassroots groups that will highlight successful strategies and approaches to cross border collaboration, and provide information about ongoing campaigns and initiatives in the U.S. and Africa. Project staff will also facilitate engagement between community-based economic justice activists in select cities and African social movements to share analysis, strategies, and to assist in developing common campaigns and mutually beneficial relationships. In addition, the Project will seek to engage the growing Diaspora community in these efforts, seeing it as a critical and underutilized source of knowledge and experience.

The US–Africa Bridge Building initiative is a project of the Fund for Constitutional Government, a non-profit 501(c)3 organization. Contributions to the US–Africa Bridge Building Project are tax deductible to the full extent allowed by law.



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