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The Challenges for International Solidarity and Labour Rights in the Emerging Multipolar World: The Case of the BRICS

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ABSTRACT: The classic literature on globalization was dominated by two central questions. The first question had to do with the forces of convergence and divergence in national models of capitalism in the face of a post-Cold War unipolar moment led by the United States and Anglo dominated global finance. The second question centred on the neoliberal nature of that order and the struggle of workers to protect, assert, and expand their labour rights. The challenge to international labour solidarity, abstractly in any case, was easy enough to identify and define: neoliberal globalization. The rise of the BRICS group raises some contemporary issues for the promotion of labour rights and solidarity in the global south. Has, for example, the emerging of this multipolar order complicated the political economy of global capitalism and given rise to new challenges for labour? To answer this question, we set ourselves two central tasks. First, we analyse how the universalist pretensions of embedded liberalism within the post-war multilateral international system were contradictory and ultimately not practicable along several vectors. Second, we examine the formation of BRICS and its relationship to labour via the BRICS Trade Union Forum. We find both the lingering constraints of embedded liberalism and opportunities for elevating the status of labour and labour standards and increased labour solidarity within the multiregional BRICS bloc.

KEYWORDS: BRICS; Multipolarity; Pluralism; Labour Solidarity; International Labour Rights

Introduction

The question over the *possibility* of international labour solidarity is a permanent feature of the global market. One angle through which to view the complexity of the matter is via the observation that labour is more or less fixed in place[3] whereas capital, particularly in the post-Cold War (unipolar) epoch, is relatively fluid in space. Neoliberal globalization under the hegemony of the United States and American capital created a dynamic whereby labour and labour standards were relatively fixed in an international whipsaw where capital was relatively free to engage in a global arbitrage over labour supply, cost, and conditions.

Of course, the geopolitical situation is never stagnant and over the last decade and a half subtle and not so subtle transformations have occurred. One of these changes which have become more pronounced over the past few years is the emergence of new global actors. Of note is an intergovernmental organization located outside the core, namely, the BRICS. While this new organization has been active since its informal beginnings in 2006, little scholarship has turned its look to it, even less so regarding its impact on transnational labour relations. We tentatively see in the BRICS a potential change in this deleterious labour dynamic with the emergence of a multipolar geopolitical system with a concomitant multinational pluralism.

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[3] Although labour migration is an old phenomenon that implies movement in space, it has always been dependent on or determined by capital flow, whether forced or voluntary. Thus, even in the case of 'voluntary' migration, it is less a matter of personal choice than a result of economic circumstances, see Reid-Musson, 2014.

While aware of the criticisms regarding the democratic deficit within some of the BRICS membership, one of our main contentions is pragmatic: these developments in the Global South are happening, they are challenging Western preconceptions about international relations and trade-labour relations, and, instead of ignoring the phenomenon, we ought to look closely to it, especially to see how labour solidarity can express itself within this new structure. In other words, we can approach the work of the BRICS at once with caution and with open curiosity.

With respect to international labour solidarity, in this paper we ask two questions. First, what is the status of labour solidarity within this new multilateral grouping? Second, has the formation of BRICS strengthened or weakened the conditions of possibility for global labour solidarity in general and labour's domestic bargaining position in particular? In answering these questions, we suggest it is important to reconceive accepted wisdoms about the forms and processes of international solidarity, arguing that more informal, yet substantive, solidarities can help bring labour questions to the economic agenda, even in the absence of formal mechanisms allowing it.

To begin an answer to the above questions this article unravels in the following manner. The first task is to define our key terms: multipolarity, multilateralism, pluralism, and solidarity. For the purposes of this article, we will make use of a distinction that we draw between mechanistic and substantive solidarity formation. The second task is to analyse the tensions and contradictions of embedded liberalism as it applies to the labour-trade nexus in the Western-dominated, post-war multilateral order, emphasizing how the shortcomings of a monolithic approach to international trade relations has pushed state actors to favour regionalism, as a way of facilitating negotiation and compromise. The third task is to assess the potential of the BRICS summits to provide a venue of coordination and organized labour's role, if any, in developing tripartite structures. We undertake this task by examining the official communiqués of the BRICS Summits from when the BRICS was a simple abbreviation used by investment bankers to an official international organisation with a concrete and far-reaching set of political and economic goals, as well as the BRICS Trade Union Forum (BTUF) declarations.

From these first echoes, we observe that, although the BRICS has not developed a formal mechanism for direct trade union participation, trade unions have nonetheless managed to put the issue of workers' rights on the table through both informal interventions and the now accepted practice of formal meetings with the Ministers for Labour and Employment (MLE) that do enjoy "official" status inside the BRICS+ group. Contrasting this with the World Trade Organization's (WTO) repeated failures to embrace non-trade considerations seems to confirm that smaller regional forums offer better spaces for pluralist policymaking. We then conclude this paper with an overarching discussion of opportunities and barriers that the multipolarity embodied in the BRICS creates for mechanistic and substantive modalities of solidarity formation between national labour movements.

Multipolarity, Pluralism and Solidarity

In the wake of the end of the Cold War, international relations became increasingly characterized by the unipolar dominance of the United States coupled with a hegemonic policy paradigm and parallel processes of neoliberal globalization. The three pillars of the neoliberal policy paradigm are price stability, labour market flexibility, and the free flow of capital and trade (Fast, 2012). This Anglo-Saxon strategy of accumulation was promulgated at a global level through a plethora of international institutions from the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and through to the World

Trade Organisation along with a host of unofficial international policy think tanks. By the end of the 1990s this system had, more or less, congealed into a hegemonic policy paradigm, an accumulation strategy with few practicable alternatives on offer, domestically or internationally.

From organized labour's point of view, the neoliberal form of globalization created an environment in which the global working classes were effectively "whipsawed" against each other over working conditions and remuneration which created a cascading effect of de-industrializations in developed regions and newly industrializing regions in underdeveloped regions. In the discussion section at the end of this paper we address these issues in more detail.

The formation of BRICS and the tentative construction of a multipolar international system poses both new opportunities and constraints on building and maintaining international working-class solidarities. Multipolarity describes an international system in which there are more than two dominant world powers or blocs as was the case during the cold war (1945-1989).[4]

The post-Cold War international order was dominated by the United States and has been characterized as a unipolar order under American leadership. Dating the start of the unipolar moment is somewhat of a haphazard enterprise but there is consensus that it began in 1989-91 with voluntary disintegration of the Soviet Union (Borell, 2021; Hagerty, 2020; Harsh; 2009; Pant, 2019, Mearsheimer, 1990). There are reasons to characterize the present international scene as that of an emergent multipolarity and a waning American unipolarity: from the rise of China as an economic and military superpower in its own right; to the re-birth of Russia as an energy and nuclear superpower; and with India's economic and military modernization granting it the status of a regional superpower (Pant, 2019), there is an undeniable shift towards geopolitical multipolarity (Peters, 2023). For our purposes we are concerned with ascertaining how the formation of the BRICS group fits into this emergent multipolar international order and how that, in turn, may shape the prospects for international labour solidarity going forward.

A closely related, but not necessarily essential concept to multipolarity is pluralism. Pluralism, as understood here, refers to the coexistence of politically and culturally diverse national polities rather than the imposition of dominant (neoliberal) model on the global community. Pluralism emphasizes multilateral institutions, diplomacy, compromise and a voluntary adherence to the mutually established norms of international law (de Coning et al., 2014; Acharya, 2023). From a labour perspective, pluralism can also refer to a plurality of normative actors, beyond the Westphalian State (Coutu, 2006-2007). The International Labour Organization (ILO), for instance, not only offers a venue for multilateral policymaking, but also implicates worker and industry organizations in the process, through its tripartite structure. In many respects, this merely reflects the values envisioned in the UN Charter of 1945 based as it is on the principles of international law, multilateralism, non-interference in domestic affairs (sovereignty) and the equality of states (Ch., 1).[5]

Where the reality of multipolarity comes into conflict with the promise of pluralism is of course over the existence of *real* and *nominal* sovereigns and the equality of states.[6] Nonetheless,

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[4] For a classic statement on multipolarity see Deutsch and Singer's *Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability* (1963).

[5] The language adopted at the 1955 Bandung conference, for example, made specific reference to refraining "… from intervention or interference in the internal affairs of another country" in keeping with the language of the U.N. Charter (Lumumba-Kasongo, 2015, p.13).

[6] The distinction here is straight forward. To be a *real* sovereign a state must posses a credible military and economic deterrence vis-à-vis other nations. The United States, Russia, China and perhaps India, and France would qualify as real sovereigns. All other nations enjoy *nominal* sovereignty insofar as they are dependent upon other nations abiding

given the pledge to pluralism and the principle of non-interference, a practicable version of equality between nations may be maintained. For, as embedded as the Americans were able to make liberalism in the post war multilateral organizations, pluralism, founded as it is on the principal of non-interference, was deeply ingrained within those multilateral structures acting as check on the hegemony of liberalism. As we shall see in the section below, the BRICS Summit communiqués *all* embrace the principles of international law; the importance of multilateral deliberation, negotiation, and dispute resolution; and *the principles of non-interference* as do the declarations from the BRICs Trade Union Federation (BTUF).

Solidarity is a rather nebulous construct containing "moral, political and performative elements" (Morgan and Pulignano, 2020, p.18). Despite being central to understanding labour organizing and broader social movements, it is a "relatively neglected" concept in the social sciences (Wilde, 2007). Scholars such as Heckscher and McCarthy, argue that it "has been rather neglected as an academic topic because it is very hard to analyse: there is little understanding of how it is created or how it has changed" (2014, p.628). Here we seek not to enter a theoretical debate on how to operationalize the idea of solidarity to generate a quantitative analysis, but, rather, to use a descriptive definition that helps assess what factors support the development of solidarity. Hecksher and McCarthy provide a parsimonious definition and "define solidarity broadly…as a communal sense of obligation to support collective action. The collective action can aim at advancing the group's collective interests and purposes, or at broader social change" (p.629).

Inspired by Putnam (2001), Morgan and Pulignano define solidarity as a form of group inclusion that requires bonding and bridging elements. Bonding elements help to forge ingroup affinities to its members whereas bridging elements create the basis for solidarities between groups with "limited commonalities" (p.20). We make a further distinction between *mechanistic* and *substantive* solidarity. Mechanistic solidarity can be defined as formal institutional linkages between organizations and between organizations and their members and relates to the official policies, collective benefits, and obligations as well as legislative agendas they adopt. Whereas substantive solidarity involves more informal and spontaneous community-level organisations, interactions, and relationships.[7]

Here we are trying to draw a *conceptual* distinction between the forms of solidarity that are required to produce autonomous and organically evolving forms of solidarity outside of official institutions and frameworks. Importantly, we are not trying to argue for the primacy of one form over the other. To put it in economic terms, we view mechanistic and substantive forms of solidarity as *complementary* rather than *rival* goods. From a research point of view, it is easier to evaluate and document mechanistic forms of solidarity formation than it is to do so for substantive forms. We shall nonetheless make some effort, however tentative, to assess the potential for substantive solidarity formation in the context of an emerging multipolar international order in the discussion section of this paper.

The first order of business is to establish why the move to a multipolar international order would have any impact on the conditions of possibility for international labour solidarity? Conceptually, at least, the problem of international labour solidarity remains the same as it ever

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by the norms of non-interference and equality of nations set out in the U.N. Charter and/or the protection of a real sovereign.

[7] An example of this form of substantive solidarity can be found in the digital platform economy, in which many organizations started from informal meetings on the ground, and eventually developed into formal independent trade unions, even connecting transnationally with other similar grass-roots organizations (Forsyth, 2023; Martínez Lucio et al., 2022; Morales Munoz & Dinegro Martinez, 2022).

was: workers are more or less fixed in national spaces and are composed of very heterogenous identities and skill sets, and located in different sectors of the economy, whereas capital is internationally fluid and has a narrower set of preoccupations and goals.[8] In a globalized, neoliberal economy, legislation does little to protect workers from the flow of capital (Arthurs, 1999; Stone, 1995) and even reinforces the control of worker movement through strict migration laws (Reid-Musson, 2017).

At the more abstract level of accumulation, however, neoliberal globalization under the unipolar and hegemonic leadership of the US created a particularly challenging environment for labour solidarity both within and between countries (Wells, 2009; Wilde, 2007). Neoliberal globalization and by extension the expansion and complexity of global supply chains meant a geographical fracturing of supply and production chains and also the workplace which have in turn acted to solidify multinational managerial control over the labour process and the organization of labour itself (Baccaro and Howell, 2017; Crouch and Sisson, 2013; McBride and Teeple, 2010: Morgan and Pulignano, 2020).

In tandem with these 'productive processes' has been the concomitant ability of capital to engage in a plethora of regulatory arbitrage strategies eroding the existence and enforcement of national, regional, and local labour laws (Warikandwa & Osode, 2014). Taken together, these processes created a certain pressure for the convergence on a neoliberal model of accumulation that was apparent to early observers of neoliberal globalisation particularly as it was transforming advanced capitalist welfare states (Fast, 2005; 2012).

Even if the above line of reasoning is taken as an acceptable approximation of the unipolar moment, the question remains: how does the shift to a multipolar, and pluralist global order change the fundamental challenges of national and international labour solidarity? For both conceptual and chronological clarity, it is necessary to interrogate the arrangements and issues which predated this emergent multipolarity. We need to examine some of the contradictions and frictions generated by the multilateral system, its universalist pretensions, and the labour-trade nexus.

From Multilateral Universalism to Multipolar Pluralism

The *General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade* (GATT) and the WTO system embody the ideal of universalism within trade and commerce. Globalization is a universalist project that seeks to even the playing field by allowing the free movement of goods and services. This universalism is partially put into question by the formation of organisations like the BRICS because its existence, as we shall see in the penultimate section, is in part a reaction to the institutional failure of these universal multilateral organizations. As Blackett (2015; 2020) points out, regionalism may be a better setting to navigate the interplay of domestic and global values and policies than hegemonic international organizations. In that regard, two aspects of the GATT/WTO system should be emphasised. First, the universalism it calls upon, as other post-war multilateral international institutions, is effectively West-centric (Dehaibi, 2024; Roberts, 2017). Moreover, it is a shallow form of universalism rather than a profound transversal one, in the sense that it seeks

[8] This goes beyond the problem of collective action where cooperation between individuals would make everyone better off but fails to do so because of conflicting interests. In the classic collective action problem, the blockage to solidarity is endogenous differences. But solidarity formation may also be hindered by exogenous barriers. For example, multinational companies can operate on an international scale with effective control over their subsidiaries in manner that international trade unions cannot because national, regional or local labour laws, as is the case in Canada, make solidarity strikes illegal. It is not conflicting interests within the group (working class) that are the cause of the failure to act collectively but rather the legal structure they are embedded in (Pankert, 1977).

a universal set of rules applicable to trade while being mostly hermetically sealed to considerations of 'non-trade' issues, such as labour and human development more broadly.

While the WTO now has 164 members, the GATT, the WTO's constitutional instrument adopted in 1947, was signed by 23 countries (7 in Europe, 7 in Asia, 5 in the Americas, 2 in Oceania, and 2 in Africa). The GATT's main objective was to increase the circulation of goods by reducing barriers to trade, such as importation quotas, tariffs, and subsidies on domestic products. It was adopted with the objective of "raising standards of living, ensuring full employment and a large and steadily growing volume of real income and effective demand, developing the full use of the resources of the world and expanding the production and exchange of goods," with a clear liberal assumption that free trade and non-intervention are the best way to achieve these goals (GATT, 1947, Preamble). These liberal ideals were simply transposed to the international scale: unfettered international trade would result in greater domestic wealth for all the signatories, owing to the inherent unfolding of the gains from trade rooted in the nostrums of comparative advantage.[9]

Within the GATT-WTO system, the trade-labour nexus has consistently been understated (Langille, 2020; Delgado, 2019; Brown, 2001; Alben, 2001; Charnovitz, 1987). The passage from the preamble of the GATT cited above suggests that states are conscious of the effects of trade on various societal issues, but that they embrace the liberal narrative according to which prerogatives of private property and the freedom of commerce will singlehandedly provide greater benefits for all. WTO rules do not (directly) consider labour protections adopted at the domestic level as trade barriers (Langille, 2020), but they are silent on how international trade can impact labour conditions.[10]

Yet, states within the ILO recognized from its inception the need to address labour protection transnationally, stating in Part XIII of the 1919 *Treaty of Peace of Versailles*, the ILO's founding instrument: "whereas conditions of labour exist involving such injustice, hardship and privation to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperilled" (Preamble). The broad acceptance of the connection between stability, peace, and labour conditions is a major reason industrialized countries progressively adopted an extensive corpus of labour law. Yet, when it came to setting up an international set of trade rules, positive actions to supervise commercial exchanges were ignored. Both regulation of labour and of trade are associated with international peace in the twentieth century, but no correlation is made between the two. Adelle Blackett views this two-track strategy of Western states as an essential element of 'embedded liberalism' (2015).[11] It also shows how a narrow universalistic framework is widely inefficient in promoting social justice.

Since the creation of the WTO in 1994, member states have had multiple occasions to address labour issues, without any success. The Singapore Ministerial Declaration of 1996 did lead to members renewing their "commitment to the observance of internationally recognized core labour standards", while specifying that the ILO was the competent body in setting those standards. In fact, members explicitly reiterate the liberal narrative by stating that "We believe that economic growth and development fostered by increased trade and further trade liberalization contribute to

[9] We are not arguing here that there are not any gains from trade. What we are calling into question is whether or not the naïve mechanics of the doctrine of comparative advantage are sufficient to distribute the *absolute gains* from trade in an equitable and timely matter and further if, in terms of power, the *relative inequality* in the distribution of the *absolute gains* from trade do not re-enforce structural inequalities and dependencies in the global market between states.

[10] The provisions of the GATT are silent on labour standards, including in its article XX which provides general exceptions to free trade.

[11] The classic statement on embedded liberalism is Ruggie (1982).

the promotion of these standards" (WTO, 1996: para. 4). Adding to this, members warned against using labour standards for protectionist purposes. This explicit consideration of labour, more than a recognition of the interconnection of trade and labour, reinforces the firewall around trade rules and reproduces the fallacious division between static labour and fluid capital.

After the Singapore Ministerial Declaration, labour standards were briefly mentioned in the Doha Ministerial Declaration of 2001, where states reaffirmed what was decided in Singapore and merely took "note of work under way in the International Labour Organization (ILO) on the social dimension of globalization" (WTO, 2001). Since then, discussions during various rounds of negotiations have been silent on labour standards, in good parts because these were dominated by the failed attempts to liberalize agriculture (Berger-Richardson & Dehaibi, 2024).[12]

There is a clear contradiction between the universalist projects of the WTO and the ILO. The WTO made it clear that enhancing labour standards was not part of its globalizing mission, whereas the ILO recognizes that global trade without global commitments towards social justice would lead to adverse results. Contrary to the WTO's shallow universalism, the ILO conceives of labour justice as a comprehensive endeavour that penetrates all aspects of social and economic life. As early as in 1919, it was clear that social justice was not a mere domestic matter, with the preamble of Part III of the *Treaty of Versailles* stating that "the failure of any nation to adopt humane conditions of labour is an obstacle in the way of other nations which desire to improve the conditions in their own countries." And when the ILO restated its mission in the 1944 *Declaration of Philadelphia*, it emphasized how its principles ought to penetrate economic and financial policies, both nationally and internationally (Art. 2), simultaneously committing itself to increased cooperation with other international organizations (Art. 4).

This call to avoid a levelling down of labour rights through coordinated efforts was even more pressing at the end of twentieth century with the rise of globalization and the corresponding challenges of deregulation, leading to a marked shift in the ILO's normative work. While the ILO's standard-setting efforts are impressive, the organization has started a colossal work of reconfiguration starting from the late 1990s by recentring its universalist message around key fundamental rights and principles of social justice. The 1998 *ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work* is the central instrument in that reorganization and associates ILO membership to a commitment to four core principles (freedom of association, elimination of forced and compulsory labour, elimination of child labour, and elimination of discrimination in employment),[13] articulated through eight fundamental conventions which all states must eventually ratify.

Alongside the 1998 Declaration, the Secretariat, under the impulse of Juan Somavia, then Director-general of the ILO, developed a policy instrument, the ILO Decent Work Agenda, which creates a new comprehensive concept, of decent work, and establishes a series of priority programs to promote labour standards in the context of globalization (ILO, 1999). It is based on four pillars or objectives: job creation, guaranteeing rights at work, social protection and promoting social dialogue. The distinctive point of the Decent Work Agenda is that it not only focuses on fundamental rights but also addresses head on the idea of commercial efficiency, by promoting sustainable economic development. It is in fact around this agenda that Juan Somavia built its

[12] Indeed, the 1947 GATT explicitly excluded agricultural products from its ambit, in large measure because western states significantly subsidised their agricultural sector and were not willing to abandon these protectionist measures. The liberalization of trade in agriculture has been at the centre of trade negotiations since 1994, with little progress.

[13] The 1998 Declaration was amended in 2022 to add a fifth core principle, namely a safe and healthy work environment.

submission to the Third WTO Ministerial Conference in Seattle which took place at the end of 1999, and which was met with intense anti-globalization protests. In this submission, Somavia refers to the guiding principles behind the GATT in relation to raising standards of living and notes how the multilateral trade system is failing in that regard. He then suggests that the four objectives of the Decent Work Agenda can act as "the social foundations of the global economy" (Somavia, 1999: para 11).

Despite these important developments which directly address issues of globalization and economic development, the WTO has not formally referred to the ILO's work since 2001, at which time it made only a vague allusion to 'work under way'. But as regional developments show, this is more a sign of the WTO's shortcomings than of the ILO's. The ILO Declaration establishes a minimum standard that can easily be incorporated into national legislation and bilateral agreements (Arnold, 2005; Coxson, 1998) and can help bridge the gap between geographically and culturally distant actors in labour markets. It is a comprehensive, systematic, set of principles which repeats a simple message, easy to adopt by unions and other organizations, both locally and internationally.

While the WTO remains hermetic to the ILO Declaration, many recent regional trade initiatives refer to it. For instance, Article 23 of the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA), adopted in 2020, refers to the ILO Declaration with a clear commitment towards the four core principles. The same goes for the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP - 2018), in its chapter 19 on labour. Both instruments recognize the importance of protecting and enforcing labour rights in their respective preamble, but also substantively suggest that labour rights are integral to the commercial conversation, not incidental (Santos, 2020).

As Adelle Blackett argues, a turn to regionalism is interesting from a counter-hegemonic point of view. She writes that "[t]he regional governance level provides a fluid, intermediate space in relation to the national and the 'global' through which approaches adapted to specific contexts can be adopted" (Blackett, 2015: 164). Regionalism is an experimental space which ought not to be idealized but provides the possibility of thinking of "trade and economic governance more broadly as a policy space through which collective goals and values should be pursued" (ibid.: 165). For Blackett, regionalism can further provide a potential remedy to embedded liberalism—that which promotes social welfare at home and full liberalization abroad (Blackett, 2020).

Indeed, she notes that regional forums have shown a greater openness to address the trade-labour linkage (for instance, within the CUSMA) and, thus, challenge the presumption that labour is confined within national borders (Blackett, 2020: 607). By reducing the number of negotiators, smaller forums allow more casual conversations on the trade-labour nexus, and a decentering of grand principles in favour of compromise, which can eventually be formalized, like the chapter on labour in the CUSMA shows. It is against this methodological backdrop that BRICS's interaction with labour should be analyzed. The geopolitical 'facts on the ground' are in flux, but BRICS currently acts as a counter-hegemonic transnational space where embedded liberalism is being challenged and thus may provide the opportunity to revisit the labour-trade nexus.

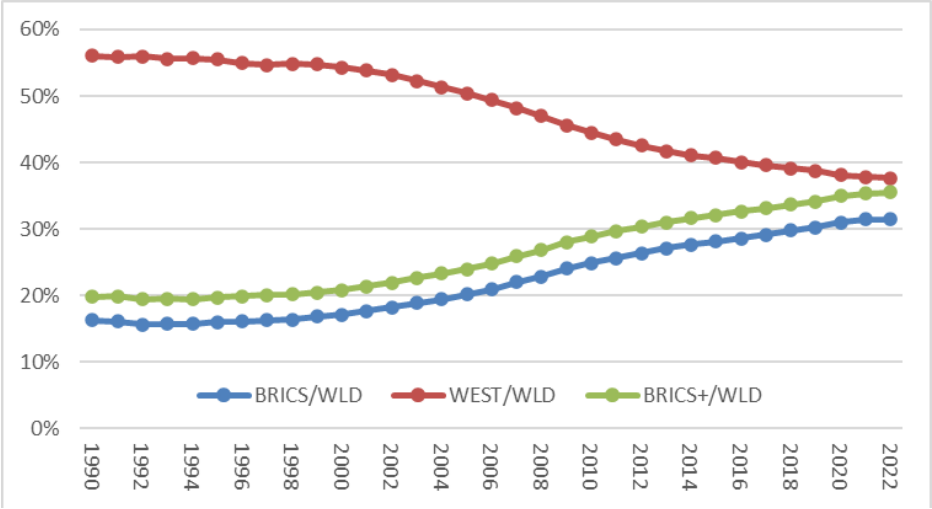
To pose the question directly: does the re-emergence of the possibility of a plurality of viable national strategies for economic development necessarily entail a removal of the constraints imposed by convergence on a unipolar neoliberal model? The immediate answer is of course that it depends on what shape this new multipolar order takes and whether that order is conducive to economic and political models which can accommodate greater solidarity between workers at the national and international levels.

From a Financial Abbreviation to a Geopolitical Realization

The term BRIC was originally coined by Jim O'Neill to denote four economies—Brazil, Russia, India, and China—that he thought, ceteris paribus, could become major actors in the global economy by 2050. He further argued that they were already significant global economic actors that should be included in the G7 advisory group (O'Neill, 2001). Informal meetings of ministers from Brazil, Russia, India, and China began in 2006 and they established the basis for formal annual summits beginning in 2009. South Africa would join the group a year later in 2010 forming the BRICS. In 2023, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Egypt, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates formally joined the BRICS to create the BRICS+. Since its founding, the organization has held fifteen formal annual summits, nine informal summits, and one extraordinary summit.

Using a slightly different methodology than O'Neill (2001), by 2022, the BRICS+ accounted for 35% of global GDP. Figure 1 illustrates that between 1990 and 2022 BRICS demonstrated a remarkable rate of growth in their share of global GDP while the West's share continued its relative decline. By 2022, according to the World Development Indicators (2023), BRICS+ accounted for 39% of global manufacturing value added with China alone accounting for 31% of the global total (Figure 2). With the BRICS expansion, the bloc now accounts for 45% of the world's population suggesting that their substantial existing economic weight in the global economy is also indicative of high potential future growth of the global economic share. Moreover, according to the *2023 Statistical Review of World Energy*, the expansion means the grouping is now responsible for +/-43% of total oil production.

Figure 1 Percent of Global GDP, PPP (constant 2017 international $)

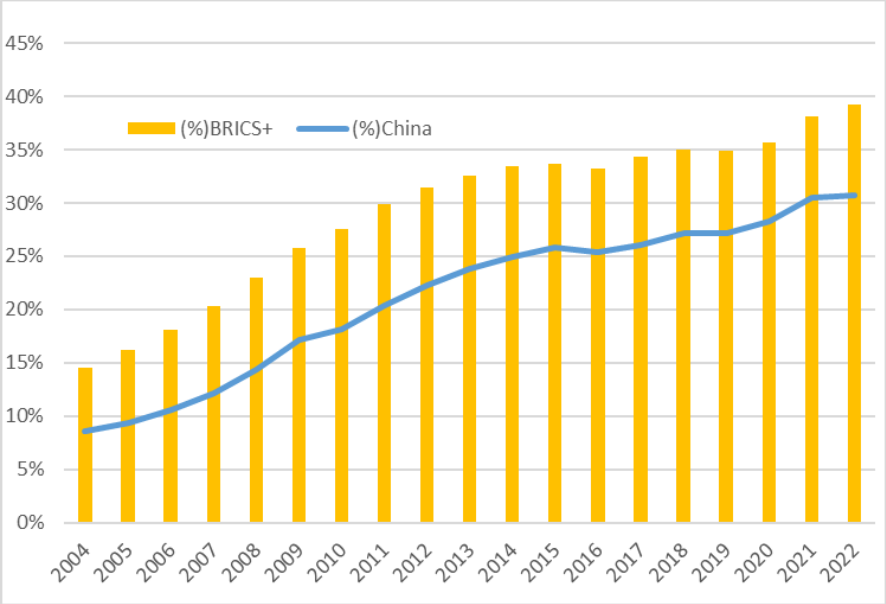


Source: Word Development Indicators (2024). GDP, PPP (constant 2017 international $ World Bank.

Beyond these basic economic statistics there is also an equally notable fact about the group which sets it off from previous multilateral formations like the non-aligned movement which came in the wake of the Bandung Conference in 1955. As we noted above, the BRICS+ bloc includes energy superpowers such as Russia, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran. Moreover, China, Russia and India are all nuclear triads making them significant geopolitical actors outside of any economic consideration. That is to say, the BRICS+ has three real sovereigns backing the group. As such, the group enjoys a large degree of internal security and freedom from external threats that a

grouping of nominal sovereigns, as was the case initially with the non-aligned movement, would not.

Figure 2: Global Manufacturing, Value Added (current US$)



Source: Word Development Indicators (2024). Manufacturing, value added (current US$). World Bank.

Contemporary accounts of the formation of the BRICS stress two main points. According to both the BBC (2024) and Reuters (2023), the formation of the BRICS was a Russian initiative and had the express purpose of undermining western hegemony, particularly that of the United States and the role of the US dollar in the global financial system. However, leading financial commentators at the time, as selectively surveyed by the *Financial Times*, seem to contradict the current narrative and suggest that China was equally, if not more so than Russia, interested in creating a counter hegemonic project while the Russians were primarily interested in containing the knock-on effects of financial crisis emanating out of the advanced capitalist zone onto other countries.

Whatever the actual origins story is, of which more below, what is clear is that the formation of the group was met with derision in the West with the *Financial Times* leading with the pithy, and misleading, observation that the BRIC "is almost certainly the first multilateral nation bloc to be created by an investment bank's research analysts and their sales team"; and concluded with a quote from the Russian liberal economist Yevgeny Yasin that the "BRIC has no future…" (2009, June 6th).

Examining the diplomatic communiqué from the founding summit provides a relatively objective way to evaluate the motivations for the founding of the group. The text lists 16 points of common concern and policy priorities of the group. They approvingly stressed the key role the G20 summits played in addressing the 2007-2009 financial crises via cooperation and policy coordination. They reiterated their commitment to implement multilateral decisions made at the G20 summits; to advance international financial institution reforms and maintain stability in international trade and the continuation of WTO trade negotiations. They further underlined the necessity of aiding the poorest nations affected by financial crises, promoting sustainable development, enhancing energy cooperation, combating terrorism, and strengthening multilateral

diplomacy. In short, the BRIC countries understood their mission as *aiding* existing multilateral international agencies both within and outside the United Nations to tackle global problems (Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries, 2009, June 16).

This initiative was by and large met with more missives in the high street broadsheets with the *Financial Times* stating that the "Bric is, indeed, an acronym in search of a purpose. But it is also a bit like God. If Jim O'Neill had not invented it, someone else would have had to" (2009, June 18). It seems clear from the quotes obtained from the Russian delegation by *The New York Times* (Kramer, 2009) that, in their view, a genuine multilateral geopolitical order would require a multilateral financial infrastructure which no one nation controlled. It must be recalled that when Russia was originally making their case back in 2008-09, the question of Ukraine was not on the table, and that the Russians along with other nations were more motivated by a desire to insulate their economies from the ever-changing needs of the advanced capitalist core.

Further, this was even more the case given the global financial crisis of 2007-2009 that the Americans had created yet all had to contend (Levy, 2009). That is, the desire for a multilateral international numeraire was more practical than an ideological or counter-hegemonic idea at that time. This also demonstrates key differences in outlooks on multilateral universalism between the BRICS and the West: BRICS views pluralism as a necessary condition for a *real* universalism in which no one state, or bloc can control the international numeraire.

In subsequent summits it became clear that there was a two-pronged strategy vis-à-vis dollar dominance and, by extension, the support it lends to the unipolar dominance of the Americans. In the official communiqué released at the end of the Delhi Summit, the *Delhi Declaration* (BRICS, 2012), they reiterated their support for multilateral institutions including the call for a "more representative international financial architecture" and expressed concern over "the slow pace of quota and governance reforms in the IMF" (2012, pts. 8, 9). At the same time, the Delhi Summit undertook to explore the possibility of establishing independent financial institutions outside the Bretton Woods and American dominated financial institutions by directing their finance ministers to explore the feasibility of creating a "New Development Bank" (BRICS, 2012, pt. 13). This feasibility study was in addition to the establishment of a joint credit facility via their respective development banks for facilitating the import and export of goods and services between member countries in their own local currencies. Such an initiative was undertaken to promote trade by lowering transaction costs for operating outside of the existing dollar denominated trading system.

Further, in 2014 the agreement for establishing the New Development Bank (NDB) was signed during the sixth BRICS summit (BRICS, 2014, pts. 11-12). The NDB was seeded with "an initial authorized capital of US$ 100 billion" and an initial subscribed capital of US$ 50 billion which was shared out equally with the bank itself, headquartered in Shanghai. The other notable development from that summit in terms of international finance was the creation of a US$ 100 billion BRICS Contingent Reserve Agreement (CRA) to provide short-term liquidity relief and related "short-term balance of payments pressures" (2014, pt. 13).

For the purposes of this paper, the *2014 Fortaleza Summit* was perhaps the most significant summit to date insofar as it was the first time that *labour and employment* were mentioned and officially put on the exploratory list of areas of greater cooperation and consideration (2014, 18). This in no doubt had in some part to do with the establishment of the BRICS Trade Union Forum (BTUF) in 2012 which in its founding document requested that the BRICS formally incorporate "workers' representatives" under the auspices that it would help to "accelerate" the "comprehensive development" of the group (BTUF, 2012). The language of their 2014 declaration

dovetails with the language used in the BRICS declaration suggesting significant levels of coordination and/or campaigning by the BTUF.

In the 2015 *Ufa Declaration*, a firm commitment was made to undertake the first ministerial meeting between the group's Ministers for Labour and Employment (MLE) to be held at the 2016 summit with labour and migration coordination issues to be discussed (BRICS, 2015, pts. 57-59). At the 2016 labour and employment meeting held in Goa, India, the ministers established a formal research network for labour and training and, significantly, announced their full support of the International Labour Organization's (ILO) "Decent Work Agenda" (something which the WTO still fails to do to this day) which has consistently been pushed by the BTUF. By the 2017 summit, labour issues had been officially incorporated into the BRICS institutional structure through annual meetings of the MLE during the summits. National representatives of organized labour participate in these ministerial meetings as "social partners" but not as a privileged group within the BRICS structure like the Business Forum or the Conference of Think Tanks.

During the 2022 concurrent meeting of BTUF alongside the BRICS summit, there was no articulated demand for formal inclusion in the BRICS summit, but rather a general statement that "trade unions should involve in formulating national occupational safety and health policies...and build tripartite joint meeting mechanisms for industrial relations" (pt. 10). However, at the 12th meeting of BTUF in 2023, the official summary communiqué begins with a much more militant language where the "historic mission of the BTUF" is described as "a critical platform for building progressive internationalism and advancing working class power in a world undergoing major re-alignments and geo-political changes." This language is however, by the end of the declaration, situated in the 2022 demand for the construction of tripartite institutions and a reiteration of the demand to be more formally incorporated into the BRICS Summit structure.

Discussion

From a mechanistic point of view, solidarity formation within the BRICS may be an easier task for all the actors concerned as the core group is much smaller and is inherently more dedicated to pluralism than is the WTO for example. The failed multilateral negotiations in agriculture, which are considered as one of the greatest challenges the WTO is facing (Gonzalez, 2002; Hunter, 2003; Sky, 2008; Scott, 2017), illustrate two things that make regionalism much more appealing for neglected actors: first, consensus is hard to attain within larger groups. The universalization of the neoliberal message which equates free trade to wealth erases differences (for instance, in terms of financial and institutional capacity to implement policies), and therefore, reinforces them. By contrast, negotiations within regional systems are more likely to embrace differences (Blackett, 2015; 2020).

Secondly, global organizations like the WTO remain largely dominated by the West. This means that legitimate concerns of smaller states—say, ensuring food security—are not given as much weight in international negotiations (Berger-Richardson & Dehaibi, 2024). As a result, instead of succeeding at including peripheral states in the universal trade project, multilateral trade regimes like the GATT push these states to look elsewhere. To be clear, regional negotiations are not devoid of power dynamics between stronger and weaker states. One can legitimately cast doubt on the willingness of BRICS countries to genuinely promote higher labour standards, and countries with a stronger social justice history, like South Africa, may not have the same political weight as China or Russia.

Yet, diminishing the number of interlocutors can help negotiate power dynamics more efficiently than in a larger forum, thus providing a more favourable environment for the inclusion of shared social values. In other words, South Africa is likely to have a greater voice within the BRICS than within the WTO. It is also worth noting that India is known for its socially oriented Constitution, and recent labour reforms in 2020, while far from perfect, could nonetheless be influential at the international level (Routh, 2024). Most importantly, not only can smaller forums allow for an easier consensus on broad principles, but, in pragmatic terms, the WTO system to date has systemically failed to embrace labour issues in its work, which means that whatever is achieved at smaller scales, such as that of BRICS, would indeed be a step forward.

It is also fundamental to view trade union participation within the BRICS from the perspective of trade-labour relations in the member states of the BRICS rather than comparing with participation within traditional western institutions. In a context of mutual distrust, relying on unofficial conversations may yield more substantive results than mechanistic structures that create a bureaucratic distance between interlocutors. Notably, the BTUF has spent the better part of 10 years trying unsuccessfully to gain the same status as the Business Forum and is thus far considered as one of many social partners. According to the documents reviewed above, one of the major goals of the BTUF remains achieving an elevated status in the BRICS forum to build tripartite structures of planning and decision making within the group. This is an ambitious project given that the federations represented by the BTUF do not enjoy this structure and coequal status within their own national jurisdictions.

In assessing the opportunities for increased international labour solidarity arising from the formation of the BRICS group, we argue that the creation of the BRICS Trade Union Forum (BTUF) itself serves as evidence of labour's solidaristic international response. That is, the formation of the BRICS was the immediate cause for the coming together of the five major national labour federations for the identification and articulation of their shared priorities with respect to economic development and labour rights. The idea for the formation of BTUF was first "mooted" at the 2010 International Trade Union Confederation Congress in Vancouver Canada and was formalized at the ILO Decent Work conference in 2012 (Blackburn, 2017, 3).

Our above analysis of the relative success of the embeddedness of labour must also be understood within an appreciation of the institutional structure of the BRICS+ group. The BRICS+ group is not an international organization like the UN or ILO with a permanent office and secretariat. Rather, it is a set of mechanisms and advisory groupings with no binding charter or mandates save for a collection of past practices and future commitments. The quasi ad-hoc nature of the BRICS+ group's agenda being determined as it is on annual basis by the host country necessarily means that BTUF's agenda and priorities with respect to the BRICS+ summits are somewhat contingent upon that agenda.

With respect to the substantive forms of labour solidarity formation within the BRICS+, the existence of BTUF and its ability to meet with MLE on annual basis provides a focussed project that allows the disparate national labour federations to work on a common platform. Additionally, it provides for the institutional facilitation of informal exchanges of information and bonding across national labour movements which are the prerequisites for building solidarity between national labour movements and the promotion of a greater sense of an international labour identity (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2022). Equally important, as the BTUF communiqué from the last summit in 2024 highlights, they have expanded their project beyond the scope of the BRICS+ group by embedding themselves as a voice in larger multilateral forums such as the ILO, smaller

multilateral groupings such as G20 via the parallel labour forum (the L20 union grouping), and international NGO social networks (BTUF, 2024).

Part of this expansive agenda may be explained not only with reference to the commonality of their status of workers within developing countries, but also to the relatively restrained national context several of the trade unions are embedded in. In Russia, China and Iran, for example, trade union activity is restricted to what we will describe here as a highly subordinated tripartism. As other labour scholars have noted (Fox-Hodess, 2019), in national contexts where trade unions are subject to either direct coercion or highly constrained labour relations regimes (legal impediments to strike, and lack of freedom of association for example), international groupings and activities may offer a means to escape the narrow confines of their domestic contexts. This in part may explain the ubiquity of references to tripartism within the BTUF communiqués—the term is nebulous enough to handle both the political realities within national labour federations which are themselves amalgams of ideological leanings and policy preferences and between national labour federations which display similar levels of practical and ideological diversity (Blackburn, 2017).

Conclusion

The ideas in this exploratory piece may raise more questions than it answers, but they are necessary questions in a context where states, especially in the Global South, are rapidly moving away from traditional international institutions in which they have felt left out of, and towards regional structures that seem more prone to compromise. In this context, it is worth exploring the role of labour solidarity in keeping the issue of workers' rights at the forefront. The picture is not necessarily optimistic for labour within the BRICS, but it is certainly not bleak. This piece should thus be approached as an invitation to pursue investigations on BRICS institutions with a view of rethinking multipolarity, pluralism and solidarity in a rapidly changing global economic order.

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