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Centering Labor

Contribution to GTI Forum [What's Next for the Global Movement?](#)

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What is missing from the global movement landscape? I would like to highlight two issues.

The first is the [international labor or trade union movement](#) as an inescapable interlocutor for a strategic conversation. Our world order, globalized from above, cries out for a globalized response from below, a new international fit for the purpose of system transformation in the twenty-first century. With their global reach and strategy, trade unions have a central role to play even if labor alone cannot be the whole international of today as it might have been in the days of Marx and Engels.

To offer a coherent alternative to the status quo of violence, short-termism, and political chaos, trade unions need to link up with the broad spectrum of transnational movements fighting for systemic change on issues from climate change to food security, women's rights to indigenous rights, and racial justice to income inequality.

The labor movement, however, needs to be at the heart of any effort to build a global alternative to the failed status quo since the exploitation of labor is as much at the core of capitalist relations of production in the "new" capitalism as it was in the old. Clearly, workers will not be the sole drivers of social transformation, and there are all sorts of divisions—formal and informal workers, male and female, settled and migrants, North and South—that must be bridged before labor can realize its full potential in an international fit for twenty-first-century challenges.

Change is in the wind, and those who do not have contact with actually existing workers' organizations need to understand how, for example, migrant support groups have brought unions and migrant workers together, women's groups have brought a feminist perspective to trade unions, and environmental groups have helped form incipient green/red alliances. For me,

only transnationally organized labor can be a counterweight to transnationally organized capital.

The second issue I wish to raise refers to a question of political perspective or, rather, a missing perspective. The increasing association of “populism” with nationalism and authoritarianism in US and European political discourse is a highly restricted use of the term populism and contributes to the debate’s isolation from the issues in the Global South. While recently co-editing a [book](#) on populism in Latin America, I was struck by just how limited the dominant interpretations and critiques were, being based almost exclusively on the North Atlantic experience.

Rarely has a term been so overinflated and so overextended that it has become practically meaningless, while at the same time achieving iconic status. In 2019, the liberal newspaper *The Guardian* ran a [long feature on populism](#), the gist of which was that “populism” was a major political foe in the Global North for all left-liberal folk. It introduced authoritarianism and irrationality into good old centrist politics. These so-called centrists included Tony Blair and Hilary Clinton, who were given a platform for their views, including a call from the latter for the liberal centre in Europe to lead on keeping migrants out so that migration would not become an issue of the populist right. The mind boggles is all I can say.

The new Northern orthodoxy on populism emerged in the 2010s as a way to categorize such diverse emerging political figures such as Trump, Farage, Le Pen, and Orbán, along with their Southern cousins such as Chávez, Morales, and the Kirchners in Argentina. Populism was thus defined as an anti-elite politics, also anti-pluralist and usually based on some type of identity politics. The purpose of defining populism, we are told, is to help in defeating it as it is a threat to liberal democracy, whether it comes from the far right or the far left.

To this day, in international commentary on the “left populism” of Chávez et al., we find quite an ethnocentric emphasis on the irrationality of populism and a constant tendency to see it as the enemy of “normal” political development toward class patterns and progressive social transformation. Yet the old oligarchic order in Latin America was changed utterly by the emergence of this nationalist-popular ideology and worldview. It could also become radicalized at key conjunctures when the “people-oligarchy” opposition became the dominant divide in society.

In Western Europe, on the other hand, the term “populism” is used mainly in a pejorative way to refer to the rise of a new right and its demagogic leaders. The different trajectory of the term in Latin America should warn us against any claims to universality of this discourse. And we may also learn from Latin America, where the left “populism” of the post-2000 left governments was also the result of the flawed and biased system of representative democracy that preceded them.

About the Author



Ronaldo Munck is Head of Civic Engagement at Dublin City University, where his role includes engaging the university's teaching and research with the needs of the community. He is also a Visiting Professor of International Development at the University of Liverpool and the University of Buenos Aires. He has written widely on his native Latin America, most recently *Rethinking Latin America*, and, as an active trade unionist as well as scholar, on the impact of globalization on labor. He was a lead author for the International Panel on Social Progress Report *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century*. His current project focuses on the prospects for the new social movements in Latin America.

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