

# Organizing Informal Workers Globally: Comparing a Global Union Federation and a Global Informal Worker Organization Network

Chris Tilly

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## Article abstract

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For both cases, I draw on five sources: secondary literature; archival material from the two federations; seven semi-structured interviews with experts on and members of these federations, plus a meeting with a small group of BWI leaders; and observations of several IDWF and BWI events.

This comparison yields two striking findings. First, despite contrasting environments and historical legacies, the two federations show much convergence in strategy. Second, they clearly differ in their degree of adherence to the standard trade union model, as a result of differences in assets and challenges. The BWI is strongly wedded to the conventional model and struggles to reach informal workers, while enjoying a robust inflow of membership dues. The IDWF is committed to welcoming a variety of organizations and readily mobilizes informal workers, while suffering from an anemic inflow of membership dues. These challenges must be met not just for the survival of the BWI and the IDWF but also for the prospect of organizing globally to defend informal and precarious workers.

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# Organizing Informal Workers Globally: Comparing a Global Union Federation and a Global Informal Worker Organization Network

**Chris TILLY**

<sup>1</sup>, Professor, Department of Urban Planning, UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, 337 Charles E. Young Dr. East, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1656

[tilly@ucla.edu](mailto:tilly@ucla.edu)

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## Summary

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longstanding one of formal employees that has increasingly attempted to include informal workers —the Building and Wood Workers International. The contrast reveals similarities, divergences and trade-offs, with important implications for the future potential for building global organizations of informal workers.

**Keywords:** Construction workers; domestic workers; global unions; informal work; power resources

## Résumé

Avec la mondialisation économique et la hausse du précariat, les efforts se sont multipliés pour créer des alliances mondiales entre les travailleurs formels, d'une part, et pour organiser les travailleurs informels, d'autre part. Ces deux efforts se chevauchent considérablement. Les organisations syndicales internationales jouent un rôle de plus en plus important dans l'organisation et la défense des travailleurs informels. J'explore ce chevauchement en comparant deux fédérations syndicales mondiales : l'une issue de réseaux hétérogènes de travailleurs informels - the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) - et l'autre, créée de longue date par des employés formels, qui tente de plus en plus d'inclure les travailleurs informels - the Building and Wood Workers International (BWI).

Dans les deux cas, je m'appuie sur cinq sources : la littérature secondaire, les archives des deux fédérations, sept entretiens semi dirigés avec des experts et des membres de ces fédérations, ainsi qu'une réunion avec un petit groupe de dirigeants de l'IBB, et l'observation de plusieurs événements organisés par l>IDWF et le BWI.

Cette comparaison permet de faire deux constatations frappantes. Tout d'abord, malgré des environnements et des héritages historiques contrastés, les deux fédérations présentent une grande convergence de stratégie. Deuxièmement, elles diffèrent clairement dans leur degré d'adhésion au modèle syndical standard, en raison de différences d'atouts et de défis. Le BWI est fortement attachée au modèle conventionnel et lutte pour atteindre les travailleurs informels, tout en bénéficiant d'un afflux important de cotisations. L>IDWF s'est engagée à accueillir une variété d'organisations et mobilise facilement les travailleurs informels, tout en souffrant d'un afflux anémique de cotisations. Ces défis doivent être relevés non seulement pour la survie du BWI et de l>IDWF, mais aussi pour la perspective de la défense des travailleurs informels et précaires au niveau mondial.

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## 1. Introduction

Labour scholars and practitioners alike have been showing much interest in two trends of the world of work: economic globalization (Bercusson & Estlund, 2008; Brookes & McCallum, 2017); and the precarization and informalization of work (Lee et al., 2020; Mosoetsa et al., 2016). Not surprisingly, efforts have increased to build global labour alliances and to expand the role of global union federations (GUFs) among formal workers on the one hand and to organize informal workers on the other. These two trajectories of worker mobilization show considerable overlap: a growing role of *global labour organizations in representing, organizing and advocating for informal workers*. The overlap matters increasingly because most of the world's workforce is composed of informal workers (International Labour Office, 2013), and because much of the formal workforce is moving toward informality as formal work becomes ever more precarious.

I will explore this overlap by comparing two global labour federations: one arising from heterogeneous informal worker associations—the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF)—and a longstanding one of decidedly formal employees that has increasingly attempted to include informal workers—the Building and Wood Workers International (BWI). This comparison yields two striking findings. First, despite contrasting environments and historical legacies, the two federations show much convergence in strategy, due in part to outsider leadership in both cases. Second, they clearly differ in their degree of adherence to the standard trade union model, as a result of differences in assets and challenges. The BWI is strongly wedded to the conventional model and struggles to reach informal workers, while enjoying a robust inflow of membership dues. The IDWF is committed to welcoming a variety of organizations and readily mobilizes informal workers, while suffering from an anemic inflow of membership dues.

Next, I will review the primary literature on this subject and follow with a description of the methods. The bulk of this paper will be a presentation of the findings. A final section will provide a discussion of the findings.

## 2. Background and Literature Review

At a time of economic globalization, we are seeing two salient developments: a growth of global labour alliances and a reawakening of long-dormant global union federations. This new global activism has met with optimism (Evans, 2010) and pessimism (Burawoy, 2010). A growing body of research has specifically examined the upsurge in activity by global union federations (GUFs)—the international linking of unions to each other—and especially their negotiation of global framework agreements (GFAs) with global employers. Evans describes these federations metaphorically as the sturdy “trees” of transnational labour solidarity. In a review of the literature on GUFs, Ford and Gillan (2015) acknowledge their powerful potential, but conclude that they “have largely engaged in a patchwork of interventions in economic sectors, production networks and specific national settings rather than through a sustained transnational strategy” (469-70). This growing literature especially features comparisons of global unions from differing industries (Fichter et al., 2011; Ford & Gillan, 2015).

If GUFs are the “trees” of Evans’s (2010) metaphor, associations of informal workers are small but dense networks of “rhizomes.” In line with Portes, Castells, and Benton (1989), I define informal work as work that is legal but not protected by the main labour laws and social security systems, either because it is excluded from such provisions or because the provisions are not enforced. This category includes domestic workers worldwide and large numbers of construction workers who

are employed by smaller contractors or inappropriately treated as self-employed “independent contractors” (International Labour Office, 2013). Although informal workers were long viewed as “unorganizable” (Bairoch, 1973; Geertz, 1963), recent research has shown the self-organization of such workers around the world (Agarwala, 2019; Eaton et al., 2017; Jiang & Korczynski, 2016). Most of this literature consists of local or national case studies, but some papers concern the formation of global labour federations, notably the International Domestic Workers Federation (Fish, 2017). An emerging literature of comparative studies shows how informal workers are organized across industries (Tilly & Rojas-Garcia, 2021), at times with cross-country comparisons (McBride & Tilly, 2021; Sarmiento et al., 2016).

It is a natural extension of such studies to compare *global federations of informal worker organizations* across industries. Such comparative study could help us characterize, explain and explore the consequences of cross-industry variation within the new global federations. To date, there have been two pioneering studies. Bonner and Carré (2013) provide five models of federations that consist entirely of “rhizomatic” informal worker organizations, along with case studies from four of the models. Their conclusions are worth quoting at some length:

We find that these networks vary in their historical roots and political traditions, and these have implications for how they structure themselves.... In addition, and importantly, the venues or forums in which they can bring their claims and operate... in turn affect directly their strategies and gains.

p.1

Ford (2019) looks instead at the GUFs—the “trees”—and analyzes how they engage with temporary labour migrants (most of them informal) in Asian countries. After examining the activities of seven GUFs across seven Asian countries, she identifies four main union activities: advocacy; serving; organizing; and finally networking and collaboration. She argues that their degree of engagement depends on several determinants: the influence of powerful affiliates (especially those in the European Union), of key donors, and of head office and regional staff; and local context.

My analysis is guided by two other literatures. One is the literature on organizational stasis and change. This long-running area of study emphasizes how path-dependence (North, 1991) and bureaucratic logics (Ebbinghaus & Visser, 2000; Michels, 1915) stabilize and narrow organizational practices. Tilly (1978) applies these concepts to social movements through the concept of established repertoires of action. Also relevant is recent research that shows how labour organizations more readily innovate when their leadership includes “outsiders” who are familiar with other repertoires (Samaluk, 2017; Voss & Sherman, 2000), and how historical legacies strongly shape the ability to innovate (Frege & Kelly, 2003).

I have also been guided by the literature on labour’s power resources. Wright (2000) and Silver (2003) launched this conceptualization by distinguishing between *structural power*, based on the workers’ position in the production process (above all, the ability to shut down production) and the labour market, and *associational power*, based on the workers’ ability to act collectively. Others have proposed additional forms of power. In a useful synthesis, Schmalz, Ludwig, and Webster (2018) parse the sources of power of labour organizations not only into structural and associational power but also into *institutional power* (union roles and prerogatives established through law or enduring tradition) and *societal power* (power by building alliances and attracting support). The last source of power includes *coalitional power*, which is grounded in formal alliances, and *discursive power*, which frames discourse in compelling ways to win broad public support.

### 3. Research Design and Methods

Bonner and Carré (2013) and Ford (2019) each carefully compare global federations *within* one category—networks of informal worker organizations and trade union federations, respectively. With globalization, precarization and even informalization of formal employment, and with scholars realizing the importance of informal employment, it is increasingly relevant to compare these two types of global federation.

The basis for such a comparison is limited. There are only four global federations of informal worker organizations. Bonner and Carré (2013) mention three, and a fourth one has since been established (HomeNet International, n.d.). Ford (2019) posits that only seven of the GUFs are both significantly engaged with temporary migrant issues and large enough to have a true global impact.

I compared as “most similar cases” two global federations: the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF); and the Building and Wood Workers International (BWI)—in some sense, the “best” of what global informal worker networks and global union federations have to offer. The IDWF, an instance of Bonner and Carré’s (2013) “Trade Union-Supported Model,” has grown and institutionalized more rapidly than the other global informal worker networks, and arguably has achieved more by getting national ratification of International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions and by making major legislative advances. Ford rates the BWI as the most invested of the GUFs in all four major areas of migrant-related activity. Unlike some of its GUF peers, the BWI explicitly targets informal workers. For example, a 2011 two-pager of its work states: “BWI supports the constant growth of trade union rights for both formal and informal workers” (BWI, 2011). Thus in terms of organizing informal workers, the two GUFs earn a “most similar” status. The two are also “most similar” in that both are GUFs affiliated with the International Trade Union Confederation—the GUF umbrella organization. Via this institutional channel, both have a voice in the International Labour Organization—the UN-linked global governance body that brings together representatives of unions, employers and governments. Of course, the comparison spans different industries with differently gendered occupations. For instance, domestic workers are 75% female globally, and construction workers 87-91% male (Norberg & Johansson, 2021; WIEGO, 2022).

Unlike the BWI, which is a free-standing GUF, the IDWF is a subunit of another GUF, the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco, and Allied Workers’ Associations (IUF). My comparison might therefore appear to be a mismatch in terms of organizational status and size, and indeed the BWI’s 12 million members (BWI, n.d.-a) dwarf the IDWF’s 670,000 (IDWF, n.d.). However, the IDWF is fully global, traces its organizational roots back to 1988, only joined the IUF in 2014 and maintains a robust independence within the IUF.

My case studies are time-delimited. The BWI case study covers the federation’s activities since the Filipino union leader Ambet Yuson became General Secretary in 2008, an event that marked a strengthening of its commitment to organize informal workers. The IDWF case study starts in 2009, the date of the formation of the Federation’s predecessor, the International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN). Both the BWI and the IDWF still exist.

The two case studies draw on four sources. One leading source is the secondary literature, including published first-person accounts from IDWF activists. A second major source is archival material from the websites of the two global federations and related organizations and/or material provided by internal sources (primarily convention documents and press releases from the BWI; a variety of public statements and reports from the IDWF). Between 2017 and 2021 I also conducted seven semi-structured interviews with experts on these two global federations and with leaders from each of them (one BWI leader, two IDWF leaders, two International Labour Organization staff members, one expert from the Women in Informal Employment, Globalizing and Organizing

[WIEGO] research and advocacy network, and one academic researcher knowledgeable about the IDWF). I participated in a small 2017 information-sharing meeting of researchers with BWI leaders, and I draw on my observations of several IDWF and BWI events: the IDWF's 2013 founding convention; a 2014 regional convention; and a 2017 BWI-organized global conference on migrant worker issues).

## 4. Findings

This side-by-side comparison of the IDWF with the BWI starts with a review of key similarities that make the comparison a relevant one. Next, I will discuss initial differences in legal/institutional and economic environments and in organizational heritages and forms. I will then present cross-federation comparisons for a set of outcomes: strategies; sources of financial resources; sources of power; and challenges.

### 4.1 Initial Similarities

In terms of “the agendas set by headquarters” (Ford, 2019, p. 74), both global federations have leaderships and central staffs actively committed to organizing informal workers. “We don’t separate [organizing informal workers] out,” commented a BWI official. “It should not be a separate campaign, it should be part of every campaign.” The IDWF explicitly identifies itself as a “workers’ organization in the informal economy” (IDWF, 2022a).

Both federations are also led by labour outsiders. The top leadership of global union federations in general has been overwhelmingly European and characterized by a “‘Europeanist’ ideology” (Gallin, 2002, p. 239). Nonetheless, after more than a century of leadership of the BWI by Europeans, in 2008, as noted above, the construction federation elected the Filipino unionist Ambet Yuson as General Secretary. Yuson was joined in the Secretariat by other non-Europeans, notably a Filipino Education Secretary and a Korean-Canadian Director of Global Campaigns, Gender, and Migration. The IDWF is arguably a federation of labour outsiders. Domestic worker organizations have generally held a marginal position within labour movements and have often not been considered part of the labour movement at all (Boris, 2019; Fish, 2017). Moreover, women make up the IDWF’s entire top leadership, most hailing from the Global South. From 2011-2023, Elizabeth Tang, a Hong Kong trade union leader, served as General Secretary of the IDWN and its successor the IDWF (Mather, 2013); in 2023 Bolivian leader Adriana Paz took her place (IDWF, 2023).

### 4.2 Initial Differences

Legally and economically, domestic workers are divided from construction workers, and those dividing lines have in turn shaped differences in organizational heritage. Domestic workers rarely enjoy the protection of labour laws that apply to other workers, in line with a widespread, gendered view that their work is not “real” work (Fish, 2017). In some countries, such as the US, they are explicitly excluded from labour legislation. In other countries, they are explicitly included, but the legislation has never been implemented for them. For instance, the IDWF estimates that in Latin America and the Caribbean, *all* domestic workers are covered by at least some laws and regulations—with 83% covered by the core general labour legislation of each country—but 72% lack effective protection, a lack due almost entirely to “implementation gaps” (Treviño & Paz, 2022). Domestic workers are also employed primarily by myriad individual households (although recent decades have seen growth of agencies and Uber-like online employment services (Fudge & Hobden, 2018). This hyper-fragmentation of employment impedes collective bargaining. There are exceptions, such as Uruguay’s tripartite sectoral wage-setting council, on which the employers of



domestic workers are represented by the Housewives' League (Goldsmith, 2013a). These exceptions are noteworthy precisely because they are so exceptional.

Construction workers, on the other hand, are universally included by name in labour laws (Palladino, 2005). Still, an ILO official estimates that “[i]nformal workers are roughly at least half of workers in construction around the world.” According to a BWI leader, “[i]n some countries, construction is 100% informal.” Construction employment is itself typically fragmented—though not to the extent of household work—by subcontracting, by the transience of construction projects and by the separation of trades into discrete production units. Historically, unions would bargain with the lead contractors. Over the last four decades, however, the construction industry has shifted globally toward more precarious models of employment, with employers adding layers of subcontracting, disavowing responsibility for their subcontractors' practices and, increasingly, evading both the unions and the employment laws. The implementation gap has thus widened for the construction industry (BWI, 2017a; Cremers, 2009). “Even in Europe, the construction workforce is becoming more informal,” states a BWI official.

The two federations' organizational DNA reflects their different institutional and economic environments and those of their predecessors. In the BWI, the template was set through over a century of continuous practice by building trade unions in Western Europe, North America and Australia (BWI, n.d.-a). This history extends back to the BWI's predecessors: the International Federation of Building and Wood Workers; the World Federation of Building and Woodworkers; and their earlier antecedents—the Building Workers International, founded in 1891 (Union of International Associations, n.d.-a), the Wood Workers International and the International Federation of Christian Building and Woodworkers' Unions, founded in 1929 (Union of International Associations, n.d.-b). The network's affiliates are exclusively trade unions, with collective bargaining as their central activity. In some countries with high rates of informal construction work, such as India, the collective bargaining model has limited applicability (Agarwala, 2013). The BWI's Indian affiliates are nonetheless formal unions, not informal worker associations.

The IDWF, in contrast, grew out of more recent and varied organizations. Its earliest antecedent, the Latin American confederation CONLACTRAHO, was established in 1988 (Goldsmith, 2013b). Latin America's household worker organizations were largely founded by liberation theology and labour feminist organizations during the 1970s and 1980s (Chaney & Garcia Castro, 1989). The Asian Domestic Workers Network was founded only in 2005, and the IDWN and the IDWF followed in 2009 and 2013, respectively (Fish, 2017). As with the Latin American ones, most of the other member organizations emerged from movements other than trade unionism. Even in those countries where organizations developed along the lines of the trade union model, IDWF members often drew on other social movements—migrant rights in Hong Kong (Swider, 2006), the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa (Ally, 2009), the developmentalist labour feminism of the Self-Employed Women's Association and kindred organizations in India (Vanqa-Mgijima et al., 2013). The founders of the IDWN, which preceded the IDWF, were likewise labour feminists affiliated with WIEGO and with European movements—along with the independent-minded union leader Dan Gallin (Fish, 2017).

As a result, an IDWF leader commented: “The IDWF and a lot of its affiliates are not traditional unions. It's more like a social movement unionism kind of thing.” This orientation includes broad leadership development initiatives, such as the National Domestic Workers Alliance's Strategy, Organizing, Leadership (SOL) program in the US and the Leadership, Unity, reNovation and Amplification (LUNA) workshops in Latin America. Today's IDWF does include some affiliates that function more or less as unions, like the Uruguayan ones (Goldsmith, 2013a). Others are structured like unions, but lack a defined negotiating partner and/or legal designation to bargain on behalf of their members. For instance, the South African Domestic Service and Allied Worker Union is a



recognized union but has no way to negotiate with employers. Instead, it engages in advocacy, in pressure tactics and, above all, in filing complaints under laws for domestic workers' rights (Ally, 2009). Many IDWF affiliates, with no pathway to union formation, are organized as membership-based civil society or nonprofit organizations—associations, cooperatives or social movement organizations. Indeed, an ILO official said, “[I]n Latin America...many of the organizations are anti-union.” The same interviewee added:

I cannot overstate the importance of the IDWF affiliation with IUF [its parent GUF]. If they were not affiliated with IUF, [the ILO] could not work with them in the same way. Also, it gives them easier access to funds from union foundations. It brings them recognition of domestic workers as sisters in the movement.

Reflecting these organizational differences, the IDWF's leadership is considerably more “outsider”-dominated than the BWI's. The IDWF Executive Committee (the governing body between congresses) includes, in addition to General Secretary Tang, four other members from the Global South and two from the Global North. All are women (a man is one of the five alternate members of the Executive Committee). I found biographical information on five of the seven Executive Committee members, and all but one of the five had previously worked as domestic workers, the exception being Tang herself. Mcwatts (2018) further discusses the prevalence of former domestic workers in the leadership of the IDWF and its affiliates. In contrast, the BWI's governing Presidium consists of four union leaders from the Global North and two from the Global South in addition to Yuson (even the far more expansive World Council has 34 Northern members vs. 24 Southern ones). Not surprisingly, only one Presidium member is a woman, and only three out of six Presidium members started out as construction workers. I was unable to gain insight into the actual decision-making process of the two organizations, but the geographic and gender backgrounds of their decision-makers are telling.

Although the IDWF remains organizationally heterogeneous, it is striving to get more organizations to become unions and access the benefits referenced by the ILO official above. That official continued: “With the change from a Network to a Federation, they [the IDWF] got more explicit about forming unions.” Subsequently, domestic worker organizations in a number of regions have gravitated toward the union model. Mexico's largest household worker organization formed a national union in 2015 (Tilly & Rojas-Garcia, 2021), and many of India's domestic worker groups have recently adopted more union practices .

Thus, the BWI has a relatively homogeneous membership and a Northern-dominated leadership, a reflection of its history. The IDWF, in contrast, has a highly heterogeneous membership and is Southern-led. As we shall see, such differences have consequences.

### 4.3 Organizational Outcomes

I examined four organizational outcomes: strategies; sources of financial resources; power resources; and, finally, challenges. The federations show substantial overlap in their strategies, funding sources and power resources but are each faced with very different challenges.

#### 4.3.1 Strategy

The two federations have much in common in terms of predominant *strategic repertoires*. In both cases, the affiliates recruit members, and the federations advocate various public policies. Both prioritize training. The BWI and its affiliates particularly emphasize apprenticeship programs, while the IDWF stresses consciousness-raising, rights awareness and leadership development and

also teaches job skills. BWI affiliates monitor and enforce compliance with collective agreements. IDWF affiliates monitor and enforce compliance with relevant labour legislation.

The two federations do differ markedly in terms of collective bargaining. Negotiating binding contracts with employers is central to the identity of the BWI and its affiliates. Workers are considered part of BWI affiliates once they are included in a collective agreement. As an ILO official explained: “Once [informal construction workers] begin to organize, they cease to be informal, and become formal.” The IDWF also seeks to formalize work, primarily by ensuring basic rights through law, and not through union contracts. Given the limited impact of existing legislation, most IDWF affiliates *remain* informal, unlike BWI affiliates.

As a direct result, the BWI boasts one major strategic tool that the IDWF lacks: the global framework agreement (GFA). A GFA is reached between a global union and a multinational corporation to set baseline labour standards and protections throughout the corporation’s global operations. Because in most cases the multinationals are European, the leverage to secure a GFA is exercised mainly by powerful European unions through the “social partnership” model of labour relations that prevails in many European countries (Agarwala, 2019; Fichter & McCallum, 2015). GUFs like the BWI have signed numerous GFAs since the 1990s. The BWI had signed 18 GFAs by 2013 (BWI, 2014), and under Yuson its leadership team has pursued this strategy even further (BWI, 2014; Rosado-Marzán, 2014).

Despite their divergence in terms of collective bargaining, the two federations have been strikingly similar in terms of strategic innovations since the late 2000s. At first glance, this claim might seem hard to sustain. After all, the IDWN won a historic victory in 2011 by securing the International Labour Organization’s adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention (C189) on the rights of domestic workers (Fish, 2017). It has since persuaded 35 countries to ratify the convention at the time of writing (IDWF, 2022b) and also successfully campaigned for the Violence and Harassment Convention (C190) against gender-based violence at work (IDWF, 2017). But the BWI has *also* built global coalitions through moral suasion and political pressure to leverage commitments from international organizations for informal workers, the largest and most dramatic one being the Global Sports Campaign. This campaign has targeted mega-sporting events—the World Cup and the Summer and Winter Olympics—to press FIFA and the International Olympic Committee on issues of workplace safety, specifically the right to organize and other protections for workers who build infrastructure for such events. The campaign kicked off, so to speak, with the 2010 World Cup in South Africa and has since continued at every World Cup and Olympics. The BWI has recently wrapped up its 2022 Qatar World Cup campaign and is now targeting the 2024 Paris Olympics (BWI, 2021a, 2023). The 2010 inaugural Global Sports campaign “gave us global visibility,” stated a BWI leader. “We were lucky—it was football—I don’t think it would have worked as well if it had been skiing!” The BWI has used the same model for several other campaigns to varying degrees: joining others to press the World Bank, successfully, to mandate the ILO’s “core labour standards” in the infrastructure projects it finances (BWI, 2014, 2017a); convincing the global Forest Stewardship Council to eject a Malaysian timber company and its Indian parent over violations of worker rights in Malaysia (BWI, 2016); and working with another certifying organization, the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification, to incorporate labour criteria in its certification standards (BWI, 2017a).

The two federations have had quite similar global campaign objectives. They pressure national governments to strengthen their commitments to, and enforcement of, labour standards. The IDWF pressures national states to ratify C189, to translate the Convention’s principles into national laws and to enforce such laws. The BWI pushes mega-event host country governments to beef up their labour protections for the long term. Both global federations have been relatively successful, at least as measured by membership gains. IDWF membership reportedly more than doubled from 280,000 in 2014 (Mather, 2013) to 670,000 by 2023 (IDWF, n.d.). BWI membership (BWI, 2014)

likewise made impressive gains during the 2009-13 period through campaigns directed at global organizations: 70,000 workers under union contract at World Bank infrastructure projects; 30,000 new union members in South Africa; and over 100,000 in Brazil from the World Cup campaigns.

This convergence has its limits. At least in countries where trade unions exist (not in Qatar, for instance), the BWI has aimed to raise standards for both formal and informal construction workers (Rombaldi, 2019), whereas the IDWF has advocated for workers who are almost universally informal. Relatedly, the IDWF and its affiliates have *mobilized informal workers* through campaigns for labour rights, whereas the BWI has sought to bring informal workers into collective bargaining (and thus formalize them), while otherwise *advocating on behalf of* informal workers rather than mobilizing them. In short, the two federations show both striking similarities and striking differences in their strategies.

#### 4.3.2 Funding

The two federations have also drawn on similar sources of *funding*. They tend to rely on a share of membership dues from affiliated organizations to pay for basic operations (staff, office, congresses, communications). For other projects, like the ones described above, they depend primarily on the Solidarity Support Organizations (SSOs)—funding bodies linked to national union federations. The bulk of the resources come from the European SSOs—above all, from those based in Scandinavia, the Netherlands and Germany (Ford, 2019, pp. 6, 72–73).

IDWF membership consists of poorly paid domestic workers who can afford to pay only minimal dues, and in fact the IDWF does not require contributions from its affiliates, which are themselves scantily funded. To support its work, it leans heavily on the SSOs, according to one leader: “FNV [the Dutch SSO], the Solidarity Center, the Olof Palme [International Center, the Swedish SSO], Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Swiss foundation [SSO]. NGOs from richer countries, but *labour movement* NGOs.” In its early years the IDWN drew on more financial support, technical assistance and, in some cases, even loans of personnel from the IUF global union federation, from WIEGO, and from UN Women (Fish, 2017), and the IDWF does attract some funding from feminist or liberal foundations, but at this point its funding sources largely mirror those of other global unions—except that such sources must cover much of the core operations, as well as campaigns.

The BWI receives significant income from membership dues, as reflected by a Secretariat (staff) of 12 people at the headquarters and an additional 32 at regional offices (BWI, n.d.-b). Its campaigns are funded through additional SSO support. For instance, Ford (2019, p. 73) says: “It was FNV Mondiaal’s call for projects on the theme of labor migration that prompted BWI to establish its Asian migration program.” That Asian initiative, launched in 2005 (p.107), in part by future General Secretary Yuson, then the federation’s Education Secretary (p. 99), became a testing ground for approaches that he later scaled up on becoming the federation’s leader (p. 83).

#### 4.3.3 Power Resources

Once again, the two federations show much overlap in terms of the *power resources* they mobilize to advance the interests of informal workers. Applying Schmalz, Ludwig, and Webster’s (2018) four-category synthesis, at first glance they both bring rather different power resources to the table. The IDWF’s main one is societal power (both coalitional—attracting powerful allies—and discursive—generating broad public support), whereas the BWI’s main one is institutional, especially through its inclusion of unions that are from wealthy countries and which wield institutional power in such countries and in global governance institutions. Certainly, the BWI’s most powerful affiliates boast institutional bargaining power that has been established through law and tradition (Rosado-Marzán, 2014). Unlike the IDWF, the BWI has a permanent presence in Geneva, where the ILO and the ITUC are headquartered. The BWI has leveraged its standing in the ILO to gain seats on boards, on commissions and at meetings of other global governance

institutions. For instance, the BWI maneuvered to secure seats on the Forest Stewardship Council board and on a working group (BWI, 2017b). The IDWF has certainly garnered support by fanning sympathy and outrage over mistreatment of household workers and their exclusion from labour protections (Fish, 2017). Of the two federations, the IDWF is the one more actively pursuing discursive power through social media. As of April 2023, the IDWF had 20,000 “likes” and followers, and the BWI 15,000, despite a larger staff and budget. This gap in numbers reflects a gap in effort: the IDWF’s latest post was published the same day and the BWI’s a month earlier.

Nonetheless, the two federations have been converging on the same wellsprings of power. The BWI’s Global Sports Campaign does tap into institutional power—all the coalition members in the 2010 and 2014 World Cup campaigns were trade unions (Cottle & Rombaldi, 2013)—but its strategy has more in common with the “naming and shaming” societal power tactics that NGOs with little institutional power have used to pressure corporations from the Global North to recognize labour rights in the Global South (Williams, 2020). Although the IDWF rallies societal power by stirring up sympathy and although its key allies have been national feminist organizations and labour feminist global networks, such as WIEGO, Boris (2019) and Fish (2017) have shown that the Convention 189 campaign was decisively pushed by strategically located ILO officials. “[IDWF’s] progress in the ILO has been driven by sympathetic individuals, some in the field, some in the headquarters,” an ILO staffer affirmed. These individuals not only supported the Convention but in some cases had advocated for such a measure before the IDWN launched its campaign. Labour feminists had set the stage through decades of lobbying (Boris, 2019). In addition, when asked about the IDWF’s sources of power, one of its leaders replied: “What’s most important is that we have very strong leaders.... People who can go into the Presidential Palace in many countries.”

Should connections and access to people who themselves wield institutional power—ILO officers, presidents—be considered societal or institutional power? Strictly speaking, this is coalitional power—winning over allies—and hence a form of societal power. But this is not coalitional power in the usual sense, i.e., organizations with little or no institutional power linking up with similar organizations until they are big enough to get attention from actors with institutional power. Instead, it falls somewhere between societal and institutional power.

#### 4.3.4 Challenges

Finally, what are the main challenges of each federation? Both are facing the challenge of enforcing and implementing international agreements. Since the 2011 passage of Convention 189, as shown by the Updates section of the IDWF website, there have been repeated efforts to get more nations to ratify the Convention and to implement its principles on domestic workers’ rights (e.g., IDWF (2021)). Similarly, if we look through the stream of BWI website news and statements on construction jobs for the 2022 World Cup, we see them alternating between reporting agreements with FIFA and Qatari authorities and criticizing those actors for not adequately living up to those agreements (e.g., BWI (2021a)). The BWI is likewise in an ongoing struggle to hold multinationals accountable under GFAs (e.g., BWI (2021b)).

Nonetheless, beyond that shared struggle, the challenges diverge dramatically between the two federations. The IDWF is chronically underfunded. As noted above, membership dues are a sparse source of funding. An IDWF leader spoke of two coexisting ways of seeing membership—being a member of an IDWF affiliate and an affiliate being a voting member of the IDWF:

If we define a member based on their identity, I think it's clear for all the unions and associations in the Global South who is a member: it is a domestic worker.... Whether they pay dues, whether they have a contract...those concepts of membership do not apply to us, just because the practical reality is different.

...

[But] for voting, it's very clear: it is members [affiliates] who are up to date with membership dues. That is the case in the [individual] unions and in the IDWF—the affiliates that are up to date with their affiliation fees, they have the right to vote. The others have the right to participate, but not cast a vote.

Because membership dues provide only a modest contribution, the IDWF has to rely on outside funding sources. An IDWF leader observed that such funding is often restricted to specific uses:

The [SSO] funders themselves are also conditioned by the back donors, which are countries. Some lines [of financing] are specific for gender-based violence. Some are specific for social dialogue engagement. Some are for leadership development and organizing—I'd like to see more! Sometimes they need to show concrete results, and sometimes our results are not very tangible—changing attitudes, educating people.

She concluded with a positive spin: “With IDWF, our funders are some of the more amazing ones. They are willing to be flexible.” Nonetheless, the difficulty is clear.

To be sure, the BWI is likewise faced with funding issues. A BWI official in 2018 complained that three American unions had just disaffiliated: “They don't see value in a global federation unless it benefits them in an organizing drive.” The official also lamented that European construction unions maintain a separate European entity: the European Federation of Building and Wood Workers, “which is mostly active toward Europe.” This parallel structure has had a “rippling effect” on the BWI's finances, since “60 percent of our financing comes from the European affiliates.” Still, with its significantly larger staff, the BWI is in a different class from the IDWF.

The BWI's main challenges lie elsewhere—in the reluctance of many affiliates to organize informal workers and in the inflexibility of a structure that limits affiliates to trade unions at a time when growing numbers of construction workers are informal. Although the BWI talks a lot about the importance of including informal workers, an ILO staffer observed in 2017: “Conceptually they support informal workers, but in practice I am not sure they are doing much.” Ford (2019, pp. 101, 104, 114–115) reports on the BWI's campaign to organize migrant workers in several Asian countries and how the efforts to engage local unions have yielded very mixed results. Although the BWI had significant success in getting a Malaysian timber union to embed organizers from a Nepali union to recruit Nepali workers, it was unable to convince the Malaysian *construction* affiliate to organize migrants. The BWI's affiliate in Taiwan initially embraced migrant organizing but then dropped the project. In Hong Kong, South Korea and Thailand, the BWI had to do an end run around reluctant unions by organizing migrant workers in separate migrant-only organizations. A BWI staffer talked about similar examples around the world:

[An American construction union doesn't] actually see their role as only organizing formal workers—but their workforce is changing, and they don't know how to organize the new workforce. In Germany there are one million migrants, and the unions there don't know how to organize them. We can't force them to do it.... In Japan, Renggo [one union federation] doesn't do it, but Zenoren [another] and the day labor unions, yes. And the same is true in South Africa....

The staffer cited one particularly galling example of union discomfort with incorporating the informal workforce: “The Netherlands has a union of self-employed workers. It was started by the construction union, but they stupidly allowed it to become independent.”

A closely related limitation is the BWI’s union-only structure. An ILO official described the problem in stark terms:

Many of them [construction workers] are self-employed. They can become members of an organization of their own choice, but not a traditional labour organization because they are not employees.... No matter how much I may like trade unions, I can’t say it’s possible the number of trade union workers in the construction sector can increase significantly. I can’t say this publicly because it’s political with the trade unions. They say this is the only way to improve jobs.

The ILO staffer noted Africa has numerous national organizations of independent (self-employed) workers: “One in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique. In Africa, it’s quite normal to see associations of informal workers.” But the official could not see how the BWI could incorporate these organizations. “I think they [the leadership of the BWI] are very well intentioned,” he said. “But they have an objective, which is to increase the number of unionized construction workers”—an objective dictated by their structure and by the views of their most powerful affiliates.

BWI leaders mentioned the same dilemma. “The nature of our [construction workers’] work is informal,” one said.

More and more work is becoming informal.... Nothing stops us from affiliating worker centres [non-union organizations of informal workers]... But the obstacle is that worker centres are not trade unions. They do not engage in collective bargaining.

Another federation official, speaking in 2017, went on at some length, framing statements as questions:

Our 2017 Strategic Plan’s message is that we have to move beyond traditional trade union work. We have to look at new constituencies, new strategies. Possibly new organizational forms. For example, do India’s Welfare Boards [tripartite sectoral social insurance funds negotiated by informal worker organizations] substitute for collective bargaining? ... Are trade unions still relevant? What types of organizations are needed? Will BWI form a parallel set of affiliates that are not unions? *How will unions react to that idea?* We are currently omitting 90% of the construction workforce. Our definition of organizing is tied to the trade union structure. Do we need to have people in trade unions, or do we just need to find ways to protect them?” [emphasis in original]

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Despite different legal and economic environments and organizational heritages, the BWI and the IDWF are remarkably similar in a number of organizational outcomes. At the same time, they also differ starkly in their strategy and structure on the one hand, and in their funding sources on the other. These differences stem from their distinct organizational roots and associated ideologies and from the divergent structural circumstances of their constituencies.

In terms of strategic innovation, both federations have sought, with considerable success, to advance organizational and labour standards for informal workers globally through their influence over global governance institutions, from the International Labour Organization to the World Bank and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). They have done so while pursuing similar goals: boosting their membership and pushing national governments to institutionalize and enforce stronger labour rights for their constituencies.

The two federations also show striking parallels in their power resources. True, the BWI leans more toward institutional power through its large, well-heeled and long-established affiliates in wealthy countries, which play institutionalized roles in many European countries and are longstanding participants in global governance institutions, especially the ILO. In contrast, the IDWF is less well positioned in global labour organizations and leans more toward societal power, appealing to the sympathies of powerful political actors and broad audiences by advocating for a particularly vulnerable and excluded group of workers. But ultimately, for both federations, much of their power arises at the fuzzy interface between institutional and societal power. Both are focused on key institutional actors and consolidate their standing in global governance institutions by acting in concert with powerful allies and by making compelling moral appeals.

To some extent, these convergent outcomes reflect the availability and effectiveness of strategies and resources. I would argue that they also reflect the outsider leaderships of both the BWI and the IDWF. As suggested by Samaluk (2017) and Voss and Sherman (2000), these outsiders are familiar with the same kinds of social movement strategies. In the BWI's case, a new strategic turn was made by the new (2008+) outsider leadership team, the first such team in its history.

Finally, both organizations rely mainly on a combination of membership dues from their affiliates and funding from Solidarity Support Organizations. SSO funding is particularly important for their campaigns directed at informal workers. Such convergence is relatively unsurprising, given that both are labour federations.

The two federations also show equally striking differences. Their organizational legacies still shape their organizational structures and their organizing repertoires in a path-dependent fashion, as described by Frege and Kelly (2003). True to its heterogeneous roots and history of bottom-up organizing, the IDWF readily accommodates a variety of organizational forms and strongly incorporates leadership development practices. In contrast, the BWI remains organizationally constrained by its long history of conventional trade unionism, thus frustrating those leaders who wish to organize informal workers by exploring new organizational templates and innovative approaches. The result is, at best, a global "patchwork" in organizing and representing informal construction workers, as described by Ford and Gillan (2015).

But the federations' differing access to financial resources cuts the other way. With minimal legal protections or market power, domestic workers earn very little and have little to contribute in membership dues. Moreover, domestic worker organizations generally advocate for all domestic workers but only recruit a small subset of them as members. Thus, the IDWF struggles to secure sufficient funding for core operations and has to meet the priorities of external funding bodies on which it depends. To organize a significantly larger share of the world's tens of millions of household workers, these funding bodies will have to become more "amazing" in their priorities. The BWI, in contrast, receives healthy streams of dues from large affiliates that include relatively well-paid construction workers, given their greater legal protections and the important role of large contractors in construction markets. Indeed, this funding gap is accentuated by the two federations' strategic victories, since high-profile infrastructure projects tend to generate wage demands that have no parallel in the world of women household workers.



In conclusion, the two federations may be converging on a broadly similar model of globally organizing informal workers and advocating for them, a convergence that seems to require innovation by outsider leaders. The differences are profoundly instructive as well. For the IDWF, the key barriers are inadequate funding for informal worker leadership development and organizing; for the BWI, there are problems with inflexible organizational models and slow dissemination of new capacities for organizing. The first problem flows from the continuing devaluation of women's care work, and the associated *de facto* exclusion of domestic workers from most institutional protections, and the second problem from the continuing influence of centuries-old structures and values. Navigating such barriers is key not just critical to the BWI and the IDWF but also, more broadly, to the prospects for organizing globally to defend informal and precarious workers.

## Note

[1] Chris Tilly, Professor of Urban Planning at UCLA, studies labor and inequality in US and global contexts, focusing on bad jobs and how to make them better. Tilly's books include *Half a Job: Bad and Good Part-Time Jobs in a Changing Labor Market*; *Stories Employers Tell: Race, Skill, and Hiring in America*; *The Gloves-Off Economy: Labor Standards at the Bottom of America's Labor Market*; *Are Bad Jobs Inevitable?*, and *Where Bad Jobs Are Better: Retail Jobs across Countries and Companies*. He has co-edited special journal issues on 'Precarious Labor' and 'Informal Work, Informalization Processes, and Governance Mechanisms around the World'. This project received support from the Ford Foundation and from a UCLA Faculty Research Grant.

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