

Ken Neumann USW

2022 SEFTON WILLIAMS LECTURE

International unionism in a globalized economy

Thanks so much.

It is truly an honour to be here, receiving the Sefton Williams award and presenting this lecture.

I want to thank the University of Toronto, the Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources, and Woodsworth College, for having me here today.

I'm always happy to be at this great university, where over 7,000 members of the United Steelworkers work.

Larry Sefton and Lynn Williams were two great Steelworkers. It is hard to express how much this means to me, to receive an award named for these two influential labour leaders. Not only were they great for the labour movement, but they had so much influence on me, personally, and on my own leadership with the United Steelworkers.

Today, I want to talk to you about one of the main accomplishments of my career. That is the work of our union in building international worker solidarity, and how essential that is in the face of globalization and the ever-more powerful multinational corporations.

I grew up on a farm in Saskatchewan. My family were strong CCF supporters during the Tommy Douglas years. My commitment to social democracy and my loyalty to the NDP are directly tied to my roots.

Still, you may wonder, how did a farm boy from Saskatchewan become so focused on building international trade unionism, working with labour leaders around the world to build workers' power?

It goes back to the influence of Lynn Williams.

Lynn was the first Canadian to lead our Union as International President. This was during the worst period of decline in the North American steel industry, in the 1980s.

The industry and workers in Canada and the U.S. were being devastated by globalization and the development of the corporate, so-called Free Trade agenda.

Under the leadership of Lynn Williams, our union's response was to say: we need to build workers' power across borders.

At the time, some unions in Canada split from the U.S. side of their organizations. But, Lynn always believed that we were stronger from working together, across borders. And he was right.

And so, in memory of Lynn Williams, I wanted to talk to you about some of the key moments in my career as the National Director for the United Steelworkers. I want to convey just how important it is to build international connections between workers and union leaders around the globe.

The globalization of capital over the last half-century and the trade agreements that have enabled that globalization, have not led to a rise in working-class prosperity around the world.

Neither have these corporate-designed trade deals led to an end to military aggression, something that was predicted by many neoliberal economists in the 1990s.

In fact, the rise of extreme right-wing movements and politics is one of the reactions to increasing inequality and concentration of economic power around the world, including in our own country.

I truly believe that the only way we can counter these phenomena is through international trade unionism and true, worker-centred economic populism.

My Union, has, from its very inception, been an international union.

I know that sometimes folks on the left in Canada mock the term “international” when it is applied to unions like the Steelworkers. They say – “well, what that really means is that you’re “American.”

The USW may have set up its international headquarters in the U.S. at its founding in 1942.

But as many of you know, our Union emerged from simultaneous uprisings and organizing of steelworkers in Canada and in the U.S., in the 1930s and 1940s.

By the end of the Second World War, the Steelworkers Union was growing like wild fire in Canada, as well as the U.S.

In Hamilton, Sault St. Marie, Sydney, Nova Scotia, and Schefferville, Quebec, steelworkers and miners across Canada wanted a democratic, international Union. And they didn’t care where its headquarters was – they cared that the Union could help them earn a decent living.

Because what was true then, and remains true today, is that working-class struggle is not, and should not, be bound by international borders.

Workers around the world have more in common with each other than they do with the bosses, no matter where they might live.

Being part of a bi-national union continues to give the Steelworkers a great starting point to expand beyond our borders, to develop connections across oceans and around the world.

Even in recent years, our work with our union in the United States was instrumental in pressuring the Trump administration to remove the steel and aluminum tariffs on Canada. Without that cross-border action, I truly believe those harmful tariffs would have stayed around, a lot longer.

Many of you will remember how, in the 1990s and the 2000s, it often felt impossible to push back against the growing power of multinational corporations. They could just shift production out of the country, facilitated by more and more trade agreements.

This affected our union, and our members, at the bargaining table.

The threat of lost jobs and plant closures was dangled in front of us constantly.

You would hear anti-union rhetoric all over the place: if wages are too high, they'll just move the factory to wherever, so why bother."

This was never acceptable to us, so we fought back.

It was daunting and it sometimes felt like the forces of history were against us. But we plowed forward, and made an intentional decision to build worker alliances around the world.

By the time I was elected as Canadian National Director in 2004, the Steelworkers Humanity Fund had already been working around the world for 20 years.

Lynn Williams had already been the first Canadian president of our international union.

NAFTA had been around for 10 years.

The dominant discourse was that trade agreements and giant corporations expanding internationally were good for workers. It was the way of the future and would bring widespread prosperity.

As trade unionists, we always saw the other side of that coin.

Hundreds of thousands of our members and other workers losing their jobs.

Communities decimated in both Canada and the United States.

The disappearance of good manufacturing jobs was not offset by good jobs in other sectors here at home. And shifting production to other countries didn't help workers abroad.

Those who worked with the Steelworkers Humanity Fund could tell you, first-hand of the horror stories in Mexico and in other parts of Latin America.

When I look back on my career, it's remarkable that so many of the big Canadian steel and mining companies, where our members fought for, and won, good jobs, no longer exist.

My working life started at a steel company in Saskatchewan – IPSCO – that made a name for itself by supplying pipe and tube for the oil patch.

In 2007 IPSCO was purchased by a European-based company, SSAB.

The following year, SSAB sold its Canadian assets to Evraz. Incidentally, given events in the Ukraine, you might know that Evraz is owned by Russian oligarchs, including Roman Abramovich.

The point is that IPSCO is no longer a Canadian-owned steel company.

Likewise, in Quebec, Sidbec-Dosco's operations, once owned by the Quebec government, were sold to Lakshmi Mittal and are now part of the Arcelor-Mittal empire, which also includes the former Dofasco in Hamilton.

Algoma Steel in Sault Ste. Marie was taken over by ESSAR, an Indian controlled company, then was bought by a group of bond holders after Algoma's third insolvency in 20 years.

Steven Harper's government approved the take-over of Stelco by U.S. Steel, on the blatantly false claim that there would be a 'net benefit' to Canada.

By 2007 the Canadian steel industry was entirely in the hands of global corporations owned outside of Canada.

As a side note, these foreign take-overs fueled our union's long-running campaign to change Canadian trade law, to give unions the right, on behalf of workers, to file anti-dumping cases to protect Canadian workers against unfair and illegal trade practices.

I am pleased to report that after years of persistent lobbying and advocacy by our union and in particular our rank-and-file members, we may have finally convinced the current government of the value of that approach.

Much like the steel sector, we've also seen many Canadian mining and resource companies taken over by global corporations. The 2006 sale of Inco to CVRD, later to become Vale, upended relationships and set into motion new conflicts that have not yet been fully resolved.

Steelworkers Local 6500 endured a year long strike in Sudbury in 2009-2010 as Vale's Brazilian management attempted to break the union. In Labrador, our USW Local 9508, with a large number of Indigenous workers, had to fight through an even-longer strike – 18 months.

The take-over of Alcan Aluminum by Rio Tinto in 2007 had similar consequences, which I will talk about in a moment.

Canadian mining companies that were not being swallowed up by their larger competitors, were themselves expanding globally. Teck (with its roots as Cominco and the giant now closed Sullivan mine in Kimberly, B.C.) invested huge amounts in the start-up of copper mines in South America and in Alaska.

What was the response of our union in the face of those ownership changes and the globalization of mining and steel?

It was not to retreat to a narrow type of nationalism.

Instead, we reached out to union allies around the world to build union power globally.

As Teck-Cominco was exploring and investing in South America, we sent rank-and-file local union leaders from mines in Trail and Kamloops to Chile to share strategy and resources with miners working for the same corporate giants.

We invited them back to our homes to share with them how we fought such companies when necessary, and how we worked with them when we could.

In Peru, we built a solid, decades-long relationship with the Peruvian miners federation, working on health and safety issues in particular.

With the Vale take-over of Inco, we worked to create a global network of human rights groups, civil society, and trade unions, called the People Affected by Vale. Together, we fought back and have built some counter balance against the enormous power and influence of that company.

This network produced an anti-sustainability report that punctured holes in Vale's official sustainability narrative, and raised questions of abuses of human rights and labour rights at Vale's annual shareholders' meetings.

In March 2007 in Sudbury, leaders from 8 Brazilian unions representing CVRD workers, and union leaders from New Caledonia and Mozambique, joined with our Canadian local unions to sign a solidarity accord.

During the 2009-2010 strike in Sudbury, we activated that network and sent striking workers to Vale operations around the world, including Indonesia, South Korea and

Brazil to pressure the company. Global solidarity was on full display at a massive rally and march in Sudbury in April 2010.

The global pressure the union brought to bear on Vale fueled the remarkable endurance and resolve of USW members during the months and months of their strike, allowing them to essentially fight the company to a stand-still.

The settlements that ended the 2009-2010 strike were not universally welcomed as great victories for the union, however, the struggle showed the company that workers were determined to stand up for themselves and their union, and that the company would have to accept the fact that the union is here to stay.

The Vale strike also allowed the union in Canada to test out strategies that would be effective in the fight with Rio Tinto in Alma, Quebec, which is one of the defining moments of my career as USW National Director.

In 2012, Rio Tinto, which as you likely know, is a massive Anglo-Australian multinational, decided to play hard-ball with USW members at the Aluminum Smelter in Alma, Quebec, which it owned as part of its purchase of Alcan.

Rio Tinto, the second-largest resource company in the world, locked out 780 workers at the most important workplace in the small town of Alma.

Rio Tinto has already earned a reputation as one of the world's most anti-union resource companies, with a history of long strikes and lockouts in several countries.

In Alma, they were seeking to replace each retiring worker with a subcontract worker who be paid 50% less than the average union wage.

We realized the only way we could possibly win the lockout was to mobilize globally against Rio Tinto. Fortunately, a couple years earlier, we had formed a strong alliance with Unite the Union, one of the largest unions in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Together, the Steelworkers and Unite had formed a global union, called Workers Uniting, to act as one trans-Atlantic voice in our global union federations.

We were able to confront Rio Tinto in Africa, Europe and Australia. We mobilised our global union federations, led by IndustriALL, which has over 50 million members in 140 countries.

Over 100 mining unions, affiliated to IndustriALL, targeted Rio Tinto at the World Mining Conference and vowed to build a long-term global solidarity campaign.

Through Workers Uniting, we organized regular solidarity protests in London, the corporate headquarters of Rio Tinto. Several months into the lockout in Alma, the union held a massive rally in the community with drew 9,000 trade unionists from around the world.

Five months into the lockout, we also discovered that the International Olympic Committee had contracted with Rio Tinto for the production of medals at the 2012 Olympics in London. And so we launched a campaign called “Off the Podium,” and held repeated actions against Rio Tinto, in London. We called on the IOC, non-stop, to get Rio Tinto’s dirty metals off the podium for the 2012 Olympics.

Finally, literally three weeks before the Olympics were to start, and six months into the lockout – this giant multinational, Rio Tinto, caved.

We won the contracting-out battle. We successfully fought back against Rio Tinto because of years of work building international connections and solidarity.

In the end, 50 trade unions around the World took action in support of our “Off the Podium” campaign. While the pure balance of power at the individual workplace was not equal, even with a collective agreement in place, the union was able to counter Rio Tinto’s power by building these alliances.

Our union’s fight against Rio Tinto is an excellent example of the power of international solidarity to influence bargaining outcomes. But of course international trade unionism and solidarity can also change the course of the labour movement itself.

Another of the proudest moments of my career is our union’s alliance with Los Mineros, the Mexican miners union, and its leader, Napoleon Gomez. As many of you know, for many decades the Mexican labour movement has been dominated by corrupt unions who were closely connected to the ruling party, the PRI.

In 2006, a disaster at Pasta de Conchos Mine in Mexico killed over 60 miners. The miners’ union leader, Napoleon Gomez, declared the disaster industrial homicide. The mine was owned by Grupo Mexico, and within a short time, Napoleon was facing trumped up criminal charges and likely imprisonment, if not worse. He fled Mexico, and my union sheltered him in Vancouver.

In Mexico, the miners’ union was subjected to endless harassment by the authorities, including the imprisonment of one of the union’s senior officials, Juan Linares, for close to 2 years.

Meanwhile, our Union supported Napoleon Gomez in exile for 12 years. We pressured the Canadian government NOT to deport him and provide him with Canadian residency and citizenship. We brought Napoleon’s case to the global union movement, and we supported Los Mineros members in Mexico.

In 2018, with the election of AMLO, all of the false charges against Napoleon were dropped and he was welcomed back to Mexico. He has since been elected as a Senator, and Los Mineros is one of the most successful and militant unions in Mexico.

It is fair to say that, without international union solidarity, the Los Mineros Union in Mexico would not exist. Indeed, the entire course of the Mexican labour movement would be different.

Beyond Napoleon Gomez, the USW continues to work with Mexican trade unions and on building labour union capacity in Mexico.

Through the demands made by Mexican trade unionists, there are important clauses in the new USMCA to support legitimate trade unions in Mexico.

No doubt, the support we gave to Napoleon and all of the work we have done with Mexican trade unions is one of the reasons we have seen a shift in trade agreements over the past few years.

The improved labour provisions in the USMCA revisions are a reflection of the growing power of workers. This change did not just happen. It came through concerted efforts and alliances between unions in North America.

And the last example I want to provide concerns the work of the Global union movement in Bangladesh.

We focus our international trade unionism not just on mining, but on other sectors of the economy where workers have been hit hard by the effects of unfair trade agreements.

In 2013, the Rana Plaza garment factory collapsed in Bangladesh, killing over 1,100 workers. These workers were mostly women, working in some of the lowest-paid and poorest conditions in the world.

In 2014, NDP MP Matthew Kellway invited me along on a delegation he was organizing to commemorate the first anniversary of the Rana Plaza building collapse.

I jumped at the chance. But I must say I wasn't prepared for what I saw and experienced in Bangladesh. It was one of the moments that shake you to your core and change you forever.

In just a few days – on April 24th, we will mark the 9th anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster. The loss of so many workers and the injuries to many more, created an international outcry and led to the establishment of the ground-breaking Bangladesh Accord on Building and Fire Safety.

As a result of this legally binding agreement between global garment brands and the global labour movement, a system of credible, independent factory inspections was created. The agreement mandates improvements to correct safety gaps, as well as worker training and a credible complaints regime.

The result has been remarkable. Factories in Bangladesh are much, much safer from a structural and fire safety point of view.

However, the global garment industry is still the poster child for everything that is wrong with corporate-led globalization.

It is an industry designed to push profits to the top of supply chains, squeeze costs to the absolute lowest possible level, and maintain poverty and misery among garment workers, with women often in the lowest-paid jobs, and facing the worst conditions.

Following my visit to Bangladesh in 2014, Steelworkers again visited in 2016, 2018, and 2019, and partnered with other Canadian unions in a joint project with Kalpona Akter and the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity. We will travel again this year to learn first-hand the impact of the pandemic among workers in the garment sector, and about the ongoing violation of labour rights.

Garment workers in Bangladesh work in factories supplying Canadian retailers and clothing brands, including Mark's (owned by Canadian Tire), YM Inc., Joe Fresh (Loblaws), and HBC. These workers are earning only \$7 per day. That's not per hour. That is per day. It isn't enough to live on, even in Bangladesh.

That is why our union, in part through our Steelworkers Humanity Fund, has gone further than providing resources to train workers on their rights in Bangladesh. We have taken on a solidarity campaign in Canada to pressure Canadian brands to pay living wages throughout their supply chains.

Some people wonder why we have done that. After all, the garment sector is not at Steelworker type of industry.

The answers are not complicated.

First, is the obvious injustices, and the fact that change is possible.

If they so choose, Canadian retailers and brands can use their resources and power to quickly take steps that will make an immediate change in the lives of thousands of garment workers, in particular women in the lowest-paid sectors of the world economy.

Second, it is also a teaching moment.

It is an easy entry into a discussion on corporate globalization.

It is not hard for anyone to understand what is happening. The power dynamics are clear. If international solidarity and local action can win improvements that reverse the global corporate race to the bottom in the garment sector, we can use that as a basis for other fights in other sectors.

Women garment workers in Bangladesh are leading this struggle, but as we've learned, we'll go a lot further by building international solidarity and bringing this fight to the global North.

Finally, as our former International President Leo Gerard has often said, "We can't pretend that we can live on an island of prosperity in a sea of misery."

If we don't find ways to address global income inequality, and if we don't succeed in building power that will reverse the race to the bottom, sooner or later our own living standard will fall, our own collective agreement will be undercut.

So, where does all of this leave us?

I'm ending my career as USW national director at a time when we see a rise in nationalism and even fascism. But, this is not the "end of globalization" that we hear about. Corporate power is still highly concentrated. Multinational companies have control over entire supply chains, from resource extraction all the way to the final products.

We hear about re-shoring of manufacturing and producing more at home.

And yes, that is one way to make sure that we have reliable supply chains and good, community-supporting jobs.

But becoming more insular is not the way to build workers' power. We need more alliances between workers around the world.

Some examples that we are working on right now are corporate due diligence laws. Several countries, such as France, have already adopted such legislation

These are initiatives that will allow workers to fight back against corporations headquartered outside of their countries of operation.

Just two weeks ago here in Canada, the NDP tabled a bill on corporate due diligence, to make companies headquartered in Canada responsible for the labour and environmental conditions along their supply chains.

If passed, this will give workers, internationally, power to bring complaints against abuses along the supply chain, with the ultimate ability to access the Canadian court system.

This is the type of international initiative that is driven by trade unions in Canada, working with our allies abroad. It is a direct result of the collective work of our union, our Steelworkers Humanity Fund and mining and garment workers in the Global South.

Workers everywhere also need a new trade regime.

As Steelworkers, we are not against the idea of trade. But, we need to change the way we trade.

We have seen Canada and other countries give lip-service to this issues, by negotiating so-called progressive trade agreements. And we have seen our neighbours to the south rip up existing trade agreements, ostensibly in the name of helping workers.

But we have yet to see a real shift away from corporate trade agreements that only bolster the power of corporations in the global North.

We need trade reforms that put workers front and center, allowing unions to identify and act when unfair trade is harming communities and jobs. We need to develop trade frameworks that don't simply allow movement to the lowest cost jurisdictions at the expense of labour and the environment.

Unions need to work together across borders to make sure we have good-paying jobs, the right to free collective bargaining, and gender equality, all while we move towards a decarbonized economy.

Yes, we need to focus on cleaner manufacturing here at home, but we also need to work with unions around the world to ensure that the good jobs aren't only available to a select few in the global North.

In doing this, we build workers' power. We counter the dominance of multinational corporations. Continuing to build this international unionism is the only way to fight back against the rising fascism that is emerging in no small part due to the failed promises of corporate-led globalization.

So, even though I am retiring, I know that this fight will go on, not only by our union, but by unions around the world, in every sector of the economy.

Thank you.