Meeting the Challenges of 2017 with International Solidarity

When events around us threaten our foundational principles, it can be tempting to retreat, but UE is not backing down from this challenge. In 2017, UE’s Research and Education Fund rebuffed isolationism and xenophobia by building new cross-border partnerships, strengthening ongoing multi-country alliances, and empowering our future leaders.

From member exchanges in Mexico and Canada, to building new international networks to take on multinational corporations, to coalition-building projects fighting free trade deals and climate change, UEREF continues to provide valuable resources for framing workers’ rights in an international context.

Rank-and-File Member Exchanges

The highlight of UE’s international work continues to be our member exchanges to other countries. This in-person, rank-and-file approach has become a model for other organizations.

In July 2017, UEREF sent a delegation of Young Activists (members 35 and under) to Mexico City for a week with our allies at the Frente Autentico del Trabajo (FAT). Matthew Braddon, Connecticut; Daniel Campos, Chicago; Bailey Kelley, Iowa; and Emma Paradis, Vermont, were joined by Director of International Strategies Kari Thompson. The National Coordinators of the FAT—Rosalba Calva Flores, Eladio Abundiz Gudian, Jose Ezequiel Garcia Vargas, and Benedicto Martinez Orozco—were excellent hosts.

The jam-packed agenda included an orientation to Mexico’s economy, labor law, and organizing struggles; a discussion of the FAT’s work to stop violence against women, including disappearances and femicides; meetings with FAT members, including a tour of an auto part plant; and a meeting with a group of workers still struggling to organize an independent union. At the end of the week, Braddon shared that he “liked seeing how struggles here in Mexico were similar to ones at home.” Kelley added, “It was great to put NAFTA in context, to hear from workers who understand its impacts.” All the members were motivated to discuss the impending North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) renegotiation with their locals with their new understanding of its implications in their lives. Campos said, “It’s like sports: if you don’t know the rules, you don’t care. I was clueless about NAFTA, but now I get its importance.”

Several UE members and officers also visited the Canadian Council of Unifor, Canada’s largest private-sector union, in Winnipeg this August. The relationships developed there led to the
approval of the new North American Solidarity Project between Unifor and UE at UE’s 75th National Convention at the end of August. This partnership has already inspired new ideas in our equity and inclusion programs, as well as new cross-border solidarity activities in GE plants represented by both unions.

A New Formation: General Electric Trade Union Network

UE Local 506 President Scott Slawson, whose local represents GE workers in Erie, PA, and UE Director of Organizing Gene Elk participated in several activities with Unifor, including a November conference in Geneva, Switzerland, hosted by the global trade union federation IndustriALL. Delegates from 17 unions in 11 countries participated in the creation of the General Electric Trade Union Network. Following the meeting, Slawson shared, “One thing that really encouraged me to believe this was both a powerful and genuine pact was each country learning from the others how similar the story is with a global giant like GE. No matter where you go, the story was virtually the same. We are building some powerful relationships and some valuable allies among our friends from international unions.”

Fighting back against Corporate-friendly Trade Deals

With NAFTA back in the spotlight this year, many of UEREF’s projects focused on the renegotiation of this free trade agreement. In its more than 20 years on the books, NAFTA has made it easier for corporations to profit by moving good-paying jobs from the US and Canada to Mexico, where workers receive poverty wages and few labor protections. In addition to those activities already mentioned, UE General President Peter Knowlton traveled to Mexico City in May to be part of a large gathering of labor, environmental, and civil society organizations to craft a cohesive, progressive vision for a fair trade deal that improves working and living conditions in our communities across the continent.

This work continued throughout the year, with partners meeting together again in Chicago in October to focus on the labor-related aspects. NAFTA renegotiations were the main theme of this year’s Tri-National Solidarity Alliance gathering, coordinated by UEREF and partners at the UCLA Labor Center and Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung. We garnered positive press attention for our action outside the Mexican Consulate office.
Coalition Building

Our national convention brought additional opportunities for strengthening international partnerships. Eleven representatives from five unions in four countries joined us. Our members learned from our guests that workers in all our countries face similar struggles against corporate greed and governments that don’t represent the interests of everyday people: bosses are rolling back protections for workers and undermining labor rights in Japan, Mexico, Italy, and Canada, just as they are in the United States.

Our guests hit the pavement with convention delegates in a march for better wages and workplace dignity outside a Pittsburgh grocery store.

UEREF has continued to develop projects on the important connections between climate change and working conditions with our colleagues at Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED) and the Labor Network for Sustainability. This included participation at TUED’s spring strategy meeting, attended by representatives from international unions as far away as Norway, South Africa, South Korea, and Australia, and a meeting of all three organizations at the People’s Summit in Chicago.

Other activities this year, from attending the Montreal convention of our partner union Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux to support for workers rights in France with ally Confédération Générale du Travail, have strengthened our resolve that our future is brighter when our bonds of solidarity stretch beyond the borders of our own country.

What’s Next?

As we look ahead to 2018, our work will continue the momentum of this year’s compelling projects as well as extend beyond their reach. Our members in North Carolina will build on the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s call for community and faith leaders to support public workers as they seek to earn a living wage and dignity on the job. Some members will travel with our allies at U.S. Labor Against the War on a trip to South Korea to learn more about the struggles of organizing under the shadow of nuclear war. Others will join in listening sessions designed for labor and environmental activists to find common ground from which to push back against corporate overreach in our communities. We also look forward to the launch of a new online publication, *International Labor News and Analysis*, to share important developments on international worker rights with our allies.

The work of UEREF is made possible by the generous sponsorship of the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock, and our many individual donors. Thank you!