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Scaling Up? TRANSNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANISING IN GLOBALISED PRODUCTION

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Contents

- 5 JULIA HOFMANN
Introductory Commentary
- 8 KARIN FISCHER, CORNELIA STARITZ, SIGNE MOE
Scaling Up? On the Possibilities and Limits of Transnational Labour
Organising in Globalised Production
- 38 MARISSA BROOKES
The Transnational Labor Alliances Database Project: Methods,
Problems, and Progress
- 62 JONA BAUER, ANNA HOLL
Workers' Power through Transnational Industrial Relations
Agreements? A Global Framework Agreement and the ACT
Initiative in the Garment Sector
- 84 JEROEN MERK
Global Production Networks, Latent Power Resources and
(Constrained) Collective Worker Agency: Findings from a Nike
Mega-Supplier in Indonesia
- 108 BETTINA ENGELS
The Scale to be? Strategic Alliances in Cotton Production in Burkina
Faso
- 130 LUKE SINWELL
Workers' Power in Marikana: Building Bridges of Solidarity in
South Africa's Platinum Mines (2012-2014)

- 151 KARINDA FLAVELL, SAMANTHI J. GUNAWARDANA
“Nothing about us without us” or “The most effective way to get it implemented”? Global South Workers’ Power in Australian Civil Society Initiatives in the Garment Sector
- 171 KRUSKAYA HIDALGO CORDERO
Decolonial Readings of Platform Economies: The Organising of On-Demand Delivery Women Workers in Ecuador
- 193 MADHUMITA DUTTA
Kitchen, Farm, Room – Spaces of Transnational Feminist Theorising by Working Class Women in India
- 214 Editors and Authors of the Special Issue
220 Publication Details

BETTINA ENGELS

The Scale to be? Strategic Alliances in Cotton Production in Burkina Faso

ABSTRACT This paper explores the factors that impact what scales are useful for labour organising and struggle. It argues that besides transnational networking and campaigns, intra- and inter-class solidarity and collaboration at the local and national scale are central to claim workers' rights and needs, even in highly transnationalised sectors. In a case study on the cotton sector in Burkina Faso, it is analysed how various groups along the chain of production organise and mobilise to raise their claims. Collaboration between the various groups on the local and national scale turns out to be more important than transnational campaigning. However, in the light of the embeddedness of the sector in global production networks, transnational networking might still be a promising strategy but comes along with substantial challenges that are distinct for various actors. The paper discusses possible obstacles for transnational networking for the smallholders and informal and casual workers, and shows how local and national cooperation may be a prerequisite for such approaches.

KEYWORDS *cotton, labour, networking, scale, Burkina Faso, Africa*

1. Introduction

Capital's striving for maximising profit by exploiting labour goes beyond national scales. This is clearly not a solely recent phenomenon; just think of the transatlantic slave trade. In recent times of globalisation, capital's operation on transnational and global scales has intensified though, with relevant implications for labour, such as an increasing frag-

mentation along(side) global value chains, outsourcing, casualisation, and various forms of the informalisation of labour. This comes along with challenges to labour organisation. In this light, it has been argued in global labour studies that labour needs to mobilise and campaign on the transnational and global scale, too (Brookes/McCallum 2017; Fairbrother et al. 2013). This is not a particularity of labour but applies to many fields of civil society campaigning, e.g. when it comes to human rights, gender, climate justice, extractivism, and others. In this article, I investigate which scales are useful for labour organising and struggles, and what are the factors that impact on the appropriateness of the respective scales for mobilisation. I argue that, besides transnational networking and campaigns, intra- and inter-class solidarity and collaboration at the local and national scale are central to claiming workers' rights and needs, even in highly transnationalised sectors. I thereby start from the assumption that i) 'work' and 'workers' are not restricted to waged work and wage earners (Komlosy 2016); and ii) that labour unions are not the only, and not always the most appropriate, organisations to represent workers and claim their rights (Atzeni 2021).

By taking the cotton sector in Burkina Faso as a case study, it is analysed how various groups – smallholder cotton producers, and formal, informal and precarious workers in the cotton factories – along the chain of production in the country organise and mobilise for collective action to raise their claims. What ways and what scales turn out to be appropriate for organising and representing workers in the Burkinabé cotton sector? It is argued that the fragmentation of labour and reproduction between agrarian and non-agrarian, rural and urban, formal and informal, hampers organising and collective action. Inter-class collaboration, solidarity and strategic alliances can potentially bridge this fragmentation and thus strengthen workers' power. To achieve better conditions of work and life for the variety of workers in the sector, it is crucial to overcome the fragmentation of labour and strive for solidarity between small-holder producers and factory workers. This means that even though the sector is highly transnationalised, in Burkinabé cotton production, collaboration between the various groups on the local and national scale for now turns out to be more important than transnational campaigning. The principal reason for this is that smallholders and workers have distinct interests but a common opponent, which is the cotton industry. As long as peasants

and workers do not join forces, they risk being pitted against each other, in favour of capital's interests.

The empirical material for the case study was collected during five research stays in 2018-2020. In total, I carried out more than 30 semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) in the towns of Bobo-Dioulasso, Dédougou, Houndé, Ouagadougou, and a couple of villages in the provinces of Mouhoun (Boucle de Mouhoun region, central-west) and Tuy (Hauts-Bassins region, southwest). Interview partners included cotton farmers, workers at SOFITEX cotton plants, and representatives from labour unions, civil society organisations, cotton companies and the official cotton farmers association Union Nationale des Producteurs de Coton du Burkina Faso (UNPCB). In addition, I had numerous informal conversations, paid visits to the cotton fields, and participated in the meetings and mobilisation events of the labour unions and grassroots organisations. Secondary sources include reports, mainly from the Burkinabé press, and documents from international organisations, development agencies, state authorities, the cotton industry, trade unions and NGOs.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, the argument is brought forward that labour is not to be reduced to waged work, and that the majority of underprivileged workers – notably in the informal sectors and in smallholder agriculture – are sparsely organised and represented by labour unions. Then, the development of the Burkinabé cotton sector is depicted, and labour organising and collective action are outlined, both in smallholder farming and in the cotton factories. I present the interests of various classes of labour in cotton production, and of the smallholders, and argue that these are distinct but not antagonistic. I then discuss why, for many of the groups, it makes more sense to strive for alliances at the local and national scale, rather than transnationally. Possible obstacles to transnational networking for the smallholders and informal and casual workers are discussed subsequently.

2. Organising casual and informal workers

In capitalism, waged labour represents just one of many forms of labour. Focusing on waged labour, it might be argued, somehow reflects a

Euro- and androcentric perspective that universalises the concept of waged labour in the factories at the time of the emergence of capitalism in Europe (Komlosy 2016: 56f.). But capitalism has certainly not everywhere produced “double free” workers (Lerche 2010: 65). E. P. Thompson, Hobsbawm and others brought forward an understanding of the working class and workers’ struggles that is not limited to the industrial proletariat but includes other forms of labour and, correspondingly, other marginalised social groups (Komlosy 2016: 61), that some authors have described as the “popular classes” (Zeilig 2009). In many contexts worldwide, and particularly in the global South, formalised waged labour represents just a minority of the labour force whileas many more people work in the so-called informal sectors, or are smallholder peasants. In the 2000s, vibrant academic and activist debates and research have emerged on precarious and informal work, relating both to the global South and North (e.g. Armano et al. 2017; Castel 1995, 2000; Standing 2011).

Organising casual, precarious and informal workers comes with particular challenges: these workers often work individually, sometimes from home and sometimes mobile (e.g. street traders); some work in remote regions (e.g. in artisanal mining or agriculture); others have diverse jobs and workplaces. Frequently, they lack material resources and time for organising and collective action, as many are occupied with day-to-day survival, feeding their families, and care work. Many informal workers are undocumented. Trade unions often do not have much experience in organising and supporting them (Bonner/Spooner 2011).

As a consequence, casual, precarious and informal workers are sparsely represented in trade unions but are present in a range of other organisations, both progressive and neoliberal (Britwum/Akorsu 2017): workers’ associations, women’s associations, cooperatives, civil society organisations, advocacy organisations, and others – ranging from scattered local groups to well-organised transnational networks. In some cases, self-organisations of informal workers, with regard to their organisational forms and repertoires, resemble trade unions but do not identify themselves as trade unions. With regard to the African continent, numerous case studies explore the organising of informal sector workers, but predominantly in urban settings, e.g. transport (Rizzo/Atzeni 2020), private security services (Omolo/Odhong 2017), port workers, and street and market vendors (Lindell 2010). Britwum

and Akorsu (2017) present the noteworthy exception of casual workers in the palm oil production in Ghana, who have organised themselves alongside their regularly employed colleagues in two competing trade unions. Lerche (2010) points out that underprivileged classes – particularly workers who are facing risks when organising, such as migrant workers and ‘illicit’ workers – are more likely to organise in other organisations beyond traditional unions.

That informal and casual workers lack representation in trade unions is also due to specific challenges linked to the organising of informal and casual labour that unions have to deal with: the instability and fluidity of labour relations; resources that are needed for informal workers’ representation and that have to be generated by regular workers (e.g. paid from their membership fees); and obstacles on both sides, including racism, chauvinism, anti-ziganism, etc. Nevertheless, organising informal workers in existing trade unions can have advantages for both: It can increase the structural and organisational power resources of trade unions, and informal workers can benefit from trade unions’ material and socio-organisational resources (Bonner/Spooner 2011; Britwum/Akorsu 2017). On the other hand, labour studies and radical activists have pointed at trade unions’ tendency to dampen labour struggles (Arnold/Bongiovi 2012).

With regards to agrarian labour, scholars point out that lines between the countryside and towns, between agriculture and manufacturing, the formal and the informal, become increasingly blurred. Categorisations as workers, peasants, traders, employed, self-employed, formal, informal, urban and rural are getting less clear. Henry Bernstein (2010) has characterised the fragmentation of labour and reproduction alongside the lines of urban/rural, agrarian/non-agrarian, employed/self-employed with the concept of “classes of labour”. Classes of labour include, beyond waged labour, all workers who indirectly depend on selling their labour power; people who “have to pursue their reproduction through insecure and oppressive – and typically scarce – wage employment and/or a range of likewise precarious small-scale and insecure, ‘informal sector’ (‘survival’) activity, including farming; in effect, various and complex combinations of employment and self-employment” (Bernstein 2008, cited by Lerche 2010: 65). Classes of labour are fragmented, as ethnicity, race, caste, gender, etc. interplay with class relations and increasingly blur class locations.

This is where global production networks (GPN) analysis comes into play. GPN analysis reveals in detail how capital and production processes are organised on a global scale, and strategically coordinate the fragmentation and delocalisation of labour to the benefit of capital. Thus, GPN analysis “can serve to reveal the variegated landscape for agency potential across different sectors. [...] such an approach can detail the variable levels of potential agency within functionally integrated economic networks. [...] Moreover, latent lines of solidarity between different groups of workers in different places may also be unveiled” (Coe/Hess 2013: 5f.). Yet, labour and labour agency do not play a central role in many GPN analyses (Carswell/De Neve 2013). Oliver Pye’s work presents an important exception. He puts everyday practices and acts of resistance by workers on palm oil plantations to the centre stage and argues that “fragmentation thus provokes a counter-reaction from workers, who scale up everyday resistance strategies [...] within the palm oil global production network” (Pye 2017: 942).

In the following case study, I focus on workers’ agency and strategies of resistance and claim-making. The cotton sector, as with palm oil and other agricultural commodities, is indeed highly transnationalised. This becomes obvious even if the analysis, as in the case study presented here, is limited to the part of the chain of production that takes place in the country. From a GPN perspective, transnational influences can be revealed in every location within the network: seeds and fertiliser on the cotton fields are produced by transnational agro-industrial companies; transnational companies hold shares in all cotton companies operating in Burkina Faso; and the purchase price paid to the farmers is impacted by the transnational buyers of cotton and by world market dynamics.

3. Burkina Faso’s cotton sector

Cotton production in the former state of Upper Volta, nowadays Burkina Faso (the country has been so named since 1984), has a long history, going back to the pre-colonial period. Production increased under colonial rule, as the colonial authorities aimed to supply their armies and workers in the factories of industrialising Europe with cotton clothes (Bassett 2001). From the 1950s onwards, the sector was developed by the French

state-owned cotton company Compagnie Française pour le Développement des Fibres Textiles (CFDT, created in 1949). In 1979, the Burkinabé government created the monopolistic cotton company Société Burkinabé des Fibres et des Textiles (SOFITEX), a joint venture of the government and the French company CFDT. From the mid-1990s onwards, the World Bank promoted the liberalisation of the sector.

In 1998, the Union Nationale des Producteurs de Coton du Burkina Faso (UNPCB) was created as the national organisation of cotton farmers. This was not a process initiated 'from below' by the cotton farmers themselves. Its creation was rather a reaction of the authorities to the attempt by some farmers to organise themselves within an umbrella organisation (the Fédération Nationale des Organisations Paysannes, FENOP, created in 1996) and to facilitate the representation of their interests (Dowd-Uribe 2014b: 557). Subsequently, some wealthier producers, together with SOFITEX and the government, pushed the creation of the UNPCB as a more 'peaceful', corporatist organisation, with the intention of taming the farmers' movement (ibid.: 558). The UNPCB is in charge of supporting the producers and providing technical advice to them and representing them in negotiations with the cotton companies and the state authorities.

In 2004, the creation of two fully private cotton companies, Société Cotonnière du Gourma (SOCOMA) and Faso Coton, was authorised. SOFITEX thus no longer holds the monopoly in the sector; however, the two private companies are much smaller and less important, as more than 80 % of production remains under the control of SOFITEX. The three cotton companies do not compete with each other; rather, the total cotton producing zone is divided between the three companies. SOFITEX controls the West, Faso Coton the Centre, and SOCOMA the East. Faso Coton is part of Industrial Promotion Services (IPS) (West Africa), a company that started with packaging in the 1960s and later expanded its activities to agri-business. SOCOMA is part of the GEOCOTON group that holds 75 % of SOCOMA's share. 13 % is held by the UNPCB and 12 % by private Burkinabé shareholders, according to the company.

The sector is organised according to a highly vertically-integrated *filière* model. The *filière* system was set up by CFDT in the 1950s and is typical for cotton production in former French colonies in West Africa. It is characterised by state-controlled monopolistic companies – in Burkina

Faso SOFITEX – that organise cotton production. SOFITEX is in charge of the proliferation and distribution of seeds, fertiliser and pesticides; it guarantees credits for agricultural inputs for producers; it provides agricultural extensions (i.e. providing education and consultancy service to facilitate the application of research and specialised knowledge to agricultural practices); and it organises the purchase, transport, ginning and sale of the grains and fibres. Today, the *filière* system functions in the same way in all zones, with the UNPCB representing the producer cooperatives and the respective cotton company being in charge of supplying seeds, fertiliser and pesticides on credit to the cooperatives, providing agriculture extensions, and taking care of the purchase, transport, ginning and sale of the cotton. The UNPCB facilitates the credit system by supporting the collection of credits and assuming liability cooperatively.

In 1999, the UNPCB became a shareholder of SOFITEX. The Burkinabé state held 35 % of the shares of SOFITEX; GEOCOTON, which replaced the former CFDT, 34 %; the UNPCB, 30 %; and private banks (BIB and BICIA-B), 1 %. So the state is the largest shareholder, yet international and private actors are highly influential. The purchase price is fixed before the season begins so that farmers have some planning security. This is a particularity of the West African *filière* system. In other cotton-producing states, the cotton sector is less controlled by the state but dominated by international companies. However, when it comes to pricing, the government and state-owned companies are significantly restricted by the international buyers of cotton, such as the Swiss Reinhart and the Dutch Louis Dreyfuss, both leading agro-industrial companies that are main buyers of Burkina cotton. As Staritz et al. (2018) have outlined, national institutions and policies have an impact on cotton pricing. Strong associations of peasant producers thereby play a central role. However, the scope of action of national politics is restricted by the power asymmetries along the global commodity chain (Staritz et al. 2018: 24). Thus, the Burkinabé state agencies and SOFITEX are able to ensure intra-seasonable price stabilisation through a price supplement fund and other mechanisms; yet they can barely influence the actual price, which is set up at the world market level.

Cultivation itself is carried out by smallholder peasants, mainly on a family/household basis. Farmers are organised in cooperatives, the groupe-

ments des producteurs du coton (GPCs). The cooperatives are in charge of administering credits to the cotton farmers. In order to have access to input supplies and to be able to sell the cotton, every farmer has to be a member of a cooperative. At the beginning of the season, the cotton companies sell inputs on credit (with interest) to the cooperatives, and after the harvest, they purchase the cotton at a fixed price. Though cotton cultivation does come with risks and challenges, farmers stick to it because it is their only chance to access agricultural assets (input supply, credit, technical support, access to the market). Many farmers state that they would actually prefer to cultivate maize or other cereals if they got credit to do so (Dowd-Uribe 2014a; FGDs with cotton farmers, Tuy province, 9 February 2019 and 25 September 2019). Cotton farmers can at least get some fertiliser for maize cultivation on credit from the cotton companies if they produce a certain amount of cotton. Yet many farmers, especially the poorer ones, are chronically indebted, as they hardly manage to pay back their debts because of poor yields due to climate conditions, pest infestation, lack in labour, and the need for money for other basic items (medical care, school fees).

Most cotton farmers in Burkina Faso own a couple of hectares of land. Those who are more well-off may own up to 50 hectares. A very small minority of wealthy producers own over 100, some even over 300 hectares. Labour in smallholder farming is mostly unpaid family labour, namely farmers' wives and youth (see Luna 2019). Whether peasants have unpaid family labour at their disposal is crucial regarding how profitable cotton cultivation is for them. Women are exploited threefold: They do unpaid labour in the fields, care work at the household, and in addition to that have to pursue other activities, such as petty trading or gardening to feed their children. In the cotton cooperatives, as a rule, only male farmers are members and thus have access to input factors on credit; women can become members of a cooperative only in exceptional cases, e.g. when the husband had passed away.

Producers who have some cash and who cultivate larger areas also hire labour on an informal and daily or weekly basis. Informal day-workers are hired, especially for the harvest. Most day labourers are relatively poor people, both men and women, who do not own any land. To load the cotton onto the trucks to transport it to the factories, farmers often hire young men from the villages, again informally, on a daily basis.

4. Labour, organising and collective action

Farmers and formal and informal workers along the chain of cotton production are organised in various ways, to represent themselves and claim their interests. However, the level of organisation varies substantially among the distinct groups of workers. In particular, informal and casual workers, and unpaid family labourers, are hardly represented in any formal organisation.

4.1 Cotton farmers

With respect to organising the cotton farmers, the UNPCB is the principal organisation that is supposed to, and claims to, represent them. However, the UNPCB is a typical corporatist institution created according to the logic of liberal corporate multi-stakeholder governance. It aims to rationalise production, though ultimately it functions more to tame and control farmers rather than to represent their interests and help them raise their claims. It was established in a top-down way by the state authorities, hand-in-hand with SOFITEX and an elite of relatively wealthy farmers, and thus advances their interests. Such an institution, created in the context of neoliberal policies and economic restructuring, fails to integrate the interests of the majority of smallholder cotton producers (Engels 2021). This became obvious in 2011, when a struggle for its leadership created a severe crisis for the UNPCB. Many farmers felt cheated by the UNPCB and considered its board a “machine” of SOFITEX (Napon 2011). The current president of the UNPCB, Bambou Bihoun, who was elected in 2017, is one of the wealthiest cotton farmers in the country (Dofini 2017), and seeks collaboration with the cotton companies and the government instead of confrontation and conflict.

As a consequence, smallholder producers begun to create concurrent organisations or align themselves with other organisations. In recent years, to raise their claims, farmers from various cooperatives in the SOFITEX zone have set up a network, the Collectif des Paysans, and have begun to organise within an existing nationwide youth association,¹ the Organisation Démocratique de la Jeunesse du Burkina Faso (Democratic Youth Organization of Burkina Faso, ODJ). In collective action, they frequently draw on non-institutionalised means in order to raise their claims. “We

have drafted an agenda of our claims”, as one smallholder explained (FDG with cotton farmers, Tuy province, 3 October 2019). “We present the agenda to the *union* [the UNPCB]. SOFITEX does not recognise the farmers but only the *union*. But at the *union*, our agenda goes straight to the wastepaper bin.” (ibid.)

4.2 In the cotton factories

SOFITEX has about 5,000 employees, of which only 1,500-1,700 have permanent contracts. 3,300-3,500 are working on temporary contracts of less than six months, though some work virtually the whole year round for the company, for example in the security service or as electricians. The main distinction among workers for the cotton companies is between permanent, seasonal and occasional contracts (*permanents*, *saisonniers*, and *occassionels*). Permanent workers have fixed contracts with access to social security and labour rights, according to the state law. Seasonal workers are recruited for the entire cotton season (up to four, in some years up to six months), usually every year again, and have social security, though with poorer conditions as compared to those holding permanent contracts. Occasional workers, in contrast, are recruited on demand and are not declared to the social security benefits office, meaning that they do not have access to social security. Some are paid on a weekly basis, others monthly, whereas the payment is basically the same and calculated per hour. The end of an occasional contract is usually announced one week in advance. Contract types and qualification are related; most of the white-collar employees and the management have permanent contracts, skilled labour is often on seasonal contracts, and ‘simple’, unskilled workers in the factories are mostly occasional. Distinctions exist among the 1,500 permanent employees at SOFITEX; namely between the management, low-ranking white-collars, and technicians.

The principle of permanent, seasonal and occasional work is the same at the three cotton companies, whereby Faso Coton has outsourced the occasional work to a sub-contracting firm.² At the factory of Faso Coton in Ouagadougou, in late 2020, around 150 workers had permanent contracts, and 250 were seasonal workers. Workers themselves estimated the number of occasional workers who work for the subcontracting firm at 140-150 (FDG, occasional workers, Ouagadougou, 07 March 2020); each year, 20-30 are deployed to Faso Coton (interview, trade union representative,

Ouagadougou, 10 December 2020). Occasional workers do most of the hard work, such as the loading and unloading of cotton bales that may weigh up to 180 or 200 kg, delivering seeds, fertiliser, pesticides etc. to the farmers, which also means carrying bags of 40 or 50 kg. Therefore, almost all occasional workers are relatively young men. The large share of casual work is a typical feature of agricultural production, due to seasonality, and all the more in highly transnationalised export-oriented agricultural sectors such as cotton and palm oil.

Permanent and seasonal workers are organised in labour unions. In the cotton companies, three labour unions represent the workers: the Confédération générale des travailleurs du Burkina (CGT-B), the Organisation Nationale des Syndicats Libres (ONSL), and the autonomous national labour union of textile workers (Syndicat national des travailleurs des fibres textiles, SYNAFITEX). The CGT-B is the biggest among the six labour union federations that exist in Burkina Faso. It is oriented towards a Marxist-Leninist ideology and understands itself as 'revolutionary', whereas the other federations are oriented towards more reformist and/or social democratic ideas. The ONSL and three other trade union federations are affiliated to the International Trade Union Council (ITUC). Besides, most trade unions have some sort of contact to trade unions in other countries, both in Western Africa and Europe (particularly in France).

At SOFITEX, 120 delegates represent the permanent and seasonal workers in the work council, of whom 73 are SYNAFITEX members, 46 come from the CGT-B, and one from the ONSL, resulting from the work council elections in early February 2019. At Faso Coton, in contrast, the CGT-B is now majoritarian in the work council. The SYNAFITEX is mostly considered a 'yellow' trade union (one that is close to, or influenced by, the employer).

Occasional workers, however, are not represented by the labour unions. The cotton companies recognise the work councils as representing the workers; however, at SOFITEX, occasional workers do not have the right to vote for the work council, and at Faso Coton occasional workers are not even employed by the cotton company itself. Though in principle occasional workers may strike, too, it is much riskier for them to do so, in view of their precarious status. However, wildcat strikes, sabotage and other forms of protest by occasional workers happen from time to time.

The CGT-B at Faso Coton focusses on improving the status and material conditions of the seasonal workers, for example with regard to the absorption of the cost for health care, housing, and transport. However, the CGT-B does not fight for the occasional workers. Union activists argue that if the union does not have a critical mass of members and supporters among the occasional workers, it cannot carry out any systematic action in favour of them (Interview with labour union representative, Ouagadougou, 3 March 2020 and 10 December 2020).

5. Establishing inter-class networks on the local and national scale or scale jumping? The 2018-2019 boycott campaign

The cotton farmers' discontent with the UNPCB and the SOFITEX was expressed in an extensive boycott campaign in the 2018-2019 season. In January 2018, smallholder producers organised in the ODJ held a press conference to complain about the poor quality of fertiliser delivered to them in the SOFITEX zone. Farmers who had received inferior quality fertiliser should be compensated, they claimed: "The cotton producing farmers must not be left alone to deal with the catastrophic consequence of the season. All actors of the *filière* have to bear the costs. Thus, simply cancel the total debts of the cotton season 2017-2018", a spokesperson of ODJ in Tuy province stated (Kinda 2018). On 30 April 2018, cotton farmers who were organised in the ODJ presented their claims to the regional state authority (the *Gouverneur*) of the Haut Bassins region. To reinforce their claims, the farmers launched a boycott of cotton cultivation (ODJ 2019). The initiative to boycott spread rapidly, particularly within the SOFITEX zone.

Boycott means that farmers decide not to cultivate cotton at all, or to significantly reduce the surface area and instead grow cereals (maize, millet, sorghum), beans or cash crops such as sesame, groundnuts and cashew. Consent for the boycott campaign varied among farmers, not only regionally – with some provinces showing a high, and others a low degree of boycott – but also within villages, GPCs and families. But regardless of whether they supported the boycott in principle, cotton producers widely agreed that fully abandoning cotton would be challenging, in view of the absence of cash-generating alternatives.

The boycott campaign resulted in a significant decrease in cotton production in the 2018-2019 season; while the Burkinabé cotton companies had set a target output of 800,000 tons, only 436,000 tons were produced, which meant a 29 % decrease as compared to the previous season. This led to Burkina Faso falling from being Africa's top cotton producing country to the fourth, after Benin, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire.³ Though weather conditions, the removal of genetically modified cotton, and the unstable security situation in Burkina Faso also negatively impacted cotton production, all actors involved consider the boycott to have been a major cause (Coulibaly 2019).

The principal claims that farmers raise in their protests include the increase of the purchase price to 500 CFA francs; lower prices for and quality control of agricultural inputs; change in the allocation mechanism for these inputs; and relief of farmers' debts for the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 seasons. Yet, the pricing of both cotton and inputs do not take place simply in the national arena, but in global production networks that are characterised by power asymmetries. Thus, if the purchase price paid to the smallholders was to be increased significantly, or the prices for agricultural inputs reduced, the government would probably have to subsidise it. Besides, key claims also concern the UNPCB: the dissolution of the national and departmental boards, an independent audit of all its offices, and examination of cases of possible malversation of UNPCB funds and the conviction of all persons in charge (Ouédraogo 2019).

Smallholder farmers – which means, usually, the male head of the peasant household – are rather well organised, in the cooperatives and thereby in the UNPCB (though many do not feel represented by it), and more recently, partly in the Collectif des Paysans and in the ODJ. In contrast, informal day-labourers and the many people who do unpaid family labour on the cotton fields, are not organised in the formal organisations, and their interests are quite weakly represented. Organisations such as the UNPCB assume that the (male) head of a household represents the interests of all household members. The ODJ addresses the fact that cotton cultivation is based on the exploitation of unpaid family labour, but this is rather a side than a core issue, and potential antagonisms within the household and the family are rarely made a subject of discussion, to my knowledge.

Related to the recent cotton boycott campaign, it became obvious that the workers in the factories and the smallholder farmers risk being played off against each other, to the advantage of the cotton companies, if they do not succeed in creating networks and strategic alliances. Representatives of the SOFITEX management and the ‘yellow’ labour union in the interviews frequently stated that both the company and the producers would have an interest in the fact that the amount of cotton produced is high, but that the claim for high purchase prices by the farmers would be unreasonable. They argue that the UNPCB represents the farmers – which, from the view of many of the smallholders, it does not – and that the UNPCB was a partner of the cotton companies and not in favour of the boycott. “We are worried about the calls for boycott”, a representative of a cotton company’s management outlined (Interview, 8 February 2019). “It has to be win-win: they win, we win, then life is pleasant.” (ibid.) So those farmers who call for boycott would actually torpedo the common interests of all engaged in the chain of cotton production. This argument is promoted by the management but reproduced by some workers, too: “If the farmers refuse to produce, this is a problem for those working in the factory.” (FDG with SOFITEX workers, Dédougou, 26 February 2019) This actually holds true, especially for the occasional workers, as they are the ones to be dismissed if the factory is underutilised, and for the seasonal workers, as the length of their contracts depend on the length of the cotton season, thus on the amount of the cotton production. So it is correct that, with the decrease of the amount of cotton produced, casual workers will find themselves without an income; yet, they are dismissed at the end of the season anyway. Thus, the issue is not the boycott by the farmers, but rather the precarious status of the majority of workers in the sector. And even though interests of the smallholders and workers are not the same, this does not mean that they are antagonistic. At least strategically, for both smallholders and workers it is wiser to ally with one another than with capital. ‘Win-win’ does not exist in capitalism; there are always winners and losers. And, as it is based on the exploitation of labour, life is unlikely to be pleasant for everybody. Most smallholder farmers exploit their own labour and others, of their family members and informal workers, often landless or poor peasants. Some of the poor peasants can be subsumed under the “classes of labour”, as Bernstein defines them, but many smallholder cotton

farmers cannot. However, they are all opposed to the cotton companies, as are the workers. In this view, inter-class alliances and solidarity between the various “classes of labour” in cotton production, and the smallholder farmers, make sense. According to a leading activist of the boycott, “If we do not produce that concerns the company and its cadres. To the seasonal and occasional workers, it is all the same; they have nothing to lose anyhow. Moreover, many of them are themselves peasants: They are on the field during the rainy season and work for SOFITEX during the cotton season.” (Interview, Houndé, 14 February 2019) As distinct from this, the idea of smallholders and workers being opposed to one another is put forward by the cotton company. As the boycott campaign activist put it: “When the workers protest, they lower the purchase price for cotton to meet their claims. If we get something, they dismiss some workers and others have to work double. That’s how it works.” (ibid.)

From this perspective, what is needed are networks and organisations to establish alliances and create solidarity between the various classes of labour and the smallholders. Obviously, the UNPCB is not the organisation to do so, as it represents the interests of the more well-off farmers, and allies with capital. The same applies to the ‘yellow’ labour unions that represent the interests of the more well-off among the cotton companies’ employees (the management and white-collars with permanent contracts). The CGT-B principally has the potential to do so, in view of the fact that it has a long tradition of broad alliances, namely between public sector servants, workers, high school and university students, and the unemployed urban youth (Engels 2019).

Cotton production in Burkina Faso is comprehensively based on informal, casual, and partly unpaid work, both in smallholder farming and in the factories. These classes of labour are barely organised in, and represented by, the trade unions, but rather by a range of other, often less institutionalised organisations, such as peasants’ groups, cooperatives, women’s organisations, youth associations, and others. Such organisations and trade unions are potential allies. This corresponds to the idea of social movement unionism (Waterman 1993); namely, labour unions that engage in broad social mobilisation beyond their core membership, their interests and claims, and thereby link labour struggles to wider aims such as democratisation, regime change, or environmental justice. For the Burkinabé

trade unions in the cotton sector, both in view of their social legitimacy, and strategically to confront the cotton companies, it seems more reasonable to strive for alliances on the local and national scale than for scale jumping and transnational networks. Moreover, as SOFITEX is a state-owned company, and the cotton sector is highly institutionalised by the state, both trade unions and cotton farmers tend to address their claims to the national rather than to the international level.

For the cotton producers, or more precisely, for their organisations, opportunities for transnational collaboration with international NGOs exist; but it seems that the issues on the agendas of international NGOs on the one side, and of most smallholder cotton farmers in Burkina Faso on the other, are rather distinct. Whereas the claims of the farmers concern the price and the quality of the fertilisers, pesticides and seeds, and the purchase price, international NGOs, when it comes to cotton production in general and in Africa in particular, are particularly interested in ecological issues, namely the fight against Monsanto's experiments with genetically modified cotton (Dowd-Uribe 2014a; Luna/Dowd-Uribe 2020) and the promotion of organic cotton (Dowd 2008). However, many smallholder producers are sceptical regarding organic cotton, and not all are opposed to the genetically modified seeds. This shows that these NGOs on the one side, and organisations of Burkinabé cotton farmers on the other, have different topics on their respective agendas.

Obstacles that furthermore possibly hinder organisations of smallholder cotton farmers as well as casual workers, are lack of time and communication barriers (many people prefer to communicate orally instead of in writing, and in African languages instead of French), and tend to use their phones rather than the internet. It is not by chance that African organisations in general, and from countries previously colonised by France and Portugal in particular, are often underrepresented in transnational agrarian movements. There are certain privileged actors that are able to play on the international stage – a case in point in the Burkinabé cotton sector is François Traoré, the first President of the UNPCB after its establishment in 1998 until 2010, and still one of the wealthiest cotton farmers in the country.⁴ As important as the efforts of such actors are, it is doubtful that they represent the majority of the poor farmers and marginalised groups, such as landless day labourers, unemployed youth,

and women. These are the groups whose interests are least of all formally organised and represented in the cotton sector.

In light of this, the need to organise marginalised and so far under-represented interests and to make the other actor aware, and to prompt them to take these interests seriously, seems more urgent than upscaling towards the international scale. The same applies to the sphere of the workers of the cotton companies; to increase their social legitimacy and their structural and organisational resources, it is more crucial for trade unions in the cotton companies to endeavour to organise informal and precarious workers than to upscale their activities and get engaged with international organisations and transnational networks. It can be argued, of course, that local and national collaboration does not rule out transnational networking; however, both peasant organisations and trade unions have limited resources available, and their principal task still is to negotiate collective interests within the respective social groups and actors, and then claim these interests from the cotton companies and the state authorities. So, eventually they have to set priorities and to gauge the advantages and drawbacks of getting engaged with the one or other scale.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that, for the collective actors that organise the various classes of labour in the Burkinabé cotton sector, it is more reasonable to engage in inter-class networking on the local and national scale rather than in transnational networking. This is however not yet an overall conclusion: the advantages and drawbacks of various forms of networking and campaigning depend on the specific conditions of economic sectors and national states. Notably, when companies threaten to outsource labour to other countries and parts of the world, transnational networking becomes a requirement for labour.

One condition is how the respective sector is structured, including whether companies are state-owned or multinational. A core feature of the Burkinabé cotton sector is the *filière* model, with the state as a central actor and SOFITEX as the main company, which is state-owned, and the UNPCB as an important organisation that farmers have to deal with.

All of these are actors and institutions at the national scale, whereas there is no strong institution at the international scale to which smallholder farmers or workers could address their claims. Thus, they are required to address the national and the company scale, whereas the latter in the Burkina Faso case is national, too. In contrast, in cases where companies are multinational, transnational campaigning is more promising, in order to put pressure on the companies by civil society organisations in their countries of origin and from the consumer side. The *filière* is indeed a relatively closed national system, as compared to cotton production in other countries and to other sectors; nevertheless, it is embedded in global production networks. Thus, the state authorities and SOFITEX have less room for manoeuvre than the peasants may assume or wish. However, transnational networking and campaigning would require inter-class solidarity at the local and national scale first.

- 1 'Youth' in terms of a social category, not necessarily age.
- 2 I do not have any information on SOCOMA, the smallest of the three cotton companies that operate in the East of the country.
- 3 In the 2020-2021 season, 492,613 tons were produced, and Burkina Faso ranked 3rd among Africa's cotton producing countries, after Benin and Côte d'Ivoire.
- 4 See Traoré's blog at <http://francoistraore.blogspot.com/> (last accessed 3.3.2022)

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*ABSTRACT Der Beitrag fragt danach, unter welchen Bedingungen welche räumlichen Ebenen (scales) strategisch sinnvoll sind, um die Anliegen und Interessen von Arbeiter*innen zu stärken. Es wird argumentiert, dass neben transnationalen Netzwerken und Kampagnen auch die klasseninterne und klassenübergreifende Solidarität sowie die Zusammenarbeit auf lokaler und nationaler Ebene von zentraler Bedeutung sind. Beides spielt auch in stark transnationalisierten Sektoren eine wichtige Rolle bei der Durchsetzung der Rechte und Bedürfnisse von Arbeiter*innen. Die Fallstudie zum Baumwollsektor in Burkina Faso zeigt, wie sich unterschiedliche Gruppen von Arbeiter*innen entlang der Produktionskette organisieren, um ihre Ansprüche geltend zu machen. Für diesen Fall zeigt sich, dass die Zusammenarbeit zwischen den verschiedenen Gruppen auf lokaler und nationaler Ebene eine größere Rolle spielt als transnationale Kampagnenarbeit. Angesichts der Einbettung des Sektors in globale Produktionsnetzwerke kann die transnationale Vernetzung aber dennoch eine vielversprechende Strategie sein, die jedoch mit erheblichen Herausforderungen für die verschiedenen Akteure verbunden ist. Der Beitrag diskutiert mögliche Hindernisse für die transnationale Vernetzung von Kleinbäuer*innen, informellen Arbeiter*innen und Gelegenheitsarbeiter*innen und argumentiert, dass lokale und nationale Vernetzung eine Voraussetzung für eine transnationale Organisation ist.*

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