Although they have varying opinions on what the role of the state should be in a globalized world, the main trade union organizations in the Americas never considered FTAs as a good instrument to implement the trade policies they wanted. They promote — with different accents and voices - the need to reshape the rules on trade in a completely different way. The trade unions tend to consider FTAs and the multilateral negotiations on trade in the WTO, as tools designed to serve the interests of the corporations, aiming to obtain free access to new markets, to reduce the costs of their production through the re-localization of productions, to freely move their capital in search of higher profits. This approach, most of them argue, has produced a dramatic race to the bottom that damages workers and the environment, and weakens and destabilizes economies by promoting export-oriented development and big trade imbalances that only benefit big corporations and investors.

1.2 Trade Unions asymmetries
As is natural in each country labor movements have different traditions, attitudes, histories and strategies. Interesting elements emerged in our research analyzing how Trade Unions (TUs) managed the different labor movements’ attitudes in each country about trade policies. One of the main challenges for the labor movement facing FTAs was trying to speak with one voice to prevent a race to the bottom between workers of different countries. This implied a new approach for most of the TUs, which are traditionally more used to operating within a national perspective.

The problems connected with handling these asymmetries and the new dimension of the challenges, can be best illustrated by the case of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which became effective in January 1994 between Canada, USA and Mexico. While today – after 15 years of NAFTA experience - almost every TU in the three countries agrees on the dramatically negative impact of that agreement for the workers and the economy of all of the three countries, it is useful to remember that opposing NAFTA during its negotiation was not the common position of the labor movements. In Canada, USA and Mexico, the TUs positions ranged from (i) open opposition to the NAFTA by the Canadian Labor Congress, representing a large majority of the Canadian workers; to (ii) a more diversified picture within the USA labor movement, where the AFL-CIO at the beginning did not take a formal position, but with some important TUs openly against the NAFTA; and (iii) finally to the opposite in Mexico, where the main TU confederations, formally representing
the majority of the workers, stood in favor of the NAFTA. The asymmetry was also related to different motives behind the positioning, even when the opposition to the Agreement was common: the motives behind the opposition to NAFTA definitely included protectionist positions by some of the northern TUs involved in the mobilizations against the agreement. While it would be stretching things to say that NAFTA could have been rejected if the TUs were able to speak with one voice, there is no doubt that this experience offered important lessons to all actors for the future.

2. Positioning on FTAs: some cases

2.1 The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC)

The CLC was one of the first labor organizations in the Americas to openly oppose FTAs. From the initial negotiations between the USA and Canada that led to the first FTA between the two countries in 1988, the CLC stood in opposition. One of the key reasons for this opposition was the CLC’s positive evaluation of the industrial policies which started in the post-war period in many western countries. As in many countries, the industrial policies in Canada aimed at building and developing a large manufacturing sector. These policies mixed measures to design forms of economic integration, that included trade agreements, with forms of protection for the national economy. One of the most important agreements of that period was the Auto Pact with the USA, signed in 1965. It allowed the three big US auto makers—Chrysler, Ford and General Motors—to obtain trade benefits in the Canadian market, including the elimination of tariffs on cars, trucks, buses, tires and automotive parts. In exchange the Auto Pact contained safeguards for Canada to ensure that major North American car manufacturers continued their investment and production in this country. The agreement stated that for every car sold in Canada, one had to be built in Canada. Each vehicle built in Canada also had to have at least 60 percent Canadian content in both parts and labor. Tariffs were applied if these conditions were not met.

3. http://canadianlabour.ca/en/about_us: “The Canadian Labour Congress is the largest democratic and popular organization in Canada with over three million members. The Canadian Labour Congress brings together Canada’s national and international unions, the provincial and territorial federations of labour and 136 district labour councils”

4. http://canadianeconomy.gc.ca/english/economy/1965canada_us_auto_pact.html: The Auto Pact eliminated trade tariffs between the two countries and created a single North American manufacturing market. Tariffs between the two countries were eliminated on cars, trucks, buses, tires and automotive parts. The single market allowed Chrysler, Ford and General Motors to rationalize production in Canada and