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Steelworkers Merge With British Union

By [STEVEN GREENHOUSE](#)

The United Steelworkers signed a merger agreement on Wednesday with the largest labor organization in [Britain](#) and [Ireland](#) to create what union leaders said would be the world's first global union.

The new union, to be called Workers Uniting, will represent more than 2.8 million workers in the steel, paper, oil, health care and transportation industries. Officials said the union plans to hold trans-Atlantic negotiations with companies including the oil conglomerate [BP](#), and ArcelorMittal, the giant steel maker.

"This union is crucial for challenging the growing power of global capital," said Leo W. Gerard, president of the United Steelworkers, which represents 850,000 workers in the United States and Canada.

Under the merger agreement, the steelworkers and its trans-Atlantic partner, Unite the Union, will maintain their individual identities but will work to meld their activities and organizations. The new union will have a joint steering committee and an executive director to coordinate trans-Atlantic activities, although each union will continue to have its own president at least for a few years.

Unite the Union was formed last year when two of Britain's largest unions, Amicus and the Transport and General Workers Union, merged, creating an organization with two million members and workers in more than a dozen industries.

Leaders of Unite the Union and the United Steelworkers, who signed the merger agreement at the steelworkers' convention in Las Vegas on Wednesday, made it clear they hoped that other unions would merge with them to form a larger, more powerful organization.

"Our mission is to advance the interests of millions of workers throughout the world who are being shamefully exploited," said Derek Simpson, general secretary of Unite's Amicus division.

In the past year, the two unions have discussed strategies for saving manufacturing jobs in the United States, Canada, Britain and Ireland, and joint collective bargaining with employers in the paper, chemical and titanium industries. The new union plans to set up operations in Colombia to help protect union members there from violence, in Liberia to aid rubber workers, and in India to help impoverished shipbuilding workers, officials said.

The union's founding constitution calls on its members to "build global union activism, recognizing that uniting as workers across international boundaries is the only way to challenge the injustices of globalization."

In a telephone interview, Mr. Gerard said the merger would be more than an alliance. "This is going to

create a grand new union,” he said. “We’ll have cooperation in similar industries and companies. We share a lot of membership in paper, aluminum, oil and refining.”

A labor relations expert at [Ohio State University](#)’s law school, James J. Brudney, called the merger “an overdue and important step considering the global nature of manufacturing.”

While it “is a first step toward developing a more comprehensive strategy toward globalization,” Mr. Brudney said, “the challenges remain daunting.”

The biggest challenge faced by manufacturing unions in industrial countries has been the exodus of operations and jobs to lower-wage developing countries and the downward pressures on wages from foreign competitors.

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