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Beverly Silver
Is Another Labor Movement Possible?

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**TAKE NOTE**

**PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED**
After observing 40 years of labor union decline uninterrupted by a major union response, developments in the last decade have given scholars reason to reconsider the prospects of the U.S. labor movement. Major changes in production processes and in the locations in which goods are produced have historically altered the playing field upon which unions operate, but the pace at which they have changed has recently increased. These changes have finally prompted transformations in the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). The turnover in top AFL-CIO leadership, the initiation of new and innovative union organizing drives, and the 2005 split of the Change to Win Alliance from the AFL-CIO have all drawn public and academic attention to the plight of labor and the changing contours of the politics of labor.

While sociologists were keenly interested in labor unions during their heyday in the 1950s, they turned their attention elsewhere as labor’s numbers and power declined. In response to these recent developments, however, sociological interest in labor movements has experienced resurgence. In recognition of this rebirth, we asked three long-standing specialists in the field—Edna Bonacich, Beverly Silver, and Arthur Shostak—to comment on what has changed and how those changes have impacted the labor movement by reviewing three recent books on the topic: Ruth Milkman’s *L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement*, Robert J. Ross’s *Slaves to Fashion: Poverty and Abuse in the New Sweatshops*, and Manning Marable, Immanuel Ness and Joseph Wilson’s *Race and Labor Matters in the New U.S. Economy*. To this list, Professor Shostak added Andy Stern’s *A Country that Works: Getting America Back on Track*.

While each of these books in some way addresses the question “whither labor,” each focuses on a different aspect of the issues faced by the labor movement and their solutions. Milkman uses the case of recent developments in the Los Angeles labor movement to argue for labor’s possible resurgence. She demonstrates how, contrary to expectations, AFL dominance in L.A., the growth of sweatshops, and the utilization of immigrant labor all ironically contributed to this resurgence. Ross focuses on why sweatshop production has reemerged in the U.S. since the 1970s. He argues that import competition (the race to the bottom) is the major culprit, and concludes that unionization alone cannot protect workers; they need the help of government reforms and anti-sweatshop NGOs. The essays included in the Marable, Ness and Wilson edited volume address how the intersection of race and class is critical to the future of the labor movement. The Stern book offers several important insights from the leader of Change to Win. He outlines how the celebrated and “revitalized” Service Employees International Union (SEIU), under Stern’s leadership, opts for cooperation with employers rather than conflict, a return to the AFL’s old policy of “rewarding your friends and punishing your enemies” in the political arena, and a futuristic orientation in its adaptation to the new economic realities.

Our reviewers and the authors of the included volumes range from the very optimistic to the reluctantly more pessimistic when it comes to predicting labor’s future prospects. Edna Bonacich emphasizes that the internal composition of the U.S. labor movement has changed as a result of the recent neoliberal transformations. She points out that a drastic decline in private-sector employment in the core industries foreshadowed a decline in private-sector unions. Consequently, whereas in the past, private-sector unions constituted the lion’s share of union membership, now the public sector unions constitute almost half of all U.S. union members. In her view, neoliberalism is a new form of class struggle waged on behalf of the producing class to enhance their class power. A main consequence of neoliberalism’s success is manifested in the growing inequality between the working and capitalist classes.

Beverly Silver focuses more of her attention on the debate about competition between countries of the global South, and emphasizes the extent to which it is embedded
in North/South income inequalities. From this perspective, “the foundations for North-South labor internationalism are problematic.” She reminds us that we should focus our attention on understanding how processes at multiple interrelated levels (local, national, and global) impact labor movement outcomes.

Arthur Shostak emphasizes the importance of the Stern book, and recommends it as essential reading for all interested in the labor movement. He argues for the possible role of computer power (he calls for unions to achieve what he labels “CyberUnion” status) and applied sociology in labor’s resurgence. Sociologists, for example, might help with research on the power structure of targeted industries and connecting pro-union rank-and-file with grass-roots leaders.

We round out this symposium by including three additional paired essays on parallel topics: neoliberalism, cross-national studies of production and protest, and immigration and labor. The first essay by Alexander Hicks reviews Aihwa Ong’s Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty and Monica Prasad’s The Politics of Free Markets: The Rise of Neoliberal Economic Policies in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States. Hicks focuses on how each of the books informs us on how neoliberalism as an ideological discourse is undergoing both devolutionary and evolutionary change.

The second essay by Rhacel Parreñas reviews Unraveling the Garment Industry: Transnational Organizing and Women’s Work by Ethel Brooks and Assembling Women: The Feminization of Global Manufacturing by Teri Caraway. She points out that these two books are unique and valuable because they offer cross-national comparative studies of production in women’s manufacturing in one case and protest against its harsh conditions in the other. Our third essay by Josiah Heyman reviews Impacts of Border Enforcement on Mexican Migration: The View from Sending Communities, edited by Wayne Cornelius and Jessa Lewis and On The Edge of the Law: Culture, Labor, and Deviance on the South Texas Border by Chad Richardson and Rosalva Resendiz. Heyman notes that although each of these two books is about U.S.-Mexico border issues, they represent two very different framings of “the border.” While the former addresses long-distance migration through the border, the latter focuses on the people who dwell near the border.

We hope these reviews stimulate the readers’ interest in these important and timely issues.

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Neoliberal globalization is transforming the world. This project, which began in the 1970s, aims at weakening government control over the economy, and allowing the “free market” to operate unimpeded. Among its principal elements have been deregulation (the elimination or weakening of government controls over company practices) and privatization (turning government functions over to the private sector).

Accompanying these shifts has been a rise in what is sometimes favorably termed flexible production, and more critically called precarization, especially in Europe. Firms have been contracting out more of their functions, and employing contractors and workers on an as-needed basis. The result has been a decline of large, centralized factories with stable, secure, fairly well-paid, union jobs with decent benefits, and an increase in various forms of non-standard work. For many people employed in contracting shops or as independent contractors, work, health care, and retirement have indeed become more precarious.

Meanwhile, more companies are moving production (and even services) offshore, in a search for ever cheaper labor. In the United States, this has led to deindustrialization, and a collapse of some of the major manufacturing industries that were the core of the economy, such as steel and automobile production. Even relatively low-wage industries, like textile and apparel production, have witnessed major shifts abroad. At the same time, the service sector has grown in importance, with lower wages and less stable employment for many workers.

Globalization has also led to demographic changes. As global capital has penetrated poorer countries, it has disrupted their economies (and sometimes their political systems), throwing millions of people off the land and out of work, and creating new streams of immigrants and refugees. In the U.S., this has included a rise in immigrants from Mexico and Central America, large numbers of whom arrive without legal documents.

How have these changes affected unions in this country? The picture is not a pretty one. Unions in the United States are suffering a continuous decline, losing membership, and encompassing an even smaller proportion of the labor force every year. The latest statistics are bleak indeed. In 2006, union membership fell by 326,000 to 15.4 million, or 12 percent of all wage and salary workers. Especially hard-hit has been the private sector, where unions now represent only 7.4 percent of workers, whereas 36.2 percent of public sector workers are union members. By now, the public sector accounts for almost

1 Thanks to Bill Fletcher and Jeff Hermanson for their feedback on an earlier draft.
2 Symposium

half of all union members in the United States. Manufacturing unions, the old core strength of the labor movement, have suffered the sharpest decline.

The decline in worker organizations and empowerment appears to be one of the goals of the neoliberal program. Certainly government support for union rights has declined. Put another way, neoliberalism can be seen as a form of “class struggle” waged by the capitalist class to weaken the working class. Pushing for free markets translates into the elimination of worker organizations that fight for the setting of standards and limits on competition. Neoliberals see unions as obstacles to free, flexible markets; their absence also increases the exploitability of workers, which is part of the capitalist plan. Consequently, the discrepancy in wealth between business owners/managers and members of the working class (including workers and the unemployed) has grown over the past 30 years. Each of these books addresses the changes that have been brought about by neoliberal globalization, and its impact on workers and their ability to organize and defend themselves.

Robert Ross's book, *Slaves to Fashion*, is a strong overview of garment sweatshops, their history, temporary decline, and re-emergence under neoliberal globalization. One of Ross's main concerns is to explain the re-emergence of garment sweatshops in the U.S. since the 1970s. He develops a forceful argument for the role of neoliberalism and globalization, including deregulation, the privatization of labor standards enforcement, and the weakening of the once-powerful apparel industry unions. Freer markets have resulted in more intense labor standards violations. Without strong government oversight, illegal sweatshops have flourished.

Ross's strength is that he uses data to "prove" points that most advocates claim to be true based on anecdotal evidence. For example, he does not simply accept the often utilized "race to the bottom" theory. Instead, he shows, using trade and wage data, that garment production is shifting to low-wage countries, displacing workers and unions in higher wage countries; or he counters the argument that immigrants are to blame for the rise of sweatshops by showing that earlier Puerto Rican immigration did not have this effect.

The book ends with a section on anti-sweatshop social movements and policies. There are three pillars of decency for working class conditions, according to Ross: workers’ self-defense (primarily unions), public and government policies that support basic labor standards, and the right to unionize, and anti-sweatshop NGOs. These three are intertwined. Under the “race to the bottom” thesis, unions are especially difficult to maintain, meaning that progressive change depends more on the second and third pillars. Under neoliberal globalization, worker self-organization is not sufficient to counter the class war against working people. Movements and government reforms need to join and support strong unions, and vice versa.

In her book, *L.A. Story*, Ruth Milkman focuses on Los Angeles as a beacon of hope for the resurgence of the labor movement. The inspiring Justice for Janitors strike in 1990 was followed by a decade of successful organizing. Milkman’s goal is to explain why this happened, and to learn from an analysis of the factors leading to success or failure. She explains LA’s rise as an organizing center by three factors: its history as a center of AFL (American Federation of Labor) as opposed to CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) strength, the emergence of the city as a center for “low road” (sweatshop) economic growth, and the heavy employment of immigrant workers. These are counter-intuitive explanations of success that she charmingly unpacks.

Most intriguing of these is the role of old AFL unions, which happen to make up the core of the new Change to Win (CTW) federation that broke away from the AFL-CIO in 2005. The AFL is often viewed as having been narrow and racially exclusive, while the CIO is touted as having been more progressive and inclusive, organizing masses of workers regardless of skill. But, as Milkman points out, the CIO unions were tied to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). With industrial restructuring, deregulation, casualization of employment, and the re-emergence of sweatshops in multiple industries, the pre-NLRB conditions faced by the AFL unions have reappeared, making their strategies once again relevant. These strategies include a focus on occupational organizing, taking wages out of competition, and putting direct

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pressure on employers rather than relying on NLRB elections. Los Angeles, which was not a strong CIO center, has benefited from its AFL legacy, according to Milkman.

The combination of large numbers of new immigrants, many of whom are undocumented, with the re-emergence of low-wage, sweatshop conditions in many LA places of employment would seem to portend a wipe-out for organized labor; but on the contrary, these two factors have combined to become sources of unexpected strength. Mexican and Central American immigrants brought experiences of militant activism from their homelands, and were prepared to fight for their rights through unions. Milkman describes a sequence of recent developments: Deunionization, the casualization of labor (subcontracting), and the deterioration of labor standards (sweatshop production), leading to an exodus of native-born workers from an industry. Immigrants move into the gap, and renewed labor organizing emerges under the innovative leadership of unions like the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

There is much to applaud in this book. It pulls many trends together into a coherent analysis of forces. A question remains for me, however: How much successful organizing has actually gone on in LA? Yes, there have been a few high-profile campaigns that have deservedly received a lot of press. But there remain millions of workers in the city who are untouched by unionism. The public sector seems like the one arena where a firm foothold still remains. We might describe the successes as islands of hope in a vast sea.

Manning Marable, Immanuel Ness and Joseph Wilson’s edited volume, Race and Labor Matters in the New U.S. Economy, addresses the critical question of the intersection of race and class. The book is the product of a conference held in New York in 2003 that brought together labor leaders and scholars to consider issues of race and the labor movement. As is widely known, the labor movement has a miserable history of discriminating against blacks (as well as other groups of color and women). Yet black workers are more affiliated with the labor movement than any other group. The 2006 statistics on union membership show that black workers are more likely to be union members (14.5 percent) than whites (11.7 percent), Asians (10.4 percent) and Latinos (9.8 percent).

Despite their “over-representation,” blacks are conspicuously absent from positions of leadership and power in the labor movement, which are still dominated by white men. A “color-blind,” defensive position towards issues of race pervades the movement. Meanwhile, workers of color will soon become the majority of the U.S. workforce. And they are bearing the brunt of the bad consequences of neoliberal globalization, including privatization, deindustrialization, and loss of job security.

Authors of this volume, which includes some excellent individual essays, all recognize that the intersection of class and race is critical in the fight against capitalist power and exploitation. Some people believe that each of these dimensions alone is the “primary” problem. Nationalist movements often ignore class, while the labor movement tends to ignore race. But both race and class, including their dynamic intersection, are absolutely critical to the way the system works. I agree that the labor movement is weak on race, but I also think it is weak on class—often lacking a critical class analysis and cooperating too thoroughly with the capitalist (and imperialist/militaristic) order.

This book points out that there is much to be learned by the labor movement from race-based movements (like the civil rights movement), and that bringing labor and community struggles together in genuine partnership is crucial to a successful movement. Amen!

As labor standards decline, both here and abroad, hope keeps rising that workers will be able to unite once again, in a meaningful movement for progressive social change. Ideally they would push for an egalitarian society that eliminates, or at least vastly modifies, capitalism (which ultimately depends on the exploitation of labor for its profits). Hoping to pull the labor movement out of its bureaucratic hardening of the arteries, many labor scholars call for “social movement unionism.”

Some believe that the creation of the Change to Win federation, with SEIU in the lead, will bring “movement” back to the labor movement, and pressure the AFL-CIO to do the same. I am doubtful. In my opinion, unless the labor movement raises an alternative vision of society, the logic of capitalism will
The books reviewed for this essay are part of a broad resurgence in the sociological study of labor movements that has been taking place in the United States since the mid-1990s. In the 1980s, with the U.S. labor movement in deep crisis, the field itself entered a period of decline. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, it was common for sociologists to argue that class-based movements had become irrelevant as agents of social transformation and as objects of study. However, a series of “unexpected” events on the ground in the 1990s challenged the irrelevance thesis and sparked renewed sociological interest in labor movements. Emblematic of this renewal was the founding in 2000 of a new and lively section of the American Sociological Association on “Labor and Labor Movements.”

Among the first and most important of these “unexpected” events was the victorious 1990 strike by janitors (mostly Latino immigrants, many undocumented) who cleaned office buildings in downtown Los Angeles. This strike was a major turning point in the now famous Justice for Janitors campaign led by the Service Employees International Union. The victory sparked a wave of union organizing among immigrant workers nationwide with a clear epicenter in the Los Angeles area.

The significance of this wave of labor militancy is not to be found in its impact on the nationwide trend in unionization rates, which inevitably drive it down. No one can be inspired by a slogan like: “We need to increase union density.” Vague words such as “fairness for working families” reveal how much the movement has lost its way. It was only when Socialists and Communists, who held a vision of a real alternative, were in charge that the movement truly moved.

Authors who support the labor movement are faced with a dilemma. Recognizing that unions are in trouble, they don’t want to foster despair. They want to hold out the hope that change is possible, and to encourage workers to take up the struggle for social justice. It is tough to balance a dry-eyed look at the realities while maintaining the optimism necessary for social action. All three of these books present excellent, class-and-race sensitive analyses of the changing political economy of neoliberal globalization—analyses that are essential to the development of an effective counter-movement. All three also try to find hope in promising examples of efforts to develop such a movement. But in the end, I am left with the feeling that something much bigger needs to be done, or the attenuation of the U.S. labor movement will continue.

Is Another Labor Movement Possible?

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The books reviewed for this essay are part of a broad resurgence in the sociological study of labor movements that has been taking place in the United States since the mid-1990s. In the 1980s, with the U.S. labor movement in deep crisis, the field itself entered a period of decline. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, it was common for sociologists to argue that class-based movements had become irrelevant as agents of social transformation and as objects of study. However, a series of “unexpected” events on the ground in the 1990s challenged the irrelevance thesis and sparked renewed sociological interest in labor movements. Emblematic of this renewal was the founding in 2000 of a new and lively section of the American Sociological Association on “Labor and Labor Movements.”

Among the first and most important of these “unexpected” events was the victorious 1990 strike by janitors (mostly Latino immigrants, many undocumented) who cleaned office buildings in downtown Los Angeles. This strike was a major turning point in the now famous Justice for Janitors campaign led by the Service Employees International Union. The victory sparked a wave of union organizing among immigrant workers nationwide with a clear epicenter in the Los Angeles area.

The significance of this wave of labor militancy is not to be found in its impact on the nationwide trend in unionization rates, which continued their seemingly inexorable downward movement throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s. Rather, the significance of the upsurge lay in the fact that it shattered many of the assumptions upon which the irrelevance thesis had been based—e.g., that immigrants were unorganizable, uninterested in or afraid of unions; that labor had been fragmented and fatally weakened by the structural transformations associated with “post-Fordism,” making class-based mobilizations a thing of the past.

The strike wave also raised important questions, which have been taken up by


scholars in the field. What was the basis of the upsurge in militancy, and especially of the victories won by workers? Might the Los Angeles-centered mobilization of the 1990s be a harbinger of a nationwide labor movement renewal analogous to the transformative wave of labor unrest that spread across the U.S. in the 1930s and 1940s?

These are among the central questions taken up by Ruth Milkman in *LA Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement*. Milkman tells the story of the rise, decline, and resurgence of the Los Angeles labor movement over the course of the twentieth century—a story in which the city moves from being a movement “backwater” at the time of labor’s big advance in the 1930s and 1940s to being on its “cutting edge” in the 1990s. Through a series of analytical comparisons (between time periods and among industries), Milkman develops an explanation for the strength and militancy of L.A.’s heavily immigrant workforce at the end of the century.

To be sure, a burst of immigrant organizing should not have been surprising. After all, first- and second-generation immigrants were the backbone of the labor unrest wave of the 1930s and 1940s. In both the 1930s and the 1990s, immigrant social networks and cultural backgrounds were positive factors in the cohesion and commitment of strikers (pp. 118–23). But, in one of those ironic twists for those of us brought up on heroic tales of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)-led sit-down strikes and factory occupations of the 1930s (and corresponding tales about the backwardness and racism of the American Federation of Labor [AFL] unions), it turned out that the union organizations that were to take the lead in organizing immigrants in the 1990s had their historical roots in the AFL.

Milkman argues that the traditional organizational strategies of AFL unions were more effective than those of the CIO in the new post-Fordist environment. The AFL’s strategy of putting direct pressure on employers and bypassing National Labor Relations Board sponsored elections—developed in the pre-New Deal regulatory environment—would prove better suited to the more hostile contemporary political environment. Moreover, as subcontracting to a myriad of smaller (frequently short-lived) firms proliferated in both manufacturing and services, the AFL strategy of organizing all workers in a particular occupation—in contrast to the CIO strategy of organizing all workers in a single workplace—would prove more effective. Likewise, the AFL tradition of establishing portable benefits—in contrast to the CIO tradition of job rights tied to specific worksites—would make more sense in an economy increasingly characterized by contingent employment practices (pp. 74–76, 189–90).

In the L.A. laboratory of the 1990s, an effective recipe for a comprehensive campaign combining “bottom-up” grassroots mobilization and “top-down” resource mobilization was developed (see chapter 4, coauthored with Kent Wong). The (mostly former AFL affiliated) unions that broke away from the AFL-CIO in 2005 to form the Change to Win Federation are betting that this is also the recipe for a nationwide labor movement renewal. Time will tell.

Just as the janitors’ strike fostered renewed sociological interest in labor movements, two other events in the 1990s—the discovery of slave labor at an apparel factory in El Monte, California and child labor at factories making Kathie Lee Gifford’s designer clothing—would contribute to widespread interest (and organizing) around the question of sweatshops in the apparel industry. In *Slaves to Fashion*, Robert Ross’s central questions are why sweatshops—which had become a thing of the past in the U.S. apparel industry in the 1950s and 1960s (largely as a result of struggles by the labor movement and allies)—reemerged during the last decades of the twentieth century; and what can be done to bring about the end of sweatshop conditions worldwide today. (Ross defines a sweatshop in the U.S. as “a business that regularly violates . . . wage or child labor and safety or health laws” [p. 26].)

Ross argues that the movement of documented immigrants from low-wage countries into the U.S. labor force does not explain sweatshops—e.g., sweatshops did not reemerge when Puerto Rican women immigrants took up jobs in large numbers in the New York garment industry in the 1940s-1960s (pp. 183–86). Milkman makes a related argument by documenting how the decline of unions temporarily preceded significant growth in immigrant employment in the in-
Ross emphasizes several other causes. He gives a compelling account of the impact that the gutting of U.S. labor law enforcement capacity (“firing guard dogs and hiring foxes”) has had on wages and working conditions. The related failure to enforce the country’s industrial labor relations laws has deprived workers in the U.S. of the effective right to organize unions to protect themselves from abusive employers. (Indeed, a key difference between the environment in which immigrant workers entered the garment industry in the 1940s-1960s and today is that labor law enforcement and unions were both relatively strong in the earlier period.) Ross also shows how the transformed power structure in the industry—where a small number of retail and brand name manufacturing giants (e.g., Walmart, the Gap) employ and then set competitively against each other thousands of subcontractors—creates pressure on subcontractors to reduce costs (including labor costs) to a minimum.

For Ross, however, “the primary force” that has led to the resurgence of apparel sweatshops in the United States is import competition from sweatshops in low-wage countries (p. 100, emphasis added). Or as he states, “the most important single reason [why sweatshops are so prevalent in the United States] is because they are so prevalent in the world” (p. 41).

While Ross is far from alone in making this argument (often referred to as the “race to the bottom” thesis), I find it unconvincing for several reasons. In establishing causal relationships, Ross relies on longitudinal data about apparel imports from poor countries—even though he stresses the importance of distinguishing between sweatshop jobs and jobs that are simply undesirable and badly paid (pp. 24–26). Even if we accept the aggregate import data as a satisfactory proxy, the data do not make the case. For example, when reports “of sweatshop conditions [in New York] had begun to accumulate” in 1979 (p. 98), import penetration in the U.S. apparel market was still under 15% (table 7: 121). Moreover, as Ross himself points out, the heyday of the U.S. sweatshop during the first half of the twentieth century was not a period characterized by import competition (p. 243).

Particularly striking is Milkman’s finding that although all four occupational groupings she examined in L.A. Story (building services, trucking, construction, and apparel) suffered major collapses in union strength and working conditions in the latter part of the twentieth century, three of the four were in the service sector and not subject to import competition or the threat of capital mobility. As Milkman points out, the fact that “sweatshop conditions similar to those in the garment trade emerged in the 1970s and 1980s” in many non-mobile industries, is strong evidence that “globalization [of trade] and enhanced capital mobility are not the primary forces driving the deterioration of the pay and working conditions of U.S. workers in recent decades” (pp. 91–2, emphasis added).

The policy conclusion that Ross draws from his analysis is to strongly support the campaign to include labor standards clauses in WTO trade agreements, with trade sanctions for countries that are found to violate those standards. Ross is aware that there has been a fair amount of skepticism in the global South about this “social clause” campaign, rooted in the suspicion that such provisions would end up being used as a protectionist weapon by countries of the North to keep out manufactured goods from the South. In an effort aimed at overcoming this skepticism, Ross reframes the “race to the bottom” dynamic as primarily one of competition among countries of the South to win access to rich country markets. A social clause with trade sanctions, he argues, would benefit workers in the South by bringing this South-South competition under control. But Ross’s reformulation (and indeed most discussions of labor in a global context in the new U.S. labor sociology) sidesteps the root of the problem: the massive North-South income inequalities upon which South-South competition for access to a handful of wealthy country markets is premised and the structures and policies that reproduce this wealth divide.

Controversies such as this are tied to important ongoing sociological debates about the nature of global class and status hierarchies. At one end of the spectrum are those who argue that the fundamental global divide is one increasingly based on class, and thus international labor solidarity stands on firm (and unambiguous) structural founda-
tions. At the other end are those who argue that global class relations remain deeply embedded in other status distinctions (including overlapping racial and global wealth hierarchies). From this perspective, the foundations for North-South labor internationalism are problematic and solidarity campaigns can easily become strategies (conscious or not) to protect existing status hierarchies under the new conditions of globalized trade in manufacturing.

This debate on global class/status dynamics parallels one of the main themes engaged in the essays collected in Race and Labor Matters in the New U.S. Economy—that is, the ways in which the U.S. labor movement has been historically shaped and continues to be shaped by racial divides. The editors argue that there has been a tendency among many labor scholars to treat “race matters as either subservient to class matters, or tertiary at best”; and a mirror-image tendency among many race scholars to be myopic when it comes to class (p. 7; also Marable and Wilson chapter). Race and class, they argue, are “two sides of a complex coin, inseparable, overlapping, intertwined, yet distinguishable in any given historical period” (p. 7).

As is often the case with edited collections, Race and Labor Matters does not give us a sustained treatment of the central theme, but we do get plenty of food for thought. The ten chapters vary in topic and style—several focus on the lessons to be drawn from specific working-class mobilizations (e.g., the chapters by Aldon Morris & Dan Clawson, Mandi Issaacs Jackson, Chris Rhomberg & Louise Simmons) while others draw attention to specific problems that they argue trade unions and community organizations should address more pro-actively (e.g., Steve Pitts’s chapter on “bad jobs” and Immanuel Ness & Roland Zullo’s on privatization).

Other chapters engage directly with the class-race tension. There is an interesting implicit analogy between the debate about the nature of 1930s interracial unionism in the U.S. (discussed by both Bill Fletcher Jr. and Michael Goldfield in their respective chapters) and the debate over North-South labor internationalism today. As Fletcher and Goldfield point out, the 1930s shift toward interracial unionism by the CIO (i.e., actively recruiting all workers regardless of race) took place in a new mass production industrial context in which white workers’ strikes could always be broken unless black workers were organized. The new industrial context obliged a change in strategy to “interracialism,” but in the postwar decades the majority of interracial unions did little to contest workplace racial discrimination in hiring and job assignments. To actively do so would challenge the status privileges enjoyed by white union members based on race.

This does not mean that there were no examples of local unions challenging the fundamentals of white supremacy in the postwar decades. Nor does it mean that white workers are solely responsible for the emergence and reproduction of racist structures and practices (any more than Northern workers are solely responsible for the emergence and reproduction of the global North-South divide). Indeed, it is hard to imagine their durability unless significant sections of elite groups and classes also benefit from them.

How will the inexorable demographic shift being produced by mass immigration affect the prospects for a multiracial labor movement in the U.S.? The volume doesn’t offer an answer, but it gives us some clues.

Fletcher points to the contrast between the recent active efforts to unionize immigrant workers (the focus of L.A. Story) and the almost complete absence of strategic union planning focused on African-American workers. This absence is especially startling in light of the fact that surveys consistently show African Americans to be the group most interested in having the opportunity to join a union (more so than immigrants, not to mention native white workers). For the union movement to ignore black workers, he argues, is “equivalent to a drowning person ignoring a life preserver” (p. 25). Moreover, the failure to address the needs of black workers while simultaneously focusing major organizing resources on immigrants is increasing tensions “rather than helping to bridge the various divides that separate these groups” (p. 18).

Pushing this theme a step further, Stephen Steinberg argues that successive waves of immigrants have avoided pariah status and “become American” by “disassociating themselves from African Americans and their plight” (p. 190). This is both tragic and ironic in the case of the post-1965 immigration wave. The wave took off just as black work-
ers were poised to make significant social and economic advances in the post-Civil Rights era’s tight labor market. Instead of harvesting the fruits of the Civil Rights struggles, African-American workers were bypassed for what employers expected to be a more pliable and less demanding labor force, with disastrous results for blacks. Steinberg laments that “immigration scholars have stubbornly avoided this conclusion, not out of any animus to African Americans, but rather out of sympathy with immigrants and their struggles” (p. 188).

Ironically, Steinberg argues, many of the fruits of the Civil Rights struggle were harvested by the new immigrants—the 1965 immigration reform was itself an outcome of anti-racist protests; moreover, immigrants entered a country in which the climate of tolerance for people of color had dramatically improved; and once affirmative action was reconfigured to follow the logic of “diversity” rather than “reparations” after the Bakke decision, immigrants of color also benefited from this fruit of African-American struggles (p. 187). If there is a basis for a black-immigrant alliance, he argues, it will come from a moral rather than a structural imperative—that is, immigrants recognizing that they owe a “political debt” to African Americans’ struggles and choosing to ally themselves with the black protest tradition in the U.S.

How this strange intertwining of fates affects the prospects for alliance-building is not clear. The chapters in Race and Labor Matters (as well as the other books reviewed here) give few concrete examples of black-immigrant cooperation or conflict. One hopeful example is found in Rhomberg and Simmon’s chapter on community-worker alliances at Yale. When a subcontractor hired immigrant Latino workers to cross picket lines and take the jobs of mostly African-American maintenance workers during a 2003 strike, local Latino ministers came out in a dramatic show of solidarity, accusing Yale of “sparking racial divisions in the community” (p. 157).

While world-economic processes have received a fair amount of attention in the new U.S. labor sociology, global political dynamics have received far less attention than they should. As Robin D.G. Kelley points out in his suggestive chapter, empire abroad has been and remains closely interconnected with popular racism and sexism at home (pp. 59–60). War and world politics have been central processes shaping the evolution of labor movements in the U.S. and around the world. The complex impact of 9/11 (and the response to it) on immigrant worker mobilizations is a contemporary case in point. A major challenge that we face is to understand how processes operating at multiple interrelated levels—including local, national and global—shape labor movement outcomes and the intertwined and “complex coin” of class, race and gender.
Our national well-being hinges in large part on the well-being of our largest social movement, the much-troubled, 15-million member labor movement. To its credit, it keeps members at the head of the work reward line, leverages considerable ballot box clout on behalf of a progressive pro-worker agenda, and helps keep employers attentive to worker wants and needs. Nevertheless, it has gone from having 35 percent of the workforce in membership in the mid-1950s to having only 12 percent in 2006. In the mammoth private sector, it is down to seven percent, its lowest level since the early 1900s. (Greenhouse 2004: A-11). Detractors forecast imminent insignificance. Boosters, however, believe history teaches unions are inevitable, indispensable, and indefatigable. Indeed, unions are allegedly at their best when on the ropes. As dynamic social inventions, they regularly surprise would-be pallbearers.

Four new books—two by sociologists, a third with contributions from sociologists, and a fourth by a sociologist by proxy, Andy Stern, America’s leading union president—offer valuable contradictory clues to labor’s prospects. Drawing on my 50-plus years as a student of unionism, my 25 years (1975–2000) as the adjunct sociologist at the AFL-CIO George Meany Center, and other related matters (consulting posts, 11 union-focused books, etc.), I explore below a selection of clues, the better to help draw CS readers into paying closer attention to unfolding union realities.

A cautionary note: Leading sociologists, such as C. Wright Mills and the late Seymour Martin Lipset, along with more contemporaries sociologists, such as Stanley Aronowitz, Dan Clawson, Daniel B. Cornfield, Dorothy Sue Cobble, William DiFazio, Rick Fantasia, Steven H. Lopez, Bruce A. Nissen, and Kim Scipes, etc., make clear the rich complexity of union-focused scholarship. Much that warrants our attention, such as union involvement in community affairs, criminality, democracy, education, foreign affairs, pension fund power, politics, and sexism, escapes discussion hereafter, in large part because the four books direct us elsewhere. Accordingly, we only scratch the surface, though hopefully enough is accomplished to whet your appetite to go further.


(CWF). This bloc of seven major unions, which broke away from the old AFL-CIO in 2005, represents 40 percent of all unionists, and is preoccupied with achieving major organizing gains. Fletcher, Jr., thinks the CWF just might be able to soon unionize millions of people of color by addressing class and race issues simultaneously.

In the end, however, doubts about the ability of labor officialdom to get beyond America’s dilemma trump hope. In a most revealing way, Fletcher, Jr., warns in conclusion “the strength of white racism and the fear of losing control may be strong enough to scuttle attempts at rebirth and, instead, plunge the union movement into the depths from which it may be unable to emerge” (p. 26). As most leadership posts that currently count in labor continue to be (zealously) held by Caucasians, Fletcher’s foreboding has substance.

Comparably bleak where labor’s prospects are concerned is a 2004 study of the return of the sweatshop to America, with all attendant social and economic costs. Entitled Slaves to Fashion: Poverty and Abuse in the New Sweatshops, the book tells in a most moving, and yet also soundly academic way, how the garment industry mercilessly devours lives, especially those of powerless new immigrants across the world (revealing attention is paid to heartache in China’s fast-growing rag industry).

Employers in the world’s largest manufacturing industry casually commit unfair labor practices (harangues, firings, even beatings, etc.) when organizers (rarely) show up, as government fines are infrequent, slight, long delayed, and lightly regarded as the cost of doing business. Dire threats to close or move a work site defeat serious organizing drives. Whereas unions in 1988 represented 23 percent of American garment workers, they had only six percent in membership in 2001, and the figure has undoubtedly fallen since (Ross, p. 195). Sociologist J. S. Ross concludes that when the history of these times is written, “the destruction of union power in the apparel industry will be recorded as one of the reasons why the beginning of the 21st century looked a lot like the beginning of the 20th” (p. 205).

If this bleak and harrowing scene is soon to change for the better, it will require what Ross calls the “three pillars of decency”: First, the rebuilding of union strength; second, the strengthening of pro-worker policies of government; and third, the forging of alliances between conscientious consumers and allied reformers. Ever the hopeful activist, Ross urges creative and sustained promotion, “sooner or later: sooner would be better” (p. 354). He has no illusions about near-future reform prospects, however, and sagely counsels that “any conceivable time horizon of success ranges far into the future” (p. 327).

Unlike the first two books, a third one by sociologist Ruth Milkman raises the possibility that organized labor, notwithstanding its latent racism and the heavy toll taken by employer anti-union animus, might have something going for it. Entitled L.A. Story, its subtitle explains its focus: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement. Milkman believes the L.A. region stands out as a rare bright spot in an otherwise gloomy labor scene. While the scale of L.A. organizing success to date has been modest, labor’s advances there “suggest the potential for a larger-scale labor resurgence” (p. 189).

Three explanations are offered: First, former AFL unions have proved far more creative than expected. Second, a rush by short-sighted employers to create marginal and low-paying, rather than secure and well-paying jobs has stirred deep resentment among workers. Third, contrary to expectations, many new immigrants have proven quite available to unionization. Provided, that is, that organizers astutely study the hidden power structure of the targeted industry (a task sociologists could help with). As well, unions must simultaneously link pro-union rank-and-file with grass-roots leaders in the wider community (another apt challenge for applied sociologists).

Especially welcomed is Milkman’s bold departure from academic conventions in labor scholarship. For example, she defends cases of “top-down” governance engineered by high-level union staff, a common feature of the lead union in the CWF: Andy Stern’s Service Employees International Union (SEIU). The opposition champions bottom-up rule by the rank-and-file. Milkman also defends reliance on creative and energetic outsiders who have not come up from the ranks. The opposition thinks this blocks upward mobility by rank-and-file, and promotes the hegemony of better-educated contemporaries.
types over the working-class. Above all, Milkman wisely eschews the use of exclamation points: she admits to considerable uncertainty about the staying power of the L.A. example. Its fate rests largely with the daring character of the CWF and its flagship union, the SEIU.

Which brings us to the fourth, and most valuable of the books under review, the one you should read if you chose to read only one. Written by SEIU president Andy Stern, his cogent 2006 semi-autobiographic volume, *A Country that Works: Getting America Back on Track*, tells more about labor realities, warts and all, than we have any right to expect. Mixing unexpected candor, warranted pride, rare personal intimacy, and intriguing visionary politics, it stands out as a must-read for sociologists seeking distinctive leads to labor gains, losses, and prospects.

Sociologists will find three features of the SEIU of special interest: First, Stern, raised in a non-union, middle-class household, and a graduate of an Ivy League college, has the union he leads opt, whenever possible, for cooperation rather than conflict. While careful to keep the union's powder dry, and well-known for employing dramatic militancy when left with no alternative, he offers to dampen shop floor militancy, aid productivity, and add value to work processes in return for better contracts, a fairer share of profits, and a sort of union-employer partnership.

Second, Stern does not hesitate to support Republicans the union finds worthy, and he has sharp disagreements with lofty Democrats who mistakenly take labor for granted. Above all, nearly everyone in labor knows the status quo is not an option. The split in 2005, on the very eve of the 50th anniversary of the merger of the old AFL and the CIO, attests to the depths of hunger for profound change. The CWF, guided in large part by Andy Stern's futurism, is going for it.

Much help can be expected from two overlooked sources—computer power and applied sociology—neither of which receives warranted attention (the indexes of the four books cite neither term). Computer use is bringing members and officers together in real-time communications, adding muscle to boycott and strike projects across time/space borders, and fostering the creation of electronic communities (local, national, and global) with heart, mind, and soul. Unions may yet achieve what I call CyberUnion status, which I fervently advocate in my recent books, and thereby help assure their renewal (Shostak 1999; 2002).

Likewise, the chances of labor's recovery would be much better if and when you share your expertise. This will not be easy, as unionists suspect too many outsiders have a hidden power-seeking agenda. Thin-skinned unionists want their foibles kept private.
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Trust must be earned, and advice given only on request. You will probably have to pass what the SEIU calls the “hang test,” or the ability to “hang out comfortably with a social service worker, school aide, or janitor, or have lunch at a diner or a beer in a neighborhood bar” (Stern, p. 122). Assisting the labor movement as an applied sociologist isn’t for everyone, but those who “carry a card” help all of us achieve more of our dream of “Bread and Roses” too.

References