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Is U.S. Labor Changing as Fast as the Workplace?

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Is U.S. Labor Changing as Fast as the Workplace?

Kim Moody

Gregory Mantsios, ed., *A New Labor Movement for the New Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press 1998).
Bruce Nissen, ed., *Unions and Workplace Reorganization* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1997).

AT FIRST GLANCE the coupling of these two anthologies in one review might seem a matter of apples and oranges. *A New Labor Movement for the New Century*, edited by Gregory Mantsios, focuses on the possibilities for US unions offered by the new leaders of the AFL-CIO; while *Unions and Workplace Reorganization*, edited by Bruce Nissen, looks at the profound changes in work organization associated with "lean production." Both anthologies present valuable discussion and debate about their main topics, but brush only lightly and infrequently on the subject matter of the other. Yet, from different angles they both address the future of organized labour in the United States. Indeed, the points of departure of these two collections say much about the changes and continuities taking place in America's House of Labour since the election of the "New Voice" team of John Sweeney, Rich Trumka, and Linda Chavez-Thompson to the top three positions of the AFL-CIO in October 1995.

For Mantsios this 1995 leadership change is the take-off point for the debate and speculation in the book's 21 contributions. That election saw Lane Kirkland, federation chief since 1979, resign under protest, and former second-in-command Thomas Donahue go down to defeat in the AFL-CIO's first contested election in its forty year history. As might be expected from such an anthology, its basic view is that the arrival of the "New Voice" means more than a mere personnel change in the Washington, DC headquarters. In the Introduction Mantsios describes the outlook of "New Voice" supporters as follows:

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> John Sweeney won the presidency of the AFL-CIO at its 1995 convention because delegates believed he and his slate represented a more significant break with the past and the best hope for the future. While economic factors that allowed corporate America to increase its hold on the lives and livelihoods of working people remain in place, enthusiasm over the leadership change was rooted in the belief that the conditions for working people could be improved, the decline in union membership could be reversed, and the change in leadership marked an end to the era of passive, narrow, and stodgy unionism. (xvi)

The essays that follow represent a broad spectrum of opinion in the current discussion of American labour's future. Many take a hard look at US labour's shortcomings, including the widespread lack of internal democracy, the failure to organize the unorganized, poor racial and gender practices, limited political vision, and the shameful history of government-financed trade union imperialism. While the writers are mostly well-wishers of the Sweeney team, the new leaders come in for criticism as well. Writer-activists Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello, for example, suggest that despite Sweeney's own statement that the new AFL-CIO must go beyond its previous Washington, DC orientation to become "a worker-based movement," many of the new initiatives are, in fact, equally Washington-bound and that "this strategy risks building not a new labour movement but rather a new bureaucracy in the shell of the old." (26, 40-41) Elaine Bernard, former president of the BC New Democratic Party and current head of the Harvard Trade Union Program, compares the federation's level of democracy unfavourably to that of the Canadian Labour Congress. (4-23) Mantsios' own contribution provides a uniquely thorough critique of American labour's past and present official ideology to which I will return. (44-64) Communications Workers' organizer Steve Early finds the newly expanded Organizing Institute's methods ineffective and proposes a member-based approach to organizing the unorganized. (82-103)

A New Labor Movement for a New Century also provides a number of essays detailing local or union specific experiences from which the new AFL-CIO leaders might learn. This includes the interesting experiment by CWA Local 1180 in New York City of involving members in issue-based politics by Local 1180 president Arthur Cheliotes and Mail Handler's Local 300 president Larry Adam's account of how taking on both workplace and broader political issues succeeded in involving more workers of colour in the union. (202-215, 255-271) The diversity of the book and perhaps a new level of tolerance in the federation itself are reflected by Tony Mazzocchi's essay on the new Labor Party founded in 1996. (243-254) By its second convention in November 1998, the fledgling organization had six national union affiliates along with hundreds of local unions. Yet, it was hardly a project that fit well with the AFL-CIO's continued dependence on the Democratic Party, even with its new emphasis on membership involvement.

Most of the contributions fall on the optimistic, more or less uncritical side. In part this is a result of the way in which the essays, first delivered at a 1995 conference, are posed. Each contributor was asked to formulate a vision for the

short-term and long-term future of organized labour. This allows the writers to project some lofty ideas of the future of unionism without specifying any particular way to get there or assessing if the "New Voice" leaders are actually moving in that direction. This side of the collection is further reinforced by the fact that the majority of contributors belong to what might be described as the left wing of the labour establishment. Many are staffers for unions on the "New Voice" side and four have become appointed aides of the AFL-CIO itself.

These two features mean that the anthology tends to avoid some of the thornier questions facing organized labour in the US. Thus, while Bernard's reflections on the importance of union democracy present a promising start, the issue is more or less laid to rest after that. Missing almost entirely from this collection is any assessment of how the current rank and file reform movements in many unions do or do not intersect with the "New Voice" program. The omission is all the more glaring because the reform movements in the United Mine Workers of the 1970s and that in the Teamsters Union in the 1990s provided the "New Voice" team its voting majority at the 1995 election and since on the Executive Council, as well as one of its top figures, Rich Trumka. Bill Fletcher, Jr., who is now Education Director of the AFL-CIO, more or less dismisses union reform movements with the arguments that formal democracy is not the same as membership control and that "*union democracy is a dead issue if the members believe that the union is irrelevant* to their principal concerns." (18, 20) These arguments, while true in the abstract, appear odd because most union reform movements arise precisely over the kinds of "principal concerns" Fletcher talks about and fight for membership control as much as for formal democratic structures.

Movements like the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), the New Directions Movement in the United Auto Workers, the Caucus for a Democratic Union in the California State Employees, New Directions in the Transport Workers, and many others are based on workplace struggles and many of the same social issues addressed in this book, as well as on matters such as the right to vote on top officers. The only contribution that relates this kind of dynamic to questions of rank and file control, social inclusion, democratic structures, and the direction of the AFL-CIO is Mail Handlers Union Local 300's president Larry Adams' discussion of how his local was changed. (202-215) The reader might want to jump from Fletcher's essay to Adams's to get the contrast. One wishes there had been more contributions like Adams's.

One of the strong points of *A New Labor Movement for a New Century* are the contributions on racial diversity and inclusion. This is a topic on which many discussions of unions in the US falter or fail and on which the AFL-CIO has a sorry record. Particularly frank and fresh is the discussion of Labour's official racial, gender, and ethnic "constituency" organizations: The A. Philip Randolph Institute, the Labor Alliance for Latin American Advancement, the Congress of Labor Union Women, and the more recently formed Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance.

Authors May Chen of UNITE and Kent Wong of the Labor Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, frankly admit that some of the older constituency groups "were formed under the initiative and control of the AFL-CIO in response to an insurgent population of rank and file workers." They argue strongly that such constituency groups should be advocates for workers of colour and women and not transmission belts for official union policy. (191) They offer more hope for the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA) formed in 1992. They point out that because there are so few Asian Pacific staffers and high level officials, APALA to a much greater degree than the others was initiated by and is composed of rank and file and local level activists. (192-195)

Questions of social inclusion and union democracy are interrelated. Nothing illustrates this more than the development of a new generation of rank and file reform leaders and groups across the US labour movement. Today's union reform movements and leadership teams tend to reflect the diverse nature of the workforce more than the current leadership of most unions. The slate led by Tom Leedham and backed by TDU in the 1998 Teamster election, for example, was one of the most diverse ever run in a major union election in the US. Of its seventeen members, three are African American, two Latino/a, four women, and one Asian American. This reflects a number of important recent reform victories in the Teamsters in the last couple of years by activists from these constituencies. The leadership teams of all the reform groups mentioned above are similarly diverse.

The future possibility of representative diversity in the leadership of most US unions has to come and is coming from below and not from the AFL-CIO, which has no direct say in how affiliated unions change or select leadership. The difficulty of dealing with this sort of unauthorized change from below in an anthology focused on the AFL-CIO's top leaders and program poses a problem for one of the book's major contributions on the topic of racial inclusion by José La Luz of the American Federation of State, County, and Muncipal Employees and Paula Finn of the Queens College Labor Resource Center. La Luz and Finn make a strong case for the relationship of inclusion and democracy, but when they deal with an actual case of a movement for democracy and inclusion in Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 399 in Southern California they reduce the conflict involved to a matter of "insufficient planning for institutional transition." (177)

The rebellion in SEIU Local 399 was significant because this was the site of the famous Los Angeles Justice for Janitors' victory in 1991 and because the International Union involved was led by John Sweeney. The militant campaign that brought the organizing victory was in many ways a model of mobilization. It was, however, staff dominated and when the victory came the newly unionized janitors were placed in Local 399, along with about 12,000 mostly African American health care workers. Local 399 at that time was dominated by a white old guard associated with John Sweeney. By 1995, activists among both janitors and health care workers were pushing for better representation on workplace issues and in the composition

of the local's leadership. As La Luz and Finn point out, questions of inclusion, union democracy, and union efficacy were intertwined. The Latino "reformistas," as they called themselves, allied with a dissident African American group to form the Multiracial Coalition. They captured all the offices and executive board seats in the 1995 election, but did not contest the presidency. The conflict continued after the election as the white president tried to block the new Executive Board's moves. John Sweeney, still president of SEIU, put the local in trusteeship. The Latino janitors were eventually reassigned to Local 1877, a geographically dispersed local of building service workers around the state.

The problem wasn't simply one of bad planning, but of bureaucracy and lack of democracy. The janitors had never been consulted about how they would be represented, nor had the idea that they might represent themselves been considered. Some had asked for their own local, but they ended up in Local 399 with people in an entirely different industry and a white leadership. When they united with a group of African American health care workers and exercised their democratic rights, the local was trusteed. Whether they are better off in Local 1877 or not, they were not consulted, much less given the right to decide. Here change in the union was avoided by a lateral transfer of the "building services division," that is the janitors, into another local. Administrative means were employed to "solve" a social and political problem. The otherwise valuable essay obscures this fact. The political question of how the transition to diversity and democracy is to take place is reduced to the usual top-down measures of leadership development, education, and good will in promotions.

Union democracy and questions of transition to a "new labour movement" are not the only causalities in this book. Also missing in action as a result of the focus on the "New Voice" program are the dramatic changes in work organization and labour markets associated with globalization, neoliberalism, and lean production. This is where Bruce Nissen's *Unions and Workplace Reorganization* comes in. The essays in this anthology compose a debate on new ways of working such as quality circles, team concept, TQM, and the new labour market flexibility wrought by deregulation, downsizing, and the growth of contingent work. Like Mantsios's collection, this one addresses a specific programmatic phenomenon: in this case the 1994 AFL-CIO Committee on the Evolution of Work's "The New American Workplace: a Labor Perspective." While *Unions and Workplace Reorganization* stands on its own feet as a debate over the changing workplace, both the document and its date provide an additional clue to unravelling the world view and prospects of the "New Voice" team.

In *A New Labor Movement for a New Century*, Mantsios himself provides the most serious look at the continuities and differences between the outlook of the "New Voice" leadership and US labour's traditional business union ideology. What he finds in the current leadership's consensus world view is both a nostalgia for the "social compact" of the immediate post-World War II era and a contemporary

version of this in the form of labour-management partnerships. The economic basis of this remains essentially Keynesian. As Mantsios puts it, "This belief assumes that American business will continue to prosper, and that the logic of capitalism requires a well-paid domestic labour force that consumes the goods and services it produces and provides." (52) From this it is but a step to the ideology of partnership. Mantsios writes, "According to this way of thinking, while labour and management may be adversaries in the specifics of particular collective bargaining agreements, they remain partners in the broad scheme of such things as economic growth, international competition, and national prosperity." (53)

The 1994 AFL-CIO report on "The New American Workplace: A Labor Perspective" is the consensus statement of the AFL-CIO Executive Council on labour-management partnerships adopted the year before the "New voice" team won election. It also represents the clearest continuity in the official ideology of the AFL-CIO — old and new. Not only has the Sweeney Administration not repudiated that report, it has set up the Center for Workplace Democracy to attempt to implement it. Thus, whatever changes in outlook, tactics, and initiatives have come from the new leadership in other areas, this major piece of business unionism remains at the core of the AFL-CIO's official world view.

"The New American Workplace" follows the economic perspective described by Mantsios, but casts it as the "high-wage, high skill" approach. As the report puts it, in counterposition to the current practice of most US corporations, "In contrast, many other industrialized nations are pursuing a labour policy premised on the proposition that prosperity is best achieved when highly-skilled workers produce high quality goods and services for which they are well paid." (Nissen, 53) This proposition is challenged in at least two essays in the Nissen anthology, those by former General Motor's factory worker Peter Downs, and Mike Parker and Jane Slaughter, authors of *Working Smart: A Union Guide to Participation Programs and Reengineering* (Detroit, Labor Notes 1994). As Parker and Slaughter put it, "Employers have undertaken work reorganization in a manner directly opposite to the AFL-CIO's hopes because new technology, globalization, and market forces reward companies that reduce their workforces, tighten management control, use low-wage labour, and either keep unions out or convert them to enterprise unions." (Nissen, 210)

The authors of the 1994 AFL-CIO report do not argue that US employers are acting in a cooperative manner. Indeed, they complain, "Many employers today act as if reducing what is paid to workers for the goods and services they produce is the way to economic prosperity." (53) What the report and the labour leaders whose consensus view it reflects do not want to understand is that cost cutting "lean production" is the way to the economic prosperity of these employers. In the heat of real capitalist competition, individual firms do not simply choose any growth strategy. They tend to imitate what works. What has worked since the 1970s appeared to be Japanese production systems that embody the forms, ideology, and

mythology of labour-management cooperation. It was a cooperation, however, that required union and employee acquiescence. As Taiichi Ohno, the father of "kaizen" or continuous improvement, admitted about its development, "Had I faced the [militant] Japan National Railways Union or an American union, I might have been murdered." (Kim Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*, London: Verso 1997, 85) In Japan, the union had to be broken before such "cooperation" could be established.

By 1994, few union people would advocate Japanese-style cooperation. The partnership proposed by the AFL-CIO is an ideal one. It is based on principles like respect, equality, and mutual interests. This is a reasonable basis for any partnership, but one that is hard to find in today's rough and tumble business world. Again, the report appears to recognize this when it says, "Partnerships will not succeed if management's ultimate aim is to speed up work or to eliminate workers' jobs." (49) Management's ultimate aim is profitability, while speed-ups and downsizing are means to that end. But the result amounts to the same thing. Despite this unrelenting reality, the new AFL-CIO not only embraces the perspectives in "The New American Workplace," but it has also accelerated the quest for partnership even with employers that are doing exactly what they object to or worse. It does so despite the demonstrated inability of the major existing partnerships even to slow down the rate of cost-cutting and downsizing, let alone create anything like a "high-skill, high-wage" model of job security.

Indeed, the most elaborate partnership schemes seem to produce the greatest downsizing. The CWA-AT&T "Workplace of the Future," for example, has been a fiasco in this respect. Established in March 1993 with much fanfare, it was followed by a series of disastrous workforce reductions, all publicly announced without prior consultation with the union despite an elaborate structure of committees that were supposed to provide union participation in such plans. The history is worth a capsulated look. In August 1993, AT&T announced it would close 40 operator centres costing 4,000 jobs. The CWA complained there might have been "ways to work with the union to cut costs without disrupting so many lives." In February 1994, the corporation announced 14-15,000 job cuts in its long distance and cellular operations. CWA Vice President Jim Irvine complained they never mentioned numbers like that and writes, "Once again, they are completely disregarding and undermining the cooperative process we are supposed to be implementing." In September 1995, AT&T made the blockbuster announcement that it will split into three separate companies. Discussions with the union about the implications of this did not begin until a week after the announcement. Then, in January 1996, the reduced AT&T company announced 40,000 job cuts, at least 16,000 in the bargaining unit. CWA president Morty Bahr replies, "we didn't even receive the courtesy of advanced notification of this announcement."

Things are not much different in the even more elaborate, multi-million dollar "jointness" program between the United Auto Workers and General Motors. Dating

back to the early 1980s, the UAW-GM "Joint Program" has developed a top to bottom structure of joint committees, a massive training center, and a legion of appointed jointness representatives in the plants. It is not itself a workplace participation program and many GM plants still operate in a more or less traditional manner. It is, however, designed to promote such programs and a cooperative ambiance through extensive "training" in problem solving techniques. The memorandum of agreement that institutionalized jointness promises "job security," but there is none. The GM hourly workforce has dropped from about 300,000 in 1992 to 220,000 in 1996, when GM agreed in the new contract to preserve 95 per cent of the workforce, and then to 200,000 in 1997 — a 10 per cent, not 5 per cent, drop.

These sorts of results have not stopped the "New Voice" team from plunging ahead with new labour-management partnerships. In April 1997, the AFL-CIO announced its new partnership with Kaiser Permenente, the oldest and one of the largest HMOs. The idea had come from John Sweeney while he was still SEIU president. Under its terms, the AFL-CIO and unions like the SEIU that signed on, would hawk Kaiser's services to unions and unionized employers. The object, they said jointly, was to make "Kaiser Permenente the preeminent deliverer of health care in the United States." In return, the unions were supposed to have a say in care quality issues and the company would remain neutral during union organizing drives. The announcement came a week after the California Nurse Association struck Kaiser and a year after Kaiser imposed a wage freeze on 14,000 of its California employees. Several hospital closings then in progress were excluded from the agreement and there was no protection against downsizing by attrition.

Perhaps the most pointless and inexplicable of the partnership initiatives to come from the new AFL-CIO was the proposed Economic Leadership Dialogue to be co-chaired by Sweeney and GE chief Jack Welch. The stated purpose of this dialogue was to "search for a common purpose." So anti-union is Welch, however, he is known as "Neutron Jack," after the bomb that kills people, but leaves buildings standing. During 1997 negotiations with a coalition of unions, Welch told managers to be prepared to keep the company running if there was a strike. GE is responsible for the largest Environment Protection Agency cleanup operation ever. To top it all, the union share of GE employees in the US dropped from 39 per cent in 1991 to 25 per cent in 1998 as a result of GE's long-standing plan to dump the unions. Thus, the new AFL-CIO leaders not only continue the search for partnership outlined in "The New American Workplace," but seem to abandon the skepticism and caution found there.

Most of the partnerships and labour-management cooperation programs discussed in *Unions and Workplace Reorganization* are, like those at AT&T and GM, focused on work reorganization rather than any grand social dialogue. In the opening essay, Nissen provides a useful history of the evolution of such workplace partnerships from the QWL schemes of the 1970s through today's TQM, reegineering, and high performance workplace programs. He notes the early disagreements

among labour leaders, with a few like Glenn Watts of the CWA and Irving Bluestone of the UAW pushing these programs, while most expressed skepticism or opposition. By today, however, Nissen notes that few "rejectionists" remain, although a number of unions like the Oil, Chemical & Atomic Workers, American Postal Workers, the independent United Electrical Workers, and, up to now, the Teamsters continue official opposition. (Nissen, 134-18)

If the consensus reflected in "New American Workplace" is less than total even at the top, it is anything but unchallenged in the unionized workplaces of the United States. There is much debate in *Unions and Workplace Reorganization* about whether the rank and file like, dislike, accept, or oppose these new ways of working. Contributions from former UAW advisor Maureen Sheahan and consultants Peter Lazes and Jane Savage stress that many workers welcome the chance to participate in shaping the new workplace. (Nissen, 110-28; 181-205) Parker and Slaughter emphasize that many also oppose these programs or at least the consequences of them. (Nissen, 210-219)

In the last couple of years, probably since most of the contributions to the Nissen anthology were written, the workforce has entered the debate forcibly in some of the country's longest-standing sites of experimentation in participation and partnership programs. The strikes at A.E. Staley, Caterpillar, UPS, General Motors, and US West all occurred at companies with developed partnership programs of one or another sort. All involved aspects of work reorganization associated with and frequently implemented through workplace forms of participation. In one case, UPS, the strike was preceded by a two-year fight against a company-initiated team concept program. Whether the others were explicitly rebellions against the cooperation/participation programs or not, they told volumes about what the fruits of partnership and participation were in the real workplace of today: downsizing, speed-up, massive overtime, ten and twelve-hour rotating shifts, extensive contracting out, and more contingent jobs.

Possibly the rebellion that signaled "trouble in paradise" more than any other was the 1998 insurgency in UAW Local 1853 at GM's state-of-the-art experiment in labour-management cooperation: Saturn. As Parker and Slaughter show, there has been conflict at Saturn, as well as NUMMI, CAMI, and AAI (formerly Mazda), for some time. (Nissen, 210-23) These have mostly been conflicts over the speed and length of work and, more basically, the role and independence of the union within the structures of cooperation and/or partnership. What makes the 1998 rebellion at Saturn different is that it was an attempt to get out of the Saturn arrangement altogether and back under the traditional UAW-GM contract. I say "back" because most of the Saturn workers came from traditional GM plants around the Midwest. If they had not been sorry to leave the old ways of working, they no longer had much faith in the promise of the new ways. The issues of speed-up, plus the exhaustion of rotating shifts, underlay the rebellion. In the face of continuing economic difficulties, management had unilaterally reclaimed any power it had

once shared. Indeed, management's ability to reassert its authority in every realm of work revealed to the workforce how superficial any power-sharing had always been. Shop Chair Mike Bennett, long Local 1853's biggest Saturn booster, declared, "the partnership is dead."

The event that sparked the rebellion was the announcement that some Saturn production was to be moved to a traditional plant in Delaware. Suddenly the language in the Saturn agreement that allowed for layoffs under certain economic conditions caught everyones' attention. The "lifetime employment" that underlay loyalty to the Saturn system vanished overnight. Unlike the UAW-GM national contract, Saturn has no income security provisions in the event of layoffs or closings. If conditions were no different from other GM plants, the promise of empowerment gone, and job security vanished, what then was the point of all the rhetoric of participation — not to mention the lower pay scales? So, early in 1998 a group of rank and filers organized a petition drive to leave the Saturn agreement and go under the GM contract. The rebels forced a vote by the local, but after new threats of immediate mass layoffs if that happened the vote went two-to-one to stay with the Saturn agreement. Nevertheless, as rebel leader Tom Hopp put it, "Two thousand people voted against cooperation and we undid millions of dollars and years of 'training' in just a few weeks." The battle at Saturn continues.

What seems clear now, is that partnerships, no matter at what level, never approach the ideal content proposed by the AFL-CIO's "New American Workplace" and by the "New Voice" team that continues to articulate these themes. Regardless of the momentary sincerity of the parties involved in initiating these programs, such lofty goals are inevitably subverted by capitalism's social relations of production. As David Robertson of the Canadian Auto Workers once put it, "our incomes are still their costs." Similarly, the ability of workers to control the pace and length of their work, whether through "soldiering," as Taylor called it, or through contractual provision, remains a barrier to capital's goals of profitability and competitiveness. Partnerships, participation programs, and labour-management cooperation have been the means to breach these barriers, not the road to some new kind of empowerment. From management's point of view, they have had considerable success. But it is an effort that must be repeated over and over, if only because the demands of competition require ever new gains and that always, sooner or later, meets with resistance from the workforce.

The conflict that results from capital's social relations of production as they intersect the demands of enhanced competition cannot be confined to orderly and periodic contract negotiations, as the AFL-CIO leaders old and new would have it. This age-old conflict is reproduced with each repeated or renewed push for more output, as well as in the fight over the surplus produced. It cannot be buried by ideology or the accoutrements of cooperation. Effective union response to this innate conflict, however, can be undermined by both the ideology and structures. The AFL-CIO's continuing "search for a common purpose" with capital is both futile

and damaging in this respect. Those who wish to alter this course would do well to understand the current debates over both the nature of workplace change and the direction of the "New Voice" team. Together these two anthologies provide such a starting point.