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References


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The editor gave me a very general charge: choose a dozen books on labor, published in the new millennium, and write about them. Since I can name perhaps three dozen books I would like to include, a selection criterion is key.

In most circumstances, for sociologists as well as others, the term “labor” evokes first and foremost the labor process, the work people do, whether that be carework, assembly line production, professional careers, or housework. But in this essay “labor,” as I use the term, focuses on work-related groups that seek to transform society, in big or small ways, by bringing people together, developing their capacities, and using the solidarity of many individuals, each of them weak if standing alone, to mobilize power and contest existing arrangements. This essay covers only books that fit that criterion, and by no means all of those works.

The confusion between these two senses of labor is sometimes helpful, sometimes a problem. At my home institution, the University of Massachusetts Amherst, the hitherto free-standing Labor Center was forced to merge with a department, and it chose sociology. I very much hope that when the chancellor or provost hears “labor center” they subliminally think it is about work tout cours. The problem however, is that many of my colleagues subliminally think it is about work and I suspect it is not just my colleagues, but many members of the ASA Labor and Labor Movements section—want to see a sympathy-for-the-victims standpoint. But they have trouble understanding why I and others jealously guard the special character of a Labor Center as a site to focus on the variety of ways workers and their supporters organize for transformation (whether or not they do so through a traditional union), of the ways people stop being (just) victims and assume agency in collective struggle.

This essay looks at some of the ways that scholarship has changed in recent years, from a focus on what (if anything) can be done to improve traditional union organizing, to alternative ways to exercise power, to struggles within labor over what kind of union to aim for and how to get there. In some sense underlying all this, but until recently largely absent from consideration, has been the disappearance of strikes.

**Pure Organizing or Structural Conditions?**

For perhaps twenty years beginning around 1990, the U.S. labor movement’s analysis of the key to victory was organizing enough workers to achieve a high level of “union density,” the proportion of all workers who were members of unions. There is good reason for a focus on density: studies show that if only one in ten workers in a sector are organized, then the union cannot win much, or if it does win, the employer will constantly be at war with the union and looking for ways to move the operation or outsourse key components. On the other hand, if ninety percent of a sector is organized, not only do employers find it more difficult to displace the union, but also paying decent wages and benefits is just a cost of doing business, and is no longer a competitive disadvantage. As a result, unions can do the most to improve conditions, and are in the most secure position, if they can achieve high density within a particular sector. (The relevant sector for leverage might be downtown hotels in San Francisco; workers and the union would not need ninety percent density for hotels in the nation as a whole.)

During the last two decades studies of organizing were central to labor scholarship as well as to the labor movement. The AFL-CIO itself sponsored three edited volumes (not reviewed here) and each focused on organizing. Within that larger focus, some scholarship focused on exemplary cases and on principles that would apply to more-or-less any organizing at any time, while other scholarship emphasized the importance of structural conditions, with

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the implicit or explicit argument that not all things were possible at all times. In the 1990s, work by Kate Bronfenbrenner (some of it with Tom Juravich), using a pure-organizing approach, had a major impact on (some parts of) the labor movement. Quantitative studies of a sample of organizing campaigns showed that no single tactic was a magic bullet, but campaigns were far more likely to succeed if they employed a range of rank-and-file intensive tactics. Even if there were no changes in labor law, globalization, or politics, labor could substantially increase its victories if it ran the right kind of campaigns.3

Why David Sometimes Wins by Marshall Ganz provides another example of a focus on pure organizing, using the 1960s Farm-workers, a union in which Ganz was a key participant, to develop a general theory of organizing. Ganz argues that the Farm-workers succeeded in significant part because their leadership devised a stream of effective strategy, strategy which came from relying on a leadership team, and a team that involved people with a range of different perspectives and from a variety of structural circumstances. The lessons and techniques that Ganz both learned and developed in his work with the Farm-workers are invaluable for anyone trying to organize, and Ganz has been important in spreading them far and wide, from the Obama campaign to the Occupy movement. A case study of a remarkable movement is used to develop lessons that can be seen as universal. Ganz does not try to explain why farm worker organizing succeeded in the 1960s and not in the 1930s, or why other seemingly similar groups have not succeeded, or any of a range of similar questions; his issue is what it takes to organize successfully, with little or no attention to the importance of structural factors.

At the other end of the spectrum, Beverly Silver’s Forces of Labor, perhaps this millennium’s most influential study of global labor, draws on an impressive database that aims to cover all strikes and labor activity from 1870 through the 1990s to argue that what is possible is structurally determined. Labor unrest is greatest during periods of capital inflow. The characteristic form of struggle varies by the structure of the industry. Consider the auto industry: unrest shifts from the United States and Canada in the 1930s, to Western Europe in the 1960s, to Italy, Spain, and Argentina in the 1970s, to Brazil, South Africa, South Korea, and Mexico in the 1990s (and we might add, to China today). Each country’s struggle is unique—but in country after country, due to the tightly-linked character of auto production, the union is brought in through action by a militant minority at a choke point in the system. Those tactics work in auto, and are independently invented again and again, but they would not work in textiles. That is, the success of worker struggles does not just depend on injustice, or even worker militance, but in a significant part on strategic position and the ability to exert leverage. Not all things are possible in all places at all times. It may not be the most oppressed who are the key to victory.

My own book, The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements, offers a somewhat related argument. The key to organizing success is not just hiring good organizers, developing an effective framing, investing the needed resources, and finding committed workers. People are doing those things at all times, but most of the time labor is losing ground. In occasional relatively brief periods, however, labor has a dramatic burst of growth; in the 1930s, union membership quadrupled in a dozen years, and at the same time the United States enacted a host of reforms, from Social Security to bank regulation to rules on overtime. In periods of quiescence only great organizers succeed; in periods of upsurge mediocre organizing wins impressive victories.

Each period of upsurge re-defines what we mean by “the labor movement,” changing cultural expectations, the form that unions take, laws, structures, and accepted forms of behavior. The upsurge gives rise to an integrated labor regime, fitted to the economy and society of that time, which constrains some forms of activity and promotes others.

New groups of workers are organized, using new tactics and new organizational forms. The 1960s, when labor and the new social movements failed to connect, could be seen as a missed upsurge, and the question my book investigates is whether the pieces are in place for a new potential upsurge.

Steve Lopez offers something of a middle ground: a focus on the organizing process, what worked and what did not, but framed in terms of the way organizing among nursing home service workers is shaped by people’s past experiences with actually existing industrial (especially steel) unions. Reorganizing the Rust Belt is an ethnography of an interconnected set of organizing drives and contract campaigns among health care workers in a Service Employees International Union local in the Pittsburgh area. Labor scholarship provides surprisingly few ethnographies; apparently, scholars generally arrive after the battles are over, or at least well along, and rely more on interviews than on observation. Lopez’s work puts us inside the struggles as they develop, and provides a powerful example of why we need more ethnographies.

Much labor scholarship connects primarily with union staff and with the most involved and committed workers. Lopez, more than any of the other authors considered here, shows us how the campaigns looked to workers who were anti-union, or at least had strong reservations about the union. In important ways that is what labor most needs to understand. For one example, Lopez explains that in the first organizing drive he was involved with “Every [nursing home] aide I talked to had her own angry stories about instances in which residents who clearly needed medical attention or a modified care plan were ignored by management, sometimes for weeks” (p. 44) but the workers nonetheless (narrowly) voted against unionizing, concerned (based on experiences with other unions) that the union would not do much, and that its most likely “accomplishment” would be to protect workers who did not do a good job. A year later the union ran a new campaign, visited workers in their homes, built a broadly-based organizing committee of workers committed to the union, trained workers in how to organize and assess their coworkers, and used “an escalating strategy of collective action aimed at building workers’ solidarity” (p. 65); the union won by a two-to-one margin.

New Ways to Exercise Leverage

If structural conditions have changed, if workers are skeptical of unions, then we need new forms of organizing, and three works, two of them by younger scholars, focus on alternatives to traditional union approaches. Gay Seidman looks at organizing consumers instead of workers, Amanda Tattersall at a focus on building community coalitions to exercise political power, and Jennifer Chun on the use of symbolic power.

Since union organizing is extraordinarily difficult in the United States, and dramatically more so in much of the Global South, consumer boycotts are an appealing alternative way to win decent pay and working conditions. In practice however, Seidman shows that boycotts are not controlled by the Global South workers themselves, but rather by well-meaning groups in the Global North. Instead of being run in solidarity with workers, boycotts are run for workers. Seidman shows that the boycotts have had very modest success in improving conditions for workers, and often create collateral damage, for example when people in the United States continue to boycott after the issues in El Salvador are resolved, leading to a drop in demand and worker layoffs. Fully aware of how counter-intuitive the conclusion might seem, Seidman argues that improved state regulation to enforce worker rights would probably provide more benefit than consumer boycotts.

Amanda Tattersall takes off from the same starting point: “Today, ‘the workers united’ are frequently defeated” (p. 2), which leads unions to seek (political) coalitions with community groups. Tattersall’s case studies—of union coalitions in Australia, Canada, and the United States—reach a number of counter-intuitive conclusions. It seems obvious that the more members of a coalition the better, but Tattersall finds that “less is more,” that coalitions with fewer members were stronger and more effective. Union leaders typically assume that the coalition will not serve labor’s interest unless
the union maintains tight control, but *Power in Coalition* argues the opposite: “Across the case studies, unions gained more power from working in coalition when they had less direct control over the coalition” (p. 161). It would seem easier to agree on a minimalist negative message (“stop Walmart”) than on a positive message, but the coalition message “was dramatically more powerful when it was positively framed” (p. 146) (“big box retailers should pay a living wage”).

Building coalitions is closely related to the issue of how workers and unions hope to exercise power. A generation and more ago, by far the most important source of union power was the strike. As that option has receded, at least in the United States (see below), labor has sought other ways of exercising leverage. Jennifer Chun’s *Organizing at the Margins: The Symbolic Politics of Labor in South Korea and the United States* develops the concept of symbolic power as an increasingly important part of labor’s toolkit. In recent years labor has won not primarily through strategic position and structural power (the auto workers shutting down one part of a tightly linked auto complex, depriving the company of all its transmissions), but rather through exercising symbolic power, appealing to a broader public and eliciting their support by influencing culture and public debates, articulating a set of values that speak to a general audience (an approach similar to the consumer boycotts that Seidman studied). It is more difficult for autoworkers or truck drivers to make such symbolic appeals, and very much related to that, they have had a difficult time winning victories. (The Teamsters’ greatest victory in the last generation, it is interesting to note, focused on winning jobs for part-time workers at UPS, who were said to be unreasonably exploited; that is, even Teamsters won in significant part through symbolic power.) The strike, we might say, gets replaced by a set of tactics that rely on “naming and shaming”—identifying those who are exploiting workers and holding these practices up to public scrutiny, enabling people to see and condemn those responsible. These new tactics are creative responses to the new forms of employment relationship, especially the rise of contingent, contracted out, flexible workers who are (it is claimed) employees of so-called “independent contractors” (say, a Chinese sweatshop) rather than of the entity that actually controls their terms of employment (Walmart).

Symbolic power, to the extent that it becomes crucial, in some sense reverses labor’s previous power dynamic. When labor’s power depended on strategic position, power tended to concentrate in those who had the most skill and occupied the most crucial positions; these were typically relatively well-paid white men. But to the degree that symbolic power is what matters, victory might be most likely for low-paid and poorly-treated women of color, and it might be most likely at employers with a high degree of brand recognition among final consumers. Thus Chun’s case studies focus on janitors at the leading universities in Korea and the United States, golf caddies in Korea, and home care workers in the United States.

**What Kind of Union?**

Innovation comes in many forms, not just boycotts, coalitions, and symbolic power. Ruth Milkman’s *L.A. Story* focuses on what in some sense is highly traditional union activity, and in other senses is totally innovative. I suspect that for most sociologists the focus will be on one of Milkman’s three key points, an historic shift by the labor movement, which had long advocated policies seen as anti-immigrant, and in the late 1990s and early 2000s flipped to strongly support immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, and to emphasize what was in practice already happening: the need to organize immigrant workers.

For those inside the labor movement however, two other arguments are likely to prove even more provocative. First, Milkman argues that Los Angeles’ labor revival was driven by unions that were once in the AFL, something of a surprise to people who still think of the CIO as the dynamic, progressive, rapidly growing part of the labor movement. AFL unions, she argues, emerged before the welfare state and monopoly mass production industry. They were occupationally-based and dealt with
a host of small and unstable manufacturers, “historical circumstances that are strikingly similar to those that unions face” (p. 4) today. The CIO unions emerged and grew together with the regulatory state; they relied on government-supervised elections and on a handful of employers dominating an industry. Now that those conditions no longer apply, the CIO unions do not have a viable strategy. The AFL unions on the other hand, have a long history of organizing employers as well as workers, persuading the employers that if the union represents more-or-less all of the workers in the industry, that provides a means to bring some stability and order, reducing ferocious competition that hurts company profits as well as worker wages.

Second, and entering into debates that have since become even more central to the labor movement, Milkman argues that labor’s Los Angeles success depended in significant part on the fact that AFL unions traditionally gave more power to staff, hired college-educated non-members as staff, and were more likely to put local unions into trusteeship. Trusteeship gives the national union the right to seize all the assets, remove all the staff and elected leaders of the local, and appoint new people to run the local. Put another way, local level union democracy might lead to stagnation; top-down control from the national union can shake things up. The fastest growing union, SEIU, has called this the difference between “just us” unionism (a focus on what is best for the workers already in the local union) and “justice” unionism (a focus on growing and reaching out to new workers). Such trusteeships are highly controversial (see below), can be abused, and can create problems, but, Milkman argues (as do Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman in their influential 2000 *AJS* article) that local unions often need to be pushed to be innovative, and many local unions have become ineffective or outright corrupt. The ability to shake things up—or threaten to do so—was, Milkman argues, one key to labor’s growth in Los Angeles. Milkman insists that top-down control is not enough: success depended on campaigns that combined strong staff strategic planning and resources with strong support from workers on the ground; if either of those elements was missing, the campaign failed; if both were present it succeeded.

In 2006 trusteeships and aggressive intervention by the national union might have looked like the route to union revitalization; by 2012 such a position seems much more problematic. In *L.A. Story* the exemplar union is the SEIU, one of the largest unions, probably the fastest growing, and probably the best at publicizing themselves and at connecting to non-labor groups, very much including academics. But recently SEIU has also been at war with others in labor, most notably with its own members in California and with another major national union (UNITE HERE), battles chronicled in Steve Early’s *The Civil Wars in U.S. Labor*.

Early’s primary focus, although by no means his only one, is on the national SEIU’s decision to “trustee” its 150,000 member California “local” (although with that many members it no longer resembles a traditional local). To “trustee” the local meant to remove all its elected leadership, to seize all its assets, to take control of its offices, to use a privatized security force to implement the takeover, and to bring in hundreds of outsiders to run the local. SEIU trustee that local, Early argues (and I would agree, but then I was a participant in these battles, and at times in alliance with Early), primarily or exclusively because the local challenged the policies of the national union. The reasons that are usually given for trusteeship did not apply: the union was not corrupt in any way, and it was one of the most dynamic and rapidly growing in SEIU. Early’s argument is that there has been too much focus on the difference between no union and having some sort of union, and not enough focus on the difference between a mediocre union and a strong union. Moreover, Early argues, although it may seem appealing to have control from the top by smart union staff who are comfortable talking to academics, before long that route leads to hubris, disaster, and destructive internal battles, as SEIU’s recent history shows. Winston Churchill noted (and Early effectively repeats) that “it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried…” (McAlevey, discussed below, is in many ways similar to Early, but she
shows little interest in issues of democracy. In the case of the California local, the leadership and much of the staff responded not by contesting the action within SEIU, but by starting a new union and fighting SEIU tooth and nail over who would represent the members. Millions have since been spent, and are still being spent, not on organizing non-union workers, but rather on which union will represent already unionized workers. In many ways that battle is a destructive waste, but there is also the possibility that it will lead both sides to build more effective unions.

Jane McAlevey’s *Raising Expectations* is at times even more biting than Early in its condemnation of national SEIU actions and leaders. (Both Early and McAlevey name names; one aspect of both books is a kind of *People* magazine for labor insiders; Early also discusses the role of academics involved in these battles.) As a marginal member of SEIU’s national leadership, she knows and presents the (or at least an) inside story of many key battles. For a certain part of the labor movement, that will be the book’s main interest. For most students and sociologists, however, the focus will be on McAlevey’s upbeat account of building a vibrant labor movement for healthcare workers in Nevada, particularly Las Vegas. *Raising Expectations*, an autobiography by a leading labor organizer who is now taking a pause and earning a doctorate in sociology, presents perhaps the most readable and fun account I know of what it means to build a militant and participatory labor movement, even if the account ends in double dealing, disaster, and expulsion. Consider just one of the many examples McAlevey offers of doing things differently: most union contract negotiations consist of five people from the employer side facing five people from the union side (typically, one staff person and four workers). In McAlevey’s version, the union bargaining team was 120 workers, one representative for each 15 workers, and all 120 workers spoke at bargaining, each presenting one part of the worker-union proposals; all workers, not just those on the (already large) bargaining team, were encouraged to attend negotiations. In Steve Lopez’s account of the SEIU local he studied, when he was working as a union intern “he sent the group [of nursing home workers] into paroxysms of anger” when he referred to the union having done something. Workers responded to his remarks by saying “The union DIDN’T stop privatization—WE did!” (p. 132), although workers and community members had done so through a campaign coordinated by the union, and which could not have happened without the union. The hope is that sustained experience with McAlevey’s form of union negotiations would lead workers to conclude “we are the union,” that it does not make sense to talk of workers and the union as separate entities. On the other hand, the conclusion of events in Nevada (you’ll have to read the book to find out) challenges the hope to build such a union.

**Strikes**

The recent focus in the labor movement on what kind of union is needed, and recent divisions within labor, as well as the focus on new ways to exercise leverage, are in some sense linked to what the labor movement has avoided for many years—strikes. In 1970, 320 strikes involved more than 1,000 workers; in 2009, only five did. (The Reagan administration stopped collecting data on smaller strikes; the drop there is probably just as precipitous.) Whether by coincidence or by some larger karma, in the last year three of the most stimulating and provocative labor books have focused on strikes.

Back in the day, strikes not only helped win better conditions, they provided a concrete test of worker support, and forced unions to reach out to members, educate them, and actively work to build solidarity. In most cases, a simple majority is nowhere near enough to win a strike, and the commitment has to be many orders of magnitude higher than that required to sign an email petition. Strikes provided a no-way-to-hide-it test of the level of worker willingness to confront employer power, and every few years forced unions to re-organize and re-invigorate. The absence of strikes hollows out a union, and creates the kind of low visibility, low engagement, do-nothing unions that lead national leaders (and sympathetic...
across the board. The absence of strikes may help explain not only the rise of the alternative tactics studied by Seidman, Tattersall, and Chun, but also labor’s internal wars, the use of trusteeships, and the focus on ways to revive moribund unions.

As Joe Burns shows in *Reviving the Strike*, the problem is that a series of laws, court decisions, and regulatory actions have made it increasingly difficult to strike. The basic rule is that if any labor tactic is effective, it will be made illegal, whether solidarity strikes, secondary boycotts, partial strikes, or sit-down strikes. Not surprisingly, the dramatic turning point was 1981 and the PATCO strike. Following that, the number of strikes dropped precipitously, and in the most visible way. The absence of strikes may help explain not only the rise of the alternative tactics studied by Seidman, Tattersall, and Chun, but also labor’s internal wars, the use of trusteeships, and the focus on ways to revive moribund unions.

Two impressive recent books, Joseph A. McCartin’s *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike that Changed America* and Chris Rhomberg’s *The Broken Table: The Detroit Newspaper Strike and the State of American Labor*, show how strong worker solidarity can be, how long workers can hold firm, what heavy costs a strike can inflict on employers, and how workers can nonetheless lose. Both books are based on massive amounts of data, show the long history leading up to the strike as the employer saw it, and as the union saw it, show what was going on behind the scenes, including the divisions within the union side and within the employer side, give us a good sense of how the strike was in some sense inevitable and in another sense contingent, and are surprisingly good reads. McCartin analyzes the more decisive battle, indeed the most important U.S. strike since 1937, but Rhomberg does more to put the strike in the context of American labor more generally, and to relate the strike to social science literature on unions and on conflicts.

McCartin tells the story of PATCO before its inception to years after the conclusion of the strike, a fascinating story with many twists and turns. Most air traffic controllers were military veterans with limited education who believed in America, discipline, and hierarchy. But the humiliating ways they were treated, the stress of the work, and the very real danger that the work practices would lead them to be the putative cause of collisions killing hundreds of people led them to organize, at first for airline safety, always for dignity and respect at work, and at the end for major pay raises. After the course of a decade air traffic controllers took several illegal strikes and job actions; in just about every case they won, and although a few people were fired, almost all of them got their jobs back. In 1981, Reagan authorized a pay package that was considerably more generous than the guidelines he had said must govern all federal workers, but the union rejected that offer, and at that point Reagan decided to crush the union and fire every striking air traffic controller. PATCO activists thought the strike would impose huge costs and cripple air travel. To a considerable degree they were right—the strike cost airlines $1 billion per month at the outset (p. 304), and even a year later TWA was down 17 percent and Pan Am down 31 percent (p. 305)—but the government never wavered.

Rhomberg’s story is in many ways very similar, although in his case it was the employers, not the workers, who were determined to force a confrontation. The unions maintained an impressive degree of solidarity, and held for a very long time, in fact for years. In the union town of Detroit, community support was solid: ad lineage fell by one-third, the newspapers reported losing $92 million in the first six months, and they did not report circulation figures for a year after the strike began. Although Rhomberg does not stress this point, I would say that he fairly decisively shows that had the struggle been confined to Detroit, had two Detroit newspapers confronted five Detroit unions, the employers could not have survived, could not have been as vicious and intransigent as they were, and would have had to accept the compromise offers the unions were prepared to accept. But by 1995 the newspapers were parts of massive chains and could sustain huge Detroit losses indefinitely in order to establish, for the nation as a whole, that newspaper employers were willing and able to grind workers and unions into the dust, so that if unions wanted to survive at all they had to accept...
most of what employers demanded. Based on Rhomberg’s impressive evidence of the level of worker and community support, I would conclude that this strike, and by extension many similar strikes, could not be won in a single city. Setting aside all the other ways the law favors employers (and the ways are legion) unless worker and unions can organize on the same scale as employers it will be extraordinarily difficult to win.

Next Steps?
Labor scholarship responds to on-the-ground battles. In recent years it has moved from “how can we do a better job with our traditional organizing activities?” to a focus on innovative forms of action, combined with a consideration of how we can reinvigorate existing unions, and the labor wars that have gone with that. Arguably, all of these changes are a response to the inability to strike—still technically legal, but in practice facing the unified power of employers and the courts, and rarely winning. The loss of the strike weapon makes it difficult to win substantial improvements for workers. As AFL-CIO president John Sweeney said following the 1997 Teamster UPS strike, “You could make a million house calls and run a thousand television commercials and stage a hundred strawberry rallies, and still not come close to doing what the UPS strike did for organizing” (Rhomberg, p. 270).

Since the on-the-ground action is shifting, labor-related scholarship is sure to shift. In the next decade we can anticipate exciting new work on labor’s response to Republican attacks on public sector unions in Wisconsin, Ohio, and elsewhere; on Occupy and the labor movement; on attempts to blame teachers and their unions for all the problems with education, and sometimes for inequality more generally; and on unspecified-unknown issues that are soon to emerge, but have not yet come to prominence.

Reference