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What is This?
What Drives a Labor Upsurge?
A Rejoinder

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I wrote The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements in hopes of stimulating, and participating in, exactly the kind of discussion presented here. These essays engage issues that will be central to any attempt to revive the labor movement. The contributors are generous about my own work, and at the same time raise challenges and add analyses that address the problems labor faces today. The labor movement will advance more through sharp and vigorous debate than by papering over differences. I’d rather that my bold analysis be proven wrong and contribute to the needed debate than to offer only vague generalities that don’t help to advance the labor movement. My comments are written in that spirit.

The discussion here is important not just to academics, but even more so to the labor movement, raising concerns that the New Unity Partnership driven debate has failed to acknowledge, much less to examine.

I can’t address all the points raised in this symposium. It seems most useful to focus on four major points, each raised by more than one contributor: the extent to which labor should focus on low-wage workers, the concept of fusion, my US-centric analysis, and the likelihood of an upsurge, including the relationship of troughs to upsurges. All these points (and many others) are, of course, inextricably linked.

Low-Wage Workers and Power

Where should labor unions put their resources and effort? Here Janice Fine and Amy Bromsen adopt opposing viewpoints. Fine argues that, “I think Clawson underestimates the power that would accrue to organized...
labor if it were simply to focus on organizing the very large numbers of low-wage workers in the United States.”

Janice Fine’s (2005) book provides the best overview of workers centers. She is both totally committed to the cause, and perceptive about the contradictions and limitations faced by workers centers. Workers centers organize constituencies that today’s unions neglect; many of those organized have employment patterns – irregular work for multiple employers – that today’s unions are structurally ill-suited to serve.

The question that Fine poses here has to do with the relative importance of this form, and this set of workers, for future labor advances. Fine objects to what she sees as my qualifications, insisting that “it seems to me to require no qualification whatsoever to say that it would be an enormous step forward if organized labor were able to succeed in unionizing a significant number” of the 27 million low-wage workers.

The labor movement, and the left more generally, often avoid issues of the relative importance of different kinds of struggles, for the very good reason that people don’t want to undercut or disparage other people’s struggles. But at the same time collectively the larger movement needs to make decisions about where to put its resources and effort. We could imagine positions from “it makes no sense to organize such workers” to “organizing such workers should be the primary [or even exclusive] goal of a labor movement.” In *The Next Upsurge* I write that the focus on low-wage workers is a strength, that organizing low-wage service workers “is clearly vital,” but that it is a limitation of the Stamford Organizing Project that it only organizes such workers since “the labor movement needs to find equally innovative ways to organize the far more numerous clerical, technical, and professional workers.” (p. 122) I would count two of the book’s four case study chapters as focusing on low-wage workers (chapters on community and on living wages), so the criticism seems a bit misplaced.

What organizing should be our priority and why? It seems to me that Marx offered at least four reasons for his focus on the working class. First, workers are oppressed, treated badly by this society so that they have little reason for loyalty to the existing order and instead have significant reason to support something better (you have nothing to lose but your chains). Second, workers are numerous; in fact, he argued, a large majority of the total population. Third, they are brought together and cooperate in the process of production and hence can effectively organize themselves, as opposed to peasants whose work isolates and divides them. Fourth, once organized, workers have the strategic position to gain real power – a shutdown in trucking has a more immediate effect on the economy than a student strike.
It seems to me that much of the left today focuses primarily on the issue of oppression, arguing that we should organize the most oppressed. This is the most morally compelling vision, and these are the people who are (believed to be) most likely to fight for radical and far-reaching change. But at least one strand of Marxism traditionally adopted an alternative focus, emphasizing those workers with the most strategic position, the people whose labor is vital to the day-to-day functioning of the economy. As Beverly Silver’s (2003) work shows, in country after country auto workers succeeded in unionizing primarily because, in a tightly interconnected production system, a group of workers were able to shut down a chokepoint. In order to hold on, those workers needed support from other workers and the community, but it was the ability to control a chokepoint that brought in the union, not just in the United States, but in most countries. This is the approach that Bromsen emphasizes throughout her piece, for example in her insistence that the key question should be “where is power located? Does labor bring any special power to achieving the goals of other movements?”

In many ways this debate is similar to the labor movement’s debate about whether the focus should be on “hot shops” – workers who are angry and eager to unionize – or strategic organizing – careful consideration of what will increase workers’ power and enable workers to institutionalize long-run gains. A militant campaign that organizes oppressed workers is a good thing under any circumstances, but if the company is so marginal that a pay increase leads to bankruptcy within months, it’s reasonable to ask whether such campaigns should be the priority.

In today’s labor movement, on the one hand each individual and organization must make choices about where to put their time and resources, but we need to recognize that it seriously weakens the movement if we are confined to (or excluded from) a sector. We need to organize clerical workers as well as janitors, graduate students as well as hotel maids, computer programmers as well as day laborers. In today's world, who has the most potential to bring the system to a halt? Perhaps those who program and operate computer and communication systems are poised to shutdown the economy. Are janitors important? Absolutely! Is it a limitation if labor does not have equally innovative organizing among clerical workers and professionals? Definitely. If anything I regret that The Next Upsurge did not devote more attention to white collar workers and professionals; the labor movement will be ever more vulnerable if it becomes ghettoized among low-wage workers of color.
Is Fusion the Way to Go?

If there was one thing I knew when writing The Next Upsurge, it was that my argument for the concept of fusion would be challenged. Most commentators have rejected the approach, but they’ve taken it seriously and engaged a debate that needs to happen. It seems to me that groups and movements in their practice and on the ground are embracing a limited fusion, although not doing so self-consciously.

Bruce Nissen’s perceptive analysis clearly lays out the issues and alternative possible meanings, and does so with more detail than I do in The Next Upsurge. Nissen says that “If I understand it correctly, [fusion] would require the US labor movement to take up these other causes in such a central and direct way that they become part of the very core of union programs.” Yes, that is exactly what I mean. Nissen also correctly notes that this would require unions to direct a major part of their activity in the community, and he recognizes that some of the most successful labor movements in the world— in Brazil and in South Africa, for example— have done exactly that.1 Nissen, quite reasonably, asks “Can the US labor movement transform itself to such a degree that, for example, environmental issues become equally important to many unions as the protection of the pay and benefits and working conditions of those unions’ members?” He finds it difficult to envision that this could be a central focus for unions, as opposed to something done in a supplementary way.

Nissen goes to the heart of the issues, and I’d like to take this chance to further develop my position. If we think about where and how to move forward toward fusion, no union will immediately take up all issues, and the issues that become central (in the next year or two) will differ from one union to the next. For Justice for Janitors, or for UNITE-HERE, immigrant rights are central to their members. Taking care of workplace issues isn’t enough if members are unable to get drivers’ licenses, constantly fear deportation, and can’t send their children to schools. To win workers’ allegiance, and address the problems in their lives, the union has a responsibility to take up immigrant rights issues. In a faculty union these issues may not be as immediately visible and central.2 In some

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1 US labor also invests large sums in politics, but it’s for the Democrats’ presidential champ-of-the-year, not for labor-led initiatives to benefit the working class.

2 But even in a faculty union international faculty have problems with H-1B visas and with students who object to faculty accents, and faculty (especially in the sciences) have problems with the ways their graduate students are treated by the US immigration process. In the union I belong to international faculty organized a caucus to discuss these issues.
unions, environmental issues may seem remote, but in a community where the factory’s waste products go into the community’s drinking water, the connection may be easy to understand (see Commoner 1973).

In our faculty union, we are trying to build a coalition with students, with the faculty joining in a campaign for free tuition and fees, and students joining in a campaign to increase the number (and proportion) of tenure-track faculty. It’s a stretch to persuade faculty that they should want – never mind fight for – free tuition, but it’s a reasonable argument, one that many faculty understand and embrace. Even those who do not, understand that our union’s support for the issue makes it much easier to mobilize student support for increases in tenure-track faculty. Nissen is absolutely correct that if a union approaches these issues by beginning with issues (that at least seem) remote from workers’ immediate interests, then it will be much more difficult to gain support.

We can think of the fusion issue along a continuum. At one end is the single-issue movement (including many unions) that relentlessly refuses to deal with any other issue, and may define its issue in the narrowest possible terms. At the other end of the continuum (as Bruce Nissen notes) is a political party that (in theory) addresses all the issues in a society. I sometimes think that I am calling for fusion because of the absence of a strong left political party that would address a wide range of issues, that if we had such a party fusion might be less of an issue – or perhaps it would be more of a reality, and easier to understand why it was needed.

A US-Centric Analysis

Roberto Franzosi, and even more so Beverly Silver, note that my analysis is almost entirely focused on the United States. Silver is extremely generous, saying that given my goals as scholar-activist, my concentration on the United States is appropriate and that the core argument probably would not change substantially if I directly confronted the question of the framework’s broader relevance. Perhaps that’s true, and because the United States is (currently) the world’s hegemonic power,

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3 In California, the Los Angeles Federation of Labor is working on a ballot initiative to win free tuition for all community college students, not only because it’s the right thing to do, but also because it will help the Los Angeles labor federation strengthen connections with an increasingly important constituency and area for union growth, the students at community colleges who work in many potentially union jobs.

4 Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (2005) show the difference that an organized left can make in the issues a union addresses and the ways it does so.
what happens here is critical to the future of labor movements and the left, not only in the United States, but also around the world. The real reason for limiting my attention to the United States is my own lack of knowledge.

Beverly Silver’s book, *Forces of Labor: Workers Movements and Globalization Since 1870*, came out the same year as mine did, and I read her work too late to incorporate her ideas in my own book. It’s an absolutely brilliant analysis, and has shaped my subsequent thinking. Those of us who study US labor tend as a result to develop a certain insularity and myopia; I certainly had done so. Along with other works I’ve read, *Forces of Labor* has convinced me that it’s crucial for those focused on US labor to connect to the work of labor scholars and activists around the world. Silver shows that faced with a labor upsurge, one of the responses of capital is to seek a spatial fix, to move capital to another country with a less well-organized workforce. That spatial fix works for a time, but as Marx argued, working class self-organization and rebellion is an almost inevitable consequence of capitalist production. Silver is able to trace the migration of capital from one country to another, and to show that labor upsurges follow that movement of capital, so that we have a series of staggered upsurges around the world.

Silver’s analysis argues that to know where the next labor upsurge will be, we should see where capital is flowing and capitalist production is newly booming. Today that means above all China, and Silver applies my book’s analysis (and her own) to the case of China, probably the country that is most important to the future of the world economy and which should be most important to the US labor movement. In addition to Silver’s spatial fix, leading to a staggered series of labor upsurges, with each country experiencing an upsurge at a different period, there are also long waves in the world-system. As Roberto Franzosi and Amy Bromsen point out, during the late 1960s a long wave led to upsurges in many countries at (roughly) the same time.

In the book I applaud the US labor movement for its post-Sweeney increase in internationalism, and argue that support for international labor standards is a significant advance over a protectionist position. Silver criticizes this on two grounds, and she is right in both cases. First, she says, support for international labor standards is a top-down approach, one that relies on national governments and even more undemocratic international bodies. That contrasts with the more bottom-up, worker self-organization, emphasis in the rest of the book. Second, Silver questions

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5 An earlier symposium focused on my book’s applicability to Europe and Canada (*Labor History* 45(3), August 2004): 333-382.
the extent to which the US labor movement is in fact internationalist, and whether (for example) US labor would support trade sanctions directed at the United States.

Here’s my response: It is true that support for international labor standards is a top-down approach, and that does contradict the approach in the rest of the book. But the chapter also talks about cross-border organizing, and labor movements supporting each other’s struggles, as happened in the 1997 UPS strike. Even the struggle for international labor standards can and does take place through mass demonstrations rather than attempts to lobby influential trade negotiators. I find it difficult to believe that the next upsurge will provide effective internationalist solutions to the movement of global capital – I see that happening in the following upsurge.

Second, of course US labor’s current internationalism is spotty and thin (as is its support for immigrants and low-wage workers), but even that marks a major advance. I’d argue it’s important to recognize, and praise, and defend, that advance, at the same time that we work to push it forward. At this moment in time a shift in labor’s stance is less likely to be toward greater internationalism than it is to be a reversion to something approximating straightforward protectionism. We should take opportunities to push for greater internationalism but as with any organizing, work hard to consolidate broad support in whatever we do – support for the Iraqi labor movement, demonstrations against the FTAA, or solidarity with labor struggles around the globe.

Evidence for an Upsurge?

Almost all the contributors raise issues about the probability and meaning of upsurge, as well as how we should behave in the current (non-upsurge) period. Bruce Nissen is “troubled by how thin the empirical evidence is that an upsurge is likely in the near future.” Anytime someone predicts society will soon experience a qualitative break, the evidence will likely not support the claim – yet sometimes a qualitative break does indeed occur. No one can with confidence, much less with evidence, demonstrate there will be a near-term qualitative break. Jim Crotty likes to say that Marxists have correctly predicted 12 out of the last 2 economic crises, and that this is a better record than mainstream economists, who haven’t predicted any of them. My prediction of an upsurge may have the same character.

Both Bruce Nissen and Janice Fine offer their own one-sentence capsules of what will be necessary for the next upsurge. Nissen says that,
“A movement upsurge in labor will occur if and when masses of American workers find the existing treatment of workers to be intolerable, and they believe an alternative is possible.” Fine argues that, “To organize millions of new workers today, women and men must be won to the mission of the labor movement.” In one sense, of course I agree. In another, I disagree.

Nissen’s formulation, and to a lesser extent Fine’s, operate on the common assumption that ideas and consciousness precede action. This was not Marx’s analysis, and it is not mine in The Next Upsurge. To the contrary, I believe that praxis is usually ahead of consciousness; rather than consciousness leading to advances in praxis, praxis leads to advances in consciousness. That is why I focus on the struggles workers have undertaken; in the process of struggle people’s consciousness is transformed, so that by the end of the campaign they may view the world very differently than they did before it began (Fantasia 1988).

But these struggles are not simply acts of will. It is not that at any time, on any issue, if we just had good enough organizers, or dedicated enough rank-and-file activists, labor could launch an upsurge. This is where the gap may be greatest between what I thought I was arguing, and how it appears (some of) my critics understood me. Roberto Franzosi writes that “Surprisingly, in fact, Clawson does not talk about structures” and he concludes that I look “for causes of upsurges in immediate events.” To the contrary, chapter two frames what is meant by a labor regime, how the pieces of it connect in mutually reinforcing ways such that it is difficult to make gradual changes. Each of the case studies chapters begins with several pages analyzing how the world has changed since the upsurge of the 1930s and the consolidation of a new labor regime in the 1940s. What is possible depends on those changes in material conditions, and in turn I find that the struggles actually taking place are precisely those that address changes in the material world.

The change is not smooth and gradual because a labor regime constrains people to behave in particular ways, offering rewards for doing so and penalties for attempting to operate within a different paradigm. As I wrote:

A successful labor regime requires that both business and labor receive benefits from cooperating with the system, that both business and labor pay a cost for not doing so, that there be legitimate but bounded ways for business and labor to contest with each other, and that there be some means of enforcing decisions. . . . To operate as a regime the balance of power must be such that each side prefers to conduct the contest within the accepted rules rather than to break those rules and engage in open unbounded warfare. In the quarter-century after World War II, this was usually the case. (2003: 33)
One major force making a labor upsurge possible is the dramatic changes that have taken place in the world – increases in women’s labor force activity, the movement of African Americans out of the rural South, the rise of immigration from Asia and Latin America, globalization, the increased importance of college education. But also important has been the ferocious employer assault on labor. Because the system is rigged, so that unions find it less and less possible to win within the (increasingly restrictive) rules, workers are forced to either give up or launch struggles outside the framework of the labor regime, for example by using non-NLRB organizing strategies.

It isn’t enough simply to operate outside the rules-as-they-have-been. An upsurge happens when struggles reach new demographic groups, take up new issues, develop new forms, and create new tactics. This is where Janice Fine’s work is so exciting: what she shows is the development of a new form, workers centers. We know that they are responding to structural changes in US demographics and the (increasingly casualized) labor market, but we can’t yet tell what will become of workers centers (or the workers whose needs they address). As Fine notes: “It is not yet clear whether immigrant worker centers will follow a trajectory toward social movement organization, labor market institution or a new organizational form that is a combination of the two.” As she also notes, “Many immigrant worker centers attract workers not so much on the basis of occupation or industry, as ethnicity and geography.” Fine’s argument here is similar to my own that the new form may be more like Jobs with Justice than it is like existing (workplace-based) unions.

Bruce Nissen raises a central issue, and in doing so points to a significant limitation in The Next Upsurge: what should workers and unions do in the troughs, in the periods between upsurges? To begin with, as Bromsen notes, we must “understand the nature of the present period.” My short capsule of what that involves: be self-conscious about the character of the last labor regime, the way the world has changed, and the kinds of issues and groups that will need to be part of the next labor regime; try to create the sorts of structures and actions, and to incorporate the demographic groups, that will be needed to create a fundamentally different labor regime; fiercely resist thinking “well, this is the way labor has always done it” or “well, that may be a problem, but it’s not a union issue.” If we can attempt to develop exemplary struggles and new forms of organization, we help create the building blocks that will make a new upsurge possible. We should recognize that during this period most of our efforts will fail, but they might be the sort of “successful failures” (as Eve Weinbaum [forthcoming] has called them) that lay the foundation for a new burst of social movements.
This relates as well to the role of existing union leadership and staff: are they needed in order “to artificially stimulate the rank-and-file activism they seek” (Nissen) or is it that “the labor bureaucracy has become one of the greatest barriers to an upsurge of working people” (Bromsen). Setting aside “artificially” (since, after all, employers are always “artificially” repressing workers’ activism), both may be true. It may be that when promoting the issues and tactics that existing leadership take for granted, all sorts of prodding is necessary. But it may also be that the labor bureaucracy is a barrier to attempts to do things in new ways, to take risks. The labor bureaucrats are undoubtedly correct that most of these risky efforts would fail and some would cause major harm to the union—but others might provide the breakthrough exemplary struggle.

What might it take to launch an upsurge? Roberto Franzosi feels that I look “for causes of upsurges in immediate events” and Bruce Nissen that a mass upsurge “depends heavily on something extraordinary occurring.” Well, yes and no. The last labor upsurge was a result of an external shock, the Great Depression. But the civil rights movement—which in turn helped generate a cascade of other movements—was internally generated. This emphatically does not mean that all things are possible at all times—material conditions help determine what is and is not possible—but it is to insist that human agency plays an important role. When conditions are right—when (as is now the case) employer structures have changed but unions have not yet found solutions to the new problems—an exemplary struggle can turn a seemingly hopeless situation into a burst of energy and a new movement. Whether it is the Montgomery bus boycott or the sit-ins of the spring of 1960, actions took on a life of their own that no one anticipated—even though core groups of activists were important in driving the changes. Under Lenin the Bolshevik paper was titled “The Spark”: by itself a spark quickly dies out, but if the fuel is heaped up ready for combustion a spark can make all the difference, changing the world forever. It is not a question of event [agency] or structure, but rather of agency (and event) responding to structure to create a new praxis.
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