

*Race and Labor Matters in the New U.S. Economy*, by **Manning Marable**, **Immanuel Ness**, and **Joseph Wilson**, Eds. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006. 192 pp. NPL paper. ISBN: 978-0-7425-4691-2

*L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. labor Movement*, by **Ruth Milkman**. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006. 193 pp. NPL paper. ISBN: 978-0-87154-635-7

*Slaves to Fashion: Poverty and Abuse in the New Sweatshops*, by **Robert J. S. Ross**. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. NPL paper. ISBN: 978-0-472-03022-4

*A Country that Works: Getting America Back on Track*, by **Andy Stern**. New York: Free Press, 2006. \$24 cloth. ISBN: 978-0-7432-9767-7

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### **Can Labor Last? Or Again Lead? And Can We Help?**

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, 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 contemporaries of ours (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.

A good place to start is with a contentious matter many (white) union leaders rankle at. Published in 2006, *Race and Labor Matters in the New U.S. Economy* is a collection of heated essays by 13 contributors (four of whom are sociologists) who lambaste Organized Labor for having marginalized and submerged race. They trace responsibility here in large part to academics and allied union leaders who mistakenly view race as subservient to class: Those they label class-only scholars are condemned for obscuring the significance and interplay of race in politics, economics, and culture.

One especially knowledgeable contributor, Bill Fletcher, Jr., a rare Labor insider, shares cautious hope in the pro-minority possibilities of the Change to Win Federation (CWF). This bloc of seven major progressive unions 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.

**Comment:** Not all of the CTW unions can be characterized as progressive

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, Fletchers' 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 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,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 21<sup>st</sup> century looked a lot like the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>." (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. As well, strengthening of pro-worker policies of government. And at the same time, 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.334) He has no allusions 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 sub-title 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 shortsighted employers to create marginal and low-paying, rather than secure and well-paying jobs has stirred deep resentment among workers. And 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 sociologist could help with). As well, unions must simultaneously link pro-union rank-and-filers 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-filers, and promotes the hegemony of better-educated 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 “must” reading 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, Stern stands out among his peers in being an avowed futurist. A close reader of Alvin Toffler’s’ popular books about tomorrow and a friend of Newt Gingrich (a Toffler devotee); Stern would upgrade unions into problem-solving, member-connected, and future-oriented organizations.

He rues the meagerness of imagination of most labor leaders, and challenges them to join him in considering ideas uncommon in their mental world.

Stern, for example, calls on unions to act as outsourcers for benefits administration, compliance, hiring, training, and the setting of industry standards. He can imagine unions becoming a new permanent partner of employees whose work is transitory, a type he expects to greatly expand: Unions could advise, invest, and oversee retirement funds, as well as offer lifetime health care benefits at low cost. Stern envisions global unions capable of supporting coordinated organizing campaigns aimed at the far-flung operations of multinational firms. He

also dreams aloud about a day soon when global movements might combine in one synergistic body the groups that now separately focus on Corporate Social Responsibility, the Environment, Human Rights, Labor, and Sustainability, etc. Best of all, Stern has task forces actively promoting all of these ideas, and many more.

Drawing contradictory leads from the four books together, it would seem Organized Labor has at least an even chance of soon stemming its losses, and earning significant membership gains. Leaders know racism eats at its soul, along with ageism, sexism, and related ills that tax American society in general. But the best leaders also know growth in non-white ranks augurs well for unionization, provided white power-holders prove man enough to accept power-sharing deals. Second, labor leaders know anti-union global employers, as in the garment industry, appear unbeatable. But the best of them also know many corporate vulnerabilities. Above all, nearly everyone in Labor knows the status quo is not an option. The split in 2005, on the very eve of the 50<sup>th</sup> 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.

**Comment:** You might want to make this term gender neutral

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 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. 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 dinner or a beer in a neighborhood bar.”)  
(Stern, 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.

Comment: You mean diner?

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