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# In Critical Solidarity

*Newsletter of the American Sociological Association's  
Section on Labor and Labor Movements*

**Vol. 5, No. 2**

**November 2005**

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## Labor's Civil War

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**Jonathan Cutler**

After 50 years of labor unity—and declining union vitality—the organized labor movement in the United States has split into two rival federations. Will the emergent rift develop into a civil war, or will unity prevail? Will the new federation represent a more progressive alternative? Does infighting in the house of labor portend the final collapse of unionism in the United States, or will competition between warring federations enhance the vitality of the labor movement? While it is too early to predict the consequences of the battle—and may be premature to speculate about the causes of the rupture—students of labor would do well to use the occasion to reflect on the implications of unity and rivalry among labor movement organizations.

On Monday, July 25, 2005, as the AFL-CIO prepared to celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary convention, two of the largest unions in the United States—the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters—formally disaffiliated from the umbrella organization. By late September, five additional unions—the food and commercial workers (UFCW), the hotel, restaurant, and apparel union (UNITE/HERE), the Carpenters Union, the Laborers Union, and the United Farm Workers—had joined the two first breakaway unions to form a new 5.4 million member rival labor federation called “Change to Win.”

There are three possible scenarios for the dual federations, and each scenario represents a signpost on the road to labor's civil war. In the first scenario, the two federations will simply go their own separate ways; secession without war. In the second scenario, the federation affiliates actively compete to organize overlapping groups of unorganized workers.

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## 2005 Section Awards

**Best Student Paper Award:** David Fitzgerald, for “Mexican State Responses to Labor Migration, 1900-1924.”

**Sociology of Labor Book Award:** Steve Lopez, for *Reorganizing the Rust Belt: An Inside Study of the American Labor Movement* (University of California Press).

**Honorable Mention:** Chun Soonok, *They Are Not Machines: Korean Women Workers and their Fight for Democratic Trade Unionism in the 1970s* (Ashgate).

**Honorable Mention:** Beverly Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (Cambridge University Press).

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## Welcome from the Chair

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*Peter Evans*

The Labor and Labor Movements Section proved its vitality at the 2005 ASA in Philadelphia and continues to grow. Our sessions at the meetings were overflowing with people and full of new ideas about the current challenges facing the labor movement and those who try to analyze and understand it. On the Friday before the ASA, the Mini-conference on Global Labor, which we organized together with the Political Economy of the World System and Political Sociology Sections, drew more than 100 participants, who debated labor and globalization with undiminished energy from 9 in the morning until 10 in the evening.

Our membership has risen to an all-time high of 371 and is still climbing. With some concerted effort next spring and summer, we should be able to top the magic number of 400 and gain the right to organize three regular sessions at the 2007 ASA meetings instead of two.[continued next page]

From the Editor**Survey Says: Electronic Newsletter**

We conducted a survey of attendees at the section's business meeting at ASA. Questions centered on the acceptability of an electronic version of the newsletter. Hard copies of the newsletter are the section's main expense.

About 90% of the attendees (42 people) filled out the survey. The results were overwhelmingly in favor of an electronic newsletter. Twenty-eight gave an unqualified yes to electronic, four said no, and seven felt an electronic newsletter was acceptable in order to save money. Three respondents did not answer the question, but two of those did say they would read an electronic copy (as did most respondents). In September, Council approved the change to the electronic format.

Respondents expressed a desire for shorter newsletters available in PDF format. A majority of those who specified a preference felt that mini-conferences would be the best use of the extra money.

Many members requested more symposia, debates, and book reviews; others asked for information on new books and dissertations, member news and ongoing research, news about the labor movement, labor resources, and funding sources. If you have ideas or wish to contribute, please email the editor at <rachel.sherman@yale.edu>.

[Evans, continued from p. 1] We are going to need bigger rooms for the 2006 ASA meetings in Montreal. The Montreal meetings portend a stimulating blend of scholarship and praxis. In addition to our two regular sessions, there will be at least three other sessions which speak directly to our interests, including one on the split in the AFL-CIO, featuring former section chairs Ruth Milkman and Dan Clawson, along with labor leaders from both the U.S. and Canada. We are also hoping to organize a reception at a local union hall that will give section members a chance to become better acquainted with the vibrant and effective Quebecois labor movement. Don't miss the Montreal meetings!

In the meantime, many of us will be participating in the July 2006 meetings of the Labor Movements stream (RC44) of the International Sociological Association in Durban, South Africa (see box). This will give us a chance to build new ties with labor and

labor movements scholars and activists other regions, especially those who work in the countries of the Global South, where the challenges to growing the labor movement are even more daunting than the ones most of us are familiar with in the United States, but where the response to these challenges has been correspondingly creative and militant.

In short, we can look ahead to another exciting year in the life of a section whose members have shown extraordinary energy and commitment from its inception. Our progress over the coming year will be documented 21<sup>st</sup> century style, both on our website and in our new all-electronic newsletter. The money that we save by leaving the expensive and unecological world of paper behind will give us new resources to put into innovative activities along the lines of the 2005 mini-conference.

As the section grows over the coming year, I know that I can count on all of you for new ideas to make our section an even more active intellectual community, better connected to one of the publics most vital to any public sociology—the working people of the world and the organizations that try to advance their interests.

### **The ISA and Labor in South Africa July 23-29, 2006**

The International Sociological Association meets next summer in Durban, South Africa. The ISA's Research Committee on Labor (the labor section), is working to organize a dozen different panels to bring together people from around the world who focus on labor; the organizers also intend to provide time for people to meet and get to know each other. The meetings will be a chance to learn from, and connect with, labor scholars from around the world. There's no better place to do that than South Africa, where labor has played, and continues to play, a crucial role.

\* The overall conference link is:

<http://www.ucm.es/info/isa/congress2006>

\* Link to RC-44 at:

<http://www.ucm.es/info/isa/rc44.htm>

\* RC44's "call for papers" for Durban is at:

<http://www.ucm.es/info/isa/congress2006/rc/rc44.durban.htm>

--Dan Clawson

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## Sometimes Things Work Out Well: Here's Why.

### The Mini-conference on Global Labor

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Robert J.S. Ross

The August 12 "Labor and Globalization" mini-conference, co-sponsored by the Political Economy of the World System, Labor, and Political Sociology sections of the ASA, attracted over 100 participants—both scholars and activists—to a daylong discussion of what globalization means for workers in different parts of the world, and workers' responses to it. Here we note some of the lofty and mundane reasons the meeting worked so well.

The conference had a long gestation. Originally proposed at a PEWS business meeting in 2001, the first call to PEWS members was narrowly cast, late, and produced few submissions. PEWS shelved the idea, and deciding to schedule the conference during a year when PEWS sessions were on the first day of the ASA, to make it more convenient for section members to attend.

Connections among the leaders of PEWS, Labor, and Political Sociology sections eventually produced the co-sponsorship. This was critical to two aspects of the conference's success; an ample supply of excellent papers (literally doubling the number of sessions the organizers originally anticipated), and a very large pool of potential attendees (about 1200 combined members).

The players were constantly consulted and "on board." Peter Evans, representing Labor, Gay Seidman, and Robert Ross (both from PEWS) organized the conference. Dan Clawson and Fred Block (chairs of Labor and Political Sociology sections) "ratified" decisions as they were made. The call for papers was distinguished by its breadth, and when an avalanche of papers was proposed, it was Gay who urged us to desert the original notion of small-conference intimacy (everyone at every session) and opt instead for the joys of wider participation. It was Peter Evans whose organizational proposal for panels helped the chairs figure out how to accommodate the riches with which we were presented.

[continued, p. 4]

## *Call for Nominations: 2006 Section Awards*

The Labor and Labor Movements Section offers TWO awards for scholarly work this year:

### **MOST OUTSTANDING STUDENT PAPER AWARD**

For the best Graduate Student Paper on Labor and Labor Movements completed or published during the past year (since January 1, 2005). Submissions are solicited for papers written by students enrolled in graduate programs at the time the paper was written. Papers should be of normal article length (circa 10,000 words). Students can self-nominate or they can be nominated by a section member. The winner gets \$150 for travel to a professional meeting.

Electronic copies of the articles or papers being nominated or submitted for the award should be sent to:

Michael Schwartz (Chair, Student Prize Committee) mschwartz@ms.cc.sunysb.edu, with copies to:

David Fitzgerald (dfitzger@ucla.edu);  
Piya Pangsapa (pangsapa@acsu.buffalo.edu); Nancy Plankey Videla (plankeyvidela@tamu.edu); Marisa Friedman (cliofurie@hotmail.com).

### **DISTINGUISHED SCHOLARLY ARTICLE AWARD**

For the best article on labor and labor movements published between January 1, 2004 and December 31, 2005 (the award is given only every other year).

Electronic copies of the articles or papers being nominated or submitted for the award should be sent to:

Steve Lopez (Chair, Scholarly Award Committee) lopez.137@sociology.osu.edu with copies to:  
Jeff Sallaz (jsallaz@email.arizona.edu);  
Matthew Mahutga (mmahutga@uci.edu);  
Leslie Bunnage (lbunnage@uci.edu).

*Deadline for Submissions is April 31, 2006, but earlier submissions are encouraged.*

*Nominate your students!  
Nominate your colleagues!  
Nominate yourself!*

CURRENT SECTION  
MEMBERSHIP COUNT:

**\*371\***

[Ross, continued from p. 3]

Included in early plans was a dinner session featuring trade unionists and activists. This session was held in discussion-question and answer format with Jeff Hermanson of the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center, Neva Makgetla, of the Congress of South African Trade Unions and Scott Nova, of the Workers Rights Consortium. Among the hotter topics was question of whether the AFL-CIO had truly reformed its foreign policy obedience to the US government. This was a really good time made specially so as PEWS was able steeply to subsidize the meal (and provided free lunch as well, thanks to its savings from going electronic with the section newsletter).

As the conference date approached, the Change-to-Win partners walked out of the AFL-CIO. This caused the co-chairs to amend their earlier resolve to stay away from a U.S.-centric view of labor issues. A highly successful lunchtime “informal” session on the split, masterfully kicked off by Dan Clawson and Ruth Milkman, was timely, informative, and dramatic, as participants debated the utility of competition and raiding within the labor movement, among other topics.

Another not-your-usual-conference-fare session addressed “Labor as a Global Actor”; Beverly Silver initiated a brief statement and a very large proportion of the about 85 people in attendance had a comment or question. If only our classes had such an intense atmosphere!

Several panels were organized topically, with papers examining the globalization of specific industries or sectors. Others were organized more thematically, including papers that explored organized labor’s responses to new global pressures, or laid out a set of challenges facing labor activists in an increasingly integrated world. Papers presented included empirical material from around the world – Mexico, China, South Africa as well as from the United States – and there was lively discussion throughout the day.

So, the recipe for a successful mini-conference: High levels of communication and cooperation among section chairs and planners; a healthy budget from money saved; historic events just

before the meeting; a mix of regular-format scholarly paper presentations and highly participative discussion formats; and topics people both care about and study deeply. It may also be that extremely unpleasant Mid-Atlantic heat and humidity kept people inside the air-conditioned rooms. (Captive audience sessions seem to work for anti-union employers.....)

One reflection on a more serious note: A view of the many presentations of research shows that there is indeed a very large cadre of sociologists working on, in and around labor issues. Among the implications of this is something we all study when applied to others: unity, community and solidarity will improve our work and lighten our loads.

*Robert J.S. Ross is Professor of Sociology at Clark University and Chair of the PEWS Section.*

### Conference/Call for Papers *Sex Work Matters: Beyond Divides*

March 29-30, 2006  
CUNY and New School, New York City

The Sex Work Matters project provides scholars, activists and analysts with a platform for multidisciplinary, cross-institutional exchange of ideas and networking and offers a much-needed opportunity for graduate students, sex workers and activists to enter the debate, present original work and identify areas for collaboration. *Possible Topics:* Feminist Issues in Sex Work; Ethics and Morality; Art and Sex Work; The Role of the State and Policy Making; Sex Workers’ Rights and Activism; Sex and Money; Sex Work and Economics; Sex Work and Immigration; Sex Work Careers in the Lifecycle; Sex Work and the Family; Issues in Male, Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, and Transsexual Sex Work. In addition to theoretical work, especially welcome are narratives, ethnographies, case studies and typologies.

Paper abstracts (max. 500 words), a resume and contact information should be received no later than **November 30, 2005** to [sexworkmatters@yahoo.com](mailto:sexworkmatters@yahoo.com). For more information: <http://sexworkmatters.net/>. Alys Willman-Navarro, The New School and Antonia Levy, CUNY Graduate Center.

[Cutler, continued from p. 1] In the third scenario, the federation affiliates compete for existing union members—i.e. they raid each other and poach disgruntled local unions and members.

The first scenario—what might be called peaceful pluralism—would likely represent the least significant departure from the status quo. The AFL-CIO would presumably carry on, albeit with a dramatically smaller treasury, while the CTW unions would embark on a relatively independent path, the contours of which remain somewhat obscure. Does the CTW have the strategic vision to reverse the losses suffered by labor in recent decades? Does the AFL? Sociologists have already begun to debate the relative merits of the two federations. Important as these considerations may be, however, the real import of the split may only become evident if the federations begin to compete actively for existing and/or new members.

Under the AFL-CIO constitution, affiliate unions are barred from raiding (article XX) and competitive organizing (article XXI). There are indications—dating back at least to discussions at a February 1999 AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting—that constitutional conflicts over raiding and competitive organizing triggered some of the centrifugal forces that have resulted in the formation of the CTW breakaway federation. Large affiliates like SEIU, AFSCME, and the Teamsters had already been stepping on each others toes in campaigns for health care and government workers. The Teamsters and Machinists came to blows over truckers and the United Automobile Workers battled the Teachers unions in higher education. After the CTW disaffiliations, however, the respective affiliates in both federations are free to compete and poach between federations.

Most friends of organized labor—not to mention leaders in both union federations—tend to dislike the idea of competitive organizing and raiding. So vast is the unorganized workforce, it is argued, that any duplication in organizing efforts would be nothing short of tragic. Such a tragedy would only be compounded, according to this logic, if competition for the same unorganized workers were to further devolve into a scramble for the small number of already existing union members.

However, the history of union rivalry in the United States and around the world suggests that the third scenario might be crucial for resuscitating a moribund labor movement. Raiding—poaching

existing union members—and even the mere threat of raiding can transform bureaucratic and unaccountable union organizations into more nimble and aggressive agents of change. Dueling organizations, in which entrenched labor bureaucrats are forced to compete for the support of existing members, can provide rank-and-file workers with the leverage necessary to force union leaders to be accountable to the interests of members. In a competitive environment, the union leader who does not deliver the goods—i.e., higher wages, shorter hours, better benefits, and improved working conditions—risks losing out to a more responsive rival. Raiding shatters the iron cage of oligarchy.

The heyday of organized labor in America, from the split of the CIO from the AFL in 1935 until the merger in 1955, occurred during another civil war within the labor movement. These were the years when organized labor constituted a vibrant movement full of drama and passion that inspired a generation of labor activists. As unions battled for the allegiance of workers the rival federations grew exponentially, labor's story was headline news, and union membership reached its high point in American history.

The raiding scenario is almost always accompanied by the second scenario, competitive organizing, as experienced poachers expand the battle to the field of organizing. Animated and emboldened unions generate enthusiasm among the unorganized, and competitive organizing campaigns foil potential collusion between employers and unscrupulous union leaders inclined to concede employee demands in exchange employer recognition. Within the context of energetic competitive organizing, employees participating in union representation elections have been far more likely to vote for union representation over “no union” in elections involving rival labor organizations. When unions compete, workers win.

In many countries around the world, employers dread the rising expectations unleashed by union competition. Insofar as the split between the AFL-CIO and the CTW lead to active competition, business leaders in the United States may finally have reason to fear a labor movement as divided—and vigorous—as the Canadian, French, Spanish, Korean, and Argentinean labor movements. A leading law firm that advises U.S. employers on handling labor issues recently [continued next page]

[Cutler, continued from previous page] published a report on the labor feud here in which it predicted, “For employers with unions from both competing factions at their facilities, competition for better wages, benefits and other terms and conditions of employment is likely” (Morgan, Lewis & Brockius LLP, “The Divided Labor Movement,” June 17, 2005; <http://www.workinglife.org/FOL/pdf/Morganlewisview.pdf>).

There is no guarantee that the split between the CTW and the AFL-CIO will ever progress beyond peaceful pluralism, nor is reunification out of the question. Even as the CTW leadership has made good on threats to leave the AFL-CIO, there are signs of union leaders—especially within the AFL-CIO—hesitating on the threshold of civil war. The AFL-CIO recently retreated from its threat to expel all disaffiliated unions from state and local labor councils. And two of the unions most actively engaged in raiding and competitive organizing—the CTW’s service employees union (SEIU) and the AFL-CIO’s public sector union (AFSCME)—recently signed a no-raiding pact and agreed to end competitive organizing. Many friends of labor have greeted these signs of unity with grateful sighs of relief. Students of the iron cage of oligarchy, however, can only hope that rumors of peace are greatly exaggerated.

*Jonathan Cutler is Associate Professor of Sociology at Wesleyan University and the author of Labor's Time: Shorter Hours, the UAW, and the Struggle for American Unionism (Temple University Press, 2004).*

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