

## **Proposal to Form an ASA Section On Labor and Labor Movements**

### ***Organizing Committee***

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This proposal represents our request to the American Sociological Association to create a new Section on Labor and Labor Movements. It is a revision made in response to a prior submission and comments conveyed to us by ASA staff member Phoebe Stevenson. This revision includes:

1. Proposal statement 2
  
2. Three overviews of important elements of the field as expressed in recent articles in the *Annual Review of Sociology* 9
  - Dan Clawson and Mary Ann Clawson, "What Has Happened to the US Labor Movement? Union Decline and Renewal" (1999, 25: 95-119) 9
  
  - Howard Kimeldorf and Judy Stepan-Norris, "Historical Studies of Labor Movements in the United States" (1992, 18: 495-517) 34
  
  - Daniel Cornfield, "The US Labor Movement: Its Development and Impact on Social Inequality and Politics" (1991, 17: 27-49) 57
  
3. A bibliography 80

**Note:** The signed petition with the required signatures was submitted earlier; since no questions have been raised about it, we have not included it in this revision.

## **PROPOSAL FOR A NEW ASA SECTION: LABOR AND LABOR MOVEMENTS**

In this proposal to form a new section in the A.S.A., we seek to establish three main points: (1) Labor and labor movements constitutes an area that is broad and important enough to justify a new A.S.A. section. Its scope encompasses a variety of important sociological concerns and the research that fits under its heading is growing in volume. The bulk of this proposal, and the appended bibliography, concentrates on addressing this point. (2) The sociological work encompassed by this topic is comparable in scope and importance to that of other established A.S.A. sections. (3) The work covered by this proposed section is not substantially covered by other established A.S.A. sections.

### **Labor and Labor Movements Constitutes a Broad and Important Topic in Sociology**

Several decades ago, sociological work on labor and labor movements had a distinguished tradition in the discipline. Prominent sociologists were centrally concerned with the study of labor and unions. Two examples of work in the area that became classics in the discipline are Alvin Gouldner's *Wildcat Strike* and Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow, and James Coleman's study of *Union Democracy*. The volume and prestige of work in the area reflected an active and vibrant labor movement that significantly impacted a broad array of economic, political and social relations such as the terms and conditions of work, workers' benefits and general welfare, income inequality, strikes, working class politics, and workers' participation in voluntary associations. Yet as the labor movement in the United States began to decline in the late 1950s, sociological interest in them began to wane too.<sup>1</sup>

The decline in attention to labor movements by a generation of U.S. scholars is centrally linked to the character of the U.S. labor movement in the period from roughly 1955 to 1995, just as the recent revival of interest in labor is connected to changes in unions themselves. In the 1930s and 1940s, the labor movement was arguably the single most important force for progressive change, and as such, formed thousands of overlapping links with intellectuals of all sorts, and became a central focus for political struggles. In the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, unions had become more bureaucratic, less connected to other progressive currents and social movements (although the UAW, for example, funded both SDS and the early civil rights movement), and far less open to connections to academic and intellectual worlds. (During this period, academics were

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<sup>1</sup> A similar shift has taken place in economics, and for that discipline we have rigorous and systematic evidence. Freeman and Medoff found that the percentage "of articles in major economic journals treating trade unionism dropped from 9.2 percent in the 1940s to 5.1 percent in the 1950s to 0.4 percent in the 1970s" (cited in Edsall 1984, p. 256 note 12).

treated with suspicion and often actively rebuffed.) As a result, even scholars who study class or the labor process tended (and to a lesser extent still tend) to neglect the importance of group processes of struggle, focusing, instead, on “atomized individual workers as the unit of analysis” (Lembcke, Jipson, and McGuire 1994, p. 117) causing labor studies “to recede from the intellectual scene” (Lembcke et al. 1994, p. 114). For example, even Harry Braverman’s 1974 Labor and Monopoly Capital hardly mentions unions, despite the fact that Braverman spent much of his life as an active trade unionist.

In 1995 the AFL-CIO had its first contested election for the presidency of the federation. The victorious insurgent slate immediately announced as a priority its intention to rebuild the labor movement’s connections with intellectuals, students, and social movements. The labor movement sought out and actively participated in “labor teach-ins” on more than three dozen campuses around the country. The AFL-CIO also initiated a “Union Summer” program, explicitly modeled on Freedom Summer and intended as much to create a future generation of labor activists as it was to have an immediate effect on union organizing. And recently, AFL-CIO representatives have offered to facilitate sociologists’ access to unions for research and have sought to hire sociology majors for jobs as labor organizers.

The renewed interest in labor among sociologists is exemplified by the existence of a labor group that has met at the past three A.S.A. conventions. From 50 to 250 A.S.A. members have gathered for meetings; in one case hearing an outside speaker, in others for informal discussions of our common interests and concerns. At the meeting two years ago, the common sentiment of the group was that there is a lack of institutionalized opportunities to discuss and debate labor and labor movement issues, and it voted to initiate the formation of a new A.S.A. section.

Given the intellectual importance of, and resurgence of sociological interest in the area, a section on labor and labor movements would contribute to the discipline by helping work in this area to regain some of the prominence which it once had. Yet we do not intend our proposed section on labor and labor movements to merely replicate the studies and study areas of the past. We envision something much broader. We have intentionally chosen the term “labor movement” rather than “labor union” to indicate this greater breadth. “Labor movement” is intended to include, for example, professional associations in various stages of a continuum from strictly professional association to full union. The National Education Association currently includes almost exclusively teachers (professors, administrators, clericals) with collective bargaining agreements, the American Nurses Association is dividing into two arms, one a union that is exploring affiliation with the AFL-CIO and one a strictly professional association, and the American Medical Association has recently (and tentatively) called for limited forms of unionization for doctors. But “labor movement” also includes a wide variety of other phenomena: living wage campaigns, codes of conduct and anti-sweatshop movements, plant closing struggles, workplace health and safety campaigns, many related environmental movements, community and religious groups that address labor issues (as increasingly they do, with active efforts from both religious and labor sides to foster such connections), immigrant rights struggles, comparable worth movements, women’s caucuses, and anti-sexual harassment campaigns. The “labor

and” part of our section’s name is intended to make clear that our interests include the underlying conditions that structure, limit, and enable labor organization, and which may demand new forms to meet changed realities. For example, what are the implications of the rise of part-time and contingent work? Of the increasing proportion of women who work for pay?

And what effect does globalization have on labor and labor movements? With growing inequality in the United States and the world, we are likely to encounter the development of new problem areas, and the worsening of existing ones. Global concerns have received increasing attention in the literature, and we feel that they will constitute an important component of any systematic understanding of labor and labor movements. One important contingent of sociologists has been interested in understanding workers and working conditions in other lands, their organizing campaigns and larger social movements that support their workplace struggles. Others have examined international labor organizing and solidarity. International and global work on labor and labor movements will constitute an important component of our new section.

It would be impossible to cover (or even to anticipate) the full range of work that will be included in a section on Labor and Labor Movements, but we here offer several purely illustrative examples, which are supplemented by our bibliographic appendix:

**Social movements** – Most studies of social movements focus on individual case studies, but unions organize more than 250,000 workers a year. This makes possible a multivariate study analyzing the impact of industry, unit size, worker characteristics, geographic location, employer characteristics and actions, and union characteristics and actions. The labor movement has been heavily influenced by such a study conducted by sociologist Tom Juravich and collaborator Kate Bronfenbrenner, demonstrating that union tactics matter, with some approaches far more likely to lead to union success. Using these same data, Ruth Milkman demonstrated that union success rates are high in all male workplaces, decline as the workforce becomes gender mixed, and then rise again (to their highest levels) when the workforce is almost exclusively female. Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman examined which unions were most and least likely to transform their organizational cultures and give priority to new organizing rather than to servicing existing members. These studies contribute to an understanding of labor issues, but they also can develop social movement theory, since they focus on a social movement whose characteristics differ significantly from those of the movements that form the focus of most existing social movement work.

**Work and family** – Most studies of child care and parental leave have focused on corporate and government policies and actions, but unions are increasingly concerned to promote such policies. In their recent AJS article Frank Dobbin and Erin Kelly examine the effect of unionization, and intend in future interviews to include the views of union as well as corporate officials in their analyses. Including union perspectives on work and family issues does not just add another variable, but rather has the potential to transform understandings of corporate policies. Corporations have every public relations incentive to announce their support of family-friendly policies; information from unions can help assess to what extent (and in what circumstances)

these statements are backed by a willingness to commit money and resources to these issues. Studies of unions also provide a basis for assessing the priority that workers assign to these issues (compared to health care, wages, etc.) when preparing for contract bargaining.

**International/Global** – As mentioned above, international and global concerns are an increasingly important component of our attempts to understand labor and labor movements. There is growing interest among U.S. sociologists in international labor movements. Following is a list of some exemplary work: Gay Seidman on Brazil and South America, Ian Roxborough and Patricia Fernandez Kelley on Mexican trade unions, Andrew Walder and Ching Kwan Lee on China, Frederic Deyo on labor subordination and auto unions in Asia, Linda Fuller on trade unions in Cuba and East Germany and Michael Kennedy's work on Polish Solidarity. Others have done interesting comparative work: Kim Voss' analysis of the Knights of Labor compares the U.S. organization with those in France and England, Jeffrey Haydu compares U.S., English and German unions before and after W.W.I. And still others offer a global focus, including those who study international labor organizing and solidarity (Boswell and Stevis, Scipes).

**Immigrants** – It would be reasonable to expect that unions could not organize undocumented workers, who are highly vulnerable. Hector Delgado's study of primarily Mexican and Central American undocumented immigrants in southern California found, that they in fact were receptive to unionization, and not having documents was not the deterrent to unionization generally presumed. This work, together with Ruth Milkman's edited collection (on immigrants and unions in California), has the potential to increase our understanding not only of unions, but also of immigrants and the immigration process. Others have focused on the connections between labor, immigration, and globalization (Bonacich, Cheng, Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Ong 1994).

**Political sociology** – Most work understandably focuses on the state, but there are 70,000 union locals in the United States, almost all of which elect officers. Understanding the political process inside unions, what circumstances do and do not lead to vigorously contested elections, and the practical impact of elections or the presence of an organized opposition caucus, provide a potentially fertile ground for understanding not only unions, but democratic processes more generally. In addition to Lipset, Trow, and Coleman's classic Union Democracy, Judy Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin have published interesting articles on this, including two in ASR. Other important work focuses on the character and effectiveness of union political activity (Form 1995).

**Comparative historical** – Whatever their place now, unions have historically been some of the most important social, economic, and political forces in a range of countries in the past two hundred years. Some examples of comparative and historical work on labor are Charles Tilly's numerous works (including, for example, Strikes in France 1830-1968), Howard Kimeldorf's study of east and west coast longshore workers, Beverly Silver's work showing an increase in labor activity in less developed countries that are receiving net inflows of capital, and Bruce Western's ASR article and

book on the factors explaining the degree of unionization in advanced industrial democracies.

**Culture** – Rick Fantasia’s Cultures of Solidarity, which won “best book” awards from both the social movements and the culture sections, used analyses of labor activism (strikes and organizing) to argue that culture is not fixed and invariant, that it influences the character of a social movement but that in its turn the movement, and the experience of participation in the movement, leads to a transformation of the culture.

These examples just begin to elaborate the breadth and scope of sociological work on Labor and Labor Movements.

Finally, we would like to make the point about the growing interest in the area. Sociological interest in labor and labor movements has been increasing with the recent developments in the AFL-CIO and its invigorated organizing campaigns. This is demonstrated by a search of the Sociological Abstracts database (available through Cambridge Scientific Abstracts) using a keyword search for: labor union(s), trade union(s), AFL-CIO, labor movement.

Average sociology articles and dissertations per year published in the U.S. on the topic of labor and labor movements

1986-1989	40
1990-1994	40
1994-1998	58

In the period just after the AFL-CIO’s revitalization, we see an increase in the number of yearly sociological articles and dissertations on the topic. We expect this to increase as the altered institutional reality leads to new research.

What we have attempted to do in the above section is to demonstrate that Labor and Labor Movements is an area of sufficient scope and importance to warrant its own A.S.A. section. We did this by tracing the history of interest in the field (and its connection to the status of the labor movement itself), assessing the volume of published work in the field, suggesting a broad set of larger interest areas with which this topic interrelated, and demonstrating a rising level of interest as measured by the number of articles/dissertations in the Sociological Abstracts database. This set of materials, along with the attached bibliography, and several recent articles in recent Annual Review of Sociology volumes on labor and labor movements, constitutes strong evidence that the area of labor and labor movements is sufficiently broad and important to be an A.S.A. section.

### **The scope and importance of Labor and Labor Movements is comparable to that of other established A.S.A. sections**

The 40 existing A.S.A. sections may be classified into several types: 22 of them represent important sub-fields in the discipline (Aging; Social Movements; Urban; Comparative/Historical; Deviance; Culture; Economic; Education; Emotions; Family; Migration; Law; Mathematical; Medical; Methodology; Political; Population; Race and

Ethnicity; Religion; Gender; Social Psychology; and Theory). Some sections represent major social institutions (Education; Family; Religion; Medical; Organizations, Occupations and Work) or spheres of activity (Economic; Political; Law; and Science). Others focus on specific sub-topics within these larger areas of sociological inquiry: Alcohol/Drugs (is a subset of Deviance); Race, Class, Gender (is at the intersection of Race and Ethnicity, Gender, and Political), Computers (a subset of Science and Technology), Environment/Technology (at the intersection of Urban and Science), Sexualities (a subset of Gender), Latino/Latina (a subset of Race/Ethnicity), Asia/Asian American (a subset of Race/Ethnicity), Children (a subset of Family), and Mental Health (at the intersection of social psychology and Medical). And still others congregate groups of sociologists using similar methodological/theoretical approaches: Comparative/Historical, Marxist, Mathematical, PEWS, and Rational Choice. Finally, there are a few that are not easily classified: History of Sociology, Sociological Practice, and Undergraduate Education.

Labor and labor movements is an important sub-field in sociology and the labor movement is a major social institution along with education, family, religion, and medical. As we noted above, its relative importance in sociology publications has varied over the past several decades, but new developments are increasingly placing it among the more sociologically interesting institutions. Moreover, labor and labor movements represents a larger and more unique body of work than many of the existing sections we classified above under the title “specific sub-topics.” Whereas many of the intellectual concerns of the sections in that category are completely subsumed under another section or can be described as being at the intersection between two or more sections, the concerns of labor and labor movements are not exhaustively represented elsewhere. Labor and labor movements represents a major social institution and a substantial sociological specialization that is not already covered by an existing A.S.A. section.

**The work covered by this section does not substantially overlap with that of other established A.S.A. sections**

Still, given the multiplicity of sections, some of what will be included in a section on labor and labor movements is currently covered in one or another of the three dozen A.S.A. sections, but scattered in bits and pieces among them such that it is difficult or impossible to develop the unity and coherence of the topic, or to stimulate debate among scholars whose work currently must be placed in scattered venues.

As mentioned above, 10 A.S.A existing sections represent sub-specialties of sociological sub-fields. Several of these might be considered to completely overlap with the larger area. But the existence of the sub-topic sections indicates that a large enough contingent of sociologists considered the topic to be of particular interest that they desired a forum in which to exchange ideas and research. What sociologists who study labor and labor movements already have within the A.S.A. section format is (1) several sections that touch on labor issues (these may in fact welcome participation by certain types of sociologists interested in labor). These include Political; Comparative/Historical; Marxist; PEWS; Race, Gender, Class; and Race and Ethnicity,

and (2) Two sections that touch more heavily on labor and labor movements issues, but have their main thrusts elsewhere: Collective Behavior/Social Movements and Organizations, Occupations, and Work. Neither of these sections opposes, and in fact both have explicitly welcomed, the creation of a section on labor and labor movements. Establishing a new section on labor and labor movements will fill an existing gap, and it will bring together a large number of sociologists who desire a forum in which to exchange their ideas and research on labor and labor movements in a comprehensive way.

## **Conclusion**

Much of what is currently discussed, researched and debated in sociology is distant from the real world problems that drew so many of us into sociology to begin with. Our proposed section will once again offer sociologists an opportunity to engage in sociological exchange on a compelling set of issues that have a distinguished tradition in the field as well as real and important social relevance. The primary purposes of the proposed section on labor and labor movements are similar to those we believe have motivated the formation of other sections: to provide a forum for existing work, to create networks and graduate mentoring opportunities that will stimulate interaction and increase the rigor and creativity of future work, to bring researchers and applied sociologists together for discussion and debate, to recognize and reward the best work now being done and thereby to encourage future research, and to heighten awareness among section members and the A.S.A. more generally about the research already being conducted in the field. We have explained our views on the importance and breadth of the field, and how the proposed section overlaps with and offers something unique to the existing list of A.S.A. sections. We hope that the A.S.A. Committee on Sections agrees to allow us to move ahead to create a section-in-formation.