
In Critical Solidarity

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

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The Success of the Labor Section

Peter Evans

Serving as Chair of the Labor Section last year was one of those rare organizational roles that turns out to be a real pleasure. It was a pleasure because the Labor and Labor Movements Section has turned out to be one of those unusual organizations that really works. The Labor Section “works” in two important ways. First, it has proved able to generate loyalty and engagement on the part of a growing number of sociologists. Second, it has delivered programs and activities that demonstrate both serious analytical efforts to understand the social dynamics of the labor movement and a “public sociology” engagement with issues that are important to activists within the movement itself.

When the Labor Section was formed at the turn of the millennium, it was unclear whether there was large enough constituency within the ASA focused on issues of labor and the labor movement to create a section that would be viable in the long run. There was good reason to worry. Many of the sociologists working on labor were already involved in the venerable section on Organizations, Occupations and Work, which had over 1,000 members at the time our section was formed. Others were already attached to the Collective Behavior and Social Movements Section, or other well established sections. Would people have time to devote to a fledgling section on labor and labor movements?

Now, 6 years later, it is clear that they would and did. The other sections formed about the same time are still in the neighborhood of 200 members. Labor and Labor Movements has grown to 416 members at last count, which puts it just at the median in terms of section membership. We have not only turned out well-attended sessions at six annual meetings, but also co-sponsored a very successful mini-conference the day before the 2005 meetings in Philadelphia.
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The Incomplete Success of the Labor Section

Rick Fantasia

Peter Evans is right when he says that ours is a section that works very well. He has left things in great shape, and our Program Committee has put together four very solid sessions for next year, including sessions on “Mobilizing Asia’s Workers,” “The Labor Movement and Immigration in NYC and Beyond” and “W.E.B. DuBois and Labor.” I’m grateful to be able to serve as Chair of such a healthy organization, one whose intellectual vigor has been consistently demonstrated (most recently at the Montreal meetings) and that has now grown to over 400 members. I only wish that the same could be said of the health and the growth of the U.S. labor movement.

I must say that it’s quite the irony being elected Chair of a section whose formation I once argued against. It’s true. I didn’t support the formation of our section when the issue was first raised back in 1991, or later when it was formally proposed in 1999. I was against it because of a concern that efforts then underway to
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Section Membership Passes 400

Section membership has reached an historic new high. Thanks to the tireless work of section members in recruiting colleagues and students, one by one, the section reached, as of September 15th, a membership level of

416

firmly establishing our place among the ASA’s sections. Special thanks are due to Jeff Sallaz of the Membership Committee, Dan Clawson, Judy Stepan-Norris and many, many others who spent their August and September making this happen.

-Peter Evans

<Evans, cont. from p. 1>

We have also successfully maintained a solid and informative Website (thanks to the dedication of George Mason) and continue to turn out high quality quarterly newsletters (like this one).

I am confident that the section will continue to excel at the traditional ASA section roles and also find ways to innovate, as we did with our unusual reception at the headquarters of the Confederation des Syndicats Nationaux this year in Montreal, where the regular wine, cheese and conversation were joined by an illuminating presentation and some intense discussion of one of North America's most interesting labor organizations.

None of this is to say that we can settle back and rest on our laurels. Our section is one of the few in the ASA which has a social constituency organized and fully capable of asking us how our work is contributing to the knowledge and analysis that they need in order to survive and grow in a hostile environment. Our future will provide one of the best testing grounds for whether "public sociology" works. At the same time, we won't draw in a new generation of sociology graduate students simply on the basis of being effective practitioners of applied sociology. Our charisma within the discipline and our intellectual legacy will depend on our ability to show that work on labor and labor movements makes key contributions to the construction of general sociological theory relevant to economic sociology, political sociology, social movements, class analysis, social change, development and other fields.

Facing the unavoidable dual challenge of being both an exemplar of public sociology and a producer of core theoretical contributions should keep both the section as an organization and the membership on their toes, but I think we can handle it. The section has proved itself good at finding new leadership and is certainly in good hands at present. The level of enthusiasm among the graduate students and young faculty members gives every reason to expect that future section Chairs will be leave their posts with the same sense of positive trajectory that I am enjoying.†

Comments or Ideas?

Send your thoughts or suggestions about what our section should be doing to the editor at rachel.sherman@yale.edu

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create working links between sociologists and the labor movement would quickly fade with the formation of an official ASA Section, with its promise of career enhancement and an established institutional framework.

A tension between trying to assist in the revival of the labor movement and enhancing our academic careers was apparent as far back as 1991. Several of us who had been writing about the labor movement put out a call for a gathering at the ASA meetings in Cincinnati. We explicitly raised the issue in our initial call for the meeting as a basis for discussion, suggesting two possibilities for our future:

“1. Continue to meet and work strictly within the framework of the ASA. This might mean a newsletter, meetings once a year at the conventions, and/or forming a section within ASA.

2. Explore various ways to work with the labor movement, including established unions, rank-and-file movements, organizing campaigns, strike support, labor education programs. Discuss ways to have our research benefit and connect with the labor movement more directly and immediately.”

Fewer than two dozen people attended that initial meeting, though many more sent notes expressing strong interest in our efforts (this was pre-email). Most who were present felt that we should not pursue official status as an ASA section at that point. Instead of using it as a vehicle for career advancement, it was generally agreed that we would use our new labor network to strengthen and expand the links among ourselves and with those at various levels of the labor movement itself. Toward this end we produced a yellow, spiral-bound "Sociology Labor Network Directory" that listed names, addresses, and research experience, and that we mailed out to sociologists and to labor groups. But I'd be surprised to learn that it was ever used by any labor group or trade union to contact a sociologist for assistance of any kind. At the time there was simply no context for such links, nor was there a labor leadership interested in cultivating them.

This situation would soon change with the election of John Sweeney and the New Voice slate to the leadership of the AFL-CIO. At the 1996 ASA
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convention our “Sociology Labor Network” and the AFL-CIO Organizing Department co-sponsored a reception addressed by Richard Bensinger, the first Director of Organizing for the AFL-CIO. Close to 100 people were present. In addition to Bensinger, Fran Piven and several participants in the newly-created Union Summer program offered remarks; throughout the convention, staff members from the Organizing Institute held individual meetings with dozens of sociology faculty and students in an effort to establish recruitment networks. It was a significant event, given the postwar history of mutual mistrust between academics and the labor leadership, and was part of a broader initiative by the new leadership of the AFL-CIO to build bridges with academics.

Later, in 1999, a formal proposal was submitted to the ASA to create our section, and it’s probably a good thing that my side lost the argument about it. Had we won, you wouldn’t be reading this wonderful newsletter or be able to access our great website, we would not have had such a strong presence at the meetings in Montreal, and there would not be as vibrant a set of programs planned for NYC next August. In short, we might not have had a section at all.

But as the section becomes more established, I recall a central argument that was raised by those on the pro-section side of the question, namely that the effort to build bridges and working relationships with the labor movement would be able to continue alongside the pursuit of professional and career-oriented interests; that the two tracks would not necessarily be mutually exclusive. At the time, my concern was that most of us would tend to be pulled in one direction only, since most of us were already inclined to take the road that our professional development had prepared us for. After all, it’s the ASA professional route that aids us in meeting the growing demands from our institutions for particular forms of productivity and that provides a ready scale of rewards linked directly to professional status and standing. This, combined with the LACK of a strong institutional pull from the other side (i.e., from a labor movement that might want and be able to use sociology and work with sociologists) suggested to me that most of us (including myself, for my trepidation was both personal and general) would be inclined to take the clearly marked track, rather than an unsure one requiring hard and time-consuming work to create.

Recent Books of Interest

*Cynthia Cranford, Judy Fudge, Eric Tucker and Leah F. Vosko, *Self-Employed Workers Organize: Law, Policy and Unions*. McGill-Queens University Press, 2005.

*Janice Fine, *Worker Centers*. EPI/ILR Press, 2006.

*Ruth Milkman, *L.A. Story*. Russell Sage, 2006.

Featured book: Moon-Kie Jung, *Reworking Race: The Making of Hawaii’s Interracial Labor Movement*. Columbia University Press, 2006.

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, Hawai‘i changed rapidly from a conservative oligarchy firmly controlled by a Euro-American elite to arguably the most progressive part of the United States. Spearheading the shift, tens of thousands of sugar, pineapple, and dock workers eagerly joined the left-led International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union and challenged their powerful employers. Drawing on a wide range of sources, this book analyzes how Filipinos, Japanese, Portuguese, and others overcame entrenched racial divisions and successfully mobilized a mass working-class movement.

Send your publication announcements to the editor at rachel.sherman@yale.edu

I very much hope that the two tracks are not mutually exclusive and that our section will be able to fuse them in a way that accomplishes both things well. In other words, I hope that we will support the careers and the intellectual vitality of our members in ways that also provide direct intellectual, practical, and creative support to organizations of the labor movement. There are undoubtedly members of our section whose work with the labor movement we can learn much from, and it’s in this spirit that Kate Bronfenbrenner has generously agreed to organize a session in New York that will focus on “The Problems and Prospects of Doing Social Research for the Labor Movement.” It ought to generate valuable discussion and debate. For now that we have established ourselves as a thoroughly viable section within the ASA, it would seem to be a good time to draw upon our collective wisdom and our institutional standing to nourish initiatives that develop the “other mission” of our section. Surely we can come up with ways to put the good health and strong growth of our ASA section more directly to the service of those who are the objects of our political commitment and research attention. †

Labor at the ASA Meetings

Dan Clawson

Ten years ago it was easy to attend all the labor movement related sessions at the ASA – there weren't any. (Okay, that's a bit of an exaggeration.) Five years ago, before the section officially existed but when we were in the process of creating it, labor at the convention was brand new, and special. This year it's impossible for a short report to hope to cover everything, since not only did we have the section's official sessions (two, plus a third block that we divide between our membership meeting and roundtables), but also a plethora of other sessions provided by the ASA in response to our greater visibility. In addition to the sessions we ourselves organized, the ASA provided two thematic sessions, an Author Meets Critics, and two regular sessions. This report is therefore unsystematic and partial, emphasizing three sessions rather than trying to be comprehensive.

An Author Meets Critics session addressed the section-award-winning book, Steve Lopez's Reorganizing the Rustbelt. All the presentations were excellent, as were the questions and comments, and Steve was relaxed and generous in his responses. Rick Fantasia and others stressed that working class anti-unionism comes from real experiences, but is in turn produced by magnifying some points and forgetting others. Eddie Webster's incisive analysis made it clear how a view from the global South, in this case South Africa, can enrich our analyses, leading us to be more analytic and theoretical, and less parochial. Eddie stressed that North and South increasingly face similar conditions, which opens up possibilities for new connections. As Steve's book makes clear, we need to remember that globalization is not a juggernaut, that solidarity needs to be built anew and to deal with the negative experiences workers have had with unions, and that union responses can't be read off from structure—agency is crucial. Ian Robinson emphasized that the essence of social movement unionism is that it moves beyond the employment relation, to encompass the rest of people's lives, and this appeals to groups on the periphery of the labor market. Steve reported that the local he studied no longer exists: it was trusted by the international and divided up. Although Left critics often object to trusteeships as undemocratic

and top down, Steve emphasized that he thinks the reason SEIU is almost uniquely effective is in significant part its strategic use of trusteeships.

A section-organized session on labor and the university examined both faculty and graduate students. In both Canada and the United States, similar faculty trends are evident. Ian Robinson reported that from 1993 to 2003, the number of full-time tenure-track faculty had increased by 4.8%, full-time non-tenure-track faculty increased 50.0%, and part-time non-tenure-track faculty increased 51.6%. Among the non-tenure-track, Canada has more part-time and fewer full-time faculty. Mikaila Arthur's analysis of the NYU graduate employee strike emphasized both the sophistication of NYU's response and its haphazard character. NYU had a history of backing down at the last minute just before a strike, which did not happen this time; its sanctions created fear and divided people. Chris Rhomberg's comments emphasized that the strike showed that the faculty have no real power and can't protect graduate students. Chris also noted that the strike failed in part because it was not industrial enough; that is, NYU students stood alone even though Columbia and Brown were also being organized.

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NEW BOOK SERIES

Working in the Americas is a new series from the expanding University Press of Florida devoted to publishing important works in labor history, labor relations and working-class studies in the Americas. We seek work that uses both traditional as well as innovative, interdisciplinary, or transnational approaches. Our focus is the Americas and the lives of its workers. We welcome inquiries and proposals.

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<Clawson, cont. from p. 4>

A session on the future of North American labor featured leading figures from the Canadian labor movement, and from both sides of the split in the U.S. labor movement (although last minute replacements stepped in for two of the three scheduled speakers). As in the split itself, there were few fireworks, lots of agreement on key basics, and a few zingers indicating continuing tensions. Andrew Jackson, of the Canadian Labour Congress, noted that one difference between Canada and the U.S. is that in Canada the student left went into the labor movement in the 1960s. Also of interest is that Canadian labor has recently shifted from an emphasis on supporting the NDP to an issue-based focus on workers' concerns. Stewart Acuff, Organizing Director of the AFL-CIO, stressed that the debate over the labor split had missed an opportunity. No one but us cares about the structure of the labor movement, he said; rather, we should have been talking about new organizational forms to broaden power. He emphasized a range of organizing campaigns and victories, and also discussed the Employee Free Choice Act, now sponsored by almost half the members of Congress (in both House and Senate), which would provide for card check, enact an increase in penalties for violating labor law, and mandate arbitration if no contract has been agreed on one year after union certification. David Mott of SEIU noted that the labor movement has to be about taking power, and that although Change to Win will cooperate with the AFL-CIO in politics, the primary goal must be to create an organizing movement that has the power to get things done. Audience comments raised numerous stimulating points – about the need to build alliances with immigrants, about the need for labor movement vision – but tended to take exactly the stance that we bemoan in workers “Why doesn't ‘the union’ do more on this and that?” What was sometimes missing was a stance of “We too are the labor movement; here's what we ourselves are doing and think you can learn from; here's how we urge you to work with us; what research and action would you (AFL-CIO, Change to Win) want to see from us and why do you think that would address labor's larger problems?”

I'd identify two problems for the section to consider for next year and thereafter. First, in the old days, when there were only one or two labor sessions, those sessions were always well attended; this year all sessions had good attendance by normal ASA

standards but some were less well attended than in the past. Second, it seemed to me that we relied too much on a handful of the old familiar faces. I like the old guard, but our organizing task is not only to increase the number of members, but to develop and recognize the abilities and opportunities of our newer members.†

2007 ASA Labor Section Program Finalized

Open Sessions

1. “Mobilizing Asia's Workers: Labor Politics and Organization in 21st Century Asia”

With a regional workforce of 1.7 billion and with rates of labor productivity that triple the global average, 21st C. Asia is a dynamic site of economic, social, and political transformation. How are workers and their collective organizations addressing the contradictory forces of rapid economic growth, social inequality, and working poverty?

Organizer: Jennifer Jihye Chun
(jjchun@interchange.ubc.ca)

2. “The Labor Movement and Immigration in NYC and Beyond”

While central to the U.S. labor movement for well over a century, immigrants have often been treated by organized labor with ambivalence, sometimes with xenophobia, and most recently with an AFL-CIO embrace. How do immigrants actually impact the labor movement? This session will explore the role of immigration in labor movements in New York City and across the country.

Organizer: Carolina Bank Muñoz
(carolbank@earthlink.net)

Invited Sessions

1. “W.E.B. DuBois and Labor”

Organizer: Michael Schwartz
(mschwartz@ms.cc.sunysb.edu)

2. “Doing Social Research for the Labor Movement”

Organizer: Kate Bronfenbrenner
(klb23@cornell.edu)

Roundtables

Organizer: Stuart Eimer
(speimer@widener.edu)

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