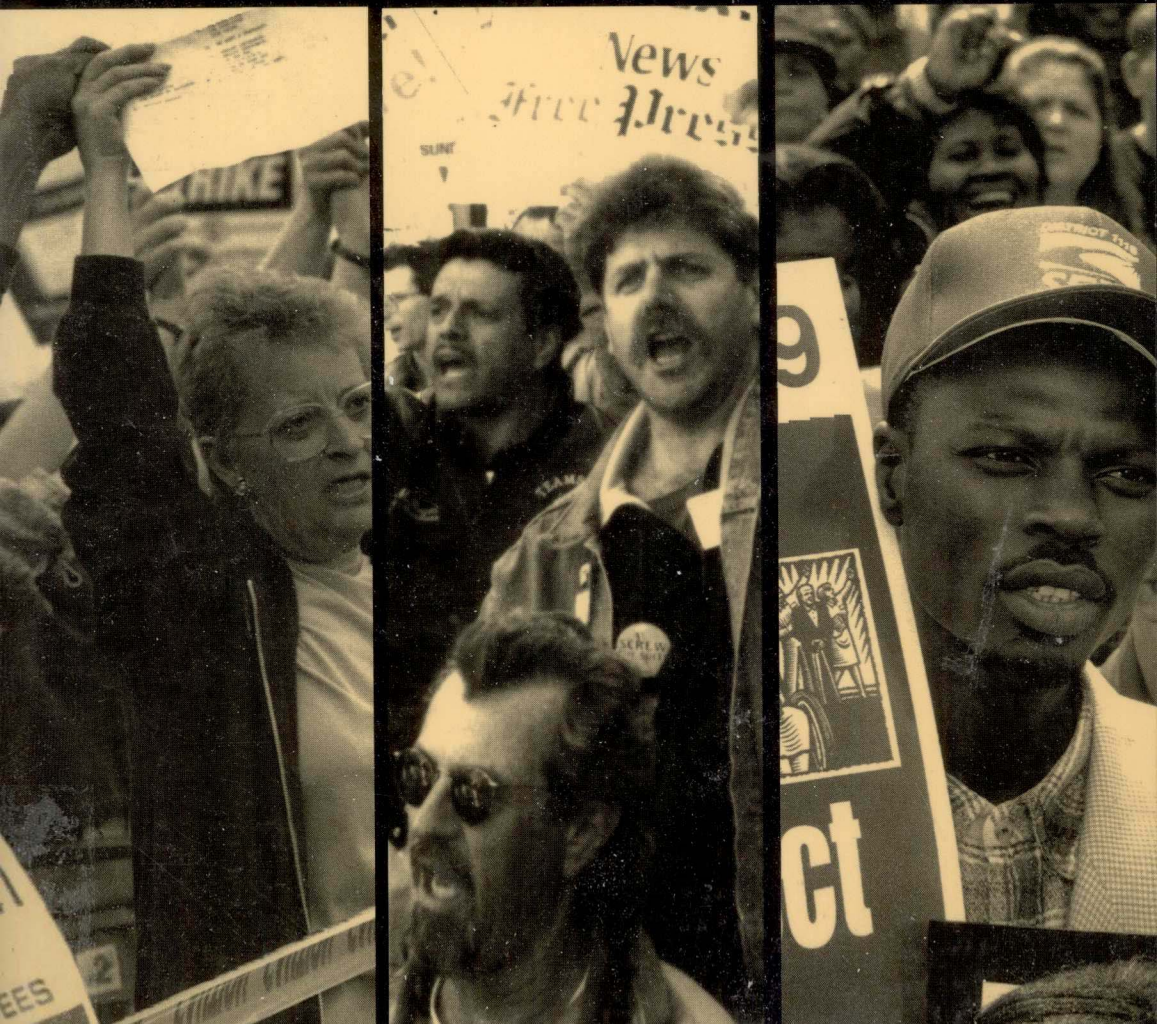


THE TRANSFORMATION OF U.S. UNIONS

Voices, Visions, and Strategies from the Grassroots

Edited by Ray M. Tillman and Michael S. Cummings



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BOULDER
LONDON

*To all the insurgents and union activists in the past,
present, and future who have dedicated their lives to
transforming the U.S. labor movement and society as a
whole; and, most of all, to my wife, Lynne, and daughter,
Rya, who through their abiding support, understanding,
and love allow and provide me with the energy to
continue the struggle.*

—rmt

*To Leonard, who made things grow; Charlie, who showed
me how things work; Harry, who fed me late at night; the
other Harry, artist of engines; Eugene, who led me to the
unknown; Ralph, who protected me; Inez, who included me;
Lawrence, who taught me that winning isn't the only thing;
Libbus, who bucked the boss; and Nellie, who showed me
how to make a difference.*

—msc

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The Transformation of U.S. Unions

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Introduction

Michael S. Cummings and Ray M. Tillman

“The search for new directions is not easy, but history is the story of change!”¹ A significant change came about in 1995 when the New Voice slate, led by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) president John Sweeney, United Mine Workers (UMW) president Richard Trumka, and Linda Chavez-Thompson, was elected to lead the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)—a stunning result of the first contested AFL-CIO presidential election in over seventy years. A key question asked in this book is how important the Sweeney team’s upheaval may turn out to be for the democratic transformation of unions. Some observers point to important changes already made by the new leadership; others argue that the reforms promised by New Voice are, democratically speaking, “two days late and two dollars short.” A key point of contention is whether labor should cooperate with or struggle against capital and its attempts to downsize, outsource, and globalize the workers and the U.S. economy.

The fourteen chapters that follow make a powerful case for a socially conscious grassroots democracy as the crux of union reform and perhaps even as the salvation of the union movement. The authors assess both the promise and the limitations of the AFL-CIO’s new, reform-oriented leadership, which hopes to reverse the disastrous, forty-year decline of organized labor’s share of the paid workforce—from one-third in the 1950s to less than a sixth in 1998. By connecting the history of union reform with a critical analysis of reform movements today, the authors develop recommendations for transforming U.S. labor in the years to come.

The chapter authors—labor activists, scholars, and journalists—explain and document the vital importance of union democracy, the importance of workers’ taking matters into their own hands by participating in union decisions, by holding their leaders accountable, and by reaching out

to the larger community. Despite differing emphases, all the contributors agree that rank-and-file workers cannot afford to entrust their lives or their livelihoods to the good graces of government officials, corporate owners, or union oligarchs. As Michael Eisenscher puts it, "Democracy is an instrument for building solidarity, for establishing accountability, and for determining strategies—all of which are critical for sustaining and advancing worker and union interests."

In the book's opening chapter, Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello stress the vital links between union struggles and broader movements for social change, urging labor to unite with other progressive community organizations. In "A New Labor Movement in the Shell of the Old?" Brecher and Costello argue that "any substantial revitalization of the labor movement will require a move toward social-movement unionism" to accompany rank-and-file empowerment within unions.

In "A Rising Tide of Union Democracy," Herman Benson shows how today's reform movements have grown out of earlier struggles for internal democracy. Faulting the new AFL-CIO leadership for failing to strengthen the rights of union members, he argues that internally, unions must open up to membership participation and dissent, and that externally, they must help build "a great new moral, social, and political force capable of moving the conscience of the nation." Benson cautions against any premature conclusions about the long-term effects of the Sweeney reform era in the AFL-CIO. These two chapters frame the basic choice facing U.S. labor today: business-friendly, conservative "reform" or authentic, democratic transformation of U.S. unions.

Jane Slaughter dissents from Sweeney's emphasis on building labor's muscle by increasing union ranks and persuading workers to vote Democratic. In "The New AFL-CIO: No Salvation from on High for the Working Stiff," she warns that workers will not be saved by the high and mighty or by the Democratic Party but by their own class-based militancy and union leaders held truly accountable by the rank and file. In "Labor: Turning the Corner Will Take More Than Mobilization," Michael Eisenscher argues that unions, "once heralded as leader of a broad progressive coalition, . . . are more commonly portrayed today as merely a 'special interest'." He emphasizes the importance of "a deep-going process of internal transformation" based on democratic and communitarian values, and of a greater role for unions in their communities, not just of a change in leadership.

In "Learning from the Past to Build the Future," Peter Rachleff finds hope for the future in the U.S. labor movement's record of resurgence from low points in the past—recoveries based on blending the experience of current unionists with the energies of new social forces and newly organized workers. He shows that U.S. labor's big comebacks have typically combined militant workplace action by the rank and file, support for local

strikes by the larger labor movement, and campaigns for public support—three strategies he finds shortchanged by the New Voice AFL-CIO leadership.

In “The Dynamics of Change,” Kim Moody proposes bottom-up approaches and stresses that change must come from rank-and-file activism rooted in social conscience. Peter Downs credits the “Unsung Heroes of Union Democracy,” its rank-and-file organizers, for benefiting not only union members but the larger society as well. “Perhaps the most important contribution of rank-and-file organizers to democracy,” he says, “is to teach working people that they don’t have to be powerful as individuals to change things for the better.”

In “Reform Movement in the Teamsters and United Auto Workers,” Ray Tillman argues that if democracy can be made to work in unions, the members will champion it in other areas of life as well. Tillman’s study of two reform movements, the Teamsters for a Democratic Union and the UAW’s New Directions Movement, connects their struggles for internal democracy with their social unionism; these two case studies suggest an alternative approach to rebuilding the U.S. labor movement. In *Hell on Wheels*, Steve Downs and Tim Schermerhorn examine the New Directions Caucus of Transit Workers Local 100, in which reformers broke the incumbent leaders’ monopoly of power and won democratic concessions for the members but continue to struggle against oligarchical tendencies among themselves, as New Directions’ own members get co-opted by accepting staff positions. As New Directions candidates, Downs and Schermerhorn daringly point out that their own platform for union democracy will “make it easier for the next group of dissidents to get rid of us if we become ‘them’ than it was for us to get rid of the current ‘them’!”

Without denying the importance of reformers’ capturing national union offices, Staughton Lynd makes a strong case for emphasizing grassroots reforms at the local level and for building horizontal networks among progressive locals. In “The Local Union: A Rediscovered Frontier,” he documents the record of locals, impressive compared to national unions. He nonetheless warns of locals’ biggest challenge: “the selfishness that destroys solidarity *inside* unions.” In “Restructuring Labor’s Identity,” Jane Williams uses SEIU Local 82’s Justice for Janitors campaign to show the need to link workers’ interests with people’s broader concerns for social justice. She also illustrates the problems a union may face if it organizes new workers but ignores the needs and views of existing members—especially if workers are divided along ethnic lines. While crediting John Sweeney for a sea change in union practices, she notes the dangers of overstressing his view that “unions should look outward, not inward.”

In “Lessons from the UMWA,” Anna Zajicek and Bradley Nash Jr. advocate a healthy balance between strong national unions and strong locals. Examining the United Mine Workers’ recent history, they caution that

unions must adapt to changing conditions and that “there is no one best way to structure a union movement.” They suggest that while excessive union centralization demobilizes the members, excessive decentralization weakens the national union and may result in losses and concessions despite increased local militancy.

Two final chapters emphasize the global challenges facing unions today. In “Cross-Border Alliances in the Era of Globalization,” Bruce Nissen documents recent cross-border alliances and offers a number of principles for helping them grow and thrive. Especially important is to increase and regularize contact across borders not only between union leaders but between rank-and-file workers from different countries. In “A Strategic Organizing Alliance,”² Robin Alexander and Peter Gilmore give an example of a U.S. union and a Mexican union building a successful alliance to deal with multinational corporations that hire workers from both countries. In addition to sharing organizational training sessions, this alliance uses language, theatre, murals, cartoons, music, and other art forms to build and express its international solidarity.

This book records offers the voices of a dissident unionism that is growing in strength as we enter the new millennium. These voices resonate with millions of Americans whose critical view of unions targets bureaucratic or corrupt union leaders. A recent Roper Center poll found that Americans, by a 2-to-1 margin, accord labor unions a right to exist, but that a slight majority (45 percent to 41 percent) view them more negatively than positively. Americans typically sympathize 2-to-1 with “striking workers” in opposition to “company management,” but favor “business” over “labor unions” 4-to-3, and fault “labor union leaders” almost 2-to-1 as “more interested in their own personal concerns” than in “helping their members.”³ It is ironic that the word *union* itself has become not a unifying but a divisive symbol, representing a “special interest” alienating many Americans from their fellow workers. Organized labor now ranks with government, lawyers, political parties, pro sports, and the media as untrustworthy when compared with colleges, religious institutions, and charities, which inspire much greater confidence among Americans.⁴

Union members are almost as hostile to union leaders as the general public is: Union respondents rated union leaders as primarily selfish by 51 percent to 38 percent (nonunion Americans were only somewhat more critical of them, 57 percent to 28 percent). For the same Roper Center report, KRC Research and Consulting assembled eight broadly representative focus groups of workers in New York, Mobile, Pittsburgh, and Los Angeles. “Nearly all respondents [including those who were generally pro-union] portray union *leaders* as ‘greedy,’ ‘corrupt,’ and ‘out of touch.’” In addition, many women workers “see unions as a male-dominated institution.”⁵ The general sentiment of the workers was that “unions need to

operate differently than they have in the past and to pursue somewhat different objectives.”⁶

Speaking for workers, labor economist Michael Yates asserts that “the accumulation of capital remains the source of our most pressing problems.”⁷ Yates may be right, but rank-and-file workers who tolerate company-friendly unions with corrupt and autocratic leaders participate in their own oppression. Racism, as well as the sexism noted above, continues to divide and conquer the labor movement. Sociologist Kenneth Clark tells us to “look at the American labor movement. With very few exceptions, it was never able to grow strong and effective because it was oppressed by its own racism. There’s a curious kind of tragic humor in racism oppressing its perpetrators.”⁸ Unions also alienate would-be friends when they support company activities that poison the environment or degrade low-income neighborhoods.

With the Soviet bogeyman dead and gone, “capitalism must now stand naked before the world.”⁹ But so must labor. U.S. society needs to attend to the unfinished business of providing for its people’s basic needs; of eliminating sexism, racism, ageism, and homophobia; of reversing ecocidal priorities of production and consumption; and of returning power to ordinary citizens both at work and in our communities. If organized labor is to play its proper and vital role in this transformation, it must practice what it preaches. It must reach out to the nonunionized and unpaid workers in our society, including those whose work is to rear and nurture future generations. It must reach out to local communities affected by its work. It must steward not only its own members and shops but also the earth on which we all depend. It must link its own struggles with those of all people who suffer from disadvantages that are not of their own making.

More than market forces themselves, it is unaccountable elites, profiting off the labor of others, that harm the working class and undermine the common good. If ordinary citizens controlled the public and private political economy, market forces could reliably serve the common good more of the time, with greater justice and efficiency. The movement for union reform and workplace democracy can help us transform U.S. society in this more humane and communitarian direction. As Michael Eisenscher argues, “Expanding the democratic realm in the labor movement is key to winning greater democracy in the workplace, in the economy, and in society.” And conversely, if the arguments are valid for democracy in politics—for Lincoln’s “government of the people, by the people, and for the people”—they are just as compelling for democracy in the union halls and the workplace.

Free markets can encourage us to produce higher-quality goods and services at lower cost, and they allow us important freedoms of choice as workers and consumers. But markets alone, whether unfettered or manipulated by

corporate capitalists, cannot adequately provide for such important public goods as job safety and security, environmental protection, maintenance of infrastructure, public health and education, protection for the disadvantaged, multicultural diversity, planning for future generations, and community integrity in the face of untrammelled growth. Market values must be balanced by community values. Eisenscher recognizes the role of values in social and economic transformation: "We need to build a labor movement that recognizes, articulates, and practices values that are fundamentally different from those of the market, namely values of solidarity, equality, inclusivity, community, and democracy."

Michael Yates notes: "Examples of union autocracy abound; whenever possible the AFL-CIO must oppose them and give support to insurgent movements."¹⁰ As the twenty-first century dawns, we may ask whether autocracy and bureaucracy must eventually triumph over democracy. We hope not, though it may be an uphill battle to prove Robert Michels wrong in his Iron Law of Oligarchy. In the complex modern world, it is always tempting for overburdened workers and citizens to leave governing to elites. Moreover, where grassroots struggles have suffered a history of defeat, "the anticipation of defeat by the relatively powerless" can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. As John Gaventa concludes in his influential study of an Appalachian valley, "Participation denied over time may lead to acceptance of the role of non-participation, as well as to a failure to develop the political resources—skills, organization, consciousness—of political action."¹¹

Many forces discourage rank-and-file workers and ordinary citizens from engaging actively in the political process that will help determine their fates. But this engagement is the only alternative to elite rule by default, and it must at a minimum succeed in holding leaders accountable. As Teamster President Ron Carey's 1998 decertification suggests, even well-meaning reformers need to be monitored by the rank and file.¹² Until unions and communities institutionalize grassroots participation in their governance, we will continue to travel a rocky journey to an uncertain destination on a road laid down by others.

Labor desperately needs collaboration with academia, the community, and other social movements (as occurred in the 1930s at the Brookwood Labor School and the Highlander Folk Center). Jerry Tucker, coordinator of the New Directions Workers Educational Center, argues that "workers confronted with huge multinational corporations and an international economic environment need new ideas and new strategies to preserve and enhance their eroding livelihoods, health and safety, and human rights." On the other hand, Tucker stresses, "the intellectual establishment needs to understand how its theories and work-organization models play out on the shop floor." Academics need to grasp such fundamentals as "how high

skills can still yield low wages and worker dissatisfaction, how ‘flexibility’ can become a code word for creating a contingent workforce” used against workers and their “hard-won legal protections.”¹³

We are pleased to offer this book as a continuation of the “labor-intellectual alliance” featured in the January 1997 issue of *Union Democracy Review*. If the history of U.S. labor is a mixed one, the appropriate response may be neither optimism nor pessimism but *hope* for authentic union democracy—and a dedication in our actions to give that hope its best chance. We believe that the cases of transformative struggle for union democracy explored in this book are indeed hopeful ones for the future of the U.S. labor movement. Unlike events over which we have no control, workers and friends of labor alike can make a difference in this future by understanding, promoting, and engaging in the ongoing process of change.

Notes

1. Victor Reuther, *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW: A Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976 [updated foreword, 1991]), ix.

2. Between the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) and the Frente Autentico del Trabajo (FAT), or True Alliance of Workers.

3. Roper Center, “Transformation of the American Labor Movement,” *The Public Perspective: A Roper Center Review of Public Opinion and Polling*, 5:5 (July/August 1994), 13–16.

4. Americans’ ratings of business vary widely, being generally positive for “free enterprise” but negative for “large corporations.” A “trust” and “confidence” survey of 800 registered voters in Colorado, carried out in 1996 by the Public Policy Program at the University of Colorado at Denver and sponsored by the NORWEST corporation, reported “business” as rated favorably by a 2-to-1 margin (compared with 5-to-1 for colleges, 4-to-1 for charities, 1-to-2 for labor, and 1-to-4 for the federal government). Institutional ratings vary geographically, and it should be noted that Coloradans, like registered voters, are more politically conservative than the general U.S. populace. However, the institutional rankings reported here in most respects mirror the results of national polls in the 1990s.

5. Roper Center, “Transformation,” 17.

6. *Ibid.*, 18.

7. Michael Yates, “Does the U.S. Labor Movement Have a Future?” *Monthly Review*, 48:9 (February 1997), 17.

8. Studs Terkel, *Race: How Blacks and Whites Feel About the Great American Obsession* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 335.

9. Yates, “Does the U.S. Labor Movement Have a Future?” 13.

10. *Ibid.*, 16.

11. John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 254–255.

12. Many believe that Carey himself was unknowingly victimized, especially by his former campaign manager and chief accuser, Jere Nash. Carey’s attorney, Reid Weingarten, has pointed out that Nash, along with Martin Davis, pleaded

guilty to misuse of funds and that Carey passed a polygraph test regarding his own ignorance of the illegal contributions to his re-election campaign against James Hoffa Jr. (Associated Press, January 1, 1998).

13. Telephone interview of Jerry Tucker by Ray Tillman, May 5, 1995.

A New Labor Movement in the Shell of the Old?

Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello

The Politics of Reform

In 1995, an insurgent campaign that dubbed itself “A New Voice for American Workers” captured the leadership of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). It called for a “new labor movement,” but any effort to construct a new labor movement was bound to come up against the fabled rigidity of the AFL-CIO, which labor historian David Montgomery once compared to a great snapping turtle, “hiding within its shell.” Why did the New Voice emerge, and what possibilities does it open up for the development of a new labor movement, given its location within the rigid and contorted shell of the old?

The Fall of the House of Labor

A lot has changed since the formation of the AFL-CIO. A regulated national economy has been transformed into a global “free market” economy, one in which U.S. workers can be put into competition with others anywhere in the world. Corporations have decentralized their activities, downsized their in-house operations, and outsourced their production even while concentrating their power around the globe. Large urban industrial complexes like Detroit and Pittsburgh have been replaced by small, highly mobile production units, which can easily be relocated. White men have become the minority of the U.S. workforce and women and people of color the majority.

This chapter is a revised version of an article that first appeared in *Labor Research Review* 24 (1996).

Meanwhile, no major U.S. institution changed less than the labor movement. At the end of the twentieth century, U.S. unions are as poorly adapted to the economy and society of their time as were the craft unions of iron puddlers and cordwainers to the mass production industries of the 1920s.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the AFL-CIO executed a stately, slow-motion collapse. Membership plunged to 15.5 percent of wage earners, with only 11.2 percent in the private sector. Major strikes and lockouts, for example Bridgestone, Caterpillar, Staley, and the Detroit newspapers, ended in devastating defeats. Not surprisingly, many workers came to accept almost any concessions rather than strike. In 1995, there were only 385 work stoppages, compared with 3,111 in the peak year of 1977, and in 1996 strikes hit a fifty-year low. Real wages declined about 15 percent between 1973 and 1995; real incomes for young families decreased by one-third. And after its greatest grassroots mobilization in twenty years, labor saw a Democratic president and Congress it had worked hard to elect pass the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which posed the threat of a personal pink slip to large numbers of U.S. workers and union officials. Maine AFL-CIO president Charles O'Leary observed that labor's public image was that of white-haired old men meeting down in Bal Harbor talking about the past. The once powerful AFL-CIO seemed little more than an empty shell.

During labor's "era of stagnation" there emerged a considerable number of reform movements, local activists, leaders, and staff members with progressive political ideas. They were visible in official and insurgent strikes like the Pittston coal strike and the Austin, Minnesota, Hormel strike; the biennial labor convocations held by *Labor Notes*; the militant AFL-CIO Organizing Institute; the transnational and strategic corporate campaigns of the Industrial Union Department; the local coalitions against NAFTA; the cross-union activism and solidarity promoted by Jobs with Justice; and the successful reform movement in the Teamsters union. Until 1995, however, barely an echo of these new forces was audible inside the AFL-CIO's headquarters in Washington or at its council meetings in Bal Harbor.

New Voice

Early in 1995, leaders of the biggest unions, well aware that inertia at the very top of the AFL-CIO was contributing to the decline of their own organizations, attempted a conventional power play. They asked Lane Kirkland, for sixteen years the president of the AFL-CIO, to step down and let his second-in-command, Tom Donahue, take over. When Kirkland refused, they asked Donahue to run against him, but he declined. John Sweeney,