

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

DAN CLAWSON, *The Next Upsurge Labor and the New Social Movements*, Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003, 235 p.

In this provocative book, Dan Clawson presents a complex argument about why the United States labour movement has been so weak since the 1960s and offers strategies for a different approach. Clawson argues that “unless the United States is transformed—economically, politically, and socially—progressive causes, not only in America but around the world, will continue to suffer more reverses than successes” (ix). He provides a sophisticated political analysis of the kinds of organizing strategies that, in any country, are likely to be most effective in mobilizing the numbers of people necessary to produce significant progressive social change.

The Next Upsurge Labor explores the contradictions between the benefits unions provide and the fact that unions are in decline. Unionized workers earn almost 25 percent more and unionized women and minority workers are relatively better paid. More importantly, Clawson documents the ways in which unionized workers have more power in their day-to-day working lives than others.

But these advantages are often offset by the way unions have been “ground down under an employer offensive” (27). Employers often display virulent hostility, going to great lengths to keep unions out of their workplaces. They are supported by governments whose policies favour business over protecting workers. I particularly appreciated his section on ‘Business Mobilization’ (37-43) although I found it terrifying. Clawson notes that United States business leaders were profoundly threatened by the progressive political mobilisations of the early 1970s. They mobilized in response with sweeping attacks on organised labour and systematic interventions to change labour laws and government policies. They targeted elected representatives to lobby and pressure them to support business interests. They also launched a war of ideas to create a culture hostile to unions and working people more generally.

Clawson also attributes low levels of unionization (only 13.5 percent of the workforce, fewer than 10 percent of the private sector), to undemocratic business unionism. More concerned with increasing the numbers of dues-paying members, union bureaucrats tend to play it safe, developing vested interests in maintaining the organisation and its structures. Existing labour regulations encourage unions to rely on staff and lawyers so that resources

often go to maintaining the organisation and paying lawyers' fees, rather than educating and mobilising members.

The alternative, Clawson insists, is that unions need to build the powerful force they have available—solidarity by large numbers of people—by putting major resources into a range of initiatives, “fostering internal debate, encouraging internal democracy, and empowering rank-and-file workers” (45). He calls for educating and mobilizing union members to identify what they want and need and then to think collectively about what would be necessary to achieve it (43). Out of such discussions would come new ways of organizing unions, organizing drives among new categories of employees not currently permitted by law to unionize, and new strategies by unions which would reject a range of other restrictions imposed by current labour laws. Unions need to form alliances with other movements and make any issues that workers and their families face into a union issue. They also need to work hard to change the current anti-union culture and create a sense of crisis in which new mobilisations to improve things for workers become leading campaigns, with widespread support from other workers, community groups, and other movements. Such strategies depend on the capacity of the labour movement to integrate into its organisations all those oppressed groups who have been excluded and to take up their concerns as important union issues.

He talks specifically about the relationship between labour movement and the women's movement, workers of colour and their communities, and issues of racism in the labour movement, the global justice movement, and campaigns relating to winning a living wage or fair labour practices. He shows how unions have been reluctant to take up such issues, shows what unions need to do to remedy their earlier exclusionary practices, and discusses what a fusion between labour and each social movement might entail. In each case he presents concrete examples of organising efforts, political mobilisations, and campaigns to illustrate his points.

He concludes that the labour movement could deal more effectively with the issues of race, gender and class, not by integrating previously excluded groups into existing labour organizations nor by forming alliances with other social movements (194). Rather he calls for a strategy of fusion, where groups organize autonomously around issues, identities and concerns, and each takes up the issue of the others “such that it is no longer clear what is a “labor” issue and what is a “women's” issue or an “immigrant” issue (194-195). It is an important book and I recommend it highly.

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