

# Review

*Solidarity Divided* (University of California Press, 2008)

Bill Fletcher Jnr and Fernando Gapasin

Reviewed by Steve Faulkner

It is a rare treat to come across a book from *within* the United States labour movement that dares to raise uncomfortable questions facing trade unions in the US, and to suggest solutions that are explicitly Left wing.

Fernando Gapasin and Bill Fletcher have produced a book that is essential reading for the progressive end of the political spectrum, but should also be read by the 'mainstream', which in US terms means conservative. Why? Because the book raises questions, delves into forgotten parts of labour history, analyses the impasse of labour in the US and internationally, critiques 'new organising' models trumpeted by some US unions, and gives insights into the impact of racism, sexism and discrimination which could shift the mind-sets of Left, Right and Undecided!

The authors are not 'outside' commentators. They have impressive activist backgrounds, and from various vantage points have been immersed in discussions and events that helped shape the US labour landscape.

They are also socialists and internationalists, and have critically absorbed what they have seen in other parts of the world. They have drawn from the sometimes bitter experiences of the struggles of migrant workers and national minorities within the US. This has provided them with an edge even if at times they almost apologise for the radical solutions they put forward!

The book opens with a meeting in Johannesburg in June 2001 between Nehawu (National Education Health

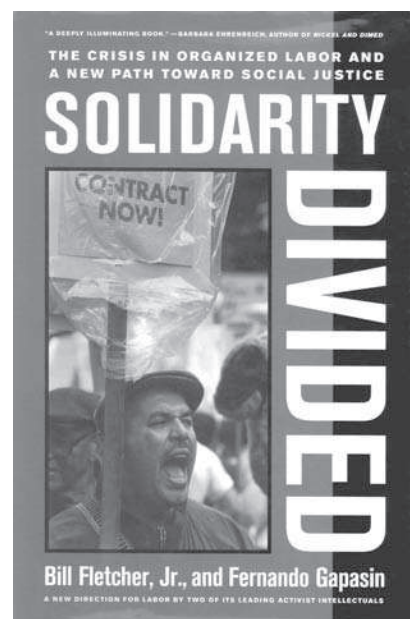
& Allied Workers Union) and the US Service Employees International Union. The SEIU has developed an international reputation for its vigorous organising campaigns, and is highly regarded by many for providing a new perspective for US labour.

The discussion centred on unions and political matters. At one stage, a young progressive SEIU comrade stated that the purpose of a union is to represent the interests of its members. Not so, replied the Nehawu comrades, to some surprise. Unions are there to represent the interests of the working class, even when they are in conflict with those of union members! This snapshot helps to explain the issues the book explores.

## EVALUATING US LABOUR HISTORY

This is not a dry history of the US labour movement that the state department would promote! It is so much better. It draws upon struggles, progressive forces and black and migrant worker communities to explore a side of labour history that has been overlooked. There is shame and pride in this story, but it is necessary to 'out' it to fully understand institutionalised racism and the manufactured intolerance of society, and its reflection *within* the labour movement.

When Cold War anti-communism embraced by conservative union leaders is added to the mix, the ideological and organisational rigidity that characterises much of the US labour movement is clear. The writers explain how difficult it was to be identified with the Left, especially if



you were an activist of colour, for almost two generations because anti-communism distorted the role of unions as organisations fighting for the working class.

They explain how the anti-communist tag was used by unionists to smear and marginalise all unionists who argued for reform of the movement itself and reduced discussion to polarised absurdities. This echoes with what a US activist told me decades ago, that any issue he raised in his union to make leaders more accountable was savagely dismissed by the phrase, 'If you are against us, you must be a communist or a communist sympathiser'. He was in fact a Quaker.

It was also a pleasure to read an analysis of the US workers' movement that was not blind to the impact made by militant black and

migrant worker organisations. However small these organisations were, they provided a hotbed of ideas for thousands of future activists who struggled to make sense of how best to work and survive within the labour movement, without losing sight of the need to tackle racism and sexism and promote internationalism.

### SHAPING OF US LABOUR POLITICS

The book examines the relationships between the leaders of the US labour movement, especially of the AFL-CIO, and the US government. It shows the spineless way that much of US labour politics was and is shaped, not by articulating the needs of grassroots workers, but by leaders bending over to mimic the policy imperatives of government including in foreign policy.

But it does cast light on those few unionists who were prepared to oppose the system and stand for principles against racism, against the immorality and wastefulness of overseas war efforts, against US government support for dictators in Latin America and elsewhere and against the super-exploitative practices of multinationals. The book reminds us that these progressive forces are also part of the American labour tradition.

The authors bring a potent analysis liberated from class, race, gender and nationality blindness to bear upon the contemporary US labour movement with devastating effect. It includes an account of leadership elites vying for power not on political or organisational distinctions, but on a pursuit of personal power and influence. The authors, approach this with a frankness that in the past would have written them off as 'communists and fellow travellers'.

It will be interesting to see how their critiques are received today.

The authors place the recent splits and factionalism in the US labour movement within a context of the crisis of capitalism, and the beginnings of pressure from below for a labour leadership prepared to take on the excesses of Reaganomics.

### NEW ORGANISING MODEL

It is against this background that unionists pay much attention to SEIU's 'new organising model' and rightly so. There is no doubt that SEIU's aggressive organising methods shook the US movement out of its torpor, and that it impacted on movements in other parts of the northern hemisphere.

Under the charismatic leadership of Andy Stern, SEIU diverted resources into the 'organising project', even at the expense of other vital union services such as education and health and safety. It used dedicated research to identify weak points in employers' marketing and profit chains to win recognition agreements.

This is documented in detail and helps explain why so many activists in the US were excited and 'seduced' by SEIU's approach. A large number of progressive comrades secured

employment in SEIU and some were the greatest promoters of its approach.

A Marxist SEIU comrade told me with messianic zeal about how the priority was 'building the SEIU, any which way' and how my 'idealistic talk of waging class struggle was not only impossible but diversionary until first we have recruited the working class'.

It sounded like a multiple stage theory of social transformation where the working class was simply waiting for when SEIU was ready to announce that class struggle could begin! Absent was SEIU linking into community struggles of the oppressed, or supporting other workers on strike, or building working-class leadership, or tackling racism and sexism.

Parts of SEIU believe that winning membership contracts is the purpose of unionisation, and the authors take this to task and locate it within a deeper understanding of the conservative traditions of the US labour movement.

SEIU's approach seemed an exciting option when the established union movements of the North were struggling to survive the onslaught of neo-liberalism. But the model



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Talking Union

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contains profound weaknesses, and I applaud the writers for being bold enough to tell the Emperors of Labour that they are wearing no clothes!

What SEIU is missing is *class politics*. Building the union through aggressive recruitment campaigns is important, but much more is required to break the hold of the market, and to replace a 'market mentality' within the movement.

What the authors argue for is a liberating working-class consciousness. They make the strong point that whatever building strategies unions use, if they are located within a market paradigm and do not move beyond bargaining wages and conditions and if they reinforce the isolation of organised workers from social movements and other progressive bodies, then these unions represent no more than a 'quick techno fix' to a politically bankrupt system.

### BEYOND CRITIQUE OF CONSERVATISM

The writers go further than a critique of the AFL-CIO's weaknesses, and the limits of the SEIU's organising strategy, and raise the need for 'social justice unionism' underpinned by social justice solidarity.

At first I thought this was a play on words to avoid mentioning the 's' word, socialism. However their

definition of social justice solidarity and unionism is reassuring.

They assert that unions, whether they know it or not, are engaged in class struggle and are a potential force for fundamental change. They insist on the term solidarity to underline the need for recognising common class interests of a tactical and strategic nature across race, gender and national divides.

Their definition emphasises that social justice unionism must be an explicitly 'left' project, and that much work needs to happen to elaborate what this means in practice. There are however many experiences from within the US and other parts of the world to draw upon. They say, 'The Left embraces a critique of capitalism that recognises the system's inability to meet the objectives of human rights, workers' rights, environmental justice... a Left led Union movement must be prepared to fight for every reform that strengthens the working class, and other sectors of society subjected to oppression.'

They admit that unions are not political parties, but that they must not limit themselves to economic matters, 'no arena should be immune from unionism'. Thinking through the practicalities, they avoid being dismissed as idealists and put forward arguments to act

as a guide for activists who are interested in this form of union transformation.

For example, they highlight the need to transform unions to make them more worker controlled, and to seek more worker control of the sectors they are in. It is impossible to talk about the transformation of society without transforming unions. They write about the need to democratise unions, and about a leadership that is not afraid to challenge capital, rather than jump into bed with it.

They write about the need to change the way unions relate to social movements and wider social issues, and how local union organisation can be enriched by doing so. They explain the importance of not paying lip service to anti-racism, gender issues and internationalism, but to integrate these issues into union development plans so they become part of everyday union struggles. In short they provide an outline of how to put 'movement' back into the labour movement!

Inevitably, the book cannot provide all the answers. It can however help us to ask sharp questions about our movement in South Africa. To what extent are we really engaging with membership on questions of extending worker control of industries and the public sector? Is worker control rhetoric or reality? Are we deepening our relationships with other sections of the poor, and acting as a mobilising force with poor communities and the oppressed? Do we have an internationalist perspective amongst our shop stewards, and are our solutions linked to a socialist transformation?

These are questions we must answer to move forward. Get your union to buy this book, and share it!

LB

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