

The next upsurge?

The US labour movement has been losing ground for many years. Is there a possibility of a revival? Dan Clawson in a book recently released in the US, 'The New Upsurge: Labour and the New Social Movements' argues it is possible but only if the labour movement links up with social movements.

Most of the US labour movement's focus has been on the need to put more resources into organising, but this will not bring about the desired results. Clawson argues that the US labour movement may be on the verge of massive growth if they were able to adopt new forms of unionisation. Clawson believes conditions are ripe: people are working harder to stay in the same place, it's clear conventional politics won't bring change, business and the rich are plundering people in increasingly obvious and obscene ways, labour groups are forming once unheard of coalitions with other social movements, and the anti-war movement shows the global nature of the problem.

If such a change were to occur it would change everything we think we know about the labour movement and what we mean by 'union'. The unions that we have today were created for a world that no longer exists. As long as they keep operating within the old framework, they won't get very far.

Clawson believes that bursts of growth come at times of social

movements, and each burst re-defines the character of the labour movement. In order for there to be a new upsurge, labour must fuse with the new social movements, transforming both. The new forms may create a labour movement that breaks down the boundaries between 'union' and 'community' or between what is a work and what is a family issue. That is exactly what's happening in some parts of the labour movement: labour has endorsed global justice and opposed war in Iraq, student activism focuses on combating sweatshops, unions struggle for immigrant rights. Innovative campaigns of this sort are creating new forms of struggle – ones determined by workers rather than union organizers – and redefining the very meaning of the labour movement.

Clawson's book presents a range of examples, many of them little known even within the labour community, from attempts to replace 'macho' unions with more feminist models, to campaigns linking labour and community issues, to struggles for cross-border solidarity and for a living wage.

If we want worker power it can only come through an explosive burst of growth.

Will the coming decade witness the rejuvenation of the US labour movement? Clawson believes the opportunity exists. Current movements may look like 'failures' but are better understood as precursors that demonstrate future possibilities and begin to develop new models.

Today, many predict the demise of unions. But in 1932 the president of the American Economics Association made the same prediction and history proved him spectacularly wrong. History can reverse directions even faster than the stock market. People are disgusted with the way things are, but don't believe they can win. One hard-fought victory against great odds might change people's minds and unleash a flood of activism.

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