

# INTERNATIONAL SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION (ISA)

## Labour Movements Research Committee (RC 44)

<http://www.socsci.mcmaster.ca/globalabour/>

### August 2004

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#### Mission of RC44

To encourage international research on labour movements, with a focus on their role both in industrial relations and in the political arena. Membership is open to any person engaged in research into Labour Movements or in Labour Movement activities.

#### Editor's Notes

The decade of the 1990s saw a proliferation of studies on the impact of globalisation on trade unions. Undoubtedly, the current decade will be dominated by studies on union responses to the onslaught. Whether we call it 'revitalisation', 'renewal' or 'rebirth' is not so important. What is important is that labour mobilisation has entered a new era characterised by the use of innovative strategies, which if replicated could see the birth of labour globally.

But what is even more exciting, is the potential for the rebirth of labour studies itself. This is a theme that runs through this edition of the newsletter. Historically, moments of union renewal have spawned path-breaking ideas that not only seek to make sense of union mobilisation, but also attempt to act as some kind of manifesto for the future. Dan Clawson's book, *The Next Upsurge*, is a bold and commendable step that sets the ball rolling in this regard.

In this edition we also carry several reports on conferences and workshops (Ottawa and Sheffield) dealing with the same theme. All of them highlight the need for new thinking that makes sense of the state of labour but also seek to shape the way we think about labour's future. In this regard a note of caution is sounded in two of the pieces (Webster and Mtyingizana) about the danger of reproducing and perpetuating the inequality of intellectual production between the global North and the global South. In my review of Clawson's book, I also argue in favour of a truly global approach to labour studies, which moves beyond seeing the South as a residual category of undifferentiated countries characterised by chaos and lack of innovation. In this regards, Achenbach and Frenkel's contribution on China is most welcome.

Boyd's piece on *Labour, Capital and Society* is immensely informative and relevant to the focus of this edition. However, the journal may also have to think about the implications of these new challenges for labour studies globally. In particular, it needs to engage with some of the innovative responses to globalisation that are emerging in the South.

Finally, we would like to thank Robert O'Brien, an RC44 Board member at McMaster University, Canada, for hosting the new and refreshing RC44 website on his University site. Access the site at <http://www.socsci.mcmaster.ca/globalabour/> and follow the RC44 link.

**Sakhela Buhlungu**

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RC44 North American Workshop  
30/31 May 2004

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On May 30th and 31st, the University of Ottawa (Canada) hosted the 1st RC44 North-American Workshop, entitled "Labour Confronted to the Transformations of Work". Born from an initiative of Edward Webster, RC44 President, this activity was organized by a North-American committee coordinated by Mona-Josée Gagnon and Thomas Collombat (Université de Montréal). Participants coming from the United States and Canada but also from South Africa, Australia and India, shared some of their research interests during two days and built links for the future.

Dan Clawson (University of Massachusetts), Chair Elect of the American Sociological Association Section on Labor Movements, as guest-speaker, made comments based on his latest book, *The Next Upsurge*. Defending the thesis that labour movement evolves by upsurge, Dan's research leads him to believe that the widest alliance between unions and other social movements is the most promising way for the future.

Ari Sitas (University of KwaZulu Natal) made us understand the numerous challenges facing the South-African labour movement today, particularly those related to land property and livelihood.

In the afternoon, Andrew Jackson (Canadian Labour Congress) presented the results of his research relating to factors influencing union density in Canada. He specifically focused on nuances between the various economic sectors, types of jobs, and provinces.

Thomas Collombat (Université de Montréal) then summarized the main elements of research he, Mona-Josée Gagnon and Pierre Avignon did on Québec unions' international activities. This research lead them to a global analysis of the international labour movement based on a typology of the various global forums in which unions are involved.

Guy Bellemare (Université du Québec en Outaouais) spoke about the unionization of kindergarten workers in Québec and highlighted conclusions made by him and three of his colleagues. This example of cooperation between unions and civil society organizations help us understand new directions taken by the labour movement in Québec and elsewhere.

Finally, Carla Lipsig-Mummé (Monash University) discussed the state of the Australian Labour movement, focusing on its position on the Australian arbitration system. She also shared ideas about current difficulties faced by Australian unions and their tumultuous relations with the Labour Party.

This workshop gave participants the opportunity not only to listen to these key conclusions but also to meet and share ideas about their current research. They were also invited to (re)discover some journals, including *Labour, Capital and Society* whose editor, Rosalind Boyd (McGill University) spoke about the journal's current situation.

The network built during and around this workshop must carry on. An electronic mailing-list was developed through this initiative so that researchers interested in the North American labour movement can have their own forum. If you wish to be added to this list, please email [thomas.collombat@umontreal.ca](mailto:thomas.collombat@umontreal.ca).

**Thomas Collombat**

1<sup>ère</sup> table-ronde nord-américaine du CR44: des  
échanges enrichissants et à perpétuer  
30/31 May 2004

L'Université d'Ottawa (Canada) a accueilli les 30 et 31 mai derniers la 1<sup>ère</sup> table-ronde nord-américaine du CR44, sur le thème « Le syndicalisme face aux transformations du travail ». Cette initiative d'Edward Webster, président du CR44, avait été relayée et organisée par un comité nord-américain coordonné par Mona-Josée Gagnon et Thomas Collombat (Université de Montréal). Des participantes et participants en provenance du Canada et des États-Unis mais aussi d'Afrique du Sud, d'Australie et d'Inde ont pu échanger pendant deux jours et créer des liens pour l'avenir.

Dan Clawson (University of Massachusetts), président-élu de la section « Labor Movements » de l'American Sociological Association, a présenté, comme conférencier invité, une communication reprenant la thèse de son dernier livre *The Next Upsurge*. Présentant une évolution du mouvement syndical par à-coups, les observations de Dan le conduisent à voir dans l'union la plus large entre syndicats et mouvements sociaux la voie d'avenir la plus prometteuse.

Ari Sitas (University of KwaZulu Natal) nous a ensuite permis de bien cerner les nombreux enjeux auxquels est aujourd'hui confronté le mouvement syndical sud-africain, notamment les questions liées à la terre et à l'auto-subsistance.

Dans l'après-midi, Andrew Jackson (Congrès du travail du Canada) a présenté les résultats d'une de ses recherches sur les facteurs influant sur la densité syndicale au Canada, mettant notamment en exergue les nuances entre les différents secteurs économiques, types d'emploi et provinces.

Thomas Collombat (Université de Montréal) présenta ensuite les fruits d'une recherche menée par Mona-Josée Gagnon, Pierre Avignon et lui-même sur les activités internationales des syndicats québécois débouchant sur une analyse globale des relations syndicales internationales basée sur une grille de lecture des différents forums auxquels les syndicats participent au niveau mondial.

Guy Bellemare (Université du Québec en Outaouais) aborda le cas de la syndicalisation des Centres de la petite enfance au Québec et exposa les conclusions auxquelles trois de ses collègues et lui-même sont arrivés. Cet exemple de coopération entre le mouvement syndical et d'autres organisations de la société civile permettrait de mieux comprendre les nouvelles avenues dans lesquelles s'engagent les syndicats au Québec et ailleurs dans le monde.

Enfin, Carla Lipsig-Mummé (Monash University) entretint les participants de la situation du mouvement syndical australien et tout particulièrement de sa position quant au modèle australien d'arbitrage. Elle évoqua par là même les difficultés rencontrées actuellement par ce mouvement et ses relations tumultueuses avec le Parti travailliste.

Outre ces communications, cette table-ronde a avant tout permis à tous les participants de se rencontrer et d'échanger sur leurs recherches en cours. Nous avons également pu découvrir ou redécouvrir certaines revues dont une, *Travail, capital et société*, était représentée par sa directrice Rosalind Boyd (Université McGill) qui nous a entretenu de la situation actuelle de sa revue.

Ces liens doivent perdurer. Une liste de diffusion a commencé à être élaborée à cette occasion afin que celles et ceux intéressés par la recherche sur le syndicalisme en Amérique du nord puissent disposer d'un forum d'échange. Si vous désirez être ajouté à cette liste, envoyez un courriel à [thomas.collombat@umontreal.ca](mailto:thomas.collombat@umontreal.ca).

Thomas Collombat

'OTTAWA IS VERY FAR AWAY'

REFLECTIONS ON THE ISA RESEARCH COUNCIL CONFERENCE

OTTAWA, CANADA - MAY, 2004

The research council of the International Sociological Association (ISA) meets every four years between the world congresses to plan the forthcoming World Congress. It is combined with a two-day academic conference where all fifty three Research Committees are invited to send a delegate and present a paper. The theme of this year's conference was 'Competition, Conflict and Co-operation', and was held in Ottawa, at the home university of the vice-president of research in the ISA, Ann Denis.

The research committees are the intellectual 'engine rooms' of our association and the conference provides a unique opportunity to assess the state of play worldwide in sociology... My sense is of a discipline returning to its empirical roots but lacking theoretical coherence and very fragmented into overlapping areas of specialisation. I had a meeting with the President of RC30 (Women and Society) from India and RC32 (Sociology of Work) from Brazil and agreed to organise a joint session/s on The Worlds of Work, Women and Labour in the Global South at the next World Congress in Durban in July 2006.

**Two issues emerged in the daylong Business meeting that I would like to highlight:**

Firstly, I raised the issue of membership of the ISA. Our experience is that many potential members of RC44 are not sociologists and do not want to pay a considerable amount of money to join ISA. They prefer to join only RC44 and pay \$20. The response from the Secretariat was encouraging; they are happy if we sign up members for RC44 only but would like at least 50% of our members to join the ISA. This seems to me to be a fair and pragmatic compromise, although it was stressed that our allocation of sessions in Durban will depend on the number of ISA members in RC44. It is also worth mentioning that unless a substantial number of us join ISA; the association will become unsustainable.

Secondly, I was concerned that, once again, the question of 'how far away Durban is' came up in the final session of the Business meeting. This interjection had been preceded by a detailed account by Dasreth Chetty, the business manager of the Durban congress, on the extensive consultations that have taken place around the 2006 congress. He presented a detailed business plan, identified the extensive conference facilities in Durban and addressed the concerns expressed over security. To be confronted once again with the contentious point that 'Durban is far away' was the final straw.

I intervened by making the observation that the distance from Ottawa to Durban is exactly the same as the distance from Durban to Ottawa. For decades, we have travelled these distances to attend conferences in the North; has the time not arrived for this journey to be reciprocated? Besides, I said, the question is 'far away from where?' Are we to assume that there is a centre and a periphery in the ISA? I suggested that the ISA see the congress in Durban as an opportunity to hear voices from the Global South and become genuinely international. This will be the first time the ISA has had its congress in Africa. It maybe a long way to Durban, I concluded, but the journey will be worthwhile...

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**JOURNAL  
Call for  
Papers**

*Labour, Capital and Society: A Journal on the Third World*

by Rosalind Boyd, (Founding) Editor

*“Labour, Capital and Society is a treasure-trove and a leading light when it comes to public good concerns related to international development. This may be the sole academic publication primarily focused on a public good approach to development issues.”* – Professor of Anthropology, Concordia University, Montreal

Founded in 1979, ***Labour Capital and Society/Travail, Capital et Société (LC&S/TC&S)*** is an interdisciplinary, bilingual, refereed journal on labour issues concerning the regions of Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Middle East. It is published twice a year by the Centre for Developing-Area Studies (CDAS), a graduate research institute at McGill University in Montreal, Canada.

The aim of *LC&S/TC&S* is to publish primary research and theoretical material mainly by Canadian-based and international researchers on all aspects of work and labour in the Third World. We attract a significant number of international contributions, which ensures that unemployment and the struggles of the labouring poor are treated in an immediate, engaged manner from a multi-disciplinary perspective; those contributions also permit us to explore and stimulate debate, in English and French, from diverse positions. While our editorial approach emphasizes that the sources of problems related to the world of work and labourers are to be found in the modes of development, we favour a critical exploration of the complex social, economic, cultural and political dimensions between modes of development and the actual conditions in which people live and work. Such an approach leads to articles on women's work in the domestic sphere and in the labour market; labour migration; agricultural workers; trade union movements; unorganized labour protests; effects of structural adjustment on people's lives; informal sector work; the impact of rapid industrialization on workers and now globalization's impact on workers. Over the past decade, we have increasingly addressed problems related to globalization, especially the harmful effects of neoliberal policies.

For historical buffs, the genesis of our journal is interesting to note. The precursor to *LC&S* founded in 1979 was a Newsletter on “Manpower (sic) and Unemployment Research in Africa” which began in 1968 with three co-Editors: Peter C.W. Gutkind, former Professor of Anthropology at McGill University and two other professors of anthropology, Andréé Lux (Laval University) and Peter Carstens (University of Toronto). Alice Gutkind, Peter's wife, faithfully typed and mimeographed the first issues of the Newsletter for circulation primarily in Africa.

I became Editor of the Newsletter in 1974, guided its transformation into the scholarly journal called ***LABOUR, Capital and Society*** and remained its Editor until now, with only one three-year break. Prof. Gutkind, noted labour scholar, remained an active member of the Editorial Committee of *LC&S* until 1987 and then the Consultative Board until his death in 2001. This transformation into a scholarly journal reflected the expanded editorial objectives (the analysis of all aspects of work and workers concerns, including unemployment, in all regions of the Third World) and the journal's growing role in the field of Third World labour studies. Since 1979, the journal has published refereed articles in French and English with abstracts in the other language, has had a relevant book review section, has published specialized bibliographies on different aspects of labour and has from time to time published a Commentary section to focus on current debates of

labour researchers. Between 1978 and 1985, the journal also published the bilingual "Register of On-going Labour Research" during a significant period of labour interest. During this period, CDAS researchers, professors and graduate students also formed the Labour Studies Group which made a vital contribution to consolidating the 'new' international studies research, moving away from area or development studies and from traditional subject categories.

For 1989 to 1991, Victor Piché of the Département de démographie and Greg Teal of the Département d'anthropologie, both professors at the Université de Montréal, became co-editors of *LC&S/TC&S* to strengthen the bilingual and multi-disciplinary character of the journal. While there has always been Francophone participation on the Editorial Committee, the Editors based at a French university achieved a firm bilingual balance in articles, expanded the network of researchers, contributors and evaluators in the Francophone milieu, and tried to increase the subscribers at French-language institutions both within Canada and abroad. I resumed the Editorship of the journal in 1992

Since 1984, the Montreal-based inter-university Editorial Committee has elaborated thematic or special issues on themes of importance in the field of Third World labour studies. At times, these were guest edited by scholars not members of the Editorial Committee; others were by Editorial Committee members or the Editor herself. The November 1985 issue on *South African Labour* was guest edited by Roger Southall (currently at the Human Sciences Research Council in South Africa); April 1986 on *Petty Commodity Production* was guest edited by Jonathan Barker and Gavin Smith (University of Toronto); April 1988 on *Health and Safety in the Labour Process* by Rosalind Boyd; November 1990 on *Industrialization and Labour in the East Asian NICs* by Greg Teal; April 1992 on *Transformation on the South African Gold Mines* was guest edited by Jonathan Crush, Alan Jeeves (both at Queen's University, Canada) and Wilmot James (University of Cape Town, South Africa); April 1993 on *Adjustments and Democratization in Francophone Africa* was guest edited by Myriam Gervais and Raymond Gervais; the November 1994 issue on *Child Labour within the Globalizing Economy* by Rosalind Boyd; April/November 1996 was a double issue guest edited by Dolores Chew and Usha Thakur, with Humeira Iqtidar on *Women and Work in South Asia*. November 1997 was a special issue entitled *Confronting Neo-liberalism* followed by a double issue (April/November 1998) on *Workers and Borders in the Context of Regional Blocs: APEC, NAFTA, and EU*. In November 2000, a special issue on Zimbabwe was guest edited by Suzanne Dansereau and dedicated to the late Peter Gutkind. Currently, guest editors Manuel Poitras and Viviana Patroni (York University, Canada) are producing a special issue on *Labour in Neoliberal Latin America*, focusing on the conditions of labour and the experiences of labour movements in Chile, Brazil, Argentina and Mexico.

*Labour, Capital and Society* is one of the very few refereed journals anywhere with a focus exclusively on Third World labour. We invite members of the Research Group 44 and others working in the field of labour to subscribe to the journal and to send articles or suggestions for special issues on any of the research themes described above.

For subscription details and more information on the journal, visit our website: <http://www.mcgill.ca/cdas> and send your articles directly to [rosalind.boyd@mcgill.ca](mailto:rosalind.boyd@mcgill.ca)



## Understanding Chinese Labour Relations: Challenge & Opportunity

Ralph Achenbach & Steve Frenkel\*

China's workforce is not only the largest in the world; it is changing rapidly as the country continues to industrialize at breakneck speed. These developments underline the need to better understand and explain employment relations in this emerging superpower. The current literature on this topic falls into two broad categories: one dealing with the institutional environment of industrial relations (IR) in China, mostly at the macro- and meso-levels, and the other being concerned with micro-level, enterprise human resource management (HRM) policies and practices.

The primary focus of the former is on notions of nascent tripartism and collective consultation and includes contributions by Oakley (2002), Clarke and Lee (2003), Taylor et al (2003) and Clarke, Lee and Li (2004). The second grouping of publications primarily examines and assesses personnel administration with a focus on activities of foreign firms (including non-mainland Chinese firms) operating joint ventures and/or wholly foreign owned enterprises in China. A useful overview is provided by Warner (2004) while examples include Ahlstrom, Bruton, and Chan (2001); Braun and Warner (2002); Bruton, Ahlstrom and Chan (2000); Ding, Field, and Akhtar (1997); Goodall and Warner (1997); and Lu and Bjorkma (2001). Studies of state-owned enterprises include those by Warner (1994), Ding, Goodall, and Warner (2000), and Benson and Zhu (1999), with fewer contributions addressing collectively-owned enterprises (Ding, Lan, and Warner 2000, Ding, Ge, and Warner 2004).

One issue that receives much attention in both parts of the literature is the fragmentation of Chinese labour. With the recent relaxation of the system of household registration, the traditional macro-level division within the Chinese labour force between city dwellers and rural inhabitants is now evident in individual workplaces, where veteran urban staff now work alongside migrant workers from rural areas. Since the latter are mostly young women, not only place of origin but also gender have become new parameters of fragmentation.

Another common theme is the notion of convergence. Are IR and HRM in China going to eventually resemble the generic patterns found in Western industrialized countries? Or are they going to move closer to the systems of other Asian countries? Or are they are going to develop and retain entirely unique characteristics? In both parts of the literature, the conclusion to date is that systems are exhibiting peculiar "Chinese characteristics". Just what this means for the future of trade unionism deserves a good deal more attention.

These two themes raise a couple of interesting points. First, many contributions are limited to describing the current situation in China or to contemplating possible trends. This has the potential for integrating research findings on China with general IR and HRM theory. With respect to the issue of labour force fragmentation, for instance, an avenue worth exploring is the role of employers in both making use of this phenomenon, e.g. by hiring workers on contracts of varying duration to achieve numerical and/or functional flexibility, and in devising an emergent strategy that provides a rationale and a guide to the evolution of this kind of complex architecture. Secondly, the use of Western frameworks and concepts raises the question of whether these contributions conceal rather than reveal more about the nature of the "Chinese characteristics" they set out to describe. By focusing on adversarial collective bargaining as a benchmark for 'genuine' industrial relations and on strikes as evidence of industrial disputes, for instance, other forms of worker organization and resistance, peculiar to the Chinese context, may go undetected.

More research on Chinese labour relations is needed, particularly the kind of enquiry that acknowledges, yet goes beyond conventional categories, and explores the customs and practices of workers and managers who are participating in the current, remarkable changes in Chinese economy and society.

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## CALL FOR PAPERS: INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM

### UNION RENEWAL:

#### Assessing Innovations for Union Power in a Globalized Economy

Montreal, Quebec

18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> November 2004

Within the framework of its project, **Rethinking Institutions for Work and Employment in a Global Era** is organizing an International Colloquium. (Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council of Canada: Major Collaborative Research Initiatives Program), the Inter-university Research Center on Globalization and Work (CRIMT - a Canadian based research center located at Université de Montréal, Université Laval and HEC Montréal).

Details are available at [www.crimt.org](http://www.crimt.org). All interested researchers are invited to submit a research paper proposal in either English or French, and the deadline for submission is **September 15th 2004**. For further information, see link to [www.crimt.org/renewal.html](http://www.crimt.org/renewal.html).

#### SUBMIT PROPOSALS TO: International Colloquium on Union Renewal

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BOOK  
REVIEW

DAN CLAWSON (2003)  
THE NEXT UPSURGE: Labor and the New Social Movements

Cornell University Press, USA

“Clawson’s vision of a new labor movement infused with the dynamic strategies and broad agendas of the new social movements is not only persuasive, it is necessary if we ever want to create a decent world for those who must work for a living. A powerful book by one of labor’s smartest and most enthusiastic champions.” – Robin D.G. Kelley, author of *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*

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### Review by Sakhela Buhlungu

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At the ISA World Congress in 2002 in Brisbane, a recurring theme in the Labour Movements Research Committee (RC44) sessions was the notion that labour was at the crossroads. Most of these presentations were based on research in the global South. But there were a few papers, mainly based on research in the US and Western Europe, which addressed an emerging, trend in these countries, namely union revitalisation. If the Brisbane papers on revitalisation were somewhat tentative in their approach, then Dan Clawson’s book presents a much bolder argument that suggests that the US labour movement has moved beyond the proverbial crossroads.

The Next Upsurge presents a concrete assessment of the state of the labour movement in US today. This assessment gives Clawson tremendous hope and enables him to predict that the ‘next upsurge’ will occur soon. This “vain hope that something will come along” (p. 199) and the optimism that underpins the prediction are based on what Clawson refers to as the “emerging paradigm” in US labour mobilisation. The two central elements of this paradigm are the increased militancy of union membership, on the one hand, and a community orientation of the revitalising movement. He argues the upsurge will lead to the revitalisation of the labour movement.

Clawson emphasises that the upsurge will not be an incremental or slow process. It will happen on a large scale and it will be dramatic. The author examines key moments in US labour history and suggests that the 1930s is perhaps the only period that provides an example of the upsurge he is predicting.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the book is the discussion of the ‘emerging paradigm’ and how

labour needs to reinvent itself if it is to survive. Part of this reinvention hinges on labour finding common cause with the new social movements. Indeed, Clawson makes bold to suggest that alliance building is not sufficient for survival. Labour “must fuse with these movements such that it is no longer clear what is a ‘labor’ issue and what is a ‘women’s’ issue or an ‘immigrant’ issue” (p. 194). This suggestion of a fused model of working class mobilization is probably the central proposition that makes the book so profound.

Although critical of certain current practices and strategic choices of the US labour movement today, Clawson remains optimistic because of recent developments in that movement. “If an upsurge comes tomorrow, or the day after”, he concludes, “I am convinced that labor will be one central element of the upsurge – not the only element, but a central one” (p. 204)

But as someone who has been observing the changing fortunes of a militant labour movement in another part of the world (South Africa), I felt the book also contains some weaknesses. Firstly, the book is too US-centric and too inward-looking and I suspect that if the author had taken the trouble to look beyond North America, he may have had to modify some of the conclusions or, in fact, could have discovered further evidence to strengthen the claims and predictions he makes. In 1997, the Congress of South African Trade Unions appointed a commission to investigate innovative strategies for organisational renewal in the face of challenges thrown up by globalisation and the democratic transition. The result was the historic September Commission, which is seen by some in developing countries as a model for union renewal. Similarly, scholars and activists in Western Europe have been observing similar trends as those discussed by Clawson. Academic journals such as the European Journal of Industrial Relations have run special editions on the subject. In a nutshell, I would like to argue that any future upsurge is going to have to draw on examples and lessons globally.

I really like the dose of optimism in the book, particularly because we are always bombarded with pessimism and predictions about the ‘end of labour’. However, I am little unsure about how Clawson arrives at the conclusion that the upsurge has to be rapid and dramatic. The material he presents in the book suggests the upsurge (when it does occur) will be the culmination of a slow and incremental process of building up. Unlike Clawson, I do not see any room for short cuts.

I found the discussion on fusion between labour and other movements most fascinating. Unfortunately, the model remains unclear and undeveloped. Are we looking at something such as the Authentic Labour Front (FAT) in Mexico, or is this something different?

I think in future scholars and activists should drop all reference to the “Third World” and find a more useful way of referring to countries outside of the US and Europe. For a long time “Third World” was used as a residual category of countries and societies characterised by political and economic chaos, lack of initiative and innovation and weak or ineffectual labour movements. Yet, there are interesting (and sometimes different) initiatives in the labour movements of these countries that could enrich our understanding of what is possible today. One of these, which continues to animate debates, particularly in the face of neo-liberal globalisation, is the strategy of forming alliances with political parties, or sponsoring the formation of pro-labour parties. I notice that Clawson makes little or no reference to how labour relates or should relate to the existing political institutions in the US. I would argue that any prediction of an upsurge should address itself to the question of political and state institutions.

Notwithstanding these quibbles, I think Dan Clawson has presented a very powerful and compelling account of the state of the US labour movement today. In addition, he has given us a glimpse of what the future could look like.

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Conference  
Report

‘Labour Movements in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’  
Sheffield, United Kingdom, 1 – 3 July 2004

by Beata Mtyingizana\*

The conference was hosted by the Political Economy Research Centre (PERC), University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom, together with the UK Political Studies Association Labour Movements Group as an initiative to renew academic interest in labour movements. Drawing on political science, political sociology, political economy, political theory, modern and contemporary history and the study of industrial relations, PERC and the PSA Labour Movements Group sought to attract and link studies on developments, policies and organizational forms of British and international labour movements (parties, trade unions and related social groups).

One of the highlights of the conference was the keynote address by David Coates of Wake Forest University in the US on labour and its continued relevance for social theory. Coates argued for a rediscovery and a re-centering of labour as a key focus of academic scholarship in the relevant intellectual fields. He argued for a re-introduction of Marxism, a revitalization of the Marxist theory that would allow for a reconceptualization, re-theorizing and re-centering of labour as an object of study. A re-introduction of Marxism across the social sciences will, according to Coates, allow for an exploration of the complex articulation of class and institutions in modern capitalism. This would be done by bringing together the best of the 'new institutionalist' scholarship with the best of its Marxist equivalent.

The conference attracted scholars from several countries including the Australia, Brazil, Denmark, France, Mexico, New Zealand, Nigeria, South Africa, Sweden, Turkey, the UK and the USA. The papers and the debates that followed explore the challenges faced by labour movements in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the organisational and political strategies that they are adopting to respond to these challenges posed by neo-liberalising economic restructuring. The deliberations were structured around several themes such as Labour, Globalisation and Social Movements; Labour and Social Movement Trade Unionism; Labour and Africa; International Labour Standards; and the State and Labour.

Conference participants argued that globalisation is not merely an ideology but a process that represents very real transformations in the world economy and in society's basic institutions. The effects of globalisation and its ideological counterpart, neo-liberalism, were said to be necessitating different approaches with regards to the internationalization of labour. Such approaches should reflect a new kind of internationalism, one that examines the prospects of reviving the labour movement.

Robert Taylor from the London School of Economics emphasized the need to re-define the concept of globalization itself as a first step towards setting up appropriate political structures for labour to deal with issues of globalization at an enterprise level. He argued that new kinds of unions and membership are emerging, particularly in the developing world, and that these unions need to reach out and form coalitions at an international level to increase their leverage.

In his presentation, Bill Dunn from the University of the West of England, argued for a revitalization of social theory to include labour and to address problems around the distribution and redistribution of labour. While he also problematised globalization as a conceptual/theoretical tool, he also argued that, as a process, globalization worked to isolate workers from one another. In Manuel Castells' terms, workers are thus "switched off" from one another. This revitalisation of social theory, Dunn argued, would provide the basis upon which labour can be revitalized as a means towards a broader end. The urgency of this was echoed by David Coates when he argued that "of late, labour has been effectively written out of the dominant discourses of both the academic and the policy worlds that our scholarship ought to shape".

A paper by Rob Lambert (University of Western Australia) and Eddie Webster (University of the Witwatersrand) argued that cyberspace technology was providing opportunities for trans-national campaigning, coalition building and revitalization of labour. At an international level, such revitalization has meant an emergence of a *new* labour internationalism characterized by a social movement orientation. The Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR) is an example of this.

Robert O'Brien, McMaster University, presented a paper on labour and multilateral economic institutions (the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and in it emphasised the need for labour to develop institutionalised mechanisms to cope with the operations of this 'liberalization trinity', particularly for the developing world that has suffered under Structural Adjustment Programmes.

While the conference managed to attract delegates from a wide spectrum of countries and therefore earned its claim to be an inclusive gathering, its international character was limited by the absence of scholars from the developing

world (except one delegate each from Brazil and Nigeria and two from South Africa), the absence of the young generation of researchers and women. As a result, the conference remained a fundamentally Eurocentric affair, both in terms of its reference points as well as the discourses that framed its debates. Thus, the international character of the conference remained representative of the North and, though certain problems of the South were touched upon, problems faced by labour in the South or in developing countries received very little attention.

This was most starkly illustrated by the fact that the only serious session on labour in the South was the one on 'Labour and Africa'. But this session was attended by not more than 10 people. This being the first international conference for me, I was conscious of being the only black, African woman (there was another black African man from Nigeria) at the conference, and this reminded me of how unrepresented black researchers, and those from the developing world in general, are in the international arena of intellectual production.

Nevertheless, the conference was intellectually stimulating and exposed to recent and current research on the impact of economic restructuring on labour movements and labour's political and organisational responses. For the first time I was able to meet and interact some of the 'academic heavyweights' whose work I had read in my undergraduate and post-graduate studies. While at one level meeting these people were a bit intimidating, at another level meeting them was inspiring.

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## FRONTIERS OF SOCIOLOGY

The 37th World Congress of the International Institute of Sociology will take place in Stockholm, July 5-9, 2005. The Congress will focus on the frontiers of sociology. Some sessions will focus on cutting-edge research in sociology while others will focus on the relationship between sociology and its neighbouring disciplines. The organising committee would like to welcome the Research Committee on Labour Movements (RC44) to hold sessions or business meetings at the Stockholm Congress. Active participation of the ISA Research Committees is important for making this into the high-quality meeting that we expect it to be.

As you may know, the International Institute of Sociology (IIS) was created in Paris in 1893. Among its members and associates were prominent scholars such as Karl Mannheim, William F. Ogburn, Pitirim Sorokin, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber. The IIS is proud of its longstanding tradition of promoting discussions on the most crucial theoretical issues of the day and on the practical uses of social scientific knowledge.

For further information, please visit our website located at: <http://www.SCASSS.uu.se/iis2005>. On our website you will find up-to-date information about the congress as well as a range of useful links. If you have any questions, please contact Michelle Ariga, the scientific programme secretary, at [michelle.ariga@scasss.uu.se](mailto:michelle.ariga@scasss.uu.se).

Peter Hedström, Official Fellow, Nuffield College, Oxford University  
Björn Wittrock, Principal, The Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences

Conference  
Report

'Labour Movements in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'  
Sheffield, United Kingdom, 1 - 3 July 2004

by Rob Lambert\*

## CHANGING THE TIDE OF SCHOLARSHIP & HISTORY: LABOR STUDIES & THE FUTURE OF THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

*Progressive politics requires progressive thought.<sup>1</sup>*

At the outset of her book, *Forces of Labor*, Beverley Silver makes a connection between 'the general and severe crisis' of the labor movement and the decline 'in the once vibrant labor studies' (p1). Certainly, those still involved in teaching labor studies in the academy find that are struggling against being marginalized by business studies. In many parts of the world, unions appear trapped in a fog of ideological confusion as the political parties they support commit to a restructuring that devastates cultures of solidarity and union organization in the workplace.

Silver's *Forces of Labor* will contribute to a revitalisation of labour studies because the starting point of her analysis is this crisis in the politics of organized labour, this ideological fog of confusion. In this context, a conference organized by Sheffield University's Political Economy Research Centre that focused on *Labour Movements in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* in July, was a timely intervention.

Indeed, in opening the conference, David Coates stated,

No conference could be more timely than this one, and no conference agenda more important. Our task, as I understand it, is nothing less than to rediscover and to re-center 'labor' as the key focus of academic scholarship in the appropriate intellectual fields; and we have that task because of late 'labor' has been effectively written out of the dominant discourses of both the academic and the policy worlds that our scholarship ought properly to shape.... but we also meet...at a moment at which we can begin to make the tide of scholarship and history run again in our direction.<sup>2</sup>

The three-day conference drew scholars from Europe, North America, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Korea. Forty six papers were presented with sessions structured around theory; regions (Europe; the Americas; Africa; Australasia and the Far East); globalization; the state; capital; social movements; and international labour standards. The conference was characterized by lively debate on the future unions, indicating that labour studies still attracts committed scholarship. It is beyond the scope of this short review to provide an extensive review of the papers presented. Instead, let me focus on the challenges the conference posed. In his address, Coates argued that we were living through 'dramatic times', where, as a result of the global mobility of capital, 'the balance of class forces has shifted dramatically in favor of the owners of capital' (p2). Ideologically, social democracy has been weakened, both in content and confidence, by the stridency of neoliberal ideas. 'The great tragedy of our age...[is that] labor movements are everywhere marginalized and in retreat' (p3). This has impacted on labor studies in the academy. 'A generation ago, the dominant frameworks of intellectual thought were clearly of the left. Marxism as an intellectual discipline was everywhere ascendant; and with it, labor studies...were at the core of the academic agenda.... The nature of work, the history of labor, the sources of inequality, the limits of markets, the requirements for social emancipation: all these were the stock in trade of radical social science. But not now: now academic units that were once proud to declare themselves 'departments of industrial relations' have long relabelled themselves 'departments management' (p3).

Intellectuals such as Edward Thompson, Ralph Miliband, C. Wright Mills and Paul Sweezy had won intellectual space at the height of the cold war 'by the sheer quality of their scholarship'. Now the current generation of labor scholars has been caught 'on the back foot by the sheer confidence and stridency of the neoliberal revival'. Now that the neoliberal alternative 'is hitting the buffers of its own inadequacies...space is opening up again'. These intellectual spaces are created by 'paradigmatic struggle...Progressive politics requires progressive thought'. Under-theorized research is undesirable. The paradigm of neoliberal economics has to be challenged in the struggle to create space for a new, reinvigorated labor studies. This requires a serious re-engagement with Marxism as an intellectual paradigm. Coates then expands on this proposition.

In my view, conference participants could well assess their own contributions by asking: to what extent were the papers contributing to a theoretical as well as a substantive engagement with neoliberalism? I would go further and argue to what degree can a reinvigorated labor studies reignite sociological imagination, picking up on David Harvey's (2000: 49) contention that '...in a time when the class struggle has receded..., is this not also a time when the painting of fantastic pictures of a future society has some role to play?' The fact that a number of the papers at

<sup>1</sup> David Coates, 'The Category of Labor: Its Continued Relevance in Social Theory, Keynote address to the Political Economy Research Center (PERC) conference on Labour Movements in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, University of Sheffield, July 2004.

<sup>2</sup> David Coates, opening address.

this conference focused on social movement unionism as an alternative to the current functional division between collective bargaining unionism and political parties indicates that there is indeed a sociological imagination at work in labor studies. A paper by Beiler and Morton on the European Social Forum led to a lively debate on the role of unions in the new global social justice movement. Ronaldo Munck's paper on *Globalisation, Labour and the 'Polanyi Problem'* was particularly insightful and relevant to the need to more fully theorize the nature and role of social movement unionism. Robert O'Brien presented a thought provoking paper on *Organised Labour and Multilateral Economic Institutions*, which analysed union and NGO responses to the IMF, World Bank and the WTO. Whilst papers analyzing labor developments in the south were under represented, there were significant contributions on Mozambique, Columbia, Turkey, Brazil and India.

Interestingly, there was a contribution from an official of the British TUC. I was somewhat stunned by his assertion that labour internationalism in this age of globalization should center on 'the export of the European social democratic model to the south. Trade unions in other continents want the same thing'. If this is a more generally held position of northern unions, there is a need to bridge this divide. The new unions in the south do have views on social, political and economic transformation that need to be taken seriously. It is a good idea to bring key union officials into these conferences. Future conferences could perhaps look at including sessions that aim to create a dialogue between north and south, based on equality and a two-way exchange. Robert Taylor, a British intellectual, shared the session with the TUC official and presented a colorful view of the predicament of labour.

We do not have a labour *movement* today. Trade unions had reached a high point in the post war period when there was a public sphere, public interest and a social coalition. Unions were strengthened by the role of the state, a state that accepted trade union values. These great achievements are now being destroyed.

Unions then had the power to mobilize. Today they can hardly mobilize enough people to fill a church hall. The forward march of labour has not just been halted (Hobsbawm), it has been reversed. Our predicament today is that New Labour has taken over the core values of Thatcherism and its great belief in consumerism. Unions in the UK are in decline. Unions have to reach out and form new coalitions and widen their agenda. The concept of trade unionism needs to be broader than the Webb's definition of unions as a collective bargaining agency.

On a lighter note, one evening the conference organizers took the delegates out to a meal. The venue was one of those huge old 'homes' of the aristocracy, set in beautiful countryside just outside of the city. Local unions took over the building when it was left derelict. Trades people worked and refurbished it. Walls were lined with fascinating posters from around the world – and, the food and wine was good. In a somewhat groggy state later in the evening, some of us wondered whether this set up was symbolic of labor's predicament – let's sit at the master's table and get what we can. Oh, for the days when we still dreamed dreams!

Let me end more seriously. There is a dire need for labor studies to produce organic intellectuals, engaged with labor movements, challenging self destructive accommodations with the politics of restructuring and advancing alternative models, grounded in an alternative paradigm. The future of the labor movement will be shaped in part by whether or not such organic links flourish. The alternative is a fog of ideological confusion, fatalism, and the continued decline of organized labor and labor studies itself. Hopefully, these are challenges we can continue to address at the 2006 ISA Congress in Durban, South Africa, the city where the mass strikes of 1973 stimulated the growth of the new democratic unions *and* the growth of a new labor studies. There could not be a more appropriate place to revisit the challenges that the Sheffield conference raised.

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Harvey D., (2000), *Spaces of Hope*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.

Leys C., (2001), *Market Driven Politics: Neoliberal Democracy and the Public Interest*, London, Verso.

Silver B., (2003), *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalisation since 1870*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

**To enquire about the availability of conference papers contact Sylvia McColm: [S.McColm@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:S.McColm@sheffield.ac.uk)**

**Conference website address: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/~perc/labourconf/>**

## Join the Research Committee on Labour Movements (RC44)

**What is RC 44?** It is the Research Committee on Labour Movements of the International Sociological Association (ISA), the largest academic forum for those engaged with sociologically related issues of enquiry.

**Mission of RC44:** To encourage international research on labour movements, with a focus on their role both in industrial relations and in the political arena. Membership is open to any person engaged in research into Labour Movements or in Labour Movement activities.

### Benefits of joining RC44:

- An opportunity to engage with interdisciplinary academics with similar interests. Current membership includes international academics from Africa, Asia, North and South America, Europe, Oceania and Asia.
- Regular newsletter featuring international articles on labour, reviews of new books, profiles of research units, conference proceedings, comments on recent publications on cutting edge research, conference and doctoral programme announcements, call for papers and more...
- Opportunity to participate in the planning of the RC44 session programme and to present at the next ISA World Congress in Durban, South Africa in 2006.
- Cost: 20 US Dollars for four years

For more information on RC44 visit: <http://www.socsci.mcmaster.ca/globallabour/>

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**How to join the ISA & RC44? Via the ISA website: <http://www.ucm.es/info/isa/>**

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- Receive *International Sociology* (the official journal of the ISA)
- *ISA Bulletin* (the ISA newsletter) and the *Directory of Members*
- A discount subscription to the other ISA journal, *Current Sociology*
- Reduction in registration fees at **ISA World Congress**, Durban, South Africa 2006
- **Over 60 years of age** - you qualify for life membership of the ISA. Send a copy of identity documentation showing your birth date. Submit an electronic ISA membership form <http://www.ucm.es/info/isa/formisa.htm> indicating your mailing address (and mark the gap Life members). It costs 300 USD and you will never have to renew ISA membership (only Research Committees).