

Industrial & Labor Relations Review

Volume 58, Issue 1

2004

Article 81

The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements

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BOOK REVIEWS

Industrial Relations Theory

The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements. By Dan Clawson. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press (an imprint of Cornell University Press), 2003. 265 pp. ISBN 0-8014-4109-9, \$42.50 (cloth); ISBN 0-8014-8870-2, \$18.95 (paper).

At the core of this book is a passionate plea for optimism in the midst of what appears to be endless calamity. As the author notes, "For more than a quarter-century unions have declined steeply, in numbers, power, public perception, and cultural appeal." When a "New Voice team" took over the leadership of the AFL-CIO in 1995 it seemed "the most promising labor initiative since the 1940s," but "several years later the early wave of optimism has given way to caution or pessimism."

Despite the objective facts, Dan Clawson believes that there is reason to be optimistic that "the next upsurge" may be right around the corner. He notes several historical situations in which predictions of status quo continuation were made just before a major upheaval. After reviewing successful innovations that have taken place in recent years, the author notes that "if a new round of social movements explodes on the scene and transforms political realities, suddenly the media and analysts will demonstrate that this was only to be expected."

About one thing, Clawson is quite certain: the labor movement "will not grow slowly and incrementally." For labor to make a significant advance, there must be an "upsurge." Such a development cannot be purposefully planned and executed, but the labor movement may, and Clawson believes should, act to improve the chances of a spark igniting the necessary fire.

Clawson describes three major elements of his action program:

- *Democratization of the labor movement.* "Labor advances will come only from a mass movement involving millions, not from a process directed and controlled by a handful of leaders or staff" (p. x). In context, it is obvious that Clawson is not calling for a leaderless movement. Rather he wants labor leaders "to empower or activate the rank and file." In his view, even the "new labor movement" remains unfortunately "staff-driven."

- *Thorough melding with other social movements on the Left.* "Labor must do more than build alliances; it must fuse with these movements such that it is no longer clear what is a labor issue and what is a woman's issue or an immigrant's issue." Clawson argues that "the failure of assorted social movements to connect with each other is one of the primary causes for the current weakness of the U.S. Left" (p. 194).

- *Rejection of the "New Deal Labor System."* Instead of beginning with what is "politically feasible," workers should "talk about what they want and need, and ... move from that to thinking about what would be necessary to achieve it." Labor should "fundamentally rethink the very concept of what a union is and how it operates." Unions should consider fundamental restructuring such as "realignment so that all health care workers, or all teachers, [are] in one organization." If they want to get out of the rut they are in, unions might "ignore the definitions in existing labor law, insisting that new groups (managers, students, maids) are entitled to unions." They need to be prepared "to take up any problem that workers and their families face." They might decide that "since the National Labor Relations Board election process does not protect workers' rights," they will "henceforth refuse to use it," and instead organize "only through non-Board campaigns of various sorts." (Pp. 48, 49.)

Although the theme of abandoning current practice reverberates throughout the book, Clawson leaves the door open a crack: "In order for it to endure, [the New Deal system] would need to be reformed enough to provide labor incentives to operate by the system's rules." However, "given the extent of business and conservative dominance, the AFL-CIO is well aware that any purely legislative attempt at labor law reform would probably make the system worse" (p. 202). The author does not comment on the AFL-CIO's recent push for the passage of an employee free choice act, which may have been initiated after the book was completed.

Clawson also believes that "electoral politics ... can't bring about significant social change unless a powerful and independent social movement has already put the issue on the agenda" (p. 202). Does this mean that labor should abandon electoral politics until that goal has been achieved? We are left to draw our own conclusions.

In fact, Clawson does a good deal of waffling between prescription and description. Despite leaving the reader with little doubt about what he thinks ought to be done, in his concluding paragraph he tells us, “This book has focused not on an abstract vision of what I think labor could or should do, but rather on what people have actually been doing” (p. 205).

The middle chapters of the book do indeed review contemporary cases that illustrate the interaction of gender and unionism (union organizing at Harvard and Yale), community organizing and unionism (the AFL-CIO’s Stamford project, in which four unions “work together not just to address workplace issues, but also to lead community-wide struggles for better housing”), ethnicity and unionism (the Los Angeles Justice for Janitors project and ethnically based Workers Centers, which undertake a variety of activities in order to improve their constituencies’ situation), the impact on unions and other social groups of neoliberal globalization (the Battle in Seattle and its aftermath), and the implications for labor of the anti-sweatshop movement and living wage campaigns.

One serious flaw in the book is Clawson’s misunderstanding of the history of what he calls the “New Deal Labor System.” He believes that the “initial basic framework” called for the National Labor Relations Board to schedule elections whenever “a significant fraction of the workforce” was able to demonstrate that it “wanted a union” (p. 29). That is the way the system works today, but that is not how Senator Wagner and his colleagues intended it to work. Instead, the Wagner strategists wanted employers voluntarily to accept and recognize labor organizations as partners. Elections were to be held only in unusual and difficult circumstances. Acceptance by labor activists like Clawson of the reasonableness of the election system as the norm, with its implication of government neutrality toward rather than firm support for labor organization, is a measure of the success of the employer assault on labor that he describes in an early chapter.

A long history of research and thought has firmly established the principle that a vibrant democracy requires a robust labor movement. Despite its flaws, as a vehicle designed to provoke thought on how that might come about in the United States, *The Next Upsurge* deserves a wide readership.

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Learning from Saturn: A Look at the Boldest Experiment in Corporate Governance and Employee Relations. By Saul A. Rubinstein and Thomas A. Kochan. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001. 192 pp. ISBN 0-8014-3873-X, \$27.95 (cloth).

Two decades ago the automobile industry was in a funk. Just coming out of the deep economic shocks of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and trying to regain its footing after the bankruptcy of Chrysler and the near-bankruptcy of Ford, the auto industry was looking for new ideas on how to manage its wide-ranging and diverse factories and logistics operations. Steeped in an authoritarian managerial culture and conditioned by the strength of the United Auto Workers, which successfully contested General Motors’ southern relocation de-unionization strategy, the auto industry began to experiment with labor-management participation models. Steeped also in the postwar marketing culture, in which the auto industry continued to tell consumers what they wanted even as they drifted away from large American cars to well-built small foreign-made models, GM attempted to use this opportunity to change its own marketing culture by creating a small car that would satisfy the increasingly demanding American consumer.

This book is about the innovative Saturn experiment, America’s most thoroughgoing attempt to restructure the entire production and distribution as well as industrial relations systems. With Saturn, General Motors tried to start with a clean slate and configure a completely new way of building and marketing automobiles. Similarly, the company decided to engage the union and the work force for the first time on the ground floor of this new enterprise, putting labor, management, and engineering on similar footing and setting out to develop a car company with a clean sheet of paper. The book argues persuasively that this groundbreaking effort on the part of the UAW returned the union to its historic roots under the legendary Walter Reuther, who believed that the auto industry needed constructive engagement with its unionized employees to be successful in a complex consumer-driven market.

As the authors demonstrate in this brief and well-written book, GM and the UAW succeeded most spectacularly. Working together, they built an entire automobile corporation from scratch. Although it took substantial time and planning