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Labor Bookshelf

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Abstract
[Excerpt] The four books under review here argue against the statistics by telling story upon story of the activities that clearly have the potential for reversing labor's demise. Most of the stories are about defensive struggles not new offensives, and even the most inspiring "victories" are hedged with all sorts of qualifications. But you cannot read these books without a sense of renewal and hope for the future, without a sense of what is possible when working people take things in their own hands.

Keywords
union organizing, unionism, strategy, tactics

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LABOR AT THE BALLOT BOX:
The Massachusetts Prevailing Wage Campaign of 1988

by Mark Erlich, 207 pp., 1990. (Temple University Press, Broad & Oxford Streets, Philadelphia, PA 19122.)

BUILDING BRIDGES:
The Emerging Grassroots Coalition of Labor and Community

Edited by Jeremy Brecher & Tim Costello, 348 pp., 1990. (Monthly Review Press, 122 W. 27th Street, New York, NY 10001.)

ROBUST UNIONISM:
Innovations in the Labor Movement

by Arthur B. Shostak, 314 pp., 1991. (ILR Press, School of Industrial & Labor Relations, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14851.)

A TROUBLEMAKER'S HANDBOOK:
How to Fight Back Where You Work—and Win!

by Dan La Botz, 258 pp., 1991. (Labor Notes Books, 7435 Michigan Avenue, Detroit, MI 48210.)

Is the labor movement in the midst of a turnaround? Is there light at the end of organized workers' decade-long tunnel of setbacks, givebacks and permanent crisis?

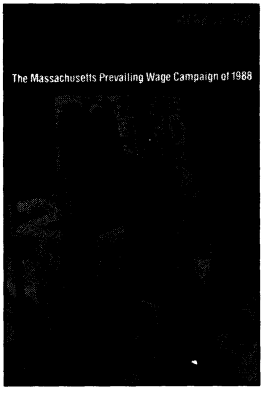
A careful look at any set of statistics used as traditional measures of labor's strength shows that no such turnaround has begun to occur. Though some years in the 1980s were not as bad as others, the overall trend is still one of precipitous decline. Indeed, by projecting various statistics into the future, social scientists can very credibly predict the virtual disappearance of unions from American life.

But statistics only show objective results after they have occurred. They cannot capture those changes of hearts and minds, that quickening of adrenelin and strengthening of will that comes when desperate people get their "second wind" just before they are about to succumb. They cannot capture, that is to say, the beginnings of the activity that will eventually change the statistics.

The four books under review here argue against the statistics by telling story upon story of the activities that clearly have the potential for reversing labor's demise. Most of the stories are about defensive struggles not new offensives, and even the most inspiring "victories" are hedged with all sorts of qualifications. But you

cannot read these books without a sense of renewal and hope for the future, without a sense of what is possible when working people take things in their own hands.

Nor are the stories simply inspiring tales of heroic struggles—though there are many of those here. These books are chock full of nuts-and-bolts details about what works and what doesn't and in what combinations. Though varying amongst themselves in their emphases and purposes, these books provide a wealth of ideas about tactics and strategies that can be, and are being, duplicated again and again to build more powerful unions—unions that can provide the institutional basis for a broad progressive working-class movement that could change all the rules of the game before it's too late.



Let's start with hard cases first. The building trades unions are a world unto themselves, usually not known and not liked by the rest of the labor movement—or by much of anybody else outside their own exclusive world. This is the most retrograde and conservative, the most racist, sexist and just generally deplorable part of the labor movement, right? Well, in 1988 the state of Massachusetts had a referendum on union construction workers' way of life. The trades won that referendum—and they did it with a 4-to-1 margin of support in Boston's black community and a "gender gap" of nearly ten percentage points of women favoring the unions more than men.

Mark Erlich's *Labor at the Ballot Box* explains how that outcome came about, how the trades organized to defeat the Associated Builders & Contractors' (ABC) well-financed, high-profile campaign to eliminate Massachusetts' prevailing wage law. A Carpenter, Erlich is the best there is at explaining the world of the trades to the rest of us, deftly puncturing the nasty stereotypes without throwing away the kernels of truth that sometimes reside in those stereotypes. His account of the "Vote No on 2" campaign is too complex and multi-faceted for easy summary here, but in broad strokes it involves a three-fold transformation of the trades:

— an unprecedented unity among the various unions.

— an unbelievably effective activation of rank-and-file workers throughout the state.

— and coalition-building efforts, at the top and among the ranks, that were able to make allies, both within and outside the labor

movement, based on the *promise* of the coalition rather than the past practice of the trades.

These transformations worked to strengthen each other, with the activation of the rank and file being the cornerstone for everything else. In the end, the trades put together a field organization of 20,000 construction workers and their friends that simply overwhelmed the money and media clout of the ABC.

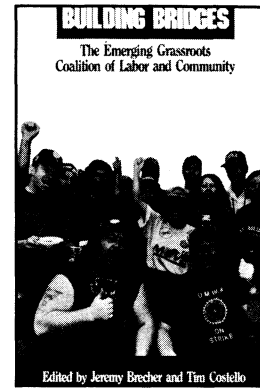
Cynics will ask, "Yeah, but what have the trades done since they got what they wanted?" The book doesn't cover the period since 1988, and there has undoubtedly been some backsliding since the intense momentum of the 1988 campaign. But the field organization the trades built to preserve the state prevailing wage law was reactivated in 1990 and played a crucial part in defeating a right-wing tax-reduction initiative that would have decimated public sector unions and the clients they serve.

Erlich's narrative moves easily between nuts-and-bolts details about the operation of a town-based rather than workplace-based field organization, on the one hand, and the broader aspects of strategy and coalition-building, on the other. He concludes:

> For all the official union involvement, what stuck in the public's mind was the constant presence of individual campaign workers in their communities. They stretched this political contest beyond the modern conventions of tightly controlled photo opportunities and television sound-bites into a campaign based on grass-roots visibility and direct voter contact. . . Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that the labor movement will arrest its decline and reassert its potential when it once again—as it has done in its finest hours—identifies unions with the desires and aspirations of the entire working community and with the broader crusade for social and economic justice. Unions have their greatest appeal when they simultaneously serve the daily needs of their members and incorporate a larger vision that can attract potential new members and the general working public.

This broad conclusion is the starting point of *Building Bridges: The Emerging Grassroots Coalition of Labor and Community*, a compendium of articles by labor and community activists on building a wide variety of coalitions.

Many of the stories collected in *Building Bridges* will be familiar to *Labor Research Review* readers; some originally appeared in the *Review*, some are written by LRR authors, and others, like the Mine Workers at Pittston, are well known among our reader-



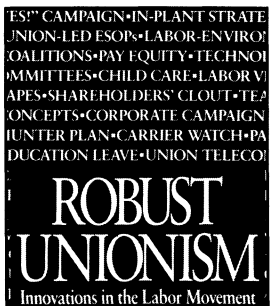
ship. Others, particularly those about electoral political coalitions from New Mexico to Connecticut, cover stories we have not. My favorites among these are LRR Associate Editor Andy Banks' stirring account of Jobs With Justice in Florida and Mike Pertschuk and Wendy Schaetzel's "Blocking Bork: Grassroots Aspects of a National Coalition."

About two-thirds of the book is devoted to telling about and analyzing particular coalitions. The other third contains more general reflections on the state of the labor movement and the possibilities for labor-community coalitions in the future. Some of the best of these are by the book's editors Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello. Assessing the 1980s, Brecher and Costello conclude:

> As conventional collective bargaining techniques failed to resist concessions demanded by corporations, unionists began to find support for workplace struggles among community allies. . .While the labor movement remains severely weakened, it is far less isolated than it was for most of the 1980s.

Based on careful sifting of experiences gathered together in this volume, Brecher and Costello persuasively argue that:

> the American labor movement is being transformed at its roots by the development of local and statewide labor-community coalitions. These alliances are rapidly becoming a new force in American politics.



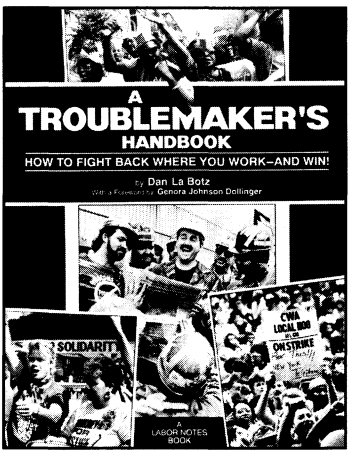
From a somewhat different focus, Art Shostak's *Robust Unionism* compiles additional evidence that the labor movement is being fundamentally transformed in a new and better direction. Though some of this evidence overlaps with that assembled in *Building Bridges*, the difference is that Shostak sees renewal occurring at all levels of the labor movement, not only at the grassroots.

While Shostak has many grassroots stories to tell in his breathlessly enthusiastic and engaging style, again drawing

liberally on many stories originally published in *Labor Research Review*, he also investigates robust innovations occurring at top leadership levels. These range from sophisticated technological innovations—like computerized telephone polling by the United Food & Commercial Workers and the AFL-CIO's use of teleconferences—to the AFL-CIO's 1988 Democracy at Work project, "the most extensive education effort ever launched by any organization to involve voters in presidential politics."

Shostak's examples of robustness range widely in other respects as well. He has a strong section, for example, on labor's use of "capital strategies"—worker ownership, pension power, and "linking job creation to housing needs and environmental issues." At the same time, he tells about small victories by persistent unionists to establish organizations for union retirees and the 11-year "great badge war" that resulted in a Boy Scout merit badge in unionism that is now the 12th most popular among 57 BSA merit badges.

But while Shostak may convince us that the labor movement is still a very robust part of American life, and while *Building Bridges* lays out a persuasive program for dramatically expanding the power of labor-community coalitions, in the end the labor movement's future will depend on its ability to redefine what unionism means day-by-day in the workplace. That's the primary message of this issue of *Labor Research Review* on "An Organizing Model of Unionism." It's also the goal of a new *Labor Notes* book by Dan La Botz, *A Troublemaker's Handbook: How to Fight Back Where You Work—and Win!*



If, as this issue of LRR suggests, a revolution in unionism is percolating with the turn toward an organizing model, then La Botz has written its handbook. Every local union and every labor education program in the U.S. should have a copy of this book, simply for reference if nothing else. It is extraordinary in every respect.

First, it is a highly intelligent compilation of most of the new tactics and strategies that have been developed (or rediscovered) within the labor movement in the past decade. There are excellent chapters on contract campaigns, inside strategies, corporate campaigns, strategic planning for

unions, and on building cross-union and community coalitions. Then, there are three chapters on striking, including judicious advice about rolling strikes, quickie strikes, wildcats and sitdowns, as well as about traditional striking in today's union-busting climate. There are special chapters on organizing around particular issues like health and safety and combatting racism and on organizing among particular groups like immigrants and women.

Many of these chapters are simply the best one-shot accounts of their subject available. If you're only interested in health and safety, you'll want to use (and re-use) that chapter. If you want to do an inside strategy or a corporate campaign, reading La Botz' brief accounts is where you should start.

The reason each of these chapters is so helpful is that each combines how-to-do-it advice with narratives of cases where it's been done and lengthy interviews with people who've been part of doing it. A long interview with Dick Leonard of the OCAW, for example, contains material about how to do corporate campaigns that is available nowhere else. And, long quotations from SEIU staffer Enid Eckstein provide key insights into working-to-rule, contract campaigns, and labor support groups. The how-to-do-it checklists simplify the basic elements of each tactic or strategy so that novices can get started, while the narratives and interviews show the complexity of applying these elements in any specific situation and stimulate readers' imaginations to begin thinking up their own applications.

But *Troublemaker* is more than simply a reference guide to new (and revived) tactics and strategies. Its first three chapters provide an analytic and strategic framework for an organizing model of unionism. The chapter on "Basics of Organizing" lays out fundamentals well-known among professional organizers but foreign to most stewards and local union officers. Then "Shop Floor Tactics" shows how the basics of organizing can be used to complement grievance-handling to build the union and put pressure on the boss during the life of the contract. The chapter on "Shop Floor Tactics" is by itself worth the $19 (includes shipping and handling) cost of the book. It is a terrific complement to Teresa Conrow's "Contract Servicing from an Organizing Model" in this issue of the *Review*.

Troublemaker neglects one important area of labor's new tactics and strategies—the many different uses of worker and worker-community ownership, pension power and labor banks that LRR, following Randy Barber, has grouped under the term "capital strategies." La Botz and the folks at *Labor Notes* want nothing to do with this kind of stuff; they think it undermines good, strong

militant unionism. LRR and *Labor Notes* have debated these questions in the past, and their point-of-view on this is wrong. But it's also useful. Capital strategies that are not undergirded by an organizing model of unionism that systematically and progressively develops and expands leadership and builds ever more far-reaching membership participation may, just as *Labor Notes* fears, lead to an advanced form of "business unionism" where leaders identify their interests more with management than with their members. Those of us who think that labor must participate more actively in and gain greater influence over managerial and investment decisions need to incorporate *Troublemaker's* organizing lessons before unions proceed too far down that road. But, on the other hand, labor is unlikely to get very far in that direction without an involved and mobilized membership based on an organizing approach to unionism.

There's plenty to argue with in each of these books, but what is clear is that none of them could have been written 10 years ago. Unions are doing things now on a regular basis, and are receptive to ideas and actions, that could scarcely have been imagined a decade ago. The energy and sophistication of the thinking, and the quality of the writing, in these books also testify to a reviving labor movement. But has the revival started in time and is it moving quickly enough to reverse a very powerful trend toward decline? Each union and each labor activist will have to answer that for themselves, not with a social scientist's statistical projections or a journalist's informed speculation, but with action. These books can help.

—Jack Metzgar