

Book Review: Solidarity Divided

Friday 23 July 2010, by [DOWNS Steve](#) (Date first published: 28 October 2009).

***Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path toward Social Justice* by Bill Fletcher, Jr. and Fernando Gapasin.**

Fletcher and Gapasin argue that the the labor movement needs a complete overhaul in order to be the engine of a movement for broader social change.

In the preface to *Solidarity Divided* Bill Fletcher and Fernando Gapasin tell of an encounter between Service Employees (SEIU) leaders and South African unionists. A South African reminds the SEIUers that a union's role is to represent the interests of all workers. "There are times," he says, "when the interests of the working class conflict with the interests of the members of our respective unions."

Fletcher and Gapasin use this moment to illustrate one of their underlying themes—that the U.S. labor movement does not see itself, or act, as if it is rooted in "class struggle." It has failed to be a vehicle for creating a broader social movement. It represents a rather narrow subset of interests—of its members—and is not doing that particularly well either.

The authors argue convincingly that the union framework is broken and a complete overhaul is needed. They come to this position from long and respected careers in different unions, as rank-and-file members, staff, and officers; they participated in John Sweeney's New Voice leadership in the AFL-CIO and had an inside view of the federation. Fletcher was the education director and then assistant to President Sweeney. Before becoming principal researcher for the AFL-CIO's Union Cities project, Gapasin was a rank-and-file activist and then an officer in his local union and central labor council. They also bring their unique perspective as activists of color and as leftists with a belief that the labor movement should be the engine of a movement for broader social change.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Last month the AFL-CIO met in Pittsburgh. One Change to Win union—UNITE HERE—rejoined the federation it left in 2005. Were the differences that caused the split resolved? Did they ever actually exist? Not really, according to Fletcher and Gapasin.

The authors take us behind the scenes of the debates that led to the split. Their insider knowledge makes clear that the way the media portrayed the split—old versus new, political activity (AFL-CIO) versus organizing (CtW)—was misleading. They argue that no fundamental differences existed on "consolidation, core jurisdiction, pragmatic international solidarity, and political flexibility."

Fletcher and Gapasin present a damning picture of SEIU President Andy Stern's organizing and management methods. Their critique of Stern's brand of unionism, with its emphasis on consolidating locals, creating mega-locals of 200,000 members in half a dozen states, making deals with employers to organize workers, and crushing internal democratic initiatives — all in the name

of growing the union — has been validated by recent events. Stern, long the darling of some in the labor movement and the press, is now intensely criticized for putting United Health Care Workers-West in trusteeship and fostering the split in UNITE HERE.

Labor would do well to listen to Fletcher and Gapasin's critique of the prevailing approach to organizing. They point out that simply organizing new workers into a union is not in and of itself a solution. What kind of union are they being organized into? Are they going to be active participants, members with voice and representation? Will they be able to negotiate good contracts, or will they be union members in name but not in practice?

NEVER A TRUE MOVEMENT

The authors say that the U.S. labor movement has always been defined by an inclusion/exclusion dichotomy. Racial exclusion, they say, "crippled the movement from its birth. One can argue that the United States has never had a true labor movement, only a segmented struggle of workers." They lay out the ways employers have used, and workers have accepted, race to divide workers, from the exclusion of African-Americans in the building trades to the hostility shown immigrants. They argue that unions' inability to overcome managements' use of race is a fundamental failure, leading to labor's continued fragmentation and weakness.

And as unions surrender their past gains, divisions among workers deepen. Two-tier contracts, for instance cause conflicts between workers with more seniority, who are often white, and workers who were hired later, disproportionately people of color and women. When jobs are cut to "restore profitability," people of color and young people have the hardest time finding work.

Fletcher and Gapasin describe how difficult it is to change entrenched union culture: bureaucrats are akin to "crabgrass, with deep and durable roots." Describing the failures of the AFL-CIO and Change to Win (CtW) is almost too easy, though, and Fletcher and Gapasin do not stop there. They assert that all union leaders adopt one of three "ideologies": they are traditionalists, pragmatists, or leftists. They argue that the function of unions is to represent the interests of all workers, not just their members—but that only leftist leaders are committed to this. Fletcher and Gapasin advocate a fundamentally different kind of unionism from the current consensus: they want social justice unionism, which sees unions as part of a broad working-class political and social movement.

Fletcher and Gapasin's description of what's wrong with U.S. unions is excellent, as is their vision of the changes needed. But they put too much emphasis on the need for leftists, especially leftist officers, to shape a new vision for labor. Instead, the emphasis should be on rank-and-file members—through reform movements and other struggles—transforming their unions and building the foundation for a militant, participatory labor movement.

For Fletcher and Gapasin the failure of Sweeney's New Voice to bring about fundamental change in the AFL-CIO (as well as the increasingly evident failure of CtW) rests on the fact that its leaders—traditionalists and pragmatists all—could not transcend the limits of their ideologies and therefore did not challenge capitalism. And leaders who won't challenge capitalism are bound to capitulate to it. Central to Fletcher and Gapasin's strategy for addressing the crisis of organized labor is getting more leftists into the leadership of unions.

But their analysis begs a few questions: Where do those ideologies come from? How do they change? Can they? Put another way, why have so many leftists in unions become pragmatists and so few pragmatists become leftists?

DAILY EXPERIENCE

Many factors help form a person's ideology. One key factor, for workers, is their experience of class struggle— especially their conflicts with their employers. Fletcher and Gapasin do an especially good job of showing the inevitability of class struggle and the ways it intersects with other social struggles

But the day-to-day experiences of union officials are different from those of the workers they represent. No matter how “left” their ideology, union officials are generally not subject to the daily battle with the boss over how they'll spend their time on the job. This struggle over how hard we will work and for how many hours, how workers will be treated and how much we'll be paid, is what class struggle looks like day to day at the workplace.

Officers are freed from that daily tug-of-war on the job; instead, their role is to negotiate daily cease-fires and to enforce the big truce reached every few years when a new contract is bargained.

This need to reach truces in the struggle doesn't rule out strikes, slowdowns, or other mobilizations of the members. But their role requires union officers to enforce “management's right” to run the business and organize the work.

Over the last 30 years, as employers have stepped up their efforts to roll back union gains, more and more officers have moved from simply enforcing management's rights to embracing management's goals. Their inability to envision an alternative to capitalism leads most to accept the need for wage cuts and taxpayer subsidies to preserve jobs. They defend socially harmful production, such as SUVs.

It is the role of mediator between boss and workers (and the higher salary and better working conditions that usually go with it), and enforcer of the contract, that is union leaders' daily reality. That's what shapes their ideology, and goes a long way toward explaining why a leftist is more likely to become a pragmatist than the other way around. This is why a strategy for change driven by leftist officers and staff is a non-starter.

TOP-DOWN OR BOTTOM-UP?

Despite their useful insights about the failures of New Voice and CtW, Fletcher and Gapasin implicitly accept that change will come down from the top and dismiss the possibility of its coming from the ranks of the union movement. They give short shrift to the so-called “caucus movement” of the late 1960s and early 1970s. While they give due credit to the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and a shout-out to Teamsters for a Democratic Union, the thrust of their argument is that the time for rank-and-file-based caucuses has passed.

But caucuses (such as New Directions in the UAW and the Longshore Workers Coalition) keep forming, because they are necessary. They are organizations of rank-and-file members and sometimes low-level officers who are not removed from the day-to-day class struggle. The best of them organize their co-workers to engage in that struggle and in the process, they provide training, skills, and, yes, ideology, for a new set of union leaders.

Like every other effort to bring about a new kind of labor movement, rank-and-file reform has been slower and more uneven than any of us would like. Many of the caucuses that formed in the 1970s or 1980s were defeated by union officials or withered away. There are examples, however, which point to the potential of this strategy. Teamsters for a Democratic Union helped transform that notoriously corrupt union. TDU was essential to the election of reformer Ron Carey to the Teamster presidency. That election, in turn, made the New Voice challenge within the AFL-CIO possible. More important, TDU's rank-and-file network helped make the 1997 strike against UPS one of the most successful in recent history.

In my own local, New Directions in TWU Local 100 in New York City led a 15-year struggle against giveback contracts, unsafe work practices, abusive supervisors, and ineffective union leadership. In 2001 it took control of the 38,000-member union of bus and subway workers. Power and authority in the local shifted to persons of color. New union leaders mobilized members through demonstrations and the enrollment of hundreds of new stewards.

Unfortunately, the caucus succeeded in ousting pragmatic local officers only to have the new leadership turn away from the kind of rank-and-file organization and mobilization that had enabled it to win. The transformation of TWU Local 100 was derailed not because the new officers lacked “an ideological framework to place reform in a broader context of social transformation”—many of them had that—but because they lacked a sufficient commitment to internal union democracy and building a member-run union. The new president actively resisted the idea of an ongoing caucus that might have held him accountable, and members and leaders of New Directions were unable, or unwilling, to maintain the organization.

TWU 100 is not the first union local where reformers succeeded in getting elected but the new leaders soon began to emulate the very politics they had run against. Frankly, this has happened too often and reflects a serious problem for the reform-from-below strategy.

One example where the rank-and-file movement did not fold up after the election victory is TDU. TDU kept going strong—and recruited more members—after Ron Carey and his team took power at the top. The caucus continued to push Carey—supportively—and was a big factor in the UPS strike. While Carey was eventually ousted for other reasons, while in office he didn’t back away from his platform. This experience suggests that when members become union officers, a strong caucus, or a local union with a culture and practice of rank-and-file organization, can provide a critical counterweight, keeping officers from succumbing to the conservatizing influences of contract enforcement and union administration. It could help to keep the “leftists” from becoming “pragmatists.”

Union democracy is hardly mentioned in *Solidarity Divided*. When Fletcher and Gapasin do address democracy within unions, they maintain their focus on what is happening at the top. They call for unions to “embrace consistent democracy.” Consistent democracy essentially comes down to practices that promote inclusion. But when they give examples, they either list demands the union should make on the employer or the government, or they narrow their focus to whether women and people of color hold staff positions high in the union hierarchy and whether those positions are invested with real power and authority.

These aspects are important, but what about consistent democracy for members? What about investing members with real power and authority? How about building structures and practices that place the initiative for the union’s transformation in the hands of the members, rather than urging leftists to become officers and then educate members? Fletcher and Gapasin do acknowledge the importance of internal democracy and point out how the move toward mega-locals undermines members’ ability to hold their officers accountable. But it is hardly integrated into their larger critique of unions and seems to be something union officers should promote, not something fought for and defended by the rank and file.

GLOBALIZATION

Like most other authors on the state of U.S. labor, Fletcher and Gapasin take a hard look at the causes and effects of globalization. They make a strong case that it is neither a natural nor an inevitable process. It is driven by political and economic decisions intended to “eliminate obstacles to the achievement of profit.” Without a better understanding of globalization and the decisions that facilitate it, they argue, unions will not be able to build an effective response.

Here, unlike most authors on the state of U.S. labor, Fletcher and Gapasin link their understanding of global capitalism to changes in domestic politics, especially the character of the U.S. government. These changes have resulted in what they call the “neoliberal authoritarian state.”

They argue that the government reacted harshly to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, intensified its authoritarianism during the “war” on drugs, and escalated further in the aftermath of 9/11. They point to a connection between that increasing authoritarianism and the drive to reorganize the international economy to eliminate obstacles to the achievement of profits. They argue that the U.S. ruling elite is committed to this project but is divided between a “unilateralist” wing (who think the U.S. should act on its own to achieve its international goals, saying “take it or leave it” to its allies) and a “multilateralist” wing (who believe the U.S. “cannot succeed alone” and must act in cooperation with its international allies). These two wings compete over who can best achieve the goals of the neoliberal authoritarian state. This is a thought-provoking argument but, unfortunately, Fletcher and Gapasin do not draw out its political implications.

ORGANIZE, BUT WHERE?

Central to their vision for achieving a union movement committed to social justice unionism is the idea that “...if class struggle is not restricted to the workplace, then neither should unions be [emphasis in original]. The strategic conclusion is that unions must think in terms of organizing cities rather than simply organizing workplaces (or industries).”

Doing this will require the formation of “social/political blocs” of the working class. They don’t define this term, but I take it to mean long-term, strategic alliances of unions and other working-class organizations that will define common goals and carry out common campaigns to achieve them.

The mechanism for building the “bloc” is the central labor council (CLC). Fletcher and Gapasin argue that CLCs, rooted in the working class of particular communities, can take the lead in reorganizing the labor movement and promoting social justice unionism. They argue that CLCs should open themselves to a broader set of working-class organizations than just unions and should see themselves as the centers of a labor movement, not just the union movement.

But how does this call for social/political blocs organized through the CLCs fit with the authors’ notion of the neoliberal authoritarian state? Any local working-class “political bloc” is going to feel the gravitational pull of the Democratic Party quite early in its life. But a resurgent labor movement, especially one committed to social justice unionism, is bound to find itself at odds with a pro-globalization, authoritarian government. Does it make sense for workers to back the multilateralists, found principally in the Democratic Party, over the unilateralists, found principally in the GOP?

In an important step, some CLCs are already opening up to workers centers and organizations such as the New York Taxi Workers Alliance, but the CLC strategy by itself is not convincing. Having ruled out reform from below, and having been disappointed by heads of the AFL-CIO and its affiliates, Fletcher and Gapasin have turned to local and regional union officers to lead the transformation. Without dramatic changes in local unions and a more active and aggressive rank and file, it’s not going to happen.

Of course some CLCs can and will play the role Fletcher and Gapasin call on them to perform. But if we focus on the CLCs and the local officers who fill them, we miss the struggles within unions and at the workplace that make it possible for unions to become cornerstones of local working-class movements. Encouraging and supporting caucuses and rank-and-file-oriented unions is a better use of our time and resources.

Fletcher and Gapasin have done an important service in challenging union activists to think about how their work fits into a bigger strategy that challenges capitalism. *Solidarity Divided* poses big and important questions about transforming the labor movement. We need more thoughtful contributions like it.

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P.S.

* From Labor Notes, Wed, 10/28/2009 - 5:08pm:

<http://www.labornotes.org/node/2509>

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