

United States: The changing working class - Challenges and new potentials

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Kim Moody—a socialist, labor historian, and founder of Labor Notes—is the author of *On New Terrain: How Capitalism is Reshaping the Battleground of Class War*, recently published by Haymarket Books. He explores the ways in which changes in the nature of capitalism over the past several decades have reshaped the composition of the working class and the economic and political grounds on which it organizes and struggles. Geoff Bailey, a filmmaker in New York and a member of the *ISR* editorial board, interviewed Moody earlier this year.

Geoff Bailey - Many of the topics that you explore in *On New Terrain*—the impact of neoliberal restructuring on the working class and resulting challenges and possibilities for working-class struggle—you also examined twenty years ago in your book, *Workers in a Lean World*. How have the conditions facing workers changed in the ensuing twenty years?

Kim Moody - Interesting, I hadn't thought of it that way. But I think my approach to labor questions, trade union questions, has probably been pretty consistent for a long time, not just in *Workers in a Lean World* but in other places as well, in terms of having a rank-and-file view of things and, in so far as possible, a global view, although most of my work focuses on the US.

When I wrote *Workers in a Lean World* in the 1990s, a lot of what I'm writing about now in *On New Terrain* was only beginning to emerge. Obviously, we had globalization, and neoliberalism was already in place; just-in-time production was largely in place. A lot of those things I wrote about, but since then the system has been intensified. For example, lean production is by now both universal in one sense and also has been bypassed or added to by all kinds of new developments in surveillance and technology. The pressure in the workplace, almost regardless of what type of work one does—not just manufacturing, but service work as well—has become more standardized, more intense, making work more difficult, and of course the downward trend of real wages, which was already well on its way back then, continues today. Really there's been no catch-up, so on average workers in the US are making less in real terms than they did in 1973. The living standard has not really changed substantially. In fact, for many it's gotten much worse.

The things that began to strike me in terms of changes since the 1990s I emphasize in the book. First, the enormous merger movement among corporations. I look mostly at the US in the book, but in fact it's a global trend, which undid a lot of the conglomeration of corporations that, until that point, had many different lines of production. These mergers, which began in the mid-90s, have for the most part undone that, so that the direction of these corporations that have arisen—both new ones and old ones—in the last twenty or more years, are more focused on a single major line of production or major related lines of production.

It occurred to me that conglomeration was very disorienting to the unions back then, because all of a sudden they were representing workers who were only a small part of a corporation that does lots of different things. Now, with the corporations more focused on a single line of products, the potential for a revival of industrial unionism is there; now you're not having to deal with all these different types of products and different lines of production. You're dealing with something that looks more like a corporation looked in the 1930s when many of them were organized by the industrial unions in the US.

Alongside that is the rise of what we now call logistics. Supply chains have, of course, always been there and I'm sure I said something about that in *Workers in a Lean World*. The vulnerability of supply chains has been fairly well known for a long time. But I would say that the development of logistics in the last twenty years has made these things even more vulnerable than they were before. They're much more electronically and digitally guided and they're much more dependent on each link in the chain, although these things are really more like networks. The potential for disruption at all kinds of different points in these networks is huge.

Now if you put that together with the idea of these big corporations now producing a single line of products or related products, and that their internal supply chain and the ones they depend on externally are more vulnerable, then unions have more points of leverage than they've have had in a long time—or to put it better, than the workers have had for a long time.

Something that is new, for example, is that the number of warehouses in the United States has grown by 2.5 times since the end of the 1990s. And the value of freight in that time has doubled. So this industry of logistics is much bigger. There's been a lot of upgrading of the rail system to carry double-stack containers so that the whole logistics as it exists now is more interrelated, more modern, and it's also, even by academic and industry accounts, more vulnerable than it was in the past precisely because it is more integrated and technology helps that, but it also makes it more vulnerable.

Another change that is related to this but that we weren't aware of until about two or three years ago is that as they've had to reorganize supply chains to make them more competitive what they've done is create these huge "logistics clusters." That means there are certain key places—mostly pre-existing transport hubs like New York, New Jersey, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Memphis is a new one in the last ten years for FedEx, and Louisville for UPS, and so on—these clusters now employ tens of thousands of blue-collar workers in finite geographic areas so that over time you have the development of geographic centers of transportation, warehousing, intermodal facilities, IT facilities—all the things that make logistics work, all concentrated geographically with huge numbers of workers who are drawn from nearby cities.

What are the implications of these changes for rebuilding a working-class movement?

The irony here to me is that capital back in the '70s and '80s began moving out of the industrial centers like Detroit and Chicago, spreading their supply chains throughout the Midwest and even into the South. Well, the spreading of the supply chains created the logistics situation we have now. In doing that, trying to escape these old centers of industrial workers, they've actually recreated concentrations of blue-collar workers, who because they're involved in the movement of products within production supply chains are, from the point of view of Marxism, themselves production workers. That is, they produce surplus value. So capital, you can say, made a big mistake here. First, it tried to get away from huge concentrations of workers, but in doing so inadvertently created these new ones—often in different places, but nonetheless huge concentrations of workers.

When you begin to put these different elements together you have the potential for a kind of

organizing strategy that can be taken up by workers themselves or those unions that have the willingness to do this. And that, of course, is the big “if” in this whole proposition.

The analogy I use is what the Teamsters did in Minneapolis in the 1930s—the Trotskyist-led Teamsters organized first in the city of Minneapolis. Then they used their connections as truckers to organize truck drivers and warehouse workers throughout the Midwest, using the point of power along the chain. So that is one of the main themes I wanted to explore. While there’s a lot of discussion on the left of some elements of this, as far as I could see, no one was pulling these things together and taking a look at these new concentrations and asking how can we socialists on the one hand and activists in the labor movement generally, take advantage of this new situation. There’s nothing inevitable about it, but I believe that the potential is there.

In fact one thing that is striking reading your book is its sense of optimism, which is rare in books about the contemporary state of the labor movement. You note the real challenges facing the movement, but there’s also a sense of potential.

I wouldn’t deny that there’s a lot of people saying that we’re at the end of the line, or that if we don’t do something drastic it will be the end of the line. I can sort of agree with the last point, and that’s why I think this kind of analysis—and what I’ve done is very rudimentary—it’s a very beginning if you’re going to develop an actual strategy for organizing from the grassroots up. There’s a lot of research that needs to be done. But I think to just bemoan that things look bad these days—and they certainly do—doesn’t really get us anywhere. So it’s not so much that I’m optimistic, it’s rather that there’s a potential there and that there are other people in the labor movement and on the left who see this potential. The big question is whether this strategic thinking can penetrate the existing unions.

Take for example what’s going on around Chicago in the huge logistics cluster there. This cluster, even according to the official employment numbers, employs about 150,000 people, most of whom are blue-collar workers. Some are well paid, like truckers or rail workers, but many warehouse workers, particularly Black and Latino warehouse workers, are very poorly paid. And there is an effort by the organization called Warehouse Workers for Justice, which is backed by the United Electrical workers (UE), beginning to organize people on a grassroots basis. Not in the traditional way of going to the National Labor Relations Boards and having an election, which they would probably lose, but by beginning to accumulate networks of activists and train people to build a layer of activists who at some point can lead a movement to unionize or organize in some form. It’s going to be difficult because there are a lot of nonunion agency workers and temporary workers, but what I say to that is, look at how industry was organized in the past.

Take the docks or trucking. These were not permanent or full-time jobs back then, in the 1930s or before that. On the docks there were scores of employers, and nobody worked full-time—you showed up in the morning for the shape-up—and yet they managed to organize themselves and force the employers to organize themselves for the purpose of collective bargaining. I don’t think there’s any human reason, any analytical reason, why warehouse workers or workers in logistics generally couldn’t do that. We have to think about how a lot of truckers or UPS workers or rail workers are unionized. They have unions. We probably have a lot of criticisms of those unions, but nonetheless they are unionized, so the question is: What can they do to support these warehouse workers as they attempt to organize, which to a certain extent a couple of unions are. That’s one of the tactical or strategic questions that must be addressed.

In your book, you also point out that this economic restructuring extended throughout the economy. How did it impact the growth of the service sector?

One of the things that has happened in the last thirty years is that the nature of the working class itself has changed a great deal. This is a pretty well-known fact, but what people look at is that manufacturing is gone, and manufacturing is what we think of when we talk about the working class (plus transport and a couple of other things). Well, what I'm saying, and I'm not alone in this, is now it isn't just (and it never was) manufacturing. A lot of big strikes in the 1930s involved people in transportation and other kinds of industries including some service industries. We tend to focus on the better-known struggles like the General Motors Flint sit-down strike, and Little Steel—the big, highly-visible struggles of that era—but in fact millions of people got organized in a lot of different professions.

Now I'm not saying manufacturing isn't important; it is. But these other kinds of jobs are still central to capital. Working a warehouse job today is a lot like working in a factory. You're not just storing goods anymore. Warehouses are less about storing goods today, and more about moving and organizing them, and now they also do rudimentary manufacturing, what they call customization, in more and more warehouses. You're talking about working conditions that are pretty much what factory workers go through. While the concentrations are perhaps not as large as in the huge auto plants, nonetheless these warehouses are still clustered in the same places and you have thousands of workers doing the same type of labor. So that's one dimension.

A lot of the service jobs we think of as "service," meaning white-collar, but they're not. A great many service jobs today are value-producing whether in hotels or hospitals, and there are huge concentrations of workers in hotels and hospitals that are larger and larger. I was surprised when I was researching the book to see that, outside of manufacturing, the average workplace is larger today than it was twenty or thirty years ago. Most people think they are smaller. I had expected that more work was fragmented and broken up, but it's not. There are lots of jobs that are, but I think that's been exaggerated, too.

How has this impacted the composition of today's working class?

There's been a change in the racial, gender, and ethnic composition of the working class, accompanied by the rise of the so-called service sector. Those jobs are filled with African American, Latino, and, to a lesser extent, Haitian workers. And that's a big change if you look at the composition of particular broad categories like production operative or people who move materials. The proportion of workers of color is much bigger than thirty years ago—even in the building trades, which are still dominated by the classic white labor aristocracy (if you want to use that language). Even those trades have changed with more Latino workers coming to this country with those skills. As a result, the working class of today is much more diverse than it was thirty years ago.

A lot of this is due to immigration, of course, but it isn't just that; it's also due to the changing nature of the jobs. For some, particularly Black workers, it meant going down the ladder. They had manufacturing or public-sector jobs thirty years ago that are now declining, and so now they or their offspring have taken jobs in hospitals or warehouses or other service workplaces. The composition of the workforce, therefore, has changed significantly and in some respects dramatically.

What we're looking at today doesn't include all of what we think of as the working class of the 1930s or '40s or '50s. Yet it is a working class. It is employed by capital. It is subjected to the rule of capital at the workplace, and it has power. Yet these workers aren't unionized for the most part. Some are getting more unionized, like in hospitals and hotels. When I think about hotels today, I think about not just what's in cities like Chicago or New York, where 80 percent of the workforce is unionized, but about the literal cities of hotels around airports, which didn't exist thirty years ago. There were a few hotels around airports, but today there are cities with scores of huge hotels employing a workforce, mostly of Latino and immigrant workers, who are to some extent getting organized.

This change to the working class presents, on the one hand, more friction because of the racism that exists inside the class but, on the other hand, it also means that you're looking at workplaces that are now more integrated or more diverse than would have been the case back in the last period of industrial upheaval in the '60s and '70s. I think this is all extremely important, and all of the studies about who is more willing to join the union show that it's usually women and workers of color.

In the book you talk about the important role played by a “militant minority.” What role can the Left play, both in workplaces and more broadly?

One of the things that I wrote about a long time ago was what I called a rank- and-file strategy. Generally for people from our broadly defined political tendency, the way we look at unions is from a rank-and-file perspective. If we had to depend on this or that group of top trade union leaders, it would be more difficult to have an optimistic point of view, because we still see, even under Trump, the conservatism of these leaders. The fear of doing anything bold is so strong that in and of itself it can be discouraging. But if you look at a lot unions today and in the last ten or twenty years, there tend to be various strands of rank-and-file resistance and rebellion. Sometimes this takes the form of trying to change the leadership and the structure of the union, like in the recent Teamster election. They don't always win, but the real point is that there are struggles going on because of the pressures that capital is putting on the workplace in almost any kind of work, on the one hand, and because the union leadership and structure are reluctant to take on the issues of the workplace. They might be willing to go for a wage increase, although there's not even much of that these days, or to defend health care benefits, but generally speaking, the workplace is where American business unionism maintains the status quo.

But because of these pressures, workers do what they can to fight and often that leads to saying, “Well, look we can't do it by ourselves, we need the union as a whole to fight this. The leaders are in the way and so let's challenge the leadership.” If you go to a Labor Notes conference, the last couple of years they've had a couple thousand union activists and other kinds of worker activists representing a lot of these movements, whether it's specifically a rank-and-file movement in the unions or a movement of immigrant workers to get organized or pressure the union they're in to recognize their needs.

But the Left and socialists, in particular, who recognize the importance of class struggle in looking at politics, doing this kind of work in the unions or helping people to organize where they're not organizing on a democratic, workplace basis is key. It's what, insofar as we can, we should be doing. A lot these jobs have a high turnover so it's not impossible to get one of these jobs. Of course, they're crap jobs and not always attractive, but it can be done. And even if you're not in one of those jobs, political organizations and socialist organizations need to have that kind of orientation: how to organize the rank-and-file, how to build leadership with stewards, in other words, how to organize the modern workplace. Organization is a key, fundamental part of our politics—not the end of our politics, but a key central part.

Nearly a quarter of the book looks at how the new terrain for the working class is impacted by the state, politics, and, in particular, the Democratic Party. Why did you feel the need to address the questions and debates about how the Left should relate to the Democratic Party?

Writing that part of the book on the Democratic Party, electoral politics, and the changes in politics in this same neoliberal period is not something that I've done a lot of in the past. But the reason I felt this was necessary is because I think this idea—you see this particularly with the astronomical growth of DSA to 30,000 or more, but it isn't just DSA—is something that's been around the Left for a long time. This is the idea that you can somehow advance progressive politics, maybe even some

kind of socialist politics, through electoral action in the Democratic Party. I think this has been around the Left as long as I have. Now I think it's even a bigger strain on the socialist Left mainly in DSA, but not exclusively. I felt very strongly that we have to argue that work in the Democratic Party is a dead end. But it's not enough to just argue against it. You have to have some idea about what socialists should be doing at this level of politics. What's our alternative?

What I'm trying to get across in the book is that it's not enough just to think about electoral politics per se. We can look at these new initiatives like Podemos and similar formations, and they've run into trouble precisely on what I see as a weakness of a lot of the Left when it comes to the idea of running candidates. Namely, that even though Podemos and some of the other social movements in Europe have had their origins in direct action movements, as they become larger political organizations they tend to move away from that, and also away from grassroots democracy and more towards simple electoral work.

How do Jeremy Corbyn and the British Labour Party fit into this picture?

A lot of people in the US look to Jeremy Corbyn as an example. It is quite an amazing thing. Corbyn stands out as something completely atypical about the direction of social democracy in Europe and elsewhere, in that his ascendancy is a move to the left. But people should be aware that much of the Labour Party structure is not in Jeremy's hands; it's still in the hands of the basically Blairite old guard. There have been a lot of problems in trying to move this gargantuan structure to the left. The parliamentary Labour Party is still overwhelmingly to the right of Jeremy. They've been silenced since the election last year when everybody said that it would prove that Jeremy can't possibly win. In fact he didn't win, but his following made all these incredible gains that the pundits said they couldn't make. And it's interesting the way people made them.

It has a lot to do with the organization called Momentum, which is a grassroots organization. It doesn't have really deep social roots. It's mostly young, middle class, not particularly working class, but very energetic. They campaigned last year doing all the things the conventional Labour Party campaign gurus told them not to do. For instance, they were told: don't go into districts that are definitely where Labour will lose—which is exactly what they did, and Labour won. They went against the officialdom. And Jeremy doesn't have much to do with Momentum. I mean they are supporters of him, but he doesn't direct them. In fact, the person who does direct Momentum is pretty awful. But nonetheless, we're talking about thousands of people organized locally as well as nationally and so they had a significant impact on the election, even though they don't have deep social roots.

I would say two things: I think that Labour under Corbyn could win the next election if it is called soon. But the problem is the ancient problem of social democracy and particularly the Labour Party. Namely, that so much of its structure and its politicians are thoroughly neoliberal, or whatever shorthand term you want to use. Even assuming that Corbyn became prime minister, there would be a difficulty there in what many of his colleagues would be willing to do. And, of course, the other side of the coin is that capital would go berserk and come down on this thing like a ton of bricks up to and including a capital strike, like they did to Socialist Party leader Francois Mitterand in the early 1980s in France when his government tried to nationalize key industries. So the question is: can this phenomenon, as exciting as it is, actually shift the class balance of forces in the UK? I think that there isn't a lot of evidence that it would be that simple. I don't want to be pessimistic about it, but we're dealing with a party that has historically never really taken much of a left turn at least not since the 1940s.

The problem with Jeremy Corbyn is that he really is a 1970s New Leftist, and class is not the major issue on his mind. He is much more concerned about foreign policy, which is important, but if you're

going to build a power base in your country, you can't do it on the basis of that alone, or even primarily that. So he's really good on all kinds of issues around the world, but fuzzier when it comes to what are we going to do to change the balance of class forces in Britain. As people look at the Corbyn phenomenon, they should also keep in mind that nothing like that could happen in the Democratic Party, which is not even a democratic organization even to the limited extent that the Labour Party is. To the question, can electoral politics and parliamentary socialism triumph in the UK today? I think the answer is no.

In the US, electoral politics has to come out of something. It can't just come out of a bunch of individuals who happen to be leftwing or even an organization of such people running candidates in primaries or even as independents. It has to come out of movements that have power or potential power like the rank-and-file movements, or the immigrant movement, or the kinds of new social movements that have sprung up, particularly since Trump was elected, and that I suspect we will see more of as he continues to do damage.

It's important for socialists in these movements to argue, first of all, not just to throw our support behind a better-than-average Democrat, but to think about how the disruptive power of direct action movements can translate into grassroots political organization. And I think the grassroots democratic aspect of this is absolutely key. If we just start running candidates, some of them may do well (most won't), but can you really get an organization or party out of the effort that will have power?

I would use the almost negative example of the Greens. And I'm not saying we should never support the Green candidate, but their whole orientation is toward elections, and although they want to be the voice of the environmental movement, they really aren't the voice of a real social movement. While they do elect people here and there, they mostly fail, and I would say it's because they are bypassing the step that is necessary to make electoral politics real. I'm not arguing for parliamentary socialism, but for election campaigns as a transitional political activity. But again, the emphasis I think has to be on building these kind of grassroots organizations and movements, neighborhood by neighborhood, workplace by workplace, that have the potential not only to elect people, but also to make sure that if elected they do what they're supposed to do. There's a long history of people being elected and then not doing what was expected of them.

In the book, I spend a lot of time talking about the changes that have taken place within the Democratic Party and why I don't think the Left can succeed in using it as a vehicle. I think there have been changes in the way the Democratic Party works at every level over the last forty years. A lot of people think that the Democratic Party is just a ballot line and you can do anything you want with it; if you get elected they can't discipline you. Well, guess again. Yes, they can and they will and they're backed by amounts of corporate money that are just unimaginable, that filters through the party from top to bottom. And they all take corporate money. I did some research on Elizabeth Warren, the patron saint of people who want to reform the Democratic Party. She takes corporate money. They all do.

I was trying to show two things: the Democratic Party isn't just some free-for-all. It never has been, and today it's even more tightly run. But also the idea that if the Left is going to engage in electoral activity it must have a social-movement base, a mass base, and an active base. And that has to come out of the workplaces, out of neighborhood organizations, out of the movements of immigrants, of women, etc. And if we don't build that, if that isn't the perspective, then once again we won't get very far.

P.S.

* <https://isreview.org/issue/109/changing-working-class>