

### Labor and global justice: emerging reform coalitions in the world s only superpower

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Lowell Turner\*

## **Labor and Global Justice: Emerging Reform Coalitions in the World's Only Superpower\*\***

This paper examines rejuvenated labor, environmental and campus movements in the U.S., in case studies of living wage, anti-sweatshop, sustainable development and Justice for Janitors campaigns. The cases offer surprising evidence for the resurgence of progressive activism in America, at a critical historical juncture in which contrasting perspectives contend for prominence – Washington consensus versus Seattle coalition, employer-driven de-unionization versus union-led mobilization, corporate power and corruption versus labor-inclusive social movement upsurge, and in the global arena, unilateral domination versus multilateral negotiation. Predominantly local, the coalitions examined in this research, taken together across the United States, amount to a substantial movement for broad economic and social policy reform, an American movement with potentially global ramifications. The argument presented here contends that this revitalization of social forces in the U.S. is significant enough to need explanation, and presents evidence pointing toward key causal forces at work: chronic inequality, strategic leadership, and coalition building.

### **Arbeiterbewegung und globale Gerechtigkeit. Neue Reformkoalitionen in der einzigen Supermacht der Welt**

Thema dieses Beitrags sind neu erstarkte Arbeiter-, Umwelt- und Studentenbewegungen in den USA, die in Fallstudien über deren Kampagnen (Lebensstandard, Anti-Sweatshop, nachhaltige Entwicklung und *Justice for Janitors*) untersucht werden. Die Fallbeispiele dokumentieren überraschende Evidenzen für die Wiederbelebung eines progressiven Aktivismus in Amerika an einer kritischen Wegscheide mit kontrastierenden Perspektiven – Washington-Konsensus versus Seattle-Koalition, kapitalgesteuerte Antigewerkschaftskampagnen versus gewerkschaftliche Mobilisierung, unternehmerische Macht und Korruption versus Arbeiter- und soziale Bewegung, und in der globalen Arena: unilaterale Dominanz versus multilaterale Aushandlung. Wenn die in diesem Beitrag beschriebenen Koalitionen auch vorwiegend lokalen Charakter haben, stellen sie doch, zählt man sie zusammen, eine substanzielle Bewegung für breite ökonomische und sozialpolitische Reformen dar, eine amerikanische Bewegung mit globalen Verzweigungen. Vertreten wird das Argument, dass die Revitalisierung der sozialen Kräfte in den USA bedeutsam genug ist, um nach einer Erklärung zu verlangen, und dass die Evidenzen auf die Kausalität zentraler Kräfte verweisen: auf chronische Ungleichheit, strategische Führerschaft und Koalitionsbildung.

Key words: **Unions, labor revitalization, coalition building, comparative political economy, American politics**

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Since the Reagan/Thatcher era, there has been an air of inevitability about the growth of corporate power, the decline of labor unions, and the expansion of global capitalism. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union deepened the sense of irreversible market triumph. The only remaining superpower has led the charge toward an increasingly deregulated, “unleashed” global economy.

Yet both organized and theoretical opposition to the dominant global vision are growing. In recent years an alternative vision has begun to take shape and to gain in political viability. The “Battle of Seattle” in late 1999 and subsequent mass demonstrations through 2002 in Prague, Quebec, Genoa, Porto Alegre and Barcelona, followed by massive world-wide antiwar demonstrations on February 15, 2003, have given voice to the opposition. Insiders such as Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz (2002), former chief economist at the World Bank, have deepened their criticism of the IMF model and Washington consensus. A corporate corruption epidemic in 2002 undermined the legitimacy of unregulated markets and corporate power.

The focus of this study<sup>1</sup> is on the labor proponents of an emerging alternate vision. The focus, in other words, is on the actors rather than what they are fighting for, since the reform vision is only beginning to take shape and will mean nothing without the actors (such as unions) who promote, negotiate, revise, campaign for and implement the new ideas and policies.

If the dominant vision can be called *market globalism*, the emerging alternative points toward a more *democratic globalism*. After a broad overview to highlight core debates, this paper focuses on key U.S. unions and their coalitions, opposing the dominance of currently configured global capitalism – for the most part in battles at the local level – while gradually developing an alternative view. In the U.S., the relevant social actors include most prominently revitalized labor, environmental, student and antiwar movements, in coalition with each other and a variety of other community, religious, civil rights and political groups.

This coalition-based research assumes that global reform conflicts will take shape not as North-South, rich-poor, business-labor or even Empire-multitudes (Hardt and Negri 2000), but rather in wide-ranging, shifting coalitions of a multiplicity of actors – including national governments and international agencies as well as domestic and international labor, business and other NGO’s. The focus here on labor as a social force inside the United States also assumes that reformist movements inside the one remaining superpower are essential for the prospects of expanded global democracy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is not meant to devalue the role of domestic and international labor coalitions elsewhere throughout the global North and South. Many unions in the U.S., in fact, are increasingly aware of the urgent need for cross-national and global coalitions (Gordon and Turner 2000; Nissen 2002). But the primary focus here is on labor-led domestic coalition building in the U.S., in the context of an increasingly global economy.

### Explaining growing opposition

Greatly simplified, the central conflict within the global North finds multinational corporations and the U.S. government (and some of its allies) on one side, promoting market globalism, backed by and working with existing national and global institutions, with groupings of organized interests, social movements and other NGO's on the other side, beginning to mobilize for reform. The argument examined in this paper explains the *growing significance of reform forces* with reference to three variables: *vast domestic and global inequality* (highlighted by recent corporate scandals); *new leadership with a broadened strategic vision* at key activist groups, including the AFL-CIO and several of its leading unions; and a growing, contagious focus among activist groups on *coalition building*.

While these variables may best explain the current upsurge of opposition to market (or corporate) globalism, they are together not enough to produce substantial democratic reform in the global economy. Also required for successful reform, evidence considered here suggests, are both an expanded capacity for *grassroots mobilization* (relying on the "people power" that affords comparative advantage to these reform groups) and a *new political opportunity structure*. The latter depends upon divisions among established powers, including multinational corporations and rich country governments. Corporate scandals that disinherit employees and investors, the European push toward a "social Europe," trade conflicts among governments, intense differences over war in Iraq, and conflicts between governments and WTO, IMF, World Bank and other international agencies all offer potential openings in the political opportunity structure.

Economic circumstances (such as inequality) and political opportunity structures (including corporate scandals) are thus significant in shaping the prospects for a viable opposition to the dominant market globalism. The focus of this research is nonetheless on strategic actors and their coalitions for reform. Unlike much social science analysis that emphasizes constraints, barriers and (often insurmountable) problems, the actor-based theoretical approach offered here emphasizes possibilities and potential breakthroughs. While we certainly need to understand the depths of the challenges facing democratic reform efforts in the contemporary global economy – and research that explores the challenges and barriers is indispensable – revitalization research is also essential in pointing toward opportunities for reform.

After the presentation of core concepts and case study research, a brief reconsideration of the literature highlights the potential contributions of an actor-based revitalization approach that focuses less on problem constellations than on efforts aimed at overcoming the problems.

### Contending visions of a global economy

In the wake of the cold war, as we build – or fail to build – a new world order, two core debates have emerged. The first is between those who favor and those who oppose the development of a global economy and society. Thomas Friedman has called

this the debate over *whether to globalize*.<sup>3</sup> In the chart below, the forces listed under *Fighting the Global Economy*, alone or in various combinations, seek to counter and oppose the modern push toward globalization. In so doing, these forces campaign primarily against the existing dominant market globalism, yet they also undermine the potential foundations of democratic globalism.

The second core debate is between what is here called market and democratic globalism. Friedman refers to a debate over *how to globalize*. In various ways, the constituents of these two contending camps promote a global economy and to some extent a global society as well. Against the nationalists, localists and fundamentalists of all stripes, these are the internationalists of our era.

## CONTENDING VISIONS FOR A GLOBAL ECONOMY

### Building the Global Economy

#### MARKET GLOBALISM

Deregulation, free trade and capital flows, maximum business discretion, current global architecture and institutions – WTO, IMF, **Washington consensus**

**Key U.S.-based proponents:** Multinational corporations, U.S. government (and neoclassical economists)

#### DEMOCRATIC GLOBALISM

Debt relief, reformed global institutions, democratic voice with core labor, environmental and human rights standards in trade agreements, new market access in the North to support strategic development in the South, expanded trade adjustment – **Seattle coalition**

**Key U.S.-based proponents:** Labor, environmental and campus activist groups, insider critics (and unreformed academics who came of age in the 1960s)

### Fighting the Global Economy

**Nationalism** – protectionism, chauvinist rivalry

**Localism** – deep local roots, anarchism

**Religious fundamentalism** – of many varieties

**Communism** – in decline, failed vision of the past, China joins WTO

**Neo-naziism** – militia, Oklahoma City, anti-immigrant demagoguery

<sup>3</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, “Evolutionaries,” New York Times, July 20, 2001, p. A21.

### Market globalism

*Market globalism* is the dominant force shaping today's world economy.<sup>4</sup> The emphasis is on free markets. Multinational corporations, backed by the rich country governments in which they are based, are the primary economic and political actors shaping this global order. We used to say "what's good for GM is good for America" (or at least that was what the widely quoted president of GM said). Now it's more like "what's good for capital is good for the global economy": trickle-down economics writ large. The World Trade Organization and the G-7 heads of states actively and centrally promote the interests of business – in the belief that what is good for international business is good for us all.

In the context of existing global institutions and architecture, this model aims to maximize opportunities for business by expanding free trade, deregulation, and capital flows while minimizing business risk. Property rights and investment protections in trade agreements are important, but not labor or environmental standards that raise costs and cut down on business discretion (and thus investment, jobs and general prosperity in this trickle-down worldview). While the primary locus of economic and political power lies in the global North, the governments and large businesses of many developing countries are also party to the dominant global order. From "crony capitalism" to labor-repressive domestic policies and acceptance of the IMF model, many (but not all) governments of the South help sustain market globalism while blocking democratic reform both at home and in the global economy.

Contemporary negotiations at the G-7, WTO, IMF and World Bank aim to deepen market globalism as an engine of prosperity and development. Markets are powerful instruments that can and often do promote an efficient allocation of resources and economic growth. But free markets typically also produce great inequalities and environmental "externalities." Growing social and economic polarization in the United States is one example; by contrast, inequality is tempered in Europe by stronger social policy (Hutton 2002). Most serious is the growing divide between rich and poor countries, referred to by Bruce Scott (2001) as "the great divide in the global village." A widespread concern here is that even if we don't care about the injustice of inequality, we will quite simply never be safe from terrorists, revolutionaries and other anti-system forces in a vastly unequal world (see also Kapstein 1996).

### Democratic globalism

In response to such concerns, *democratic globalism* has emerged in recent years as a powerful yet still largely unformed alternative vision and force.<sup>5</sup> Most participants at the Seattle demonstrations would I believe fall under this heading. American labor unions, for example, have in many (but not all) cases moved beyond national protectionism to

<sup>4</sup> Alternative labels could include *free market globalism*, *liberal globalism*, *global neoliberalism*, *corporate globalism* or just plain *global capitalism*. Theoretical justification ranges from a softer social-democratic version by Thomas Friedman (1999) to the hard-core market fundamentalist perspectives of Milton Friedman (2002) and his followers.

<sup>5</sup> Authors range from insiders like Joseph Stiglitz (2002) and George Soros (2002) to deeper critics such as Will Hutton (2002), Charles Derber (2002) and Naomi Klein (2002).

advocate basic labor and social standards in trade agreements and to demand a seat for labor at the WTO and other corporate-dominated bodies shaping global economic relations. Environmental groups mobilizing for Seattle and subsequent efforts (including the annual World Social Forum in Porto Alegre and the 2002 Johannesburg Earth Summit) have moved beyond species or wilderness protection to build coalitions with labor and community groups for sustainable jobs and earth-friendly development. Human rights groups, debt relief advocates, religious organizations, consumer groups and many more have mobilized in new coalitions, local, national and global, to advance human and environmental interests in a changing world economy.

Among such a wide variety of international, national and local groupings, there are to be sure substantially diverging interests. Some World Social Forum leaders are in fact more anti-globalist than reformist. Policy proposals in areas such as immigration and debt relief are highly contested within reform circles. Conflicts among environmental and poverty activists are commonplace and chronic. Overcoming such contradictions is an ongoing challenge for today's activist coalition builders, from the local level on up (Rose 2000).

While such groups and coalitions are still emerging, still working out points of unity and disagreement, there is a common thread: a growing call for voice, for democratic input, for the concerns of workers, citizens and the environment to be heard in economic and political decision-making processes. The press typically labels the protestors "anti-globalization." Some of them are, including many of the most visible and violent (the ones the press itself loves to glorify). Understanding that we live in an increasingly global society, however, most of these activist groups aim to expand democratic voice at all the levels where it is now essential: local, national, regional and global. The democratic globalist vision, in its developing essence, aims to preserve and expand democratic voice where it now exists at national and local levels, and to build a new global social dimension so that globalization does not overwhelm local and national democracy.

Democratic globalism is not for the most part a revolutionary force. On the contrary, it is overwhelmingly reformist, seeking to reform existing market globalism to make it more democratic, more just and green. Just as the brutalities of early capitalism called forth both reformist and revolutionary opposition, so the brutalities of global capitalism call forth many types of opposition. In the rich countries at least, and to a large extent in developing countries as well, the dominant call of the opposition is not for overthrow of the system but for inclusion. This could change if inclusion is denied, as the powers-that-be are often warned – from the outside by vast demonstrations and from the inside by analysts such as Ethan Kapstein (1996), George Soros (2002) and Joseph Stiglitz (2002). A new focus at Nike and other companies on "corporate social responsibility" and codes of conduct as well as the World Bank's new sensitivity to political realities in developing countries can all be understood as responses to (and attempts to co-opt) mounting pressures for reform.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Michael Skapinker, "Why Nike has broken into a sweat." *Financial Times*, FT.com, March 6, 2002.

Exclusion combined with deprivation can transform reformist into revolutionary forces, creating a fertile seedbed for extraordinary evils such as ethnic cleansing and terrorism. In short, the alternatives to a reformist democratic globalism are not pretty.

### Forces of reaction

Forces opposing the global economy vary across a wide range of strategies and world-views. What they have in common, in addition to an opposition to globalization, is a tendency to look backward in time. Earlier romantics looked to a state of nature or an idyllic medieval village – one that may never have existed but has been nicely recreated for mass consumption at today's Renaissance Faire. Anti-globalizers look back to the glory and security of the nation-state, the vitality of the local community, the sanctity of religious purity or the certainty of past ideologies. While the visions may be compelling and may even attract mass followings, each is in fundamental ways impossibly discordant with the modern world.

*Nationalism* puts the interests of the nation-state above all else. Historically, this force is associated with the nation-building of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and has brought many gains, from national defense and prosperity to the welfare state. On the downside, nationalism produces intolerance, narrow-mindedness and war. In the global economy, nationalist sentiment can choke off world trade and global solutions to common problems. A contemporary example of shortsighted nationalism lies in the American decision in 2001 to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol, a far-reaching international agreement to reduce greenhouse emissions and global warming, on the grounds that this might hurt the American economy.

*Localism* offers a beautiful alternative vision based on the vitality, environment and interpersonal connections of local place and community (Mander and Goldsmith 1996). Again, however, the task is to integrate communities, along with regional and national economies, in a constructive way within the broader world economy. Localism that takes the form of anti-government anarchism is a utopian dead-end – or worse when it takes shape as window-smashing black shirts at otherwise non-violent mass demonstrations.

If Hitler and the Holocaust were products of a vile, extreme nationalism, the terrorist attacks of September 11 were products of an extreme and intolerant *religious fundamentalism*. While most religious fundamentalists are non-violent and many withdraw to a large extent from the modern world, uncompromising religious belief can motivate all kinds of horrors. Historically, wars and massacres in the name of religion have been particularly bloody, and in our time the targets have ranged from doctors performing abortions to ethnic cleansing in the Balkans to the attack on innocent civilians at the World Trade Center. Religious fundamentalists look backward in time to early religious communities and saviors and forward in time to some promised land beyond the earth. Squeezed between these idealized points of reference, an increasingly global society, especially a commercial, secular one, appears alien and often threatening to core fundamentalist values.

*Communism* offered an alternative global vision, one that failed long before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today's communists, in places such as China and Cuba (along with significant reformed communist – now largely social-democratic – unions

and parties throughout eastern and western Europe), hardly offer much threat to the new global order. China, the one large bastion where a communist government rules, has largely abandoned any kind of Marxist economic vision in favor of the dynamism of markets – with great economic success – and has now joined the WTO.

*Neo-nazism* is an extreme one-dimensional form of nationalism, based on racial or ethnic superiority. This is also largely a failed vision of the past, with ugly present echoes in “skinhead” attacks on foreign workers in Germany, in anti-immigrant propaganda in France and many other societies, and in outrages like the Oklahoma City federal building bombing. With little mass following anywhere, thoroughly discredited in the wake of World War II, such ideologies have only minimal bearing on global debates yet continue to persist as dangerous, backward looking fringe forces in modern societies.

None of the five forces fighting the global economy offer realistic solutions to contemporary problems. All look backward in time rather than forward. While communism and neo-nazism offer only failed and seriously flawed visions of the past, nationalism and localism each offer one important building block as long as neither is reified into the sole solution. Where religious fundamentalism is non-violent, it offers a test of the capacity of modern secular societies for wide-ranging religious tolerance and freedom. A broadly acceptable global vision will surely exclude neo-nazism and terrorism while accepting reformed communism and religious freedom and building upon local vitality and the still important nation-state.

### **Forces for reform: Labor, environmental and campus activism**

At the dawning of a new millennium, perhaps anything is possible. How many of us dreamed in our darkest nights of passenger planes exploding into mammoth high-rise buildings? The unspeakable proved all too possible.

Yet there were also signs of wonder and hope at the turning of the millennium. On November 30, 1999, sea turtles rose up on two legs and marched through the streets of Seattle. They challenged the World Trade Organization and joined with workers and students to protest corporate dominance of the global economy. Together they planted seeds of democratic globalism. The emerging vision persists, now offering a way beyond the horrors of September 11 and the injustice of growing inequality and massive corporate corruption.

What American actors can promote and advocate the deepening of democracy at local, national and global levels? As always in such periods, multiple movements are present, feeding off each other, overlapping, in conflict and in coalition. As unions move toward new tactics of rank-and-file mobilization and broad coalition building, the *labor movement* is a central presence in the current upsurge, and indeed the core issue is economic and social polarization – in both American and global society. The *environmental movement*, building on three decades of progress, swells in fits and starts as the earth’s limits become increasingly clear and as former opponents such as unions come around. “Blue-green” (labor-environmental) alliances spread, from college campuses where green and sweatshop activists intermingle to local coalitions for sustainable jobs and national campaigns against fast track and the Free Trade Area of the Americas. After decades of quiescence, *campus activism* is on the rise, around labor, en-

vironmental and a variety of other issues. In addition, human rights, civil rights, the women's movement, consumer protection, international solidarity, the peace and debt relief movements, community organizing around local issues – all play a role in today's resurgent progressive coalitions. And building on all of these is the more recent and potentially massive *antiwar movement* (led by groups such as MoveOn.org, ANSWER, ATTAC, and USLAW – U.S. Labor against the War).

There is also a blending of generations in these campaigns for reform and expanded democracy. Many of today's labor, environmental and antiwar leaders are themselves former activists of the sixties. Idealistic, informed by lifelong social values, they are now highly skilled organizers and competent administrators as well. Yet the driving energy comes from a new generation, in their late teens and twenties, campus, community and workplace activists, coming of age in a churning social environment that kindles activist passion. From Students Against Sweatshops to “union kids” on the front lines of organizing drives, from green-haired sea turtles in Seattle to high-school demonstrators against war in Iraq, the next generation of activists has arrived.

When social movements subside (as they always do), they leave behind networks and communities of activists who defend the gains and carry on the campaigns, especially at the grassroots level. This is a phenomenon well known to social movement theorists, and this is exactly what happened in the 1970s and 1980s (Staggenborg 1998; Tarrow 1994). In the absence of powerful social forces on their side – quite the contrary in the Reagan era – veteran activists from the 1960s did more than bide their time. Some spread environmental consciousness and green politics (with a perfect target in the environmental policies of Interior Secretary James Watt), while others developed through experimentation labor's new “organizing model.” They have fought through the system into positions of leadership and responsibility. Most importantly, they have kept the flame burning for a new activist generation.

### **The evidence: Coalition building**

This paper is intended more as a provocative research design than as the presentation of a fully formed argument. The resurgence of labor, environmental and campus activism is demonstrated here in case studies of coalition building that together indicate the growing salience of contemporary reform movements. While labor is at the center of this analysis, environmental, campus, antiwar and other movements – and especially the growing linkages among them – are as essential for the prospects of national and global reform.

After 40 years of declining business unionism, the American labor movement announced at least the possibility of revitalization in its impressive coalition-building efforts for the Seattle demonstrations of 1999. Campaigns with environmentalists in battles against NAFTA (1993) and fast track (1997-98) inspired a broad Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment (Shoch 2001; Rose 2000), that itself laid the groundwork for the demonstrations in Seattle against the policies of the WTO. Empowered by the broad nature of this global justice coalition, activists fanned out into growing and often successful local coalition efforts aimed at a broad range of issues, from living wage and anti-sweatshop to peace and sustainable economic development.

The building of active coalitions – most of them at the local level – has been a central component of the revitalization of the American labor movement since the early 1990s. The Seattle coalition, which brought together 30,000 demonstrators organized by labor groups with 20,000 from environmental, religious, human rights and other groups to protest World Trade Organization policies, was only the most dramatic manifestation of the growing coalition phenomenon (Hawken 2000). Since the plant-closing coalitions of the 1980s, accelerating since the mid-1990s, key unions have moved beyond traditional bases, in some cases to build enduring alliances with human rights, environmental, religious, student, feminist, and other community groups. In response (and perhaps wisely from a political perspective), the Bush administration has attempted to break apart such coalitions, signing up several unions, for example, to support the campaign for Arctic oil drilling. The continuing revitalization of the American labor movement may well depend on the success or failure of labor in redefining itself as a broad partisan force, in lasting national and local coalitions with a broad range of social groups.

As part of a broader picture of revitalization, coalitions have increased in importance for particular activist unions, especially for those with a strong commitment to organizing (including, for example, SEIU, HERE, CWA and UNITE). Labor-backed coalitions cover a wide variety of local concerns, in addition to national alliances with environmental (and other) groups around issues such as fair trade (Rose 2000). At the same time, the environmental movement has developed an increasingly significant “environmental justice” dimension, opening the door to expanded social coalitions (Shabecoff 2000). And a new generation of student activists has built reform coalitions extending across campus, into the community and even into national and global politics.

The paradox for advocates of democratic globalism is that most of these coalition efforts are local. Building on local groups, issues and leaders, such coalitions nonetheless reflect the economic and social realities of a global economy. Local activists, to be sure, may not “think globally” at all, even as their campaigns serve as carriers of a broader reform vision.<sup>7</sup> But just as local coalitions laid the groundwork for the massive Seattle demonstrations, such groupings increasingly and inevitably are drawn into global issues and debates – from immigration and corporate accountability to investment, skills training and tax policy. And some of the most promising coalition-building cases take place in so-called “global cities,” where concentrations of global capital collide with growing low-end service (and often largely immigrant) workforces (Sassen 1998).

American unions are still far less global in orientation than they need to be. While international solidarity networks are expanding (Gordon and Turner 2000; Nissen 2002), the major contribution of American unions and other interest groups and social movements to democratic globalism remains at the local and national levels, pushing from within the superpower for economic, social and environmental policy reform.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Herod 2001; and Reynolds 2002.

### Coalition case studies

While most national unions (led by the AFL-CIO) sat out the social movements of the 1960s, local unions here and there, in cities such as San Francisco, Seattle and New York, did participate in antiwar and civil rights coalitions (Turner 2003). As those movements declined in the 1970s, labor's limited participation also declined; and not coincidentally labor's isolation deepened and membership density dropped in the face of growing employer opposition. In response to deep recession and plant closings in the 1980s, labor-community coalitions finally emerged in defensive campaigns to save factories and jobs (Brecher and Costello 1990). On that foundation, a new wave of labor-backed coalition efforts, some strategic and enduring, emerged in the 1990s across a range of issues. Of particular recent interest are the following examples of strategic coalition building, presented here as partial findings from ongoing research.<sup>8</sup>

Journalist Robert Kuttner has described the *living wage movement* as "the most interesting (and under-reported) grassroots enterprise to emerge since the civil rights movement" (quoted in Pollin and Luce 1998, p.1). In cities large and small across the country, coalitions of activists, often labor-led, campaign for local minimum wages (at least for government-contracted or subsidized work) considerably higher than the national minimum wage, with notable cases of success. Examples include the Community Labor Alliance in Connecticut (with living wage laws passed in New Haven in 1997 and Hartford in 1999), the Santa Clara County Central Labor Council in alliance with Working Partnerships USA and sixty groups (pushing the San Jose City Council to adopt living wage policies in 1998; Brownstein 2000), and the Los Angeles Living Wage Coalition (with broad popular and deep political support resulting in victory in 2000). In most cases, successful coalitions are led by local unions with active national union support, with networks of overlapping activists in long-term regularized relationships among a variety of community-based groups, including social movements, churches and political organizations. Broad success for the living wage movement is indicated in the spread of new legislation: over 70 American cities had passed living wage laws by 2002 (Luce 2002; Reynolds and Kern 2001).

The *anti-sweatshop movement* of the late 1990s and beyond offers another example of successful coalition building, in this case for campus-based local movements originally inspired (but no longer led) by organized labor.<sup>9</sup> UNITE has from the start been the key union involved. Chapters of Students Against Sweatshops (180 of them later

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<sup>8</sup> Findings are based on an extensive collection of coalition case studies gathered over the past three years. Research has been supported by grants from the Ford Foundation and Cornell University, with conference support from the ILO, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Hans-Böckler-Stiftung. Graduate student research assistants who have conducted case studies and helped develop the analysis include Ian Greer, Nathan Lillie, Julie Sadler and Sarah Swider. Earlier versions of the living wage and Justice for Janitors cases appear in Hurd, Milkman and Turner 2003.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example Steven Greenhouse, "Students Urge Colleges to Join a New Anti-Sweatshop Group," *New York Times*, October 20, 1999; Victoria Griffith, "Anti-Sweatshop Campaign to be Launched," *Financial Times*, October 19, 1999; and the web site [usasweb.org](http://usasweb.org).

brought together in 1999 in the umbrella United Students Against Sweatshops) took hold on American campuses after the first Union Summer in 1996. A project of the new Sweeney-led AFL-CIO, Union Summer placed hundreds of young people in summer internships in organizing and collective bargaining campaigns, encouraging them to build centers of labor activism on their return to the workplace or college campus. Inspired by these returning activists, the anti-sweatshop movement grew rapidly and dramatically, with successful sit-ins at universities as diverse as Duke, Brown, Michigan, Wisconsin, Penn, Arizona, Georgetown and North Carolina. While UNITE and Union Summer helped to launch the movement and UNITE has underwritten the costs of USAS national meetings, case study interviews indicate that campus-based coalitions are significantly autonomous. Supporting each other when possible, working together loosely in USAS, activists have built distinct local coalitions with a variety of campus, religious, community groups and local unions. Critical components of success in the growth and development of the campus anti-sweatshop movement appear to include: national union support (especially at the beginning, for resources and education, and for continuing USAS conference funding); the building of lasting local organizations (SAS and related coalitions); and the capacity to mobilize thousands of students for demonstrations, sit-ins and other activities.

In some ways the most problematic yet at the same time most promising coalitions are *sustainability alliances*, with labor and environmental groups at the core (Moberg 1999; Rose 2000). When these two groups – often adversaries in the past – work together, the potential for both national political influence and local mobilization is great. Recent research shows that in spite of stereotypes, relations between labor and environmental groups are on the whole quite positive (Obach 1999). Today there are scores of such coalitions working together on a wide variety of issues, from living wage and anti-sweatshop campaigns to toxic waste sites, workplace health and safety, clean air and global warming. A recent potentially path-breaking example is the Apollo Project, advocating a 10-year \$300 billion research plan to promote hybrid and hydrogen cars and clean energy factories and appliances, thereby promoting manufacturing and construction jobs in the U.S. and at the same time fighting environmental pollution – in a coalition effort backed by key unions (UAW, USW, IAM, UMW, IBEW, SEIU) as well as environmental groups such as the Sierra Club.<sup>10</sup>

While local coalitions predominate and are generally quite autonomous, they typically receive important support from national labor and environmental organizations and sometimes as well from national umbrella groupings such as the Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment. The Alliance formed in the losing fight against NAFTA in 1993, regrouped to defeat fast-track legislation in 1997 (Shoch 2001), and provided the framework within which the Seattle demonstrations were organized in the fall of 1999. Active members at the national level range from Steelworkers and Carpenters to Friends of the Earth and the Sierra Club. While recent tensions over

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Greenhouse, "Unions Back Research Plan for Energy," New York Times, June 6, 2003, p. A20. (UAW is the United Auto Workers, USW the United Steel Workers, IAM the International Association of Machinists, IBEW the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and SEIU the Service Employees International Union.)

global warming policies, oil drilling in Alaska, and automobile mileage requirements have made collaboration more problematic, over 200 member groups remain committed to fighting anti-labor and anti-environmental legislation at national and local levels. Local coalition efforts continue to thrive in dozens of cities and regions.

Observing that labor-environmental coalitions are often “cross-class alliances,” Fred Rose emphasizes the role of bridge builders – those who have been upwardly or downwardly mobile or have social movement histories that push them across the divide (Rose 2000).<sup>11</sup> Also typically present in the building of labor-environmental coalitions are strong support from national organizations, overlapping networks of activists in the different organizations, and an ongoing history of common effort leading to processes of alliance institutionalization.

Closely related to living wage and anti-sweatshop campaigns are union-initiated coalitions conceived in support of labor campaigns that develop long-term strategic potential. One example is SEIU’s *Justice for Janitors*, essentially a national effort to reorganize urban building services after a period of de-unionization. Faced with the loss of members as building owners eliminated jobs and turned to janitorial service contractors in the 1980s, SEIU developed a combined organizing, bargaining and civil rights strategy based on the corporate campaign model with special attention to building coalitions in specific communities. This has been a national effort based on the mobilization of local union activists in coalition with local churches, community organizations, and labor-friendly elected officials. In some cities the coalitions have been temporary or sporadic, but in other cities they have endured. Perhaps the best example is Los Angeles where thousands of largely Hispanic janitors have been organized and won major contract improvements in a series of successive campaigns from the early 1990s through a dramatic strike victory in 2000, each campaign building a broader and deeper level of community support (Erickson et. al. 2001; Milkman and Wong 2001).<sup>12</sup>

In spite of these promising examples, the reality is that most American unions continue to think about coalitions in more narrow, defensive terms. This is true even where unions have relied on comprehensive campaigns as a source of leverage during contract negotiations and organizing drives. Outreach to potential allies for support in pressuring employers tends to be on union terms, and typically dissolves when the campaign ends. Although such outreach may help in the effort to reconstruct labor as a broad partisan force, sustainable momentum requires more lasting relationships.

Increasingly indispensable for organizing, political action and international solidarity, coalition building is critical to the current revitalization of the American labor movement. Moving beyond the “special interest group” mentality of business union traditions, coalition-building unions seek to broaden community bases while expanding political influence.

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<sup>11</sup> Note the parallel here to the finding by Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman (2000) that local unions shifting focus toward external organizing require activists with experience in other community or social movements.

<sup>12</sup> And Los Angeles is a good example of the “global city” – a critical arena for labor movement revitalization – where great concentrations of corporate wealth depend on new inflows of low-paid migrant and immigrant labor (Sassen 1998).

### The argument summarized

For the cases presented above and many more, progressive coalitions including labor have developed and deepened across the United States over the past decade. In cities such as Los Angeles, the result has been the wholesale transformation of local politics.<sup>13</sup> Coalition case studies offer preliminary but important evidence pointing toward key causal factors at work in the emergence of contemporary forces for political, economic and social reform.

*Expanded coalition building* among revitalized activist groups appears to be a driving force and necessary condition for the growing significance of reform forces and their budding alternative vision (itself local and national as well as global). While the other two necessary conditions, inequality and strategic leadership, cannot be fully developed here, their importance is demonstrated in processes of labor-led coalition building, presented above and summarized as follows.

*Growing inequality* is clearly an important underlying economic condition pushing labor toward coalitions such as living wage, anti-sweatshop and Justice for Janitors. Economic and social polarization, seen for example in the decay of inner cities, has also inspired the emergence within the environmental movement of a new focus on environmental justice, opening the possibility of broadened coalition efforts with labor, human rights, religious and community groups. And contemporary campus issues, from USAS to solidarity with university workers and their collective bargaining campaigns, are in many cases driven by a passionate outrage at the massive inequalities of global, national and local economies. Corporate corruption scandals have only magnified the awareness and readiness for protest action, especially of an increasingly activist young generation.

*Strategic leadership* appears to be the third necessary condition for the growing significance of contemporary reform forces. Most obviously, the election of an insurgent slate at the AFL-CIO in 1995 has expanded the strategic vision of a considerable "vanguard" (if still a minority) of American unions, shifting emphasis toward organizing and rank-and-file mobilization and encouraging progressive coalition building (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Turner, Katz and Hurd 2001). In a parallel development, the movement for environmental justice has transformed the thinking of key environmental leaders, moving the focus beyond wilderness preservation to urban revitalization and sustainable development coalitions (Rose 2000; Shabecoff 2000). On American college campuses, a new generation of activist leadership has emerged, with an expansive view of coalition building and reform possibilities.<sup>14</sup> Strategic leadership

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<sup>13</sup> This is particularly striking for a native Angeleno returning to visit. The Los Angeles I grew up in was largely Republican and non-union. L.A. today has a plausible claim as one of the country's strongest union towns, and the latest mayoral runoff election (2001) was between two pro-labor Democrats. The transformation has been driven by the expansion of the Hispanic community and its political and economic mobilization, along with the coalition building of a revitalized local labor movement (Milkman 2002).

<sup>14</sup> The most visible national manifestation of new strategic campus leadership has been the founding of United Students Against Sweatshops, referred to by one student activist in-

appears to be important both at high levels of organizations – John Sweeney and David Brower, for example, each played key roles in bringing together the Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment and the subsequent Seattle coalition – and at local levels, where bridge builders with cross-movement experiences or perspectives are especially important.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to coalition building, inequality and strategic leadership, two more factors appear to matter in explaining the growing strength of reform forces. One is the *political opportunity structure*. Clearly, corporate scandals open the door for reform efforts. Yet the breadth of successful living wage and anti-sweatshop campaigns in a great variety of American cities and universities (pre-dating the corporate corruption epidemic of 2002) suggests that other factors – strategic leadership, coalition building, chronic inequality – may be more important, something for future research to consider. The other significant factor is *grassroots mobilization*, present to a significant extent in all of our successful coalition campaign cases. How and why such mobilization, participatory politics at its best, becomes possible is also a question for future research. Is mobilization a causal factor in itself, making everything else possible, or is mobilization a sort of “natural force” that occurs spontaneously when the door is opened (and when other factors such as inequality, strategic leadership and coalition building are in place)?

### The literature reconsidered

Findings presented here challenge various perspectives in comparative industrial relations, political economy and sociology. This can be illustrated through a focus on contrasting analyses of labor.

Postwar industrial relations analysis in the U.S. operated within a dominant American-centered, pluralist perspective, assuming a stable social system and well functioning sub-systems such as industrial relations, with a focus on institutions and the details and effects of policies such as collective bargaining (Dunlop, 1958; Dahrendorf 1959; Kerr, Dunlop, Harbison and Myers 1960; Slichter, Livermore and Nash 1960). The mutual recognition of the two major actors, business and labor, ensured stability of the industrial relations system. According to this perspective, mutual recognition was itself the consequence of the withering away of class conflict across the advanced world and its substitution with the joint search for technocratic solutions to the problems of industrialism (Dunlop, 1958; Kerr, Dunlop, Harbison and Myers, 1960).

This perspective reflected postwar growth and stability through the mid-1960s, as well as the cold war dominance of the American mass production economy. Consis-

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tinted for this research as his generation’s Port Huron (the founding of Students for a Democratic Society in 1962).

<sup>15</sup> Examples include Miguel Contreras, head of the L.A. County Federation of Labor, who earlier worked with Cesar Chavez in the social movement-oriented United Farm Workers; and Ron Judd, who helped develop the Seattle blue-green alliance prior to 1999, as head of the King County Central Labor Council (and is now Director of the Western Region for the AFL-CIO).

tent with apparently stable business unionism, this literature was challenged from a comparative perspective in the 1970s and 1980s by a new European-based literature on democratic corporatism (Schmitter and Lehmbruch 1979; Berger, 1981; Lehmbruch and Schmitter, 1982; Goldthorpe 1984). While the new literature broadened the scope of analysis, moving labor and business out of the sub-system and into more central positions in the political economy in line with their place in most western European societies, the focus remained on institutions and policies. Each of these contending perspectives, pluralism and corporatism, served as precursors for the new institutionalism of the 1980s and 1990s (Hall 1986; March and Olsen 1989; Steinmo, Thelen and Longstreth 1992).

In the meantime, social and economic stability in North America and western Europe came undone with the war in Vietnam and the social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. A new literature appeared, seeking to understand and explain the rise and fall of social movements. Although the late 1960s and early 1970s were marked by strike waves (legal and wildcat) across western Europe and North America, the social movement literature focused largely on movements such as civil rights, anti-war, women's and environmental. While a few studies brought labor and social movements together in a limited way (Crouch and Pizzorno 1978; Sabel 1982), analytical currents moved significantly apart. While labor was viewed for the most part as an established force with institutional support (and perhaps thus even part of the problem rather than the solution), social movements were seen as fresh, insurgent, and fighting for space within the political economy and society (Offe, 1985; Habermas, 1989).

In other words, just as American labor largely failed to ride the social movement wave of the 1960s (Turner 2003), so too did the literatures on industrial relations and political economy fail to incorporate the insights of a rich, new social movement literature. And with the decline of the social movements of the 1960s, the narrow focus persisted. By the 1980s, however, it was impossible to ignore the increasing effects of global economic pressure as well as the newly aggressive posture on the part of many firms and states.

While the literature on corporatism challenged American pluralist thought from a comparative perspective (e.g., labor plays a very different role in different societies), the next wave of American literature accepted pluralist assumptions but challenged conventional industrial relations views based on sub-system stability (Kochan, Katz and McKersie 1986). In a context of economic crisis in the 1970s and 1980s, this new perspective emphasized the strategic choice of employers in the U.S., who increasingly opposed unions and undermined traditional collective bargaining arrangements in their response to competitive world markets (Piore and Sabel 1984). Dynamic markets and employer opposition (often backed by government policy) resulted in serious and accelerating union decline in the U.S., destabilizing and in some cases marginalizing the traditional industrial relations sub-system while offering little hope for unions beyond concession bargaining and the acceptance of new employer-led flexibility and labor-management cooperation. Labor's decline in the U.S. and U.K. together with the hegemony of Reagan/Thatcher free-market policies would have far reaching effects on unions and workforces everywhere in an increasingly global economy.

While the labor literature of the 1990s was dominated by strategic choice on the one hand and institutionalism on the other, a new mobilization perspective emerged hand-in-hand with the revitalization of labor movements, especially in the U.S. and U.K. (Johnston 1994; Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Hurd 1998; Heery 1998; Kelly 1998; Milkman and Wong 2001; Turner, Katz and Hurd 2001). In contrast to earlier literature, revitalization research emphasized the key role of union strategies, of unions and workers as actors with choices that matter. Early postwar theorists (industrial relations scholars, political scientists, sociologists) had seen unions as integrated, stable parties to enduring bargaining arrangements, with rank-and-file participation largely unnecessary (except in political elections and every once in a great while in the event of a strike). Workforce demobilization was an assumption common to theorists of American business unionism and European corporatism alike. Kochan, Katz and McKersie, by contrast, reflected the break-up of postwar stability and viewed unions to a large extent as victims of global markets, employer opposition and state policy. While unions did have choices, none were very promising, with options limited by employer attitudes and competitive markets: cooperation and limited participation seemed to some the best route but offered little hope for turning around the protracted decline of the American labor movement (cf. Kochan 1995; Kochan and Osterman, 1994).

The new institutionalism also emphasized unions, employers and government as actors integrated into a more or less stable framework of laws, organizations and regularized relationships. With behavior shaped by institutional and political constraints, however, labor was largely marginalized in the U.S. and U.K. in the 1980s and early 1990s, with little hope for any fundamental change.<sup>16</sup> In all of these earlier perspectives, whether unions were nicely integrated or unfortunate victims, there was little room for labor as a movement, for coalition building, for expanded rank-and-file activism, for activist leadership committed to reform, for an expansion of democracy in the workplace and beyond.

The latest wave of labor scholarship, by contrast, examines the potential for unions to serve as pro-active organizers, system builders, grappling with and shaping the challenges they face, to a large extent through coalition building and the mobilization of participation (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Kelly 1998; Turner, Katz and Hurd 2001). This latest literature thus brings together insights from the long neglected (or pigeon-holed) social movement literature with strategic choice from industrial relations and the new or historical institutionalism from comparative political economy.

Strategic choice and institutional literatures offered important breakthroughs, in particular regarding concepts such as actor choice, strategic alternatives, transformation, and the powerful shaping influence of existing institutions. But both perspectives are also flawed. None of their conceptual frameworks, for example, could have predicted the AFL-CIO turn toward organizing, coalition building, and local mobilization

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Thelen 2001. The most recent incarnation of the comparative institutional perspective, to which Thelen's work contributes, is the "varieties of capitalism" literature (Hall and Soskice 2001). In this view, labor is for the most part either nicely integrated in the "coordinated market economies" or hopelessly marginalized in the "liberal market economies."

and the very real possibility of labor movement revitalization. Both postwar industrial relations and new institutional perspectives favor system stability, taking institutions and bargaining arrangements as given. Strategic choice with its focus on transformation is more dynamic, reflecting changing world markets and power relations; yet the emphasis is still on shoring up collective bargaining and shifting toward labor-management cooperation. Current revitalization literature, by contrast, seeks to integrate institutions, global markets and debates, coalition building and rank-and-file mobilization into a comprehensive actor-based framework, with a focus on describing and explaining contemporary activism, its presence or absence, successes and failures, effects both narrow and broad.

Rejuvenated labor, environmental and campus movements in the U.S., as indicated in living-wage, anti-sweatshop, sustainable development and Justice for Janitors campaigns (and much more), offer surprising evidence for the resurgence of progressive activism in America, at a critical historical juncture in which contrasting global visions are just beginning to contend for prominence.

### **Concluding remarks**

There is no reason to believe that the global economy cannot be constructively reformed in a contemporary, coalition-led push toward democratic globalism. To be sure, the barriers are high, but new possibilities are also present. While we can only speculate at this point about the institutions and policies that would predominate in a democratic globalist world (and the typical safe academic approach by contrast is to give all the reasons why the current one-sided and corrupt market globalism will continue to dominate), we can point to some of the essential social forces coalescing around reform efforts. Here in the world's only remaining superpower, revitalized labor, environmental and campus groups have been critical actors in promoting reform aimed at local, national and global conditions. Predominantly local, such coalitions, taken together across the United States, amount to a substantial movement for broad economic and social policy reform, an American movement with potentially global ramifications.

The argument presented here first contends that this revitalization of social forces in the U.S. is significant enough to need explanation, and, second, presents evidence pointing toward key causal forces at work: chronic inequality, strategic leadership, and most importantly coalition building. Because inequality is increasingly highlighted in contemporary corporate scandals, because labor, environmental and campus movements now offer strategic leadership with a greatly expanded perspective, and because coalition building among these and other groups is rampant across a range of issues, especially at the local level but increasingly at national and global levels as well, there is reason to hope for the expansion of substantial ongoing reform efforts, right here in the so-called "belly of the beast."

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