

INTERVIEW

# United States: Reviving Labor From Below

Saturday 29 July 2017, by [MOODY Kim](#), [UETRICH Micah](#) (Date first published: 10 April 2014).

**The American labor movement won't be able to revive itself without organizing at its grassroots.**

The American labor movement has seemingly been on the verge of total obliteration for decades. Union membership and strikes are at their lowest levels in almost a century, former union strongholds like Michigan have become "Right to Work" states, massive inequality has shown little signs of abating. The American working class has seen few darker days.

Labor activist and scholar Kim Moody has long argued that the way to reverse labor's long slide is not through top-down reform efforts, but through renewed commitment to struggle at labor's grassroots. He co-founded Labor Notes as part of an effort to promote this kind of bottom up, rank and file-led unionism. And he reflects on failed renewal efforts — both from above and below — in his latest book *In Solidarity: Working Class Organization and Strategy in the United States*.

Moody spoke at a book event with Jacobin online editor Micah Uetracht in Chicago, two days after the 2014 Labor Notes conference.

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## Micah Uetracht

Much of your work is on the rise of American business unionism and the defeat of more progressive visions of unionism. Can you sketch out some of the contours of business unionism in the US briefly?

Kim Moody

Business unionism comes out of the defeat of socialism in the United States. What makes it different from, say, European unionism is the idea that labor doesn't need any ultimate goals; it doesn't need a socialist ideology, for sure, or any kind of reform program that projects far into the future.

To a certain extent, it comes out of the conditions in the US about 100 years ago, when we had an employer class that was unrestrained, especially in comparison to a European capitalist class that was not. In most of Europe, you had big government and not-so-big business; here, we had big business and not-so-big government. So the power of the employers to undermine unions was there.

Leaders like Samuel Gompers looked at the idealistic formations like the Knights of Labor and anarchists and said, "Well, they have not been able to organize the working class, so we have to be practical." The irony of this, of course, is that some of the inventors of business unionism like Gompers were, in their earlier years, socialists and Marxists. But they drew the opposite conclusions

from those politics: that to get along in the US, you had to function like a business, and unions needed to develop permanent and friendly relationships with employers.

That's not unique to the US, of course. But the main difference is not whether unions are functioning within capitalism — unions don't have much choice about that — but the embrace of capitalism as a system that requires reform but not transformation or abolition. So labor leaders begin to think like and even see themselves as business people.

One of the consequences of this is the embrace of the Democratic Party by labor, despite all its disappointments and betrayals. The labor movement in the US is historically unique in that it does not have a labor or social democratic or communist party that it has been allied with — for at least the past century, it's been allied with a bourgeois party, Democrats. That further limits the vision that people can have.

### **Micah Uetricht**

You've taken pains within several of your books to say that the crisis within the labor movement is not solely the result of external forces like what's going on in the economic system — that many of labor's wounds are self-inflicted through this kind of unionism.

Kim Moody

Where we are now is the result of something that goes back to 1979, when we had a managed recession. From the mid-1960s to the 70s, there had been these rank-and-file rebellions, these upsurges — wildcat strikes, leaders thrown out of office, contract rejections, all these things that aren't supposed to happen in a business union context, because the members were under enormous pressure from what Mike Davis calls the “employers offensive” of the late 1950s and 60s. The fight against speedup at factories like Lordstown, Ohio's GM plant; the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement; by the end of the seventies, these movements were exhausted or defeated. Business unionism reasserted its power.

And so the recession of 1979 arrives. And within a year, strike activity falls by half. (This is, of course, even before PATCO.) In the next two years, the unions lost a quarter of their membership, much of their wage gains — all of it, all at once.

This was a radical change. Even during the rank-and-file rebellions, the idea was that the company and the union would sit down every three years or so, negotiate a new contract, you got an annual raise, and that was the routine. That was over.

Beginning in 1983, there's a recovery. How did this happen? It happened on the back of the working class. Which maybe wasn't that odd. But even Marx said that the time the workers have the best opportunity to make economic advances is during an expansionary period for capital; the problem was, that got turned on its head, because this expansionary period of capital from 1983 until our most recent recession was the result of the fact that not only did you get an enormous productivity gains of that period, but you got wage compression. Real wages fell throughout the period — and are still below 1973 levels today.

So the old idea that we give them productivity and they give us some wage and benefit increases was out the window. The pattern agreements on which the industrial unions were based in the postwar boom were dismantled in this period, and the whole postwar structure of how collective bargaining was carried out was undermined in this period. And labor's numbers kept eroding.

Business unionism had no way of dealing with this new situation. It was so used to the tradeoff

between productivity and wages and benefits — what do you do when there's no longer a tradeoff to be had, unless you are willing to take on new ways of fighting?

### **Micah Uetricht**

One of the chapters in the book is your essay from the 1990s, "The Rank and File Strategy," a strategy that militants in unions like the Chicago Teachers Union have successfully employed. What does that strategy look like, and what relationship does it have to the business unionism you've described?

Kim Moody

The rank-and-file strategy is meant to do two things. One, it's a path for the revival of the labor movement. The traditional business union, top-down methods of fighting (when they do fight) are not going to work in this period, so the involvement and mobilization of the workers of themselves are essential to union revival.

But it is also a strategy for socialists. For half or three-quarters of a century, socialists have been over on one side, and unions have been on the other, and there hasn't been much interconnection. So how do the socialists who came out of universities, whether in the 60s or 70s or now, reconnect with the unions? Well, with the rank and file strategy, you could be involved in these movements — not as a sectarian group but actually organizing within the movement. This could be a way to revive these unions.

The rank and file strategy comes out of something that is real in the American labor movement, precisely because we've had business unionism for many decades now and because American employers are always aggressive. The activist layer of the rank and file, when it is under enough pressure, is likely to rebel — as they did in the 1960s and 1970s, as they did in the 1930s against craft unionism, as they did in the post-World War I period. This is when a section of the membership, often with much or most of the membership behind it, takes on the business union leaders and attempts not just to get new faces elected, but to organize and mobilize the ranks of the union, build workplace power, and use that base to transform the union.

Now a lot of these movements have been defeated — which might be cause for pessimism for some. But knowledge from those previous efforts does get passed along, and we learn the lessons from what happened, say, during the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s.

It's not a guarantee that some kind of mass socialist movement will be produced, obviously, but it is an opportunity to reconnect something that's been broken for a long time between socialist ideas and working class activity.

Now, it might be tempting — especially to anyone who was at the recent Labor Notes conference in Chicago — to wonder if we are at the beginning of one of these upsurges right now. I don't know — I won't make a prediction. But there are certainly more rank-and-file movements than I've seen in a long time, all at the same time. That can't be a coincidence. As much as I love Labor Notes' staff, I can't say they went out and organized all these movements. There's something going on.

### **Micah Uetricht**

On the other hand, one might wonder if these movements are surging up precisely because the labor movement is at death's door; that these are its last dying gasps.

Kim Moody

Well, if you look at the history of the labor movement, whether in the US or elsewhere, they always go through these kinds of ups and downs. We haven't seen an upsurge in a long time, but we have reason to believe that that kind of thing can happen again. And these sort of rank-and-file rebellions do give us some hope that we won't go over into the final abyss.

But again, I think these things are built into American business unionism — that sooner or later, things change. Usually what changes is the way production is done. For example, some of the first rank-and-file upsurges, like the one in post-World War I or the one in the thirties that produced industrial unionism, were brought on by Fordism and Taylorism. The way people worked changed radically and drastically in the early years of the twentieth century.

The rebellion seems to take about a generation for people to deal with these new work norms. If you look at basic industry through the twenties, people are learning how to deal with mass productive and Taylorism — the cutting up of jobs, the speedup. And they find ways, and then you get the upsurge.

In the eighties, you get lean production. It begins in the automobile industry. It's a new way of speeding up work, using Taylorism and mass production and all that, but it brings in some new ways of doing that. Now, lean production is everywhere — not just steel mills and car factories, but in hospitals and schools, wherever you look. Labor Notes staff Mike Parker and Jane Slaughter called it "management by stress."

In the old days, you didn't want the production line to break down — that was anti-Fordist. Under lean production, you want the system to break down because then you can see the weak points: who isn't doing the right thing; who isn't working as fast; if we've got eight people working, can we do it with seven? This has been going on since the 1980s, along with just-in-time production, with human resource management — telling workers "you're our most important asset," "we're partners," etc.

And for a while, this had an impact. In the 1980s and 90s, workers in these car factories were arguing: "Is this team thing actually a good thing? Maybe it actually gives us some power. They're actually asking our opinions — nobody's ever done that before." There was debate and division among workers on these issues.

But sooner or later, people recognize these things for what they are, and they begin fighting back. And this involves, not surprisingly, rank and file mobilization and the recreation of workplace organization. The business unionist has two attitudes towards workplace organization: bureaucratize it, which was the attitude of the United Auto Workers — everything is legalistic, there's no real independent workplace organization to speak of. The other way is to just get rid of it, which employers would prefer. Leadership of some unions, like SEIU, prefer to get rid of workplace organization.

Again, referring to the Labor Notes conference, there were 2,000 union militants there. What were they talking about? They were talking about workplace organization. That's because that's where workers build their power.

## **Micah Uetrict**

There have been rank-and-file upsurges in recent years, but the subtitle of your previous book is "the failure of reform from above, the promise of revival from below." Can you talk about those reforms from above, and other recent reform attempts outside of traditional unions like "alt-labor" groups?

Kim Moody

The thing about American business union leaders is that they're not all stupid. They figured out way back when that they were in trouble, and something needed to change. You may remember or have read about John Sweeney taking over the AFL-CIO on this program of reorganization and new strategies and tactics in the mid-1990s.

Some of those reforms were good (although all of the reform seemed to be located in Washington, DC, rather than everywhere). There was a new attitude that was supposed to be more militant. And yet somehow, labor-management cooperation kept being part of this. Quite obviously, the Sweeney-era reforms didn't work. Membership kept dropping, contracts got worse, wage increases and benefits were being taken away. So that failed.

We had a second try at this with Richard Trumka — a much more militant guy, no doubt about it. And yet, still, reform hasn't happened.

But these union leaders did come up with some ideas. One of them was, okay, we're having problems organizing because the whole National Labor Relations Act and National Labor Relations Board system is bankrupt. It has been turned on its head and is now a barrier to unionization.

So what do you do about this? Well, in the old days, you'd have strikes. But that wasn't so easy anymore. So they came up with the idea of the neutrality agreement. We can't go through the NLRB anymore, so the thinking goes, because it doesn't work very often (although many unions still do it). So we're going to go to the employer and ask them to sign an agreement that they will remain neutral if there is an organizing drive. Accompanying that is often the idea of card check: instead of agreeing to an election, the employer agrees to let us, the union, simply sign up a majority of people on union cards.

So all this sounds pretty good. And in fact, it did work in a number of situations, and using neutrality and card check was very popular for a while — many unions still use them. But the Great Recession seemed to kill them. When these agreements worked, it was often when the union already had a bargaining relationship with the company, and they were going after a subsidiary or something.

But the vast majority of American employers are not interested in neutrality. Of course, if you're asking the employer to be neutral in an agreement, they're going to ask something from you. So the company agrees not to badmouth the union, but they also demand that the union not badmouth the company. This is part of the reason why the UAW failed to organize Volkswagen in Chattanooga.

So the neutrality agreement has been, at best, extremely limited, and at worst a failure as an overall strategy, because capital in America is not about to be "neutral" about anything.

Separately, there are the alternative forms of worker organization, particularly workers centers. I think these are good things — don't get me wrong. They have an important function to play: they bring people into unions, but they also have an independent function, particularly in immigrant communities, of waging fights where it's not yet possible or it's too difficult for the workers to organize a union.

But one has to look at the reality of power relationships in society. And the reality is that these organizations do not have much social power. They're also often funded by foundations, which is a tricky business — I'm not saying that they shouldn't take that money, but it can be a bit of a problem.

So they're a good development, but they're not going to solve the problem of the working class and of the labor movement.

Now, the latest thing in top-down reform at the last AFL-CIO convention is to embrace the idea of these alt-labor organizations. In one sense, that's a very good thing. But in another sense, it's like the top leadership of the labor movement saying, "The way we're going to solve our problem is to bring in somebody else," when the fundamental problem of the weakness of American unions is not being addressed.

The good thing about some of the organizations that have come along is that they raise ideas that labor needs to pay attention to — not just the leadership, but the members, too. They emphasize that direct action has to be part of the package. If you don't disrupt, if you don't bring things to a halt, if you don't stop business as usual, you're not going to be able to successfully fight back. All of that is essential. But labor-community coalitions are not going to be a panacea.

## **Micah Uetricht**

You were one of the founders of Labor Notes, which turned thirty-five this year. In reading your first book *An Injury to All*, I was struck by your analysis of the problems of the rank-and-file upsurges in American labor history and how Labor Notes seems to have been created in order to address some of those shortcomings and to create more durable and connected rank-and-file fightbacks in the future. How would you assess the success of Labor Notes as a project?

Kim Moody

It's been a surprising success. Looking back at the 1970s, there were all these rank-and-file efforts: the United National Caucus in the UAW, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, Steelworkers Fight Back, Miners for Democracy, Teamsters for a Democratic Union — not just local, but national movements. All of these things had an impact on the atmosphere at the time.

But the problem was that they didn't relate to each other. Each one would have a handful of radicals or socialists who would try to connect them, but it wasn't a class movement in a real sense. And if you look at the history of successful radical movements like these, it's usually because you have a layer of activists who, across the movement and across the class, function together consciously in order to push the movement forward — in the thirties, this would have been Communists, Trotskyists, etc. We haven't had anything like that for a long time.

In the latest Labor Notes, Jane Slaughter and Alexandra Bradbury ask, "How do we fan the flames of these movements?" And they say that one of the problems we have in changing the labor movement is that we don't yet have this self-conscious layer of activists. So when Labor Notes started, and we looked at this fragmented situation, we knew there was a need to somehow connect these things.

Of course, Labor Notes was founded in 1979 — just as these movements died. Really bad timing. So we weren't even able to make an attempt at connecting the upsurges of the 1970s, much less succeed.

But the project didn't fold. So then, when concessions started coming in the eighties, we helped people organize against it. The labor leaders said, "Oh, it's just the recession — the concessions will go away." We said, "No. It's not about the recession — it's about power relationships."

Then, when lean production came along, we took it on, because no one else was. In fact, half of academia was telling us that lean production was workers control — it was a great experiment in empowerment. Which was a fraud: workers weren't being empowered, they were being confused and co-opted. So we confronted lean production when no one else was.

That's how Labor Notes grew. There was a need for it, so people came to our local "Troublemakers

Schools” and national conferences. But for most of that period, we grew incrementally and slowly. What has happened in the last three conferences is a huge leap in attendance. If anyone had asked me ten years ago if we’d have a conference of over 2,000 labor activists, I’d have said, “That’d be nice, but let’s get real.” But there it was this past weekend in Chicago: over 2,000 activists — who, if you listen to their speeches or engage with them in conversation, clearly think of this as a cross-union, class-wide movement.

The ability of Labor Notes to stick through a very difficult period has been critical. Let’s be frank: the Left often has the habit of jumping from one issue to another. “Who’s moving this year? Let’s follow them!” Labor Notes did something different. It said, “Let’s stick with this. We know what it is we want to do.” And I think having that long-term view allowed us to survive and grow, even in the most difficult times. So now, when more people see the need for this kind of fighting unionism, they have a place to go.

To celebrate Bastille Day, new subscriptions are just \$17.89 (sorry, no renewals) if you follow this link.

**Kim Moody**

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**P.S.**

\* Jacobin. 04.10.2014:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/04/reviving-labor-from-below>

\* Kim Moody is a co-founder of Labor Notes. He is the author of numerous books about the American labor movement, including *On New Terrain: How Capital Is Reshaping the Battleground of Class War*.