The Social Structures of Accumulation and the Labor Movement: A Brief History and a Modest Proposal

Draft #21 - 08/02/17 - Kimberly Christensen

I. SSA Theory: A Brief Summary
Originally developed by Gordon, Edwards, and Reich in *Segmented Work, Divided Workers*, social structures of accumulation (SSA) theory provides a useful shorthand for analyzing the complex changes in the institutional framework that underlies capitalist growth and development. (Gordon, Edwards, and Reich [GER] 1982)i

A variety of interpretations exists regarding the “periodization” of these SSAs. For instance, in *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*, Kotz places primary emphasis on the relationship of capital to the state and the changes in attendant ideologies - from the Keynesian aggregate demand management and state regulation in the postwar era to the current market-centered neoliberalism. (Kotz 2015) Others have emphasized the international sphere; in particular, the importance of the dominant international economic hegemon. (See, for example, O’Hara 2004, O’Hara 2006, Nardone and McDonough 2010, and Rosenberg 2010.) Still others have emphasized the dominant form of labor control or labor relations. (GER 1982, Edwards 1980, Wallace and Brady 2010) In *Segmented Work, Divided Workers*, for instance, Gordon, Edwards, and Reich label their first three SSAs as “proletarianization, homogenization, and segmentation [of labor].” (GER 1982)

What is common to all varieties of SSA theory is that capital/labor relations - the form and technology of capitalist control over labor in the process of production - remain central. (Kotz 2015) To stay ahead of the competition and to maximize profits, businesses need to seek out the lowest-cost and highest-productivity labor. In many cases, particularly where technologies are primitive and profit margins slim, this will lead them to search for workers who are disempowered or marginalized in some way – by being gendered or racialized, by a lack of full civil rights or legal documentation, or in other ways that make them less able to organize and to resist exploitation. Thus, the search for labor, properly skilled and socialized, has been central to the historical trajectory of capitalist development. The SSA refers to those institutions, both domestic and international that must be constructed and maintained to reinforce this central dynamic and to support other elements necessary for robust investment and continuing profitability.ii

This SSA approach is not universally accepted among progressive economics or in labor circles. For example, McIntyre (2014) and McIntyre and Hillard (2012, 2014) argue that the postwar capital/labor “accord,” a central concept in the “regulated capitalism” SSA of the postwar era, underestimates the existence of continuing labor conflict and overestimates business acquiescence to the New Deal labor relations regime. Others (e.g., Rosenberg 2010) accept the basic concept of the postwar “accord” but acknowledge that there was more capital/ labor strife in the postwar era than the phrase would suggest.

However, it is indisputable that the institutional framework underlying capitalist development has undergone substantial, qualitative changes since the beginnings of US capitalism in the 19th century and that these institutional changes have had a profound impact on the economy’s
trajectory and ability to deliver jobs and prosperity. As I will argue here, they have also had a profound impact on the structure, functioning, and relative success of the labor movement. As capital/labor relations and forms of labor control have shifted, so too have the forms, practices, and institutional structures of the labor movement.

What follows is a brief, stylized summary of the first three American SSAs and their concomitant forms of labor organization, followed by a discussion of the post-1970s globalized neoliberal financialized (GNF) SSA and the implications of the GNF-SSA for today’s labor movement.

A. Competitive Capitalism with Personal/Simple Labor Control (1840’s-1890’s in the North)

The early period of competitive capitalism was characterized by small-to-medium-sized firms serving local or regional markets. The “leading edge” industries of the day such as garment and textile depended directly or indirectly on the products of the slave labor system (e.g., cotton and indigo). Later, after the 1876 Tilden-Hayes Compromise that signaled the end of Reconstruction, these industries continued to rely upon the products of the de facto Black agricultural feudalism in the US South.

Given the primitive nature of the era’s technology, it was crucial for employers in these “leading edge” industries to seek out low-wage labor disempowered by gender, by age, and/or by immigrant status. Had they been forced to pay the wage levels necessary to lure white, prime-aged men away from subsistence agricultural production, or had they been forced to pay prices for their cotton and other inputs grown by wage labor, it is doubtful that these industries would have been profitable.

The small size of the firms, combined with the relatively primitive technology, meant that capitalists’ control over their labor was, in general, direct and personal; i.e., the owner of the firm was generally on-site, organizing production, hiring and firing workers, and overseeing and directing their efforts. The apparent “naturalness” of this personal form of control was undoubtedly enhanced by the pre-existing patriarchal relations in the home under which many of the workers (e.g., women garment worker) had previously labored.

**Quoting Wallace and Brady, “Entrepreneurial [personal] control was arbitrary, capricious, and sometimes clumsy but usually effective because the hard work and personal involvement of the capitalist-entrepreneur inspired loyalty from workers and obscured the class character of the production process.” (Wallace and Brady 2010, p. 128).

Unions, where they existed, tended to be located in the more highly skilled occupations (such as woodworking), disproportionately held by men. They were generally AFL-style unions organized along craft lines (as opposed to industrial unions such as the CIO) and were often dedicated to limiting entry and preserving the “integrity” of the craft. Attempts by production workers to organize industrial unions (e.g., the IWW in the garment sector) tended to be ephemeral. This was due to both the intense competition among firms (and resulting low profit
rates) and the transitory nature of much of the labor force; i.e., unmarried women, children, and immigrants. viii (Kessler-Harris 2003)

B.1. Oligopolized “Corporate” SSA with Labor Homogenization (late 19th century to 1929)

The leading-edge firms in this era were the highly oligopolized corporations (great trusts) serving primarily national markets.ix As in the previous SSA, many firms depended on cheap products and inputs (including wage goods like rice and sugar) from the de facto Black agricultural feudal system in the US South.

The monopolization of leading industries was accompanied by increasing size of both firms and workforces, rendering simple, personal labor control impossible. This period therefore witnessed the development of technical labor control (“Taylorism” or scientific management) and the deskilling of labor in leading firms. (Fairris 1994, Rebitzer 1993, Stone 1974) For those industries where mechanization and assembly lines were not practical (e.g., insurance adjusting, clerical work), the period also witnessed the beginnings of bureaucratic labor control; i.e., labor management by intricate rules and regulations. (GER 1982)

This homogenization and concentration of labor – the increasing similarity of the work experiences of massive numbers of semi-skilled operatives – greatly increased the potential for worker solidarity and organizing/resistance. (McDonough 1994, Fairris 1994) This was the era of the 1877 “Great Uprising” in railroads, the 1892 Homestead steel strike, the 1896 Pullman strike (which brought Eugene Debs to prominence), and the five-month coal strike of 1902. These early attempts at industrial unionism were often smashed quite violently – generally with the assistance of the state. (Witness the government involvement in breaking the 1919 steel strike [Brecher 2014] or the pivotal involvement of the U.S. military in defeating miners at the Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921.) (Blizzard 2004, Corbin 2011, Shogan 2004)

Employers often manipulated racial and ethnic tensions among workers in a conscious attempt to undermine solidarity. Said one plant manager in steel, “My experience had been that Germans and Irish, Swedes and what I denominate ‘buckwheats’ (American born country boys), judiciously mixed, make the most effective and tractable labor force you can find.” (quoted in Brecher, p. 119)x Finally, as Stone demonstrates, this era also witnessed early attempts to artificially create job differentiation and job “ladders” in order to “motivate” workers and undermine solidarity. (Stone 1974)

B.2. The Great Depression

The inequality, financial manipulation, and instability created during this oligopolistic SSA led to its spectacular end with the crash of 1929. The institutions of the postwar “regulated” SSA were constructed in this environment of both increasing worker desperation and militancy, and a need to use government policy to increase and stabilize aggregate demand.

By the 1930s, the major industrial unions, most of which had their origins in the era of the “homogenizing” corporate SSA, had grown in strength and in militancy. For example, by the mid-1940s, approximately 90% of coal miners were union members. (Christensen 2014 from
BLS 2013) High rates of union density were also achieved by CIO unions in many other core industries such as steel, rubber, autos, and electrical. (Zieger 1995, Murolo 2001).

John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers, was particularly important to the construction of the CIO (the industrial union federation) and what would become the postwar labor relations regime. (Christensen 2014) His “decking” of Thomas Hucheson, the conservative president of the Carpenters’ Union, at the 1935 AFL convention over the legitimacy of industrial unions, is the stuff of labor legend and signaled a major shift in the orientation of the US labor movement. (Dubofsky and Van Tine 1986)

The trauma of the Great Depression also pushed workers – and the labor movement - to experiment with alternate philosophies and politics. As Schrecker points out, by the 1940s, perhaps 20% of major industrial unions in the US (e.g., electrical, longshore and warehouse, clerical, mine mill, and agricultural) were led by either Communists or other left-leaning radicals.xi Many other unions (e.g., the UAW, USW, UPWA, and UMW) knowingly employed Communist or Socialist Party organizers. (Schrecker 1999)xii In addition to generally winning better wage and benefits packages than mainstream unions (Stephan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003), many left-led unions were at the forefront of struggles against racism and for gender equality. (Schrecker 1999, Stephan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003, Kelly 1990, Rosswurm 1992, Honey 2004)

The pressure created by these militant unions, combined with the need to raise wages to increase aggregate demand, led to the passage of the 1935 Wagner Act and the creation of the NLRB and our modern structures of collective bargaining and industrial relations.xiii

C. Postwar “Regulated Capitalism” (1945 – late 1970s)

The postwar “regulated capitalist” SSA was constructed in the wake of the Great Depression and under the umbrella of US military and economic hegemony. (McDonough 1994) This hegemony was perhaps best symbolized (and facilitated) by the Bretton Woods international monetary system, which used the U.S. dollar as both mandated medium of exchange and as “reserve” or “anchor” currency. (Block 1978, Steil 2013)

The leading-edge firms in this era continued to be the highly oligopolized corporations of the corporate SSA era, now selling products to international as well as domestic markets. (For instance, as Kotz points out, from 1960 to 1979, imports as a percent of goods-only GDP increased from approximately 7% to approximately 22%.) (Kotz, 2015). Under the canopy of US hegemony, these firms also began the process of relocating in search of cheaper labor, first to the U.S. South and the “sunbelt,” and, over time, to areas of the world with impoverished or otherwise disempowered populations.

This US hegemony required massive military spending, which necessitated the destruction of dreams for a social welfare state in the US – and politically neutralizing those organizations and persons who advocated such policies. Among others, it required the depoliticization of the more radical elements in American labor and the movement’s reorientation to a “business union” model focused on wages and benefits for members, not on control over production or broader dreams for racial and economic justice.xiv
The passage of Taft-Hartley in 1947 was instrumental in this regard. Taft outlawed many of the tactics of inter-union and community-union solidarity disproportionately used by left-leaning organizers (such as sympathy strikes and advocacy of consumer boycotts). In addition, Taft legalized and legitimized state right-to-work laws and gave employers legal standing to bring unfair labor practice complaints against unions. (Lynd and Gross 2011) Finally, Section 9(h) of Taft forced all union leaders to sign affidavits swearing their non-allegiance to the Communist Party “or any other subversive organization” on pain of their unions being barred from participating in NLRB-sponsored certification elections and procedures for the resolution of unfair labor practices. (Schrecker 1999). After the passage of Taft-Hartley and the expulsion of the left-led unions, union density began its historic slide, from a high of over 35% of the labor force in 1945 to its current rate of under 11%. (Goldfield 1987, BLS 2016)

As Albelda and Tilly point out, analyses of the postwar SSA that relegate race and gender to the margins miss another of the most important phenomena of the postwar era; namely, the massive entry of white women into the paid labor market, the integration of African American men from agriculture and secondary occupations into the industrial core of the US economy, and the integration of African American women into markets previously reserved for white women (such as clerical and government). These changes coincided with the stunning growth of employment in retail, services, and government, sectors that grew much more quickly in the postwar era than traditional manufacturing. For instance, between 1946 and 1990 employment in retail trade grew by 226%, and in services by 501%. This compares with a 30% growth in employment in manufacturing over the same period. (Albelda and Tilly 1994, p. 218)


The vast majority of SSA theorists now agree that, in the wake of the economic crisis of the 1970s, a new SSA began to emerge. (McDonough, Reich, and Kotz 2010). This new institutional structure has been variously characterized as the globalized, neoliberal, and financialized SSA (GNF or “gonif” for short).

A confluence of factors set the stage for the crisis of the 1970s and for the creation of this new GNF-SSA. These included:
1. The end of postwar era of unfettered US economic dominance primarily caused by the recovery of Germany and Japan from WWII, and the rise of OPEC (the latter being unthinkable before the US defeat in Vietnam) (Block 1978);
2. The demise of the Bretton Woods system combined with the maintenance of the US dollar as the global reserve/anchor currency and continued US military hegemony (Block 1978);
3. Unionized and sometimes militant workers in core sectors of the US economy demanding wage/benefit increases equivalent to productivity increases and safer working conditions (Christensen 2014, Bowles, Gordon, and Weiskopf 1992);
4. Constraints on profits from increasing demands for wage and benefit equality by women and people of color connected with the era’s popular movements for gender and racial liberation (Albelda and Tilly 1994);
5. Constraints on profits from increased environmental and health and safety regulation (e.g., EPA, OSHA, EEOC) – resulting largely from pressure from environmental movements and unions (Bowles, Gordon, and Weiskopf 1992);
6. The development of new technologies of communications and coordination that permit the dispersal of production processes (“spatialization”) around the globe (Wallace and Brady 2010);
7. A significant increase in immigration resulting from the 1965 Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act combined with a series of financial-economic crises in immigrants’ countries of origin (Wolgin 2015);
8. The partial undermining of the New Deal financial regulation regime and the beginnings of the growth of the lightly regulated “shadow banking” system (Russell 2008, Crotty 2008, Silvers 2013, Taub 2013);
9. The increasing “financialization” of non-financial corporations with the resulting single-minded focus on maximizing shareholder value and shortening of corporate time horizons (Crotty 2003, Epstein 2006, Lazonick 2013, Stockhammer 2013);
10. The failure of Keynesian aggregate demand management policies to deal effectively with the stagflation of the 1970s and Keynesianism’s replacement with laissez-faire as the dominant ideology of the economics profession and government policy-makers (Crotty 2013, Kotz 2015);
11. Significant changes in public ideology and rhetoric regarding the proper role of the government and the increasing dominance of neoliberal ideologies, political platforms, and practices (Kotz 2015).

These interacting factors resulted in the prolonged recession of the 1970s and early 1980s, the worst, to date, since the great Depression. And the globalized, financialized, and neoliberal SSA that emerged from this crisis represented a qualitative change from the regulated capitalism of the postwar era.xviii

This new GNF-SSA was characterized not just by an increase in imports and exports as a percent of GDP, but by the creation of truly global supply chains, particularly in the manufacturing and technology sectors. For instance, in 1981, Ford introduced the Escort into the North American market, characterizing it as the very first “World Car” and bragging that “Engineering teams from America and overseas joined forces to create a new car with better ideas from around the world!” (The Henry Ford 2017) The 1990 World Development Report account of the US auto industry stated that components for this first “world car” were manufactured in fifteen countries. (World Bank 1990)

The vast increases in capital mobility, enabled by the new technologies of communications and coordination and by the globalization of finance, led to the creation of a truly international capitalist class, to capitalist access to an exponentially greater number of disempowered workers around the globe, and to the undermining of unions’ and workers’ bargaining power in the advanced capitalist countries. (Gaspasin and Bonacich 2002, Scruggs and Lange 2002, Rosenberg 2010). The GNF-SSA has also witnessed the creation of new transnational institutions (e.g., the WTO), new bilateral and multilateral treaties (e.g., NAFTA) as well as the repurposing of older institutions (such as the IMF) and their use of structural adjustment and related policies to enforce a deregulated, neoliberal vision. (Nardone and McDonough 2010)xix
These changes in the structure and geography of production, often undertaken in search of disempowered, cheaper labor) have vast implications for domestic labor relations and the future of the US labor movement.

**Forms of Domestic Labor Control Under the GNF-SSA**

The global dispersal of production and the creation of global supply chains have resulted in significant changes in the forms of domestic labor control. I will argue that, rather than establishing one new, dominant form, the GNF-SSA has given rise to a divergence of labor control methods, each adapted to, and reinforcing of, the legal status and relative political/social power of the workers in various segments of the labor market. For instance:

1. **“Creative” control**
   In high-tech and other industries requiring a great deal of imaginative innovation, we may be witnessing the emergence of a new form of “creative” labor control (or, if not a new form, at least a very serious redefinition of the “primary labor control” of earlier eras). Creative labor control is characterized by an enormous degree of leeway for a certain select group of employees who are trusted by management to conceive and pursue their own projects under very favorable working conditions. (Witness the sprawling Google campus with gourmet food, state-of-the-art gymnasiums, and ultra-flexible work schedules.) These employees, often working in teams and in communication with their peers abroad, are expected to internalize the goals of the corporation to such an extent that they can be trusted to work largely independently. Not surprisingly, these positions are filled disproportionately by workers of the dominant race and gender from wealthy countries with advanced, often elite, educations.

2. **Technical (and bureaucratic) labor control**
   Machine-pacing, Taylorism, and bureaucratic labor control are still alive and well in the much-reduced US manufacturing sector. However, the (often realized) threat of outsourcing, combined with a less-than-favorable legal and political atmosphere for unions, has significantly reduced the bargaining power of even workers of the dominant race and gender in this sector..xx

Under the GNF-SSA, we have seen the resurgence of pre-New Deal open warfare against unions, even in formerly-heavily-unionized core sectors. A majority of firms facing organizing drives now hire outside “management consultants” to discourage and/or intimidate workers into voting against union representation. Bronfenbrenner’s findings, for instance, indicate that, during union organizing drives conducted between 1989 and 2009: “employers threatened to close the plant in 57% of elections, discharged workers in 34%, and threatened to cut wages and benefits in 47% of elections. Workers were forced to attend anti-union one-on-one sessions with a supervisor at least weekly in two-thirds of elections. In 63% of elections, employers used supervisor one-on-one meetings to interrogate workers about who they or other workers supported, and in 54%, used such sessions to threaten workers.” (Bronfenbrenner 2009, p. 2) Aside from firing union supporters or physically threatening workers, Taft-Hartley and subsequent case law have rendered such tactics perfectly legal expressions of the “free speech rights” of employers. And even if employers are charged with unfair labor practices, the glacial pace of NLRB resolution, and the paucity of the penalties, often makes it economically “rational” for an employer to violate labor law. (Bronfenbrenner 2009) In other words, if the capital/labor accord ever existed, it is now but a distant memory.
Under these conditions of outsourcing and union-busting, even formerly powerful unions like the UAW, UMW, and USW have been forced to accept wage concessions, two-tiered wage and benefit systems (for established workers vs. new hires), greatly diminished dues coffers and decreasing political influence. (Greenhouse 2009) This is true even in the public sector, where unions had traditionally had some protection from competitive pressures; many are now facing right-to-work initiatives and similar restrictions on both their finances and their spheres of action.

3. The growth of the “precariat” and the reemergence of simple labor control

Perhaps most importantly, we are witnessing the growth of what many have labelled the “precariat.” The decline of manufacturing employment, women’s increasing financial responsibility for minor children, the rising cost of higher education, and increases in immigration (especially undocumented immigration) have produced a growing population of super-exploitable workers. These are the Uber drivers, the “gig” code writers, the adjunct college professors surviving on food stamps, the fast food workers, the part-time retail workers, the subcontracted maintenance workers working at three job sites, the retail clerks on “flextime,” the FedEx workers forced to buy their own trucks, the day laborers and the house-cleaners, the eldercare workers and the nannies, the fast food workers, the part-time retail workers, the subcontracted maintenance workers working at three job sites, the retail clerks on “flextime,” the FedEx workers forced to buy their own trucks, the day laborers and the house-cleaners. This increasing percent of the US labor force often labors without stable worksites, long-term employment contracts, health and pension benefits, or meaningful prospects for advancement. By some estimates, these workers now account for an astounding one-third of the U.S. labor force. (Kotz 2015)

As the precariat has grown, so has the prevalence of the simple, “personal” labor control, supposedly a remnant of an earlier era. Witness the prevalence of outright wage theft from vulnerable employees (Fine 2006), the growth of arbitrary and capricious managerial control (often coerced by corporate headquarters via unrealistic scheduling and staffing requirements), the rise of practices such as locking workers into buildings overnight, and other egregious violations of both civil liberties and minimal health and safety standards. (Greenhouse 2009) As unions are decimated, and the neoliberal state shifts away from enforcement of the FLSA, OSHA, and other laws regulating the workplace, these and other violations can only increase.

Traditional, site-based strategies of union organizing are often ineffective in this population, as their geographic dispersal and lack of stable employment makes them extremely difficult to organize via firm-based methods and structures. New models, practices, and institutions are needed to respond to this latest iteration of capital.

Just as the labor movement needed to adjust to the transition from small competitive firms to massive manufacturing plants by changing from a craft-based to an industrial union strategy, so now labor must begin again to adjust to the new organizations and structures of capital with new, creative organizing strategies and structures. The labor movement, broadly defined to include “alt-labor,” has been making some interesting forays into non-traditional organizing practices and structures. Part II offers a brief review of some of these efforts along with a few recommendations for increased communication and coordination among the various sectors of labor.
II. The Response of the (Broadly Defined) Labor Movement to GNF-SSA

The growth of the “creative class,” the diminution of traditional manufacturing, and the rise of the precariat; we are witnessing a fundamental restructuring of the US – and global – economies and significant changes in labor relations in the US. The success or failure of the labor movement will depend on how well it responds to these changes and constructs effective alternative structures and practices for worker organizing, consciousness-raising, and resistance.

A. Existing Craft and Industrial Unions; Cross-Border Organizing

Despite the massive restructuring of much of the economy, craft unions representing workers who hold specialized, difficult-to-acquire, and difficult-to-outsource skills (e.g., construction, plumbing, electrical work) will likely be able to maintain some degree of influence in their industries and substantial bargaining power for their members. This will undoubtedly also be true for less skilled workers the nature of whose work makes outsourcing difficult or impossible (hospital workers involved in direct patient care, for instance).

But the majority of industrial unions represent workers whose jobs are vulnerable to outsourcing and mechanization. If these unions are to regain or increase their influence, they need to move towards becoming truly international unions that represent all of the workers employed by a given transnational corporation or in a given industry. Simply put, the labor movement must develop the same geographic reach as the companies it is attempting to organize.

Several unions have made interesting forays in this direction, often with the aid of either the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center and/or non-government organizations in the US and abroad. For example, the United Steel Workers of America (USWA) has formed a “strategic partnership” with Los Mineros, the National Miners and Metalworkers’ Union of Mexico, and has engaged in several cross-border campaigns of mutual interest. (Elk 2011) The United Electrical Workers, long a proponent of transnational organizing, has developed a “strategic organizing alliance” with Mexico’s Authentic Labor Alliance (FAT). (UE 2012)xxi SEIU has engaged in a variety of cross-border organizing efforts, including the “Driving Up Standards” campaign with the Transport and General Workers’ Union in the UK (Tattersall 2007). SEIU successfully organized employees of the Sweden-based Securitas company in Chicago by working with Swedish transport unions to pressure the company to bargain in good faith. (Quan 2007). UNITE HERE has instituted a Global Campaigns Department to coordinate their efforts with local union organizing and social justice activism overseas. Recent campaigns include supporting efforts to obtain justice for striking workers killed in Tunisia and for the textile workers killed in building collapses in Bangladesh. (UNITE HERE 2017).xxii The UAW, while attempting to organize Nissan plants in Mississippi, is working closely with unions in Brazil, France, Japan, and South Africa who are organizing Nissan workers in their countries. (Zweig 2014) Finally, the AFL-CIO’s Solidarity Center is currently engaged in a variety of solidarity campaigns, from Haiti to Colombia to Cambodia. (AFL-CIO Solidarity Center 2017)

There are serious obstacles to the success of these and similar cross-border campaigns. First is simply the diminished financial state of the American labor movement. Cross-border campaigns are expensive. They necessitate video-conferencing technology, (frequently) translators, and at least occasional long-distance transportation. Given that US unions currently represent approximately 11% of US workers, and that right-to-work legislation is further decreasing dues
income, it is not surprising that many unions are reluctant to invest the resources necessary to reach across borders. xxiii

Second is the political history of the AFL-CIO whose Cold War-era AIFLD (American Institute of Free Labor Development) was a handmaiden to bellicose US postwar foreign policy and helped to undermine the formation of left-leaning unions abroad. (Zweig 2014, Sims 1992) AIFLD was disbanded in 1995 when John Sweeney was elected president of the AFL-CIO; it was replaced by the Solidarity Center which often opposes US foreign policy and supports the development of authentic, grassroots unions of whatever political persuasion. Quoting Zweig, “The New Voice slate [of John Sweeney] completely reorganized the Federation’s international structures. AIFLD and related organizations were disbanded. The AFL-CIO opened up cooperative relations with COSATU (the Congress of South African Trade Unions), and the socialist-oriented Central Unica dos Trabalhadores in Brazil. (Zweig 2014) The AFL-CIO’s public stance against the Iraq War and the formation of USLAW (U.S. Labor Against the War) in 2003 are additional evidence of these changing priorities. (Zweig 2014) But, despite these positive changes, the memory of AIFLD lingers in many countries, serving as a constraint to full and open partnerships.xxiv

Third, and perhaps most important is the relative lack of serious political education – or serious debate – about politics and international issues in most of the American labor movement. Quoting Zweig, “. . . the Federation and the labor movement as a whole must create a new culture, one that engages its members in the work of international solidarity and its related requirements to address U.S. social priorities at home.” (Zweig 2014, p. 275) This will require going beyond passing progressive resolutions at annual conventions, or even devoting significant Federation resources to solidarity efforts abroad. It will require active, grassroots education and debate at all levels – among members, organizers, staff, and leadership.

Despite the obstacles, it is imperative that these conversations – and these international ties – be nurtured and supported. This is obviously important for the future of industrial unions at home and abroad. But it is also important for the future of the entire US labor movement. For despite their dramatically decreased financial resources and political clout, traditional industrial unions still provide crucial financial and legal resources for new organizing initiatives, for political/electoral campaigns, and for many of the “alt-labor” experiments currently underway. Proposals by Congressional Republicans for national right to work legislation, and anti-union appointments to the NLRB by Trump, threaten to undermine even this fragile position.

B. Organizing the Precariat

As we saw above, industrial unions and the site-based organizing methods that produce them are inadequate for organizing the “precariat,” those workers in the increasingly mobile, temporary, “gig” economy. In addition, for reasons of racism, gender bias, and political expediency, many precariat workers (e.g., housekeepers and agricultural workers) were explicitly excluded from the New Deal’s Wagner Act and, until recently, from the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act.xxv Thus, many are lacking even the most basic labor protections. Addressing their economic and political needs will require the labor movement to move beyond its traditional practices and institutions.
Labor needs to experiment, to find new forms of organizing and resistance that fit the new realities of globalized, neoliberal capitalism.

Advocates for precarious workers are currently exploring several new models to address the needs of these populations. We’ll briefly discuss three: efforts to increase state regulation, the rise of worker centers, and the rise of worker ownership/worker coops.

B.1. Increasing State Regulation and Oversight

One possibility, favored by many worker centers (see below), some unions, and many NGOs and community groups, involves increasing the pressure on the legislative and administrative state to enact new labor laws and other pro-worker policies. These include the “Fight for $15” and other campaigns to raise the minimum wage.xxvi (Rolf 2016, Broxmeyer and Michaels 2014) as well as the current “One Fair Wage” state-by-state campaigns by the Restaurant Opportunities Center United (ROC-U) to eliminate the separate minimum wage for tipped workers, currently set federally at $2.13/hour.xxvii (ROC-U 2017)

These and related efforts build upon earlier, state- and city-based living wage campaigns. (Luce and Pollin 2000, Pollin and Brenner 2008, Luce 2012, Broxmeyer and Michaels 2014) Initiated in Baltimore in 1994 by a coalition of pastors and union organizers, living wage campaigns, to date, have successfully increased wages in at least thirty-nine counties and cities. (UC Berkeley Labor Center 2017) women,

Similar initiatives include efforts by the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) to pass a “Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights” in every state. Founded as Domestic Workers United-NY in 1999 by a subcommittee of the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, NDWA has grown into a national organization with sixty affiliates comprised of over 20,000 nannies, eldercare workers, and housecleaners.xxviii (NDWA 2017) To date, their efforts have resulted in Bills of Rights being passed in seven states and several localities.xxix Basic rights granted in the New York State legislation include the right to overtime for workweeks lasting over forty hours (forty-four hours for live-in workers), a day of rest every seven days, and three paid days off after working for the same employer for a full year. The bill also calls for coverage under currently existing laws against gender and racial discrimination and against sexual harassment. (New York State Department of Labor 2017) In 2011, pressure from NDWA and similar organizations prompted the International Labor Office of the United Nations (ILO) to add a “Convention and Recommendations for Domestic Workers” (Convention #189) which includes the right to a written contract, to health and safety standards, and to social security and maternity coverage, to its core labor standards. (ILO 2011)

Such pro-worker labor legislation, which does not require that affected workers be connected to, or stably employed at, one worksite, can be very useful in protecting the basic rights of homeworkers, day laborers, and other very dispersed workforces. This is particularly true in situations where worker marginalization (e.g., via documentation status) makes direct union organizing even riskier than usual. Campaigns such those by the NDWA for the Bill of Rights educate precarious, marginalized workers, disproportionately women, in the tools of leadership and organizing skills. (Goldberg 2014, Brady 2014) In addition, campaigns to pass pro-worker
legislation can gather together otherwise dispersed workers and give them a real sense of empowerment and solidarity. Witness, for example, the enthusiasm of domestic workers and their supporters dancing outside the New York Statehouse while lobbying for the Bill of Rights (Domestic Workers United 2009).

There are, of course, potential difficulties in relying on the state to maintain workers’ basic rights. The election of anti-labor governments at the state and federal level can result in legislation being overturned, administrative agencies being defunded, appointees who disagree with the missions of their agencies, or other actions that can complicate or undermine enforcement. Favorable legislation alone can never be a substitute for workers’ self-organization and worker-directed activity to control their conditions of work. Achieving and maintaining better conditions requires continuing organizing and mobilization – and constant vigilance to oversee enforcement of progressive legislation – on the part of workers and their organizations.xxx (Cordero-Guzman 2015, Poo and Mercado 2015)

**B.2. A New Form of Labor Organization for the Precariat: The Rise of the Worker Center**

Many observers consider worker centers to be the most dynamic sector of the US labor movement today. “[T]he most exciting developments are happening outside traditional labor, where an ecosystem of organizations and campaigns are embracing flatter, more nimble forms while harnessing the power of technology and social media.” (Fine in Pope 2017)

African American workers in the South, excluded from labor protections by law and custom, were some of the first to organize worker centers. (Fine 2006) This was followed by two waves of new worker centers in the 1980s and 2000s, serving primarily Latinx and Asian immigrants. (Fine 2006) Today, there are more than two hundred worker centers spread across the country, serving diverse, disproportionately immigrant, populations of precariat workers. (Fine 2013) Some of the largest and most well-known are NDWA, ROC, United for Respect – formerly OurWalMart (aligned with the UFCW), the Retail Action Project (aligned with the RWDSU), The National Guestworkers’ Alliance (NGWA), the National Day Laborer Organization Network (NDLON), the Taxi Workers’ Alliance, and the many centers associated with Interfaith Worker Justice.

According to Janice Fine, worker centers began as “community-based mediating institutions that provide support to low-wage workers. . . . through service delivery, advocacy, and organizing. (Fine 2006, p. 2) Worker centers “combine activities characteristic of legal aid clinics, ethnic and fraternal organizations, settlement houses, community organizing groups, and social movements.” (Fine 2012, p. 1)

In addition to providing legal advice, ESL classes and job training, worker centers often organize public pressure campaigns (including press conferences, picketing, and boycotts) against employers who underpay – or do not pay - their workers, expose their workers to unsafe working conditions, or otherwise violate basic standards of fairness and decency. For example, in 2011, Brandworkers, a worker center serving food chain workers in Long Island City, Queens, won $470,000 in unpaid back wages for workers at Pur Pack, a food distribution warehouse supplying many of NYC’s most popular Chinese restaurants. In 2013, they won a $450,000 settlement –
and improvements in plant safety - for the widow of Juan Baten, a worker killed by unsafe (and illegal) conditions at a Queens tortilla factory. xxxi Brandworkers is currently conducting a campaign against TomCat Bakeries, one of NYC’s premier commercial bakeries, which was recently purchased by private equity investors Ancor and Merit Capital, and is now attempting to dramatically reduce the workers’ health insurance benefits. (Brandworkers 2017)

Given that they were excluded from the Wagner Act, agricultural and domestic workers were also excluded from the activity restrictions contained in Taft-Hartley. This means, ironically, that worker centers often have more flexibility than traditional unions to advocate consumer boycotts, engage in secondary picketing, and otherwise employ tactics prohibited under Taft-Hartley. These tactics have often been pivotal in winning struggles for back pay, improved safety conditions, and other improvements. (Fine 2017)

In addition to their direct engagement with workers’ struggles, worker centers and their allies have become organizing centers for many of the recent campaigns for progressive labor legislation discussed above, such as the Domestic Workers’ Bills of Rights and state laws prohibiting the two-tiered “tipped wage.” (NDWA 2017, ROC-U 2017) In addition to a number of unions (notably RWDSU and 32 BJ), a number of worker centers (e.g., Taxi Workers Alliance and Make the Road) were also members of the coalition pushing for the recently-passed Fair Work Week bills in NYC. (Pikovsky 2017) This package of legislation would help to stabilize workers’ work schedules and paychecks by, among other provisions, requiring two weeks advance notice for work schedule changes, placing restrictions on on-call staffing at retail establishments, and requiring fast food employers to offer additional shifts to existing employees before new hires are made. (NYC City Council Progressive Caucus 2017) These changes are particularly important for workers who are single mothers – who must currently adjust their child care schedules to their often-capricious work schedules.

Worker centers – from ROC-U to NDWA to Make the Road and the Taxi Workers’ Alliance – also have been central players in the resistance to Trump’s “Muslim ban” and his anti-immigrant policies. Witness, for example, the Taxi Workers’ Alliance’s one-day strike at JFK Airport on January 28, 2017 in response to Trump’s initial “Muslim ban.” (Fenton 2017) Tweeted one driver, “We go to work to welcome people to the land that once welcomed us. We will not be silent.” (Fenton 2017)

Due to their “flatter, more nimble forms,” freed from Taft-Hartley restrictions on activities, and frequently rooted in cohesive immigrant communities, worker centers are clearly doing some of the most innovative and exciting organizing work in labor today.xxxii Their ability to empower and educate workers, and their ability to win justice for under- or not-paid workers or for those injured by unsafe conditions, is clearly unparalleled in other sectors of organized labor.

However, worker centers face several serious challenges before they could become a more general organizing model for the precariat. I’ll briefly mention three, along with recent efforts to mitigate these problems.

1. The first obstacle is the relative lack of coordination among various worker centers, many of which are very geographically-based and isolated from others who are doing similar work. This can result in unnecessary duplication of effort and a stretching of already-scarce resources.
There have been several notable efforts to overcome this problem. Locally-based worker centers such as Domestic Workers United-NY, ROC-NY, and local day laborer associations have merged with similar organizations in other locales to form nationally-based networks (NDWA, ROC-U, and NDLON, respectively). Along with preexisting national/international networks such as Interfaith Worker Justice, these networks have allowed otherwise scattered groups to become a presence in statewide and national policy debates. (Cordero-Guzman 2015)

In addition to forming regional or national networks, several of the larger worker centers have begun to pursue more formal relationships with established labor organizations. In 2006, for example, NDLON (day laborers) signed a formal partnership agreement with the AFL-CIO; NDWA (domestic workers) and NGWA (guest workers) followed suit in 2011. And in 2011, the Taxi Workers’ Alliance established a formal affiliation with the labor federation. In addition to gaining access to the technical, legal, research, and tech/media resources of Federation, these partnership and affiliation agreements will allow worker centers to draw upon the AFL-CIO’s extensive policy experience. According to the Federation website, these agreements should prove to be mutually beneficial: “The worker centers will benefit greatly from the labor movement's extensive involvement and experience in policy and legislative initiatives on the local, state and national levels. This relationship will also benefit the unions and other affiliates of the AFL-CIO by allowing them to connect to the worker center communities in a structured and meaningful way and to develop new methods in partnership with these centers in order to expose abuses and improve workplace standards in various industries to the benefit of all workers--whether union or non-union; whether immigrant or U.S. born.” (AFL-CIO 2006)

There also have been several attempts to create national or international organizations of excluded and marginalized workers, the most important of which was the Excluded Workers Congress/United Workers Congress. Formed at the 2010 Social Forum in Detroit by NDWA, NDLON, and Jobs with Justice, the Excluded Workers Congress brought together marginalized and disempowered workers from nine sectors into a single organization. The vision for the organization was to “build a shared basis of power that will allow them to work with established unions to strengthen the labor movement, reform federal labor law, and enable all workers to exercise their human right to organize.” (Goldberg & Jackson 2011) EWC’s May 2011 NYC conference featured representatives not only from worker centers, but from established US union federations (both the AFL-CIO and Change to Win) and representatives of marginalized workers from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Europe. (Goldberg and Jackson 2011) The AFL-CIO’s Richard Trumka gave the keynote address. The EWC/UWC did not last as a national organization; at the present time, it is mostly active on a local level, sponsoring faith- and labor-based events in Baltimore and elsewhere. But the vision behind EWC – a national or international organization supporting marginalized workers – is a crucial one.

2. A second major challenge for many worker centers is a lack of technical, legal, and organizing expertise. Some of these challenges could be met via formal affiliations with established unions. However, in cases where that is undesirable or unfeasible, a number of other non-profit organizations are arising to meet these needs. For example, the Lift Fund (Labor Innovations for the 21st Century) “offers grants for project-based work that promotes collaboration and innovative cross-sector learning between communities, the labor movement, and organizations working for a fair economy.” (Lift 2017) Community Resource Exchange in NYC provides
strategic planning, organizational management, leadership development, and other resources for labor-oriented and other community organizations. (CRE 2017) Roadmap offers webinar and in-person trainings for organizations on issues ranging from leadership development to strategic communications. (Roadmap 2017) Finally, a number of law schools offer clinics in labor-related topics and provide free legal expertise to worker centers and related groups. This budding organizational infrastructure will be crucial if the worker center movement is to thrive.

3. Finally, by far the most serious obstacle for worker centers concerns funding. Unlike unions which are supported by members’ dues, most worker centers are classified by the IRS as 501c(3) (tax exempt charitable) organizations and are fundamentally reliant upon foundation grants and donations for their continued existence. This financial dependence may, knowingly or unknowingly, affect the public stances worker centers are willing to make and the issues they choose to contest. It may also endanger worker centers’ long-term survival, as foundation funding will eventually move on to other issues and institutions. For this reason, it is crucial that, over time, worker centers construct sustainable, worker-based funding streams compliant with relevant labor and tax laws. (Glick 2016)

Different worker centers have experimented with different approaches to this problem. Some are moving more to a membership/dues structure similar to that of unions (though, depending on how it is done, this can present problems for their tax-exempt status). Some depend on legal fees for winning back-pay and related cases. Some contract with governmental or other agencies for services they provide (ESL classes, job training, etc.). But most are currently heavily dependent for their survival on foundation and faith-based funding, on fund-raising events, and on individual donations. If the worker center movement is to survive, and is to become a model for labor organizing in immigrant and related communities, this central dilemma of funding will have to be addressed. (Cordero-Guzman 2015)

B.3. Worker Ownership and Worker Cooperatives

A third approach to providing stable livelihoods for the precariat is the growing movement for worker cooperatives and worker-owned enterprises in low-income communities. As opposed to worker-ownership, where workers may receive financial benefits, workers in cooperative businesses have a “say” in all decisions made by the firm, from investments to marketing strategies to wages and benefits. Quoting Kennelly and Odekon, “Worker-owned cooperatives are autonomous business organizations characterized by democratic ownership and control. They differ from the more common and popular (and generally far better known) employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs) in that workers directly participate in management and control and in decisions regarding the distribution of the surplus (profits) created in the production process.”
(Kennelly and Odekon 2016, p. 164).

Worker-owned cooperatives are not new; indeed, the U.S. has a long history of agricultural producer cooperatives dating from the late 19th century, and of utility cooperatives dating from the Great Depression. (Kennelly and Odekon 2016) The Knights of Labor, an important progressive labor organization of the late 19th century, proposed replacing the wage system with a “cooperative commonwealth” of producer and consumer coops. (Murolo and Chitty 2001) The Knights’ guidelines stipulated that 30% of dues money should go towards strike support, 10%
towards the education of the membership and the general public, and 60% was to be set aside for the establishment of cooperative enterprises. (Dubofsky and Dulles 2004, p. 122) Finally, Jessica Gordon Nembhard has documented the rich history of cooperative ventures within the African American community. These range from a Black-owned cooperative shipyard in post-bellum Baltimore, to a Depression-era grocery store in Gary, Indiana, to the North Carolina Bricks Rural Life School which operated a credit union, health program, and agricultural training institute. More recent examples include the Alabama’s Freedom Quilting Bee which, by 1992, contained not only a marketing coop for the famous quilts, but also a day care center and after-school programs. (Nembhard 2006 and 2014)

Despite this rich history, it is only fairly recently that cooperative development has been seen as a strategy to address the problems of the precariat. In 2014, the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies released “Worker Cooperatives for New York City: A Vision for Addressing Income Inequality” (Austin 2014) which specifically advocated fostering the growth of cooperatives in low-income communities of color in NYC. In fiscal year 2015, the New York City Council funded the Worker Cooperative Business Development Initiative which allocated $1.2 million to the development of worker cooperatives in NYC. (Rosenthal 2017) And in February, 2015, the New York City Council passed, and Mayor DeBlasio signed, “Worker Cooperatives Local Law 423-2014,” which requires the City’s Department of Small Business Services to report on how it engages with and supports worker cooperatives. (Rosenthal 2017) Supporters see this as a first step in gaining preferential treatment for worker-owned coops in the NYC procurement process, a status currently granted to minority- and women-owned businesses. (Rosenthal 2017)

Worker owned coops provide several advantages as a development strategy for low-income communities. First and most important is their commitment to stable employment. (Kennelly and Odekon 2016) During the 2008 economic crisis, for instance, workers in the famous Mondragon coops in Spain went to a four-day workweek and took a 20% wage cut rather than lay off any of their fellow workers. (Kasmir 2017) Second, worker owned and managed enterprises give workers more control over working conditions (e.g., Si Se Puede cleaning coop uses only non-toxic “green” cleaning products) and related issues such as stable work schedules. Third, worker coops frequently pay significantly higher wages and offer more opportunities for training than traditional, for-profit businesses. For instance, “Within four years of starting their house cleaning business, Sí Se Puede’s worker-owners, many of whom did not speak fluent English, tripled their wages to as much as $25-an-hour.” (Austin 2014, p. 14) Fourth, worker/owners frequently report higher levels of satisfaction and feelings of self-efficacy than similar workers working in traditional firms. (Rothschild 2000, Kennelly and Odekon 2016) Finally, worker coops, by their nature, are immune to capital flight; any wealth that is accumulated tends to stay in the community and helps to support other local businesses.

In the current-day US, social justice-oriented nonprofits and worker centers often serve as sponsors for worker owned coops. (Austin/FPWA 2014) Make the Road/NY, for example, is sponsoring Pa’Lante Green Cleaning, a worker-owned cleaning cooperative in Jackson Heights, Queens. (Strawbridge 2014) And Make the Road is also planning on developing a Queens-based worker coop for transgender residents who are frequently discriminated against, particularly in low-wage labor markets. (Schreil 2015) Others worker cooperatives are initiated by “coop incubators” such as The Center for Family Life in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, which currently sponsors a childcare coop, eldercare coop, and a housecleaning coop. (Estey 2011) Similarly, the
Green Worker Coops in the South Bronx, is an incubator which offers, among many other services, a “Coop Academy” for prospective worker/owners. (Green Worker Coops 2017)

Unions have also begun to express interest in developing worker owned coops. In 2009, the United Steel Workers signed an agreement with the Mondragon network to foster the development of worker-owned steel plants in the US. (Witherell 2009) In 2012, UE (the United Electrical Workers) was instrumental in helping the employees of Chicago’s Republic Windows (now New Era Windows) buy their company when management closed the factory. New Era is now a profitable worker-owned business supplying energy efficient windows throughout the Midwest. (New Era 2017) And, in Denver, the Communications Workers of America Local 7777 has established a taxi drivers’ worker cooperative to help combat the exploitation of Uber, Lyft, and related drivers. (CWA 2015)

Worker coops are more often successful when they are tied to anchor institutions such as hospitals/medical centers, universities, or government. Evergreen Cooperative Laundry in Cleveland, for instance, has a continuing contract with the Cleveland Clinic Medical Center. Cooperative Home Care Associates in the Bronx, currently the largest worker coop in the US with over 2000 worker-owners, relies primarily on revenues from federal and state Medicare/Medicaid reimbursement.

Cooperative enterprises are not without their problems. As with worker centers, finances and a lack of expertise can present real barriers to success. (Dastur 2012) Quoting Nina Dastur of the Center for Community Change, “Given the allure of the human dimensions of worker owned enterprises, it’s all too easy to gloss over the fact that worker owned cooperatives are in fact businesses that must identify and secure a market niche in order to survive.” (Dastur 2012, p. 9)

Given their unusual governance structures, worker owned cooperatives frequently find it difficult to raise capital from traditional sources such as banks and IPOs. Collaboration with existing unions, worker centers, or other established institutions can be helpful in this regard, as can loans from other cooperative businesses such as consumer credit unions. Another possibility is voluntary conversions of existing businesses; this may become increasingly common as significant number of “baby boomer” business owners retire without heirs. (Kolokotronis 2017)

As with worker centers, there is a growing network of non-profits that can assist infant worker coops in gaining the technical expertise and management skills needed to successfully run the business and to maintain workplace democracy. In addition to those mentioned above (Lift, Roadmap, law school clinics, coop “incubators,” etc.), additional support may be available from organizations such as the US Federation of Worker Coops, the International Cooperative Alliance, and, locally, from organizations such as the New York City Network of Worker Coops (pronounced “nick knock”). Finally, The Working World, a New York-based non-profit, has provided both start-up loans and financial/technical consulting for a number of cooperatives including New Era Windows, Bed-Stuy Fresh and Local (a worker-owned grocery dedicated to providing fresh food in a former “food desert”), and the Sunrise Coop (a network of immigrant-owned auto repair shops in Willets Point, Queens). (The Working World 2017)

Ideally, we would witness more cooperation among worker centers and progressive unions in creating and sustaining worker owned enterprises in low-income communities. Regardless of
whether you believe that worker owned coops represent the “leading edge of the new economy,” (Wolff 2012) or just a survival strategy for the precariat in times of economic stress, worker cooperatives have a proven track record of improving wages, increasing job stability, and increasing autonomy and job satisfaction among low-wage workers.

III. A Modest Proposal

Thus far, the traditional labor movement has been strikingly unsuccessful at dealing with the new organizing terrain created by the globalized, financialized, neoliberal SSA. The time-honored formula of site-based organizing leading to an NLRB-supervised election and collective bargaining is simply irrelevant for a substantial – and increasing – percent of the American workforce. And the increasing mobility of capital has undermined this formula even in sectors, such as heavy manufacturing, where it once held sway.

“Alt-labor” has been experimenting with new forms and approaches to organizing including worker centers and worker owned enterprises, which do not presume steady employment in one traditional capitalist firm. Although promising, these experiments are currently too small to have much impact on most workers.

This raises a crucial question: Are there ways in which we can combine the experience and resources of traditional organized labor with the enthusiasm and community connections of alt-labor? Can we use organized labor’s expertise and assets to defend alt-labor’s current experiments – and to widen the search for organizing practices and institutions more compatible with the new GNF SSA?

One possible model is provided by an organization from an earlier era of unprecedented inequality and unprecedented economic change – the Knights of Labor of the late 19th century Gilded Age. Formed in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War by two tailors, the Knights of Labor was a national labor federation that often acted more like a social movement. It welcomed all “productive” members of society, including not only all wage-earners, but farmers, sharecroppers and tenant farmers, clergy, small shopkeepers, doctors and other professionals, and housewives/mothers. Note that this 19th century labor formation recognized household labor as legitimate labor and welcomed women’s membership; by 1886, ten percent of the Knights were women. In fact, the Chicago Knights “Assembly,” the largest in the nation, was led by Elizabeth Rodgers, whose claim to membership was being a housewife and mother of twelve. (Murolo and Chitty 2001) The only people who were excluded from Knights membership were owners of large firms, bankers, stockbrokers, professional gamblers, lawyers, and liquor dealers!

For their day, the Knights were also quite progressive on matters of race. African Americans were half of the membership in Virginia, North Carolina, and Arkansas, and constituted approximately one-third of all southern membership. (Murolo and Chitty 2001) When Frank Ferrell, an African American officer of the New York Assembly, was refused hotel accommodations at the 1886 Knights convention in Richmond, Virginia, the Knights boycotted the hotel and staged a 2500-person civil rights march through this former capital of the Confederacy. (Murolo and Chitty 2001)
The Knights sometimes functioned as a traditional labor union. In 1884, they won a strike against the Pacific Railroad and in 1885, they won a major victory against the immensely powerful Gould Railroad which was demanding wage cuts from its employees. But they also took seriously their educational and political functions, sponsoring lecture series on women’s suffrage and Black civil rights, and campaigning against child labor, for the eight-hour day, and for progressive income taxation. (Murolo and Chitty 2001) Finally, as stated above, the Knights were major supporters of cooperative enterprises. By the late 1880s, there were over 135 functioning producer and consumer cooperatives created and supported by the Knights. (Dubofsky and Dulles 2004, p. 126) In their Declaration of Principles, they looked forward to a day when capitalism would be replaced by a “cooperative commonwealth” of owner-producers in both agriculture and industry. (Murolo and Chitty 2001, p. 123)

The Knights, at their height an organization of over 700,000, was destroyed by a combination of government repression (particularly after Haymarket), a series of unsuccessful strikes, internal dissent (partly over the question of craft vs. industrial unionism), and incompetent leadership. But, for a time, their organization served as an incubator of new forms of labor organization and critically important social movements. In short, they served as a “hub” for organizing by progressives battling the increasing concentration and inequality of the 19th century’s Gilded Age.

So, a question arises: Could the AFL-CIO evolve into a new Knights of Labor? Could the Federation, in this time of rapid economic and political change, serve as an incubator, not only for international/cross-border organizing, but also for current (and future) alt-labor experiments? Could organized labor hold on to the strengths derived from the regulated capitalist era while providing technical, legal, and experiential support for cross-border and international organizing – and for experiments to address the condition of the GNF precariat? To do so would require not only new methods of non-place-based organizing, but sturdy alliances with the social movements and organizations that are currently addressing the issues of concern to many precarious workers - from immigrants’ rights to Black Lives Matter to feminist and LGBT struggles. In other words, could the AFL-CIO, like the Knights of labor before it, become the center of a true social movement unionism? (Fletcher and Gaspin 2008, p. 197)

At first glance, there are at least three obstacles: legal, financial, and cultural/historical. First, as stated above, many worker centers and related associations are classified by the IRS as 501(c)(3); i.e., as non-profit, charitable organizations capable of receiving tax-exempt donations. By contrast, most unions are classified 501(c)(5); i.e., as non-profit organizations that serve primarily their members and are therefore not eligible to receive tax-exempt donations. Any attempts to form formal affiliations between worker centers and unions must be done carefully so as not to undermine the fiscal foundation of the worker centers. (Glick 2017)

Second, as stated previously, although still formidable, the financial resources of organized labor are much-reduced from their peak during the era of regulated capitalism. Given the Trump administration’s support for right to work and similar legislation, they are undoubtedly going to be reduced even further in the near future. As a result, it is important that new initiatives and projects engage, as much as possible, support from the grassroots; i.e., that labor substitute “people power” for “money power” as frequently as possible. (Here, organized labor could take a
lesson from alt-labor worker centers, which frequently accomplish significant victories on truly minimal budgets.)

But third and most important are the cultural and ideological barriers to this shift. Weaving together organized labor and alt-labor will require real conversations – and real listening – on all sides. Worker center adherents have much to learn from the centuries of struggle of organized labor in this country; they are not just “the Old Guard” to be “swept out of the way,” but are a valuable resource of organizing and policy experience. On the other hand, organized labor has much to learn from the experience of worker center members – about organizing outside of NLRB protections and limitations – as well as about the experiences of those on the front lines of globalization, immigration, and precarity.

There are positive signs. In 2000, the AFL-CIO changed their traditional, exclusionary position on immigration and have since devoted significant resources to immigrant rights activities. And, of course, the increasing number of worker centers affiliated with the Federation is another hopeful sign. But for organized labor to truly evolve into a social movement union federation will require much more member education - and many more serious conversations. The alternative, however, is the increasing irrelevance of traditional organized labor, increasing income and wealth inequality in this country – and all of the predictable political and social consequences that entails.

Conclusion

As the US economy transitioned from competitive capitalism, to corporate capitalism, to regulated capitalism, the forms of labor control also changed – from simple/personal control to Taylorism/technical control and bureaucratic control. And organized labor adapted its practices and institutions - from the Knights of Labor’s social movement unionism to the craft unionism of the AFL to the CIO’s industrial unionism – to meet these challenges. Meeting the challenges of the current globalized, financialized, neoliberal SSA and its complicated array of domestic and international forms of labor control - will require experimentation, flexibility, and a willingness to learn on all sides. But the alternative – the continuing dominance of capital in our politics and cultural life, and the continuing impoverishment of greater and great swaths of our population – is simply unacceptable. Let the conversations begin.
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i “By social structure of accumulation we mean the specific institutional environment within which the capitalist accumulation process is organized. Such accumulation occurs within concrete historical structures: in firms buying inputs in one set of markets, producing goods and services, and selling those outputs in other markets. These structures are surrounded by others that impinge upon the capitalist accumulation process: the monetary and credit system, the pattern of state involvement in the economy, the character of class conflict, and so forth. We call this collective set of institutions the social structure of accumulation. . . . These social structures of accumulation define successive stages of capitalist development.” (Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982, p. 9).

ii These include transportation and communications systems, monetary and credit systems, the relationship of government to the economy, and military institutions. (Wallace and Brady 2010)

iii In his 1981 “The Best Defense is a Good Defense: Toward a Marxian Theory of Labor Union Structure and Behavior,” David Gordon related the chances of success of labor struggles to their timing with respect to the construction and demise of the existing SSA. In contrast, here we discuss the structures and fortunes of the labor movement among the various SSAs.

iv All dates are rough approximations.

v As Marglin (1974) points out, this technology did not develop “autonomously,” but, rather, was constructed in response to the specific labor conditions facing these industries. For instance, early factories (“manufactories”) used exactly the same technologies as home-based “putting out” systems – with the exclusion of distractions from children and household labors – and the existence of capitalist pacing and “discipline.”

vi Craft unions organize workers on the basis of their shared skills or roles in production; e.g., nurses, construction workers, coal miners, or truck drivers. Industrial unions organize all of the workers in an industry or plant into one union; e.g., everyone at Ford’s River Rouge plant would be organized into one UAW local regardless of whether they worked in the paint shop, the parts department, or on the assembly line.

vii Quoting Michael Yates, “The AFL was rooted in the culture of skilled laborers, who formed narrow craft unions and used the skills and the homogeneity of their members’ race (white), gender (male), and culture (collective and democratic) to organize themselves and extract from their employers higher wages, shorter hours, and respect for their power.” (p. 188)

viii In “Bread and Roses Revisited: Women’s Culture and Working Class Activism in the Lawrence Strike of 1912,” Ardis Cameron discusses both the centrality of women’s community organizing to the success of the 1912 Lawrence Strike – and the IWW’s failure to maintain a lasting presence in the plant. (Cameron 1985)

ix Those international trading relations that did exist took place under the umbrella of British colonialism with the pound sterling as the reserve/anchor currency.

x For a fascinating account of racial/ethnic conflict in a modern workplace, see Ribas (2016).

xi Stephan-Norris and Zeitlin put the figure higher, at 27.4% (Stephen-Norris and Zeitlin 2003, p. 18).

xii As Schrecker also notes, the CP-led unions were virtually the only unions attempting to organize African Americans in agriculture and related industries in the South; their expulsion from the CIO and subsequent destruction dealt a major blow to labor organizing in the South (and the country as a whole). For further information on Communist/leftist labor organizing in
the South, see Kelly (1990), Korstad (2003), Rosswurm (1992), and Honey (1993). For a “mainstream” account of the CIO in the 1930s, see Zieger (1995).

xiii For interesting critiques of the notion of the capital/labor “accord,” see McIntyre (2014) and McIntyre and Hillard (2012).

xiv For further information on postwar shopfloor relations, see Fairris (1994).

xv Lynd and Gross (2011), Benson (1999), Tillman (1999) and other dissident labor organizers have argued persuasively that the Landrum-Griffin Act, passed in 1959, has encouraged internal union democracy and the growth of dissident movements within the Teamsters (Teamsters for a Democratic Union TDU), UMW (Miners for Democracy MFD), UAW (New Voices) and other unions. However, at the time Landrum-Griffin was passed, in the wake of the McClellan hearing on corruption in the Teamsters Union (IBT), it was widely viewed as an attempt to use the IBT scandal to tarnish the reputation of the entire labor movement.

xvi For instance, the labor force participation rate of women of all races rose from 33.9% in 1950 to a high of 60.0% in 1999. By 2015, it had fallen to 56.8%, largely as a result of the Great Recession. (BLS/Toossi and Morisi 2017) According to the latest Current Population Survey, African American men now comprise 16.1% of the employment in the motor vehicles and motor vehicle equipment manufacturing sector (BLS 2017). This is contrasted to the immediate prewar era when Blacks were employed on the auto assembly line only at Ford, and even there, their numbers were very limited. (Whatley and Wright 1990) For African American women, the changes were even more stunning. In 1940, over 60% were domestic workers and another 11% worked in agriculture. By 1980, Black women had largely moved into what had previously been “white women’s jobs” such as clerical and teaching, though they were – and are – more heavily concentrated in public sector employment. (Cunningham and Zalokar 1992)

xvii Although a full account of the causes of the crisis of 2008 is beyond the scope of this paper, the inherent contradictions and weaknesses of the GNF-SSA are certainly implicated. The super-exploitation of vulnerable populations and smashing of unions characteristic of the GNF have resulted in unprecedented inequality, both domestic and international. This has led to both a rise in debt (as in unsound mortgages and the rise of the giant pool of money) sloshing around the globe searching for high rates of return. (Blumberg 2008) This combination of debt, capital seeking rates of return, and a deregulated financial services industry was a recipe for disaster. It remains to be seen whether the GNF-SSA can be propped up with sufficient government intervention or whether, as I suspect, a new SSA, with more effective redistributional and international regulatory mechanisms, will be necessary to restore robust growth.

xviii For a more comprehensive account of the institutions of this new globalized SSA, see David Kotz and Terrence McDonough “Global Neoliberalism and the Contemporary Social Structure of Accumulation” in McDonough, Terrence, Michael Reich, and David Kotz. 2010. Contemporary Capitalism and Its Crises: Social Structures of Accumulation Theory for the 21st Century. Cambridge University Press.

xix Interestingly, this increasing commitment to the transnational mobility of capital has not extended to similar rights for labor. Outside of the EU, we are witnessing worldwide crackdowns on immigration and the international adjudication mechanisms of trade treaties relating to labor rights are often weak or non-existent. Witness, for example, the “side agreements” on labor (NAALC) and environmental standards (NAAEC) contained in NAFTA and the relative weakness of their enforcement mechanisms compared with those dedicated to maintaining “open” trade among the three signatories. For a labor perspective on the side agreements, see UE n.d.
Manufacturing employment in the US peaked in July 1979 at approximately 19,500,000; by April of 2017, it had been reduced to approximately 12,400,000. (Federal Reserve of St. Louis using BLS data 2017)

In “Free Trade and Worker Solidarity in the Auto Industry,” Babson discusses both the challenges and the potential of cross-border organizing in the auto industry, including the legacy of PRI-dominated unions in Mexico and the history of the US’s political and economic domination of Mexico. (Babson 2002)


In Wisconsin, since the passage of the 2011 “right to work” law for public sector employees, “the state branch of the National Education Association, once 100,000 strong, has seen its membership drop by one third. The American Federation of Teachers, which organized in the state college system, saw a 50 percent decline. The 70,000 person membership in the state employees union has fallen by 70 percent.” (Samuels, 2015, p. 2)

Scipes (2010), Rahman and Langford (2014), and others have characterized this AFIFLD-era policy as “labor imperialism”; Rahman and Langford claim that traces of this approach persist in current cross-border campaigns (Rahman and Langford 2014).

Domestic workers came under the jurisdiction of the Fair Labor Standards Act via a 1974 amendment (Nadasen 2015, p. 142); migrant agricultural workers, although now included in the FLSA’s minimum wage provisions, are still not covered by overtime and similar regulations. (NYCLU 2015)

In “Faith, Community, and Labor: Challenges and Opportunities in the New York City Living Wage Campaign,” Broxmeyer and Meyers describe the sometimes-cooperative, sometimes-conflictual relationship between faith-based groups and the RWDSU, the two main actors in Living Wage/New York. LWNY was eventually successful in convincing the NY City Council to pass a living wage for workers in firms subcontracted by New York City. Differences in assumptions and philosophies, organizing styles, structures of leadership, and cultures are some of the challenges facing these faith/labor/community coalitions.

Quoting the ROC-U website: “Through the One Fair Wage campaign, ROC is fighting nationally to eliminate the two-tiered wage system by raising the separate, lower minimum wage for tipped workers to match the regular minimum wage, so that no one has to experience the financial insecurity, discrimination, and sexual harassment that comes with being forced to live off tips.” (ROC-U 2017) As of this writing, seven states (California, Oregon, Washington, Alaska, Nevada, Montana, and Minnesota) have passed legislation ending the two-tiered wage system for tipped workers. (ROC-U 2017)

NDWA, the national organization, was founded in 2007.

States that currently have Domestic Workers’ Bills of Rights are New York, California, Massachusetts, Illinois, Connecticut, Oregon, and Hawai’i.

The experience of the United Farm Workers after the passage of the 1975 California Agricultural Labor Relations Act is instructive in this regard. Denied their traditional tactics of secondary boycotts and sympathy strikes by the Taft-like provisions of the CALRA, the UFW found itself unable to win contracts in many of its organizing campaigns; its influence in the fields is now greatly diminished. (Tejada-Flores n.d.)

Settlements to lawsuits can, and frequently do, include provisions other than money damages. Ashar (2007) describes the settlement of a ROC-NY case against a well-known NYC restaurant
in which the workers secured paid sick days, paid vacation days, and a one-year guarantee of employment. (Jayaraman 2014, Ashar 2007, p. 1916)

xxxii In “From Charity to Solidarity: The Promise and Challenge of Service Learning in Labor Courses,” I describe some of my students’ experiences interning at ROC-U, Brandworkers, and several other NYC area worker centers. (Christensen [date])

xxxiii Declared to be “independent contractors” by the NYC Taxi and Limousine Commission in 1979, taxi drivers are no longer eligible for NLRB-certified union recognition and collective bargaining. (Gaus 2014, p. 249)

xxxiv These included domestic workers, agricultural workers, taxi workers, restaurant workers, day laborers, guest workers, workers from right to work states, workfare workers, and formerly incarcerated workers.

xxxv Change to Win is an alternate labor federation formed in 2005 when SEIU, the Teamsters (IBT), the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), and several smaller unions seceded from the AFL-CIO. For further information, see Fletcher and Gaspasin 2008.

xxxvi Law school offering such clinics include Yale, Fordham, CUNY, University of California at Irvine, and University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

xxxvii This issue may be especially difficult regarding gender and sexual politics, as faith-based charities fund and support many worker centers.

xxxviii See, for example, the new nonprofit organization, Fast Food Justice, a new advocacy group for fast food workers in NYC, that will be funded by membership dues. (Miller 2017)

xxxix For information on the rich history of worker coops abroad, see Ness and Azzellini 2011, Azzellini 2015, and Ness 2014.

x The grants that resulted from this $1.2m resulted in a near-doubling of the number of worker coops in NYC – from 23 to 44 – in the first year alone. (Abello 2016)

xli Like many labor organizations of their day, the Knights were less progressive about Chinese immigration, accusing Chinese immigrants of being de facto slave laborers under the control of the tongs.

xlii For further information on the Knights’ views on race and ethnicity, see Joseph Gerteis, Class and the Color Line: Interracial Class Coalition in the Knights of Labor and the Populist Movement (2007).