

## **Solidarity Divided cheatsheet: how to fake it in a discussion of the book**

*Solidarity divided: the crisis in organized labor and a new path toward social justice*, Bill Fletcher Jr. and Fernando Gapasin, 2008, University of California Press, ISBN 978-0-520-25525-8.

### **How much time do you have to prepare before the discussion?**

- 2 minutes: read “What does this book do?” below; ignore the rest of these notes; flip through the book.
- 15 minutes: read these notes.
- 30 minutes: read these notes and flip through the book to see what catches your interest.
- an hour or so: read these notes, the preface, and chapter 17.
- If you still have time, read chapters 18 and 19.
- Still have time? Read the whole book.

### **What does this book do?**

The authors briefly sketch the history of trade unions in the United States and then use a detailed examination of the Change to Win (CTW) split from the AFL-CIO to diagnose the current difficulties of organized labor in this country and offer their prescriptions of what to do about them.

The authors’ diagnosis: U.S. unions took a wrong course when they adopted Gompersism (a form of business unionism that emphasizes service to members within an acceptance of capitalism and support for the international policies of the U.S. government).

Their prescription: U.S. unions must convert to social justice unionism, that is, they must see themselves as part of an international social justice movement that serves the interests of the worldwide working class. They should organize multi-constituency blocs to take power in cities rather than just organize workplaces or industries. Central Labor Councils offer a prime vehicle for building social justice unionism.

### **Ultra-condensation, chapter by chapter** (page numbers from 2008 hardback edition)

Preface. “Revelations in South Africa” (pages ix-xiii)

Introduction. “Change to Win and the split in the AFL-CIO” (pp 1-5)

Part one. Challenges facing the U.S. labor movement.

#### 1. “Dukin’ it out” (pp 9-17)

Early history of trade unions in U.S. Inclusion vs. exclusion. Race as a key element. Gompers (AFL president 1886-1924) “traditionalist”. “Bread and butter” unionism serving current members. Exclusivist. Unions should/must form “partnership” with capitalists and the U.S. government.

#### 2. “The New Deal” (pp 18-25)

In first half of 1900s, the key role of leftists in U.S. unions.

3. “The cold war on labor” (pp 26-31)

Defeat and purge of leftists. Taft-Hartley Act. Slow decline of U.S. unions begins. Meany becomes president of AFL-CIO (1955), taking “Gomperist” positions. “Business unionism”.

4. “The civil rights movements, the left, and labor” (pp 32-38)

Roughly 1955-1970.

Three ideological perspectives: leftist, pragmatist, traditionalist. Each has own way of answering three key questions:

1. What are the constituencies of the union movement?

Leftists say all of the working class.

Pragmatists and traditionalists say union members.

2. Who are the friends, allies, and enemies of the union movement?

Traditionalists see “good capitalists” and some politicians as allies. Rely on such alliances. See leftists as the enemy.

Leftists define allies as those who support reforms in favor of working-class people and that weaken imperialism. See pragmatists as potential allies. Enemies include transnational corporations, IMF, World Bank, antiworker/antipeople elements. Most see traditionalists as enemies. Segments of left attack other leftists in sectarian conflicts. Pragmatists have similar views as traditionalists, except they see leftists as potential (but disposable) allies, especially when they need dedicated and disciplined ground troops when organizing.

3. What geographic scope should our concern for workers have?

Leftists say whole world.

Pragmatists compromise selectively to preserve U.S. unions.

Traditionalists support U.S. policies and the policies of businesses union members work for.

Part two. The revolution will not be televised.

5. “Whose welfare matters, anyway?” (pp 41-48)

In 1970s, rise of neoliberal globalization. Rightwing counterattack against progressive social movements, including those of color.

Kirkland and 1981 PATCO defeat.

“The AFL-CIO did not grasp that the growing right-wing movement in the United States was not only amenable to attacking the social movements of people of color and women but also to neutralizing progressive efforts generally and gutting the power of even the most conservative sectors of labor. Carrying out this strategy called for changing the overall political climate, including raising hostility, particularly among middle-income whites, toward social programs and collective demands by workers.” (page 46)

Rising frustration among union leaders with Kirkland.

6. “What’s left for us?” (pp 49-58)

Union reform caucus efforts of late 1960s and 1970s.

Two flawed views of labor within left: (1) Unions can never be reformed. (2) Just need to replace bad union leaders.

Case study of Mail Handlers Union.

Defeat of business unionism is key to union transformation.

7. “Organizing to organize the unorganized” (pp 59-66)

In 1970s-1980s union reform movements faded. Some activists went into Central Labor Councils (CLCs). Jobs With Justice (JwJ) founded 1987.

Late 1980s and early 1990s “organizing model” (page 60-62) and its flaw of being staff driven.

SEIU (under president John Sweeney) adopts a version of organizing model. Jobs for Janitors (JfJ) as prototype of SEIU organizing. Idea in SEIU (dominant after Andy Stern replaces Sweeney as president in 1995) that change can come only after blowing up a situation.

Part three. Sweeney’s grand gesture.

8. “The New Voice coalition takes office” (pp 69-82)

1995 Sweeney’s reformist “New Voice” slate wins top positions in AFL-CIO.

Clearly Gomerist, but gives more visibility to race and gender, changes stance on immigrant workers, opposes some aspects of U.S. foreign policy. Internal conflicts limiting Sweeney. Role of leftists in moving key programs. Difficulties in first years of Sweeney administration. Increasingly clear that there is no consensus on the role of AFL-CIO. Fear of embarrassing President Clinton. The “Battle of Seattle” demonstrations against WTO. Didn’t take opportunity to use Clinton’s 1997 race initiative. Bumbled response to 2000 Gore campaign and Bush selection by Supreme Court. Bush begins courting selected affiliates of AFL-CIO. “The strategic and policy paralysis of the AFL-CIO had become so clear that the ties binding the union movement started to unravel.” (p82) Chapter ends with half-page summary of status of AFL-CIO (p82).

9. “Developing strategy in times of change” (pp 83-90)

An effort in 2000 by AFL-CIO to spark organizing in the South fizzled; neither affiliates nor AFL-CIO fully committed to it.

“Union Cities” program attempts to revive CLCs, but stymied by administrative questions and organizational structures. AFL-CIO officials minimize CLCs’ role in organizing.

“New Alliance” program in late 1990s begins restructuring state federations and CLCs. After doing some states, it gets derailed.

Changes in technology and structure of jobs (as examined in Benjamin Harrison’s book *Lean and Mean*) cause declining living standard for workers, especially African-American workers. Changes in kinds of jobs and in where they exist. “[T]he U.S. working class is further stratifying along racial and ethnic lines, as well as in relations to work.” (p89) Raises questions about common union movement practices. But these “strategic implications ... have not led to a change in the theory and practice of the U.S. union movement ....” (p90)

10. “Globalization: the biggest strategic challenge” (pp 91-99)

How we understand globalization affects what we think possible or desirable to do about it. Three views of globalization summarized (p91). Errors in two of the views.

We have a particular kind of global economy now — neoliberal globalization. It has developed as the most recent stage of capitalism, in part as reaction to collapse of USSR and to China’s embrace of capitalism. It relies on state violence (including U.S. military interventions) for enforcement. Heightened privatization and “systematic elimination of the public sphere.” (p94) Rise of neoliberal authoritarian state. Disagreement within U.S. ruling circles about *how* (not whether) U.S. should dominate the world: unilateralist vs. multilateralist. Multilateralist view “appears to favor a corporatist model of internal governance, a view that holds great appeal for much of the leadership of organized labor....” (p98-99)

11. “Could’a, would’a, should’a: Central Labor Councils and missed opportunities” (pp 100-113)

Context of CLCs in AFL-CIO’s formal structure and “conglomeration of traditions and organizational structures.” (p100)

Case study of “dramatic change” in Los Angeles County Federation of Labor (LACFL). Solidly traditionalist from 1959 founding until Union Cities and new executive secretary-treasurer elected in 1996. Then built power to win major state legislative and local victories. “Two social movements changed the LACFL: first, the immigrant rights movement in Los Angeles and, second, the Living Wage Campaign. Leftists played important roles in both ....” (p103)

Case study of “missed opportunity” with Los Angeles Manufacturing Action Project (LAMAP) 1992-1998. Importance of organizing manufacturing workers: they have a key role in capital accumulation, among most oppressed and exploited, linked to other production workers in same industries around the world. Leftists and other veteran organizers founded LAMAP “in conjunction with, but independent of, unions.” (p109) A creative model of organizing, it died for lack of union support, though “few unions working by themselves could do what LAMAP was designed to do.” (p109)

Case of Charleston 5 in 2000-2002. A major victory won by local leadership with non-union activist support *and* with support of state and national AFL-CIO (including strong support by Sweeney). But AFL-CIO didn’t follow up on it. Maybe because they didn’t recognize its value as a model. Maybe because it followed too unorthodox a model.

12. “International affairs, globalization, and 9/11” (pp 114-120)

Sweeney launched big changes in AFL-CIO’s relations with labor organizations outside the U.S. Highpoint at 2000 meeting of International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in Durban, South Africa, where he called for a review of ICFTU’s role and blasted globalization with an analysis “inconceivable coming from any previous AFL-CIO president.” (p116) But after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, the AFL-CIO reverted to nationalist, confused, vaguely reformist, or mixed messages, mostly in the Gomerist tradition.

Part four. When silence isn’t golden.

13. “Restlessness in the ranks” (pp 123-130)

In Sweeney’s first years as president, some affiliates suspected that SEIU dominated the AFL-CIO. Tensions developed. “The lack of a truly open forum for debate, and the toxic culture within the overall union movement that denies the importance of debate, conspired to prevent the development of an atmosphere of trust and to convince affiliates that their concerns were being heard.” (p124)

Early endorsement of Gore in 1999.

Signs of fragmentation after Bush sworn in and opened discussions with selected unions (Teamsters and Carpenters first) but ignored AFL-CIO.

President Douglas McCarron transformed Carpenters into “a highly corporate organizing machine guided by a particularly blatant form of right-wing trade unionism.” (p126)

“[S]egments of the left wing of labor decided to ally themselves with pragmatists (and, indeed, with the traditionalists at times) under the practical *and* ideological domination of the pragmatists. We call this move the ‘ideologizing of organizing,’ which holds that organizing workers into unions is, in and of itself, a progressive, if not revolutionary, action.” (p128) This error happened because of the lack of a “left project” (that is, an overall plan for creating a postcapitalist society).

Carpenters' departure from AFL-CIO provided an opening for other affiliates to raise concerns.

SEIU and its allies in New Unity Partnership (NUP) offered 4 solutions:

- Consolidation into fewer unions.
- Unions focused on core jurisdictions.
- Pragmatic international solidarity.
- Domestic political flexibility.

But no real debate happened.

14. "Change to win: a return to Gompers?" (pp 131-146)

Looking at 4 solutions proposed by SEIU (and later by NUP and CTW): No split-worthy differences exist about these issues. Presented without historical context. No strong differences emerged in part because both sides share Gompertist assumptions.

Consolidation: Ignored Australian example. Ignored "the importance of analyzing the balance of power in each industry and identifying the pressure points ...." (p133)

Core jurisdiction: Serious questions ignored. "By posing the problem narrowly, CTW locked itself into an internally inconsistent approach and risked strategic shortsightedness." (p136)

Pragmatic international solidarity: "sectoral solidarity" or "social justice solidarity" or what? Reciprocal or U.S.-centric? CTW's rhetoric unclear.

Domestic political flexibility: doesn't mean political organization to represent interests of working class but instead "a dance between the two established parties." (p140) But Republicans have "no social forces committed to organized labor." (p140)

Stern's views and problems with them. (pp 142-146)

15. "Anger, compromise, and the paralysis of the Sweeney coalition" (pp 147-151)

During time of NUP (before CTW), Sweeney focused on trying to persuade Carpenters to rejoin. So he avoided any open debate. Tactically on the defensive. That choice left SEIU and allies with uncontested space to push their views during 2003-2004. Sweeney arranged a ceasefire for 2004 presidential campaign. After the election, Sweeney called for debate and views from all parts of union movement. Lots of response to website. But no real engagement in debate; just position papers without replies.

A proposal (reprinted in Appendix A) from AFGE, CWA, APWU, and IFPTE called for postponing the split in order to have a real debate, starting with discussion of the current global and domestic situation, and with a set time to end the debate. CTW rejected the proposal as too late.

"None of the responses [to CTW] acknowledged the depth of the crisis or called for the level of discussion and membership involvement that were necessary to get to the roots of the problem. Only the AFGE coalition proposal encouraged a thoroughgoing evaluation." (p151)  
"Instead of inaugurating a major campaign or even implementing the sort of debate that the AFGE and other unions were calling for, the AFL-CIO leadership seemed to disappear behind a veil of silence ..." (p151)

16. "Left behind" (pp 152-161)

While staff and top leaders of some (mostly CTW) unions had engaged in discussion of a split for a year or two, they did not spread the debate to the members. "[M]embers were more like spectators at a sports event than participants in a social movement." (p153)

Case study of UFCW defeat in 2003-2004 southern California grocery strike, transition in UFCW president, and UFCW's disaffiliation without internal debate.

“Andy Stern deserves credit for kicking off the Internet exchange [about the threatened split] through the creation of his blog.” (p156) Other blogs and websites followed, including the AFL-CIO’s which “logged some seven thousand comments”. (p156) This use of technology informed and engaged members somewhat, but “neither side solicited the views of the average member, or even the average local union activist, ... in a way that assured members that their views would have an impact.” (p156)

List (pp156-157) of activities that could have promoted real debate.

Discussion largely involved only white male union leaders. AFL-CIO Constituency Groups mostly ignored. Unionists of color felt uninvolved. Issues of crucial importance to women and people of color got no attention.

Part five. The way forward: social justice unionism.

17. “The need for social justice unionism” (pp 165-185)

Existing union leadership (both CTW and AFL-CIO) has misunderstood the current situation. They mistakenly follow a pragmatist or traditionalist approach. (See key points listed on p. 166.)

We need an alternative framework — social justice unionism.

Class struggle is inevitable. We need to understand its current dynamics. “Trade union struggle is a subset of class struggle.” (p166) We also need to understand how class interacts with other forms of oppression, especially race and gender. Katrina as an example. Unemployment and ways to respond to it.

Labor-community alliances of various forms summarized. Instead we need a workplace-community framework. “The term *labor* should denote forms of organization with roots in the working class and with agendas that explicitly advance the class demands of the working class. ... a community-based organization rooted in the working class (such as a workers’ center) that addresses class-specific issues is a labor organization in the same way a trade union is. ... a trade union that addresses the interests of only one section of the working class (such as a white supremacist craft union) deserves the label *labor organization* less than does a community-based organization that assists the unemployed or the homeless.” (p174)

We need to create “a *social-political bloc* whose goal is to achieve power.” (p174) Power in society as a whole, not just in the workplace, not just in electoral politics. “[I]f class struggle is not restricted to the workplace, then neither should unions be.” (p174) Unions must organize “cities rather than simply organizing workplaces (or industries). And organizing cities is possible only if unions work with allies in metropolitan social-political blocs.” (p174) Some examples (pp 175-176) and possibilities (pp 177-178) of city organizing. “Rather than have each struggle move ahead on its own, the bloc would aim to build coherence among progressive forces, thereby transforming a series of tactical alliances into a social movement. The ultimate aim, of course, would be to construct a nationwide strategic bloc.” (p 179)

“[T]he working class divides along lines drawn by the oppressions built into capitalism.” (p180) We “not only must reject the Gompers paradigm of anticommunism and empire but must embrace *consistent democracy*.” (p182) See list (p182) of examples of how to struggle for consistent democracy. “[U]nions must reconceptualize their relationships with other progressive social movements. The demands that these movements generally raise are not tangential to economic demands but rather speak directly to the question of consistent democracy.” (p184) Union staff and elected officers must mirror the membership in race and gender (at least).

18. “The need for a global outlook” (pp 186-196)

In the past, unions functioned as “‘schools for democracy’ in which working people could learn how to build their power where they work and often learned to fight for the equal rights of all workers ...” (p186) “[T]oday, a union movement that reflects how global forces affect workers in their communities and effectively combats neoliberal globalization at the local level (and unites with others to resist it globally) will improve workers’ lives and enable unions to reclaim their place as the basic institution of working-class people.” (p187)

Conflicting views of the term “solidarity”: rejected by some unions, but the authors “find the term not only politically valuable but analytically useful, because it describes a particular practice that organizations, social movements, and other groups undertake to establish common cause in their efforts.” (p187) How Cold War geopolitics hindered relations between U.S. unions and the Global South.

Responses to neoliberal globalization vary in the Global South. Southern elites often embrace it. Some “ruling groups formerly associated with national liberation movements have also”. (p188) Many grassroots groups, however, challenge it. The collapse of previous projects “has created a space in which new transformative movements are attempting to grow.” (p189) “[C]lass, gender, ethnicity, and the environment have become critical issues ... providing the bases for significant social movements.” (p189) “In some cases, these issues have been skewed or coopted by the right wing.” (p190) “Vibrant trade union movements have emerged” (p190) But in some countries, “the absence of a broader social movement allows organized labor to backslide toward standard labor-capital relations.” (p190) Brief sketch of situation in South Africa (p190-192).

“Although [U.S.] union leaders frequently cloak their acceptance of U.S. foreign policy in patriotism, something far deeper and more troubling is at work: *acceptance of empire*.” (p193) Failure to question empire comes in part from high U.S. standard of living and from jobs dependent on military spending and corporations doing business abroad. U.S. workers need to “consider the consequences of their actions or failures to act.” (p193) We need to build solidarity across borders, and not just with other workers. If we do not “advance a constructive alternative to neoliberal globalization, it opens the doors to right-wing nationalist movements that pose as anti-imperialist...” (p194)

U.S. unions look at foreign policy in “the narrowest of terms—for example, by focusing on [NAFTA]—rather than considering its impact on democracy, self-determination, and human rights.” (p194) Neither AFL-CIO nor CTW “has consistent views on the international situation.” (p194)

We need *social justice solidarity*. Unions “are workers’ organizations engaged in class struggle (whether they like it or not)” and have “common interests at both the tactical *and* the strategic levels”. (p195) Social justice solidarity based on these common interests will take the form of changing relationships, “commitment to common struggle and mutual respect”. (p195) Examples. Issues U.S. unions will need to address. (p196)

19. “Realizing social justice unionism: strategies for transformation” (pp 197-215)

Production has become global. “[T]he material basis for international working-class solidarity is greater than at any point since the development of capitalism.” (p197) “[T]he U.S. union movement must become part of a new labor movement. To do so, unions must move left; they have no alternative.” (p197) We need changes in ideology, leadership, and program. “[C]apital has eliminated the possibility for significant capital-labor cooperation.” (p198) “[E]xpand worker control over the workplace and the work process and ... expand democracy beyond its formal limits.” (p199) “[F]ight for every reform that strengthens the working class and other sectors of society subject to oppression.” (p199)

We need “an intense process of strategic planning and so-called power analysis.” (p200) “[R]eal transformation cannot be imposed from the top.” (p201) “Transformation is a long-term effort and has no shortcuts.” (p201) “Not until a significant portion of the membership embraces the new style of unionism can reformers say a union is on the road to social justice unionism.” (p201)

“[T]he union movement must become a vehicle through which oppressed groups, such as women and people of color, can advance their demands ....” (p202)

In the U.S. South and Southwest, the public sector “offers interesting opportunities to link electoral activism, community-based work ..., and workers’ rights” especially including communities of color. But unions can’t just “call upon their traditional allies to show up and wave; they must engage with these allies in formulating a coherent strategy.” (p202-203)

Non-majority unions offer useful options, especially in the U.S. South. Examples include Black Workers For Justice in North Carolina and SEIU Local 1985 in Georgia.

Internal democracy within unions matters. Union structure can affect member involvement and control. A tension exists between democracy and consolidation of structures. UAW and Teamsters have examples of “local unions with roots in particular communities while facilitating regional and even nationwide bargaining through joint bargaining councils....” (p205) SEIU in contrast tends to favor statewide consolidated locals.

Internal dissent and even organized factions don’t necessarily hurt unions. One study “found that a competitive political atmosphere in unions can strengthen an organization’s democratic culture as well as increase members’ enthusiasm about participation.” (p206) “[U]nions could move toward a system of internal dialogue followed by membership votes.” (p206)

We need serious, a sustained member education program that “provide[s] a framework that members can use to analyze their experiences and guide actions in their own interests. Thus, it deals with the big picture.” (p206) “What is a union? How do employers operate, and why do they seem to have the upper hand? What is capitalism, and what are its impacts on workers in the United States and overseas? What role do race and gender play...?” (p206-207) “[I]t should encourage members to question, express differences of opinion, and debate.” (p207) Members have many views, some contradictory. Member education must “help provide a framework for members to sort out their ideas and contribute to a consistent union message while struggling to win over workers to the theory and practice of social justice unionism.” (p207)

“[A] struggle must unfold over the future role of the central labor councils. Labor councils should reconstitute themselves as the local representative bodies of working people.” (p208) CLCs should shift “from a council of unions to a council of working-class organizations” (p208), form working people’s assemblies, represent the working class in economic development projects, build local neo-Rainbow political blocs, etc. Local unions must be required to affiliate with CLCs to provide CLCs with sufficient funding. National and international unions must not control CLCs. “CLCs would become the hub or prime mover of working-class activism within specific geographic areas.” (p209)

We need debate on the role of a “national labor center” such as the AFL-CIO. It could coordinate organizing, initiate organizing in areas where affiliates don’t, develop an independent political organization, coordinate membership education, and work with labor centers of other nations to address global topics.

These ideas “are antithetical to the current practice of trade unionism in the United States. ... an alliance of the pragmatists and the traditionalists still holds hegemony.... the Left must recognize that it begins from a position of weakness....” (p211) “The next step, ... risky because of the U.S. trade union movement’s intense discomfort with dissent, is to build a movement



linking those inside and outside the trade union movement who embrace a vision of social justice unionism ....” (p211) This movement must transform the existing labor movement.

Final section “Conclusion” (pp212-215) gives a big-picture summary. “[K]eeping the higher goals in mind is a prerequisite for winning real power.” (p214)

Appendix A. “A process for addressing the future of U.S. organized labor” (pp 217-224)

See notes on chapter 15.

Appendix B. “Using race, class, and gender analysis to transform local unions: a case study” (pp 225-243)

A detailed, how-to study of one local example. “The plan had five stages and took three years to implement.” (p232) “To succeed, union strategies require rigorous examination of the intersection of race, gender, and class. Union leaders must critically examine the union’s governance structure and organizational culture. Most important, union leaders have to be self-reflective and force themselves to examine their own social encasement ....” (p243)

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