

## **FORTRESS UNIONISM: A CROOKED TIMBER DEBATE**

### **With Fortresses Like These ...**

**John S. Ahlquist & Margaret Levi**

Rich Yeselson's stimulating piece, "[Fortress Unionism](#)," has attracted [wide attention](#) and appears to have provoked yet another round of [soul-searching](#) within the US labor movement. Yeselson clearly and convincingly shows how the laws and institutions governing American labor markets have, since Taft-Hartley, sapped the energy and resources of American unions, rendering them unable to effectively organize and represent workers as times have changed. He calls for unions to hunker down in their existing geographic "strongholds" and wait for someone or something else to bring workers into the streets.

We agree with Yeselson that the organizing efforts of the last 15 years, while substantial in relative terms, are no where near the levels that could possibly reverse any decline in unionization. But we contest three of his assertions. First, "fortress unionism" is not a proposal; it is the doomed strategy unions have been following for some time. Second, we cannot and should not discuss public and private sector unions as if their fates are not directly bound together. Third, and most importantly, we highlight some of the lessons available from existing social science research that can inform—and correct—what we believe to be some of Yeselson's misguided policy advice for unions. Holing up in regional enclaves, hoping to exploit some exogenous worker mobilization produced magically by others is cynical and unlikely to benefit workers or save existing unions, whether public or private sector. We conclude with suggestions about strategies and tactics, some of which echo Yeselson's own calls for more creative disruption.

### **American unions: circling the wagons (and the drain)**

Yeselson argues that the "comprehensive" organizing campaigns of the last 15-20 years, while improving the lot of certain workers, did little for the broader labor movement. This is not news. The organizing efforts of US unions, even in the Sweeney era, were far short of what is necessary to reverse the decline in unionization. [Farber & Western](#) calculate that by the late 1990s the resources needed to stop the decline in private sector unionization were so large as to require organizing expenditures to increase over 500%, surpassing total current union expenditures on all activities. Union leaders know all this, so it seems unlikely that existing organizing efforts were really as "comprehensive" as Yeselson claims. And at least since Sweeney's "union cities", efforts have been underway to build up city labor councils and create coalitions with community-based groups. Yet, the devotion of energy and resources did not realize the hoped for increase in union rates. When looked at in this light, the US labor movement has *already* been practicing defensive unionism for some time, organizing where it is cost effective

(e.g., among quasi-public sector workers such as those in health care) but not committing the resources necessary to actually turn the tide, if this is even possible.

### **Links with the public sector**

Yeselson dismisses the need to discuss public sector unionism in the context of the collapse of private sector unionism. We believe this is a mistake for two major reasons. First, as [Ahlquist](#) demonstrates (gated), public sector unions owe their strength and very existence to the previous successes of private sector unions. Government workers cannot typically rely on industrial strength or tight demand conditions to force unions on their (government) employers. Such an approach is particularly questionable in a democracy. Public sector unions therefore rely on the willingness of voters to support the validity of the unions' claims to legitimately represent their members' interests. Voters are more willing to do this when they, themselves, enjoy the rights and benefits of union representation in their own workplaces. The collapse of private sector unions implies a collapse in the public support for public sector workers' unions. Public sector unions have, however, shown little interest in devoting serious resources to shoring up their allies in the private sector. Public sector unions are living on borrowed time.

Second, the largest, richest, and most stable unions in the American labor movement are now unions of public sector workers. Where are the resources to defend the erstwhile labor citadels of Los Angeles and Las Vegas going to come from if not largely from public sector unions? Any meaningful defense or expansion of workers' organizations in the United States is going to need the active support and participation of public sector workers and their unions. It is in the interests of public sector unions to devote the resources to these activities, but it remains to be seen if they will.

### **Implications**

All this has implications for Yeselson's "fortress unionism" prescription. Contrary to Yeselson's claims, the US labor movement appears to have been following this strategy for some time already. Fortress unionism has, at best, slowed the decline marginally. It is particularly telling that, even having pursued this strategy, the labor movement has been unable to defend basic union rights in states like Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin, former "strongholds." It is hard to see how long the fortress will hold under Yeselson's recommendations.

### **Understanding past waves of unionization: opportunities and actors**

Yeselson rightly observes that unions have rarely expanded in incremental fashion. Rather we see large and rapid waves of union organizing. These waves usually coincided with major social upheaval such as mass warfare (WWI, WWII) and economic distress (the depressions of the 1890s and 1930s).

But Yeselson makes a big jump, arguing that since previous organizing happened in large waves we should therefore sit back and wait for the next Big Era of Worker Anger. This is where we (and existing thinking on social movements) part company with him. His prescription rests on two dangerous assumptions, both of which are contradicted by existing social science.

His first assumption is one about worker grievances and demand for unions. In his telling, workers are simply not yet pissed off enough to mobilize in the face of current repression, so union leaders should just wait until they are. [Survey work](#) by Freeman and Rogers have documented the extensive, deep, and persistent unfilled desire by workers for a greater voice on the job and more control over their working lives. As with so many social movements, the existence of grievances are unlikely to be a good predictor of collective action or movement success.

Second, Yeselson seems to imply that the success of past waves of union organization hinged entirely on external events, independent of the work of generations of union activists who toiled in less opportune moments but gained knowledge of local conditions and relationships with local workers, ultimately planting the seeds for local organizations.

A longer look at labor history can be instructive. There have been many periods of unrest, riots, short strikes and protests that left no durable legacy on which to build. There have also been extended periods in which labor organizations were continuously trying to organize large groups of workers, with only limited near term success. Many of these activities may have appeared unprofitable at the time or seemed to leave no marks, but they were crucial. They trained the leaders and laid the organizational groundwork necessary for unions to take advantage of opportunities when they come. They also enabled new kinds of workers—first, craft; then industrial; now service—to develop organizing and action repertoires more appropriate to the nature of the work and skill and more likely to succeed in the given political environment. As the economy and the laws change, so do must the labor organizations.

Such moments of opportunity are exceedingly difficult to foresee *ex ante*, so there must be organizations in place, continually experimenting with new tactics, strategies, and objectives. This is not achieved by withdrawing to only narrowly defined geographies and industrial sectors. The union movement can control the extent to which there are some basic resources ready to be deployed, the existence of networks of activists and workplace organizations, and whether labor activists can articulate a coherent and compelling alternative to existing economic relations. As we show in our [forthcoming book](#), a cadre of committed activists able to articulate a coherent alternative to existing institutions plays a key role in creating and sustaining durable organizations capable of mobilizing workers for broader causes.

### **Forging a future for workers' organizations**

So what can existing social science point to as clues to a way forward? There are several.

1. *Private sector unionization rates have effectively crashed.*

Analogous to a fishery that crashes—when its population is too small to effectively reproduce itself—unions have crashed in the United States. Yeselson, along with Farber & Western, powerfully articulate the steep costs of organizing new workers in the private sector. Those costs must be shared across an ever-shrinking group of existing union members. It appears we have reached the point where it is effectively impossible for existing unions shoulder this cost and organize themselves out of their problems, *if we imagine that workers must be organized into existing unions as conventional union members.*

2. *Alternatives to formal unionization under existing labor law must be considered more seriously.*

Unions as we know them may be fading, and no fortifications, based on old technologies, are sufficient to defend against new and shiny weapons. As with all struggles, the armaments and strategies evolve. Organizations representing workers might have to find a new instantiation. New kinds of workers—first, craft; then industrial; now service—each developed organizing and action repertoires more appropriate to the nature of the work and skill and more likely to succeed in the given political environment. As the economy and the laws change, so too must the labor organizations. They may have to shift the primary focus from the employers to the government and the courts. More importantly, they will need to find new organizational forms that free them from the bureaucratic and legal restrictions on collective bargaining. Existing unions may need to channel their resources into building their replacements—a difficult task for any organization and a difficult thing to convince existing union members to do. But the alternative is losing everything.

Some attempts already exist including [debt strikes and the occupation of foreclosed homes](#). Another pathway involves more of the unions joining existing coalitions of immigrants, the 99%, and others who are raising serious questions about the distribution of wealth and jobs.

The key here is, as Yeselson notes, are new coalitions. The good news, [reported by Kang](#) (gated), is that the public still seems to have sympathy for the rights of workers despite antipathy to particularistic demands perceived as self-serving. Reframing the debate and rhetoric must be part of the strategy. Perhaps more importantly, union members have overlapping memberships; they should be seen as participants in the variety of groups trying to protect consumers, taxpayers, the environment, etc. Too often unions are seen as using coalition partners for union goals rather than as active citizens joining a coalition for larger and overarching interests.

### 3. *Workers tend to have the most leverage at times of crisis and war*

This has several important implications, especially for the immediate future. Times of war and its aftermath can present workers with leverage in the political to successfully win major [policy victories](#) (gated), including [progressive taxation](#) (gated). Wars and crisis also generate leadership and activism. There is [new evidence](#), along with extensive historical work demonstrating that returning soldiers present a potent challenge to existing political orders; they are often gifted organizers. The 1990s SEIU made considerable use of veterans from the 1960s social movements, and the 1930's CIO relied heavily on Communist activists. Workers rights organizations need to actively take advantage of, not simply wait, for these kind of political opportunities.

### 4. *Organization matters*

As unions or the movements that replace them grapple with how to proceed serious discussion over how to organize their various interests will be critical. Previous attempts at broad organization, such as the 19<sup>th</sup> century Knights of Labor, were [unable to sustain their rapid initial growth because the organization they created failed to account for the diversity of interests and resources involved](#). Others, such as the Teamsters, are able to create large, diverse and long-lasting unions but only by narrowing their focus to the interests of the particular workers. This may protect a given union but is not the way to build a movement in the contemporary world. Workers' organizations able to uphold the rights and livelihood of workers must become part of a larger movement on behalf of citizen rights and protections. Our research suggests this requires the combination of a leadership that fights to improve the workers' well-being but also urges workers to fight on behalf of others as part of a larger "community of fate." The organizations that succeed on both fronts are those with governing rules that encourage a vibrant rank and file democracy informed about the world around them and able and willing to challenge their leaders and each other. Durable organizations require both foresight in the design of rules and the flexibility to revisit them down the road. And they must be an integral part of the larger conversation about creating a better society for all. Only in this way can unions (or whatever takes their place) ensure that workers' rights are citizenship rights.

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## Hortatory uplift is not a plan

### Rich Yeselson

I thank John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi (hereafter A/L) for their response, “With Fortresses Like These ...” to my essay in Democracy, “Fortress Unionism.” I had an odd feeling reading and rereading their essay. I thought its bark was far worse than its bite. A/L warn that my strategy is “doomed”, and rests on “dangerous assumptions.” Unions are already doing what I advocate, and they are thus headed down “the drain.” Yet, given their final set of suggestions, it seems as if we really don’t have much to disagree about at all. When all is said and done, A/L ignore most of my proposals before agreeing with others.

To take a stab at synthesizing these initial impressions about the A/L rebuttal to “Fortress Unionism: it frames its major disagreement with the essay in such vague terms that it barely presents an alternative to it at all. My goal in writing the contemporary sections of “Fortress Unionism” was to give readers a deeper understanding of how historically rare truly large union membership growth spurts are, not just in the United States, but throughout the entire advanced world. Therefore, I proposed a *very* specific list of transitional action steps to take in the perhaps very lengthy interim until such growth occurs again. A/L don’t address most of these proposals and recommendations. Therefore, they don’t put forward a concrete set of contestable counter-proposals, relying instead upon a sturdy group of incontestable, but very general axioms that don’t speak to the question: Given how occasional union growth fueled by militant worker’s activism is, what should unions do *now*? A/L’s underlying argument is saturated with the hortatory uplift alluded to in my title, but with very little strategic or tactical detail. I don’t object to hortatory uplift— “Si se puede” is not the slogan of modern labor for nothing—so much as I think of it as insufficient. “With Fortresses Like These ...” has an emotional urgency unmatched by analytical precision.

A/L reference something I call “fortress unionism” in order to reject it. That’s fair enough, as far as it goes. But they don’t actually quote or even comprehensively paraphrase exactly what I mean by it. As I just wrote, in “Fortress Unionism”, I included a list of quite specific next steps for action, including extensive organizing within already existing areas of strength and training of the leaders of (perhaps) tomorrow’s period of labor militancy today. Yet A/L barely allude to this list. Reading their essay, a reader would be entitled to think that I propose no actions, no organizing at all—just a quiet euthanasia for the remnants of American organized labor. This, however, is untrue. A/L seem so mesmerized by my use of the word, “wait,” at the conclusion of my suggestions, that they’ve forgotten everything written immediately before it. They claim that, “...’fortress unionism’ is not a proposal; it is the doomed strategy unions have been following for some time.” If A/L had directly and specifically addressed my recommendations, readers would quickly realize that, for better or worse, unions are not at all following this “doomed

strategy” today. For two large examples, the logic of, as I write, “[increasing] the density of existing strongholds” might indicate that the Teamsters should considering throwing an enormous store of their existing resources into a 20-year program to organize Fed Ex or that the UFCW should undertake something similar vs. Whole Foods. Moreover, the recently announced deal reached between UNITE HERE and the Hyatt hotel chain is a perfect example of augmenting existing strength while also creating conditions that should organize thousands of low-wage workers of color. Perhaps none of these projects is so wonderful, in concept or execution, but I don’t understand why A/L label the antecedent analysis for them as, in their phrasing, magical or cynical. Therefore, for the assistance of readers who haven’t read my essay (and to refresh A/L’s memories), I include my conception of Fortress Unionism and my recommended steps for action below. (For those who have my read my essay and/or prefer to skip to my direct responses to A/L’s rebuttal, see the non-indented text that follows.)

So what is to be done? I propose what I call “Fortress Unionism.” (I am speaking here only about private-sector unions, which face a deep crisis. Public-sector unions have their own well-known dilemmas, but require a completely different discussion.) Fortress Unionism would buttress the remaining strengths of labor. The fortress would remain open; labor’s effort to build coalitions with other progressive forces should continue. Unions, however, should not undertake long, expensive comprehensive campaigns outside their core areas of strength. Today, less would be more. In sum:

*Defend the remaining high-density regions, sectors, and companies.* They include, respectively: Las Vegas, Los Angeles, the Bay Area, Seattle, and New York City; the auto industry, large supermarket chains, several hospital chains, building services in major cities, and convention-sized hotels in major cities; UPS (Teamsters), and the telecom companies (Communications Workers). Strong labor movements in metropolitan areas are especially important to sustain, as they are labor-liberal bulwarks of economic and political strength. The labor movement has been particularly effective in jointly mobilizing with Latinos in Las Vegas and Los Angeles. There is no contradiction between organizing around class issues and so-called “identity politics.” It was called something else then, but identity politics as part of union organizing has been around since the first German-American and Irish-American workers unionized in antebellum New York and Philadelphia.

*Strengthen existing union locals.* Many local unions have atrophied. Staff and a cohort of committed members often run local unions on behalf of a large silent majority of members, who view union membership as something like an insurance policy, paid for by their union dues, rather than a rank-and-file driven activist organization. Train more workers and hire more staff to enforce contracts and teach workers their rights. Invest heavily in worker education programs, everything from knowledge about occupational safety



and health to labor history courses. Workers who feel connected and engaged with their local union will someday help organize new members.

*Ask one key question about organizing drives: Will they increase the density or power of existing strongholds?* Try, for example, to organize remaining nonunion casinos in the labor powerhouse of Las Vegas. (The Culinary Workers Union in Vegas is, arguably, the strongest, most militant local union in the country.) Continue “bargain to organize” efforts, in which unions gain new organizing rights as a condition of collective bargaining agreements for current members. But for the time being, do not try to organize, via multiyear campaigns, currently nonunion or *de minimis* union sectors.

*Sustain coalition work with other progressive organizations.* Post-New Left egalitarians fill top leadership positions across the labor movement and are pushing the movement beyond the white-male iconography of the Taft-Hartley era. They have urged unions, with increasing success, to reach out to environmentalists, community organizations, immigration reformers, racial justice advocates, feminists, gay rights activists, and political reformers to pursue policy changes like limiting the filibuster and protecting voting rights. Unions should make the most of these alliances. They expose unions to creative thinking from outside of organized labor and put union money and staff to use behind important projects. Unions, whenever appropriate, should yield control to other organizations and advocates, and play a supporting and facilitative role. Labor’s time in the spotlight is during those great upsurges of high growth. This is not such a time.

*Invest heavily in alt-labor organizations, especially Working America.* Alt-labor is the name given to efforts to organize disparate workers outside the conventional one-union to one-workplace structure. The AFL-CIO’s 3.2 million-member Working America, led by legendary “9 to 5” organizer Karen Nussbaum, is the largest and best funded of these efforts. The logic of alt-labor is to find the potential leaders of tomorrow’s mass union organizing and organize them today around discrete, achievable demands. It’s exactly the right idea. As AFL-CIO president Trumka said in *The Nation* recently, “We hope that we will have the seed planted for people to understand the importance of collective action.” Seed away.

*And then...wait.* Wait for the workers to say they’ve had enough. When they demand in vast numbers collective solutions to their problems, seize upon that energy and institutionalize it.

That is how massive union growth occurs—workers take matters into their own hands and then unions capture that energy like lightning in a bottle. The workers risk their jobs, and sometimes even their lives, to form a union. It has happened this way all over the world. The workers will signal—loudly—when they want to organize.

By not including or properly summarizing in their essay my recommendations above, A/L, not surprisingly, end up simply eliding them. And they don't propose much in the way of concrete alternatives. I don't think they are so much wrong—although there is a bit of that—as I think they are earnest, engaged, and yet too allusive to generate even a useful heuristic procedure. I will now review A/L's argument section by section.

### **Comprehensive Campaigns: Process and Paradigm**

I argued that comprehensive campaigns, conceived in response to the atrophy of labor's power in the workplace, had "responded creatively to [this] problem, with some substantial victories to its credit." However, after 30 years (really more like 35), "they haven't worked on a scale sufficient to reverse the trend [of the decline in union density]." In their opening section, "American unions: circling the wagons (and the drain)", A/L seem bored by this assertion: "Union leaders know all this...." I think there is a bit more to the failure of comprehensive campaigns than that. Comprehensive campaigns, as either a strategic paradigm or a measurable process for union growth—have failed. They've been around since the late 1970s. Union density in the US has declined by over 50% since then. To say, as A/L do, ".... it seems unlikely that existing organizing efforts were really as "comprehensive" as Yeselson claims," is only to restate my argument in another register. If 30-35 years of working to "build capacity," to use the language of union staff, in the major unions hasn't led to the initiation of dozens of more campaigns than we have seen, it tells us that the idea fails as both conception and execution. Yet, it indeed has been the dominant paradigm for union organizing of the contemporary era, the ideal type that major unions strive to master. It's no defense of that paradigm to say that most campaigns are too complicated, too expensive, too time consuming, and yield too few new union members for them to be considered successes (Which is why, as I noted earlier, extending existing areas of union strength allows the several unions who are competent to run such campaigns to continue to do so.) In summary, it is not even clear what A/L are lamenting here, my remarks about comprehensive campaigns or the overall decline of the American labor movement.

### **Public Sector Unions and Private Sector Unions: The Banal Truth**

Next, A/L contest my decision not to address the dilemmas of public sector unionism in an already long essay. I wrote that public sector unions have "their own well know dilemmas" and "require a separate analysis." They, instead, claim that my essay "dismisses the need to discuss public sector unionism" as if I found the entire subject to be of no value whatever.

I then looked forward to A/L providing the synthesis of private and public sector union analysis that I had chosen, in my essay, to omit—or, in fairness, just the

outline of one. Instead, A/L make two points. First, public sector unions need private sector unions to dramatically increase their membership, because, “Voters are more willing to [support public sector unionism] when they, themselves, enjoy the rights and benefits of union representation in their own workplaces.” Second, in an inversion of point one, the “largest, richest, and most stable” unions today are public ones (or, like SEIU, hybrids of public and private). Therefore, “Any meaningful defense or expansion of workers’ organizations in the United States is going to need the active support and participation of public sector workers and their unions.”

Indeed. To slightly paraphrase a vastly better writer than myself, these are truths universally acknowledged. Which therefore, as Jane Austen wisely did not continue, are simply truisms. Yes, to make myself clear: I entirely agree with these truisms, and, thus, as I often did while considering this essay, feel puzzled. If I thought I could have plausibly synthesized a rigorous analysis of private and public sector unionization by merely repeating nostrums that affirm that public sector unions ultimately need the support of larger private sector unions in order to survive and that private sector unions ultimately need the support of public sector unions in order to grow stronger, I would have done so. I don’t see how such observations, however well meaning, advance the discussion of what unions should do, so I saved my analysis of public sector unions for another day.

A/L conclude their analysis of this issue by claiming, “... the labor movement has been unable to defend basic union rights in states like Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin, former ‘strongholds.’” But, in part, this statement is false, and in a revealing way. Another truth universally acknowledged is that Ohio’s labor movement achieved a smashing victory by rolling back that state’s onerous anti-union laws via a 61-39 referendum victory in 2011. California’s unions have also successfully resisted Republican efforts to weaken them over the past several years. I think that, in the next several years, the laws in Wisconsin and Michigan will be repealed, too. We will see if I’m right. The point being: Union ‘strongholds’ may win or lose these fights, but it’s not clear, in A/L’s telling, why my proposals would weaken, rather than strengthen them for these battles. (Although this is precisely what they purport: “It is hard to see how long the fortress will hold under Yeselson’s recommendations.”)

For one very large thing, I would hypothesize that my suggestion to strengthen existing local unions (unacknowledged by the authors) would only help in the push back against anti-union state politics. A mobilized membership is one that fully engages in pro-union political persuasion. In Wisconsin, 38% of union household voted against the effort to recall Gov. Scott Walker, effectively dooming it. It’s hard to imagine unions even holding their own unless they can *internally organize* their own members and their families. So A/L end up being annoyed with, as I’ve noted, what they call my “doomed strategy”, but I argue that my strategy of extending existing areas of union strength via more organizing and also internally organizing local unions would serve labor quite effectively in these political fights. And they

argue...what? I'm not even sure, except that they don't seem to like the world "fortress."

### **Dangerous Assumptions, Vaporous History**

A/L then go on to assert that, although I understand the basic pattern of past waves of union growth, I misconstrue what to make of this pattern. Citing Richard Freeman, I argued that unions since the 1880s, not only in the United States, but also throughout the western world, have had only five great spurts of growth. Edited for space, although implied in my historical account are when these growth spurts have occurred: during either periods of intense worker militancy or, during the first and second world wars and their immediate aftermath when the hand of the state decisively places itself on the scale in favor of labor, so as to facilitate maximum production. In almost all other periods, unions have languished or regressed.

A/L think that, "Yeselson makes a big jump, arguing that since previous organizing happened in large waves we should therefore sit back and wait for the next Big Era of Worker Anger.... His prescription rests on two dangerous assumptions, both of which are contradicted by existing social science."

Dangerous assumption #1 seems to be (it is not stated directly and clearly) that I think that workers are not yet "....pissed off enough to mobilize in the face of current repression....", and that, in fact, according to surveys, they are—but this, itself, is insufficient to generate massive growth because "....the existence of grievances are unlikely to be a good predictor of collective action or movement success."

Several readers have cited this survey work to me, about which I am deeply familiar. A/L and others seem to think this is somehow a decisive argument: you see, workers really *are* pissed off right now, and have been for a couple of decades! In their telling, the wrinkle is that this proto-militant condition doesn't mean that they can be motivated to organize without several other conditions being met. A/L say the survey work describes an "extensive, deep, and persistent unfilled desire by workers for a greater voice on the job and more control over their working lives."

I disagree and the disagreement is connected with my motivation for writing "Fortress Unionism" in the first place. I wanted to sketch for those interested in unions just what real union power meant in the late 1940s, and, also, what real rank and file worker activism entailed in that period (with a brief look back to the 1930s). In short, I wanted to convey to practitioners and allies what a strong labor movement actually looks like so that they might see that regenerating a strong labor movement is *even harder than they thought it was*. I have read the survey work, heard about the focus groups, talked to workers. "Extensive, deep, and persistent unfulfilled desire...." would be, to transmute fully into the language of romance, an ardent unquenchable erotic and romantic passion for another person—as if millions of American workers had committed Barthes's A Lover's Discourse to memory and were prepared to act on it. Most workers today are, at best, abstractly interested in

something that might improve their lives, but they don't know what they are getting into. Some of them are at the stage of, "Ok, I'll have coffee" with the union. Very few (although they certainly exist) are in the throes of an ardent and unquenchable passion.

What I tried to evoke in "Fortress Unionism" was not something like a wan interest, a tepid sense that the average worker might give unions a try if it was convenient to just sign up, the way buying a subscription to Netflix is convenient. Instead, the militancy required to increase unionism by the millions means the willingness to risk being fired or beaten up or sometimes something worse— **\*\*millions\*\*** being willing to risk that, not a few hundred workers at a time (although a few hundred, sometimes, might lead to millions). And, no, I don't blame people for not wanting to do that--that's kind of a heavy lift. That's the kind of guts I certainly don't know if I would have if faced with similar circumstances. Those kinds of surges have happened only several times in labor history. Most people in the history of the world haven't done anything like I've described. But every once in awhile, some of them do.

Here's what I mean, multiplied countless times. An African American scow captain (basically a freight boat employee) in NY harbor on strike in 1934 says to his boss (from Irving Bernstein's classic history of labor in the thirties, Turbulent Years, p. 119):

You've got to settle this strike. We've been hungry. I've been hungry and if I get any hungrier I won't stop short of killing you. If you can afford a beautiful office and a good home, you can afford to pay your men enough so that they won't have to go to their garbage cans for food.

This is what I'm talking about--not merely telling an academic pollster, "yeah, ok, sure: I might be willing to sign a card and join a union." That's fine for starters, but it doesn't go nearly far enough. And, if you say: Well, that's just envisioning something that may never happen again, that's almost unthinkable--you're right. It might not happen again. I am not making a foundational or deterministic argument. But this is how unions grow---by enormous numbers, or pretty much not at all. If workers by the millions don't match that scow captain's desperate rage, there isn't going to be much union growth, if any. To say that American worker's today are, in aggregate, at that point, but only need to be competently organized, as A/L imply, is absurd.

A/L then consider my "dangerous assumption" #2. They argue that:

Yeselson seems to imply that the success of past waves of union organization hinged entirely on external events, independent of the work of generations of union activists who toiled in less opportune moments but gained knowledge of local conditions and relationships with local workers, ultimately planting the seeds for local organizations.

Here is where A/L present their alternative to my specific proposal to organize and extend existing areas of union strength as well as simultaneously buttress the hundreds of local unions around the country—a plan that, if unions took it seriously, would provide them with years and years of work to do. A/L promisingly begin, “A longer look at labor history can be instructive.” Yes it can! We can derive significant historical and analytical questions from examining case studies in the history of the American labor movement.

So: Would A/L they describe the period between the failed 1919 steel strike and the creation, via the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) of the steelworkers union almost 20 years later? Would they discuss the trajectory of railway organizing, say, between the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, and the Pullman Strike of 1894, which made Eugene Debs a national figure? How about the building and sustaining of 1199, the hospital workers union, from it beginning as a union of pharmacists in the early thirties to its dramatic expansion to include hospital workers of color in the late fifties and sixties? Or the background and conflict that led to the 1934 textile workers strike, the only large failed strike of the Depression era, in which, nonetheless, 2/3rds of Southern textile workers, 170,000 strong, courageously walked off the job?

Well, no. Let me pay A/L the respect of quoting the entirety of their “history” paragraph in full:

There have been many periods of unrest, riots, short strikes and protests that left no durable legacy on which to build. There have also been extended periods in which labor organizations were continuously trying to organize large groups of workers, with only limited near term success. Many of these activities may have appeared unprofitable at the time or seemed to leave no marks, but they were crucial. They trained the leaders and laid the organizational groundwork necessary for unions to take advantage of opportunities when they come. They also enabled new kinds of workers—first, craft; then industrial; now service—to develop organizing and action repertoires more appropriate to the nature of the work and skill and more likely to succeed in the given political environment. As the economy and the laws change, so do [sic] must the labor organizations.

I think this single paragraph encapsulated my disappointment with “With Fortresses Like These ...”, a disappointment underscored by A/L’s foreshadowing at their essay’s outset that this section of the whole would “most importantly... highlight some of the lessons available from existing social science research that can inform—and correct—what we believe to be some of Yeselson’s misguided policy advice for unions.” Despite A/L’s anticipatory nod to labor history, they don’t engage the specificity of actual history, or even the controversies of the relevant historiography. They only use an intellectual signifier with a distinguished pedigree

(History!) to substitute for actual, concrete examples and analysis. It's the difference between an incantation and an argument.

To sustain my dog trope from this essay's beginning: there's nothing here to sink one's teeth into. This is supposed to be the substantive alternative to my "two dangerous assumptions, both of which are contradicted by existing social science." What A/L wrote will never be accused of being dangerous; it is not even memorable. Again, how does this actually address the particular dilemmas of the labor movement today? If you were a union officer or a director of organizing designing a course of action, what would you make of this paragraph, how would it inform your future actions? At worst, these remarks are evanescent. At best, they are benignly incontrovertible. Within, there isn't a single name of a union or any other institution, a geographic location, a reference to a significant historical actor or the date of a significant event or a series of dates that analytically frames a social, economic, cultural, or political period. I should also note that my queries do merely evoke a disciplinary conflict between history and political science. Despite the earned disciplinary expertise A/L bring to this subject, the paragraph does not even hint, either, at a replicable social science model. A/L basically say that organizing can be "crucial"—except, as they also remind us, when it's not. They use different terms for what we know to be familiar and inarguable concepts, and thus they do not extend their analysis in compelling ways. For example, they urge that "organizational groundwork" be undertaken—is this distinct from just plain organizing? So, too, we shouldn't forget the need for "action repertoires", which may or may not be what old timers used to call "tactics" or just "ideas." Finally they conclude with a shocker: when the times change, institutions must change, too. I'm kind of surprised they didn't squeeze, "In the long run, we are all dead" in here, too.

There is nothing here, even in the merest sketch (all that can be done in a single paragraph), that approaches David Brody's still masterful 1967 essay, "Labor's Institutional Sources of Expansion and Contraction" which argues that the "pure and simple" unionism of Samuel Gompers and the early AFL have, for better and worse, informed the subsequent successes and failures of American throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such an analysis may be disappointing to those, like A/L and myself, who wish that labor be part of a broad movement for social justice. So, too, might Thaddeus Russell's Out of the Jungle (2001), a brilliant revisionist recasting of the history of the Teamsters. But these interpretations cannot easily be dismissed. It may be, however, that the tension that A/L allude to between the an amorphous organization of both individual and disparate union like the Knights of Labor, and a successful member-centric union like the Teamsters is irreconcilable.

So choices must be made. Strategizing, as is said of governing, is to choose. When A/L modestly continue that, "Such moments of opportunity are exceedingly difficult to foresee *ex ante*, so there must be organizations in place, continually experimenting with new tactics, strategies, and objectives", they sound like nobody so much as failed venture capitalists who lack the judgment to make shrewd investments while eschewing less savvy proposals. There "must be organizations in

place”? Ok. *What kind of organizations? Where should they be located? Which industries or corporations should they address? Should unions focus on founder owned and controlled companies like Walmart and FedEx, which are rabidly anti-union, yet market leaders? Or should they, instead, focus upon more conventional public companies, which may result in more rapid, but less significant victories? Or should labor look to the increasingly significant sector privately owned by hedge funds/pensions funds/sovereign wealth fund? How many of these labor counter-organizations should there be? How large should they be? What criteria do we use to distinguish between what appears to be ‘unprofitable’ and what, in time, might become ‘crucial’?* Labor can’t just cast a big net across the United States in order to compensate for the fact that “moments of opportunity are exceedingly difficult to foresee *ex ante*....” For that very reason, unions have to make hardheaded calculations about where they should organize and how great the opportunity costs will be. This is what I have suggested. I am not at all sure what A/L have suggested, except that, writ large, history is unpredictable.

After this invocation of Clio, the “suggestions about strategy and tactics” come as something of an anti-climax, and almost entirely replicate and underscore my own recommendations. A/L stipulate and acknowledge that I am correct regarding the “crash” of “private sector unionizing rates.” We have no dispute here. They note, as I have in this essay, following Freeman, that war and periods of social activism are most likely to generate union growth. Here, however, they apparently do not grasp what it is about total war—world war—and only world war that engenders mass unionization. It is not, as they suggest here, the repurposing of returning veterans as organizers, although this is a fine and good thing, and has certainly helped on the margin. And it is not that union growth occurs during and in the wake of any old war. To be crass, medium or small wars will not suffice. There was no union surge during and after the Korean War, the Vietnam War, or either of the two Iraq wars. Only the capacious economic imperatives of a world war force the government to propitiate labor in order to keep it on the job and making the guns, bombs, planes, and uniforms required to sustain total economic and military mobilization. We should be grateful that it is hard to imagine in the nuclear age a third conventional world war. But that also means that American unions may never again have the full leverage of the federal government behind them. The merciful (we hope) end of world wars has the secondary effect of severely proscribing the operational possibilities of organized labor.

### **Endgame: An Important Insight**

A/S conclude with another unexceptional paean to the power of organization, in which they argue, “Workers’ organizations able to uphold the rights and livelihood of workers must become part of a larger movement on behalf of citizen rights and protections.” Again, this rehearses remarks from my essay (see the Fortress Union proposals, reproduced above), although the desired social democratic left liberal labor movement—call it a Reuther/modern SEIU model--however normatively desirable, is not necessarily more achievable and sustainable than pure and simple



unionism. Nor is it necessarily more attractive to ordinary workers. We can, however, save this meta- discussion for another time.

I credit A/L with one very interesting and shrewd intervention. They make an extremely provocative point about the structural constraints on existing labor organizations, and then observe, “Existing unions may need to channel their resources into building their replacements—a difficult task for any organization and a difficult thing to convince existing union members to do. But the alternative is losing everything.”

Now, I don’t think it’s realistic to imagine that existing unions will, on behalf of the greater good of the movement and of workers, commit organizational suicide. But the larger point stands: much of the most militant, risk taking organization over the past 125 years has come from new or nascent labor organizations with no money in the bank and nothing to lose. Certainly the recently certified UAW’s actions at Flint in 1937 are such an example. The new union exploited the freedom of its insignificance. It could afford to ignore a judicial injunction, secure in the knowledge that Governor Frank Murphy, the greatest of the New Deal governors, would not bankrupt what little they had or brutalize the sit down strikers.

Today, however, the remaining large, functional unions—especially them, in fact—find themselves in a kind of sweet spot of weakness. They are too weak to have the enormous influence over the economy and politics that unions did in the late 1940s, when unions truly were “big labor.” But they are paradoxically still too strong—with building and pension funds worth millions, hundreds of employees, six and seven figure membership rolls—to take the legal risk, the sanctioning of worker civil unrest, that are necessary to force elites to recognize unionization rights on a mass scale.

This is also why, as the historian Melvyn Dubofsky pointed out in a comment about my article, it is more likely that, as in the past, the impetus for mass organizing will come from non-union workers who, as Dubofsky notes, “have broader rights to engage in direct action, that is to strike, than employees bound by union contracts.” It is an excruciating situation for unions to be in, ensnared within a juridical trap they dare not upset. Thus, in ways we cannot today predict, workers may have to create, from scratch, their own alternatives to existing unions. I noted in “Fortress Unionism” that, if it is to happen again, union growth on a massive scale was much more likely to be generated by workers themselves than by unions. This will include the creation of new unions or other labor related organizations. Presumably, as with the Farmer’s Alliances of the 1870s and 1880s which led to the rise of American Populism, new labor organizations will contain aspects of what Raymond Williams called “residual” and “emergent” cultural and institutional formations. As I wrote in “Fortress Unionism,” the fortress “would remain open.” My proposals are designed to sustain labor until the time when another great spurt of growth might occur. Beyond them, my remarks, too, are necessarily general. As Yogi Berra never said, “It’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.”

I would not, finally, want the tough give and take of our respective polemics to obscure that A/L are obviously deeply knowledgeable about the American labor movement and deeply concerned about its fate. Their final insight about structural burdens that inhibit contemporary unions is a good place for me to end my remarks, too. I look forward to reading their forthcoming book, which, given its greater length, might contain some of the details I wished for here. Again, I thank them for reading "Fortress Unionism" and thinking, along with me, about the history and future of American unions.