

# Labor Upsurges: From Detroit to Ulsan and Beyond

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A central theme in Clawson's book is the concept of the "labor upsurge". "Historically", Clawson argues, "labor has not grown slowly, a little bit each year. Most of the time unions are losing ground; once in a while labor takes off . . .". These periodic labor upsurges are fundamentally different in form and substance from one another because in the decades between upsurges, economy and society (and the working class itself) are fundamentally transformed. Labor upsurges both reflect past change and themselves bring about major new transformations. Seen qualitatively, "each period of labor upsurge redefines what we mean by 'the labor movement,' changing cultural expectations, the form that unions take, laws, structures, and accepted forms of behavior" (Clawson 2003: 13).

It is in periods of labor upsurge and their immediate aftermath that major labor movement advances are made. For Clawson, this is not just a description of the past, but also a prediction about the future. "Slow and incremental advances, sustained over many years, are unlikely . . . to lead to labor revival" in the United States. Rather, a major advance for labor is most likely to come about through "some sort of upsurge, leading to a period where labor's numbers and power triple or quadruple in a short period", as happened in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>1</sup> A "next

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<sup>1</sup> When speaking of labor movement advances, Clawson sometimes seems to be referring specifically to growth in trade union membership; however, it is clear from the overall thrust of his argument that he has in mind more wide-ranging gains (e.g., rising real wages, better working conditions, the extension/deepening of democratic rights, broad advances in social rights and equality), which may or may not go hand-in-hand with formal membership growth. Steve Jefferys (2004: 336) has pointed out the same ambiguity, arguing that the French case supports the existence of a more wide-ranging connection between "labor upsurge" and labor movement advance, although not the narrower connection with formal trade union membership growth.

upsurge” for US labor is not inevitable in Clawson’s estimation, but it is indeed possible (Clawson 2003: 199). Much of Clawson’s book is devoted to analyzing emergent practices as a way of detecting what form a new US labor movement upsurge might take – e.g., community-based rather than workplace-based unions; direct action rather than NLRB-sponsored legal provisions; mobilizing around demands that address the specific concerns of women and immigrant workers, and in ways that bridge the gulf between labor and the new social movements – and what kinds of activist strategies would enhance (rather than constrain) the upsurge’s transformative potential.

*The Next Upsurge* is an important and thought-provoking book, written in a style that is accessible to a diverse audience of scholars, students and activists. The book focuses entirely on dynamics in the United States. Nevertheless, I will argue that the framework is relevant for thinking about future prospects for labor movements worldwide. Indeed, part of my sympathy for the book is no doubt rooted in the fact that Clawson’s labor upsurge framework resonates strongly with my own approach to understanding the *world-historical* dynamics of labor movements (Silver 2003). We both work from a framework in which the development of historical capitalism (transformations in the organization of production and social relations) recurrently “make” new working classes (with new types of demands, bargaining power, and forms of struggle), even as established working classes are simultaneously being “unmade” by the same processes. We both argue that the struggles of these new working classes have tended to burst on the scene suddenly and unexpectedly (although in retrospect antecedents are clearly visible). Labor movements that had been widely seen as hopelessly weak (or even dead) succeed in making major and wide-ranging gains in a short period of time, often through new forms of struggle that sweep aside the “organizational residue” left by the previous mass upsurge.<sup>2</sup>

Clawson, however, does not address the question of whether his “labor upsurge” framework is relevant for labor movements outside the United States. Given Clawson’s goals (as scholar-activist) for *The Next Upsurge*, his concentration on the United States is appropriate, allowing for detailed and illuminating accounts of recent transformations in the US working

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<sup>2</sup> Among the common influences that account for some of this convergence in approach (apart from a particular reading of Marx) is no doubt Frances Fox Piven’s and Richard Cloward’s *Poor Peoples’ Movements* (New York: Vintage, 1977).

class (e.g., the growing weight of women and immigrant workers) and emergent new forms of struggle (i.e., the potential antecedents of a future upsurge). Moreover, I don't think that the core argument of Clawson's book would have been changed substantially as a result of a direct confrontation with the question of the framework's broader relevance.

That being said, I would argue that by not addressing this question, Clawson has made himself vulnerable to falling into a line of argument (in his discussion of neoliberal globalization in Chapter 5) that is inconsistent with his own overall theoretical approach. Specifically, I am referring to the curious inconsistency between his emphasis on the importance of grassroots mobilization and labor upsurge from below as the only sound basis for significant future advances for US labor, and his emphasis on what is essentially a bureaucratic solution from above – WTO sanctions for violations of core labor standards – as the most promising basis on which Third World labor movements might make major new advances.

Assuming that Clawson is not putting forward a thesis of US (or First World) exceptionalism – which I don't think he is – then this inconsistency can be resolved in one of two ways. The first would be to emphasize the central role that labor upsurges have played (and will likely continue to play) *everywhere* in bringing about major advances for labor. The second – which would only partially resolve the inconsistency – would be to argue in favor of WTO sanctions against the United States for labor rights violations as a critical basis for future advances to be made by US labor. Let me start with the latter.

### Whose Afraid of the WTO?

One of the most interesting and compelling lines of argument in Clawson's book is about the degree to which workers' rights are systematically violated in the United States. *The Next Upsurge* offers abundant evidence to support the contention that "violations of workers' rights to form unions may be the most systematic and pervasive violation of human rights in the USA today," including vivid descriptions of "the vicious employer actions that are routine" in anti-union campaigns. Moreover, when it comes to identifying the key sources of labor weakness in the USA, Clawson points – not to competition from low-wage countries – but "first and foremost" to "a relentless employer assault, backed by government policies" that "ground down" US unions (Clawson 2003: 7, 16, 45, 202). For Clawson, what prevents the United States from making workers' rights or environmental protection a priority "is not minimum wage

workers in Indonesia and street children in Brazil – but rather the decisions of corporate executives about how to produce goods and their ability to dominate the political system” (Clawson 2003: 160).<sup>3</sup>

Yet, when he raises the issue of international sanctions, he does so – as is common throughout the literature – solely with regard to enforcing workers’ rights in the Third World. Thus, he writes: “If labor were to win international labor standards, enforceable through the World Trade Organization or some other mechanism with teeth, it would become dramatically easier to organize workers *in the Global South*” (Clawson 2003: 155; emphasis added). The closest he comes to addressing the issue of sanctions against the United States is when he makes a brief reference to US government opposition to international labor standards, and more specifically, Congress’ failure to ratify the ILO convention on “freedom of association.” “Pro-business members of Congress fear that the US government would be found in violation of ILO Convention 98, which declares that ‘workers . . . shall enjoy *adequate* protection against acts of anti-union discrimination in respect of their employment’” (Clawson 2003: 147).<sup>4</sup>

What would it mean for the labor movement *in the United States* to take up the cause of trade sanctions *against the United States* for violations of core labor standards? For one thing, it would be an unambiguously clear case of labor internationalism. As Clawson points out in the book’s preface (2003: ix), what happens in the United States matters far beyond its borders: “Unless the United States is transformed – economically, politically, socially – progressive causes, not only in America but around the world, will continue to suffer more reverses than successes.” Indeed, although Clawson himself does not explicitly make the argument, he provides plenty of empirical evidence for the contention that it is the United States that has been leading *the race to the bottom* for labor worldwide. Ensuring that labor rights are enforced in the United States – through all means available – would be a far greater act of labor internationalism

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<sup>3</sup> Among other things, in making this argument, Clawson convincingly demonstrates that significant sectors of the US economy (and their workers) are not subject to competition from imported goods and/or the threat of relocation of production overseas (2003: 140-44).

<sup>4</sup> According to a 2002 Human Rights Watch report, in the United States “millions of workers are expressly barred from the law’s protection of the right to organize.” Moreover, even when workers are theoretically covered by the law, “the reality of NLRA enforcement falls far short of its goals” with “weak and often ineffective remedies and enforcement” often delayed to the point where it ceases to provide redress.” (Human Rights Watch 2002, quoted by Clawson 2002: 147).

than the current emphasis of the US labor movement on imposing sanctions elsewhere.

Clawson takes the position that the current US labor movement's emphasis on trade sanctions for violations of international labor standards is "worlds apart" from the previous protectionist policy. "Politically the message is not 'Americans against foreigners', but rather 'worker rights against employer repression'" (Clawson 2003: 146). To be sure, it is important to acknowledge the major changes that have occurred within the US labor movement over the past decade. Yet, not everyone is so sure about the depth of the transformation with regard to international trade policy. "Critics," as Clawson himself notes, "sometimes describe" the new policy of support for international labor standards as "disguised protectionism."

What might convince the skeptics (among whom the present author would count herself) that they are wrong? Let's try a mental experiment and *imagine* (for it requires under present circumstances a real act of imagination) that the WTO – an organization that Clawson describes as "dominated by representatives from the world's richest countries acting on behalf of the most powerful business interests" – imposes sanctions *for labor rights violations against the United States*, including imposing punitive tariffs on sectors of the US economy that were not among the offending sectors (e.g., sectors with relatively strong unions). Would the US labor movement (including unions and workers in the non-offending sectors) support the WTO decision, accept the punishment calmly, and focus their efforts on campaigning to have the labor rights violations swiftly eliminated? (If this proves to be the case, the skeptics should be quite happy to have been proven wrong.) Or would US workers and unions join with "powerful business interests" in one of "the world's richest [and most powerful] countries" to demand that their government flaunt, obstruct or otherwise undermine this infringement on US national sovereignty – perhaps even getting some material concessions from employers and the state in the process, in exchange for mobilizing behind the "national interest"? (In this case the skeptics would only have the consolation of having been confirmed in their skepticism.) In other words, faced with this "test," would the US labor movement's support for international labor standards still look like genuine labor internationalism, or would it look more like a policy of double-standards, in which those with the power to do so avoid the imposition of the will of the world community?

It is clear that Clawson himself would not be sanguine about the outcome of any such "test." For as he points out: while "people living in small or weak states have no trouble understanding" the limits of "formal claims to sovereign national power, . . . both intellectuals and ordinary

citizens in hegemonic states, such as the United States, . . . have much more difficulty remembering this, and may become angry or engage in victim-bashing when events force them to recognize the limits to sovereignty” (Clawson 2003: 134). Moreover, he is fully aware “of the huge differences” in both interests and power that potentially divide the opponents of neoliberalism as a result of their varying structural locations (North/South, male/female, citizen/immigrant, etc.). As such, he acknowledges that: “An important part of the struggle for a new system will take place *within* the groups opposed to neoliberalism” including workers across the South-North divide (Clawson 2003: 161).<sup>5</sup>

### **Twentieth Century Labor Upsurges: From Detroit to Ulsan and Beyond**

A more promising approach – and one that would be far more consistent with the theoretical framework on which Clawson’s book stands – would be to think of labor movement advances worldwide as proceeding through similar processes of “labor upsurge.” As I have argued in detail elsewhere (Silver 2003, especially Chapter 2), the US labor upsurge of 1936-1937 was not unique. In the twentieth century, Fordist mass production tended to recreate similar social contradictions wherever it grew, and, as a result, strong and effective labor movements emerged in virtually every site where Fordist mass production expanded rapidly – from North America in the 1930s, to Western Europe in the late 1960s, to a group of rapidly industrializing semi-peripheral countries in the 1970s and 1980s.

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<sup>5</sup> One could argue that it really doesn’t matter if there is a double-standard in the way sanctions are imposed as long as they help workers in the sanctioned countries to organize and better their conditions of life. One problem with this argument is that it assumes a causal relationship that remains to be demonstrated. Moreover, this way of approaching the matter is inconsistent with the theoretical framework on which Clawson’s book firmly stands. In a different context (assessing living wage and anti-sweatshop campaigns), Clawson poses the rhetorical question: “If workers’ conditions improve . . . what difference does it make how this happens?” He proceeds to answer that it does indeed matter, for “the labor movement is about empowering workers”. Clawson approvingly quotes the first sentence of the rules for the First International drafted by Karl Marx, which reads: “The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.” Defending this premise, Clawson draws a distinction between “other groups” (e.g., students) who join in struggle “in solidarity with workers” and those that act “*on behalf of workers*” (2003: 166-7). To be sure, this is an important but tricky distinction with regard to non-worker support for workers’ struggles in a given country, as well as with regard to *the support of workers in one country for the struggles of workers in another country*.

The rapid expansion of mass production industries in the USA in the first decades of the twentieth century dramatically undermined the existing trade union movement; craft-workers (and their unions) were marginalized from production and new reserves of immigrant labor were tapped. As Clawson points out, in the late 1920s, contemporary observers judged the prospects for US labor to be bleak indeed; but by 1937 previously unimaginable victories had been achieved through a mass upsurge based on new forms of unionization (industry-based) and direct action (most notably, the sit-down strike targeted at specific sites calculated to exploit modern mass production's vulnerability to localized disruptions).

An analogous process is visible with the advance of mass production in Western Europe in the 1950s and 1960s. The power of craft-workers and their unions were undermined, while at the same time a new semi-skilled working class was created, composed of recently proletarianized migrants. As in the 1930s upsurge in the United States, this new working-class-in-formation became the backbone of a sudden and highly effective mass outburst of labor unrest in the late-1960s and early-1970s throughout Western Europe. Likewise, the cheap-labor economic "miracles" of the 1970s and 1980s – ranging from Spain and Brazil to South Africa and South Korea – each created new, strategically located working classes, which in turn produced powerful new labor movements rooted in expanding mass production industries. In each of these labor upsurges, major victories were achieved as new independent unions were formed and the residue of old organizational structures were swept aside (or forced to transform themselves in response to the mass upsurge from below).

To be sure, the labor movements born in each of these upsurges were eventually weakened through a variety of means, including the geographical relocation of production. Nevertheless, the dynamic described above is one in which the "globalization" of mass production manufacturing has had a much less unidirectional and negative impact on labor worldwide than is commonly argued to be the case in the literature. Rather, labor upsurges are intertwined with the spatially uneven development of historical capitalism. Or to put it crudely, "where capital goes, conflict goes."

Where should we expect the "next labor upsurges"? From what has just been said, to answer this question we need to answer the question of where capital is going.<sup>6</sup> In the past decade or so, mass production

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<sup>6</sup> In the above discussion of "where capital is going," I emphasize the geographical movement of capital *within* an industrial sector. However, it is also important to look at the *inter-industry* flow of capital, particularly the flow of capital into new post-Fordist

manufacturing capital has been going massively to China. While keeping in mind the important differences across place and time in each of the cases, I would argue that analogous processes are visible and significant.

Just as the spread of mass production undermined the established craft-based working class in the early twentieth-century United States, so the transformations associated with the flood of foreign investments into China has gone hand-in-hand with mass lay-offs from state-owned enterprises and the breaking of the “iron rice bowl” social contract more generally. The established ways of life and livelihood for the old urban working-class – the protagonists (or rather the next generation and beneficiaries) of China’s last mass (revolutionary) labor upsurge – are being undermined. These workers have responded with a wave of protests since the late-1990s, which initially slowed, but has not stopped their marginalization from the world of work (cf. Lee 2003).

The same economic transformations that are “unmaking” this old working class are creating a newly proletarianized (mainly rural migrant, in large part female) working class in China’s expanding mass production industries. There are growing signs that this emerging working class might form the backbone of a “next upsurge” in China.<sup>7</sup> But, to paraphrase Clawson’s observation with respect to the significance of current grassroots militancy in the United States, we will only be able to know *in retrospect* whether these workers’ mobilizations were “insignificant historical oddities” or “the prehistory of the upsurge” (Clawson 2003: 26).

A new labor upsurge in China would have an impact well beyond its borders – at least as significant as a new labor upsurge in the United States. For as has become more and more widely recognized in recent years, China is emerging as the new center of the global economy. To quote Martin Wolf (2003) in an article in *The Financial Times*: “Asia’s rise is the economic [and political] event of our age. . . . Europe was the past, the USA is the present and a China-dominated Asia the future of the global economy. That future seems bound to come. The big questions are how soon and how smoothly.”

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activities. Clawson rightly emphasizes this latter process (what I call the “product fix” as opposed to the “spatial fix”) in seeking to identify new major sites of employment expansion (and working-class formation) in the United States (see also Silver 2003, Chapter 3).

<sup>7</sup> Among the many press reports is the following recently published in the Washington Post: “Heralded by an unprecedented series of walkouts, the first stirrings of unrest have emerged among the millions of youthful migrant workers who supply seemingly inexhaustible cheap labor for the vast expanse of factories in China’s booming Pearl River Delta.” This “spate of walkouts may signal [a] new era” for China (Cody 2004).

A Chinese labor upsurge is likely to have major “demonstration effects” elsewhere (cf. Clawson 2003: 200, on the question of triggering events); but it is also likely to have important indirect effects as well. For just as the outcome of the US labor upsurge of the 1930s and 1940s shaped in crucial ways the *global* regulatory framework established by the United States in the post-war decades – the so-called “globalization of the New Deal” (Silver 2003, Chapter 4; Arrighi & Silver 1999, Chapter 3 and conclusion) – so, the *global* regulatory framework (including the international institutional framework in which national labor movements will be operating) will be significantly shaped by the outcome of struggles in the rising hegemonic power.

**Labor Internationalism,  
or Moving Beyond the Cold War and the ‘Yellow Peril’**

Another central theme in *The Next Upsurge* is on the contradictions of organizations, including the role of the “organizational residue” of earlier upsurges in a next upsurge. Reading *The Next Upsurge* just after returning from China, I was struck by analogies between the predicament and challenges facing the main trade union federation in China (the All China Federation of Trade Unions; ACFTU), and Clawson’s description of the predicament and challenges facing the AFL-CIO. Both trade union federations are the organizational inheritance of their country’s prior mass labor upsurges. In the immediate aftermath of the upsurges, both found themselves in a relatively friendly institutional environment. In this context, “servicing members” became a predominant focus of union work; and some trade unionists became “bureaucrats [seeking] cushy jobs for themselves” (Clawson 2003: 14).

When the environment in the USA suddenly turned hostile in the 1980s, Clawson (2003: 28) writes that the US “labor movement was largely caught napping and did little to rethink its own approach” and counter the onslaught. Likewise, the Chinese unions were “largely caught napping” when the environment in which they were operating suddenly turned hostile in the 1990s, and did little to rethink their approach or to counter the onslaught. Those trade unionists who attempted to defend the interests of their members fought against lay-offs in state-owned enterprises and/or sought to negotiate deals that would save at least some jobs through restructuring, while seeking more generous early retirement packages and other means to soften the blow for those workers whose jobs were to be permanently lost – a painful set of decisions familiar to many US trade unionists, starting with the “give-back” contracts of the 1980s.

Yet, in both cases, such defensive struggles were insufficient as a means for unions to retain power and influence. For the restructuring that was eroding their old membership bases was also creating a new working-class that they failed to organize. In the USA, in the 1970s, rather than reach-out to and aggressively seek to organize the rapidly growing number of women working for pay outside the home, “the union people scorned women” (Clawson 2003: 51, 59; quoting Karen Nussbaum). Likewise, in China, the unions failed to meet the challenge posed by the massive inflow of rural migrant workers into urban areas. Indeed, it would be fair to say that, initially, “the union people” (and urban workers more generally) “scorned” the migrant workers, and attempted mainly to exclude them from urban areas (or, if not, at least from the best jobs), rather than organize them (cf. Solinger 1999).

Forward-looking trade unionists in both countries have come to the realization that if they are to remain relevant they must actively reach out to this new working class. Clawson discusses “a variety of [current] efforts to reshape unions so that they do more to address women’s concerns,” but he also argues that, although these efforts form “a base on which to build,” “an upsurge would require a much more thoroughgoing transformation than has so far been achieved” (Clawson 2003: 51-2). Interestingly enough, the ACFTU carries out an analogous exercise: each year it singles out a “model union” that has used innovative strategies to defend workers’ rights (e.g., new ways of addressing the needs of migrant workers, of using the mass media to draw attention to abuses of workers’ rights), from which lessons can be learned for revitalizing the labor movement in the new, more hostile environment (Feng 2003). Yet, although these efforts are creating “a base on which to build,” they are also far short of the transformations that would be required for a next upsurge.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Clawson’s characterization of the status of US unions could also have been written about Chinese unions: “Many existing unions are weak and ineffective. The members are minimally involved, think ‘the union’ is something separate from them, don’t see the union as a way to mobilize to address the problems in their lives, figure that if anyone should address the problem it is the union staff who are paid to do so, but don’t have much hope that [it] will happen. Many union leaders and staff are overwhelmed. . . . Some union leaders and staff are no longer motivated by high ideals, and hold the job only because it provides more pay and rewards than the alternatives. A few union leaders are outright corrupt . . .” (Clawson 2003: 196-7). To be sure, it might well be argued that the proper analogy (to date) is between the present day ACFTU and the pre-New Voice AFL-CIO – with the more militant and innovative trade unionists still in the minority position within the federation.

In the previous US labor upsurge, the pre-existing (AFL craft) unions at first attempted to thwart the necessary organizational changes “that were anathema to many of the old AFL leaders.” But, as it became clear that the industrial form and more militant style of the CIO unions were highly effective, “AFL unions responded by changing themselves” to meet the challenge – the challenge not only of the new economic environment, but also of the competition from the new CIO unions (Clawson 2003: 165). It remains to be seen whether any future Chinese or US labor upsurge will simply sweep aside the “organizational residue” inherited from the past (i.e., the AFL-CIO and/or the ACFTU), or will force them to dramatically transform themselves (in style and substance) so as to become relevant to the mass workers’ movement, as well as to be able to compete with any new organizations that might emerge with the upsurge itself – e.g., independent trade unions in the case of China.

Of course, there are significant differences between the two situations as well. Nevertheless, the analogies suggest an untapped potential for international labor solidarity through the sharing of experiences and mobilizing strategies. As such, the AFL-CIO’s long-standing position of refusing to have any contacts with the ACFTU not only seems misguided, but also evidence of the continuing imprint of Cold War thinking, and the even longer-term legacy of mobilizing against the ‘yellow peril’, which has marred the US labor movement since the late-nineteenth century (Saxton 1971; Silver and Arrighi 2000; see also Quan 2004).

Such considerations bring me to a final, but very important issue that I can only touch on briefly in the present context – that is, the geopolitical context in which labor upsurges unfold.<sup>9</sup> Clawson largely sidesteps this issue in *The Next Upsurge*,<sup>10</sup> even though the role that war mobilization played in union advances during the First World War, and then, in solidifying the organizational gains of the 1936-1937 labor upsurge during the Second World War is a key theme in US labor history. One outcome of this link has been a US labor movement that has been closely allied with the maintenance and expansion of US world power throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, the AFL (and later, the AFL-CIO) openly supported US foreign policy and backed every US war – until the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

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<sup>9</sup> On this theme, see Silver 2003, Chapter 4; Silver 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Except for a passing reference to war as a potential “trigger” for an upsurge; and a brief discussion of the role of competition from the Communist bloc in explaining US support for a post-war global regime that (at least promised) to distribute benefits more equally across class and national lines; and a brief reference to AFL-CIO resolution against the 2003 Iraq war (Clawson 2003: 200, 139-40, 203).

According to Clawson (2003: 203), “unions with high proportions of women workers led the push to get the AFL-CIO to oppose war with Iraq” – a hopeful sign for the future given the trends highlighted in Clawson’s book. Yet, after passing what was (for US labor) an historic anti-war resolution in March 2003, the AFL-CIO shifted the focus of its international agenda away from anti-war agitation, and put its organizational resources into campaigning for trade sanctions against China – what Clawson rightly calls “a reversion to nationalism and protectionism” (Clawson 2003: 161).

The last labor upsurge in the USA took place in a rising world hegemonic power; the next labor upsurge in the USA would take place in a declining world hegemonic power. The question of what posture US labor (and citizens more generally) take as the decline of US hegemony unfolds is not only critical for understanding the potential shape of a next upsurge, but is also critical for the future of the workers (and peoples) of the world.

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