

SUMMER 2008

## from the editorial team

**Great expectations fill the air. The presidential election has become the focus of a deep longing for some fundamental break with the old order. Eight years of imperial war, corporate greed and corruption, once unimaginable constitutional transgressions, malignant social neglect and prejudice, and now the gathering storm clouds of economic breakdown, feed this desire. Given the nature of American two-party politics, the presidential campaign only dares voice this yearning in the most amorphous and imprecise way for fear of otherwise appearing too partisan. Despite this inherent**

political timidity, the new Democratic administration will have to respond to this super-charged political atmosphere. It is those great expectations, not the presidential contest itself, which promise to open up a new chapter in the popular struggle for social justice and to close the door on a long generation of conservative counterrevolution. For that reason, this issue of *New Labor Forum* is devoted to examining some of the most strategically significant developments that inspire the labor movement's own set of great expectations and account for its greatest challenges.

During the last third of the twentieth century, a new system of capital accumulation gradually supplanted the old one. We might characterize the old one as mass industrial production occurring within the framework of the

Keynesian welfare state and industrial unionism. The new one is a system, sometimes called flexible accumulation, characterized by the financialization of the U.S. economy, the dispersal of industrial production to the Global South, the de-industrialization and de-unionization of the home economy, and the lowering of the social wage. The globalization of industrial production and the transformation of the domestic labor force into a deeply insecure, unprotected, and transient one have altered the ground rules for the American labor movement. It has taken time to adjust and still is adjusting. But, if vague incantations about "change" are to be realized, here is where it has to happen. All of the articles in this issue bear on this dilemma.

Three contributions address the globaliza-

tion question directly. One is a general assessment of the main efforts underway to form global unions or, short of that, tactical and strategic alliances among trade unions across the world. It analyzes what the obstacles are, what has worked best and which efforts have floundered. A second takes a close look at the United Steelworkers (USW), in particular. The USW has initiated a formal merger agreement with metalworking unions in the U.K. and Canada, a merger yet to take practical shape. But more important, for the moment at least, are the more limited but concrete and remarkably successful collaborations between the American union and fellow steelworkers elsewhere, particularly in Brazil, in confronting some of the largest steel corporations on the planet. Meanwhile, one of the most encouraging attempts to take on the global sweatshop economy during the last decade has been the movement to regulate and upgrade the abysmal labor conditions under which garments, shoes, and other consumer items are now produced. That movement of student groups, NGOs, trade unions, and others gave birth to mechanisms of “corporate social responsibility” which were supposed to prohibit the worst abuses and allow for worker representation. The results of this campaign have, however, been deeply disappointing as our article in this issue makes painfully clear.

As the new capitalism accelerates the outflow of industrial production abroad, it simultaneously encourages the inflow of cheap labor from the South to the North. *New Labor Forum* has regularly reported on this phenomenon and will continue to because it contains the possibility of a transformative alliance between the immigrant rights and labor movements. One critical but little noted obstacle in

the way of that happy marriage, however, is revealed by a recent set of detailed surveys which show how far apart the leadership of the labor movement often is from its own rank-and-file on how to respond to the huge influx of immigrant workers. Our article here closely examines that research and its implications. Finally, the de-industrialization of the U.S. that has accompanied globalization has produced a tragic dilemma for what remains of the organized industrial working-class here at home. Our article assessing the long-term implications of last year’s auto industry settlement with the UAW suggests a grim future indeed. That prediction appears certain, especially if the foreign-owned auto plants in the Sunbelt remain impervious to unionization (a question to be taken up in the fall 2008 issue of *New Labor Forum*).

If unionized industrial workers seem compelled by globalized, flexible capitalism to suffer precipitous declines in their wages, their health and retirement benefits, their job security, and in the bargaining power of the institutions they struggled so hard to create, the predicament of the new working-class—which never enjoyed any of those benefits—is that much more dire. But it is also, paradoxically, riper with signs of rebellion. The “new” working-class is disproportionately female, African American and immigrant. The most inspiring recent instances of combativeness and determination to rebuild the labor movement have occurred precisely among these segments of the workforce. Here we present several articles examining this world of sweated labor. One provides a general analysis of the characteristics and dimensions of low-wage work in today’s economy. Another essay analyzes low-wage women workers in particular, and their readiness to organize. In that latter connection, a

third article examines in detail the recent and remarkable unionizing victories in various parts of the country among home-based caregivers who are overwhelmingly women of color. We also include a firsthand account of life in the brave new world of temporary labor, the fastest growing segment of the labor force.

If the labor movement is to be reborn, that revitalization will have to occur among these invariably low-wage, often women, African American and immigrant workers whose work life is far more transient than the old industrial working-class of the last century. This will demand of the labor movement new forms of organization more suited to present challenges than either the craft unionism of the 19th century or the industrial unionism of the mid twentieth. Whether or not these transformations will occur depends, in part, on labor's openness to self-critique. The labor press—a potential vehicle for such discussion—unfortunately continues its decades-long tendency to shun this role, as described by a further article in this issue.

One way or another, however, the question of whether the labor movement achieves dramatic growth or this presidential election year lives up to its great expectations will heavily depend on what happens in these invisible pre-

cincts, far away from the ballyhoo of the campaign platform and the voting booth.

Our regularly appearing columns and the “Books and the Arts” section also reflect the overriding concerns of this issue. “Economic Prospects” is devoted to the question of regulating an out-of-control financial sector which has played such a strategic role in transforming the economy and precipitating the current recession. “Caught in the Web” alerts our readers to internet sites tracking low-wage labor. One book review critiques an examination of blue-collar conservatism; another tackles two studies of union organizing in response to flexible capitalism, one about taxi drivers, the other about the Teamsters at UPS. And we present a review of a remarkable film about the lives of working-class blacks in Los Angeles who suffered the trials and tribulations of flexible accumulation decades before the category was invented. Finally, we offer a striking collection of poems by Greg McDonald, member of the Transport Workers Union, Local 100, and former shop steward. McDonald recently appeared at our offices, poems in hand, offering them “just in case” we “might be interested.” We are honored to publish the lyrical, penetrating poetry of this award winning worker-poet. ■