

## **Questions for prompting discussion of *Solidarity Divided*.**

Russell Herman, <volunteers@organizenorthcarolina.org>, 18 March 2011 draft

We divided the book into six discussion sessions, each of about 1.5 hours. With such short times, we didn't cover all these questions.

### **Session 1. Preface, introduction, and chapters 1-4 (pages ix-38).**

Page ix, first paragraph.

Who does your union serve — its members, the working class, or something else? Who does it say it serves? Who do you think it should serve? Why?

Page 10, first full paragraph.

Have you seen race divide workers against each other in your workplace? Elsewhere? How did it happen? What resulted?

Page 10, second full paragraph, last two sentences.

Have you seen whites unite across class lines? How did it happen? What resulted?

Page 26.

For those old enough, what do you remember of the “social contract” of roughly 1945-1970? How did workers fare then in this country? Which workers benefitted? How does that compare with today? What changed?

Page 28-29 “This postwar social accord with capital was symbolized by the so-called Treaty of Detroit in 1950, in which corporate America bought back managerial initiative and control of the shop floor .... The price was abandonment of class struggle ... and further bureaucratization of the union movement.”

What do you think of this summation? Correct or not? What evidence points each way? If you agree with this summary of the deal, what do you think of this deal? Good deal for workers? For which workers? For how long?

Page 36-38 Three ideological tendencies answer three key questions differently.

How do you answer these three questions? How does your union, your school, your religious fellowship, or other organizations to which you belong? Have your union, school, religious group, or other organizations discussed these questions explicitly? If not, why not? What results from discussing these questions in an organization? What results from avoiding these questions?

### **Session 2. Chapters 5-9 (pages 39-90).**

Page 43 near the top.

Why would Volcker say “The standard of living of the average American has to decline.”? Who would benefit from such a decline?

Page 43, second full paragraph. “[T]he assault on the U.S. working class was successful precisely because the opening round targeted people of color .... [T]his focus would minimize

resistance.”

Correct? Did the assault succeed? Did targeting people of color first minimize resistance? If so, why did that work?

Page 46, bottom paragraph that begins “The AFL-CIO did not grasp that the growing right-wing movement ... was not only amenable to attacking ... people of color and women but also to neutralizing progressive efforts generally and gutting the power of even the most conservative sectors of labor.”

Do the authors have it correct when they write “a new form of class warfare was unfolding”? If so, why didn’t the AFL-CIO leadership understand that?

Did your union, school, religious group, or social justice organization understand it and help you understand it?

What happened in your life during this period? Did you understand it? What helped you understand it as it happened? What hindered you from understanding it as it happened? What helps and hinders your understanding today?

Page 50, bottom paragraph and footnote 4.

What do you think about the NLRA’s requirement of exclusive representation? Who benefits from it? How?

Page 52, second full paragraph. “The leadership of organized labor reflects, at least in part, a social base within the union movement.”

Correct? How does this look in your union? How does it look in your religious organization or social justice organization? What creates and shapes this social base?

Page 57, whole page.

Does this happen in your union? What contributes to it happening? What helps protect your union leaders from this tendency?

Page 57, near bottom, “[I]n the absence of an ideological framework to place reform in a broader context of social transformation, the reformers tend to fall backward.” Continuing to end of page 58. “A platform and long-term strategy ... that do not rely on ... one leader, are essential...”

What do you think about these arguments? Mostly correct or mostly incorrect? Why? What evidence points each way?

Page 73, middle of the page, “[N]o one knows what the actual authority of a national labor center should be.”

What authority, if any, do you think a national organization of labor should have? What should it do? What not do? Who should it serve? How should it make decisions?

Page 82, final section.

What do you think of this summary of our current situation? Reasonably accurate? Any key factors omitted? What do you think of the authors’ reliance on “action at the local level”?

Pages 84-87.

What do you think of the idea of opening up Central Labor Councils to non-union, community-

based social justice organizations? Who would benefit from such a change? Who might lose some power from such a change?

Pages 87-90. The nature of work changed but union approaches mostly didn't. Which of these changes have you seen in your workplace? What happened? Who benefitted? Who lost? How, if at all, did your union respond? How, if at all, did other organizations to which you belong respond? What happened then? Why?

### **Session 3. Chapters 10-14 (pages 91-146).**

Pages 91-92.

What do you think of these three definitions of globalization? Does globalization just mean a global economy? Could a global economy have developed into a different form than the one it has today?

Page 94, near top. "Fundamental to neoliberalism is the drive to eliminate obstacles to the achievement of profit. ... emphasis on privatization and the systematic elimination of the public sphere."

Why would capitalists see privatization and elimination of the public sphere as necessary for profits? What pushes them in those directions?

Pages 94-95.

Why does neoliberal capitalism need "a military component to reinforce its ideological component"? When did the neoliberal authoritarian state begin and why does it continue?

Pages 97-99.

What does the division of the U.S. ruling circles into two foreign-policy approaches (multilateralist vs. unilateralist) mean for the global working class? For the U.S. working class? For U.S. trade unions? Who would benefit or lose under each approach? Which approach appears dominant now?

Page 105 (bottom 2 paragraphs)-106 (top). "When public- and service-sector unions pressure corporations to pay their workers more, they are, in part, asking for a bigger share of the wealth stolen by capital. ... [R]aises in their wages do not threaten the regime of capital accumulation in the same way that raises in agriculture or manufacturing do."

Do you agree with this analysis? If so, what differences does it mean for organizing unions? In which sector do we have unions locally? Do we see differences in those unions that might result, at least in part, from this difference in the ways they affect capital accumulation?

Page 107. "U.S. unions have a responsibility to educate workers to think and act locally and globally ...."

Looking at the examples on this page of global connections of U.S. workers, how does your workplace fit into the global system of capitalism? With what other workers in the world do you need solidarity? Who elsewhere in the world could benefit from your solidarity?

Page 113.

What do you think of the lessons the authors draw from the Charleston Five campaign? Which of them does your union or other social justice organization have a readiness to implement? What would need to change to get ready to implement all of them?

Page 115-116.

With what parts of the excerpt from Sweeney's speech in Durban do you agree? With what parts disagree? Why?

Page 117-118. "Sweeney ... assumed that in the face of the al-Qaeda attack, Bush would seek allies in U.S. labor. But nothing could have been further from the president's plans. The Bush administration had decided to carry out a war on two fronts: a foreign war against al-Qaeda ... and a domestic war against the U.S. worker."

Do you agree with the authors about what Sweeney assumed and Bush planned? Why or why not? What explanations, if any, do you think account for their actions? For the authors' diagnosis (or for your diagnosis if it differs from the authors'), what would help prevent such a mistake by U.S. labor leaders in the future?

Page 124, bottom sentence.

Where in your union (or other social justice organization) experience have you seen a serious debate? Where have you participated in a serious debate? What would happen if someone tried to start a debate? What would need to change to create frequent, serious, respectful debates that actually affect your organization's policies and actions?

Page 128, ideologizing of organizing.

Under what conditions does it make sense to not organize workers into a union? Under what conditions does it make sense to organize workers into a union?

Page 130. Four points proposed by SEIU.

With which of these points do you agree? Why or why not? Which of these points (if you agreed with them) would justify leaving the federation?

Page 143.

Do you agree more with Stern (as portrayed by the authors) that neoliberal globalization and privatization happen almost automatically outside of human control and that we therefore can at best tinker with the details? Or with the authors that human beings control these developments and therefore we can change them through a "proactive working-class strategy for power"? Why?

Page 145-146 three points on problems with Stern's analysis.

What do you think about these three points? Especially, what do you think about the last point on the "team America" concept?

#### **Session 4. Chapters 15-16 and appendix A (pages 147-161 and 217-224).**

Page 148 bottom paragraph.

The authors write that Sweeney didn't encourage a debate because "[t]aking advantage of this

opportunity would have required an entirely different approach toward struggle than Sweeney was used to.” If so, and if we assume this resulted not from a personal limitation of Sweeney’s but from the currently dominant culture within U.S. trade unions, what can today’s union leaders, activists, and members do to help shift that culture toward one that welcomes debate? If they want to continue avoiding debate, what can they do to maintain that culture?

Page 150-151. Summaries of responses to CTW’s arguments.

The authors find only minor differences between the stated views of CTW and AFL-CIO leaders. Do you agree? If not, which differences seem important? Do you count them as important enough to justify splitting the federation?

Page 152-153.

The authors report that both sides used top-down messages to their members (to the extent that they communicated to members about these topics at all). What do you remember from that time? What news about the potential split did you get? To what extent did you get involved in these topics at the time? What caused it to happen that way for you? What could have caused it to happen differently for you?

Page 156-157. “Andy Stern deserves credit for kicking off the Internet exchange through the creation of his blog.”

Did you participate in the Internet exchanges that followed? Why or why not? Did you know of anybody else who participated?

Looking at the list of “steps the leaders could have taken”, which would have gotten you involved in discussing these topics? Which would involve you today in debating the issues facing the union movement? Which would you guess would involve people not like you? Who, why, and how?

Page 157. Stern described the union movement as “too male, too pale, and too stale.” Does that seem correct to you? Does it apply to your union, your local, your non-union social justice organizations?

Page 158, first full paragraph. The authors report that union members felt afraid to voice their views. Members and leaders of color felt the discussions did not concern them. If you wanted to maintain that condition within your union, what would you do? If you wanted to change it, what would you do?

Page 158-160. “Consolidation of unions, if not mitigated by other structural changes and shifts in power relations, tends to place power in the hands of whites generally and white males in particular.” CTW advocated consolidation of unions; SEIU (and some other unions) have pushed consolidation of their locals. When, if at all, would you support consolidation? If you wanted consolidation without white control, how would you arrange to get that?

Page 160-161. List of issues “critically important for women and people of color” that got avoided. To what extent has your organization done productive things on these issues? If you wanted to make sure your organization avoided such topics, how would you do that? If you wanted your organization to consider these issues, how would you achieve that?

Page 219. What do you think of the five topics listed under “Objectives” as the “fundamental issues facing organized labor in the USA”? Which would include your main concerns? Do you think of any fundamental issues that got left out? What makes an issue fundamental?

**Session 5. Chapters 17-18 (pages 165-196).**

Page 166. “[T]he principal faces of U.S. trade unionism have misanalyzed the moment. They have concluded”.

I disagree with the authors here. I agree that the “principal faces” act as if they believe the points listed. I don’t think they arrived at those beliefs as conclusions resulting from careful analysis. I think they began by assuming these points, mostly unawarely. What do you think? Why? What evidence supports or refutes your view? What difference, if any, would it make whether the “principal faces” misanalyzed or misassumed?

Page 166. What do you think about the first two points in the list? Does a wing of U.S. capital exist that has a strategic interest in partnering with labor? If so, which segments of capital? Does the U.S. state serve as “a neutral vessel that can be filled by either side—capital or labor—and thus can serve ... as arbiter”? If so, give examples of when has it done so.

Page 166, bottom. “Class struggle emerges from a simple dynamic: in a society with a social surplus and a division between those who produce and those who make decisions, a struggle inevitably occurs over that surplus.”

Discussing this quote may benefit from a working definition of “surplus”. In this context, “social surplus” means the total value (all goods and services) produced by the society minus the value socially necessary to maintain and reproduce the people producing the society’s goods and services and the relationships within which the production happens.

Profits come from this social surplus. Likewise, any pay or benefits workers get beyond the minimum necessary to maintain them as workers and enable them to reproduce future workers also comes from this surplus. The owning class participates in the class struggle to maintain and increase their portion of the surplus. The working class participates in the class struggle to maintain and increase their portion of the surplus.

Do you think a society structured this way could function without any struggle (whether open or hidden) between the two classes over the surplus? How might that happen? Or do you agree with the authors that such class struggle happens inevitably? What difference, if any, does it make whether this struggle happens inevitably or not?

Page 174, bottom half. Forming a social-political bloc.

What changes in the attitudes and practices of our unions and non-union social justice organizations would we need to form such blocs and use them to achieve power?

Page 175. The authors call for us to gather the strategic forces, not just the comfortable ones, and build trust among them. With which progressive forces do you (or your organizations) find

it most comfortable to work? With which would you need to build trust?

Page 177.

If you had a working people's assembly where you live, what local issue might it take up that would gain the participation of large numbers of working class people across the lines that tend to divide us (race, gender, immigration status, education level, age, religion, sexual orientation, urban-rural divisions, attitudes about patriotism, etc.)?

Page 181, bottom. "The leadership of organized labor fails to confront [divisions such as race and gender] not because of stupidity but because of awareness of the consequences of addressing it: leaders have a deep-seated fear that addressing the all-too-apparent divisions will antagonize whites or men."

What would happen to your union (or non-union social justice organization) if it antagonized whites or men? What would happen (or has already happened) to your union or non-union social justice organization if it antagonized (or ignored) people of color or women?

Page 182.

If your union or non-union social justice organization practiced anti-racism by championing consistent democracy with most of the points on this page, who would it attract? Who would it antagonize? What might result from such a policy, if consistently followed for several years?

Page 185. The authors close this chapter with four points they call "facts." To what extent do you agree or disagree with these points? What evidence supports or refutes these points? If a large portion of the union movement adopted these points, what might result?

Page 192.

What do you think of the authors' use of the term "empire"?

Page 193, top.

How do you answer the five questions at the top of the page? Has your union or non-union social justice organization discussed such questions? Why or why not? What might happen if it did discuss such questions? If you wanted to prevent such questions from coming up in your organization, how would you? If you wanted to encourage discussion of such questions in your organization, how would you?

Page 196.

The authors list seven issues relevant to international social justice solidarity. How do these issues show up in your life and in your workplace? If you wanted to prevent the working class in the U.S. from addressing these issues, how would you? If you wanted to start a discussion of these issues with your neighbors or co-workers, how might you?

### **Session 6. Chapter 19 and appendix B (pages 197-215 and 225-243).**

Page 198. What do you think of the four points? What similarities and differences do united fronts and political parties have? Has the possibility of significant capital-labor cooperation ended? What evidence do you think of for and against the ending of the possibility of significant

capital-labor cooperation? What would it mean for your union to act in its members' and potential members' interests? Who should your union consider potential members? How should your union identify the interests of its members and potential members?

Page 199, the top several lines. What do you think the authors mean by "democracy"? What do you mean by that word?

Page 200. The authors group union reformers into "two camps one might call *technicians* and *reconstructionists*." What examples of reforms might each of these camps have sought? Why do the authors reject both camps?

Page 201, middle. "[W]in a political mandate from the membership for social justice unionism. ... [W]in over a significant portion of the membership to a new approach. Genuine membership education must be a major component of this process. Transformation is a long-term effort and has no shortcuts." If you wanted to hinder such a transformation from happening in your union, what could you do now to slow or stop it? If you wanted to win membership support in your union for social justice unionism, what could you do now that would make a step in that direction?

Page 202, top. How might unions that "become a vehicle through which oppressed groups ... advance their demands" and unions that "look at these groups simply as several constituencies among many" differ in their daily functioning? Which model does your union most fit? How did it get that way? Who benefits from that arrangement? Who loses?

Page 203. What do you think of nonmajority unionism? Does your union have majority support? Did it always? Will it always?

Page 204, first full paragraph. "To succeed, nonmajority unionism requires significant commitment by the parent union—in the form of subsidies. The idea of constituting an organization with no guaranteed dues checkoff and, more than likely, a fluctuating membership without external support is untenable." But almost all social justice organizations other than unions operate without dues checkoff and with fluctuating memberships. Many operate without external support. To what extent, if any, might such a model work for social justice unionism? What characteristics, if any, of unions might make dues checkoff, a steady membership, or external support essential?

Page 205. The authors recommend less consolidation, letting locals have local identities, bargaining through joint councils, and welcoming internal factions. What do you think about these ideas? Which ways has your union tended to move recently on these topics?

Page 206-207. How does member education in your union or other social justice organization compare to the authors' recommendations? What experience have you had with educating your fellow members? What do you think would work well?

Page 208-209. What do you think of their suggestions on Central Labor Councils? How closely does your CLC approach their model? North Carolina has eight CLCs, each supposed to cover

many counties, none with paid staff. Our entire state has approximately as many union members as some CLCs elsewhere do. How might their model work here?

Page 214. Gompertist unions cannot survive, the authors conclude. “[A] Left, anticapitalist analysis and a reconstituted Left are essential for the renewal of labor and reconstruction of trade unionism.” Having read to this conclusion in their final chapter, what do you think? To what extent do you plan to work for non-left unionism? For anti-left unionism? For left, social justice unionism? To avoid unions of all sorts? You have a choice. What do you choose? Why do you choose that course?

Page 232. “The plan had five stages and took three years to implement.” How might you build an organization that could develop and implement a serious plan? If you wanted to prevent such from happening in your organization, how might you do that?

Page 241, bottom paragraph. In your organization, what has become the norm? How did that happen? Who benefits? Who gets left aside? What do you like about that? What bothers you about it?

Page 243, final paragraph. What helps you think self-reflectively? What helps you examine your own social encasement? What makes it harder for you to do that? If you wanted to hinder union and other social justice activists from such self-reflection, how might you do it? If you wanted to encourage such self-reflection, how might you do that?