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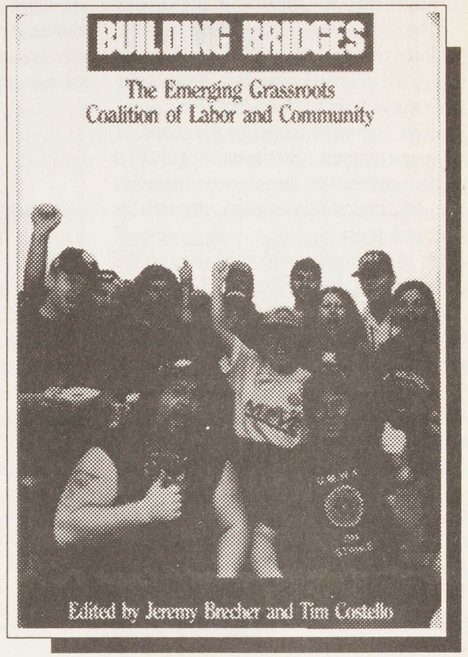
Labor Builds Bridges. . . But to Where?



By Rinku Sen

Building Bridges: The Emerging Grassroots Coalition of Labor and Community.
Jeremy Brecher, Tim Costello, editors.
New York City, Monthly Review Press, 1990, 348 pages.

Brecher and Costello's collection of essays about an emerging "social alliance" of community and labor is, for communities of color, like the experience of people of color with organized labor itself. The potential is exciting and the benefits easily understood. The reality, however, has often been profoundly disappointing. "The unions don't seem to get it," Barbara Nabors-Glass, director of San Francisco's Income Rights Project told me the other day, "that by organizing our folks [African-American welfare recipients often in "workfare" programs] they are protecting their own jobs."

To be fair, *Building Bridges* describes what is arguably one of the most important tactical shifts on the part of labor in recent decades. Brecher and Costello see labor/community coalitions as both part of an emerging labor insurgency within the international unions, and as a way to revitalize the labor movement itself. The key premise of the editors and most of the contributors is that, in the face of global economic changes and a deadening conservatism in the international union leadership, local unions and labor activists have to find new ways of fighting for workers' rights to livable wages, work rules and working conditions. For Brecher and Costello, building coalitions between community organizations and labor to fight labor union battles is one of the most powerful and exciting new organizing tools to come along in quite a while.

Brecher and Costello want ultimately to revitalize a movement for social and economic justice that has workers at its base. They hope to disprove "media images of workers. . . beating up on peace demonstrators. . . and abandoning traditional blue-collar loyalties in disgust at kooks and troublemakers from radical social movements." The editors and most of the contributors try to show that cooperation between rank and file activists and community institutions, long ridiculed by organized labor, can circumvent the "business unionism" that many labor activists believe is at the root of labor's current anemia when it comes to even the most bread-and-butter workplace issues.

I would argue, however, that the real reason labor is in such tough shape in this country is that very few of the international AFL-CIO unions have done any real organizing in industries where the workers are predominantly people of color, immigrants and women. As Patrica Lee, an organizer with HERE Local 2 in San Francisco, explains in her essay "Sisters on the Borders," there is a "generational crisis" in most unions. Where unions have decided to organize new shops at all "the leadership remains predominantly older white males, [even though] the membership is increasingly minority, immigrant and female." Brecher and Costello agree in their introduction that these generational crises manifest themselves in dwindling memberships, "isolation from the

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